

2007

# Mauerkunst, Lebenskunst: An Anlysis of the Art on the Berlin Wall

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## Recommended Citation

Brooke, Magdalene A., "Mauerkunst, Lebenskunst: An Anlysis of the Art on the Berlin Wall" (2007). *Scripps Senior Theses*. Paper 4.  
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**“MAUERKUNST, LEBENSKUNST”: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ART ON  
THE BERLIN WALL**

BY

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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April 20, 2007

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## **Introduction**

On August 13, 1961 East German soldiers stretched roles of barbed wire through the heart of Berlin, encircling the Western zones. This rather drastic measure was the latest in a long series of temporary solutions to the problem of German identity. Located in middle Europe, Germany had, in its various forms, been caught in clashes between opposing sides of the continent for much of its history. During the Cold War it became, once again, a battlefield in a war between East and West. This time, however, it was a war of propaganda, a war of words, and the battle lines had been drawn in Germany's capital: Berlin.

Berlin remained a front in the Cold War until 1989 and the Berlin Wall was the most visible symbol of the division of all of Europe. As a Wall it kept out no invading armies, but succeeded quite well in keeping the citizens of East Germany in. As a symbol it became a powerful propaganda tool, especially for the West, and became a politically loaded place of protest. As early as the 1960s, anonymous words and phrases of protest would appear on the Wall's western surface. However, in the 1980s painting on the Berlin Wall exploded. Suddenly murals and graffiti began to appear on the Wall, painted by people from all over the world and all walks of life. Internationally known artists began to use the Wall as a sort of exhibition space. The Berlin Wall was no longer just a tool in a war of propaganda, but became a surface for unparalleled exchange of ideas through visual representation.

The art on the Berlin Wall has been looked at often for its social and political meaning. Like sociologists trying to discover the secrets of life in Pompeii, intellectuals have tried to discover what the painting on the Berlin Wall "says" about the people who

were involved in its creation. Instead, I intend to look at the artwork and text which appeared on the Berlin Wall as art. In this paper I will discuss the formal aspects of the art on the Berlin Wall as well as its import as an example of public art and as a forum created through visual representation. But first it is important to understand how the Wall came to be and why the paintings began to appear when they did.

## Chapter One: Background, History of the Berlin Wall

Berlin, Germany is in many ways a bizarre city, a city shaped by a peculiar history. It has been a city of kings, of plagues and poverty, of vicious and violent politics, of fascism and insane delusions. But today, the name of the city brings up a time many people today remember, one of the stranger chapters in European history. Berlin was for 44 years the crucial front in a war of politics and propaganda. The famous wall bearing the city's name was both an answer to and an infamous symbol of the clash between the most powerful empires in the world. But how did it come to the actual, physical division of a city? Before we can begin to look at what was painted on the Berlin Wall, we have to look at the Wall itself: how it came to be, what its existence was like, and when messages and art began to appear on it at all. The era of division began with the end of World War II.

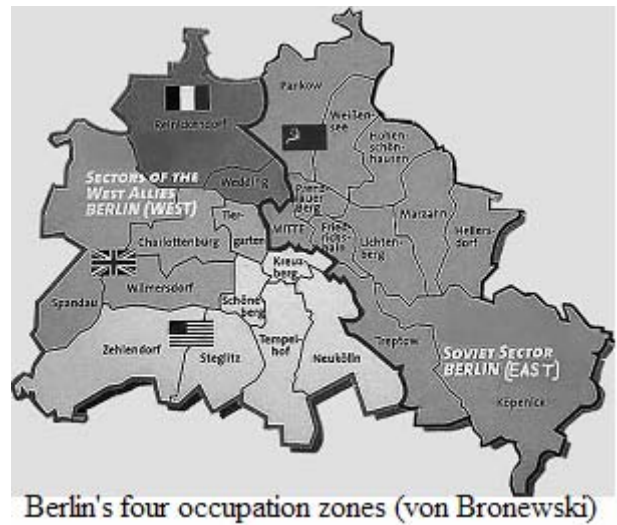
*Stunde Null*, or zero hour is the phrase used to describe the moment of Germany's surrender to the Allies in 1945. Ground zero, in a way. Germany was a nation defeated,

bankrupt, starving, left crippled by a disastrous twelve year dictatorship and even more disastrous war. Whether this moment was truly a "zero hour" is debatable; however, it obviously had to be a change, a new beginning. The "German question," which had plagued Germany and its politics since the Napoleonic era, was back on people's minds, this time around the world. The Allies had to



The Four German Sectors ("Berlin Wall")

decide what to do with a nation that had caused such destruction, twice. At the Potsdam Conference, before the war had even ended, the “Big Four” had concluded that Germany would be divided into four zones of occupation: one for the Soviet Union, one for the United States, and one each for Britain and France. Berlin was also divided into four zones, with eight city districts going to the Soviets, six to Americans, four to Britain, and two to France (Ladd 13). But at the end of the war Germany needed more than physical rebuilding. The Allies needed to demilitarize and denazify the country as well as form a new, democratic government. Considering the increasing animosity of the Soviet Union and the United States, this was not going to be an easy task.



The four zones were controlled relatively independently; however, the political reconstruction played out similarly in the three Western zones. During the first year after the war, political parties began to organize themselves. The Social Democrats (SPD) and Communists (KPD) reformed, and two new parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP), were founded. The essentially Marxist SPD and clerically oriented CDU quickly became the two leading parties, while the liberal FDP was somewhat in between the two, but had trouble distinguishing itself and offering real opposition to either of the primary parties (Kitchen, 319).

In the East, the idea of “denazification” was used to clear the political arena of opponents of the Communist Party. Walter Ulbricht and the “Ulbricht Group,” a few

politicians hand-picked and trained in Moscow, flew to Germany in 1945 in order to take over leadership of the KPD. Ulbricht wooed the SPD and, under extreme pressure from the Soviets, the two parties merged in 1946 to form the Social Unity Party of Germany (SED). All other, smaller parties in the East were subdued into obedience to the SED, creating what was in reality a one-party dictatorship (319).

One of the most important steps was going to be rebuilding some form of economy in all of the German sectors. The black market was flourishing, and the allies needed to introduce an economy and a currency in order to stop it. In the summer 1947 American President Harry Truman created the “Truman Doctrine” which promised economic assistance to people fighting communism. Around the same time, Secretary of State George C. Marshall promised a huge program of aid to a recovering Europe. This program, known as the Marshall Plan, resulted in \$17 billion of aid to Western Europe beginning in 1948 (322). The Marshall Plan not only helped rebuild Germany’s economy, it also solidified the American economic position in the world, functioned as an export of the American way of life to West Germany, and further polarized what was quickly becoming effectively two zones of occupation in Germany (Fulbrook 129). In March of the same year, in fact, the three zones of West Germany formed the Western European Union, a formal military alliance against the East. The increasing separation of the two zones made the economic rebuilding difficult. In order to shut down the black market and create a new economy, the German mark was introduced in West Germany. The Soviet Union’s answer to the new Western currency was to introduce the East German mark (also known as the “German Mark” in the Eastern zone) in its zone of occupation. This created difficulty, especially in Berlin, which was also divided into four



occupation zones. The mayor, Ernst Reuter, was adamant that the West German mark be the currency of the Western parts of the city (Kitchen 322).

In a sudden move on August 4, 1948, the Soviets blocked all routes in and out of Berlin, cutting off all supplies to the Western zones of the city. In a famous response, the Western Allies supplied West Berlin for 11 months via air. Planes flew into the Tempelhof airport, a plane setting down nearly every minute of every day for the duration of the Airlift. The Soviet blockade was not only an international propaganda disaster; it also merely served to strengthen the American opinion that Berlin was an important “battlefield” in the war against Communism (322).

So, as the prospect of unifying Germany looked ever less likely, each half began to consider its future as a state. In West Germany, a Parliamentary Council was formed and given the duty of writing the *Grundgesetz* or “Basic Law” for what would become the western state. One of the main objectives of the council was to create the basis for a government without the weaknesses of the Weimar constitution, which allowed Hitler to come to power. Although the outlook for a unified Germany was grim, the designers of the *Grundgesetz* did include a section, Article 23, which would allow East Germany to enter into the West German constitution if it so chose. The *Grundgesetz* was accepted on May 23, 1949 and in August the first Parliament was elected. The CDU dominated the election and its leader, Konrad Adenauer, was named Chancellor. In September of the same year, the Western Allies ratified the new government, and the *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (BRD) came into existence (323).

The Soviets also realized that there was really no chance of German unification under a Communist system, and set about creating a government in East Germany. A

“People’s Council” was formed and began to write a constitution. The resulting document promised a wide range of rights to its citizens, but also contained many clauses giving the government the ability to restrict freedom of speech and other important, guaranteed rights. In practice, there was very little separation of the branches of government; rather, the party controlled all facets of government. On May 30, 1949, shortly after the *Grundgesetz* in the West and the end of the Berlin Airlift, this constitution was adopted. In September, Stalin accepted the new state and on October 11, 1949, the constitution of the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR) was passed and Wilhelm Pieck became the president, while Ulbricht became a deputy to the minister-president (325).

During the 1950s, each country operated on its own, recovering and rebuilding from the war. One more attempt was made at unification, oddly enough from the eastern side of the iron curtain. The Soviets proposed a unified, neutral Germany to the Western Allies, however, still believing that Germany, especially Berlin, was important in stopping the spread of Communism, the Allies refused. Adenauer also refused the offer, a move which was often attacked by his political opponents. However, no more attempts were made to unify Germany (328).

Under the control of Ulbricht, the DDR slowly developed into a police state, political purges and secret police informants strengthening the SED’s singular control of the country (330). Berlin remained a contested territory throughout the 50s, each side unsatisfied with the status quo in the city and each trying to gain control. Meanwhile, Berlin also continued to be the gate through which citizens escaped the DDR (337). The East German economy suffered greatly with the loss of so many highly educated citizens.

Ulbricht asked Moscow, not for the first time, to be allowed to seal off West Berlin and was given permission in August of 1961. So, on the morning of August, 13, the DDR began building what they called the “antifascist defensive wall” to stop the flood across the border in Berlin. In a day, the city was completely divided, the border marked by barbed wire and East German guards. The first incarnation of the Berlin Wall was standing (338).

From 1961 until 1989, Germany and Berlin remained an important front in the Cold War, but little changed. The BRD and the DDR went about their business, clashing mainly in propaganda campaigns, fighting for the minds of people on both sides of the Wall. In the early ‘70s Willy Brandt began a new policy of *Ostpolitik*, officially recognizing the DDR as a country, and the two states began to have dealings with one another in 1970 (355). The change in government from Ulbricht to Honecker in the East, however, again drew a sharp line between the two Germanys. West Germany oriented itself culturally very closely with the United States, and enjoyed great economic success. East German culture stagnated somewhat, but grew increasingly varied in the ‘80s. It is important now to look at the timeline of the structure in question in this paper, the structure that physically and symbolically separated these two cultures and two nations: the Berlin Wall.

So, in August of 1961, approximately two months after Ulbricht had claimed “No one has the intention to build a wall,” a wall was built. Although it is often looked at as an assertion of power by the East, Brian Ladd explains in his book *The Ghosts of Berlin* that the construction of the Wall actually meant the Soviet block was physically relinquishing any claim on West Berlin. In addition, although the East built the Wall, the

decisiveness of the measure was more of a relief to the Western Allies than anything. They had proved their willingness to defend their rights to Berlin during the Berlin airlift, but none of the Allies wished to have an out-and-out battle for the city (Ladd 22).

At first the “Wall” was not a wall really; rather a barbed wire barrier defended by soldiers (Hildebrandt 10). Two days later East German forces began construction of a concrete wall to replace the barbed wire. Seven checkpoints (the most famous of which is Checkpoint Charlie) were left for regulated traffic between East and West. East Germans continued trying to cross the Wall and some succeeded. Today at the site of Checkpoint Charlie there is a museum dedicated to these people, showing their wild escapes. These escapes include a 145 meter-long tunnels underneath the Wall (in operation from 1966 to 1971); a homemade hot air balloon flight over the Wall (1979); and cars retrofitted to drive under the bars of the border control, through the Wall, or smuggle people across the border (Hildebrandt). Some attempted escapees were not so fortunate as to succeed, however. The highest profile case was when 18 year-old Peter Fechter was shot in 1962 trying to escape (Waldenburg 114). He lay for 50 minutes bleeding to death just on the East side of the wall, in perfect view of horrified onlookers and journalists on the West side (Hildebrandt 52).



Peter Fechter dying next to the Wall ("Berlin Wall")

During the 60s and 70s, the Wall continued to be an important propaganda battle for both sides. It was the symbol of the division of all of Europe and thus was politically

important. (Ladd 19). Adenauer, Kennedy, and Reagan were just a few of the important German and American figures to visit the Wall from the West side, and on the East side



Kennedy's 1963 visit to the Wall ("Berlin Wall")

carefully controlled events and photo opportunities were also part of the political propaganda battle (22). On the East side it was called the “antifascist defensive wall,” one the West *Schandmauer* or “wall of shame,” among other things (19). Ladd describes this as a “battle to define a symbol”.

Each side pretended that the wall separated them from some remnant of Nazism. This was a truly Orwellian battle of language, and the West won. The Wall was increasingly seen internationally as a human rights violation, and the East German justification of “defense” lacked sincerity and support (22). The Berlin Wall was more than a symbol, though; it was also a structure with a political meaning to its physical space.

The Wall was a place of protest on the west side: both as a convenient, politically loaded area for assembly and as a blank page on which to vent or paint political slogans. On the East side, however, the Wall was not simply a wall but a fortification. Unlike most other walls of defense in history (including the medieval one surrounding this very city), the Berlin Wall’s main fortifications were on the inside. Whereas the West side was unused, unordered space; the East side of the main wall, “the Wall,” was hyper organized. This border was a no man’s land, accessible only to frontier guards. It was known as the “death strip” and varied in width depending on the density of the city



System of defense on the East side of the Wall (Flack)

adjacent. The death strip was punctuated with watch towers, manned by guards prepared to kill in order to “defend” citizens against succumbing to the temptations of the West. Barbed wire, smaller fences

and walls, guard dogs, and floodlights further protected the East side of the concrete structure, which in itself was rather plain and unthreatening (17-18).

Needless to say, the east side of the Wall was not a space for protest or political writing, citizens were not even supposed to mention its existence (Ladd 19). Even on the west side, however, there was little writing on the Wall and no art up until the late 70s and early 80s when the Wall was again rebuilt. In fact, during this time the Wall all but disappeared from the “cognitive

landscape” of the West Berlin consciousness (Stein 85). There were several incarnations of the Wall after initial barbed wire was strung in 1961. First it became a block and mortar structure topped with barbed wire, then in 1963 it was replaced



The block and mortar Wall in 1961 (Burkhardt)

with thick, stacked concrete slabs. At one point, in 1966, the Wall along Chausseestraße, near the center of the city, was even decorated with yellow, corrugated plastic siding. In

1975, construction began on the “fourth generation Wall,” and this structure was not complete until 1980. This time the DDR replaced the concrete slabs and the wire of the third generation wall with the familiar thick, smoothly jointed concrete wall. Instead of barbed wire to make climbing difficult, a large pipe was placed at the top. This is the Berlin Wall that is most commonly seen in pictures. It is this Wall that is truly



The fourth generation Berlin Wall (Pastemaci)

synonymous in many people’s minds with the name “Berlin.” It was also this Wall which provided a new type of political gallery space as well as a space for public discourse. The East Germans even whitewashed the wall, creating what has been called the

*Betonleinwand*, meaning concrete screen or canvas (Gray, Hildebrandt 114).

This turned out to be a perfect term for the new wall, as the surface attracted writing and painting from all over. In the early and mid 80s internationally known artists such as Keith Haring, Richard Hambleton, Christophe Emanuel Bouchet, Thierry Noir, and Jonathan Borophsky painted stunning murals on the Berlin Wall. The phrases and written protest on the Wall continued, but now they were complimented by beautiful artwork, some by famous artists, and many more anonymous. The DDR actually built the Wall about two meters inside of their borders, so they technically had the right to sensor anything on even the western side of the wall, which they did at first. As time went on, however, this became virtually impossible. There was simply too much. (Gray).

Of course as the Wall became increasingly a visual political statement on the west side, it remained conspicuously blank on the east side. However, this would not last forever.

In 1989, the DDR was in bad shape. The government was basically bankrupt, but Honecker refused calls for reform, and continued to lie about the government's lack of funds to everyone but a select few. The Soviet Union under Gorbachev was reforming and loosening restrictions, but Honecker would not comply with their requests that he follow suit. The border between the Soviet block and Austria was opened up, allowing East German citizens to travel to Hungary by way of Czechoslovakia with legal travel passes. They could then escape to the BRD through the gap in the iron curtain between Hungary and Austria. In response, the DDR closed their border with Czechoslovakia to prevent an embarrassing mass exodus (Kitchen 382-385).

Throughout the summer citizens began to mount more and more protests calling for freedom of movement. In September and October, several demonstrations were broken up violently by the East German police. People persisted, though, and demonstrations during Gorbachev's visit to the DDR and leading up to the large 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration on October 11 showed that Honecker had lost his grip on the nation. On October 17, he was removed from his office of secretary-general. His successor, Egon Krenz reopened the border with Czechoslovakia, and 10,000 people poured out of East Germany and into the BRD between November 1 and 3. Then, on the evening of November 9<sup>th</sup>, the Associated Press broadcast that the border between the



Berliners celebrating on Nov. 9, 1989 ("Berlin Wall")



DDR and the BRD was open. The Wall was no longer being guarded. Everyone knows what happened then, people streamed across the Wall, climbed on the Wall, broke through the wall with sledgehammers. The iron curtain fell along with Berlin Wall (Kitchen 382-385).

Most people wanted the Wall, the structure itself, to just go away. First Berliners, then tourists hacked away at it. Pieces were kept or sold as souvenirs. There were a few calls to save stretches of the Wall, but these were mostly ignored. The one exception is an almost mile-long stretch of the Wall near Ostbahnhof. In 1990, thanks mostly to a Scottish gallerist, Christine MacLean, a series of colorful, celebratory murals were painted here. The artists, 118 of them from around the world, claimed small portions of the Wall and created 106 paintings total. The artwork saved the Wall in this area from destruction and remains a huge tourist attraction today. It also served to monumentalize and create a memorial out of the Wall (Ladd 34-35).

Throughout the rest of this paper, I will be concentrating on the writing and painting done on the Berlin Wall while it still stood, mainly between 1980 and 1989. This was the period when the biggest volume of work was done, thus creating the most interesting pieces and exchange between artists and writers. The formal aspects of the artwork are important as well as the surface of the Wall itself, but first thing to do is define the painting on the Berlin Wall and create a language with which to speak about it.

## Chapter 2: Defining the Art on the Berlin Wall

In 1985 Cleve Gray wrote in *Art in America* of the painting on the Berlin Wall:

“In the last year or two the character of the visual protests has changed. The ubiquitous graffiti and sloppy images that previously abounded are giving way to more serious, complex and powerfully painted communications; professional artists as well as students are in the process of making the Wall into one of the most extraordinary political statements in the world.” (Gray 39).

Obviously, the first important to do in order to properly discuss the painting on the Berlin Wall is to separate and define the genres of painting that were there. Categorizing the types of writing and painting on the Wall will provide the specific vocabulary to use in its analysis. It may not seem like this takes a lot of effort, choose a word; wall painting, graffiti, mural; and then stick with it. The problem is, though, that the Berlin Wall is a veritable palimpsest of words, phrases, and artwork. To call it simply “wall painting” is not specific enough, and does not address the different intentions and appearances of what is painted on the famous structure. Two types of artwork emerge as possible classifications for the art on the Wall: these are graffiti and murals, specifically the community murals that came out of New York City in the 1960s. Before we can apply these terms, however, it is important to examine their meanings. “Graffiti,” in particular, is a word loaded with conflicting meanings. The person using the word tends to define it based on their own prejudices with regard to graffiti and graffiti artwork themselves. It is also a very inexact word, one that describes two specific types of wall “writing.”

The word “graffiti” comes from the Italian *graffiere*, and literally means “little scratchings” (Abel 3). Robert Reisner describes graffiti as dating back to the first drawings made on the walls of caves in Paleolithic Europe. He argues that the act of writing on walls and leaving one’s mark as proof of one’s existence, is a basic human

impulse (24). Reisner, along with Abel and Buckley, has made a career of analyzing what people write on walls. Many scholars argue that the phrases people scrawl anonymously on the walls of bathroom stalls and other highly accessible public places have a lot to say about the society in which the writers live. This sociological analysis of wall writing has a long history and is often used to look back at ancient cultures such as Rome, Greece, Pompeii, and even Medieval Europe, in order to discover what life and society were like through what private people thought worthy to pen anonymously in public (Abel, Reisner). One use of the word “graffiti” refers specifically to these anonymous, public texts.

There is, however, a more common use of the word among art critics, city authorities world-wide, and the general population. I am referring, of course, to the bright and bold, textually based wall art that has become a common site in most cities around the world: what is called “New York subway” or “hip hop graffiti”. The origins of this type of graffiti are unknown, some say that it grew out of the other type, bathroom wall writing for example, but it is certainly a movement that developed in response to very specific conditions in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Miller 15). David Ley and Roman Cybriwsky write in their survey (1974) of use of graffiti as markers of urban territory that this time was “an era of massive social change” that led to a reappearance of “one small feature of man’s heritage...the practice of making graffiti in public places” (Cybriwsky 491). The middle class was moving to the suburbs, leaving behind in the inner city minority groups with relatively low socioeconomic status. Graffiti is generally considered to be a response to poverty and racism in the city at the time: youths, mostly young men of color, tried to regain a sense of control by laying

physical and artistic claim first to the subway lines across the city and later walls around the country (Miller 15). Graffiti was one of the four elements of the hip hop culture that developed in response to the situation in which young people in the inner city found themselves. Rap, break dancing, and “turntablism” are considered the other three arts of hip hop (Riviere 25). Because the art form began by using simple, stylized texts, graffiti artists refer to themselves as “writers.” In 2000, graffiti writer MICO told author Ivor Miller, “Aerosol art, along with jazz and gospel music, is one of the few art forms to have originated in the U.S.” (Miller 12).

By the late 1980s, tagging, or signing of one’s graffiti pseudonym in a stylistic manner, as well as large scale graffiti murals called “pieces” dominated the walls of New York City, as well as most other cities around the United States (Ferrell 3). Authorities responded with many anti-graffiti campaigns, the largest of which was the “Keep America Beautiful” campaign (Miller 6). Often, people who were against the wall writing in their cities called graffiti “vandalism” and were quick to draw connections between graffiti and poverty, crime, and gang activity. They often used the so called “broken windows” theory to connect graffiti with petty criminality (Riviere 25). In his ethnography of artists in the graffiti subculture in Denver, Colorado, *Crimes of Style*, Jeff Ferrell argues that these conclusions by city authorities, as well as city residents, were completely false. He provides numbers released by the mayor’s office in Denver stating that in 1988 50% of graffiti was done by graffiti writers and another 30% by serious taggers. So, in reality, gang related and racially motivated graffiti was relatively limited (4).

Also during the 1980s, despite public outcry in the United States against the “vandalism” taking place in cities, graffiti gained a great following among people who look at art for a living. In 1983, the pseudo-documentary film *Wild Style* was released, followed shortly by a catalogue style book about graffiti by Martha Coopers, titled *Subway Art* (1984). A year later another film was released, *Style Wars!* (Ferrel 9). These three works on graffiti served to popularize the “art” around the world. Especially in Europe, hip hop graffiti began to appear abundantly in cities. It went from being an American phenomenon to a common characteristic of cities nearly everywhere. Europeans and others made innovations, of course, and the style of the graffiti varied immensely even within the US, but a certain basic look and the importance of lettering, spray paint, and brilliant color remained characteristics of hip hop graffiti around the world (11).

Since the word “graffiti” has gained such a negative connotation through anti-graffiti campaigns and general public disapproval, many of the artists themselves reject the label and instead use the term “aerosol art” to describe their work. Conversely, other artists enjoy using “graffiti” as a name for their art exactly *because* of the rebellious connotation. They think of it as a way of fighting what they see as a perverse, classist, and racist system (Miller 19). However, although protest and fighting the system are both important aspects of graffiti, the socioeconomic status of the graffiti writers’ backgrounds is not instrumental in the classification of artwork as “graffiti.” Most, if not all, of the authors who delve into the social meanings of graffiti concentrate on artists who are poor and often Latino or black, but they also admit that even in the US and especially in Europe, there are many white, middle-class graffiti writers. So, the

background of the writer specifically is not important, but graffiti generally has to have some element of class or power struggle.

As graffiti gained the respect, or at least the interest, of the art world, it was inevitable that someone would try to make it a commodity. In 1988, Richard Lachmann writes: “Recently, police repression and the recruitment of a few writers to paint graffiti canvases for sale in galleries have fragmented the graffiti art world.” (229) Gallery owners and art critics, as well as many graffiti writers themselves, tried to sell graffiti and define it as art in the traditional sense, thus reducing graffiti “to a new fashion, fit to be sold on canvases, T-shirts, or coffee mugs.” (Lachmann 232). Interestingly enough, this road from public borderline hysteria about the societal dangers of graffiti to a watered down, for-sale approach in the art market can be compared to the Berlin Wall itself, as well as the art on it. When the border was opened and the Wall lost its function as a dangerous border, it almost immediately became a commodity (Ladd 8-10). People broke up the Wall and sold the pieces. Tourists can still buy small bits of concrete, bright on one side with paint from the art on the Wall. There are calendars, postcards, coffee cups, and books plastered with photographs of the Wall and its famous paintings, usually generalizing them as “graffiti”. But can these paintings truly be called graffiti? There are several important aspects of graffiti that are absolutely intrinsic to the art, and at least some of these must be applicable in order to call wall painting “graffiti.”

I made reference earlier to the “graffiti subculture.” This is one extremely important aspect that the painting of the Berlin Wall did not and could not share. Lachmann explains that graffiti writers are at once involved “in an art world and a deviant subculture.” (230) Ivor Miller recounts how many of his contacts in the graffiti

world no longer wanted to be involved in his book when they found out that artists like Keith Haring were going to be mentioned. From the perspective of the writers, Haring was an outsider, not part of the subculture. For this reason, many graffiti writers rejected peoples' use of the term "graffiti" in connection with Haring's work. "There remains a vanguard of writers who view their art form as a living, sacred one with its own value system, hermetically sealed from the rest of society," says Miller, explaining the importance of membership in this subculture (16). Ferrell, Ley and Cybriwsky, and Lachmann all describe in detail the graffiti world's highly structured hierarchy of "toys", full "writers," and the masters or "kings." They also discuss the progression of an artist's work from tagging to full pieces. If Haring is rejected by graffiti artists who all have to pay their dues to what Lachmann calls this "alternative social order" (232), one can assume that many of the other famous artists who worked on the Wall, such as Fetting, Borofsky, Rolot, Hambleton, Bouchet, and Noir, would most likely also be rejected by this group. Similarly, the anonymous people who wrote on the Berlin Wall can not accurately be called "graffiti artists" or "writers" either, simply because they wrote on a wall once. "Writing is a well-organized urban art movement with traditions and social structure: individuals, crews, and hierarchical positions," says Anthropologist Melisa Riviere (25), and the "artists" of the Berlin Wall are absolutely not a part of this movement. However, although the people themselves cannot truly be included in the term "graffiti," except the actual graffiti writers who worked on the Wall, there are aspects of the space and painting itself that allow the concept to be applied to some of the work that appeared on the Wall.

The first important characteristic of hip hop graffiti is really a quality of the wall painted on and not so much the art that is put there. Simply put, graffiti is illegal. This is actually true of both hip hop graffiti and simple wall scribbles: they are in places where they are not supposed to be. Riviere says that what distinguishes graffiti from other forms of aerosol art, such as murals, is its “guerilla tactics.” “Graffiti is art produced illegally,” she writes, “without permission, and clandestinely” (25). Ivor Miller suggests that not only is the illegality of graffiti a form of protest against society, it is also an expression of freedom. He writes that true freedom is to write on something that you are not supposed to, to demonstrate that you are able to break society’s rules and property laws (19).

The question to be asked then is: was the painting on the Berlin Wall illegal? Perhaps de jure but generally not de facto. Since the Wall stood inside East German territory, the East German government could to some extent control what was painted on the West side, but with so much volume, they generally ignored their right to censorship. However, Brian Ladd writes in *Ghosts of Berlin* that an exciting element of risk was added to painting on the wall because of “rare occasions [when] East German border guards slipped through concealed doors in the Wall and nabbed graffiti artists defacing the border fortifications” (26). So there *was* an element of illegality, of danger, but a very small one. As for the West German authorities, they tended to even encourage the decoration of the West side of the Wall, both as protest and as a lucrative tourist attraction for West Berlin (Gray 40). Painting on the Wall therefore would probably not have gained a lot of respect from the graffiti subculture, where both physically and legally dangerous spaces are considered the only canvases for painting (Cybriwsky 494).



An early Berlin graffiti writer, KUBAM told *Urban Calligraphy and Beyond* authors Markus Mai and Aurthur Remke in an interview that in the '80s European, especially German, writers often proved their “skills and style” on the Berlin Wall; however, many of the younger Berlin graffiti artists at the time already considered the Wall too easy and were only interested in illegal writing (Mai 4).

Still, although the art and writing on the Wall were not particularly dangerous, and to a large extent lacked the illegality of graffiti (and certainly the heavy police repression) it did express the freedom that Miller discussed in a similar fashion. The artists, tourists, and citizens of Berlin were, in a way, writing on something that they shouldn't: they were writing on a formal border, a political structure—one which most people preferred simply to ignore. Cristina Haus writes for *ARTnews* that in 1986 artist Keith Haring “left his characteristic marks in perhaps their most appropriate context—the site where such expressions are most blatantly denied” (11). So although the defacement of the Wall was not particularly controlled by either side, writing or painting on it was still symbolic of the freedom to do so, a freedom not available on the other side.

Another important element of graffiti that is closely related to its opposition to the law is its status as art in protest; however, this has more to do with the intention of the art itself rather than the space on which it appears. Miller lists two of the four main themes of graffiti as “the idea of constructing an identity in opposition to the state and consumer culture; and the idea that resistance through cultural production is reinforced” (13). He says that a graffiti writer manipulates language and image in such a way as to challenge the limits of the alphabet and the authority of society and the government (22). Graffiti artists were forcing people to acknowledge their existence and their rebellion; similarly,

artists who painted the Berlin Wall were creating a form of protest that was aesthetic, but that forced passersby to acknowledge the presence of the Wall that so many of them tried to ignore. Many of the phrases on the Wall, phrases such as “*Berlin wird Mauer-frei!*” (Berlin will be Wall free), “Ghetto, ghetto, ghetto,” and “If you love somebody set them free,” express artists’ “moral indignation” to the division of the city (Gray 40). Just as Riviere defines graffiti as being politically active (25), every social analysis of the art on the Berlin Wall talks about the fact that much of what was written and painted was done so in protest against what was happening: against division, Communism, walls, totalitarianism, etc. In this aspect, the painting shares much with hip hop graffiti.

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The next few traits intrinsic to graffiti that are important to examine in relation to the Berlin Wall painting are more formal qualities of graffiti writing/art itself. The first two deal with the process of painting graffiti on a wall. Miller defines graffiti as a “living art form,” meaning that it is a highly active form of painting in which the process is of great importance (5). In fact, he compares graffiti to Jackson Pollock’s process of action painting (4). Ferrell also describes the methods of creating graffiti. The writer starts by applying a ground of light paint and then tops the field with whatever text and imagery he wants to create (78-80). The important thing about this process, however, is the conditions under which the painting is done, and the setting chosen for the painting. The situation in which the process is completed and the wall on which the writer sprays is nearly as important as the ideas of the writer and style of the work. Graffiti must be completed carefully, while watching out for the police and spectators. Speed is necessary, which adds to the active nature of the medium. The wall interacts with the

paint by limiting the dimensions of and providing a very specific surface for the piece. The Berlin Wall obviously does with its peculiar dimensions (14ft high by whatever length the artist chooses) as well as the politically charged nature of the structure itself. The artist has an interaction with the wall on which she is painting that is a result of the nature of the structure. Gray describes the wall as a “highly charged historical setting, one which triggers an immediate metaphysical interaction of geography, human destiny, the artists’ declarations and the spectators’ responses” (39).

This quote points directly to a second important quality of the process of making graffiti, the fact that it is an interactive art. Miller calls graffiti a call and response form in that it can be covered up or responded to by other graffiti writers (5). Thus graffiti creates layers of interactive art, often combinations of images and text, sometimes around one subject like a conversation between artists but at other times consisting of unrelated messages next to and on top of each other, creating a cacophony of images. The painting on the Berlin Wall has the same call and response nature, and most photos show a palimpsest of art and messages by different authors, sometimes famous, sometimes anonymous. For example, on the morning of the twentieth anniversary of the wall the performance artist Stefan Rolot painted a section of the wall near Potsdamer Platz a brilliant gold. By afternoon the gold was covered with responding images and text, some by Berlin artists, some simple messages left by tourists (Gray 39). Graffiti art and the art on the Berlin Wall also both interact with their audience, the average graffiti because of the “need to express shared urban experiences,” (Miller 5) and the Berlin Wall again because of the nature of the Wall itself and the emotions it evoked in the artwork’s audience.

The final two traits that are absolutely crucial to graffiti, and thus the categorization of artwork as graffiti, are attributes specifically of the work. The first is the impermanence of graffiti. As Ley and Cybriwsky write, “The graffiti king conquers a place momentarily; maintenance is impossible.” (505) Obviously, this is also a quality of the space: graffiti must be on a wall, generally in a “public space” and is open to reworking or obliteration by other artists as well as the property owners, city authorities, and the elements. Paul Pettit of the Manhattan Transit Authority said in 1988 to Miller that, “Graffiti is not art in any way, shape, or form. Art to me is everlasting” (7). To him, the impermanence of graffiti excluded it from consideration as artwork. Miller then points out that photography is what makes this art “everlasting” (7). In the same way, the art on the Berlin Wall could be whitewashed by authorities on either side, covered by other “artists,” and was also exposed to the elements. Gray says that the “changing aspect of the Wall’s surface ... gives increased force to the political protests being continuously made there.” (Gray) However, the paint on the Wall turned out to be even less permanent than most people in the ‘80s could have guessed. When the Wall came down, so did the artwork. It was sold in pieces, sometimes large chunks, sometimes bits the size of a dime. Just like most graffiti pieces, the “immortality” of these works is provided by the photographs taken of them when the Berlin Wall was still up. In fact, they are the only record for someone like myself, who is too young to remember the Wall or its colorful West Side, to analyze this artwork at all. Even today, the East Side Gallery is continually tagged and painted over, and has been so faded by pollution and weather that many paintings are hardly recognizable.

Finally, an important formal aspect of graffiti is its relationship with text. Although there are large graffiti murals that are pure imagery, the term graffiti is mostly used to refer to writing. This is true of the graffiti scrawled on bathroom walls by everyday individuals as well as hip hop graffiti, which began with the stylized signing of one's name (Miller 3). Reisner argues that this writing is a basic human impulse and a normal response to the environment. If this is true, then hip hop graffiti and the writing on the Berlin Wall are cousins, both born out of difficult political and social situations. Both often set themselves in opposition to what the artists considered unjust conditions, but both also have a lighter side, humor comparable to the bathroom stall humor that Reisner, along with others, including Abel and Buckley, catalogues. The relationship between text and imagery in the painting on the Wall will be discussed further later, but it is obvious that both the painting on the Berlin Wall and hip hop graffiti in general share a strong tie to written messages and the more traditional sense of the word "graffiti."

As graffiti is not the only kind of art which can be invoked in descriptions of the artwork and writing on the Berlin Wall, I also used the term mural when appropriate for the type of artwork being described. There are a number of different types of murals and different mural movements. Graffiti itself can be described as a very specific type of mural as in Alan Barnett's book *Community Murals: The People's Art*. Community murals arose as a movement in 1967. Like graffiti they began in response to the political situation at the time as a form of activism (Barnett 42). Barnett defines murals as "any form of large-scale articulate wall painting, mounted in public places, indoors or out, for viewing by large numbers of people at one time." Community murals specifically are called such because they are created by people, both trained and untrained, in a certain

community (131). Barnett writes “A movement of authentic people’s art has sprung up throughout the country. Artists are collaborating with local residents to paint murals that assert the fundamental concerns of a community life” (11).

On the surface this may seem very different from the art on the Berlin Wall, which was created by people from around the world and was not physically a part of one specific neighborhood or community in the city. However, it was a democratic space used by trained and untrained people to create a communal, public demonstration. Many of the large, intricate pieces must truly be defined as murals (and they fit well in Barnett’s definition), and in a way the artists came from an international community of people who were concerned about Communism or the act of physically dividing a city because of a political dispute. “The mural represents an important achievement in building a democratic culture and technology,” writes Barnett of the community mural (20).

In addition, many of the aspects of graffiti on the Berlin Wall are qualities of the community mural as well. For instance, Barnett defines the murals as functional art, art of real life that provides a political service for the neighborhoods in which it is created. Its quality is measured in terms of the message conveyed (17). These murals often memorialize a fight won by a particular union, or are meant to encourage racial understanding within the neighborhood. Thus, this type of mural also includes paintings in protest and paintings with a political conscience, much like graffiti. Muralist Jason Crum has said: “Public art established beauty and a sense of one person reaching out to touch another, as part of the experience of city life. Wall paintings provide a forum for the city’s artists and establish a line of communication between the artist and the community” (37). This demonstrates the murals’ ability to interact with the audience,

perhaps in an even more meaningful way than graffiti, since it is more accessible to the general public. One final similarity among community murals, graffiti, and the art on the Berlin Wall is almost too obvious to mention, but is an important formal aspect: they are all outdoors and are all at the risk of being destroyed the next day. They are all also very closely tied, artistically and in their meaning, to the setting in which they are created. Murals, like graffiti and the art on the Wall, are created generally in response to a specific setting, both symbolically and physically.

The main thing that separates community murals from graffiti lies in the graffiti subculture and the text/image balance. As stated earlier, the graffiti subculture is an important part of the genre. It is highly structured, hierarchical, and artists who are not initiates cannot truly call themselves graffiti writers, nor their art graffiti. Community murals are often organized by groups of artists who have no such subculture. They are members of the art world, but not members of the deviant art world. Their work is fully legal. Also, murals tend to center far more on the image: most have no text whatsoever. This is in obvious contrast to graffiti which may be purely image-based, but is more closely tied to text.

Thus, from this survey of two similar, yet quite different genres in which to place the art of the Berlin Wall, it has become clear that in order to categorize it we must split the art up into two basic types—text-based and image-based. Yet, this is obviously far too simple a definition, as many times text and image are layered, often by several different artists. I will thus refer to “graffiti” as that which fits into the hip hop graffiti category as well as that which is simply graffiti in the classic sense—“little scratchings,” messages left by people, anonymous or otherwise. Names, humorous messages, blank

political statements, and highly stylized hip hop text on the Berlin Wall are graffiti. Also included in this category will be anonymous cartoons and other quick, sketchy drawings which could not be called finished murals. On the other hand, large-scale, fully finished paintings by famous artists can not truly be called graffiti: they lack anonymity, illegality, and would be rejected as graffiti by the graffiti subculture. These are murals, murals belonging to the international community in response to their particular setting as well as international political and social conditions. I consider them to be a specific example of the “community mural.”



### **Chapter Three: Formal Aspects Berlin Wall Art**

As suggested in the previous chapter, the graffiti and murals of the Berlin Wall were often in competition with one another. I call this “competition” not just because of the layering of images and text on the Wall, but also in reference to Michel Foucault’s work on the relationship between words and images in visual representation. Foucault was one of the first to delve into this relationship, and he discovered that text and image “fight” for the attention of the audience. On the Berlin Wall this competition certainly exists, and is much more complicated than simply the question of who wins, image or text. This chapter will analyze the continuum of image/text relationships as well as the parallel graffiti/mural relationships that existed on the Wall.

Before beginning to look at specific works and stretches of Wall, I need to define and limit the images that I will be considering. An important aspect of the painting on the Berlin Wall briefly mentioned earlier and discussed in more depth later is its impermanence. What is specific to this wall is that even the art and writing that managed to survive other painters, the elements, and censorship from the East were still destroyed in the months following the fall of the Wall. Except for the East Side Gallery, which I will not be looking at specifically, none of the painting on the Berlin Wall exists anymore, nor has it existed for nearly 18 years. I have selected several images to work with, most from Hermann Waldenburg’s book of photographs of the Wall and a few supplemental images that were particularly interesting from various internet sites. I believe that this forms a collection of images that is representative of what existed on the Berlin Wall and also spans a wide range of text/image relationships, themes, and intent.

Many intellectuals have explored the relationship between text and image in art and visual representation. In his book *This is Not a Pipe*, Foucault writes, “In one way or another, subordination is required. Either the text is ruled by the image...or else the image is ruled by the text”. Foucault laid out the traditional view of these interactions. There are pure images and pure texts, but when the two are combined in visual media, they compete with one another with one type of representation dominating: the image becomes merely an illustration of the text or the text becomes an explanation of the image. These two situations can be clearly understood by thinking of a book that includes illustrative images or a painting that has a descriptive title (Gaggi 7). Cultural critic Silvio Gaggi argues in *From Text to Hypertext* that although these two types of representation do compete for power in a work, they also each have a role in the formation and communication of the subject to the viewer or audience (1). Gaggi examines the painting, “The Wedding of Adolfini,” by Jan van Eyck as an example of a piece in which the text and image are nearly, if not completely, equal in importance. Interestingly, in accordance with Foucault, Gaggi concludes that this equality between two types of representation that are so at odds adds to the disquieting effect of the painting, and causes it to function almost like a legal document (8).

From the arguments by these two theorists, Foucault and Gaggi, it seems that we can be sure of the existence of works of pure text, pure image, and various power relationships in between: images with text, text with image, and the very occasional work in which they are equally important. However, W.J.T. Mitchell complicates what seems like a simple continuum from pure text to pure image in his books, *Iconology* and *Picture Theory*. In *Iconology*, he argues that the traditional way of looking at text/image

relationships is really a result of the critic trying to elevate one form of representation above the other. He considers it to be a rather natural, but artificial distinction between two quite similar types of representation. In *Picture Theory* he explains that the difference is more between “modes of experience” (5), that images and text are two somewhat different channels to a common understanding. Mitchell goes on to make a rather revolutionary argument, that all media are “composite” media, or a mixture of image and text (95). He calls this composite “imagetext,” a description which is broken down into two categories: “textual pictures,” which are texts that create an image and “pictorial texts,” or images which involve text (107-112).

Below, I will look at the painting on the Berlin Wall in light of these critical concepts about the relationship between image and text beginning with an attempt to separate out what Foucault or Gabbi might call pure images by looking at pieces that fit under my definition of “murals”. Because of the layered nature of the Wall, there are surprisingly few works that are really purely image or text, but they did exist. In particular, many images on the Wall so totally dominated any signatures, or other “little scratchings” around them that they can be considered completely image based (figures 1-9, Appendix). Many of these works were exhibition pieces by single or small groups of artists. Some were by famous artists like Bouchet, Noir, Hambleton, and Haring; others are anonymous. These pieces can truly be called “murals” as they were large scale and existed mainly in popular tourist areas of the city where they were viewed by thousands of people. Many are works in protest against the politics that divided Berlin or against the construction of the Wall itself. These messages of protest are communicated in different ways, some, including figures 1 and 2, merely depict a positive, cohesive image

of humanity. Others, exemplified in figure 3, use rather nationalistic language: the German flag was a common symbolic image on the Wall. Violence was also a common theme, as the Berlin Wall was a violent structure, and sometimes bloody imagery was used to protest the political, psychological, and physical violence that resulted from the division of the city (figure 4).

Another common visual theme was the illusion of a breach in the Wall itself (figures 5 and 6). This visual destruction of the Wall is reflexive, the artist creating a work that directly referenced the structure on which it was painted and in doing so the work destroyed the surface. This is what Mitchell would define as a “metapicture,” or an image which references itself or the act of painting, in this case its “canvas” (*Picture Theory* 58-61). Such paintings create an optical illusion of a breach in the Wall which actually reminds the viewer of the fact that there *was* no hole in the Wall. The representation of the Wall’s destruction conveyed a feeling of the structure’s permanence and the impotence of the citizens of both Berlins. This idea can be expanded to the other themes and images, all of which were a reaction to and a protest against the very structure on which they were painted. They protest the Wall and yet function as a constant reminder of its existence.

Not all of the murals were political protests, however. Some images seem to have very little to do with the Berlin Wall other than the fact that that is where they were painted. Figures 7, 8, and 9 are examples of works that are politically uncharged. The artists were simply using a well-visited structure as gallery space: the Wall became a place of exhibition. Gray writes in his “Report from Berlin,” that some works are the “exploits of artists looking for publicity—when their work is completed, they call a news

conference” (39). This statement sounds rather critical of these artists, but one can hardly blame people for choosing a place to exhibit their work that was free and visited by thousands of tourists from all over the world. These works, along with the more political ones, helped mold the Berlin Wall into a forum of international exchange.

There is almost no obvious text in any of these works, and what few words may appear in the photographs are certainly little competition for the image. However, Mitchell’s argument that *all* images are really pictorial texts can actually be quite easily applied to the images at hand. The works whose object was to mount a visual, political protest do not use text directly, but they are wildly symbolic and metaphoric. Figures 1 and 2 use a sort of cartoon language in order to depict and explain a vision of humanitarian universalism. Figure 3 is another example of the use of imagery in order to convey a particular meaning. The flag becomes a succinct sign for German unity or disunity. Text is really just words, symbols that communicate a specific meaning to anyone who speaks that language. The flag functions as a word in this image. Figures 4, 5, and 6 also use loaded symbols; the Wall, the East German TV tower, a skull, barricades, and guns to convey a message. These images do more than simply illustrate one particular idea, however. They are visual stories, narratives that protest the Wall and the politics of German division. The artists of these pieces tell a story in a visual language that all observers can immediately understand. In a way, these images are a more powerful form of text because they do not have the limitations of language, which could not be understood by all viewers.

The more exhibition-like pieces also include aspects of text, even though they are practically text-free in the traditional sense. For example, the works of Bouchet (figures

7 and 8) have no text other than his signature. But in fact, this little bit of text is quite important: in *Picture Theory*, Mitchell maintains that the artists' signature should actually be considered text in a painting. It communicates to the audience the fact that the artist claims the painting and helps instruct them how to receive the work (95). Why did Bouchet sign the paintings on the Wall at all? He did it, of course, in order to tell the viewers that he was responsible for the work. Many of the paintings on the Wall are completely anonymous, but through his signature, people know to look at these differently. Signatures aside, though, the images themselves are also highly textual because of their content. Both are mythological and use the language of legends and religion to create a sort of a narrative that is separate from the Berlin Wall itself. Mitchell explains this narrative quality to be in fact a textual quality, as it uses the traditions and conventions (such as metaphor) of literature.

It is much more difficult to find examples of supposedly pure text on the Berlin Wall, mainly because of how text was layered, by different individuals usually over or around pre-existing images. Most of what one does see is graffiti in the traditional sense of the term, words and phrases written by private people in this highly public place. There are personal messages between lovers, individual political statements, and innumerable names, dates, and phrases that amount to declarations of "I was here," made by tourists who wanted to mark their existence on one of the most politically loaded and famous structures in the world. However, these all have much more sociological importance than they do formal artistic meaning. One could argue that they are examples of Mitchell's "textual images" because they invoke images of people and places around the world, and use visually loaded topics like the Wall itself. However, it is far more

interesting from an artistic standpoint to go on and consider what lies in between image and text, the shades of gray in the power scale laid out by Foucault.

The scrawlings on the Wall that existed in tandem with pictures do compete for attention with the images regardless of their intention, but many did not have the same formal relationship with the image as a painting in a gallery would with the text it includes or its own title. This is because the text was often written by someone other than who created the nearby image. One can tell in a glance which phrases and sentences are related to the images with which they appear and which are added by someone different and hence do not refer to the content or subject of the image. The distinction can mainly be seen in the materials used to make the marks. Also, sometimes the content is what immediately gives away whether the image and text were intended to coexist. This is remarkable, as it is a text-image relationship not really considered by any of the authors who have examined these types of representation. For the art on the Berlin Wall it becomes necessary to break down the intermediate steps along the image/text scale into two groups, both of which have their own scale: those in which image and text were intentionally painted next to one another in order to convey some joint meaning and those in which image and text were put next to each other purely coincidentally by different individuals. This distinction eliminates the problem of trying to compare segments of Wall with completely different intentions; and it is important for the examination of the power struggle between text and image in these different types of composites.

The first type of imagetext is the intentional combination of image and text to create one representation. There are several different ways in which this was done on the Berlin Wall, and each of these creates a different relationship and level of tension

between the pictures and the words. One method is exemplified in figures 10 and 11. These are large-scale, well crafted murals that use text in order to explain and help convey the artist's message. In figure 10, there is a good deal of tension between the image and the written text mainly because they are equal in power and importance. Like *The Marriage of Adolfini* that Gaggi discusses so thoroughly, the image in figure 10 needs the explanation of the text, and although the text could function without the image, it would have been a flat, simple thought rather than the exciting, lively piece that results from the illustration. Both forms of representation need each other to communicate the feeling and message to the viewer. Figure 11 is another classic example of the art on the Wall; however it is different from the previous work as in this case the image functions merely to illustrate the text. The picture of the hand adds importance to the text and catches the eye of the intended audience, but it is the text that actually communicates the creator's political stance. The hand could not begin to do this alone. Both text and image combined make this piece much more aggressively political than the first.

In both of the above cases, the image provides illustration and feeling to a message conveyed through text. In figure 12 the opposite is true: the image of the dove formed from human hands is a complicated symbol of unity and freedom. In this case the image absolutely dominates the work, conveying the entire concept of the piece, while the text merely sits inside, relatively inactive. The signatures perhaps add to the idea of unity communicated through the dove, but only act to claim the creation of the image, they do not particularly add to the message. It is important to note, however, that although the image dominates the picture, it is a highly textual image, even more so than the German flag discussed earlier. The dove is a common, easily read symbol for peace,



while the clasped hands are strongly metaphorical. Considering Mitchell's arguments, one could go beyond the initial dominance of the image and call this piece almost purely textual because of the nature of that image.

Another, very different use of combined text and image is far less formal and actually functions as an extremely cynical joke. Figures 13 and 14 are both very much metapictures in a similar way as figures 5 and 6. They consist of simple, concise images labeled in such a way as to remind people of the fact that the Wall is an impenetrable barrier. In both of these pieces, which are true graffiti because of their quick sketchiness and anonymity, the image and text are in one color, and do not separate themselves from one another. Image and text are both necessary for the joke that is the intention of the graffiti, yet there is basically no visual tension between them because of the similarity with which they are used. They are read like political cartoons. The outline of the door and sign are immediately recognized as and associated with the objects that they represent. The images become the objects and the text then simply becomes the label that one might see on that object in everyday life. This is a case in which the words and pictures function together like object and sign in the real world.

One final type of intentional combination of image and text is of course the use of hip hop graffiti on the Berlin Wall. Figure 15 is an excellent example of some European hip hop graffiti. One can very quickly see that although it is a text-based genre, and that the text is dominant, the colors and style of the text are imperative for the piece's identification as graffiti. The result is a beautifully styled tag that unlike all of the previous pieces really has no meaning at all, other than to claim the space for the writer. It is more similar to the tourists' messages of "I was here" than to the large-scale murals.

However, one also cannot ignore the fact that it is not just someone writing their name. Rather, it is an image of text, its whole intention is to serve as a sort of a territorial marker for the writer.

So, there are many different ways in which images and words were intentionally used together, all with different results. Unintentional, communal use of words and images was far more common on the Berlin Wall than were the full-scale imagetext murals. These interactive, composite works give many different visual results, but there is really only one method by which these palimpsests were created: by the layering of usually unrelated image and text by multiple parties. There is only a limited amount of discussion about the formal, artistic aspects of these layered works. Instead, they are more important for the examination of the Berlin Wall as a surface for public art and public exchange of ideas. However, it is important to see these pieces (figures 16-20) and appreciate how interesting and varied the resulting stretches of Wall are. In these chaotic, layered representations, the image generally wins its power struggle with text. If one takes an entire stretch of Wall and looks at it as a single work, the text has a tendency to fade into the background. Figures 16, 17 and 18 are examples of this, where the image has far more power than the text and becomes the focus. Figure 20, however, is an exception. On this length of Wall, a rare balance is achieved between the imagery and the text scrawled on top. Perhaps because the images are so varied in size, color, and subject matter and the text is so varied in size and background. Through this variation, the scatter of pictures and words achieve a sense of proportion and the multiple artists achieve a beautiful composition. The different pieces seem to belong together despite having originated independently.

There is considerable variety in the way text and image relate to one another in the art of the Berlin Wall. To some extent the paintings follow patterns laid out by Foucault, Gaggi, and Mitchell, however they also depart, mainly in pieces created by anonymous addition, cooperation, and even destruction by many artists and writers. These are the collaborations that particularly stand out, because of the amount to which they depart from traditional artwork. This Wall was a space where anyone could add, edit, even paint over preexisting artwork. It is in this area that the Berlin Wall truly stands out as a different kind of surface for artwork.

## Chapter Four: The Berlin Wall as a Space for Public Art

So far I have talked about the art on the Berlin Wall mainly as if it were art on any wall. However, it obviously is not. To fully discuss the paintings on the Berlin Wall, it is necessary to look at their setting, and their context, both important aspects in postmodern art. One cannot isolate a work from its surroundings. Especially in a case as high-profile and overtly political as the Berlin Wall, both the content of the paintings themselves and the surface on which they are painted are meaningful. The surface has significance, since it adds another layer of content to the graffiti and murals that were painted there.

A wall in general is a very specific surface for artwork. For many reasons, to paint on a wall is not the same as painting on a canvas. Art historian Uwe M. Schneede writes in the catalogue *Wall Works* that wall painting was the first type of painting in human history. Then, in the Middle Ages, religious panel paintings gained popularity and became the principle form of painting. The panel, and later the canvas, liberated art from the wall and made it mobile and therefore marketable. This form made museums and galleries as we know them possible. Wall paintings remained important as visual narratives in churches and later, in the Baroque period, as ornament to architecture. Wall painting became a medium which, in contrast to easel art, maintains a close connection to everyday life. It is the function of both the surface on which the painting appears and the space around the work that preserve this connection to the “real world”. First, the surface on which wall art is painted has true function in the world: to hold a building up. Schneede explains this by saying, “artwork derives its legitimacy from its constructed, functional surroundings” (Schneede 9). This in itself defines artwork that appears on a wall in functional terms.

In addition to the function of the actual surface, spaces which surround works of art on a wall have function and maintain their connection to the everyday world. In this way, the Berlin Wall, like most walls, is a very different exhibition space from the modernist gallery where most of us tend to observe artwork. Art theorist Brian O'Doherty discusses in depth the functions of a gallery and walls in a gallery in his book *Inside the White Cube*. He follows the development of gallery space from the nineteenth century salon, packed full of pictures of all themes and styles, separated from one another only by their heavy frames, to the modern gallery which he terms "the white cube." Even before the postmodern era, artists and critics realized the importance of the space where art is displayed. When examined carefully, the gallery takes on a very distinct meaning: it is an artificial, rather clinical, elite space where art is elevated to the level of a spiritual object. Artists are kept carefully separate from their artworks, yet artist's rebellions and publicity can increase the value of their pieces. This brings us to another very important function of a gallery—to sell paintings. The gallery presents itself as a space above and separate from the everyday world, it separates art very clearly from life, yet it is really another part of the consumer world in which we live. It is, in fact, precisely the separation from the real world which allows the gallery to call the works inside "art" and thus put a price tag on them. (O'Doherty 13-34). By these definitions, wall art has no monetary value because it appears in a functional space which is part of the real world. This space connects the artwork to everyday life, yet does not have the gallery's ability to endow its contents with monetary value.

The wall itself, in addition to the surrounding space, interacts with the artwork which appears on its surface. Wall paintings are inseparable from the context of the wall

on which they are painted. They are not tested against new settings or changing neighboring paintings (Wall Works 11-15). They are generally permanent, and can only be “removed” from the wall by photographic documentation. Like the Berlin Wall, if something happens to the surface itself photos are all that is left of the artwork. These photographs then take the artwork out of its all-important context. In the case of the Berlin Wall, the murals and graffiti cannot be discussed individually in relation to their context because photographs rarely show more than one limited segment of work. Instead they have to be discussed in terms of the political context given them by the Wall itself. In this way the nature of the structure gives meaning to the artwork. It imposes visual limits and borders on the painting, and can lend symbolic meaning to the work if the wall has meaning on its own.

While the Berlin Wall did not end up having the permanence which is generally intrinsic to walls on which people paint, it did give social and political significance to the art which appeared on its surface. Paintings on the Berlin Wall were paintings on the most controversial and political structure of its time, perhaps in history. The German flag and symbols of unity (figure 3) create a political statement in their own right, but the fact that they are painted on this specific surface gives the painting a huge, diverse audience and also heightens the effect of the political statement. The shooting scene (figure 4) would be disturbing if seen anywhere. However, it has much more impact when it is present on the structure whose “defense” it is depicting. The presence of the painting on the Berlin Wall changes a general statement about violence into commentary on the specific violence taking place at that very structure. Figures 5 and 6 visually destabilize the Wall. The painted illusion of a hole in a wall is not particularly political or activist

when painted on the wall of a house or any random building. However on the Berlin Wall it becomes more than just a painted window, it is a condemnation of the division, a strong statement about world politics. In general, every statement on the Wall becomes a political statement because of the Wall's constant use as a propaganda tool.

The Wall also had a formal effect on the artwork by putting physical constraints on the size and shape of what appeared on its surface. Brian Ladd writes an anecdote about this, saying that concept and performance artist Joseph Beuys actually suggested that the Wall be raised slightly, giving it more pleasing artistic proportions (Ladd 27). The Wall serves as a physical frame for the artwork done on it as well as a contextual and symbolic frame. This is interesting in light of a distinction which O'Doherty draws between murals and easel art. He writes that while canvas art often uses conventions such as perspective, which work well with distinct edges and frames, wall artwork tends to be very flat and reinforces the "integrity of the wall" (18). Much of the artwork on the Berlin Wall follows this trend, emphasizing the flatness of the surface itself. Some works, however, such as figure 5, 6, and 9 do add the deep space with which O'Doherty credits easel painting. These works are examples of those on the Wall which work with the frame of the Wall itself and use the conventional signs which convey depth—both architectural and atmospheric perspective. The illusion of depth formally pulls away from the Wall and deemphasizes the fact that the painting *is* wall artwork, yet at the same time reinforces the Wall's framing function. This breaks a traditional distinction of wall artwork and makes the Berlin Wall a very specific wall space, not only politically but also formally, physically.

Of course the accessibility of the Wall to the public is an important attribute of the Berlin Wall, making the writing and painting highly interactive. While most wall art has a static context created by the structure on which it is painted, the art and writing of the Berlin Wall were part of an ever-changing surface. The paintings could be added to or even painted over at any time by anyone. Thus, their content also constantly changed. A painting or phrase might mean one thing when next to a blank, white stretch of Wall, but anyone could completely change its content in an instant by adding some sort of representation next to or on top of the work. This added to the conversational nature of the Berlin Wall by creating a discourse of sorts between anonymous, private citizens as well as famous artists. It also further differentiates the Berlin Wall from the modern gallery. O'Doherty claims that the ideal gallery "subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art'" (14). The mural and graffiti composite of Berlin Wall, on the other hand, thrived though these distractions. The politics and constantly changing nature of the Wall "interfere" with the fact that it is art and yet elevate the artwork and give it importance and gravity that it would not otherwise have possessed.

The political nature of the Berlin Wall also managed to legitimize it as a space to paint. Most average citizens would not go out and paint on just any wall of their city. Instead the legal murals are delegated to mural painters and graffiti is left to groups of kids who go out and spray-paint by flashlight. The Berlin Wall artists and writers, on the other hand, included many different groups of people, from famous artists, to graffiti artists, all the way to regular citizens and tourists. For example, there is a website which chronicles the American journalist Kay Xander Mellish's life in Berlin. When her time in the city was coming to a close, she decided that there was only one thing that she had



to do before leaving: she “*had*” to paint on the Berlin Wall (Mellish). This is not a woman who would have painted illegally on buildings around the city, rather one who simply wanted to leave her small mark on history. “*Mauer wird bald abgerissen*” (the Wall will soon be torn down) she stenciled in 1987, not believing for a moment that the statement was true. What Mellish’s attraction to painting on the Wall demonstrates is that the average public’s acceptance of the Wall as a space for murals and graffiti gave it a much wider audience and artist/writer base than probably any other wall in history.

In turn, the artwork lent meaning to the Wall itself, tying into the idea of wall artwork as functional artwork. Schneede describes paintings on walls as functional with regard to the function of the structure on which they appear. As previously explained, the artwork on the Berlin Wall has a political function because of the use of the Wall by both East and West as a political statement, a symbol to attach to their negative portrayals of the other side in the propaganda war. However, the actual Wall itself had a limited physical function because of the fact that it was only a small part of the ramparts of division in Berlin. The main Wall, the symbolic Wall became mostly a metaphor for division while the “death zone,” and the razor wire, fences, dogs, and lethal guard towers which it included, functioned as the main enforcement of the tyranny which the Wall represented. The symbolic nature of the Berlin Wall was reinforced by the art writing that were painted on it. However, the paintings also created a *new* symbolic and concrete function for the Wall: they made it a space of protest, a forum for political debate and exchange of ideas and arguments. While on the Eastern side, the Wall remained a structure of physical division and terror, on the Western side it provided a space to protest and fight its own existence. In addition, the paintings reminded citizens of West Berlin

of the continued existence of the Wall which they tried to ignore and publicized the artist and writer's opinions and objections to the scores of visiting onlookers. It is deeply ironic that the Berlin Wall, a violent, divisive, and highly negative structure in history, provided the means (on its West side) for positive political action against the division of Germany and Berlin.

As a form of public artwork, the Berlin Wall must also be analyzed in that context. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, is one of the canonical texts that delves into the definition and history of the public sphere. He integrates arguments by Kant, Marx, and Hegel in order to create one of the most expansive theories on public space and public opinion. In *Picture Theory*, W.J.T. Mitchell explains Habermas's ideal public sphere, based on a Hellenic Greek example, as a place and a set of social interactions that encourage private people to meet and engage in free discussion based on Enlightenment reason (363). Habermas refers to this as "the sphere of private people come together as a public" (27). He explains how the public sphere has, in recent times, undergone a "refeudalization" as the political process, which was formerly a true expression of public opinion, has deteriorated into a system of advertising and public manipulation. In short, he is not exactly optimistic about the possibility of the existence of his ideal public sphere under modern conditions. Mitchell notices Habermas's many references to public discourse through visual representation and applies Habermas's ideal of a public sphere to public art. This public sphere would be a "stage" or space with open access to the public, free from outside power where ideas could be exchanged through public visual representation (364).

Mitchell goes on to analyze different media, for example art and film, with this idea in mind. He discusses public and monumental art in detail including the *Goddess of Democracy* statue in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in New York City, Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, and the Vietnam War memorial in Washington D.C. He finds that public art cannot seem to escape a certain amount of violence, whether as physical and tyrannical as the Tiananmen Square massacre or merely violent public censorship as with Serrano's *Piss Christ*. He comes up with a list of three types of violence in public art: an image itself can be an act or victim of violence; an image can function as a weapon against public space; or an image can embody or represent violence. These three types of violence related to visual representation haunt public art, and Mitchell finds one or all in all of the above examples (371-381).

In many ways, the Berlin Wall fulfills the criteria of Habermas's ideal public sphere, or at least of a public space within that sphere. For example, it is important that such a space have free public access. On the West side of the Wall there was not only free public access, but a certain amount of encouragement even for everyday citizens to paint on it. There is an image of a phrase written on the Wall directly above Hambleton's shadow figures, "I like Beuys," referring to German artist Joseph Beuys. The statement is edited, though, by another writer and ends up reading, "I like ~~Beuys~~-Boys" (Waldenburg 40). This may not seem all that amazing right off the bat, until one realizes that this kind of conversation is very rare in the art world. How often can one walk into an art gallery, step up to a work by a world-famous artist and spontaneously scrawl a joke? This is merely one small piece of evidence demonstrating the immense gap between the closed, private space of a gallery and relatively free, public space of the

western Berlin Wall. Even with normal graffiti on city walls, this kind of visual discussion only takes place between graffiti writers in their highly structured subculture. What's more, within the subcultures there is a strictly defined code regulating what type of layering of graffiti, or "going over" is done with reverence and respect and what is done with the intention of insulting another writer (Ferrel 87-89). On the Berlin Wall anyone on the West side could step up and paint an addition to a piece by Hambleton, Haring, or one of the many beautiful works done by anonymous artists. These layered images battled ideas and opinions, but had little to do with personal conflicts or competition between artists and writers.

Still, the Wall was obviously not free from the violence that Mitchell describes in relation to public art and therefore not a truly ideal public space. First, the structure itself was incredibly violent. Not only was building the Wall an exceedingly extreme political move, creating a slash through the city, physically dividing families, and causing mental trauma among Berliners, it was also violent in a very concrete way: many people were shot crossing the Wall. The content of the murals and graffiti on the Berlin Wall mirror this violence, for example figure 4 and 19, with representations of weapons, violence, death, and division. Thus the Wall was an attack on the public space of the city and the art carried multiple images depicting violence, both of which fit neatly into two of Mitchell's types of violent public art.

The third is, again, the art as an act or object of violence. One type of violence against public art which Mitchell mentioned was censorship. *Piss Christ* and *Tilted Arc* were both victims of public outcry. Much of the public felt violated by *Piss Christ* because of its blasphemous edge and by *Tilted Arc* because of its brutal, looming

presence on a public plaza. Both were then the targets of the public. The Berlin Wall was actually quite free from censorship. As mentioned before, the East side for all practical purposes waived their rights to censorship of the West side of the Wall. On the West side, except for a brief censoring of anti-American messages before Reagan's visit to Berlin in the summer of 1987, when he cried with such passion, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall!", the West Berlin authorities left the messages alone (Ladd 28). So the Wall did not suffer the violence of censorship to any great extent.

However, when looking deeper into the public visual representation on the Berlin Wall as a perpetrator or victim of violence, the distinction between acts of violence and free public discussion becomes quite problematic. The imagetexts themselves were often visually violent protests against the structure on which they were painted. They were acts of literal violence, vandalism against the Wall and in some ways against the minds of the Berlin audience as they forced people to remember a structure that they had been quite successful in forgetting, or at least ignoring (Stein 85). Also, the representations were often victims of visual violence by other writers and artists. Beautiful murals were tagged and signed until completely unrecognizable. People edited each other's statements and images, often perverting the original intent of the painting. However, if it were not for the acts of violence against the Wall in image form and the layering of different people's work, the Berlin Wall would never have been the public exchange that it became. Indeed, human communication is inherently violent. Even in a conversation, people interrupt, they talk over each other, they yell, they disagree, but this is what makes the conversation a good representation of true human contact, exchange of opinions and ideas. In the same way, the Berlin Wall is an amazing example of private individuals, as

well as those in the public eye, coming together to create public discourse about world politics, nationalism, and life in general through visual representation on one of the most controversial structures in human history.

Thus the Berlin Wall is a peculiar space for art. The surface itself as well as the politics and ideas that people projected on it shaped the artwork that appeared there. In turn, the artwork shaped the meaning of the Wall itself. Furthermore, the Berlin Wall represents, although not a perfect public space within Habermas's ideal public sphere, an important, representative forum for public exchange. Despite the violence surrounding the conception and maintenance of structure itself, one result was a relatively nonviolent space for visual discussion of world events. As the Wall was a symbol of totalitarianism and the brutal division of Europe, it redeemed itself somewhat as a place where anyone, on the Western side, was able to participate in a highly publicized exchange of ideas and beliefs. Although not all of the art or writing was sincere, neither is all of human communication. Indeed no human communication can truly fulfill Habermas's ideal and highly utopian public sphere, but the Berlin Wall created what may be the one of the closest examples in the realm of public art.

## **Conclusion**

Photographic Appendix



Figure 1 (Waldenburg 44)



Figure 2: Keith Haring painting on the Berlin Wall (Waldenburg 6-7)





Figure 3 (Waldenburg 42)



Figure 4: Piece by Thierry Noir (Rosset Gallery 2)



Figure 5 (Flack)



Figure 6 (Rosset Gallery 1)



Figure 7: Piece by Bouchet (Waldenburg 24)



Figure 8: Piece by Bouchet (Waldenburg 31)



Figure 9 (Waldenburg 54)



Figure 10 (Waldenburg 50)



Figure 11 (Waldenburg 94)



Figure 12 (Waldenburg 65)



Figure 13 (Rosset Gallery 1)



Figure 14 (Rosset Gallery 1)



Figure 15: Hip Hop Graffiti (Waldenburg 87)



Figure 16 (Waldenburg 17)



Figure 17: *Shadow Figures* by Hambleton (Rosset Gallery 4)



Figure 18 (Walden 74)





Figure 19 (Waldenburg 34)



Figure 20 (Waldenburg 59)

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