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Chapter 7

Practices of defacement: thresholds to rediscovered commons

Collective memory challenged?

We usually understand collective memory as connected to specific sites in which a specific community of people recognizes indications of past events worthy of recalling. Collective memory, thus, uses space as a kind of repository of meaning, open to those who know how to navigate their way in an inhabited environment marked by socially recognizable indicators.

However, this understanding of the relationship between space and memory is only partial. First of all it implies a role for the members of a society or social group that defines them as mere readers of signs. Collective memory, accordingly, is considered as a process of establishing and accumulating, through education and commemorative rituals, meaningful references to a collectively recognized past.

If, however, we understand collective memory as always-in-the-making, if we understand collective memory as always contested, being a crucial arena for social antagonism, then we should try to locate the different ways in which space is employed in such a dynamic process. In his study on oblivion, Augé uses a highly indicative spatial model to describe the relationship between memory and oblivion. 'Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea' (Augé 2004: 20).

This spatial metaphor says a lot more than simply describing memory and oblivion as always separated and differentiated. If we consider the space of the beach as an intermediary space in which sea and land always struggle to define a border that changes due to weather as well as to human interventions, then oblivion and memory are a product of an ongoing process rather than two fixed recognizable areas. More than that, if memory and oblivion were to be connected to space, to space as it is socially perceived, then it would have to be space in the process of being defined, moulded and created by social actors in their contesting gestures to capture a meaningful past. We can thus use Augé's metaphor to actually describe the relationship of space and memory. Hidden in this metaphor might be a potentially interesting knowledge: memory, while being contested, not only employs space but also transforms space. If it is always a matter of struggling to define the porous border between memory and oblivion, then space too is created through a kind of heightened awareness about the role that outlines play, outlines defined again and again in practices of appropriating, inhabiting and evaluating space. And it is on the spatial as well as temporal intermediary zones (like the beach in Augé's image) that the temporary meaning of spatial outlines is at stake.

What follows is an attempt to catch the inner logic of a certain memory mechanism that gives form to struggles over the definition of such intermediary zones. Because space becomes socially meaningful in the process of being performed (Massey 2005: 189), memory is not simply deposited in space but actively reconfigures space by directly affecting spatial perception.

This particular mechanism involves acts and gestures that interfere with the meaning of public space (a crucial component of

collective memory) by manipulating images that shape its perception. Such gestures meaningfully distort the image of space by partially hiding some of its characteristics or by completely transforming the appearance of buildings, sites or places. As we shall see, however, these gestures and acts do not simply produce changes but also generate memory shocks by – purposely or not – providing the ground for revealing comparisons between what was formerly visible and what became visible as a result of these acts. It will be shown that in certain cases collective memory is performed and represented through practices that reclaim public space-as-commons.

In describing this particular mechanism we can use the term *defacement*. Defacement refers to acts aimed at destroying the ‘face’, the expressive centre of something’s or someone’s appearance, by distorting it, by partially hiding the face’s characteristics. There is always a kind of latent violence in the defacing gesture. And there is always a kind of confrontation with an appearance, with an image representing an identity.

Space and especially public space is predominantly perceived in the form of stereotyped images which circulate through the dominant culture-shaping media and become actualized through in situ experiences. These images mould the very appearance of a specific building or urban site and establish a strong connection with the corresponding space’s identity. These images identify space. Defacing the appearance of public space would thus mean targeting the perceivable characteristics of such space that create its identifiable image. Defacing acts create memory shocks because spaces familiar or recognizable through established images are suddenly rendered strange. Defacement brings forth ruptures in urban memory, since memory

is essentially connected with the socially crafted images of public space.

The anthropologist Michael Taussig, who has problematized the ritual meaning of defacement, has this to suggest: 'Defacement works on objects the way jokes work on language, bringing out their inherent magic nowhere more so than when those objects have become routinized and social' (Taussig 1999: 5). This inherent magic is nothing other than a not-realized or, rather more important, repressed meaning of objects and space that suddenly comes into view by the act of defacement. The idea is that defacement does not simply distort or hide but necessarily reveals. Defacement reveals or even demythologizes without being part of a naïve Enlightenment project according to which what is hidden needs simply to be drawn to light. Myth covers reality in a way that directly shapes or transforms it. Demythologizing or the revealing of what is kept as secret, thus, means being able to execute a rather fine and cunning procedure. The secret needs to come to light without losing its transformative power over reality. Taussig often refers to Benjamin's call to reveal the secret by doing justice to it (Taussig 1999: 2, 160, 167, 194). In Benjamin's own words, 'truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it' (Benjamin 1990: 31). In such a peculiar demystification process, the secret is illuminated 'by treating the secret's inherent mysteriousness, its being-as-mystery, as an integral component of what makes the revelation possible in the first place' (Surin 2001: 213).

We may reformulate Taussig's argument, emphasizing the role of collective memory: defacement produces a comparison between the past and the present status of a certain 'face' which may create a new interpretation of both past and present.

Defacement can thus generate – without, however, always intending to do so – a kind of ‘profane illumination’, as Benjamin would call it (Benjamin 1985: 227), which forms a new constellation of present and past. It is not that the past is illuminated by an act that happens in the present: the past becomes visible as a past connected to a present which redeems it, calls it forth and thus assigns meaning to it. This process involves collective memory as the shared ability to connect and compare rather than store and retrieve. It is not simply a matter of recalling what is being temporarily hidden from view but also a way of bringing forth layers of repressed (actively forgotten) collective experiences and activating knowledge connected with the defaced places.

The logic of the defacement mechanism is a result of the essentially contested character of both collective memory and public space. As Hénaff and Strong insist: ‘public space ... is always contestable’ (Hénaff and Strong 2001: 4). The defacement mechanism is influenced by specific relations of power which take shape in space and time. Halbwachs, for example, in an effort to trace the history of the early Christian community’s collective memory, draws attention to the acts of ‘enemies of emergent Christianity’ who ‘tried to deface these places [imbued with the community’s memories] and to destroy signs that could help to recognize them’ (Halbwachs 1992: 202). Who is defacing what and under which circumstances is crucial. Comparing differing performances of defacement we can perhaps discover possibilities of employing defacement in order to actively pursue dissident uses of urban collective memory or even acts of restaging the scene of the common (to recall Rancière). In this context, it is important to understand memory as an inventive ability to compare times and places.

Collective memory can become an important target as well as a means of commoning. The most obvious aspect of this relation is the power that collective memory has to give form and content to events in the past which the members of a community recognize as their common past. From this, however, it becomes clear that the selective character of shared memory, as already illustrated in Augé's image, has a strong performative result. What the members of a group recognize as their common past crucially contributes to their identity as a group. Collective memory, then, shapes the 'distribution of the sensible' (in Rancière's terminology) and gives form to the common world which characterizes a community.

As we will see, defacement creates sudden shocks in collective memory by bringing forth inherent contradictions hidden in the foundations of the common world. Defacement may possibly introduce explosive moments of dissident awareness into the common world and thus destabilize common beliefs about the past. However, because defacement is a public gesture, a gesture made in public and directed towards dominant images which support the certainties of established common worlds, it necessarily enters the field of struggles over representations (to recall Bourdieu's suggestions). Defacement, thus, may evoke interpretative practices that give ground to new shared knowledges. Demythologizing and revealing acts through defacement produces sudden shocks both to the commoning of memory and to the commoning through memory, shocks that may force collective memory to reinvent itself, to transform, to expand and to become open to contestation. Through defacement, public spaces, and especially officially sanctioned monuments, lose their defining stability and sometimes their attachment to a dominant authority's control.

Defacement may temporarily convert public space to common space if it triggers forms of collective reinterpretation. The very violence of its clash with dominant images may even give to defacement the power to challenge the self-sufficiency and 'obviousness' of common worlds, no matter how democratically they were expressed in monuments meant to secure and reproduce a stable image of important past events. Defacement may be a dissident 'art' but it may also be one among the 'arts' of envisioning commoning (in and through representations) as an always-open process of creating open communities of equals.

Official acts of defacement

In 1995, a very important turning point in the recent history of Germany, an official act of defacement took place in Berlin. Commemorating the fifth anniversary of Germany's 'national unification', a gesture of monumental proportions was to create a public debate on the role of collective memory and public art (Hanssen 1998). Christo, the well-known artist, extended his almost obsessive art of wrapping famous buildings or sites all over the world to include Berlin's Reichstag building. Preceding the building's renovation in the following years, this act of wrapping was contested as essentially involving a kind of gesturing towards the Reichstag's role in Germany's history. And indeed this role is full of important parts as the Weimar Republic was proclaimed there in 1918 and as the site is connected with the Nazi seizure of power emblematically condensed in the infamous Reichstag fire.

The wrapping of the Reichstag can be considered as an act of defacement. The building was effectively hidden from view without, however, totally disappearing. The contour of the building was there to perceive. What remained then was a

distorted image, an image that violently reduced the building to an immense and strange object. Some could and did say that this gesture was an offence to shared memories: even temporarily hiding the building appears as some kind of memory erasure. As if a memory site can be reduced to a *tabula rasa* on which to write anew. Was it a modernist gesture *par excellence*? Perhaps, but if we are to profit from Huyssen's interpretation, a very subtle and ambiguous modernist gesture indeed. According to his view, Christo created 'a monumentality that can do without permanence and without destruction ... informed by the modernist spirit of a fleeting and transitory epiphany' (Huyssen 2003: 46). Thus, the transitoriness of the event might have hinted towards the 'tenuous relationship between remembering and forgetting' (ibid.: 36)

What this act of defacement initiates is probably a reflective attitude towards the past. While the creation of historic monuments is an essentially selective act (Boyer 1994: 144) which defines what deserves to be remembered and what is to be left to oblivion, Christo's wrapping creates some kind of contradictory monumentality. The fact that the wrapping was temporary could have made people reconsider the absent familiar image that was temporarily out of view. It could have made them see what was no longer there by generating a kind of memory shock: memory becomes activated by focusing on a building that was covered by stereotypical images cleansed from possible traumatic collective reminiscences. 'Christo's veiling did function as a strategy to make visible, to unveil, to reveal what was hidden when it was visible' (ibid.: 36).

The wrapping event had shaken a collectively repressed image of the Reichstag. The building was there to see but only as

a ceremonial place or museum. How could it be connected to those traumatic events of German history that still demand publicly shared explanations? And who is going to produce those explanations? And how can collective memory accommodate the struggle between collective guilt and collective amnesia?

The unique presence of a building-monument binds it to a role that traps memory. It somehow becomes a recognizable locus around which official history weaves threads that immobilize it to a mythical once-and-for-all appraisal of a certain past. Monuments do not even express this appraisal as interpretation. They rather emphatically convert it through their presence to a self-proven truth. What corroborates this power of monuments to 'naturalize' the past is their unchangeable presence in the visual horizon of those who inhabit the city.

Monuments acquire a certain aura, the aura which characterizes a human work (or a work of nature when the human gaze captures it) when considered unique and unrepeatable. 'The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth' (Benjamin 1999: 447).

The wrapped Reichstag surely lost its aura stemming from its unique presence in the city as a work of distinguished public architecture. The very gesture of wrapping and packaging reduces objects to common recognizable and repeatable shapes. However, although Christo's wrapping reduced or even obliterated the building's recognizable unique characteristics, it was publicized as a gesture of art. Wrapping was to be interpreted as a meaningful gesture. Meaningful gestures of such monumental and site-specific proportions inevitably create singular objects. So, the created new object, the packaged Reichstag, emerged in the visual horizon of Berliners as a unique work with its own aura,

a 'transitory aura,' as L. Koepnick (2002: 111–12) has suggested. This peculiar aura made the presence of the building a challenge to memory and interpretation. '[T]he project's aura called forth competing images of past and present, bringing into focus the constructedness of history, truth, and identity' (ibid.: 112).

Defacement refocused collective memory. Defacement re-activated unresolved questions about the meaning of the recent past: who has inherited this past's promises and guilt, and how? What did the building represent anyhow? And for whom? The act of partially hiding the monument, distorting its 'face' as a recognizable image which remained silent about many of the past conflicts and dilemmas, suddenly created an interpretative stake. Public discourse about the symbolism and public value of the monument erupted: who has the right to shape its current image? The memory shock created may have triggered for some a renewed awareness that the past is not over, that the past is a contested terrain on which comparisons with the present bring forth new meanings and affective approaches. Probably most of the people who had to confront such a strange, albeit temporary, transformation of their customary visual urban landscape became confronted with what Benjamin described as the 'unconscious optics' (Benjamin 1992: 230). What is seen but repressed from view can suddenly emerge as visible in the time of its defacement. Isn't this process becoming a crucial factor in the perception of space in cities where different layers of history struggle to define the present?

It is not clear which official strategy was supporting Christo's art or even profiting from the Reichstag wrapping. Aside from its tourist attraction advantages, this kind of officially encouraged defacement necessarily creates ambiguous results in collective

memory. However, what makes it really difficult for this act to catalyse an emerging awareness about the past as a collectively experienced process is its emphatic orchestration as a publicly sponsored, therefore approved by the state authority, artistic practice. Memory shocks were probably diverted or absorbed by the dominant rhetoric of avant-garde art which shifted attention from history to the very whimsical, surrealistic elements of a strange (therefore considered 'interesting') artistic gesture.

Can the collective memory shocks initiated by Christo's gesture create potential experiences of memory-commoning? Could the wrapped Reichstag become a *site* of memory-commoning? The very fact that this gesture had shaken established habits of collective interpretation was not enough, probably, to completely change the character of such a public space. The transitory aura of the artistically hidden monument did not destroy the site's monumental character. It certainly indicated a crisis in interpretation, but the dominant practices of sightseeing and artistic contemplation effectively managed to preserve a controlled and explicitly manipulated publicness. Public art could have introduced elements of commoning while defacing a monument so long as those gestures were part of a shared demand for reconsideration of the past. Even if Christo's gesture initiated a crisis in public space, this crisis was already tamed in advance. It was more like a staged crisis which possibly absorbed potential demands for reconfiguring public space (its monumental aspects included) during a period in which rethinking about the past was crucial for shaping modern Germany's identity. Christo's Reichstag became a rather cunning collective memory trap: no indications for a different interpretation of the past were offered and no collective acts of reclaiming the past were expressed.

After all, the ephemeral character of wrapping, sanctioned by the state authorities, guaranteed the future return of the building to its monumental presence at the centre of the city. Defacement could have been only a trick, an imitation of crisis to avoid crisis.

A second example, less well known but equally indicative, comes from Athens. During the 2004 Olympics, various government initiatives were taken in order to 'upgrade the aesthetics of Athens' (as the relevant law N2947/2001 explicitly states). Interestingly, in a municipal programme for façade remodelling, Athens was presented as 'an old lady in need of make-up'. In this context, some buildings had to be hidden from view. In front of a social housing building facing a major avenue (characterized as 'Olympic route') a large photo placard was erected. Depicting a glorious view of Athens from one of the surrounding hills, this image explicitly presented the city as a historical landscape full of recognizable ancient monuments. Behind this image however, a very important part of the city's history was carefully hidden.

The defaced building belongs to a housing complex known as Alexandras Prosfygika (the same complex analysed in Chapter 3). Constructed during the mid 1930s this complex was part of a large programme of slum clearance that was meant to house refugees from Asia Minor. As was already mentioned, these people had to come to Greece in 1922 after a population exchange that was the result of a disastrous expedition of the Greek Army into Asia Minor. The buildings were therefore associated with a collective trauma. And they represent even today a past full of poverty and struggles connected with the difficult incorporation of refugees into Greek society.

In the derelict façade of the Alexandras Prosfygika buildings, full of 'embarrassing' traces, the past seems to have become

reduced to natural history: because the history of Alexandras Prosfygika was pushed to the realm of collective oblivion, decay is easily misinterpreted as a natural phenomenon rather than as a social condition and process. There are people, however, who have struggled for the preservation and renovation of these buildings as potentially inhabitable sites of collective memory.

What the glorious image defacing the buildings did was to connect an almost forgotten public debate on the complex's historic value with a renewed awareness of its existence. Even though covering the building had a completely different intent, curiously Alexandras Prosfygika seems to have become more prominent in the act of being disguised, as if the hiding gesture emphasized the presence of the buildings. Due to such an unexpected intrusion into the realm of collective oblivion, forgotten or repressed questions may arise anew. Why are these buildings there? What has caused this decay? Who still lives there? And what about the bullet marks on the walls (traces of a decisive battle fought there in 1944 at the beginning of the 1944–7 civil war)?

As in Christo's wrapping, an official act of defacing reveals by hiding. In the case of the Alexandras Prosfygika 'screening', defacement actually reveals in spite of its aim to hide and erase, albeit also temporarily. Defacing may produce ambiguous ruptures in memory through the shock in perception created by interventions in familiar and historically 'neutralized' images that colonize everyday urban experiences. Even though in this case an obvious strategy of redirecting urban memory was planned, a repressed past faintly emerged behind the distorted image. Memory generates comparisons and is generated by them. As if to show this power of revealing comparisons, one of the inhabitant-activists secretly tore the photo placard, partially

revealing to the passer-by what was hidden. Defacing the official defacement is in this case an act of corroborating and multiplying defacement's power to agitate collective memory.

As an official gesture, the defacement of Alexandras Prosfygika was more straightforwardly directed against a part of collective memory that was meant to be kept dormant if not to vanish altogether. The gesture, however, was too provocative, too expressive in terms of its objective to hide something unwanted. This is why it could more easily result in attracting attention to what was hidden. Nevertheless, the visual shock alone could not have the power to prefigure a site of memory-commoning. Perhaps the activist's gesture was a dissident act that could potentially bring to the fore the space-commoning life hidden behind the defaced Alexandras Prosfygika façade. For this to be perceived by passers-by, however, one has to presuppose that they have some kind of knowledge or at least questions about the buildings present.

Alternative or dissident defacement and common space

Defacement can create through a shock in perception a shock in interpretation. Defacement can participate in the ongoing – no matter how latent – struggle for the always-contestable definition of the 'coastline', areas between memory-land and oblivion-sea (or is it memory-sea and oblivion-land?). Defacement generates experiences and thoughts comparing past and present.

Can we perhaps discover performances of defacement that may contribute to struggles against official manipulations of collective memory? Can people learn from the ways in which power not only effaces traces of an unwanted past but also defaces the past in order to control its social meaning? Officially sanctioned monument-defacing gestures may attempt to redirect collective

memory by manipulating the ambiguous dialectics of hiding–revealing (as in the case of the Reichstag wrapping), or it may attempt to control collective memory, carelessly ignoring the revelatory results of any gesture of hiding (as in the case of the Alexandras Prosfygika photo placard). Can defacement performances employ defacement dialectics not simply to attack established meanings and uses of public space but also to invent new ephemeral appropriations of space made possible as collectively repressed memories emerge? And do these acts of collective appropriation produce potential prefigurations of common spaces?

We may broadly distinguish between three different forms such an alternative use of defacement may take: defacing spatial form, defacing spatial texture and defacing spatial traces.

Defacing spatial form

Defacement can be directed against the defining shape of public space. If we consider that public space is perceived as a meaningful social artefact through stereotyped images that fix and reproduce its meaning, then defacement practices directed against the recognizable material support of these images can produce collective memory shocks. This is why demonstrations and relevant transgressive practices not only produce political events but may also deface dominant street images. Demonstrations may use the asphalt as a blackboard on which to write their demands. The black functional carpet of vehicle traffic becomes suddenly an area of collective expression. So do the pavements when demonstrators rest on them.

Demonstrations can even reconfigure the street outlines as did street blockings by members of the *piqueteros* movement

in Argentina. There, jobless people used to protest by violently interrupting traffic in major avenues, paralysing the city until they were violently evacuated. The visual, symbolic and functional shock they produced forced society to notice them and authorities to respond. With their ephemeral barricades, *piqueteros* defaced the urban normality epitomized in everyday vehicle traffic. Intentionally or not, they used streets as short-lived common spaces and they projected through them images of space-commoning that would challenge the dominant representations of public space. As one of them explained, 'it's a liberated zone [the *piquete*], the only place where the cops won't treat you like trash. There the cop says to you "pardon me, we come to negotiate". The same policeman would beat you to death if he saw you alone in the street' (Motta 2009: 94).

The Reclaim the Streets movement is a characteristic example of defacing the street in order to produce a new awareness of what the street could be and used to be. This movement organized public collective acts through which it tried to reappropriate streets as ad hoc common spaces. Through self-organized parties which abruptly invaded vehicle streets in city centres, the image of traffic was defaced: in some cases a deliberate mild car crash was used to start the blocking of the street. Astonished passers-by would discover that what they routinely interpret as a temporary misfortune in the traffic order (a car accident) could be theatrically used as a means to deface traffic, to create interpretative shocks and reveal hidden or forgotten possibilities for the collective uses of the streets. As if evoking the May 1968 symbolic motto 'beneath the pavement lies a beach', which is already a defacement gesture expressed in words, the Reclaim the Streets movement showed that underneath the predominantly

car-traffic street lies the public square. An emerging public square crafted by collective acts of defacement is a kind of common space experienced and envisaged at the same time. 'Cars cannot dance' (Ferrell 2002: 136) was one of the movement's mottoes which gained currency in Britain in 1995 and spread to many metropolises throughout the world. Participants used to transform the occupied street area by means of their carnivalesque performances into a temporary public stage (Notes from Nowhere 2003: 51–61). Memories of a different culture were thus evoked which included the communal feast and its generalized metastatic effervescence.

In all these cases, temporarily hiding from view the recognizable image of the street as a linear channel for distributing traffic creates the possibility of remembering the street as a multifarious common space. In cities where those repressed collective memories may resurface, actively defacing the street images can indeed reveal something important by hiding. Equally revealing defacement gestures can be performed in symbolic acts such as guerrilla gardening (emblemized in the famous People's Park in Berkeley created during the late 1960s and violently attacked by the police) or in the creation of community vegetable gardens in public areas destined for gentrification, as was the case of El Forat de la Vergonya in Barcelona, which met harsh repression too during the 2000s.

Defacing spatial texture

Defacement can be directed against the texture, the materiality, of public space as it is perceived and made meaningful by people who inhabit it. Skateboarding is one familiar example of how a group of people can temporarily transform public space

by defacing the material core that supports its habitual uses and perceptions. If we follow Borden's understanding of skateboarding as a 'performative critique of architecture' (Borden 2001), the city is for skateboarders reduced to a degree zero of meaning, only to re-emerge as the locus of a new awareness of meaningful differences. Among the important differences are those between soft and hard surface materials or between high and low objects – obstacles (benches, stairs, pavements, fences, etc.).

As the skateboarder defaces the street (and in many countries this is described as a criminal act) he or she makes repressed memories, which are connected with the urban texture, erupt or indeed create new possible experiences. 'These are my streets. I know every crack of every sidewalk there is down there' (quoted in Borden 2001: 191).

The practice of skateboarding involves groups of people collectively organizing their defacing presence in the city. A kind of commoning-through-defacement unfolds in such peculiar reinterpretations and reappropriations of the streets. The area outside the Museum of Modern Art in Barcelona is a good example of such a process. Young people have transformed the area into a collectively used common space in which they exhibit their outstanding skills. The police have attempted many times to regain control of the place and to reconvert it into the public square initially designed for the museum's visitors.

Skateboarding was the means to establish a fleeting common space and to show how space-commoning may transform public space. Skateboarding-designed tracks and parks attempt to contain and control the defacement potential of this performative critique of the city. In these publicly used spaces, groups of skateboarders are left to enjoy their art without producing infectious images of space-commoning.

Children playing where they should not – as when climbing on monuments or statues – often bring forth a materiality of public space which is completely hidden from view, as well as performatively evaluating the user-friendliness of the materials used in its making. Defacing official memory sites, children re-activate them as surfaces, obstacles and shelters in a redeemed public space.

Defacing spatial traces

Finally, defacement can be directed against a crucial characteristic of public space: its power to absorb and retain traces. Many urban gentrification programmes include acts of erasing traces of the gentrified area's past, as we have seen. A very obvious strategy of remaking the meaning and use of existing spaces is to control and select their connections with the past, especially those connections based on material remnants.

What graffiti does, however, is not to efface or carefully hide traces but, rather, it juxtaposes traces, adds traces, 'deflects' traces and critically manipulates traces, as well as simply marking by traces an ephemeral presence. In all those cases, graffiti defaces buildings, sites or objects. Those who practise this ephemeral, fugitive art are always on the move, writing their own city on top of the existing one. To some, their acts can sometimes appear blasphemous or offensive. Sennett, interpreting the fear of graffiti, imagines the graffiti maker's battle cry: 'We exist and we are everywhere ... we write all over you' (Sennett 1993: 207).

These defacement gestures, however, do not demand a total eclipse of the object's or the building's former image. Rather, graffiti makers want a comparison between what used to be there (usually derelict, unused, out of sight) and what temporarily is made present. The memory shocks they produce can lead to revealing

comparisons between a past violently erased and a controlled present as, for example, in the ironic graffiti image made on the Israel Wall in Palestine by Banksy, who bitterly staged a freedom opening on its grey, massive, ruthlessly dominant side (Banksy 2005). Milder memory shocks may be caused by ephemeral ruptures in everyday life's homogeneous settings made by graffiti images that capture the city dweller's gaze through the windows of the underground train or bus. Graffiti climb on walls, penetrate metro stations, travel on transport cars and train wagons or deface large advertisement images. In every case, the graffiti redirects attention to the traces left on the skin of the city by small and great acts in a literal 'iconoclasm' (Latour and Weibel 2002).

By being exposed to harsh weather and to alterations and distortions caused by those who try either to erase it or 'write' on it, graffiti become themselves targets of defacement acts (Schacter 2008: 47–8). The urban palimpsest created in such acts hides and reveals different layers of meaning inscribed on the city's body. The very act of official erasure (in the name of the law or protection from 'aesthetic pollution'), exposes itself as a violent act of war against dissident images through its often limited success in effacing the graffiti traces. What remains exposes the internal dynamics of defacement: defaced (rather than completely effaced) images which are themselves products of defacing acts take part in the creation of an ever-changing visual landscape in which hiding and revealing always clash and coexist. 'Defacement tampers with the borders between signifier, signified, and referent' (Nandrea 1999: 112).

Elusive and fugitive as it is, graffiti art often attempts to reappropriate public space as a crucial social area through which messages and shared values are transmitted. Graffiti art in

such cases gestures towards a possible commoning-through-representations that criticizes, ironically deconstructs or, almost sacrilegiously, attacks dominant images of the city. Iconic or written messages are the means through which graffiti reclaim the city. There is of course a considerable difference between the narcissistic tags which emphatically declare 'I was there' and the collective works of 'crews' which often transmit messages at war with the dominant representations of the city.

We can perhaps trace further possible routes for alternative defacement practices in acts that consciously combine art and activism. In these performances, defacement acquires the status of a paradigmatic gesture that explicitly aims at redefining new possible urban experiences in search of 'liberated' and 'liberating' public spaces: in search, that is, of reinvented common spaces. Defacement can give form to gestures of symbolic appropriation as well as to gestures of inventive inhabiting. It is one of the many ways that cities become 'stages for the ephemeral reconfiguration of meaning on the streets' (Robinson 2006: 84).

Traverso's bicycle might be one example of such an inventive use of defacement. Taking his stencil of a full-scale bicycle to many countries of the world, Traverso, an Argentinian artist and activist, paints the same bicycle image on the walls of buildings, on street corners or inside community centres. His almost haunted 'bicycle' stands there as if temporarily left by someone. This bicycle image was initially crafted to remind us of all those people who disappeared during Videla's dictatorship. Tortured and executed by Videla's junta, the disappeared people left no traces, virtually suspended between death and life. This was how one of Traverso's friends disappeared in those days, leaving behind his deserted bicycle on a street corner.

Traverso made the image of the bicycle a kind of ‘invented trace’ of his disappeared friend. Reproducing it on the surface of different buildings, the artist subtly introduces this invented trace in places where other traces dominate. This is what he did by painting his bicycle on the wall of one of the buildings of the Alexandras Prosfygika housing complex. Such a gesture becomes part of the defacing palimpsests of urban graffiti. Traverso, however, does something more than that. He uses this stencil image to reactivate layers of public memory dormant in key places of collective memory all over the world. ‘Traverso insists that his *bicis* are counter-monuments,’ says Katherine Hite and she quotes him: ‘Monuments meant to remember people just end up killing them all over again’ (Hite 2012: 90).

Many artist groups were encouraged to use this almost totemic stencil image to mark areas in which horrible collective reminiscences were either suppressed or still wait for justice and redemption (ibid.: 93). As in the image painted on the Alexandras Prosfygika, Traverso’s bicycle potentially works as a catalyst for collective memory: a strange image hides and reveals at the same time, creating small memory shocks. We expect to see a bicycle leaning against a wall somewhere in the chosen places, but since it is obviously a painted bicycle, why did someone paint it there? We know that a person can leave his or her bicycle somewhere, but nobody seems to be returning for *this* haunted bicycle.

Traverso says about his bicycles: ‘[The *bicis* were] physically at the limits of the corporeal and the intangible, they were opening the sense of different stories and interrogations for everyone who saw them’ (ibid.: 106). Out of the ambiguity created by a graffiti-like image that defaces and draws attention at

the same time to what it defaces, Traverso creates the potentiality of a political gesture. Defacement thus becomes a way of calling forth common space as a contestable social artefact moulded by memory. Traverso spreads a message meant to encourage memory-commoning and to ignite practices of space-commoning through the reintroduction of repressed or violently erased common memories into the public realm. There is no guarantee for such an interpretation and no way to ensure that Traverso's bicycle will activate and recreate traces of alternative memory. We can imagine, however, that such gestures can possibly teach us ways in which we learn how to appropriate defacement's dialectics. And if defacement reveals by hiding and directs our attention to what it veils, defacement can be used to bring to view repressed dreams and forgotten alternatives.

There is an interesting relation of inverse symmetry between Traverso's bicycles and Christo's Reichstag. Through his gesture Christo has made prominent a crisis in the appreciation of contemporary images: it is the crisis of aura which is attributed to unique singular works. Christo's work has an ambiguous kind of aura, an aura which generates interpretive ambivalences and inconsistencies. It is because of this that the wrapped Reichstag may assault, irritate or activate, or even inspire collective memory when it unexpectedly replaces the monumental building's established aura with a new aura that puts the old one's reception into crisis.

For his part, Traverso through his invented traces puts into crisis the trace value which can be attributed to an image. He mobilizes the power traces have in order to prove that certain events took place and to testify about the existence of certain people at certain times in order to rescue from oblivion events

and people whose traces were effaced by the military junta. Disappeared people return to collective memory through the shock that defacement creates: absent signs are reinvented through Traverso's use of defacement's peculiar dialectics. Inserting his graffiti in the urban palimpsest, he revealingly challenges dominant defacement acts. His invented staged traces challenge the elimination of traces and thus attempt to show that effacement will always be partial and at the mercy of defacement potentialities so long as there are people willing to use those potentialities in their struggles against imposed collective amnesia. Walter Benjamin has suggested that the trace is on the aura's antipode: 'The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be' (Benjamin 1999: 447). In Christo's gesture, defacement establishes an aura in crisis, and therefore puts into crisis the very tactics of creating a distance between the object and the viewer. This kind of ambiguity potentially releases the object from its monumentality without making it familiar, though. Glimpses of space-commoning may emerge in spectral form as viewers experience a clash between a renewed monumentality that fails to impose itself and an equally failed familiarity with a mundane object (a package). Common space may be envisaged in this context as the space of possible collective demythologizing appropriation (in between a renewed public mythology and the trivial private experience of consumer habits).

In Traverso's gesture, the invented nearness of an invented trace is perhaps the necessary means to defy power's undisputed right to select traces and arrange them in dominant narratives about or dominant images of the past. His haunted bicycles emblematically establish the possibility of common space. This kind

of space may be created and used in practices that introduce to existing public spaces elements of a past that carry memories of collective struggles.

Sharing Benjamin's view that the past is full of not-realized opportunities and possibilities (Benjamin 1992: 247), we can employ defacement to search in the past for alternative possible futures. Maybe this is the deeper motive of the Zapatistas in the faraway cities and villages of south Mexico: they too seek to transform public space to common space by reactivating memories which redeem the egalitarian aspect of indigenous traditions. In an act of collective self-defacement, Zapatistas hide their faces using ski masks (Taussig 1999: 261). 'We have hidden our faces so that you can see us,' they say. Defacement becomes an act of demanding to be seen – an act of demanding to be recognized as equal, as having rights, needs and dreams. Isn't this after all an alternative politics of memory, a kind of potential emancipation and proliferation of shared memories in search of a different future?