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# **Writing on the Wall: Conversations with Beirut's Street Artists**

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MSc in Media and Communications

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# **Writing on the Wall: Conversations with Beirut's Street Artists**

**Zeina Najjar**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), graffiti that was once only used by militias to mark territory across the capital Beirut has evolved and proliferated greatly. Stencils, elaborate murals and various other forms of street art crowd the city's walls alongside posters of sectarian leaders and fallen martyrs, creating a unique media ecosystem. While literature on graffiti and street art points to their use as tools for self-expression, social critique, and resistance, insufficient academic attention has been paid to the role of street art in the unique context of Beirut. Still less academic attention has been paid to the individuals behind the art, understanding their motivations, beliefs and attitudes. This study seeks to explore the role of contemporary street art in Beirut from the perspective of those who create it. In-depth qualitative interviewing of five leading figures from the city's street art scene, combined with the thematic analysis of findings, reveals three major themes. Stemming from a reaction to the country's frustrating political situation, street art in Lebanon exists in positive relation to its environment, which it seeks to improve through the beautification and preservation of spaces. Street art in Beirut also serves as a soapbox for artists looking to counter dominant discourses of sectarianism and homophobia and carve out a space for dissent in a media landscape otherwise hijacked by the private interests of political groups. Finally, street art plays a role in Beirut's cultural politics, unproblematically seen by some as a Western medium and used by others a means to represent what they believe to be true Lebanese culture. This is symptomatic of Lebanon's larger, long-standing identity crisis. Street art in Beirut, then, simultaneously plays a unique, unprecedented role in the city and reproduces tensions in identity politics that pre-exist its emergence.

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## INTRODUCTION

For those who care to look closely enough, the story of Beirut is etched on its walls. Suffocating under a combination of political posters and street art today, the walls of the Lebanese capital are host to different types of media that can be traced back to its civil war (1975-1990). The start of the war brought with it an avalanche of political posters printed by warring factions in a bid to rally their supporters, undermine their rivals, and cultivate an awareness of their cause (Maasri, 2009). Simultaneously, more spontaneous scrawls appeared across the city as militias taking over various neighbourhoods began to spray walls with graffiti to mark the territory as their own (Chakhtoura, 1978). Posters, graffiti, and other visual materials like billboards and banners were therefore used as a means of communicating, but also one of demarcating areas of influence (Maasri, 2009). Though the war has since ended, tensions remain high in Beirut. Still split along largely sectarian lines, the country's political divides are reflected in its physical spaces (Seidman, 2012: 8). A walk through most of Beirut's streets reveals this fact; posters celebrating political parties, their leaders, and their martyrs are as much a part of the city's fabric as its residents or landmarks.

While political posters continue to serve much the same purpose they did during the war, graffiti - or street art more generally - has evolved significantly from its original usage (Salti, 2008). Partisan graffiti continues to exist on the city's walls, but it now shares the stage with sprayed anti-sectarian slogans, provocative stencils, elaborate murals and unexpected splashes of colour on public staircases and other facilities. These more recent forms of street art inhabit the city's spaces and continue to proliferate with every month that passes. This has not gone unnoticed, with numerous dedicated publications as well as local and international media outlets exploring Beirut's emerging street art scene. Having avidly followed coverage of the topic from its beginnings, I have observed that it typically falls into one of three general categories: (i) academic writing on the practice of street art and its significance in the Lebanese context, (ii) visual analyses of pieces found around the city, and (iii) press articles briefly interviewing prominent artists and/or showcasing their work<sup>1</sup>. While an examination from these angles has undoubtedly contributed to the body of knowledge surrounding the medium of street art in this very particular context, I have nonetheless felt that a thorough, academic examination of the artists and their opinions was missing.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of (i) and (ii) can be found in the literature review that follows. Anderson, 2011; Abi Saab, 2012; Talty, 2013; Sioufi, 2014 are but a few examples of (iii).

This gap I identified in the treatment of street art in Beirut quickly turned from a source of frustration to a perceived opportunity for an original and timely contribution to a topic that has long captured my attention. My hope is that the research that follows will add, however modestly, to a thoughtful and conceptually framed discussion of a rapidly evolving artistic phenomenon in one of the world's most politically charged environments *from the perspective of individuals behind it*. It should be noted that I opted to specifically focus on Beirut because the overwhelming majority of street art that exists in Lebanon can be found there (Kraidy, 2013). Moreover, my research also aims to meaningfully engage with relevant concepts predominantly developed in a Western context, and test their validity and applicability in the Lebanese context.

This dissertation was inspired by a desire to better understand the perceptions of the individuals behind the art that has recently become a defining feature of Beirut's public spaces, with a particular focus on the role they believe such art can play. I aim to do so by bringing the hitherto lacking rigour of academic inquiry to interviews with prominent individuals from the scene. How do they define street art? What motivates them? What message(s) are they looking to communicate? How do they perceive their art and what do they think it can achieve, if anything? Moreover, how do key concepts and theories from the study of media and communications help to analyse these artists and their work? Following chapters outlining the theoretical and methodological grounding of my research, I will be examining all of the above questions and more through analysis of in-depth interviews with five leading street artists from Lebanon. I will then conclude by highlighting key insights gleaned from my analysis based on the theoretical underpinnings of the discussion. Further research could potentially build on the dimension I have chosen to examine and continue to study the function of street art in Beirut as the medium evolves in exceptionally volatile surroundings.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Street Art: Definitions and Central Tensions**

It is first important to outline what we mean by street art and how it relates to graffiti, a term often used alongside or instead of street art. In the words of Schacter, since its birth in the 1960s and 70s, "street-art (or if you prefer, graffiti), in its various forms and manifold designs, is one of the most ubiquitous sources of visual culture in the contemporary urban metropolis" (2008: 35). While Schacter opts to use the terms interchangeably, other authors

perceive the relationship between graffiti and street art differently. According to Brighenti, defining the field of graffiti writing is problematic because its boundaries are hard to trace (2010: 316). For example, McAuliffe defines graffiti as “a range of practices from tagging through to elaborate ‘pieces’ [...] with a focus on stylized words and text, usually including the tag name of the artists/writers and their associated crew” (2012: 190). Graffiti pieces are typically hard to read and therefore regarded as “an appropriation of public space” and an exclusionary, “egocentric form of private communication among writers” (McAuliffe, 2012: 190). In contrast, continues McAuliffe, street art is thought of as possessing a “public address, less tied to subcultural practices and conventions” (2012: 190).

Ferrell, on the other hand, refers to the “the subculture of contemporary urban graffiti”, which encompasses “tagging [...] subcultural identities on walls and bridges, executing quick two-colour ‘throw-ups’ in urban alleys, or spending hours painting large, elaborate ‘pieces’ on abandoned buildings or bridge abutments” (2009: 23). Differing from both these views, Chung sees street art as “rooted in graffiti culture and its attitude toward the world” but now a “post graffiti movement” that includes “traditional spray-painted tags, stickers, stencils, posters, photocopies, murals, paper cutouts, mosaics, street installations, performances, and video projections displayed in urban streets” (2009). Writing about the Lebanese context, Saleh describes street art as a “technical and artistic” reaction to political events in Lebanon and the region that is “not divided, [...] patriotic, localized, and colloquial” (2011: 85).

The divergences in naming practices reflect the larger tension within the body of literature surrounding street art and graffiti. One major tension centers on whether street art and graffiti constitute a form of ‘pure, unmediated expression’ to be celebrated or an illegal act of vandalism that runs contrary to the notion of civil society (Schacter, 2008: 35; McAuliffe, 2012; Cronin 2008). Moreover, Hasley and Young trace the divergences in academic attitudes towards graffiti through the angles from which it has been studied (2006: 276): beyond sociological interpretations of graffiti (Abel and Buckley, 1977; Feyner and Klein, 1982; Lachmann, 1988), scholars have approached it as a part of hip-hop culture (Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987; Ferrell, 2001; Macdonald, 2001), a practice traceable to ancient cultures in the West as well as the East (Pritchard, 1967; Betts, 2001), an aesthetic phenomenon (Mirzoeff, 1995; Baker et al., 2004), and a regulatory issue (Gomez, 1993; White, 2000). In all sections that follow, I will be accepting Schacter’s use of street art and graffiti as interchangeable terms. Doing so has proved the best way to take full advantage of the literature relevant to my research topic and ensure that the range of practices that currently exist in Beirut is covered.

## **Street Art and Resistance**

The sociologist Stephen Duncombe describes ‘cultural resistance’ as a use of culture that resists or alters the hegemonic social, political, or economic structure (2002: 5). Such resistance can take many shapes but is characterized by creating a “free space” away from the rules of the dominant order, allowing for new ways of developing “tools and resources for resistance” (ibid). By virtue of culture being shared, such resistance also provides a ‘focal point’ around which community can be built (Duncombe, 2002: 6). Focusing on graffiti specifically, Phillips asserts that the ease with which it can be produced makes it the preferred medium for politically marginalized groups or individuals seeking to challenge existing power relations (1999: 20). Similarly, Dickens describes street art as a ‘critical social practice’ (2008: 30).

There is no shortage of examples of street art being used as a tool for resistance in highly politicized contexts. From murals in Belfast (Rolston, 1991) to the Berlin Wall (Iveson, 2010: 131) and the Israeli separation barrier, street art can be used as a “formidable weapon for hearts, minds, and justice” (Perry, 2011: 73). In *Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries*, Chafee Lyman argues that “street art breaks the conspiracy of silence” and, like the media, contributes to forming social consciousness (1993: 4). Lyman likens street art to a barometer for the spectrum of thinking in a given society at times of democratic transformation (ibid). Charles Tripp echoes this view in his book *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (2013), exploring the relationship between power and forms of resistance employed in the Arab uprisings of 2011 with a particular focus on symbolic forms of resistance such as graffiti, street art, and posters (2013: 256-309).

## **Art in Beirut: Origins and Transformations**

Modern-day street art (or graffiti) is widely acknowledged as having originated in the Western world (Reisner, 1971; Naar, 2007). Much like the tagging characteristic of gangs in Los Angeles and New York (Saleh, 2011: 84), Lebanese street art originally appeared as a means of marking territory for militias during the 1970s (Zoghbi, 2011: 89). Today, political battles have shifted from the street to mainstream media, making way for expression of a different kind on the city’s walls (Zoghbi, 2011: 90). Post-war street art now exists in stark contrast to that of the civil war, both in terms of content as well as “purpose, interlocution, interpellation, dissemination, scope and quantity” (Salti, 2008: 7). No longer exclusively

sectarian, it has ventured into matters of civic participation, secularism, sexuality, equality, and various other ‘new left campaigns’ (Kraidy, 2013), as well as individual, non-political expression (Salti, 2008: 3).

While consensus exists around wartime street art and graffiti differing markedly from post-war graffiti, there is little consensus in the literature around what has motivated a new generation to take up the practice. While some argue that street art is a direct reaction to the difficult political and social situation in Lebanon (Saleh, 2011; Zoghbi, 2011; Kraidy, 2013), others argue that it is a harbinger of the end of the war and the start of individuals expressing apolitical, everyday experiences (Salti, 2008: 3). Regardless of these differences, authors agree on the democratic dimension of the practice (Kraidy, 2013; Salti, 2008; Zoghbi, 2011), which disseminates messages that would not appear in mainstream media because of their “radicalism or marginality” (Kraidy, 2013). Street art is even hailed as being “interactive, dialogical, playful, and on the whole, profoundly democratising” because it does not restrict art to socio-economic elites but rather places it in the public realm, addressing onlookers as “citizenry and an electorate” rather than a monolithic mass susceptible to sectarian rhetoric (Salti, 2008: 11).

### **Habermas and the Public Sphere**

Before discussing the concept of the public sphere as it relates to Lebanon, an explanation of the classical concept is first in order. Although the said concept can be traced back to Greek antiquity, Habermas’ theorization endures as the most widespread (Dean, 2003: 96) and “theoretically sophisticated” to date (Mouffe, 1992). This theorization is two-fold, outlining the public sphere as both a historical phenomenon as well as a normative ideal (Calhoun, 1992; Lunt and Livingstone, 2013). In his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Habermas describes the historical emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in the coffee houses and salons of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, initially confined to educated, land-owning men (Calhoun, 1992: 3-5). Habermas also theorizes it as the normative, democratic ideal of public participation acting as a counterweight to state authority through rational, discursive deliberation (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 91). In his own words, he describes the essential concept of the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” and to which all citizens are guaranteed access (Habermas, 1974: 49).

While Habermas’ writings on the public sphere have undoubtedly enjoyed great success and durability, they have also been extensively critiqued from a number of perspectives. Nancy



Fraser, turning to Seyla Benhabib (1992), Geoff Eley (1992), and Mary Ryan (1990), among others, put forth a comprehensive feminist critique to the Habermasian public sphere (1990). In it, she argues that the rhetoric of openness and accessibility often used to describe the public sphere in fact masks “a number of significant exclusions” such as women and other marginalized groups (Fraser, 1990: 59). Other criticisms include the deliberative model’s inability to take power differentials into account, its overemphasis on the use of reason and persuasion, its failure to recognize the role of social identities in the formation of public positions, and its dismissal of the ambiguity between public and private as well as state and society (Gambetti, 2009: 93). Finally, Chantal Mouffe’s well-known alternative to the model of deliberative democracy, termed ‘agonistic pluralism’, insists on the need to make political conflict and struggle central parts of the public sphere rather than dismiss them in the name of consensus or rationality (1992). The job of democratic politics, she argues, is not to deny passions a place in the public sphere but to “mobilize those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs” (ibid).

### **The Public Sphere and the Middle East**

Habermas himself has admitted to his view of the public sphere as being a ‘eurocentrically’ limited one (1985: 104). Indeed, both Edward Said and Jean-Francois Lyotard have pointed to this lack of engagement with the rest of the world as being problematic (Khan, 2009: 361). Where does this leave those interested in applying the concept in a non-European context? Should it be discarded entirely? A useful starting point for answering this question is Fawwaz Traboulsi’s assertion that “theories, concepts, and notions that arise in one national or regional situation are not necessarily applicable in another” (2009: 45). Traboulsi argues that while many concepts do enjoy global application despite their place of origin, such universality should not be taken for granted without first critically examining it. In the case of the public sphere, the idea appears to be too entangled with the specific experiences of the Western world to “claim a priori universal value” (2009: 45). However, this fact should not lead us to discard the idea entirely, but rather use a critical historical approach to extract lessons and inspiration from it (Traboulsi, 2009: 50).

Concurrently, other authors cite the public sphere as a useful concept for studying the development of the media and the Arab world. For example, Dietrich Jung states that the concept of the public sphere has been “firmly established” as useful in studying media in the Middle East (2012: 161). He argues that the proliferation of transnational, online, and other forms of media has allowed for the undermining of previously centralised spaces of communication controlled by autocratic regimes (Jung, 2012: 161). Accepting Jung’s

assertion, and insofar as the public sphere enables publics to criticise and keep the state in check (Habermas, 1962: 142), the concept remains salient. Similarly, Eunice Goes uses Habermas' (2006) definition of the public sphere as "a communication structure rooted in the lifeworld through the associational network of civil society" to describe the role that Tahrir Square played in the Egyptian uprising (2012: 6).

### **Beirut Spaces: Public or Public Sphere?**

One cannot take for granted that what is public is in fact a public sphere. Gambetti argues that by adopting the communicative dimension of Habermas' model, we are able to widen the scope of the concept's historical emergence to include new spaces in which "publicness takes effect"; these include "representational spaces, symbolic spaces, spaces of circulation, spaces of performance, margins and in-betweens" (2009: 93). She also posits that a public becomes a public sphere when the normative dimension contained within the latter – "self-determination, critical distance to power structures, communication" – become lasting elements of society rather than fleeting instances of resistance quickly absorbed by the political system (Gambetti, 2009: 110). In this sense, the passive act of being part of a public cannot be equated with "deliberate community formation" (ibid).

Lebanese scholars invite us to think about the issue more concretely. Because of a corrupt ruling class with a penchant for clientilistic privatization and a laissez-faire economy always open to the highest bidder, in Lebanon things public are few and far between (Salti, 2008: 4). Calls for political mobilization and rivalries between factions are nonetheless expressed on Beirut's walls as well as on posters and banners, forming "the informal public sphere of the streetscape" (2008: 3). According to Kraidy, activists looking to penetrate the public sphere have turned to the use of online tools as well as graffiti (2013). Despite online media as well as Beirut's walls being subjected "to the disciplinary power of the political-commercial nexus", they remain relatively autonomous compared to other platforms (ibid). However, delineating the border and components of the public sphere in Lebanon remains complicated. Determining whether a public space is necessarily a public sphere in the democratic sense is even more so.

In the same way that political power in the country is shared between different religious groups, so are Lebanon's media landscape and public spaces (Seidman, 2012: 11). Diverging visions of nationhood, almost invariably connected to sectarian identity, are clearly reflected in the country's overtly politically affiliated media outlets (Kraidy, 2013). In turn, Beirut's neighborhoods are portioned between political parties that stake a claim to the space through

the display of countless posters, banners, and billboards (Schmitt, 2009). Public spaces, then, are simultaneously spaces of inclusion and exclusion where “crippling civic indifference and paranoia” towards the other is bred (Seidman, 2012: 12). In this context, Traboulsi aptly gives the example of a public space in the Southern suburb of Beirut where Hezbollah is most heavily present. He asks: “Is the constitution of an urban space for Hezbollah [...] a closed space (because restricted to one sect to the exclusion of other sects) or is it a public sphere because it brings together members of otherwise closed and exclusive families, clans, regions, and others?” (Traboulsi, 2009: 58). Extrapolating to the entire country where political institutions and representative bodies are created around regions, religious sects, and ethnic groups, we must ask ourselves if it is safe to assume that a public space catering to a community is really a part of the public sphere and “conducive to democratization” (ibid).

Le Ray offers valuable insight here. She argues that creating meaning in spaces where strangers will encounter it, or ‘spatial meaning-making’, is a means *par excellence* of producing publicness as well as creating platforms for debating the social and political status quo (2009: 428). As such, Le Ray posits that public spheres can emerge in instances when ‘public grammars’ are challenged or renegotiated: “whenever and wherever actors organize to create breathing spaces, challenge the dominant normative system and subvert existing categories to produce new ones” (2009: 431). Drawing on Calhoun’s (2005) understanding of the public sphere as a “spatial metaphor for an only partially spatial phenomenon” (in Le Ray, 2009: 498), Le Ray maintains that taking into account the conflicted social fabric of spaces as well as the everyday experiences of those who inhabit them is a ‘privileged entry’ to understanding how public spheres emerge in restrictive political contexts (2009: 427).

Just as the correlation between a public space and a public sphere cannot be taken for granted, neither can the relationship between the existence of a public sphere and citizens’ ability to take meaningful action. Habermas warned that we must not be overly deterministic about the power of the public sphere, as the capacity of discourse to solve problems alone is limited (2006). Still writing about the Egyptian uprising, Goes turns to Habermas to argue that the newly-formed public sphere of Tahrir Square served as a ‘sounding board’ for issues that needed to ultimately be dealt with by the political system and its institutions (2012: 6). Gambetti takes the discussion further yet, asserting that the debate ought not to center around the theoretical validity of the concept of the public sphere altogether, but around whether political action is at all possible in our day and age (2009: 95).

### **Cosmopolitanism: An Elusive Concept**

Stuart Hall understands cosmopolitanism as a utopian ideal of global citizenship that cannot be achieved until there exists equality between different parts of the world (2006). Similarly, Seidman defines it as “a cluster of cognitive and evaluative beliefs such as tolerance and respect for social differences, [...] an orientation that invites encounters with foreign cultures” (2012: 4). Moreover, Taylor defines cosmopolitanism as the “deliberate attempt to create a consensus about values and behavior – a cosmopolitan community – among diverse communities” (1999: 540). Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, and Chakrabarty plainly point out that they “are not exactly certain what it is”, as cosmopolitanism as a concept and a practice “must always escape positive and definite specification, precisely because specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an unc cosmopolitan thing to do” (2000: 577). Despite the multifaceted and ambiguous character of the concept (which is not immediately relevant to the purposes of this research), cosmopolitanism at its core (i) goes beyond the nation-state model; (ii) can negotiate actions and ideals simultaneously oriented towards the global and the local; (iii) is opposed to forms of cultural essentialism; (iv) and can represent a complex range of identities and allegiances (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002: 3-4). Thus, it offers a way of “managing cultural and political multiplicities” (ibid).

Cosmopolitanism has perhaps most concretely been studied in relation to cities (Jacobs, 1993; Sennett, 1971; Young, 1989). With specific regard to the Middle East, some wonder whether applying the idea outside the Western world might “carry the stench of neocolonialism”, while others worry that not doing so might be seen as patronizing (Seidman, 2012: 5). In a bid to assuage such concerns, *Cairo Cosmopolitan* (Singerman and Amar, 2006) explores the ways in which the concept of cosmopolitanism is a useful framework for studying changes the city is undergoing. Similarly, Mayaram argues for the appropriateness of what some might deem a Western notion to the Middle East (2010). Her argument is echoed by a body of studies (Amin et al., 2002; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Hiebert, 2002; Sandercock and Lyssiotis, 2003) also insisting that cosmopolitanism is “a central thematic focus for analyzing urban dynamics across the globe” (Seidman, 2012: 4). Seidman takes the argument further, claiming that the concept is produced and used locally, allowing it to take root as a collective representation or “social force [...] with real-life consequences”, e.g. a class ideology (2012: 5).

## **Lebanon’s Cosmopolitan Promise**

The national mythology of Lebanon is that of a country of exceptional dualities (East and West, city and countryside, snow capped mountains and sea), fated to be a haven of tolerance and diversity in contrast to its Arab neighbors (Ajami and Eli, 1988; Hourani, 1946). Once dubbed the ‘Switzerland of the Middle East’, Lebanon was imagined to be a model in ‘civic pluralism and cosmopolitanism’, home to eighteen officially recognized religious sects and their institutions, laws, media, and political organizations (Seidman, 2012: 28). Indeed, such respect for diversity is ‘the normative core’ of the national identity of many Lebanese, who in their rhetoric on cosmopolitan nationalism often contrast modern Lebanon (‘forward-looking, individualistic, pluralistic, and global’) with the rest of the traditional Arab world (‘backward-looking, communitarian, intolerant, and provincial’) (Seidman, 2012: 25). This dichotomy created between Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East is also applied inside Lebanon itself: social spaces, institutions, and political as well as cultural figures are used to signify the country’s modernity, while others symbolize its backwardness (ibid). It would appear, then, that Lebanon’s cosmopolitanism is not distributed equally throughout the country.

Sadly, Lebanon did not live up to its cosmopolitan promise, becoming plagued instead by sectarianism and recurrent civic violence (Seidman, 2012: 28). Though actual violence has mostly ceased, wars continue to be fought symbolically through posters in the streets and personality cults created around sectarian leaders (Seidman, 2012: 28). This startling disconnect between how many in Lebanon imagine their country and the reality on the ground is captured by Salti’s assertion that it is “an open yet bigoted country, profoundly parochial while boasting a cosmopolitan portend forming a barometer of political trends, ideologies and conflicts throughout the region” (2008: 4). This duality, aptly termed ‘Lebanese Exceptionalism: The Rhetoric of Cosmopolitan Nationalism’, is part of a larger struggle over Lebanese national identity and often cited by proponents of liberalism who oppose both Arab nationalism and traditional sectarianism (Seidman, 2012: 24).

On a final note, Seidman argues that the intersection of urban topography with sociohistorical conditions (e.g. the enduring sectarian partitioning of Beirut’s neighborhoods save for a few ‘cosmopolitan’ enclaves) creates ‘dispositions or a habitus’ that structures how people relate to urban space as well as each other (2012: 5). He goes on to state that individuals studied in Hamra, one of Beirut’s most diverse neighborhoods, possessed dispositions that run contrary “to the kind of emphatic and dynamic exchanges that would characterize a robust cosmopolitan culture” (ibid). Hamra is one of Beirut’s most street art-rich areas (Kraidy, 2013), making exploration of the assertion that the dispositions of Hamra’s inhabitants are antithetical to the spirit of cosmopolitanism worthwhile. Bourdieu

defines habitus as

a system of durable, transposable dispositions [...], principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (1990: 53).

For instance, a child raised with artists for parents is likely to internalize the dispositions of his/her family by picking up a taste for art and acquiring the know-how to engage with it (Swartz, 2002: 62-63).

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

Many of the tensions identified in the above literature will frame my research project. Through conversations with artists, I will aim to investigate if and how such tensions play out among street artists in the context of Beirut and attempt to provide answers to the questions they raise. Specifically, is the lack of consensus surrounding the definition of street art itself reflected amongst Beirut's street artists? Is the practice of street art able to catalyse meaningful action or change amongst civil society? Does it enable cultural resistance? Do Beirut's public spaces and all they carry on their walls constitute a public sphere to any extent? And is the medium a Western import that feeds into Beirut's cosmopolitan aspirations? While answers to such questions are most likely not going to be clear-cut or unanimous, they will enable me to start forming an understanding of street art in Beirut from a fresh perspective. Framing the discussion with artists around the theoretical framework developed here will also allow for investigating the applicability (or lack thereof) of much of the relevant literature written with other contexts in mind.

As stated in the introduction, the objective of the research conducted for the purpose of this dissertation is to glean in-depth insights into the perceptions of Lebanese street artists as to the function of their work. While academic attention has been paid to the practice of street art in the Lebanese context and media coverage of the artists also exists (both evidenced above), a close and theoretically grounded examination of the persons behind the art allows for a fresh entry-point into relatively uncharted territory. Indeed, none of the literature reviewed turned to the artists themselves for answers, choosing to focus more on historical accounts and academic examinations of the medium or analyses of the pieces created in Lebanon. While these approaches are valuable, they offer only a partial picture of a practice that fundamentally consists in the expression of individuals. Who are the people behind the art? What do they think their work can achieve? Are its functions unique to the context they

exist in? Do they help explain the remarkable proliferation of street art in post-war Beirut? Speaking to some of the persons driving the city's street art scene can offer unique insight into these questions. This dissertation will therefore aim to answer the following research question: *How do Beirut's street artists perceive the function of their work?*

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

In light of the fact that this dissertation is focused on examining the views and opinions of street artists around specific topics, qualitative interviewing was deemed the most appropriate and potentially fruitful research methodology. Interviews were identified as the best means of answering a research question that requires a deep and thorough understanding of the perceptions of individuals, as “the purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on a person's mind [...], to access the perspective of the person being interviewed [...], to find out from them things that we cannot directly observe” (Patton, 1990: 278).

Despite the ‘didactic nightmare’ (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000: 10) that qualitative research can sometimes be, it nonetheless allows for a depth of analysis necessary for the purposes of this dissertation. Qualitative interviewing refers to a one-on-one, semi-structured depth interview (Gaskell, 2000: 38). Although my research question centres on a rather well delineated theme (artists' perceptions of the role of their work), variation in the range of possible answers was potentially enormous. I therefore required a research method that could accommodate this fact and allow me the time and freedom to collect detailed information, ask follow-up questions, and further pursue topics of interest as they arose (Berger, 1998: 57). Qualitative interviewing allowed me to the flexibility to explore and harness the richness of my findings without restricting them.

Furthermore, the stated objective of qualitative interviewing is “a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts” (Gaskell, 2000: 39). This captures the essence of my research question, which aims to provide a thoughtful answer to the ways in which Lebanese street artists see the function of their work. In order to satisfactorily respond to the question, I required a research tool that enabled me to probe the beliefs, attitudes, and motivations of actors in their specific social context under scrutiny (Berger, 1998: 55).

Deeper inquiry into interviewing as a method revealed its aptness for the purposes of this

dissertation. Much of my interest in conducting social research in Lebanon stems from a belief that social reality is not “an unproblematic given”, but rather constructed everyday by people living under conditions they do not fully control (Gaskell, 2000: 38). These constructs constitute their own personal realities, referred to as ‘life worlds’ (Gaskell, 2000: 39). This rings particularly true in the Lebanese context, where social actors are subjected to a relentless stream of political events over which they can exercise no control but are left to make sense of in their own way, after the fact. In light of all this, what life worlds have street artists in Beirut constructed for themselves? How do these inform their art and their understanding of themselves and their work? These are questions that can best be answered first hand, through candid dialogue.

After understanding the life worlds of respondents through interviewing, it is the interviewer’s job to introduce “interpretive frameworks to understand the actors” accounts in more conceptual or abstract terms, often in relation to other observations’ (Gaskell, 2000: 39). This dimension of the research method coincided neatly with the larger exercise of writing a dissertation, which demands the integration of a conceptual framework with empirical findings obtained during the data collection phase.

Before settling on the choice of qualitative interviewing, others methods were considered. A pilot study was initially conducted by applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992) to short texts extracted from various pieces of street art found in Beirut. As the aim of this dissertation began to evolve following discussions with professors and experts in the field, I decided to focus on the artists themselves rather than the art. This fact rendered CDA irrelevant as a standalone method because it does not allow for a narrow and sustained focus on the producers of the discourse, calling instead for analysis of the text itself, as well as its production, distribution, consumption, and the wider social practice within which the discourse is created (1992: 72).

While focus groups would have yielded interesting data, this research project aims to learn about individual rather than group opinions. When this is the case, it is recommended that in-depth interviews be used instead of focus groups (Boyce and Neale, 2006: 3). What’s more, placing different artists together within the same focus group interview may have created competition and compromised their willingness to answer certain questions openly while in the presence of others (Berger, 2011).

Questionnaires were also considered as a means of collecting data, but dismissed due to the small number of respondents as well as my desire to explore issues in depth and detail, rather



than limit possibilities for answers. Questionnaires brought with them a high risk of impoverishing and confining the range of findings and their degree of nuance (Holdaway, 2000: 166). Moreover, live interaction with artists could reasonably be expected to bring with it more opportunity for the exploration of themes and substantiation of answers (Stroh, 2000) than questionnaires filled without the active intervention of the researcher would. The choice of in-depth interviewing was further bolstered by Bauer and Gaskell's assertion that "neither the survey questionnaire nor the focus group is the royal road for social research" (2000: 7).

In-depth interviewing can also present certain limitations. The inherent uncertainty attached to not knowing what will come out of interviews until after they are conducted is one of these. The potential impact of circumstances (e.g. the mood of interviewees, the timing and location of interviews) on the quality of data also adds uncertainty (Gaskell, 2000; Stroh, 2000). Interviews are also susceptible to bias and do not allow for a generalization of findings (Berger, 1998). In spite of this, interviewing remains the method that best allows for having open, meaningful conversations around topics of interest with relevant respondents. In short, the grounding assumptions, procedures, and objectives of qualitative interviewing were best suited to treat the research question guiding my work.

## **Research Design and Procedures**

### *Interviewee Selection*

In selecting a pool of respondents, my guiding principle was to cover the range of street art practices that currently exists in Beirut. I decided to do so because I wanted the selection to be technical, rather than normative, insulating me from possible researcher bias or personal preference. Furthermore, the fundamental purpose of conducting qualitative research "is not counting opinions or people, but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue" (Gaskell, 2000: 41). Applying this to my own research project, interviewing artists that engage in different street art practices was a means of trying to tap into these different representations of the issue and sample significant currents of opinion. The main types of street art practices are: sprayed text or tags, stencils, throw ups, murals, and shapes and colours on atypical surfaces<sup>2</sup>.

### *Challenges*

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix for examples.

The nature of this research project brought with it very specific constraints and challenges. Street artists often prefer to remain anonymous. This significantly reduced the pool of prospective respondents. Moreover, Beirut is a relatively small city, as is its street art scene in turn. While I ideally aimed to interview six to ten artists, I was not able to secure interviews with more than five, despite several attempts over a three-month period. Upon meeting the artists who did agree to interviews, I requested to be put in contact with other members of the scene, to no avail. Naturally, this imposed limitations on the quality and exhaustiveness of my data. The fact that I was nonetheless able to secure meetings with leading artists who engaged in the full range of existing street art practices and conduct in-depth interviews mostly exceeding an hour in length helped mitigate this limitation.

### *Respondent Profiles*

Respondent profiles are necessary for best understanding quotes cited in the 'Results and Analysis' section. All information included below was provided to me by the artists themselves.

1. Ayla Hibri (AH), 26-year-old female. *Stencils*, sprayed texts and tags. Ayla studied interior architecture and went on to obtain a Masters degree in photography from the US.
2. Hamed Sinno (HS), 26-year-old male. *Stencils*. Hamed studied Graphic Design and is now the lead singer of the internationally acclaimed Lebanese band 'Mashrou' Leila'. He is the only openly gay vocalist currently in the Middle East.
3. Jubran Elias (JE), 25-year-old male. *Shapes and colours on atypical surfaces*. Jubran studied Graphic design and is a founding member of the designer collective now well known for painting staircases across Beirut and involving local communities in the process.
4. Omar Kabbani (OK), 31-year-old male. *Murals, throw ups, and stencils*. Omar is one half of the hip-hop duo 'Ashekman', started with his twin brother. The group was one of the first to start creating street art in Beirut. They also operate an urban clothing brand.
5. Yazan Halwani (YH), 21-year-old male. *Murals*. Yazan is currently a student of

Electrical and Computer Engineering.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval was first received from my dissertation supervisor, who signed off on my ethics checklist after my research project had been altered and the list updated accordingly. Furthermore, to ensure that ethical standards were upheld throughout the data collection process, respondents were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the start of every interview. Before presenting them with the form, I outlined its contents then waited however long was required for reading and signing it. The form briefly explained my research project and stated that respondents' full names would be included in the final dissertation, unless requested otherwise. It also stated that participants were at liberty to revoke their consent or permission to use information obtained during the interview at any point, and that all information obtained would be used solely for the purposes of this dissertation. Finally, I explained that the interview would be recorded for transcription purposes, pending their approval. In order to help "establish a relationship of trust and confidence" or 'rapport' (Gaskell, 2000: 45), respondents were asked to think of the interview as a conversation rather than a rigid or formal interview.

### *Topic Guide*

The topic guide is an integral element of the research process and requires meticulous attention (Gaskell, 2000: 40). It was developed following a semi-structured format that outlines general themes to be covered over the course of the interview. This was done with a view to not restricting flexibility in pursuing one-off topics, yet maintaining overall coherence and consistency (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 149). As mentioned previously, my pilot study was aimed at the study of CDA (Fairclough, 1992). After making the decision to change focus, I spoke with several members of the Media and Communications Department and consulted experts in the field of street art and Arab media. This allowed me to feel fairly confident and draft a topic guide comprised of eighteen questions ordered in a logical progression, which I later employed as a memory aid for what to explore during interviews (Marshall and Rossman, 1989).

### *Conducting the Interviews*

All interviews were conducted in person across Beirut, Lebanon over a two-week period in July of 2014. Each lasted between 45 minutes and an hour in length. I was mindful of the fact that most of the interviewees are accustomed to giving press interviews and might deliver pre-prepared answers or “adopt positions on issues that match a particular self-image” (Gaskell, 2006: 46). Conversely, my concern was that a minority of interviewees might feel uncomfortable or shy discussing their work and limit their answers as a result. To help overcome these potential issues, all interviews were conducted in comfortable, informal locations such as cafés or the artists’ workspaces. I also made sure to establish a rapport by speaking a little about myself, my interest in street art, as well as my research project before presenting interviewees with consent forms or starting to record. It should be noted that I explained that while I use the terms ‘graffiti’ and ‘street art’ interchangeably, they ought not feel bound by this and would be given the chance to offer their own understanding of the terms at the beginning of the interview.

### *Conducting the Analysis*

After conducting the interviews, each one was listened to and transcribed word for word. I made notes and comments in the margins as I went along, jotting down preliminary remarks close to passages that seemed to be of particular interest to the research question. After completing all transcriptions in this way, it became clear that rough patterns and themes had already begun to appear and were readily identifiable (Rice and Ezzy, 1999). Thematic analysis was selected as a means of examining the findings, as it allows for emerging themes to “become the categories for analysis” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008: 82). Such analysis was conducted inductively, driven by interpretation of the data itself after it had been collected (Boyatzis, 1998).

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

Before delving into the role of street art, interviewees were asked general questions about how they understand street art and their motivation(s) for getting into the practice. The main themes gleaned from the analysis of the findings are then outlined, followed by a brief section of critical self-assessment.

### **Definitions and Motivations**

The general lack of agreement on what the term street art encompasses and how it relates to graffiti is clearly reflected in the answers of interviewees. Some do not acknowledge the existence of a difference between street art and graffiti, others insist on separating between the two, and others still consider the political posters, advertisements, and miscellaneous media found on Beirut's streets to be a form of street art. While this lack of consensus shows continuity and consistency with the literature, most respondents included political posters under the label of street art, underscoring the uniqueness of Beirut's outdoor media ecosystem. Moreover, the answers included below are telling of the rather significant variation in the tendency to rationalize responses. While some interviewees use academic and artistic jargon, others speak in what comes across as a less self-conscious manner. Such variation in the level of intellectualization and self-awareness is a recurrent characteristic of the sample.

Street art is just a form of expression. It started with cavemen expressing their fears, scribbling on walls, drawing fire and wild animals. (OK)

Graffiti is just the act of writing one's name or tagging to become dominant, without any message... And then you have street art. Street art is actually a broader collection of everything else. (YH)

I see street art as two types. The first type is sending a political or religious message - no matter if it's a poster or graffiti, sectarian or secular - and the second one is just being free and expressing your feelings or just making artistic murals. (JE)

It's graffiti writing, stenciling, cheap ads, even political posters and people who spray paint stuff like 'I love you, Ali', full of spelling mistakes and all. To me this is the new art. It's so kitsch and unselfconscious. (AH)

When you say 'art', it means nothing. It means discourse. It's really just a matter of appropriating it. Political party stencils are not considered art but there was a designer behind them and a clear intention of communicating something. (HS)

When asked about their initial motivation for turning to street art, responses centred around two themes: (i) the need to react to the socio-political situation and (ii) the desire to make Beirut more beautiful. Like much of the literature on street art in Lebanon portends (Saleh, 2011; Zoghbi, 2011; Kraidy, 2013), some respondents describe their desire to become street artists as a direct counter-reaction to the social and political situation. Interestingly, those who only cited beautifying the city as a motivator at first soon after mentioned the ubiquity of political posters in Beirut and the recurrent cycle of violence it seems to be trapped inside as

well. It appears that street art is turned to as a reaction to frustration and exasperation with one's environment and a desire to alter it somehow. This is not surprising, as "for many Lebanese, the present is thick with an affective aura of loss, with barely contained feelings of fear, vulnerability, and rage [...] as the present remains deeply wedded to a 15-year period of civil violence" (Seidman, 2012: 10).

We are the aftermath of the civil war. Everything we do is a reaction to the political volcano we live in. We need to express ourselves. (OK)

The only public references to homosexuality were very hateful and condemnatory. There was something very powerful about standing behind my homosexuality and refusing anonymity. (HS)

The idea came from wanting to beautify and make Beirut more colourful... We're going around in a cycle of wars - the new generation is just expressing itself through art more. (JE)

I started stenciling stuff that reminds people of childhood to add some lightness to the walls... I wanted to add some humour instead of all the heavy and sad political sh\*\*. In my opinion, every single piece of graffiti in Beirut is a reaction. It comes from a place of f\*\*\* you. (AH)

In the same vein, noticeable in the speech of many artists is the creation of a dichotomy between local politics (i.e. sectarianism) and civil society. It was implied during several interviews that politics and all that is associated with it (e.g. political posters, government property) existed in contrast or opposition to society and its best interests. This mirrors an existing tendency in Lebanese civil society discourse, which has created distinct terminologies to describe 'two societies', one referring to the communal society of politicized religious and ethnic groups and the other covering civil society with its trade unions and NGOs (Traboulsi, 2009: 58).

If you're conveying a political message, you're targeting a few people, but if you're doing a mural or an artistic thing, you're targeting all the citizens. (JE)

I always ask for permission if it's someone's house. I never paint illegally – unless it's government property. (YH)

As demonstrated throughout this section, several of the artists make it a point to discursively differentiate between their work and all things 'political', referring to the two in opposition to one another. Mouffe, however, invites us to think about the matter differently. Within the concept of agonistic pluralism that she outlines in opposition to Habermas' theory of rational

deliberation in the public sphere (1962), a distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ is created (1992). The former is “the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society”, which can take discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of “the political” (Mouffe, 1992). Accepting this definition, the work of the street artists interviewed, whether it calls for gay rights, expresses strong opinions, or seeks to counter the ubiquity of political symbolism in the capital, can be thought of as ‘political’.

### **Picking Up Government Slack**

Much of the tension within the larger literature on street art and graffiti debating whether it is praise-worthy art or condemnable vandalism (Schacter, 2008: 35) does not seem to apply to the Lebanese context. Confusion surrounding the ownership of many walls or buildings and a lax police attitude (Zoghbi, 2011: 90) render the point rather moot. In a place well accustomed to crime on the largest scale (e.g. bombings, shootings), street art does not appear to fall high on the list of police priorities. Amongst the artists themselves, there also seems to be little self-perception of wrongdoing. Interestingly, not only do the police turn a blind eye, but residents and passers-by in neighbourhoods where street artists are active also tend to be extremely welcoming and encouraging. It appears that street art in Beirut is commonly perceived as a beneficial practice, and not an act of defacement or vandalism as it might be in the Western world (Cronin, 2008).

The police turn a blind eye. There’s not a big risk at all. (HS)

We were doing it in broad daylight, not even at night. We didn’t care. (AH)

They say graffiti artists are like gangsters, vandals, but the real vandals have weapons here and they rule streets. (YH)

People thank us and say they’ll pray for us. (JE)

A lot of people would tell us to go for it. Even adults would stop and say: ‘amazing, keep doing this - we need this’. (AH)

This fact, combined with disdain towards local politics and its affiliated institutions, positions the role of street art rather uniquely in Beirut. In addition to taking on the task of beautifying the city, the street artists interviewed seem to perceive their work as a push towards

improving conditions in the city in spite of the difficult political situation and general neglect of public spaces. According to interviewees, street art goes with the city and its inhabitants and looks to effect positive change.

I really believe that graffiti currently has a positive relation with its environment in Beirut.  
(YH)

Remember there were pictures of all those dead people on the walls? Martyrs and politicians?  
I wanted to change the vibe of the city a bit. (AH)

We thought that some places are all dark, all grey. The people there are living in sh\*\*. So we wanted to change something small. (JE)

In line with the discursive dichotomy between ‘politics’ and ‘society’ created earlier, street artists appear to conceive of themselves as being part of the fabric of civil society, helping to right the wrongs Beirut’s inhabitants are subjected to. Street art, then, can serve to fulfill functions presumably deemed the responsibility of government institutions in other, less dysfunctional contexts. In a place typically marked by “crippling civic indifference” (Seidman, 2012: 12), such responsibilities include improving safety and living conditions for locals, fostering an unprecedented sense of ownership and care towards public spaces, and mobilizing citizens to protest the demolition of community spaces by the government. While graffiti (or street art) is traditionally viewed as an offense against public property that must be removed and criminalized (Gomez, 1993), street art in Lebanon works to protect public spaces and save them from disrepair.

People care about the pieces... People were very pissed about the pieces being ruined. Whenever I tried to ask if they had seen who had ruined them, people would start complaining about it before having any idea who I was. (YH)

The stairs that we painted didn’t have a railing at first. They’ve now placed one for older people to hold on to. This wasn’t part of our project; it happened after we went and beautified the stairs. The second stairs we did had trash bins placed next to them so people don’t litter there. This is happening with all the stairs that we’re doing. Initially there’s nothing there, but we paint them and things start to change. (JE)

There are stairs that we coloured with triangles – the first project we did. It was threatened with demolition because of this new highway project. Three demonstrations were held. The first time, the project was postponed. The second time, it was postponed again. The third time, the decision was cancelled. (JE)



While findings suggest a connection between respondents insofar as they have a social or political agenda in mind, trying in their own way to better Beirut and improve life in the capital, it cannot be taken for granted that they perceive of themselves as being part of a unified or cohesive group. In fact, upon being asked if they saw themselves as members of a larger community or movement of street artists, interviewees generally responded in the negative. One went so far as to say he sensed that, more than anything else, competition defined the relationship between Beirut's street artists. A feeling of kinship or community, when it occurs, seems to stem from a sense of solidarity with society at large and not a select group of likeminded practitioners.

I think it's more like competition between artists. Graffiti fuels on competition. (YH)

There's a community only in the sense that it has increased in numbers. (OK)

I grew up under the same circumstances as people in Beirut... A lot of sensibilities emerge from just existing in a certain place at a certain time, under all these changes in power dynamics and structures like globalization, the Internet.... There's bound to be a dominant discourse, a counter-dominant discourse, and that counter-dominant discourse runs across the board. So even when you're acting very individually you're bound to have a lot in common with the people around you, even if you're not really connected. (HS)

We do it differently. We don't work alone like other artists. We do our work with other people, for other people. We want them to colour with us, to participate. (JE)

## **A Fifth Estate?**

While the Lebanese state is undoubtedly a failed one (Khazen, 2000), it is nonetheless a nominal democracy based on a system of sectarian power-sharing that does not leave any single political actor in a position of hegemonic power (Krayem, 1997). Moreover, and as mentioned previously, it is common knowledge that mainstream media outlets in Lebanon are privately owned and politically affiliated (Seidman, 2012; Kraidy, 2013). Very few avenues for expression are left untouched by sectarian rhetoric, leaving little room for expression of a different kind. With this in mind, Mouffe's insistence that pluralistic democracy needs to accommodate dissent because "its survival depends on collective identities forming around clearly differentiated positions, as well as the possibility of choosing between real alternatives" (1992) acquires salience. Although the government and

the media do not make room for such dissent, street artists seem to make room for themselves on Beirut's walls, creating a kind of forced pluralism.

The messages out there in the media were aggressive towards homosexuality. There were no public platforms to fight this sort of thing so you go to a public platform - like a wall. (HS)

I consider graffiti to be the 8 o'clock news – we have the news on the walls 24 hours a day. I can write anything. No one can do anything about it. It's mine – freedom of expression – no one can tell me what to write. (OK)

Doing street art felt like making space for myself. (AH)

Thus, studying the public sphere in Lebanon takes the term to its literal extreme. 'Public' discussions or grievances are voiced in actual public spaces, blurring the lines of the debate around what constitutes a public sphere as opposed to a mere space (Salti, 2008; Gambetti, 2009). To the extent that the walls are (in theory, at least) accessible to all citizens and allow for the voicing of public opinion (Habermas, 1974), Beirut's streets can come to serve as a public sphere of sorts. Not only are issues that cannot be voiced through mainstream media brought into the public domain, offering artists a soapbox, but, according to a member of one of the best-known crews in Beirut, graffiti can also serve as a mouthpiece on behalf of those who will not speak for themselves.

I think I am representing a silent group – people who don't want to express their opinions but want people to express them for them. A lot of people like us and agree with what we do. They support us. (OK)

Implied in the responses of most interviewees was the sense that street art somehow constitutes a pure or privileged form of expression, uncorrupted by the country's otherwise misleading or duplicitous media outlets. According to Kraidy, "the importance of graffiti [in Beirut] is its ability to carry messages that, because of their radicalism or marginality, would never appear in mainstream media, especially in a system divided into sectarian media enclaves". Street art plays a curious double role as a medium in itself and a platform that allows for critiquing the larger Lebanese media system that artists denounce.

When I started, everything I did came from a very, very innocent and naïve place. (AH)

Unlike TV, graffiti can't be biased, censored, or fabricated. When I create a piece, I'm being rational, truthful, and not brash. (OK)

It's a very honest form of art - you don't have ulterior motives when you're painting in the street. It can't be distorted by wanting to get rich. (YH)

It was the only thing I could imagine as a platform that wasn't television or a newspaper. (HS)

Kraidy (2013) asks us to consider the privileged place of graffiti in Beirut by thinking of it as heterotopia, which Foucault defines as places that are “outside of all places” and that are “absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about ... heterotopia” (1984). Such spaces simultaneously mirror the broader social system outside them while forming a distinct social space (Kraidy, 2013). This, combined with the relative autonomy of graffiti compared to other forms of media in Lebanon (Salti, 2008), is basis for us to consider graffiti's place “as heterotopia within Lebanon's sphere of media and cultural representation” (Kraidy, 2013). Further elaborating on the relationship of street art to other forms of media in Lebanon, some respondents made references to their social media following, citing the number of ‘likes’ obtained on Facebook, Instagram, and other online platforms. Bringing to mind the Habermasian concept of deliberative democracy (1962), one artist mentioned that a picture of a politically satirical piece he uploaded online sparked a meaningful debate between Facebook users. While it is not unusual for images of street art to be shared online, the fact that such pieces are well received and ‘liked’ suggests that the Lebanese public has an appetite for street art as a form of cultural resistance (Duncombe, 2006).

We started with 100 likes on Facebook. By the third staircase we did, we jumped to 2,000 in two weeks. Now, we're at around 23,000. (JE)

I have a Facebook page and I noticed that non-Western pieces using Arabic calligraphy and portraits of well-known Arabs went viral . I used to get 10 likes, then it went to 100. Now I get 500 or even 2000 in some cases. (YH)

When I publish on Facebook or social media, people start interacting. Everyone has an opinion. It's nice to see the debate between them. (OK)

### **Confused Cosmopolitanism**

The need to react to the socio-political situation (cited previously as a motivator) is a ubiquitous theme in the sample. Each of the artists interviewed voiced frustration with or opposition to Lebanon's failed sectarian political system. There appears to exist an anxiety

amongst artists as to the proliferation of politically affiliated media and a strong desire to counter its weight through their own work. Beyond sharing such frustrations during private conversations, artists are explicit about their desire to replace representations of politicians – symbols of sectarianism – and bring sociopolitical issues to the forefront.

Whenever I paint, I make it a point to remove posters of politicians from the walls. These politicians are kind of conquering our urban landscape. They do it so well that anyone growing up in this city will think that these politicians are the masters of the country. (JE)

Posters make the walls so heavy. I tear down posters before applying a stencil. (AH)

I needed to do something equally aggressive as what was being said by the media. I needed to counter the current of hateful, homophobic discourse. (HS)

We go out there and talk about social injustice and the terrible political situation. (OK)

Such opposition to a system built on the institutionalization of difference between citizens can perhaps be interpreted as a *de facto* belief in the ideal of cosmopolitanism in the sense of building a single community from diverse groups that rally around shared values and behaviours (Taylor, 1999: 50). While it does appear that there is consensus amongst respondents on some values that they reject, finding common ground in terms of the values and beliefs they seek to uphold is more challenging. This is the case both in terms of artists' attitudes towards the West, as well as their attitudes towards Lebanese or Arab culture itself. One interviewee in particular offered a response that succinctly introduces the tension among street artists upon being asked why he thought the practice had proliferated so much in the capital.

Street art is trendy and trends work very, very well in Beirut... Thinking of ourselves as being trendy has a lot to do with Beirut's delusions about its own cosmopolitanism. There's that on one level. On the other level, there's this sort of 'Western is better' thing. I use that very loosely because I don't have that anti-Western xenophobia at all. But there is this sort of 'if it's big in Paris, we should do it here.' (HS)

When asked what had prompted them to make the decision to create street art, some respondents cited the fact that they had seen examples of it in a Western context and thought they would do the same in Lebanon. These respondents did not feel a need to rationalize or justify the use of what is perceived as a foreign medium in the Lebanese context, as evidenced by the matter of fact tone in their responses.

I think I had just come back from Berlin and I saw how cool it was over there, with all the graffiti everywhere. And then I would go to Palais de Tokyo in Paris and see all these books – I think it was my exposure to the Western world. I felt like we lacked some of that in Beirut. I came back and just did it. I'm not very conscious of the things I do – it just happened naturally. (AH)

I started everything because I was inspired by something I saw in Germany. I saw it and said to myself that we weren't lacking the capacity to do the same in Lebanon. (JE)

In stark contrast, other artists rather strongly reject the very premise that street art is a Western medium or should emulate Western styles and implant them in the Lebanese context.

It's paint on a wall. They may have started it, but I think we started break dance in Lebanon. We started hip-hop and MC-ing. 'Dabkeh' is a form of breakdance. 'Zajal' is a form of battle MCing<sup>3</sup>. We started it and didn't get the credit. It's just a form of expression. (OK)

I strongly emphasize the fact that Graffiti in Beirut should fit with its environment and not just be some Western thing sprinkled in. (YH)

These fractures in opinions and attitudes towards things 'Western' are symptomatic of the larger identity crisis in Lebanese culture and politics. In fact, the range of opinions found in the sample reproduces the larger rivalry between (self-proclaimed) cosmopolitan liberal nationalists and Arab nationalists (Seidman: 2012, 6) in Lebanon. While many of the artists speak of street art in previous sections as though it were free or insulated from Lebanon's traditional political scene, it appears that this is not entirely the case. There is also significant variation within the sample as to what type of cultural references ought to be deployed by street art. Some artists recreate Western styles and characters without qualms about the implications of this fact. One artist even used Disney references in an attempt to create pieces that would cheer up all who saw them, not stopping to consider that such references may only be recognizable to those from a relatively privileged background.

I wanted something that would make everyone think of happier times, so I stenciled ET and Bambi. All this silly stuff. (AH)

Others make it a point to use Arabic calligraphy and represent Arab and Lebanese cultural

symbols that they believe to be a part of an authentic, local culture. It is worth nothing that this tendency to essentialise cultures counters one of the fundamental tenants of cosmopolitanism, as stated by Vertovec and Cohen (2002).

Arabic writing and calligraphy - this is what has allowed us to make our art form strong. (OK)

Whenever I started painting something more cultural, like Fairuz or Mahmoud Darwish<sup>4</sup>, I realized they actually kind of became an enforcement of the culture - a reminder of the true culture. (JE)

Creating yet another sharp contrast between the artists, one respondent extensively critiqued the use of cultural symbols deemed 'truly' Arab. In his view, doing so is in part a means of grappling with contemporary Arab identity, which has long passed its heyday. The respondent makes use of heavily academic terminology to makes sense of the phenomenon, demonstrating an extremely high level of reflexivity.

I find it quite oppressive, really. The idea that there's a 'good Arab', that there's a magical history of the Arab world that we should revert to... A lot of people fall back on these actually quite self-exoticising archetypes. People fall back to that golden age when there was a very clear idea of what an Arab identity could be. And it's interesting to see people trying to negotiate locality like that. Obviously no one gets it right because locality is such a fluid notion. Also, the idea that there's such a thing as a 'Western' practice is very dangerous because it at one and the same time creates an 'other', and then allocates ethnicity to any kind of discourse that emerges from that other. (HS)

### **'Let's Be Realistic'**

Ending the previous section on a note about respondent reflexivity offers an ideal entry point for a few self-critical thoughts. While the analysis of findings has shown that street art in Beirut can fulfill a range of functions, these nonetheless remain limited by a number of factors. Couldry warns that we must not over-estimate the effect of any media on its consumers, as it is but one small part of the patchwork of influences from which audiences derive meaning (2010: 44). Some respondents seem to be careful not to overemphasize the impact of their work, with one artist saying:

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<sup>3</sup> 'Dabkeh' is Lebanon's traditional national dance; 'Zajal' is a form of ancient Arabic slam poetry.

<sup>4</sup> Fairuz is Lebanon's most celebrated singer and Mahmoud Darwish is Palestine's best-known and acclaimed poet.

Let's be realistic, I'm just painting a wall at the end of the day. So it might put a few ideas at the back of people's heads – a few very small ideas – but change the country? It wouldn't. (YH)

Another important factor that must be taken into account is that every artist, without exception, has attended a top university in Lebanon or abroad and has therefore received exposure to a privileged milieu. This is evidenced in several ways, not least of which is one respondent's arsenal of intellectual jargon fired at the drop of a hat or another's declaration that inspiration for becoming a street artist struck during a trip to Paris. These sensibilities that the artists seem to share can be linked to Bourdieu's theory of habitus, which argues that individuals reared in certain environments become equipped with the dispositions to excel in them (1990). What's more, many of these artists' pieces are most heavily concentrated in areas of Beirut that are mixed but frequented by the top socio-economic stratum (Seidman, 2012: 6), raising questions about just how public or accessible the medium is.

On a final note, I cannot discount my own position in all of this. I am a young Lebanese person who has also attended top academic institutions in Lebanon and abroad. My sensibilities and ideas about what counts as important or meaningful are undeniably shaped by the world I am lucky enough to be exposed to. They have also no doubt informed my research project and interest in this topic to begin with. While I am not a close personal friend of any of the artists, our worlds intersect. This is a fact I have been mindful of throughout this process and I have tried to use it as a reminder to be especially vigilant and reflexive when analyzing findings.

## CONCLUSION

This research has attempted to investigate how street artists in Beirut, Lebanon perceive the role of their work. While a sizable body of literature exists on the topic of street art as well as themes intimately connected with it, insufficient attention has been paid to the opinions and attitudes of those responsible for spreading street art in one of the world's most unique and unpredictable contexts. Although study of the art itself and the audiences consuming it is important, it offers only a partial picture of a phenomenon that has quickly become a fixture of Beirut's streetscape. Rather than conduct focus groups with several artists at once or distribute questionnaires for them to complete, this study uses in-depth qualitative interviewing to glean a textured insight into the values, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals who have left their mark on Lebanon's capital city.

The research consisted of five interviews with artists engaging in a range of street art practices. Interviews were thematically analysed and revealed several major themes, in addition to preliminary findings regarding both what artists understand street art to be and why they were initially compelled to take it up. Much like the literature surveyed, there exists little consensus between artists as to what it is that the term 'street art' encompasses. The range of answers is broad and contradictory, going from art that expresses strictly non-political themes to political posters plastered on the walls of the city. There was more consistency in terms of motivations cited for becoming a street artist, with all responses ultimately orbiting around the topic of Lebanon's difficult socio-political situation. Be it the urge to voice dissent openly or the desire to add beauty to a city with pockmarked walls and a 'heavy' history, artists interviewed unanimously felt that the pull of street art stemmed from a need to react to their environment.

Three main themes emerged from artists' reflections on the role of their work. Findings reveal that street art in Beirut to some extent compensates for the state's inability to carry out its basic duties. It acts to help cultivate a sense of ownership as well as improve the material conditions of public spaces, previously neglected by authorities and citizens alike. Street art also serves as a fifth estate of sorts, counterbalancing the discourse of Lebanon's overwhelmingly partisan and sectarian mainstream media landscape. It offers street artists an open avenue for what they perceive as honest expression, creating the conditions for a model of agonistic pluralism where dissent does not wait to be accommodated but carves out room for itself instead. Finally, findings reveal that while street artists conceive of themselves as an alternative force to Lebanon's political system, they too are affected by some of the schisms that define it. This holds particularly true with regard to artists' attitudes towards the West, as well as their understanding of what constitutes 'true' Arab or Lebanese cultural identity.

As the Middle East experiences conditions of unprecedented volatility, Lebanon is sure to be affected significantly. It will be particularly interesting to track the evolution of the role of street art as the environment for which and within which it is created continues to change in unpredictable ways.

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## APPENDIX I

### Street Art Practices



*Figure 1. Example of sprayed text (created by interviewee Ayla Hibri).*



(Tunisiagraffitiproject.wordpress.com, 2014)

*Figure 2. Example of stencils (created by interviewee Hamed Sinno).*



(Chemaly, T., 2009)

*Figure 3. Example of a throw-up (created by the duo of which interviewee Omar Kabbani is a part).*



(Facebook.com, 2014)

*Figure 4. Example of a mural (created by interviewee Yazan Halwani).*



(Timeoutbeirut.com, 2014)

*Figure 5. Example of shapes and colours on atypical surfaces (created by the collective of which interviewee Jubran Elias is a part).*





(Designboom.com, 2014)

## APPENDIX II

### Topic Guide

- How do you understand street art? What do you consider to be street art?
- Do you think of it as a counter-culture or a sub-culture?
- Do you perceive yourself as a street artist?
- What made you do it?
- Do you consider yourself to be part of a movement or larger community?
- Is what you do individual expression or part of some larger mission?
- If so, how would you describe that mission?
- Why is street art/graffiti your chosen form of expression? Why xxx, specifically?
- What do you think it enables? Do you believe it can change anything?
- When you create a piece do you have an audience in mind? Who are you addressing?
- How would you describe the message?
- Where do you create pieces and why do you choose any given area or spot?
- How are you aware of the context when you create a piece? How does this awareness influence your message and your mode of expression?
- There is a perception that street art and graffiti is the medium of choice for the disenfranchised and the voiceless. How do you react to that?
- How do you perceive it? Describe it?
- Why do you think it's proliferating so much?
- Any last comments or questions?

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