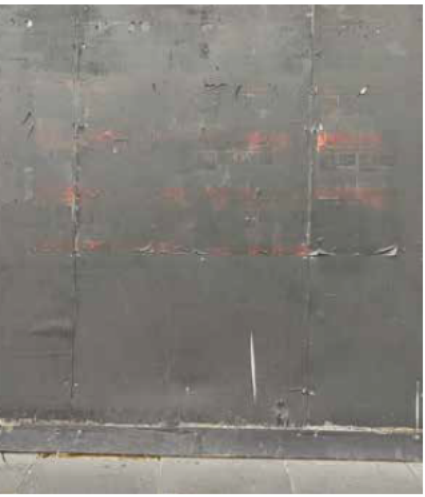
Public posters and the visual justice of erasure

Postdoctoral Fellow in Cities and Urbanism at the Melbourne Centre for Cities **Sabina Andron** explores the power of poster politics



Buildings are surfaces

I get my news from walls. Observing the outer layer of buildings and how they seep into social dynamics in the city is the foundation of my research, writing, and thinking, and of my being in the city. Walls speak to us through their design features and the values they embody, but there is also a more literal side to this communication, as anyone who has ever put up a poster or a sticker, or who has ever marked a wall in any way, will know. Graffiti writers are building users and urban citizens. And so are political activists, advertising companies and sign makers, shop owners and street cleaners. They all trade in public images and signage: adding images, upkeeping messages and standards of appearance, and increasing the semiotic richness of the city.

Take a moment now to imagine the streets you are familiar with, the cities you are connected to and you wish to explore – imagine experiencing these places if all public signage, messages, and images, would be muted, covered, erased (see São Paulo Clean City Law from 2006). How much of the identity of places would be lost to their signage? Particularly at street level, where cityscapes elude us and we don't see the megatextures (Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour 2000: 13) of familiar, iconic high-rises, much of our interaction with urban environments takes place through the messages displayed on their surfaces.

The history of architecture takes note of graffiti as evidence for the lives of buildings (Pressac 2018), but is less keen to do so when it comes to contemporary wall markings. In most places in the world, the surfaces of cities are objects of painstaking maintenance, design and upkeep – in cyclical processes that mirror the rhythms of cities and the grievances of their inhabitants. While buildings tend to be stable, their surfaces change all the time: intrusive TO LET signs signal changes in occupancy; property is protected through cautionary signs; posters are glued to walls and come apart with the battering of rain; and graffiti often fills the material and symbolic cracks of the bricks, stone and concrete that hold the whole thing together, pointing to the fragility of buildings (Parisi 2019).

Kidnapped from Israel, pasted worldwide

I first noticed these posters on a construction hoarding in Melbourne, the city I now call home. The encounter was with their erasure, which continued to be the case in almost every instance since. The hoarding had been freshly painted black, but a crinkled underlayer texturised the paint, stubbornly resisting full obliteration. In fact, this layer also appeared to have been charred, partially burned off the surface.

Over the many years I have observed, photographed, and classified surfaces and inscriptions, I had never encountered an image that had been removed through burning. Painting over, scratching off, covering with masking tape, paper, or stickers, subverting the image, washing it off or diluting it with chemicals, even knocking down the wall or removing it from its building – methods of surface iconoclasm abound, but they had not included destruction by fire.

And yet here they were: these partially burned posters, covered in black paint, attacked and erased yet still peeking through the insufficient coverage of the buff. They said "KIDNAPPED" and showed photos of Israeli citizens who were kidnapped by Hamas on 7 October 2023, the day that ignited a full force retaliation by the Israeli government against the occupied Palestinian territory of Gaza. At the time of writing this, seven months later, the Israeli military operation in Gaza is ongoing, and surfaces around the world still offer a reliable home for creative, desperate, aggressive, and hopeful responses to the conflict. Architecture becomes a communicative infrastructure for these visual activations, as it has done many times during uprisings, protests, conflicts, and

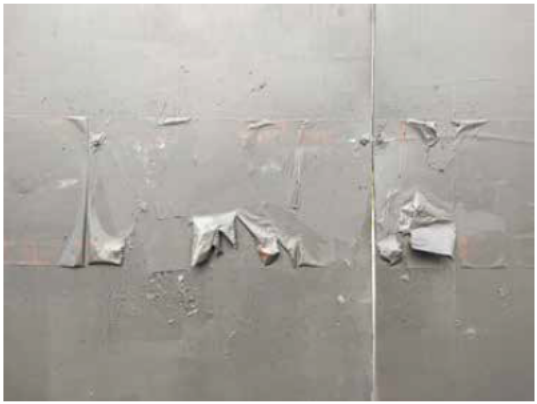


Image: (1) and (2) Burned and blacked out posters on a construction hoarding in Prahran, Melbourne (October 2023)

revolutions: Paris May 1968, Tahrir Square Cairo 2011, or campaigns for "the disappeared" in Latin American countries. The closer we are to our current image making capacity, the better these events are documented. But this instance was different – and I will spend the remaining paragraphs of this essay discussing the campaign of the *Kidnapped* posters, and offering some historical context for the defacing of public posters.

Self-described as 'one of the most widespread guerrilla public artworks in history' accessed 27 March 2024), *Kidnapped from Israel* is a viral global postering campaign started by two New York artists, to distribute and paste the same posters of Hamas kidnapping victims in cities all over the world. The posters have been translated in dozens of languages. They can be accessed and downloaded by anyone, diffusing information globally from the single source of this website. Much like perfume advertising campaigns travel through bus shelter posters all over the world, the *Kidnapped* posters became a movement through voluntary contributions globally, offering a ready-made means of public display to anyone who wanted it.

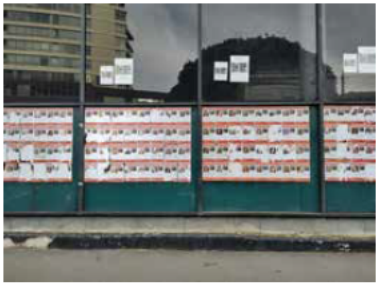
Yet nobody paid much attention until these posters started being defaced: scribbled over, shredded, torn off the wall, or burned and painted over, like the ones I first noticed. Their destruction was widely publicised by international news media. We read about people losing jobs or being investigated by police, and the tearing down of posters was described as anti-semitic and a hate crime. However, what seems to be forgotten is that these posters had not been authorised to begin with, in the same way that graffiti tags, many commercial posters, or indeed other political messaging aren't. It is rare that illicit images on public surfaces are given so much attention in mainstream media. What is the significance of these visual contestations? What does it mean to deface an unauthorised image? And what can we learn from other examples of damaging illegal posters?

Erasures and difference

Images are erased, defaced, and removed from public view all the time in cities, and the act of erasure is often done under civic mandate to maintain visual amenity, ensure the upkeep of urban branding standards, or obliterate graffiti and unwanted marks. Practices of defacing and tearing down posters have existed as long as the posters themselves, mostly because of the competing commercial interests of bill posters which led to 'nearly any and every available surface of urban space crowded with a dense cacophony of handbills and advertisements' (Guffey 2015: 8). The first posters being linked to capitalism more than politics (Sontag 1970, Guffey 2015), their destruction was often a form of defiance against the capitalist spectacle of the modern city – and this continues to be the case today. From Debord's détournement and other situationist practices, to ad busting and subvertising (Dekeyser 2021), and examples such as Jordan Seiler's Public Ad Campaign and Public Access projects – tampering with the content and material integrity of urban posters can be a righteous practice of resistance. If they are commercial, that is.

Or – if it's done as an artistic gesture. Posters have been removed from public walls to be taken into private collections as far back as the first Moulin Rouge illustrations in 1890s Paris (Guffey 2015: 51). Then, the 1950s saw a generation of French artists using décollage practices to remove posters from urban surfaces, bringing attention to the process of removal and the aesthetic of shredded paper and deconstructed messages. Artists such as Jacques Villeglé, Mimmo Rotella, and Raymond Hains made these posters into celebrated *objets trouvés* inside gallery spaces, but they also left behind defaced urban surfaces that largely went forgotten.

When done with political motivation, the defacement of posters is often a reaction to visual propaganda campaigns such as during the Russian Revolution – reflecting dynamics of power and political opinion through contested public displays. Walen describes mutilated portraits of election posters in Kabul as a form of Islamic iconoclasm linked to individual disfigurement (2012); and Guffey recalls poster destruction as a tactic of French resistance groups lighting bonfires with Nazi poster shreds towards the end of the war. With the distance of history, these conflicts over visibility appear as insightful measures of social change. Philipps suggests that investigating such defacements 'can work as a "seismograph" to detect politics from below' (Philipps 2015: 199), describing them as a form of political culture jamming.



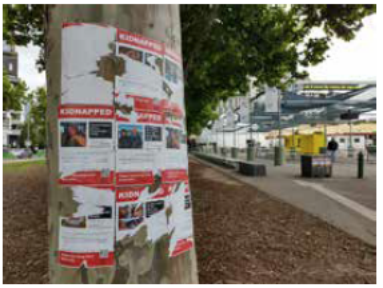


Image far left: A surfaceful of posters, some torn, some defaced, others intact (Wellington, New Zealand, December 2023)

Image left: Posters are removed from a tree near Queen Victoria market in Melbourne, Australia (October 2023)

Image below: From disagreement grows justice (Melbourne, November 2023)

And while subvertisers have been blamed for damaging private property and décollagists were accused of petty theft, tearing down *illegal* posters has never been a crime – until the *Kidnapped* campaign. In this case, those removing the posters were frequently filmed and publicly shamed on social media, some losing their jobs as a result. An inquiry was even raised when a community police officer was caught on camera removing the posters in Prestwich, Greater Manchester – when he would have been tasked to do exactly this to any other unauthorised display.

Visual justice in the city

Beyond the politics of the poster contents, there is a politics of the image that is recruited in each of these examples and in the *Kidnapped* campaign. The 'image and word-choked façades and surfaces of the great modern cities' (Sontag 1970) have developed complex management strategies for this semiotic arena, often regulating public images through multiple, contradictory systems of production and erasure (Andron 2023). An entire history of modern cities could be written through their strategies of managing public images, from heritage plaques to municipal signage and from street art murals to graffiti removal strategies. Posters densify and thicken the materiality of public images, as does their erasure and removal. Whether subtractive or additive, these image productions elicit public discourse and involve more of us in writing the archive of the city.

Defacing unauthorised images is a form of civic engagement and a development of visual literacy among urban dwellers, be they authorised to do so, or not. Removing illegal posters typically falls under the remit of postering companies and municipalities, and is something that people get paid to do.

At the very least, the act of removing posters outside of one's professional remit is usually construed as public maintenance and protection of municipal or private property – the good citizen cleaning up their neighbourhood walls. But this erasure, just like the tearing of the Israeli posters, produces social space by making visible our values and translating them into a semiotic transaction. I show, therefore I am of the city. I efface, I am therefore of the city too.

Just like none of these posters ever go up on blank walls, the absence left by their erasure is not an empty space. Rather, it is an affirmative space that maintains the relevance of city streets and surfaces as public forums, and an opportunity for us to learn that all tensions over public images present similar contradictions and complications. If anything, the *Kidnapping* posters defacement demonstrates that our public spaces in numerous world cities continue to be energised enough that they support the pasting *and removal* of these posters. Our expression of disagreement with any of these positions is a form of urban visual justice (Andron and Lata 2024) – the process of image creation, alteration and destruction resulting from the interventions of many, in the name of diverging values.