Negative curation and contested claims over the public visual landscape: Street art and graffiti during the Australian campaign for marriage equality

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Abstract

This paper explores the graffiti and street art produced during the 2017 postal plebiscite for same sex marriage in Australia, including activists' creative visual responses to the hate speech that proliferated in urban and suburban areas during this highly charged period. The paper has a particular focus on the wholesale erasure of street art and graffiti bearing political messages in support of, or against, marriage equality. Communities increasingly exert stewardship over the public visual landscape, and may engage directly in buffing graffiti or street art deemed offensive, or defending and restoring work deemed valuable. This analysis draws on repeat photography and video materials showing a series of attempted erasures of pro-same sex marriage murals by so called religious 'activists.' These materials show both the active challenges from passersby these erasures attracted, and the buffers' defense of their actions, which affords a unique level of insight into the divisive social dialogue of this period.

Introduction

Australia has a long history of discrimination against sexual minorities, with the decriminalisation of homosexuality occurring as late as 1996 in some states (Webb, Chonody & Kavanagh, 2017). Same sex marriage was effectively banned in Australia in 2004 when the conservative Howard government altered the Marriage Act 1961 to define marriage exclusively as "the union of a man and a woman." This was the same year that Britain's Labor government enacted the Civil Partnership Act which legalized same sex partnerships, paving the way for marriage equality in the UK in 2013. Between 2004 and 2017, 22 same-sex marriage bills were unsuccessfully brought before the Australian parliament before the eventual legalization of same sex marriage in December 2017, following a national voluntary postal plebiscite where 61.6% of respondents voted in favour of changing the law to recognise marriage equality, making Australia the 25th country to do so (Zimmermann, 2018). The postal survey was a novel strategy initiated by the Turnbull government, who had made an election promise to act on this issue, but who were unsuccessful in passing it through parliament.

The six week campaign leading up to the plebiscite for marriage equality was marked by an increase in reports of homophobic hate crime associated with offensive campaign material. This hateful material continued to circulate largely unchecked despite the government

passing a special law during the campaign banning vilification, intimidation, and threats, in an attempt to apply last minute electoral law safeguards. Terri Butler, Labor's spokeswoman for equality, said that these 'abhorrent' incidents "underlined why a national opinion poll on people's human rights was an inherently bad process… At the end of the day, we're asking a majority to cast judgment on the human rights of a minority" (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2017: n.p.).

The Australian marriage equality campaign has since been described by some as "an acute external minority stress event" (Ecker, Riggle, Rostosky & Byrnes, 2019) which took a measurable toll on the mental health of LGBT+ people and their allies. Veralli and colleagues (2019) found that high levels of psychological distress were associated with exposure to the negative media messages of the anti-marriage equality campaign. Conversely, they found that positive messages of public support reduced psychological distress for participants whose immediate social networks were opposed to same-sex marriage. The political messages circulating during this time were inextricably bound to the wellbeing of Australia's citizens. Indeed, this period was characterized by a highly emotive public debate marked by citizens' own political visual commentary in public space. Often this commentary was in direct response to the media messages of the campaigns in favour of, and opposed to, marriage equality, which each produced considerable volumes of divisive campaign material. These campaign materials were disseminated widely, including by post, via media outlets, and on public billboards.

The official documents of the NO campaign (coordinated by the Coalition for Marriage) gave citizens permission to "say no" to marriage equality, and reassurance that it was morally acceptable to do so. In the Coalition for Marriage's logo, the two O's take the form of male and female sex symbols - signifying that this is a coalition for heterosexual marriage only. While in posted material, the sorts of things it was "OK" to say no to were spelled out (e.g., redefining marriage; political correctness; gender confusion in schools) the campaign's billboards were more minimalist (see Figures 1a-b, below).

Figure 1a and 1b. *Subversion of "It's OK to say No."* Photographs ©Aimee Clarke/Twitter

The NO campaign's billboards, which stated *IT'S OK TO SAY NO,* were prominent and placed in high traffic areas, but they were also highly vulnerable to subversion by activists. The Coalition for Marriage's billboards appeared particularly amenable to sentence completion, which worked to turn the 'reassurance' it offered in on itself – effectively recategorising its own slogan as, in Figure 1a, *propaganda* and in Figure 1b, more starkly, as *homophobia*.

Note also the faint message added to the billboard in 1b, where someone has interjected with a textual counter to "IT'S OK TO SAY NO", via the retort, "NO, IT'S NOT!"

Advocates for the NO campaign also took to the skies above Australia's major cities, with planes spelling out 'VOTE NO and 'NO', while on city walls, graffiti featuring these messages also proliferated. This period also saw a significant rise in reports of homophobic graffiti. This was identified as hate crime in the local media, and was promptly removed. In Figure 2a, below, the graffiti in question, on the interior of a Sydney train, was removed by the authorities shortly after it appeared. In this photograph, taken prior to its official removal, we can also see the smeared fingerprints left by an attempted removal by hand, marking a level of immediate visual resistance to this overtly homophobic message.

Figure 2a. *Homophobic graffiti, Sydney train.* Photograph ©Imgur/ecarter6*; Figure 2b. *Cobargo community erasing homophobic graffiti*. Photograph ©David Wilson/Facebook

Indeed, the campaign prior to the plebiscite saw an increase not just in graffiti and street art on the topic of marriage equality, but also in attempts by ordinary citizens to remove or erase work on the street deemed offensive. Traditionally, the buff consists in the erasure of graffiti and street art by local authorities, homeowners or traders. While what counts as art and vandalism in public space may be contested, there appears to be a growing consensus that the curation of the public visual landscape is a matter of shared concern and civic responsibility (Hansen, 2015). Indeed, communities increasingly exercise stewardship over street art and graffiti, and may engage directly in buffing work deemed offensive, or defending and restoring work deemed valuable (Hansen, 2018). During the campaign, the rural town of Cobargo in New South Wales was hit by a wave of anti same sex marriage graffiti, which covered many of the public buildings in the town centre, and took the town's Post Office as a central target, perhaps as this was a postal survey. However, the local community identified this as "hate speech" and banded together to erase the graffiti within hours (see Figure 2b, above). Here we can see evidence of a level of proactive community responsibility for public space - a form of collective responsibilization similar to initiatives such as neighbourhood watch and residents' associations.

However, the strategy of erasing "offensive" messages was not restricted to communities buffing homophobic graffiti painted in support of the NO campaign. "Religious activists" also adopted the buff as a strategy, and encouraged others to erase "offensive" pro marriage equality murals from the public visual landscape, on behalf of "the general public." The buff appears, then, to be a mobile strategy capable of appropriation by various actors – while the "general public" seems a highly contested category that may be claimed by a range of actors with divergent agendas.

As Gamboni (1996) has asserted, historically, such acts of apparently iconoclastic destruction have been associated with political change. Tripp (2015) notes further that they may also signal an attempt to "reclaim" public space. In the field of heritage studies, such practices of erasure have been referred to as "negative curation" (Bernbeck, 2010: 108) and are considered to be part and parcel of the ephemeral nature of street art and graffiti in the public sphere (Merrill, 2015). Holtorf (2006: 108) has argued further that the "destruction and loss" of popular works may paradoxically contribute more to the shaping of people's collective identities than works left untouched.

Studies of street art and graffiti, in socio-political context, may be fruitfully approached via a combination of methods that allow for our apprehension of walls as a form of visual dialogue that are part of wider societal conversations. The following section combines an analysis of photographs showing visual dialogue over time (through repeat photography) with an analysis of video-recorded real-time interactions of attempted erasures in process. This approach has the potential to add considerable depth and detail to our understanding of the social life of contested walls. Indeed, these different forms of visual data have complementary affordances. As sequential forms of communication, both are amenable to forms of broadly ethnomethodological analysis. The transcription of video data, in particular allows for a more detailed treatment akin to conversation analysis, revealing in real time both the active challenges from passersby these unauthorised erasures may attract, and the buffer's defense of their actions. These forms of analysis depart from existent forms of visual analysis in that they not concerned with the semiotics or iconography of decontextualised individual photographs, but rather with mark making – and erasure – in public space as consequential and accountable forms of social action.

Case study: Attempted erasure of pro-marriage equality murals

This section examines the fate of two popular pro marriage equality murals produced by the Australian artist Scott Marsh, and in particular the attempted erasure of these by "religious activists." The first of the pro marriage equality murals under consideration, *The Happy Ending* (Figure 3a, below) features two of the most high profile campaigners for the NO campaign – former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott with Cardinal George Pell. The title of the work – *The Happy Ending* – here has a double meaning, both as a celebration of the majority of Australians voting yes to marriage equality and as a reference to ejaculation (implying a sexual relationship between Abbott and Pell). Pell was at that time a highly controversial public figure, as he was at the time charged with a series of child sexual abuse cases. Indeed, two months after this mural was painted, he was convicted of five counts of child sexual abuse of two boys. The 'Happy Ending' title thus is also perhaps a sardonic reference to Pell's highly public moral downfall as the former leader of the Catholic Church.[1]

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[1] Pell has since been acquitted of these charges.

Figures 3a-c. *The Happy Ending*. Scott Marsh, Newtown. Photographs ©Scott Marsh

This mural was almost immediately paint bombed after it appeared on the eve of the announcement of the results of the plebiscite (Figure 3b) and was then completely painted over (Figure 3c). This action was 'applauded' on social media by proponents of the NO vote who identified the perpetrators as "Young Christians" – but in the mainstream media, they were more commonly described as "mural vigilantes" and "vandals." People's reactions to this extreme buff were immediate – the black paint became a "community blackboard" of sorts, with messages identifying the buff as a form of "hate" – and asserting that – despite the 'loss' of the mural – "love wins" (as evidenced by the result of the plebiscite). Most messages were written in chalk (Figure 3c).

A group called Christian Lives Matter praised the erasure of *The Happy Ending* on Instagram and Facebook and called for people to remove all similarly 'offensive' murals – identifying a further mural of Scott's (painted the year before as a private commission, but often interpreted as a pro marriage equality mural) – as a target, for being offensive and pornographic (Figure 4a, below).

Figures 4a-c. *Saint George*. Scott Marsh, Newtown. Photographs ©Scott Marsh

The first attempts at erasure of Scott's *Saint George* mural, via paint bombing, were ineffective (Figure 4b). However, this paint was immediately washed from the mural, briefly restoring it. A further attempt at erasure was made by a man filmed by local residents in his attempt to cover the mural with black spray paint. Although the results of his efforts

resembled an illegible graffiti tag, these disorganised marks appear to be the product of the man's efforts to cover key elements of the piece: the title of the work, the artist's signature, and some apparently sacrilegious elements – the joint and the popper bottle in George Michael's hands (visible in the lower section of Figure 4c). Video footage of this attempted erasure was posted on social media, and the man was identified (as he was wearing his work shirt). He was later arrested, fired, and charged with criminal damage.

Shortly afterwards, another man arrived (again in daylight) to erase the mural more efficiently with a long handled roller. He too was arrested and charged, but not until after he had effectively permanently erased the majority of the mural. He was praised as "a legend" for his actions by Christian Lives Matter but he was described as a "vandal" in the mainstream press - though the Daily Mail described him as an "activist" (Daily Mail, 2017). As with *The Happy Ending*, people responded to the buff as an invitational democratic surface, leaving similar words of support, defiance, and encouragement (Figure 4c). Indeed, following Gamboni's observations on iconoclasm and the destruction of images (2002), Schacter (2008) has argued that attempts to destroy art on the street may perversely inspire the replacement of the piece with an abundance of further work.

Analysis

Each of these unauthorised erasures was filmed in process, by both an accomplice to the buffer, and by community members on the scene. These videos offer an unusual level of insight into the dynamics of a social practice that is not ordinarily recorded. These are not neutral recordings – they were filmed for divergent political purposes by different parties, and were disseminated via social media and mainstream news channels, and eventually used as forensic evidence by police. The close analysis of such video-recorded real-time interactions has the potential to add further depth to our understanding of contested walls. The video data was transcribed so that conversation analysis could be applied to these exchanges (e.g., Schegloff, 2007). Conversation analysis is a method which allows for a detailed apprehension of talk as a form of social action, which illustrates the ways in which each party shows their understanding of the work on the wall via their own contribution to the conversation.

In terms of structure, the video interactions follow a markedly similar interactional form and very similar argumentative strategies (see Table 1, below). These are conflictual encounters initiated by a community member (A) that escalate fairly rapidly to demands for the buffer (B) to stop, threats to call the police, and insults.

Table 1. Interactional structure of challenges to contested erasures

DEMAND FOR AN ACCOUNT/EXPLANATION	REJECTION OF/CHALLENGE TO AUTHORITY TO BUFF	RESPONSE TO DEMAND TO STOP
A: Why are you painting over it? *A: What are you doing?* *A: What the HELL are you doing?*	*A: It's not yours. It's not yours to destroy.* *A: This is not your wall. This is not your space.* *A: Do you live here? Do you have to come and see this- if it's offensive to your eyes? Do you live across the road and have to see it all the time?*	*B: Don't tell me what to do!* *B: Get away from me!* *B: Get over it mate, I'm not gonna stop.* *B: I'm gonna keep painting it.*
ACCOUNTS GIVEN *B: I don't want to see it.* *B: It's offensive to the general public.* *B: It's pornography.* *B: It's religious/I'm defending my religion.* *B: It's hate crime.*		**THREATS TO CALL AUTHORITIES** *A: Call the council. Call the police.* *A: Arrest him! You'll go to jail.*
	COUNTERS TO CHALLENGE TO AUTHORITY TO BUFF *B: No, but I live in Australia.* *B: It's Australia I'm free to come here whenever I want, and when I do wanna come here, I don't want to <u>see</u> this!* *A: So, don't <u>look</u> at it!*	**RESPONSE TO THREATS TO CALL AUTHORITIES** *B: Call the police. I've done nothing wrong.* *B: I don't care what happens to me.* *B: My religion's more important to me.*
COUNTERS TO ACCOUNTS *A: So, don't look at it!* *A: Sooo, the general public – did you hear the results yesterday?* *A: That's not religious mate, that's art.* *A: There's nothing religious about this!* *B: That's Jesus! That's Jesus. That's <u>Jesus</u>!* *A: It's GEORGE MICHAEL, you idiot.*	**DEMAND TO STOP** *A: Stop that!* *A: Take his paint!* *A: Take his brush!*	**INSULTS** *A: Fucking idiot! You idiot! Numpty!* **RESPONSE TO INSULTS** *B: Stop having a go at me.* *A: Have you got something against Christians?*

Both videos begin with a challenging demand for an explanation – apparently designed to stop the buffer in their tracks to provide an account for their actions – e.g., "what are you doing"; "why are you painting over it?" This analysis has a particular focus on the claims and counter claims made early in these interactions, prior to the escalation to threats and insults. In both videos, the parties employ a range of strategies to invoke their right to alter (or protect) the shared/public visual landscape – on behalf of "the public" or the "community."

The following analysis provides a detailed examination of the opening sequence of the contested erasure of *The Happy Ending* only. Here, as in the buffing of *Saint George*, commonsensical questions are initially used to achieve a momentary consensus in order to undermine the claims of the buffer to be acting on behalf of "the public" in erasing work on the street:

Extract 1. Happy Ending

1. A: Why are you painting over it?
2. B: Ah because it's offensive to the general public.
3. C: It's pornography mate.
4. A: You know that this is Newtown right?
5. B: Oh yeah, OK, It's still part of Australia.
6. A: Soooo, the general public – did you hear the results yesterday?
7. C: Go[od on you, you don't need t-a pooft-
8. B: [Oh yeah and the vote was for gay marriage, not for- this painting.
9. A: Do you <u>live</u> here?
10. B: No I do n- I live in Australia
11. A: But do you- do you have to come and see this- if it's offensive to

12. your eyes- do you live across the road, and have to see it all the time?
13. B: Yeah well, it's a jus- it's Australia I'm free to come here whenever I
14. want, and when I do wanna come here, I don't want to <u>see</u> this!
15. A: So don't <u>look</u> at it!

This interaction begins with an opening demand for an account/explanation "why are you painting over it?" (line 1). This question marks the buffer's actions as problematic, accountable, and in need of explanation. B's account, "because it's offensive to the general public" echoes the rhetoric of the Christian Lives Matter's call for 'offensive' murals to be removed, while C (B's accomplice, who is filming) adds a further specification as to the nature of the offensiveness represented by the mural – categorising it as "pornography."

A's next question at line 4, "you know this is Newtown, right?" challenges B's right to act on behalf of the general public of Newtown, while perhaps also questioning his status as an insider/local. Newtown is an inner city suburb of Sydney with a high LGBT population that voted overwhelmingly in favour of same sex marriage. A's question thus works to make this community's opinion on marriage equality relevant to B's actions. Here, A's use of "you know" as a preface implies shared or common knowledge. This is also a confirmation seeking tag question ("right?") with a positive polarity – the form of the question prefers agreement – which indeed it receives with the buffer's response at line 5, "Oh yeah-." "Oh yeah" has a similar function to "of course", and indeed this response establishes a moment of consensus in the conflict. However, the buffer then immediately recategorises Newtown as "still part of Australia" (line 5) – a meta-category that subsumes Newtown within a larger national category, and one to which, importantly, he has equal membership rights to his challenger (and thus equal rights to ground his claim to be acting on behalf of "the public").

Crucially, A's question has a flat epistemic gradient; it assumes a shared knowledge between the speakers. Heritage and Clayman (2010) have described the way in which conversational participants using questions orient to an 'epistemic gradient', or a difference in knowledge between speakers. They discuss the way in which questions designed to find something out, such as "why are you painting over it?" project a 'steep' epistemic gradient, interactionally displaying that the question-asker does not know the answer. While, at the other end of the spectrum tag questions such as "you know this is Newtown, right?" work to confirm an answer (but show interactionally that the question asker is pretty sure of the answer) thereby projecting a flatter epistemic gradient. Thus, the question, "you know that this is Newtown, right?" is not a question in the same way that questions such as "why are you painting over it" are. Indeed, such questions are not working to find something out at all, instead they are designed to obtain a specific response – in this case, a confirmation. Indeed, such 'self-evident' questions are a core resource enacted by A in the course of challenging the buffer's right to paint over the mural.

At line 6, A's so-prefaced turn sets up a further challenge: "Soooo, the general public – did you hear the results yesterday?" This is a challenge designed to undermine B's claim that the mural is offensive to the general public. Here, A is working towards the formulation of an upshot about B's actions in order to contrast this with his claim. Reynolds (2011) describes this form of social interaction as "enticing a challengeable." A is here attempting to use B's agreement that he is aware that "the general public" voted in favour of same sex

marriage to undermine his claim (at line 2) that the mural is "offensive to the general public" (and thus to undermine B's account for their actions in painting over the mural).

So-prefacing is used here to mark an incipient agenda and an epistemic link between the challenge and the prior turns. Connectives like 'so' perform important interactional work (Bolden, 2009). This challenge works to re-enact the arguable (line 2: that the mural is offensive to the general public) and aims to juxtapose the result of the challenge against the arguable in order to reveal a mismatch between the buffer's claims and his admission, as an appearance-reality device (Pollner, 1987). As with A's challenge at line 4 ("you know this is Newtown, right?") this question has a flat epistemic gradient; it is a polar question (yes/no interrogative) with a positive design. That is, it projects the preferred answer – a confirmation of what was, at that time, common (and highly topical) knowledge. The results of the plebiscite had just been declared and were overwhelmingly in favour of marriage equality. The main business of A's challenge here is then to propose an inconsistency on the part of the buffer, and an important prerequisite of this is to implicate B in their own words.

However, in response to A, the buffer confounds the assumptions built into the design of A's question – that, in erasing a pro-same sex marriage mural, he does not represent the views of the general public – at least as officially recorded the day prior. He accomplishes this by first circumscribing the subject of the vote to "gay marriage", and secondly by excluding and particularising "this painting" from any implications that may be drawn about public opinion from the vote: "Oh yeah and the vote was for gay marriage, not for- this painting." (line 8) Note this is also an "oh yeah" prefaced response (as seen earlier in line 5) marking this as an admission or concession to A's self-evident question, before rebutting it by particularising the implications that may be drawn from this momentary agreement.

A then redirects her challenge to focus on the buffer's incumbency in the local place-based membership category (Sacks, 2006) of "someone who lives here" via her question (in line 9) "Do you live here?" Here, she appears to accord local residents more rights to decide on the fate of art on their streets than 'outsiders.' At line 10, B starts to admit that he does not live in Newtown, but he then changes course and repairs this to "I live in Australia", echoing his earlier re-categorisation of Newtown as "part of Australia" – a more encompassing place based reference to which he has equal membership rights to A. At line 11, A queries B's motivation in choosing to come to see something that is "offensive to your eyes" (note that she particularises the offence to "*your* eyes") and implies that B could/should simply choose not to see it, by not "coming here." The buffer counters A's challenge, again with reference to "Australia", but this time in order to emphasise the "freedom" of movement that comes with being Australian (lines 13-14). Note that here, the parties draw on the fine volitional distinction between seeing and looking, with A countering B's assertion that, "when I do wanna come here, I don't want to see this" by pointing out B's executive control over the objects of his visual attention: "So, don't look at it then!"

In this interaction, self-evident – or commonsensical – questions are used by A to challenge B's actions in painting over Scott's pro marriage equality mural and to undermine B's claim that the mural is "offensive to the general public." This strategy appears to work, but only temporarily, before the buffer employs rhetorical strategies based on recategorising the object of the agreement forced by the challenger, by a) invoking national place-based rights

to override his lack of local community membership; and b) by particularising and excluding "this painting" from the vote for marriage equality.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has explored the graffiti and street art produced during Australia's 2017 postal plebiscite for marriage equality, with a particular focus on the wholesale erasure of street art and graffiti bearing political messages in support of, or against marriage equality. These unauthorised erasures represent attempts to exert control over the shared visual landscape in order to remove visual material deemed to be offensive to the public – as a form of negative curation. However, as we have seen in the analysis of one particular interaction, the "general public" is in practice a flexible category that may be invoked by both those attempting to remove "offensive" public art, and those attempting to protect it against removal. In disputes over who has the right to buff on behalf of a "general public", meta-categories (e.g., citizenship; nationality) may be used to invoke shared rights to override local (place-based) rights.

We more often focus on the production and reception of street art, and less often on its wilful – and in this case, contested – erasure. However, as we have seen, attempts to destroy or erase work may perversely inspire the replacement of the work with a proliferation of further images and visual dialogue. This is evident here in the messages of defiance and hope added to Scott's buffed marriage equality murals – and indeed in other creative responses which show continued societal reflection on the issues raised by these emotive erasures. For instance, a musical which dramatically re-enacted the fate of Marsh's mural was developed and initially performed with a community choir as part of Sydney's Mardi Gras in 2019. This later became a fully fledged musical production, *The Rise and Fall of Saint George* (Sydney Morning Herald, 2020).

The campaign period leading up to the postal plebiscite for marriage equality was a highly charged chapter in Australia's history that directly impacted on the wellbeing of its citizens. The erasure of "offensive" graffiti and street art by various parties with divergent agendas gives a unique level of insight into the divisive social dialogue of this period. Art and vandalism in public space is a matter of shared concern and civic responsibility. Communities increasingly exert stewardship over murals and street art, and may engage directly in buffing (or otherwise subverting) work deemed offensive, or actively defending work deemed valuable. Indeed, our city walls reflect wider societal debates. Graffiti and street art exist within a field of social and affective interaction, as a form of asynchronous, yet sequential, visual communication. By combining forms of analysis that show visual dialogue on walls over time with the close analysis of real time interactions showing erasures in process, we can gain a more nuanced appreciation of the socio-political life of contested walls, and an understanding of the real time reception of attempts to destroy work, in the active challenges from passersby these unauthorised erasures attract, and the buffer's strategic defense of their actions.

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