**Graffiti and Common Space in The Dheisheh Refugee Camp** (ricerca originale)

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# Graffiti and Common Space in The Dheisheh Refugee Camp

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**ABSTRACT**

Palestinian refugee camps are suspended and exceptional spaces in the contemporary global system. By focusing on the Dheisheh refugee camp (Bethlehem, West Bank), I explore how the precarious space of the camp becomes an actively productive site that is constructed by refugees. The space of Dheisheh is a form of *common* that, I claim, produces – and is produced by – graffiti. By analysing the role of visual art in the Dheisheh camp in its connections with spatial practices, I demonstrate that in Dheisheh art, *common*, and space are profoundly related and mutually constitutive. I argue that aesthetics and politics, contextualised in the *common* space of the camp, produce counter-narratives that can de-structure the dominant political aesthetics. Palestinian refugee camps are excluded from the Israeli narrative and de-politicised by the humanitarian discourse. However, I claim that the Dheisheh camp, through spatial, political, and artistic practices, can offer new political perspectives on space and art, thus questioning the main narrative on refugees that describes them as non-political victims, objects of humanitarian assistance, and problems to be solved.

## 1 - Introduction

The Dheisheh refugee camp, in the Bethlehem urban area, is one of the biggest and most densely populated camps in the West Bank: it hosts, in fact, over 15.000 inhabitants who live in 0.33 square metres.[1] The camp was established in 1949 to serve as a temporary accommodation for Palestinian refugees who had been ethnically cleansed from forty-five villages around Jerusalem and Hebron. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) initially provided the over 3.000 refugees with tents. Later, in the mid-Fifties, the Agency «built shelters, each family received a 9 square metre shelter and every 15 families shared a bathroom».[2]

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[1] "Dheisheh Camp". UNRWA. Last accessed 22/06/21. https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/west-bank/dheisheh-camp.

[2] Qussay, Abu Aker et al. 2013. *The Unbuilt. Regenerating spaces.* Dheisheh Refugee Camp: Cam-

The land on which Dheisheh refugee camp was established has been leased by UNRWA with a 99 years long contract which does not allow nor recognise the renting, selling and transferring of properties by refugees. These regulations contribute to creating a suspended space where refugees are meant to wait passively for humanitarian assistance. However, regardless of UNRWA policies, Dheisheh refugees have been building, buying, and selling houses and lands[3] that they do not legally own since private – or public – property does not legally exist in the camp.

The space of the camp, neither private nor public, has been defined by Dheisheh refugees themselves as a *common* space[4]. This definition emerged in the context of the project *Campus in Camps*, conducted by the Decolonizing Architecture Art Research (DAAR) in the Dheisheh camp. DAAR is an architectural studio and art residency programme founded in Beit Sahour (Bethlehem) in 2007 by Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, and Eyal Weizman. The work of the DAAR studio aims to «reuse and profane […] the material conditions of real existing colonialism»[5] by using an approach that combines theory, pedagogy, and spatial practices. Through art and architecture, DAAR intends to generate spaces where practice, research, and political invention are interconnected. The idea of *Campus in Camps* emerged in 2007, when Alessandro Petti, who at the time was teaching at the al-Quds Bard University in Jerusalem, realised, during a conversation with some students from refugee camps, that «their narrations, ideas and discourses could have flourish [*sic.*] in a protected space such as the university but they needed to be grounded in context and connected with the community».[6]

One of the outcomes of the project is the "Campus in Camps Collective Dictionary",[7] in which some of the participants, already engaged with the community, re-define key terms such as "*common*", "knowledge", "citizenship", etc., offering alternative collective readings rooted in the experiences and knowledge of Dheisheh refugees. The *Campus in Camps* project is a fundamental tool for this research, as allows us to comprehend

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pus in Camps. 43.

[3] *Ibid.*, 18.

[4] Throughout this article, I use the term "common" instead of "commons" to avoid any confusion with the history of the European "commons" that is deeply related to the state. Because of the absence of the state in Dheisheh, I focus on «commoning» as a set of practices that, as described by Peter Linebaugh, are «independent of the state [and] also of the temporality of the law and state». See Linebaugh, Peter. 2008. *The Magna Carta Manifesto. Liberties and Commons for All.* Berkeley: University of California Press. 45.

[5] Hilal, Sandi, Petti, Alessandro, & Weizman, Eyal. 2013. *Architecture After Revolution.* Berlin: Sternberg Press. 31.

[6] Petti, Alessandro. 2013. "Prologue", Alessandro Petti et al. (eds.), *Campus in Camps. A University in Exile.* Dheisheh Refugee Camp: Campus in Camps. 19-28. P. 21.

[7] "Collective Dictionary". Campus in Camps. Last accessed 26/06/21. http://www.campusin-camps.ps/.

how some of the concepts that I will explore in this article – *common*, space, time, and art – are understood by the refugees of Dheisheh. In what follows, I analyse graffiti in their relation to spatiality to demonstrate that visual art has an actively productive role in the *common* space of the camp that, I claim, generates – and is generated by – graffiti. To do this, I will provide a visual analysis of some of the graffiti that I photographed in the Dheisheh camp, focusing on the relations between aesthetics and politics.

## 2 - **Background and methods**

In 2014 I spent two months – July and August – in Bethlehem. One day in July, I visited Dheisheh for the first time. Here, a friend introduced me to some of the members of the *Ibdaa* Cultural Centre who told me about the project *Campus in Camps*. After this encounter, I went back to the camp several times, during which I had the opportunity to talk about its everyday life with some of its inhabitants. I walked the streets of Dheisheh with one of the members of *Ibdaa*, with whom I discussed some of the graffiti he worked on and some of the *Campus in Camps* booklets. These conversations inspired my Master's dissertation, which I completed in July 2015 and in which I analysed the role of visual art in the camp. I then continued exploring other artistic practices emerging from Dheisheh in my ongoing PhD at Goldsmiths University of London, started in January 2017.

My research builds upon an approach that combines ethnographic observation, discussions, and the visual analysis of graffiti. By understanding the camp as a «place of conversation rather than discovery»,[8] I propose a reading of graffiti that relates aesthetics to everyday political practices, such as *commoning*. Building upon existing studies on the links between image, politics, and space in Arab contexts,[9] I insist on the «culture-politics nexus» that has been neglected by the majority of the «mainstream academic literature on the Arab world's political systems and cultures».[10] As Ruba Salih and Sophie Richter-Devroe observe in their article on "Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond", «the field of cultural studies [...] tended to be heavily influenced by

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[8] Al-Hardan, Anaheed. 2013. "Decolonizing Research on Palestinians: Towards Critical Epistemologies and Research Practices", *Qualitative Enquiry* 20(1). 61-71. P. 64.

[9] Maasri, Zeina. 2008. *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War.* London: I.B. Tauris; Sabry, Tarik (ed.). 2011. *Arab Cultural Studies. Mapping the Field.* London: I.B. Tauris; Khalili, Laleh. 2009. *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine. The Politics of National Commemoration.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Abaza, Mona. 2014. "Post January Revolution Cairo: Urban Wars and the Reshaping of Public Space", *Theory, Culture and Society* 31(7-8). 163-183; Salih, Ruba, & Richter-Devroe, Sophie. 2014. "Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond. On the Politics of Art, Aesthetics, and Affect", *Arab Studies Journal* 22(1). 8-27.

[10] Salih & Richter-Devroe, "Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond", *op. cit.*, 10.

Marxist political economy approaches or a nation-state-centered paradigm».[11] Reading the cultural as not being «epiphenomenal to the political»,[12] I choose a non-Western-centric methodological approach that, drawing from subaltern and decolonial studies, focuses on «alternative, informal political expressions and subaltern political subjectivities»,[13] and understands «the political, economic, and cultural to be closely intertwined and mutually constitutive».[14]

## 3 - Exception and temporariness

Existing literature on Palestinian refugee camps describes them as exceptional spaces in the contemporary global system.[15] They are, in fact, both «extraterritorial sites – exempt from tax, voting obligations, service fees and most regulations»,[16] and spaces that are included in the mechanisms of biopolitical power[17] through the Israeli occupation and the *new* sovereignty of humanitarian regimes. Palestinian refugee camps «are established with the intention of being demolished. They are meant to have no history and no future; they are meant to be forgotten».[18] Nevertheless, Palestinian camps have been in place for over seven decades. I claim that this exceptional «permanent temporariness»[19] produced, in the Dheisheh camp, a non-linear multidimensional space where past, everyday life, and the future of return unite refugees in an ideal – and actual –

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11 *Ibid.*, 15.

12 *Ibid.*, 15.

13 Salih & Richter-Devroe, "Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond", *op. cit.*, 10.

14 *Ibid.*, 15.

15 Feldman, Ilana. 2015. "What is a Camp? Legitimate Refugee Lives is Spaces of Long-Term Displacement", *Geoforum* 66. 244-252; Hanafi, Sari. 2009. "Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Palestinian Territory: Territory of Exception and Locus of Resistance" in Ophir, Adi, Givoni, Michael, & Hanafi, Sari (eds.), *The Power of Inclusive exclusion. Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.* New York: Zone Books. 495-517; Hilal, Petti, & Weizman, *Architecture After Revolution.*

16 Abourahme, Nasser, & Hilal, Sandi. "The Production of Space, Political Subjectivication and the Folding of Polarity. The Case of Dheisheh Camp, Palestine" (paper presented at the California Berkeley Conference in January 2009). Last accessed 25/08/21. http://www.campusincamps. ps/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Nasser-Abourahme-and-Sandi-Hilal_Deheishe-Paper.pdf. P.10.

17 Michel Foucault describes biopolitics as «the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race...». (Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics.* Lectures at the Collège de France. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 317).

18 Hilal, Sandi, & Petti, Alessandro. 2021. *Refugee Heritage.* Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing. 26.

19 Hilal, Sandi, & Petti, Alessandro. 2018. *Permanent Temporariness.* Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing.

*common* space.

The camp's space is indissolubly linked to temporariness, and both are shaped by the return, an act of waiting which is «an embodied state of *active stasis*, punctuated by movement».[20] The idea of return is also reflected in the physical space of Dheisheh: the camp's architecture «can be characterized as 'low profile', in that any bold formal gesture is interpreted as a statement against the right of return».[21] Dheisheh inhabitants have built the camp with cement blocks, a cheap and versatile material that «enables the camp to maintain its form and design as both permanent and temporary. Always on the verge of being destroyed, Dheisheh's half-constructed, half-ruined form serves to oppose settlement and protect the right of return».[22]

The material space of the camp, thus, is shaped by the narrative of return, which is «the strongest possible challenge to the sovereign power of the state».[23] In this perspective, the collective counter-narratives of the refugees may have deeply subversive and anti-hierarchical effects. I claim that in the suspended space of the camp, refugees, deprived of their political life, challenge the notion of «bare life» which Giorgio Agamben defines as:

> [...] the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed.* [...] An obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [ordinamento] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed) [...].[24]

Sacred life is not «politically relevant [...] and can as such be eliminated without punishment».[25] Despite their exclusion from the juridical order, Dheisheh refugees unveil their political relevance by creating a form of *commonality* that is both spatial and cultural. In order to fully understand the potentialities of Dheisheh spatial, artistic, and political practices, it is necessary to take a step back and explore the powers and narratives that are enacted upon the space of the camp. The following sections will explore how the Western imperial narrative is imposed on the Palestinian space through the settler colonial Israeli state and the humanitarian regime.

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[20] Peteet, Julie. 2018. "Closure's Temporality. The Cultural Politics of Time and Waiting", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117(1). 43-64. P. 44.

[21] Hilal & Petti, *Permanent Temporariness, op. cit.*, 283.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Hilal, Petti & Weizman, *Architecture After Revolution, op. cit.,* 44.

[24] Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Stanford: Stanford University Press. 8.

[25] *Ibid.*

## 4 - Imposing the Imperial Narrative

### 4.1 - Israel and space

After the Zionist occupation of Palestine and the subsequent foundation of Israel, in 1948, over 750,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed and confined in camps in the Palestinian territory and the neighboring countries. More camps were created after the 1967 Six-Days War, following which Israel gained control over the Sinai, the Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank. In order to control the Occupied Territories and keep them in a permanent state of exception, Israeli governments, since 1967, and especially after the Oslo process (1993-2000), have focused on urban planning as a way to control, fragment and enclose the Palestinian space. Israel inscribed sharp power relations in the Palestinian space through a complex system of internal frontiers, settlements, and checkpoints. As Eyal Weizman points out in *Hollow Land* (2007):

> The fences, walls, ditches, dykes and all sorts of other territorial apparatuses and inventions placed around Palestinian territorial islands […] became bureaucratic-logistical devices for the creation and maintenance of a demographic separation.[26]

As Nur Masalha describes it, «political Zionism was the product of east and central European nationalist ideas and colonialist movements of the period».[27] In fact, the idea of creating a «homogeneous Israeli political space»[28] responds to the modern Western logic of the nation-state. The bureaucratic-logistical devices that Weizman refers to are defined by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, in her seminal book *Potential History*, as an archival regime through which the Western imperial power operates:

> The archive is not only an institution, and the institution does not only consist of past documents that it is tasked with preserving. The archive is first and foremost a regime that facilitates uprooting, deportation, coercion, and enslavement, as well as the looting of wealth, resources and labor.[29]

By destroying Palestinian villages, houses, and documents, Israel erased Pales-

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[26] Weizman, Eyal. 2007. *Hollow Land. Israel's Architecture of Occupation.* London/New York: Verso. 178.

[27] Masalha, Nur. 2012. *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory.* London/New York: Zed Books. 34.

[28] Weizman, *Hollow Land, op. cit.* 178.

[29] Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. 2019. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism.* London: Verso. 169.

tine from its spatial[30] and historiographical[31] narrative through the enforcement of an «[i]mperial temporality [that] functions by imposing a single, linear progression of time».[32] Refugee camps are the product of this imperial ideology, and they function as fundamental tools for «limiting political aspirations, narratives, and histories».[33] In this perspective, I understand the Dheisheh camp – where political narratives flourish – as a space that can disrupt the power of the archive. Dheisheh refugees, in fact, through their artistic and political counter-narratives, prove their existence as political subjects, thus revealing the fiction lying behind the imperial Western/Israeli narrative that depicts them as people without a land, without history, without political existence. Palestinian refugees' exclusion from state sovereignty – and yet existence as political subjects – help us understand «Palestinian refugee camps [as] the only space through which we can start to imagine and practice a political community beyond the idea of the nation-state».[34]

## 4.2 - Humanitarian space

The humanitarian discourse further exacerbates the idea that Palestinian refugees' existence is non-political.[35] As Sari Hanafi describes it, the humanitarian regime «has transformed refugee camps into disciplinary spaces».[36] In the Dheisheh camp, the UNRWA and a consistent number of NGOs play a crucial role in the management and control of refugees. The spatial and political fragmentation that emerged after the Oslo Accords led to a rapid proliferation of NGOs, which work as «political replacements for local ruling classes and imperial policy makers»[37] and «foster a new type of cultural and economic colonialism».[38] As the *Campus in Camps* booklet *The Unbuilt. Regenerating spaces* points out, the emergence of NGOs in Dheisheh deeply affected the collective space of the camp by moving the political and social debate from the streets to the

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[30] Weizman, Eyal. 2007. *Hollow Land, op. cit.*; Bhandar, Brenna, & Toscano, Alberto. 2016. "Representing Palestinian Dispossession. Land, Property, and Photography in the Settler Colony", *Settler Colonial Studies* 7(1). 1-18.

[31] Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba, op. cit.*

[32] Azoulay, *Potential History*, *op. cit.*, 134.

[33] *Ibid.*, 45.

[34] Petti, Alessandro. 2017. "Refugee Heritage. Part III Justification for Inscription", *Humanities* 6(3). 66. Pp. 4-5.

[35] Bocco, Riccardo. 2009. "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees. A History within History", *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28(2-3). 229-252; Gordon, Neve, & Perugini, Nicola. 2015. *The Human Right to Dominate.* New York: Oxford University Press.

[36] Hanafi, "Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Palestinian Territory", *op. cit.*, 504.

[37] Petras, James. 1999. "NGOs in the Service of Imperialism", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29(4). 429-440. P. 432.

[38] *Ibid.*, 434.

NGOs buildings, and by proposing a top-down model of social responsibility. It is in this perspective that Michel Agierunderstands the humanitarian as a form of «totalitarianism, which has the power of life (to make live or survive) and the power of death (to let die) over the individual it considers the absolute victim».[39] Thus, refugees are «transformed into bodies to be fed and sheltered while being deprived of their political existence».[40]

Building upon existing literature on refugee camps as spaces of agency,[41] I understand Dheisheh as a space that, despite not being «officially planned and organised [...] grew organically with the exiled Palestinian society, each making, sustaining and perpetuating the other».[42] With this in view, I claim that Dheisheh inhabitants, by building their own material and social space, challenged the dominant narrative, thus affirming their existence as political subjects.

## 5 - De-structuring the Imperial Narrative

### 5.1 - Subversive *common*

By understanding Dheisheh as actively productive in terms of political, social and spatial practices, I analyze the *common* of the camp as a profoundly political space that is produced and reproduced through everyday practices, such as: «trust, shared responsibility, respect, sustainability, equality, participation».[43] The *common*, in the Dheisheh camp, is understood as a collective process, as something that «need[s] to be activated and taken care of, otherwise [it] cease[s] to exist».[44] Stavros Stavrides describes common spaces as being «distinct from public as well as from private spaces [that] emerge in the contemporary metropolis as sites open to public use in which, however, rules and forms of use do not depend upon and are not controlled by a prevailing authority».[45]

The Dheisheh *common* does not emerge in a metropolitan space. However, since

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[39] Agier, Michel. 2011. *Managing the Undesirables. Refugee camps and Humanitarian Government.* Cambridge: Polity Press. 30.

[40] Hanafi, "Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Palestinian Territory", *op. cit.*, 503.

[41] Tabar, Linda. 2007. "Memory, Agency, Counter-Narrative: Testimonies from Jenin Refugee Camp", *Critical Arts* 21(1). 6-31; Ramadan, Adam. 2013. "Spatialising the Refugee Camp", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38(1). 65-77; Salih, Ruba. 2013. "From Bare Lives to Political Agents: Palestinian Refugees as avant-garde", *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 32(2). 66-91; Achilli, Luigi. 2015. *Palestinian Refugees and Identity. Nationalism, Politics and the Everyday.* London: I.B. Tauris.

[42] Ramadan, "Spatialising the Refugee Camp", *op. cit.*, 74.

[43] Abu Alia, Mohammed et al. 2013. *Common I.* Dheisheh Refugee Camp: Campus in Camps. 13.

[44] *Ibid.*, 14.

[45] Stavrides, Stavros. 2016. *Common Space. The City as Commons.* London: Zed Books. 2.

the existing literature on the *common* in refugee spaces is rather scarce, I draw from Stavrides' analysis in order to explore the possibilities of *commoning* in its connection to «spatial transformation [and] political subjectivation».[46] The idea that *common*, space and subjectivity are deeply related is crucial for my research, as it allows me to read Dheisheh *commoning* practices as being related to space and political existence. I understand, in fact, the *common* as a set of «social relations»[47] that go «against and beyond Capitalism»,[48] which needs to be understood as a set of values that are the product of Western modernity. In this perspective, I read the Dheisheh *common* as a kind of social and physical space that offers its «antimodern»[49] perspective *against and beyond* the Western imperial ideology. The collective counter-narratives emerging from Dheisheh gave birth to collective spatial practices that produced the space of the camp as we know it today:

> Without municipal involvement and state governance, residents were largely left to determine the evolution of their urban environment according to the values they themselves willed. [...] In adapting to urban conditions, unique systems of civic management were developed to preserve elements of the rural cultures residents brought with them.[50]

Refugees continuously generate the *common* through material and immaterial practices. Here we shall focus on the immaterial aspects of commonality by linking the graffiti production in the camp to its (common) space. *Campus in Camps* project and other studies on Dheisheh have explored the production of space,[51] *common*,[52] and graffiti[53] in the camp; however, the idea that the three are mutually productive has never

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[46] *Ibid.*, 6.

[47] An Architektur. 2010. "On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides", *E-flux Journal June-August* 17.

[48] Federici, Silvia. 2019. *Re-enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons.* Oakland: PM Press. 85. See also: De Angelis, Massimo. 2003. "Reflections on Alternatives, Commons and Communities", *The Commoner* 6; Venn, Couze. 2018. *After Capital.* London: Sage.

[49] Hardt, Michael, & Negri, Antonio. 2011. *Commonwealth.* London: Harvard University Press. 67.

[50] Abu Alia et al., *Common I, op. cit.*, 5.

[51] Abourahme, & Hilal, "The Production of Space, Political Subjectification and the Folding of Polarity", *op. cit.*; Feldman, Ilana. 2015. "What is a Camp? Legitimate Refugee Lives in Spaces of Long-Term Displacement", *Geoforum* 66. 224-252.

[52] Petti, Hilal, & Weizman, *Architecture After Revolution, op. cit.*

[53] Asthana, Sanjay, & Havandjian, Nishan. 2016. *Palestinian Youth Media and the Pedagogies of Estrangement.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Hopper, Philip. 2016. "Beyond the Wall in Dheisheh Camp. From Local to Transnational Image-Making", *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal* 1(7); Lehec, Clémence. 2017. "Graffiti in Palestinian Refugee Camps: from palimpsest

been explored in the context of Dheisheh. To fill this gap, I focus on the political role of graffiti, profoundly rooted in the space of the Dheisheh camp.

## 5.2 - Subversive art

The link between art and *common* space has been examined, in the field of Cultural studies, mainly in the context of metropolitan anti-capitalist uprisings. Authors such as Mona Abaza,[54] David Harvey,[55] and Yates McKee[56] have observed how public space in the city is occupied and transformed into *common* through art and performance. These studies are useful to understand how politics and art – when intertwined – affect and shape the actual space by giving birth to the *common.* However, the common space of the uprising is extemporaneous, while, in the Palestinian camp, the formation of the *common*, through art and politics, has been a long and continuous process. In this perspective, by building upon studies on the relation between art, politics, and space in Palestinian refugee contexts,[57] I understand visual art in the Dheisheh camp as deeply political: the *common* narratives that emerge from graffiti are simultaneously the product of collective counter-narratives and productive of shared political imaginaries.

In the *common* political space of the camp, Dheisheh refugees escape the Western/Israeli/humanitarian narrative imposed on them and succeed in creating meanings through which they claim their right to represent themselves. As *Campus in Camps* defines it, the camp is a form of *common* generated through everyday practices of *commonality* and collective narratives around Palestine. Graffiti, in this perspective, are understood as a form of *commonality* that produces spatial counter-narratives. The space of Dheisheh «is not just outcome but a process with emergent powers»[58] that, I claim, involves artistic production. In Jacques Rancière's words:

walls to public space", *Arts in Cities-Cities in Arts* 15; Olin Margaret. 2019. "How Long Will Handala Wait? A Ten-Year-Old Barefoot Refugee Child on Palestinian Walls", Singer, Cristoph, Wirth, Robert, & Berwald, Olaf (eds.), *Timescapes of Waiting. Spaces of Stasis, Delay and Deferral.* Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi. 176-197.

54 Abaza, Mona. 2016. "The Field of Graffiti and Street Art in post-January 2011 Egypt", Ross, Jeffrey Ian (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art.* New York: Routledge. 318-333.

55 Harvey, David. 2012. *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution.* London/ New York: Verso

56 McKee, Yates. 2016. *Strike Art. Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition.* London/ New York: Verso.

57 Peteet, Julie. 2005. *Landscape of Hope and Despair. Palestinian Refugee Camps.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Stein, Rebecca, & Swedenburg, Ted (eds.). 2005. *Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Popular Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press; Tawil Souri, Helga. 2011. "The Necessary Politics of Palestinian Cultural Studies", Sabry, Tarik (ed.), *Arab Cultural Studies.* London: I.B. Tauris.

58 Abourahme & Hilal, "The Production of Space, Political Subjectivication and the Folding of Polarity", *op. cit.*, 27.

Art and politics, as forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done. It is here that we encounter the [...] relationship between literarity and historicity. Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality.[59]

In this perspective, art and politics are deeply related to power.[60] By building their own space and offering artistic and political counter-narratives through graffiti, Dheisheh refugees, I claim, can challenge the power-knowledge nexus that lies behind the political representations of refugees as marginalized *bare life* and non-political objects of humanitarian assistance.

## 6 - Common Space, Common Art

In the booklet *Ownership*, one of the entries of the *Campus in Camps Collective Dictionary*, graffiti are described as a form of commonality:

For us and for the other inhabitants of the camp, the walls are neither public nor private property. Many people consider them common. The paintings tell our stories of refugeehood and daily life to visitors and to residents of the camps. They are part of a process of communal participation, creating collective emotions with a greater value than that of the applied material. This is how the meaning of ownership is interpreted in the camp.[61]

In the *common* space of the camp, therefore, graffiti contribute to the formation of a community that shares the same historical memory and political imaginations. In the camp's exceptional and suspended space, graffiti are informal and subaltern practices that generate collective imaginations and spaces. In this particular space, art becomes a way to «opportunize the liminality and exceptionality – including the ambiguity of control – of [the] refugee camp in ways that contest power and social relations».[62] Memory, counter-narratives, and struggle are all embedded in the *common* space of Dheisheh, which needs to be understood not as a strictly physical space, but rather as a set of

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[59] Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible.* London and New York: Continuum, 39.

[60] Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* New York: Pantheon Books.

[61] Al-Homouz, Alaa et al. 2013. *Ownership.* Dheisheh Refugee Camp: Campus in Camps. 15.

[62] Abourahme & Hilal, "The Production of Space, Political Subjectification and the Folding of Polarity", *op. cit.*, 6.

practices and imaginaries that unite the refugees of the Dheisheh camp. The production of graffiti is one of these practices in which the collectivity is involved:

> The artist is not the only one painting; rather, expression is a social event where people in the area participate in the activity. Some prepare coffee while others discuss what to paint. In this way, the walls' paintings form a tool to improve and revive identities, which have been missing as a result of the political condition, and ideas such as participation, neighbouring, collective learning based on experience, knowledge, public and ownership.[63]

The graffiti form in the Dheisheh camp is equitable, in Rancière's terms, as it is available to everyone: anyone in the camp can participate in it, can modify it, see it, and recognize its aesthetics of resistance and displacement. This collective experience, in which politics and art are merged, creates counter-hegemonic meanings through a series of acts that are generated by the common experience of displacement, oppression, and occupation.



*Figure 1 - Right to return. Author's photography, Dheisheh refugee camp (2014)*

In this mural, one can read the names of the Palestinian villages where Dheisheh refugees come from; at the center of the graffito, the UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of December 1948 is reported, in Arabic and English, thus re-stating the legiti-

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63    Al-Saifi & Odeh, *The Pathways. Reframing Narration*, *op. cit.*, 17.

macy of the refugees' claim for the right to return:

> The refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their
> neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and com-
> pensation should be paid for the property of those, choosing not to return and
> for loss or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in
> equity, should be made good by the governments or authorities responsible.[64]

On the top of the mural stands the key, one of the symbols of return and a power-
ful trope in Palestinian imagination and artistic production. When Palestinians were
forced into displacement, in 1948, many carried their keys with them, hoping to return
to their homes. The fact that especially first-generation refugees still keep their original
keys needs to be understood not only as a nostalgic gesture, but also as a political state-
ment for the right to return. With this in view, it is possible to read the graffito in light
of its deep relations to time, space and counter-narratives: the present of displacement,
the past of pre-1948 Palestine, and the future of return are contained in these highly
symbolic images. The spatial and temporal layering of this graffito is the result of «a
dialectically suspended dual attachment to place: the camp as both the marker of dis-
possession and the means to its resolution is substantively and cognitively fused with
the image or the imagining of the vanquished village».[65]

The collective act of remembering Palestine, the *common* artistic space of Dhei-
sheh, and the shared political imaginaries, constitute a multidimensional space that
embodies the claim for the right to return. It is in this perspective that I understand
displacement and return as being deeply related, since Dheisheh refugees, by politici-
sing their displacement, «have opposed efforts to resettle them in exile permanently».[66]
Despite the long experience of displacement, the unavoidable attachment to the camp,
and the complex relation to normalization, Dheisheh refugees have managed to create
counter-narratives that resist throughout time and space. As explained in the *Campus
in Camps* booklet *The Suburb*:

> At the beginning of the camp's establishment, people hesitated even to build a
> sewage network inside the camp because they thought that in doing so they would
> be normalizing the camp. [...] With the passage of time, people in the camp started
> to recognize and be aware of their political status, and to understand what affects

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64 "Resolution 194". UNRWA. Last accessed 28/05/21. https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolu-
tion-194.

65 Abourahme & Hilal, "The Production of Space, Political Subjectification and the Folding of
Polarity", *op. cit.*, 29.

66 Feldman, "What is a Camp?", *op. cit.*, 248.

this political exceptionality and what does not.[67]

## 7 - **Returns**

Return is deeply linked to the idea of movement and, thus, to space. As Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal put it, «[a]fter more than seven decades, the right of return is no longer simply the right to return to the village of origin – rather, it implies a radical call for an extended freedom of movement».[68] In this perspective, the political imagination of the *common* overflows the camp's borders, thus questioning the very structure of the Western nation-state. As Isshaq al-Barbary points out:

> When my refugee friends had the chance to go to the occupied territory of for-
> ty-eight, their priority was to see the Mediterranean Sea rather than the villages
> of their origins. Such an act explains and reinterprets the third generation's notion
> of returning to the common, while reflecting the spirit and idea of the evolving
> culture within refugee communities in the refugee camps.[69]

In this perspective, the political production of *common,* emerging from the camp, can question the Western narrative on spatiality by re-imagining the notion of space. The *common* is the camp, but it also exceeds its space: the *common* is a set of relations, memories, political imaginations that are projected towards the future of return, towards the space of historical Palestine and beyond it. By reading the right to return as the right to free movement, it is possible to understand the significance of the production of *common* space in Dheisheh. The camp is a temporary space, where Dheisheh inhabitants actively wait for the return through spatial practices and the production of counter-narratives,[70] and a permanent space, where refugees have been living their everyday life for over seven decades. This collective act of waiting contributes to creating a common perception of time and space that is specific to the Palestinian refugee camp. In Dheisheh, the *common* time/space is transformed into shared narratives through everyday acts of *commonality* – including graffiti production.

Return is, thus, a fundamental aspect of the camp's spatial formation, and as such, its presence is constant on the walls of Dheisheh. When I accessed the camp in 2014, one of the first images that caught my attention, at the entrance of the camp, was a large graffito depicting three prominent Palestinian personalities that contributed to the

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[67] Abu Aker, Qussay, & Al-Lahham, Ahmad. 2013. *The Suburb. Transgressing Boundaries.* Dheisheh Refugee Camp: Campus in Camps. 71-72.

[68] Hilal, & Petti, *Refugee Heritage, op. cit.*, 35.

[69] Al-Saifi & Al-Barbary, *Common II, op. cit.*, 17-18.

[70] Peteet, "Closure's Temporality", *op. cit.*, 44.

formation of a Palestinian narrative through art: Ghassan Kanafani [Ġassān Kanafānī],[71] Naji al-Ali [Nāğī al-ʿAlī][72] and Mahmoud Darwish [Maḥmūd Darwīš][73].



*Figure 2 - Kanafani and al-Ali. Author's photography, Dheisheh camp (2014)*

*Figure 3 - Darwish. Author's photography, Dheisheh camp (2014)*

Aysar al-Saify and Murad Odeh explain why these artists are significant for Dheisheh refugees:

> Graffiti in the camp is not just for the martyrs of the camp but also for other Palestinian politicians and artists. This graffiti is of the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, who wrote about the Palestinian political situation. People perceive him as the Palestinian writer who most powerfully addressed the core of the Palestinian struggle. The other is Naji Al Ali, the Palestinian political cartoonist who presents the Palestinian situation through his drawings. He created the famous caricature Handala, which became a symbol of resistance and revolution.[74]

Gassan Kanafani, Naji al-Ali, and Mahmoud Darwish are indissolubly linked to the Palestinian struggle and the camp's space. They had been displaced themselves and, through their artistic production, they have reinforced the symbolic power of the return

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[71] Ġassān Kanafānī (1936-1972) was a Palestinian writer, novelist, and journalist. Member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, he was killed in an attack in Beirut, after a life in exile.

[72] Nāğī al-ʿAlī (1937-1987) was a Palestinian cartoonist. He became a refugee in 1948 and was assassinated in exile in London. His most famous character, Handala [Ḥanẓala], has become one of the symbols of the Palestinian return.

[73] Maḥmūd Darwīš (1941-2008), Palestinian poet, novelist, and journalist, is one of the most illustrious poets in the Arab world and a symbol of the Palestinian resistance.

[74] Al-Saifi & Odeh, *The Pathways. Reframing Narration, op. cit.*, 32-33.

in the Palestinian collective political imagination. They also embody the fusion between art and politics: through art, they contributed to forming a Palestinian national culture[75] that resounds in the minds and hearts of all Palestinians and cannot be erased, despite Israeli censorship and demolitions. Additionally, these three political artists narrate, through their lives and works, a history of exile and displacement that Dheisheh refugees endure in their everyday lives. In this perspective, the shared experience of displacement reinforces the collective political imagination of the right to return. For the same reason, al-Ali's character, Handala [Ḥanẓala], is a pervasive presence on the walls of Dheisheh and, as tattoos, on the bodies of some of its residents. Handala is a symbol of resistance and return, as Naji al-Ali explains:

> His name is Handala and he has promised the people that he will remain true to himself. I drew him as a child who is not beautiful; his hair is like the hair of a hedgehog who uses his thorns as a weapon. Handala is not a fat, happy, relaxed, or pampered child. He is barefooted like the refugee camp children […]. His hands are clasped behind his back as a sign of rejection at a time when solutions are presented to us the American way. […] Handala was born ten years old, and he will always be ten years old. At that age, I left my homeland, and when he returns, Handala will still be ten, and then he will start growing up. The laws of nature do not apply to him. He is unique. Things will become normal again when the homeland returns.[76]

Handala's time is suspended: he will turn around and start growing up when Palestine will be free. On the walls of Dheisheh, Handala recounts the common history of displacement of Palestinian refugees, working as a reminder of the return. In the following graffito, which reproduces one of al-Ali's cartoons, Handala looks towards the future, when Palestine will be free.

This graffito actively interacts with the space of Dheisheh: Handala gives his back to the camp, thus projecting refugees into the space of the homeland. In the words of Tamara Abu Laban, one of the contributors to *Campus in Camps* and an inhabitant of the Dheisheh camp, Handala «refuses to look at the camp and wants to keep his eyes on his original homeland. Therefore, he is a symbol of the many things that built the culture of exile».[77] In this graffito, time and space are intertwined with narratives of

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[75] Here, national culture needs to be understood, in Franz Fanon's terms, as «the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence». See Fanon, Franz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth.* New York: Grove Press. 233.

[76] Quoted in LeVine, Mark, & Shafir, Gershon (eds.). 2012. *Struggle and Survival in Palestine/ Israel.* Oakland: University of California Press. 435.

[77] Al-Saifi, & Odeh, *The Pathways. Reframing Narration, op. cit.*, 49.

exile and displacement. The mural opens a multidimensional window where refugees are simultaneously in the present of the camp, in the past of the remembered Palestine and in the future of a free Palestine.



*Figure 4 - 'Palestine. The whole national land'. Author's photography, Dheisheh camp (2014)*

This multidimensionality contributes to the production of the camp's space. As Dheisheh inhabitants pass by these graffiti, they are reminded that the space of the camp is temporary and that the return is awaiting. Graffiti, in this perspective, reinforce the collective memory and stimulate the co-creation of common knowledge and narratives that profoundly shape the political space of the camp. As the authors of a volume on *Sensible Politics* emphasize, aesthetics and politics may have an impact on the actual space.[78]

The relevance of the *performative context* – in this research, the space of the camp – is related to that of *vision,* understood «not as a naturally given optical faculty, but rather as a historical, shifting assemblage of technical and social forces that shape – without mechanically determining – the perceptual, cognitive, and psychic lives of subjects in their relation to the world».[79] This idea of vision, that the DAAR has also highlighted through a series of spatial interventions[80] and in the context of *Campus in Camps*,[81] is very much related to power and right to see. As Gil Hochberg observes, the

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[78] McLagan, Meg, & McKee, Yates (eds.). 2012. *Sensible Politics. The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism.* New York: Zone Books.

[79] McLagan & McKee, "Introduction", McLagan & McKee (eds.), *Sensible Politics, op. cit.*, 8-26. P. 12.

[80] Hilal, Petti, & Weizman, *Architecture After Revolution, op. cit.*

[81] Al-Lahham, Marwa et al. 2013. *Vision.* Dheisheh Refugee Camp: Campus in Camps.

«conditions of vision dictate the oppressive relationship between the Israeli occupiers and the Palestinian occupied, which is articulated through and manifested in uneven distribution of "visual rights"».[82] In this perspective, the idea of vision is strongly related to issues of representation.

## 8 - Self-representation

In Palestine, and particularly in refugee camps, the collective historical narrative is not developed through museums, history books, official festivals, or statues. Instead, the narratives of Palestinian refugees emerge through the collective space of the camp, through informal acts of commonality, and through artistic/political practices and acts of resistance that are part of the camp's everyday life. As the *Campus in Camps* booklet *The Pathways* puts it, «the camp is not a museum»:

> Museums take things out of their reality, but the camp is an intense expression of its reality and hasn't strayed from this path even after 65 years. Throughout this time, the camp's walls were used as a place for political, cultural, and social expression. Here, the camp's walls tell real stories that are connected with the timeline of its events. Here, whoever walks by the walls is reminded of the suffering and yet the creation of a community.[83]

The refusal of museumization needs to be understood, more broadly, as a claim against the appropriation, objectification, and erasure of minor histories. As Ariella Azoulay affirms, imperial violence, colonisation, and exploitation are intrinsic to the idea of universal art proposed by Western institutions: «[f]rom the beginning, art has been one of imperialism's preferred terrain».[84] For this reason, with the aim of problematizing the universality of the notion of heritage, Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti have proposed Dheisheh for inscription in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage list. This nomination aims to evidence the fallacies of the «Eurocentric understanding of heritage»[85] that «roots heritage firmly in a European, nationalist, and materialist set of values that are in turn presented as universal».[86]

Despite having its own history and heritage, thus, Dheisheh cannot be understood as a museum, where objects are «appropriated [...] detached from the environments,

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[82] Hochberg, Gil. 2015. *Visual Occupations.* Durham/London: Duke University Press. 3.

[83] Al-Saifi & Odeh, *The Pathways. Reframing Narration*, *op. cit.*, 15.

[84] Azoulay, *Potential History, op. cit.,* 58.

[85] Hilal & Petti, *Refugee Heritage, op. cit.*, 29.

[86] *Ibid.,* 27.

communities, and modes of activity to which they had belonged».[87] With this in view, I claim that graffiti, being deeply embedded in the space of the Dheisheh camp, are a fundamental aspect in the production of refugees' counter-narratives and the quest for self-representation. In the following graffito one can grasp the refusal to succumb to a binary representation of the Palestinian struggle. Here, culture and struggle are depicted as complementary elements in the constitution of the refugee, a multidimensional human – and political – being that, in the space of the camp, produces counter-narratives through art, politics, and resistance.



*Figure 5 - Culture and Struggle. Author's photography, Dheisheh camp (2014). The written text reads: «Today the important thing is not how we resist... because the important thing is to understand, first, for whom and for which reason we resist» (my translation)*

Non-violent resistance and armed struggle are seen by humanitarian regimes and the international community as two alternative options that enable them to categorize the refugees either as good/peaceful/ in need of assistance, or as bad/violent terrorists. Through this graffito, Dheisheh refugees reject the violence of representation imposed upon them and claim for self-representation. The image invites to focus on the purpose of resistance rather than on its methods, thus projecting the observer into the future of return.

In this perspective, representation, present, and future overlap in the claim for the right to return that, in turn, is strongly related to space. Through political visual art,

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87 Azoulay, *Potential History, op. cit.,* 59.

Dheisheh refugees collectively «call into question the distribution of roles, territories, and languages [thus challenging] the given distribution of the sensible».[88] The camp becomes thus a space of self-representation where refugees are political subjects who actively produce deeply anti-hierarchical meanings that can challenge the Western narrative on space, time, and art.

## 9 - Conclusions

The article has explored the relations between the production of space, the idea of *common*, and graffiti in the Dheisheh camp. Through the analysis of some of the graffiti on the walls of Dheisheh, I explored the possibilities emerging from the intersections between art and politics in the suspended space of the Palestinian refugee camp. By emphasizing the exceptional spatial and temporal asset of the camp, I explored how permanent temporariness gave birth to a multidimensional space that has been built – both physically and conceptually – by refugees themselves during the over seventy-three years of displacement. In the Dheisheh camp, the suspended, excluded space has been transformed through acts of everyday commonality memorial, and artistic practices.

This transformation has contributed to the production of a *common* space that, in turn, generates shared counter-narratives. In this perspective, the *common* is strongly related to issues of representation and, as such, it is a profoundly political space. Through this temporary-permanent space, suspension becomes a possibility of de-structuring dominant representations of refugees as passive objects of humanitarian assistance, victims, and terrorists. By focusing on the political role of graffiti, I have explored how they work in the space of the camp, through the production and re-production of counter-narratives that unite refugees in a *common* space. Memory, everyday life, and return constitute and shape a camp space that is indissolubly linked to temporariness.

These aspects are embedded in the camp graffiti, which have been understood in their connections with spatial practices and politics. It is in this perspective that I highlighted the profound link between graffiti and the temporary-permanent *common* space of the camp by focusing on the idea that art in the camp is not purely aesthetical: rather, it is a deeply anti-hierarchical form that poses issues of representation. Unlike the idea of art-as-object, embedded in the institution of the museum as a constitutive part of Western modernity, in Dheisheh art needs to be understood as a productive form that dissolves the boundaries between artist and spectator. In the proactive *common* space of the camp, the community is co-creator of the meanings embedded in the graffiti drawn on the walls of Dheisheh.

Graffiti, thus, contribute to generating a community that reproduces itself through

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[88] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible, op. cit.*, 40.

images and symbols that anyone in the camp can recognize because of the shared experience of displacement. Both their form and content become anti-hierarchic and counter-hegemonic in terms of representation. Graffiti can be erased, but the counter-narratives emerging from the walls of Dheisheh cannot be deleted, because they are deeply embedded in the space of the camp and in the memory of refugees. The right to return – indelibly engraved in Palestinian refugees' political consciousness – is claimed through the space of the camp and through the refugees' artistic/political counter-narratives. Graffiti and the *common* space of Dheisheh, in this perspective, are mutually productive elements that generate counter-narratives, which can structurally put into question the linearity of the Western narrative.