

IMAGES OF PROTEST: BARRIER WALL ART BY RON ENGLISH
AND OTHER STREET ARTISTS

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis looks at illegal public art produced on state built barrier walls. The focus is on the artist Ron English, and his artworks produced on the Berlin Wall, Israeli Barrier Wall, and Mexican Border Fence. I examine English's works in their respective contexts of Cold War divisions, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and tensions at the border between United States and Mexico. I also situate English's works in relation to other artworks produced on these barriers. I argue that English is doing something different from other barrier wall artists in his work in Palestine and Mexico, offering a framework for understanding the primary motivations and tactics behind barrier wall art and highlighting English's unique contributions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. ENGLISH IN BERLIN	11
III. ENGLISH IN BETHLEHEM.....	22
IV. ENGLISH IN REYNOSA	31
V. CONCLUSION.....	38
APPENDIX: FIGURES	42
REFERENCES CITED	54

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Ron English, <i>Think Different</i> , Manhattan, 1999	42
2. Ron English, <i>MC Supersized and Son</i> , Oil on Canvas, 2004	42
3. Ron English, <i>Cereal Killers</i> , placed in a Ralph’s in Venice, CA., 2011	43
4. View of Thierry Noir’s murals on Berlin Wall, 1986.....	44
5. Keith Haring, <i>Berlin Wall Mural</i> , West Berlin, 1986.....	44
6. Peter Unsicker, <i>Work of the Depraved</i> , West Berlin, 1986-87	45
7. View of Ron English’s Mural on the Berlin Wall, 1988	45
8. View of Ron English’s Mural on the Berlin Wall, 1988	46
9. Ron English’s Mural on the Berlin Wall with Ron English, 1988	46
10. Swoon, <i>Wall Mural</i> , Bethlehem, 2007.....	47
11. Jon van Erven, <i>ICH BIN EIN BERLINER</i> , Bethlehem, 2007	47
12. Wissam Salsaa, <i>untitled</i> , Bethlehem 2007	48
13. Ron English, <i>Pardon Our Oppression</i> , Bethlehem, 2007	48
14. Ron English, <i>You are not in Disneyland anymore</i> , Bethlehem, 2007	49
15. Ron English, <i>Grade School Guernica</i> , Bethlehem, 2007	49
16. Ana Teresa Fernández, <i>Erasing the Border</i> , 2015.....	50
17. Enrique Chiu and La Casa Del Tunel, <i>Mural de la Hermandad</i> , Tijuana, n.d.	50
18. Anonymous, <i>Coffins of the Dead</i> , Tijuana 2005.....	51
19. Anonymous, <i>Crosses with names of the deceased</i> , Tijuana, late 2000s	51
20. Coalition for the Defense of Immigrants, <i>Día de los Muertos en memoria</i> , Tijuana, 2009.....	52
21. Ron English, <i>You Must Be This Color</i> , Reynosa 2011	52

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
22. Ron English, <i>Double Donkey</i> , Reynosa, 2011	53

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The artist Ron English (b. 1966) has created illegal public artworks on three of the world's most divisive barrier walls: the Berlin Wall, the Israeli Barrier Wall, and the Mexican Border Fence. English's work on these walls protest their existence and the circumstances that supposedly justify their creation. As English is the only person to have ever produced art on all three of these barriers, his work offers a unique lens through which to look at the practice of artists visiting state built barriers to produce site-specific works, protest ideological, political, national, and ethnic divisions, and express solidarity with the people oppressed by these structures. In studying the barrier wall art of English, his work appears to differ in a significant way from that of other wall artists working in Bethlehem and Reynosa. English's barrier wall art in Berlin exhibits the same primary motivations and tactics of most barrier wall artists – beautification, expression of solidarity, and structural resistance – but in Bethlehem and Reynosa, he breaks with these standards.

English began his street art career in the greater Dallas, Texas area. Starting with simple spray paint projects in 1979, he later began making the “billboard liberations” for which he would become best known.¹ While interested in contributing to the increasingly prominent genre of street art in the 1980s, English did not live in a dense urban environment that offered ample space to create covert street art in highly trafficked areas. Instead, he chose billboards as his target for defacement and guerrilla art making.² Through the 1980s to 2000s, English, along with a group of collaborators, would pose as maintenance crews and convert billboard advertisements

¹ Ron English, *POPaganda: The Art & Subversion of Ron English* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004), 36.

² *Fourth Annual Media That Matters Film Festival*, DVD, (2004; New York, MediaRights and Media That Matters).

into subversive statements, either by altering the existing advertisement or pasting entirely over the current ad.³ To date, English has completed dozens of these projects. These efforts are often meant as critiques of corporate advertising and capitalism. After moving to New York, English created one of his “billboard liberations” in 1999 in Manhattan, where he installed his version of the Apple corporation’s “Think Different” advertising campaign. English created an almost identical version of one of the iconic Apple ads featuring prominent revolutionary thinkers (e.g., Pablo Picasso, the Dalai Lama, etc.), but with the portrait of Charles Manson [Fig. 1].

In addition to creating street art, English has also maintained an active gallery art practice. Typically working with oil paint, English’s style is self-titled as “POPaganda.” His paintings mix nightmarish images and figures with a variety of references culled from American popular culture and corporate imagery. The paintings’ uncomfortable combinations and uncanny scenes critique the power of corporations. In works such as *MC Supersized and Son*, English presents Ronald McDonald as an obese, oddly proportioned figure with an added gold chain necklace featuring a dollar sign [Fig. 2]. A child dressed as Ronald McDonald holds his hand, but pulls away from the obese “MC Supersized” figure in obvious discomfort, highlighting how corporate imagery is used to influence children. *MC Supersized and Son* highlights the disturbing way corporate imagery influences children.

After his initial experiments with “billboard liberation” and the development of his “POPaganda” style, English blended his street art practice with his studio painting. Continuing his critique of consumer capitalism and corporate advertisements, his street art moved beyond billboards. He’s engaged in guerilla art placement such as putting fake cereal boxes in grocery

³ English, *POPaganda*, 37.

stores to point out how unhealthy children's cereals are [Fig. 3]. He also engaged in more standard street art practices such as the painting of large mural and wheat pasting of posters to walls.⁴

In 1988, English traveled to West Berlin to paint on the Berlin Wall. Almost two decades after this initial experience with artistic protest at the Berlin Wall, English joined famous street artist Banksy in Bethlehem, Palestine in 2007 to paint on the Israeli Barrier Wall. Most recently, in 2011, English produced work on the Mexican Border Fence in Reynosa, Mexico. This thesis focuses on English's barrier wall art at these three distinct sites, comparing his art to pieces by other artists working on the same barriers. I show how English's work in Berlin fits in with the primary approaches to barrier wall art, but how his projects in Bethlehem and Reynosa stand out as atypical examples of barrier wall art.

All barrier wall artists engaged with the dividing structures as a means of protest. All the artworks discussed in this thesis were illegal and unsanctioned by the governments that built these barriers. As such, the production of these artworks stood as a defacement and protest of the barriers. Looking at key artworks produced on the barriers in Berlin, Bethlehem, and Reynosa, I propose that there are three main tactics and motivations behind barrier wall art: beautification of the barrier, solidarity with the oppressed, and resistance to the barrier. Generally, when aiming to beautify, artists do not directly engage with the structures or underlying socio-political conflicts of the barriers, but instead create pleasant imagery and subject matter as a means of overcoming the negative aspects of the barrier by improving the viewer's aesthetic experience of the surrounding area. Artists whose main goal is to express solidarity usually strive to represent the

⁴ Wheat pasting is the most common technique that street artists use to install posters, mixing water and wheat flour or starch to create a cheap and quick solution for pasting posters.

people oppressed by the barrier and depict those communities actively protesting the division, either through literal representations or abstracted imagery that references relevant protest movements. The final exemplary motivation for creating barrier wall art is to resist the physical structure, most apparent in pieces that depict the barrier being destroyed or otherwise removed. These three primary motivating factors/artistic strategies – beautification, solidarity, and resistance – have been prominently represented in the barrier wall art of Berlin, Bethlehem, and Reynosa. In this thesis, I situate English’s interventions on these three walls within their broader setting. I examine English’s projects in Berlin, Bethlehem, and Reynosa in connection to their socio-political contexts and artistic settings, showing how English stands out as a barrier wall artist. Tracing English’s chronological trajectory across three sites, I reveal how his barrier wall art changed from a rather typical expression of solidarity and resistance in Berlin to a practice more closely related to his gallery-based works, which emphasized the involvement of his home country, the United States, in cross-border conflicts in Bethlehem and Reynosa.

Research on state built barrier walls has been thorough. Many detailed histories of the Berlin Wall, Israeli Barrier Wall, and Mexican Border Fence exist in books, articles, and anthologies by such prominent scholars such as Norman Gelb, Eyal Wiezman, and Robert Lee Maril. This literature provides a foundational understanding of these socio-political contexts of these barriers, helping to clarify the situations to which street artists are responding. Some scholars have focused on the phenomena of states building these barrier walls not for military defense, but to prevent the illegal movement of non-state actors, as seen in Wendy Brown’s *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.⁵ Brown writes:

⁵ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

What is also striking about these new barriers is that even as they limn or attempt to define nation-state boundaries, they are not built as defenses against potential attacks by other sovereigns, as fortresses against invading armies, or even as shields against weapons launched interstate wars. Rather, while the particular danger may vary, these walls target nonstate transnational actors - individuals, groups, movements, organizations, and industries. They react to translate, rather than international relations and respond to a persistent, but often informal or subterranean powers, rather than to military undertakings. The migration, smuggling, crime, terror, and even political purpose that the walls would interdict are rarely state sponsored, nor, for the most part, are they incited by national interests.⁶

Brown defines state built barrier walls not only as structures of military defense (like Harridan's Wall or the Great Wall of China) but as policed borders intended to restrict individuals or communities from accessing a nation's territory.

As one of the major flashpoints of the Cold War, much has been written detailing the history of the Berlin Wall. The prominent book, *The Berlin Wall*, by Norman Gelb offers the history of the barrier, from construction to destruction.⁷ The literature on the Berlin Wall focuses on the greater political forces of the United States and the Soviet Union surrounding the Berlin Wall's conception and use as a political tool by both the East and West. So far, there has been little discussion of the barrier as a work of architecture. A significant exception is the writing of Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, who offered a concise, theoretically based discussion of the Berlin Wall as architecture.⁸

The greatest surprise: *the wall was heartbreakingly beautiful*. Maybe after the ruins of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the Roman Forum, it was the most purely beautiful remnant of an urban condition, breathtaking in its persistent doubleness. The game phenomenon offered, over a length of 165 kilometers, radically different meanings, spectacles, interpretations, realities. It was impossible to imagine another recent artifact with the game signifying potency.

And there was more: in spite of its apparent absence of program, the wall - in its relatively short life - had provoked and sustained an incredible number of events, behaviors, and

⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁷ Norman Gelb, *The Berlin Wall* (New York: Times Books, 1986).

⁸ Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, "Field Trip A(A) MEMOIR (First and Last...) The Berlin Wall as Architecture," in *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).

effects.

Apart from the daily routines of inspection - military in the East and touristic in the West - a vast system of ritual in itself, the wall was a *script*, effortlessly blurring divisions between tragedy, comedy, melodrama.⁹

Koolhaas and Mau appear to be the first writers to attempt to discuss a state built barrier wall as a work of architecture. This perspective allows for the possibility of understanding these barriers beyond the greater politics surrounding their creation. Urging scholars to read these barriers using the methodologies of art and architectural history. While much of the research into the Israeli Barrier Wall has focused on its impact on the Palestinians in the West Bank, *Hollow Land* by Eyal Weizman concentrates on the barrier itself. Weizman not only discusses the conception, construction, and the effect of the Israeli Barrier Wall's erection, but also attends to the wall's design and structure.¹⁰ The Mexican Border Fence has not received the same level of academic research as the other two barriers. Robert Lee Maril's book, *The Fence* is the most exhaustive study of the socio-political circumstances surrounding the Border Fence, focusing on the circumstances leading to the construction of the barrier.¹¹

Books such as *Taking the Train* by Joe Austin and *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* by Graig Castleman have laid the foundation for academic research on graffiti and street art.¹² The most substantial publications on street art have been such works as *Street Art: The*

⁹ Koolhaas and Mau, "Field Trip A(A) MEMOIR (First and Last...) The Berlin Wall as Architecture," in *S,M,L,XL*, 236.

¹⁰ Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, (London: Verso, 2007).

¹¹ Robert Lee Maril, *The Fence: National Security, Public Safety, and Illegal Immigration along the U.S.-Mexico Border*, (Lubbock, Tex.: Texas Tech University Press, 2011).

¹² Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Graig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982). Graffiti and street art are two distinct styles of illegal public art. Graffiti is associated with "writers" who focus on create their "tag," with spray paint or markers, through an urban environment. Graffiti writer's tag can be a mixture of calligraphy and symbols meant to be cryptic and hard to read by those outside the graffiti community. Street art is illegal public art that takes on the more traditional methods of studio art makers. Consisting of any medium, but typically paint, posters, or spray paint stencils, street artist focus on creating images with iconography that have a message and clear intent.

Graffiti Revolution by Cedar Lewisohn and Carlo McCormick, Marc & Sara Schiller's work *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*, which provide a clearer definition of street art and analyze the work of prominent street artists, such as Banksy, Swoon, Blu, JR, Shepard Fairey, Richard Hambleton, and Keith Haring.¹³ These scholars have forged a basic understanding of street art, but what is needed now is more focused research into trends within the larger movement.

Studying barrier wall art provides a specific lens with which to further develop research on street art. William Parry's book, *Against the Wall*, currently provides the most thorough research on art at the Israeli Barrier Wall.¹⁴ While Parry engages with the art, he largely focuses on the plight of the Palestinians who are oppressed by the Barrier, while championing the artists involved. A limited amount of research has been accomplished on the art on the Berlin Wall, such as Emily Pugh's article on Gordon Matta-Clark and Keith Haring's works.¹⁵ So far, no scholarly research on the artistic interventions at the Mexican Border Fence have been completed; the related writing is limited to journalistic coverage in newspapers and magazines. At this point, there has been no art historical study that examines the phenomenon of art on barrier walls from a transnational perspective. This thesis aims to fill this gap in the scholarship on barrier wall art not only by highlighting the significance of English's practice, but also by exploring the major tactics and motivations used by other artists at the key sites of the Berlin Wall, Israeli Barrier Wall, and US/Mexican Border Fence.

¹³ Cedar Lewisohn, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2008). Carlo McCormick and Marc & Sara Schiller, *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2010).

¹⁴ William Parry, *Against the Wall: The Art of Resistance in Palestine*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011).

¹⁵ Emily Pugh, "Graffiti and the Critical Power of Urban Space: Gordon Matta-Clark's Made in America and Keith Haring's Berlin Wall Mural," *Space and Culture* (2015) 421-435.

My identification of the primary tactics and motivations of barrier wall artists aims to intervene into the discussion over the merits of barrier wall art as a means of protest. Debates by scholars, politicians, and concerned citizens regarding barrier wall art tend to be led by those who see the art as a fruitful protest and benefit to those who live around the art and those who are opposed to barrier wall art, seeing it as a punishable crime, or, in some cases, as an aestheticization of the barrier's oppression. In Palestine, for instance, local artists and activists have criticized efforts in beautifying the Israeli Barrier Wall such as Palestinian artist Ayed Arafah's, stating "I won't touch the wall with colors, it's an act of normalization or beautification... They [tourists to the West Bank] see the beauty of graffiti now instead of the suffering."¹⁶ On the other hand, artist Muhannad al-Azzeh has argued, "As technology has changed life over the years, people want images rather than texts... It became a way of supporting the resistance again."¹⁷ Such arguments against and for beautification tend to reduce the complexities and varieties of the motivations of barrier wall art. Few barrier wall artists seem to be concerned with simply creating "beauty" on the barrier. Adding more nuanced understandings of various motivations, as well as the links between them (beauty *as* a mode of resistance, for example) provides a deeper consideration of barrier wall art.

My thesis will be the first piece of art historical writing on the work of English. While the artist has published books on his own art, such as *POPaganda*, these function primarily as large picture books with little text. Documentation of his art largely consists of journalistic articles on gallery openings and promotions of his mural work such as the coverage of his *Temper Tot*

¹⁶ Rich Wiles, "Palestinian Graffiti: 'Tagging' Resistance," *AlJazeera*, November 26, 2013, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/11/palestinian-graffiti-tagging-resistance-2013112015849368961.html>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

mural.¹⁸ English was also the subject of a full-length documentary highlighting his billboard liberations and gallery practice.¹⁹ His gallery work has received some attention from art critics, but none from art historians. The most significant writing on English comes from the introductions to his self-published books, such as the introduction to *POPaganda* by Dominique Nahas:

English is a Provocateur, a strong believer in the renegade/shaman persona of the artist as a useful and necessary agent for change, the fool to the king, so to speak who is tolerated if not rewarded for these efforts towards clarity. The artist is intent on pointing to art as an interchangeable and fungible commodity. He historicizes aesthetic styles (applying kitsch, nostalgia, parody and pastiche to them) and takes note of the waning of the content of such, as a monk so points to certain pathologies of the body social. These include accelerated rates of imagistic overload (often through the simulacrum), the aberrant information-drenching of the aberrant information-drenching of the contemporary psyche, leading to dysfunction, the homogenization of late postmodern life that glorifies frenzied consumption and conformity-driven pluralism... Ron English's work helps things along; it points to the pain turned to the killer of souls.

Nahas's positioning of English as an artistic hero fighting the "evils" of corporate culture by co-opting corporate imagery, mocking it, and rebranding it as his own is characteristic of the way the artist has been written about thus far

In the following three sections, I aim to offer a more critical understanding of English's practice, and especially his little studied barrier wall art, focusing on projects on the Berlin Wall, the Israeli Barrier Wall, and the Mexican Border Fence. Each section begins with an introduction, and then discusses the specific barrier's socio-political circumstances, other artists' projects at the site, and English's work in these contexts. In section one, I focus on his untitled piece at the Berlin Wall in West Berlin. I consider the Cold War era politics that led to the Wall's

¹⁸ Rom Levy, "Ron English 'Temper Tot', a new piece in Manhattan, New York City," *StreetArtNews*, July 31, 2015, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://streetartnews.net/2015/07/ron-english-temper-tot-new-piece-in.html>.

¹⁹ Pedro Carvajal and Ron English, *POPaganda: The Art and Crimes of Ron English*, directed by Pedro Carvajal, Harvest Moon Productions, 2005, Youtube, June 23, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inz7e4J7fOs>.

construction, and look at other artists who produced work there, such as Theirry Noir, Keith Haring, and Peter Unsicker. In the second section, I focus on English's artworks, *Pardon Our Oppression*, *You are not in Disneyland Anymore*, and *Grade School Guernica*, at the Israeli Barrier Wall in Palestine. Here, I place these works in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and consider how other artists, such as Swoon, Joy van Erven, and Wissam Salsaa, have responded to that conflict. In the third section, I examine English's works, *You Must be This Color* and *Double Donkey*, created on the Mexican Border Fence. In this section, I focus on the tense circumstances surrounding issues of immigration and migrant labor that exist at the border between the United States and Mexico, considering responses by English, and other artists, such as Ana Teresa Fernández, Enrique Chiu, and various anonymous figures. I conclude by summarizing how English's art has uniquely functioned at each of the three barriers sites, while considering his relationship to the communities who live with these barriers.

CHAPTER II

ENGLISH IN BERLIN

In this section, I examine English's work on the Berlin Wall. Beginning with a brief overview of the situation English would have encountered in West Berlin in 1988, I then move on to give an historical overview of the barrier. Next, I offer a history of barrier wall art on the Berlin wall, concluding with three examples that exemplify the three main motivations and tactics of barrier wall art: Thierry Noir's work as representative of beautification, Keith Haring's as resistance, and Peter Unsicker's as solidarity. I then provide a formal analysis of English's art on the Berlin Wall, and interpret how it manifests the primary motivations and tactics of barrier wall art as seen in preceding projects.

English was one of many artists who traveled to Berlin to produce work on the Berlin Wall. Arriving in Berlin in 1988, he found a city in the uncomfortable position of being a West German metropolis in the middle of East Germany. West Berlin was an island of democracy and capitalism within the Eastern Bloc. A city with West German draft dodgers, foreign soldiers, and East German dissidents, West Berlin embodied Cold War tensions. The Berlin Wall's intention was to keep East Germans from fleeing to the West. Yet being in West Berlin, one could not help but feel enclosed by the barrier.²⁰ Coming to the Berlin Wall, English saw an expansive barrier covered with graffiti and street art. Dozens of layers produced by artists, activists, and anyone with spray paint were readily visible, along with gaps where concrete had been removed by tourists and souvenir peddlers. Arriving at Check Point Charlie, English would have seen the East Berlin guards standing on the Western side of the wall. As the Berlin Wall was not directly

²⁰ Leland Rice and Charles E. McClland, *Up Against It*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 1991), 16.

on the border, but 15 feet within East German territory, East German guards would be stationed at high profile points on the Western side of the barrier. It was here at Check Point Charlie that English, along with many artists before him, produced his work on the Berlin Wall.

Artists had been producing work on the Berlin Wall for a decade prior to English's arrival in 1988. After arriving in Berlin, English met with the director of the Checkpoint Charlie Museum who provided English with supplies to paint on the Wall, as well as some level of education on the history of the barrier and the consequence if he were arrested by East Germans.²¹ English knew he was inserting himself into a fraught history and complex circumstance of a divided Germany. The development of the work was directly affected by interactions English had with people in West Berlin.²²

The Berlin Wall's construction began before dawn on August 9, 1961. Berliners awoke to sections of crudely built cinderblock walls and barbwire surrounding West Berlin. Seeing the end of free movement between the two Berlins, many East Berliners made the quick decision to escape through the buildings that straddled the border. It is important to note that the Berlin Wall surrounded West Berlin. Most attention and photographs of the Wall focus on the final phase of the Berlin Wall, and the barrier directly dividing the two Berlins. The Berlin Wall was not completely consistent around the entire border; it ranged from a formidable concrete barrier with watchtowers to more simple fencing around the western side of West Berlin.²³ To stem the flow of East German refugees into West Berlin, it was necessary to surround and control the movement of people at every possible entry. The final building phase of the Berlin Wall, referred to as "Grenzmaur 75," included the construction of two uniform concrete walls, designed to

²¹Rice and McClland, *Up Against It*, 16.

²² Ibid.

²³ Norman Gelb, *The Berlin Wall*, 44.

make climbing them extremely arduous, with an extended strip allowing for landmines, attack dogs, and border guard vehicles to be on constant alert for any potential escapees. It is on the last phase of the Berlin Wall that graffiti and street art began to appear.

All written and photographic records of graffiti and barrier wall art on the Berlin Wall have been of its western face. This was the only aspect of the “Grenzmaur 75” that West Berlin had access to. It is highly improbable to impossible that any graffiti could have existed on the eastern concrete barrier of the Berlin Wall as access to it was heavily guarded, with a restricted zone near the concrete wall preventing East Berliners from approaching it. Even if a dissenter made it to the concrete wall, if they were caught, the consequences would be harsh and the graffiti would have been quickly painted over.

The eventual prevalence of graffiti on the western face of the Berlin Wall might give the impression that there were no consequences for putting graffiti on the Wall. The western face of the Berlin Wall was technically still in East Berlin. There were numerous signs along the Wall warning that crossing the threshold Wall would mean leaving the British, American, or French zones of Berlin. Both East Berlin border guards and West German police would give citations or make arrests of people they found defacing the wall.²⁴ The risk to artists and others creating graffiti and street art on the Wall varied. Sometimes it could lead to a simple citation, but in other cases, graffiti writers and street artists were arrested by East Berlin border guards and thrown in East Berlin jails for months. In one instance, Wolfram Hasch, a member of an artist group who

²⁴ Rice and McClland, *Up Against It*, 25.

painted a white line through the graffiti of the barrier wall, was grabbed through a secret door and imprisoned in East Berlin for three months.²⁵

In the late 1970s, the graffiti on the Berlin Wall consisted mostly of either painted or spray painted slogans in German that were either anti-Wall, anti-GDR, or anti-capitalist, executed by those associated with the vibrant student movement that existed in West Berlin.²⁶ Beginning in the 1970s, a mass of West German students moved to West Berlin for university study. The two primary factors that led to students going to school in West Berlin was the tuition free education offered at the aptly named Freie Universität [Free University] and the promise that mandatory service in the Federal Republic of Germany [West German] military would be waved for those that live in West Berlin.²⁷ The combination of free college education and the avoidance of military service drew an especially radical student population. With little to no stylization, it seems that the primary interest of the students in putting graffiti on the Berlin Wall was writing text and defacement of the Berlin Wall. Examples of the scale and messages were seen in the documentary film that captured Gordon Matta-Clark's creation of his work, *Made in America*, serving as the clearest piece of documentary evidence of graffiti on the Berlin Wall prior to 1980.²⁸

There is little photographic record of graffiti on the Wall in the late 70s. This is most likely due to the GDR policy of buffing out (painting over) graffiti on the western face of the

²⁵ Philip Olterman, "A line in history: the east German punks behind the Berlin Wall's most radical art stunt," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/nov/03/east-german-punks-berlin-wall-radical-art-stunt>, (November 3, 2014).

²⁶ GDR is an acronym for German Democratic Republic or East Germany.

²⁷ David E. Barclay, "Benno Ohnesorg, Rudi Dutschke, and the Student Movement in West Berlin: Critical Reflection after Forty Years," in *Berlin: Divided City, 1945-1989*, edited by Philip Broadbent and Sabine Hake, 125-134, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010) 128.

²⁸ *Made in America*, Vimeo, performed by Gordon Matta-Clark, (1976; West Berlin, FGR). <https://vimeo.com/53784980> (November 13, 2010).

Wall. At some point in late 1979 or early 1980, the East Berlin border officials ceased to buff or white out graffiti that appeared on the wall due to budget cuts, seeing its ineffectiveness in preventing graffiti, or the reduction of the number of East Berlin guards having access to the western side of the Wall.²⁹ It is this point in 1979 to 1980 that street art consistently appeared on the barrier. With more time to produce work and a reduced risk of arrest after 1979, artists began exploring various motivations and tactics for their protest. The Berlin Wall represented many conflicts and struggles for Berliners and artists. It was a blight and source of destruction in the city of Berlin, cutting through the middle of the city. The Wall represented the Cold War, a conflict that affected the entire world. It was the site of the deaths of over 200 East Germans, who, while attempting to cross the Berlin Wall to escape life in Communist East Germany, were gunned down by East German guards.³⁰ In painting the barrier, artists were inherently protesting it through criminal defacement. Nevertheless, individual artists that came to the Berlin Wall held a variety of motivations and tactics that informed their protest art.

French artist Thierry Noir should be considered a pioneer of barrier wall art. While Matta-Clark created his art installation *Made in America* prior to Noir, it is only after Noir started painting in 1980 that barrier wall art became a significant part of the Berlin Wall. The lack of photographic interest in Berlin Wall art in the 1970s was largely due to the significant difference in the kind of work Noir produced compared to early graffiti writers working on the Berlin Wall. Noir's most significant choice was to not use text, but paint actual figures and scenes on the Wall. There are no records of any artist doing this prior to Noir. He brought his

²⁹ This is evident by the appearance of work by Thierry Noir in 1980 and there being no evidence that it was ever buffed over.

³⁰ Leland and McClland, *Up Against It*, 12.

unique style to the Wall, opening the greater possibility of using the Berlin Wall for artistic expression and the emergence of barrier wall art.

Noir's work represents the first broad category for motivation in artistic intervention on the barrier: beautification. The Berlin Wall was a major source of stress for West Berliners.³¹ Not only as a reminder of being in the middle of the Cold War, but also an ugly concrete wall encircling them. The desire to "beautify" the barrier derived from wanting to turn the barrier into something that could spark a positive response, in the hopes of overcoming its oppression. Noir's style and subject matter stayed largely consistent from when he first began painting the wall in 1980 [Fig. 4]. His work normally consisted of large heads and figures painted in a high contrast, colorful, and cartoonish style that resembled childlike doodling. Noir has said that his interest in producing work in this style over text was meant to "transform it, make it ridiculous, and help destroy it."³² By turning the barrier into a wall of color and figures, Noir "destroyed" it as a symbol of West Berliner entrapment. Confronting an otherwise oppressive structure, Noir aimed to alter the Berlin Wall for West Berliners by turning its gray and monotonous walls into something aesthetically beneficial to the urban landscape.

After Noir began painting on the Berlin Wall, other artists began creating artwork on the barrier. Many did not follow Noir's initial choice to produce beautifying imagery. Another subset of motivations that emerged on the wall can be referred to as resistance. Often advocating for the unification of Germany or destruction of the Berlin Wall, such work took the messaging of the original graffiti associated with student movements in the late 1970s, but now was

³¹ Leland and McClland, *Up Against It*, 16.

³² Daisy Wyatt, "Meet Thierry Noir: The street artist who 'mutated' the Berlin Wall in protest," in *The Independent*, May 2, 2014, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/thierry-noir-the-street-artist-who-mutated-the-berlin-wall-in-protest-9316814.html>.

expressed through artistic imagery rather than only text. It is unclear how aware each artist would have been of the history and politics of the Wall as many were not native to West Berlin. However, a clear desire for the end of a divided and conflicted Germany was apparent in numerous works by artists, who I argue were motivated primarily by resistance to the barrier.³³ By creating imagery that emphasized the artist's support of the destruction of the barrier, these artworks maintained a clear message of protest.

Keith Haring was in West Berlin in 1986 for the exhibition *Overcoming the Wall by Painting Over the Wall*, which featured Haring's gallery work and the planning and execution of a major painting project by Haring on the Berlin Wall near Check Point Charlie. Invited by the director of the Berlin Wall Museum, Haring created a mural representing the hope for reunification and as he said, "the ridiculousness of all walls and enemies and borders."³⁴ Painted in the colors of black, yellow, and red used in both German flags, Haring created a long chain of figures done in his well-developed "radiant baby" style, connected by the feet and hands [Fig. 5]. Haring's project exemplified an artwork of resistance, expressing the hope for a reunified Germany. Barrier wall art rooted in resistance in West Berlin articulated a desire to see the destruction of the Berlin Wall and an end to the Cold War. Through his conjoined figures representing East and West Berliners, Haring advocated for the end of the conflict and destruction of the Berlin Wall.

Peter Unsicker's sculptural installations on the Berlin Wall were motivated by solidarity. Where most artists narrowed their focus down to the physical barrier for inspiration or out to the

³³ The concentration on foreign artists in this thesis is due to the documentation and research is heavily skewed toward foreign artists.

³⁴ Pugh, "Graffiti and the Critical Power of Urban Space: Gordon Matta-Clark's Made in America and Keith Haring's Berlin Wall Mural," 429.

larger geopolitical situation, Unsicker looked beyond to express empathy with individual East Berliners. In his sculpture, Unsicker arranged plaster and terracotta faces spread over a fabric that blended in with the Wall [Fig. 6]. These faces appeared to push through the wall.³⁵ As the sculpture was on the Western side of the Berlin Wall, the faces were meant to be interpreted as East Berliners becoming visible from behind the barrier. While West Berliners could visit East Berlin, interaction between East and West was limited.³⁶ What was lost in much of Berlin Wall art was the recognition of those the Berlin Wall most effected, the East Germans. Not only did Unsicker offer the viewer a way for those in West Berlin to “see” the East Germans, he also included small mirrors at eye-level. Viewers in West Berlin would thus look simultaneously at their own reflections and representations of East Berliners, perhaps imagining the dissolution of the Berlin Wall.

For his contribution, English painted a continuous scene spanning a large section of the wall. To the extreme left of the barrier, he placed five creatures, each of which were one half of an entwined lizard heart shape which was a signature for English during the time [Fig. 7]. Each one of these creatures expressed through their facial expression and position a different emotion: one curiosity, another concern, and another, attacking the neighboring figure, frustration. The curious creature to the far left looked around the corner of the Wall at Check Point Charlie, where a few East German guards would have been stationed. Two of the creatures were also shown with thought bubbles. The one to the far left appeared to be thinking of the possibility of being reunited with another creature, yet in this imagination, one half was happy about the connection and the other angered, suggesting the unlikeliness of a reunion. The creature sawing

³⁵ Heinz J. Kuzdas, *Berlin Wall Art* (Berlin: Elefant Press, 1990), 40.

³⁶ Gelb, *The Berlin Wall*, 44.

into another also appeared to be thinking of the possibility of being reconnected. However, in its act of violence, the creature was being hypocritical, perhaps wishing to escape the cycle of violence in which it was trapped.

The emotions these figures depicted could all be understood as stemming from anxiety over being separated from each other, apparent in the difference between the separated figures and the joined pair at the center of the mural. At the center of the work, two of the creatures embraced to form a heart [Fig. 8]. The two appeared happy in their form. Rendered in heightened detail, their expressions were of ease, and radiant lines surrounded them, likely a reference to Keith Haring signature rays. The embracing figures were not orange like the others, but red, signaling a heart. They appeared to rest together at the center of a sea. Other divided versions of the creatures held back the coming tide of waves, attempting to maintain the separation. A large dog leashed to a red and white striped ground stood between the creatures [Fig. 9]. The dog's face was composed of a surreal depiction of two human faces coming together, simultaneously being both the two faces and that of the dog. The upper right of the ground was marked with the hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union. The emotions of the two faces making up the dog's face were ambiguous, but a sense of imprisonment was present with the dog leashed to the ground.

Absent from the mural was the opposite shoreline. While the USSR was represented, the United States was presumably on the other side of the ocean. The far right of the mural abruptly ended with a straight-line break. It is unclear why English failed to continue the motif. He has stated, "I had a show in Amsterdam in 1988. I decided since I was pretty much next door to the Berlin Wall and I had two weeks to spare I should get over to Berlin and paint the wall."³⁷

³⁷ Ron English, *Berlin Wall 1988*, <http://www.popaganda.com/ronsnews/berlin-wall-1988/>.

Perhaps the level of detail he invested in the work and time constraints did not allow him to continue the motif to include a depiction of the United States. Additionally, the rising fear of arrest by East German police might have aided in his desire to finish the mural.³⁸

Producing his mural in 1988, English had much of the history of Berlin Wall art to influence his choice of imagery. As stated earlier, English arrived in Berlin with the idea of starting with his embracing heart “signature” and later added to the composition based on the suggestions of West Berliners. English synthesized the experience of West Berliners with the established imagery of resistance and solidarity-focused barrier wall art. The separated figures of the mural could be understood as both East and West Berliners, with their separation leading to distress and their union achieving their intended form. Overall, English’s mural stood as a mixture of hope towards the reunification of Germany and recognition of the complexities of achieving that goal. The hope expressed and the higher status of the combined creatures formed a heart at the center of the mural, contrasting with the separated figures committed to division. The anxiety and frustrations represented by the various separated creatures intimated that actors on both sides of the barrier were committed to maintaining the status quo of a divided Germany.

Before English painted at Check Point Charlie, there was a succession of artists who had painted on that same spot besides Haring, such as Noir, Richard Hambleton, and Christophe Boucher.³⁹ Not only did English’s work express the shared motivation of resistance, it also appeared to refer to one of the most iconic expressions of that motivation, the mural by Haring. By using radiant lines on his heart figures, English seemed to directly reference Haring’s work,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kuzdas, *Berlin Wall Art*, 46.

which once existed at the same site. When English arrived, Haring's work had already been covered over by over a year of other graffiti writers and local street artists adding their work to the famous Check Point Charlie. Though English connected in some ways to the message of resistance in Haring's work, English approached the message of reunification with more nuance and an awareness of the difficulties of achieving that goal. English's work articulated a clear message of hope for unification as well as an understanding of the complexities of the situation in a divided Berlin.

As one of the last works of Berlin Wall art to appear at Check Point Charlie before the Wall fell in November of 1989, English's work stood as a final example of artistic protest at the barrier. By 1988, feelings of complacency to the status quo could be felt even by those most dedicated to protesting the barrier. In an act of frustration, a group of East Germans in West Berlin painted a white line through much of the western face of the Berlin Wall to get West Berliners to see the barrier, rather than just the art on it.⁴⁰ By crossing out the art with a white line, the group hoped viewers would ruminate on the barrier rather than focus only on its artwork. While English painted over this white line, the imagery he employed attempted to participate in the protest of the barrier. At Check Point Charlie, a small group of East German protesters served as lookouts for him, warning English when East German guards started making moves to try and arrest him.⁴¹ With the support of those most dedicated to the fall of the Berlin Wall, English's work could be understood as a strong protest of the barrier. His mural conveyed a message of resistance and expressed solidarity.

⁴⁰ Olterman, "A line in history: the east German punks behind the Berlin Wall's most radical art stunt."

⁴¹ English, *Berlin Wall 1988*.

CHAPTER III

ENGLISH IN BETHLEHEM

In this section, I look at the barrier wall art created by English in Palestine. I start with a brief overview of what brought English to Bethlehem, and then provide a history of the barrier and its artistic interventions. Examining other artists involved with the *Santa's Ghetto* project that brought English to Palestine, I read the work of Swoon as a demonstration of solidarity, the Gouda Group's work as an example of beautification, and Wissam Salsaa's work as expressing resistance. I then analyze English's three pieces erected on the Israeli Barrier Wall, arguing that these artworks did not maintain the standard motivations and tactics of most barrier wall art.

The street artist Banksy first visited Palestine in 2006 to produce art on the Israeli Barrier Wall. After that first project, he saw the potential to raise awareness of the plight of the Palestinian people living behind the Barrier Wall by moving his art show, *Santa's Ghetto*, to Bethlehem. *Santa's Ghetto* was an annual art show hosted by Banksy in impoverished areas of England. This show drew his collectors and fans to underserved areas, with Banksy donating much of the proceeds to charity.⁴² For the Bethlehem iteration of the show, Banksy invited over a dozen notable street artists, including English, to participate in producing art on the Barrier Wall.⁴³ The project included a gallery selling artwork by the participating artists in Bethlehem with the proceeds going to charities dedicated to helping Palestinian children.⁴⁴ A secondary aim of *Santa's Ghetto* was to help add to the tourist appeal of Bethlehem by bringing in foreigners to

⁴² Gary Shove and Patrick Potter, "Banksy Out of Context," *Banksy: You Are an Acceptable Level of Threat*. (London: Carpet Bombing Culture, 2012), 23.

⁴³ Artists included JR, Marco, Swoon, Blu, Faile, Joy van Erven, Know Hope, Paul Insect, Wissam Salsaa, and Suleiman Mansour.

⁴⁴ Ronen Eidelman, "The Separation Wall in Palestine: Artists Love to Hate It," in *Cultural Activism: Practices, Dilemmas, and Possibilities*, edited by Aylin Kuryel and Begum Firat, (New York: Rodopi, 2011), 107.

see the work of the participating street artists, adding much-needed commerce to the area. The artists also hoped to show solidarity with the Palestinians in their struggle against the barrier. Overall, the event's primary goal was to use Banksy's fame and that of a variety of street artists to create a media event, bringing photographers and reporters to the West Bank to record the experiences of the artists and the Palestinians and to raise awareness of the Israeli Barrier Wall's impact on Palestinians.

Built by Israel across its border with the West Bank, the construction of the Israeli Barrier Wall began in 2000, continuing until 2014.⁴⁵ The Israeli Barrier Wall is a combination of fencing, ravines, patrol roads, and most recognizably, 25-foot-high concrete walls. It was built in response to the sharp increase in terrorist attacks originated from the West Bank in the late 1990s, which came to be called the Second Intifada, with the stated purpose to stop suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks coming from the West Bank into Israel.⁴⁶ Palestinians argue that the Barrier Wall was primarily intended as a land grab, as the barrier extends beyond the "Green Line," or the agreed border of Israel and Palestine from the 1947 armistice line.⁴⁷ The barrier also works to control the flow of Palestinians into Israel through high security pedestrian and vehicle checkpoints. Staunchly defended by the Israeli government, the barrier has come under international scrutiny, with the International Court of Justice declaring the barrier illegal in a 2004 resolution.⁴⁸

Artistic protest on the Israeli Barrier Wall happened almost from the moment the first concrete slabs were installed. A combination of local Palestinians youths, artists, grassroots

⁴⁵ Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, 164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

organizers, and left-wing Israelis regularly added graffiti and organized artistic events to protest the barrier.⁴⁹ Internationally recognized street artists have been drawn to the Israeli Barrier Wall to protest it. The Israeli Barrier Wall became a focal point of the international street art community after Banksy organized *Santa's Ghetto*.

Banksy did not give artists any specific directions, Banksy likely anticipated that artists interested in taking the risks associated with visiting Palestine and defacing the property of the Israeli Defense Force would be interested in protesting the barrier. Additionally, the specifics of the works produced by those involved in *Santa's Ghetto* did not need coordination since the most important thing the foreign artists brought to Palestine was their fame. With the primary purpose of the event being to raise awareness of the Israeli Barrier Wall and to offer support for Palestinians negatively affected by the barrier, the individual artist's celebrity was more important than the work they were producing. No matter what the artists produced, there would be media coverage of Banksy and the other artists connected to the project.

Still, the motivations of these artists tended to fit into the main categories of protest art done on the Berlin Wall. As I discussed in the previous section, the broad motivations behind barrier wall art are beautification, solidarity, and resistance. Whereas most of the artists involved with *Santa's Ghetto* clearly were motivated by these categories, English's work in Palestine explored a different model. All three of his works in Palestine break with these precedents to reveal new motivations for producing street art on state built barrier walls.

⁴⁹ Craig Larkin, "Jerusalem's Separation Wall and Global Message Board: Graffiti, Murals, and the art of Sumud". (Washington, D.C.: Arab Studies Journal, 2014), 2.

The artist Swoon aimed to commemorate a protest that had taken place on a section of the barrier. A seventeen-year-old Palestinian boy climbed the barrier and placed a Palestinian flag on top of it. He was promptly arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison. After his sentencing, the site of his arrest drew a massive protest, leading to protesters setting fire to the barrier.⁵⁰ Swoon's work depicted a woman knitting a message onto the barrier. The figure's dress was made up of two halves; on the figure's right side were harsh red lines with skulls mixed in and to her left were blue signs of life, including flowers [Fig. 10]. The work referenced the fire that left scorch marks on the tower through the red flame-like side of the figure's dress. In between the extended edges of her dress was a quote detailing how matching the resonate frequency of a structure, with just a small amount of energy, could destroy it.⁵¹ Swoon's motivation was to offer solidarity at the Barrier Wall as a means of commemorating and celebrating the struggle against it. The work became a visual representation of the specific protest at that spot and a celebration of the efforts of the boy who was imprisoned. By representing this specific protest, Swoon created a work of solidarity to commemorate and demonstrate her personal protest of the barrier.

A group of Dutch activist artists called the Gouda Group traveled with Dutch youths to the Barrier Wall, where they teamed up with Palestinian youths to collectively paint on the Barrier Wall. The Dutch artists brought young Dutch and Palestinian people together to teach graffiti techniques as part of a cultural exchange. This project aimed to create a pleasant artwork that would add something positive to the area as stated by the organizers: "the inspiration for a piece that should be as cheerful as possible and give some color to the literally gray

⁵⁰ Zia Krohn and Joyce Lagerweij, *Concrete Messages*. (Arsta: Dokument Press. 2010), 77.

⁵¹ Ibid.

surrounding.”⁵² They created a scene of rainbows, giant purple mushrooms, and Disney characters [Fig. 11]. Almost identical to the motivations of Thierry Noir in Berlin, the Gouda Group sought to beautify the barrier as a means of supporting those Palestinians forced to live under its shadow.

Finally, the most common motivation expressed by artists in *Santa’s Ghetto* was to see the Barrier Wall taken down, as in Wissam Salsaa’s untitled sculpture. Salsaa installed a leg wearing jeans and a tennis shoe, kicking through the barrier with painted cracks surrounding the leg [Fig. 12]. The leg kicking through the barrier conjured the raw frustration and physical power of a Palestinian or ally who might kick a hole in the barrier and work towards its destruction. This simple message of resistance spoke to the overall desire of Palestinians and their supporters to see the barrier taken down.

Arriving in Bethlehem to produce work on the Israeli Barrier Wall, English had three works prepared or planned for the barrier. One of these works was the painting *Pardon Our Oppression* [Fig. 13]. In this work, English turned the vertical segments of the concrete barrier into the stripes of the flag of the United States. The stripes corresponded to the segments of the concrete wall, imposing the American flag on the construction of the barrier. In these vertical stripes, English depicted a youth in clown’s makeup and camouflage fatigues, holding a M-16 rifle, wearing a M-1 helmet used by the U.S. military from World War II until 1985. This figure was painted in high detail and modeling, but was obscured by the paint of the stripes representing the American flag. The clown makeup of the soldier gave a double meaning to the painted background, reading as both American flag and a circus tent. There was a blended

⁵² Ibid., 47.

quality to the figure, being present on this side of the wall (Palestine), but also behind the wall (Israel), obscured by the white and red stripes. Around the clown soldier, there was an abstraction of place, making it hard to tell if the soldier was in a defined space, or if there were other figures behind him. To the right of the soldier, the horizontal stenciled phrase, “Pardon Our Oppression,” appeared.

The second piece that English displayed on the Barrier Wall was *You Are Not in Disneyland Anymore* [Fig. 14]. English produced several of these posters, pasting at least three on the barrier. In the poster, the central image was of Mickey Mouse wearing a black and white kufiyah, a traditional Arab headscarf for men, and what appeared to be a blue thobe, an Arab robe or tunic for men. Mickey’s face was purposefully altered to give him a more sinister look, losing his traditionally cute proportions, and taking on an Aryan complexion with blue eyes. The text around the poster, in the standard font of the Disney corporation logo, read at the top “Palestine” and below, “You Are Not in Disneyland Anymore.”

The final piece that English produced for the Israeli Barrier Wall was a large print of *Grade School Guernica*, originally painted as a gallery piece in 2006 [Fig. 15].⁵³ This work by English was part of a larger series, for which he created his own versions of Picasso’s *Guernica*, altering the situation, figures, and space of the original painting. In *Grade School Guernica*, English placed the figures uncomfortably into three dimensional-like space with a single point perspective. Many of the familiar figures from Picasso’s original painting were present, including the crying mother with a dead child, the contorted bull, the screaming horse, and other figures in agony. English’s primary addition to Picasso’s composition was a centrally placed

⁵³ *New Print, Ron English, Grade School Guernica*, Lazarides // *New Print, Ron English, Grade School Guernica*, accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.lazinc.com/mailling-list/mailout/282,new-print-ron-english-grade-school-guernica>.

child dressed as a World War II pilot staring menacingly at the viewer, piloting a toy plane, with the distinctive star in a circle used on U.S. Air Force aircraft. Also altered were the animals present in the scene, which were changed into carousel seats in English's version. The stars decorating them evoked the symbols of the United States.

The work of English in Palestine stood out from the other artists participating in *Santa's Ghetto*. English broke with the traditions established in Berlin to find new ways of protesting against the barrier. The difference seemed to lie in how much of his own identity and perspective he put into his choices of subject matter. While all the other artists of *Santa's Ghetto* seemed to find their subject matter by focusing on the circumstances surrounding the barrier, English mainly critiqued the United States, the artist's home country. *Grade School Guernica* did not directly engage with the Israeli Barrier Wall. Here, English's use of imagery related to the United States and aerial bombardment may have aimed to connect the violence conducted by the Israeli Air Force against Palestinians with US support of Israel. *Grade School Guernica* was a painting first produced by English independent of the Israeli Barrier Wall. When it was applied to the barrier, the work took on new meaning not by a change of the subject matter, but simply by its placement. In a gallery setting, this work spoke to the United States military's use of violence in bombardments, connecting US government ordered attacks on civilians with the Nazi bombardment of Guernica. It is unclear why English choose to bring *Grade School Guernica* to Bethlehem. In this new context in Palestine, the meaning and possible interpretations changed. English stated, "I felt it was important to do something as American tax dollars funded a large portion of the wall. I wanted to bring some attention to that fact to the American people."⁵⁴ Here, English attempted to connect the violence experienced by Palestinians to the United States

⁵⁴ Krohn and Lagerweij, *Concrete Messages*, 16.

government's support of Israel. As part of *Santa's Ghetto*, English focused on the main mission of the event: to raise awareness of the Israel's Barrier Wall and the Palestinians it negatively affected. English's key concern was the role of the United States in supporting Israeli violence against Palestinians.

The largest of the three pieces, *Pardon Our Oppression* was English's only work where he painted directly onto the barrier. Here again, English was primarily concerned with an anti-war message and protesting American support for Israel. *Pardon Our Oppression* offered a twist on the category of solidarity commonly seen in barrier wall art. In more standard works where an artist has attempted to offer solidarity to the people negatively affected by the barrier, a barrier artist would typically depict those affected and raise awareness of their struggles. Instead, with *Pardon Our Oppression*, the oppressors become the central focus of the subject matter, referencing the United States' complicit support of the barrier. The clown soldier is meant to reference US support with the use of the M-1 helmet and M16 rifle to identify the clown as US soldier. What most connected this work to the typology of solidarity-focused work, was the text, "Pardon Our Oppression." The tongue-in-cheek nature of the phrase "Pardon Our Oppression" parodied signs such as "Pardon Our Mess." The text suggested that the US has been complicit in the oppression of the Palestinians and in the existence of the Israeli Barrier Wall. In an interview, English explained, "The concept behind *Pardon Our Oppression* was to link American support to the oppression of the Palestinian people. Since Israel is our welfare state, we have a certain responsibility for the Palestinian people that we don't seem to want to acknowledge."⁵⁵ As with his statements on *Grade School Guernica*, English was primarily concerned with exposing US complicity in the Israeli oppression of Palestinians. With *Pardon Our Oppression*, English

⁵⁵ William Parry, *Against the Wall: The Art of Resistance in Palestine*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 59.

targets not only the local Palestinian viewer, but also the US viewer, informing them of the consequences of US support for Israel.

English's final work in Palestine was his poster series *You're Not in Disneyland Anymore*. Here, his aim was to speak to the tourists visiting Bethlehem and his artwork. These posters confronted *Santa's Ghetto* as a tourist attraction intended to help generate more tourism on the West Bank. English played with visitor's touristic expectations. Here, he seemed concerned that tourists may disengage with the severity of the situation of the Palestinians and hoped to have tourists viewing the posters connect with the seriousness of the conflict through the posters. Rather than dealing with the conflict itself, this poster series addressed the implications of the artistic event.

All three of English's works in Palestine broke with the traditions set on the Berlin Wall. Perhaps as the only artist participating in *Santa's Ghetto* who also produced work on the Berlin Wall, English sought a different basis of motivation. What is clear is that English took the primary mission of *Santa's Ghetto* and his personal connection to the barrier as a US citizen as the most important driving forces behind his choices of subject matter.

CHAPTER IV

ENGLISH IN REYNOSA

The Mexican Border Fence was the last state built barrier wall to draw the attention of English. In a project called *April Fools on the Border*, English, along with four other artists; traveled to Reynosa, Mexico to produce three works around the border, including two directly on the barrier.⁵⁶ This trip was English's first time confronting a barrier created by his home country, let alone in his own backyard as a Texan. Working on the Mexican Border Fence, English sought subject matter that would illuminate the politics surrounding the construction of the barrier, again breaking with the standard categories of barrier wall art. This final section looks at the barrier wall art produced by English in Mexico. I begin by examining the history of the Mexican Border Fence. I then provide an overview of barrier wall art on the Mexican Border Fence, investigating the work of Ana Teresa Fernández as a demonstration of resistance, Enrique Chiu with Casa Del Tunel as an example of beautification, and works by various anonymous artists and the Collation for the Defense of Immigrants as manifestations of solidarity. I finally provide an analysis of two works produced by English on the Mexican Border Fence, demonstrating how their motivations and artistic strategies diverge from the established standards of barrier wall art.

The only natural barrier between the United States and Mexico is the Rio Grande River. Beyond that river, the border is only a line on the map with little difference between communities and families living on both sides of the border. With the construction of the Mexican Border Fence, families were divided, farmers were separated from their land, the

⁵⁶ Bryan Curtis, "Billboard Liberation: Artistically Redesigning the U.S. -Mexico Border Wall," *The Daily Beast* June 30, 2011, accessed on January 21, 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/06/30/billboard-liberation-artistically-redesigning-the-u-s-mexico-border-fence.html>.

University of Texas-Brownsville got split, and ecosystems were disrupted. The conflicts and issues surrounding the Mexican Border Fence have not received as much coverage as the international disputes linked to the Berlin Wall and Israeli Barrier Wall, but the Mexican Border Fence is no less a site of oppression and suffering.

The Mexican Border Fence was authorized by the United States Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2006 under the Secure Fence Act. While some fencing along the border was present prior to the 2006 legislation, primarily in San Diego, the Secure Fence Act was the first initiative to create a comprehensive barrier along the United States-Mexican border.⁵⁷ The law mandated that 850 miles of fencing would be constructed across the 1,954-mile-long border. Later, owing to mounting overages in the cost of construction and to petitioning from the Department of Homeland Security, the length was reduced to 700 miles of fencing.⁵⁸ The purpose of the Fence was defined as threefold: to prevent the entering of illegal immigration into the United States from Mexico, stem the smuggling of illegal drugs into the United States, and to thwart any entrance attempts by international terrorists.⁵⁹ The Border Fence's construction was divided into different sections by state, with the design and timing of construction varying for each one. In certain places like between San Ysidro and Tijuana, the barrier is right on the border. In other places, it can be miles inside United States territory.⁶⁰

The most prominent artistic protest of the Mexican Border Fence has been the work of Ana Teresa Fernández, a Mexican-American artist. In her series, *Erasing the Border*, Fernández has on at least two occasions painted the Mexican side of the barrier sky blue in an attempt create

⁵⁷ Maril, *The Fence: National Security, Public Safety, and Illegal Immigration along the U.S.-Mexico Border*, 56.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

a space to imagine the barrier gone [Fig. 16]. This section of the Mexican Border Fence consists of metal vertical bars allowing for a viewer to see through the barrier.⁶¹ In painting the fencing sky blue and at the right angle, the Fence was rendered near-invisible. Through this simple technique, Fernández “removed” the barrier, elegantly resisting the barrier.

Similarly, the artist Enrique Chiu, with his organization Casa Del Tunel, aimed to bring community members and artists together to beautify the barrier. The goal of Casa Del Tunel was to paint the Mexican side of the Border Fence and to bring families together through positive imagery.⁶² The mural project stretched for miles as participants continuously painted the barrier in Tijuana. Due to the size and number of people painting, styles varied deeply, but the overall imagery consisted of pleasant scenes of planets, rainbows, balloons, hand prints, hearts, plants, and so on [Fig. 17]. Chiu worked with individuals who had been negatively affected by the Mexican Border Fence to beautify the barrier.

Numerous other artistic projects have focused on offering solidarity with those that have died crossing the border. These projects were also conducted on the Mexican side of the barrier. The artists of these projects, who remain anonymous, have created memorials to those who died crossing the border through the installation of coffins and crosses on the barrier [Fig. 18 & 19]. The earliest installations of this kind appeared on the barrier predating the 2006 Mexican Border Fence.⁶³ In this work, each coffin represented a year, and painted on the front was the number of people who died crossing the border in that year. Another anonymous artistic installation on the

⁶¹ Border Patrol requested that most the barrier be see through fencing to be able to more easily monitor activity on the Mexican side of the border.

⁶² *Game Changer Enrique Chiu*, Performed by Enrique Chiu, CGTN America, January 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RplIS2ZuTJo&t=421s>.

⁶³ Tomas Castelazo, “US-Mexico border deaths monument,” *Georgetown: Borders*, accessed March 28, 2017, <https://apps.cndls.georgetown.edu/projects/borders/items/show/10>.

Mexican Border Fence included a long series of crosses with the names, ages, and origins of those who have died attempting to cross the border, including crosses for those who could not be identified. One group publicized the creation of such an installation on the barrier in Tijuana. Collation for the Defense of Immigrants planned and created a media event around the placement of 5,100 crosses on the barrier. Each cross represented one person that died while attempting to cross the border between 1994 and 2009 [Fig. 20].⁶⁴ In these efforts, artists offered solidarity with victims who have died attempting to cross into the United States in inhospitable environments.⁶⁵ While these installations were likely intended as memorials rather than artworks, their creators used the same tactics and carried the same motivations as many of the barrier wall artists I've examined thus far.

English was in Texas in 2011 for an exhibition of his work and decided to travel to Mexico at the urging of a friend to produce street art near and on the Border Fence.⁶⁶ He produced three works while in Mexico in one day, including a billboard take over, and two other pieces on the Border Fence.⁶⁷ These two pieces on the Fence were a sign board placed at a pedestrian access through the fence and a poster on a concrete section of the barrier. *You Must Be This Color* was a signboard placed by English on a pedestrian border checkpoint on the Mexican side of the border in Reynosa [Fig. 21]. The signboard was done in the style of a roller coaster or amusement ride height bar. Instead of height, this bar measured skin tone. On the left side of the

⁶⁴ Associated Press, "5.100 cruces en frontera EE.UU-Mexico para recorder migrantes," *Noticias 24*, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.noticias24.com/actualidad/noticia/108386/5100-cruces-en-frontera-eeuu-mexico-para-recordar-migrantes/>.

⁶⁵ Maril, *The Fence: National Security, Public Safety, and Illegal Immigration along the U.S.-Mexico Border*, 286.

⁶⁶ Billy Jam, "Guerrilla Street Artist Ron English Takes Risk with Daring US/Mexico Border Art Prank," *Amoeba*, accessed March 27, 2017, <https://www.amoeba.com/blog/2011/04/jamoblog/guerrilla-street-artist-ron-english-takes-risk-with-daring-us-mexico-border-art-prank.html>.

⁶⁷ As this work was not directly on the barrier and is not site specific to the Mexican Border Fence, I have not considered it barrier wall art. The piece was four squares of monochrome colors with pieces of Picasso's *Guernica*. Each square has one word in it all together stating, "You are not here."

indicator was a sinister version of Uncle Sam. Instead of his original heroic depiction, here Uncle Sam was depicted as a villainous character looking directly at the viewer and pointing with his right hand at the viewer. The skin tone scale went from darkest to lightest, with Uncle Sam pointing at the scale's second from the top skin tone. Pointing at this tone, the implication was that only people with white skin can enter the country. The text at the top of the sign made this understanding explicit by stating, "You must be this color to enter this country." Pasted on a concrete section of the Mexican Border Fence, English's *Double Donkey* engaged different issues at the U.S.-Mexican border [Fig. 22]. Here, English presented two donkeys attached at the midsection, with each side having a head and no rear end. The left side of the joined donkey was depicted with the American flag, and the right side with the Mexican flag. Each side of the donkey was shown in stride, as they appeared to walk away from each other. Depicting each country as a donkey, English aimed to invoke a dual nature of the issues at the border. Each side of the donkey was a mirror of the other, the only difference being the flags. English thus charged both the US and Mexico with equal culpability.

In Mexico, English broke from the standard categories of motivation for art on state built barrier walls. As with his work in Palestine, English breaks with the other artists working on the barrier, foregrounding his own identity as a white liberal American concerned with the larger policy concerns. As opposed to other artists working on the border between the United States and Mexico, who focus on the experiences of migrants and those who live with the barrier, English responds to the barrier as an object of international policy. *You Must Be This Color* focuses on historical racist immigration policies. Placed at the border, English attempted to raise the implicit history of U.S. immigration policy into an explicit expression of what English saw as the rationale for U.S. policy. Uncle Sam, as symbol of the U.S., instructed the viewer that race was

the deciding factor in who could enter the country. This likely referred to the racist quota system used until 1965, which determined the number of immigrants that were allowed from each country.⁶⁸ English implied that not much has changed in the immigration policy of the United States, as he saw the Mexican Border Fence as a continuation of the racist immigration policies in the United States. *Double Donkey* seemed to blame both Mexico and the United States for conflicts surrounding the Mexican Border Fence. By placing the U.S. and Mexico as equals in the work, demonstrated by their mirroring, English seemed to propose that the United States is not entirely to blame for what is happening at the border. The choice of a donkey was cutting; each country was made the “ass” of the other. It is difficult to know exactly what English was trying to imply in the equal culpability message of the piece. Perhaps *Double Donkey* was commenting on the drug trade between Mexico and the United States, with the donkey or mule being a term used for those who move drugs across the border. Both works sat outside the standards of artistic protest of state built barriers. English was not interested in beautification, resistance, or solidarity. Instead, he focused on the politics surrounding the issue of US immigration policy at the southern border and responsibility for the conflict. Just as in Bethlehem, English in Reynosa used mocking imagery of his home country to critique the barrier – in this case a dividing structure built directly by the United States government.

With renewed interest in border security following the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States, and President Trump’s calls for expanding existing barriers, it is important to examine the policies and ideologies that have fueled the Mexican Border Fence, as well as artistic responses to this barrier. In Mexico, English’s personal reaction to the Border

⁶⁸ "Postville," interview, *Vox.com* (audio blog), March 24, 2017, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.vox.com/2017/3/24/15038406/podcast-american-immigration-policy-workplace-raids-effects-postville-2008>.

Fence was based on how he understood the barrier as part of a larger narrative of U.S. immigration policies. English crafted his subject matter based on the barrier's broader political contexts.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Ron English has been the only artist to produce work on the Berlin Wall, Israeli Barrier Wall, and Mexican Border Fence. His project in Berlin appeared motivated by the typical aims of artists working on barrier walls: to beautify, express solidarity with people oppressed by the barriers, and resist the dividing structure. However, his barrier art in Bethlehem and Reynosa marked a significant departure. While most other barrier wall artists have focused on the people negatively affected by these barriers, crafting subject matter accordingly, English utilized his own extant artistic content and focused on the culpability of the United States in the conflicts between Israel and Palestine and at the Mexican border. The chronological development of English's barrier wall art in Berlin, Bethlehem, and Reynosa signaled a movement away from engagement with the sites' local communities and concerns.

English spent a full two weeks in West Berlin. Working long days to complete his mural, he spoke with a wide range of Germans, including West Berliners and East German dissenters who had escaped to West Berlin. He noted that his mural on the Berlin Wall, motivated by aims of resistance and solidarity, was heavily inspired by his conversations with local community members.⁶⁹

Regarding his project in Palestine, English admitted he was nervous while producing his work there, stating "While we were there, obviously guns were pointed at us as we worked."⁷⁰ In Bethlehem, he drew from his preexisting oeuvre and focused on the complicit, even if indirect, role the United States played in constructing the Israeli Barrier Wall and the related oppression

⁶⁹ English, *Berlin Wall 1988*.

⁷⁰ Zia Krohn and Joyce Lagerweij, *Concrete Messages*, 16.

of Palestinians. While he spent multiple days in Bethlehem, his main contribution to the Israeli/Palestinian Barrier Wall consisted of two posters, *Grade School Guernica* and *You are not in Disneyland*, which were most likely printed beforehand in the United States. Without drawing inspiration from direct communications with people living amidst the Israeli/Palestinian barrier, English's work in Bethlehem stood as a more personal project, connecting to his American dissident politics. He displayed his own previously created art (which in the case of *Grade School Guernica* had already been shown in a gallery), which carried a political critique of his home country, the United States.

English's disengagement from the local circumstances and communities of the barrier at which he worked climaxed in Reynosa. English readily admitted he was frightened to go into Mexico, stating "Very close to where we were on the Mexican side doing the billboard [was where] all those people got shot. It was scary."⁷¹ Spending less than an hour and half in Mexico, English brought with him two prepared works which he installed and quickly photographed. These works, which closely resembled his earlier non-street art projects focused on corporate critique, mocked the exclusionary immigration policies of the United States. While many other artists working on the Mexican Border Fence have concerned themselves with the migrants and communities affected by the barrier, English's art primarily commented on the role of the US government in policing the border.

English's changing relationship with the locality of where he produced his barrier wall art has helped explain his break with other barrier wall artists working in Palestine and Mexico. In Bethlehem, artists such as Swoon demonstrated an understanding of the history of resistance at

⁷¹ Jam, "Guerrilla Street Artist Ron English Takes Risk with Daring US/Mexico Border Art Prank."

the Israeli Barrier Wall by placing her work on a site of significant protest. In Mexico, Chiu organized the local community to paint on the Border Fence, helping residents reclaim the space taken over by the barrier. English, in contrast, spent little time in Palestine and Mexico, erecting his pre-made and/or pre-planned works without input from the people living with these barriers. The study of English's work provides one lens with which to better understand the many nuanced motivations behind barrier wall art, while reminding artists of the power of engaging with local communities through beautification, solidarity and resistance.

In the end, the study of English's work has provided an entrance to a deeper understanding of artists who produce barrier wall art. In this thesis, I identified a set of standard motivations and tactics that have connected most all barrier wall artists except English with his work in Bethlehem and Reynosa. Where the artists working on the Israeli Barrier Wall primarily focused on the political struggle between Israel and Palestine, English stood out as being more interested in commenting on the influence of the United States on the barrier. As most artists working on the Mexican Border Fence concerned themselves with the migrants and communities affected by the barrier, English's art was most concerned with policy views and the relations between governments at the barrier. By moving away from the standard motivations and tactics of beautification, resistance, and solidarity, English made the power of these tactics clearer as the predominant motivations behind barrier wall art. My study of English's experiences in Berlin, Bethlehem, and Reynosa might also offer a cautionary tale, as his disengagement in Palestine and Mexico demonstrate English's greater interest in promoting his personal views, rather than offering support to those who are oppressed by these barriers. Street artists looking to create barrier wall art should remember to engage with the people and places these barriers affect. Through local community engagement, barrier wall artists demonstrate their concern for

the oppressed and their genuine wish to see the barrier's destruction.

APPENDIX

FIGURES

Introduction

Fig. 1



Ron English, *Think Different*, Manhattan, 1999
<https://vaughanjordan.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/ron-english.png>

Fig. 2



Ron English, *MC Supersized and Son*, Oil on Canvas, 2004
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/12/huffpost-arts-interviews-ron-english_n_1335586.html?slideshow=true#gallery/213586/15

Fig. 3



Ron English, *Cereal Killers*, placed in a Ralph's in Venice, CA., 2011

<https://laughingsquid.com/wp-content/uploads/ron-english-cereal-boxes-20111012-112729.jpg>

Ron English in Berlin

Fig. 4



View of Thierry Noir's murals on Berlin Wall, 1986

<http://www.huckmagazine.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/thierry-noir-berlin-today/>

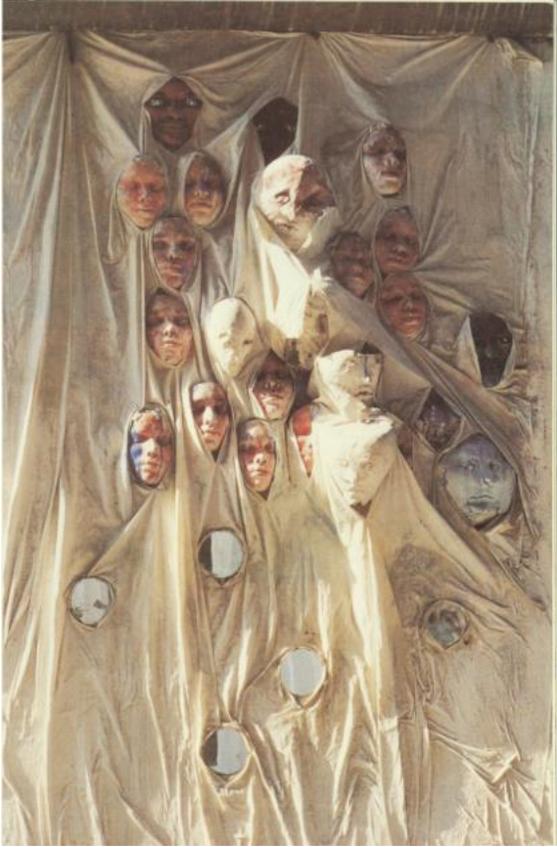
Fig. 5



Keith Haring, *Berlin Wall Mural*, West Berlin, 1986

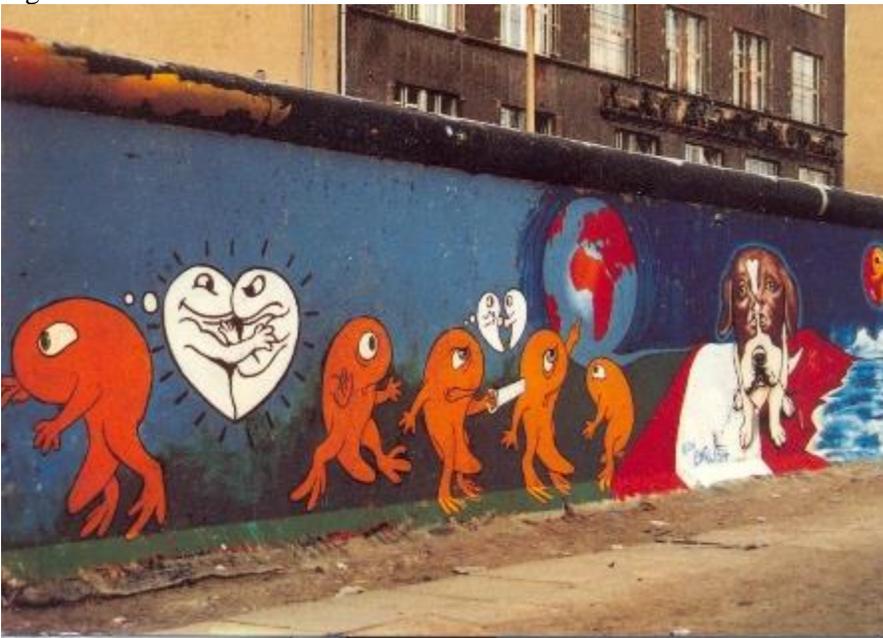
<http://www.widewalls.ch/street-art-legends-best-of-keith-haring-art/>

Fig. 6



Peter Unsicker, *Work of the Depraved*, c.1986-87
From *Berlin Wall Art*

Fig. 7



View of Ron English's Mural on the Berlin Wall, 1988
<http://poieinkaiprattein.org/beyond-images/photography/kuzdas/exhibition-at-goethe-in-athens/>

Fig. 8



View of Ron English's Mural on the Berlin Wall, 1988
<http://therumpus.net/2009/11/ron-english-remembers-the-berlin-wall-1989/>

Fig. 9



Ron English's Mural on the Berlin Wall with Ron English, 1988
<http://www.popaganda.com/ronsnews/berlin-wall-1988/>

Ron English in Palestine

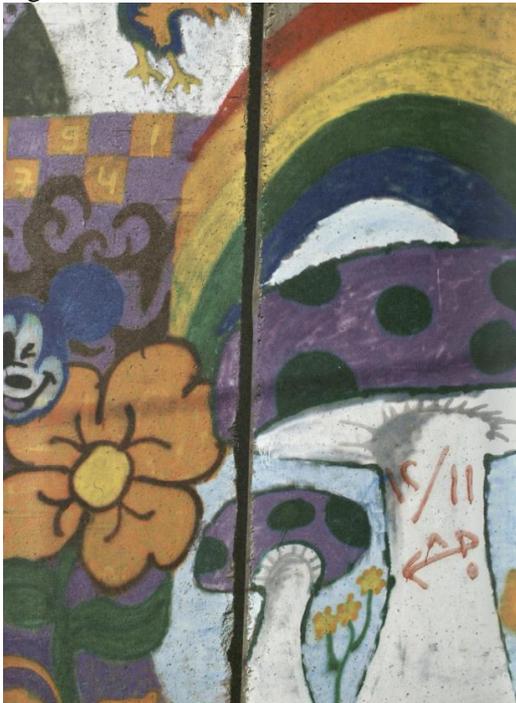
Fig. 10



Swoon, *Wall Mural*, Bethlehem, 2007

<https://palestineposterproject.org/poster/swoon-wall-mural-palestine>

Fig. 11



The Gouda Group (Dutch and Palestinian youths), *untitled*, Bethlehem, n.d.
Taken from *Concrete Messages*

Fig. 12



Wissam Salsaa, *untitled*, 2007

http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/44277000/jpg/_44277609_leg.jpg

Fig. 13



Ron English, *Pardon Our Oppression*, Bethlehem, 2007

<http://ang-enuity.blogspot.com/2012/03/artist-spotlight-street-artists-in-west.html>

Fig. 14



Ron English, *You are not in Disneyland anymore*, Bethlehem, 2007
<http://madamepickwickartblog.com/2009/10/art-and-misdeameanors/>

Fig. 15



Ron English, *Grade School Guernica*, Bethlehem, 2007
<http://madamepickwickartblog.com/2009/10/art-and-misdeameanors/>

Ron English in Mexico

Fig. 16



Ana Teresa Fernández, *Erasing the Border*, 2015
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3271495/Artist-plans-render-border-fence-invisible.html>

Fig. 17



Enrique Chiu and La Casa Del Tunel, *Mural de la Hermandad*, Tijuana, n.d.
<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/arts/the-most-memorable-acts-of-protest-art-at-the-border/>

Fig. 18



Anonymous, *Coffins of the Dead*, Tijuana 2005
<https://apps.cndls.georgetown.edu/projects/borders/items/show/10>

Fig. 19



Anonymous, *Crosses with names of the deceased*, Tijuana, late 2000s
<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/death-at-the-wall-20020314>

Fig. 20



Coalition for the Defense of Immigrants, *Día de los Muertos en memoria*, Tijuana, 2009
<http://www.noticias24.com/actualidad/noticia/108386/5100-cruces-en-frontera-eeuu-mexico-para-recordar-migrantes/>

Fig. 21



Ron English, *You Must Be This Color*, Reynosa, Mexico 2011
<https://www.amoeba.com/blog/2011/04/jamoeblog/guerrilla-street-artist-ron-english-takes-risk-with-daring-us-mexico-border-art-prank.html>

Fig. 22



Ron English, *Double Donkey*, Reynosa, Mexico 2011

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/06/30/billboard-liberation-artistically-redesigning-the-u-s-mexico-border-fence.html>

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