

Between Memory and Mobilization: The Graffiti and Street Art of the Paris Commune

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Abstract:

Discussing his 1971 urban art installation, *Les gisants de la Commune de Paris*, Ernest Pignon-Ernest stated he felt it necessary for art dedicated to the Paris Commune to be created in the street. Only there could it do justice to a movement built on popular seizure of urban space. In recent years, as 'Street Art' has emerged as a significant artistic movement, the affinity Pignon-Ernest asserted between art in the street and the Commune has continued to make itself felt. This article discusses three Paris-based street artists who have referenced the Commune: A2, Morèje, and La Rue Meurt d'Art. Their work resists the Commune's erasure from collective memory. However, their strategies sometimes risk relegating it to the past, stripping it of its political radicalism. This, combined with Street Art's growing commercialization and institutionalization, poses questions about urban art's capacity to engage the Commune on an ideological – not just iconographic – level.

Body:

On the morning of March 18th, 2014, employees at the Basilique du Sacré Coeur in Montmartre arrived at work to discover the church's entryway covered in graffiti. Written in red and black spray paint, the tags read "1871 Vive la commune," "Vive l'insurrection," "À bas toute autorité," "Fuck Tourism," "Allez debout les grands chasseurs d'étoiles," "Feux aux chapelles," and "Ni Dieu, ni Maître, ni État." They also called for solidarity with "Monica and Fransisco [*sic*]," a reference to Mónica Caballero and Francisco Solar, Chilean anarchists arrested in Spain in 2013 for the bombing of the Basilica del Pilar in Zaragoza. The timing and location of the tags were significant. On the 18th of March, 1871, French soldiers were confronted by angry crowds while confiscating ordinance from the National Guard's arsenal atop the Butte Montmartre. In some areas of the city soldiers opened fire, killing unarmed civilians, but demonstrators succeeded in preventing the removal of the canons. The army and government were forced to retreat to Versailles, setting the stage for the Paris Commune. Two months later, the Butte Montmartre was where many communards made their last stand before being killed by soldiers. The Sacré Coeur was constructed as a response to those events. Patrice de Mac Mahon's reactionary government voted in 1873 to commission a church on the Butte as a symbolic expiation of the violence the city had experienced two years prior. The plan was widely taken as a provocation of the communards and encountered significant resistance from

liberal politicians. Nevertheless, construction went ahead (albeit slowly) and the Sacré Coeur is today one of the most-visited tourist destinations of the city.¹

The history of the site gives cohesiveness to what otherwise seems like an anarchist grab bag of slogans. And yet, it is striking the degree to which the Commune and the Sacré Coeur's historic relevance to it were missing from reactions to the graffiti. Across the political spectrum, from Bertrand Delanoë to Wallerand de Saint-Just, the graffiti was condemned as an attack on religious freedom. Many newspapers omitted the reference to the Commune from their transcription of the tags, giving the impression they were exclusively anticlerical. *L'Express* made no mention of the Commune and Christophe Cornevin, writing in *Le Figaro*, suggested that the timing might have been a coincidence.² In another article in *Le Figaro*, Julie Graziani, a spokeswoman for a right-wing Catholic advocacy group, acknowledged the references to the Commune only as further insidious proof that anticlericalism is inextricable from anti-Republicanism.³ The Sacré Coeur played the role it was built to play: mobilizing French Catholicism in the erasure of the Commune's memory.

The whitewashing of the Commune in discussions of the graffiti was not universal – Bruno-Nassim Aboudrar wrote a one-paragraph op-ed in the *Libé des écrivains* discussing the Sacré Coeur's symbolism for the left and similar discussions could be found in a blog post by Roland_T on the *Rue 89* website and a Mathieu Dejean editorial in *Les Inrockuptibles*. Notwithstanding these exceptions – all them published in marginal fora in the French news media – the fact that the Commune could be omitted from discussions of the graffiti testifies to the reluctance French Republicanism has at times shown to assimilating the Commune into its symbolic canon. Bertrand Tillier has argued that the political legacy of the Commune has historically been bound up with the contestation of its memory, with the Commune's opponents seeking to erase its traces while its supporters rally around

¹ For more detail on the history of the Sacré Coeur cf. Harvey.

² "Hasard du calendrier ou pas, les graffitis ayant dégradé le lieu de culte ont été découverts le 18 mars, date anniversaire commémorant le début de la Commune de Paris en 1871" (Cornevin).

³ "L'inspiration anticléricale et anarcho-communiste est évidente. Elle vient rappeler en creux que s'en prendre à une communauté à raison de son appartenance à une religion est un acte profondément antirépublicain, en ce qu'il menace le vivre ensemble" (Graziani).

preserving them. Tillier sees this fight as still ongoing – an assertion supported by the case of the tags on the Sacré Coeur (Tillier 19).

These tags also draw our attention to graffiti's historic role in that fight. The spray paint on the forecourt and doors of the church echoed a graffito in another church, believed to have been written during the *semaine sanglante*, the week of street-to-street fighting and mass executions that brought the Commune to an end. In the nave of the Église Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis in the rue Saint-Antoine, "RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE OU LA MORT" is engraved in acid on a support pillar. While the spray paint on the Sacré Coeur was scrubbed soon after being found (though its traces could be seen for days), the message in Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis has resisted erasure for 150 years. It is a demonstration of graffiti's capacity to contest the narratives written in public spaces, transforming walls into ghostly palimpsests where repressed memories reappear long after they've been erased.

The tags of March 2014 were graffiti in its conventional modern usage and the message in Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis is a *graffito* in the literal sense, engraved in the wall. In the past fifty years, however, the definition of "graffiti" has become more open. Starting in the 1970's Paris became one of the centers of the street art movement, in which traditional graffiti has been supplemented by a variety of artistic techniques. The Commune played a key role in the early development of Parisian street art as it was the subject of one of the first pieces, Ernest Pignon-Ernest's *Les gisants de la Commune de Paris*, that could be classified as such. Street art continues to reference the Commune today. While Pignon-Ernest's work is a major point of reference in research on representations of the Commune, more recent examples of Commune street art have not yet attracted critical attention. This article's goal is to rectify that by analyzing work by three contemporary street artists: A2, Morèje, and La Rue Meurt d'Art.

Two questions will run through this analysis. The first is how these artworks participate in the battle over the Commune's memory. The second, somewhat more subjective, is whether preserving the Commune's memory is an adequate form of engagement with the Commune's legacy. One of the starkest defenses of the Sacré Coeur graffiti in 2014 came from Julien Salingue, a far-left activist

academic who co-administers the French media watchdog, Acrimed. In a tweet he described the omission of the Commune from newspaper discussions of the graffiti as “les assauts des néo-Versaillais” (quoted in Dejean), depicting politicians tweeting outrage as Republican soldiers shooting their way through communard barricades. The idea that preserving the Commune’s memory is a direct continuation of the fighting of 1871 is a common trope and it helps explain why memorialization is a major concern in the artworks to be discussed.⁴ However, many of these works teeter on stripping the Commune of its political content in their eagerness to commemorate it, posing questions about the balance between memory and activism in art that pays tribute to a radical political movement. With this in mind, I’ll ask how these works engage their audiences and to what extent they mobilize their viewers politically.

LES GISANTS DE LA COMMUNE DE PARIS



Figure 1. *Les gisants* on the steps of the Sacré Coeur, Ernest Pignon-Ernest. Photo by the artist.⁵

Before discussing more recent street art, let’s first examine Ernest Pignon-Ernest’s *Les gisants de la Commune de Paris*, which represents a key moment in the dialogue between urban art and the

⁴ Tillier, for instance, refers to the “bataille de l’écrit” between the “communards vaincus” and the “versaillais vainqueurs” (23).

⁵ All images reproduced with permission of the artist

Commune. This will allow us to lay out the iconography A2, Morèje, and La Rue Meurt d'Art respond to. In 1971 Pignon-Ernest was commissioned to produce a piece for the Commune's centenary. He writes, "il ne m'était pas possible de rendre compte d'un tel évènement au moyen d'un tableau qui irait prendre place dans une exposition. Cela me paraissait un non-sens: la négation même de l'esprit de la Commune" (Pignon-Ernest). His desire to do justice to the Commune led him out of the gallery and into the street. He took an image of a dead communard and printed it at life size on dozens of sheets of paper. The images were stretched out on the ground in symbolically resonant locations around Paris. These included significant places for the Commune, like the steps of the Sacré Coeur, and the Quais de la Seine and Métro Charonne, where protestors against the Algerian War had been killed by French police in the early 1960's.

Pignon-Ernest understands space as a repository of memory (Wackers-Espinosa 4). Walls and streets remember even when people do not. His art is a way of accessing that latent resource and unlocking what the city knows about its own past. For him, the artwork is not his images but space itself, which tells its own stories through an encounter with images. The primary goal of *Les gisants* was thus a pedagogic one, attuning people to reservoirs of historical knowledge lying untapped in their neighborhoods. By covering the steps of the Sacré Coeur and the Métro Charonne with images of dead bodies, Pignon-Ernest alerted people to the acts of violence that had been repressed from the collective memory of those places.

But the artist's engagement with space was not just about local history. *Les gisants* carefully played with the materiality of the city. The images were installed not on walls, like most posters and graffiti, but on the ground. Over time, feet pressed them down into the sidewalk, giving them the uneven texture of the city's cobbles. Those same cobbles had been pulled out of the ground by communards to form barricades in 1871, and the audience of a century later needed to look back only three years to remember cobbles being torn up for street fighting. They may have been

reminded of one of Mai 68's most famous graffiti slogans: "sous les pavés la plage."⁶ The recency with which cobblestones had served as weapons gave another inflection to the work's title. A *gisant* is a tomb effigy, but *gésir* bears the archaic meaning of something hidden or forced into unnatural sleep. As the posters dissolved into the ground, the streets and cobbles themselves became the *gisants*: trapped or dormant tools waiting to be freed for another revolution.

Placing the posters on the ground also implicated passers-by in the work. At the Métro Charonne the images covered the stairways in and out of the station. Commuters had a choice: walk over the dead bodies or make a detour. Those who chose the former contributed to the disintegration of the paper, causing the bodies to vanish and acting out the metaphorical trampling of the Commune's memory. By refusing to treat places where acts of violence had taken place as sacred, pedestrians tore the resurgent memory of that violence into so much paper garbage.

Tillier argues that Pignon-Ernest's decision to put his images on the ground was also a statement about the wall's unavailability as a platform for discussing the Commune. That unavailability is equal parts legislative and symbolic. Tillier cites the famous law of 29 juillet 1881, which allows the mayor of every jurisdiction ("chaque commune," fortuitously, in the text of the law) to regulate which walls can be posted on and what messages are allowed. That law put a stop to the mediatic anarchy that characterized Paris's walls in the decades prior, a situation documented in 1851 by Alfred Delvau in *Les murailles révolutionnaires*. Delvau transcribed the hundreds of posters that pullulated on the walls of Paris during the 1848 revolution. He called Paris's walls an "oeuvre collective qui a pour auteur Monseigneur tout le monde" (Delvau 1). Pignon-Ernest's work protests the loss of that mediatic collectivism.

On the symbolic side, the rows and rows of anonymous *gisants* also recall the *mur des fédérés*, the site where 147 communard fighters who had taken refuge in Père-Lachaise cemetery at the end

⁶ Graffiti was a major part of the Mai 68 demonstrations. The avant-garde group, Situationist International, called on its sympathizers to paint playful and rebellious messages throughout the city. Though the Commune was not a central point of reference for that graffiti, it was present, as evidenced by tags like, "VIVE LA COMMUNE 10 MAI 1968" and "Il y a, en France, 38 000 communes... nous en sommes à la seconde."

of the *semaine sanglante* were executed by French soldiers. Their bodies fell into a ditch into which were thrown the bodies of hundreds of other dead communards. In the aftermath of the Commune the *mur* became a rallying point for survivors and sympathizers, but for decades the government refused to place an official memorial there. Over time, the lack of official recognition led to confusion about where the wall was, denying it some of its power as a *lieu de mémoire*, a place where collective memory is cultivated (Nora).

The Paris Municipal Council's decision in 1907 to acquire Paul Moreau-Vauthier's sculpture, *Aux victimes des révolutions*, which it intended to install at the *mur*, exacerbated the situation. The left found the sculpture unacceptable as its title assimilated the deaths of soldiers and revolutionaries without regard to what Sidonie Verhaege calls the "dissymétrie" between the number of dead Versaillais soldiers (877) and the number of dead communards (between 17,000 and 35,000) (Verhaege 35), and it elided the French army's responsibility for the bloodshed. Consequently it was banished to the Avenue Gambetta, a decision that spread more confusion. In 1936 Moreau-Vauthier's sculpture was featured on advertisements for the traditional march in honor of the Commune, which was in fact supposed to go to Père Lachaise (Cerf). The next year Guy de la Batut misidentified Moreau-Vauthier's sculpture as the *mur* (La Batut 274). The belief that the communards had been executed in front of Moreau-Vauthier's wall was widespread in communist countries in the 1930's (Dali 35). Websites including Wikipedia continue to spread the legend that Moreau-Vauthier's sculpture was constructed using stones from the real *mur des fédérés* and that the simulated bullet holes in it are from the massacre itself ("Mur des fédérés").

As a result of this confusion the *mur* lost its specificity. Conceptually it remains a powerful symbol and rallying point for Commune sympathizers, but the memories it evokes are not firmly anchored to the wall in Père-Lachaise. The "Mur" has become detached from the physical wall. In some ways this has diminished the wall's power as a *lieu de mémoire*. And yet, at the same time, Pignon-Ernest's installation suggests that the introduction of a false *mur* in the Avenue Gambetta can be read not as a halving but as a doubling. If there can be two *murs des fédérés*, there can any

number. They can be anywhere. Members of the Commune were killed in Montmartre so Pignon-Ernest can exhume their bodies there as well. The Sacré Coeur can become a *mur*. Another moment in history can produce a *mur*, like the struggle for Algerian Independence.

In these ways, Pignon-Ernest played with the materiality of the street and the absence of the wall to draw attention to the local history of the places he targeted and to demonstrate the flexibility, iterability, and mobility of the symbols generated by the Commune. His work was pedagogic, drawing attention to repressed memories in Paris's history, and polemical, asserting a kinship between 19th-century Parisians and 20th-century Algerians. It confronted people in their routines and challenged them to ethically alter them. As we will see, these *enjeux* have remained central to more recent Commune street art. Pignon-Ernest's work, however, also had limitations. To start with, it was a commission, a legally-sanctioned work of public art rather than a transgressive one. While the artist's decision to work in the street rather than a gallery was motivated by a desire to do justice to the unruliness of the Commune, one could fairly ask if accepting state subsidy compromises his anti-institutional rhetoric. Additionally, the artist represented the Commune with bodies that were already/still dead. The Commune returns in the guise of its final defeat. While passers-by were forced to actively engage with the work, they participated by re-enacting the trampling of the bodies. Viewers were challenged to respect the dead, to preserve their images, to remember them – but they were not challenged to carry on their struggle. *Les gisants* protested the erasure of the Commune from the city's history and alluded to the possibility of its (eternal) return, but it did not directly do anything to mobilize its audience as political actors. There is virtually no risk of a passer-by responding to the work in a way that would result in their body taking the place of one of the images of bodies on the ground. This is an example of how street art can privilege the contestation of the Commune's memory at the expense of its political vitality, and it's a dimension that has become all the more important in more recent Commune street art.

A2 AND THE ANARCHIST LEGACY OF THE COMMUNE



Figure 2. A2's Heart-A (bottom) with pieces by Invader (top) and GZUP (middle) in the Rue Marx-Dormoy, Paris, 18^e arrondissement. Photo by the artist.

On the surface, the work of A2, or *les amoureux anarchistes*, seems designed to rectify the activist shortcomings of Pignon-Ernest's work. Whereas Pignon-Ernest focused on the historical amnesia surrounding the Commune, A2 is involved with the Groupe Louise Michel of the Fédération anarchiste (A2, Personal interview) and defends the notion that the Commune is not only still viable as a political program but still ongoing. The artist mixes figures from the Commune with motifs from other periods like the 1970's punk rock scene to assert the Commune's continued relevance in French society. A2 has done portraits of Louise Michel with a punk rock mohawk and has also represented other major figures of 19th century anarchism like Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin (both sadly sans mohawk). In addition to portraits, A2 does conventional spray-paint graffiti writing – “Macron t'es foutu les communards sont revenus!!” – and has a tag that has been placed in hundreds of locations around Paris. The tag is a stylized version of the anarchist circle-A where the circle has been replaced by a heart-shape. The two elements of the tag represent the two “A”s of the artist's pseudonym: Amour and Anarchie. Sometimes the symbol is spray-painted, sometimes it is made of painted wood, mosaic tiles, or other media. When the tags are done in spray paint, A2's symbol has the sharp diagonal lines of classic 70's punk anarchist circle-A's. In wood the A is symmetrical, with its legs aggressively foreshortened and a perfectly flat horizontal line across, giving the letter the appearance of a desert highway in the American west, pointing the way through the heart to an unknown horizon. In most cases the heart is red and the A black, evoking the red flag of 19th-century anarchist movements and the black flag used today. On occasion, other colors are used, like the rainbow peace flag.

While A2's work engages with important sites for the Commune – the heart motif evokes the Sacré Coeur and the artist has produced a piece in the shape of the basilica reading “Massacre au Coeur” – the pieces are not installed only in historically-resonant spots. A2's work can be found in every arrondissement of the city. This is not to say that place isn't important. A2 tends to tag street corners and party walls, areas commonly tagged by other artists. These locations are popular because they are in the eyeline of pedestrians and motorists, and their popularity creates a feedback

loop. By tagging walls that already feature street art, artists make their work dialogue with the work of other artists. For example, A2 created an anarchist diptych in the rue Foyatier by posting a heart-A tag alongside a portrait of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon by TeneT. (TeneT produces black-and-white portraits of historical figures captioned with provocative quotes attributed to them. They have also posted portraits of the British anarchist and friend of Louise Michel, Emma Goldman, but their work is not explicitly anarchist; TeneT has also featured Otto von Bismarck and Hedy Lamarr.)

A2's pieces are also frequently found near advertisements and street signs. The artist has repeatedly tagged walls bearing "Défense d'afficher" warnings, the same warnings Tillier was reminded of by Pignon-Ernest's refusal of the wall. This produces another layer of dialogue: between the official and the illicit. The world-famous French artist, Invader, writes in one of his *Invasion Guides* about being stopped by a police officer as he was gluing a mosaic to a wall in Paris. He pulled the piece down to avoid arrest, but was surprisingly told to put it back. The policeman assumed it had been put there by the city (Invader 70). Invader's story demonstrates street art's capacity to flatten mediatic hierarchies, undermining the power structures that police the wall as a channel for some messages and not others. In that respect all street art has a degree of anarchism in it; it acts out the principle that everyone has a right to write on walls. By concentrating his tags on walls that already feature a large amount of street art, A2 gives the latent politics of street art an explicitly anarchist signature. The artist's use of diverse media emphasizes the links between A2's project and the other works of street art that surround it: pieces in wood evoke GZUP's ubiquitous woodcuts and mosaic tiles evoke Invader, two artists whose work can almost always be found near A2's. By imitating the styles and placements of more well-established artists, A2 underlines the idea that all street art participates in an anarchist project.



Figure 3. A2's Punk Rock Louise Michel, Paris, 20^e arrondissement. Photo by the artist.

However, dialoguing with official signs and other street art is not without risk. In the past decade, street art has become almost entirely unproblematic for the institutions it used to antagonize. Galleries market it, landlords rip walls off buildings to collect it, and artists who once ran the risk of jail time now receive major commissions. Figures like JR, Jace, and El Seed have produced street art for the Paris municipal government, making it impossible to argue that art in the street is inherently anti-institutional. One could read Invader's police anecdote not as proof of street art's capacity to befuddle authorities but as symptomatic of its transformation into an innocuous practice, something police tolerate as long as it stays within certain boundaries. While A2 might seek

to reassert the intrinsic anti-institutionalism of street art, the artist's anarchist images run the risk of instead being neutralized through their contact with more mainstream and commercial street art.

This danger is embodied by the punk rock Louise Michel: while her mohawk is meant to draw a line between the anarchisms of the 1870's and the 1970's, it risks condemning Michel's anarchism to the same fate as Johnny Rotten's: a depoliticized marketable aesthetic à la the French clothing brand, *Commune de Paris 1871* ("Indépendance, audace et liberté sont ainsi au cœur d'une mode qui se veut simple et bien faite, mais avec un peu de sens," ["Manifeste"]). Louise Michel with a mohawk is arguably more cool than dangerous. A similar criticism could be made of pieces like a simple wood block reading "ICI C'EST ENCORE ET POUR TOUJOURS LA COMMUNE DE PANAME." The anachronistic use of Paris's nickname connects the Commune both to the Panama Scandal of 1892, which exposed government corruption and fueled anarchist movements, and contemporary youth culture, but it also contributes to a de-historicization of anarchism, abstracting it from any specific political context and reinforcing its latter-day transformation into a postmodern empty signifier. Moreover, while A2's pieces often explicitly reference the Commune, many of them don't; the signature heart-A in particular is not clearly political when viewed on its own. Without context it's possible to take these woodcuts for innocuous love emojis, not appeals for revolution.

These issues are exacerbated by the fact that, whereas Pignon-Ernest confronted pedestrians with an ethical choice, forcing them to decide whether or not to tread on dead communards, A2's work allows its audience a purely spectatorial mode of engagement. Even at their most explicit, the pieces declare that the Commune is still on and sometimes issue calls to arms, but they suggest rather than demand political mobilization. It's easy to walk past them.

The passive spectatorship permitted by A2's work is especially noteworthy given the artist's identification with Louise Michel, whose name is part of the artist's Instagram screen name and website title. Michel was an artist herself, in addition to being a *communarde* and an anarchist political organizer. As a playwright she helped shape the principles of anarchist art in the late 19th century. While she was working in a different medium from A2, Michel also confronted the issue of

how to balance the competing imperatives of memorializing the Commune and carrying it on as a political movement. Michel had been a teacher and, consistent with the Commune's institutional support for theater as an "educational medium and morale booster" (Beach 28), her plays have strong pedagogic elements. Her characters experience moral tribulations and through their actions serve as models or warnings to the audience. Because the plays drew on real events they educated viewers about the recent history of European anarchism and connected their local struggles to those taking place elsewhere. But Michel's plays were not just pedagogic tools. She was a master at stoking her audience, exhorting them into a participatory mode of viewing that blurred the lines between spectacle and revolution.

Cecilia Beach describes the April 29, 1882 premiere of *Nadine* as deeply interactive. "The anarchists in the audience alternatively applauded the protagonists' efforts to overthrow an oppressive government, joined in the songs sung by the revolutionary factions within the play, and yelled angrily at the antagonists' betrayal of the revolution." Eventually, swept away by the violence onstage, the audience members started their own revolt:

The anarchists in the audience actually began attacking the bourgeois with various projectiles, crying "Vive le pétrole!" (Long live petrol!), thus making explicit the link to the Commune and its legendary Pétroleuses [...]. The judicious bourgeois, who had come prepared for such audience participation, protected themselves with umbrellas, crying "A bas le pétrole!" (Down with petrol!) in response. In the end it was necessary to turn off the lights in order to avoid a full-scale confrontation (Beach 36-37).⁷

The show was subsumed into a real political conflict. The lights were cut, the performance stopped, and a real class struggle was left in its place. Despite its pedagogic elements, Michel's play revealed itself to be little-interested in remembering the Commune as a thing of the past. The action may have been edifying for aspiring militants, but the performance of revolution onstage was largely a pretext for the audience to perform revolution in the stalls.

⁷ Over the course of her career, Michel developed more methods for inciting the audience. When *Nadine* went on tour, she gave a political speech before each performance. At performances of *La Grève* in 1890, the anarchist Leboucher gave a speech after the prologue, and Michel's producer set aside 300 tickets for known anarchists (Beach 41).

Now, one could argue, in the vein of Guy Debord, that these plays gave the audience revolution as spectacle, a simulacrum in place of the real thing. *Nadine* didn't start a new Commune, and its riotous nature became a selling point, a part of the show audiences were keen to experience.⁸ That the bourgeoisie attended and, as the umbrellas indicate, came hoping to be pelted with food suggests that they saw the plays not as serious threats to the social order but as fun opportunities to be mobbed, safe in the knowledge that when the lights went out things would go back to normal. These criticisms notwithstanding, it's clear that Michel saw the line between art and politics as a blurry one. In her memoirs, she describes revolution as a drama, a play in which every person has taken up a role (Michel 98, 146, 347). Her framing of the relationship between art and activism gives a strikingly different model for how art can engage with the legacy of the Commune. Whereas Pignon-Ernest can be accused of treating the Commune as a dead movement and A2 of presenting it as a set of symbols or slogans rather than as a political praxis, Michel understood her performances as rehearsals, perhaps triggers, for new outbreaks of revolution. She used art for political mobilization, not just to shore up collective memory. The two final pieces of Commune-related street art I'll discuss both draw close to Michel's theater by making participation part of viewership, striving to entice their audiences into political action.

⁸ A critic at her heavily-censored third play, *La Grève*, came dressed for a riot but left disappointed not to have "'a revolution' to relate to his readers" (Beach 41).

THE PARCOURS IN COMMUNE STREET ART

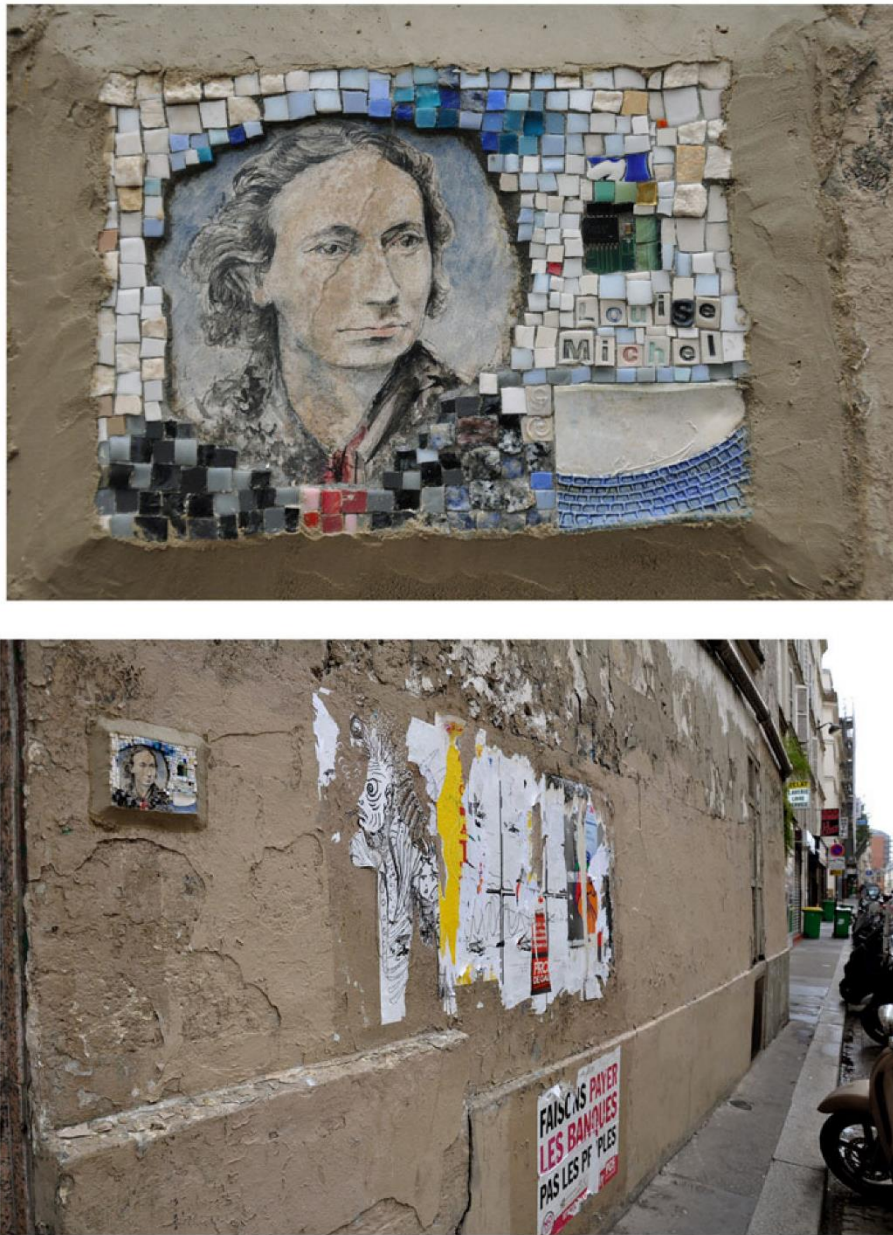


Figure 4. Morèje's mosaic of Louise Michel in rue Véron, Paris, 18^e arrondissement. Photos by the artist.

The first of these works was by mosaic artist Jérôme Gulon, alias Morèje. Gulon created over two dozen portraits of communards and set them in his signature mosaics, each of which incorporated a small section of circuit board and a computer chip. He wrote the name of the figure on the mosaic and posted each in a location with significance to that person's involvement in the Commune. A portrait of the actress Agar, who was forced to leave the Comédie-Française, was

affixed to the Salle Richelieu. Gustave Courbet, forced into exile after being held liable for the destruction of the Vendôme Column, was affixed to a corner of the Place Vendôme. Louise Michel was posted in the rue Véron in Montmartre, a block away from where workers building the Sacré Coeur were housed, and her friend and cellmate, Nathalie Lemel, who tended the wounded during the *semaine sanglante*, was posted on the École de Médecine. Two mosaics broke the pattern: one contained an image of a guillotine and in the other small stones were arranged to resemble Paris's cobbles. The first reminds the viewer of the connection between institutional violence and the forgetting of the Commune, and the latter makes one recognize the city's streets and barricades as mosaics in their own right and transforms the mosaic medium itself into a memory of the Commune.

Gulon often uses *parcours* to structure his street art interventions. He conceptualizes each mosaic as a single tile in a city-wide mosaic that's ephemerally bound together by pedestrians walking from piece to piece. By requiring viewers to explore the city to see the full work, Gulon, like Pignon-Ernest, challenges pedestrians to break free from their normal routines.⁹ Those who participate become co-authors of the work as their movements determine the form of the city-wide meta-mosaic. Participation in a *parcours* is not only aesthetic; there is a political dimension as well. Gulon's Commune walk carries echoes of the *Montée au mur*, the annual leftist march to the *mur des fédérés* that commemorates the Commune and serves as a political rally. By walking from mosaic to mosaic, each of which is tied to a location of significance for the Commune, Gulon's participants create their own version of the *Montée au mur*. They become not walkers, but marchers. In this way Gulon, like Michel, binds viewership to active participation. He literally mobilizes his audience.

However, Gulon's work has features that tilt it from participation to historical commemoration. To start with, whereas Michel's plays sought to set off riots, Gulon's work asks its participants only for a private and symbolic tribute to the Commune. There is no law-breaking involved and no threat to the status quo. On top of this, Gulon does not foreground the political character of his *parcours*.

⁹ Gulon is an expert on Pignon-Ernest and authored a retrospective book of his work: *Ernest Pignon-Ernest: le lieu et la formule*, Critères Editions, 2012

He focuses instead on how his work relates to art institutions. He says he wants to free the mosaic from the gallery and describes his walks as primarily aesthetic experiences: “le fil conducteur qui conduira le regard à la rêverie, à la réflexion, à la poésie” (Gulon). He notably doesn’t say he wants his walks to lead to political engagement. His language positions his *parcours* not as a mock-*défilé* but as a stroll through an open-air museum, or as one of the Street Art Walks that are now offered to tourists in cities like Paris. The fact that most of the mosaics feature recreations of historic portraits of famous individuals further evokes the museum. If Pignon-Ernest felt Commune art was too wild for a gallery, Gulon’s street portraits offer a form of vigilante reparation for the communards’ exclusion from the traditional canon: left out of the historic galleries of Versailles, they get their belated historical canonization in the street, arguably at the expense of their radical unassimilability. It’s also worth noting in this vein that Gulon’s only reference to the Commune in his work was in 2011. Like 1971, the year of *Les gisants*, this was a round-numbered memorial year. The focus on decennial anniversaries risks reducing the Commune to a ritual carnival, a regular but quarantined moment in which the status quo is briefly overturned.

Lastly, while Gulon’s work was designed for active participation, it was passive in eliciting that participation. While Pignon-Ernest’s *gisants* were life-sized and blocked staircases and streets, forcing pedestrians to confront them, Gulon’s mosaics were the size of a paperback. Like A2’s heart-A’s it was easy to walk past one and not notice it. Even if a pedestrian did find one, he or she would have difficulty understanding it was part of a set and would not know where to look for another. While some third parties documented their personal *parcours* online, the artist himself did not provide an online map or guide to his Commune mosaics, something he has occasionally done for other entries in his *parcours* series. The pieces were not clearly signed, so someone unfamiliar with Gulon’s work would struggle to find the artist’s website or other online guides. By Gulon’s own admission, whether a *parcours* took place was subject to chance: the “*hasard d’une promenade*” (Gulon). If one happened, it was perhaps more likely to take place on Wikipedia when the viewer

looked up the name on the portrait than in the street, an outcome that would shift this intervention firmly to the domain of historical pedagogy.

Many of these same criticisms can be made of Jean-Marc Paumier's tributes to the Commune. Paumier, alias "Rue meurt d'art," produced a collage of Louise Michel in 2006, the 135th anniversary of the Commune, and two more collages for its 140th anniversary in 2011.¹⁰ All three involved historic portraiture. One of the interventions in 2011 was a set of three portraits – Louise Michel, Nathalie Lemel, and Elisabeth Dmitrieff – painted on paper and pasted to Le M.U.R. in the rue Oberkampf, a dedicated, invitation-only street art wall officially sponsored by the Mairie de Paris. Posting his work on a sanctioned wall was a problematic choice that sapped Paumier's work of its transgressive power. The second component of his 2011 tribute to the Commune was more participatory. It also involved portraits of women who participated in the Commune and, like Gulon's, was structured around a *parcours*, but rather than leaving his *parcours* to chance, Paumier personally led a group of thirty participants to locations with importance for the Commune and made them post the images on the walls themselves.

¹⁰ The artist is planning another work about the Commune in 2021



Figure 5. Jean-Marc Paumier (right) helping a participant glue a portrait of Nathalie Lemel to a wall as part of his “collage sauvage collectif.” Photo by Denis Pasquier.

Paumier’s “collage sauvage collectif” demanded engagement from its participants. While it had pedagogic elements, its lessons could only be received through active participation, not passive spectatorship. And participants did not just have to walk; they had to transgress the city’s norms. They had to become street artists. The notion that the walls of Paris should be an open and anarchic forum for public messages, the collective work of “Monseigneur tout le monde” in Delvau’s formulation, was implicit in Pignon-Ernest’s *Les gisants* and is invoked more directly by A2. But Paumier, rather than simply drawing attention to the policing of urban channels, structured his work to enact their collective reappropriation. He required his audience to perform an act similar to the communard graffiti that still adorns the Église Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis.

That said, the transgression Paumier demanded was minor. The portraits were on paper, which is not illegal in many places and can easily be washed off. The work was a one-off, involving a small number of people supervised by the artist and posting images he selected. Paumier’s “collage sauvage” was orderly and circumscribed, a strikingly demure approach in comparison to the graffiti in Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis, *RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE OU LA MORT*, scrawled permanently in acid by a

person who likely received the latter in the days to come. By inciting people to transgressive re-appropriations of urban channels, Paumier differentiates himself from the other artists here under discussion and comes the closest to an artistic engagement with the Commune that treats it as a living practice rather than as a memory from the past. His mild demands on his participants, however, ultimately limit his work to a kind of proof-of-concept for street art's potential as a platform for political engagement and mobilization.

By way of conclusion I'd like to take a closer look at the graffito in Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis. Is there anything contemporary street artists of the Commune could learn from this anonymous *graffeur communard*? The graffito in Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis is much plainer than the works described above. Looked at in a vacuum it is unremarkable. Few would be moved by the awkwardness of its lopsided scrawl or its simple rhetoric. What power this tag has comes not from its form or message, but from the story behind it, namely (and who knows how accurate this is) that it dates from the *semaine sanglante*. That detail conjures an image: a communard fallen back from the barricades seeks refuge in a church. Preparing for an onslaught of Versaillais troops, he takes to the walls to write... This story transforms the text. Suddenly it has become a trace, an indelible form of resistance to the Commune's erasure. The evidence of multiple failed attempts at scrubbing it, which have only made the words stand out more, symbolizes the endurance of the Commune's ideals. But the image conjured by this graffito is captivating for a second reason as well. When we imagine a communard retreating to the church to engrave a wall while the fighting continues outside, we are imagining a scene of artistic creation anchored within a wider political praxis. We are imagining a continuity between aesthetic and political modes of contesting the city. While contemporary street artists have found many ways to combat the erasure of the Commune from collective memory, they have so far struggled to re-create a continuity between the aesthetics and politics of the Commune. Doing so might allow them not just to commemorate the Commune, but to keep it alive.

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