Posters against the Patriarchy

A Phenomenology of Feminist Street Art in Brussels

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This paper is concerned with urban streets as a site of political action. While much has been written about such action as the gathering of bodies (Arendt 1998; 1984; Cavarero 2021; Butler 2015; Gago 2020), I want to consider in this essay a different kind of political action, consisting of physical interventions, that is, in posters, stickers, graffiti, and other material and visual objects. More specifically, I am interested in feminist interventions that protest various forms of gender- and sexuality-based violence, and will argue for the heuristic importance of the public-private divide for understanding those posters and graffiti. The divide helps us to understand the specificity of two forms of patriarchal violence, namely, street harassment and domestic violence, but importantly also how they are related. My approach starts from the concrete lived experience of the posters, and I hence want to open this essay with the very specific urban context in which it originates: the streets of Brussels. This is a city in which political and feminist street art abounds, with much of it strategically placed in the central squares and main avenues, sometimes sprawling across walls and other times subtly stuck onto a lantern pole or an electrical enclosure. Much of it decries everyday acts of sexism, as is the case for the 'laisse les filles tranquilles' posters starting to appear from 2018 onwards.[2] Other art names the victims of feminicide—names that are glued on the wall and should also be mentioned here: Eleonora, Yentl, Daniela, Anela, Maria, and Malek, and Aurelie and Karine and Jill, and many others.[3]

These posters deploy different visual styles and target different aspects of patriarchy; and yet their feminist messages resonate with one another as they use the same walls and can be found in shared public space. Indeed, the very word 'public' has taken on increased significance in recent years. When the Belgian government announced a general lockdown in the spring of 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the last pre-pandemic demonstration was the March 8 celebration of International Women's Day. The stickers and the posters from that day stayed around, mingled with those predating the lockdown.

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2 'Laisse les filles tranquilles' refers both to the text on the posters, as well as the collective behind the posters. When capitalized, the sentence is used to refer to the collective.

3 http://stopfeminicide.blogspot.com/p/violences-machistes.html

As the streets emptied of people and public gatherings were prohibited, we were
reminded firstly of the force of visual messages: all official advertisements in bus stops
were replaced with government messages, while people put up self-made notes and
banners. If anything, we witnessed an intensification of visual interventions in the public
space. Secondly, as people were ordered to stay in their 'kot' (denoting both a small space
of storage as well as a dwelling, typically for students), fears over domestic violence
increased, and demonstrations in support of Black Lives Matter had to navigate the
various and competing demands of a precarious population, reminding us of the ways in
which protective measures exacerbate the exposure of some groups to violence, while
simultaneously restricting protests against that violence.

    Many of these considerations are not unique to Brussels, and I would like to
underscore two points that are of general importance. First, they require us to re-evaluate
the equation of political action with physical gatherings. The lockdown was a blatant
example of the closure of the public space (Arendt 1998; Butler 2015; Gago 2020). This
Arendtian phrase does not primarily refer to the disappearance of actual physical spaces
(although this happens, too), but rather to the way in which the conditions of collective
action are undermined. The inhospitability of urban spaces to gatherings by protest
movements has, in this approach, a devastating effect on politics, for these gatherings
correspond to exceptional moments of collective action. Seen in this light, the lockdown
underscored the ruinous impact of urban regulations on politics. At the same time, it
seems incorrect to render streets emptied of assemblies as having been fully depoliticized.
That would neglect the extent to which objects can exert political agency. As the posters,
the stickers, and the graffiti indicate, the absence of concrete physical gatherings does not
exclude the contestation of gender- and sexuality-based violence. While I acknowledge
the crucial role of rallies for a politics of disputation, I also want to push back against a
bias in favor of physical gatherings that might have us gloss over alternative modes of
being on the streets and doing something political. Hence, I argue that we have to extend
our phenomenological vocabulary to account for those alternative political moments on
the street.

    Secondly, as this paper interrogates the vocabulary of action in public spaces, it also
negotiates the concept of the private. Firmly rooted in feminist analyses, most of the
authors I discuss are highly critical of the classic private-public divide, which applies in
their view also to Arendt's ontological distinction. In particular, they take issue with
Arendt's relegation of gendered and racialized difference, as well as biological life
processes, to the private realm, which allows her to posit a public space that is supposedly
'free' from these dimensions. The 'private' thus functions, the critique runs, as politics'
constitutive outside, while Arendt does not allow the distinction to be politicized—a
charge that is motivated by the historical exclusion of women from politics and issues
pertaining to reproductive labor (Butler 2015, 78; Honig 1995; Pitkin 1981; Young-Bruehl
1997). My aim in this paper is not to salvage Arendt from this critique (which would be
rather presumptuous), but to show the ongoing importance of the public-private

distinction, starting from the posters, stickers, and graffiti in Brussels. In different ways, these interventions relate isolated and privatized experiences of violence to patriarchal structures. While these interventions preceded the COVID-19 lockdowns, the rigid enforcement of the public-private divide during the pandemic underlined their importance. Hence, we might want to critically and preliminary hold on to the private-public divide as a heuristic device for understanding the politicization and contestation at work in these interventions.

1. Rethinking assembly

In this section, I follow Arendt's (1998 [1958]) suggestion that protests create spaces of appearance, and, additionally, that these spaces galvanize public support for fighting forms of precarity, inequality, and oppression (Butler 2015; Gago 2020). Put in these terms, street protests raise questions about their duration, as they rely on the physical proximity of people; they also raise concerns about who can and cannot participate in this space of appearance, and in what way, as public space is subject to various forms of policing. More specifically, I investigate these limits of embodied resistance, to develop an account of politics on the street that goes beyond the assembly as a physical gathering.

I want to start by noting the importance of the urban context for this space of appearance. "Only where men [sic] live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them," Arendt argues, "and the foundation of cities, which as city-states have remained paradigmatic for all Western political organization, is therefore indeed the most important material prerequisite for power" (Arendt 1998, 201). Only insofar as people live close to one another do they have the opportunity to convene and act together. The urban space is only made into a *public* space when people physically come together in a collective practice that enacts their freedom, that is, changes the shared conditions under which they live.[4] 'Public' describes a site of collective action, and it is hence not restricted to designated, shared urban spaces: collective action can contest the privatization of common spaces, and it can transform spaces typically considered 'private' into a public space. I am leaving these cases to the side, and stress the embodied aspects of protests in urban spaces. From a phenomenological perspective, particularly significant is "Arendt's insistence on the spatial, physical, and corporeal dimension of political interaction" (Cavarero 2021, 20), or, in other words, the assertion that "the assembly is the *concrete place where words cannot be detached from the body*. Where raising one's voice is to gesture, breathe, sweat, and feel that the words slip and are trapped in the bodies of others" (Gago 2020, 161). This making-public can take many forms: it can be a march or a sit-in; it can involve speeches, chants, and moments of silence; it can revolve around processes of collective decision making and the mundane activities of cooking, eating, and sleeping.

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4 See also Butler 2015, 71.

The space of appearance pertains to individual agents, but also to the world that appears in common. Each of these assemblies provides "a physical space of reciprocal recognition in which those present see and are seen, hear and are heard" (Cavarero 2021, 20). They also have a hermeneutic role, because in gathering, acting, and speaking together, the world is being disclosed: "the assemblies are constituted as a *situated apparatus of collective intelligence"* (Gago 2020, 155). It should be noted that not all forms of physical proximity are instances of assembly (as one is reminded when walking down a busy shopping street), and not all collectives gather to fight against inequality (as one is reminded with the occurrence of far-right marches). What distinguishes these gatherings from the assemblies favoured by Arendt, Butler, Cavarero, Gago, and others is the activity they engage in: regardless of their differences, these authors stress how these protests claim *and* enact a sociality that is horizontal and equal, and that allows for individual uniqueness. The protesters thus bring into being amongst themselves the very modes of being-together that have been denied to them by the state and by wider society.[5]

These assemblies have immense importance for prefiguring a more just society, but are also highly transient. They constitute a space of appearance that "disappears not only with the dispersal of men—as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed— but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves" (Arendt 1998, 199). This transience can be abetted, as Arendt proposes, by institutionalizing spaces for collective action, for instance in the form of a council democracy, or it can be celebrated, as Butler does, by equating their transience with their critical function,[6] or we can think about their recurrence, their non-linear sequence as they pop up, as "a repetition that produces difference" (Gago 2020, 156; see also Arendt 1984, chap. 6). Either way, both Arendt and Butler counter the charge of an assembly's failure by refusing the instrumental logic that underlies criteria of success and failure: while the demands may or may not have been met, the enactment of the new sociality breaks open the future.

To this well-known account of assembly, two crucial correctives have to be made. Firstly, it has to be supplemented with an account of the agency exerted by objects. When a protest emerges, it is conditioned by the specificities of its space. Things such as the width of the street, the shape of a bus stand, the gates around a park condition collective action, but they do not fully determine it. As Butler reminds us, in some cases, the objects that initially impede an assembly can be 'refunctioned' (the term is Brecht's) (Butler 2015, 72): for instance, "the overturned tank that suddenly becomes a platform on which people

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5 In her reflections on the feminist strike in Latin America, Gago elaborates on refusals that simultaneously bring about a new distribution of care: "to stop certain activities, *to free up time and energy* in order to give time and space to others (both existing and those to come)" (Gago 2020, 25); and the strike "condensed in a practice that does not make demands, but rather expresses precisely that desire to change everything" (Gago 2020, 35).

6 An important argument against celebrating their transience is that in order to allow the cultivation of new subjectivities, these democratic experiments have to endure: it is only through such endurance of alternative modes of co-existence that new modes of subjectivation emerge, because these require the acquisition of new routines. See, for instance, Hardt and Negri (2017, xiv).

stand to voice their public opposition to the military, as happened in Cairo in 2009" (Butler 2015, 136). What matters here is the distribution of agency between things and people—the sense in which any given assembly involves human and non-human agency. Butler might not go so far, and neither would Arendt, with both authors suggesting that the material objects are conditions for a sense of action that, for them, is ultimately the prerogative of humans. For instance, after stating that "those material environments are part of the action, and *they themselves act* when they become the support for action" (Butler 2015, 71, my emphasis), Butler seems to shy away from the implications of things exerting agency and oscillates back and forth between this and the more modest—and humanist—claim that things are supports: "Human action depends upon all sorts of supports—it is always supported action. We know (…) that bodily movement is supported and facilitated by nonhuman objects and *their particular capacity for agency*" (Butler 2015, 72, my emphasis). This "particular capacity for agency" is not really expanded on by Butler, but I would like to point here to one way of understanding it, namely, as the agential force of material objects and their ability to induce involuntary 'acts' of the body. Sara Ahmed is the author who, I think, theorizes this interaction between things and people best: objects are not part of a teleological action, in which a subject sets itself a goal that might be impeded or furthered by an object, but rather trigger movements because of its interaction with other objects. I will return to this issue shortly.

The second corrective concerns the access to the space of appearance. Who is permitted to appear in public is restricted by constraints that keep people from participating in assemblies; it is also restricted by norms regulating recognition, as a consequence of which some people are not recognized as the political agents that they are. Arendt has been criticized for disregarding these restrictions: for her, collective action and the exercise of freedom transcend the conditions under which they take place, and as a result, she disregards how space is constituted by power relationships in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault refuses to "dissociate the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves" (Foucault 2000, 356); Arendt focuses on the first, acknowledges the third, but ignores the second. Foucault's reference to "practices of social relations" is particularly useful here, because it is more fine-grained that the vocabulary of inclusion and exclusion, which runs the risk of flattening out the myriad ways in which people are kept out of assemblies. Gago, in her reflection on the feminist strike, gives the example of women wanting to join the strike, but being unable to because they provided food for the neighborhood's children: their inability to join the strike was due to the social relations of dependency in which they found themselves (Gago 2020, 40). Furthermore, the terminology of practices of social relations points to the malleability of these practices: as Gago narrates, the women found a solution by providing raw food, leaving it in pots and pans with notes stuck on them saying that they were on strike. They thus brought attention to their disregarded and undervalued labor, and, as Gago shows, the exclusion of reproductive labor from standard analyses of capitalism. Slightly shifting the emphasis, I am citing this example to stress the objects involved: the food, the doorsteps at which it

was deposited, the notes that accompanied the women's acts. These objects were part of
the women's action, and I already want to hint here in a preliminary way at the
compatibility between assemblies and objects with agency.

What about the restriction effected through norms of recognition? In a passage that is
probably among the most despised in her oeuvre, Arendt comments on the moment
"when the poor, driven by the needs of their bodies, burst onto the scene of the French
Revolution" (Arendt 1984, 59). Read favorably, it points to the way in which politics, in
order to retain its free and undetermined character, should not be directed at
representing socio-economic interests (Cavarero 2021). We should be mindful, however,
of the language of inclusion and exclusion, which the notion of 'recognition' (and its
implied opposite, misrecognition) seems to call for. Critically referencing Arendt's
comment on the masses of the French Revolution, Butler writes that "even after the public
sphere has been defined through their exclusion, they act" (Butler 2015, 81). Their point is
that overstating the 'outside' of politics as a realm of physical necessity wrongly denies
political agency to the excluded. I agree with this point, yet would like to complicate it a
bit further by showing that what is excluded involves a vast and heterogeneous set of
practices. Life, and the bodily needs of food, shelter, and protection from violence, are
implied in politics from the get-go. One way to cast the issue of recognition (a term that
Arendt refrains from using) thus concerns the preservation of (biological) life: what
practices of care unfold in political mobilizations?

This second corrective, centering issues connected to life, seems at first glance to cast
doubt on any attempt to hold on to the private-public divide. The former has multiple
meanings in Arendt's work, and I discern at least five: the private as 1) a space of
deprivation, in negative terms as the place that is not public, defined by subjective
experiences such as sensations and feelings that remain vague and inarticulate; 2) the site
of reproductive labor, which is marked by repetition and necessity; 3) the realm of
domination and violence, especially in antiquity, where the male head of the household
rules violently over his subordinates; 4) the 'dark background' of politics, in which
differences between bodies are affirmed; 5) from modernity onwards, a space of intimacy
and affection, in which one shows oneself in a uniqueness that is diametrically opposed to
the self as it is disclosed in the public domain.[7] While many feminist criticisms have
focused on Arendt's exclusion of labor from the public space, I want to stress the affinity
highlighted by Arendt between labor and violent domination. For her, the private space as
a domain of domination and one of reproductive labor are historically intertwined.
Admittedly, she mostly restricts this notion of the private space to antiquity, but I believe
it resonates with the observation that as feminists have stressed, the contemporary
private space is still pervaded by violence (Federici 2012). Once we acknowledge the

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7 These are interrelated: for instance, the domination of the household served, in Arendt's reading, to liberate
the Greek citizen from laboring for their physical needs; while the bodily difference are the object of the
intimacy and affection. My reading of the private space as a realm of subjective experiences is informed by
Sophie Loidolt's work on Arendt's 'phenomenology of plurality' (2017), as well as my reconstruction of
Arendt's account of romantic love (2018; 2022)

endurance of the link between labor and domination into modernity, we can also see, *pace* Arendt, that romantic and maternal love have been used to mystify and extract care work. Hence, feminist objections notwithstanding, I want to hold on to the idea that there is a phenomenological difference between the public and the private space—a difference that results from (violent) acts of policing and regulation, as well as from the different modes of being-together. An experience that is shared takes on another quality: it becomes more real, as Arendt suggests. An experience that is shared and taken up in an analysis of society transforms both the analysis of society and the person who had that experience; a transformation that consists in "collectively processing the suffering caused by austerity measures and the crisis, by historical and more recent injustices" (Gago 2020, 163). Arendt's public-private distinction and, more specifically, her favoring of the public insofar as it provides a space of contestation that allows for comprehension, points to an important aspect of contemporary struggles against gender- and sexuality-based violence: the way in which it contests the 'private' character of this violence (that is, as taking place in private, and as policing who enters the public space and how one can comport oneself there), and the way in which, by making it a topic for all to see and discuss, new links can be established between these forms of violence.

2. Challenging street harassment

Returning to Brussels, how can we think of the operation of the public-private distinction with regard to feminist posters? Feminism is understood here, following hooks, as "the movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression" (hooks 2000, 33; cited in Ahmed 2016, 5). This radical and comprehensive definition includes but is not restricted to the equality of women: feminism does not represent women in a narrow sense, but struggles for all those who suffer from patriarchy in its many imbrications with capitalism and white supremacy. These posters, insofar as they are feminist, should thus be intersectional and demand radical change. Furthermore, I take it that the groups that put these posters up typically have the form of an assembly, in which the members enact the very sociality that they demand: one free from violence, sexism, and masculine claims to authority. In the following, I want to focus on the visible part of their practice: not the structure of their group but the presence of their posters in public spaces. I use the concept 'public', here, in a less restrictive manner than in the previous section, to include those objects that are open to inspection by a variety of people who are not in a personal relationship with one another. This shift, from a public space defined by the gathering of people to one that also includes objects, is asserted by Arendt herself in 1964, when she redefines the public space as the that "in which all kinds of things appear" (Arendt 1994, 20). These public things do not require the concrete, physical presence of others and that they can be seen as one walks down the streets alone; but what makes them public is that even in this solitary encounter, one knows that the same object can and will be seen by unknown others.[8] In other words, I want to explore

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8 In the following, I follow Arendt's suggestion that these others are mentally represented as friends, that is, concrete others with whom one is in a convivial relationship in which one shares one's unique perspective on the world. However, as I argue in the original paper presented in Paderborn, I believe Arendt's model is less

the issue of public and private from the perspective of the lived experience of those walking down the street, reading those posters. This raises the question, firstly, of the specific scenes of address: what is going on when we read these posters in terms of affect, embodiment, and movement? Focusing on two particular collectives, I ask in this section and the next how these posters navigate the public and private divide. The first collective started with challenging street harassment, while the second emerged in response to cases of domestic violence; each of these collectives, however, eventually deployed a more generalized critique of patriarchal violence. This raises a second question: how do these posters relate to one another, and what are the effects of their proximity? In the final section I suggest that this proximity brings about new links between forms of violence that are often sequestered from one another.

Figure 1. Picture by the author. February 2022

Let's start with the posters that exhort their readers to leave girls alone, 'laisse les filles tranquilles,' which appeared from 2018 onwards. Consisting of a simple white background with black letters, these posters initially targeted street harassment. While the first posters called to leave *les filles* alone, later on they extended the demands to queer and trans people, people of color, and others. Articulating an informal imperative, the posters address passers-by as potential transgressors. The context of this intervention matters. A few years earlier, in 2012, a young Flemish filmmaker had released a short documentary, 'Femme de la rue', in which she walked down the streets of Brussels in a summer dress, recording sexist comments made by men. Its very real and legitimate

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convincing than the one offered by Jean-Paul Sartre in his discussion of seriality, where this very specific 'publicness' involves the presupposition of an abstract other, who is defined by their socio-political position and with whom one hence might be in a relation of antagonism. See Sartre (2004, 274–75)

concern with the impact of this harassment on the freedom of movement of young women
was taken up, but in such a way that street harassment was presented in a stereotypical
and racist manner as the harassment of young, white women by men with migratory
backgrounds. While not unique to Belgium, this presentation of street harassment is
partly due to the typically Belgian tension between the Dutch-speaking Flemish
community that prefers small towns to the capital, and the predominantly French-
speaking city of Brussels, where the former has elected many Flemish nationalists with an
anti-migration (that is, anti-Islam) agenda, and the latter is among the most diverse cities
in the world. With this in mind, we can return to the posters calling on passers-by to leave
girls and other groups alone. In interviews about their action, the collective explicitly
stated their opposition to right-wing narratives reducing street harassment to a problem
caused by migration from 'non-western' countries: they put up their posters in all
neighborhoods, and especially on spots where people are confronted with street
harassment (De Valck 2018; Coutereel and Majecki 2018; Houdmont 2018). The posters
therefore, firstly, contest the various forms of street harassment that impacts people's
movement through the city. Street harassment influences when and how one moves
about, including at what time of the day, whether one is alone or with someone else (and,
if so, whether one holds hands or not), the means of transport, the pace of movement,
one's posture and one's gaze. The posters, in denouncing street harassment, point to a
way of being-on-the-street that is less controlled and more diverse. Secondly, and as a
side effect of wanting to challenge street harassment at the very spot at which it is
happening, the posters function as an archive of sorts: in their denouncement, they
document the—often furtive—acts of harassment that have taken place in that location.

While we could think of these posters as a call, as the interpellative act in which a
police officer yells 'hey you!', they are, of course, silent: they do not involve a voice, and in
contrast to, for instance, chants at a protest, these pasted-on lines are material, and last
after their makers have come together. While they might issue from a physical gathering,
their temporality is thus different from it: dependent on the weather and on the zeal of
the metropolitan cleaning service, they exert their own agency. They also, in important
ways, interact with the material objects of their environment. Not all things are alike, and
the repurposed use-objects discussed by Butler and Gago exert their agency in a different
manner than objects that have texts written on them. I am less interested, however, in
providing different categories of things and their specific interaction with humans, as I
am in their mutual interaction and joined effect on humans. To put it differently: I am
interested in a form of agency that is distributed and irreducible to the intentions of those
who put these objects out there in public. With regard to the posters, the combined effect
is typically an arrest of movement. This arrest might be the aim of the posters (people
slowing their pace to read it), but it could also be a consequence of where it is hung
(opposite a bus stop, at a popular hangout spot, on a busy square). Whatever the reason
for the initial break, our gaze follows the lines and tries to read. This temporality of the
posters is important, I think, for extending our phenomenological vocabulary: as our

bodies stop to move, our eyes start to read, fixing us, however briefly, in a place with respect to the text.

This fixation, in the very best case, is also a critical moment that opens up thinking about what is pointed at in the poster. We could think of this as the Arendtian '*stop* and think,' where our habitual movements and the pursuit of a specific goal are suspended as we engage in reflection.[9] For Arendt, the '*stop* and think' points to the incongruity of thinking and acting: the latter is a collective activity, in which we affirm the concrete reality in which we find ourselves, while the former is a solitary mental activity, in which we take leave from the concretely given world to dwell in a realm of speculation and abstraction (Arendt 2003a, 105; 2003b, 176). City life, as experienced by many women, girls, LGBTQI+, and other minorities is marked by harassment, and our comportment is often a response to actual or anticipated intimidation—our gait, our studied ignorance or cautious glances over our shoulder, the key or phone we hold in our hands. Could the '*stop* and think' point to a negation of that reality? Paraphrasing Butler, I would argue that "this kind of pausing is itself part of action and activism" but importantly "not only, or not exclusively" (Butler 2015, 124). Here, I want to underline its embodied and political dimension: the arrest of habitual movement and the way in which it opens up a movement of thought that is not fully determined. The suspension of movement echoes observations made with regard to the assembly: while the latter is a collective exercise, the '*stop* and think' points toward a similar "appropriation of time [that] is a way of anticipating, a way of stopping to think, stopping in order to imagine. It is a way of suspending our routine to open up another temporality" (Gago 2020, 163).

At the same time, the suspension cannot be enforced. While the explicit addressees of the message are potential harassers, its wider audience consists of everyone who passes by. Indeed, the very people it addresses might also be the least likely to stop and read, while those who do engage with the posters, might, rather, be its message's beneficiaries. The posters are, in other words, objects *in* the street, intervening in interactions that take place *on* the streets. We might ask how this call can be extended beyond street harassment, by demanding a stop to other forms of patriarchal violence. In subsequent years, new series of posters started to emerge. Some used the informal 'you' to address victims of domestic abuse: "ton mec est violent, mais c'est occasional: tu es victim du violence conjugale." Others deployed an imperative that called out the police: "trop de propos de racistes, sexistes, homophobes, violents. La police: on vous voit"; still others called for an end to rape culture, and to "educate your sons better." In other words, these posters widen the set of addressees explicitly targeted, as well as the forms of violence they critique, expanding these to include homophobic and racist violence, and violence perpetrated by individuals as well as by the state. As the line 'laisse les filles tranquilles'

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9 My shift in pronouns, from the unpersonal 'one' to the personal 'we' is intentional, to show how this paper is itself anchored in the experience of harassment. The 'we' does not denote a predefined group, such as woman, but is open-ended, and neither does it presuppose a homogeneous experience of street harassment, which shows variety in degree and kind. For other first-person descriptions of street harassment, see Bartky (1990, 27); Ahmed (2016, 23); Vera-Gray (2016)

started to circulate and appear in new contexts, other posters emerged that may or may not have been posted by the same collective—which does not really matter if we think of the meaning of those posters in terms of their effect rather than their origin. As such, the demands opposing these various other forms of violence are linked to the rather innocuous and hardly contestable demand to leave girls alone.

3. Commemorating the victims of domestic violence

The collective of 'Laisse les filles tranquilles' do not name anyone, either victim or perpetrator. Yet, the streets also have an important role in publicizing these names. In recent years, other posters have started to appear doing exactly that.[10] These posters are similar to those that have appeared in France and elsewhere, where names and words are formed with separate sheets of paper, each depicting one character.

Figure 2. Jill. Picture by the author. May 2020.

Figure 3. Karine. Picture by the author. July 2020.

These posters articulate a critique of feminicide. The term is more comprehensive than the related notion of femicide: the latter refers to the murder of women and girls because they are female, while feminicide stresses "the systematic nature of these killings and the complicity of the institutions of the state and capital" (Federici et al. 2021, 4). 'Feminicide' originated in the analysis of patriarchal, capitalist violence by afro-indigenous feminists

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10 In describing the origin of these and similar initiatives, many news sources cite Paris-based feminists, in particular Marguerite Stern, the former FEMEN activist who opposed trans inclusivity and spoke out against the veil. These latter points are cause for concern and have been explicitly rejected by the initiative that I describe in this paper: "Marguerite Stern a toujours tenu publiquement des propos transphobes, islamophobes et putophobes. Ce n'est pas du féminisme. Et ces propos étaient directement discriminant envers des membres de La Fronde. C'est de l'intolérance déguisée et une insulte gigantesque pour des minorités qui en subissent déjà assez comme ça. On n'a pas besoin d'oppression en plus au sein même de la lutte féministe et entre militant·es" (Cheurfi 2020). In addition, I am hesitant to cite this genealogy, as it reproduces the notion that the French capital takes up a vanguard position vis-à-vis other cities, both within and outside the hexagon, and because the very practice of collage is a collective and often anonymous one (like other practices of street art), and as such is at odds with an individual possessivism that attributes the origin to one single person.

in Latin America mobilizing against precarity and for the survival of their community, and consequently facing violent backlashes from the government, multinationals, and other segments of society. Advancing decolonial and Marxist theories, these movements highlight the manifold conditions of this violence, such as dispossession, coloniality, and socio-economic exploitation. While most murdered women and girls die at the hands of a male (ex-)partner, feminicide also includes the murder of lesbians and trans and non-binary people, and the killing of sex workers, politicians, and leaders of indigenous or environmental movements by people they do not know. The critique of feminicide serves, in other words, to expose firstly that intimate partner violence is not an isolated event, but is rather structural; and secondly, how domestic violence is related to other forms of violence that target women and other feminized bodies.

Returning to Brussels, the feminist collective La Fronde started by pasting the names of victims of intimate partner violence on walls in squares and on streets. These interventions commemorate their deaths, which are often described in the media as 'family tragedies.'[11] The absence of the women is signaled by writing their names largely on the walls, visible from far away and often in busy, central parts of town. Restricted to their first names, these memorials hint at the victims' unicity while their anonymity also conjures up a sense that it could have been anyone. On the right side of the name, on a page the size of one of the characters of the name, a few lines from news articles on the murder are glued, describing the perpetrator, typically a partner or ex-partner, and the abuse that preceded the killing. The posters raise questions about the conditions under which these lethal scenes took place: what are the social and political conditions under which such abuse were able to continue?

These posters straddle the distinction between public and private, showing that these deaths cannot and should not be contained in the depoliticizing category of 'family drama.' They use the streets to publicize the names of the women who have been killed; they condemn the bodily harm committed in the private space, denouncing the perpetrator and the institutions that tolerated the abuse; and they bring out the structural dimension of this violence. If we acknowledge the scale on which feminicide occurs, we could describe these three aspects by using Arendt's response to totalitarianism: "this called not only for lamentation and denunciation but for comprehension" (Arendt 1966, xiv). Lamentation, I suggest with Arendt, is the transformation of grief into a public display of the loss: it is traditionally associated with wailing and raising one's voice in complaint, while nowadays we are more likely to associate it with silent marches and make-shift street memorials. These latter typically accompany high-profile deaths, while in the case of the feminist *colleuses* it is the very invisibility of the murder that calls for its public display. This public display transforms the 'private' character of these murders: it exposes the violence of the private space, and it provides the means by which subjective experiences can be linked to objective conditions. Furthermore, the sheer quantity of

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11 For Belgium, see the blog *Stop Feminicide*. https://stopfeminicide.blogspot.com/

these posters provides a catalogue of acts of violence that thus underscores the structural
dimension of these acts. Ahmed writes:

> To catalogue instances of violence is to create a feminist catalog. (…) the cataloging of
> sexism is necessarily a collective project. The project involves the creation of a virtual
> space [in this case, a physical space, ls] in which we can insert our own individual
> experiences of sexism, sexual violence, or sexual harassment so that we know: that
> this or that incident is not isolated but part of a series of events: a series as a
> structure. (…) We need a deposit system to show the scale of sexism. When there is a
> place to go with these experiences –and feminism is about giving women places to go
> –the accounts tend to come out: a 'drip, drip' becomes a flood. It is like a tap has
> been loosened, allowing what has been held back to flow. Feminism: the releasing of
> a pressure valve. (Ahmed 2016, 30)

While Ahmed does not talk about private or public, I suggest that the 'feminist catalog'
is a public set of objects. Indeed, the *colleuses* transform the streets into a place for
women to go—a place that, as discussed in the previous section, and as many know from
personal experience, is not always the most hospitable to women and other targeted
groups. Notice also how Ahmed refers to collective action: it can consist of forms of
assembly, but also of the serial addition of objects that document experiences of sexism,
sexual violence, and sexual harassment.

In documenting these experiences, the posters also denounce the murder and the
murderer, expressing indignation and righteous anger that this crime has been
committed. The frustrating implication of denouncing a crime is that it allows the
perpetrator to show their identity as it is disclosed through this action, while the victims
might remain anonymous as merely the passive recipient of the blows. The feminist
collective pushed back against such readings, acknowledging the agency of women by
putting up posters with statements such as "elle le quitte, il la tue."[12]

The form of address of these posters is worth noting: just like the posters by Laisse les
filles tranquilles, they express feminist resistance and do not call for the state to
intervene. Such state intervention, or 'carceral feminism,' promulgates the protection of
women (typically restricted to white, cis, privileged women), which is used to justify state
repression of other groups, whether migrant, trans, or sex workers. Such carceral
feminism reinscribes a paternalistic relationship at the heart of the state (Brown 1995,
chap. 7; Butler 2015, 141). Furthermore, abolitionists have stressed that incarceration
disproportionally impacts black and brown communities, while failing to reduce the

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12 Here, as on other points, we are reminded of the extensive work by feminists working in Latin America.
Writing on feminicide in Bolivia, Helen Álvarez of Mujeres Creando writes that "There is no single motive,
but there is a common factor: women's *disobedience*. 'Our dreams are their nightmares,' wrote Mujeres
Creando in one of their graffiti" (Federici et al. eds., 2021, 139).

incidence rate of crime. These arguments have also been raised in the Belgian context, where a general law was proposed to address violence against women and girls. So far, it has been presented as a legal ground for documenting the number of femicides, and part of a more extensive approach to gender- and sexuality-based violence, which includes public services that support victims and perpetrators (Rosa VZW 2023a; 2023b). Such data collection and public service support are much needed, and should also be distinguished from the reflex to turn to criminal law. At the risk of reading too much into the posters, I do believe that their denouncement opens up lines of feminist solidarity that is free from criminalization.

What about comprehension? For Arendt, this term refers to the meaning of historically singular events. The mental activity of thinking is crucial for establishing this meaning. I have already discussed how this mental activity corresponds to the cessation of habitual movement. Here, I would like to stress that thinking a matter through takes the form of an internal dialogue, and while Arendt at times seems to suggest that thinking posits a self-sufficient subject, it is more convincing to think of it as an internal dialogue with friends (Arendt 1990, 85; 2003a, 98). These friends do not have to be physically present: we could, for instance "think of reading feminist books as like making friends" (Ahmed 2016, 31), and the same is true for our encounters with posters, graffiti, flyers, websites, and other objects. These objects do not *do* the thinking, but insofar as we stop and read them, they are props in our thinking process, pointing us to unknown others who are absent, but with whom we can enter into an inner dialogue.

4. A public and collective depository of structural violence

I have been talking about thinking and comprehension, and by way of conclusion, I would like to turn to the manner in which the mere proximity of various posters to one another contributes to that mental activity. The posters I discuss enter into a relationship with each other, combining into what Ahmed aptly calls a feminist catalogue; they also interact with other posters, stickers, graffiti, and street art. Think, for instance, of the tags that denounce police violence and name its victims; or the stickers that call out everyday sexism in the workplace and in education. As we walk past, we ask ourselves if these posters are related, and we might start to ask the more fundamental question: how does this violence relate to that violence? How does violence perpetrated by the state relate to economic exploitation? What alternatives do we have to call out patriarchal, racist violence that do not center the state?

This relation between different posters can also be established by asking who put them up: which collective, identifiable by the design of their interventions? These stylistic genealogies might clarify, as in the case of La Fronde, the political background of these initiatives. They point, importantly, to the collective action being enacted by these collectives. However, political action is not restricted to physical gathering. As the streets are covered with posters by different groups, we see that these initiatives are not

coordinated, but nevertheless 'work together' in order to transform the streets into a site of contestation. Hence, the streets bear witness to a form of action that is initiated by different groups converging in the common direction of a feminist denunciation of violence.

While these interventions in the public space are the results of different collectives, their physical proximity suggests an affinity: as one walks through the city, one may connect *this* form of violence to *that* form of violence. This practice of weaving is in part stimulated by the physical proximity of these various posters, and requires the bodily action of moving through the city. That walk can be a solitary one: we can think back to the pandemic and the lockdown that so heavily impacted our rights to assemble in public, and how the streets were nevertheless sites of politics. It is a walk during which we might briefly pause, for whatever reason, and in that pause take in words and images that set off a train of thoughts. It is also a walk in which we are, even if we are alone, we can enter into an inner dialogue with others that are physically absent.

This thinking exercise starts from concrete experience, but abstracts beyond sense-experience. While Arendt would object to this, I suggest that comprehension involves bringing out the structural dimension of violence, the socio-economic processes that impact everyday life, which in the Belgian context involves such aspects as restricted access to regulated labor markets, the organization of care work, the failing support for asylum seekers, and the underfunding of social welfare services. By asking about the structural dimensions of these acts, we can "produc[e] a political cartography, connecting the threads that make different forms of violence function as interrelated dynamics, [such that we can] denounce the ways their segmentation seeks to enclose us in isolated cells." And, Gago continues, "[s]uch a cartography implies overflowing the confines of violence that make it possible" (Gago 2020, 57). The terms 'domestic violence' and 'street harassment' are not rendered redundant, but denote forms of violence that are connected to others, a weaving practice that Gago discerns in the Latin American feminist strike. This 'cartography,' which was described above using Ahmed's term of a 'feminist catalog', and to which I alluded when describing the archival function of the 'laisse les filles tranquilles' posters, draws lines between events that are often dismissed as unrelated. This structure is tentative and open to revision, as items are added to the catalog and the cartography of violence is extended and redrawn. It requires collective action—people coming together in the streets. But it also requires things, which act with each other and on us; things that have been left there with others whom we do not know and that may trigger us into an inner dialogue with absent friends. Moving beyond the assembly as a physical gathering to also include inanimate objects, we could redefine it to refer to the interaction between physical objects and their passers-by. Seen in this light, the comprehension of the structural dimension of violence involves "an arrangement, an order, a building; an assembly" (Ahmed 2016, 30; also cited in Gago 2020, 176).

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