

From the street to the walls: the “yellow vests” movement in France.

Christian Gerini

Pr. at the University of Toulon, France President of the association “Nouvelles Mémoires”

Email address: ch.gerini@gmail.com

Abstract

The French “yellow vests” movement is a new kind of revolt – nearly a revolution – against the State and financial policies. Since its beginning, the expression of this movement also occurs through what now is referred to as street art. This is a solidarity expressed by artists with the yellow vests revolt, but also a way of being themselves actors of it. It is important too to consider how digital social networks, protest websites and blogs have provided the possibility all around the world to get acquainted with the Gilets Jaunes movement as well as with the works of the urban artists linked to this movement. In addition to that, the digital memory of this ephemeral art or of this revolt in the streets is a matter of urgency. It is of utmost importance to save by that way the historic and artistic works on the walls, quickly erased by State or local authorities.

Keywords: graffiti, street art, yellow vests, gilets jaunes, black lines, French revolt

1. Introduction

The French yellow vests movement (the “Gilets Jaunes”, GJ in the text below) is a new kind of resistance and fighting against the state and financial policies. It's the birth of a revolution, a way to bypass (and criticize) the traditional press - television or written press-, thanks to the digital social networks and instant communication with the smartphones. We will quickly visit the history (since one year) of it in the part 2.

An expression of this "revolt" or of the support that some people show for it occurs through what is now called street art. We will illustrate (part 3), of course without being exhaustive, what forms this presence of street art takes in relation to the GJ movement. One will see for example the great place occupied in it by the Black Lines group. However, the GJ themselves try to make themselves art works or messages that one could classify street art : on walls, but also on their own vests for example (first photo of fig. 1), or in 3D works like we will see in part 3.

We will indicate the connections between these two kinds of revolts (the GJ and the artists) and the reasons why it is also important to consider how digital social

networks, protest websites and blogs have provided the possibility all around the world to get acquainted with the GJ's protest as well as with the urban artists directly or indirectly linked to this movement. In addition, we will demonstrate that the digital memory of this ephemeral art or of this revolt in the streets is a matter of urgency. The crucial question being whether or not are to be saved the historic and artistic memory of the quickly erased walls.



Fig. 1

2. The context

The history of yellow vests began on social networks in spring 2018. Initially, people who do not claim to belong to any political party or trade union, were protesting against the gasoline tax increases announced for January 2019. Therefore, they gathered around the same symbol: the yellow fluorescent vest that every Frenchman is required to have in his own car. The movement grew very quickly on the web.

Jacline Mouraud, a Frenchwoman who was involved since the beginning, called on the French President via a video published on Facebook on October 18th: "What are you doing with the French people's money?", "Where is France going, Mr. Macron?" This video was viewed very quickly more than six million times.

On Facebook, thousands of viewers joined dozens of groups to organize a national mobilization on November 17. This consisted in asking to block roundabouts, roads and shopping malls. There were many gathering points but, it was impossible to know what proportion of the population would move to the streets. The first Saturday of the "yellow vests" began in some cities as early as 6am, soon more than 290,000 demonstrators were presents all over France. The tragic toll was two deaths and more than 500 wounded.

The following week the movement seemed to weaken in the street and the number of GJ decreased: approximately 166,000 people throughout France. Act II however was marked by the first clashes with the police on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. In total, 24 people were injured, including five police officers. Thereafter the "yellow vests" decided to organize themselves, always with the desire not to be associated to any political party or trade union. Spokesmen were then appointed to negotiate with the government and concentrate their demanded on lower taxes, the establishment of a citizens' assembly and shortly after the holding of a popular referendum.

The following Saturdays saw an increase of violence, barricades, burned cars, broken windows and looted shops. This took place mainly on the Champs Élysées and around the Arc de Triomphe in Paris which became a symbol of the movement, as we will see later. However, GJ demonstrators were not necessarily the percipients of this violence. The looters took advantage of the circumstances to destroy and rob.

Despite decisions by the French President and the government to reduce taxes and stricter police measures to discourage demonstrators this movement has continued, primarily Saturdays, although the number of demonstrators has dropped considerably, today around 30,000.



Fig. 2

3. Yellow vests, graffiti and street art.

3.1. Everything, everywhere

Since the start of this protest, messages have appeared on walls or other areas: they are either simple but explicit graffiti, individual or collective mural works that some would classify as "muralism" if made for official commissions. This last sentence leads us to refer to Diego Rivera's murals in Mexico during the 1920s, and more broadly to Mexican muralism. However, the context is different since Rivera's murals were official and now part of Mexico's heritage. At the same time, they expressed political and ideological convictions, "For muralists, for Rivera and Siqueiros at least, walls must provide the possibility to see, understand drive to action." (Plâa, 2008, p.39).

This quote could apply here to the way some street art artists have expressed the GJ movement on walls. The mobilization they encourage is for example strongly expressed in this "Liberté guidant le peuple 2019" (Fig.2), a reinterpretation of Delacroix's masterpiece of 1830 (at the Louvre Museum, Paris) by PBoy in Paris, Aubervilliers Street, painted during the first weekend of January 2019.



Fig. 3

However, this mural was sponsored by a British contractor and is considered a publicity stunt for the artist. This ambiguity is assumed by the artist on his website and in an article of the French newspaper *Le Parisien* (January 10, 2019): "My murals encourage people to form their own opinion without first imposing a speech on them". We are therefore here in the consequence of the "artification" (Heinich & Saphiro,

2012) of the street art and the digital dimension that participated in it, as we pointed it out in the volume N°72 of the scientific journal *Hermes* entitled "The Artist. A Researcher Not Like Other Ones" (Gerini, 2015).



Fig. 4

To counterbalance this aspect of the "artification", here is (Fig. 3) a realization that was certainly inspired by the previous one but due to the demonstrators themselves in the Var (Côte d'Azur, precisely at the Cannet des Maures).



Fig. 5

One can find on the walls many simple phrases like this one (Fig. 4) showing how much the French president is hated by some people in France. We are sorry to show this photo but it is representative of what one can express on the walls with very simple sentences/graffiti. The French president is often targeted by graffiti writers or demonstrators, as here again (Fig. 5) with this "Let us box Macron" tagged on a wall in Toulon, Var, France (April, 2019). He is also considered as the "president of the rich": often sentences denouncing this aspect can be seen on the walls. For example here (Fig. 6) with this "let us sink the yachts, let us eat the rich" written on the portal of a large warehouse for the storage and repair of luxury yachts.



Fig. 6

But one can see on the web many slogans and graffiti. For example on this page were we found the one of the Fig. 7: <https://positivr.fr/gilets-jaunes-slogans-graffitis/>



Fig. 7

Here we are in front of simple things done by the GJ themselves or graffiti writers in many places in France. It is important to show that if one wants to understand this "revolution" and its link with the street artists. The works of art appeared almost at the beginning of the GJ's street demonstrations. If many graffiti since the 60's were done "to keep the name alive" (Fraenkel, 1986), they are today often realized to challenge power and its politics and to say "we exist".

3.2. The Black Lines

In this way, one finds about the GJ on the walls many very radical works, close to muralism as we said earlier, sometimes forbidden, sometimes authorized, but absolutely free in each case. For example those of the Black Lines community. This informal group founded by Itvan and Lask together brings urban artists whose works are essentially claiming and committed against all forms of economic, political or cultural domination. Even if Martin Irvin is largely right when he writes that street art "is a paradigm of hybridity in global visual culture, a post-postmodern genre being defined more by real-time practice than by any sense of unified theory, movement, or message" (Irvin M., 2011), we are here in front of a political and critical intention assumed by the artists who sign on behalf of this group.

For example here it is in Fig. 8 to 11, parts of a collective wall done a few months ago, just before the beginning of the GJ's movement in the streets: some of the artists (their blazes/names are on the Fig. 11) of the Black Lines community denounce here what they consider as violence of the French police against the population or of the local authorities against the district of "La Plaine" where this wall is in Marseille (Fig. 8).

Next are following six photos (Fig. 9 to 14) of the same wall, with many different styles and messages: one of the photos gives us the names (the blazes) of the artists.

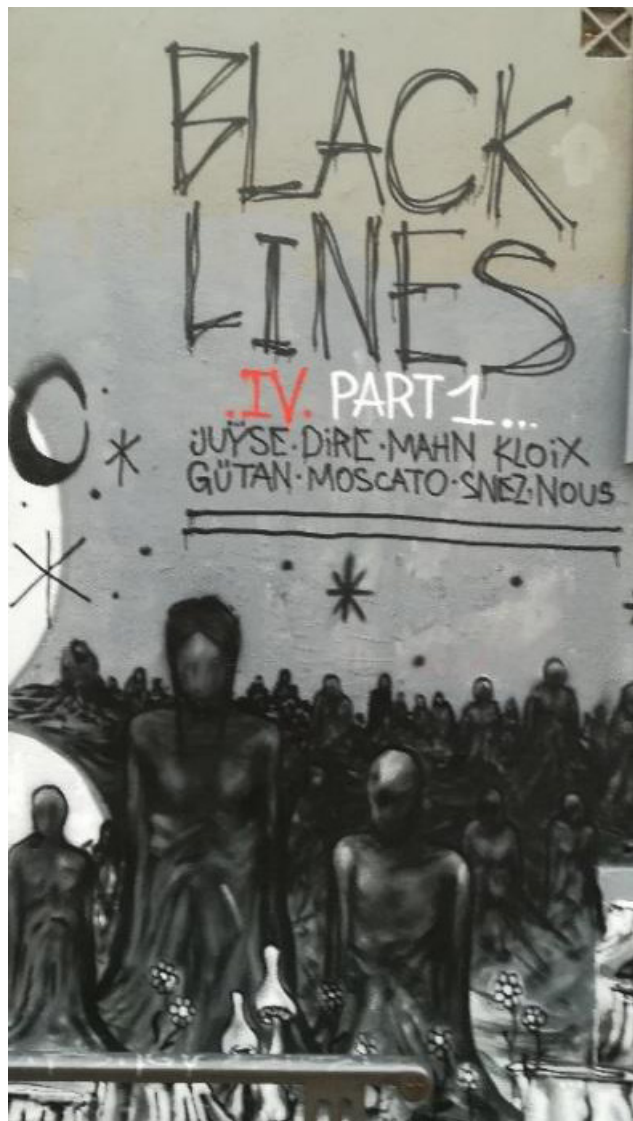


Fig. 8

We are here in a “continuity between... works of art and everyday events, acts and suffering” (Dewey, J., 2005, p.8; quoted by Baldini, A., 2016). It is therefore not surprising to see a large number of them mobilizing for the Yellow Vests, sometimes only on their demands and the violence they are subjected to, sometimes by mixing different causes of struggle.

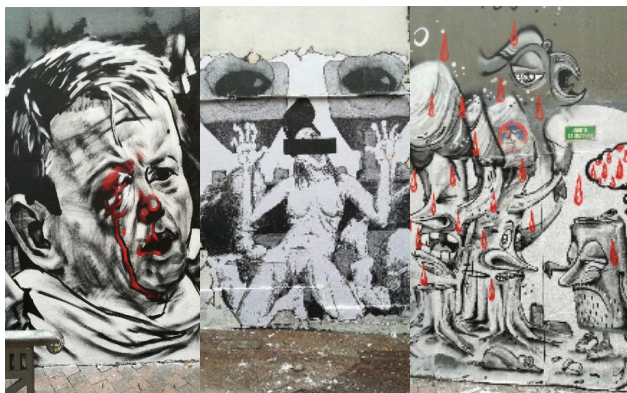


Fig. 9, 10, 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Here is for example (Fig. 15) one of their collective walls in Paris that mixes different fights with those of the GJ: social justice (one of the GJ's claims), climate change (sustainable development of the planet), support for the Algerian and Cameroonian peoples. And a sad reference (the street sign on the left) to Zined Redouane : she was an innocent octogenarian who died following a tear gas canister wound when she was looking from her home at the GJ protestors and the police in a street in Marseille. One can see also on this photo the acronym RIC for Référendum d'Initiative Citoyenne (Citizen Initiative Referendum). One of the main requirements of the GJ. So as well with the Black Lines members as with independent artists all around France and in other countries, the GJ's fighting, the denunciation of the policies of the government and the French president, the strong actions of the police, the injuries of demonstrators and the risks they take. These are expressed on many walls. Here are some examples of the different messages they deliver and the different art styles they offer (Fig.16 to 19). The figure 16 concerns the inequality and injustice felt by people of the working and middle classes in the face of the fortunes held by the rich classes, accomplices according to them of the politic power.

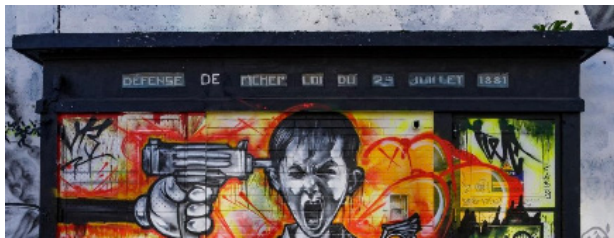
The figure 17 is the portrait of Jérôme Rodriguez, probably an influential personality of the "yellow vests", he was wounded in the eye on Saturday first of December while filming an intervention by the police on Place de la Bastille in Paris.

Many people have been wounded since November 2018 by tear gas grenades and other protection and deterrence weapons used by the French police. This is denounced on the walls in many instances, for example in this portrait of a children with his yellow vest (Fig.18) or this wall in the same street of Paris (Fig. 19), the two ones done by artists of the Black Lines.

One can also see on those walls many writing styles and references to art, comics, etc. So in the Fig. 20.

3.2. Many other artists

Obviously many artists other than those of the Black Lines participated in this artistic mobilization on the walls. Here is (Fig. 21) a very symbolic work of MOZE (his crew is ODC). First because the woman painted in blue, white and red (the colors of the French) is Marianne, French symbol of the French Republic, of the liberty, the equality and the



fraternity an in turn of the French people. She is crying because many people (and MOZE himself) think that at that time we have lost liberty and specially equality. Thus the GJ's movement allows us to find again fraternity (those are the words of the artist himself in a conversation on a DSN, thanks to him). Secondly because Marianne revolts by removing a scotch that had been put on her mouth to keep her quiet and seems to say (on the left): "forbidden to shut up!" Third because of the quote (to the right) of another engaged artist, Sean Heart: "Freedom is taken as life is given: with violence and noise".

Another symbol of their protest movement for the demonstrators is the "Arc de Triomphe" at the top of the "Champs Élysées" in Paris because of the difficult struggle which took place there between them and the police since November. Especially on the first of December when i the monument had been damaged with graffiti by demonstrators. Most importantly because the importance of this monument in the French history. After this event one have seen appear on the walls many paintings where this monument is represented.

But what is surprising about this Arc de Triomphe is to see it built (as well as the Eiffel Tower and the Pyramid of the Louvre Museum) in three dimensions by some GJs themselves in the Var (south of France), in a place they are occupying since December of 2018 (Fig. 22): we are here in front of a 3D street art work.





There are many other works representing the GJ's movement in the whole France. Even as the number of demonstrators decreases every week the urban artists go on fighting for them as if they have adopted this sentence also painted by MOZE (Fig. 23): "We put down nothing!".

4. The "yellow vests' street art", its impact and its safeguard thanks to the web.

It is also important in this study to look at the digital social networks and protest websites and blogs that have made it possible to give to see all around the world this protest by urban artists directly or indirectly linked to the GJ's movement. To preserve the memory of the deleted walls because many of them are quickly deleted by order of the

State or local authorities. The very important presence on the web via the Digital Social Networks, the traditional media websites (Les Inrockuptibles, Médiapart, etc.). The protest or information sites are more than an extension of what is done on the walls.

This is the case, for example, with this video on Youtube, which informs us about the creation of Black Lines and their involvement in the GJ's struggle:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unhzBBp6mVc&feature=share>

One can also see for example the great number of Facebook GJ groups, their thousands of members and followers. What is interesting in regard to dealing with our subject is the link they offer with the representations



of the GJ's movement by the street art. For example, the group Mouvement Gilets Jaunes : 8684 followers, and the banner of the Facebook page is the wall of PBoy we spoke about before. One can verify for example at that page this important number of groups on Facebook : <https://www.pagesgiletsjaunes.fr/gilets-jaunes/> . What is interesting is to see that on every page one finds photos, videos, and art works done by street art artists. Of course the artists have their own pages. Included are their crews or communities with many photos, videos, interviews about what they do on the walls to help the GJ. Obviously this observation is the same on all the digital social networks: Instagram, Tumblr, but also YouTube, Twitter, etc.

It would be interesting to accurately measure the impact of this web presence of the street art on the opinions of the French people about this movement as well as on political and police decisions taken week after week. In

a first approach (we will not go further here because of the maximum space dedicated to an article in the SAUX Journal). It is obvious that this impact is very important when seeing the big number of views and sharing on the DSN and other websites. On the aspect of art history , the database of photos, videos, interviews that we are building since the beginning of the GJ struggle and its illustration by street art works will provide an important digital patrimony for the researchers of the future, as well in history, history of art, sociology, information and communication sciences, etc.

An open conclusion

The web is a major tool for reaching audiences who do not necessarily see the works in situ. Most importantly to ensure the memory (for the historians as well as for the artists and the history of the street art) of those art works,

which are by definition ephemeral. Particularly those dealing with the yellow vests, for example when a wall made by the Black Lines is very quickly erased for obviously political reasons, as it recently occurred with the ones of the street of Aubervilliers and of the Kellermann Boulevard in Paris (Fig. 24).

One must then transform a "heritage as a stock" (photos, videos, etc.) scattered on the web into a "valued heritage", and of course into a "digital heritage" (Treleani, 2016). There is sense of emergency about this digital memory of an ephemeral art as well of the memory of the GJ's movement. One can compare it to the one of the French revolution in 1968 and its representations on the walls at that time. However, we could have mentioned the art on the walls and its impact via the web during the more recent Arabic revolutions.

Thanks to the team of the Nouvelles Mémoires association, a database (photographs, videos, interviews, etc.) is being created. It will be accessible on the web in a few months. In addition, interactive webdocumentaries will also be offered online. This will allow users to complete them and post commentaries.

It will participate to the future necessary works in many fields of scientific researches about that recent kind of art that is the street art, and here more precisely about the ways it shows struggles and resistances on the walls since about fifty years: art history, of course, but also sociology, anthropology, political and social history, etc. It the reason why this conclusion is open. And why we choose to end our text with that quote "Is the spray can mightier than the sword?" (Perry, W., 2011, p.65).

Bibliography

Baldini, A., 2016. Quand les murs de béton muets se transforment en un carnaval de couleur, Cahiers de narratologie, Ed. of Côte d'Azur University, 30, Nice, France. Online :

<https://journals.openedition.org/narratologie/7469#article-7469>

Dewey, J., 2005. Art as experience, Berkley Publications Group, New York.

Fraenkel, B., 1986. La délinquance lettrée des délinquants

de NY, Journal Tribu, N°10, Paris, France, pp. 15-24.

Gerini C., 2015, Le street art, entre institutionnalisation et altérité, in : L'artiste, un chercheur pas comme les autres, Revue HERMES, N° 72, CNRS Éditions, Paris, pp. 103-112.

Irvin, M., 2011 The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture, in :

The Handbook of Visual Culture, 'Heywood, I., & Sandywelle, B, eds.), Berg Publishers, London & New York, p. 237. text extracted from the pre-press version online at: <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/articles/Irvine-WorkontheStreet-1.pdf>

Heinich, N. & Saphiro, R. (Eds), 2012. De l'artification. Enquêtes sur le passage à l'art, Editions de l'EHESS, Paris, France.

Perry, W., The Art of Resistance, in: Arabic Graffiti (Zoghbi, P., ed. and author), From Here To Fame Publishing, Berlin, Germany.

Treleani, M., Qu'est-ce que le patrimoine numérique? Une sémiologie de la circulation des archives. Éditions Le Bord de l'Eau, Lormont, France, 2017.

Acknowledgements

Nadine Darras, photograph :

<https://www.nadinephotos.com/les-gilets-jaunes-ou-gj/>

The Blak Lines and their founders ITVAN KEBADIAN and LASK from their TWE crew

<http://facebook.com/Black-Lines> ,

<https://www.instagram.com/blacklinescommunity>

<http://facebook.com/ltvan.Kebadiann>

<http://facebook.com/Lask.Twecrew> , Instagram [laskthecrew](https://www.instagram.com/laskthecrew)

The artist MOZE (and his crew ODC):

<http://facebook.com/mozeodc>, Instagram [mozeodc](https://www.instagram.com/mozeodc)

The Yellow Vests from the Var, France:

<https://www.facebook.com/Gilets-Jaunes-Coeur-du-Var-320084558586614/>