



Language is material. If psychoanalysis teaches us anything, it's this. The psychological realism of analysis.

Los Angelenos are so inundated by material language that its removal is a line item on the city's annual budget. ~ \$30,000,000 was budgeted in the 2022-2023 fiscal year to the Board of Public Works, which manages the Department of Public Works (DPW), and lists "graffiti removal [*sic*]" as one of its primary functions.<sup>1</sup>

But, funds apportioned for similar purposes can be found throughout the budget. \$330,000 was allotted within the Street Lighting Maintenance Assessment Fund for graffiti removal<sup>2</sup>; Pacific Graffiti Solutions — an LA City Council Community Project, listed in the veritable no man's land of the Nondepartmental Footnotes — was awarded \$25,000<sup>3</sup> (it's worth mentioning here the anachronistically titled *Report No. 1*, dated 10/9/2020, from the Office of Community Beautification (OCB), a subsidiary of the DPW, which lists a "ceiling" to that awarded amount as \$2,000,000)<sup>4</sup>; Graffiti Abatement Strike Teams had \$1,670,000 set aside for similar purposes within the Unappropriated Balance.<sup>5</sup> In total, the OCB requested \$46,500,000 in funding for graffiti removal contracts for the period of July 2020 through June 2023, outlined in a different *Report No. 1*, this one dated 2 months prior.<sup>6</sup>

The LA body politic exerts a considerable effort toward the removal [*sic*] of graffiti. This is a misnomer of course, as painting over something does not remove what is underneath. Erasure leaves its mark *in absentia*: the repressed and its inevitable return.

---

<sup>1</sup> Los Angeles City Council. (2022) *Budget for the Fiscal Year: Beginning July 1, 2022, Ending June 30, 2023*. p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Public Works. (2020) *Report No. 1: Request to Execute Strike Force and Specialty Graffiti Removal Contracts for the Period of July 2020 through June 2023*. p. 1.

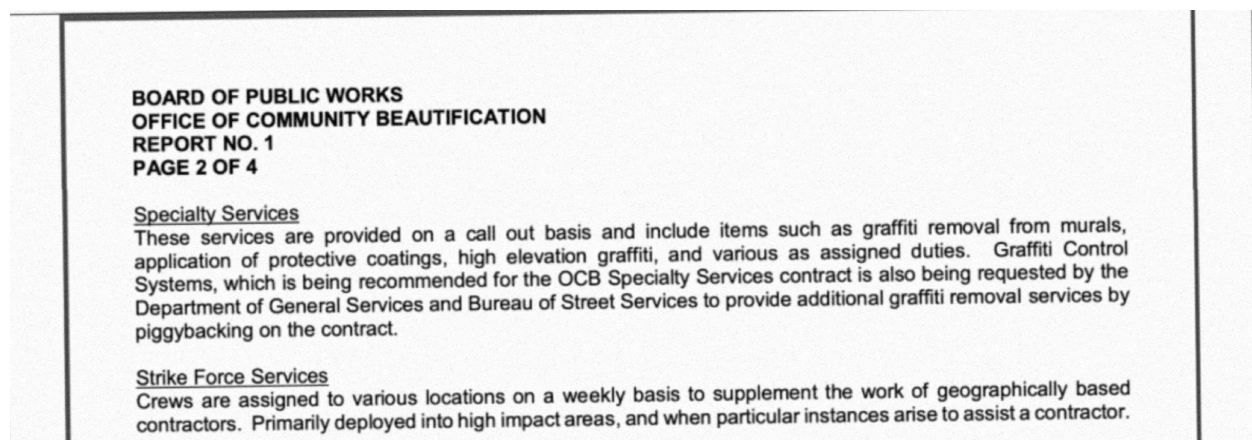
<sup>5</sup> Los Angeles City Council. *Budget for the Fiscal Year*. p. 234.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Public Works. (2020) *Report No. 1: Request to Execute Graffiti Removal Contracts for the Period of July 2020 through June 2023*. p. 2

What is writing if language is material? Freud draws a helpful analogy between the psychic and the physical in *A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad.'* He writes:

To make use of the Mystic Pad, one writes upon the celluloid portion of the covering-sheet which rests on the wax slab. . . On the Mystic Pad the writing vanishes every time the close contact is broken between the paper which receives the stimulus and the wax slab which preserves the impression. . . It is as though the unconscious stretches out feelers. . . towards the external world and hastily withdraws them as soon as they have sampled the excitations coming from it.<sup>7</sup>

Haste is also a key metric for the DPW. The OCB lists the estimated "Percent of Graffiti Removal Requests Completed in 24 hours" as 75% for 2022 (a 2% increase over the previous year's metric).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the OCB boasts a whopping 85% of removal requests as being completed within 48 hours.<sup>9</sup> The (second) *Report No. 1* also offers more insight into this matter under the "Specialty Services" and "Strike Force Services" headings:



I spoke to several employees of the DPW to get a better sense of language's materiality and their roles as emissaries of repression, as feelers of the unconscious being sent out within the metropolitan psyche.

---

<sup>7</sup> Freud, S. (1925) *A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad.'* pp. 229-231

<sup>8</sup> Los Angeles City Council. p. 22

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 22



PH: What did that say before you painted over it?

Mr. A: I don't know. I can't read this shit, I don't think it's really meant to be read.

PH: What's it for then?

A: Just to be seen, just to say they were here.

PH: Who are they?

A: Some dipshit kids, or gangs I guess.

PH: Depends on what they write?

A: Yeah.

PH: Who writes what?

A: Kids'll draw dicks or "Fuck so-and-so" and stuff like that, but gangs have specific tags they use.



PH: What's the worst thing you've ever had to remove?

A: *[laughs]* I'm not sure. . .

PH: Well, I guess you don't really remove it, just paint over it. . .



PH: That's pretty big, how long did it take?

Mr. B: This whole wall probably took me 30 minutes, starting over there and ending here. Or did you mean the tag?

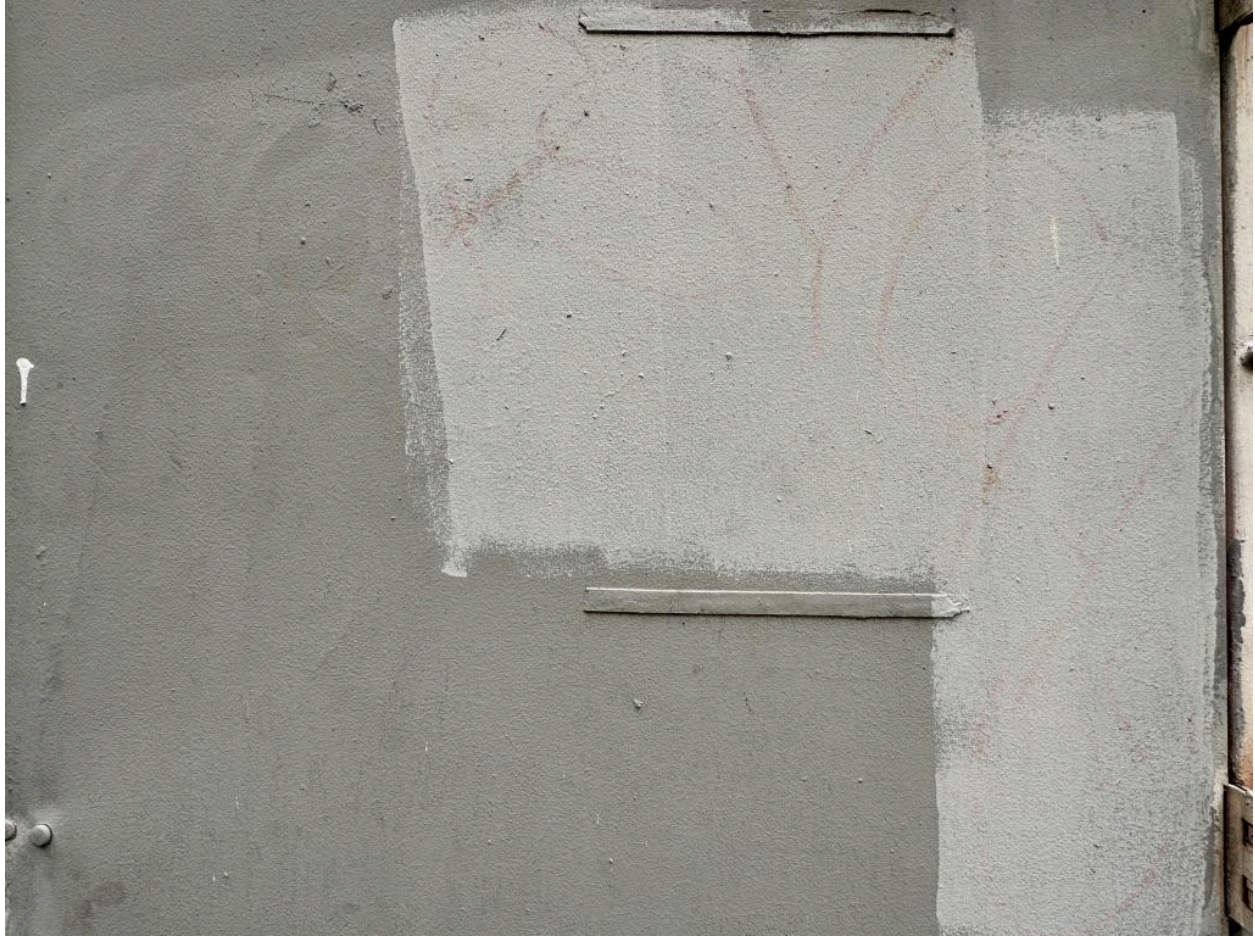
PH: I assume the tag took a lot longer, all the colors and what not.

B: Yeah, but they gotta do it quick so no one sees them.

PH: Do you ever see a tag that you wish you didn't have to paint over?

B: Doesn't matter, there'll be another one thrown up in no time.





PH: I can kinda read that through the paint, huh?

Mr. C: Yeah, I'll hit it again once it dries. I don't have a darker color on me. I don't want to walk all the way back to the truck just to get one.

PH: Does it matter if the paint doesn't match the wall, doesn't that sort of stand out too?

C: I don't think it matters that much, it's cleaner. Better than having whatever that said on it.

PH: What did that say . . . is that a 'P'?

C: [*puts paint roller where I was gesturing*] Don't know, and after this coat no one'll be able to tell.

## References

Freud, S. (1925) *A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'*. In A. Freud (Ed.), J. Strachey (Trans.), *The standard edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. (1923- 1925)* (Vol. XIX, pp. 226–232). Hogarth Press.

Los Angeles City Council. (2022) *Budget for the Fiscal Year: Beginning July 1, 2022, Ending June 30, 2023*. <https://lacontroller.org/budgets/2022-2023/>

Department of Public Works. (2020) *Report No. 1: Request to Execute Graffiti Removal Contracts for the Period of July 2020 through June 2023*.  
<https://cityclerk.lacity.org/councilagenda/AttachmentViewer.ashx?AttachmentID=111180&ItemID=110272>

Department of Public Works. (2020) *Report No. 1: Request to Execute Strike Force and Specialty Graffiti Removal Contracts for the Period of July 2020 through June 2023*.  
<https://cityclerk.lacity.org/CouncilAgenda/AttachmentViewer.ashx?AttachmentID=114377&ItemID=113003>