

Where the Wall Hesitates

“Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”¹

Universities often present themselves as spaces of freedom, critique, and enlightenment. Yet, as Michel Foucault has shown on 02/12/1970², institutions dedicated to knowledge are also institutions of power. The university operates as a disciplinary apparatus: it organizes bodies through schedules and deadlines, regulates movement through corridors and classrooms, and legitimizes certain forms of knowledge while excluding others.³ Power here does not simply repress; it produces subjects who internalize institutional norms and learn to govern themselves.

Architecture plays a central role in this process. For Foucault, space is never neutral: it is one of the primary technologies through which discipline is exercised. Walls, corridors, and interior's structure visibility, circulation, and behaviour. The inner walls of the university — usually blank, clean, and unnoticed — participate in this logic. Their apparent neutrality reflects an institutional desire for order, efficiency, and continuity. The wall functions as a silent surface of control. This resistance begins the moment when that silence is interrupted. What I will be trying to convey here by referring to walls is that, unlike Foucault's Panopticon, which he defines as “...it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use,”⁴ I am not directly

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¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (Thesis V), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 255.

² Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 227.

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). p. 205.

referring to the oppressive power, but rather to the power of to produce and teach knowledge.⁵



image i. Mural under construction.

The artwork⁶ presented here is approached not as a finished object/product but as an unfolding process: A small group of people occupies the inner walls of the university, gradually transforming them through gesture, colour, and collective labour. This intervention does not stand outside institutional power. On the contrary, it exists only because it is permitted, scheduled, and spatially contained by the university itself. Yet, as Foucault reminds us, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”⁷ From this perspective, the mural functions as a form of micro-resistance. It does not aim to overthrow the institution or escape its structures. Instead, it negotiates them from within. The artist work on a surface designed to remain neutral and functional, temporarily reconfiguring its meaning. What is resisted is not authority as such, but the smooth, uninterrupted operation of disciplinary order. In other words, resistance

⁵ The reason I feel the need to draw this distinction is that, in a way that confirms Foucault, the difference between the methods of oppression employed by power and those operating through knowledge is often quite subtle.

⁶ Mural by Hadassah Emmerich, (Langeveld Building: Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2025).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 95.

functions as a shadow of power: wherever there is light (power), the shadow exists, and this shadow cannot be eliminated; only might be controlled. And as we see from the images that I am happy to present, we might have found a way to control it!



image ii. A warning sign in operation.

Moving through the artwork: the act of the mural alters institutional time and space. It slows down circulation, introduces uncertainty, and interrupts routine. Ladders appear in corridors, bodies linger where they are not meant to pause, paint marks the floor. The wall becomes unfinished, unstable — no longer purely administrative, not yet fully absorbed as decoration. In Henri Lefebvre's terms, a space designed as abstract and functional is briefly transformed into a lived space, shaped by bodily practice rather than institutional planning⁸. Crucially, the resistance enacted here is neither heroic nor spectacular. It does not announce itself as rebellion. It is quiet, fragile, and procedural. This paper therefore focuses not on the final image/form on the wall, but on the gestures that produce it: hands holding brushes, bodies leaning into surfaces, moments of coordination, hesitation, coffee breaks, and fatigue. Here, resistance appears not as representation, but as practice. This emphasis resonates with Foucault's broader methodological shift from ideology to practices — from what things mean to what they do. Following Lefebvre's steps: "Space is never produced in the sense that a kilogram of

⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

sugar or yard of cloth is produced. Nor is it an aggregate of the places or locations of such products as sugar, wheat or cloth.”⁹ Which tells us that there should be other elements regarding the producing process of the space. And these elements should be social and dialectic — in a way similar to the understanding of *polis* where space, power, and public life are inseparable.



image iii. Mural under construction in detail.

The photographs that I present operate as a form of counter-memory. Rather than monumentalizing the finished artwork, they archive a moment that will inevitably disappear — once the mural is completed, normalized, or passed without notice. In documenting the unfinished, the images resist the institutional tendency to stabilize meaning and absorb difference. They preserve the moment when order falters and something else briefly emerges. Therefore, it seems crucial to me that always remember and preserve the process of production, in order to illuminate the future. In other words, both resistance and power/knowledge in Foucauldian sense, play a big role in the creation of a work of art. Separating or denouncing one from the other is impossible in this context.

⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 85.

And now, I would like to return to the beginning of the text and give Benjamin the floor again: “Only dialectical images are genuinely historical — that is, not archaic images.”¹⁰ This suggests that the present is always connected to the past, and that this connection takes the form of a continuous process of negation. This paper does not propose art as liberation. It insists on its ambivalence. The artwork exists inside power, not beyond it (I would love to add a “yet” here). Yet within that condition, it opens a small space of negotiation. The wall does not collapse; it hesitates. And in that hesitation, the possibility of sensing and thinking otherwise becomes visible.



image iv. temporary coffee corner in one of the classrooms.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (Thesis V), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 463.