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# THE MIMETIC POWER OF D.C.'S BLACK LIVES MATTER MURAL

*The pavement itself has become part of the protest.*

By Kyle Chayka

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*For the city, the new Black Lives Matter mural is also a blatantly anti-Trump symbol.* Photograph by Julien James

This past Friday, at around 3:30 A.M., staff from the District of Columbia Department of Public Works began painting the stretch of Sixteenth Street directly in front of Lafayette Square, which protesters of police violence had been occupying for days. In bright-yellow road paint, the kind used for street centerlines, they outlined and then filled in fifty-foot, all-capital letters that stretched from sidewalk to sidewalk, over two blocks, that read “Black Lives Matter.” D.C.’s mayor, Muriel Bowser, also renamed the area Black Lives Matter Plaza with a gleaming new road sign, white text on black metal.

That same afternoon, I went down to see what had quickly become the newsiest piece of public art in recent memory. And public art it is—of a very civic, poetically simple, almost brutalist variety. It highlighted the protest with a visual field of color, demarcating a space that now seemed officially sanctioned for the protesters, beyond the reach of the military-police squads that patrolled the surrounding blocks with dun-colored Humvees. You could call the mural a political Instagram trap: the yellow provided a stage for posing and a graphic pattern to enliven the background of selfies. Most protesters still carried cardboard signs, but the mural was an omnipresent sign of its own, the phrase reiterated with every glimpse.

For the city, it is also a blatantly anti-Trump symbol. As you gaze south down Sixteenth Street, the letters merge toward the horizon, until the field of yellow collides with the white structure now hidden behind several layers of fencing and guards, like an arrow identifying the current face of the problem. It also serves to punctuate Bowser's clash with the President last week, after Trump used tear gas to clear protesters from Lafayette Square for the sake of a photo op at St. John's Church. Last week, Bowser also requested that the President pull the National Guard troops that he'd deployed in response to the protests as an occupying force on the streets of D.C. In this sense, the mural might be interpreted as a marker of territory. The mayor's clearest statement of purpose came in a tweet from her chief of staff, John Falcicchio: "There was a dispute this week about whose street this is. Mayor Bowser wanted to make it abundantly clear that this is DC's street."

The idea for the mural was conceived late on Wednesday, when Bowser asked her staff to find a way to reassure protesters that the space would be safe for them, in advance of the larger protests planned for the weekend, Falcicchio told me. Bowser decided to rename the plaza; a mural painted directly on the street would be a way to further highlight the new name, the mayor's office reasoned. The Department of Public Works convened a group of eight local artists involved with its Murals D.C. project, who collectively proposed the "Black Lives Matter" text in yellow. (The artists have decided to stay anonymous.) "I think the mayor liked it because it stood out," Falcicchio said. On Friday morning, the artists directed city workers in outlining the letters, then gave instructions when passersby volunteered to grab paint rollers and help fill them in. A D.C. flag was added after the letters to show that the government was responsible.

The mural has been criticized as a superficial gesture, given Bowser's failings on the very issues the Black Lives Matter movement is fighting for. She has proposed a more than fifty-per-cent increase in the 2021 capital budget for the Metropolitan Police Department; planned to double the size of the cadet program, from a hundred and seven to two hundred; and allocated more than three million dollars to growing the police force in 2021. On Saturday, the D.C. chapter of Black Lives Matter released a statement disavowing the mural as "lip service." "I saw it as a pissing contest between her and Donald Trump," McKayla Wilkes, a criminal-justice-reform activist and candidate in a recent Maryland congressional race, who is black, told me. She first saw news of the mural spreading in viral tweets and news headlines (John Lewis called it "a powerful work of art") but didn't share the enthusiasm. "It's not enough to have a pretty painting in the middle of the street; we need politics," she said. She pointed out that Bowser has explored the idea of building a new jail in D.C.





*Aerial and satellite images downplay the mural's scale; on the street, it is immersive and overwhelming.* Source: Apple Maps

Without action, the mural is window dressing. But the meaning of a public work of art belongs more to its viewers than to its author. Walking across the painted stretch of Sixteenth Street, one experiences it as something deeper than its role as a photo-friendly symbol would suggest. Aerial and satellite images downplay the mural's scale, reducing it to a footnote on the White House. On the street, however, it is immersive and overwhelming, the sharp intersecting angles of the sans-serif letters evoking a massive version of a monochrome Ellsworth Kelly canvas. Standing at street level, a pedestrian never sees the full phrase at once. It's an abstract—not the same as contentless—installation that you have to experience on foot, as a landscape. It reminded me of the artist Robert Irwin's series of sculptures, "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow & Blue," in which large rectangles of primary-colored aluminum lie on the floor and are suspended from the ceiling, an implacable composition.

Such art works generate visual force fields that make us more aware of our bodies in space. (Think, too, of the late Christo's work festooning natural geography or urban monuments with monochromatic fabric, another precedent for art as intervention.) This has always been an accomplishment of minimalist art; in the Black Lives Matter mural, it also speaks to the act of protest itself. The mural reminds us that, by marching these recent weeks, we are using our physical presence in public to communicate, an action that's even more potent given the long isolation of quarantine and the lack of access to art caused by the shuttering of museums.

In the nineteen-sixties, the Brazilian neo-concrete movement also turned abstract art into a disruptive social and political strategy, partly in response to the country's 1964 military coup. Artists like Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape made wearable art works and brightly colored sculptures that were interactive and activated in public performances. In Pape's "Divisor," from 1968, a huge, parachute-like expanse of white cloth was cut through with many small holes. In its début in Rio de Janeiro, dozens of people

poked their heads through the holes at the same time and were briefly united, as well as constrained, by the cloth. The work provided an experience of collectivity, on the street rather than in the rarefied space of a gallery.

By outlining a stretch of public space and making it more welcoming, the Sixteenth Street mural invites interaction: with its letters, its message, and other people. In that way, it's the opposite of another recent monochrome phenomenon, the black squares that took over Instagram last Tuesday, as users attempted to demonstrate solidarity with the protests. The plan badly backfired, when many users tagged their squares #blacklivesmatter, which unwittingly washed out the hashtag and blockaded more useful information. It was a gesture of support that ended up erasing activism rather than championing it. (Hence the speed with which many of the posts were subsequently deleted.)

The moment calls for something more expansive and energizing than negative space. During the 1968 student protests in Paris, a slogan was graffitied on city walls: "Under the paving stones, the beach." An outgrowth of situationist philosophy, it was a reference to the sand that protesters found when they pulled up bricks from the street to throw them: when the illusion of normalcy is shattered, anything is possible, even radical or utopian change. The line sounded in my head as I took in the D.C. mural and the whirl of marching, music, and chanting that unfurled on top of it. The pavement itself had suddenly become part of the protest.

Powerful artwork is generative; it creates more art. The mural is now mimetic. In Raleigh, North Carolina, artists painted "End Racism Now" in yellow on a downtown block in front of the Contemporary Art Museum of Raleigh. In Oakland, protesters painted three blocks near city hall with "Black Lives Matter." And, on Saturday night, protesters in D.C. added to the Sixteenth Street mural, editing the city flag at the end of the text into an equals sign (it was later restored) and writing their own phrase in yellow, so that the final result read "Black Lives Matter = Defund the Police." "It's not something that we agree with," Falcicchio, Bowser's chief of staff, told me, adding, "The mayor's actions speak louder than the words." The fear is precisely that her actions will continue to negate the manifesto emblazoned on her street.

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