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Contemporary Public Arts and the Contested Urban Public Space

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Tijen Tunali

Editor

The new forms of agencies and strategies of urban public arts in the form of interactive sculptures, graffiti, street art, wheat pasting, yarn bombing, stickers, urban gardening, street performances, tactical art, creative campaigns and theatrical actions, among others, demand active spectatorship and have a growing power to renegotiate public space for new forms of participation. This special issue elaborates on the thesis that public art is not merely art in the urban public space but art that institutes a public place—a place of encounter, interaction, dialogue and common action among city dwellers. Our task is to discuss issues of political aesthetics surrounding public art in urban spaces from various theoretical perspectives and with examples from different parts of the world.

The authors test the hypothesis that through the establishment of a certain type of public space, pubic art contributes to the creation of a determined public—a specific audience. How can we establish a multidisciplinary criterion to determine what does and does not count as 'public art' for a democratic urban space? Which potentials, dilemmas and challenges characterize public art's role in transforming urban cultural and social landscape? To what extent can public art increases social empowerment and be an important resource for enabling civil society engagement? Currently, there is a pressing need to challenge the dominant arguments that reduce the complex and contradictory role of public art to a straightforward occurrence in a continuously evolving neoliberal urban landscape. The authors of this issue challenge this view by addressing a variety of social and political faculties of public art in the contested urban space namely citizen participation, cultural cohesion, po-

litical consensus and dissensus, aesthetic domination and resistance, participatory citizenship, artistic resistance and community empowerment.

The issue opens with editor's theoretical article that lays out the claim that every open space is not a democratic space and the plurality of voices does not mean a plurality of discourses and democratic political existence. Tunali discusses why it is important to always take into account the dialectical dimension of the urban space and public art and points to the perils of the 'democratization' of the public space. She alerts us that some public arts are directly commissioned by the government for a more 'democratic city' and there are also those artistic projects that confront government-supported public artworks for the 'democratization' of the urban space, but actually display even more autocratic or exclusionary tendencies. She argues that, despite their radical potential, public arts as the consolidator of political publics, do not simply concede the democratization of the public space. These publics can as well be constituted by neoliberal agendas, and even worse, authoritarianism. In the light of this critical perspective, Tunali asks: What kind of public art can then be appropriate for a democratic public?

Cristina Morraru's theoretical article builds on Tunali's arguments on political aesthetics in the urban public space by discussing the artistic protests. For Morraru in the actual political configuration of the public space, art and protests remain the only non-consensual space of discourse. She argues that protest-art can deconstruct the arguments of formal politics, especially those that aim at globalizing the economy, and it can reveal our current post-political condition in which we approach politics as a suspension of polit-

ical choice followed by a delegation of political decisions to technocratic experts.

Friederike Landau sketches how commissioned public art contributes to making space for historically marginalized communities such as the Chinese-Canadian community in Vancouver. Landau discusses the political implications of public art commissions in Vancouver within a two-dimensional conceptual trope: first, by examining the contours of institutionalized 'politics' of public art, manifest in creative city strategies, cultural planning and policy documents, and second, by unpacking the multiple-layered, socio-spatial, affective and aesthetic dimensions of 'the political' in and of public art.

The organization of public space has always played a central role in the Islamic Republic of Iran and in its management of an Islamic space inhabited by the ideal Muslim citizens. Yet, so far, the visual representation of social roles has focused essentially on the male figure, namely martyrs, national heroes, and religious icons. Rassa Ghaffari's article analyses the female image as represented in the Iranian public space through two media: the official posters, murals and banners sponsored by the Iranian State, and the illicit street art created by young street artists on public walls. She investigates the femininity models conveyed by these kinds of public arts and the functions they are responsible for, focusing on some contradictions and more recent cases. Through her analyses, Ghaffari questions whether these works contrast the state's gender ideology and what are the alternative responses they propose.

Lina Michelkevičė analyses two cases of urban resistance

in Vilnius, Lithuania: Pro-test Lab project from 2005 against the demolition of the Lietuva Cinema, and the activism against a reconstruction project of the Reformist Square from 2018. Both of them were protests against tearing down architectural structures from Soviet times and along with other cases mentioned in the essay may represent the second wave of revisionism over the last fifteen years that has been restructuring the city landscape by cleaning it of Soviet legacy. Michelkevičė investigates in what ways urban protests are able to remake a particular understanding of public space and public interest, what kind of positions cultural professionals take in these disputes, and whether the artist's work may contribute to their efficacy.

Revue Ensable's artists Sreejata Roy and Mrityunjay Chatterjee question the everyday based on two art projects in which dialogue has a central place and is utilized as a central instrument, uses different media forms to creatively express the dynamic of everyday life and its 'uneventfulness.' This philosophical framework pushes back against convenient canonical schemas of what constitutes appropriate subject matter for public art. The two art projects analyzed are located in two different sites in Delhi, and one is in the project Axial Margins-Urdu Park located next to Meena Bazaar and the Jama Masjid. The other project they implemented is called the Museum of Food: A living Heritage, which is located in an urban village, Khirki and HauzRani. This socially engaged art project looks into the journey of food with refugees and asylum seekers to Delhi through creating a space for collective cooking and discussions. With those two socially engaged projects, Revue worked closely with the women in those localities and the artists

tell us that through the daily painting and other activities, those women reclaimed their living space uniquely.

Emre Çetin Gürer's photo essay documents the Monument Lab in Philadelphia, which emerged from the discussions held by Farber and Lum with university students on the subject of public art in 2015.

With his photographs, Gürer shows how the Monument Lab tried to establish a dialogue about the history, reimagining the possibilities for ways to present collective memories in Philadelphia's public spaces through temporary, site-specific works.

Contemporary Public Art and Dialectical Aspects of the 'Democratization' of the Urban Public Space

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1. Introduction

All artistic practices have a political dimension because they play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order but also create challenges to it. The contemporary art world's historic gatekeeper organizations – e.g., auction houses, museums, biennials and fairs, publishing houses, university departments and art schools – located in western Europe and the US since the late-nineteenth-century have derived their continuing power within the capitalist system, that are socio-political, ideological, cultural, aesthetic and economic. Hence, the art world's domination on art's production, dissemination and reception has also been limited and vulnerable to many kinds of social and cultural pressures.

Until the late nineteenth century, there had been no clear definition of public art and built environment. Architects were trained in the same school of sculptors and painters and churches, monasteries, squares, schools, hospitals, bridges, factories, etc. were embedded with paintings, sculptures, carvings, mosaics and ornaments. In the 1990s, we have encountered discussions on the separation between, public art, street art and graffiti, based on their situation as sanctioned or not, how they constitute urban publics and their public functions based on a committed relationship between content and audience. Although the avant-garde modern art contested the perspective that understands aesthetic experience as the disinterested perception of unified form long ago, it is rather a recent phenomenon to acknowledge the sociality of art in the public space as its inherent aesthetic property.

Recently, with what has been described as a 'spatial turn of social theory' (Soja 2008) and 'social turn of art' (Bishop 2006) we witness changes in art's engagement with politics from igniting critical awakening in society to creating communal and egalitarian relations in the public spaces and the spaces of activism. Diversification in socially engaged art, as well as contemporary art's erasure of medium specificity, has prompted artists to establish a more direct dialogue with the public, and in public spaces.

Public art --as art that has an active presence in the urban pubic space characterized by a dynamic becoming and a continuous social exchange-- can give us answers about the manifestations of power and its everyday presence and representation in our urban lives. The role of public art in reconstituting the urban space as one of the defining elements of urban culture renders a twofold role. Public art has been compatible with corporate intervention and state control but we have also witnessed insurgency in the urban public spaces showing how art and emancipatory politics intertwine. Therefore, in looking at art and public space, it is essential to adopt a dialectic and materialist perspective, which acknowledge that public art and public space are two social spheres in dynamic, intertwined and evolving relations with each other and cannot be separated from any other social phenomena in contemporary society and culture.

Urban public space is a complex and multifaceted notion that covers a wide variety of social and public locations, ranging from the street to the squares, from the children's playground to sports facilities, from the neighborhood to

recreational parks. Neoliberal urbanism is driven by political motivations towards using aesthetics as a strategy for private profits that causes the loss of urban public spaces, the exclusion of neighborhood residents from planning decisions and the forced relocation of poorer residents due to rising rent and run-down buildings. On the one hand, contemporary urban space has become increasingly regulated and policed, and is therefore defined by a process of exclusion based on race, gender, class, sexuality, age, disability. At the same time, economic injustices, social exclusion and cultural reifications caused by new urbanism result in the growing praxis of urban social resistances. Urban public space has also become a physical and symbolic ground for political action as a site of protest for the labor movement, women's rights, sexual liberation, racial equality, urban justice, etc. This dialectics of access and exclusion, law and custom, power and protest is one of the defining features of the urban public space. It is in this highly contested space that the art's institutional baggage has been turned inside-out and its sociality is put to test.

The contemporary moment of crisis and insurgence paved the way to the moment of self-representation and self-determination and allowed art to occupy the spaces that politics has so far occupied. Jacques Rancière reminds us: "The more art fills rooms of exhibitions with monumentalized reproductions of the objects and icons of everyday life and commodity culture, the more it goes into the streets and professes to be engaging in a form of social intervention, and the more anticipates and mimics its own effect" (Rancière 2010, p.148). Through unmediated social interaction, public art may lead to greater control over the spatial and social dynamics of the urban space. It can also present us with the possibility of cohesion, sociality and conviviality as desired effects to achieve some degree of social change. This paper discusses why it is important to always take into account the dialectical dimension of the urban space and public art and points to the perils of the 'democratization' of the public space.

2. The contested urban public space
In the time of neoliberal urban redesign and restructuring, when commercial interests gain too much influence over public space, the ultimate result is a destruction of the

sense of shared ownership of that space (that it belongs to the people) and erosion of civic identity. Furthermore, public interaction becomes carefully planned, mediated, and commodified. The strategic principles of urban symbolic economies are made up of a fragmented sprawl of communicative signs and symbols that reproduce the dominant socio-political premises and preferred images of the city. Lefebvre identified this as mastering the representational space, imagined, lived and experienced by *citadins*, the urban dwellers (Lefebvre 1996). Urban public spaces are areas for interaction and encounter but also for self-expression, symbolic affirmation and collective construction of the commons. Official and neoliberal discussions of redevelopment claim to provide urban publics with an accessible and participatory public space while they serve to conceal the privatization and bureaucratization of cities and exclude *citadins*—especially the vulnerable communities such as the working class and migrants from real political debates on the future of their neighborhoods and cities (Tunali 2021). As cities have become centers of economic development, services, knowledge and creativity, they have also become places of social polarization, intercultural confrontations, the concentration of poverty, unemployment and environmental problems. The politics of cultural reification can exploit urban aesthetics and public art as a strategy for social exclusion and the management of the class and other social identities. Public art practice is indeed capable of both inclusive involvements and contributing to lived realities of exclusion.

Today, we encounter a variety of forms and practices of artistic creativity in the urban public space such as monuments, statues, street art, graffiti, public performances, community media, billboards, and interactive installations. Public art is not merely art in the urban public space, but art that institutes a public place – a place of interaction and common action among people. In recent years, with the popularity and influence of Lefebvrian space theory, the study of public art has been more concentrated on the issue of social production of space and the re-appropriation of public space. Along with the sociality of human aesthetic experience in the urban public spaces, how this experience is translated into politics has also been an important inquiry. In Lefebvrian space theory, the individual's everyday life is

adapted to the designed urban space. Power relations configure spaces and, in turn, those spaces act upon and shape the actors effective in those relations. For Lefebvre "Space and the political organization of space express social relations but also react back upon them" (Lefebvre 2003, 25).

The possibility and power for people to shape their city is fundamentally a social, political, historical and aesthetic one. In Harvey's discussion, neo-liberal policies commodify and enclose 'commons', e.g. common property, common knowledge and common resources (Harvey 2008). Recent urban social movements suggest that the reversal of this process can be achieved to a degree through occupation and re-appropriation of streets, squares or state buildings. In his much-celebrated book *Rebel Cities: From Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, Harvey states that, at the heart of the multitudinous diverse urban struggles, there is one collective aim: "to change the world, to change lives and to reinvent the city more after their heart's desire" (Harvey 2012, 25). What Harvey means by this romantic political statement is that to claim power over the process of urbanization entails claiming the power of self-determination over life and the social relations in the city. Elsewhere, Harvey and Potter write that:

> 'the right to the city' is a continuous process shaped by our desire to create a different sociality: The inalienable right to the city rests upon the capacity to force open spaces of the city to protest and contention, to create unmediated public spaces so that the cauldron of urban life can become a catalytic site from which new conceptions and configurations of urban living can be devised and out of which new and less damaging conceptions of rights can be constructed (Harvey and Potter 2009, p. 49).

At the heart of this claim, which both call for and enact a new form of social existence, is the earnest demand for expressive and democratic participation.

3. Antagonisms and dissensus in the spaces of public arts

It is well discussed that public art interacts with and draws attention to often hidden features and qualities of the urban public space and highlights the fact that this is a territory of multiple antagonisms among multiple actors. Recently, there has been a lot of effort from academics, cultural critiques and artists to re-establish the concept of public space as a realm of democratic political debate and public art as work that helps to create this democratic space. For theorists Deutsche, Lefort, Laclau and Mouffe, public space is not a space of consensus, but rather a space of dissent. In their discussions of the political in the urban public space, the mainstream understanding of public art–as art that occupies and designs the urban public space–shifts to an understanding of public art that constitutes urban publics by activating their social capacities and simultaneously engaging them in political debates. Based on this discourse, what is imagined is a plurality of citizen voices and actions that emerge to turn the spectators into conscious agents in the transformation of the public space. Yet, we have also experienced that this recognition of public space and public art as facilitating citizen participation in the urban culture and politics has also been a viable political instrument for municipalities and other governing bodies in the city and social legitimacy of any public space and any public art as 'democratic'.

Public art is always an assertion, a competition for visibility; all the while urban public space is always a place of contestation for power by managing the power of visibility. To be visible is to be known to be recognized, to exist. Recognition is both an internal code within the community of public art practice and the larger social effect sought by the works as acts in public or publically viewable, space. Public art's engagement with the public relies on the redeployments of the dominant image economy and hierarchical distribution of public space on the one hand, and reorganization of what is visible, on the other. This visibility—that is a part of the social symbolic city-life—is often conceived of as conversion or reclamation of public space, or as creative destruc-

tion, wherein wrongly privatized space is returned to its rightful owners (Visconti, Sherry Jr., Borghini and Anderson 2010). For example, unsanctioned public art such as graffiti, and street art, can be seen as moments, gestures, acts of fracture and dissent in the ordinary constructions of the social, moral and spatial order of the city. Yet, if they could have the potential to create an opening in the 'grammar of power' would depend not only on their visibility and dialogical form but their social capacity to make social equality the desired focus of public debate.

Like many of his contemporaries, Rancière thinks of the public space as the social arena where art, individuals and the community come together for a re-composition of the shared sensorium. He uses the concept of 'the police' to describe how power is organized in the public space through institutions and political processes to legitimate the roles and subject positions that people can occupy. According to Rancière, the order of political domination, what he calls 'the police order' always relies on a hierarchical division of the places, roles and functions required in the control of individuals or groups of individuals (Rancière 1995, p. 29, 32, 33). This order of domination is not a top-down imposition on the majority by a few, but it is exercised in the division of space and time that frames our common everyday life. The imposition of the particular sharing of places, roles and functions in the urban public space is also how the *citadin* experience this space and time as "normal" segments of common life. For Rancière, aesthetics is a means of collectivity that forges the entire sensorium of a community by producing a world of audible, visible, exchangeable, communicable, transformable objects, things and experiences. In the configuration of that common social world, 'the police (order)' organizes and commands the distribution of spaces and times, occupations and capacities as a way to create consensus and social hierarchies that make up our perceived social realities, thus it is also an aesthetic order (Ranciere 2010).

For that reason, social resistance as the struggle for space that has been inequitably organized should be at once a political and aesthetic struggle to reinvent new, sensible modes of common spaces, words and appearances. This politicization of ordinary citizens and the reclamation of the

public space of visibility and speech that belong to them paves the way for the democratization of public space. Yet, having the power over visibility and speech is not enough to constitute a democratic and emancipatory public space. For Rancière, emancipatory politics exists "when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999, p.11). It is not just how art can do it but to whom art renders it possible, is the main struggle here. Rancière, wants art to reconfigure the sensorium of common life, yet for this art needs to do more than making visible that is made invisible, audible that has been made inaudible—it needs to rearrange the relationships between people and institutions, urban space and citizens. This radical dis- or re-ordering of the social world, which Rancière, names as 'dissensus' is enacted through an aesthetic redistribution that enables different forms of knowledge and different roles and subjectivities to be expressed in the urban space.

Similar to Rancière, Chantal Mouffe insists on moving away from the desire for consensus and instead of recognizing and accommodating antagonism, which necessarily produces pluralism. Mouffe looks at identity in Derridean terms and writes: "the constitution of an identity is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the resultant two poles–form/matter, essence/accident, black/white, man/woman, and so on" (Mouffe 2005, p.141). Therefore, for Mouffe, antagonism is necessary, for "every identity is relational and [. . .] the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an 'other' that is going to play the role of a 'constitutive outside' (Mouffe 2005: 2). She argues that "cultural and artistic practices could play an important role in the agonistic struggle because they are a privileged terrain for the construction of new subjectivities" (Mouffe 2005). Mouffe and Rancière ascribe to art a unique potential to instigate a disruption in the existing sensory and discursive regime and to contest the emergence of hegemonic consensus. While Mouffe uses agonism and disagreement as an essential component in democratizing social conflicts, for Rancière disensuss is more than agonism. Building upon the Aristotelian idea that politics is based upon the human capacity for speaking and discussing publicly, Rancière explains: "Political dissensus is not a discussion between the

speaking people who would confront their interest and values. It is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as the argument on justice" (Bowman and Stamp 2011, p.2).

We already know that the subaltern could speak but in which ways, where and to whom it speaks matter. In the 1990s, we have witnessed how the instrumentalization and spectacularization of the subaltern voices and visuality became the norm of the exhibition spaces. Now, both in the public space and online space (with blogging and social media) there is enough open space for communication expression and visibility. In 1995, Deleuze foresaw that and wrote: "The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces do not stop people from expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, or even rarer, the thing that might be worth saying" (Deleuze 1995, p.129). What Deleuze wanted us to understand—even before the purge of social media and hypervisibility and audibility –is the privilege of silence. The privilege to have the space and time to remain in silence and have the freedom of non-speech. When the repressive forces dictate a monophonic discourse, the right to not being visible and audible becomes as radical as the freedom of expression for the construction of autonomous subjectivity. Every open space is not a democratic space and the plurality of voices does not mean a plurality of discourses and political existence.

Democratization of the public space through public arts cannot be achieved by merely facilitating plurality and citizen participation. Both concepts 'participation' and 'plurality' have served either the conservative and neoliberal notions of the public space in which political publics are constructed with the unified interests in the name of 'public good' or have fed into the bourgeois conception of the public space where inclusive urbanity still happens on gender, racial and class grounds. For this reason, we should always

be vigilant in recognizing who gets to define and design the public space and public art. We should question, how does public art involve the empowerment of some urban publics and segmentation of others?

In 1981, even before gentrification was established as a concept, Alexander Kluge declared that public space is in fact "a factory for the production of politics" (Kluge 1981). Nancy Fraser warned us three decades ago that in contemporary political discourse, the 'private' and the 'public' "are powerful terms that are frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others ... to restrict the universe of legitimate public contestation" (Fraser 1990, p.73). In her affluent article "Rethinking the Public Sphere," Fraser argued that absorbing the subordinate and the less powerful into a false 'we' in fact, reflect the dominant and the powerful (Fraser 1990, 67). Fraser has been influential since the 1970s with her view that democracy and plural publics require a porous border between civil society and the governmental apparatus and not a surveyed and controlled one. In her much-cited essay, she claimed that even Jürgen Habermas' (1991) definition of 'public sphere' inadvertently reinforces the unfortunate idea that "a system of limited government and laissez-faire capitalism is a necessary precondition for a well-functioning public sphere" (Fraser 1977, p.89). Indeed, Habermas' notion of a public sphere can be understood as an intermediary connector between the state and civil society. In the discourse of 'democratic communities' Fraser's idea of 'counter publics' is still very significant. She unpacks:

> Likewise, under conditions of social equality, the porousness, outer-directedness, and open-mindedness of the publics could promote intercultural communication. After all, the concept of a public presupposes a plurality of perspectives among those who participate within it, thereby allowing for internal differences and antagonisms, and likewise discouraging reified blocs [. . .] All told, then, there do not seem to be any conceptual (as opposed to empirical) barriers to the possibility of a socially egal-

itarian, multi-cultural society that is also a participatory democracy. But this will necessarily be a society with many different publics, including at least one public in which participants can deliberate as peers across lines of difference about policy that concerns them all (Fraser 1990, p. 70).

Democratic communities, as Fraser imagines, do not only debate and improve, but also find new artistic languages and modes of operation that allow for the coexistence of different and constantly competing viewpoints. Can the public spaces in late-capitalist societies allow a public sphere of competing for politics between the one exercised by state apparatus and private domination and the one exalted by 'counter publics' and the anti-capitalist resistance movements? If so, which kind of politics consolidate a public as directly and equally participating agents and which one allows public participation in mere *modus operandi* of institutional design of the urban public space? In what conditions do the contestations between different politics open the way for new forms of public engagement creating 'counter publics' that are resilient to the oppressive practices of exclusion under the veil of participatory parity?

For Rosalyn Deutsche, "the public square remains democratic only insofar as its exclusions [of rival views] are taken into account and open to contestation" (Deutsche 1996, p.289). Deutsche claims that public space is not the unified social entity, It is the site of a dynamic social contest raising issues of authority, control, exclusion and access. Deutsche analyzes the consensus-driven public space as a masculine model that ultimately intends to master difference. As a result, her argument establishes that "public space is produced and structured by conflict" (Deutsche 1996, p.24). For Deutsche, a democratic public space is therefore an 'agonistic' arena that allows for an ongoing contest for audibility and visibility among many adversarial views. Deutsche argues that beyond the ability to be audible and visible it is the ability to question all types of power that is at the heart of our civil rights as free citizens and *citadins*. When this right is threatened, economic, social, technological or environmental consequence, public space loses its functioning as 'belonging to the public'. However, at that very loss, the

opportunity for conflict arises again. While discursive function is lost, the spatial potential for openness and access is not. And art can infiltrate this space and question that dominated space that has been officially ordained as public.

Our cities are filled with public arts that are directly supported by the government for a more democratic city and there are also those artistic projects that confront government-supported public artworks for the 'democratization' of the urban space, but display even more autocratic or exclusionary tendencies. Despite their radical potential, public arts as the consolidator of political publics, do not simply concede the democratization of the public space. These publics can as well be constituted by neoliberal agendas – and even worse authoritarianism. In the light of this critical perspective, another question emerges, what kind of public art can then be appropriate for a democratic public?

Along with these pressing questions that demand urgent answers, we should also consider what kind of public can truly be democratic. A type of public that Iris Marion Young described as "heterogeneous, plural, and playful, [occupying] a place where people witness and appreciate diverse cultural expressions that they do not share and do not fully understand" (Young 1990, p. 237) is the kind of public often desired in the public art discourse and practice. Young articulated the complex diversity, which has replaced the reductive idea of a public, with multiple publics. However, critical attention is needed to understand whether or not these multiple publics can allow the coexistence of diverse political contestations in the urban public space. And also, imperatively, we need to ask, how can the plurality of competing publics be a political and aesthetic reality of the urban public realm in late-capitalist societies?

4. Conclusion
Diversification in socially engaged art, as well as contemporary art's erasure of medium specificity, has prompted artists to establish a more direct dialogue with the public in public spaces. The increasing popularity of public space discourse in contemporary art depends on several factors among which are the occupation of squares in urban social movements and their radical aesthetics, the aestheticization of the urban space for neoliberal urban growth and

renewal, and the spurge of socially engaged public art for citizen participation. People's access to public space and public art has been an important pursuit of artists, cultural workers, NGOs as well as municipalities and policy-makers to achieve some degree of social impact. Thus, it has prompted questions about the instrumentality of art as a tool for hegemonic social policy.

Public art engages the masses through creativity, originality and beauty in the urban space and creates a particular sociality. All this allows it to overcome its function as privileged activity of privileged some and as such gives it the responsibility to inactivate the hegemonic sensory-social order in the urban public space. Either opening up to a consensual and universal perspective of reflection or a dissensual and conflictual form of public opinion, the aesthetic contestations over the democratization of the public space are decisive in both the role and function of public art.

Public space can be a system of places with a precisely defined urban functionality, or it can be a shared space created by people who appropriate it. Thus, public space is the place of both consolidations of power and political subjectivities. The creative and spatial dynamics of the urban space offer us a multi-dimensional perspective to analyze how the dominant modes of power are reproduced and how the marginalized are kept outside the spaces of the performance of power. It can also allow us to recognize and understand public art's dialectical relationship to the 'democratization' of the urban public space both as an instrument to help produce a public space and as a social practice that contests the dominating ideology in that space.

This paper discussed that public art functions dialectically between the aesthetic experience of the public realm by agonistic agents and the framing of a political subjectivization. It proposed to rethink the link between critical visual practices in the urban public spaces and democratic engagement to better understand what kind of publics public art can create and to what ends. It also wished to address the need for a more sustained knowledge and multidisciplinary understanding of what art and artists can do to create democratic spaces, forms and languages in a world devastated by multiple crises.

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The Post-Political Urbanity:
Art and the Contested Public Sphere

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We live in post-political times (Rancière 2004), when the fetishization of urbanity and technocracy creates the context of replacing the usual terms of describing the city with regard to neo-liberal thinking as competitiveness, creativity, sustainability, globality – terms that have been finding their applicability simultaneously, in a material and discursive manner. Thus, the city is being approached in terms of the competitive city, the creative city, the sustainable city, the global city, considering different perspectives over masses and class distinctions, which presuppose a special relation between singularity and universality: a singularity of its proper name – as the post-political city (Swyngedouw, 2010) – and an absolute universality of the action of the masses.

It has been argued that the actions of the masses have constituted a saturation that determined the obsolescence of theorizing in terms of mass and class distinction, and thus we should open the possibilities for a non-expressive conception of political dialectics (Badiou 2005). Art manifestations and protests, as non-expressive configurations of political dialectics, would not signal a circumstantial manifestation of the social contradiction, but it would represent a new way of configuring social action, given that politics are constituted as a space of constant controversies which need recognition, a space of conflict that accepts the need for socio-political reconfiguration (Rancière 2004). In the actual political configuration, art and protests remains the only non-consensual space of discourse. If governance extends beyond-the-State (Swyngedouw 2010), by promoting experts and attesting their incontestability as a substitute for political debates, the symbiosis between art manifes-

tations and protests remains the only medium trusted to bring attention towards the dangers of post-political consensus, which is reconfiguring political power as a rhizomatic diagram of power. Art can deconstruct the arguments of formal politics, especially those that aims at globalizing the economy, and it can revel our current post-political condition in which we approach politics as a suspension of political choice followed by a delegation of political decisions to technocratic experts.

In these circumstances, the end of proper politics is determined by the current neoliberal political strategies that have been implementing consensus at the level of specific governmental techniques. The democratic political consensus, despite its appearances, is radically reactive, anticipating the articulation of conflicting and annihilating divergent trajectories. Outside the consensual order, politics of difference cannot be constituted, which means that the post-political regimes dismiss any dissenting position, ignoring the freedoms and circumventing the individual's possibilities of choice. In this context, unfortunately, the only dissenting manifestations that are noticeable are those of the "traditionalists, stuck in the past, who refuse to accept the inevitability of a new neo-liberal order, or that of the fundamentalists. The only way to respond to them is by sheer violence, by suspending their humanitarian and their democratic rights" (Swyngedouw 2010).

The death of proper politics, the end of the actual political moment, is correlated with the death of the *Polis*, understood in the idealized Greek sense, as a place of public meetings and democratic negotiations, a space for the es-

tablishment of dissident positions, often radical, a place of dissonance and a framework in which political subjectivation is born and configured (Swyngedouw 2010). The post-ideological consensus, criticized by a radical group of post-political theorists, is what reduces proper politics to the status of social administration and determines the establishment of an urban governance, which replaces the rule of law; the articulations of social space through consensual governmental strategies is configuring a zero moment in politics.

This zero moment in politics is considered the starting point in the process of establishing a depoliticized, post-democratic and post-political city. For Rancière, this moment is identified immediately after the collapse of the Soviet system which revealed the precariousness of democracy, despite its triumphant appearance. The politics of identifying formal democracy with liberal economic strategies manifested themselves as consequences of the inherent exhaustion of democratic arguments. The socialist alternatives were dismissed without imposing a renewal of democratic arguments, but, as a substitute, a reduction of democratic life to the management of local consequences of global economic needs was imposed as a common condition – which presented the same solutions, both in right-wing and left-wing politics: the consensus as a supreme democratic value (Rancière 2004).

However, this post-democratic logic betrays a constitutive error: the consensus, seen as the supreme democratic value, the dissolution of counter-arguments and the annulment of dialectical positions between right-wing and left-wing politics is exactly what cancels democracy. In this context, the appeal to liberal arguments, especially regarding economic policies was criticized, despite the popularized opinion that all these new forms of neoliberal governance deepen democracy. This consensual, post-political condition in fact nullifies democracy, and in the end, "perverts and undermines the very foundation of a democratic *Polis*" (Swyngedouw 2010), eliminating politics itself – which involves maintaining the divergences at the level of one's own symbolic space, through dissensual public meetings.

This is how the paradox of democracy is constituted. Although it promises equality, democracy produces a form of "oligarchic government" (Rancière 2012), in which only the illusion of a nation that governs itself, that chooses for itself is created, when, in fact, an institutional governmental minority decides for the people in accordance with their financial strategies and the economic policies they seek to implement. Thus, "governmental arrangements that consensually shapes the city according to the visions, tastes and needs of the transnational economic, political, and cultural elites" (Swyngedouw 2010) are created in dependence to transnational economic strategies appropriated by new regimes of urban governance, which fuse social actors, cultural elites and institutions at an international level.

The post-political urban governance, constituted as a participatory government that delegates decision to technocratic experts and trusts in formal policies determines a public liberation from politics, causing the end of political debates and the agency of political change. Thus, political power is reconfigured at the level of rhizomatic diagrams between the newly established centers of power, namely the non-governmental organizations, social groups, but also private institutions and corporations, determining an institutional arrangement of governance. Erik Swyngedouw understands the post-political urban governance as form of governance that is characterized by a broadening of the sphere of government, although the political space itself is narrowing or even suspending. This is the moment when we feel the need to rethink politics and to evaluate the possibilities of returning to the original values of politics in the sense, specified by Rancière, that of the search for the common good. Hence, even this hypothesis was appropriated by post-political urban governance for which "the return to politics, to the common good, represented an ideal justification of the consensual order" (Rancière 2011). However, the apparent return to politics is, in fact, its liquidation. The democratic political consensus, despite its appearances, is radically reactionary, anticipating the articulation of divergent and conflicting trajectories. Despite the fact that they implemented consensual democratic policies, they brought everything but not peace, however they did search for alternatives to the established urban assemblies and for future possibilities of urban development.

In his article *The Post Political City? De-Politicization or the Insurgent Polis*, Erik Swyngedouw considers that the politics of consensus, by defining a post-political order, are constituted around encouraging a populism that overrides democracy and leads to "ultra-politics of violent disapproval and, ultimately, to the foreclosure of any real spaces of engagement" (Swyngedouw 2007). For Swyngedouw, violence is a natural consequence of this context, in which the leftist arguments of the constitution and maintenance of a commune are reinterpreted in terms of consensus – as a politics that refuses difference –, constituting a cynical, neoliberal and cosmopolitan framework. This is inevitably "the only form of politics which resides from a deconstructionist critique of the impossibility of a genuine radical politics, [which] the neo-liberal elites that assert the impossibility of an urban world, different from what they created [fear of…], clinging on the privileges their institutionalized urban settings generously provide them, radically evacuating proper politics from the urban space, and reducing the polis to a mere city" (Swyngedouw 2011).

Rebellion, in such a context, is exciting even when it can only be instituted at the symbolic level, which is why the artist James Becket proposes an exercise of catharsis, a form releasing tensions through art, as an alternative to establishing a violent political radicalization. Thus, Becket sketches the portraits of important personalities in the field of financial industries, such as: John Rusnak, former economic agent of *Allfirst Bank* and *Aib Group Washington*, or Joseph Cassano, executive director of insurance and former employee of *Aig Financial Products Brooklyn* – these annotations being a constituent part of each portrait. By framing these portraits and arranging them in relation to a stone on which the name of a city was inscribed ⍰ as "the presumable place of crime" (Bailey 2015) ⍰ James Becket realizes the installation *Voodoo Justice for People of Finance* (2013), which was exhibited at the International Hacking Exhibition *Habitat - Art of Control* in Utrecht, and later at the Thessaloniki Biennale in Greece.

Figure 1. James Becket, *Voodoo Justice for People of Finance*, 2013. All rights reserved by the author.

Despite the excesses, incoherencies, violence and contradictions of the contemporary urban order, Swyngedouw identifies a possible solution to contest the consensual order of neoliberal politics and to set up an urban utopia. What Swyngedouw points out is that at the level of all urban incongruities, interstitial spaces of the post-political urban order could be occupied in order to create a new environment for the actual political configuration. Even if the *Polis* – as a space for political expression – is replaced by what neo-liberal thinking promotes as a creative city. The interstices that are undoubtedly constituted in this space, which can only be manifested in conflict, constitutes the materiality of a possible change operable at the level of an intermediary space of a political commitment, which challenges the post-political consensual order. This interstitial space is the place where the utopia of the proper politics can be established.

Occupying this interstitial space is the only way in which a new political order can be built from the inside, thus positioning itself in the impossibility of being excluded, since it is constituted within the consensual space. The post-political condition requires the inclusion of all social actors, institutions and corporations in a pluralistic-consensual order, in which any dissenting position causes the radical exclusion of those who think or want the revolution. However, as Alain Badiou states, forms of insurrection or revolution are not structural effects of the classical conception on revolutionary politics – whose main feature relies on an expressive dialectics –, but there are moments, influenced by certain circumstances. Thus, "the moment, the political struggle, expresses social contradictions. And that is why an insurrection can be purely singular and universal: singular because it is a moment, a pure moment, and universal because finally this moment expresses the generality of the fundamental contradictions (Badiou 2005)."

In other words, the post-political urbanity is based on contradictions – which are taking place worldwide – as consequences of social inequalities, spatial differentiation and irregular urban developments. At the glocal level, the post-political city is fragmented, its contradictions creating "tensions, inconsistencies and exclusions forged through these kaleidoscopic yet incoherent transformations [of the city generating] all kinds of frictions, cracks, cracks, vacant spaces" (Swyngedouw 2010), which are simultaneously within and outside the consensual order of the post-political society.

These vacant spaces – liminal and interstitial – can configure sub-urban relationships, functioning as a rhizomatic system of experimenting with alternative urban possibilities. At the level of these "marginal spaces – [configured from] fragments left unoccupied and non-sutured by the urban police order that regulates, assigns and distributes" (Swyngedouw 2010), new cultural-social practices and new forms of urbanity are emerging. These sub-urban spaces, radically marginal, configure alternatives for the expression of new political agencies ⬚ through the valorization of freedom, hope, desires and promises. In contrast to the globalized order of urban polity, in which transnational relations at the level of capital circulation impose certain conduct of social practices, dictated by the stock market and capital flows, the marginal order of free spaces favors an affective economy and configures hybrid social practices, often at the limit of political exclusion and compromise of social power.

The creativity of these liminal spaces is not measured in terms of capital, although life is emanated, in these interstices, at the creative and imaginative level. However, creativity is not constituted as a neo-liberal value that can be capitalized, but as an attribute of the third space; "a fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency" (Soja, 1996). As Swyngedouw points out, quoting Guy Baeten, this acceptance of sub-urban marginality as the third space acquires a dystopian note in the imaginary of the social elites for whom these "spaces of unchecked and unregulated experimentation reinforce the dystopian imaginary of cities, as places of chaos, disintegration and moral decay" (Swyngedouw 2010).

Contrary to the separatist tendencies of the social elites, these alternative social practices need their own space, not necessarily in order to avoid the establishment of a generalized state of chaos, but because their own development demands attention, recognition and enhancement in their own cultural space – which allows questioning the post-po-

litical condition and evaluating the new status of politics itself –, in the context of radicalizing democratic practices. Also, these new rhizomatic spatial configurations require a different constitution of practices and social relationships, which is why this interstitial space necessitates the recognition of its constituent multiple identity. It is this interstitial social space that allows the political moment to be constituted, in Slavoj Žižek's terms. Insisting on the post-political condition that requires the constitution of the political moment – as a state of political dissension and antagonism –, Žižek differentiates post-politics from *arche*-politics: which is considered as an "attempt to define a traditional, close, organically structured, homogeneous social space that allows for no void in which the political moment could be constituted (*Žižek* 1999)."Trying to exemplify the political moment, Žižek draws an analogy between the moment in which politics itself is constituted, as a phenomenon, in Ancient Greece, and the present moment of post-politics in post-traditional, fragmented and kaleidoscopic societies. Ancient Greece formed the social hierarchy within the *démos*, in which each member defended his privileges – a typical situation, favorable to the establishment of conflict, tensions being usually produced in a structured social body in which each individual recognizes a designated position.

The political moment is constituted, in this case, when we begin to recognize in the public sphere the voice of those whom lack power, those who are usually not represented: the excluded, the ones without a firmly determined place in the social edifice, although they present themselves, paradoxically, as the inhabitants of the whole society, of the true Universality: "we – the 'nothing', not counted in the order –, are the people and we are All against others, who defend only their own privileges" (*Žižek* 1999). This is how, in *Žižek terms, the empty principle of universality is constituted, determining that the social nothingness,* the void, the powerless part of society becomes the one that destabilizes the entire structure of the Universality.

Exploring this situation, the group of Russian artists AES + F are representing a possible urban utopia, in which a shift of power occurred from the privileged ones to those excluded, those who do not have an established position within the social hierarchies. The multi-channel video installation

Inverso Mundus presents a reversal of roles, depicting scenes in which the rich people are asking for money from the poor, women are wearing man's clothes and man are wearing dresses, students are punishing their teachers and pigs are spluttering their butchers. In this regard, the work of art illustrates precisely *the empty principle of universality* theorized by Žižek, insofar as the reversal of roles are destabilizing the internal rules of society.

In this paradigm, recalling Etienne Balibar's concept of *equaliberty*, according to which there should be a principle equality of all those who have the ability to speak, Slavoj Žižek identifies "a short circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a singular which appears as standing for a Universal, destabilizing the natural functional order of relations within the social body" (*Žižek* 1999). At the level of this short-circuit between the Universal and the particular, the political moment is constituted ⬚ a moment successively repudiated by politics of consensus, which propose the suppression of the radicalized marginalization's irregular and unverified interstitial space. This suppression is made, on one hand by the liberal politics, namely the *para-politics*, which neutralizes political space by approaching political conflict in terms of elite competition (Mouffe 2005); and, on the other hand by the Marxist meta-politics that, at the level of some constitutive ambiguities, translate the political conflict – although fully assumed – in the sphere of economic-administrative processes.

The subject of Žižek's thesis, in the context of this discussion, regarding *meta-politics*, *para-politics* and *arche-politics* – as a means of challenging the post-political aspirations – is reinterpreting the thinking of the political philosopher Carl Schmitt in the post-political era. The aim of Slavoj Žižek in his article *Carl Schmitt's in the Age of Post-Politics* was to identify the paradoxes of Schmitt's thinking that are overlaping liberal reasons with critical positions toward liberalism. For Slavoj Žižek, Schmitt betrays his right-wing political orientations, disavowing the actual dimension of the political antagonism [the political moment] and considering politics itself as constituting a social situation that invokes the radical opposition between friend and foe – "no matter how radical it could seem, this opposition is not radical enough, insofar as it already transfers the inherent antago-

Figure 2. *AES+F, Inverso Mundus, 2015.* All rights reserved by the author.

nism, essential to politics, to external relations between us and them" (*Žižek* 1999).

Thus, for Schmitt, politics is shaped at the level of collective forms of identification – us, unlike them –, "the criteria of politics, its *differentia specifica*, is the friend/enemy discrimination, the political being understood only in the context of the ever present possibility of antagonistic friend and enemy grouping, regardless of all the aspects that this possibility – constituted in the realm of decisions, and not of free discussions – implies for morality, aesthetics and economy" (Mouffe 2005). In the current post-political context, Schmitt's *ultra-political* arguments are no longer relevant

and must be countered by appealing to proper politics. However, it is necessary to return to Schmitt's thinking, given that his theories are established as a point of reference in "detecting the deadlocks of post-political liberal tolerance [...and shaping] the form in which the foreclosed political returns to the post-political universe of pluralistic negotiation and consensual regulations" (*Žižek* 1999). Žižek proposes, as a method of resistance to these Schmittian *ultra-politics*, the reactivation of antagonistic instances, relevant for proper politics. Tolerance, compromise of truth or blaming of cultural differences are deficient attitudes in contexts in which part of the "true Universality are not those who preach global tolerance of differences or the

all-encompassing homogeneous unity, but those who engage in a passionate struggle for the assertion the Truth which compels them" (*Žižek* 1999). Thus, the reactivation of the antagonistic instances would not deny the Universality, but it would be substantial for it.

Aware of this political reality, the artist duo Claire Fontaine realize the work: *They Hate Us for Our Freedom*, in which the typical disjunction '*us-they*', defining the Schmittians *ultra-politics*, can be anticipated even from the title. The work, realized in a particular sculptural technique of the artists – practiced in different contexts and with different references to current political realities – represents in a sculptural manner George W. Bush's affirmation following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The sculptural text: *They hate us for our freedom* – an assertion that was used as the title of the exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St.

Louis of Washington – was represented on the wall, as an installation made of matches, which was lit in the opening of the exhibition. The artist duo frequently uses this technique, drawing with burning matches maps of countries, as the United States of America or Italy, with the intention of signaling the imminence of armed conflicts or the precarious security of living in these territories.

The exhibition *They Hate Us for Our Freedom* problematizes the understanding of freedom in liberal societies, discreetly signaling the violence and lack of independence that comes from simply being governed. George W. Bush's statement is constituted in a disjunctive logic of liberal thinking, specific to strategies of exclusion that attests an ideological and economic distance to the Orient, which anticipates the armed conflicts that will follow. The paradox of the Schmitian thought, which associates the consensus of separatist pol-

Figure 3. Claire Fontaine, *They Hate Us for Our Freedom*, 2008. All rights reserved by the author.

itics with a 'friend-enemy' type relationship is accompanied here by another paradox, that one of freedom constitution. George W. Bush affirms a logic of freedom, which arouses hatred and envy towards the American people, but how can freedom be constituted in a state of terror? Where can one find the freedom of a nation that is constantly threatening, and which in turn threatens? What, in the end, is freedom?

The radicalized Schmittian politics, implemented at the level of decisional, non-contextual confrontations between *us and them* are constituted, paradoxically, as a result of identifying the consensus in a specific dynamic for exclusion – us, unlike them –, which makes the rational politics of consensus only partially accomplished. However, this hypothesis, as both Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe point out, is the double paradox of Schmitt's approaches to democratic liberalism – "whose main characteristics, outside of individualism, was the rationalist assumption on the existence of a universal consensus, based on rational arguments" (Mouffe 2005). The consensus cannot be understood through liberal rationalism for the simple reason that each persistent rationalism calls for the irreducibility of denying antagonism. As a consequence, the consensus cannot be reached by liberal politics which are based on relations of exclusion, since these politics are experiencing the circumstances of 'a blindness', specific to the antagonistic dimension, a blindness which does not represent an empirical omission, but a constitutive one.

In conclusion, an urban revolution is the only possible solution to the non-expressive configuration of political dialectics. This possible revolution will not signal a circumstantial manifestation of social contradiction, but it would represent a new way of configuring social action, given that for both, Žižek and Rancière, politics is the space of constant controversies that need recognition, a space of conflict that accepts the need for socio-political reconfiguration, a space where not only the elites are those who dictates social needs, a space where even those who do not have a firmly determined position in social hierarchies are recognized as legitimate partners in political debates – which are not configured as mere competitive assertions of the interests of elites, but as real political struggles for "the recognition of the other as a legitimate, and at the same time legitimizing

partner" (*Žižek* 1999) –, a space of those who are excluded, who are not recognized, who do not represent an instance of power, but who are capable of destructing power from within, according to the *empty principle of universality* in which the particular can destruct the universal.

This new social configuration must recognize conflict as a constituent part of society since true politics are inevitably setting up "a space of contestation in the name of equality […] a space for those who are uncounted and unnamed, not part of the *police*' (symbolic, social or state) order; where they claim their rights to the Polis" (Swyngedouw, 2007). In other words, the urban space requires an opened reconfiguration, an indefinite one, which leaves space for the subsequent requests of each individual, since proper politics are constituting the moment when a particular request is not simply part of negotiating interests, but something that generates a metaphorical condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space. These reconfigurations do not aim at simply including the particular in the Universal, or designating a proper place of the particular in Universal structures, but completely change the existing parameters of politics.

In his work *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology, Žižek* recalls the modern definition of politics as an art of the possible, considering that, in postmodernity, "authentic politics are constituted antithetically as an art of the impossible, given that they change the very parameters of what is considered possible in the existing political constellation" (*Žižek* 2000). Apart from a complex reconfiguration of the current parameters, new consequences of the post-political suppression of politics appear, its exclusion from the symbolic order determining its return in the form of new postmodern racial prejudices. These segregationist prejudices can also be linked to sexual orientation or ethnicity, perfectly fitting into the configuration of a "depoliticized notion of society, in which each particular group is 'accounted for', has its specific status – of a victim – acknowledged through affirmative action or other measures designed to guarantee social justice" (*Žižek* 1998). Thus, the victimization of minorities and protests are utilized in order to ensure compensatory treatment for the injustices.

Figure 4. Jason Lazarus, *Phase 1/Live Archive*, view from the exhibition organized within the Museum of Contemporary Art from Chicago, 2013. All rights reserved by the author.

Starting from the idea of creating a symbiosis between art and protest, the American artist Jason Lazarus identifies a possible form of compensation for the social injustices suffered worldwide: mediating the demands written on protest banners by those excluded, and disseminating them as art. In this sense, the artist selects banners made by protesters of social movements, such as the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa or Occupy Wall Street in America, and displays them in a gallery project called *Phase 1 / Live Archive*, which aims for a re-instrumentation of political protest as a learning approach. This strategy becomes public and has an impact on the public, while evoking Marx's thesis on history, according to which man creates his own history, but not under his chosen conditions (Anita Chari 2015).

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Contentious Walls:
Inscribing Conflicts into Vancouver's Chinatown Murals

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1. Introduction

In diverse cities, dense cities, cities full of different bodies, buildings, and places, artwork in the public realm elicits a variety of reactions: appreciation, awe, celebration, critique, disgust, indifference, outrage, protest, vandalism. The motivation or rationale to install artwork in public spaces ranges from the commitment to commemorate collective grief, loss or trauma (Burk 2006), but also the expression of collective joy, celebration and pride (Sharp et al. 2005). In short, public art appears as a complex trope in urban space (Pollock and Paddison 2010, 2014; Cartiere and Zebracki 2016). Public art encompasses various artistic means and practices, including (but not limited) to sculpture, monuments, audio and light installations, frescos and wall art. Public art can be temporarily or permanently inscribed in public spaces; it can be commissioned by state-led, arms-length or private local actors and agencies. Besides public art commissions, *public* art – or the more encompassing term street art – can take many different unsanctioned creative forms (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017; Ross 2016).

Out of the wealth of artistic media and forms in public spaces, in this article, I focus on murals as forms of public art. I consider murals artistic expressions that are more or less temporarily placed on 'public' walls (even though those can be privately owned). Without going into further detail about the blurry lines between privateness and publicness in urban space, I understand murals as relatively public due to their necessary exposure or outward-orientation towards streets, boulevards, parks, alleys, highways. Murals are often commissioned by local public authorities such as art agencies, neighborhood associations, business improvement areas (BIA), local businesses or real estate devel-opers; but mural art may also emerge (or remain) without permission or license. Briefly, I am interested in the politics that arise from, about and around murals' painted walls (Landau forthcoming). As Caitlin Bruce (2017, p. 226) argues, murals in urban settings "function as nodal points for braiding together more ambient and latent intensities that inhere in a space or neighborhood." Put differently, murals coalesce different pictorial (re)presentations of the past and present memories of places, communities, conflicts; they weld together who is part of a neighborhood (and who is not). In short, murals differently yet significantly shape urban subjectivities and senses of place. Murals can elicit multiple political effects that, on the one hand, have been planned, desired or aspired to by policymakers and commissioners (e.g., brightening and/or beautifying an urban area, highlighting (re)presentations of specific events, groups, information, political messages, etc.). On the other hand, murals also mobilize political discontent that far exceeds the walls from which they radiate or 'speak' into urban space. In sum, I seek to explore murals as a *matter of concern* that brings forth inherent tensions in urban spaces of creativity and politics (Ferrell and Weide 2010; Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017; Gibril 2018).

With the aim to unpack the affective qualities of place (Anderson 2009; Duff 2010) via my cursory discussion of murals, I set out to address the polyvalent effects and affects – or æffects of murals – to capture their constitutive interwovenness (Duncombe 2016). The term æffect points to the interpenetrating meanings and sensations of politics and feelings. Doesn't politics always imply a *feeling* or emotional response, perception, reaction, affective response to the world?

Inspired by affect-attuned understanding of space, I conceptualize space as inherently marked by contingency and conflict (Landau et al. 2021; Landau 2021). As Pierce et al. (2011, p. 60) state with regards to a relationally entangled, conflictual notion of space, "place-contestation is always ongoing, as particular place-frames are tactically deployed toward strategic (though perhaps not always conscious) political aims." Their observation points not only to continuous conflicts in and around spaces. It also gestures to the multiple *politics of place*, imbricated in 'tactical deployment' of political aims. In the context of discussing the æffects that creative, artistic and aesthetic production can evoke in public space, my conflict-oriented understanding of public space aims to detect these multiple politics along the lines of the political difference between 'politics' and 'the political' (Mouffe 2005, 2013; Marchart 2010). In summary, in light of the intertwined politics of space, and spaces of politics (or the political), I encounter public art as a socio-spatial form to study public space as a place to negotiate dissent (Young 1986; Young 2010). Let us set out to encounter art in public spaces as a potential lever to uncover forms of political (dis)enchantment in diverse urban contexts.

Figure 1. *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea,* BAGUA Artist Association. Photograph by the author.

2. Vancouver's Chinatown Murals:
Interconnecting Politics of Place and Community

In the following, I look at murals as forms of public art to substantiate and theoretically develop my conflict- and affect-oriented notion of public space. This exploration of the 'politics of walls' seeks out what such politics look and feel like. By sketching the diverse reactions to a newly commissioned mural in the neighborhood of Chinatown in Vancouver, BC, I capture how the mural makes or *takes* space to (re)present Vancouver's historically marginalized Chinese-Canadian communities. Moreover, by looking at various (more or less subtle) tensions appearing around these walls, public art is marked as an irreducibly conflictual public space. Extending the conceptual framework of conflictual public space – hinging between an affective sense of place and a conflict-attuned politics of space – I engage with one of Vancouver's most recent murals in Chinatown: *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* (Public Art Registry 2019, Figure. 1) by the Vancouver-based artist collective BAGUA Artist Association, consisting of artists Katharine Meng-Yuan Yi, Sean Cao, Xingyue Feng, and Yuan Liu.

The mural is one of four newly commissioned public art pieces in Vancouver's Chinatown which resulted from the city's first-ever *Chinatown Mural Artist Call* (February-September 2019) administered by the local engineering services department. The process was collaboratively carried out together with the City of Vancouver's *Integrated Graffiti Management Program*, the public art department and arms-length organization *Chinatown Transformation Team*. The latter, a small team of four staff members, two co-leads, advisors and a project manager, was established in September 2018 as a result of the City of Vancouver's formal apology for the historical racial discrimination of Chinese Canadians (City of Vancouver 2018).

In this city-initiated process of reconciliation and heritagization, the objectives of the artist call state that commissioned murals, either painted or digitally produced, should aim "to contribute to an enriching public realm in Chinatown for residents and visitors through artwork… to encourage artists to critically think about Chinatown's

living heritage and it's representation in the public realm" (City of Vancouver - Engineering Services 2019). Emphasis is placed on the 'enrichment' or animation of public space. Moreover, the celebration of contemporary urban practices and lifestyles that embody forms of "living heritage" (ibid.) or "intangible heritage" (Heritage BC 2015), which includes the maintaining and experiencing culinary and cultural traditions and customs (e.g., performing and visual arts events, attending parades, festivals or street markets; Chinatown Transformation Team 2019). Briefly, the political objectives articulated in the artist call can be considered in broader debates about the urban politics of navigating cultural, ethnic and economic diversity. Bearing in mind Vancouver's complex urban historical present, couched between spatial crises of affordability, homelessness on the one hand, and financialization and speculation on local real estate on the other, tensions around the ownership and management of urban space have been subject to community-led protests against displacement and upscaling.

Within these tense urban politics of space, there have been multiple attempts at the activation, animation, programming or upscaling of public space. The City of Vancouver entertains diverse public space initiatives, including public-private-partnerships with BIAs and arms-length organizations such as *Viva Vancouver* (see Dillon 2013 for local example of laneway activation). These public space initiatives have been discussed concerning the re-branding and revalorization of laneways for real estate upscaling (Foong Chan and Lade 2020). In the Vancouver context, planning rationale seems to have shifted to a mindset and planning practice that considers "streets as places" to facilitate the results of urban densification (for an overview, see Vancouver Public Space Network 2017). In line with such functional understanding of alleyways to provide usable public space, the *Vancouver Public Space Network*, a citizen-led and self-organized group of planners, architects and community organizers view laneway activation as "tactical activation [is] to demonstrate the potential to rapidly transform unloved laneways into people-friendly places, at low cost" (Vancouver Public Space Network 2017). With a focus on pragmatic parameters such as swift, mobile and low-cost

urban transformation, the associative effects of such 'quick and easy' place-making efforts or 'creativity fixes' (Peck 2009) move to the background (let alone its dissociative effects). While public space activation might be well intended by planners and public-private partnerships, Foong Chan and Lade criticize that:

> ...curated activations of dead spaces may stifle the life or possibility for spontaneity that activation is meant to create. 'Activation' sometimes disables the dialogues, bodies, and voices that do not conform to the image of the beautiful public realm according to those who have the ability to make decisions about the space (Foong Chan and Lade 2020, n. p.).

In short, the 'activation' of assumedly underused public spaces is not always desired and/or desirable, let alone necessary. *Chinatown Transformation Team* cultural planner Belle Cheung expresses her view on alleyway activation in Chinatown as "totally different" from the rest of the city, "because in Chinatown, the alleys are very active. If you are activating it, are you displacing people?" Hence, many public spaces are *already* active, or activated, in ways that planners or BIA managers may choose not to acknowledge.[1] Also, Cheung's question of displacement alludes to the consequences that different assumptions made about the activity or inertia of alley spaces. Public space or alleyway activation necessarily elicits different rationales of why, how or for whom to activate those spaces. Programming initiatives such as the publicly-privately-sponsored *Public Disco Laneway Series* (Public Disco Laneway Series 2019) have realized a fun dance party and cause for celebration to some residents of Vancouver, but for others, that very same initiative meant that they needed to find a new place to sleep, exchange goods or consume drugs.

3. From Politics of the Street to 'the Political' of Alleys

I first engage with the spatial politics of murals, which are often positioned in highly exposed and frequented urban arteries such as shopping streets or boulevards. In a second step, I discuss their spatial 'other', namely backstreets, alleys or laneways. I then introduce the historical roots of the Chi-

1 - Interview of the author with Belle Cheung on March 6, 2020, in Vancouver.

nese myth of the eight immortals and their strikingly contemporary relevance in societies striated by transnational migratory movements and Asian Diasporas (Goh and Wong 2004). Third, to see how this multi-layered spatial and temporal framework of murals plays out on the local grounds of Vancouver's Chinatown, I discuss two incidents that occurred over the course of introducing the *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* in Chinatown's alleys. I explore how – via local authorities' initiative to instruct the painting of walls – the space of the alley has been transformed into a broader space for political commentary. This space was materialized not only by the officially commissioned artwork, but also via an unsolicited graffiti tag. The 'uninvited' artistic expression (i.e., unplanned and unsanctioned) *within* the space of an 'invited' one (i.e., formally planned and funded) thus reveals how the transformation of the hitherto little noted public space of the now-muralized alley surfaced forms of urban division. Discussing the nuances of this ephemeral act, we learn about identity- and place-related tensions that have been simmering (or not) in Chinatown before the mural commission. I conclude by offering conceptual pointers to indicate what the affective politics of murals tell us about the futures of public art in public spaces which come to the fore from back alleys.

I focus on the street as a socio-spatial unit to articulate, make and take space, to express and negotiate political contradictions and tensions. Streets thus can be public spaces or places of everyday urban encounter, of political clash, of temporary communities. In the case of Vancouver's Chinatown, I look to the winding grids of pedestrian streets, rimmed with stores, restaurants, residential buildings, and their spatial counterparts, alleys. As I will show, the newly painted alley where *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* is located, emerged as a contested public space. Judith Butler has crucially coined the term 'politics of the street' to describe movements of bodies in public protest. Similar to street politics (e.g., Bayat 2003), the politics of the street can be broadly defined as the bodily, material and built components of political dissent. Butler (emphasis by the author) argues:

> ...though these movements have depended on the prior existence of pavement, street, and square... it is equally true that the collective actions collect

the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture. As much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly and public speech, we have also to *ask how it is that assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment* (Butler 2018, p. 71).

Indeed, assembling, speaking, walking, protesting, occupying bodies (re)produce the materialities of public spaces. If we considered the making of public art as practices of 'public assembly and public speech', these painting, sketching, etching, spraying, chiseling bodies also formulate or "lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments" (ibid.). While the 'politics of the street' notably invoke different politics in the global South and North (Awan 2020), Butler (2018, p. 85) remarks that the politics of the street become manifest through an engagement with power "a new space is created, a new 'between' of bodies, as it were, that lays claim to existing space through the action of a new alliance, and those bodies are seized and animated by those existing spaces in the very acts by which they reclaim and resignify their meanings." In sum, Butler's account of political expression taking place in the public realm sensibilizes attention to the material and spatial conditions that create new spaces. In addition, she cautions to consider the affective, bodily aspects of these politics of public space. Let us move from the street to its much less considered counterpart, the alley.

While alleys and laneways have long been assumed as inert, dark or dead spaces, they also have the potential to function as neighborhood landscapes (Martin 1996). Landscape architect scholar Michael Martin characterizes alleys as "both fearsome and benevolent" (Martin 1996, pp. 138-39). Moreover, he suggests conceptualizing alleyways via a three-fold framework of alley's hiddenness, revealingness and utility. While Martin's discussion about the true "alleyness" of alleys sits uncomfortably with my non-essentialist and conflict-oriented understanding of space, his framework to capture the socio-spatial exposure and usability of alleys nevertheless proves helpful to discuss the Chinatown

mural in question: With regards to the continuum of hiddenness and revealingness of alleys, how does the location of the BAGUA mural affect the formation of bodies in alliance and encounter? How do degrees of hiddenness and revealingness situate bodies in tension and/or disagreement? With regards to the utility of alleys, how did the commissioned mural contribute to the larger policy and planning rationales to 'enrich' the public realm? And lastly, how is the assumed utility or function of the alley interrupted (or amplified) by the graffiti tag that occurred spontaneously on the mural wall?

Instead of considering "the alley as the repository for untidy services", and the street as "the repository of all that is prescribed, uniform, closely regulated, official, continuous, repetitive, well-behaved, and proper" (Martin 1996, p. 152), the versatile functions of the street and the alleyway require fundamental rethinking. Instead of a binary notion of alleyways – considering streets as tidy and regulated, and alleyways as 'untidy' and thus unruly – the "wealth of odd elements and activities" that take place in alleyways should be foregrounded (Martin 1996, p. 138). Martin concludes that the potential for the emergence of new community spaces can lie in the alley, "in the back, where human relationships among the 'familiar few' are more informal, variable, intimate, and secure" (Martin 1996, p. 152). All the while this fairly hopeful outlook on alleyways seems intriguing, the political implications, or politics of the street, or more concretely, the *politics of the alleyway* need to be considered. Through political difference, I grasp the political implications of the alleyway beyond the politics of the street, to conceptualize spatial politics within broader registers of both the 'politics' and the wider-ranging realm of 'the political' (Mouffe 2005). The logic and practice of politics is roughly assumed to touch upon the routinized, regularized and often normalized practices and procedures of political decision-making and power. The political, in contrast, goes beyond these narrowly prescribed practices of politics: the political emerges from and articulates, in the most diverse forms, the general contestability of any political or social institution. As Chantal Mouffe argues, the political appeals to "the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies" (Mouffe 2005, p. 9).

In light of the manifold opportunities of critical art practice to articulate counter-hegemonic voices, stories and narratives, I propose to look beyond, beneath and below those practices and procedures of 'politics' which are visibly at stake in processes of public art-making (e.g., artist calls, memos, press releases, written communication between different departments of the local state and other private actors engaged in the commissioning of public artwork). My ambition is to push for a broader and more conflict-oriented understanding of the politics and the political that linger in both public space and public art (see Landau 2021, forthcoming). Moreover, when we study alleys as potential public spaces 'animated' by public art via a framework of political difference, the scope of politics is broadened towards a more encompassing view of 'the political'. This space of the political can hold space for the many more actors, places, conflicts, and affects that play a role in determining where and how public art potentially leverages spaces for bodies in alliance, bodies that negotiate a sense of belonging and their place in the city. Concretely, the transformation of the alleyway brought about by Chinatown's *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* mural unfolds a space that both articulates new communities or bodies in alliances, but also novel space(s) that align and misalign existing urban communities. To explore these spatial politics, as discussed, I bounce off from Butler's politics of the street. In addition, I borrow from Imai's (2013) reflections on Japanese urban alleyways called *roji*, who notes that alleyways work as interstitial spaces or boundaries between past and present. In line with this understanding, I consider not only the street as a place of political protest, assembly and artistic articulation, but significantly, also the alleyway as material-affective space of the political.

4. Polyphonic Walls:
Melding Past and Present Migrant Stories

The artist collective BAGUA Artist Association, consisting of Katharine Meng-Yuan Yi, Sean Cao, Xingyue Feng, and Yuan Liu, had applied for the *Chinatown Mural Artist Call* in early 2019, and was shortlisted with their proposal to paint the popular myth of the eight immortals on the side of *Liang You Bookstore*, located on 218 Georgia Street East. While the walls to be painted upon are owned by a private pro-

prietor, the walls face streets and laneways, which are public property. Hence, I wonder whether walls aren't oddly enough always to some extent public due to their inevitable exposure to the public? Without further going into details about the different implications of public or private walls or mural locations (for further reflection, see Merriam 2011), let us focus more closely on the mural's motive and its concurrent political and æffective implications.

The *Eight Immortals* are a remarkably diverse bunch: the myth tells the stories of eight differently-abled and -resourced immortals, including male, female and gender-fluid characters. Amongst them is an elderly immortal, an artist, a saint with mental illness, an immortal associated with death, a designated saint leader, one prince. It becomes apparent that each of the immortals has special capacities and weaknesses; yet they all possess the power to enact good and prevent or destroy evil. Also, often depicted on a vessel and/or surrounded by water, the immortals are emblematic for voyage, travel or as contemporary urban scholars might say, histories of trans-local migration.

In their artist statement, the BAGUA artists refer to the common saying 仙過海, 各顯神通, "eight immortals crossing the sea, each with their prowess" (Public Art Registry 2019). The artists provide a hopeful outlook stating that their mural could "act as a catalyst to re-imagine Vancouver's Chinatown, its history, and its people as the work re-interprets a traditional story in celebration of the real stories of the community members who shaped this neighborhood." Thus, BAGUA interweaves unique, individual stories of migration with its historical continuity and the hardship attached to migratory experiences for centuries. While experiences of transnational movement, arrival and rejection in new cultures constantly shift shapes, challenging both newcomers and resident communities to live together 'with difference' (Valentine 2008). Living with difference not only implies challenges of how to be in physical proximity or contact with diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. More broadly, the idea to live together with and in difference surfaces the question of how both arriving and already residing communities approach new partitions of 'us' and 'them' to reinforce, overcome or embrace difference.

As a gesture towards this urban context of (living with) difference, BAGUA seeks to stimulate inter-generational awareness and learning, to "provide an opportunity to bridge cultures" (Public Art Registry 2019). In an interview, BAGUA artists highlight the relevance of both the pictorial motif and the story of the eight immortals itself: "They [immortals] have so many different metaphors, they sound of Chinatown, of immigration, but they also remind of contemporary issues and people that are living or working in Chinatown."[2] Hence, the artist collective melds stories of past and contemporary migration; historical continuities

of exclusion and potential racial stigmatization. Moreover, the mural projects a space of imagination to interconnect historical, even mythical figures' experiences with resonate with contemporary migrants' struggles to settle into new countries, cities and cultures. Within the political conundrums to engaging with difference, the mural alludes to the shared, yet subjectively experienced trajectories of living with difference. It is in this difference that heterogeneous cultural traditions and norms need to be negotiated amongst diverse urban populations.

5. Inscribing Difference onto Walls

After the proposal of the motif was selected for commission, the artist collective began their extensive painting work in the summer of 2019 on the assigned location on

2   - Interview of the author with BAGUA artists on February 25, 2020, in Vancouver.

Figure 2. Graffiti tag on *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea*, photograph courtesy of BAGUA Artist Association. Photograph by the author.

the sidewall of the local *Liang You Bookstore*, on Georgia Street. While the choice of location has not been explicitly criticized by the commissioned artists, they describe the designated alleyway as "quite scary…a bit grungy…there was trash and needles" (ibid.). In light of Chinatown's adjacent neighborhood, the Downtown Eastside, (in)famous for large populations of persons without a fixed home, and persons who use drugs and other substances, this description aligns descriptions of the Downtown Eastside's sense of place oscillating between risk and safety, marginalization and harm (Robertson 2007; Ivsins et al. 2019).

Throughout the meticulous production process, the first-time muralists covered their daily progress under plastic sheets. One morning upon returning to work, the BAGUA artists encountered a graffiti inscription with the tag "Refugees welcome" on their mural site (Figure 2). This unanticipated interjection mobilizes what Bruce (2019, p. 161) calls an "open space with a resonant history", or maybe, a resonating space altogether. The graffiti tag encapsulates one of the main public messages of global movements of predominantly Left-Wing refugee activists, who circulate hashtags such as #RefugeesWelcome or #LeaveNoOneBehind worldwide. One BAGUA artist reflects on the graffiti incident as follows:

> While we were working on our mural, one morning, we arrived at the site to find our mural vandalized. Huge black letters that wrote "Refugees Welcome!" were sprayed across the waves that we had just painted the previous day. It's ironic how our mural, which was our way to celebrate and acknowledge the diversity of people that shape our community, and the history of difficulties and adversities one had to face and overcome to flee and migrate to Vancouver Chinatown – the place they now call home – was vandalized by words that are coherent to our subject (November 30, 2020).[3]

While the quotation quite clearly situates the graffiti tag as 'vandalism', the mural artists' response also speaks of the

3 - Interview of the author with BAGUA artists on November 30, 2020, in Berlin.

paradox that the commentary inscribed via the tag reinforced some of the artists' intentions. Based on the artists' self-described motivation to project the eight immortals as a display and celebration of both past and present diversity, difference and migratory struggle, the graffiti does interrupt the planned (and commissioned!) artwork in some ways, but also amplifies or affirms its political message in other ways. Could it be considered as a contentious form of political participation (Waldner and Dobratz 2013), or even a claim towards spatial justice (Bengtsen and Arvidsson 2014)?

It is worth noting that the painted wall at that stage did not yet show the immortal characters, but merely the ocean waves and sky. Hence, when the graffiti writers (who remain anonymous to this day) encountered the canvas somebody else had visibly prepared for a larger work, they could not have anticipated the full motif. In that sense, the mural wall was still 'empty' to some degree (hinting in the least at a bright oceanic scenario), but not peopled, not populated. Hence, it remains unclear what the graffiti writers were intending to intervene *into* or comment *on*. This intervention into a tendentially empty canvas considerably sets the action aside from other types of graffiti, which openly and explicitly tag *over* finished public artworks, thus more clearly ringing the bells of violating a code of conduct to leave street artists' work intact, be it murals or other graffiti work (Jupiterfab 2020).

Briefly, it matters that *this* wall was tagged. It also matters that the wall was unfinished in discussing the multiple political and affective effects of the mural. In line with these site-specific politics of place, Awan notes that "places where offerings are left or the walls where messages are written are not picked at random, instead they emerge through particular social and spatial relations. For example, a place to write controversial messages has to be both discrete enough and public enough to be worth risking oneself" (Awan 2020, p. 15). Still unable to detect the writers' rationale for the siting of their tag, I wonder: If the wall hadn't been prepped to be covered with a mural, would it not have attracted the graffiti writers? Or the most burning question, to me personally – would this tag have been there at all if the writers would have known about the planned

motif to go up? Ultimately, did they ever see the finished piece by BAGUA?

In Jean Baudrillard's work, we find a crucial indication that graffiti give a "wild mobility to walls" (Baudrillard 1978, p. 29) and his proposition that graffiti "territorializes the empty space of the city." While, again, the to-be-muralized wall was not completely empty, but set up for a sanctioned artistic appropriation of the wall, the uncontrollable and mobilizing aspects of graffiti come to the fore (or the back of the alley). In other words, while the graffiti was unexpected and unsolicited, it also mo(ti)v(at)ed the BAGUA artists to change course in their artistic alleyway production. Curiously, Baudrillard's (1978, p. 101) understanding of the street might also suit the context of the alley mural – considering the street as "the alternative and subversive form of all mass media … which is not objectivized carrier of messages without reply … but a free space of symbolical exchange of ephemeral and mortal speech." The equivocation of 'mortal' speech, or the street as the stage for such always-transitory speech, also suits to describe the mortality of street art, or murals in particular. Mind you, the Chinatown murals have only been commissioned for two years (2019-2021), despite policymakers explicitly stated the goal for the murals to "help conserve Chinatown's living culture and heritage" (City of Vancouver - Engineering Services 2019). Together with Baudrillard's reference to the mortality of speech, or extrapolated to our context, the fleetingness of street art, including murals, the metaphor of morality encapsulates the precarious temporality of art in urban spaces. In this temporal and spatial limbo, the BAGUA artists responded to the graffiti tag by incorporating it into their own artwork:

> We did not clean off the tag, instead, we painted the eight immortals on top of it, the characters in whom we see representations to real people that had crossed the sea, who arrived Chinatown and took root in this community from all over the world (November 16, 2021).[4]

BAGUA's collective response to subsume the graffiti tag rather than intentionally erase it reveals the mural and its wall as a palimpsest in which different meanings, voices and messages reside. While the finished mural does not visibly show or carry the tag (Figure. 1), the resolution of the graffiti incidence, or encounter with another artistic form in that very wall appears less confrontational than city-led graffiti abatement policies. Generally, the city of encourages and co-funds murals as part of their approach to 'graffiti management' (City of Vancouver - Home, property and development 2020).

In comparison, social planner David Lewis, the City's *Integrated Graffiti Management Program* emphasizes one of murals' functions to abate graffiti: "The mural part, for us, is seen as both animating public space but also hopefully abating graffiti at the same time, with a whole bunch of other goals."[5] The quotation reveals quite a number of expectations placed onto murals to increase the social and aesthetic quality of public spaces, including streets and alleys. This attitude aligns with the existing policy rationale, which seeks to commission murals to prevent graffiti (Craw et al. 2006). Moreover, Craw et al. refer to earlier studies, which argue that graffiti occurs in urban contexts striated by segregation and social conflict. In the local context of Vancouver, Lewis also points to the ambivalent interrelation between murals and graffiti: "I don't know if murals would necessarily attract graffiti. I guess it partly depends on what the intent behind the murals are." This statement destabilizes the wide-spread claim that murals can 'effectively' deter graffiti, circulating amongst public art planning agencies and mural (co-)funders such as BIAs. In my interview with them, the BAGUA artists stated that they perceived the City as somewhat helpless in how to handle graffiti. When BAGUA approached the responsible department, the artists remember.

> We had to ask the City: How do we deal with situations like this? The City doesn't have a good answer either. They don't have a way to resolve it. They only told us: 'You have to paint quicker.' We had to put up plastic sheets every day after we finished. It's ac-

4 - Interview of the author with BAGUA artists on November 30, 2020, in Berlin.

5 - Interview of the author with David Lewis, March 11, 2020, in Vancouver.

tually funny, because the mural project, I think the city is doing this to prevent graffiti in Chinatown. The way it works is that people don't normally tag or vandalize finished artwork on a street (February 25, 2020).

While the artists reflect on the expected goal for murals to help alleviate graffiti 'vandalism', they also show suspicion on whether and how this function of murals can matter-of-factly be accomplished. Their reference to "the way it works" shows the subtlety of this potential effect, but certainly shows that there is no guarantee for murals to precisely leverage this æffect. Part of this assumed causality between murals and graffiti, which functionalizes murals as a beautifying cleanser of public space rather than artistic form in its own right, is further based on the assumption that graffiti is inherently a problem or nuisance. While Baudrillard (1978, p. 31) is skeptical about the political æffects of commissioned murals, and suspects that murals will "precede" and "outlive" graffiti, this hierarchical temporal relation can also be reversed – by being incorporated or dissolved into the mural (notably, at the expense of losing its explicit or public visibility), doesn't the graffiti in some ways also live on? Aren't there always various lives, voices or stories within urban walls?

In sum, the graffiti tag exemplifies how alleys, or alley art, can act as a plane to negotiate conflicts about the (re)presentation and politics of diverse communities in urban public space. Via the spatial inscription of a message of 'the political' rather than narrow 'politics' into a wall commissioned to function as commemorative tissue, the wall and the graffiti tag articulate the alleyway space anew as public space. The tag inscribes itself informally into a wall that is seemingly commissioned by 'politics' to beautify the area, yet lingering between affirmation and critique, vandalism and expression of political solidarity. All the while, the graffiti tag unfolds the precarious position and polyphonic nature of that very wall. Moreover, it unleashes the generally unfinished nature of urban public space as relational, processual and ephemeral. Bruce captures this mobilizing force of graffiti pervasively:

Graffiti, if nothing else, is a desire to render spaces otherwise: to leave a mark, to quilt connections, to inscribe presence, and to temporarily change one's environment. In graffiti worlds that are now influenced, if not always structured, by the transnational, the city becomes a staging ground for local, national, and hybrid or transnational styles and identities (Bruce 2019, p. 203).

This transformative potential of graffiti can also apply to murals themselves. The mural certainly leaves a (sanctioned) mark on a designated wall, it becomes a stage for the confluence of historical and contemporary stories of migration, of migratory hardship, of trans-local identities. Borrowing from Awan and her analysis of 'wall chalking' which communicates religious statements in Pakistan, these writing practices can be "used across the political spectrum to air grievances, provide social commentary, and often also to intimidate (Awan 2020, p. 11)." While the pro-refugee tag might not have been directed at the artists themselves, or as a means to frighten or critique them, the artists report that passersby also shouted and ushered racist slurs when they walked or cycled by the mural (BAGUA, February 25, 2020). Hence, while the particular #RefugeesWelcome commentary or act of wall chalking could have been intended as an expression of solidarity, and pro-refugee sentiment, other graffiti in Chinatown has been used to express a xenophobic sentiment (Fong 2015; Hurst 2020). Between this multiplicity of meanings and ways to interpret graffiti, Lewis argues that the presence and spread of graffiti can be seen as a way of saying: "'We're here' 'we're in this neighborhood', almost saying 'we matter and we belong here', which aligns with the goals that we want to promote(March 11, 2020)."[6] Lewis' use of the term 'we' appears curious vis-à-vis policy expectations about criminalized graffiti and commissioned murals. As murals are explicitly promoted to encourage the (re)presentation of marginalized communities and their living heritage, thus commissioned to portray a specific (re)presentation of community voice or memory, the 'we' of graffiti writers is much more unruly, vague, opaque. Nevertheless, the quotation points to the many actors who take space in the city to enact and claim their presence, their pol-

6 - Interview of the author with Lewis, March 11, 2020, in Vancouver.

itics, their right to the city (Zieleniec 2016).

Another Vancouver Chinatown mural artist, Dawn Lo,[7] reports her experience with graffiti on her piece ⬛ Gathering, situated on a shutter door on Carrall St, facing the SUCCESS Simon K.Y. Lee Senior Care Home: "Yeah, there were a couple. and the City has been cleaning them. That's the sort of thing that I know a lot of murals suffer … I expected graffiti but I didn't know it was going to be that bad (March 4, 2020):" Without going further into the motif- and site-specific context of Dawn's mural, her experience further illustrates how murals and graffiti engage in continued, differently-layered struggles. The conflicts coming to the fore range from claiming visibility for different groups in different places in the city, their temporary or longer-term presence in public space to the different assessments of whether murals, and graffiti respectively, are to be considered and celebrated as art, practical urban design, a means for crime prevention or means of political expression or even protest. Cultural planner Cheung summarizes this as follows:

> So, if you're looking at public art, we can't think about it as neutral because it's not. There's no such thing as neutral space … especially in Chinatown because the whole history of the neighborhood exists because there was nowhere else to go (March 6, 2020).

Certainly, stating that public art, or more extensively, public space is not neutral does not simply equal to assume that public art, and its surrounding spatial context, are inherently contested or striated by conflict. Yet, the multiple perspectives provided from both artists and policy-makers coalesce into a notion of public space that is entrenched with conflicts – linking the complex history and historical present of Chinatown, fusing into a sense of place that is full (and empty) of told and untold migrant stories and political messages, some painted, some continuously invisible and pushed out, some now incorporated underneath the painted journeys of immortals. A conflict-attuned public space is negotiated between presences and absences of very differ-

7 - Interview of the author with Dawn Lo, March 4, 2020, in Vancouver.

ent types of bodies. It is also produced by those very bodies, some of whom struggle throughout the alleys of Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside, dwelling, panhandling, being private in public, while others want to encounter Chinatown as an economically viable, culturally exciting and aesthetically appealing, sanitized and safe place. In short, by highlighting some of the paradoxes that hover between the goals and hopes articulated by policies and policymakers on the one hand, and artists' understandings of their work in public space on the other, I have shone a light not only on how public art mobilizes inherent conflicts in public space, but also how public art pushes unexpected modes of 'the political' into the public realm.

6. Outlook: The Political within and beyond Walls

In this article, I disentangled some æffects of public art pieces, potentially mobilizing public space as a realm not only structured and planning by agencies of 'politics', but less controllingly, also by 'the political'. Without wanting to romanticize neither street art nor commissioned artwork as hopeful harbinger or therapeutic pacifier to solve enduring systemic crises of economic inequality or institutional racism, I have contextualized an unexpected graffiti tag as modality and moment of the political which otherwise would not have been expressed, heard, seen. At the example of the local context of Vancouver's Chinatown murals, I have delineated, first, how murals escape their imposed objective to 'animate' public spaces. These murals are not quite complicit in sanitizing even alleyways of unwanted urban activity and dwelling. Second, by attending to the encounter between a mural and a graffiti, which fused different street art projects, I highlighted that street art can address shared political concerns, for example, to write migrant stories, with a variety of different means rather than antagonizing them. Overall, I have sought to underscore the manifold haphazardous practices contributing to the *political* production of urban space. Via the layering of different spatial and political claims for (re)presentation, presence (and absence), traveling within and beyond one mural, ongoing and necessary conflicts that will continue to linger in streets, alleys and walls have become a bit more tangible.

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Between Official Propaganda and Street Art:
The Representation of the Female Figure on the Iranian Walls

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1. Introduction

In the new Islamic space set up in Iran after the 1979 revolution, urban space has been used to build and rebuild collective identities and the state, in its various forms, is a huge producer of material and immaterial cultural contents (Honarbin-Holliday, 2013). This process involves multiple actors and social forces that intervene and interact from above and below, individually, and collectively.

Wall paintings in Iran can be divided into two groups: murals and graffiti. The main difference lies in the subject who holds the political legitimacy, that is the right to create or prohibit them (Del Lago and Giordano, 2016). Thus, while the former serves to highlight and support the government's ideology, the latter operates under an apparatus of censorship. Billboards sanctioned by the government typically have advertising or social and political functions and express the regime's view about the ideal society and social roles. On the other hand, graffiti of dissent is rare but exists as a form of underground street politics since any art expression contrary to the regime's ideology is forbidden.

On this basis, the paper debates the politics of image and the ways in which images invest power in specific tropes, signifiers and narratives (Shirazi 2010). While scientific literature has widely discussed Iran's propaganda culture (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 1999; Khosronejad, 2013; Varzi, 2006), mural images *per se* have not been analytically investigated until recently and even then, with few exceptions (Shirazi 2010, 2012), researches have focused mainly on the iconography of war and the representation of its main characters, the martyrs. That is, on the regime-sanctioned conceptualization and exposure of the male

figure. Purpose of the article is to critically examine how women's figure has been theorized and represented within the post-revolutionary Iranian public sphere by two conflicting media: illicit graffiti drawn by street artists, on the one hand; official billboards and murals allowed by the Iranian authorities, on the other. The paper has two major goals: first, it aims to understand which models of femininity both media display and what targets each pursues. Secondly, it draws on the examination of woman-centered graffiti to deepen the theme of production and resistance from below (Bayat, 1997, 2010) - intended as "the way individuals and groups practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination" (Poster 1992, p.1). To do so, this work analyzes whether and how these acts of expression can be read as 'street politics'[1] (Bayat, 1997, 2010), hence a "rejection of various assaults on the body" (Winegar, 2018) rendered by the Iranian authorities.

Western media often presents Iran as a nation of "angry fists and of crazed martyrs rushing the frontlines of battle with the Iraqis –a place where for impermeable surface of images and imaginings and where, for years, the black and red colors of mourning and martyrdom shrouded the nation" (Varzi 2006, p. 150). This image corresponds only partially to reality. The main argument of this research article is that following the theorization of space as power, the representation of the female figure in public spaces takes the form of a site of contestation between the authorities and the civil society where both murals and graffiti are involved

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1 - Bayat theorises street-politics as 'a set of conflicts and the attendant implications between a collective populace and the authorities, shaped and expressed episodically in the physical and social space of the streets' (Bayat, 1997, p.63).

in a dispute of contents, meanings, and political legitimacy. Far from being static and homogeneous, they express ambivalences and nuances that reflect the internal complexity and polyphony of the Iranian society. Such feature makes official wall paintings just as meaningful as the analysis of street artists' graffiti, as far as the role of women in the public discourse and space is concerned.

The paper is structured as follows: the first paragraph exposes the role of visual representations as social and political tools for the appropriation and use of public space in and by the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereafter IRI). The second one examines some concrete cases of murals figuring women and the debates they raised within the society. After an overview of the social history of graffiti in Iran in the third section, the last paragraph analyzes some counterproposals by the youth graffiti culture and investigates whether and how they re-conceptualizes the canonical image of the Iranian woman and what are the original alternatives conveyed by the current generation of street artists. The works of three Tehran based street artists will be examined, two of which have been interviewed by email as key informants: their comments on their work and the Iranian context allow a more in-depth look at this peculiar and still relatively unexplored reality.

2. Wall paintings and the public sphere in Iran

Public spaces represent ubiquitous public goods. By choice or necessity, they constitute arenas of conflicts, world views and interests that express themselves semiotically and aesthetically (Del Lago and Giordano, 2016). Visconti asserts that "the public nature of goods, such as public space, implies the emergence of contemporaneous, interactive, and convergent or divergent forms of agency - that is, imbricated agency - due to the multiple entitlements on the consumption of such goods" (Visconti et al., 2010, p.100).

The history of wall painting returns to the first attempts of human beings to trace their experiences and thoughts visually, to communicate and ornament their lives. Bringing art into the public sphere is a crucial characteristic of wall paintings. Urban murals are distinct from other forms of painting in that they bear the feature of 'publicity' - a paint-

ing that is created in public for the public. Walls are the privileged site for this type of communication as they allow the transformation of a public space, like an abandoned building or a residential block, into an arena where "something like public opinion can be formed" (Dartnell 2014, p.2). These spaces might become open-air galleries show-casing a wide range of issues, where those who hold the walls also hold the control of the message conveyed.

In many societies, notably the highly politicized ones like post-revolutionary Iran, murals mainly express the ideological values of the state as they are almost invariably commissioned and sponsored by the government or its affiliated organs. Wall paintings may play a vital role in manifesting ideological, economic, social, and cultural changes because they are made in public space where everyday life intersects and mixes with art and advertising. IRI has a long experience in molding contemporary art for political purposes (Vanzan 2020). Within this frame, the management of public space has acquired a crucial and innovative role. As 'political bodies' (Harvey 1990, 2004), Iranian cities express the asymmetries of the Iranian society through the planning of urban spaces and the subsequent renegotiations operated by citizens. Harvey writes that "each social formation constructs objective conceptions of space and time sufficient unto his own needs and purpose of material and social reproduction and organizes his material practices in accordance with those conceptions" (Harvey, 1990, p.419). In Iran, there is a close link between the embodied performance of identity, the politics of appearance and dress code, and the gendered notions of citizenship: an investment in visual and visible modes of representation is crucial for issues of governmentality[2]. For the public spaces to be regulated, Al-Bayyari writes: "the individual bodies and their belongings are controlled, monitored and excluded throughout and from different spaces managed or affected by the power" (Al-Bayyari, 2014, p.12); similarly, Moallem (2005) claims that the regulation of citizenship through visual media has been critical for both the project of modernization and nation-state building, as well as for the establishment of the Islamic State.

2 - I refer to governmentality in its Foucauldian sense to talk about technologies of domination of others and those of the self.

Like any other similar event worldwide, 1979 revolution transformed most social ethics and values, and art was no exception. Revolutionary cultural policies in every sector of IRI, including visual media and figurative representations, are aimed at creating and projecting an Islamic identity on and to the public (Balasescu 2005). Symbolism plays a major role in the new construction of the post-revolutionary public space. In this social context, murals are rarely neutral or disengaged but rather advocate a particular worldview. The creation of Islamic identity is inextricably tied to the one of an Islamic social space, which represents a substantial part of the official policy. The Iranian government created a visual state that incentives and promotes ideology keeping to Lefebvre's axiom that what may be seen defines what is licit and obscene (Varzi 2006).

As in many other cases, in Iran too mural painting inescapably moved from a subversive role in the first phase of the revolution to a celebratory one with the stabilization of revolutionary institutions. During the 1978-79 turmoil, walls turned into a forum characterized by a plurality of expressions, while later they have been monopolized by the authorities, becoming state media (Khosravi 2013). Revolutionary mural paintings proliferated in a disorganized and unpredictable way, with Tehran receiving the lion's share, in step with the revolutionary zeal that characterized the first years after the monarchy's downfall. There was yet no formal authority for the commission and oversight of murals; the government did not dictate where murals ought to be drawn and self-proclaimed revolutionaries painted when and where inspiration struck. The main goals of mural painting were the remembrance, re-creation, and revival of revolutionary passions in the name of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of IRI.

Yet, the war against Iraq (1980-1988) has been the real trigger of the mural movement in Iran (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Massoumeh, 2013). Once the conflict arose, murals served as ideal vehicles for the state to gather admiration upon its heroes and victims and to unite the population in the name of a superior patriotic sentiment (Vanzan 2020). Murals allowed those who did not get to the front lines to connect to the 'heroes' on the battlefield and to band to-

gether on behalf of the values of the Iranian State. Famed martyrs would find themselves 'immortalized' on the walls of their cities of origin, encouraging a spirit of sacrifice and transcendence. Murals also provided a significant public outlet for the Islamic revolutionary leadership's denunciation of the West and 'Western disloyalty', who was held as implacably hostile to the revolution and all it signified. As suggested by Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999), the convincing effects of public myths and collective symbols meaningfully contributed to the achievement of IRI's wartime purposes.So far, hence, the décor of public space in Iran has been state-sanctioned, limited to what falls in line with the state's ideals: faces of leading *mullahs*, colourful and intense commemorations of martyrs from the war, and anti-West slogans.

However, in the last decades, a partial renegotiation of these representations occurred in conjunction with significative social, political, and economic transformations. From a chronological perspective, mural art development suggests that change in the thematic repertoire has been motivated by an effort to conform to the relevant directives of the times (Chehabi and Fotini, 2008; Lotfata and Lotfata, 2019). In the so-called 'Reconstruction Period' that followed the end of the war and that was characterized by a run towards neoliberal capitalism, Tehran's administration launched a project aimed at redecorating the urban space with colourful murals, such as natural landscapes, as part of the governmental strategy to de-revolutionize society, introducing a discourse that praised 'beauty' in opposition to cultural austerity and revolutionary rectitude (Rivetti, 2020). During Khatami (1997-2005) and Rouhani's (2013-2021) more liberal administrations, the religious banners and paintings of mullahs and martyrs have been gradually replaced by new, luxurious, and fashionable characters (figure 1). In recent years, billboards and advertising signs flanked by innovative narratives of trendy and expensive masculinities and femininities have become increasingly pervasive, in stark contrast with the Constitution's claim to emancipate women from "being an object or a tool in the service of disseminating consumerism and exploitation"[3]. This new shift mirrors an aggressive commercialization of the urban space, a turn towards a more cosmopolitan and

3 - Source: Iranian Constitution.

Figure 1. Advertising billboards in Tehran, 2018. Photographs by the author.

consumerist ideology and a distancing from the revolutionary de-sexualization of public spaces (Moruzzi and Sadeghi 2006).

Transformations in the public spaces reflect deeply mutated social relations as well. The transition from revolutionary to reconstructive discourse has also meant a gradual adumbration of war veterans and the related theme of martyrdom, redesigned from a political and religious category into a sort of civil religion. The political and cultural turning point under Rafsanjani and Khatami's administrations testifies to a change in the collective climate and the desire to leave the austerity and social closure of the previous decade behind. Wide cohorts of youths, grown up under the aegis of globalization without any experience of the revolution or the war against Iraq, led the renovation (Vanzan 2020).

3. Women in official murals

In the official pictures that occupy public spaces, women are not given as much space as men. Since the birth of IRI, all graphic representations of women have had to respect a strict regimentation established by the clerical elites. Given that body visibility is a delicate issue and spatial segregation of the sexes is an important moral concern in society, practices surrounding representations of bodies are predictably sensitive to these contexts. As a result, the depiction of gender roles is mostly limited to the male figure, particularly those of the martyrs and religious figures of national history. Indeed, apart from few exceptions, it can be said that murals and, more generally speaking, public spaces, are tributes to masculinities (Vanzan 2020). This is not surprising since IRI has established a gendered social construction of spatiality that counterposes public and private with masculinity and femininity respectively. These vi-

Figure 2. Mural in Vali Asr Square, Tehran, 2018. Photograph by the author.

sual narratives are meant to shape and reinforce a national collective identity "constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power" (McClintock, 1995, p. 354), that "typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope" (Enloe 1990, p.15).

Nonetheless, we should avoid supposing that Iranian image politics totally neglect women and their public representation. On the contrary, images of women continue to be used today to further the Islamic message of revolution and nationalism, taking the female body as target and medium at the same time (Shirazi 2010). Following 1979, one of the most common murals was the image of *chador*-cladded women to promote *hijab* and piousness. Murals with this sort of content constitute an extension of the state's authority as guardian of the public space and its 'moral probity'. Fatemeh Zahra and Zeynab al-Kubra (Prophet Mohammad's daughter and his grand-daughter, respectively), are among the few women portrayed publicly. Images of

women during any crisis can be reshaped to project various identities (Shirazi 2010). Back to the Iran–Iraq war, posters representing a faceless Fatemeh usually delivered religious messages to Iranian women, urging them to be courageous and persistent while reminding them that their beloved men were engaged in *jihad* against the enemies. Meanwhile, Zeynab was portrayed as a combatant, ready and willing to fight for her homeland (Shirazi 2010). While posters depict facial images of Imam Ali, Hassan or Hoseyn, no specific facial features are provided for the holy women, according to the Shiite tradition.

Image 2 represents use of public space functional to the gender discourse conveyed by the Islamic government. The mural was exhibited in 2018 in one of Tehran's main squares: it portrayed a sleeping young girl who holds the photo of a martyr, among a series of individuals engaged in various activities. It appears that the characters follow specific gender patterns: while men are depicted as scientists, farmers, technical workers and fathers, women are

Figure 3. Billboard figuring Maryam Mirzakhan. Photograph by the author.

epitomized solely as wives, mothers, and grandmothers or in prayer, surrounded by other family members. Following the example of Fatemeh Zahra, thus, the ideal Iranian woman is portrayed as dedicating herself to domestic life and devoutness.

Women's active participation in the 1979 upheaval earned them the nickname of 'soldiers of the revolution' (Rezai-Rashti 2012), leading Khamenei to condemn "the dominantly oriental delineation, [where] women are regarded as peripheral elements with no role in making history"[4]. Indeed, since then, their social, political and economic role has been influenced by a mix of tradition and modernity labelled 'marginalization-mobilization process', according to which they were simultaneously invited to take part in political life, fighting against monarchical usurpation and sustaining the rebuilding of the nation, and ex-

horted to recover the traditional female roles (Guolo 2016; MacCormack and Strathern, 1980). This paradox is well exemplified also by the Iranian Constitution, that praises "women who joined openly all the scenes of this great Holy War, ever more actively and extensively [than men]", emphasizing at the same time their "serious and precious duty of motherhood"[5].

In recent years, there has been several new initiatives in this respect: as part of a larger plan to mark 2018 National Women's Day, Tehran Municipality carpeted the city with portraits of prominent Iranian women who have played a role in the development of the nation. Figure 3 shows prize-winning mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani, renowned among Iranians for the prestige she conferred on Iran abroad by excelling in a traditionally male-dominated discipline. Welcomed by some as a step towards women's emancipation from previous stereotypical representations,

4 - Source: https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5794/Why-is-Islam-s-outlook-on-women-preferred-over-the-Capitalist.

5 - Source: Iranian Constitution.

Figure 4. Poster in Kashan, 2018. Photograph sent to the author by key informant. All rights reserved by the author.

the initiative raised numerous criticisms too: many branded it as mere propaganda for its own sake, followed by no concrete measures for the improvement of women status, in accordance with Kratochwil's remark that 'repopulating the shadowy Hobbesian public space with new members by suddenly admitting women to it, will not do' (Kratochwil 2007, p.36).

As mentioned before, this process of inner dialogue within the Iranian State is not exempt from contradictions. Figure 4 shows another popular advertisement in summer 2018.

The billboard features two opposing female figures: a woman with the *chador* on the left, a woman that the official discourse labels '*bad hijab*' (inappropriately veiled) on the right. The writing on the top of the board addresses women asking which one they would prefer as their husbands' colleague. The message reechoes a famous statement by Ayatollah Motahari who wondered, "Where would a man be more productive, where he is studying in all-male institutions or where he is sitting next to a girl whose skirt reveals her thighs? Which man can do more work, he who is constantly exposed to arousing and exciting faces of made-up women?" (Moghadam 2006, p.54). The message is twofold: women who do not respect the Islamic dress code do not re-

Figure 5. Billboards in Vali Asr Square, Tehran, 2018. Photographs by the author.

spect its moral code and they threaten the integrity of family and society. Hence, for the Islamic propaganda, the obstinate provocation of the bad veiled women not to respect the dress code turns to *fitna*, a danger to familial values and social cohesion (Guolo 2016). The banner also incites women to ally against a treacherous and deviant model. In a society where women are placed one step below men since their birth, inviting them to attack each other establishes a survival game mechanism that makes women interiorize their presumed inferiority.

Another interesting and heated debate took place on social networks during the 2018 World Cup. The first billboard at the top of figure 5 was posted in Tehran's Valiasr Square at the beginning of the championship. The writing at the bottom right says: 'Together we are champions, one nation, one beat'. In few hours, social media had been filled with hashtags and comments outraged by the total absence of even one female figure, asking whether women are part of this 'one nation'.

The billboard appealed to the strong nationalist sentiment of unity that World Cup usually arises among populations, while erasing half of it and raising general indignation. The popular anger did not go unnoticed: a couple of days later, the billboard was replaced with the second one portrayed in figure 5. The same motto stood out under a row of people on a football field, among which a limited number of women could be spotted too. The tide of sarcasm and protest raised by the case did not settle that time either: people continued to reclaim a fairer representation of the civil society, and few days later a third version of the billboard appeared, with a significant share of women in it, dressed in different types of *hijab* (third image on the bottom on figure 5). World Cup billboards are a fascinating and peculiar instance of contestation of the use of public space and the representations of social identities between civil society and public administration. The widespread outrage for the misrepresentation of women is a fitting example of the new awareness on the use of public spaces gained by the public opinion, who now feels legitimized to express its own opinion on how these spaces are and should be used. As well, it shows the existence of a dialogue – albeit limited - amongst multiple actors who contend the social public representations' legitimacy.

4. Responses from below: the Iranian graffiti

Since ancient times, mural writing has been a form of active presence on the public scene that is opposed to a legitimate organization of social life and urban space (Del Lago and Giordano, 2016). In this sense, urban space is conceived as cultural fields and texts that affect the community (Warner, 2002). As the official murals, graffiti is located on the sides of buildings, houses, highway retaining walls and so on, becoming therefore a salient feature of visual public

discourse. The fundamental difference between graffiti and official billboards lies in the absence of legitimacy in the use of public space. As Blume put it, "[graffiti is any] pictorial or written inscription for which no official provision is made, which is largely unwanted, and which are written on the most various publicly accessible surfaces, normally by anonymous individuals" (Blume, 1985, p.137). Dartnell (2014) adds that graffiti conveys a specifically local socio-political message in an evocative manner. Graffiti can be regarded as 'freedom of expression' (Tracy, 2005) and writers often use pseudonyms to hide their identities for personal inhibitions and social norms. Because of this, graffiti could be considered as a "second diary book" (Raymonda, 2008) which echoes the voice of people, in either public or private places, conveying their anger, instantaneous thought, love declaration, political proclamation or outcry. Accordingly, the analysis of graffiti could provide vital information for investigations of the breakdown of discipline and order (Reisner, 1974).

In Iran, the use of urban art and murals as a political tool is not new. Stencils representing Khomeini were widespread during the revolution, as well as his posters and photos on the walls and buildings throughout the country represented a small but crucial media in mobilization and propaganda (Farnia 2014; Khosravi 2017). However, they they were not part of an organic propagandistic effort and were not linked to a specific youth (sub)culture. Khosronejad (2013) claims that studies of the resistance and protest art created during the revolution are rare because visual artists at that time worked quite independently and were not affiliated with political groups or ideological factions. It is in the post-1979 era that revolutionary stencils and murals began to spread, changing their features and themes throughout the years. While some experts date the first examples of modern graffiti back to the 1990s (Kousari, 2010), it can be said that their dissemination began in the early 2000s (Khosravi 2013, 2017).

Due to the difficulty of finding scientific data on the social background of Iranian street artists, one can only suggest some primary hypothesis. Observers believe that there is no clear link between social class and graffiti in Iran but it appears that, at least in Tehran, graffiti is most popular

among the middle-class young men born after 1979 (Khos-ravi 2017). It is noteworthy that, following a global trend, women involved in street art are a narrow minority, albeit a few such as RUN and Salome have made their voices heard in the metropolis. Despite its countercultural status, street art remains male-dominated like many other artistic fields. Reasons for this are little freedom of movement for women in public, powerful cultural resistance, and alleged concerns around authors' safety - due to graffiti's illicit nature in urban spaces.

Kousari (2010) links this popular art with the youth protest culture and street art in metropolitan cities around the world. Indeed, youth cultures have been recognized as a form of youth resistive expressions (Skalli 2013). Graffiti is strategically used by those groups traditionally excluded by the official propaganda to express their political and cultural stands. In Iran, youths are indeed among the most vulnerable categories and those most affected by the growing disconnection between government and civil society. Youth unemployment represents one of the most urgent emergencies the Iranian State must deal with. Hence, international sanctions, failing economic reforms, mismanagement and widespread corruption constitute additional pressures that weaken the ability of institutions to provide large cohorts of youths with adequate job opportunities. These youths did not experience the revolutionary spirit that forged the generation of their parents; on the contrary, they were born and raised during or immediately after the conflict with Iraq, in a period of huge social changes, and currently live a profound socio-economic and political crisis marked by a growing loss of cultural and moral references and existential uncertainty. This generation comprises today about 60% of the nearly 80 million people of IRI and it has been the main target of the Islamization policies implemented by the post-revolutionary governments, which aimed to create the ideal Muslim citizens through the redefinition of the main institutions. However, many of them – including the large numbers of those who emigrate abroad – do not recognize those same institutions of IRI (Khosravi 2013). Labeled either radicalized or too apathetic for long, young Iranians have been articulating for years their own politics through cultural and artistic forms despite the narrow margins of autonomy given by the authorities. In this dis-

heartening scenario, graffiti become a way to express ideas and ideals symbolically, but also a way to distinguish youth sub-culture from the official one. In accordance with the global youth culture, the underground Iranian one bears a critical stance towards the social, political, and economic status quo. Thus, most Iranian new graffiti creators are young people who do not act in line with the official principles, but sometimes fight against them and even find fun in such an experience.

Although street art and graffiti are not formally a crime, artistic expressions deemed contrary to the official ideology can be branded as satanic and the authors accused of promoting the spread of Western culture. The crackdown tightened after the 2009 demonstrations, when numerous official murals were damaged in protest or covered with insurrectionist graffiti and stencils. Despite this, in Tehran particularly, there has been a flourishing of artistic dissent in the last years. The phenomenon has numerous causes: on the one hand, the economic collapse that hit the country in the past years pushed more and more youths to adopt public spaces as new vehicles of social and political expression; on the other hand, the increasing contacts with the international artistic scene and the globalization process played their role in inspiring and encouraging new generations of artists. According to Dartnell (2014), since 2005, Tehran has seen new styles of street art, with new cohorts trying to reconquer the usage of public spaces, resist urban arrangements and construct alternative social and cultural models.

Internet and social media are gaining an innovative role in shaping and promoting youth's subculture. Literature has extensively analyzed the importance of social media among young generations worldwide (Antonelli 2017; Babran 2008; Moore 2012) and in Iran (Rahimi 2003, 2011). Social media are the groundbreaking devices these generations use to spread art and make a name, albeit incognito. Linking with the international stage becomes a requirement for "trying to connect with people, here or anywhere else in the world", asserts Nafir, one of the artists interviewed for this research. Instagram is among the favorite platforms where graffiti makers share their creations, often posting short videos that portray them at work. This social network is particularly popular in Iran as it has not been censored
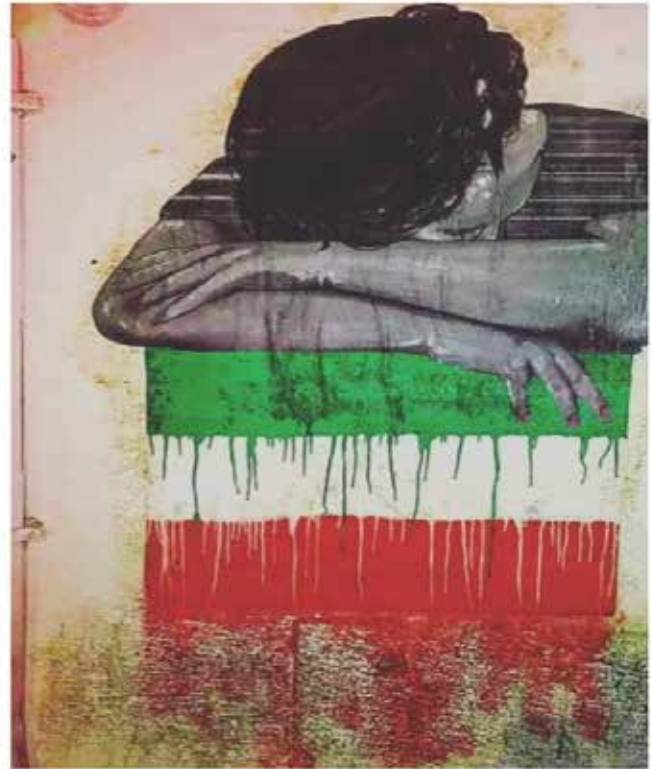
Figure 6. Graffiti by RUN, RUN's Instagram profile. Al rights reserved by the author.

yet and it enables artists to connect with each other, locally and globally. This unprecedented mode of communication allows preserving the creations even if they are erased from the walls. Hence, street walls become linked to virtual walls (Khosravi 2017). Nafir, for example, defines its art a 'disappearing art', for the speed at which authorities remove it from its canvas made of concrete. His Instagram profile, however, counts over forty thousand followers and allows him to save his work and spread it beyond local boundaries.

Like what Peteet (1996) documented in Palestine, Iranian street art as form of cultural productions is not only a means of communication, but intervenes also in a relationship of power. It is placed in the eternal struggle for the appropriation and reuse of public spaces between government and public authority on the one hand, and the youth's subversive counterculture on the other. The reconfiguration of gender roles as structured by IRI is part of this phenomenon. The next paragraph discusses how Iranian graffiti deals with female representation, questioning whether and how such artistic expression succeeds in creating and spreading a counter-narration of women's role in the public sphere.

Figure 7. Graffiti by Black Hand. Black Hand's Instagram profile.

5. Women's representation in the Iranian graffiti

Khosravi (2013, 2017) declares that, although born as an artistic expression of a broader underground culture, graffiti in Iran rarely represents openly political motives, focusing mainly on social or artistic themes to avoid problems with the law. Yet the boundary between political and a-political is not so well defined and rigid. The number of graffiti containing explicit political messages on platforms like Instagram is increasing. Khosravi states: "social [graffiti] highlights the everyday anxieties and needs of youths. The issues at stake include a more liberal attitude toward relations between boys and girls" (Khosravi 2006, p.13). In IRI, gender does represent a political issue. Thereupon, it is not surprising that multiple graffiti deal with the female image,

the body of women and the space they occupy within the society. Graffiti, like political demonstrations, is a way to express "one's *being there* [...] Graffiti signifies the existence of a young generation that challenges the political authorities by their presence" (Khosravi 2013, p.14). They can "formulate beliefs about the nature of reality and values regarding desirable states of reality" (Hirschman, 1983, p.46).

As social actors neglected and discriminated by the official propaganda, women may feel more urgent the need to affirm their presence and their 'being there'. However, as mentioned above, the number of women street artists globally is still very low, if not almost zero. RUN, interviewed as a key informant, is the pseudonym of a Tehran-based
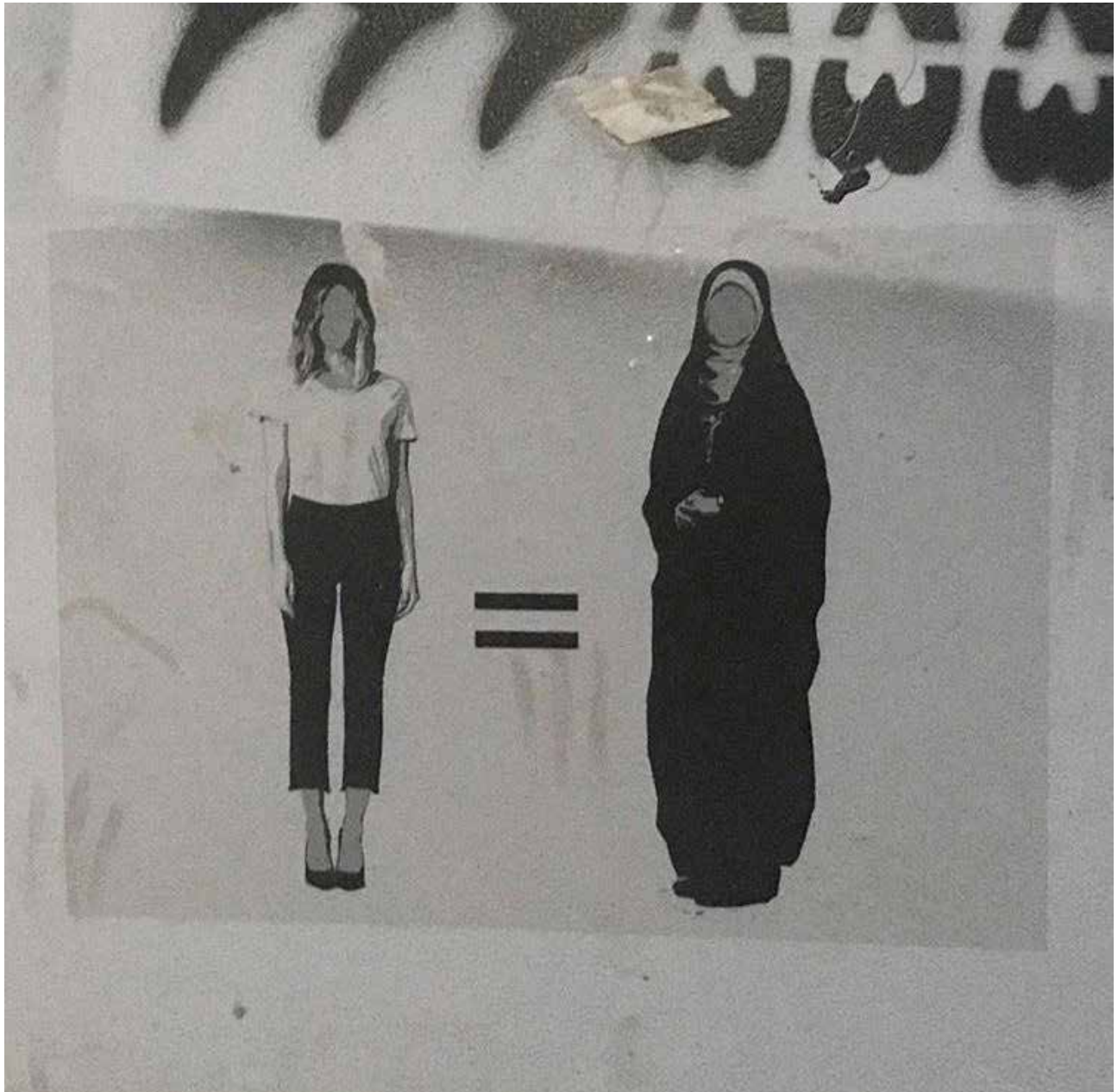
Figure 8. Graffiti by Nafir. Nafir's Instagram profile. All rights reserved by the author.

female artist who presented herself in the interview as a "skateboarder, rebel, and the only girl currently active and traceable on the Iranian street art scene". Her creations represent almost exclusively female characters and want to "translate my emotions and moods, free my mind from destructive thoughts and convey them in art. Therefore, I also protest our government that neglect women. I do not like that we do not have equal rights." RUN shared the graffiti on the left in figure 6 with the caption: "for all the girls and women in the country. Never underestimate a woman's power: we are beyond your imagination".

The image represents an unveiled young woman staring at the viewer directly in their eyes, with her head held high. Visual contact - or lack thereof - and spatial orientation in relation to the public are salient elements. In a culture where eye contact between men and women is deprecated and men are constantly reminded to control the gaze to avoid sinful thoughts, RUN's work seems to openly challenge the passerby to break the rules by responding to the proud look of the girl. The "on" symbol on her shirt may symbolize the strength and perseverance of women who attend the public sphere despite authorities' repeated attempts to switch them off. The image on the right, sent to the author by RUN herself and dating back to the economic crisis in 2018, portrays a woman crying on the national flag, whose colors are dissolving. For RUN, the work refers to 'the situation of the country, the prices and currency, with everything becoming increasingly expensive. I simply wanted to share my sadness!'.

Male street artists address women's figure as well. In 2014, the stencil in figure 7 became viral. The work, claimed by Black Hand, a Tehran-based street-artist, depicts a woman wearing the Iranian soccer team's uniform and holding a bottle of dish detergent called *Jaam*, which, in Persian, also means sports championship. The stencil may refer to the controversial stadium ban for women but also the increasingly sharp contrast between the traditional female role promoted by the state and women's flourishing affirmation in conventionally male dominated fields such as sport. The image may also refer more generally to Iranian sportswomen, who are obliged to compete with the *hijab* and whose merits often go unnoticed by the authorities.

It did not take too long to cover Black Hand's graffiti with red paint, and soon enough the whole wall was cleaned up, but as it happens often in Iran, the conversation continued on social media for long.

Nafir, the self-defined 'street vandal artist' quoted above, is the author of figure 8.

The stencil precedes chronologically the poster of figure 4, but it can be read as an indirect reply to it. While the government labels badly veiled women as a threat to public modesty and morality, this stencil supports the equality of all women, be they religious, with *chadors*, or western-fashioned and without the veil. The two women are faceless and Nafir leaves the viewer free to decide their own reading, giving them the right to choose whether the work expresses a condemnation of the State's attempts to control and cancel women's identity through the mandatory *hijab*, or an affirmation of absolute equality of all women regardless of their clothing. During the interview, Nafir held that drawing graffiti is a doubly dangerous practice, as it smears public surfaces and tries to make people think about social and political problems, such as discrimination towards women.

In the cases discussed here – which inevitably constitute only a limited selection -, graffiti become a tool to communicate with the public without any filter or intermediary, to vehiculate political and social messages the authors feel urgent to debate and to assert their own presence and identity. Unlike Bayat's (1997) disenfranchised groups, these examples of street art represent conscious political acts. In a context where public or private political debates are often labelled subversive and dangerous, walls become places for public discussions and provocations, where the sensory norms governing the movements of and between bodies in public space are disrupted (Winegar, 2018).

6. Conclusions

Lefebvre (1991) theorized the conflict over the appropriation of spaces as an engine of urban development where the exclusion of inhabitants from the control of their cities represents an expression of contemporary urban power. Following Foucault's (1991) observation of space as power,

it results that the use of public spaces becomes a political activity due to its participative nature, and takes the form of a site of contestation between the population and the authorities.

The Islamic project implemented after 1979 employs public spaces to formulate new narratives and identities where the female figure has been explored and exploited to serve the official political agenda and to share its standpoint. The spasmodic reiteration of the symbolism of IRI gives the impression of a ubiquitous panoptic gaze over the urban scapes (Khosravi, 2017), whose main aim is to educate and unite the population under a single ideal - while silencing a significant part of it through its segregation in public space at once. Female bodies particularly have always been one of the major targets of the Iranian state's ideology and politics. The official posters discussed in this paper show how the official rhetoric seeks to stem the role of women in the public sphere, confining it to the private one and portraying them in a reassuring fashion, like mothers and wives or, on the contrary, as heroines ready to defend their nation against enemies. In an increasingly cosmopolitan, globalized and consumerist society where women and youths are the main target of sanctions and control, the state's appropriation of public space is intended to reaffirm traditional social roles, and carries powerful pedagogical and dialogical functions (Zeiny 2018).

However, the paper proved these images are not immune to change. The public debate on the World Cup's billboards, along with other initiatives like the installation of a special wing of the Museum of Martyrs dedicate solely to female martyrs[6], reflect IRI's new strategy to project innovative public images of modernization and gender equality, and a continuous back-and-forth dialogue within its different apparatuses. It testifies the growing struggles of the regime's cultural producers to keep their educational projects up with the times (Bajoghli, 2019) as well as the ability of collective grassroots power to partially influence the ready-made reality presented by the authorities.

On the other hand, street art stylistically and symbolically opposes the government's mural propaganda: to images of

6 - See Shirazi, 2012, and Vanzan, 2020.

blood, martyrs, and bombs, which echo a rhetoric of death and violence, graffiti replies with colourful messages of equality, social justice, externalization of identity and emotions kept hidden and unexpressed. These creations are part of a counterculture that offers a different interpretation of social reality and a dissimilar worldview. Furthermore, they are also involved in a battle of contents, meanings, and political legitimacy in accordance with Poster's (1992) definition of resistance as the way individuals practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination.

Both the government billboards and the graffiti examined in this article propose their version of the female identity and image. Each of them narrates diametrically opposed social roles. Following Gehl's thesis, by which works of art and places that become their casual *milieu* share the same agency as their authors (Dartnell 2014), the paper showed how woman-centered graffiti confronts institutional power and official representations of gender and social roles. Women occupy a central position in several graffiti, as they become symbols and agents of change and disruption. Multiple political and social matters, like the stadium ban on women or their right to choose their own clothing, found expression through graffiti.

These forms of resistance have been long ignored by both elites and social scientists whose attention is largely concentrated on those acts that pose a declared threat to powerholders, such as social movements or violent dissident and revolutionary groups. Nevertheless, as Scott (1986) remarks, there is no requirement that resistance takes the form of collective action. Street-art allows young authors to stage their individual and collective self; to protest an enforced institutionalized silence that is particularly visible for women; to reshape and self-manifest themselves against a deficiency of representation, and to enact thus new practices of urban citizenship (Khosravi 2017). Although these works may lack the revolutionary fervour that animated the 1979 graffiti and murals, they succeed in undermining the gendered social construction of spatiality established by the State by forcefully dragging the female body into a public space where the law wants it to be covered and hidden, in obedience to the Islamic role models.

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Clashes Over Soviet Legacy in Vilnius:
Artistic Activism and the Making of Public Space

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1. Introduction

In this essay I will analyse two cases of urban resistance in Vilnius: Pro-test Lab project from 2005 against demolition of the Lietuva Cinema, and the activism against reconstruction plans of the Reformist Square from 2018. Despite the big time gap, the two cases relate to each other in several aspects, which are in focus here: 1) both of them were protests against tearing down architectural structures from Soviet times, and as such they may represent the broader wave of the late post-Soviet revisionism related to infrastructural changes in cities; 2) because they fought not only for material legacy, but also for public spaces which had a certain history of urban practices, these cases show the development of 'public space' and 'public interest' concepts within public discourse, and also how these very concept were embodied in the activist actions themselves; 3) as cases of activism, which involved many cultural professionals and artists among them, they are productive ground to start with when researching ways cultural professionals engage in social movements.

When it comes to social movements, urban activism is perhaps one of the most common forms of grassroots initiatives in post-socialist Europe, though often overlooked by social movements' researchers because of the excessive focus on nation-wide organised activism. "[W]hile there have been debates about the (non)existence of truly participatory social movements in Eastern Europe, […] some research on East European cities has shown that grassroots movements are able to emerge in urban settings in relation to disputes over public spaces, non-corrupted urban planning mechanisms, or opposition to gentrification"

(Císař 2018, 192). As Kerstin Jacobsson suggested, "local, grassroots-driven, small-scale, low-key forms of activism—such as much of urban grassroots activism—represent an important component of post-socialist civil society as well as an important new phase of post-socialist civil society making" (Jacobsson 2015, 275).

A certain growth in urban movements after 2004 shows that a sufficient level of social welfare had been reached so that citizens of the new capitalist state could start taking care of their environment beyond the private sphere and matters of survival. Yet the rapid development brought its own problems, such as harsh privatisation that was hard to control due to insufficient legislative framework, and fast but not necessarily well-balanced urban development, especially in Vilnius. A lot of buildings and spaces, which previously belonged to the state or municipalities, during the 1990s–early 2000s, gradually became privatised and many changed their functions as a result. In Vilnius, but also in other Lithuanian cities, these included poorly administered cultural and leisure institutions. So-called cultural houses and palaces, several swimming pools, and a dozen of cinemas from the Soviet era, which all had become a burden for the administering municipality, were converted into shops, supermarkets, entertainment places, etc.; some were demolished in order to build new real estate. After Lithuania entered the European Union in 2004, urban developments also started to get new funding shots from the EU that were at times misused by municipalities due to the urge of "using and implementing funds".

Figure 1. Pro-test Lab in front of the Lietuva Cinema, 2005. Photo: Nomeda Urbonas. All rights reserved by the author.

2. Cinema Lietuva and the Pro-test Lab

A cinema called Lietuva (which means 'Lithuania') was one of two municipal cinemas—out of a dozen previously—that were still operating in 2005, at the start of the Pro-test Lab. Built in 1965 as a piece of functionalist architecture and the first widescreen cinema in the country with 1000 seats, Lietuva continued to operate without interruption for fifty years except the major reconstruction and technologic refurbishment in 1997. In 2002 the building was sold to a branch of the holding company Vilniaus Prekyba (the owner of the largest supermarket and pharmacy chains in Lithuania), with an obligation to continue the operation of the cinema until summer 2005. The state land lease

agreement as signed in 1994, defined the function of the land lot for economic activities associated exclusively with the purpose of cinema. Despite that, at the beginning of 2005 the company announced its intent to demolish the cinema theatre and to build a block of flats with a few small cinema halls—the project included the building up of an open square in front of the cinema building.

As an immediate response to the news, few separate initiatives took place: a few hundred gathered next to the cinema and a nearby supermarket, as part of the Vilniaus Prekyba group's supermarket chain, to protest against cinema's demolition; activist Evelina Taunytė (aka Candy Cactus) initiated a series of discussions on public spaces

Figure 2. SOLD OUT. Poster action on bridges and in public sites, Vilnius. Organised by Vilnius Citizens. Photo: Nomeda Urbonas, 2005. All rights reserved by the author.

held in the premises of the cinema (ELTA 2005; Reklaitė et al. 2016).The case also became the main trigger for the Pro-test Lab project[1], which officially started in spring 2005 soon after the aforesaid protest. In the cinema lobby, previously used for the ticket office, artist couple Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas set up a laboratory with the aim of researching, archiving and constructing possible and impossible forms of protest. The artists later described the

1 - The description of the Pro-test Lab project is based on the following sources: the media material collected in the project's website http://www.vilma.cc/LIETUVA/ and its timeline http://www.vilma.cc/lietuva-timeline/; Urbonas 2005; Urbonas 2007; Urbonas 2008; Urbonas 2020; Kongress 2011; as well as on my own experience as an irregular participant in the project.

circumstances of the project: as for themselves, thinking about the problem of public spaces began in autumn 2004 after the invitation to contribute to the exhibition *Populism*[2] planned in Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius in 2005. Yet they also recollected several other initiatives in relation to Lietuva case and the general will to act: "There was [...] something in the air, so to speak, between people who

2   Populism was an exhibition project initiated by NIFCA, the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, and curated by Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero and Nicolaus Schafhausen. Travelling between four European cities (Vilnius, Oslo, Amsterdam and Frankfurt am Mein) it aimed at exploring the relationships between contemporary art and current populist cultural and political trends.

Figure 3. Polyphonic Protest 4 inside the Lietuva Cinema, June 2005. Organized by Involved & Co:labUK. Photo: Mirjam Wirz. All rights reserved by the author.

before then were in no way related; or between groups of people, between ideas; there was a sort of Geist, you know" (Urbonas 2016).

Hence, the project joined together several initiatives and grew further by inviting various groups or individuals, dissatisfied with the present situation of public spaces, to join and to offer their protest scenarios. Among participants were students and teachers of the Lithuanian Music and Theatre Academy and Vilnius Academy of Arts, high school students, Architecture Students' Club, community movement Erdvės Mieste (Spaces in the City), the Greens and leftist movements, cultural professionals and intellectuals, etc. Several organisations came into being in the course of the project, e.g., the citizen movement Už Lietuvą be Kabučių (For Lithuania Without Quotation Marks), as established by the artists themselves; for some groups, like the leftist movement that in 2007 eventually established

an organization Naujoji Kairė 95, or NK95 (New Left 95), the participation in this project was an important marker in the formation of their identity.

The diverse panorama of the Lab's participants meant that there were various concerns behind the protest. I would group them as follows: untransparent and possibly unlawful decisions by the municipality; harsh privatization of cultural spaces and their subsequent elimination; the building itself as part of the modernist history and possible Soviet heritage; planned build-up of the public space at the front of the cinema, and the decline of public spaces in general. Diverse concerns resulted in a lively combination of different activities that merged characters of both protest and leisure time (screenings, architectural proposals, concerts, cooking parties, public discussions, TV and radio broadcasts, guided tours, activist performances, etc.).

Figure 4. Human-chain of swimming enthusiasts at the former site of a privatized and demolished public swimming pool, Vilnius. Organized by VILMA, 23 May 2005. Photo: Mirjam Wirz. All rights reserved by the author.

Figure 5. The Barking of the Dogs Won't Disturb the Clouds. The barking competition in front of the cinema. Organized by VILMA, 2005. Photo: Nomeda Urbonas. All rights reserved by the author.

Figure 6. Exploration of Space: Vertical and Horizontal Values, in front of the cinema. Organized by the citizen movement Už Lietuvą be Kabučių, 2005. Photo: Nomeda Urbonas. All rights reserved by the author.

Due to broader concerns around neoliberal politics and the fate of public spaces Pro-test Lab was also used as a protest and discussion platform beyond the particular case of the cinema, e.g., to support the strike of a chain supermarkets' employees, to question the fate of other cultural and public places in Vilnius (the Užupis district library, the Palace for Sport and Culture, the Žalgiris swimming pool, etc.), to discuss the urban planning strategy of Klaipeda port city, to support squatters, etc. At the dawn of the era of social media activism, the project also had its virtual side, an electronic discussion list. The list, which started a bit earlier and lasted much longer than the protest space, served as a place for coordinating participants' actions, sharing news, writing petitions, negotiating about actions or meetings, etc. It also incited heated debates, antagonism and polemics.

The physical lab continued until the eventual closure of the cinema in September 2005; yet the end of the project itself was never really clear due to affiliate activities, heated discussions on related issues in the media, legal processes, and eventually—the revival of the project's material as part of other projects by the artists[3]. Afterwards, the protest continued mostly as a legal battle, which included:

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3   The Pro-test Lab archive was exhibited in Gwangju biennale in 2006; as part of the Urbonas' project "Villa Lituania" in the Lithuanian pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007; and in other solo and group shows.

1) A petition to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania with around 7000 signs.

2) Two civil claims by the members of the citizen movement Už Lietuvą be Kabučių (For Lithuania Without Quotation Marks) against Vilnius Municipality and its decisions in relation to the Detailed Plan of Vilnius and the violation of the State property land lease agreement of the lot where the cinema was standing.

3) Two other civil claims by the company Rojaus Apartamentai (the developer of the housing project) against the members of the same movement. One of the claims asked for up to 500 000 EUR in order to reimburse losses that the company suffered due to the citizens' "experiments in the framework of the public interest", and for the temporal arrest of the defendant's properties. These claims were perfect examples of a strategic lawsuit against public participation, or SLAPP, which by raising irrational claims against activists, attempts to intimidate and put off people from participation in public issues rather than aims for actual justice and reimbursements.

Figure 7. MO museum in place of the Lietuva Cinema, Vilnius. Photo: Norbert Tukaj, 2018. All rights reserved by the author.

4) Reassessment and correction of the Lithuanian translation of the Aarhus Convention. Passed by The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in 1998 and entered into force in 2001, the Aarhus convention aims to guarantee the right of everyone to receive environmental information that is held by public authorities, the right to participate in environmental decision-making and the right to challenge public decisions in environmental matters. The activist group claimed that the convention's translation into Lithuanian was inaccurate, which supposedly led to rare use in practice and insufficient application in the national law. A new translation was approved and published by governmental institutions in 2009.

At the beginning of 2010, the developer announced its bankruptcy, followed by a threat to make one more claim against the citizen movement worth as much as 2 300 000 euros (8 million Litas). The legal processes ended in 2011 with the peace agreement among participating sides and commitment to withdraw all civil and administrative claims. The building was sold a few more times, after it was finally acquired by a private company that aimed to develop a modern art centre. In 2017 the cinema was turned down and replaced by the MO museum (opened 2018) built after a project by Daniel Libeskind.

Figure 8. The monument for Soviet partisans toppled down, Reformist Square, Vilnius. Photo: Rimantas Lazdynas, 1991. All rights reserved by the author.

3. Reformist Square and Protests Against its Reconstruction

The summer before the opening of the MO museum in 2018 another protest against a planned reconstruction took place in the city centre of Vilnius, just a few streets away from the former Lietuva Cinema. Separated from the main Pro-test Lab events by more than a decade and also much smaller and less ambitious in scale, the backlash against the reconstruction of the Reformist Square (Reformatų skveras), however, is interesting as a comparison when trying to understand certain dynamics of urban development in a post-Soviet city and public reaction to it.

The Reformist Square takes its name and its history from the Evangelical Reformed Church in Vilnius, which was the owner of the land lot since the mid-17th century (Mikalajūnė & Antanavičiūtė 2012, 222–229). The lot hosted a cemetery, a garden, several chapels and a wooden church, a hospital, a clergy residency, a school, and other related buildings; in 1830–1835 a new classicist church was built across the street, and the old church was torn down. In 1947 the church was closed and ten years later turned into a cinema for documentary movies called Kronika; the cemetery was destroyed, and all relics demolished. The lot with only two buildings remaining was made into a public park.

Figure 9. Reformist Square, Vilnius. Photo: Andrej Vasilenko, 2018. All rights reserved by the author.

In 1983 due to a planned monument to Soviet partisans the relief of the park was altered dramatically: stair-like concrete constructions, supposed to symbolise trenches and to serve as a pedestal for the sculptural composition of about ten figures, were introduced all throughout the space. Built in the terminal decade of the Soviet Union, the monument lasted very shortly; dismantled on 13 December 1991, it was one of the last Soviet monuments in Vilnius city, which rushed to get rid of any signs of the recent painful past. The square remained in the municipal disposition, while the church was given back to the Reformist community. The sculptural composition, after being stored for another decade, was given over to Grutas Park (Grūto parkas) open-air museum, where it is exhibited along with many other dismantled Soviet monuments and public sculptures. Yet, the pedestal structures remained untouched for another 27 years, and continued to be used for a practical purpose—as a substitute for benches. The

amphitheatrical relief became a sheer aesthetic quality and characteristic look of the park for the Independence generation, which grew up without ever seeing the monument in its complete form.

Due to a lack of decent maintenance, the concrete structures started to decay, prompting reconstruction plans, which now and then have been touched upon in the media since 2007. Nevertheless, the square has not been renovated or otherwise taken care of, except occasional trimmings and cutting down of diseased trees. The renovation project took off mainly when the building company EIKA, the developer of residential buildings nearby, undertook the funding of the technical project in 2015. The reconstruction plan prepared by Vilniaus Planas, municipally-owned corporation, was publicised in the media in June 2018 as the Reformist Garden (Reformatų sodas), after the municipality received EU funds for reconstruction and signed the reconstruction contract with EIKA.

Figure 10. Re:formatas festival in the Reformist Square, 2018. Photo by Andrej Vasilenko. All rights reserved by the author.

The project of the future garden included the complete removal of staircase structures, flattening of the relief and re-planning of the paths network, which also required cutting down part of the trees. Among the publicised features of the project was the restoration of the "historical relief", which has been altered in the 1980s for the sake of the memorial composition.

The news caused a reservation and even an uproar among some, who felt the new plan was neither adherent to the historical truth, nor fair to those who used the park on a daily basis. Urbanists and architecture historians voiced their opinion that the project rather aims at unifying and deleting distinct faces of the city, than restoring the historical features (Gimbutaitė 2018; Ropolas 2018; Mikalajūnė et al. 2018). Some were worried about insufficient respect to the Reformist history and its cultural heritage, some blamed the removal of the Soviet structures as a wish to

"erase historical memory", comparing it to plastic surgery, "when a city tries to make itself younger and to deny the epochs it lived through" (quote by Jekaterina Lavrinec in Gimbutaitė 2018).

In addition to many detailed reproaches to the project, such as the elimination of transit paths, introducing a fence and gates locked at night, completely demolishing the characteristic stair structures, cutting down around 1/3 of the trees, also healthy ones, in order to make new network of paths and to open up a space between the two remaining Reformist buildings (the synod building behind the park and the church on the other side of the street), etc., the protesters voiced concerns that indicated more general problems in the planning of urban spaces still persisting after nearly 30 years of Independence. I would summarize them as follows:

Figures 11 and 12. Re:formatas festival in the Reformist Square and a discussion about the reconstruction project in Vilnius Reformed Evangelical Church, 2018. Photo: Andrej Vasilenko.

1) The project is unspecific; park functions are unified; it has no unique character and echoes many other recent projects of public spaces. Entrusting the projects of public spaces (squares, parks and plazas) to municipally owned corporations and their architects solely threatens the city to become uniform and standard in its planning.

2) Despite declaring the aim to restore "historical justice", it is insensitive to the historical layers of the place (both to the Reformist history and the Soviet past), and does little beyond demolishing concrete structures and levelling the relief.

3) The project was not communicated properly to the public prior to its final stages. As such, it presumably breached the right of everyone to participate in environmental planning guaranteed by the Aarhus convention.

The reaction to the planned reconstruction was very fast: in a week after the project was made public, concerned professionals, activists and residents of the neighbourhood formed a group, which started a discussion with the municipal administration, created a Facebook group and an online survey about the quality of the new project, initiated several public discussions with the project's architect and other administering bodies involved, wrote a petition and loaded the municipality with letters requiring discussions with the society and respective changes in the project or an open architectural competition for a new project. The main protest initiators and participants were all from art and culture fields (pop singers Jurgis Didžiulis and Erica Jennings, film director Giedrė Žickytė, art historian Eglė Mikalajūnė, artists Ingra Miler, Milda Laužikaitė,

Figure 13. Reformist Square after the reconstruction, 2021. Photo by Tadas Šar nas. All rights reserved by the author.

Laima Kreivytė, architects Gintautas Tiškus, Ona Lozura-itytė, Justinas Dūdėnas, Jonas Žukauskas, and many others), so among other forms to start a conversation with the municipality was a one-day festival-protest Re:formatas in the square with a programme that included performances, public readings, workshop of protest signs, discussions, guided tours, concerts, and public games; also, an organized discussion in the Reformed Church among the Reformist community, activists, and the municipality about the future of the project.

Despite public discussions and approaches to Vilnius municipality and Remigijus Šimašius, the City Mayor, also despite the conclusion and advice by the Regional Council of Architecture to suspend the reconstruction and to pursue an architectural competition, very little was done to change the project. The assertion by Mindaugas Pakalnis, the Senior City Architect, voiced at the above said discussion, that "the project can be modified as much, as its essence stays the same"[4] represented both the municipality's unwillingness to change the project, and the defective application of the Aarhus convention in the national law and practice, when a tardy notice allows for little or no participation. As Daiva Veličkaitė stated in her doctoral dissertation "Public Interest and the Conditions for its Implementation in the Field of Architecture" in 2019, "in contrast to what is required by the Aarhus Convention, the Law [of Territorial Planning] does not imply procedures, which would allow to collect information about the condition of the planned territory, and about problems and expectations of the community in the early stages of the planning, when there is still a possibility to consider alternatives" (Veličkaitė 2019, 83).

Regardless of the protest and attempts to delay the process until a mutually acceptable decision would be reached, the reconstruction started as planned with the demolition of Soviet structures in November 2018. It continued with minor changes in the project, i.e., the elimination of the planned fence, small alterations to the path network and planned zones, and the promise to reduce the number of trees to be cut. The public communication praised this decision as a common agreement stating that

"the Reformists Garden will be reconstructed after Vilnius citizens" (Činga 2018), although the Municipality's promise to organize one more meeting with activists to discuss the alterations in the project was never kept (Budzinauskienė 2018; Alper 2018). Interestingly enough, the municipality relied on the support of the Reformist community (Lithuanian Society of the History and Culture of the Reformation, and The Consistory of the Lithuanian Evangelical Reformed Church), which was informed about the project a few years earlier than the rest of the society, and mainly asked for due commemoration of the Reformist history and architectural heritage, which included a monument to Lithuanian Reformists (LRIKD, 2018a, 2018b; INFOREF. LT, 2018). The reconstruction took longer than planned because of archeological finds and pandemic restrictions; hence, the park after its opening in summer 2021 still missed the monument due to the lack of funding.

4. Contesting Soviet Legacy in Vilnius

Although very different in scale and progress, the two protests described above had a few things in common. Both of them started as a backlash against ill-considered attempts to reconstruct the city by cleaning it of Soviet legacy. The revisionist policy towards Soviet architecture and public art is characteristic of all post-Soviet states; and the more time has passed after the collapse of Soviet regimes, the more interesting it becomes. If the "first wave of revisionism" (Baločkaitė 2016, 18) in the early 1990s was rather an unquestionable part of liberation and historical healing process—monuments to ideologists and political heroes were sentenced to be toppled down, their names to be deleted from street and plaza plaques, any remaining signs of their past glory to be swept off—its sequel was much less universally accepted and had many more practical and ideological reasons (both overt and hidden) than a pure change of regimes.

"Both in Lithuania and other Central and Eastern European countries the first wave of revisionism did not touch "ideologically ambiguous" heritage objects: monuments to artists, who collaborated with Soviet regime, also squares, streets, and schools bearing their names; sculptures and panels that glorified the working class; monuments to the

Soviet victory in World War II; architecturally significant buildings (cinemas, sport and culture palaces, stadiums), Soviet military cemeteries, and others" (Baločkaitė 2016, 18). Their ambiguity not only made these objects last longer, but also implied that their elimination nevermore would be as fast and univocal. Rasa Baločkaitė names several main reasons for the second wave of revisionism that started fifteen to twenty years after the first one: the worsening state of objects and buildings; changes in urban planning and infrastructure; Westernisation and Europeanisation of the former East, and on the other side, the tension and information war between some CEE countries and Russia (Baločkaitė 2016, 19). If infrastructural plans (whether hidden or open) are often here the main cause of removals, political tensions are among important, often unacknowledged, factors that may increase the society's support. As to political anthropologist Arvydas Grišinas, "If we feel tension, for instance, due to repressions in Russia or Belarus, we can easily associate it to repressions in the Soviet Union. Soviet monuments in this case become signifiers of this inner association, and if we topple the monuments down, we use them also as scapegoats, certain mechanisms of coping with the tension" (Bankauskaitė 2021).

In the sense of revisionism, none of the cases I described before was as painful or long-term, as those of monuments, e.g. The Bronze Soldier in Tallinn (built 1947), the relocation of which from the city centre in 2007 caused two days of violent riots. Or statues on the Green Bridge in Vilnius (built 1952), representing Soviet workers, peasants, students and soldiers—their fate was discussed for a decade until their final removal in 2015 due to dangerously worsened conditions. Or a monument to Lithuanian writer Petras Cvirka, a proponent of USSR and Soviet collaborator, in Vilnius city centre (built 1959), which has been heating public discussion steadily since the 2000s, in the last years also due to intended reconstruction of the square it stands. The ultimate withdrawal of the statue from the national Register of Cultural Properties in 2021, which would necessarily end in its prompt removal as to Vilnius Municipality (Bertašiūtė, Jačauskas 2021), was met both with approval and disappointment along with a concern about the further fate of the park itself.

Although pro-Russian powers have their say in these debates (e.g. Russian state-owned media platform Sputnik, which operates online news in Lithuanian as well, did not miss an opportunity to claim that Petras Cvirka's monument case along with other monument removals are part of "an active fight against Soviet memorials" and "a campaign of historical revisionism" (Sputnik 2021)), and CEE states or municipalities sometimes tend to communicate conflicts about Soviet monuments as conflicts between pro-European and pro-Russian or pro-Soviet thinking (e.g. see Černiauskas 2015), neither proponents, nor opponents of the revisionist policy are so unambiguously classified. And this is especially so when we take into regard the post-Soviet generation, who are now in their late twenties: their liking or disliking of Soviet legacy may not necessarily be related to their political views, education or attitude towards memory politics, but often to their lifestyle and whether they have personal habits related to one or another object or public space. "While the generation, which grew up and came of age in Soviet era (I am part of it as well), was fighting the ghosts of their past," wrote artist Laima Kreivytė, activist of the Reformist Square, "no one troubled to listen voices of the Independence generation, which had never seen the monument itself, and saw the staired space not in the Soviet, but in a larger cultural context unlimited by the Iron Curtain" (Kreivytė 2019).

Baločkaitė states that opponents of the second wave of revisionism are mostly "leftists graduated from Western universities, feminist cultural historians, philosophers. In their approach they argue for cultural liberalism, pluralism, openness, diversity, active memory, heterogeneity, anti-hegemonic thinking" while the revisionism proponents take more conservative stand and are represented by "right wing politicians, journalists, political observers, who base their position on common moral values, mobilisation of political community, an imperative to commemorate the statehood's history, respect to victims of a totalitarian regime, and the need of public space safe from traumatic irritants" (Baločkaitė 2016, 20).

This panorama may reflect common moods as represented in the media, yet is not necessarily so in close-up. Whereas politicians and administrators tend to follow their political agendas, the positions of cultural professionals in

these debates are not so easily divided into simple pros and cons, rights and lefts. For instance, Simonas Kairys, the Minister of Culture since late 2020 and member of The Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania, actively aimed for the removal of Cvirka's monument from the national Register of Cultural Properties and praised the positive decision by the Department of Cultural Heritage in such words: "Today is the big day for contemporary Lithuania. We chose values of a free country" (LRKM 2021). Whereas the previous Minister of Culture and researcher of literature Mindaugas Kvietkauskas has several times criticised this urge and doubted whether the renewed revisionism did not simply hide functional reconstruction plans of a larger territory (Jačauskas 2019; Kvietkauskas 2021). Historian Rasa Čepaitienė, who otherwise expresses conservatist to nationalist views, in her heritage research and public opinions has nevertheless argued for preservation and re-actualisation of Soviet heritage claiming that its removal from public space becomes "a "reverse fetishism", which does not help the society to break free from Soviet mentality" (Čepaitienė 2015, 20). Art and Church historian, and a Catholic Church member Irena Vaišvilaitė sees the late fight with public objects from the Soviet period as a symptom of "cancel culture" and a "modern form of Maoism" (Bogdanienė et al. 2021). Meanwhile, leftist philosopher and public intellectual Gintautas Mažeikis has clearly stated in relation to the Cvirka monument's case: "This history [of the occupation of Lithuania] for sure does not need a monument; neither leftists, nor rightists, neither writers, nor tillers have anything here to be proud of. There is no necessity to keep such a monument in Vilnius centre. A tiny sculpture garden would replace it perfectly" (Bogdanienė et al. 2021).

Hence, the position a cultural professional takes in these battles is often influenced not only by their political views, or generation, but, differently from that of administrators, by their professional take on an object's historical, cultural, artistic value and context, its relation to larger communities of artists or cultural professionals and values they represent, its place in the tissue of a city, etc., and due to that may actually contradict their overall political stand. An attack against a memorial or architectural object may directly offend certain cultural communities—a bitter reaction

of the Lithuanian Writers' Union to the intended removal of the monument to writer Petras Cvirka is perhaps the clearest example of this. It is also always an attack against an artwork, and as such may be perceived as a broader attack against history of art and culture—as a wish to dispose of certain narratives and/or authors. The Lithuanians Artists' Association along with Lithuanian Society of Art Historians and AICA Lithuania in a public letter stated its position against the relocation of Petras Cvirka monument, defending it as a rare heritage of social realism in its original surroundings (LDS et al. 2019). The monument was also repeatedly defended as one of the last public sculptures by its author Juozas Mikėnas, a renowned modernist sculptor. The Lietuva Cinema activist group addressed a letter to UNESCO in relation to planned building works in Vilnius historical centre. The appeal to the historical surrounding was relied upon, since Lietuva Cinema (and in a very similar manner a much recent case of another cinema called Garsas in a medium-size city Panevėžys, which before being demolished in 2021 confronted a small scale but long-lasting opposition of the city residents) was much easier to dismiss as a "typical project". Cinema historian Lina Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė called such rhetoric a usual strategy used to push an object into "the zone of conflicted values or uncomfortable heritage, where most of Soviet heritage objects reside" and the society's trauma—Soviet occupation—an excuse behind the elimination of such objects (Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė 2019).

The debate is even more complicated and difficult to solve in spaces where several cultural strata are still present or remembered. The strict position of the Lithuanian Society of the History and Culture of the Reformation, and of many members of the Reformed Church, that the Soviet structures should be removed from the Reformist Square, relied on still alive memories for some and on deep conviction that the "historical justice" had to be restored. "It's very good that this Soviet relic, which desecrated our cemetery, is now going to be destroyed and the original relief restored. Our demands are minimal, they're not impracticable. Along with the renewed physical appearance, the spiritual body of the square—a monument to the Reformation and to the founding fathers of the Lithuanian literature will be erected", said the Society's chairman Donatas

Balčiauskas, claiming he himself painfully recollects the final destruction of the cemetery in the 1980s (Kielė 2018).

The longing for historical justice, despite being utterly acceptable, is easy to manipulate and can be used to attract a community's support by filling certain "minimal demands", yet ignoring others. As cultural researcher Skaidra Trilupaitytė has noticed: "The arguments for the restoration of historical justice are really difficult to challenge with counter-arguments about trees, grasslands, public spaces, or certain laws of greenery" (Budrys et al. 2009). After all, the reason for concern is not necessarily the Soviet objects per se (or the "Soviet-nostalgia", a well-liked charge against their defenders), but the destiny of public spaces around (or as part of) these objects. In and around Vilnius historic centre the 'historical justice' argument is often disadvantageous for green spaces, since most of the squares here were created only after World War II in place of ruined buildings or repurposed open markets (Drėmaitė 2021). Nevertheless, public spaces become part of urban life as they are, not as they have been. Discussing the role of parks in the city Vaišvilaitė has written that "citizens in the city need city parks, so they habituate to places, which have certain elements of a park, even though poorly maintained and neglected—this is what happened to the Sapiegos Park, Missionaries Hill, or Reformist Square. Habituated to a derelict place, citizens inhabit it, establish their spaces and ways of being, and defend these spaces as Parisians did defend the Luxembourg Garden back in the days. It is their living and socialising space, and interference to such a space provokes a painful response" (Vaišvilaitė 2020).

5. Public Interest Embodied in Public Space

Another aspect important to discuss in relation to both the Pro-test Lab and Reformist Square activism, is the way they understand and discuss 'public interest' and 'public space'. Although these concepts may seem rather natural and omnipresent today, neither of them has been discussed to such an extent in the Lithuanian media before 2005. Responding to the post-Soviet wave of privatisation, Pro-test Lab raised questions in relation to 'the public' and questioned concepts of public interest, public opinion, and public space, and the way they functioned in the laws and executive actions of the post-Soviet state.

The project initiators stressed that "the movement Už Lietuvą be Kabučių [For Lithuania Without Quotation Marks] never set a goal to combat private business. Our opponent was only public authorities and their untransparent decisions that violated public interest […]" (Judėjimas 2010). The movement made the "public interest" a buzzword in the media and a keyword in legal processes that continued long afterward. The petition (2006) signed by 7000 citizens, demanding for protection of the Lietuva Cinema, also asked "to guarantee democratic participation of the society in substantial decision-making of cultural policy in Lithuanian capital" (Urbonas et al. 2006); and in 2007 the activist group initiated an NGO called Institute of Public Interest's Protection (Viešojo intereso saugos institutas, or VISI). Although VISI never evolved into a visible and significant institution, it was nonetheless a moderate try to counterbalance the Lithuanian Free Market Institute (Lietuvos laisvosios rinkos institutas, or LLRI), which, founded in 1990 with a goal to foster free market and related ideas was very much visible in the media as a harsh supporter of any development based on private investments.

Despite the failure to protect the actual cinema building, the activist group was relatively successful in legal and juridical processes. The group members and related lawyers have publicly talked about the necessity to initiate the law of public interest (Jackevičius 2007) (it would never be approved though). Several strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) by the investing company against the movement members that were either rejected or ended with peace agreements became precedents to rely upon for future cases. A public forum on SLAPPs in 2018 in the Lithuanian Parliament, where one of the Lietuva Cinema activists architecture historian and heritage expert Jūratė Markevičienė took part and reported on her experience as a defendant in a SLAPP, resulted in a resolution addressed to the Lithuanian Government and Parliament, which asked to initiate changes in the Civil Code in order to facilitate the protection of public interest and to prevent lawsuits against defenders of public interest (Vilniaus bendruomenių asociacija et al. 2018). In March 2021, the Lithuanian Parliament finally formed a working group to prepare legal means in order to combat SLAPPs.

Members of the activist group also successfully appealed to governmental institutions in relation to the incorrect translation of the Aarhus convention that might have prevented the citizens from having the right to environmental information. The revised translation was published in early 2009, and it also became the main reason for the Supreme Administrative Court to renew the process in relation to Lietuva Cinema (Bernardinai.lt 2009). The Aarhus Convention was appealed to by the Reformist Square activists as well, who in their petition "Stop the Reformist Square project" asked for appropriate and timely application of the Aarhus convention in relation to the planning of all urban public spaces (Reformatų skvero iniciatyvinė grupė, 2018).

Next to the judicial gains, the bodily implementation of public space via continuous physical and discursive action is an important strategy of such protests, which also changes the overall perception of what public space is. Public space may be understood either instrumentally as "a system of places with a precisely defined urban functionality", or as common space created by people who participate in it. "Urbanism defines the public space (by the organization of buildings) and architecture portrays it (by the construction of buildings). It is not however able to create it. Why not? Because the public space is our common space. We create it the moment we take part in something that goes beyond us, that we do not control ourselves", says Fedor Blaščák (2010, 506).

The first approach understands public space as an urban function that is implemented (or not) by architecture and defined by governmental or municipal institutions. It comes from the perspective of urban planning—of architectural and even more so of administrative decisions, which shape the functional view of a city—allow and forbid, define purpose, measure proportions and allocate (how much space is meant for public purpose, for culture and recreation, for living, etc.). These decisions help to regulate flows of people, money, and material and immaterial goods in the city. Defending a particular architectural object or a particular place in the city means defending a particular implementation of the public space function, or a governmental or municipal property as opposed to private property. Yet, on the other hand, protesting by being in that

space, by bodily and discursively occupying it for a common interest means creating the public space "by taking part in something that goes beyond ourselves". When the activist group founded its headquarters in the cinema lobby, when it became a lively and frequented place, when an open space in the front of the cinema was filled by people who protested, performed, discussed or simply spent their leisure time, when people gathered to Re:formatas festival to celebrate but also to accumulate their daily practices (to sit around, to walk a dog, to play ball, etc.) in one time and space, the architecturally implemented and bureaucratically defined public space got a bodily dimension as well.

Interestingly enough, this individual, bodily expression of public space and public interest may be unacceptable if anything 'public' is understood as abstract (i.e., as opposed to particular, individual) rather than as common. In his article called "The Defence of Public Interest or Profanation?" philosopher Žibartas Jackūnas calls the Lietuva case the first one among the simulations of public interest (Jackūnas 2013, 2–8). Jackūnas understands public interest as an abstract need of the majority, which is implemented by governmental institutions because they by definition represent the majority. In such an approach any down-top citizen initiatives that are not committed to representing anyone beside themselves, would be automatically classified as the opinion of a minority, hence unable to represent the public interest. The majority in this approach does not mean the bodily majority, yet correct procedures, and institutions, which follow them, and any embodied will is mainly seen as private. Therefore, the activists, bodily present in the Pro-test Lab or Reformist Square, manifesting the corporeality of the public sphere, breached the very abstractness of the majority, which is the base for such an understanding of 'public interest'.

'Public interest' as a concept is dynamic, constantly changing and thus very difficult to grasp, so in law it is more often defined through judicial practice than in legislation (LVAT 2009: 326), nevertheless the right to represent and to defend what seems to be public interest is granted to everyone. As philosopher and urban activist Jakaterina Lavrinec has noted in a discussion on the protests in the Reformist Square, "I only want to remind, that law speaks not about the community's opinion, but about the reasoned opinion

from the interested society. The interested society is indeed those who come and show their interest" (Budrys et al. 2009). So in fact public interest cannot exist without those who take part and express their interest, because if this was the case, the critical mass of practice would not be accumulated and no precedent would be set. Stripped of (embodied) practices, 'public interest' risks to become an unusable bureaucratic concept; after all, participation is precisely what the 'interest' stems from (Lat. *interesse* << *intersum*: to be in the midst; to be present; to take part in).

6. Conclusions. The Role of the (Artist's) Occupation

From the two cases analysed we can see how grassroots movements in urban settings, though small in scale, tend to influence each other: even if distant in time, or of different scope, they gradually make a sort of conceptual rhizome with every segment being a support for the other. In this way some local initiatives with a more universal focus can accumulate, and sometimes even grow to the national level (a good example of this are various initiatives against tree cuttings in Lithuanian urban settings that roughly started in 2014 and peaked several years later).

The alertness about the destiny of public spaces weaved into a single narrative the cases that otherwise might have seemed pretty different—some of them relate to architectural objects and buildings, some to public squares, some to monuments in public squares, some to monuments on architectural structures. The Lietuva Cinema, Green Bridge statues, Reformist Square, Lukiškės Square (the former Lenin Square), Garsas Cinema, Petras Cvirka statue and square, and others are more than often recalled and discussed in parallel in the media and public opinions: all of them seem to be symptoms of the policy of public spaces, which is precisely the reason that incites opposition.

Post-Soviet revisionism is rather neatly interwoven into this policy: differently from the Soviet legacy that was eliminated during the first wave of revisionism, the arguments for the second wave seldom place 'Soviet ideology' in the foreground. Whether it was the Tallinn's Bronze Soldier, Vilnius's Green Bridge, Cinema Lietuva, or Reformist Square, the first and main argument for relocation or demounting was infrastructural changes or worsening

condition of an object. However, when the plans confronted critique or resistance, the Soviet origin and ideological content became a repeated argument. The Reformist square is an interesting case in this sense, because it was deconstructed in two phases. The sculptural group representing Soviet partisans was swept away by the first wave of revisionism as a clear representative of Soviet ideology, whereas its large architectural pedestal waited for much longer, until practical reasons and the imperative of historical justice dictated reconstruction plans. So the start of the new wave of revisionism is also related to the long-time neglect, when objects or spaces left untouched during the first wave remained, however, in a sort-of no-man's land for years.

Both in protests and the media, the voice of artists and other cultural professionals is often stronger than the others', because they do relate to contested spaces and objects not only as citizens or nearby residents, but also professionally, and tend to see them not as isolated stories, but as part of a city's architectural and cultural fabric. "Values that we are defending, it is not the building itself. It is Lietuva as a public cultural space and a few decades long tradition of cultural life", wrote the movement Už Lietuvą be Kabučių (Judėjimas 2010). Cultural professionals' opinions on contested objects and spaces depend not only on their (dis)likings, or political values, but as much on their professional fields and interests.

There is one more important aspect about the cultural professionals, especially the artist's role in activism, which relates to occupation. In the context of art Julia Bryan-Wilson, as well as Hito Steyerl, have written about 'occupation' and 'occupying', eloquently displaying the tight relation between all their meaning including holding the position and the control or filling up of time, space, or one's own or the other's attention (Bryan-Wilson 2012; Steyerl 2011). When it comes to protesting in public space, occupation is always present, even if shortly. Both the Pro-test Lab and Reformist Square activists occupied the spaces they aimed to protect; while doing that they were occupied with a search of legal, discursive, and performative means to influence the situation; they occupied their spare time with this new form of leisure; this occupation occupied the minds of many.

Yet, occupation also means job, or remunerated life, and I find it important to stress this particular meaning in relation to artistic activism, or activism as an artist's work. Differently from organized social activism, small-scale grassroots activism most often relies on free-time resources, i.e., leisure activism. Yet, for the artists in the Pro-test Lab and people they hired for particular tasks it was the project they engaged within their working time, it was their art *work*. And although precisely this may lead to conflict within the community, because many can resist the framing of activism as a project and consequently wish to expel artists for "privatisation" of the discourse (Urbonas 2007), it may also be among sources for effectiveness. Even though one can fully sympathize with the resentment of those who do not wish to be subjected to someone's (i.e., the artist's) project, one also may wonder whether this does not hide the thinking that artistic work (only) imitates processes and is never authentic, or is less authentic than the proper process, here, activism. In my opinion, the insistence to draw a line between art and activism makes little sense, because politically engaged art is political activism; like all participatory art practices, it creates aesthetic and social events simultaneously (Michelkevičė 2021, 265–274). Moreover, it seems to me that precisely artistic engagement, or art as work, was an important factor that made the Pro-test Lab in many senses effective—and more effective than the Reformist Square activism. Undertaking the activist task as their project, the artists presumably put all their efforts into making the project work—it is not something they occupy themselves with (in spare time), it is their occupation.

Acknowledgment

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The Art of Uneventful Everyday:
On Socially Engaged Art Project in Delhi

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1.Introduction

Like any other south Asian city, Delhi had grown organically through migrants of different communities and classes. Many working-class people develop their site of work and residence through a network of social relationships. Most of the time, these sites are illegal or quasi-legal. They often suffer the blow of violence of demolition due to the beautification of the city or through the logic of hygiene. These migrant working-class people are seen as trace-passers in the city. One such site is Meena Bazar. It is a makeshift market outside the main gate of Jama Masjid, a Mughal time famous mosque in old Delhi. This mosque stands just opposite the side of another spectacular Mughal site, Red Fort. Every year these two Mughal monuments attract millions of tourists.

Meena Bazar is a location for the working class to buy and sell their products. This is a site for very cheap commodities and food items. Next to Jama Masjid on one side is Chawri bazaar which connects the primary wholesale market of Delhi, commonly known as Chandni Chawk, but it has several lanes and bylanes of different names and is dedicated to markets for different commodities. This market employs thousands of workers doing all kinds of work, from pulling karts or rickshaws, loading-unloading deliveries and many more activities. Meena Bazar also feeds these people with their daily essentials. Another site is the urban village located in the heart of the city. At one time, on the edges of Delhi, many sprawling and congested working-class colonies inhabited by generations of rural migrants have now been subsumed into the core of a rapidly mutating metropolitan landscape.

The local communities in the neighbourhood of Khirki Village, along with nearby Hauz Rani, are part of the sprawling, congested unauthorised colony of Khirki Extension in South Delhi. The world of informal labour practices here is essentially kept very private, dependent on particular regional and community affiliations, operating within its pragmatic norms, and somewhat sequestered. Like millions of similar tiny and inconsequential sites all over the third world, in terms of economic struggle and subsistence Khirki Village is continually manipulated by global market forces as well as the unyielding pressures of 'urban 'development'. The efforts of migrant workers in such sites are appropriated, recycled and reshaped repeatedly to satisfy the veracity of the profit motive and the long chain of its evident and hidden beneficiaries. While the city thus incorporates and assimilates its margins and redefines its notions of what constitutes the 'urban', it also re-configures provincial attitudes. It offers a range of new affiliations and new possibilities of personal freedom to the large population of young working women from these communities.

2.Axial Margins||Urdu Park

The project Axial Margins||Urdu Park (2015-present) is situated within a night shelter for homeless women, occupying a section of Urdu Park, a large field next to the archaeological heritage site of the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi. It engages in an aesthetic and conceptual exploration of the collaborators' experience of public and private spaces with the resident single mothers who are beggars, victims of domestic violence, abduction, and other kinds of abuse.

Figure 1. Night Shelter of single women at Urdu Park, 2015. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

In the project Axial Margin, with some in-depth experience of collaborative work for a couple of years through various engagements like diaper making, pillow making, painting on the interior of the shelter wall, collaborators then undertook a more elaborate exploration of the idea of map-making as a way to narrate their experience of their environment. Their interest in this modality became more urgent when agencies in charge of the shelter proposed moving it from its present site in the heart of Old Delhi to a place outside the city. This caused much anxiety among shelter residents, many of whom have a deep, reliable, and in some cases lifelong, relationship with Jama Masjid and Meena Bazaar. These particular contexts are embedded in the women's personal histories and continue to be the pulse of their daily lives. The women collaboratively created a map of the locality with acrylic paints on a single 16 ft x 4 ft canvas – a unique form of existential cartography. The women's prolonged experience of this area is so intimately fused with their material and psychological survival. Each participant also painted personal impressions of Meena Bazaar on individual canvases, depicting the shops, lanes and objects sold there, such as slippers and bags. While painting, they orally reflected on their complex, intricate relationship with the surrounding environment, acknowledging its presence as a redemptive stable feature within their frequently chaotic, fluctuating and highly stressed circumstances.

Figure 2. Collaborative work through various engagements like diaper making, 2015. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

Figure 3. Collaborative work through various engagements pillow making, 2015 Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

Figure 4. The women collaboratively created a map of the locality with acrylic paints on a single 16 ft x 4 ft canvas, 2016. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

Figure 5. The women collaboratively created a map of the locality with acrylic paints on a single 16 ft x 4 ft canvas, 2016. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

2.1 Daily survival

From the inception of the project, while building a relationship with these single mothers, we have been continuously observing a crucial lack of adequate food supplies and medical care arrangements for the shelter's residents. There were several government-run social services and programs providing shelter residents with three meals a day. This was discontinued for some reason for some time. The women then began cooking for themselves in the open, in the courtyard of the shelter. They made a rudimentary stove by placing two bricks in parallel, between which sticks or other wood and waste paper could be burnt as fuel. The residents buy ingredients from the vegetable market, fish and meat market, and a particular grocery shop that gives them items on credit. They also obtain leftover food from various local dhabas (roadside eateries). Despite these daily efforts, they do not have enough for a proper meal and can only feed their children biscuits or bread with tea for lunch and dinner.

While working on the large collaborative map of the locality, women delineated the shops where they regularly get food, tea and ingredients. This visual narrative enabled a parallel map of their social networks in the neighborhood. The women's day is not complete without broader interaction in the community – going out of Urdu Park into the market on their morning mission to procure ingredients and food for the day's meals and chatting to each other and the people around Lala's grocery shop and Kalim's dhaba, Bihari dhaba and Bangali dhaba. Sometimes they start the day with a

Figure 6. The women created individual maps of their neighbourhood with acrylic paints on canvases, 2017. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

breakfast of tea and fan-shaped biscuits from Ustad's shop or Number 18 Tea Stall.

The collaborators developed personal narratives in more depth through exploring the relationship of their food, cooking practices and their environment. The sessions resulted in creating recipe books based on the discussion of food traditions of the communities in which the participants were raised. They also narrated where and how they have learnt to cook and how they have adapted their cooking techniques and philosophies of food to the available ingredients, available money and exigencies of life in the shelter. Each collaborator created her recipe book with paints and collages made from coloured paper and sequins.

2.2 Personal Memories

While creating the recipe books, women talked about their favorite foods that, in some cases, they had not eaten for a long time after migrating to the city from rural areas. For instance, Sabrun recalled the dish she most loved: *makai-chawal* (corn-rice), that she last ate in her village as a child. Corn was a significant crop in her region, so corn-rice and corn were our staples in the local diet. Sabrun spoke of becoming an orphan when she was very young and being raised by a strict and demanding aunt. One day, instead of tending to the pot of *makai-chawal* on the stove, Sabrun left the kitchen to play in the courtyard. The food got burnt, and her aunt punished her by making her eat all of it. At present Sabrun has the support of a man who ensures two daily meals for her, but he is reluctant to feed her children even while he wants her to be with him and cook for him. She does cook *makai-chawal* today but uses a different method from the one she learnt from her aunt.

Each woman painted small (1 ft x 2 ft) canvases with brightly colored images of the particular spices they use in their cooking and of the vegetables they cook daily. Reshma commented that dire poverty limits food choices, and while destitute people know they should not reject any food, it is still crucial that whatever they eat should have swaad (good taste). They don't like to eat food which is not tasty, even if it is free or very cheap. For example, the meals sent to the shelter, first by Anganwadi and later by the Delhi govern-

ment, were completely bland, with no swaad whatsoever. Those nutrition schemes have been discontinued, but in any case the women prefer cooking their own food in the courtyard of the shelter, even if it is a struggle to get money for ingredients. Moreover, they make sure their food always has swaad. Reshma's favorite curries are made from magur (black catfish), shikhara (silver catfish) or rohu fish, cooked in mustard oil with onions, tomatoes, garlic, red mustard seeds, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, black pepper, green chillies and salt.

The collaborators also talked about their excellent relationships with shopkeepers at the particular stalls in Meena Bazaar where they buy their ingredients and the Dhaba owners who support them by giving them food on trust, accepting payment later. The women rely on this generosity. For example, Binu explained that when they buy a ten-rupee plate of dal-chawal (lentils and rice) from Kalim and ask for extra helping in the form of meat gravy, he adds a boti (small piece of meat) to the gravy. Bihari, another Dhaba owner who has known the shelter's residents for a long time, does the same when they buy dal-chawal (lentil-rice) from him.

As mentioned earlier, the shelter residents used to cook on a makeshift stove made of bricks, using wood and waste paper as fuel. Now they cook on gas, getting their cylinder refilled at Kala Mahal as the owner takes Rs 80 per re ll, while Lalaji near the market charges an extra Rs 10 for his effort. The women used to buy their utensils from Kala Mahal, but now they buy them from the Sunday Market. They prefer to use heavy utensils such as kadhai as they are durable and food cooked in them does not quickly burn.

The collaborative creation of the map of Meena Bazaar had inspired the idea of a shared kitchen. For some time, the collaborators had been discussing how to pool their limited resources, acquired with great difficulty, towards cooking meals in the courtyard of the shelter—then selling this food as a source of income – an option to their normative practice of earning through begging, and a form of work that would enable them to maintain their dignity. Their work – objects, canvases, maps, texts and food – is displayed and experienced within the shelter during the project's open

Figure 7. Paintings of spices, 2017.
Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

Figure 8. Paintings of spices, 2017
Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

days, that living space itself undergoes a dynamic metamorphosis into a genuinely alternative exhibition venue, far beyond the conventional boundaries of canonized institutions such as galleries and museums. This corroborates Revue's aesthetic philosophy and organic mode of research over the past decade, part of our effort to embed a strongly democratic, inclusive template within the generally closed, elitist ethos of contemporary Indian art.

With the destruction of Meena Bazaar, the women of the Urdu Park shelter have lost the bustling environment that was in itself a nurturing refuge for them in so many ways.

They are still coming to terms with the stark, disorienting, haunting absence they encounter each time they leave the shelter compound. Their social connections within the now-empty grid of the demolished market still exist but are ruptured, enfeebled and elusive. Nobody knows when the shelter may itself be targeted for demolition within uncompromising myopic municipal agendas of 'beautification', 'urban development' and the profit-driven mandates of a 'global' city. The once-throbbing matrix of Meena Bazaar now exists as a site in the collaborators' histories, memories and hearts; it is being celebrated and commemorated through their texts and paintings.

Figure 9. Paintings of vegetables, 2017. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

Figure 10. Meena Bazar. It is a makeshift market outside the main gate of Jama Masjid, 2015. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

Especially during the pandemic lockdown, when the migrant workers who found Meena Bazaar and the wholesale market as their permanent home are being forced to live on starvation for days and are destined for an uncertain future. However, the women's creative work and personal commentary in effect now constitute an invaluable archive that memorializes and honors what once was a thriving material and social space, its many micro-ecologies supporting many thousands of people and interwoven into a dynamic way of life. Perhaps such inscription is also the most appropriate, immediate and meaningful way to mourn, negotiate the shock and grief at the death of a context that was so precious, such an intense, reliable and significant variable in the daily push to survive.

3. Museum of Food: A Living Heritage

During our community art project – *Mobile Mohalla (2015-present), we collaborated with young women*[1] from dif-

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1 - The project Mobile Mohalla engages residents of the adjacent localities of Khirki and Hauz Rani, two urban villages in south Delhi. The long-term goal was to examine how art interventions can mobilize women from different backgrounds to create their own public spaces within the male-dominated space of the neighbourhood. It was a challenge to find project participants within a patriarchal culture where gender segregation is the informal norm and women, in general, have little public visibility/are restricted to their own private spheres. https://www.mobilemohalla.net .

Figure 11. Sharing food in the kitchen, 2018. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

ferent ethnic backgrounds and between women and men from the community. In the course of the discussions, food emerged as one of the contours. The focus was to explore the histories of cuisines, ingredients and tools that people carry with them. The informal and formal dialogues with food as a site of interaction among the groups unraveled the complexities of social life, displacement, memory, leisure, and gendered experiences that can move beyond nostalgia.

Food has always been a vital aspect of a place, a city or a neighborhood. Besides fulfilling one's daily needs of hunger, food has always occupied a social, political and economic significance in a region. Its importance in a person's every-day life, embedded in the social relations of a community, cannot be overlooked. Khirki and Hauzrani, two adjacent neighborhoods in the heart of South Delhi, has been the hotbed of migrants coming from across the country and even international borders. On the one hand, there are local migrants from Bihar, UP, Rajasthan, Bengal, Kerala, North-east India sustaining on the opportunities the city provides them with and on the other hand, there are international migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Congo, Nigeria and many others. Khirki and Hauzrani have also seen a transformation in its culinary spaces over the last few years with the opening up of new joints offering food prepared by the migrants: internal and international. A girl from Manipur can be seen enjoying an Afghani burger on the streets, or an Afghan teenage girl could be seen relishing the 'Golgappas' from a vendor. The interaction between multiple food consumption practices

has made the neighborhoods an exciting display of mutating food habits.The process of food preparation is not a process in isolation, but one which is mired in multiple processes ranging from the selection of ingredients, the style of cutting the meat which is specific to each culture, the assortment of vegetables, the proportion of salt and sugar, the right amount of heat and the process of stirring which offers different possibilities based on one's social identity. The local migrants and especially the ones rooted in their native places, carry 'food practices' as one of their defining identities to the new place. This explains the growth of places serving different cuisines in the cities worldwide, which have seen streams of local and international migrants. In this context, the idea of exchanges through food forms an essential component of our social bonds.

The project Museum of Food: A Living Heritage (2017-present) was launched in December 2017 to bring these multiple food practices into a shared space through simple yet layered cooking. The agents of exchange in this are women who have been socially and culturally bounded in the kitchen owing to the more extensive patriarchal setup. The relation is not restricted to the act of cooking but also consists of the stories hidden in the selection of ingredients, the role of their mothers in sharing the age-old recipe, the range of utensils, etc.

3.1 Everyday Engagements

The daily activity of the kitchen starts from buying ingredients like vegetables, meat, spices etc and then cooking, eating collectively and also maintaining the kitchen. The method at the kitchen is to rotate the tasks of food preparation, i.e., to have one dish from each cuisine cooked daily, often focusing on a common ingredient or a theme. Monday is Afghan day, Tuesday is Congo, Wednesday is Iraqi, Thursday is Somalia and Friday is from the different migrant commu-

Figure 12. Daily activity of the kitchen, 2018. Photograph by Pallavi. All rights reserved by the authors.

nities of Bihar and North East India. The weeks are planned, aiming at unique dishes based on selected grains, like wheat, rice, semolina, maize, etc. Initially, the women used to cook food in the kitchen, sharing the meal within themselves. Later after a few months, they started inviting their friends to have meals together and share recipes among other everyday experiences and concerns through a casual conversation. Further, they present these dishes collectively at a monthly Pop-up Kitchen at different sites, where others are invited to share the meal and encouraged to interact with the project. This mode of engagement cohesively brings the different food traditions together both within the tight, intimate space of the kitchen and the broader context of the general public.

3.2 Words and Gestures

This project's fascinating and complex dimension is that not all the women in the group speak each other's language yet can actively communicate vis-à-vis essential cooking information and transmit their emotional experiences associated with their traditional foods. As speakers of Arabic, Dari, French and various native dialects from their places of origin, they rely on an intuitive, flexible, amalgamated vocabulary of words, gestures, facial expressions, similar regional socio-linguistic codes, and idiomatic translations by those among them who do have some broader knowledge of the various languages in use within the group. They also frequently draw from a lexical cache common to the different languages, enabling fragmentary utterances to be layered and honed into comprehensible meaning. For

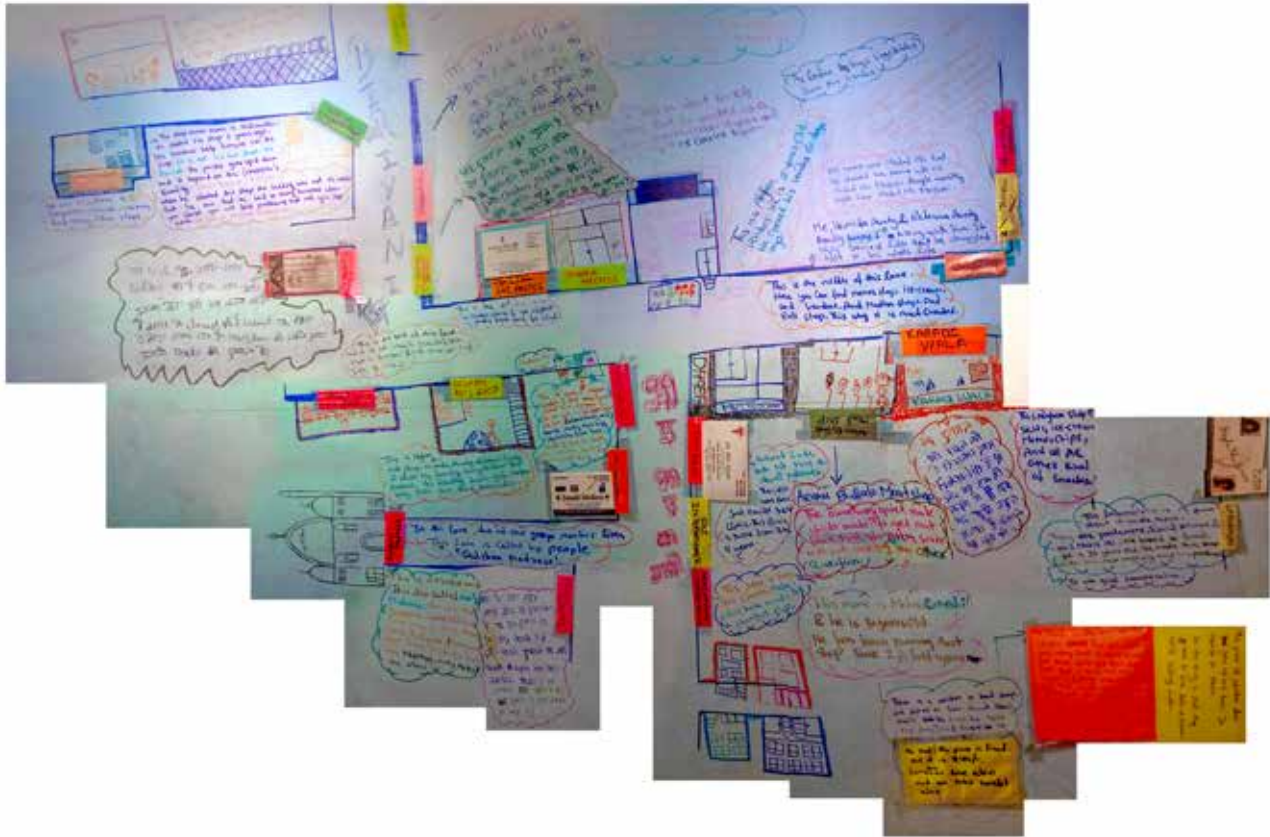Figure 13. Sharing food collectively, 2018. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

Figure 14. Maps created by Khirkee Collective based on discussions, 2018. Photograph by Anubhab(KNMA).All rights reserved by the author.

instance, Arabic and Farsi share many words, and Dari is very similar to Farsi. Hence the speakers can interpret each other's statements with a bit of effort. Those speakers with a full or partial grasp of Hindi or English also quite skillfully use these languages to engage with one another. Several of their children who attend school and regular tuition classes in the locality speak fluent unaccented Hindi and English, very often help in the lab by translating for their mothers.

Immediate direct communication is also skillfully facilitated through digital media. Participants research their queries online and share information and images of particular ingredients, staples, or spices via mobile phone. However, in symbolic terms, it might well be asserted that within this unique ethos of empowered polyglot sociality and community, it is a traditional food culture that serves as the strong,

singular, definitive mother tongue of all those participating in the Khirki Living Lab and Pop-up Kitchen.

3.3 Social Networking
Through a discursive engagement of the food maps in collaboration with women in the kitchen, we propose to show how innovation contributes to rebuilding new idioms of food and nutrition among the community. The food maps provide a valid entry point to understand how gendered migration experiences problematizes the idea of 'authentic' vis-à-vis 'fake' in the everyday life of the communities. Thus, food maps are about everyday realities of searching for new ingredients, tools and within budget and local dietary constraints that have to be understood at the cusp of violence that intersects these lives.

Further, the concept of aesthetics in the project has emerged from the mundane objects, the utensils, that women use in their everyday life. The color, quality, materials and shapes of the vessels and pots they carry to the kitchen or pop-up site determine the form of aesthetics that some have carried with them from their home country and some obtained from the neighborhood market. In this project, we have a deliberate attempt to avoid the artificial construction of planted aesthetics of market dynamics or try not to create a fake "authenticity" about Afghan, or Somali or Congolese; instead, we have emphasized what has emerged organically through everyday necessity.

4. Conclusion

"Here, the term space refers to a complex construction and production of environment - both real and imagined; influenced by socio-political processes, cultural norms and institutional arrangements which provoked different ways of being, belonging and inhabiting. This space simultaneously also impacts and shapes the social relations that contribute to its creations" (Phadke, 2012, 53).

The everydayness of sharing space, collectively buying the cooking ingredients, cooking, then eating together and chatting creates the possibility of interpersonal relationships. A sustained collective interaction facilitates comradery that helps to share personal and social crises. A collective member's death, health, or financial crisis brings everyone closer and lends a hand for support. The daily interaction renders the community kitchen's collective space a necessity for everyone in the group. On the other hand, through the project Axial Margin, we observed that sustained and systematic creative engagement had catalyzed profound and positive shifts in collaborators' sense of self and identity. They no longer see themselves as struggling destitute individuals primarily concerned with their own/their children's daily survival in challenging conditions. While their material hardship continues, their psychological horizons seem to have radically expanded, and they now affirm themselves as emerging artists with good voices, good perspectives, valid subjectivities, valid symbolic languages, good skills and, above all, a proper place within a social system of unconscionable inequality.

The paper questioned the everyday in which dialogue has a central place and is utilized as a central instrument, uses different media forms to creatively express the dynamic of "everyday life" and its "uneventfulness" (Lefebvre 1947) in the urban public space. This philosophical framework pushes back against convenient canonical schemas of what constitutes appropriate subject matter for 'art'. In human terms, the 'everyday' is the ground of our material awareness, holding us and flowing through us; it is what we know and where we live. Flexible, non-purposive, intangible, insignificant, ignored, overlooked, neglected, obscure, the many-faceted 'everyday' is so customary that it is experienced as a reflex and escapes further scrutiny. However, in fact, mundane reality manifests through an oscillating dialectic of the familiar and the strange. It also is evident in the habitual and the exceptional, the banal and the special, the dull and the vibrant, the numbing and the stimulating, the iconoclastic and the traditional. These are not oppositional energies but complementary ones – intersecting coordinates on the axes of time and space within our daily experience.

Art conceived in, nourished by and organically emerging from the everyday, the existential matrices of the community as both creator and the visitor, and using the physical substrate of that everyday reality as a medium of expression, is one mode that can disrupt and transfigure our experience of what is unremarkable. Democratic in scope and intent, embracing and celebrating the 'ordinary', such art has the potential to recalibrate our perceptions and enable us to re-immerse in the every day – all the internal and external phenomena we reflexively take for granted and may no longer even notice – as 'extraordinary', i.e., experienced as uplifting, fascinating, astonishing, expansive, and even emancipatory.

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Temporary Monument:
A Portrait of Urban Time in Philadelphia's Public Spaces[1]

"What time is it?" asks artist Tyree Guyton in his mural installation at Kensington, Philadelphia. A question that asks more than what the clocks show at the present moment. As if the name of the installation, The Times –in the plural, not the singular time of the one accurate clock– asks how many times are there that order this monumental space, how many temporalities cross-cut each other at the walls of that old Kensington factory, now being a special installation within the city-wide temporary public art and history project: Monument Lab.

Figure 2. Malcom X Park, Monument Lab location with DJ King Britt and Joshua Mays' performance in front of the park mural.[1] Photograph by the author.

1 - To learn more about DJ King Britt and Joshua Mays' performance, visit https://philly.curbed.com/maps/philadelphia-monument-lab-public-art-locations-map.

Monument Lab: A Public Art and History Project[2] was a temporary installation of monuments across 10 sites of Philadelphia, curated by Paul Farber and Ken Lum together with the Mural Arts Philadelphia. It centered on an overarching question: What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia? which is posed initially to 20 artists. It exhibits artists' responses in the form of temporary monuments at 10 different publics sites between September 16th and November 19th, 2017. Installations accompanied research laboratories where visitors participate through proposing their appropriate monuments for the current city of Philadelphia. I think it is fair to say that Monument Lab was a majestic collective inquiry and experimentation on the ordering of public spaces of the city with art installations and citizen participation.

2 - For more information on the project: https://monumentlab.com/about.

Figure 3. Thomas Paine Plaza, featuring Hank Willis Thomas's "All Power to All People."³ Photograph by the author.

3 - More information on Hank Willis Thomas' work can be found here: https://monumentlab.com/projects/hank-willis-thomas-all-power-to-all-people.

The project was topical as well. It opened within the heated national debate around the politics of the monuments, primarily of the confederate monuments (Suerth 2017) in the Southern states and protests for the removal of Frank Rizzo Monument (Segarra 2017) at Philadelphia's Thomas Paine Plaza. It provided a local venue to carry out the debate on an appropriate monument in a positive form of proposing new monuments that would tell the story of Philadelphia. Monument Lab Research Director Laurie Allen's call in the project's newspaper summarizes the historical-polit-ical starting point of the project: "Our monuments have meaning. They are the city's way of telling its story, of picking out moments in history for elevation, and for making a statement about who and what deserves to be honored and remembered. In 2017, we must recognize that the story told by our monuments is not our city's full history. Help us elevate a richer reading of our history and move creatively toward a better future (Allen 2017, p. 3).

Figure 4. Rittenhouse Square, featuring Sharon Hayes' monument "If They Should Ask"[4] Photograph by the author.

4 - To learn more about Sharon Hayes' monument: https://monumentlab.com/projects/sharon-hayes-if-they-should-ask.

Some of Lab monuments, such as Sharon Hayes' "If They Should Ask" at Rittenhouse Square, marks precisely this selective historiography of the existing monuments in Philadelphia. Hayes problematizes that in the entire city there are only two monuments that are dedicated to women: French heroine Joan of Arc and Bostonian Quaker Mary Dyer. By half-scaling nine pedestals of the existing monu-ments in Philadelphia and writing dozens of names of public women figures from the Philadelphia area on the pedestals, Hayes monumentalizes the absence of women's monuments and powerfully makes the case for the exclusion of women in the public memory.

Figure 5. Rittenhouse Square, featuring Sharon Hayes' monument "If They Should Ask" Photograph by the author.

Figure 6. Washington Square, featuring Kaitlin Pomerantz's "On the Threshold."[5] Photograph by the author.

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5 - For more details on Kaitlin Pomerantz's work, visit https://monumentlab.com/projects/kaitlin-pomerantz-on-the-threshold-sal-vaged-stoops-philadelphia.

Figure 7. City Hall, featuring Mel Chin's "Two Me."[6] Photography by the author.

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6 - For more information on Mel Chin's work, visit https://monumentlab.com/projects/mel-chin-two-me

Figure 8. City Hall, featuring Mel Chin's "Two Me." Photograph by the author.

Figure 9. City Hall, featuring Mel Chin's "Two Me." Photograph by the author.

Figure 10. Marconi Plaza featuring Shira Walinsky's work "Free Speech"[7] Photograph by the author.

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7 - For more information about Shira Walinsky's work: https://monumentlab.com/projects/shira-walinsky-and-southeast-by-southeast-free-speech. .

Figure 11. Vernon Park, featuring Karyn Olivier's "The Battle Is Joined."[8] Photograph by the author.

8 - For more information on Karyn Olivier's work, visit https://monumentlab.com/projects/karyn-olivier-the-battle-is-joined.

Figure 12. Franklin Square, featuring Kara Crombie's "Sample Philly."[9] Photograph by the author.

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9 - To learn more about Kara Crombie's work: https://monumentlab.com/projects/kara-crombie-sample-philly.

Figure 13. Penn Treaty Park, featuring Duane Linklater's "In Perpetuity."[10] Photograph by the author.

10 - To learn more about Duane Linklater's work: https://monumentlab.com/projects/duane-linklater-in-perpetuity.

Figure 14. Logan Square featuring Emeka Ogboh's "For Logan Squared: Ode to Philly.".[11] Photograph by the author.

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11 - For more information on Emeka Ogboh's sound monument, visit https://monumentlab.com/projects/emeka-ogboh-featuring-ursula-rucker-logan-squared-ode-to-philly.

Figure 15. Penn Treaty Park featuring RAIR (Recycled Artist in Residency).[12] Photograph by the author.

12 - To learn more about RAIR (Recycled Artist in Residency), visit https://monumentlab.com/projects/rairrecycled-artist-in-residen-cy-plainsight-is-2020. .

"A monument" writes Jane Golden, the executive director of Mural Arts Philadelphia, is what "commemorates something or someone, in order to uplift and keep it in public memory –an enduring symbol" (Golden 2017, p. 2). Monuments are mostly deliberate symbols engrained in the built environment of the city/town that encapsulates a particular past to carry it to the future.[13]

Most monuments are symbols of the state and commemorate the founding acts and heroes of the nation to remind whose heritage that land is loyal to. For critics such as Kim Dovey, "Public monuments often use the memory of a past use of force by the state to signify such future possibility" (Dovey 2007, p.12). Others uplift political principles such as the human rights monuments, cultural figures or commemorate past tragedies such as genocide memorials. Each monument's commemoration of the past has a particular purpose in the present to frame future social and political relations. Monuments' symbolic universe dictate a certain code of conduct, a way of thinking and acting in the public, and depending on the material they are made and the surrounding social-political relations, they usually do so for long durations.

13 - It is important to note that there are many kinds of monuments and here I am reflecting on only the intentional ones. For instance, there are "unintentional monuments" such as a closed factory, or natural ones such as the Uluru, aka Ayers Rock at the central desert in Australia.

William J.T. Mitchell states in his video lecture "What do Monuments Want?" (Mitchell 2016) that the desire of the monument is "to live forever, to defeat death and history." He says that they express power and desire to immortality while at the same time; almost all of the monuments eventually scum to the blows of history and crumble. Monuments are temporal, in both sense of the term. They are made to remain intact over time, defeat death and history, but they are also products of history and the social-political relations that erect or remove them. In that sense, the time of the monument is not less frail than human time in the *longue durée*. Nevertheless, when it is intact and granted its demand of honor, monuments' time poses a contrast to human temporality. Our mobility and short life span stand out against the background of monuments' claim to stability and immortality.

Lab's exhibit of monuments, installed for a short period of time, defeats this conventional logic of monument-time from the outset. It occupies what art critic Rosalind E. Krauss calls a "negative condition of the monument" where the monument becomes nomadic by resigning its usual position of the established place and entering into a field of "sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place" (Krauss 2006, p. 35). With temporary monuments, Lab not only experiments with various monumental contents fitting for Philadelphia but also questions the temporal logic of monumentality.

The temporality of the Lab monuments, both temporary and timely, defy the oppressive elements Lefebvre detected in urban monumental spaces. In his book *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre cautions on the colonizing power of the monuments where these durable statues represent and assert the power of authorities (Lefebvre 2003, p.21). By selectively memorializing history, authorities engrave their versions of the past while ensuring their will to the future. For Lefebvre, that is what makes monuments convenient instruments of power dominating urban space. The transient nature of the Lab monuments, arguably, prevents such top-down imposition in public space. It retracts the monumental claim soon after asserting it and promises -from the outset- to leave the presently filled content empty–an emptiness in public space crucial for democratic participation.

This photography essay aimed at contemplating the difference between the time of monuments and that of human beings. Is it a contrast between the ephemeral and durable, the dynamic and stationary, alive and concrete? Against the background of Monument Lab locations in Philadelphia, this series, accompanied by a short essay, means to pursue and restate these questions. It can be considered as a visual dialogue with, or maybe rather an ocular ode to, the artists, curators, and participants of the Monument Lab. Maybe it is even a photographic attempt to immortalize the passing of multiple times at each monumental site before they migrate to their next location. Taken together, this series paints a portrait of the urban flow of time in Philadelphia's public spaces. Each photograph in the series is taken with the same long exposure technique using an ND filter in daylight, which allows the photographic moment to be as long as 25 seconds. I am grateful to people who kindly posed for certain frames even though their faces are not recognizable.

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