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# The politics of restor(y)ing: towards a conflictual approach to art in urban public space

Friederike Landau-Donnelly  and Martin Zebracki 

*This paper investigates the political implications of public art using frameworks of conflict and antagonism. We introduce ‘restor(y)ing’ as an analytical scaling device for examining public art’s potential to destabilise official planning processes and reclaim cities through acts of re-telling (restorying) and re-making (restoring) urban spaces. We probe how commissioned/formal and unsolicited/informal public art practices can concurrently operate as artistic activism – or ‘artivism’ – to subvert the status quo in urban contexts that encounter rising socio-spatial inequalities. We deploy restor(y)ing both as an epistemic and real-world commitment to challenging hegemonic powers, and thus amplify activist agendas of marginalised communities. Our argument demonstrates how such politics of restor(y)ing works as a device to unpack conflictual interrelations between ‘æffects’: affects and effects that political public art can invoke simultaneously, yet potentially unevenly. The politics of æffects reveal contestations around public art in urban planning contexts and policies, public communication, and reception. They foreground intended inclusions vs. systemic exclusions (politics of effects) and the emanating impacts on urban belonging vs. alienation (politics of affects).*

Keywords **public art, artivism, restor(y)ing, æffect, conflict, antagonism,**

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*While much public art scholarship accentuates its alleged positive benefits, we attend to the (oft-ambiguous) negative, conflict-attuned effects of public art. Ultimately, we advocate for an intersectional approach to restor(y)ing urban justice through public activism.*

## Introduction

Public art is a tricky beast. The compound term public art surfaces a variety of pressing questions around space, identity, and politics. As if the terms ‘art’ and ‘public’ were not complex enough, public art introduces further complexity via the interrelated terms of ‘publics’ (i.e. members of the public as everyday users of public spaces) and ‘publicness’ (i.e. senses and degrees of being (in) public, or rather not). What makes public art public? What is public for whom and how many? How public exactly is public art? If public art cannot exist without being (for ‘the’) public, how come so much public art is either overlooked in urban space, or highly contested?

Without providing exhaustive definitions here, we consider public art to straddle permanent artistic objects, such as sculptures, murals, monuments, ornaments, and installations. It also comprises temporary creative and artistic-activist expressions in everyday public spaces – think of posterizing, stickering, stencilling, guerrilla knitting, seed bombing, graffiti, throw-up murals, flash mobs, installations, projections, sound sculptures, smellscapes, and so on. Within this overarching notion of public art, we subsume the heterogeneous and socially engaged set of ‘street art’ practices, as part of the public art modalities that we analyse in this paper.

Our argument adopts a critical pedagogy towards public art that essentially deconstructs binaries (see Ibáñez-Carrasco and Meiners 2004). The lines between art and non-art that *take* place in and between urban spaces and social contexts are constitutively contested and fuzzy. Hence, we do not seek to produce categorical distinctions between commissioned and therefore ‘sanctioned’ public art and other ‘unauthorised’ forms of public art, which is frequently the case in discussions surrounding graffiti writing (e.g. Arnold 2019; McAuliffe 2012). Such forms are often fiercely fought against, and criminalised, but also critically appreciated as a form of ‘art crime’ (Vanderveen and van Eijk 2016; Young 2010). As the social, spatial, and political dimensions of the production of art in urban public spaces *matter* in all their tangible and intangible capacities, we take both commissioned and informal works and practices of public art into account – and, thus, study them in tandem in this paper.

Public art can elicit a variety of emotional responses, ranging from, but not limited to, feelings of joy, pride, gratitude, and hope, but also distress, trauma, disgust, helplessness, shame, disbelief, outrage, and alienation (Bruce 2017). As we seek to grasp beyond dichotomies of ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ feelings (Cvetkovich 2012), our discussion pushes public art into a conversation about the manifold tensions between higher-order politics, including governmental policies, and everyday grounded practices, experiences, and emotions (that is, the political *differences* in and of public art).

Public art oscillates between designed and spontaneous states of physical presence and absence. They might display, misplay, or underplay marginalised subject positions in urban politics of place (Serino 2012). These positions are multi-layered, as urban subjects navigate and belong in diverse spaces considered to be public, quasi-public, or private (Ehrenfeucht 2014; McCarthy 2003; Smeets and Watt 2013). We take an interest in the role of public art and use *restor(y)ing* to critically unravel a heterogeneous array of places, identities, and politics that condition the contentions taking place concerning public art in cities and beyond.

We continue this paper with a discussion of the contributions of our analysis of urban public art through *restor(y)ing*. We then unpack its politics around ‘affects’: the complex combination of social implications (effects) and emotional implications (affects) of public art practices, before concluding with a discussion about the critical takeaways of *restor(y)ing* for urban scholarship.

## Contributions

A substantial body of interdisciplinary scholarship has studied the regenerative economic and socio-spatial impacts of the uses of public art in contexts of culture-led urban development (e.g. Cameron and Coaffee 2005; Lossau and Stevens 2015; Mathews 2010; Hall and Robertson 2001; Sharp, Pollock, and Paddison 2005; Skinner and Jolliffe 2017). Notwithstanding a perceived lack of critical tools to evaluate the attributed benefits of public art (Hall and Robertson 2001), existing empirical case studies typically discuss public art as a ‘positive’ medium for urban planning and cultural development. Public art might contribute to what Amin (2008, 5) described as ‘a distinctive sense of urban collective culture and civic affirmation’. Moreover, claims on both formal and informal public art practices have been ascribed to its alleged qualities to beautify abandoned dilapidated areas, improve social ambience and cohesion, celebrate cultural and ethnic diversity, aid the development of disadvantaged neighbourhoods towards safer, cleaner, and an overall ‘better’ quality of life, or to even upscale property and land values (Brighenti 2016; Hall and Robertson 2001).

Although we do not call the widely assumed beneficial values of public art into question, in this conceptual paper, we seek to destabilise, and denormalise, the assumption that public art has, or should have, positive effects. Moreover, while our primary focus is on public art in urban contexts, we acknowledge that the consumption and (re)making of public art also takes place on sites (far) beyond the original material and urban boundaries of public art, which integrate the spaces of social and digital media, too. ‘Problematic’ public art heritage can become contested beyond city spaces, as, for example, manifested in the renaming of streets and removal of sculptures, as well as social media content ‘cancelling’ dissonant public art.

Our argument focuses on public art in relation to its generative capacity to form and reform urban identities (see Kwon 2002 [1997]). Specifically, with this paper, we seek to contribute to critical understandings of the transformative potential of urban public art’s dimensions of negativity (see Bruce 2017; 2019). Negativity is not to be understood in a judgemental or moralistic sense. Our

understanding of it is situated in political theories of ontological conflict or antagonism, where negativity stems from radical democratic traditions that embrace conflict as necessary and constitutive to establishing socio-political meaning and power (Marchart 2018; Mouffe 2007).

While antagonism, which is confrontational in nature, can invoke destructive friend–enemy relations, we inquire about the empirical possibilities, and impossibilities, of spaces for a(nta)gonism. While antagonism might persist among political parties, temporary constructive settings of conflict might emerge wherein political stakeholders consider each other legitimate *adversaries* rather than *enemies* (Mouffe 2013). In such public art settings of antagonism, encounters between agents with different social backgrounds may not only mobilise space for potential negations of historical and cultural meanings but also produce an actual change to mend forms of historical discrimination.

With such a negative understanding of the relationship between politics and space, we hope to advance a notion of public art as mediating between complicated pasts and presents. These are histories charged with stories and lived experiences of marginalisation, violence, exploitation, and trauma, as well as present-day challenges to maintain diversity in socially and spatially heterogeneous urban spaces. Through acts of restor(y)ing, we argue, multiple pasts percolate into a complex present, and vice versa, which demonstrates the unevenly intertwined faces of restor(y)ing. This notion helps to understand two key implications for critical research on art in urban public space.

First, it bridges disciplinary antagonisms between traditional art historical and conservationist discourses on the one hand, and public including street art theorisations on the other. The paper thus strengthens interdisciplinary discussions on the political implications of art in public space. Second, it allows for a more fine-grained analysis of conflicts regarding the public artwork's placement, meaning, and durability, that is the resistance to social, material, environmental, and political transformations – especially in negotiations among administrative and civic stakeholders. This ultimately consolidates theorisations of the democratic and political underpinnings of public art.

The transitions between 'restorying' and 'restoring' are helpful in dissecting issues of (in)justices in public art processes and (mis)representations of public art content. It is with the bracketed term of restor(y)ing that we seek to conceptualise, and acknowledge, the ongoing ambiguous tensions between the two implied logics of the politics of effects and affects (as we clarify below). We mobilise the reference to the Latin prefix 're' – that is to say, 'again' or 'back' – to signal repetition, backward movement, or even withdrawal. But we also signal 're' as 'with critical reference to', to extrapolate the analytic of restor(y)ing beyond mere deconstructions of contested public artworks. We propose restor(y)ing not only to dismantle existing hegemonies (such as in the case of tearing down colonial or otherwise racist monuments), but also to envision and articulate new counter-hegemonies in the veins of restoration, reconciliation, and repair.

The contents and contexts of public art practice in the contemporary urban condition are particularly intertwined with contested spaces of neoliberal, colonial, white heteropatriarchal, as well as state hegemonies and institutions. Public art, in so doing, should be seen along socially as well as emotionally charged dimensions of important matters such as inclusion or exclusion, and

representations or under- or misrepresentations. In light of this, we interlock with recent scholarship that suggests antagonism and radical negativity as frameworks for theorising the conflictuality of urban public spaces and spatiality more generally.

We proceed by unpacking public art's *politics of effects* as part of restor(y)ing. Subsequently, we apply the politics of effects to fathom the potential roles that public art can play in addressing, and redressing, urgent matters concerning artistic activism, in particular relating to emerging social issues of racial reconciliation and equity claims (e.g. Valls 2018). We close the argument with a discussion about how urban scholars can understand public art's political implications through restor(y)ing.

### *Restor(y)ing: unpacking the politics of effects*

Public art lingers in the city in many different shapes and sizes. It ranges from tiny figurines sitting on traffic lights, stickers planted on bus stops, etchings in subway windows, graffiti tags on building walls to commissioned shiny sculptures made from expensive materials, murals protected by anti-graffiti coating, and delicate installations behind glass cubes. Some pieces of public art are standing still, exuding a sense of immobility, heaviness, and majesty – think of sedate memorials or bigger-than-life-size monuments. Other public artwork finds itself in motion through digital screens, reposts, strings, projectors, or trains that carry their inscriptions, such as graffiti tags removed, painted over, or 'buffed'. Whether expressions of public art are sanctioned or not, what connects them is that they tell stories through the mouths, hands, and eyes of their makers. Public art objects do not act on their own; rather, they are produced through social relations/interactions and the interpretations of their designers, viewers, or users. Public art can be textual, textured or pictorial. Sometimes, it is obscure, screams in your face, or leaves an indifferent impression. So, it is highly contextual through references to the places and times in which it manifests itself.

In this context, and in the search for new 'vocabularies' for public art (Turner 2004), we suggest the notion of *restor(y)ing* as an analytical device to flesh out different narratives and experiences of public art. As such, we use this notion to disentangle the multiple facets of public art practices in re-making, re-claiming, and re-signifying spaces, places, times, people, and things that are restored or restoried. Our idea of restor(y)ing is inspired by larger bodies of scholarly and curatorial work, particularly issues around public art practices' site-specificity (e.g. Hopkins, Solga, and Orr 2009; Kwon 2004), activist underpinnings (e.g. Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017), as well as politics of memory-making (e.g. Cento-Bull and Hansen 2015; Courage et al. 2021; Mitchell 2003).

With restor(y)ing, we seek to capture the complex and inherently contested material and symbolical manifestations of urban power, belonging, presence, and inclusion, as well as its antipodes: marginalisation, alienation, absence, and exclusion. Consequently, we render 'restor(y)ing' as both an epistemic and real-world commitment to challenge hegemonic norms that shape urban politics, places, and communities, while highlighting the manifold potentials of artistic and activist critiques and practices for doing so. Restor(y)ing can take many

shapes, such as creative commentaries on existing monuments via diverse media like graffiti, projections and etchings, or practices like flower bombings and dressing sculptures in self-made clothes. Such interventions do not merely re-narrate the meaning of 'difficult' heritage related to slavery, colonialism and other historical traumas with playful reinterpretations, but in that way also contribute to partially restoring historical wounds of marginalisation and exploitation. To demonstrate *how* the politics of restor(y)ing can be used as an analytical scaling device to unpack these inseparably interwoven political dimensions of public art and activism, we borrow the term *æffect* from Steven Duncombe (2016, 119, emphases in original):

before we act in the world, we must be moved to act. We might think of this as: *Affective Effect* or, if you prefer: *Effective Affect*. Or, using the grapheme æ, we can encompass both affect and effect by creating a new word: *Æffect*.

Hence, restor(y)ing can help us to critically reflect on pressing issues of urban inequality, exclusion, and displacement, as well as to find out what public art interventions reveal about the forces and processes that underpin them – their *politics of effects*, commonly linked to contexts of urban policy and planning. To make sense of these effects on urban communities and space, restor(y)ing also requires being attentive to the ambiguous impacts of public art processes on people's sense of belonging vs. alienation – in other words, the *politics of affects*. Such politics of effects *and* affects thus operate simultaneously, yet potentially unevenly, producing *æffects*. In sum, our everyday lived realities are deeply affected by prevalent rules and normalcies just as we embody, enact, and challenge the urban policies and plans that surround us (Borén, Grzyś, and Young 2020).

The politics of *æffects* allow us to unravel the contestations that emerge around the production and consumption of public art within everyday engagements with urban public spaces. For example, a public art commission might pursue outcomes such as social cohesion, safety, and cleanliness in a neighbourhood with a 'bad reputation', thus invoking politics of effects. At the same time, street art commentaries such as anti-gentrification slogans or colour bombs may destabilise such top-down appropriations of public space, thus bringing the politics of affects to the fore.

On the one hand, the politics of effects reveal the consequences of political measures, rules, and decision-making practices, which are not necessarily controllable or identifiable as such. They point to the planned, instructed, and authorised modes of realising public art projects, typically targeted at enhancing the inclusivity of urban spaces. The politics of public art are connected with institutionalised funding, formal policy reviewing processes, zoning, permits, and so on (Robidoux and Kovacs 2018).

The politics of affects, on the other hand, highlight the emotional implications of public art, which, depending on its material and social affordances (see Massey and Rose 2003), can shape a range of affects, such as senses of inclusivity and enjoyment, or conversely, estrangement or sadness. The politics of affects appeal to the diverse and potentially clashing emotional responses or resistances towards public art manifestations. This becomes tangible in recent activist movements like the New York-based *Decolonize this*

*Place*, suggesting taking down problematic monuments, or the *Black Monuments Project*, which seeks to establish new monuments that provide greater visibility of Black political and community leaders.

Effects and affects can never be neatly separated, as implied by Duncombe's (2016) intertwined term *affects*. Nonetheless, the temporary analytical separation of effects and affects allows us to untangle how commissioned and unsanctioned forms of art in everyday urban public spaces can invoke quite different, yet interconnected, emotions, encounters, and actions. For example, if activism *takes place* by reclaiming urban public space for marginalised people, their stories of pain and erasure can be partially restored as well as 'restoried' – happening through acknowledging historical wrongs and concrete measures to alleviate exclusion, marginalisation, and disservice (e.g. Tellidis 2020). Hence, restor(y)ing helps to disentangle how objectives for public artworks might invoke emotional reactions other than those intended, or wished for, from the vantage points of policymakers, public art commissioners, curators, and (co-)creators.

At this stage, it is worth mentioning a classic example of an (in)famously commissioned public artwork, which is Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*. This long-curved black steel wall, inaugurated in Federal Plaza in New York in 1981, caused great public controversy. Many found it a monstrosity blocking the pedestrian walkway and it was removed after a lawsuit in 1989. *Tilted Arc* held ambiguous values of an artwork storying nuisance or aesthetic delight and one that was a testimony to the restoration of urban modernity or an act of unrestoration (as it never came back in material form). A recent example of the contested politics of the place of/for public art is Rodney Graham's *Spinning Chandelier*, a kinetic sculpture unveiled at Granville Bridge in Vancouver in 2019,<sup>1</sup> where individuals without a fixed home used to meet, sleep, and dwell (Midgal 2019). The installation, which rocketed to almost 5 million Canadian dollars, was jointly funded by a private real estate developer with seemingly little consideration of the end users at the location. In addition to these examples of commissioned, non-monumental public artworks, there are a plethora of memorials that honour foregone political, religious, and civic leaders (most of the time, white heterosexual males). Over the past years, monumental conflicts have become particularly pressing within postcolonial contexts and Black resistance movements across the UK, Canada, the US, and India (BBC 2020c) as well as in post-Socialist contexts of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia (Kudaibergenova 2017).

Contested artworks in prominent public city places such as squares and parks have either 'fallen' through official decommissioning or potential re-location or re-purposing. Think of how museums have adopted and 'updated' colonial and oft-racist statues by adding interpretative panels that call audiences to re-read those statues, and strip them of their colonial power (e.g. Blei 2020). On some occasions, grassroots opposition has led to the abrupt removal of public statues, as notably seen when the statue of the notorious seventeenth-century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol was toppled by anti-racism protestors in 2020 (BBC 2020b). Another striking case was the withdrawal of the statue in the image of Canada's first prime minister, Sir John MacDonald in Montréal. MacDonald initiated the residential school system that gave rise to the displacement and eventual death of thousands of Indigenous children between the mid-nineteenth century and 1996 (BBC 2020a).



Together, these examples resurface important questions such as: what makes public art public, and public for whom? How are the publics historically bound to specific sets of values and norms? Which aspects influence the decision for an 'appropriate' fit between a chosen public artwork, location, and user audiences? Who had, or did not have, a say in the selection, placement, and time stamp of a public artwork? On a more conceptual level, who and what legitimises the presence or absence of public art? It becomes apparent that previous uses of the aforementioned Granville Bridge (i.e. sleeping and finding shelter under the bridge) were considered neither a preferred nor legitimate usage of that public space. Thus, Granville Bridge was 'upgraded' with a kinetic sculpture for different, more desired urban dwellers than, in this case, homeless people.

Like Frank and Ristic (2020), we are interested in 'how urban fallism shapes the past, present, and future of cities' (ibid., 562). Through restor(y)ing, we aim to push understandings of public art through considering not only its continuous *presence*, but also the presence of its *absence*. The past, present, and future are particularly entangled in monuments revealing 'ghostly' dimensions of how aspirations and meanings are inscribed into urban public space through on-going struggles for more just cities. So, with restor(y)ing, we critically look at how public art *matters* in terms of how it represents, effaces, or offends certain urban identities or communities. Notably, graffiti writing has seen a lengthier history of scholarship interested in its ghostly contours through its ephemeral, and perhaps even uncanny, appearances, reappearances, and disappearances (e.g. Arnold 2019; Ferrell 2016; Kindynis 2017; Parisi 2019). Such hauntological manifestations in other forms of public art including monuments have only been little theorised for their political implications, leading us to turn to a deeper discussion of the politics of public art with the objective to discern its fleeting aeffects.

The term 'politics of public art' has seemingly its first appearance in Dubin (1985, 274) who described public art as 'a screen onto which larger political and organizational concerns are projected.' Public art, in this context, is primarily understood through the parameters of urban policy, and formal commissioning practices, rendering it a kind of public service that is consensus-oriented and typically uncontroversial. The politics of public art can be expanded by an integration of a 'politics of the public' (Palmer 2012), expressing a concern with the public – or rather its plural 'publics' to highlight social diversity across a myriad of different public interests and values. While institutionalised public art commissions might claim to have 'the' public interest in mind, they may paper over internal differences among communities, especially when certain publics are negatively disposed towards the installation of public art amidst community spaces that are conceivably being serviced.

We argue that the politics of public art should precisely be understood in the interstices *between* the 'politics' of institutions, norms, and rules on the one hand, and the counter-hegemonic, self-initiated, and partially transgressive expressions of 'the political' on the other. It inevitably remains difficult to pin down what or who 'is' political or not. The political as we understand it derives from an ontology of constitutive conflict and antagonism (Marchart 2018; 2019; Mouffe 2007). Thus, it penetrates any formation of 'politics' or 'the political' for that matter, and asks for an ambiguous understanding through the politics of aeffects.

## *Effective spaces of restor(y)ing*

The *effects* of public art do not form within binary or oppositional parameters. They ambiguously sit between and besides formal commissions and informal practices, public authorities and publics, public and private spaces, legal and illegal practices, brightness and void, permanency and temporariness, presence and absence, and so forth. This is, again, where the ghostly appearances of public art are brought into the limelight. How do such ghosts show up in the reappropriations of public art? Maybe, by making present some historically fraught absences: the erasure of minoritised voices, the lack of acknowledgement of non-majoritarian including Indigenous heritage, customs, languages, etc.

Here, restor(y)ing can help in conceptualising how imbalances of visibility and invisibility as well as absence and presence are renegotiated and superseded. New forms of presence can emerge through the removal of problematic sculptures, thus making them relatively absent: This, for example, happened during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) resistance in 2020 when historically marginalised BIPOC (i.e. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities took up material and symbolic urban spaces across the 'Global North' (as well as in formerly colonised spaces such as South Africa, where Rhodes Must Fall took place in 2015). Furthermore, public spaces that were once 'taken' by colonial sculptures, could be no longer filled with art, but with a newly acquired emptiness of public space, leveraged by restor(y)ing. This may crack open public space as inherently contested as well as open to previously ignored voices, subjectivities, and claims on the city. Where restorying, in this sense, invites new narratives to the stage of urban public space, restoring sets out to *transform* space and *not* maintain or preserve it in a conformist fashion.

Our approach to the politics of public art departs from a view of public art as both socially and spatially situated (Deutsche 1996): who is (not) involved and where (not)? This touches on the socio-politics of public art (Schuermans, Loopmans, and Vandenabeele 2012), to which we would add *visual politics*: what do we (not) see in public art? The distinctions between social, spatial, and visual politics of public art can deepen our understanding of *æffects*. By relating them to processes of inclusion and exclusion, participation and non-participation, commission or omission (i.e. politics of effects), as well as belonging, trauma, reconciliation, and redress (i.e. politics of affects), we can ask: who instigates the politics of *æffects*, what do they look like, where and how long do they take place?

Consequently, we understand public art as a political modality of restor(y)ing the city, entailing processes that navigate through different stages of contestations over urban identities and rights to the city (Dikeç and Swyngedouw 2016; Mbaye and Yeh 2020). Hence, such restor(y)ing processes should be understood as a heterogeneous composition of narratives and voices of official, grassroots and private actors, spanning policymakers, urban developers, artists, and everyday users of public space. As such, restor(y)ing pronounces the political dimension of public art's 'memory work' (Burk 2006) to consider alternatives to dominant processes of civic monumentalism (Amin 2008). As put by Russo (2021, 20), 'public art [...] can re-texture city spaces, interrupt rhythms of technocratic efficiency, lift up submerged histories, and force a questioning' (see also Bruce

2019), which can take subversive forms of art and activism to re-make the city (Maeder, Piraud, and Pattaroni 2017).

Some commissioned public art is meant to be permanent or only be in place for a limited amount of time, for example, to advance and celebrate the historical overcoming of discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, restor(y)ing requires attention to both public space *and* public time to grasp critical movements and moments of public art in the city and who is (not) seen, heard, or included, and when. The analytic of restor(y)ing, hence, unfolds the complexity of moving simultaneously backwards and forwards in time, space, discourse, and memory to 'do' public art *otherwise* – or to 'undo' it. As such, public art can appear as counter-hegemonic artistic practice (Mouffe 2007; Marchart 2019), defined as an 'attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony' (Mouffe 2007, 3). In that sense, counter-hegemonic restor(y)ing seeks to uncover the inevitable manifestation of conflict or dissent to make 'visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate' (Mouffe 2007, 5). For example, monuments erected in memory of George Floyd, or feminist statues in lieu of racist sculptures, aim to reshuffle the previously problematic presence of certain public art towards more equitable expressions of urban culture and identity.

As indicated above, we subsume everyday street art practices such as graffiti, tags, stickering, guerrilla knitting, and other do-it-yourself (DIY) interventions as politicising public art forms. These might be intentionally fleeting, removable, washable, transportable, reversible, etched, or written onto decade-old marble. Think of Vienna's controversial memorial of the former mayor Karl Lueger (Vienna.at 2021), which has been repeatedly tagged with the term '*Schande*' (disgrace). Other public art pieces are explicitly commissioned to collectively commemorate his- or *her*stories of loss, trauma, grief, and disappearance (e.g. Museum of Transitory Art 2020; Preitler 2015).

Restor(y)ing, crucially, also entails attention to ambiguous prisms of formal as well as grassroots, self-organised or activist stakeholders, as commonly imbricated in modes of 'public activism.' Zebracki (2020, 133) defines this term as an entanglement of public art and activism: construed as art practices in publicly accessible sites which address and problematise social marginalisation through activist critique and the imagination and promotion of more intersectionally inclusive futures. Such public activism allows a critical reconsideration of notions of 'the public', or 'publics', which move beyond commissioned, arms-length public art agencies and institutions.

Subsequently, restored and restoried public art fuses and intervenes *between* instrumental, aesthetic, and activist rationales in contexts of public art curation, consultation, and realisation. Thereby, restor(y)ing aims to expose the complicated, and potentially contradictory, rationales and complicities of public art commissioning. In other words, neither the sheer removal nor the continued presence of public art creates a space for more polysemic narratives. Restored or restoried public art navigates between unsanctioned street art, such as graffiti and DIY artistic resistances (frequently targeted against gentrification; see Mathews 2010; Forkert 2013; Porter and Barber 2006), and public art that is commissioned 'from above' (e.g. Ehrenfeucht 2014; O'Connor 1996; Young 2014), or applied 'retrospectively' in urban design (e.g. Prichard 2000).

In sum, the mutual relations, synergies, as well as frictions of restoring and restorying should be precisely seen within the ambiguous affective spaces of restor(y)ing. Where restorying can take more ephemeral forms of sudden commentary, occupation, demonstration, and public testimony, restoring can enact as a more permanent material change to monumentalised built environments. So, while restoring can also signal conservative, or conservationist gestures, our notion of restoring is explicitly directed *against* repeatedly oppressive, representationalist, monumentalist, and immobile socio-spatial structures of the city. Such structures comprise physical objects like state buildings, statues, heavily securitised buildings including banks and museums as well as immaterial dimensions that encompass discriminatory ideologies, notably heteropatriarchy and colonialism. While restoring can infrastructure colonial practices and perpetuate claims on urban identity (Knudsen and Kølvrå 2020), it can also foster interstitial forms of counter-hegemonic memory-making (Demos 2012).

When restorying and restoring coalesce into counter-hegemonic activism, the politics of effects and affects merge into affective restor(y)ing. The affective oscillations of public art practices thereby hint at their transgressive potentials (Doron 2000; 2002), highlighting powerful movements *between* legality and subversion (Austin 2010; Hansen 2018; Ortiz van Meerbeke and Sletto 2019). In those processes, the politics of effects and affects occur in a tense relationship with formal and oft-authoritarian politics of placemaking (Buser et al. 2013; Courage et al. 2021).

Within the purview of urban fallism (Frank and Ristic 2020), BIPOC-led movements, notably BLM and Decolonize This Place, have strikingly pioneered iconoclastic activist protests against colonial and patriarchal urban statues and monuments (e.g. Boetcher 2020; Cohen 2020). These actions have inspired wider groups fighting for intersectional justice and against exclusionist urban memory-making or processes of 'unremembering' (Davis 2021). Regarding this matter, Mbaye and Yeh (2020, NP) elaborate on Sobande (2019) to produce a critique of neoliberal complicity in sustaining an ambivalence between visibilising and invisibilising the socially marginalised. As they aptly argue within the scope of BLM:

Urban culture is articulated in public spaces where the official narrative is glorified with its version of the past and the present, and multinational corporations not only commodify racial difference but also engage in 'woke-washing', where brand marketing simultaneously enables the visibility and erasure of intersectional, feminist, and Black social justice activism.

The restorative aspect of restor(y)ing reminds us of the potential forms of implicit violence that public art can elicit (see Mitchell 1990); for example, through the continuing and partially un-commented presence of colonial monuments. Countless Confederate monuments in the former slave states in the southern US have been artistically re-interpreted via temporary video projections, performances or graffiti, or have been moved or toppled. Such re-appropriations of already existing public artworks critically impart *whose* collective memories and histories are restor(i)ed, or not. The 'revision' of public

art by diverse media, such as counter-monuments and muralism (e.g. Morrison 2022), can thus further materialise the affective politics of public art.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper has presented the politics of effects and the politics of affects in a relational yet dissimilarly enmeshed fashion. Both serve as epistemic levers for a critical urban consciousness that is constructively guided by differences *between* the politics of effects and affects. We have introduced restor(y)ing as an analytical scaling device for differentiating contestations around public art practices. This can actively work for social and symbolic reparations, markedly against formerly or current oppressive regimes. For example, it can be used for unpacking struggles against hegemonic white heteropatriarchy and racial discrimination in the present and the past (Minty 2006), thus pointing beyond existing systems of oppression. Our conceptualisation of the effective and affective underpinnings of public art has indicated various possibilities of how public artworks are inscribed in and out of the political realm of urban public spaces.

Our proposed analytic of the politics of *affects* dovetails with critical urban thought about public art in the following ways. Firstly, it contours the *political* ramifications of public art, which are (i) couched between logics of effects and those of affect, (ii) between and beyond 'positive' and 'negative' experiences or feelings of public art, and (iii) striated by conflicts between belonging and alienation, presence and absence, or other such contentious spectrums. Secondly, we have grounded the politics of *affects* in political theories of antagonism and negativity to establish a guiding conception of conflict as a necessary and inevitable occurrence in urban cultural politics and everyday life. Thirdly, we encourage scholars and practitioners including activists to critically locate and engage in political tensions in concrete topical struggles (whilst being mindful of their potential activism fatigue). Public art can serve as an important communicative medium in exploring and potentially overcoming tensions, especially those that have recently emerged around reconciliation with culturally minoritised and racialised groups.

It remains challenging to pinpoint how sanctioned/commissioned vs. unsanctioned/informal public art practices relate to restor(y)ing. As we have argued at the outset, the politics of restor(y)ing might transcend such dichotomies altogether. In practice, however, restor(y)ing could mandate to sanction and, in so doing, sustain certain exclusions and inequalities. We advocate for a mindset of nuanced planning and policy approaches that appreciate the socially contingent and multifaceted nature of conflicts around public art. This would avoid one-sided, hegemonic restoring that eschews public dialogue and the inclusion of a diversity of voices. A short-sighted example would be the 'simple' removal of a contested public monument from public space without any prudent procedure for public consultation and productive conflict – in other words, an agonistic approach to conflictual public art. Precisely the latter, as we have contended, would host conditions for fostering ongoing critical public engagement that also holds space for conflict. This would be vital for a

sustained 'aftercare' for public art, one that empowers multiplicities of voices and positions rather than one that imposes a single authoritative ideology or reading of urban identity, belonging or normalcy.

While our notion of restor(y)ing can help in navigating through the complex multi-stakeholder processes of urban public art formations, it cannot forecast the effects of public art pieces and processes. In lieu of considering such non-conclusiveness a shortcoming, it opens doors for those polyvalences that have long been occluded by dominant and overly 'positive' readings of public art in discourse and practice. In contrast, we have suggested attending to the conflictual effects of public art. Restor(y)ing through public art can provide urban subjects, individually as well as collectively, with agency to imagine and move towards radically different urban meanings and futures, that may counter exclusionary regimes of power. The reshuffling of urban cultural presences and absences through the restor(y)ing of public art can yield new possibilities for conflict-attuned yet constructive urban identity and community formation. Such reclaiming of the city could also occur in a backwards motion by re-contextualising past 'difficult' legacies and heritage through activist practices, thereby restor(y)ing the different and co-existing lived experiences in city spaces.

Transitions from restorying to restoring, or vice versa, remain dependent on various parameters. Sometimes, the permanent restoration of public art does not chime with official planning or policy priorities that are typically intertwined with political ones. However, ideas or contents of temporary, formerly unsanctioned public art pieces that seek to restory urban identities can become integrated into more permanent (and publicly permissible) registers of urban heritage, by that means restoring memories, especially those that have traditionally remained underrepresented.

Ultimately, restor(y)ing implicates an open-ended, and somewhat untameable, process of re-signification between public space, artwork, and multiple engagers, unlocking a variety of political and cultural meanings of/for public art. Restoring, in the sense of 'restoration', can address complex politicised aspects of conserving, or disbanding, art in urban public spaces while producing *new* stories, too (Hall and Robertson 2001). By attending to the precarious lifecycles of public art pieces, such as contested temporary murals (McCormick and Jarman 2005), we encourage future scholarship to pursue restor(y)ing to continue excavating insights into the politics of public art's absences and presences and its ambiguous conflict-attuned effects.

Through public art's politics of effects and affects, we have argued to critically re-assess the impetus, or imperative, to restore and restory difficult memories of the urban past. Requests for 'revised' or new public artworks are usually steered by local public art commissioners, urban planning offices, place branding incentives, etc. that may instrumentalise public art for reconciliation (e.g. Burk 2006; CBC 2019; Smith 2015). Such formalistic intents are, however, constantly crisscrossed by counter-hegemonic and self-instituted forms of cultural production, such as graffiti writing, stencilling, and colour bombing to challenge weighty norms and hegemonies that are interlinked with colonialism, racism, sexism, and so forth.

Calls for public art's institutionalised support might be nothing new. Yet, the analytic of the politics of *affects* can help to better grasp ambivalent entanglements

between the effects of well-intentioned projects and their emotional affects, such as public endorsement as well as disapproval, hurt, outrage, and irritation (as in the recent case of the *Spinning Chandelier* discussed above). Hence, public art's politics of effects cannot force public opinion, reaction, and thus a specific politics of affect. Public art's legitimation is, therefore, invariably negotiable and contingent. Public art's politics of effects do produce criteria of possibility, legality, location, motif, and so on. Nevertheless, frameworks that condition public art are constantly permeated by (the politics of) affects. The latter include unsolicited, unforeseen and unforeseeable reactions to artistic choices, including forms of cultural protection or vandalism (depending on perspective), as well as alternative suggestions, dreams, and hopes for art in public space.

All in all, our argument has highlighted how restor(y)ing can serve as a valuable analytical scaling device for urban and cultural scholars. It can help unpack public art's politics of *affects*: one that materialises within a conflictual sphere of the effects and affects that the politics of public art can invoke simultaneously. Importantly, restor(y)ing should not be conceived of as a scissor-like analytic that merely dissects the effects of political motivations from everyday affective responses to artworks in urban public spaces. As much as the politics of effects may sometimes overshadow the politics of affects, the latter always already contains a metaphorical counter-hegemonic spike, enabling people to speak, paint, and take back the urban canvas.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Note

- 1 We wish to refer to Vancouver as situated on the ancestral, and unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish Nations of xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh).

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