MARKED SPACE:
PUBLIC ART AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Introduction

Art has played a prominent role in the lives of every human culture. Sometimes controlled and sometimes just predictable, sometimes stunning, and often controversial, art has been ineradicable, despite political struggles to control it. Something about the way art communicates seems to satisfy a fundamental human impulse towards creativity, emotional connection, discovering new meanings, and an emotional and experiential logic that operates in a realm outside words.

Yet the majority of political theory on democracy and political communication describes a world of communication that happens only through direct words. Whether addressing its possibilities or its failures, public discourse is discussed in terms of linear, verbal logic, a rational-critical exchange of proposition and counter-proposition. This thesis aims to contribute to addressing an alternative and neglected aspect of political communication. Basing our political understandings on this limited range of human verbal communication fails to account for the whole world of artistic communication going on around it. Moving beyond the constricts of the rational-critical exchange in political communication may also expand our concepts of the role of communication itself in politics.

I work from an understanding of democracy as never settled. Leaders are reassigned, laws are repealed and passed, jurisdictions change, and, above all, even meanings of our “shared” democratic history and experience are always contested. Mean-making should never be foreclosed. No ideas or meanings in a democracy should ever be above reinterpretation, proposal, or contradicting. Living democracy is
a struggle, and meaning-making is likewise the struggle underlying democratic interactions. When a meaning becomes stable and beyond the reach of struggle, meaning becomes authoritarian. Stasis of meaning is the fossilization of democracy: the stabilized meaning may reflect traces of a democratic process that brought it about, but its inability to be challenged makes its reality authoritarian.

It is in this context of the need for struggle over meaning that it is worth thinking about the characteristics of meaning-making in art.

Art has the potential to remain open to meaning-making in a way that persuasive verbal argumentation is not. The viewer is invited to participate in making meaning when viewing art, to interact with the work on a personal level to complete its purpose. The viewer may be invited to open themselves up to possibility of new ideas. The personal nature of art, its dependence on continual interaction, and its interest in creativity means that art encourages multiplicities of meanings, in an embrace of the indefinite and infinite and re-definable that is valuable in the multiplicitous publics of democratic societies. A work of art may take advantage of the opportunity to communicate emotions and experiences that cannot be expressed or are not welcome in direct discourses of traditional logic. The unsettledness of art makes it a natural tool for democratic communication and the process of continually remaking, whether by challenging or reaffirming, meaning. By its very methods of communicating, art recruits participation from its audience.

In recent decades, the fine art world has supplied many pieces of art that have commentated on politics: stained glass bombs, collages of headlines and presidents’
faces, a byzantine-styled mural of atrocities in modern Iraq at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Meanwhile, cities have supplied continued political involvement in art from the other side of the government, by maintaining government-sponsored monuments of generals on horses in parks and putting up modern sculptures and monuments in public squares. And graffiti artists across the U.S. and the world continue making art that is often denied both the title of art and status as political speech, and hunted down instead as meaningless vandalism. The fine art is generally interpreted in isolation for its political message, with no accounting for its actual social and political impact and relevance. The public art of city governments, usually attempts to harness the emotional power of art to unify the public, are often treated as attempts to settle and consolidate political meaning, with no accounting for its artistic and experienced impact once established. And street art and graffiti is rarely treated as having any meaning at all, other than a symptom of crime.

All of these forms, however, play a role in the give and take of voices in the public sphere. This is especially true on the streets, in public space. The right to speech is well-addressed in democratic theory—the ability to be listened to, less so. Therefore I focus on art in the last space where anyone who places their art has a chance to be heard, because those physically sharing the space are forced to see it: public art. Geography brings together diverse artworks and communication onto a single shared arena where democratic struggles over meaning become evident. Just the presence of different forms of art, when it puts its mark on spaces already full of social
meanings, has political meaning, even before delving into the content of the art’s messages.

The thesis begins by developing a concept of the public sphere that both can accommodate nontraditional forms of communication like art, and that highlights democratic needs that public art is best suited to facilitating. The second chapter examines the implications of geography as a particularly important aspect of the context of meaning-making for art in the public sphere. The final chapter first ties together the political theory, the geography, and art to explain the political dynamics of art when it is placed in public space. Then, a case study of art found in the Station North neighborhood of the city of Baltimore offers an illustration and evidence of these dynamics at work.

Creativity, Nawal El Saadawi (1996) tells us, is inherently dissident; it is dissatisfied with what it is given and seeks to add to the world that which was not there before. Struggle too, especially in the context of working against oppression and anti-democratic forces, is creative. It acquires new knowledge of ideas and ways to live, and demystifies oppressive myths. El Saadawi continues:

Creativity means uniqueness: innovation. Discovering new ways of thinking and acting, of creating a system based on more and more justice, freedom, love and compassion. If you are creative, you must be dissident. You discover what others have not yet discovered. You may be alone at the beginning, but somehow you feel responsible towards yourself and others: towards those who are not yet aware of this discovery, who share your struggle with the system. Towards those who have lost hope and have submitted (El Saadawi 1996, 156).

Resistance of art as political communication, resistance of democracy’s need for disruption over consolidation, resists the democratic potential of art as critique and as
a force for inclusion. The stories contained here will hopefully begin to make visible the democratic experiences already happening through art.
Chapter One
The Context: The Public Sphere

Art’s role in politics is analyzed in this thesis as part of the public sphere. The idea of the public sphere treats communication itself as partially constitutive of democracy. This is particularly useful for understanding art, since art is, at heart, about communication. The same criteria that contemporary theorists suggest using for improving the democratic quality of the public sphere can be used as standards for evaluating public art’s democratic impact (Young 2000; Bickford 2000; Mansbridge 1990a and 1990b; Sanders 1997). Inclusiveness is one of the most prominent of these criteria. Inclusiveness is both a basic source of legitimacy for democracies, and is also itself an ongoing end of democracy, one of democracy’s basic purposes. In the public sphere, communication—including artistic communication—is the way that inclusion is formed and continually practiced. Real inclusion, in this analysis, is a more profound process than just formal access to democratic institutions. It is an ongoing process that requires diverse groups to have real opportunity to speak, to speak critically, and be listened to, in ways that avoid reproducing the inequalities of a stratified society in its public sphere. A conception of multiple, pluralized public spheres rather than one single public sphere may be necessary to achieve inclusive democratic practices.

The public sphere is the discursive realm where individuals meet to discuss issues of common concern and, hopefully, reach some conclusions about what to do about them. It is a society’s discussion and debate. It is the evening news and pundits, community meetings, advertisements, conversations with your relatives on the
phone—anywhere that the public at large talk about and debate questions that cannot be solved individually. Basically, the public sphere is the arena of political participation relatively independent of the state itself, though it is impossible to be entirely free of its influence. Because the public sphere is distinct from the state itself, it can theoretically criticize the state. Many theorists who use the term also conceive of it as separate from the official economy, as is true in Jurgen Habermas’ history: “it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling” (Fraser 1992, 110).

When people participate in public deliberation, the public sphere can be a tool of societal integration and coordination. Through discussion and debate, resources are allocated, social norms are created, and spaces are built. Calhoun (1992) describes the ideal image of engagement in the public sphere as “the means by which the conflicting private wills of rational people could be brought into harmony" (18). The public sphere is critical to understanding a society’s politics because communicative processes are powerful. Habermas and theorists following his lead developed models of communicative processes in the belief that they hold a better promise of emancipation than specific political ideologies (Calhoun 1992, 5).

Although the public sphere is independent of the government, it is implicitly a necessary part of a democratic government. It is true that deliberative practices are only one possible way of coordinating social life—other popular tools include money and power. But neither of these has the same democratic potential, nor prioritizes ideas themselves in the way that the public sphere can (Calhoun 1992, 6). This is why the
public sphere is necessary to democracy not only for the outcome it can produce of coordinating life, but also because of its processes. Often, democratic models focus on the formal design of a democracy—the organization of elections, voting, and delegation of power. All of these practical steps of democracy implicitly rest, however, on a robust public sphere. To have a government that responds to the will of the people, there must be venues where people are expressing their wills. The hard work of creating policy is not done through voting itself; it is done through idea formation and debate. A robust public conversation also allows a society to coordinate action outside of government. Every principle of democracy depends on communication at its heart.

HISTORICAL MODELS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The ideal of a civic public sphere emerged as part of Enlightenment republican ideals, during the emergence of a public life unique to the mingling of new urban centers. The civic public was articulated by Rousseau, for example, as the sphere where the people could pursue the collective interest by being willing to transcend personal interest in order to serve the general good. Rousseau’s treatment of the public as a unified being with needs divorceable from the particulars of individual’s lives is what allows the idea of a ‘general will’ to make sense. Habermas (1962) later outlined the public sphere that emerged in the era of Rousseau as a historical phenomenon of the bourgeois, yet still considered it an ideal form worthy of nostalgia. The Enlightenment-era premises of universality and impartiality built into these concepts
of the public sphere still pervade modern ideas of political discourse and shape political actions and attitudes.

The historical, bourgeois public sphere in the era of the Enlightenment was based on a belief in rational-critical debate. The quality of the rational argument, completely independent of the identity of the person arguing, was believed to be what counted. The theory is that the best ideas, proven through competition with other ideas and rational evaluation, would emerge out of arguments and debates as solutions to shared political questions.

Underpinning the ideal of rational-critical discussion is an assumption of universality, which is in turn assumed to lend itself to creating harmony. Impartial reason is supposed to cut across differences and particulars of context, identities, and perspectives to apply in the same way to every circumstance. The reasoner divorces his or herself from their own interests and perspectives to adopt a kind of “transcendent view from nowhere,” or, in other conceptions, a “view from everywhere” that is able to take into account every experience and perspective in society, and deduce the needs of the whole regardless of the reasoner’s personal needs (Young 1990). The ideal of impartial reason see emotion, desires, and affectivities as the cause of heterogeneity. The variability cause by emotion and desires interferes with reason’s aspiration to universality and a unified view of human needs. This approach takes a totalizing approach to public needs and justice: a proposition is either a or not-a, just or unjust, relevant or irrelevant, in the interest of the public good or in service of private desires. Because rational-critical debate is supposed to function
without regard for the identities of the participants, it responds only to claims that are made in universal terms. Claims made with reference to the particulars of participants’ circumstances are invalid, outside the purview of public discussion, and damaging to the entire project of a public that is assumed to need a consensus, an objective ‘general will’ (Young 1990). Debate in the public sphere, for the sake of the common good, is to rest on the universal.

The result of this privileging of the universal over the particular is that the ideal of the bourgeois public sphere rests on a strict division of the public and the private. Because of impartial reason’s impulses towards totalizing separation, reason and emotions or desires are mutually exclusive. Emotional life and desire are relegated to the private, domestic sphere; reason governs the public sphere. Early ideas of the public sphere do acknowledge that the private sphere is a base for public life, the foundation from which private individuals enter public conversation: Habermas (1962) called the public sphere "the sphere of private people come together as a public," and this connection is what motivated Rousseau to concern himself with proper morals in private life (Landes 1988). But both theorists still treat the two spheres as exclusive and well-bounded. Rousseau segregated the personal functions of the domestic sphere from the public sphere as a way to satisfy human emotional needs without interfering with the reason necessary to maintain the public’s unity. Only by containing partial needs and desires to the home realm could the modern state achieve its ideal of impartiality, universal justice, and bureaucratic success (Young 1990; Landes 1988). Habermas is less totalizing and moralistic in his description of the public sphere:
rationality is at least treated as derived in part from dialogue, as opposed to treated as existing in some ideal form in nature independent of actual people. But the private realm, the “lifeworld,” is still subordinated insofar as it interferes with the public citizen’s ability to rely on universalist reason.

The Habermasian public sphere too inherited the implication that it is selfish to promote one’s own needs, which are assumed to be so private as to be developed and pursued without any influence from other members of the public. Insofar as the bourgeois public sphere’s ability to separate private and public lives was a status marker, as Fraser (1992) argued, speaking of one’s particular needs is even tacky. The private—certain aspects of business, the domestic sphere, one’s social and class relations—are not appropriate topics for public dispute; the ‘public’ in this use is for the pursuit of general interest. The rational public sphere is concerned with what it considers, a priori, political matters.

The alternative to rational-critical debate--what takes its place when it breaks down-- is, in Habermas’ re-telling (1962), the consumption of culture. As the public sphere opened up to groups beyond the elite bourgeois, the sheer scale and diversity of the public more or less overwhelmed the model. The ideal of an objective general interest and debate was replaced with an ideal of fairly negotiated compromise, and involvement in debate was replaced with passive consumption of positions and culture. Public opinion—a consensus—was in Habermas’ view replaced with private interest. And with concern only for one’s private needs and pursuits, the formerly critical public turned into a pacifiable mass, receiving instead of engaging, conforming
instead of debating, engaging in apolitical sociability in place of shared critical activity.

The centering of impartial rational discourse, and its attendant strict division of the public and private spheres, causes antipathy towards plurality in the public sphere. However, reality makes the ideal of impartial rational discourse impossible. Although even its proponents would admit that perfect reason and impartiality is impossible, impartial rationality is harmful even as a norm because of the way it obscures and protects exclusions and injustice. Furthermore, circumscribing what counts as acceptable subject matter for public conversation causes further social oppression and encourages the very selfish pursuit of personal interests that rational discourse tries to prevent.

PROBLEMS AND EXCLUSIONS CAUSED BY THE IDEAL OF IMPARTIALITY

In reality, of course, social statuses and power relations cannot be stripped away any practice of human engagement, no matter how rational we like to believe ourselves. Insisting on a charade of complete rationality only serves to conceal the power relations at play and deny the marginalized the opportunity to challenge their place in the conversation.

The first problem with the impartiality is its attempt to exclude people from the equation. However philosophically appealing it seems, there is no natural a priori answer that exists somewhere in the ether that rationality draws on, no universal answer to human problems that exists independent of the people deciding them—and because of the dangers of false universalizations, it is problematic to assume there is.
Human beings are intrinsic to the reasoning process, and this is only more true when discussing social reasoning. Social decision-making and reasoning is only important because of its relevance to people and specific problems—because of context. To reject context as a factor in decision-making, in favor of the universal and impartial, is to discount the only motivation for making the decision in the first place. The people who make decisions about their communities are relevant—after all, there is no meaning to decisions about social life without its people. To try to access some abstract impartiality as the authority in decisions that don’t exist without particularity is illogical in and of itself. Real social decision-making only occurs because of the social needs of particular people.

The reality is that no human interaction can be devoid of social meaning. And so, no person can forget the social positions of the people they are interacting with, no matter how enlightened they try to be or whether they think they have left behind their own position. And the aspiration to try and take into account the perspectives of every social position in society, however admirable, is unrealizable. If, moreover, such complete and total identification were possible, there would not be social differences to begin with. Reason, therefore, can never actually be impartial, because no person is completely impartial. The reproduction of societal inequalities in the public sphere is only augmented by differences in material access to media and other valued means of communication (Bohman 1996).

Nor can impartiality be created in a person by stripping away their “private interests.” In reality, the public and the private realms are not two separate lives, but
closely connected and co-determining. Asking that dialogue in the public sphere not include reference to the personal or to the specifics of someone’s life does not “protect rationality,” but just deems some topics inappropriate for discussion.

Limiting the conversation to topics deemed universally relevant, or even worse, limiting legitimacy to those voices which are deemed to have a universal perspective, is especially harmful to disempowered groups. In an unequal society, the most privileged group is the most likely to be seen as having the most neutral perspective; the interests and perspectives of the privileged group are likely to be treated as universal and common to all. Belief in the rationality project encourages this: because it is believed that impartiality can be attained by leaving behind particulars, those who see themselves as engaging in impartially rational debate believe that they are not tainted by their own perspectives. Yet, as we have already agreed, it is impossible to fully leave behind one’s own perspectives and experiences; therefore, what is really happening is that the reasoner who believes himself to be rational treats his own interests as impartially universal (Young 1990). Members of disadvantaged groups, however, are treated as particular; the very fact of their ‘otherness’ is seen as a special interest, while dominant traits such as whiteness are not challenged as particularizing in the same way. Therefore, if only the ‘universal’ and non-‘private’ are welcome in the public sphere, disadvantaged groups are much more likely to be excluded and have their needs ignored than privileged groups—and are much less likely to have a chance to even articulate this difference than if impartial reason was not imposed as a norm on the public sphere. Deliberation is a way of
concealing domination when differences are excluded from conversation: formally inclusive institutions can shunt aside, drown out, change the meaning of, and otherwise exclude or malign subordinate group’s speech, while using ‘universal’ reason based in a limited perspective (Sanders 1997; Mansbridge 1990).

This equation of privileged experience with universal experience can be seen in controversies such as those surrounding appointments of women and/or minorities to the Supreme Court. Objectors worried that Sonia Sotomayor would be subjective, biased, and generally particularist because she did not deny that her life had been affected by the fact that she was a Latina woman—worries that never showed up as concern that white justices, even those that talked about their ethnic background such as Justice Scalia’s references to his Italian family, would be biased or less objective because of their race. Bias because of one’s race, apparently, only occurs in non-whites.

Furthermore, specifics are relevant to decision-making: the circumstances of a shared problem are precisely what make the problem what it is, precisely what need to be understood to be responded to responsibly, and precisely what make us care about solving the problem to begin with (Young 1990). To ask us to make shared decisions without thinking about who is involved, and how it will effect them, is like designing a building on mathematical principles solely, without knowing the land being built on or the materials being used. Even emotions are sometimes relevant to shared decision-making and political problems. If emotions were not relevant, governments would not invest in propaganda campaigns; cities would not try to revitalize themselves through
mentoring programs, beautification efforts, and huge billboards urging citizens to “Believe,” as one long-lasting effort did in Baltimore. The idea that acknowledging particular experiences, particular perspectives, emotions, and other diversities of humanity is harmful to the quality of conversation is not only dishonest. It too functions to suppress the needs of people who are seen as ‘other,’ who can’t disguise their experiences as impartial and neutral, and so are more likely to be pressured to exclude their experiences.

Drawing an a priori boundary around what is suitable for discussion in the public sphere defeats the purpose of the public sphere, which is to discuss matters of common concern. What counts as common concern must be decided by the participants themselves. If a society mostly agrees that, in fact, some aspects of shared life do need to be treated as universals, the discussion itself must still welcome the particulars so that the universal is never mistaken for inherent, but rather an alterable social agreement. All participants, of course, will not always agree on what is of common concern (Fraser 1992). But all participants must have a fair chance to make relevant issues a common concern. If the more powerful participants in the conversation enforce norms that keep certain issues off the table, only the issues that matter to those participants will ever be addressed or even acknowledged as connected to the wider community. Many of the social justice movements of the recent past have concerned themselves primarily with getting the wider public to acknowledge that certain problems were not private or domestic problems, but matters of public concern with connections to the public world: for example, the movement against domestic
violence, or the provision of free and reduced school lunches for hungry children, or the legally-mandated opening of private business establishments and clubs to non-white or female patrons. In other instances, large companies whose actions profoundly affect the lives of many people are able to exclude the public from interaction with their decisions in the name of their actions being “private.” Remember the slogan, “the personal is political.”

Drawing a strict division between private and public spheres, and assuming that addressing “private” concerns in the public sphere is detrimental to the public conversation, also creates an unrealistic idea of communication (Okin 1990). Such fear of private selfishness assumes that all interests and identities are made independently, without interaction with the rest of the world. In reality, communication, which includes references to other people’s experiences, has a strong influence on people’s interests and perspectives. This is one of its great possibilities. It also neutralizes some of the supposed danger of selfish private concerns, because “private” concerns are not what we think they are. They are not only selfish and self-interest driven concern, which liberal logic thinks work pretty much the same way from person to person but are changed only by their circumstances. Rather, concerns dismissed as “private” encompass a host of motivations and needs that are changed and determined by the people around them. This interdependence of particular experiences with the public around them means that there are many forces at play in people’s ‘private’ lives, not only mechanical material self-interest, but also social and spiritual concerns; and it also means that concerns based in one’s personal life must be allowed to be addressed
in relation to the public sphere, because they are inextricably connected to each other. From a communication viewpoint, by being honest about human mutual influence, the positive effects of including personal concerns and perspectives emerge. Listening to and influencing other people’s experiences and perspectives is an aid to addressing and recognizing problems of common concern.

The division of public and private spheres, of the universal and the particular, is self-reinforcing. When we accept a norm in which the “private” is excluded from the public sphere, the “conversation” has no other way of incorporating and responding to these claims, since they fall outside the boundaries of acceptable conversation. If the topics of conversation in the public sphere are closed off, the interests of someone’s private life are in fact more likely to be selfish, because they have had fewer opportunities to interact with, respond, and adjust to the needs of other people’s lives. But if norms acknowledge a more fluid, mutually-dependent relationship between public and private, expression of particular needs need not be motivated in selfish self-interest, but rather can part of a conversation that is interested in and respects the particular needs of everyone’s situation. An open conversation like this changes people as they encounter and interact with other people, because no one’s particular interests are actually developed in a vacuum free of other’s actions.

Communicative exclusions caused by false impartiality and artificial public/private divisions have particular repercussions for the assumption that any flaws in the liberal public sphere can be solved by greater formal inclusion. This argument claims that while the first attempts to achieve liberal ideals were flawed by
class, gender, and racial exclusions, the ideals of a liberal public sphere can and should still be pursued—all that needs to be fixed is to grant access to these formerly excluded groups, a process that time is on the side of. However, the idea that the flaw of inequality can be overcome by inviting the dominated to participate in the dominators’ public sphere only works if discourse were truly able to transcend social differences and achieve absolute impartiality. Unfortunately, true transcendence of partiality, I have argued, can not exist in the real world, and it is arguable that it is not desirable for them to (Fraser 1992; Young 1990; Burke 1999; Mansbridge). The result is that the ideals of the liberal project cannot be intactly saved by a less exclusive practice of those ideals; the ideals of communication themselves must be adjusted if we are to prevent exclusion in the public sphere.

RECLAIMING MULTIPICITY

While some theorists might balk from acknowledging differences because they seem divisive and threatening to successful democracy, multiplicity in a society's people and in their ideas and histories and values is a reality. It is better to recognize that multiplicity is inescapable and build a kind of democracy that not only accommodates for it, but benefits from it. A democratic society that embraces differences in its processes of communication not only is able to be more just, but may have more inclusive, comprehensive, and profound conversations impacting its politics and policies (Brettschneider 2007; Mansbridge 1990a and 1990b; Young 1990).
Re-evaluating divisions between public and private spheres is critical for expanding the agenda of the public sphere to include problems with origins in the 'private' realm, as well as to include certain kinds of people altogether. Furthermore, the public sphere should not be understood as one single public sphere, which could not possibly fairly represent all, but as plurality of overlapping subpublics that both act as enclaves and reach out to other publics (Fraser 1992; Ryan 1992; Young 2000). Assertion of group differences can be positive for democratic deliberation rather than a detriment in this model.

The analysis of the bourgeois public sphere set forward by Habermas and concurring theorists treats “the public sphere” and “the bourgeois public sphere” as if it were one and the same. This is an extension of the false universality that plagues the bourgeois concept of the public sphere. By presenting the modes of communication and experiences of privileged groups as universal, the supposedly impartially rational public sphere conceals the suppression of the diverse groups actually present; in the same act, the bourgeois public sphere’s pretense of being the public sphere of everyone conceals its specificity, and conceals the very existence of diverse groups in its mix. Of course, the lack of recognition of communication outside of the rational-critical public sphere does not mean that it doesn’t exist. In reality, there have always been public spheres co-existing outside and overlapping with the bourgeois public sphere (Brettschneider 2007). In many ways, the alternative histories of previously-ignored groups, like the LGBT community, women, people of color, or the poor, that have emerged in recent decades are precisely the histories of these multiple public
spheres. Where histories of peoples and countries were previously treated as if they had one narrative, these histories attempt to show the other narratives that have been concealed by the false predominance of dominant bourgeois public sphere. Nancy Fraser refers to these alternative public spheres, which are not treated as a universal realm of discourse like the bourgeois public sphere is, as “subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1992, 123).

Fraser (1992; 1990), Mary Ryan (1992), and Joan B. Landes (1988) all provide excellent accounts of counter-publics of women that organized at the same time that they were explicitly and deliberately excluded from the bourgeois public sphere that had pretenses of representing all of society. Fraser (1992) provides the example of the second and third wave American feminist subaltern counterpublic,

with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places. In this public sphere, feminist women have invented new terms for describing social reality, including ‘sexism,’ ‘the double shift,’ sexual harassment,’ and ‘marital, date, and acquaintance rape.’ Armed with such language, we have recast our needs and identities, thereby reducing, though not eliminating, the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres.

Ryan (1992) examines the public of the mid-1800s in the U.S. and finds that, although the elite dominated public office and were treated deferentially by the press, the amorphous and diverse groupings of citizens that divided and overlapped with each other were the “major staging ground of public politics” (264). Although women were excluded from the official public sphere, they played considerable roles in public life
and politics, organizing everything from moral reforms to charitable precursors of the welfare states to suffrage movements for women and Blacks. Ryan (1992) warns that an ideal of a bounded public, with rules about appropriate behavior and aspirations of being singular, would exclude the female citizens who “played for high stakes in a real world of politics” from both our analysis of politics and from even more avenues of political participation itself.

When these counterhistories are recognized, it provides a challenge to Habermas’ depiction of a decline of the public sphere caused by growing inclusivity—rather, when we look beyond the limited world of the bourgeois public sphere, when we reject the idea that the bourgeois public sphere was the same as the entire public arena, we can see numerous public spheres that have strengthened. These pluralistic public spheres should be recognized by any grounded democratic theory, and put to their best use instead of seen as a weakness. And if the way these restrictions exclude marginalized groups and consolidate the power of dominant groups is concealed, our norms of the public sphere should provide avenues to reveal those restrictions.

Landes’s (1988) history of women during the era of the French Revolution reveals the ways that women became associated with the private and particular from the very beginnings of modern democracy, an association that persists to this day. One of the ways that the new rule of the people would be superior to the monarchy, it was argued, was that women would no longer be in public, allowing reason to be the defining character of the new regime. This argument was made explicitly, deriding the ways that women’s presence in conversation turned everyone’s speech ‘‘from
conversation into *style*”, or, in Rousseau’s estimation, from “natural language” into ‘society’ language. Women furthermore, being relegated to the private life and private interests, were seen as inherently connected to sentiment, selfish interests, and the personal rather than the civic. The very fact that women were visible in the court of the former monarchy was seen as evidence of the corruption of the royalist system; the frivolity and excess of their fashion and involvement in court affairs was evidence of the frivolity of royalist regime and was a violation of the order of nature. The answer, of course, was to remove the feminine influence from public affairs—to turn the public woman into a private woman. Reason was the antidote to mere opinion, reason was opposed to particularity and to play and to style, and reason therefore was opposed to women (Landes 1988, 45). As a result, the ideal of universal reason was not positioned to eventually eradicate sexual exclusions, as many argue. Rather than reason eventually working to end exclusions by revealing their hypocrisy, the idea of universal reason was constructed in a way that sustained gender-based exclusion. In the post-monarchical regime, a woman’s “confinement to the private realm functions[ed] as a public sign of her political virtue” (Landes 1988, 69). It is worth considering what other subaltern groups this may still be true for: the association of black bodies with physicality and sexuality, for example, also establishes Blackness in opposition to reason and as a threat to the public good. Staying in the private realm—behaving docilely and quietly, never becoming angry or impassioned or demanding—can also behave as a public sign of political virtue for Blacks in American society.
The phenomenon of portraying docility as a political virtue in oppressed groups is an example of the way that rewards are handed out to oppressed groups for maintaining their own oppression. That oppression can only be maintained if the only public sphere to which oppressed groups have access is the falsely universal bourgeois sphere seen in the works of Habermas and Enlightenment writers: that is, the sphere that rewards certain people for staying in the private realm and decries them for becoming public. But in a society with multiple, interconnected public spheres, members of oppressed groups have access to public participation at least amongst others like themselves. And when those lines of communication are open, and members of oppressed groups also acquire political skills, subaltern groups are much more able to be able to claim their rights and articulate their grievances—and reveal their concealed exclusions—to the dominant public sphere. The singular public sphere that projects the interests of its elite as impartial and universal will not by itself become more inclusive; it is arranged in such a way, and with such sorts of boundaries, that this bourgeois public sphere is supported by its exclusions. And the rhetoric of universality and transformation of privateness into a virtue will win the belief of even some of its excluded citizens, who care about the public good and believe in the undeniably useful phenomenon of reason. It requires multiple, decentered, pluralized public spheres to overcome the exclusions of the classical or bourgeois public spheres.

In short, in order to overcome the domination that “‘absorb[s] the less powerful into a false ‘we’ that reflects the more powerful,’” (Mansbridge 1990a)
members of subordinated groups need spheres in which they can deliberate free of dominant groups and articulate their needs and thoughts. These diverse identities, and the personal experiences that define them, are not detrimental to the public good or the quality of debate. Multiculturalism will not, as some fear, tear apart democracy because people’s needs are too dissimilar. Empirical studies from Eastern Europe, for example, have shown that ethnic pluralism (Fish, Kroenig 2006; Radnitz 2004) is not linked to democratic failure; a history of violent conflict was linked to democratic failure, but ethnic diversity in a country was not a predictor of violent conflict.

Insisting that everyone’s differences be concealed and that we do not discuss them is what will undermine democracy. Embracing and discussing different experiences, which may involve talking about some issues that have been relegated to “private” sphere in the past or the particulars of some people’s lives, will have positive effects on democratic communication. Respect for differences, a norm in which many different voices are expected to be part of the conversation, will improve the quality of democratic communication.

Why is it not necessarily divisive to publically claim a particular identity, such as those of ethnicity, gender, race, religion, or any other potentially incendiary idea?

First of all, the reality of diversity in virtually every country exists. If this diversity is renounced, the inevitable result is that people themselves are renounced and excluded from public, as the dominant groups are treated as if they were the public. This is fundamentally more divisive and harmful to social unity as well as to true democracy and to notions of justice. A democracy based on implicit exclusion,
even in situations of formal inclusion, is not democratic, and is not just. Our political theory must incorporate these diverse groups as genuine public spheres as well, because otherwise we ignore the relations between public spheres and the true conditions of the dominant sphere. There are whole currents of communication and influence that are ignored if we only look at the elite communications on records, and not the speech of subaltern groups.

Secondly, identities are fluid and overlapping. It is false that acknowledging one’s racial or gender identity publically is exclusionary and aggressive. Rather, forming a positive, affirming self-image is essential to being a participating and productive citizen—and not a sidelined citizen. For example, in the 18th and 19th century in the U.S., women were given the role of being republican mothers in the private sphere, a positive identity attached to their femaleness. Through their own public sphere and involvement in politics, they were able to lay claim to participation in the public sphere as well. But their organizing in public was purposefully female organizing, and often based in the long-standing values of private womanness (Ryan 1992); the transformation to participation in public politics arguably was only able to happen because they possessed a positive group identity as women, which allowed women to mobilize past gender-based exclusions. But that does not mean that the identities of women who organized together stopped at being female. Women were also obviously members of groups such as different classes, races, localities, ages community causes, unions, schools, charities, business associations—any interest group you can think of. Similarly, being able to speak publically about the particular
experiences of one’s own identity in the public sphere requires being willing to listen
to people speak about the particularities of their experiences. In doing so, opinions and
interests change; in fact, identities themselves are formed through interaction with
others and modified by participation in the public sphere.

Thirdly, communication and democratic participation is partially a learned
behavior that can be practiced (Pateman 1970). Participation in communication affects
the identities, perspectives, and behaviors of participants; reactions and self-interests
are not fixed. Scholars have developed a number of different theories of democratic
communication that are useful to understanding what happens when people
communicate across difference in the public sphere.

VALUING DIVERSE MODES OF COMMUNICATION IN AND ACROSS
MULTIPLICITOUS PUBLIC SPHERES

Having obtained a presence in the public, citizens sometimes find that those
still more powerful in the process exercise, often unconsciously, a new form of
exclusion: others ignore or dismiss or patronize their statements and
expressions. Though formally included in a forum or process, people may find
that their claims are not taken seriously and may believe that they are not
treated with equal respect. The dominant mood may find their ideas or modes
of expression silly or simple, and not worthy of consideration. They may find
that their experiences as relevant to the issues under discussion are so
different from others’ in the public that their views are discounted. I call these
familiar experiences internal exclusion, because they concern ways that people
lack effective opportunity to influence the thinking of others even when they
have access to fora and procedures of decision-making. (Young 2000, 55).

Acknowledging that ideally the pluralistic public sphere needs to be open in
order to improve inclusion, exclusive norms of communication styles also need to be
revisited. Certain styles of communication are valued over others in political
communication, especially by those with power over the discourse, because this offers control over the discourse. The impartially rational tone is a contender for most privileged tone; it commands authority instantly through its claim of being dispassionate and impartial, free of untrustworthy qualities like emotion and interests. Since actual impartiality is impossible, the impartial tone needs to be recognized as just as much a tone as any other. As Young puts it, “What such privileging takes to be neutral, universal, and dispassionate expression actually carries the rhetorical nuances of particular situated social positions and relations, which social conventions do not mark as rhetorical and particular in the same way that they notice others” (2000, 63).

Landes’ (1988) analysis of criticism by French revolutionaries of women in public dialogue is relevant here. Women were attacked for turning conversation into “style” in politics, but civic virtue in the new order could be proven by what were themselves choices of style. The virtuous alternative of ‘natural’ conversation extolled by the revolutionaries as an embodiment of reason was, of course, just as much of a style as the modes of speech used by the women in the courts. Young notes that there are two levels of speech, the content and the manner in which is said (2000). The dispassionate, impartial tone pretends that it accesses only content, and has no manner of being said; this is to some extent what the French revolutionaries meant when they claimed that reason was universal and natural. Obviously this is impossible; dispassionate speech has a manner of being presented just as much as emotional or contextualized speech.
Incorporating means of communication beyond argument itself into democracy provides opportunity for greater inclusion and communication across diverse identities. Different kinds of rhetoric and narratives provide information about the context in which a political conversation occurs and the meanings of actions, many of which may not have been visible to other participants before. Oftentimes the reasons of an argument will not make sense without the context of the history and experiences—the narratives and emotions—that surround them (Sanders 1997; Young 2000). For example, a frequently studied example is the emergence of laws against sexual harassment. This phenomenon did not even have a name until it was discussed in women’s subaltern counter publics, allowing it to be named and developed because of the support of a subpublic in a way it could not be articulated in the larger, male-dominated public. When making the case for naming and creating laws against sexual harassment, feminists could not jump straight to the arguments for creating laws against it: that it creates hostile work environments, that it contributes to economic inequality, that it is a violation of civil rights, that it is harmful to society as a whole. First, they had to share narratives about the experience so that those who did not have firsthand knowledge of the problem would understand what it was at all and its impact. Secondly, it was not inappropriate to use emotional or evocative language when sharing such a topic: the emotional and social impact on individuals was extremely relevant to the problem. Furthermore, to set such a previously unknown issue on the agenda requires a certain amount of urgency of tone; since sexual harassment had gone unarticulated as a problem for so long (and could not formerly be
articulated by the mostly male-dominated political sphere), routine dispassionate argument was unlikely to break through the indifference towards the issue that had ruled the day thus far.

Young (2000) also notes an aspect of political communication that she calls “greeting.” She explains that

Prior to and a condition for making assertions and giving reasons for them is a moment of opening to and directly acknowledging the others, without the mediation of content that refers to the world. Prior to a thought to be conveyed, a world to refer to, act in, and share is the gesture of opening up to the other person where the speaker announces ‘Here I am’ for the other, and ‘I see you’....

Without these gestures of respect and politeness, that are only Saying without anything said, people would probably stop listening to one another. If we were to imagine a communicative interaction in which such mode of greeting were absent, it would feel like the science fiction speech of an alien, some sort of heartless being for whom speech is only for getting things said, interrogating their truth or rightness, and getting things done. Greeting has a very important place, moreover, in situations of communication among parties who have a problem or conflict, and try to reach some solution through discussion. (Young 2000, 59).

Recognition of others in the public sphere is itself a basic form of justice. Many groups fight for such recognition as a political goal in and of itself, among other goals. Ryan (1992) notes that despite the theoretical flaws in many concepts of the public sphere, and the formation of counter public spheres in response to exclusion from the dominant public sphere, the attempts of the marginalized to gain access to the dominant public sphere shows the resilience of the public ideal. The colloquial meaning of ‘public,’ she argues, is simply access to the political sphere. Marginalized groups cannot be considered to have accessed the political sphere if other participants do not recognize their presence. One clear sign that a group is not being greeted or
recognized as equal participants in conversation is if they are discussed as the subject of debate, rather than assumed to be participating in debate—if they are always referred to in the third person, never addressed in second person (Young 2000).

Furthermore, when discussion is going badly or substantial communication breaks down, we return to rituals of greeting to maintain basic openness to each other and to display a willingness to engage and respect the other person. Respect for a variety of experiences is the basic element that allows for democratic communication among in a multicultural society. This idea of recognition and respect as a key form of communication other than rational argument will be returned to later chapters when I examine geography and public art itself: often, when the subject is not greeted, they must assert themselves and force a public acknowledgement.

The argument for respecting forms of communication outside of dispassionate reason is not an argument, heaven forbid, for less logic, fewer reasons, and more irrationality in politics. Rather, it is an argument that logic and rationality have a plurality of forms, not all of which readily conform to dominant expectations; that speaking in dry, detached tones does not necessarily make your argument more rational, and is a product of particular socialization and education; that social cues, context, and specific experiences are relevant to decision-making processes; and that acknowledging a broader range of forms of communication is likely to create greater inclusion not only by acknowledging speech that does not reproduce the academic style of the privileged, but also by directing public attention to experiences and meanings that cannot be made visible by rational argument alone. Some would argue
that emotional speech is dangerous due to its potential for manipulation, but every form of communication can be used to harmful ends. Just as public criticism can be directed against misleading arguments and poorly founded logic, it can be used to delegitimize manipulative, deceptive, and harmful uses of emotional, passionate, particular speech, of narratives, of greeting. Furthermore, members of the public sphere who are accustomed to listening to forms of communication that may sound different from their own styles may respond to difference in more accommodating, respectful ways than those who are told they need to listen to forms of communication that seem strange to them. Art as a form of communication lends itself to conversations across difference through its suitability to communicating greeting, emotion, and personal experiences, as well as through its openness to interaction with its listener.

The idea of the public sphere provides a theoretical base for analyzing art’s political contributions in a broader sense, as part of a communicative ethics. It is difficult to trace the specific ways that art impacts politics if we think of politics as only arguing over policy. The relationships between specifically political art and specific political policies are usually unclear; for example, we’ll never be able to say that Picasso’s “Guernica” prevented any specific wars, or that the puppets carried by anti-war protesters in the protests before the U.S. invasion of Iraq won hearts over to their side, or that Sheppard Fairley’s famous portrait of Barack Obama was decisive in the youth vote. Social and political commentary is continuous in art, and often it is not heard outside of limited audiences. However, the public sphere allows us to think of
politics as a broader arena than just policy, but also a realm of participation and communication. As a resource for political communication, art in its varied forms provides a form and style of communication that may be more accessible to some members of society than more traditionally recognized political communication. Art also serves the needs of expressing emotion, experiences, and greeting in ways that the ideal of rational argument cannot, expressions which are critical to a healthy public sphere. Art in public spaces, in particular, has the potential to improve inclusion in the public conversation, because it geographically imposes itself on the broadest, most inclusive section of the public. Recognizing the dynamics of diversity and the power relationships at play in the varied public spheres of democratic society, we can better understand the specific problems and debates that are currently being discussed through public art, whether or not the discussion is commonly recognized. In the next chapter, I examine the ways that the dynamics of the theoretical public sphere are acted out in physical public space.
Chapter Two
The Setting: Public Space

Moving through the city, space is incessantly marked with social messages. The form of buildings, advertisements, surveillance, parking facilities, architecture, murals, parks, plazas, and social activity are unconsciously or consciously read by passersby to understand the use of the space, who the space is welcome to, and the relationship of the space’s inhabitants to each other and the city as a whole. This is the canvas on which public art takes place. Public art is different from a gallery or museum piece, which is generally intended to be read based on its own standing, independent of its location and how it got there. These deferential social conventions are not in place for public art. Instead, public art’s meaning is intertwined with the meanings of its setting. Meanwhile, public space itself physically acts out and enforces many of the exclusions and inclusions of the public sphere. This provides public art with the possibility of providing tools to publics and counterpublics to either consolidate or challenge exclusions from the public discourse, in a public conversation that occurs right in the midst of everyday life.

MARKING SPACE: PHYSICAL CLAIMS TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Public space physically enacts the theoretical public sphere. Exclusion from the public sphere occurs through the exclusion of voices from the media of discourse, but also through physical exclusion from public spaces themselves. Even developmentally, Ryan (1992) identified public space on the streets as the location of the emergence of counter public spheres of women and laborers, while Boyle (1992,
342) notes that the bourgeois public sphere emerged alongside the emergence of urban public space:

A politicized and self-conscious language of public and public opinion was closely connected, moreover, to the development of a vibrant urban culture that formed a spatial environment for the public sphere: lecture halls, museums, public parks, theaters, meeting houses, opera houses, coffee houses, and the like.

Space is as much constituted by interrelations and processes of interaction, as it is by physical material; this concept is the basis of the field of human geography. What gives a space its nature is how it is used: public space is public space because it is used openly or for common socialization; private space is private because it is used by limited people with controlled boundaries; space for children is determined by a group of mothers regularly bringing their toddlers to this corner of the park; the graffiti alley is a graffiti alley because other graffiti artists continually come there to make their name, but when it is whitewashed over and that continuity is interrupted, it becomes a space for hate group scrawls instead. Physicality and action trump the abstract existence of a right or other forms of access when we are defining its use; groups may occupy, protest in, live in, hand out pamphlets or food in a space before any court or even owners say they have the right to do so. These uses can make unintended spaces public, whereas other, carefully designed “public” spaces that go unused or that are actually controlled by specific purposes (such as commercial interests) may less public in reality.

Seeing these interactions allows us to see that space itself is not neutral any more than the public sphere is. Its content is specific, and it creates a context that
determines the meaning of what happens within it. The illusion of impartiality in space, like much of the supposedly impartial in our social interactions, is often accepted by the dominant groups of society that are themselves coded as neutral—in the United States, the middle class, the white, and/or the male. The exclusions signaled in shared spaces are often visible only to those who are excluded. Since these excluded people are often not categorized as part of the public at all, included groups are able to continue to consider spaces that exclude these Others to be public spaces.

“Fortress Los Angeles,” as Mike Davis (1990; 1997) called the city, is full of spaces that have been designated sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly as belonging to particular social groups, often in a full out cold war over space between haves and have-nots. The architecture of the revitalized downtown business district—which was built over cleared tenement housing—sends signals to the subaltern through a language of reflective glass, ramparts and battlements, and elevated pedways that this space is not for them. Revitalization efforts in many cities across the United States in reality are projects for commuters and privileged groups. These projects often build private structures that replace the unpredictability of public interaction on the streets as much as possible with elevated walkways and bridges from buildings to parking garages, all much more controllable spaces that masquerade as public but are controlled by private groups. In its attempt to keep undesirables out of the business district and the business district’s pure economic reputation intact, LA designed prickly space such as segmented or circular bus benches upon which it is impossible to lay down (Davis 1997). These signals are generally unnoticed by the
privileged groups for whom the region is designed, but are clear to undesired residents, who recognize that they are not allowed there, regardless of whether or not they actually engage in criminal behavior or other transgressions that might justify exclusion from public areas. Sibley (1995, xiv, citing Channel 4 TV’s Rear Window 1991) relays a conversation between Mike Davis and a Black homeless man within view of the redeveloped Bunker Hill. Davis asks, “‘Could you walk up there?’ and the man replies: ‘If they were to catch me in that building, they would have so much security on my ass, I would probably be in jail in five minutes.’”

In poorer districts of the city, space and design send signals as well. As Fraser (1992) said, subaltern counter publics have the chance to build identity and identify their needs when they have a public sphere of their own, apart from the all-encompassing singular public sphere. Fiske (1998) looks at the way that, due to surveillance in privileged areas, underprivileged residents and/or crime are confined to certain spaces that can act either as ghettos or as enclaves, that is, prisons or communities: “The difference between the two is a difference of control over what, or who, is inside and over who has the right to cross the boundary between inside and outside” (77). This control can sometimes be asserted by residents, but is also often asserted and marked by outsiders instead. In urban neighborhoods, the uses, conditions, art, and other characteristics of neighborhood space speak to the control that residents have over space. These characteristics are also part of the identities and discourse of neighborhood subpublics. Assertions of value, such as murals and other
art or nontraditional business ventures, are particularly important in ghettos, skid rows, and neighborhoods that have otherwise been given up on.

Furthermore, city residents aggressively fight over the meaning of shared urban space through the placement of social signals across subpublics, not only within them. Robin Kelly (1996, 134) gives the example of rap music in public in LA:

Because the Vietnam-like conditions in their communities and the pervasive racism throughout the whole city (and county) circumscribe the movement of young Blacks, their music and expressive styles have literally become weapons in a battle over the right to occupy public space. Frequently employing high-decibel car stereos and boom boxes, they ‘pump up the volume’ not only for their own listening pleasure but also as a part of an indirect, ad hoc war of position to take back public space. The ‘noise’ constitutes a form of cultural resistance that should not be ignored, especially when we add those resistive lyrics about destroying the state or retaliating against the police.

Winning the right to be part of public space is directly connected to the extent to which a group is considered part of the public sphere. Consider the language of campaigns to 'clean up' parks—to replace users of the park who are homeless or supposedly criminal with recreational users engaging in daytime activities such as jogging, sports, and picnics. The reformers call such spaces unsafe and underused, abandoned, and say that they are claiming the parks for “community use” (England 2008; Mitchell 2003), The people who do use such spaces, and in fact might depend on them for safety in a city where they are unwelcome, clearly belie the characterization of the parks as unused; these users may easily be local residents as well. But they are not people who count as full members of the public sphere or the community to other participants in the discourse; they are “them” and not “us.” The denial of the rights of people such as the homeless to use space like parks is closely
tied to the denial of their standing as participants in the public discourse, or to put another way, to the denial of their representation in the public sphere. These people might be acted on in the public interest, but they do not share in the public interest, from the central view; a universal notion of a “common good” as the goal of discourse in the public sphere becomes tyrannical for certain groups in this context.

By making a physical claim to a space, by acting in a space and therefore implicitly asserting the right to be there, groups can both make a space a public concern, and declare themselves part of the public and its concerns. Mitchell (2003, p.129) asserts it well: “By claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public. Only in public space, for example, can the homeless represent themselves as a legitimate part of 'the public'.” As long as the homeless are not appearing as a legitimate part of the public on TV programs, congressional hearings, or other nexuses of power with wider audiences; as long as the homeless are referred to in the telltale third person but never addressed in the second person as part of the conversation (Young 2000), their exclusion from dialogue will implicitly exclude from membership in “the public” at all. “The public” is a mental concept, developed through representations viewed in the media and in daily life; the entire public, of course, cannot ever meet. Without physical spaces in which people see each other, it is easy for the public to become balkanized by fragmented media consumption (Mitchell 2003). In the most severe cases of exclusion, such as for the homeless, physical presence as a form of visibility may be the only form of visibility in the public sphere left.
That literal public visibility provides a recourse to groups excluded from the broadly recognized public is warning against strict divisions between “private” and “public” life. If groups that are not welcome in public, such as the homeless, can be successfully hidden from public view and made a private concern only, then they can be truly and thoroughly excluded from the public sphere. By continuing to exist visibly (such an annoyance to many business districts and city politicians!), the homeless assert a minimal presence and can demand at least the most basic of public recognition—even if the recognition is sometimes only direct interactions on the street, in a society that has mostly moved on to mutual recognition through media and Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities. The lack of acknowledgement of the existence of rural homelessness in comparison to the attention paid to urban homelessness is arguably an example of influence of physical visibility.

Space turns theoretical distinctions between public and private into social practices with normative weight, something that is especially clear when people look for guidelines for how they are allowed to use space and where they are allowed to engage in certain activities. All space is coded to varying degrees as public or private. Maintaining those distinctions requires a certain amount of exclusion and ignorance of the relationship between private and public realms, as well as creates behavioral imperatives. Sibley (1995), for example, sees increasing discomfort with and punishment for using spaces of consumption for any non-consuming purposes: one example would be security guards chasing youth out of malls for socializing there instead of purchasing. The normative and fundamental quality of our distinctions
between public and private explains why dominant social groups seem to find homelessness and similar perceived social transgressions not merely distasteful, but unacceptable. All activities of life usually considered private, from socializing to sleeping to urination, must exist in public for the homeless. As such, the homeless defy the private/public sphere boundaries that are so fundamental to our norms not just of space, but even of interaction in the public sphere, in the conception of Habermas and the Enlightenment (Bickford 2000). A refusal to accept that people might exist without private homes can be seen in laws and policies attempt to legislate the homeless out of public space. These regional laws outlaw sleeping, sitting, or even eating in public spaces; selectively enforce anti-loitering laws against people believed to be homeless; or even conduct sweeps to physically move the homeless out of a targeted area, even though forbidding homeless people from engaging in the basic functions of human existence in public unrealistically leaves them without a place to be able to exist at all.

The transgression of the distinctions between the public and private spheres may be why homelessness is so rejected, and almost certainly triggers the psychological response described by Sibley (1995). Sibley argues that the geographic expression of social cleavages is based on a psychology of decontamination. The transgression of activities considered to be part of the private realm onto public space triggers a psychological disgust. People mentally want to separate out the clean and 'normal' from the diseased and dirty, characterizations that are used to exclude groups of people from particular spaces. These can be acknowledgedly private spaces—who
is allowed to live in certain gated communities and the behavior expected there—or spaces that present themselves as public but are designed for particular people’s interests—such as the tendency to design new public spaces in cities for day visitors from the suburbs and for a certain kind of commerce.

The attempts to separate public and private spheres create the same kinds of problems of exclusion and false universality for space as they do for the abstract, Habermasian public sphere. As in the discourse of the public sphere, opening up the boundaries of space and being willing to hear a diversity of narratives counters this problem. In spaces that strongly tend towards single use, or, in Sibley’s (1995) way of looking at it, in purified spaces where the normal has been thoroughly purified of the abject, deviance is more pathologized. “Difference is less likely to be noticed, less likely to be a source of threat in a weakly classified environment like Jane Jacob’s Manhattan than it is in purified space” (Sibley 1995, 90). The multifunctionality or unifunctionality of space contributes to its inclusiveness and to its willingness to host a variety of voices instead of decontaminating plurality into a universal, dominating voice. This has implications for any public discourse, which occurs among people who live in these more and less purified spaces and are more and less accustomed to decentering universalizing narratives.

The public surveillance projects undertaken by many American cities in the name of safety are an example of how attempts to control space and its uses are intertwined with exclusive definitions of the public and the public good. Fiske (1998) argues that in cities, surveillance enables different races to be policed differently.
Surveillance of public space for safety, after all, works by recognizing deviation from acceptable uses of space, and non-whiteness is categorized as deviant in American social interactions, seen as Other in comparison to normal. For actions to be policed differently by race for the protection of ‘the public’, targeted races—in particular, Black men—must be excluded from the idea of the public. The concept of who ‘the public’ is becomes whitened (Fiske 1998). This is an example of how the false universality of the idea of a single public can lead to exclusion. When surveillance is used to determine who is allowed and who is not allowed in supposedly public space, public space becomes the physical enactment of political struggle for democratic inclusion. Countersurveillance has been undertaken as a means of resistance in several cities, such as the formation of a “Cop Watch” in Berkeley (Fiske 1998). This redefinition of who surveils whom is a challenge to an exclusive definition of the public, and is a challenge to the dominating narrative that pretends to be universal. A Cop Watch in a neighborhood whose residents have been treated as suspect criminals asserts that their residents are part of the public, with a public interest; and in redefining the public, and by adding new narratives to the public experience, the CopWatch challenges the idea that the police are ‘public’ servants to all, or the assumption that police make members of the public safer.

MULTIPLECTIOUS PUBLICS AND SPACE

In the goal of encouraging a more inclusive public sphere and recognizing the multiplicity already present in democratic society, space is particularly relevant. As Massey (1999) argues, the existence of multiplicity is dependent on space: variation
occurs ‘over’ space (or sometimes, time, a related concept). Space should be understood as

the sphere in which distinct narratives co-exist; space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of more than one voice...if space is the product of interrelations (my first point) then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. The very fact of interrelation entails the notion of multiplicity. Multiplicity and space are co-constitutive (Massey 1999, 279).

An inherent aspect of organic space dense with interaction as in cities is that it arranges multiple uses and narratives next to each other in happenstance ways. This leaves space in a constant state of disruption and open-endedness; uses, meanings, and interactions are constantly changed or reasserted through multiplicitous activity. This is not conducive to maintaining singular grand narratives. For example, the universality laid down by political ideologies like neo-liberalism or Marxism maintains that the differences between “developed” and “developing” countries are temporal, when those economic differences only clearly occur across space—the inevitability of all countries following a single path is more of a mental myth (Massey 1999). The reality of difference created by space suggests instead a variety of co-existent narratives. Similarly, the universal experiences suggested by traditional concepts of the public sphere—in which there is only one public sphere, a single public good, and universal principles for reaching correct debate—is not well-supported by the physical space in which it lives. Actual lived space, particularly in the density of a city, necessarily is filled with multiplicitous experiences and a variety of public sphere. This inherent tendency of dense space to be multiplicitous can be restricted by segregation and purifying policies, but not destroyed. Diverse debate and
communication occurs across lived space that sometimes reaches across different social groups to everyone sharing the space, and sometimes communicates only to those who have the eyes and relationships to see it.

The physical intersections of spatial use in a city support the intersectionality of identities of the people who use the space, and are an opportunity for difference to be a natural part of political interaction, rather than a destructive addition. Massey (1999, 288) again:

Just as places may be thought of as open articulations of connections so too may constructions of difference and identity. Both are moves primarily motivated by the effort to imagine the world in a manner which is non-essentialist: identities of subjects and identities of places constructed through interrelations not only challenge notions of past authenticities but also hold open the possibility of change in the future...For there to be interrelations (so that political subjects, for instance, can be constructed) there must by multiplicities (a multiplicity of potential subjects) and for there to be a multiplicity there must be space. Objects (with their internal space-times), relations and space, then, are co-constitutive. Non-essentialist identities require spaciality.

The openness of space is naturally related to the openness of an inclusive politics and to the constantly re-forming identities that make up a diverse public sphere. For example, John Francis Burke (1999) uses the idea of mestizaje, the mutually-transformative phenomenon between Mexican and United States cultures, as a model of “unity in diversity” that allows collaboration between identities to create a more democratic citizenship. His example of mutual transformation through interaction, which can occur without hegemonic assimilation nor essentialist division, is one example of how diverse public spheres can actually enrich democratic quality. Meanwhile, in Edward W. Soje’s widely cited theory of “thirdspace,” mestizaje and
hybridity form the basis of a lived, open geography. Thirdspace is essentially lived space, the geography that resists binary categorization and is formed through practice; Soje (1999, 276) explains the social hybridity essential to thirdspace’s existence:

They [lived human geographies] are made more ‘real’ by being simultaneously ‘imagined.’ The metaphorical use of space, territory, geography, place and region rarely floats very far from a material grounding, a ‘realandimagined’ that signals its intentional Otherness from more conventional geographies. Thirdspace as Lived Space is portrayed as multi-sided and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine, knowable and unknowable. It is a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representations, investigatable through its binarized oppositions but also where il y a toujours l’Autre, where there are always ‘other’ spaces, heterotopologies, paradoxical geographies to be explored. It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity and mestizaje and moving beyond entrenched boundaries, a margin or edge where ties can be severed and also where new ties can be formed. It can be mapped but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully lived.

Two aspects of thirdspace stand out when considering it in the context of the inclusive public sphere and art. First, once space is understood as formed by living action, as intertwined with the expression of diversity, and as “multi-sided and contradictory,” space is almost unconsciously also considered to be liberatory, as a site of struggle. Soje construes its openness as ‘radical.’ This makes sense in the context of democracy, which is also a site of openness when it is genuinely inclusive. If the process of making meaning ever is concluded, shut, and not left open, the democratic process ends and turns authoritarian. Meaning is constantly struggled over in democratic communication; the diversity of the public sphere precludes a single universal meaning to social life, experiences, and debate, whereas established meanings—such as the exclusion of certain topics from debate on the grounds that they are ‘private’—
shuts out multiplicity and variegated experiences in favor of a single narrative. Therefore, if space, which is filled with social meaning by its uses and non-uses, is also multiplicitous and open, then it is naturally a site for struggle over meaning. This is related to the second notable aspect of thirdspace: it intertwines the real and the imagined. That is, it is based in a reality, the physical experience of place; but it is overlain with an imaginative understanding of space that assigns social meaning to physical locality, that reads and places signs in the space about what and who it is for. It is this imaginative aspect of thirdspace that allows for political struggle over meaning to be carried out through struggles over space. In thirdspace, the site of struggle, as inherently creative (El Saadawi 1996), can be created through the help of art, which is an intuitive medium for communicating symbolic, imaginative, and social meanings.

Political struggle over meaning through struggle over space takes advantage of the disruptability that Massey (1999) identifies as inherent to space. Mitchell (2003, 130) noticed the same phenomenon, writing that

The central contradiction at the heart of public space is that it demands a certain disorder and unpredictability to function as democratic public space, and yet democratic theory posits that a certain disorder and rationality are vital to the success of democratic discourse. In practice, the limits and boundaries of ‘democracy’ seem to be determined as much through transgression—as with the Free Speech Movement’s insistence on using the campus, against the will of the university, as a space for political organizing—as through legal or bureaucratic ordering.

Transgressions, of course, are tactics that violate norms of reasoned and orderly discourse. But they may be necessary for visibility or when more accepted formal forms of democratic speech are inaccessible. Because space is inherently constantly
disrupted and disruptable, it lends itself to interruptions of more established meanings
in political and artistic interactions.

COMMUNICATING THROUGH SPACE

In the city described above, the forms of communication through which the
public sphere is enacted are channeled through physical space: these communications
are situated and determined by space, products of and contributors to the human
relationships that form space.

Because any experience of space is already filled with so many meanings,
choosing a space is a message in and of itself. It may refer to a space's history or its
visibility, cross boundaries, or assert a contradicting vision for the space. Any message
that is placed in a space that has not been particularly defined for it is more distinctive,
intense, and noticeable; it is not unconsciously absorbed and accepted in the same way
that messages designed for a space are. Advertisements in a shopping mall consolidate
the meanings that the mall was designed to accommodate; graffiti or a theatre troupe
performing throughout the mall disrupts them. This makes disruptive messages seem
more powerful—they gain much more impact and poignancy by their setting and gain
more conscious attention. However, consolidating messages that suit the space made
for them can be extremely powerful because of their unconscious acceptability and
absorption into their environment—they make it easy to forget that alternative visions
of their space could exist. 'Negative' meanings can be just as consolidating as positive
ones. Messages that your neighborhood is bad and hopeless can be consolidated by
spatial signals just as well as messages of patriotism can be consolidated on state buildings.

Because *space* holds meaning just as much as visual, verbal, and sensory communication, public art works double time to carry meaning. There is the work of art's direct meaning and message (diversity should be celebrated, imperialism is destructive, buy ramen noodles, etc) and there is the meaning conveyed by the space chosen (we are here and live in this space as well, consumerist spaces are healthy benefits to the city, etc). Public art simultaneously makes a claim on space and a content claim, a process which will be further explored in the next chapter.
Chapter Three
Public Art in Station North

THE MEANS: ART

Across the landscape of the city, art asserts itself in shared spaces. The city is experienced through the senses, and it is through the senses that boundaries are marked. It is natural for artistic contributions, which operate by appealing to our senses, to build and intervene in social meanings through sensory space. Because of its natural suitability to multiplicity of meanings, art is an indispensable tool to the decentered public sphere, inclusive space, and democratic communication. Art also provides a way for excluded groups to assert their role in the public. It has the power to challenge and transform space, to counter space’s exclusive boundaries, as well as to support a space’s established boundaries. Across the city, public art contributes to the transgressions and authority that allows users to read a space and its meanings, and to conceal or reveal alternative meanings to a space.

Aesthetics of expression are, of course, attached to group membership. Some forms of expression are granted authority, and others are not. Strong authority in aesthetics closes off openness, and therefore shuts down participation in meaning-making. Visual aesthetics, like styles of speech, can be a way to delegitimize nonconforming styles; aesthetics can also be a way of affirming and positively developing group identifications. Fraser (1992, 125) reminds us that participation is more than making propositions in a ‘neutral’ forms of expression, but also the ability to speak in one’s own voice and identities of idiom and style. At the same time,
cultural institutions cannot escape some specificity; some styles of expression are always better accommodated in some spaces than others, just as space’s meaning is consolidated through use. Just as an academic journal accommodates a limited range of style, the classical paintings inside the city art museum do not always transition well as a style on the street, and only occasionally is the style of street art invited inside the museum (and the invitation is not always desired). The cultural associations inherent in any style or idiom of art are what turn art into a socio-political tool, a way to claim representation, and a resource for making statements about space.

Some of the art found in public spaces supports the meanings already attributed to the space it is in. Advertisements on posters, billboards, and signs in shopping districts are probably one of the biggest visual signals of the purpose of space that go unnoticed; flags in front of government buildings are another example. Other art may be more consciously visible, but still is in line with the dominant use of space around it: statues of former justices in front of the state courthouse, statues and landscaping in upscale parks, caricaturists for hire in tourist districts. These public works of art serve to consolidate meaning.

Other art, however, disrupts dominant meaning. Because public art’s meaning is created both through the work’s content and its placement, art can disrupt commonly accepted meanings through its images or by being placed in unexpected places. Because of their association with poor members of society, tags and graffiti challenge social relations more aggressively when they are painted in government or glossy shopping districts than when they are painted in poor neighborhoods. In such
locations, graffiti interrupts the process of mutually reinforcing images (stately buildings with columns, flags, clean marble, inoffensive fountains in carefully controlled plazas) with a “one-of-these-things-is-not-like-the-other” effect. The contrast makes the dominant meaning of the space more consciously visible; such dominant meanings are often read and responded to without any conscious recognition, in same way that no one might notice that almost all of a television network’s political commentators are men until they all gather on a panel and the single woman stands out. If a work of art is effectively done, the unexpected juxtaposition creates the potential for passersby to reconsider their assumptions about appropriate uses and people for a space; to see the amount of maintenance that goes into purifying spaces of counter messages and unsuitable persons; or recognize a point of view in public debate that they might not have otherwise recognized as relevant.

Of course, reactions to disruptive art are often not accepting or open to its meaning. Graffiti, in particular, especially if it is in the classic bright and cartoonish style of tags, is hunted down and eradicated, sometimes with great effort and expense. The importance attached to keeping spaces clean of graffiti is a testament to its visual power, and to the impact of the visual. Sibley’s (1995) concept of the abject and the psychology of decontamination helps explain the instantly response of rejection that disruptively-located art may create. Art coded for a different social group than its space is an incursion, a defilement of boundaries. Urban spaces that have fewer uses and whose purpose are strongly classified are more likely to identify difference as a source of threat. Weakly classified, multiplicitous space, of the kind advocated by Jane
Jacobs for the health and vibrancy of city life (1961), lends itself to acceptance of
diverse and even incongruous voices through its art, because such space is already
defined by its multitude of differing uses and people. The purity of the space that art
occupies, then, determines the extent of the art’s disruptiveness, and the degree to
which the art is likely to be rejected by viewers.

Art is different from other ways of marking space and participation in the
public sphere because art is a form of communication that inherently moves against
the consolidation of meaning. Multiplicity of meaning is part of what makes art, art—
creative images engage with the viewer to demand that the personal influence the
interpretation of meaning, so that the inherent multiplicity of society unfolds a
multiplicity of meanings in a work of art. Nawal el Saadawi (1996) argues that
creativity is inherently dissident, as creativity by definition is attempting to discover
new ways of thinking and acting; innovation is necessarily a break from the
established. This is why art is an opening moment: it creates a possibility for shift in
thought and interaction, for genuine communication instead of rote role-playing of
positions, because art at its best operates outside of rigidity and in the zone of flexible,
constantly creating-and-recreating possibilities of thought. A form of communication
that encourages such un-predetermined thought has the political potential to
communicate across differences that some might fear impede communication. The
very mythology of the artist as an outsider from the normal course of society reflects
the inherent potential that most people perceive for art to shift meanings and redefine
shared experiences.
Public art takes this multiplicious energy of art and makes it part of living thirdspace, so that art contributes to the breaking of communicative (and spatial) dichotomies. It expands the forms, styles, and aesthetics of communication in the public sphere beyond formal discourses of spoken argument-counter argument, to include diverse methods and messages of speaking. Soja’s (1999, 268) idea of thirdspace maintains that continual living and formation of meaning through space rejects essentialized lines of thought and introduces a “disruptive ‘other-than’ choice.” Soja argues that dialectical thinking itself, by becoming a spatial phenomenon and, I would argue, a spatially artistic phenomenon, is visibly enacted and expands discourse beyond “the presumed completeness and strict temporal sequencing of its classical framing in the form of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Rather than a culminatory synthesis or conclusive statement that can itself trigger another dialectical round of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, thirding introduces a disruptive ‘other-than’ choice. This othering does not derive simply and sequentially for the original binary opposition and/or contradiction, but seeks instead to disorder, deconstruct and tentatively reconstitute in a different form the entire dialectical sequence and logic. It shifts the ‘rhythm’ of dialectical thinking from a temporal to a more spatial mode, from a linear or diachronic sequence to the configurative simultaneities and synchronies…” (Soja 1999, 268).

Art, as an element of thirdspace, embraces multiplicity and the continual reformation of meaning, and provides a diverse set of tools of communication for those who might not be comfortable communicating in the style of discourse favored in traditional concepts of the public sphere.

Public art allows people outside of decision-making apparatuses to take control of decision-making processes in a very direct way in the question of the form of the city. As Norton (2001) points out, everyone must live in the landscape of the city, but
very few people decide what it looks like: architects, planners, private business owners. It is obvious when large and unusual architectural works, like the Space Needle or the Pompidou Center, impose themselves on our vision, whether we are interested or not. Equally, the common landscape of ordinary buildings, banks and strip malls, sidewalks and roads, and, emphatically, advertising on buses and buildings and billboards, all determines the experience of the city that all its residents live in and respond to. It is not irrelevant that the people who make decisions about the appearance of the city are a limited elite, because the choices of business and planners are binding to others, rather than just some free choices among many. The rest of the residents of the city do not have the freedom to make choices about the visual shape of their city; citizens who have different ideas of how the inherently shared space of the city should look are punished. Norton (2001, 191) writes,

“We are obliged to live (without much reflection or objection) within the limits these invisible governors draw around us. We must see what they build. We must see their walls. And we ought not to write on them. Not as graffiti artists, not as academics.”

While some public planning projects, if enacted by the city government, have some nominal public participation (the effectiveness or adequacy of the government’s engagement with residents is, of course, always open to debate), most of the decisions that form the city are not even seen as part of public concern. Advertisements, developments, and building projects are decided and funded by private actors, and therefore are rarely subject to public discussion—through being labeled private, such decisions with repercussions for all are nevertheless excluded from topics accepted for discussion in the public sphere. Advertising is not “political speech,” but “economic
speech,” natural and not subject to political critique. This protection of private, visual economic speech results in the persecution of visual speech that approaches economic speech as the public participant it is:

“In the economic zone of the visual there is no free speech at all. There is, however, all the speech money can buy. Normally, that speech echoes in the silence of opposing speech….There are practical differences between corporate speech and the speech of the graffiti artist. One is expensive, one is free. One is legal, one is a crime. One may be seen as an advertisement, an act of advertising creativity, or an informative convenience. The other must be seen in a certain way. We must not see graffiti responses as part of a political debate. We must see these as defacement of property rather than as public responses to public speeches” (Norton 2001, 192).

In order to prevent economic speech through advertisements and buildings from being challenged in the public sphere, public speech like graffiti that responds to economic speech is also excluded from the public sphere. Laws and norms react in such a way as to marginalize the entire conversation out of the public realm, even though that conversation is still occurring.

The argument over visual control over public space can be surprisingly direct. In New York City on April 25 and October 25, 2009, for example, a group of artists organized by Jordan Seiler of the advocacy group Public Ad Campaign held a “New York Street Advertising Takeover” (NYSAT). Targeting billboards and posters that were hung illegally without permits, the artists whitewashed advertisements around town and replaced them with their own art. In many locations, representatives of the illegally operating billboard company showed up within several hours and recovered the art with new advertisements, which the artists would then return to repaint, in a day-long game of cat and mouse. 9 artists were arrested for participation in the
projects, though all cases were dismissed (Public Ad Campaign website 2011); no one responsible for the illegal advertisements was arrested. The visual impact of the dramatic alteration of the street-level landscape sent a clear message, demanding a role for people beyond corporations in the city’s aesthetic form and underlining the ways that speech was bought instead of free. Underlying the direct struggle over the visual, the struggle for inclusion and a democratic public sphere was taking place. One of participating artists, who goes by the name Gaia and is discussed more at the end of the chapter, wrote on his blog about the NYSAT as a way to reclaim open participation and engagement in public discourse:

I think that the issue should not be framed as Art Vs Advertisement but instead, as interaction versus limitation or conversation versus monologue. The issue is that there are spaces that have been designated as purely for the dissemination of information regarding commerce, corporate interests, events and communication, and that these spaces must only be received. (Gaia, 2009).

In the city, where access to space is directly related to access to the public, struggle for visual control over space is furthermore a struggle for representation in the public sphere. Creating art or otherwise altering the visual condition of city space is a way of asserting presence, and therefore legitimacy as a participant. The act of speaking inherently requires the speaker to claim the right to speak. This forceful claiming of legitimacy is why art like graffiti in authoritative spaces is so disruptive of meaning, but even in less directly confrontational settings, the assertion of presence and legitimacy is strong. Graffiti and other street art in poor neighborhoods, which are spaces often more associated with graffiti’s style and idiom, still asserts presence: it asserts the presence of individuals who have not lost their desire to speak and be
heard. This is meaningful in a society that sometimes lumps together the poor into an undifferentiated mass and does not have many visible individuals with thoughts and experiences and emotions of their own. Probably the most classic form of American graffiti is tagging (see figures 1a-c, 9a, 9f, 10c). Tagging is the practice of painting one’s assumed name in a stylized manner in various places around the city. Most tags are small and quick—whatever can be thrown up without getting caught. Postal stickers that have been drawn on ahead of time, for example, are a commonly used way to place one’s tag in public quickly and effectively. But there is competition to paint more impressive and complex tags in more and more inaccessible spots—overpasses, water towers, official buildings. One graffiti writer that I met in the Howard Street graffiti alley in Baltimore gave me advice on how to break into the top of state building’s cupola to tag it. The more inaccessible the location, the better the writer’s reputation becomes, so that the best writers become known by their pseudonym to anyone who pays attention. The entire point of tagging is to assert presence and mark ownership of territory (gang symbols are another common form of tagging). Tagging writes “I am here,” and forces the world to recognize the writer’s name. Being able to claim visibility—and the more difficult the setting to infiltrate, the better—is the goal. This is why highly visible (but irregularly policed) locations like public transit lines are popular. When greeting, which Iris Young (2000) identifies as a basic form of political communication, is not present, the subject must go out and force public acknowledgement another way. Tags greet those who have not greeted their writers.
Figure 1a, 1b, and 1c: examples of tags

1a. Empty lot on Calvert Street between 21st and 22nd streets, in Barclay.

1b. Tag on the side of law offices off of St. Paul St. in Barclay/Charles North.

1c. Rooftop tags visible from North Avenue.
Because idioms of style are associated with specific groups of people, graffiti tags are at once singular and communal. Because of the emphasis on individual reputation, graffiti writers are very much individuals who may not claim to speak for anyone but themselves; they are in some ways embodiments of the ideal solitary artist. But because tags are associated with marginalized urban social groups, and because of the mythologizing influence of anonymity and assumed names, graffiti cannot help but claim a presence for the marginalized groups that its artists abstractly represent to the viewers, not just the presence of the individual artist. The distinction between individual and collective is blurred in the non-neutral style’s visibility. The anonymous presence gives the impression of omnipresence, and because of the style’s association with the underclass, the impression for some may be of omnipresent and indeterminate danger. Norton quotes Cool Earl, a legendary tagger from Philadelphia who helped create the form, as saying that he wrote

‘to prove to people where I was.’ He recognized that writing was to be the medium of his presence; writing would call him up in his absence….his will was thus more and less effective than he thought. It is not the author alone who decides the meaning of what is written, but the readers. For many of those readers, Cool Earl was (and is) no one in particular. Cool Earl is a sign, an icon; a black man, a member of the underclass, rarely visible, but leaving signs of an ungoverned, ungovernable presence: a presence that insists on its own authority, a presence that should be erased” (Norton 2000, 198).

BACKGROUND: STATION NORTH ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT, BALTIMORE

This case study explores the dynamics of public art and its implications for the public sphere in the Station North Arts and Entertainment District of Baltimore, Maryland. As a neighborhood in transition, a neighborhood reflective of many of the
problems of Baltimore as a whole, and neighborhood with a professed commitment to
the arts, there is a rich array of voices, mediums, and social groups asserting
themselves in the shared space of the district. Figure 2 maps district’s constituent
neighborhoods and shows the location of the images collected by the author of the
neighborhood and its public art in December, 2010. Descriptions of the neighborhood
and its art are based on its appearance in December 2010 unless otherwise noted.

_Baltimore_

The city of Baltimore faces many of the challenges typical of the post-
industrial, mid-sized American city. Baltimore’s population peaked at just under 1
million residents in the 1950’s and has steadily declined since, to a population of
620,000 in 2010. From 1990 to 2000, the population decreased 11.5%, even more
rapidly than Detroit in the same period, according to the U.S. census. The row houses
with marble steps and formstone facades that define the architecture of the city are
plagued by abandonment. In some neighborhoods, entire blocks sit empty. In others,
habitants must deal with the challenges of keeping their home in good condition when
it is attached to another, abandoned and deteriorating row house. Formerly home to an
industrial base of steel and shipping, Baltimore now has a primarily service-based
economy, with Johns Hopkins Hospital and University being the largest employer.
The city’s reputation for crime has made it the setting for the popular crime television
rates are consistently among the highest in the United States, although violent crime
rates have been dropping since the 1990’s, as in most of the rest of the country.
Figure 2: Map of Station North (left) and map of images taken December 2010 (right)
Within easy reach of New York City and Washington, D.C., yet much more affordable, Baltimore has developed a fairly vibrant artistic scene. The city’s two most respected museums, the Walter’s Art Gallery and the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA), have been free to the public with the support of city and county government since 2006. Other museums and events, such as the American Visionary Arts Museum, the popular National Great Blacks in Wax Museum and dance, music, and theatre events are periodically sponsored by the city’s “Free Fall Baltimore” program to provide free admission. Every July, the city hosts Artscape, which claims to be the country’s largest free arts festival. Artscape features 3 days of artists and fashion designer’s booths; national musical acts; theatre, dance, and literary performances and lectures; arts workshops; art exhibitions; and the Janet and Walter Sondheim Prize, which exhibits the work of, and awards substantial cash prizes to, local artists. The city also sponsors a mural program. A majority Black city, the local government has a tradition of strong Black politicians.

Independent of the city government, Baltimore is home to the respected Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), the Peabody Conservatory, and a countless number of small venues for local creative ventures, such as the Wind-Up Space, The Creative Alliance at the Patterson, and the School 33 Art Center. Baltimore is the birthplace of a style of electronic house music known as “Baltimore club” music that blends hip-hop into house and features looped samples. The neighborhood of Hampden, most recognizably featured and parodied in John Waters’ films such as *Hairspray*, has become a center for celebrating pride in Baltimore’s white, working-
class culture through kitsch and unabashed love for the hokey and local; pink flamingos, beehive hairdos, the word “hon,” and other images from Waters’ films have become shorthand symbols for pride. Other quirky local art projects, such as the festively and bizarrely decorated “art cars”, make regular appearances at any local festivals. The do-it-yourself atmosphere encouraging innovation in these settings is strong.

The city’s most widely lauded achievement in urban revitalization was the transformation of the Inner Harbor area from a somewhat desolate post-industrial region to the tourist and shopping center of the city in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Creating a tourist and suburban audience for city neighborhoods remains in the consciousness of elites and poor alike as the most likely route for city-sponsored development and improvement efforts.

As part of city efforts to combat drugs and urban decay, several public art and advertising campaigns have shaped the visual appearance of the city. By far the campaign with the most decisive visual impact was the Baltimore “Believe” campaign (see figure 3). From 2002 to 2008, simple, stark billboards and signs that simply read “BELIEVE” in white lettering against a black background flooded the city. They were accompanied by television commercials depicting sordid drug violence ending with the same exhortation to residents to “Believe.” Although directly an attempt to engage residents mentally and emotionally in the battle against drug use and drug violence, it often read as an attempt to get the residents to believe in the city’s ability to overcome all of its problems in general. It was widely criticized in local papers for addressing
the symptoms of the city’s problems with poverty, and none of the structural causes, but it also was successful at permeating the city’s consciousness. The images became ubiquitous enough that gentle mockeries still appear around the city, from the Hampden Baltimoresese-loving bumper sticker “B’lieve, Hon”, to stickers exhorting residents to “Behave,” to a sign on a bathroom door reading “Relieve.”

Station North

In 2002, the Station North neighborhood of Baltimore became the first neighborhood in the state to become a Maryland Arts and Entertainment District. The new state Arts and Entertainment District designation is a marketing and tax incentive designation intended to “stimulate the economy and improve quality of life” (Maryland State Arts Council website 2011). Each county is eligible to receive one such district each year (Baltimore City is an independent city with the standing of a county). Formal benefits include property tax credits for construction or renovation of buildings for the purpose of artists’ live/work space or arts and entertainment enterprise; income tax deductions for artists for income earned from art made and sold in the district; and an exemption from the admissions and amusement tax for businesses. The draw of the tax credits for a generally very low income group like Baltimore artists is debatable. The tax breaks have been beneficial to larger businesses like the local alternative movie theatre and property developers. But even residents who are investing in renovations do not always have the funds to do so quickly enough to qualify for the tax breaks, and few artists in the area sell enough work for the income deductions to add up substantially (Dickinson 2007). Arguably, the real
3. Several city-sponsored images and one spoof from Hampden.
benefit of the designation is the investment of attention in planning and development that is being poured into the area. The mental value of the designation was in fact the motivation for the local residents who wrote the application. One of the residents responsible for developing the application, David Crandall, remarked that "We were seeking recognition as much as anything. The real benefits come from official recognition that artists have something of value to offer" (Jensen 2003).

Station North as such is a new, artificially created neighborhood, formed by joining together a 100-acre swath of the existing neighborhoods of Charles North, Greenmount West, and, to a lesser extent, Barclay\(^1\), and bounded by the train tracks of Penn Station on the South (figure 2). This new identity has been formed wholesale by neighborhood organizations and local governments (the neighborhoods included in Station North are also still part of a number of other community designations, including local neighborhood and business organizations of each constituent neighborhood, the Historic Charles Street association from North to South, and the Charles Village Community Benefit District for the northern neighborhoods). The neighborhoods, even by the standards of struggling city, were and are badly off. This is especially true for Greenmount West and Barclay. In the 2000 census, 44% of households in Greenmount West had a total income of less than $10,000; the same was true for 35% of Barclay. 36.4% of buildings in Greenmount, 27.1% of buildings in Barclay, and 25% of buildings in Charles North are vacant. Crime, of course, is a major concern.

\(^1\) Although only one block of Barclay is formally included in the district, some informal references to the area strive to include it. For example, while the map on Station North’s website only shows the district extending north as far as 20th Street, most articles refer to the district’s boundaries as 23rd St.
The choice of Station North as an arts district built off the momentum of many artists already living in the area, primarily in the Charles North neighborhood. The art college, MICA, is located directly south, on the other side of Penn Station and approaching the relatively well-off neighborhoods of Mount Vernon and Bolton Hill. As a result, many students, teachers, smaller studio schools, and art supply stores have searched out the cheap but established spaces of Charles North. Several former factory buildings still zoned for industrial use, most notably the Copy Cat building on the edge of Greenmount West, had been being used illegally as combination studio work and living spaces for years. The enormous but cheap, well-lit, flexible industrial spaces are attractive to artists. The Copy Cat building, and similarly repurposed spaces that developed alongside or have been inspired by the Copy Cat, is a center of artists’ cooperatives, exhibits outside the gallery system, and performance collectives. One of the benefits of the transition to the arts district designation was the opportunity to negotiate a transition to a residential zoning, although the necessary renovations to meet code have necessitated some rent increases. The area also was already home to The Charles Theatre, the city’s only independent and art movie house, and the Everyman Theatre troupe; and it hosted some of the overflow of Artscape, the city’s major art festival every summer. When applying for the arts and entertainment designation, the artists and neighborhood organization of Charles North reached out to work with the neighboring community organization of Greenmount West.

Despite its more favorable reputation, the neighborhood of Charles North also saw 64% of its households with a total income of less than $10,000 in the 2000
census. However, the average household in Charles North has 1.38 people, as opposed to 2.4 to 2.5 in Greenmount West and Barclay; and over 90% of the residents of Charles North are adults, whereas households in the other neighborhoods house families with children. Greenmount West and Barclay are neighborhoods where families have been living for a long time, as opposed to Charles North, which is also statistically poor but more inhabited by newcomers, artists, and students. The difference in history can be seen in the demographics, both in the differing patterns of poverty and in the fact that over 90% of the residents of Greenmount West and Barclay identify as Black, as compared to 72% of Charles West. And although the economic growth that the arts district designation aims to provoke is hoped to improve all the neighborhoods of Station North, it is no secret that Charles North is the base and hub of the transformation of the area’s reputation.

The differing social backgrounds of the artists, trendsetters, and longterm residents of Station North inarguably create a social tension, caught up in different understandings of the neighborhood, the use of its space, and each other. However, the articles in the local papers—*The Baltimore Sun*, the alternative weekly *City Paper*, and the local monthly magazine *The Urbanite*—reflect that most residents, artists and families alike, share a common fear of developers much more than of each other. Artists living in one of the reclaimed work/living spaces in Charles North told *City Paper* in 2003 that:

“We get along great with neighbors across the street. We both have similar goals. We'd like the neighborhood to be better, but not too good--because if it does get gentrified, it's not just the local residents that could get pushed out but us as well.”
"While we don't want gentrification, it would be nice to go to a corner store that didn't have to have bulletproof glass. It would be nice to see people enjoy their neighborhood and have their kids run around without fear…. We all have acquaintances who are very nervous about even driving through these neighborhoods." (Jensen 2003)

Meanwhile, long-term residents of Greenmount West who were aware of the arts district designation responded to City Paper (Jensen 2003) that they fear the designation was a cover for speculators to grab up houses in the area, and that neighborhood education was needed:

"I'm afraid of seeing the houses being offered to the wrong people. It seems they want to change the neighborhood by pushing us out. But if they really want to make it a better community, they should let folks who have lived here for years have a chance to buy before they're priced out…. [As for the artists,] It would be good to have people of different backgrounds moving into the neighborhood. It's the developers I worry about."

"I might be standing in the doorway, and somebody will drive by and ask me if I want to sell my house. And they're not telling me why they want to buy it."

Another anonymous Greenmount neighbor suggested:

"White folks want the city back. They all moved to suburbs, and now they're tired of driving all that way to go to work" (Jensen 2003).

Several articles quoted city officials using the expression “gentrification without displacement,” although how exactly the city plans to ensure that happens, beyond a general agreement that that is desirable, is unclear (Dickinson 2007; Jensen 2003).

The first physical change to the area came from the city in the form of “streetscaping”: replacing streetlights from the 1970’s with new “pedestrian-style” lights, repaving the streets and sidewalks, planting trees in the medians. Similarly, the branding began almost immediately, with “Station North” signs of all sizes and
4a. Signpost on North Ave, of the kind located around the district.

4b. Station North sign on top of the iconic Copy Cat building, viewed from neighborhoods south of the train station. Photo from *The Baltimore Sun*.

4c. The Load of Fun Gallery and Node collective on the western end of North Ave. have placed a glossy version of the Station North logo on their window.

4d. Station North Art and Entertainment District website
locations appearing across the neighborhood, including one prominent sign on the Copy Cat building overlooking the train station (figure 4b). The district hosts monthly “Second Saturdays” with free events and a festival type activities. Renovations to former factory buildings, such as the new Area 405 collective gallery that is an organized spin-off of the Copy Cat building concept, were supported by the code changes almost immediately as well. In the last few years, several development projects have begun to take motion. City Arts, a live-and-work apartment complex designed as an affordable housing development for artists, went up in 2010 on a formerly vacant lot, funded by low-income tax credits through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. 10 of the 69 apartments are reserved for people on Baltimore’s public housing waiting list, who do not have to be artists. Plans are in place to transform Penn Station to include a chic hotel in the building’s upper stories and a shopping arcade, as well as to form a park along the nearby highway; and one notable development of $300,000 townhouses were built in 2007, although their selling prices have declined since the housing bubble bust (*City Paper* 2008) (average home prices were around $100,000, and often as low as $30,000 in Greenmount, according to *The Baltimore Sun* in 2005).

The rapid changes to the uses, demographics, and lived experience of the neighborhood create a rich tension of visual markers and varieties of art across Station North. Fears of gentrification, pushes for improvement, and diverse social groups—poor black long-term residents, newcomer artists of mixed races and geographic origin, suburban tourists, and government bureaucrats and law-enforcement—have
investments in the space and ideas of both what the space currently is and what it could be.

MARKED SPACE IN STATION NORTH

A Visual Tour of the Neighborhood

Starting on the north side of Station North, above North Avenue, the neighborhood of Barclay bears the signs of a poor black Baltimore neighborhood: the signs of abandonment and, although less recognized, the attendant signs of struggling for life. Many of the row houses are boarded up, sheets of plywood bearing stenciled legal and property notices and the house number, accompanied by quick, simple tags (figures 5). As is true across every area of Station North, windows and doorways are almost all covered by grates and bars, generally pleasantly designed. There are several empty lots and lightly-frequented parks, most of which feature a large mural. “Random Acts of Kindness” reads one otherwise abstract mural, and another, a city-sponsored collection of positive scenes of the neighborhood in different seasons (figure 6, figure 16a). Two of the most noticeable empty lots feature signs from the city notifying passersby of developments planned for the spaces of “affordable and market-rate home and apartments” (figure 6). “Barclay Redevelopment In:” their headlines proclaim (without a clear follow-up to the colon), accompanied by the slogan “Building on our strengths. Investing in our future.” On the blocks of Calvert St between 20th and 21st street, a few of the houses that are surrounded by abandoned buildings have set out stone pots, garden fountains, and fake flowers on their stoops.
6. Empty lot on Calvert St. adjacent to Axis Alley and scheduled for redevelopment
In the alley behind these houses are the remnants of a MICA art project undertaken in 2009-2010, Axis Alley, which decorated the abandoned backyards with a treasure hunt of sculpture, fine art paintings, and conceptual art pieces (figures 19a to 19j, figure 6). One of the most striking places in the alley, however, is the very last house at the end of this art elephant’s graveyard (figure 19j). It is the only house in the row that is indisputably lived in, with brightly painted decks, a few handmade birdhouses, and wildly-tended gardens. The markers put in place by city initiatives north of North Avenue consist of several of the police department’s blue lights and camera boxes (figure 15d), and several trash cans with “Charles Village Community Benefits District” signs attached.

Two blocks above North Avenue is Dallas F. Nicholas Sr. Elementary School, which boasts several metal sculptures resembling stylized worms outside its doors, and long student-made mural along its playground walls (figures 7a-c). The playground is notable for having a large amount of grass in its green fields in addition to ball courts and a playground: many schoolyards in Baltimore were paved over completely in the sixties and seventies as part of an effort to save money on groundskeeping and maintenance. The block around the school has several signs common to schools across the state—“Drug-Free Zone,” which refers to increased legal penalties for drug possession on school property—and others more specific to the area, such as the surveillance notice, “Lawbreakers Beware!,” complete with the community logo and a watching eye.
Figures 7a-7c: Dallas F. Nicholas Jr. Elementary School

7a. Entrance and sculpture.

7b. Elementary school mural. Across from empty row houses and the police station.

7c. Notice of surveillance next to the school entrance.
8a. District police station from the side of the elementary school and memorial mural (figure)

8b. District police station from North Ave.
Directly next to the elementary school between 20th St and North Avenue is the district police station, an authoritative old building surrounded by police vehicles (figure 8). Directly next to both are several of the most desolately abandoned blocks in the area, with entire rows of houses that can be seen through to the other end of the block, an extensive empty lot in place of a common area between the abandoned rows, and one bright mural doubling as a memorial site in the shadow of the police station and a “Station North” lamppost sign (figure 16d).

North Avenue is the collision center of the arts district development effort, a space used by both the artists filtering up from the art school, and the poorer, mostly black communities of Barclay (figures 91-f). Many of the buildings’ upper windows and doors are still bricked up from the 1968 riots that rocked Baltimore after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr (figure 9e). It is also here that city “Station North” signs begin to appear on lampposts (figure 4a). Mostly locally-based businesses—food joints, art supplies, a florist, a funeral home—and a few fast-food restaurants line the street. A major street that cuts through the city and colloquially marks the division between North and South Baltimore, many bus lines run along the wide street. More ambitious, large and colorful tags are visible on the rooftops and nearby alleyways, and when the nighttime gates of businesses are down, you can see more images, of such color and care that it is difficult to tell if it is a tag, some other form of graffiti, or a commission of the business owner (figure 9d). The further east you go, towards the center of town and the police station, the more churches, local restaurants and community stores you see. The west end of the block, close to the easy
9a. Typical block in the middle of North Ave: fast food, a showy tag, and the city’ Station North lamppost sign.

9b. North Avenue further east, across from the police station.

9c. Art supply store at the westernmost end of North Avenue at the Howard St bridge and highway.
9d. Bright graffiti or mural on business being renovated on North Avenue.

9e. Cyclops bookstore and performance space. The arches and entrances on the right side of the building are still bricked up from the 1968 MLK riots.

9f. Small thrown-up tags on a stop sign on North Ave.
escape of the highway and the brightly-painted Howard Street Bridge and directly
North of Charles North rather than Greenmount, is where the alternative galleries,
creative spaces, art supply store, and combination bookstore/performance/exhibition
spaces tend to be located (figures 9c, 4c). Behind the Loads of Fun gallery is the
graffiti alley, a local mecca for graffiti that the city has agreed to leave alone due to
the requests of the immediate business owners in conjunction with local street artists
(figure 4c and figures 14a-14i). Although some of these clubs near the highway have
been glossily decorated and chicly put together, many retain marks of their recent
abandonment and the shared poverty of their entrepreneurs. For example, at the end of
2010, I attended the opening of a photo exhibition and concert for the anniversary of
John Lennon’s death at Cyclops, a bookstore and event space at the corner of North
Ave and Maryland Ave. The space at the end of the strip had only two small banners
on the exterior, no signs; no heating at that time; more empty space than the dusty
books and local publications could begin to fill; and sold the popular, cheap, local beer
National Bohemian (more commonly called “Natty Boh”) at its ad hoc bookstore café.
The photographer was a white office worker, the performers high school students and
a gay songwriter, and in the back an elderly black woman named Yisrael with
beautiful dreadlocks set up a table selling chill for donations with her elegantly
dressed punk friends. Although the emergence of Cyclops is undoubtedly part of the
wave of changes accompanying the arts district designation, it is an example of a
slightly different tone than the tapas bar and crepe place two and half blocks south.
Figure 10a-10c: Intersection of North Ave. and Charles St.

10a. Abandoned chicken restaurant featuring a paste-up in the style of Gaia.

10b. Converted “Library and infoshop.”

10c. Tags and stickers on the drain-pipe outside the chicken restaurant. Notice the tagger pseudonym “Caspa.”
Figure 11: Walls on the Charles St. corridor just south of North Avenue
Heading south from North Avenue, Charles Street in particular is a colorful collision of old and new artistic ventures. On the corner of North Avenue stands an abandoned chicken joint; on one side is an intricately drawn paste-up of a chicken in the style of locally renowned street artist Gaia, and on its other is an extensive gray painting of bare bushes (figure 10a). Postal sticker and other quick ways of putting up tags are common on the sides of buildings, stop signs, and newspaper vending machines on this block (figure 10c; similar to the quick tagwork done in figure 9f); event posters and political ads, current and outdated, plaster the convenient plywood covering windows (figure 11). One newspaper vending machine has been fitted out to hand out free zine and other do-it-yourself political, event, and art publications: “LIBRARY and infoshop. FREE” read cut-out letters along its side (figure 10b). A theatre space, the “Bohemian Coffee House,” the new “Station North Arts Café & Fine Craft Gallery” with a hand-painted sign, and a club painted with mural outlines of party-goers accompany this block, which starts with the empty chicken joint and ends with a gas station that still has old-fashioned painted advertisements for its services on its building (figure 12).

In the next block is the heart of the business success that helped encourage action on the arts and entertainment district designation: the Charles Theatre, an independent movie theatre that draws in culturally-oriented residents with a bit of money from all over the city and county (figure 13a); and the tapas bar and crepe place on either side of the theatre that cater to creating a complete evening out for movie-goers (figure 13b, 13c). The block is also home to a live theatre. The creatively
Figure 12: Businesses on Charles St just south of North Ave.
Figure 13a-e: The Charles Theatre and surrounding block

13a. The Charles Theatre

13b. The adjacent tapas bar.

13c. Sofi's crepes and one of the contest bike rack designs.
13d. Another bicycle rack design contest winner and a spontaneous bulletin board.

13e. Police booth before the bridge that leads south out of the district.
shaped bike racks on either side of the street may be the result of a competition that the Station North managing organization held for designs in 2008 (figure 13c, 13d). Nearby is a parking garage and an old-fashioned luncheon whose windows been papered over with local newspapers for years, and a block over is a popular concert venue and several well-maintained row houses. At the end of the block is a bridge with a police booth that leads to the train station and out of Station North (figure 13e). To the east is Greenmount West, whose collection of inhabited and abandoned buildings is very similar visually to Barclay. Overlooking the train station in Greenmount are the factory buildings like the Copy Cat, large brick buildings that differentiate themselves from their residential surroundings only by the virtue of the fact that they are not row houses. On top of the Copy Cat is the large billboard bearing the ubiquitous Station North logo, which is visible in the neighborhoods south of the train station as you approach Charles North (figure 4b).

*Art in Station North: Reading the Space*

We read the visual social signals of space naturally enough that you may have a good understanding of the struggles playing out in Station North just from reading the above description of its space. The most prominent of these narratives is intuitive and familiar: the threat of gentrification. The simple story of the threat of gentrification should not hide the more specific struggles that make up the neighborhood, however. Poor residents versus rich, long-term residents versus newcomers, yes; but also poor newcomers and long-term residents alike versus developers; poor black residents versus police versus businesses and newcomers and
long-term community defenders who rely on police; the city planning department versus the city housing departments versus neighborhood organizations; private property ownership versus communal appropriation of space; government-sanctioned art versus independently acted-on and sometimes illegal art; recognized art versus art that may be marginalized as not art at all; “fine art” versus relevant art; vision versus realities.

This is the portrait of a neighborhood at the moment of transition—or not—something that is sometimes missing from other stories of gentrification, which tell of neighborhoods ‘before’ and ‘after’ the new class took over, without accounting for when and how the change physically and temporally happened. Because the fate of the neighborhood has not yet been solidified one way or another, every inch of space on any block is currently in play, from a block of buildings being renovated, to the corner of a street sign open to a sticker. Even in a city where the conditions of neighborhoods regularly change drastically within the space of a couple of blocks, the variety of messages and social associations placed in such a small space is overwhelming. Even directly next to the bourgeois safety of the tapas bar, there is an empty building and nooks and crannies full of graffiti. The façade of the tapas bar itself chooses to make use of the crumbling, decayed appearance of its layers of brick in a way that is somehow undeniably chic and rich, in a bizarre combination of nod to and contrast to the genuine decay of the homes around the corner (figure 13b). The density of diverse uses means that it is difficult to consolidate the meaning of the district. Most people moving through the district will process both signals that make them feel comfortable
and make them feel unwelcome. There is a fluidity and openness to meaning-making, by whoever wants to try to their hand at joining the community, that places the district in a supremely democratic moment of conversation, in which the biggest threat to the democratic tug and pull over meaning are those large developers who can unilaterally wipe out a space and redefine its meaning wholesale.

Art and appearances are the palette with which conversations about the use of the neighborhood’s space is being played out, in a way that is all the more self-conscious because of the prominence given to art as the priority of the district. It creates a dimension of the public that draws in, that perhaps cannot be escaped by, people who don’t feel comfortable in politics, who don’t follow local political processes, who might not have known when the arts district designations passed or might have moved in because of it, but don’t like to talk about politics, who want to reach out and/or communicate directly with their neighbors without having to search them out in formal block organizations. For now, at least, projects to change space that multiple people have investments in have forced a certain amount of shared dialogue. The artists’ collectives worked with the Greenmount West neighborhood organization in the arts district application process, for example, and the art professor behind the Axis Alley art installations had to work with her Barclay row home neighbors when transforming the lots behind their houses into gallery spaces. Large organizations who do not live and work on the street level have the most freedom to avoid these shared democratic conversations—developers, businesses, and sometimes city government. It is possible that the focus on art as the goal of the district can provide a third, more
inclusive path for neighborhood revitalization, as opposed to traditional plans for revitalization that define progress as the accumulation of middle and upper class markers and uses, and therefore inherently are exclusive. The unfortunate cultural association of respected forms of art with an elite, bourgeois or recently bourgeois, intelligentsia will prove to be the main challenge to the possibility of escaping this displacing form of revitalization.

Possibly a side effect of the jostle of artists, new exhibition/club spaces, and traditional black residents and entrepreneurs around North Avenue, graffiti writing and street art have shown indications of being taken seriously as art forms in the neighborhood. The graffiti alley behind the Load of Fun art gallery off Howard Street has become a local landmark, and for good reason: stepping into the small L-shaped alley, where every inch of space down to the concrete ground and the gutters is painted and painted over in vibrant colors, is like stepping into a neon coral reef or being submerged in a living Chihuly installation (figures 14a-i). At any given time, veteran graffiti writers, young people from the city or the suburbs, an out-of-towner tipped off by an in-the-know friend, the gallery owners whose back walls host the alley, or a group of young black men taking fashion pictures to advertise their start-up online clothing line might wander through the alley. When the Load of Fun gallery opened in 2005, owner Sherwin Mark painted murals on the back of his building that in turn attracted additions of carefully crafted graffiti writings, more sophisticated than the scrawls that had been there before the gallery moved in. According to The Baltimore Sun (McCauley 2009), in 2007, a national gathering of graffiti writers held
an evening barbequing at Load of Fun and went to town on the alley, establishing a precedent that continued to attract more and more writers, as it does to this day, creating its impressive current state. Mark entered into a stand-off with the police, who issued him a citation for refusing to paint over the graffiti, as building owners are required to do in the city. The confrontation broke only when Mark went into the alley one morning and discovered that adjacent building owners had painted the entire space white out of desire to not fight with the city. What moved into the blank space was a more hateful form of graffiti: gang symbols, racist slogans, and pro-al-Qaida messages. Armed with photos of this new use of the space and support from the property and business owners of the neighborhood, Mark gained agreement from code enforcement to allow the graffiti so long as it is strictly confined to the alley, generally not visible from outside the alley, and that Mark cleans up graffiti found outside the alley. Mark claims that the alley has been cleaner and better cared-for since it became a graffiti destination (McCauley 2009).

The fate of the alley is an example of a space’s meaning being determined by its use. As the culture of the alley’s space is formed through practice, so democratic communication is a matter of practice that can be learned and improved. The graffiti and local community as curator of the space is critical to its maintenance as an accessible, productive space for the community, rather than a sinkhole for violent energy. As Sibley (1995) would put it, the Howard Street graffiti alley is a strongly classified space, with a particular purpose: the alley is devoted to the painting of graffiti by street artists. When the graffiti community was cleaned out of the space, it
Figures 14a-14i: The Howard St. Graffiti Alley

14a. Entrance off of Howard St.

14b. “stock cap rock.”

14c. Colt45, Seth, Circus, Eli.
14d. Elaborate graffiti alley tags.

14e. Graffiti alley portrait.
14f. Graffiti alley portrait.

14g. Graffiti alley portrait.
14h. Partially covered graffiti alley manifesto.

14i. Even the ground of the graffiti alley is used by graffiti artists.
either joined the ranks of blankly neglected and trash-filled alleys in the rest of the city, or became a chalkboard for hastily-scribbled hate speech, like the absolute freedom found in a bathroom stall. Deprived of its strong singular use, the alley became an in-between space, a leftover space that soaked up uses that had been pushed out of better-maintained spaces. When the alley had a particular use, the precedents created by its use as a graffiti mecca set certain expectations for discourse in the alley. It functioned as a very small subpublic—a counter public sphere in which, à la Fraser (1992), a non-elite group can communicate with each other (and with outsiders who also view the work) before reaching out to the wider collection of public spheres. The alley is a space of positive identity formation that fulfills the need for social groups to communicate internally as well as externally. The easily policed boundaries of purified space, while often a tool of exclusion and consolidation of meaning, does not mean that strongly classified space cannot be used positively—especially in very small sizes, or when a space is surrounded by strongly classified space that creates a need for excluded uses to have a space to go. Signaling a clear intentionality to a place can encourage engagement and stewardship of place, as well as suggests certain topics of discourse and shapes the sort of messages that occur to speakers to share. While I maintain my argument from Chapter 1 that having universal restrictions on the idiom and topics of conversation is deleterious to the public sphere, these aesthetics make no attempt to falsely impose themselves as universals, and are an example of the necessity of infinitely multiple public spheres in our concept of the public, instead of a singular universal public sphere. When space is given a use, an
idiom is inevitably created for that space that sets expectations and acceptability for the kinds of communication found there. It is only when space cannot be altered, there are no alternative spaces to the ‘universal’ space, or when spaces with access to power deny that same access to alternative spaces, that it becomes problematic. As a small space within a large neighborhood full of different modes of expression, the graffiti alley is still contributes to the multiplicity of expressions and uses of the neighborhood, rather than closing it off. And because the community’s standards of communication encourage the speaking of different perspectives, it is still a fairly open space—although not so open that it would welcome government and upper class idioms and messages to impose on one of the few spaces that is their own.

The conditions and culture of the graffiti alley are generally the same as the street art world elsewhere. Ephemerality is part of the game. Paint over others’ work, but only if you can do a better job. Churches, small businesses, public monuments, private homes—these are not appropriate places for tags, but everywhere else is fair game. Many of the images are still tags, but the best also feature additional figures and images to embellish on their usual work and provide commentary. Several of these images are cartoonish people, one holding a graffiti can himself, giving the impression that the anonymous taggers of the city are finally providing portraits of themselves and showing their identities here—but, given the lack of realism in the portraits, it is still their tagger, re-imagined, reputation-tied identity, not their “real” face and name (figures 14e, 14f, 14g). One large, sick looking face put up in 2010 with the words “stock cap rock” blends drug and graffiti slang in a mixed commentary (figure 14b). A
nearby graffiti manifesto challenging other writers had recently been partially
capped—painted over. Brashness, self-affirmation, and posturing are the name of the
game: one mostly painted-over figure is wearing a crown, another work is signed
“Colt 45”, and a bubble on the dumpster reads “NO LOVE FOR HATERS.” The
formation and assertion of individual identities fills the space—an interesting heart to
an art form that is based on anonymity and is often seen as an indiscriminate threat
from the entire underclass. If graffiti is as subversive or threatening as it is treated, the
rich and individualist artworks of the alley make seem that the assertion of individual,
proud identity in the poor and minority youth of the city is what is being responded to
as inherently subversive and a threat.

The alley may be a place to see and be seen, a community gathering point
where a writer can take the time to do painstaking work without having to hide, but if
you want to make your name as a writer, you have to take the risk of asserting your
presence across the city. Prominent Baltimore graffiti artist Adam “Stab,” an advocate
of the graffiti alley, nonetheless told The Sun:

They aren't claiming any space. They aren't making a personal decision to take
something that doesn't belong to them and put their tag on it. That's the process
one has to go through to be a graffiti writer, and it cannot be changed.
(McCauley 2009).

Certainly, the badge of official approval creates some problems for an art form that is
all about challenging authority and claiming spaces where some don’t want it. The
graffiti alley, as a space, is inadequate to the needs of the form, the spirit of which lies
in disrupting space. The continual threat of the city hovering in the background, ready
to crack down on the alley again if it gets out of hand, almost helps the alley maintain
its raw creativity rooted in subversiveness, as well as its sense of community by uniting in common cause. If the city had set up a space with the express purpose of being a legal place to place graffiti, would it have been able to gain the same reputation and success? But presence of the graffiti alley in the neighborhood still has some challenging effects on the space. It places members of the established art world, the gallery owners, on the same team as the impoverished and/or minority graffiti writers of the city. The battle asserted that graffiti and street art should in fact be included in the category of art, and not contentless crime. The bit of legitimacy won by the alley lends legitimacy to graffiti as a form of expression in the rest of the neighborhood, for illegal tags abound throughout the district. People who visit the graffiti alley cannot help but look at the paintings in their own right, almost as if visiting an exhibition, but without the embarrassing fears of being insufficiently educated to be allowed to appreciate it. Once having seen these works, attuned their attention to them, and seen the interplay and deep conversations between them, a person who may not have read the messages of graffiti before, may have overlooked tags as background noise or symbols of decay and aggression, will likely go back onto the street and see the tags they did not before. As such, the graffiti alley as a sanctioned space is a useful addition to the established anti-establishment sphere of graffiti artists, because it is a point of access and interaction for the rest of the community to engage with their work. If the community of graffiti artists is a subpublic sphere, the graffiti alley both acts as an enclave, that is, as place to communicate with each other, practice their messages and aesthetics, and form a
message and identity; and as a site of outreach, to provide a point of access and outer legitimacy to their form of communication, to see the messages that graffiti in the city communicates with its own social group and not only the messages it communicates to the rich and the authorities.

One sticker on a rainpipe in the corner of the graffiti alley is a copy of an image available around the country. A play off of the neighborhood block watch group signs common in many cities, it reads “COMMUNITY WATCH AREA: POLICE NOT WELCOME” (figure 15a and 15b; see also surveillance imagery in figure 7c). The reappropriation of the official government and police symbols is particularly effective at challenging assumed meanings, because it flips around the intention of the police symbols, contradicting their universality and making alternative meanings and interpretations of the same institutions accessible to others. This reappropriation of official, government-sanctioned imagery is a subtrend in its own right in a city extensively marked with the signs and means of surveillance and power. As the panopticon reminds us, the signs of surveillance are as important to our experiences of the public and private city as actual surveillance is, if not more so. Another artistic reaction to surveillance plays off the system of “blue lights” installed in most poor neighborhoods in Baltimore (figure 15d). The boxes on top of lampposts and traffic light poles are emblazoned with the police shield, the words “24/7”, and a black banner around the bottom reading “Believe”—integrating the blue lights with the anti-drug and crime campaign that flooded the city with its message of personal responsibility in the beginning of the 2000’s. The blue lights on top of the boxes are
15a and 15b. “Community watch area: police not welcome” sticker in the graffiti alley versus a real neighborhood watch area sign.
intended to discourage crime through illumination, and the cameras inside the boxes are to discourage crime through surveillance. Police statistics say that crime decreased 16% in areas with blue lights. A few blocks across the city, including one in northern Barclay, were targeted with noisy, high-powered floodlights that illuminated the street at night so brightly that it resembled day. An gutsy art installation at Artscape—a huge festival attracting an audience from all around the metropolitan area—made a lifesize version of the blue boxes, emblazoned “People Watch” on the outside, and inviting viewers to sit inside the box beneath the words “Peep Show” and watch passersby (figure 15c). The challenge to the interpretations that the city wants residents to have of the blue lights makes this installation among some of the most overtly political art in the city; because the issue is so local and experienced in the same spatial and visual places as the art about the issue, the piece’s role in the public conversation is stronger and more impactful than similar art about, say, the politics of George W. Bush might be.

Although the city announced in 2008 that they were phasing the blue light boxes out due to excessive manpower requirements (to be replaced with other, less visible, cameras), they are still common throughout Greenmount West and Barclay. Some residents seem to concur with Fiske’s (1998) evaluation that surveillance doesn’t stop crime, just displaces it, along with any people whose bodies are viewed as aberrant. Some Baltimoreans express the attitude that if they aren’t doing anything wrong, they don’t mind them. Others are simply skeptical of the efficacy of displacing crime or distrustful of the city’s motivations:
15c. “People Watch” installation at Artscape (compare to 15d).

15d. Actual police blue light camera box in Barclay at the corner of Calvert and 22nd (compare to 15c).
"It used to be an active corner, but they moved away--where to I don't know…Until they bother somebody else, it's good."

"This block is a ghost town now, that's all I know."

"If we want to be consistent, we should put the flashing lights in the Inner Harbor. Let the people with money know they're being watched too."

"I wonder about the motivation for putting them here now. It's not to help people that live here--it's because the city wants to beautify the neighborhood. Somebody wants to buy up this neighborhood, that's what it's about." (Janis 2005).

The assumption behind the last quotation—that neighborhood beautification is inherently for others, not for the people who live there—is strikingly sad. It demonstrates the extent to which neighborhood improvement and fixing-up has become synonymous with bringing space into line with upper-class aesthetics and uses. It shows how distant the city government is from portions of its citizenry, who see it as a tool of the rich. It demonstrates the low expectations of the city’s poorest residents. It also begs the question: what ways of “beautification” could be imagined and enacted that residents would feel was for themselves, was in an approach and aesthetic that belonged to them? What does a “beautiful,” healthy neighborhood look like when it is not channeled into an upper-class ideal?

One of the most popular quick beautification tools is of course the community mural. The mural is deemed appropriate for all kinds of neighborhoods, but especially for poorer neighborhoods. There are many beautiful murals in poor neighborhoods, often painted by locals; however, the poorer the neighborhood, the more likely it is that any positive depiction of the neighborhood, however poorly executed by adults or children, will be greenlighted to be painted, whereas ritzier shopping districts might
require their murals to be artistic and attractive sources of charm. Baltimore City has a city program to sponsor mural painting. One of the primary points of the mural program in the words of its managing office is to combat graffiti; the artists and groups who create the murals are more likely to see them as ways to develop community pride and claim public spaces in a positive way, which the city does acknowledge in its actions. Certainly the mural is way to reestablish community presence in space; to redefine community image in a positive outlook; to assert that a neighborhood’s space is worthwhile, worth care and respect; and to assert presence in neighborhoods that are covered in the visual indicators of abandonment. Private businesses also use them to assert identity and community affiliations, for their own visual pleasure, and to differentiate themselves from large chains by showing a personal touch.

There are a number of murals in the Station North area. Figures 16a to 16i collect a number of them. The murals are a strange combination of official sanctioning, which can have the effect of disconnecting people from some of art’s urgency, and community origin, which imparts some legitimacy, voice, and genuine emotion and messaging. The creators of the murals themselves are mostly individual artists working with a team of volunteers, so the images are not necessarily organic to the neighborhood. However, communities are involved in selecting their images, and the artists may be part of the community to begin with. In some neighborhoods, this means a board block organization somewhere chooses the image; others are so
Figures 16a to 16i: Station North area murals

16a. Community mural in Barclay, park at Calvert St and 21st.
16b. Private mural in Charles North, in back parking lot off of Charles St, south of North Avenue.

16c. Mural in empty lot on Calvert St. in Barclay, painted by an artist involved in Axis Alley.
16d. Community mural and memorial in Barclay, directly across from the police station.
democratically organized as to host online voting for everyone in the neighborhood to have input.

As community art, Station North’s community murals are inclusive. The whimsical murals of businesses (for example, figure 16b) also seem broadly accessible, as they have no agenda at all save friendliness. The community murals usually make an effort to depict people who look like the people who live in the neighborhood, but even those who do not necessarily have lives like those people in the murals are unlikely to feel excluded by the message of friendship that implicitly extends a hand, especially if you care as much about the health of the community as the people who put up the mural do. In Barclay and Greenmount in particular, the community murals are a challenge to the worthlessness that might be associated with the area, proving a love. In that sense, they disrupt meanings; no one can argue that the neighborhood has been completely given up on if murals are going up. At the same time, their messages are not terribly challenging to the viewer; the majority of the murals sponsored by the city have essentially the same message of community pride and cooperation, which dulls the impact of the work. Murals that are abstract and more artistic, in this sense, might have slightly more impact in declaring that the neighborhood deserves something of beauty, not just the minimum message that there is life in the neighborhood at all; however, purely fine art, as mural artist Tom Chalkley argues below, can be totally disconnected from the neighborhood, and many of the seemingly hokey mural images do mean something to residents, especially when well executed. The “Random Acts of Kindness” mural in Barclay (figure 16c)
strikes a balance of being artistic and abstract, adding a distinct kind of artistic spirit; but also providing a message that is relevant to community spirit, one that is at least more inspiring than the tired, distanced and stark “Believe” messages (figure 3) that the city usually gets.

Tom Chalkley, an artist who proposed and executed a mural in Waverly (figures 18a and 18b) a mile and a half north, as well as in Highlandtown, had his designs voted on and requested by the neighborhood; his volunteers included young artists who grew up in the city, students from the local universities, suburban teenagers, local homeless people who he hired, and one neighborhood boy who’d done graffiti. A one-time resident of Waverly, Chalkley now lives in a well-off city neighborhood in the north of Baltimore. He has strong opinions about his role and the role of publicly sponsored art like his murals, as well as the murals’ mental and emotional connection to the neighborhood:

The point is really a thing of community self-esteem. Before starting, I would have said, it’s decorative, it has a marginal effect on things. But in the course of working on, I’ve come to see it as something a little more powerful than that. It's not just decoration, it's an aspirational image--some people would say, where's the winos? where’s the murders? And I'd say this is the magical mirror, there's enough of that out there. Having designed this image, I've developed a philosophy of public art that it needs to be more than aesthetic. It's a great way to communicate ideas to people, not just intellectual ideas.

What really was eye-opening was that as we were working, people were constantly giving us praise and thanks. And, believe me, that is such a head trip for somebody who is used to working in a studio by himself. Imagine working on a scaffold and everyone looks up and asks intelligent questions about it, every kind of people—except for the completely blotto winos who poked around to see if there was anything they could sell—and said “thanks” and “we love what you're doing.” Someone stole a pair of black glasses and a bag of new shop cloths, and I figured they could use it more than me. One wino wore a shirt from the old t-shirt bag and I didn't begrudge him. There were two
Figures 18a and 18b: The Waverly mural

18a. Piece of the Waverly mural, designed and led by Tom Chalkley. Picture courtesy of Chalkley.

18b. “The reading lady.” Close-up of the Waverly mural, with Chalkley in the foreground.
occasions, middle aged white guys got out of their cars at the gas station and came up and asked indignantly "Is the city paying for this?" And I just didn't argue with him. One guy I did argue with, who said can't believe they're paying for this when people starve, and I did argue that one.

You know, I’m a cartoonist. The way I define it, a cartoon is a picture that you read. To me, that's the most natural thing to put up on a wall. If you want to communicate, put a picture up everyone can understand. It's not obscure, [and] it's aesthetically pleasing. I love the murals that have been painted by homeless women at My Sister's Place. Those are beautiful, they're more symbolic but not obscure. One is called “A Dream Image” of women being empowered. Others [murals] in town, I look at and go, wha? What does this have to do with anything? A lot of fine art is vanity projects. That's a harsh way to put it; another way is graphic navel gazing. It doesn't reach out to people. It is what it is. I don't blame it or criticize it for being what it is. If you put up a public mural at public expense, it has a public function, to function to give hope and raise spirits on a rainy day, that sort of thing. I decided at 20 I didn't want to be a decorative function.

Here’s the risk: if we mess up, the mess-up is in front of everybody. The flaws are so obvious to me, but they don't see them, other people: they see what it's supposed to be.

It's ironic, cause there's a lot we've lost [in Baltimore] that does give a city self-esteem, like flagship businesses, but I think Baltimore has had a tendency to compare itself with other places like DC or New York and come up lacking, but you know, it's not those places. But I think culturally Baltimore is started to have a feeling of, yes, we’re not DC or New York, but we are Baltimore. It’s true in the arts particularly, music theatre and art, a kind of art. There's more happening: there's bands from Baltimore, getting attention, the visual arts, areal Baltimore aesthetic is growing. We have serious problems but I think there's an affirmation here. When I got here in the mid 70's, it was a depressed town, psychically. When we tried to do something big and grand, there was a desperate pleading to it, a “we're as good as anyone else.” A lot of it was city sponsored, and it came off as forced and off. A lot now is indigenous. In order to get out of our problems we have to keep people here, preserve our communities and keep people around who do work and try to make something positive about where they live and work. We need those people. The fabric of the neighborhood falls apart without them. Baltimore lives and dies by its neighborhoods. That's why they wanted a mural there: it's a battleground. The month before we painted, there were two murders there. They wanted an assertion of something else there. Shit like that starts to happen, people wonder, “what am I doing here?”. There were police there the whole time we were painting. We were happy about that. The city was trying to keep a close
eye, as a symbol to the community that the city was paying attention and just to prevent crime.

(Tom Chalkley, interview with the author, December 20, 2010)

One mural in Barclay, directly across from the police headquarters and accompanied by a miniature park area, has become a community gathering point of a less usual kind for a mural: a memorial (figure 16d). “RIP Norman” is spray-painted on the lower part of the mural, and faded balloons hang in the tree nearby. On the sidewalk, several more spray-painted names have been added: RIP Hands. Donell. Boodie. Tinka (figures 16e to 16g). It is especially striking that the mural was chosen because the mural is placed at the end of one of the most desolately abandoned blocks of buildings in the city. The empty houses are practically an infinite blank canvas for spray-painting messages. The people who wrote the messages, however, wanted their friends to be remembered here, at the symbol of community life. The fact that the mural was city-sponsored, and in the shadow of the ultimate symbol of city authority, did not stop residents from experiencing it as their own. It is worth comparing this memorial to another memorial in the southernmost end of Station North, in Charles North. On the sidewalk there is a white bicycle, adorned with flowers and accompanied by a laminated card (figure 17). The card explains that a bicyclist, a 67-year-old white man, was killed by a motorist there in 2010 and educates the reader about bicycle and traffic safety. The mural memorial is a public, but internally communal way of remembering one’s dead; the bicycle memorial is a public outreach, explicitly politicizing attempt.
16e. Close-up of the Barclay community mural: “RIP Norman.”

16f. Spraypainted on the sidewalk in front of the mural (shown in figure 16d): RIP HANDS

16g. Spraypainted on the sidewalk in front of the mural (shown in figure 16d): Donell. Boodie. Tinka.
16h. The almost completely vacant blocks next to the community mural/memorial.

16i. More vacant blocks of housing next to the community mural/memorial and police station. These are slated for redevelopment by the city.
Figure 17: Bicycle memorial at Maryland Ave. and Lafayette
Station North has been the location of a number of public fine art projects, of the sort doubted by Tom Chalkley. The city sponsored an installation of sculpture exhibitions on North Avenue from 2007 to 2008, for example. Meanwhile, several blocks of the alley behind Calvert St in Barclay still bear remnants of a series of art installations placed in the alley’s empty backyards, under the initiative of a MICA art professor, Sarah Doherty, who lives near the alley (figures 19a-j). Doherty, who moved to Baltimore in 2009 from San Diego, explained the “Axis Alley” project as a reaction to the 85% vacancy rate of the block, as an exploration of the unique contexts of alley, and as an experiment in urban intervention (Axis Alley 2009). With the permission of the city and neighbors, Doherty, her students, and local paid homeless people cleaned the alley spaces out to prepare them for the exhibitions, which had opening nights and barbeques. With the advent of the city’s redevelopment plans for the block, the project has officially ended, but much of the art remains. In the lonely lot next to the “Random Acts of Kindness” mural, one stumbles over an almost concealed cast sculpture of a woman’s torso (figure 19a), before reaching a crumbling abstract sculpture of brightly taped tubes and an installation of several stark pieces of furniture: a toilet, a bed frame, a crooked shelf (figure 19b). A sticker from code enforcement marks the shelf as solid waste scheduled for removal, and it is unclear if it is an ironic piece of the original installation or the work of a confused (or unappreciative) city official. Stepping into the alley and its backyards itself, there are a number of paintings of Winnie the Pooh characters facing enormous cockroaches and rats (figures 19c and 19d), sculptures of noses and mouths emerging from plywood.
Figures 19a to 19j: Axis Alley

19a. Cast torso in the empty lot next to the alley.

19b. Installation from Axis Alley exhibitions. The artist described the project to the Baltimore Sun: “Your bed and bathroom are very private. You feel kind of vulnerable in them. There are lot of houses in this neighborhood where people were kicked out for redevelopment. I wanted to express what it is like having that private space invaded.”
19c. A puzzled Winnie-the-Pooh faces a cockroach in Axis Alley.
19d. Christopher Robin watches two rats fight on the fence of a lived-in house in Axis Alley.

19e. Sculpture in Axis Alley.
19f. Conceptual art in Axis Alley.

19g. Art installation that has since disappeared from Axis Alley. Photo from the Axis Alley blog.
19h. “Forgive us our trespasses,” Axis Alley installation that has since disappeared. Photo from the Axis Alley blog.
19i. A public announcement from residents living in Axis Alley.

19j. Brightly-occupied house at the end of Axis Alley.
surfaces of windows (figure 19e), a few simple tags, and an abstruse installation of messages in one house’s empty windows: “Kinds of water drown us. Kinds of water do not.” (figure 19d).

Doherty intended the project as a contribution to neighborhood improvement and reclamation. In many ways it is immediately successful. Doherty says that the alley has remained cleaner and in better shape since the art has been there. Similarly to the graffiti alley or indeed any of the artistic installations mentioned here, the claiming of the space for a definite, generally respected use discourages others from disrespecting it, as well as keeps the space from becoming a dead zone that soaks up uses and people that have been rebuffed from other spaces. Passersby also may pay attention to a space they may have completely dismissed otherwise. Placing fine art into an impoverished urban setting can also be interpreted in one of two ways: from the positive angle, that the more privileged denizens of the art school see the neighborhood as their home and concern as well, and that an impoverished setting is as suited to and deserving of fine art as any rich museum or gallery; and from the negative angle, that the privileged set are imposing their uses and agenda and aesthetics on the spaces that remain to the poor. The difference depends closely on the relationship between the artists and neighborhood residents, and on whether the placement allows residents to feel some co-ownership of the work, who came to the opening events, and even on whether residents enjoy the art or find it too inaccessible. The neighborhood association did enthusiastically endorse the project, according to The Baltimore Sun (2009), and Doherty reports help from neighbors in hanging
paintings and appreciation from “the street people.” Looking through older documentation of the project, some installations used the site in a way that seems striking and identifiable to anyone moving through the space—one plywood sign, mimicking the style of city messages placed on the plywood doorways of abandoned homes, read “FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES” (figure 19h; compare to figure 5). Others placed personal art in a public setting in a way that is almost uncomfortable—a collection of words like “stranger” and “lousy lover” may be effective expression of one’s inner state in an indoor installation, but when placed on the side of a building, they seem to be labeling the shared space in a way that is perhaps not a desirable way to label one’s neighborhood (figure 19g).

In many ways, especially as the exhibit is left to fall apart, the effect of the works is not to counteract urban decay, beautify the space, or bring positivity to the problems of abandonment. After all, many of the images are fairly fatalistic: the rats and cockroaches of the alleyways, references to drowning and going under. Rather, the sensation is of working with the decay, of seeing the perverse beauty and possibilities of abandoned space as an artistic experience. By embracing the surreal and entrancing possibilities of the space as an artistic experience, it to some extent subjugates the human experience of the space that compels us to interpret its ills as a problem. At the same time, the fatalistic images serve as an outward expression of lived problems, and the art causes a redirection of attention—the viewer is forced to consider what they expected to find in the space of the alley, and respond to the conditions of
abandonment. The human experience of the space—the context of the artistic experience—cannot be expunged from this visual conversation.

Somewhere in between graffiti tags and the fine art of Axis Alley is the increasing prominence of illegal street art. This art is colloquial, as transient as graffiti, and, although sometimes featured in galleries, generally created outside the establishment; but it has a wider range of aesthetics and styles than traditional graffiti writing, including intricate drawings and influences of modern art. Currently, wheat paste-ups—which can be worked on and drawn at length at home, but glued to outdoor surfaces rapidly—are a popular medium in Baltimore and other cities. One article from *The Brooklyn Rail* (Vartanian 2008) explores the differences between traditional graffiti, street art, and fine art like this:

In an email interview with Gaia, a 19-year-old street artist, he explained to me some of the intricacies of this constantly evolving form, “…the one defining factor is that it directly addresses the question of what is the definition of private and public space [and its ownership]...this is a question that street art inherently poses simply due to its illegal nature and that other art inherently does not consider because it is sanctioned.”

What appears to differentiate street art from its graffiti predecessor are two things: the self-consciousness in its conversation with the city and its lack of the aggression and violence. If spray-painted names seem as much an act of ego as aesthetic statement, the newer and younger variation seems to take a step back and self-critically examine its social role. Sarcasm and irony is rife in the new street aesthetic. Gone is the radically transgressive scribbling on very public places (subway cars, store shutters, commercial walls, etc.) and in its place is street art’s obsession with niche spaces such as abandoned buildings, alleys, construction sites and doorways. What doesn’t exist is an external critical dialogue around the work; in fact, its “what you see is what you get” matter-of-fact-ness makes it highly palatable to the general public that is often confused by critical discourse.
In Baltimore, a great deal of attention has been heaped on the artist going by the name Gaia, who is originally from New York but has been living in Baltimore as a student at MICA. The choice to stake his reputation on a pseudonym, like the famous street artist Banksy, is another sign of the art form’s natural connection to graffiti. For both taggers and street artists, the essentiality of the pseudonym to participation is practical for legal reasons, but the embracing of the name shows a deeper psychological meaning. The chance to determine one’s identity and reputation when creating art and commentary is a chance to redefine subjectivity, to perhaps escape the power relations that monopolize one’s identity—or, perhaps it is the opposite: by disappearing the physical individual, it makes the power relations that form the subject visible, as they fill in the space that the physical person should occupy but have nothing to attach themselves to. The hate speech that moved into the graffiti alley when its custodians were wiped out is also evidence of the importance of speakers having an identity in public conversation. Anonymous communication could be considered the best way to reach the rationalist ideal of ideas considered independently of the person proposing them. Yet when ideas are truly completely divorced from the identity of the person proposing them, as in anonymity, the quality of conversation plummets and the quantity of hatefulness skyrockets. Even though graffiti artists are formally anonymous, their reputations provided a chosen identity that keeps them accountable to their actions and ideas. The person attached to the public sphere’s public conversation must be acknowledged.
Figures 20a to 20c: Street art by Gaia

20c. Portrait and quotation of Robert Moses on the Franklin Expressway (outside Station North): “Some of the slum areas through which the Franklin Expressway passes are a disgrace to the community and the more of them that are wiped out the healthier Baltimore will be in the long run” - Robert Moses, 1944.

Photo from Gaia's website: gaiastreetart.com
Many of Gaia’s paste-ups have appeared and disappeared across the city, including frequently in Station North (figure 10a, figures 20a-20c). The intricate drawings depict meldings of humans and animals, old men of power, and other surreal, prophetic imagery. They are created with the intention of working with and commenting on Baltimore’s often-troubled landscape. An article in *The Urbanite* (Dickinson 2010) quoted Gaia:

> Baltimore's been a fantastic canvas, which is sad because ultimately my work wouldn't exist if there wasn't any neglected space. What that neglected space allows for is a certain freedom and grassroots, democratic, public space. The artist has full agency, and there aren't any boundaries or obstacles for an artist to produce work besides the law of posting on property.

Many of the images of elderly white men include controversial city planners such as Robert Moses and Le Corbusier (figure 20c), sometimes accompanied by quotations that create an awareness of the assault that such outside planners perpetuated on the city, and of the difference between the meanings of Baltimore’s neighborhoods to those who live there and to those who make decisions about how the neighborhood will be formed. There is something accusing in seeing a symbol of power high in the abandoned buildings of the city, that asks the prosperous white men who abandoned the city to its fate to now deal with the aftermath. Other, more surreal images, seem to be a way to acknowledge the ghosts of the city that we live with. The specter in the doorway of trash (figure 20a) reminds us that this building is not merely a worthless, dislikable trash heap, but a minor tragedy that might have meaning to some of us despite its objectively bad condition.
Perhaps it is the work’s nod to the graffiti tradition as well as its inherent fusion with its space that makes it feel more authentically suited to the district than the fine art that Axis Alley imported wholesale to Calvert St. Axis Alley was an event, and perhaps a good event for the neighborhood to have the opportunity to host. But street art in the style of Gaia feels more like a voice and expression of the city, an organic part of the landscape instead of an addition to the landscape. In such a hurting landscape, this kind of street art’s combination of broadly appreciable artistic value with local relevance may be exactly the kind of art that serves the voices both of the long-term Black residents and the new white artists trying to share Station North’s Space.
Conclusion

The visual landscape of Station North reflects the voices of multiple public spheres, made visible through different choices of how to speak and where to speak. The meanings of the landscape are as yet unsettled as these different pieces of art jostle against each other. The democratic nature of communication in the public sphere is present here, because democracy by definition must also be unsettled, constantly open to redefinition and other possible meanings. North Avenue in particular constantly reveals to its visitors another set of alternative possible meanings to its space. The spaces cycles between well-established healthy businesses in still-unrenovated blocks of buildings, elaborate subversive tags in high places, tolerated tags hidden in alleyways, city-sponsored promotional images, grassy police pavilions, hand-painted restaurant signs and slick art gallery entrances. Some meanings are starting to become relatively settled, while others still resist: the city “Station North” banners sit more easily across from the Charles Theatre than they do in the abandoned block next to the mural/memorial.

The fact that so many of the diverse groups living and working in Station North have all made their presence known through art and images is a sign of art’s indispensability as a tool of communication, and of public art’s usefulness in particular as a tool of inclusive communication. Regardless of how many of those making public art are able to be heard in city planning decisions, in development and purchasing decisions, or in the national-level decisions that created the economic disasters of inner-city communities in the U.S., they are all visible as members of the public of Station North. They have claimed their right to be represented when they put up their
art, whether that art is a conceptual outdoor exhibition, a mural of their community, a quickly thrown-up tag, a sign in their window, or an adaptation of the city’s promotional district imagery for their business’s exterior.

The district’s art has also functioned sometimes in Station North as a way to show commonalities between groups that are sometimes assumed to be inherently opposed to each other, the poor, mostly Black residents and the newer, somewhat whiter artist residents. The choices of what art to put up and to support have shown that their interests are not so far apart. The support of both new, (often) white, traditional artists and established, (often) Black graffiti artists for the protection of the Howard St. graffiti alley is an example, as is the emergence of street artists with ties to the art college, MICA. The range of meanings encompassed by a piece of art of a socially-flexible aesthetic, like Gaia’s paste-ups, allows people from diverse backgrounds to access a common sphere of communication. As such, the process of making art in Station North has helped make democratic public communication between diverse identities possible, in a political situation where putting aside group and personal identities would have been impossible in reality. If the public art of Station North retains its democratic flexibility, the district may have a chance of avoiding the destructive gentrification experienced by places like SoHo. If residents’ diverse involvement in the appearance of the district disappears, however, and instead the city and developers are the primary determiners of the space’s appearance, the situation may degenerate into a winner-take-all process of taking over space block by block.
In a vision of the public sphere where only anonymous, rational-critical debate free of personal emotion is permitted, the dynamics of Station North would have been invisible. Context is everything in Station North: histories of gentrification, past city revitalization plans, class and racial interactions, and even art history are the meat and meaning of its politics and the motivations of its residents. The immediate emotional connection and subconscious meaning-making of public art communicate within and between different publics, ensuring direct communication through shared space in a way that communication in limited, approved media and political processes cannot.

The meanings of Station North’s public art are partially determined by the implied identities of the people making the art, as determined by the art’s aesthetic ties, and thus cannot be divorced from their speaker. The most genuine examples of anonymity—for example, the simple slogans of hate written in whitewashed graffiti alley—were the least productive contributions to the public discourse. In a vision of the public sphere where only anonymous, rational-critical debate free of personal emotion is permitted, much of the art found in Station North could only be interpreted as vandalism and violations of space; in a spatial, contextualized, diverse vision of the public sphere, Station North’s public art can be interpreted as evidence of personal investment in the space of the neighborhood and its fate.

The question remains whether we can formally create the conditions for publics to participate in making healthy, continually disruptive kinds of public art; or if the involvement of authority inherently works against organic art with multiplicitous meanings, and the strength of its presence must be left to chance. A certain amount of
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official sanction can be endured at least at the micro level: the continued success of the graffiti alley and certain local murals are evidence of that. These indirect methods of enabling art—by refusing to prosecute its trespass, or by offering grants to citizen’s initiatives—might be beneficial to enabling public representation in a way that city-installed art—district advertising and formal monuments—can only occasionally be. To prevent developers from taking over and consolidating the meanings of shared space does require public vigilance and involvement as well as the support of governmental planners.

Most critical, however, is a respect for alternative methods of communication and recognition of the legitimacy of the messages and of the people who are communicating in non-traditional, often overlooked ways. The immediate dismissal of some public messages and claims to space as vandalism or illegitimate wipes away entire public conversations from the considerations of those with power. It is worth considering why some people feel a need to communicate through such forms of public art, and that there may be legitimate socio-political motivations that traditionally acceptable methods of communication cannot satisfy. Even for those fortunate people who have the option of meaningful access to traditional venues of media and political processes, the range of emotional, experiential, and stylistic meanings contained in art may make it a more effective way to participate in the public sphere and communicate across diverse subpublics. The publics of Station North, at least, have benefited from the diverse social origins of the public art that
shapes the public experience and conversation of the neighborhood. The struggle over meaning, in all its creativity, continues.
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