Contentious Walls: Inscribing Conflicts into Vancouver's Chinatown Murals

Friederike Landau-Donnelly
Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen, Netherlands.

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While alleys and laneways have long been assumed as inert, dark or dead spaces, they also have the potential to function as neighborhood landscapes (Martin 1996). Landscape architect scholar Michael Martin characterizes alleys as "both fearsome and benevolent" (Martin 1996, pp. 138-39). Moreover, he suggests conceptualizing alleyways via a three-fold framework of alley's hiddenness, revealingness and utility. While Martin's discussion about the true "alleyness" of alleys sits uncomfortably with my non-essentialist and conflict-oriented understanding of space, his framework to capture the socio-spatial exposure and usability of alleys nevertheless proves helpful to discuss the Chinatown mural in question: With regards to the continuum of hiddenness and revealingness of alleys, how does the location of the BAGUA mural affect the formation of bodies in alliance and encounter? How do degrees of hiddenness and revealingness situate bodies in tension and/or disagreement? With regards to the utility of alleys, how did the commissioned mural contribute to the larger policy and planning rationales to 'enrich' the public realm? And lastly, how is the assumed utility or function of the alley interrupted (or amplified) by the graffiti tag that occurred spontaneously on the mural wall?

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

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

4. Polyphonic Walls:
Melding Past and Present Migrant Stories

The artist collective BAGUA Artist Association, consisting of Katharine Meng-Yuan Yi, Sean Cao, Xingyue Feng, and Yuan Liu, had applied for the *Chinatown Mural Artist Call* in early 2019, and was shortlisted with their proposal to paint the popular myth of the eight immortals on the side of *Liang You Bookstore*, located on 218 Georgia Street East. While the walls to be painted upon are owned by a private proprietor, the walls face streets and laneways, which are public property. Hence, I wonder whether walls aren't oddly enough always to some extent public due to their inevitable exposure to the public? Without further going into details about the different implications of public or private walls or mural locations (for further reflection, see Merriam 2011), let us focus more closely on the mural's motive and its concurrent political and æffective implications.

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

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

As a gesture towards this urban context of (living with) difference, BAGUA seeks to stimulate inter-generational awareness and learning, to "provide an opportunity to bridge cultures" (Public Art Registry 2019). In an interview, BAGUA artists highlight the relevance of both the pictorial motif and the story of the eight immortals itself: "They [immortals] have so many different metaphors, they sound of Chinatown, of immigration, but they also remind of contemporary issues and people that are living or working in Chinatown."[2] Hence, the artist collective melds stories of past and contemporary migration; historical continuities of exclusion and potential racial stigmatization. Moreover, the mural projects a space of imagination to interconnect historical, even mythical figures' experiences with resonate with contemporary migrants' struggles to settle into new countries, cities and cultures. Within the political conundrums to engaging with difference, the mural alludes to the shared, yet subjectively experienced trajectories of living with difference. It is in this difference that heterogeneous cultural traditions and norms need to be negotiated amongst diverse urban populations.

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

5. Inscribing Difference onto Walls

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Certainly, stating that public art, or more extensively, public space is not neutral does not simply equal to assume that public art, and its surrounding spatial context, are inherently contested or striated by conflict. Yet, the multiple perspectives provided from both artists and policy-makers coalesce into a notion of public space that is entrenched with conflicts – linking the complex history and historical present of Chinatown, fusing into a sense of place that is full (and empty) of told and untold migrant stories and political messages, some painted, some continuously invisible and pushed out, some now incorporated underneath the painted journeys of immortals. A conflict-attuned public space is negotiated between presences and absences of very different types of bodies. It is also produced by those very bodies, some of whom struggle throughout the alleys of Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside, dwelling, panhandling, being private in public, while others want to encounter Chinatown as an economically viable, culturally exciting and aesthetically appealing, sanitized and safe place. In short, by highlighting some of the paradoxes that hover between the goals and hopes articulated by policies and policymakers on the one hand, and artists' understandings of their work in public space on the other, I have shone a light not only on how public art mobilizes inherent conflicts in public space, but also how public art pushes unexpected modes of 'the political' into the public realm.

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

6. Outlook: The Political within and beyond Walls

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

References

Anderson, B., 2009. Affective atmospheres: emotion, Space and Society 2, 77–81.

Avramidis, K., Tsilimpounidi, M. (Eds.), 2017. Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City. Routledge, New York.

Awan, N., 2020. Performing on the streets: Infrastructures of subaltern resistance in Pakistan. Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space 39 (6), 1274–1293.

Baudrillard, J., 1978. Kool Killer, oder, Der Aufstand der Zeichen. Berlin: Merve.

Bayat, A., 2003. The "Street" and the Politics of Dissent in the Arab World, in: Middle East Report 226.

Bengtsen, P., Arvidsson, M., 2014. Spatial justice and street art, Nordic Journal of Law and Social Research 5, 117–130.

Bruce, C.F., 2017. Public art, affect, and radical negativity: the wall of daydreaming and man's inhumanity to man, Subjectivity 10 (2), 223-241.

Burk, A., 2006. Beneath and before: continuums of publicness in public art, Social and Cultural Geography 7 (6), 949–964.

Butler, J., 2018. Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cartiere, C., Zebracki, M., 2016. The Everyday Practice of Public Art: Art, Space and Social Inclusion, London, New York: Routledge.

Chinatown Transformation Team, 2019. Hidden Gems of Chinatown. Available online at: https://vancouver.ca/home-property-development/chinatown-transformation.aspx

City of Vancouver, 2018. Official apology for historical discrimination delivered at special City Council Meeting in Chinatown. Available online at: https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/historical-discrimination-against-chinese-people.aspx.

City of Vancouver - Engineering Services, 2019. Call for Artists – Chinatown Artist Call. Available online at: https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/chinatown-artist-call-guidelines-2019.pdf

City of Vancouver - Home, property and development, 2020. Manage graffiti. Available online at: https://vancouver.ca/home-property-development/manage-graffiti.aspx

Craw, P., Leland, L., Bussell, M.G., Munday, S.J., Walsh, K., 2006. The Mural as graffiti deterrence, Environment and Behavior 38 (3), 422–434.

Dillon, M., 2013. Little Streets in Small Cities: the role of laneway activation in Regional Queensland CBD revitalisation, University of Southern Queensland.

Duff, C., 2010. On the role of affect and practice in the production of place, environment and planning D: Society and Space 28 (5), 881–895.

Duncombe, S., 2016. Does it work?: The Æffect of activist art, Social Research: An International Quarterly 83 (1), 115–134.

Ferrell, J., Weide, R.D., 2010. Spot theory, City 14 (1-2), 48–62.

Fong, P., 2015. Mural outrage: vandalism in Vancouver's Chinatown, Post Magazine. Available online at: https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1860993/mural-outrage-vandalism-vancouvers-chinatown

Foong Chan, P., Lade, C., 2020. Space activation and re-territorialisation, Urban Transcripts, The Journal. Available online at: http://journal.urbantranscripts.org/article/space-activation-and-re-territorialisation-dr-patrick-foong-chan-camilla-lade/.

Gibril, S., 2018. Shifting spaces of contention, European Journal of Turkish Studies 26, 1–33.

Goh, R.B.H., Wong, S., 2004. Asian diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Heritage BC, 2015. Vancouver Chinatown Intangible Heritage Values Report.

Hurst, A., 2020. Chinatown lions vandalized twice in two weeks. In BC TV 2020. Available online at: https://bc.ctvnews.ca/chinatown-lions-vandalized-twice-in-two-weeks-1.4961316.

Ivsins, A., Vancouver, Area Network Of Drug Users., Benoit, C., Kobayashi, K., Boyd, S., 2019. From risky places to safe spaces: Re-assembling spaces and places in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Health & place 59, 1–8.

Jupiterfab, 2020. Arts and social projects in the 21st century, City, 1–15.

Landau, F., 2021. [Un]Grounding agonistic public space, in: Friederike Landau, Lucas Pohl, Nikolai Roskamm (Eds.): [Un]Grounding - Post-Foundational Geographies. transcript, 153–173.

Landau, F., Pohl, L., Roskamm. N., (Eds.): [Un]Grounding - Post-Foundational Geographies. transcript.

Martin, M., 1996. Back-alley as community landscape, Landscape Journal 15 (2), 138–153.

Merriam, J., 2011. Painting black spaces red, black, and green: The constitutionality of the mural movement, Berkeley Journal of African-American Law & Policy 2011 13 (1), 1–44.

Marchart, O., 2010. Die politische Differenz. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Mouffe, C., 2005. On the Political. London, New York: Routledge.

Mouffe, C., 2013. Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically, Verso, London/New York.

Peck, J., 2009. The creativity fix, Variant (34), 5–9.

Pierce, J., Martin, D.G., Murphy, J.T., 2011. Relational place-making: the networked politics of place, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 36 (1), 54–70.

Pollock, V., Paddison, R., 2010. Embedding public art: Practice, policy and problems, Journal of Urban Design 15 (3), 335–356.

Pollock, V.L., Paddison, R., 2014. On place-making, participation and public art: the Gorbals, Glasgow, Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability 7 (1), 85–105.

Public Art Registry, 2019. Eight immortals crossing the sea. Available online at: https://covapp.vancouver.ca/PublicArtRegistry/ArtworkDetail.aspx?ArtworkId=809

Public Disco Laneways Series, 2020. Available online at: https://ra.co/events/1271452.

Robertson, L., 2007. Taming space: Drug use, HIV, and homemaking in downtown Eastside Vancouver, Gender, Place & Culture 14 (5), 527–549.

Ross, J.I. (ed.), 2016. Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art. Ed Ross, Routledge, London.

Sharp, J., Pollock, V., Paddison, R., 2005. Just art for a just city: Public Art and Social Inclusion in Urban Regeneration, Urban Studies, 42 (5-6), 1001–1023.

Valentine, G., 2008. Living with difference: reflections on geographies of encounter, Progress Human Geography 32 (3), 323–337.

Vancouver Public Space Network, 2017. Inside Out: Getting ready for Laneway Living Rooms, Vancouver Public Space Network Blog 2017. Available online at: http://vancouverpublicspace.ca/2017/06/28/inside-out-getting-ready-for-laneway-living-rooms/.

Waldner, L.K., Dobratz, B.A., 2013. Graffiti as a form of contentious political participation, Sociology Compass 7 (5), 377–389.

Young, A., 2010. Negotiated consent or zero tolerance? Responding to graffiti and street art in Melbourne, City 14 (1-2), 99–114.

Young, I.M., 1986. The ideal of community and the politics of difference, Social Theory and Practice 12 (1), 1–26.

Zieleniec, A., 2016. The right to write the city: Lefebvre and graffiti, Environnement Urbain 10, 1–21.