

Introduction

On a mid-September afternoon in 2010, I walked through the Little Village, a neighborhood south and west of Chicago's central downtown Loop that is socially peripheral in terms of its class and race makeup. From working class to working poor, with a majority of first- and second-generation Mexican immigrants, it is one of the largest Chicano/a neighborhoods in the United States outside Los Angeles. The neighborhood is also known nationally as the main territory of the Latin Kings and the Two Six gangs.¹ While walking past a car-dominated expressway and silent single-family homes on California Avenue and Thirty-Sixth Street, I heard snippets of heavy bass beats and laughter emanating from what looked to be a loading dock. Continuing alongside an angled concrete driveway that turned into a massive wall, I came face to face with the Crawford Steel plant, a full city block in size, with dozens of artists standing and sitting along its adjacent walls. They were chatting, painting, smoking, drinking, and grilling food while music blasted from parked cars.

From 2009 to 2014, Little Village was the primary site for an international graffiti festival called the Meeting of Styles (MOS), a global festival that was founded in Wiesbaden, Germany, in 2002 and has since spread to nearly every country in the world. Although the aesthetic works produced at the event were colorful and monumental, with wild lettering and fantastic cartoon and comic book figures, the scene of cross racial and cross generational engagement was more impressive, particularly in light of Chicago's history. A few middle-aged Latino men joked with a young Caucasian teenager and gave

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him pointers as he balanced on a ladder and executed an orange name, “Enigma,” above a bubbling volcano. A Latina woman in her thirties wearing patterned leggings and bright sneakers, with long, wild, blonde-streaked hair and large pink sunglasses, produced a flame-surrounded name while exchanging banter with an African American man in his forties: “Who let the girl on the wall?” he joked. “What girl?” she responded. “That’s no girl, that’s a woman!” a third man chimed in. This scene of connection across ethnic, race, class, and national differences complicated Chicago’s racialized geographies. Chicago is a city that is still deeply segregated, racially and economically, and such evidence of deep communicative habits, playful competition, intimate social ties, and intergenerational knowledge transfers across differences was impactful.

Surprisingly, these communicative exchanges from graffiti subculture were taking place during the day, in permission-based contexts. Anyone could observe the process and learn about the art form’s histories. As an outsider at the 2010 festival, I had anticipated suspicion or guardedness. I realized I was holding my breath, waiting, perhaps, to be chased away, when a large, African American man in his early forties, the same man who had joked with the woman on the wall, greeted me with “How you doin’, sister?” I exhaled, smiled, and waved back and crept closer to the walls. I later learned that he was Uncle Hek, a kind of ambassador for Chicago hip-hop as president of the Chi Rock chapter of a global hip-hop organization and member of the XMEN crew. Shortly after this interaction, the woman working on the same war wall said hello to me and asked, “Do you want to buy a T-shirt? It’s for the ESP [Eastern Sentral Pacific] show. Here’s a postcard.” She introduced herself as Stef Skills and patiently explained that ESP was a national crew of women writers² and that she too was in XMEN; she agreed to an interview at a later date.

Urban expansion and exponential rates of inequality challenge scholars and policymakers with a pressing question about the fate of the city: can it be a space for democratic urban citizenship, or is it simply a glorified shopping mall? Communicative deserts in urban life underwrite growing gulfs between different kinds of populations. Such distances fuel misunderstanding, hate, and neglect. Creating spaces for encounter enables urban citizens to bridge differences and create ways for living together more sustainably; insights into how to create spaces for encounter across differences can often be located in the streets.

Painting Publics: Transnational Legal Graffiti Scenes as Spaces for Encounter explores how public art enables spaces for encounters across difference. A space for encounter is a scene for contact, convergence, or conflict.³ It may be routine, repeated, or rare. It is infused with contingency—a place where poli-

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tics can happen and imaginations can be set alight. A space for encounter is also a physical or virtual locale that is framed in such a way as to encourage transformative engagements, even when its initial purpose may have been very different. For instance, Crawford Steel, which provides some of the walls for MOS Chicago, was designed as a steel-rolling facility but has since become a robust space for encounter. Conversely, certain spaces that are built with the intent of encounter can fail at that task: a city plaza might be framed by developers as a public square but lack protection from the sun or rain or include stone benches that are immovable and face only one direction. Brasilia is a particularly paradigmatic example of a city that was designed to offer highly rational spaces and make life for residents more efficient yet missed the mark entirely. The city is shaped like an airplane, and each section of the plane contains different zones, cut up into massive blocks; for instance, housing might be on the right wing, while supermarkets sit on the left. Its massive blocks and single-use zones make it an unwieldy place to live: those without cars have a difficult time moving between neighborhoods that are multiple miles apart. A zone that might include banks could be separate from another area with grocery stores and yet another separate space with offices. The scenes that this book investigates, including four legal graffiti festivals and a legal graffiti space, serve as powerful examples of ways to encourage encounters. Public art offers a context that is particularly ripe because it foregrounds questions of public emotions, creativity, and experimentation.

“Spaces of encounter” is a key concept in human geography, political science, critical theory, and environmental studies.⁴ I modify this term into “spaces *for* encounter” to acknowledge how space and living beings play an active role and agentive role in encouraging interactions. It has a range of scales and intensities: such spaces can be spectacular and involved, diverting and convivial, or they might not lead anywhere at all. Yet encounters, writ large, are necessary if heterogeneous societies are to meaningfully address social and political inequalities and forms of violence, micro and macro, because spaces for encounter function to reactivate the sense of the contingent in social and political space. Structural forms of violence, such as racism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal class oppression, are united by the drive to erase, ignore, repress, consume, or monetize difference. Spaces for encounter create an opportunity to generatively engage with difference, potentially ameliorating such violence.

This book argues that public art is one means by which citizens can create spaces for encounter in the transnational city, thus enabling transformative engagements across differences. Such spaces (and moments) can be found in transitional contexts, hovering between rupture and continuity. At MOS, the

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subcultural activity of graffiti becomes visible to dominant publics and changes spectator understandings of the art form. The encounters at Crawford Steel are structured by plurality; subjects interact across varied racial, economic, and gender identities. Agonism emerges in the form of competition and playful adversarialism between writers. Interrelationality can be found between participants in the festival and members of Chicago's graffiti worlds. A block up from the wall where Stef was painting in 2010, I was able to witness a scene of mentorship between three old-school writers (Flash, Chumbly, and B-Boy B) and a new-school writer (Enigma); they were giving him tips while he painted an elaborate version of his name (called a "burner" or a "piece") above an erupting volcano that Flash had painted with crew members. This pedagogical exchange reveals intergenerational networks of care, and the surface of Crawford Steel contains traces of years of collective activity. These spaces for encounter recharge our awareness and sense of the contingent by illuminating it in moments of invention. The result, to varying degrees, is a greater awareness of how public life can be transformed.

Although contingency is a baseline condition for public life, this sense of possibility is not always manifest. Urban space can appear smooth and immutable, having erased any evidence of texture and encounters, a phenomenon that Achille Mbembe has called "superfluity."⁵ Eve Sedgwick's work also grapples with the problem of texture. What she calls "textxure," defined as texture with evidence of its past on the surface, I call "texture," or the evidence of rich interactions and their traces. Graffiti scenes make visible a variety of textures: social, material, and political, akin to Quintilian's framing of "contextus," where one can see the weave that makes up an art scene, address, or work. "Contextus" makes clear the constructedness and potential alterability of its arrangement and infuses the idea of alterability into the context of the social.⁶ Spaces for encounter are moments and places where the weave of the social is loose enough to see evidence of its construction and opportunities for intervention.

Public art is a form of communication wherein creativity, affect, relationality, spatial context, and disagreements are crucial to the production process. Public art must intervene in and grapple with publics and public spaces in explicit ways, making it an ideal context in which to consider the possibility of democratic culture. Graffiti is often the neglected stepchild of public art. Routinely framed by municipal officials as vandalism and anti-aesthetic, its history as a form of youth communication in contexts of abandonment and its transnational networks, competition culture, and heterogeneous makeup make it particularly well suited to an analysis of spaces for encounter.

This book explores legal graffiti scenes in New York; Chicago; Mexico City and Ciudad Neza (near Mexico City); Wiesbaden, Germany; and Perpignan,

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France. I chose these cities because they provide diverse ways to analyze the artists' navigation of changing relationships with publics, institutions, and commercial entities. Graffiti is a transnational phenomenon, and this multi-country focus allows us to see how such relationships are in motion across the United States, Mexico, and Europe. New York and Chicago provide little state support to artists; instead, artists construct graffiti spaces from personal relations, abandoned or less-used spaces, commercial sponsorship, and tacit community support. Mexico, on the other hand, has a substantial legacy of national and municipal sponsorship for the arts as part of civic education and patriotic indoctrination, but the private sector has recently taken the lead in contemporary art worlds. In France, arts support has long been crucial to the production and maintenance of national culture but is being transformed in the wake of neoliberalism. Support for legal graffiti festivals points to tensions between republican imperatives for inclusion and capitalism's drive for smooth flow in the contexts of syncretism and hybridity. In Germany, state support for culture has played a major role in post-World War II national redefinitions of identity, such that alternative cultural formations are likely to be given more space and support, yet these spaces are also under pressure from urban developers.

But why *legal* graffiti scenes? Illegal graffiti is, frankly, exciting. I had the chance to go out at night with a practicing tagger⁷ in a large northeastern city and see the writer's unsanctioned tags⁸ and throw-ups⁹ under the support beams of a major bridge and alongside a regional railway track. The ground was uneven and it was dark, and we could see evidence of not only writing activity (paint cans, caps, and pens) but also other nocturnal activities (beer cans, vodka bottles, lighters, clothing), and I was not sure whether we would accidentally trespass on another writer's territory. I took rapid photos, my camera flash providing the only light thrown upon ghostly inscriptions, and I had the sense of uncovering a secret. As we walked along the train tracks next to a river, our sense of calm was suddenly disrupted as my guide grunted "RUN!" and we fled as a train barreled down the tracks, hiding behind an electricity booth for several minutes until the train had passed. In the realm of illegal graffiti, bodily and legal risks, including fines, criminal records, and even imprisonment, are explicit, but this type of graffiti is conceptually and politically important. It offers a framework with which to consider an aesthetic of radical disagreement, cultural practices of subcultural belonging, and forms of anticapitalist critique. But legal graffiti sites, such as MOS Chicago, are also sites of risk. Linking one's body with one's word renders the artist differently susceptible to criticism, challenge, or dismissal.¹⁰ I do not make claims about the superior authenticity or aesthetic value of either legal or illegal practice; instead, I focus on how writers move from a position of

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rupture and disruption to building frameworks and spaces for expression. This book's focus on legal graffiti, which may seem to be a contradiction in terms, allows us to track a public art process in transition as practitioners renegotiate their relationship to state, capital, and surrounding publics. In this evolving context, the contingency of graffiti culture and its spaces of inscription is palpable and allows us to see moments where possibility is being actively reckoned with by practitioners.

Rhetorical Methods: Invention and Contingency

Rhetoric is informed by the belief that communication emerges as a product of contingency, or the could-be-otherwise. It is the art of excavating the possible, a means of articulating alternatives in situations of uncertainty and pointing to possibilities for effecting change. To that end, this book is subtended by a rhetorical approach, which nuances encounter theory by adding a thicker sense of the role of invention, enabled by interventions into the space of appearance (and encounter) in urban sites.

At its core, invention is imaginative and based on reckoning with contingency; it is about excavating and examining possibilities for thought and action. It is a process and a rhetorical capacity. E. Johanna Hartelius observes that invention is “creativity, discovery, and intellectual production” that emerges as a function of “ambiguity.”¹¹ In the transitional contexts under analysis here, artists and participants are engaging in art making and collaborating with each other in scenes that are in flux, articulating possibilities for their practice and for their worlds that do not have determined outcomes. Invention is not just about *dissoi logoi*, pros and cons. It is about topics, or the *ars topica*: the locating and assembly of all possible arguments.¹² *Ars topica* encourages reflexivity by presenting the wide range of the facets and forms of making the argument and therefore is potentially democratic because it reveals a multiplicity of positions.¹³

Legal graffiti scenes are spatializations and materializations of the *ars topica*, revealing multiple ways of imagining how space should appear and opening it to diverse possibilities, engaging with contingency. At Crawford Steel, Flash's erupting volcano is quite different from Enigma's readable gothic name. Stef's wildstyle and flame-surrounded burner¹⁴ is different from an adjacent scene of an ogre and a fairy creature. At the same spot in 2011, the volcano was replaced by the extremely clean, precise, and letter-based production of Asend. Sharp lines and neat blocks of color replaced the curve of the name and the mountain. At first blush, the notion of graffiti as a key hermeneutic for reimagining the city as more plural, democratic, and ripe with pos-

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sibility may seem strange, but contemporary rhetoricians remind us that invention involves seeking out forms of creative expression in surprising places.¹⁵ Drawing on the work of the eighteenth-century scholar Giambattista Vico, scholars Alessandra Beasley Von Burg and David L. Marshall have focused on Vico's notion of *ingenium*, the "faculty of finding the point of similarity between things that appear dissimilar."¹⁶ Vico's novel reapplication of ancient theory states that greater attention to practices of everyday perception can make *ingenium* a habit of mind or bodily comportment that can be cultivated to create orientations open to difference.¹⁷ Public art offers a way to see connections between seemingly disparate practices and brings forward a diverse set of thematic resources, helping viewers develop heuristic capacities to see potentiality in a variety of places. It makes use of places, objects, and contexts that are not formally designated as political. Artists' reimagination of urban space occurs not only in their wall work but also in conversations about the potential murals; in writers' sketchbook (black book) exchanges; and, more recently, in images posted to Instagram, Flickr, Facebook, and graffiti websites. In these engagements, the artists are also negotiating different aesthetic models and hierarchies, histories of training, and relationships to the city. Yet in the space of the festival, similarities and differences can be identified. The faculty of imagination renders the status quo pliable, enabling new horizons for reshaping the given.¹⁸ At MOS, artists imagine urban space and municipal ordinances as more capacious, colorful, and marked by human hands. Scenes of rhetorical invention require the imagination to articulate possibilities beyond the given or the visible and to emphasize the range of possible frameworks, thus creating an expanded perspective for possible destinies of urban space. This is discussed by writers at MOS as enlarging understanding, gaining influence, and opening one's mind.¹⁹

This book traces transitional public art scenes that seek to cultivate plurality in multiple spaces among multiple publics—art serving as connecting nodes and bridges. This emphasis on creating and sustaining engagements with plurality—and, by extension, difference—also makes public art a scene for politics. Public art as a scene for the enactment of topics helps us reimagine the polis as, as Bonnie Honig and Marshall advocate, a decentralized "series of analogues":²⁰ the polis is found wherever politics is happening. This prevents political arenas from being walled off from the general public or limited to a select handful of spaces. In this framework, politics is about activating spaces for discussion, conflict, solidarity, and enjoyment; it is about expression instead of administration. Sharing a pizza while painting an underpass is not a high-stakes endeavor, but it allows citizens to interact, learn, and engage with each other and cultivate a different understanding of what the city could be.

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Three elements within the space for encounter contribute to the activation, or shedding of light on, the contingent: agonism, interrelationality, and plurality. Here, “agonism” refers to non-consensus-based political and aesthetic engagement that does not presume a pregiven positivity to the social or the political. Spaces for encounter are often agonistic; plurality ensures that no single aesthetic or social category is dominant and entails a constant dynamic of negotiation and elaboration of different styles. The plentitude of possibilities thrown into relief in inventional moments speaks to the vicissitudes and textures of urban life, the push and pull of conviviality and conflict, currents that are stoked by the agonism of the social. Agonism is about relationships between subjects but also, as Debra Hawhee reveals, about the making and remaking of subjects themselves.²¹ Chantal Mouffe argues that agonism is a mediation of the constitutive antagonism and contingency of the political into more democratic forms. In a framework of agonistic pluralism, opposition is reframed from enmity to adversarialism, and the goal shifts from elimination to negotiation.²² This requires “channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues,” eliminating the passions not to establish “rational consensus” but rather to “mobilize” them.²³ In this way, agonism reckons with the centrality of affect: the “passions and emotions” that are central to “securing allegiance to democratic values.”²⁴ Mouffe nuances understandings of democratic subjectivity by considering the political as being more shaped by affect rather than persuasion alone. Art can shape subjectivities and mobilize attachments and identification.²⁵

Agonism’s athletic connotations might risk its being misunderstood as requiring a kind of masculine hyperstrong subject or as being confined to the privileged space of the athletic match. Honig offers a corrective to such readings, arguing that agonism is “always becoming,”²⁶ almost in a Spinozistic sense of affecting and being affected by context and others. Agonistic action, Honig specifies, is “in concert” and does not fall under the purview of a super autonomous and heroic individual.²⁷ The democratic subject, then, is emergent from a particular context and cannot be assumed to be an abstract “bearer of natural rights.” In the context of legal graffiti scenes, writers are shaped in and through their interactions with law, spaces, and each other. By foregrounding the roles of emotions, particular styles, and histories of shared practices, MOS offers an ideal space in which to consider agonistic world making.

Agonism, interrelationality, and plurality work hand in hand at the festival. Hawhee recalls that in the *Panegyricus*, Isocrates “marvels at the sheer multitude of people who visit Athens for festivals. Such a gathering, he contends, enables ‘the most faithful friendships’ and ‘the most varied social in-

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teraction.”²⁸ Strikingly similar language is used in participant accounts of MOS and the 5Pointz legal graffiti center: gathering, witnessing, friendship, variety, excellence, renown. These rhetorical spaces help us understand the significance and potential of public art as space for encounter for invention.

In all the case studies considered here, production is a collective process.²⁹ Graffiti production is based on networks, frameworks of dependency and reciprocity such that the graffiti writer is always supported and shaped by the multiple styles, histories, and publics surrounding them. Spaces for encounter involve interrelationality because invention is a collective “inter-subjective process” that is located in a social imaginary where “common-places or topoi constitute a cultural repository.”³⁰

“Plurality” here refers to the range of differences that constitute the political. Hannah Arendt is particularly helpful in thinking through what plurality entails in public space. Her theory of the political is based on the *vita activa*: a life counts as political insofar as it is lived in common. Her formulation of the common is not simply about being with others but rather enunciating political community, grounded through common objects of concern. Plurality is the condition of “all political life” because “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”³¹ In other words, we are linked through the shared fact of our singularity. Because of foundational plurality, human beings must find mediating objects around which to conduct public affairs. While I do not agree with Arendt’s refusal of affect as a kind of “privation” or threat to the political, her thinking about plurality, public space, and the agon are crucial to imagining how public art scenes can enable encounters across differences that might amplify the visibility or the sensation of the contingent.

Finally, seeing public art scenes rhetorically involves accepting and embracing contingency between structure and experience, because the intended form of an aesthetic event and its felt experience do not always line up. Kris Cohen suggests that convivial events are not always felt as warm or “comforting” and that people maneuver between “habits, expectations, and an unavoidably improvisatory encounter with the event—between comfort and risk, self-consolidation and self-dissolution.”³² In a similar vein, Ash Amin argues that the mere fact of public gatherings in urban spaces need not be read as indices of “*a politics of the public realm*. . . Sociality in urban public space is not a sufficient condition for civic and political citizenship.”³³ These insights about the volatility of the aesthetic event and its affective form temper euphoric notions about public art as panacea. For instance, the graffiti festival in Mexico City is purportedly a show of cosmopolitanism and conviviality, but it is also *felt* as a space for resentment, anxiety, and ambivalence.

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However, Amin's pessimistic conclusion—that sociality (or public encounters) is insufficient for “political citizenship”—misreads the lived experience of citizenship. Citizenship emerges in public performances of the common that can be cultural and not founded in state-based institutional politics. Public art is necessary, but not sufficient, for political transformation. In acknowledging these limitations, the idea of contingency complicates the prevailing research on public art, which reads political intent as sufficient for political outcome. Instead, following Amin and Cohen, I read ambivalence as central to art practices in transitional moments.³⁴

A rhetorical approach with a focus on invention lends scholars and artists the ability to find common places. Urban critics such as Erik Swyngedouw and others lament the attenuation of public space, which is a reasonable stance. But they miss that public art as a space for encounter allows spaces to be made public again. Rhetoric draws attention to the concept of publicity, recognizing that the communicative action of designating spaces as public generates a wealth of conceptual and discursive resources that mobilize new conversations about how and what it means to make a space public. I refrain from wholly lamenting the loss of the polis because these transitional public art scenes teach us that the polis can be brought into being in a variety of unanticipated locales.³⁵ Understanding public art as a form of invention that shapes and reshapes the affective residues that are active or latent in public spaces through agonism, interrelationality, and plurality helps us understand how and why public art may enable forms of encounter that reactivate dormant, forgotten, or overdetermined public spaces.

Breaking with Scholarly Rupture Fetishes for Illegal Graffiti

This book also intervenes into rupture narratives fetishizing graffiti, which are prevalent in the current scholarship. Given graffiti's global history, this perspective is not surprising. Most accounts of graffiti, Ronald Kramer suggests, including such germinal works as those of Jeff Ferrell, Nancy Macdonald, or Janice Rahn, position illegality and the outsider status of graffiti as the “essential support beam for the theoretical claims being advanced by the author.”³⁶ For example, Daniel Makagon cites street art as a form of disruption to notions of urban order and decorum.³⁷ Leslie Hahner and Scott Varda track how street art is valued differentially against graffiti.³⁸ Other communication scholars characterize graffiti as “resistance” to state hegemony,³⁹ “cultural heterotopia” or “alternative counter-hegemonic spaces of representation,”³⁴⁰ a form of com-

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munication for civil society in times of crisis,⁴¹ culture jamming,⁴² and post-revolutionary communication media.⁴³ In these interpretations, graffiti figures as an exemplar for revolutionary praxis, anti-state resistance, and counterculture activity. Such approaches are not limited to urban communication or communication studies. In history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and cultural studies, graffiti often functions as a stand-in for rupture and cultural transformation.⁴⁴ Legal graffiti is often condemned by scholars and practitioners as a sort of capture. For example, Timothy Cresswell notes of gallery shows that “the art world has transformed and commodified graffiti by displacing it,” constructing a “table of oppositions of graffiti-as-crime and graffiti-as-art,” framing its artification as a transition from “outside” to “inside,” “temporary” to “permanent,” “wild” to “tame,” “non-artifact” to “artifact,” “large” to “small,” “illegible” to “readable,” “non-commodity” to “commodity,” and “unexpected” to “expected.”⁴⁵ But legal graffiti scenes become much more complex when we attend to their specific spaces of inscription and the encounters that they enable.

By reducing graffiti to illegality, scholars fall prey to conflation, presuming that its practitioners occupy opposing ideological or identity positions. For instance, Ferrell aligns graffiti with a “politics of anarchism,”⁴⁶ and Miller suggests that it is an “‘intrinsically rebellious’ public art.”⁴⁷ This perspective, Kramer continues, demonstrates how dominant interpretations of graffiti assume that writing culture is an inherently “critical force” and a performance of what Herbert Marcuse calls “the ‘Great Refusal.’”⁴⁸ Graffiti, it seems, is as much a vehicle for scholarly desire and imagination as it is an urban phenomenon.

Such treatments flatten the culture, eliding how graffiti has always been an aesthetic and social practice that works between, alongside, and within multiple spheres, including the official, the unofficial, the commercial, and the vernacular. To treat graffiti as an exemplar for rupture too easily agrees with official narratives that have criminalized the practice. Joe Austin reminds us that in the 1960s and 1970s, writers in New York City did not seek out illegality—rather, it was imposed on the practice by the city and some press narratives.⁴⁹ So, conflating graffiti with the illegal uncritically adopts “social problem” narratives promulgated by municipal authorities in the 1970s and 1980s. Such writers as MOS founder Manuel are explicitly reflective about how the “legal/illegal” binary is a “frame system” that is at best simplistic and at worst used to undermine graffiti as a form of cultural expression by creating social divisions, antagonisms, and blind spots. Rupture readings evince “a nostalgia for direct political action and unmediated sentiment that attaches to graffiti in general.”⁵⁰ Because graffiti is a cultural formation that is often

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iconic or representative of the urban, a “caption for urbanity,” as Diedrich Diederichsen has noted,⁵¹ a rereading of graffiti as more than simple resistance is important for nuancing urban scholarship. Following the work of such urban studies and media scholars as Alison Young and Lachlan MacDowall and such sociologists as Stefano Bloch, Gregory Snyder, and Ronald Kramer,⁵² this book explores legal graffiti as a form of urban communication that can amplify our sense of the contingent and spotlight public culture as made through networks of interrelationality, plurality, and agonism. This shift of optics helps us understand graffiti as essentially embedded and moves away from the idea of graffiti as an avatar for heroic and masculine creation.

Interdisciplinary Conversations: The Transnational, Urban Studies, Public Art, and Critical Theory

The Transnational

Following the work of Michael Peter Smith, I define the “transnational” as the circuits of communication, social, and cultural practices that move bodies, objects, and discourses. These circulation networks come together in localized urban spaces, implicating practices of placemaking, power, or collective identity.⁵³ Transnationalism is interrelational and affective: subjectivities of individuals, collectives, nations, and regions are subject to the pushes and pulls of those with whom they are in relation, involving identification, disidentification, and other affective movements.⁵⁴ I draw on the transnational instead of the global to point to the importance of movement and to acknowledge the unevenness of such mobility. National borders, economic disparities, and cultural biases are key determinants of who can move and when. Art making may occasionally work within the structures of state institutions and capital but does not occur in a top-down manner. These case studies let us think more deeply about transnationalism “from below” and how cultural, political, social, and economic elements relate to everyday lived experience at a variety of scales.⁵⁵ The transnational is not limited to the urban, but it is particularly visible at the urban scale.⁵⁶

Graffiti is typically a scale-jumping practice: writers can move from the neighborhood to the city to the nation to the globe and back again, painting one week in Little Village, Chicago, and the next in Mexico City. Graffiti’s emergence as a “problem” via the spread of global antigraffiti policies and zero-tolerance policing and as a newly seductive iteration of “creative cities” aspirations is also a transnational phenomenon. Thus, graffiti is not an expression that emerges from isolated cities and single actors, although some cities

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may be more networked to graffiti flows than others. As a form of belonging and identity, graffiti's social imaginary, too, is transnational, reinforced through multiple media forms, including zines, online forums, cinema, and television.

By using a multisited approach and a “multifocal imagination,” I track shifting social relationships on multiple sides of borders.⁵⁷ Following the same festival in cities in Western Europe, the United States, and Mexico, I can trace how transnational graffiti scenes implicate subjectivities as festivals and artists move across nations. Seeing and speaking with them in different sites clarify the continuities and transformations in festival and writer experiences.

Urban Studies: The City and the Civic

According to Richard Sennett:

The city brings together people who are different, it intensifies the complexity of social life, it presents people to each other as strangers. All these aspects of urban experience—difference, complexity, strangeness—afford resistance to domination.⁵⁸

In Sennett's framing, the city is an exemplary space for thinking about publics not only as sites of stranger relationality, difference, and complexity (plurality) but also as key sites for understanding the arts of domination and resistance. Each of the chapters in this book explores how art scenes complicate dominant urban design philosophies that create particular trajectories for possible (or impossible) encounters, providing a dynamic that public art may align with or challenge.⁵⁹

One of the integral roles of urban design in the five sites that I discuss is the management of encounters, design practices that have the goal of maintaining “zero friction.” “Zero friction” is usually articulated as a way to make encounters comfortable and convenient. In reality, urban design that privileges zero friction, which arises from modernist and rationalist planning ideologies, often ends up producing zero to few encounters. The concept is clearly unattainable, but it nevertheless drives development practices that exacerbate inequality and attenuate spaces for encounter.

For instance, Mexico City was planned by Spanish colonial *letrados* as an ideal space where rational modernism would domesticate and civilize unruly natives. It was driven by Ciceronian ideas of *urbanitas*, the idea of an urban sensibility based on “refinement, politeness, and individual morality[,] . . . cleanliness, and rationality.”⁶⁰ Such norms skew political and cultural ideol-

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ogy toward a desire for consensus and order instead of the vigorous disagreement and discomfort essential for public debate. In Chicago, the Northwest Ordinance of 1785 transformed the flatlands north and west of Ohio into a monumental grid of plots. In 1909, Daniel H. Burnham's Chicago Plan, modeled after Paris's city spaces, was another axis of European influence on urban design in the Americas meant to encourage smooth flow.⁶¹ Although New York was an organically grown urban space that has a history of generating a large amount of interclass contact by virtue of its density, in 1811, city planners attempted to domesticate it under an ever-expanding grid system. The system was first applied to lands south of Greenwich Village, and in 1855, the grid was expanded from Manhattan into the Bronx and Queens. Such a grid plan created "flexibility" where "spaces [could] easily be swept clear of obstacles."⁶² Robert Moses's 1940s proposal for a massive highway plan within New York accelerated and amplified modernist desires to rationalize the city.⁶³ His proposals for highways, parks, and street redesigns for improved "circulation," largely constructed between 1946 and 1957, were inspired by Le Corbusier's 1925 urban plan.⁶⁴ Perpignan, which was built during the Middle Ages as a walled city that was organized on the basis of priorities of defense, is now being reframed by urban planners and officials as a space for social mixing, touristic enjoyment, and attractiveness. Although mixing is encouraged, friction is discouraged, and certain kinds of mixing, such as youth squatters' settlements or black-market economies, are interdicted. Other types of mixing, such as Spanish tourists' interacting with Perpignan shopkeepers, are encouraged.

Wiesbaden, where MOS was founded, is a spa city that gained renown in the nineteenth century. It offers an urban image as "the world's spa" and a "luxury city" defined by its nineteenth-century patrimony.⁶⁵ The city offers a model of urban planning driven since 1806 by ideals of "water-villas-green refuges," an urbanism characterized by its emphasis on "internationality, luxury, and diversion," making the city a "19th-century urban monument."⁶⁶ Like other modern cities, geometric design helped forward such goals. Christian Zais was commissioned by Duke Friedrich August in 1818 to develop a plan for town expansion, and Zais's plan created a "pentagon of streets" to create a "regular geometric layout" in a "sober neoclassical style."⁶⁷ Like many nineteenth-century town expansions, the grid system was key. In 1843, a new town beautification society promoted the concept of designing the city as a whole on the lines of a "giant landscape park"; it submitted a plan in 1844 that was "inspired by the treatises on garden art by Prince Pückler-Muskau."⁶⁸ Here, we can see a model of the city as a touristic bauble for enjoyment and as a garden for refinement and healing.

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Not mentioned in Wiesbaden's bid for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage status is the key role that Wiesbaden played as a transport node for sending its Jewish people to concentration camps and the role of the city as an important political site for Nazi elites. The city was relatively unscathed in Allied bombing during World War II, and after emerging as the site of the U.S. air base in Europe after previous decades of French and then British control, it has continued to promote its identity as a nineteenth-century spa town. The first site for MOS, a slaughterhouse called the Schlachthof, was later demolished in the service of creating a more "modern" image for that part of the city; the building that replaced it is bereft of texture. MOS emerged as part of a defense of the Schlachthof, a slaughterhouse turned concentration camp train stop turned cultural center for graffiti and hip-hop culture. Threatened with destruction in the name of urban renewal in the 1990s, MOS was organized to demonstrate the vital role that such spaces played in youth culture. Although spa discourses are complicated by post-World War II discourses of culture for all,⁶⁹ the destruction of the Schlachthof, the site for the Wall Street meetings preceding MOS, sharply demonstrates how some elements of Wiesbaden's history and frameworks for encounter are seen as fungible, while others are situated as central and precious.

Globally, urban spaces are increasingly "fenced, gated, and guarded" with divisions framed for dwellers as "the very image of the good life."⁷⁰ Such trajectories of modernist design, rationality, and reduced friction mask conditions of inequality, neglect, and decay in cities across the globe. This book proposes that an alternative may be found in transforming spaces into terrains that are sticky and have textures that enable division and dissent. Smooth spaces are smooth for only some, and public art practices often index the ways in which seemingly abandoned spaces are crucial territories for invention, encounter, and play.

Public Art Studies: A Rhetorical Approach

I define "public art" broadly, as a creative practice that either generates or is framed by discourse about shared space and collective life.⁷¹ My reading method is to focus more on the "scene" of public art—process and social relationships—rather than only its formal or textual qualities. Public art is a site for identification and community unity but also for disidentification and general ambivalence. Scholarship on public art largely oscillates between two poles: art as a force of unification and art as a means of disruption. In both cases, art often figures as a means of uplift and civilization, whether in dis-

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cussions of twentieth-century statuary and public buildings or in studies of Brechtian defamiliarization.

The reading of public art as uplift has deep roots in modern city design. In 1913, art scholar Edwin Howland Blashfield named the “artist as school master, and his school became the public building.”⁷² He established the artist as leader and teacher, and the space of public art as a kind of schoolhouse for the public. Blashfield’s perspective was borne out in public sculpture in New York in the early twentieth century, where, in the wake of massive social change due to waves of new Eastern European immigration, industrialization, and middle-class fragility in the years following the Civil War, sculptors were concerned with art as a civilizing force in an unstable historic moment.⁷³ In New York, such order was lionized through “civic sculpture,” which used “noble European stereotypes” to “teach . . . moral lessons.”⁷⁴ Most academically trained artists in the early twentieth century were influenced by Charles Blanc’s *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, in which sculpture is framed as a means of “expressing universal ideals . . . advancing public education” but also has the side effect of naturalizing social relations through “conventionality and circumstantiality.”⁷⁵ In France, Germany, and Mexico at the turn of the twentieth century, we can hear echoes of this ideology, as art was used as a means of linking citizen to state as a kind of civilizing force.⁷⁶

This uplift narrative has evolved significantly in recent years, particularly in the wake of social practice art that privileges artists’ interactions and collaboration with communities. Contemporary art theory has a prevailing tendency to consider public art either as a medium for community unification, wherein the artist is largely subject to the desires and needs of the public, or as a means of disruption, wherein the artist has more autonomy. Some scholarship positions art negatively, as “unease, discomfort, or frustration—along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity”;⁷⁷ “interruptions, infiltrations and appropriations that question the symbolic, psycho-political and economic operations of the city”;⁷⁸ “violence”;⁷⁹ and “critique.”⁸⁰ Other scholarship locates public art positively, as “utopia,”⁸¹ “identification,”⁸² “corporate bauble,” or “pleasurable and profitable paradise.”⁸³ Such framings situate public art’s impact on viewers in binary terms. Both accounts fail to encapsulate public art’s social processes and lived complexity. This binary also fails to teach us to see possibility in society’s gray areas. Transitional public art scenes emit murmurs about, and allow glimpses of, models for urban space and urban citizenship. They are neither transcendental answers nor final resolutions to vexing problems, nor are they edgy slogans. But such scenes offer postures, opportunities, and frameworks for nurturing and establishing multiple vectors of engagements across differences.

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This tension between autonomy and heteronomy, artistic singularity and networks of interrelationality, animates contemporary debates about collaborative art. Grant Kester frames collaborative art as a means of producing social dialogue and expanding social relations: art as social pedagogy that resists oppressive social relations, wherein the relation itself is the work.⁸⁴ Claire Bishop has incisively critiqued Kester's approach because it risks focusing on the "intersubjective space" of relations as the only focus of artistic work and critique and for prioritizing projects that "tighten the space of relations."⁸⁵ Yet Bishop's fixation on rupture, too, courts the danger of fetishizing public art as a transcendent means of social transformation. This fixation on disillusionment is problematic because it "suggests that meaningful change can only occur through an absolute rupture of historical continuity—a single moment that breaks radically with the past and owes nothing to the existing distribution of social and political forces" bracketing the "incremental, capillary nature of political change or the importance of provisional forms of solidarity."⁸⁶ Kester and Bishop make important contributions—notably Kester's willingness to look beyond rupture as the primary guarantor of a work's success and Bishop's suggestion that negative emotions can be an important element of art's ability to transform understandings—but both approaches are insufficient on their own.

Rosalyn Deutsche has mapped how public art can neutralize and naturalize the effects of dominant ideological uses of public space. Her reading responds to the increasing prevalence of public-private partnerships in cities and the use of public art as a means of depoliticization in the 1980s and 1990s, which used the language of functionality and spatial order to occlude "the conflictual manner in which cities are actually defined and used."⁸⁷ Deutsche points to the way space is not given but is made through social and political processes and decisions. Public art can support such depoliticization and "secure consent for redevelopment."⁸⁸ Thus, public art runs the risk of stabilizing the status quo if the process by which it is created is unclear.⁸⁹ This risk points to the need for a rhetorical framework that understands the aesthetic to be linked to the social, seeing contingency as a baseline condition for public life. Rhetoric allows us to challenge the supposition that there are "non-contingent uses of space."⁹⁰

My approach differs from prevalent treatments of public art by attending to mid-level scenes that cultivate possibilities rather than explicit and eventual moments of resistance, such as revolutions, protests, and campaigns. This book cultivates a hermeneutic for seeing possibilities. Spaces for encounter acknowledge ambivalence: scenes may or may not result in social transformation. And yet transnational legal graffiti spaces provide a heightened aware-

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ness of contingency. This book moves away from approaching public art either as a space of resistance or as a site of capitalist enchantment by attending to art's range of intensities, which breaks from the prevalent scholarship in cultural studies, art history, and communication studies. Transitional art scenes are contexts (*contextus*) and places where urban texture's weave is loose. The destinies of the players, their genres, and their audiences are still up in the air; therefore, these scenes can play with ways of imagining urban space, political subjectivity, and forms of relationality. For this reason, I speak more frequently in this text with the fifty-year old graffiti writer who is a retired national guardsman than with the twenty-year-old revolutionary. It is not a matter of hierarchy: one is not better than the other. But the revolutionary is repeatedly the subject of scholarly analysis, which typically ignores the artist who has been involved in cultural production for decades, experiencing changing outlooks and philosophies about public art. "Encounter" is the key term here; the terms of commodification and opposition imply a decisive trajectory and judgment.

The Aesthetic, Difference, and Affect

French and Caribbean theorists Jacques Rancière and Édouard Glissant provide the animating conceptual architecture for my consideration of difference and the aesthetic. I take up Rancière's formulation of the "distribution of the sensible," which has been deeply influential in political theory, art history, and critical cultural and communication studies. His key claim is that the political and the aesthetic are intimately connected because the ways in which the space of appearance or the field of everyday sensation are organized influence felt senses of political possibility. Some practices and bodies are seen as part of the "count," or the field of political recognition and agency, and others are not. By changing the space of appearance, or sensorial fields, one can change political possibilities, changing "noise" to "speech." Rancière has also intervened in debates about art reception. One example is his concept of the emancipated spectator, which states that there is never a straight line between the intention of the artist and the reception by the spectator. Instead, the aesthetic relation is characterized by contingency and uncertainty. This concept is vital for my exploration of art practices that are nonpolemical and that actively embrace the contingency of responses. Art affects passersby on the order of the murmur as well as the shout. Rancière has also conceived of art as being implicated in an aesthetic regime that is constituted by the poles of autonomy and heteronomy. He argues, *contra* much aesthetic theory, that such tendencies can exist in the same work simultaneously. The aesthetic re-

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gime is art's internal tension. This insight is vital: autonomy no longer means art is antipolitical; instead, it is the motor for art to create wonderment or to fuel the reordering of political distributions.⁹¹

I break with Rancière's work in its seemingly evental nature. Something too neat persists in the moments of sensorial redistribution that he tracks, from slaves moving from *barbaros* to *logos* or art that changes understandings of modernity. The frustrations, chronic setbacks, and long-term practices that go into articulating new forms of speech fall out in rupture-based readings. This book is less interested in counterspectacles than in ordinary moments, thrown into relief through repeated event spaces. Moreover, I am suspicious of the implicit politics of recognition at work in the move from noise to speech. Following Raymond Williams's work on dominant and residual forms, I am drawn to moments in which noise stays noisy and is not translated into speech, either deliberately or incidentally. Rancière's prioritization of moments of rupture can omit a host of artistic practices.⁹² The desire for transcendence via an "authentic" politics that is defined solely by rupture avoids the difficult and messy work of political and social transformation.

Glissant reminds us that noise ought not always be read as speech, arguing that opacity, the inherent nontransparency of the subject to itself and others, is necessary to stop the colonial impulse to force assimilation and thus make otherness legible.⁹³ Whereas Glissant primarily links opacity with language, I read public art as a vehicle to mediate encounters with difference and understand opacity as a tool or tactic. This type of opacity can be aesthetically induced and amplified in graffiti practices that hold on to residual modes of illegibility. Artists, too, are theorists who contribute to the conceptual architecture of this book, including writers who comment on the political and ethical necessity of illegibility. The impenetrability of the graffiti phrase calls for a model of urban citizenship that is willing to acknowledge that there is always more to be known. They advise that encounters are processes and that, to engage in them, one must weather discomfort in the wake of the other.

The kinds of encounters that are traced in this book differ from those that are often discussed in sociology or political science, which foreground interactions between citizens and the state. I am more interested in horizontal articulations between subjects and spaces or subjects and each other and in the synesthetic nature of spaces for encounter. Metaphors of touch, sound, and sight expand and intertwine: textures and murmurs and visual noise and smooth spaces evoke the ways in which urban space shapes urban subjectivities through multiple sensorial modalities. Spaces for encounter are felt

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in another sense. They are affective experiences: nonlinguistic but still impactful charges that may later be labeled as joy or fatigue or irritation. In the art scenes discussed in this book, aesthetic recalibration is gradual, oblique, and playful. This approach contributes to an understanding of “encounter” that is not based on bringing an audience toward a transparent understanding of the rhetorical performance, object, act, or message but rather involves a form of oscillating gravity between meaning and obfuscation. As such, the acts of civic imagination that public art might engender also might be based on failure or disappointment.⁹⁴

The role of discomfort points to another major conceptual influence in this book. The relationship between publics, affect, and space profoundly shapes spaces for encounter and moments of invention in art scenes. Anglo thinkers who understand the public to be continually made and remade through objects of attention and shaped through affective trajectories and spatial contexts present a picture of public culture that is less ideal and more humble than the model of the public that is conjured up by abstract meditations on the public and the public sphere. Understanding how affect energizes public formations acknowledges that the public is a temporary and shifting entity, constituted through changing plays of force rather than logical argument. The public is contingent, not given in advance, and hewn together through feeling. Following such thinkers as Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, I define “affect” as electric, intermittent, and excessive to representation but nevertheless recognizable in liminal scenes through a more Spinozistic approach to affect as prelinguistic, embodied, and shared. This definition of affect points to the ways in which public art may activate scenes of sensation that can challenge or extend collective repertoires for appreciating and engaging with otherness.