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"The limitations imposed on artistic expression by urban policies and censorship can highlight the importance of art education in advocating for diversity and inclusivity."

Asian Diaspora: Understanding Toronto Public Spaces Through Art and Performances

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In this article, I explore how art can help Asian immigrants in Ontario understand the public spaces and the community of Toronto. Using Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* as a theoretical framework, this study asks: How does navigating and responding to issues of equity, inclusion, and environmental resiliency foster residents' understanding? The study is based on field research that involved a series of improvised art and performance activities in Toronto's outdoor public spaces from February 2022 to May 2022. I argue that art can enable individuals to recognize and challenge the inequity in public places and develop relational understandings and practices that can inform public policy and inspire further research and action. The findings reveal that participants' social interactions through artmaking in public spaces enhanced their personal growth, learning, and creativity, connecting their everyday lives with formal education. This article highlights the impact of diasporic experiences in shaping the process of placemaking within these spaces.

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What is the Asian diaspora? In studying the Asian diaspora, K. Yoon and Jin (2016) emphasized action and movement. They defined the *Asian diaspora* as the migration and dispersion of Asian groups, especially to foreign countries or regions. They discussed that the reasons and effects of diasporic movement are factored into its historical, economic, social, political, and educational considerations. In the case of Canada, the country witnessed waves of Asian immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These immigrants formed diverse Asian communities, each with its own culture and society. They reflected the country's multiculturalism and immigration history, recontextualizing their culture in North American urban areas with diverse ethnicities (I.-J. Yoon, 2012). In this light, Zhang (2004) analyzed the concept of home in the Asian diaspora, emphasizing its dynamic and changing nature as it relates to language, gender, and transnationalism. Further, they discussed the significance of these qualities in the diaspora experience, highlighting the difficulties and opportunities of immigrants in learning new customs while keeping their cultural roots.

The study I introduce in this article focuses on seven individuals of Asian descent who were born in Asia and migrated to Canada. The study demonstrates how the diversity within the Asian diaspora, including different ethnicities, languages, and cultures, influenced their thinking and decision making in everyday situations, especially through art. In trying to contribute to Canadian society, these individuals are adapting or have adapted to their new context. Their diverse experiences offer unique insights into the challenges, achievements, and cultural dynamics of migration and assimilation, and their very lives make everyday contributions to their communities.

In this article, I suggest that there is a potentially profound impact of the Asian diaspora on the dynamics of public spaces. Through the unique perspectives of seven individuals, this study uncovers the transformative influence of art as a means of navigating public spaces, revealing prevalent inequities and fostering meaningful connections. The next section briefly previews the study and its outdoor art workshops. Following that is a section devoted to the methodological foundation. Subsequently, I delve into three specific activities and creations that exemplify how the participants navigate their individuality through art and performance, thereby deepening their understanding of public spaces in Toronto. I also discuss the implications of this study for scholarship and social justice. This research can enhance the academic debate on how creativity influences public spaces and offers insights for creating more equitable and just environments.

About the Study

The study, "Asian Diaspora: Understanding Toronto Public Spaces Through Art and Performances," engaged preservice and in-service teachers in conceptual artmaking in outdoor public spaces. The purpose of the study was to connect and expand their disciplinary perspectives while also examining the impact of collaboration with university

students from different majors. Drawing on Shusterman's (2000) *Pragmatist Aesthetics* as the theoretical framework, I explored how participants' interactions with others and the environment unfolded through collaborative conceptual artmaking practices.

The randomly recruited participants happened to be individuals born outside of Canada. While not initially intended, the fact that all participants had significant ties to places beyond a national border created an opportunity to reflect on the potential of conceptual artmaking practices to foster social awareness and cultivate multicultural understanding (Donahue & Stuart, 2010; Finley, 2017; Sims, 2017).

I conducted a series of workshops from November 2021 to May 2022, with specific outdoor workshops occurring from February 2022 to May 2022. These workshops took place in various outdoor public spaces in Toronto, including city parks, shorelines, streets, and corridors.

In each workshop, as a researcher and coparticipant, I actively engaged in artmaking, encouraged participants to tap into their imaginations, facilitated sharing disciplinary knowledge through discussions, and prompted questioning to enhance learning experiences. The workshops led to the creation of three collaborative artworks and performances: *Graffiti Cartography*, *Anonymous Robot*, and *Diasporic Walking Robot*.

These creations inevitably emphasized improvisation, heightening awareness of local and global occurrences stemming from COVID-19-related regulations. The study also had to improvise and shift to address participants' shifting contexts, including changing COVID-19 regulations, omnipresent surveillance, governance, and censorship in Toronto's public spaces. Consequently, the process required navigating and responding to diverse issues in various locations throughout Toronto, using participants' cultural frames of reference as valuable lenses for examination. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the relevance and significance of the encountered challenges.

Theoretical Framework

When individuals interact socially, they synthesize their thoughts, aspirations, and perceptions, giving rise to an aesthetic experience (Greene, 2001). This experience, as Dewey (1934) described it, contributes to the "quality of human experience" (p. 34) and continues to influence future encounters. The study is based on Shusterman's (2000) *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, which emphasizes the transformative and experiential aspects of art in shaping individuals' understanding of their surroundings. According to Shusterman, aesthetics is not limited to a contemplative appreciation of art but can extend to the lived, embodied experiences that art generates. In this context, pragmatist aesthetics becomes a dynamic process of engagement, influencing individuals' perceptions of their environment and fostering a deeper connection to the sociocultural context.

The idea of pragmatist aesthetics resonates with the study's focus on how navigating issues of equity, inclusion, and environmental resilience through art contributes to residents' understanding of public spaces. By adopting Shusterman's (2000) framework, the study illustrates the practical implications of aesthetic experiences within the Asian diaspora in Toronto. It highlights diversified artistic approaches that challenge preexisting perceptions and promote meaningful interpretations in urban settings.

Methodology

Art-Based Research

Art-based research (ABR), as a mode of inquiry and methodology (Finley, 2017), uses

artistic processes and expressions from various art forms. It recognizes the key role of artistic curation in the research process and employs art forms as primary methods to gain insights into participants' experiences (Finley, 2017; McNiff, 2017). ABR emerged as a qualitative research methodology in social and educational contexts between the 1970s and 1990s. Over time, the concept of art as research gained recognition within academic research, including in education (Pentassuglia, 2017). Rolling (2010) described ABR as having the potential to transform our perspective on education. It can disrupt traditional approaches to curriculum development and educational practices, indicating that ABR holds the power to bring about substantial changes in our educational methods.

In this section, I outline three qualities of ABR that illustrate the tensions and promises in education and research. My intention is to highlight its transformative potential, reshaping research practices and paradigms to deepen our understanding of the human experience (Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008).

First, ABR emphasizes problem-based projects and improvisational approaches in artistic practices (Garoian, 2011/2016; O'Donoghue, 2015; Sullivan, 1993). It goes beyond the process of artistic creation, fostering imagination, subjectivity, and individual voice (Burge et al., 2016), and it emphasizes the importance of artistic forms in making meaning and theories (Rolling, 2017; Suominen et al., 2017).

Second, ABR invites audiences into the learning and artmaking process, allowing participants to make sense of various worldviews through the manipulation of ordinary materials into expressive art forms (Finley, 2017; Schembri & Boyle, 2013). Through expressive forms like imagery, poetry, and drama, ABR accesses embedded feelings and emotions, echoing the meaning of the experience. The constant questioning of established norms, balancing critical inquiry with a readiness to embrace change and transformation, becomes crucial, highlighting that genuine growth requires a willingness to be transformed by the subject of inquiry (O'Donoghue, 2015). These properties enable learners with different perspectives and worldviews to transform their experiences into a public form and explore contextual meanings (Eisner, 1997; Pentassuglia, 2017).

Third, I note that ABR is not without criticism. Leavy (2017) pointed out the perceived obscurity in conducting research using this approach. Barone and Eisner (2012) further discussed various challenges associated with ABR in education, particularly when it diverges from conventional research norms by incorporating artistic and nonlinguistic modes of expression. This can lead to communication limitations, potentially perplexing traditional researchers and audiences accustomed to written research reports (Geertz, 1988). The intended audience for ABR in education varies, at times targeting academic scholars, educational practitioners, or the general public, each with distinct expectations and evaluation criteria (Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Springgay, 2001). This can be both a limitation and a benefit, as it enables ABR to broaden the scope of research by creating new ways of seeing and describing experiences, providing a different lens for evaluating engagement quality (Burge et al., 2016).

In my ABR study, incorporating the methodology became a compelling departure from traditional research paradigms, offering innovative approaches to understanding the world and the human experience, and creating meanings and theories (Rolling, 2017; Suominen et al., 2017). By centering conceptual artmaking practice, the participants and I, as coparticipants and researcher, collaborated to design problem-solving-based workshops and create various types of conceptual art. ABR allowed us to explore how the transformation of materials and perceptions emerges

through social and cultural practices (Halverson & Sawyer, 2022), as well as how individual voices were manifested through the process (Burge et al., 2016).

Types of Data

In this study, I used different data types, such as images, videos, interviews, field notes, memos, and online communications, to examine the participants' experiences in coproducing art in public. The data were cross-analyzed by type, timeline, category, and participant using comparative analysis techniques within qualitative methodology (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Glaser & Strauss, 1965). This improved the rigor and comprehensiveness of the research approach. Five group interviews and 26 individual interviews were conducted with the participants (Charmaz, 2014). The responses were transcribed and analyzed to address the research question. The focus was on the participants' own interpretations of their experiences, which was vital for interpretive inquiry (Charmaz, 2014). Field notes and memos documented the participants' commitment, contribution, and perceptions (Charmaz, 2014). These memos captured the researcher's thoughts and questions, avoiding preconceived notions about the data. The emphasis was on how the participants integrated their life experiences into conceptual artmaking. Video recordings captured the participants' engagement in public art. These recordings showed their dialogues and gestures, providing insights into their collaboration and negotiation. Other modes of communication, such as emails, online postings, and surveys, supplemented face-to-face interactions. Data from Types 2 and 3 were analyzed together, allowing for adjustments and modifications based on the researcher's interpretation and insights.

Recruitment

I recruited participants by mass emailing students enrolled in the teacher education program at York University and by contacting my former students. Nine participants consented, but seven withdrew due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its no-contact restrictions. Subsequently, I reached out to my colleagues in the teaching profession, who invited three university students to join the study. The final participant pool, completed on January 10, 2022, comprised three in-service teachers (Nancy, Joe, Arushi), one pre-service teacher (Olga), and three university students (Jayden, Donghyun, Minyoung) with different majors. They represented diverse age groups, ranging from their 20s to 30s, and various cultural backgrounds, including South Korea and Iran. The participation of individuals with diverse Asian backgrounds, a subset of the Asian diaspora, facilitated a focused exploration of their experiences and perspectives in this cultural context. This inclusion enriched the dialogue during the workshops, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the topic (Liebenberg et al., 2012).

Outdoor Workshops

The workshops involved outdoor activities, such as walking, collecting information, and creating conceptual art in various forms. The participants selected materials, handled tools, and conceptualized ideas to make their designs. They also installed their artworks or performed in specific outdoor locations to engage others, creating a collaborative and interactive experience. The workshops were sequenced so that each one built on the previous, reflecting on the participants' progress and perspectives. The first three workshops were the main data-collection activities, while later workshops, designed by Joe and Nancy in April and May 2022, furthered participants' interests (Dewey, 1934; Liebenberg et al., 2012). This section provides an overview of the initial three outdoor workshops, which were collaboratively designed by the participants. The main emphasis is on the third

workshop, in which the diasporic perspective was more pronounced. To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the third workshop, I also introduce the first two workshops to establish context.

Graffiti Cartography

Powell's (2020) StoryWalk research explored the interplay between storytelling and walking in a specific location, involving several community members in Japantown San Jose. Their narratives, spanning the past, present, and future, intertwined with the physical environment. This sensory engagement reaffirmed the significance of local lived experiences and deepened their connection to the place (Powell, 2016). This was evident in my study in the first workshop. During our walk, the participants discussed various topics, including street art governance, differing views on the protest, and our experiences as visible minorities in Canada. These topics naturally emerged from their interaction with the public space. The police presence added to the atmosphere, shaping their perspectives and inspiring exploration (Jones, 2018). Jayden said, "I believe that protests are a form of art." In a later interview, he explained, "Good protests can make people think and be moved, and that is what art is for." The walk was a sensory journey with the anticipation of the Freedom Convoy and its impact. The walk showed limited chances for crossing roads and using public spaces, with many areas blocked. This made us focus on the equity issues in public spaces. We asked, "Who is the public place for?" This moment changed the study's focus, leading to deeper discussions in later workshops. About public art, three participants (Nancy, Olga, Minyoung) complained about the unfairness of restricting the interaction with public art in public spaces. Nancy argued from the view of those who use these public spaces:

> I completely disagree with their approach[,] which privileges paid customers to enter the space and enjoy city-sponsored public art at *RendezViews*. Art and spaces that celebrate and showcase local artists should be viewed and accessed to [*sic*] the entirety of the public. This way there's more engagement and exposure as opposed to the city benefiting from a space purely for profit. … How do you appreciate one's art if you can't even interact with it? (Nancy, personal communication, February 15, 2022)

Jayden took the picture in Figure 1 during our walk on McCaul Street in downtown Toronto on February 12, 2022. It captures a striking juxtaposition of sanctioned art and tagging, with the added element of me, as the researcher, also participating in the process. This visual encounter served as a focal point for our discussions during the exploration.

The conversation was controversial regarding who can create art in public spaces and whether everyone should have the same privilege to display their artwork. Olga stated, "There should be some guidelines because you don't want hateful imagery or language. So, there needs to be some oversight on what can be on these [public] walls" (Olga, personal communication, February 14, 2022). Participants advocating for city restrictions on public spaces by both artists and nonartists supported institutional intervention, for instance by municipal bodies, to ensure only qualified artworks are exhibited. The discussions extended to topics of censorship and illegal graffiti, with some participants suggesting government monitoring and censorship for public artworks. Minyoung expressed, "Not everyone can make good art. And someone has to look over it to weed out bad work, so it is reasonable for the city to monitor it and choose what to put up" (Minyoung, personal



Figure 1. Documenting city vibe. This photograph, taken on February 12, 2022, on McCaul Street in downtown Toronto, captures a striking juxtaposition of sanctioned art and tagging. The presence of the researcher in the scene emphasizes the interactive nature of the urban exploration and serves as a focal point for subsequent discussions on the urban landscape and its interpretations. Photo courtesy of research participant Jayden.

communication, February 12, 2022). The interviews revealed how participants recognized "multifaceted perspectives and practices" (Kim & Ho, 2021, p. 763) in public art during the workshop. They observed rules in public spaces, prompting questions about the public's freedom (Lentz & Buffington, 2020).

Thirty photos of graffiti and street art, along with 15 videos of up to 30 minutes each, were generated from the workshop. As participants discussed equity in public spaces while walking, they had opportunities to immerse themselves in street art (Powell, 2016; Yip, 2020). This shift in perspective made them recognize their viewpoints, learn from others, and expand their understanding (Powell, 2016, 2020). Walking as an aesthetic practice offered a different perspective and sparked meaningful conversations, leading participants to reflect on their experiences and explore the social and cultural landscape (Gradle, 2007).

Anonymous Robot

In response to the downtown graffiti expedition from the first workshop, we created a surveillance robot as an outlet to express our reflection of the city atmosphere, in which police were everywhere to prevent the Freedom Convoy[1] and any associated violence by the protesters. Some noticeable parts of the street vibe were blocked major and small intersections, face-masked passersby, cold weather, distant noises and honking, and street art and graffiti. The robot is the representation of the merging of urban culture with a newly created cultural sphere as a result of recent events. The robot was about 4.7 feet tall and 1.6 feet wide, constructed primarily from recycled materials. These materials included cardboard boxes, which were attached to each other using wooden sticks and various adhesives. Then, the surfaces were spray-painted over as we experimented with graffiti techniques to mimic the graffiti artists. This was then stationed at the corner of a hut at the Lee Lifeson Art Park, where the walls are filled with graffiti. The choice of location was intentional; we wanted to work alongside the existing artwork at the park so the park users, who are accustomed to art and respect it, would view the robot accordingly. All in all, *Anonymous Robot*, positioned at Lee Lifeson Art Park (Figure 2), aimed to highlight the intricate interplay of sociopolitical factors, such as censorship, surveillance, systems, and the dynamic relationship between urban culture and governance.

This robot may manifest the omnipresent censorship and governance many of us live with on a daily basis. One such example is the suppression of public speech in a form of protest—the Freedom Convoy. Regardless of one's personal opinion of the protest and its merits, the protest was defined as objectionable by the government, and their protocols to suppress it directly affected the public. The police not only blocked the intersections, but they honked unreasonably (too threatening for a warning) at individual drivers of small cars who mistakenly passed through the roads. Ironically, it later turned out that the protesters canceled the convoy at downtown Toronto on the day it was to have taken place. Participants in my study raised the question: What types of censorship and standardization do we notice in our system, whose decision is that, and for whom is it intended?

The robot not only responds to censorship and governance but also addresses the systemic structures deeply embedded in society (Sheren, 2018). It explores the use of public space within the community, and it questions accessibility. Moreover, it is closely linked to the lives of diaspora groups grappling with uncertainty regarding the local system, laws, and regulations. Minyoung expressed, "I am uncertain about whether some situations are legal or illegal, as there are instances where certain people are allowed to engage in actions while others are not. As East Asians, we tend to be more reserved and less



Figure 2. Lee Lifeson Art Park. This photograph captures the ambiance and setting of the second outdoor workshop held at Lee Lifeson Art Park, Toronto. The image provides a visual context for the workshop's location, illustrating the park's environment on February 20, 2022. Photo courtesy of the author.

expressive due to our upbringing." In light of this symbolic discomfort with public identification, the participants chose to name their creation *Anonymous Robot*. Further discussion on this topic will be presented when introducing the next artwork (Figure 3).

Anonymous Robot was stationed at the hut in Lee Lifeson Art Park, where it remained throughout the day. The photo on the left was taken by me during the daytime, while the photo on the right was captured by Jayden in the evening, both on February 20, 2022.

Diasporic Walking Robot

The performance of walking robots embodied the diasporic longing for belongingness and their proactive engagement with environments and individuals to comprehend the surrounding culture. This workshop retraced the inquiry that emerged during the Walking Cartography workshop: "Who is the public place for?" This critical juncture in the study redirected our attention to navigating the inequities that arise from limiting public access to publicly funded art in shared spaces. Thus, the purpose of the performance was to democratize the outdoor public space in Toronto as a furtherance to animating the annual public exhibition Winter Stations 2022. As a continuation of the *Anonymous Robot* creation at the Lee Lifeson Art Park, we brought the art piece to the park to juxtapose it next to the artworks at the Winter Stations on Sunday, February 27, 2022. This exhibit was organized by the city to celebrate the work of competition winners, and bringing the *Anonymous Robot* was a form of soft protest to question the colonization of public space. Bodnar (2015) warned that privatization and commercialization of public space



Figure 3. *Anonymous Robot* at Lee Lifeson Art Park. This figure comprises two photographs of the *Anonymous Robot* installation at Lee Lifeson Art Park. The left photo, taken during daytime, and the right photo, captured in the evening, illustrate the installation's presence and its interaction with the changing light conditions throughout February 20, 2022. These contrasting images highlight the dynamic nature of public art in urban spaces. Photo courtesy of the author.

are the two major concepts that can dismantle public space. The public could resonate with the juried and censored artworks as part of the exhibition however they wanted to. The City of Toronto's main website delineated that:

> In recognition and celebration of this courage, the theme chosen for the 2022 edition of Winter Stations is Resilience: the ability to withstand adversity and recover from difficulties. To be resilient, one is faced with hardship, confronts it, and pushes to overcome it. Whether on a micro or macro scale, families, livelihoods, cities, and countries have experienced loss and isolation—but also—have been presented with great opportunities for adaptation and growth. (Winter Stations, n.d., para. 1)

As we arrived at the location, we realized that it was too windy along the shoreline, and the robot made out of cardboard was too fragile to stand still. To "withstand adversity and recover from difficulties" (Winter Stations, n.d., para. 1),

we improvised our robot into a diasporic performance where the group of us boxed ourselves with the robot to withstand the wind and still be able to interact with the environment, artworks, the visitors to the show, and many other nonhuman objects (Figure 4).

The participants strolled along the shoreline, adorned with elements of *Anonymous Robot*, as they explored the exhibited artworks. Jayden skillfully captured this moment in a photograph on February 27, 2023, at the Winter Station at Woodbine Beach in Toronto. This image serves as documentation of the participants' active engagement during the activity.

This diasporic performance happened to challenge the standardization across various systems—governmental, local, societal, and beyond—and the perceptions of what is normal and abnormal. Walking the shoreline in a box was enough to stand out from the crowd, where some of the participants felt awkward and ridiculed the kinetic robot. Donghyun stated that "people would definitely see us [as] abnormal. I hope they don't see this (wearing a box and walking as a performance) as an Asian thing." Arushi responded,

> They may think we are strange, but that's perfectly fine. People look at us, they're curious, they come to us, and they ask questions. It's in those moments that new conversations can spark, and that's where learning truly begins. … [W]e make an impact and we provide different experiences for them, which is the whole purpose of this performance, to interact with the audiences through our art.

Despite not expressing disagreement with Arushi at the moment, Donghyun conveyed his reservations during the in-person



Figure 4. Diasporic performance. This photograph showcases participants exploring the Winter Station exhibition at Woodbine Beach, Toronto, while incorporating elements of the *Anonymous Robot* in their stroll along the shoreline. Taken on February 27, 2023, the image documents the active engagement of participants with the artworks displayed, reflecting on the interactive and dynamic nature of diasporic performances within public spaces. Photo courtesy of research participant Jayden.

interview. He found the act of wearing a box and walking along the shoreline unconvincing, drawing an analogy to an old form of punishment in Korea. In this analogy, parents would make a child wear a rice strainer and walk along the neighborhood to ridicule them for wetting the bed, aiming to stop the behavior. It is interesting to observe that Donghyun made this analogy and expressed a sense of comfort and belonging when his actions aligned with societal norms and expectations. This insight suggests that our upbringing plays a significant role in shaping our perception of what is considered standard practice, leading to a natural inclination to conform in our daily lives. Donghyun perceived any deviation from this conformity as abnormal or out of the ordinary.

The perception of our performance serves as a reflection of the diaspora experience. In this cultural context, it is noteworthy how locals perceive ethnic groups and how diasporas navigate adopting the customs and lifestyles of their new country while inevitably standing out.

While our participation in the exhibition at Woodbine Beach for Winter Stations 2022 aligned with this cultural sphere, we deliberately stood out from the crowd. Alongside the five originally selected installations (later joined by a sixth), our performance became an integral part of the visual culture, supporting the overarching theme of the show: resilience. Moreover, our *Diasporic Walking Robot* performance allowed us to engage with the environment, artworks, visitors, and other elements within the space. It represented the diaspora experience, characterized by a yearning for acceptance through conformity, yet lacking a sense of true belonging. This perspective prompted us to consider the contrasting viewpoints within our group, where seeking conformity to fit in, as Donghyun expressed, intersected with Arushi's belief that embracing the abnormal can lead to significant impact within the cultural sphere.

Implications

The insights derived from this study hold significant implications for the field of art education and extend their relevance beyond, into the broader societal context. The recognition of public spaces as inherently political, shaped by urban policies that may affect the accessibility of public art, underscores the importance of incorporating discussions on political and societal contexts within art education. These observations may serve as inspiration for art educators to engage students in critical conversations about the role of art in public spaces, its potential barriers, and its significance in facilitating public discourse (Bodnar, 2015). The limitations imposed on artistic expression by urban policies and censorship can highlight the importance of art education in advocating for diversity and inclusivity. The exploration of the influence of the Asian diaspora on public spaces provides significant revelations into cultural diversity and its impact on artistic expression. This encourages educators to incorporate diverse perspectives into art education curricula, fostering a more inclusive and globally aware approach to art (Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). Emphasizing the creation of safe spaces for diverse artistic expressions and underscoring the potential of art to challenge societal norms and foster inclusivity (Molnár, 2017; Schuermans et al., 2012) extend beyond educators to encompass society at large. The active engagement of the study's participants with their surroundings serves as a model for educators, highlighting the potential for art to act as a vehicle for community engagement and empowerment. Educators can use this as a model to encourage students to actively engage with their communities through artistic endeavors, thereby making a positive contribution to society (Champagne, 2020).

The findings of this study are intricately connected with Shusterman's (2000) *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, given that participants' social interactions in creating art in outdoor spaces contribute to a transformative experience, shaping

their understanding of public spaces. These experiences served as a bridge between everyday life and formal education, aligning with previous research. The study highlighted how these experiences enriched personal growth, impacted the learning process, and influenced the environment. By integrating "art is a matter of experience for both maker and viewer" (Grierson, 2017, p. 1246), the study encouraged artmaking practices in public spaces, breaking disciplinary boundaries and enhancing understanding. Particularly, the study shed light on the participants' diasporic experiences and perspectives, which made a significant contribution to shaping the placemaking process within these public spaces, adding a unique dimension to the overall findings.

The implications of this study extend far beyond the field of art education, resonating with the challenges and opportunities inherent in ABR. By examining the broader societal context and the transformative potential of art, this research offers meaningful perspectives that can inform and enhance ABR practices. For educators, these implications can extend from the confines of the classroom to encompass society at large. The active engagement of the study's participants with their surroundings serves as a model for educators, demonstrating the power of art as a vehicle for community engagement and empowerment. By addressing the needs and interests of the community, ABR practitioners can be inspired by this model to harness the community's creative potential and actively engage with diverse audiences, thereby making a substantial contribution to societal discourse. For ABR practitioners, this model can inspire them to harness the community's creative potential and actively engage with diverse audiences, thereby making a substantial contribution to societal discourse. Thus, it provides a robust foundation for educators and ABR practitioners to navigate the challenges and complexities associated with nonlinguistic art forms, ultimately enhancing the communicative power and impact of ABR in education and the broader domain of research and educational practice.

Conclusion

This study of ABR, guided by Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2000), explored the experiences of seven individuals from the Asian diaspora navigating Toronto's public spaces. Through innovative outdoor art workshops, including *Graffiti Cartography*, *Anonymous Robot*, and *Diasporic Walking Robot*, participants expressed individuality, challenged societal norms, and engaged with sociopolitical dynamics. The study emphasized the transformative power of art in navigating various challenges. The inclusion of diverse participants enriched the dialogue, offering holistic insights into their experiences within the cultural context. The implications extend beyond art education, advocating for diversity, inclusivity, and the creation of safe spaces for artistic expression. This research contributes significantly to ABR practices, providing a model for educators and practitioners to engage actively with communities, fostering positive contributions to societal discourse and dynamics.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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

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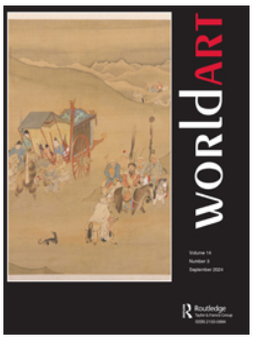
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ENDNOTE

[1] The Freedom Convoy was a series of protests and blockades in Canada that began in January 2022, primarily involving truckers and other demonstrators opposing COVID-19 vaccine mandates and other public health restrictions. The protests, centered in Ottawa and at various border crossings, significantly disrupted traffic and trade, leading to a national emergency declaration and widespread debate over public health policies and the right to protest.



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Position Essay

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LGBTQ+ themed public art: promoting an expanded view on genders and advancing gender education

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This essay explores the transformative role of LGBTQ+ themed public art in promoting an expanded view of genders and advancing gender education. By engaging with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I want to stress how public art both serves as a medium for aesthetic expression and also acts as a crucial participant in the performative act of gender identity construction. From the vibrant defiance of rainbow crosswalks to the poignant narratives of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and the impactful murals by Keith Haring, LGBTQ+ themed public art challenges traditional gender roles and identities, offering alternative visions that resist binary classifications. These public artworks create inclusive spaces that foster community engagement, historical commemoration, and activism, effectively enhancing public pedagogy in gender education. By embedding diverse and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality in public consciousness, such art prompts a reevaluation of societal norms, thereby contributing to a broader understanding and acceptance of gender diversity. This essay emphasizes the potential of LGBTQ+ -themed public art to serve as a dynamic medium for communicative pedagogy, manifesting its significance in shaping social consciousness and advancing the cause of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ art; public art; Keith Haring; rainbow crosswalks; AIDS memorial quilt; gender education

This paper argues that LGBTQ+ themed public art holds significant potential to promote gender education by challenging traditional gender norms and offering alternative perspectives on gender identity. The evolution of the LGBTQ+ movement, from a struggle for basic rights to a global force for equality and inclusion, marks a critical trajectory in social history.

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From the Stonewall riots of 1969, which prompted the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement, to contemporary debates over marriage equality and against discriminatory laws, the progress has been important and transformative (Carter 2004).

LGBTQ+ themed public art contributes to this ongoing discourse by serving as a medium that reflects key concerns, a zeitgeist, of its time and space, communicating the values, struggles, and achievements of the LGBTQ+ community. The essay builds on previous scholarship by examining the intersection of LGBTQ+ themed public art and gender education, particularly through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler 1990), introduces the concept of gender performativity, which posits that gender is a socially constructed set of behaviors and performances rather than fixed attributes. My essay engages with these issues to explore how LGBTQ+ themed public art not only serves as aesthetic expression, but also actively participates in the performative construction of gender identity, challenging and redefining normative narratives around gender and sexuality.

Background and essay positionality

To help frame my position, I want to first briefly survey the framework and choices in my approach. This essay employs a research approach based in the field of art studies and based on existing literature and theoretical frameworks (Lord and Meyer 2013). In particular, this is to engage with the analysis of complex issues surrounding the role of public art in LGBTQ+ activism (Dolan 2012).[1]

I am particularly interested in identifying recurring themes, patterns, and theoretical insights across different case studies, which can then be contextualized within broader socio-political discourses (Tyburczy 2016). My case studies includes the AIDS Memorial Quilt, rainbow crosswalks, and Keith Haring's murals. These cases were selected due to their historical significance and, moreover, their public visibility. They have also made significant impacts on public pedagogy – a critical area of study that examines how public art can educate and influence societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality (Lord and Meyer 2013). The cases help illuminate how LGBTQ+ themed public artworks contribute to public pedagogy and the construction of inclusive spaces, as theorized by Butler (1990).

Before the LGBTQ+ movements, gender education had been heavily binary-focused, aligning with societal norms that recognized only male and female genders corresponding directly to biological sex. However, as feminist and LGBTQ+ movements gained momentum, gender began to be critically examined as a social construct influenced by cultural, psychological, and social factors beyond mere biological differences

(Butler 1990). The recognition of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming identities has significantly shaped the need for an expanded view in gender education. Gender education has evolved to incorporate interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and queer studies (Kimmel 2008). This has broadened education to include discussions on gender roles, sexuality, power dynamics, and the intersectionality of gender with race, class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw 1989). Such interdisciplinary approaches facilitate an expanded perspective on gender, reflecting the diverse influences on gender identity across different societal contexts.

Despite progress, gender education continues to confront challenges, including societal resistance to moving beyond traditional gender norms and the politicization of gender issues. These challenges underscore the need for an expanded approach to gender education – one that fosters dialogue, reduces stigma, and promotes acceptance of gender diversity (Crenshaw 1989). Adopting a broader perspective is crucial for achieving more comprehensive understanding of global gender variations, ensuring educational content that not only acknowledges the existence of diverse gender identities but also provides inclusive and respectful approaches to understanding their experiences and perspectives.

LGBTQ+ themed public art

If public art functions as a mechanism for social activism, this is because it facilitates the engagement of artists and the public in process of social construction. It presents narratives that reflect the complexities and fluidity of identities (Mirzoeff 2015). This form of art mobilizes public sentiment towards enhanced acceptance and understanding, encouraging viewers to reassess their perceptions and attitudes regarding various social issues (Senie 2016). By stimulating thought and dialogue, public art can encourage the collective reevaluation and reconstruction of societal norms (Kester 2004).

Incorporating LGBTQ+ -themed public art into gender education is a powerful tool in achieving this expanded view. Public art that celebrates LGBTQ+ identities and experiences serves not only as a visual representation of diversity, but can also catalyze productive conversation and reflection. These artworks can introduce individuals to the stories and struggles of the LGBTQ+ community, encouraging empathy and a deeper knowledge about gender diversity. For example, rainbow crosswalks and murals depicting LGBTQ+ historical figures or events can transform public spaces into interactive learning environments. In particular, these installations invite observers to engage with the art and its meanings, prompting discussions about inclusivity, history, and the ongoing fight for equality.

The engagement with public art as a means to foster a deeper understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities reflects Ahmed's (2006) concepts of public spaces and cultural objects in shaping our perceptions and interactions with the social world. In this context, the art becomes a dialogue starter, a visual prompt that challenges existing norms and opens up spaces for new conversations. For instance, Keith Haring is a prominent artist whose work intersected with LGBTQ+ themes and activism. Haring's art, characterized by its accessible and often provocative imagery, transcended the traditional boundaries of the art world to engage with social issues directly, most notably the AIDS crisis (Gruen 1991). As an openly gay man, Haring used his art to combat stigma, advocate for awareness and prevention, and express solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community, embodying the dual role of the artist as an activist (Burk 2020). LGBTQ+ -themed public art can challenge prevailing norms and perceptions of gender and sexuality, offering alternative narratives and perspectives. It can demystify and destigmatize LGBTQ+ identities, presenting them as integral parts of the human experience rather than as outliers or anomalies (Ahmed 2006). By integrating public art into gender education, educators and communities can leverage the emotional and intellectual impact of art to enhance understanding, acceptance, and respect for all individuals, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. This approach not only enriches gender education but also contributes to the creation of a more inclusive and compassionate society.

In the next section, I want to highlight how LGBTQ+ themed public art has fostered visibility and inclusion, as Butler (1990) might have anticipated. These artworks render queer identities visible in the public sphere, promoting a sense of belonging among marginalized communities. By presenting diverse and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, public art functions as a performative assertion of LGBTQ+ presence and legitimacy: they engage the public in a dialogue that fosters understanding and inclusivity.

Suburban rainbowization

Queer street art, exemplified by vibrant rainbow crosswalks, serves as a dynamic form of activism that transcends mere aesthetic enhancement to challenge societal norms and champion LGBTQ+ rights. These colorful installations, dotting urban landscapes worldwide, do more than beautify city streets; they signal a profound message of inclusivity and welcome for all identities, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Lord and Meyer 2013).

Far from being just decorative, these crosswalks stand as powerful instantiations of LGBTQ+ pride, visibility, and resilience, representing

community unity and the continuous fight for equality. This call for visibility and support introduces the critical perspective of 'rainbow infra-struggles,' as explored by Bain and Podmore (2023). Their analysis critiques how 'rainbowization' attempts to enhance LGBS visibility within suburban spaces, yet often fall short of offering/receiving substantive community support. This practice, while aimed at signaling progressiveness, may inadvertently align with neoliberal agendas that prioritize the appearance of cosmopolitan diversity over addressing the genuine needs and challenges of sexual and gender minorities. This dichotomy between intent and impact reveals the complex interplay between visibility efforts and the actualization of meaningful support for LGBTQ+ communities.

If we take Butler's theory of gender performativity, we might interpret these rainbow crosswalks and broader 'rainbowization' initiatives as acts that challenge traditional gender norms and binary understandings of identity (see Figure 1). They represent more than just LGBTQ+ identity markers. They actively participate in the social construction of gender, advocating for a fluid and inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality. In this case, we can sense the transformative power of public art in redefining societal perceptions of gender, showcasing how these installations do more than occupy physical space – they catalyze shifts in social consciousness (Butler 1990).

Consequently, initiatives like rainbow crosswalks can help cultivate a more inclusive society, enlightening the public about the importance of visibility and support for LGBTQ+ communities. This integration of art, activism, and education manifests the transformative potential of public



Figure 1. Rainbow Crosswalk in Washington, DC, June 2017. This crosswalk was part of a community-led initiative to show Washington, D.C.'s commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Photo by Ted Eytan, used under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 License.

spaces to foster understanding, acceptance, and solidarity in the ongoing journey toward equality for all.

The AIDS memorial quilt: stitching together memory, grief, and activism

The AIDS Memorial Quilt, initiated in 1987, is a monumental effort to memorialize the lives lost to AIDS. Featuring over 48,000 panels, it serves as a collective expression of grief, love, and defiance. Each panel, uniquely designed to commemorate an individual, weaves together personal stories of loss, creating a tapestry of collective memory and unity. This artwork transcends conventional acts of remembrance, and has become a platform for LGBTQ+ heritage preservation and a rallying cry for community solidarity and action in the face of the AIDS crisis (Sturken 1997).

The quilt emerged as a profound response to societal and governmental neglect during the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Its production challenged the stigma, fear, and silence surrounding AIDS, transforming personal loss into a public, visual, and emotional plea for recognition, understanding, and change. The quilt's existence and continued relevance underscore the ongoing impact of AIDS, fostering dialogue on treatment, prevention, and the pursuit of a cure (Blair and Michel 2007). The AIDS Memorial Quilt exemplifies Butler's notion of performativity in its public narration, and evocations, of grief and remembrance. Each panel performs a counternarrative to the societal erasure of LGBTQ+ lives lost to AIDS, challenging the public to confront the reality of the epidemic and the individuals it affected. The quilt's collective assembly and display act as a performative gesture of community identity, resilience, and demand for recognition and rights (see Figure 2). The quilt educates and mobilizes the broader community, converting private grief into an instrument for public awareness and activism. It serves as a dynamic form of public pedagogy, encouraging critical reflection on the AIDS crisis, the responses it elicited, and the ongoing needs and challenges of the LGBTQ+ community. By fostering empathy and understanding, the quilt contributes to a broader societal commitment to combating AIDS and supporting those affected (Brier 2009).

Keith Haring's art: embodying the universal language of liberation

My final reflection concerns Keith Haring's murals; with their distinctive style and social messages, they amply demonstrate the power of art to connect, communicate, and liberate (Gruen 1992). His works, especially those commemorating significant events like the Stonewall riots, reflect



Figure 2. Display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt at the 46th Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, National Mall, Washington, D.C., July 2012. Photo by Elvert Barnes, used under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 License.

LGBTQ+ history in the collective memory of society. Haring's art engages directly with social issues and embodies the universal language of art as a means of liberation and connection among LGBTQ+ communities worldwide (Gruen 1992). Haring's murals, including those at the Stonewall Inn, function as monuments to historical events and enhance urban landscapes through their pictorial and aesthetic qualities. These works are also educational resources, embedding significant moments and figures of LGBTQ+ history within the social fabric.

The mural at the Stonewall Inn, in particular, represents the beginning of the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement and illustrates the importance of public art in commemorating shared history (Buchhart et al. 2014). Haring's *Once Upon a Time* mural similarly reflects LGBTQ+ themes and helps enable community engagement. This work demonstrates Haring's commitment to visibility and support for the LGBTQ+ community (Ziegler 2018; see Figure 3).

Haring's murals provide alternative representations that celebrate diversity and resilience, contributing to the deconstruction of normative gender roles and identities. Haring's art aligns with Butler's model, because works perform gender identity, as is it constructed and enacted within public contexts. I would also underscore that Haring's murals serve as gateways to education and dialogue, inviting observers to engage with the complexities of LGBTQ+ history and the ongoing fight for rights (Kolossa and Haring 2004). They ignite thoughtful dialogues, at the same time they challenge societal norms. As dynamic elements of



Figure 3. Keith Haring, '*Once Upon a Time*' mural, New York City, 1989. This artwork reflects LGBTQ+ themes and highlights Haring's dedication to visibility and advocacy within the community. Photograph by Ziegler (2018).

public pedagogy, these artworks leverage the visual medium to impact perception, inspire action, and effect change, ensuring that the struggles and triumphs of the LGBTQ+ community are remembered and also honored and learned from (Buchhart et al. 2014).

Concluding words

As public pedagogy, this selection of artworks offer accessible venues for gender education outside traditional academic settings. This must remain ongoing. Rainbow crosswalks and 'rainbowization' initiatives, despite critiques, begin conversations on inclusivity and the complexity of LGBTQ+ experiences in public spaces. The AIDS Memorial Quilt is as a poignant educational tool, humanizing the AIDS crisis and eliciting empathy and social consciousness. Similarly, Haring's murals provide historical context and inspire collective reflection on LGBTQ+ rights and identity.

These public artworks catalyze dialogue and critical thinking, inviting individuals to question and learn about the nuances of gender and sexuality. By embodying the principles of gender performativity, they underscore the performative nature of social change itself – how visibility, representation, and commemoration can alter perceptions and foster a more inclusive understanding of gender diversity. The integration of LGBTQ+ themed public art into urban planning signifies a transformative approach toward inclusivity and diversity within public spaces. This strategic incorporation demonstrates municipalities' deep-seated

commitment to fostering acceptance, equality, and unity within their communities. These collective endeavors can generate environments with safety and acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals into the urban fabric. The shift in urban design may facilitate ongoing discussions on LGBTQ+ rights and visibility (Bain and Podmore 2021). By embedding these artworks across cityscapes, urban spaces are reimagined as vibrant platforms that feature diverse narratives and identities within the LGBTQ+ community.

Ultimately, LGBTQ+ themed public art, through its embodiment of resistance, memory, and community pride, is a dynamic domain for gender education. Public spaces as arenas for learning can challenge societal norms and promote acceptance. Artworks depict LGBTQ+ identities and participate in the active construction of gender as a diverse and inclusive category. As such, they provide invaluable opportunities for public engagement with gender education, and can highlight the transformative power of art in shaping social consciousness and advancing the cause of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.

Note

1. An exhaustive literature review is unnecessary here, but I do wish to acknowledge the importance of positionality (Dolan 2012), since contemporary art research and practices need to emphasize reflexivity and the subjective nature of interpretation (Butler 1990). My approach in this position essay aims to be both academically rigorous and also personally resonant.

Disclosure statement

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

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Dr. Somi Lee is a Teaching Assistant Professor in the Art Education department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, within the School of Art and Design. Her research centers on exploring diversified urban public policies, culture and education through the lens of art, with a primary aim of promoting social equity. Through her work, she actively contributes to anti-racism initiatives by deepening our understanding of lived experiences shaped by racialization.

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International Society of the Learning Sciences

Democratic Interventions on Walls: Embracing Plurality and Differences Through Street Arts

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Abstract: Graffiti and street art are unsanctioned urban artifacts outside art institutions. Nevertheless, graffiti and street art are seen as self-expression by their practitioners and these art forms have pedagogical values as they raise questions on political, social, and creative issues within the society. The myriad of voices that echo on these walls resembles a democratic space that accommodates plurality and differences. In this paper, we examine how six graffiti and street artists implicitly or explicitly practice public pedagogy as described in Biesta's work. Our analysis shows that their urban interventions exhibited "activist", "experimental" and "demonstrative" qualities of public pedagogy while also being engaged in active learning about their contexts and art practices.

Introduction

Our study explored the dynamics of the modern graffiti movement and its global impact through the lens of public pedagogy and plurality. Originating in Philadelphia in the mid-60s and evolving into diverse forms globally, graffiti has often served as a medium for marginalized individuals to express themselves (Stewart, 1989). Drawing on Biesta's (2014) concepts, the study dealt with the interconnectedness of action, collective engagement, and the recognition of diverse perspectives within the artists' portrayal of their work. The paper navigates the neoliberal influences on urban spaces, the challenges posed by corporate dominance (Zieleniec, 2016), and gender disparities in street art. The analysis manifests narrative elements within street art, illustrating how artists interpret their city and their work within that environment for further narration associated with the physical location, and how the artists draw inspiration from their surroundings. Street artists challenge the perceptions of public spaces and promote diversity, fostering public pedagogy and plurality in urban spaces through vibrant narrative expressions.

Plurality in graffiti art refers to the diversity and complexity of graffiti as a form of expression, reflecting the hybridity and multiplicity of the artists and their communities. Different scholars have explored the concept of plurality concerning graffiti. Vanderveen and Eijk (2016) argued that plurality entails recognizing and respecting the diversity of perspectives, identities, and voices within society. They further suggested that plurality is a paradoxical aspect of graffiti, as it can be perceived as both vandalism and art. Thus, plurality can be a form of public pedagogy, social justice, and community empowerment, which can be seen as a way of challenging the dominant narratives and norms of society and creating alternative spaces for dialogue and representation.

Our goal for this study was to comprehend how street artists experiment and interact with the public, each driven by diversified objectives and narratives. We explored the varied voices, including women's and the narratives of these street artists to navigate the nuanced process of expression, how this plurality influences the formation of public perceptions, and how this influence reverberates back to the artists themselves.

Street art, critical public pedagogy, and plurality

Critical pedagogy involves a perspective that challenges established power structures and seeks transformative education. The practices of graffiti and street artists align with the transformative and empowering aspects of critical pedagogy, challenging authority and expressing a reclamation of public space through creative and subversive means (Ho & Kim, 2022; Freire, 1970/2002). Street artists often challenge capitalist power structures by re-authoring spatial narratives, advocating for their inclusion in art curricula as a means of empowerment and transformation aligned with justice and activism (Ho & Kim, 2022; Eldridge, 2013). Despite street art's cultural and aesthetic contributions to urban spaces and narratives, the ongoing hostile portrayal of graffiti as destructive can be linked to a historical context of discrimination based on class, race, gender, and ethnicity (Pennycook, 2010). Scholars suggest that the actions of graffiti and street artists, as they defy the power and oppression they experience to transform public spaces, resonate with the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2002).

In view of this, we turn to Biesta's (2014) public pedagogy. The graffiti movement has far-reaching effects as it has inspired similar actions globally, and various kinds of street art emerged from its humble roots. This unfettered trajectory takes after what Biesta (2012, 2014) pointed to in Arendt's work, that action requires others to act upon, in doing so, freedom can be achieved, and it must exist in collectivity. Biesta (2014) contended

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that the vibrancy of the public sphere and public pedagogy is inherently tied to the principle of plurality, which involves recognizing and respecting diverse perspectives, identities, and voices, encouraging democratic engagement. The acknowledgment that there is no universally accepted truth further underscores the significance of embracing this diversity. Public pedagogy for Biesta (2014) is to work in the interest of the public condition of plurality, creating a realm where engagement of discourse can exist openly, and it shifts away from sameness and homogeneity and embraces diversity. For Biesta (2014), the ideal public pedagogy disassociates from the traditional schooling of teaching and learning and is composed of multiple pedagogies (activist, experimental, and demonstrative). Some scholars emphasize the criticality of arts, and use the term, *critical public pedagogy* (e.g., Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). Operating as experimental educational approaches, they generate numerous methods and outcomes derived from their socio-cultural experiences, thereby manifesting the possibilities of approaching activities in varied ways (Biesta, 2014; Cooper & Sandlin, 2019).

Definitions and terminologies

Broadly speaking, graffiti is a letter-based expressive form found in public places, and may include illustrative elements like cartoon characters in its composition. Street art is an evolution of graffiti as a result of the rigorous crackdown on graffiti by the authorities. Street art tends to be image-centered. Stickers, stencil art, wheat paste, and tile art are examples of street art. From the stance of the law, graffiti and street art are both illegal as they are performed without permission (we are mindful of the complexities of the definitions and the legality of graffiti and street art; however, it is not the intention of this paper to engage in a debate on those two areas). There are legal variations of graffiti and street art such as legal graffiti, murals, or other aesthetic forms that are carried out in public areas with the consent of property owners. Acknowledging these diverse practices, we refer to those who practice illegal graffiti and street art, and legal graffiti and street art as "street artists" hereafter.

The study

This study used phenomenological reflection on the experiences of street artists (van Manen, 2003), exploring how their experiences are narrated through their work and its impact on public pedagogy. The first author led the study by reaching out to artists active on social media platforms, specifically Instagram, from various parts of the world. For data collection, we used written and Zoom interviews, social media conversations and posts, and information from other websites. We first sent them a set of questions through Google Form and communicated through social media chat messages. We then asked follow-up questions using different response formats of artists' preferences, such as email, Instagram messages, and audio chats.

The analysis focused on the phenomenon of artists asserting their presence and voice on the walls of their cities for the public to perceive. The artists' responses provided an opportunity for both the artists and the researchers to contemplate their personal narratives, practices, and artifacts. We paid special attention to their presence as a means to diversify, alter, and destabilize the narratives of the visual urbanscape, typically dominated by establishments of authority (hegemonic values). This involved considering their use of space, how they reconfigure it, and how they appropriate the urban environment.

Recognizing the limited representation of women's voices in street art and its research, we made continuous efforts to include their perspectives in our work by reaching out to female artists around the world. We also gather perspectives of practitioners from countries with emerging graffiti scenes (Southeast and North Asia, Eastern and Central Europe, North Africa, and Central and South America). Gaining access to non-English speaking graffiti and street art communities, however, proved to be a challenge due to our research team's limited language capacities. We could only gather data from artists around the world who were willing to continue our exchange in English. We engaged in online conversations with potential participants (10 female and 15 male artists) to develop trust and eventually invited them to join our research. Of the four female and five male artists who agreed to participate, only two female and four male artists fully participated in initial and follow-up interviews. The female artists include Bruna from Brazil and Chinagirl from Austria. The male artists are Bamamo from Hungary, Drash from North Macedonia, Tukeone from the US, and EASY from Poland. While participants had the option to utilize pseudonyms and fictitious city names via informed consent to protect their identities, they agreed to use their artist names and their countries and cities.

Although we gave them the option to conduct a voice interview, most of them preferred to write their responses via email or online chats. We examined their written interviews and online chat recordings, looked for significant and reflective episodes, and analyzed the artworks they sent or their posts on Instagram. For data analysis, we conducted a detailed examination of the interviews, carefully analyzing every word and line. For each sentence, we recorded our reflections on the artists' patterns of thought. These reflections were critically compared among us to identify distinct categories, which naturally evolved into themes. After examining the data, we found that the artists' practices are exploratory and innovative, and have the potential to advocate social

changes. Hence, we adopted Biesta's activist, experimental and demonstrative pedagogies as a framework to further the discussion of public pedagogy. In writing this article, the artists were provided a draft of how they were being depicted and they were allowed to contest it if they felt misrepresented.

Findings: Plurality and differences of graffiti narratives

Contemporary urban politics are largely defined by neoliberalist logic, driven by powerful corporations emphasizing efficiency and consistency (Zieleniec, 2016). This homogenization is an adversary of democracy (Giroux, 2006) that values plurality and differences. In neoliberalist logic, everything is commodified for profits, and graffiti and street art are no exception. Auction houses, museums and galleries are some of the cultural sites that profited from the commodification of the art form (Ross, Lennon & Kramer, 2020). Visual reconfiguration of the city by street artists is at odds with neoliberalist vision to privatize public space for corporate needs. Historically, graffiti was framed as a crime associated with black and Latino youths, and these impoverished communities of color were scapegoated for the decline of the city (Dickinson, 2008). The neoliberalist cities strive to establish social and spatial control by policing, surveillance and enforcement of penalties. A participant from Brazil, Bruna, mentioned how she seeks authorization to avoid engaging in illegal activities related to graffiti. Bruna said: "While graffiti becomes a contemporary art, graffiti is synonymous (in common sense) with vandalism. However, without proper authorization to occupy spaces, whether public or private, both are considered a crime here in Brazil. As I work a lot with commercial art, I have authorization from companies and for public places I end up asking for it too" (Bruna, Written Interview, April 10, 2023).

Corporate presence is prominent in the visual aspects of urban settings, contributing to visual clutter through signs, advertisements, and billboards. This control reveals the extent to which corporations shape the urban visualscape (Christensen & Thor, 2017) without adequate consultation with the residents who live in these areas (Pennycook, 2010). Tukeone, a Denver-based graffiti artist questions its legitimacy: "Does a billion-dollar company have the right to advertising space just because they paid for it… well I'd say at this point it could be debated because we can easily take that space from you to use for ourselves and ironically I feel more and more of society is agreeing with us" (Tukeone, Written interview, April 10, 2023). Biesta (2012) warned that as neoliberalism dictates our lives, private corporations become legitimate contributors in shaping our everyday experience, thus threatening democracy and leading to the decline of the public sphere. Whether illegal or legal, graffiti and street art celebrate a cornucopia of styles, forms, actions, meanings, personal experiences, and opinions. What binds them is their public character and their accessibility to the people on the street. To remake public space, graffiti and street artists mobilize the necessary resources to create their art for public consumption. To understand how public pedagogy can be enacted in the interest of publicness, Biesta (2014) identified three aspects necessary to foster plurality and freedom: activist, experimental, and demonstrative. Biesta's (2014) interpretation of public pedagogy specifically addresses the interplay between art and learning in public spaces. Biesta's (2014) framework uniquely highlights how street art can enact activism, experiment with new forms of expression, and demonstrate alternative narratives, directly correlating with our study's focus on the educational impact of street art within urban environments. Organizing the artists in thematic structure is not an attempt to confine or limit them, but rather, to illustrate and rethink activist, experimental, and demonstrative pedagogies in a different light.

Activist pedagogies of female artists

Drawing from Arendt, Biesta (2014) maintained that "to be able to act we therefore need others—others who respond to our initiatives and take up our beginnings. It also means that action is never possible without plurality" (p.19). This is the very nature of activist work and "we cannot act in isolation" (Biesta, 2014, p.19).

Chinagirl Tile

Frustrated by the limited attention women get in the graffiti and street art scene, Chinagirl Tile, an Austrian tile artist (specifically bone china, a type of ceramic material), started "Hands off the Wall" (Figure 1a) Street Art and Graffiti Festival for Women in 2016. Her festival mission statement highlights the neglect women face in the art fraternity: "Gender inequality is a sad reality within the art world, women are often underrepresented or not showcased at all at festivals and exhibitions. Sometimes you have to remind people that there are actually s**tloads of great female artists out there who simply are overlooked because they are female" (Chinagirl Tile, 2019). Her initiative gains support from fellow women artists, affirming their competence and artistic prowess on par with their male peers. Furthermore, The choice of the name "Chinagirl" is explained as a deliberate effort to make her gender visible in a male-dominated scene.

I decided to take the China(girl) as a way to actually describe what materials I'm working with. And I chose to actually put the girl in there because back then, you didn't see the ladies in the scene. There were quite a few actually, and more than people know. But you wouldn't know of them because they're hidden behind pseudonyms. So I decided to actually make it visible to the public that I'm female. That was on purpose. It was basically, 'Hello, I'm here,' a call to all the ladies as well. So that's how I got my name (Chinagirl Tile, Zoom interview, November 4, 2023).

Figure 1

Chinagirl Tile's Art in Bristol, England: (a) Bristol Calling, Upfest 2016, July 2016; (b) Geoffrey the Giraffe, "It's a Zoo up there," July 2018

(a)  (b) 

Bruna

Sharing the same sentiment that there are very few women artists in the street art scene, Brazilian female street artist Bruna relates: "I like to think that my work adds a female vision in the public space and the vision that we are everywhere…and try to portray female figures to empower more women" (Bruna, Written interview, April 10, 2023). Bruna's women's portraits occupy large surfaces on the walls she paints. They are close-ups of women's faces (Figures 2a and 2b) and in another instant, she depicts an extreme close-up of the woman's eyes (Figure 2c). These close-ups are intimate and emotional and it invites the viewer to engage in their world. Realism heightens their existence. The act of making women visible on a monumental scale in public spaces has an activist dimension to it and is a political statement that changes the narrative of the urbanscape giving women more power and voice. Bruna's remarks manifest the gender imbalance within the local street art scene as a prevailing condition from the viewpoint of an engaged street artist since 2016. One of her goals is to communicate the gender disparity to the public through her presence and work towards bridging this gap.

Figure 2

Close-Up Portraits of Women by Bruna



Their collective actions reflect "the creation of real alternatives, that is, alternative ways of being and doing—of acting in concert—that reclaim opportunities for public relationships-in-plurality… It is, therefore, about the creation of ways of being and doing that, on the one hand, resist and push back the logic of the market and that, on the other hand, resist and push back incursions from the private sphere" (Biesta, 2014, p.23).

Experimental pedagogies of pluralistic inventions

Experimental educational work "is about the invention of new ways of being and doing" (Biesta, 2014, p.23). Street artists are constantly seeking novel and unconventional methods to inform their art, suggesting to their viewers new possibilities of seeing and engaging the world.

EASY

The iconic arrows, dynamic curves, spikes, bubble letters, and quick marker tags are not the visual aesthetics of EASY's graffiti. EASY, a Polish street artist is more influenced by 20th-century art masters (such as Mondrian, Rothko, Pollock, Liechtenstein, MC Escher and etc.) than graffiti and street art. Lettering is central to his graffiti, and he is constantly looking to re-interpret the designs of his letters. In one of his large-scale graffiti projects (44m x 13m), he experiments with wall angles and M.C. Escher's impossible objects to redefine graffiti. The rendition of an impossible object relies on calculated measurements and optical illusions to trick the eye. The illustrated 3D object can only occur in 2D rendering but not in reality. The site as seen in Figure 3a, is carefully curated by EASY to execute his lettering. The inclined wall provides opportunities for optical illusion, In his words: "when you move along the painting or you move away from it, the proportions of the letters seem to change (like if the letters were dancing)" (EASY, Instagram chat, August 18, 2023). EASY clones himself in the photo to depict multiple vantage points and the scale of the work. The resulting style of the graffiti is balanced, restrained, and minimal, a far cry from what traditional graffiti looks like. His approach demonstrates the possibility of varied interpretations but also invites viewers to rethink their interactions in the public sphere, fostering the potential for shifting perceptions.

Figure 3

EASY's Graffiti: (a) Rendition of Impossible Oobjects under an Inclined Wall under a Bridge in Warsaw; (b) An Eexample of a Re-Interpreted Letter

(a)  (b) 

Bamamo

The experience of living through communism, democracy, and dictatorship in Hungary has left indelible marks on Bamamo's artistic narratives. These tumultuous eras experienced by Bamamo are ingrained in his wheatpaste by means of popular cultural artifacts. Layered with subtext, Bamamo embeds critiques in his wheatpaste to highlight the economic hardship faced by fellow Hungarians who are left behind by the growth purported by political entities. One of his prints (Figure 4a) reveals a malaise that looms heavy over Hungarian society exposing the struggles of the people. He laments that: "Alcoholism is quite a big problem in the country, and these small empty bitter and shot bottles can be found everywhere littered in the streets. This art represents the bottled hopelessness of the Hungarian people as the labels say: 'Bitter','Hungarian','Reality'" (Bamamo, Written interview, May 23, 2023).

Figure 4

Bamamo's Wheatpaste: (a) Keseru Magyar Valosag (Bitter Hungarian Reality); (b) Indiana Jones with the Canned Liver

(a) 

(b) 

In another wheatpaste (Figure 4b), Bamamo constructs an offbeat allegory, "Indiana Jones with canned liver", where the fictitious relic hunter is seen making a lunge to seize the can of Sertésmájkrém (liver paste) foregrounded on a pedestal, like a precious heirloom. With this, he teasingly alludes to the economic disparity of two very different political ideologies: "I already mentioned Indiana Jones with the canned liver. Every household

has had this canned liver since the 70s, and it comes with the same golden design since then. Which makes it even funnier that one of the cheapest meals comes in a golden can" (Bamamo, Written interview, May 23, 2023). Creativity and humor can be subversive as it destabilizes social norms and ideologies. The capacity to laugh at institutions of power signifies resistance and a rejection of official rhetoric (Bakhtin, 1984).

Drash

In a playful tone, Drash, a Macedonian street artist, invents an imaginative world filled with joy and whim. This world is inhabited by fantastical characters other than humans, insinuating diversity (figure 5). They are seen living harmoniously or embarking on journeys together. While naïve and idealized, this portrayal has the quality that is "oriented toward cooperation and the hard work of living together in plurality and difference" (Biesta, 2014, p. 23). Drash encourages one not to be a passive reader but to interpret his art based on their own interpretation. Drash highlights: "Every piece has it's own story... I would like everybody to see the art form from their own perspective and the characters and the forms to be the lead to the personal story on their own" (Drash, Written interview, August 9, 2023). This further underscores that meanings are unfixed and polyphonic and it reinforces that if we deny the voices of others, we are also hindering their freedom to act (Biesta, 2012). Through their actions, we see how they embrace experimentation by innovating practices and creating new visions, suggesting new likelihoods, which in turn enrich the public sphere and support diversity.

Figure 5
Graffiti Murals by Drash



Tukeone

Oppression, personal beliefs, and reaching one's full potential is a kind of ideal growth we seek as humans. Coming from a disadvantaged background and getting himself into trouble with the law as a youth, Tukeone overcame the obstacles and became an accomplished artist working on commissioned works and murals on national and international levels (Figure 6).

> …artists like myself who defy the odds and make something beautiful in forgotten places of decay and gentrification give people hope and shift their mood to feel that they still matter…most graffiti writers coming up in these neighborhoods, they have been told most of their lives that they don't matter… if you're thinking outside the usual box you can do just about anything you set your mind to…"Art has always been the voice of revolution but it also has the capability to transform someone's mentality about the status quo (Tukeone, Interview, April 10, 2023).

Figure 6
Graffiti Art and Commercial Work by Tukeone



Tukeone reinvented and transformed himself from a marginalized individual to an active contributing member of the street art scene. His graffiti challenges societal norms, expressing bold resistance. Tukeone aims to diversify street art, contributing to an inclusive community through interactive murals. Transforming decay

into vibrant expressions, his art embodies rebellion, shaping perceptions of the status quo. His personal narrative of reinvention and his transformational street art defy the odds and societal beliefs. However, he demonstrated that there are new pathways of doing and being that align with Biesta's experimental pedagogy.

Demonstrative pedagogies of sanctioned and unsanctioned street art

Our findings demonstrate the transformative power of street art in shaping public perceptions, with a particular focus on diversity and plurality. In their activist and experimental work, street artists embody notions of plurality, showcasing diversity and uniqueness. The artists in our study have demonstrated their capabilities by confronting challenges and expressing their identity, values, and skills. These actions align with the principles of demonstrative pedagogy, illustrating that "it is possible to do things differently" (Biesta, 2014, p.23).

When addressing the challenges of women's invisibility and underrepresentation in street art, Chinagirl Tile confronts these issues by creating opportunities for female street artists in the festival she initiated. Building support from arts and corporate partners not only strengthens their presence but also validates their perspectives and talent. Bruna, in her effort to paint portraits of women in the city, seeks permission to amplify her cause of empowering women's voices and status. By gaining official approval to feature empowering images of women, their lasting impact on the streets is assured, contributing to the expansion, and normalization of women's presence in the city. Both women are shaping alternative narratives of their urban landscapes.

The graffiti and street artists in our study operate in diverse circumstances—some in authorized spaces, while others navigate unsanctioned contexts. Operating within unsanctioned spaces exposes street artists to legal risks as they engage in demonstrative pedagogy. Drash reflects on his experience, having been apprehended by law enforcement on more than 10 occasions. However, perceptions of graffiti art have evolved over the years in Skopje, and it is now embraced by the public. For EASY, contemporary art is central to his graffiti. Continuously integrating and reinterpreting his vision has led to unexpected results. He shares, "When I paint on the streets or in a place where I do it illegally, people don't bother me because they don't associate what I do with vandalism" (EASY, Instagram chat, November 16, 2023). EASY introduces a distinctive graffiti style to reclaim space in a novel manner. To navigate vandalism laws, Bamamo opts for wheatpaste as his medium, as it can be misconstrued as party or commercial posters affixed to the streets. This strategy blends his art with other street artifacts, inserting his voice into public spaces. Tukeone, who engages in both sanctioned and unsanctioned street art forms, incorporates alternative exit routes into his plans when executing graffiti writing.

The enforcement of rigorous state regulations to suppress dissent erases narratives and a rich array of artistic resources crucial for democratic societies. While illustrating the possibility of alternative approaches in state-controlled and corporate-owned spaces, street artists may encounter strict policing and penalties. Conflicting forces may intervene, hindering their efforts to create democratic channels for dialogue. Biesta (2012) contended that to uphold plurality, "as soon as we erase plurality, we deprive others of their actions and their freedom, and as a result, we deprive ourselves of our possibility to act, and hence our freedom" (p. 688).

Discussion

This paper illustrates the intersection of street art and public pedagogy, drawing on the works of six street artists. Informed by Biesta's public pedagogy framework, our analysis reveals the activist, experimental, and demonstrative qualities embedded in their urban interventions. The artists challenge the status quo and resist the homogenizing tendencies associated with neoliberalism, contributing to the democratic nature of public spaces.

A significant observation we derived from the graffiti artist' works and their explanations is the presence of narrative elements that convey stories within the context. Regardless of whether the artwork carries deep, weighty themes or lightheartedness, or even the absence of profound meaning, it reveals how the artists interpret their living environment, which is reflected in their creations. When facing challenges such as gender disparities and societal biases, the two female artists use their work to advocate for marginalized voices and contribute to the democratization of urban spaces. Chinagirl Tile mentions her role as the organizer of "Hands off the Wall," a street and graffiti festival for female artists, which aims to address the gender gap in the art world. Chinagirl Tile discusses the challenges faced by female artists, noting that gender biases often limit their visibility, irrespective of their artistic quality. She contends that male artists receive more acknowledgment, and their work surfaces more prominently due to deeply embedded biases within the art industry. Pabón (2016) asserted that women frequently encounter biases and skepticism concerning their artistic capabilities within the male-dominated field of street art. This issue is further exemplified by our own study, which faced challenges in recruiting female street artists, indicating the scarcity of female voices.

Street art is a powerful form of expression that can enhance the learning experience of students and teachers in different contexts (Eldridge, 2013). Specifically, the symbiotic relationship between street art and the specific characteristics of its surrounding community can be a compelling area of learning. Artists, in intentionally

choosing locations for site-specific exploration, foster dynamic interactions. This deliberate engagement encourages observations and reflective analyses of how the physical environment contributes to the layered meaning, and the context illuminates the depth of this relationship. Engaging artists with their surroundings fosters meaningful and authentic learning outcomes (Cooper & Sandlin, 2019). This engagement highlights the inherent connections between action, collective engagement, and the recognition of diverse perspectives within artists' works. Simultaneously, it embodies the synergy of place-based learning's focus on the local context and community while emphasizing the body's role in embodied learning.

Conclusion

The paper provides a comprehensive exploration of the dynamics of the modern graffiti movement and its global impact through the lenses of public pedagogy and plurality. We explored challenges posed by corporate dominance, and gender disparities, and emphasized the transformative power of street art. Using phenomenological reflection on the experiences of street artists, the study highlighted diverse narratives, challenges, and the potential of graffiti as a form of critical engagement and public pedagogy. The findings demonstrate the significance of plurality in urban spaces, inviting further exploration into the transformative power of street art. While this paper has explored the perspectives of various street artists, it is evident that voices from people of color are underrepresented. Moving forward, our research will expand on this group, aiming to ensure a more inclusive and comprehensive examination of diverse perspectives.

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