Murals, Street Art, and Graffiti: How Philadelphia Artists Maneuver the Politics of Public Space

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Abstract.........................................................................................................................2

II. Acknowledgements........................................................................................................3

III. Introduction....................................................................................................................4

   A. Background...............................................................................................................10

   B. Methodology.............................................................................................................15

IV. Chapter 1: Literature Review.......................................................................................19

V. Chapter 2: Mural Case Studies.......................................................................................29

VI. Chapter 3: How Murals Build and Interact With Communities.................................47

VII. Chapter 4: The Public Art Hierarchy.......................................................................67

VIII. Conclusion..................................................................................................................92

IX. Bibliography...............................................................................................................95
ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I conceptualize and analyze the distinctions between three kinds of public art in Philadelphia (murals, street art, and graffiti) using interviews that I conducted with various individuals from the Philadelphia public art community. As I do this, I provide small case studies of various murals created by the Mural Arts Program, I examine the Mural Arts Program community mural-making process and how it chooses which communities to collaborate with, and I analyze how members of the street art community and the Mural Arts Program conceptualize the differences between murals, street art, and graffiti. However, the underlying question of this thesis is one regarding the politics of public space, as the prioritization and illegalization of different kinds of public art makes a profound statement about who is welcome in a space and who isn’t.
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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever written on the walls of a bathroom stall? Have you ever etched your feelings into a desk in a classroom or library? Have you ever scribbled on the inside of a playground slide, on Jenga blocks, on posters on the street, or written something on a Post-It note and left it somewhere? In other words, do you have experience intervening in and expressing yourself in public space vis-à-vis written words or art? If so, you have something in common with mural artists, street artists, and graffiti artists.

My interest in murals and street art was something that accumulated gradually, as I was exposed to different kinds of murals and street art again and again. The first instance was at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, where I worked as a summer intern in 2015 and 2016. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival, organized by the Center, centered around Peru in 2015, and I was given the task of conducting/editing interviews with two Peruvian street artists. I didn’t anticipate how riveting their stories would be. One artist strung tales about hanging up his posters in the dead of night because street art was illegal under Lima’s government. I was given footage from Peru to edit, shot by a staff videographer, and watched the clips of him gluing his posters onto the wall over and over, partly because I had to choose which parts of the video to cut and include and partly because I was entranced. Lit by the orange glow of the street lights and underscored by the sound of beeping car horns and motorcycles whizzing by, he glued each poster up one by one using a paint roller smothered in clear glue, quickly glancing around every ten seconds or so, perhaps keeping an eye out for police.

In the fall of 2015, I went on a Philadelphia Mural Arts Program tour with a class I was taking at the time. I had noticed the murals and street art in Philadelphia before, but I had been
oblivious to their intricate backstories. Our charismatic tour guide told us in a booming voice about how the Mural Arts Program was dedicated to working with various Philadelphia communities, and as I looked at the faces in the murals, I imagined the communities behind the community mural process he described. The tour guide was a Mural Arts Program employee, so of course his job was to make the Mural Arts Program sound incredible-- and he absolutely did that. I left the tour thinking about the history of the murals I had seen and the alleged impact that they had on the people who were involved. I even decided to interview a mural artist from the Mural Arts Program for my final project for the class I had gone on the tour with, and the artist spoke with me about a mural he had made about suicide awareness, describing it as one of the most valuable and rewarding life experiences. When I visited the mural to take pictures of it for the final video project, I was struck first by its colossal size, and then by the faces of suicide victims and their families, which I knew from the artist had been painted by their families.

Finally, I lived in Madrid for the first half of 2016 when I was studying abroad, and was constantly bombarded by street art when I was there--when I went downtown, when I went out to dinner, even when I walked to the grocery store. I lived near a neighborhood called Malasaña, which is one of the two neighborhoods in Madrid that is famous for its street art. In May, I attended a street art festival in Malasaña where I watched dozens of artists...
put up graffiti or street art in broad daylight. Unaware of Madrid’s public art policies, I wondered if they were doing it legally or otherwise. I also frequented the other neighborhood famous for street art, called Lavapiés, and attended a few events in a building there called La Tabacalera, a tobacco factory turned cultural space that holds markets, concerts, photo exhibits, neighborhood collective actions, and street art/graffiti exhibits. I enjoyed looking at the graffiti on the walls surrounding the building, in addition to a series of underground pathways underneath the building that were also saturated with graffiti.

As I accumulated these experiences with murals and street artists, I became increasingly interested in the idea of intervening in public space in this specific artistic way and the effect that it has. Even more so, I was fascinated by who was transgressing public space and why. Every time I came across a new piece of street art or a mural I hadn’t encountered before, I wondered who the artist was and what their intention had been.

Murals, street art, and graffiti are public art forms inherent to nearly every city, where mural artists, street artists, and graffiti artists can lay claim to public space in a visually grabbing way. Sometimes this claim to public space is subtle, in the form of a small graffiti tag or poster, and sometimes it’s grandiose, in the form of a giant mural hugging the side of a building (for example, Josh...
Sarantitis’s mural *I Am The Atlantic* in Center City). In this thesis, I examine who creates the public art in a city, why some kinds of public art are legal and why some aren’t (specifically, murals vs. street art and graffiti), what kinds of communities are represented through these kinds of public art, and how these different kinds of public art interact with public space. Specifically, I focus my research on public spaces within Philadelphia, a city nicknamed the “City of Murals” because it has more murals than any other city in the world. I look at the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and why and how it has led to the proliferation of murals in the city and participated in the stigmatization and decline of street art and graffiti. I also look at the street art community and examine how streets artists freely associate themselves with their “illegal” work via their Instagram accounts or personal websites and why they are able to do so, in addition to examining why graffiti artists are elusive to this conversation.

My thesis is about how the different kinds of public art—murals, street art, and graffiti—interact with public space. But even more so, my thesis is about who is allowed to exist in public space, as I argue that the different kinds of public art are respected and seen as “legitimate” to various degrees not because of their aesthetics, but because of who makes them. While murals are oftentimes partially funded by the government, street art and graffiti are deemed to be illegal. This juxtaposition is meaningful because graffiti has often been viewed as a rebellious public art that is intrinsically linked to minority groups and racial and class tensions. In a way, graffiti is a way for minority communities to fight against systemic oppression by making them more visible in a world that makes them less so. Street art is also illegal, but most street artists are white and therefore unafraid to freely associate themselves with their work, due to white privilege and its relationship to law enforcement. Murals, on the other hand, are
considered to be one of the oldest art forms in the world and are often painted for commission by organizations like the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, and are oftentimes seen as more legitimate or artistic to street art. This is significant because the Mural Arts Program is a part-city organization consisting of people with more social capital than street artists or graffiti artists, and murals are legal. This implies that city bureaucrats and Mural Arts Program officials are allowed to impose themselves into public space whereas street artists and graffiti artists are not. Although the Mural Arts Program makes clear their dedication to collaborate with low-income and/or minority communities to create their murals, they sometimes instead impose what they think are important issues for the community as they ultimately decide on the mural’s design.

In this thesis, I first give a brief overview of the history of murals and street art in general and in Philadelphia in particular. I discuss the origins of graffiti and street art in Philadelphia and New York, and I discuss the creation and development of the Mural Arts Program in Philadelphia. Next, in the literature review, I introduce scholarship relevant to murals and street art and the politics of public space, dividing my analysis into three sections. In my analysis, I postulate that the legality and illegality of public art is inextricably linked to class segregation and structural discrimination. Next, I discuss how street art interacts with the city and public sphere to further elaborate on this argument. Finally, I explore the institutionalization of public art in order to provide some context and parallels to the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. After the literature review, I provide an overview of my methodology and explain who I interviewed, how, and why.

Following my methodology, I conclude with three chapters discussing case studies and my analysis of the interviews I conducted. My first chapter looks at various specific murals in
Philadelphia created by the Mural Arts Program and illuminates how the organization quickly gained momentum and money as its standards of artistry were elevated. It also discusses the various communities that the Mural Arts Program has worked with to make murals and sheds some light onto the collaborative mural-making process.

In my second chapter, I concentrate on how the Mural Arts Program conceptualizes itself, mostly drawing upon interviews that I conducted with Mural Arts Staff. I discuss topics including the communal ownership of public space, the politicality of murals, and the accessibility of public art. Ultimately, I argue that although the Mural Arts Program provides a platform for lower-income and minority groups to express themselves in the public sphere, they are still exclusionary in that they choose which groups to highlight, and they ultimately exert their own control over public space.

In my third chapter, I discuss the hierarchy between the different kinds of public art: murals, street art, and graffiti. I introduce these categories as “genres” and examine how their artists conceptualize these genres. I ultimately argue that public art and its categorizations are linked to class discrimination and social segregation, and that conceptualizations of public art as “tasteful” or “distasteful” are not related so much to the aesthetics of the art as to who makes it.

In my fourth chapter, I analyze the public art hierarchy as my interviewees understood it and analyze why murals, street art, and graffiti are viewed with varying levels of respect and enjoyment. I introduce the topic of genre and argue that each category of public art constitutes its own artistic genre. Ultimately, I argue that the hierarchization of public art is linked to class discrimination and social discrimination, and that the judgement of graffiti as “distasteful” has less to do with the aesthetics of the work as much as who created the work.
BACKGROUND

In this section, I provide a brief and broad overview of the history of murals, street art and graffiti to provide a context and better understanding of how these different kinds of public art have come to interact with the city today. The focus of this chapter is upon the history of two kinds of public art: graffiti, an illegal form of public art that can vary in complexity from simple “tags” (signatures of graffiti artists) to images that are sketched out beforehand, and murals, a legal kind of public art that requires more planning, money, and manpower than graffiti does, and is usually funded by organizations or wealthy donors. I will also briefly discuss street art, which is newer than graffiti and murals. My discussion here draws heavily from Talk About Street Art by Jérôme Catz (2014), a book that provides a meticulous detailing of the history of street art and the disparities between different kinds of street art.

According to Catz, public art has existed since nearly the beginning of time. Catz implies that public art is inherent to human nature, in that humans like to territorialize space, and public is a way for us to do it in a visual way. By colonizing space in a visual way, public art allows the artist to assert their own existence while being visually expressive. Therefore, because of its deep historical roots, the act of using art to lay claim to public space wasn’t completely groundbreaking when it exploded in New York in the beginning of the 1970s, although for that
generation it was. However, it was revolutionary in that it was the first time that public art emerged as an artistic movement, mostly in the form of graffiti and tagging (the act of creating a "tag") (Catz 2014, 24).

The act of tagging occurs when a graffiti artist leaves their signature on a wall using a spray can or a thick marker called a Posca. A graffiti tag usually attracts more tags, thereby eliciting a kind of public conversation amongst the graffiti community (Catz 2014, 16). When graffiti became popular in New York in the 1970s, the first taggers identified themselves in their districts by associating their names with streets, congregating with other graffiti artists who lived in their area. Therefore, communities of people involved in public art seem to have always been as important as the act of making public art itself.

As graffiti communities grew in New York in the 1970s, they were also sprouting up across the nation. Philadelphia was involved in the first wave of the graffiti and tagging movement in the 1970s due to its proximity to New York—in fact, Cornbread and Cool Earl, the fathers of graffiti in Philadelphia, are considered to be some of the first creators of street art today (Catz 40:2006). In addition to these east coast hubs of graffiti, there was also an active graffiti scene in California—the first signs of graffiti in Los Angeles were actually painted around 1940s by groups of Mexican origin. Later, in the 1970s, the graffiti movement in California exploded similarly to how it did in New York, but unlike in New York, it mostly revolved around gang culture. The first tags in Los Angeles were due to gangs and their various battles—for example, conflicts between the gangs the Crips and the Bloods left countless slogans tagged on the walls of certain districts (Catz 2014, 16). Therefore, graffiti in Los Angeles served as a way for different groups to assert their existence in the city, as the groups producing graffiti
were the ones who were often made to feel unwelcome. While graffiti interacted with and stemmed from a wide variety of different groups, it was mostly associated with the lower class, minorities, and gang culture. For this reason, it became stigmatized as an act of vandalism and eventually declared illegal.

Not long after the graffiti movements in the United States gained momentum, anti-graffiti laws ramped up in the 1970s and 1980s as graffiti became increasingly stigmatized (Catz 2014, 15). The subway in New York City had been one of the graffiti hubs where artists would leave tags and other kinds of graffiti, but in 1986 the Metropolitan Transportation Authority decided to remove any subway car with graffiti from use, thereby withdrawing an important graffiti center from circulation (Catz 2014, 32). Similar anti-graffiti sentiments were also expressed in nearby Philadelphia. The mayor at the time, Wilson Goode, initiated the Mural Arts Program as part of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network in 1984, which was meant to dispel graffiti through the city and establish murals instead. Through doing this, the program was meant to beautify the city by establishing murals and eliciting constructive dialogue while eradicating graffiti simultaneously (Catz 2014, 110).

After the mayor Wilson Goode established the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, he asked Philadelphia muralist Jane Golden to help develop the program (Catz 2014, 110). To do this, Jane Golden reached out to local graffiti writers “in order to redirect their energies into constructive public arts projects, ” or murals (Mural Arts Philadelphia). The basic premise of the Mural Arts Program is to work on these murals with local artists and the greater community while also using collective mural-making as a tool to build relationships, generate dialogue, and empower communities (Mural Arts Philadelphia). Their mission statement declares, “We believe
art ignites change” and that they aim to transform places, individuals, communities, and institutions through art to establish new standards of excellence in public and contemporary art (Mural Arts Philadelphia).

The Mural Arts Program is funded by donors including other organizations and wealthy individuals, and with this funding, they create murals to represent certain community groups. On the Mural Arts Program, anyone can apply for a mural to represent their community by submitting an application that includes the applicant’s organization, the proposed project and its significance to the community, the suggested location, and information about the applicant’s community and its commitment to this project. Therefore, communities can no longer represent themselves through street art as easily as they once could with graffiti, due to the processes of evaluation and broader claims of representativeness they are subjected to by having to submit community mural applications. The Mural Arts Program chooses which and how communities in the city are represented by choosing from amongst the applications sent in by different individuals, looking for criteria that I will describe in subsequent chapters.

So far I have highlighted the history of two different kinds of public art (graffiti and murals), but there is a third kind of public art that I will analyze in this thesis. Street art

Figure 4: Amberella, unnamed wheatpaste, 2017, Philadelphia, photograph by the author.
is a completely separate category from graffiti and murals. Similar to graffiti, street art is also an illegal art form, but the term is broader than graffiti because it can encapsulate public art of various mediums. Whereas graffiti strictly refers to a personal signature in a graffiti artist's unique handstyle vis-à-vis a tag, street art can refer to elaborate painted pieces that could resemble murals, yarn-bombing, wheat pastes, stencils, stickers, and even signs.

Wheatpastes are popular because once applied to a wall, they are difficult to remove, as they consist of a paper poster that is glued to a wall with wheat paste (flour mixed with boiled water), usually using a paint roller.

Yarn bombing is a type of knitted street art that employs knitted or crocheted yarn rather than paint.
METHODOLOGY

To answer my questions about the Philadelphia public art community, I conducted seven phone interviews with employees from the Mural Arts Program and three phone interviews with artists from the street art community. I also travelled to Philadelphia to take pictures of murals and street art. To find people to interview, I contacted the founder of the Mural Arts Program, Jane Golden, for her permission to conduct my study with her organization. After obtaining her permission, I reached out to Philadelphia Mural Arts Program employees using their emails that are clearly displayed on the organization’s website. I reached out to and heard back from four mural artists and three office employees who expressed interest in being interviewed. After interviewing the Mural Arts Program staff, I decided I needed to reach out the Philadelphia street art community, as the view of the public art community that I had been conceptualizing had been largely from the perspective of the Mural Arts Program. To find street artists to interview, I looked at a major Philadelphia street art blog. I reached out to the creator of the website, who I heard back from quickly saying that he was interested in being interviewed. In this interview I learned that the website creator, who is also a street art photographer, had played a major role in bringing the Philadelphia street art community together through their street art blog. Additionally, I found two street artists who expressed interest in being interviewed after I perused this street art blog and reached out to them after finding their Instagram accounts which included links to their websites and email addresses.

All of my interviews were conducted over the phone and audio recorded using the phone app “TapeACall” that records phone calls, and each one lasted around an hour. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I had questions prepared to make sure that we would discuss
all of the topics I wanted to cover, but also allowing the participants to elaborate on subjects that they found particularly compelling. I had different sets of questions prepared for the Mural Arts Program employees and the people for the street art community, although there was some overlap in the questions. Broadly, my questions for the Mural Arts Program employees were about how they became involved with the Mural Arts Program, what kind of work they did beforehand, how they would differentiate murals from street art and graffiti and how they conceptualize these different public art forms, how the Mural Arts Program interacts with various communities to create their murals, common themes between these murals, and how the public art scene has changed in Philadelphia has changed since the creation of the organization. My interviews with people from the Philadelphia street art community spanned topics such as how they became involved with the street art community, what they think of organizations like the Mural Arts Program, conflicts of public space, and again, how they conceptualize the differences between street art, graffiti, and murals.

I started off my interviewings by asking, “Can you introduce yourself and tell me about your position within the Mural Arts Program/Philadelphia street art community?” From there, I delved into more specific questions about how they conceptualize different kinds of public art. However, the topic of graffiti would often arise in the conversations before I had the chance to ask about it. After conducting various interviews where this happened, I wondered if I should also interview graffiti artists. However, as the street artists I spoke with pointed out, graffiti artists are far less likely to publicly associate themselves with their work due to the stigmatized nature of graffiti. Therefore, graffiti artists don’t have Instagram accounts or websites like most streets artists do, which would make them difficult for me to find. However, I do acknowledge
that the voices of graffiti artists would have been beneficial to my study and would have provided me with a more holistic view of what the Philadelphia public art scene looks like today. I wish that I could have interviewed some graffiti artists so I could have done more than read about and speculate over their stigmatization in addition to hearing about it from Mural Arts Program staff and street artists. However, the fact that none of the mural artists or street artists I spoke with personally knew any graffiti artists showed me how detached graffiti artists are from the rest of the public art community. Their absence from the conversation is valuable to me because it highlights and reflects how they are marginalized in and even erased from society in a similar way to how their art is.

It is also important for me to mention that nearly all of my interviewees are white. I interviewed two African American Mural Arts employees, but the other Mural Arts staff and people from the street art community I interviewed are white. The whiteness of the street artists that I interviewed is especially important to note because their white privilege is what allows them to freely public associate themselves with their “illegal” work, as they are less likely to be reprimanded for practicing an “illegal” art form than a person of color graffiti artist would. Additionally, all of the Mural Arts Program mural artists I interviewed were men, whereas all of the office employees were women. The street art photographer I interviewed was a man, and the two street artists I interviewed were women, which is interesting because most street artists tend to be men.

In addition to conducting interviews, I also travelled to Philadelphia to take pictures of murals and street art to include and discuss in this thesis. The older murals that I visited were on the outskirts of the city, whereas the newer murals that I visited tended to be closer to the center
of the city. I drove into the city and drove from mural to mural in order to efficiently view a wide range of murals that were created near the beginning of the Mural Arts Program’s creation and near the present day. In my second chapter, I discuss the different murals that I visited, their history, and their surrounding areas.

After transcribing all of the interviews I conducted, I read them all over, looking for similar themes, clashes in thinking, or things that surprised me. The following chapters are a result of the themes and ideas I discovered, including discussions of the legality and illegality of different kinds of public art, how public art interacts with public space, the institutionalization of public art, and murals and community building, amongst others.
CHAPTER 1: Literature Review

I. The Legality and Illegality of Public Art

As I first began to delve into the topic of the different kinds of public art, one of the first questions I had was simply, “Why is graffiti illegal whereas murals are not?” The answer might appear obvious: graffiti is a defacement of public property whereas murals are sanctioned by the government or by different organizations. However, I would like to explore and unpack these reasons by asking why graffiti is seen as a defacement of public property. Who typically owns this public property? Who declared that graffiti was a defacement of public property? Who creates graffiti, who supports it, and who is against it? Regarding murals, I believe that it is also important to ask who creates the murals, and who funds them? (The Philadelphia Mural Arts Foundation was created as part of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network, after all.) Both graffiti and murals are kinds of public art, yet seem to be fundamentally opposed, torn across the line of legality and illegality. Both are meant to communicate with an audience, but for some reason are not able to communicate with each other. It’s not even sufficient to declare graffiti as a lesser art form than murals, rather, it has been declared as completely illegal, removing a community’s way to express itself. In this section, I posit that the reason that graffiti threatens society so much is inherently tied to class segregation and structural discrimination as opposed to simply its transgressiveness. I will be focusing on graffiti rather than street art, which is a different kind of illegal art, due to graffiti’s more extensive history and discourse that surrounds it.

In my analysis of legality and illegality of public art, one of the main texts I draw upon is Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger; an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Her text helps to answer one of my key questions—why does graffiti threaten society enough so that it has
to be deemed illegal? Douglas argues that humans feel the need to construct a world with concrete categories, and that the disturbance of these categories implicates societal discord and challenges social order. She says, “if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained” (1966, 50). If dirt is matter out of place, as Douglas declares, then graffiti would inherently be seen as “dirty” within the eyes of society due to its transgressiveness.

However, where do these conceptions of what is “dirty” and what is not originate from? The condemnation of graffiti, an artistic form of expression, is constructed by a politics of exclusion. Similar to my claim, augmented by Douglas’s argument, that graffiti is seen as “dirty” and unacceptable due to its transgressive nature threatening the social order, Zohlbeg posits that when city dwellers and passerby look at graffiti, “the spell of reality is temporarily broken as they are forced to confront the artist’s alternative reality” (1990, 93). Because graffiti serves a way for minorities and the lower class to assert their existence in the city, when one looks at graffiti, they are forced to confront alternative realities that they may not consider otherwise: racism, poverty, class segregation, and structural discrimination. Wuggenig argues that not only does graffiti exist outside of the norms of cleanliness and order within a public space, but that it bolsters these norms (2009, 135). Therefore, as the viewer is forced to confront these alternative realities, these alternative realities are bolstered and concretized as the viewer registers the illegality of graffiti and the stigmatized connotation that it carries.

One of the alternative realities that graffiti forces the viewer to confront is class segregation because the condemnation is graffiti is inherently tied to class differences and the structural discrimination that constructs them. In this argument I draw upon Bourdieu, who
argues that social subjects are defined by their taste, and that their social standing defines their
taste (1984, 6). Zohlberg explains that taste preferences are cultural signs that can be used to
perpetuate social inequality and solidify class differences, so that the dominant classes inherently
have a "superior" taste (1990, 150). Therefore, taste preferences perpetuate social inequality
regarding public art because city bureaucrats condemn graffiti as "distasteful" due to its
association with minorities and/or lower classes, and therefore excludes these groups from being
able to represent themselves within the public space of the city.

To conclude, the illegality and legality of public art is inextricably tied structural
discrimination and class segregation. Although graffiti is illegal because it is transgressive, it is
transgressive because it represents the lower class and minorities asserting their existence in a
space where they are not welcome. Graffiti may be conceived of as "dirty" because it is "matter
out of place," but these notions of what is "dirty" and what is not are constructed by ideas
inherent to structural discrimination and class segregation. In the next section, I elaborate on
these ideas by discussing what graffiti's existence and illicitness in public space implies.

II. The Public Art Hierarchy

Obviously, murals are legal while street art is not, but the distinctions between these
different kinds of public art seem to run much deeper than the question of legality, as the
stigmatization and fear of certain kinds of public expression (such as graffiti) is what made them
illegal in the first place. DiMaggio discusses the topic of "genre" as central to the sociology of
art, and pronounces that the term "genre" simply refers to a "kind" or a "type" of art—therefore,
murals, street art, and graffiti constitute their own genres (1987, 441). DiMaggio argues that the
notion of genre presumes that there exists some kind of aggregation principle that enables
observers to sort cultural products into categories. He also states that the notion of genre represents “socially constructed organizing principles that imbue artworks with significance beyond their thematic content and are, in turn, responsive to structurally generated demand for cultural information and affiliation” (DiMaggio 1987, 441). Therefore, the categories of different kinds of public art--murals, street art, and graffiti--are socially constructed, and infuse these different kinds of artworks with significance beyond the thematic content that they feature. Therefore, even if a mural, a street art piece, and a graffiti tag all centered around the same topic, their different “genres” would cause them to be interpreted and construed in different ways.

DiMaggio also posits that different genres are created by artistic classification systems, which are systems that describe the way that the work of the artists is divided up both in the heads and habits of consumers and by the institutions that bound the production and distribution of separate genres (1987, 441). Art classification systems vary from society to society regarding how art is differentiated into genres and how these genres are ranked hierarchically by prestige.

III. Public Space and Street Art’s Claim to the Cityscape

Arguments of illegality and legality are intrinsically linked to power--specifically, to who has the power to claim public space. Although public space is coded as something belonging to all, it definitely isn’t--something that is made clear through the stigmatization and illicitness of graffiti. Graffiti is transgressive because it posits a claim to private ownership within a public space that isn’t truly public, as it is constructed on the kinds of exclusions that make the nature of graffiti transgressive in the first place. Low says that a concern with the public realm is integral to anthropological analysis as it lends itself to addressing social issues such as political conflict, social inequality, and racism, all of which are relevant to the stigmatization of graffiti within
public space (201, 390). Graffiti draws attention to economic cultural, and ethnic divides, and, as Shobe and Banis say, “constructing rigid views of graffiti and what belongs in public space reflects larger public discourses about who belongs and who doesn’t” (2014, 598).

In this section I draw upon Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, which he describes as a space where citizens who enjoy political rights join together to debate and discuss public issues. He also posits that the public sphere “may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public” (1989, 28). Habermas sees public space as democratizing, when in reality the creation of his conception of the public space is predicated on pushing others out. Fraser critiques Habermas’s singular and narrow conception of the public sphere, criticizing how it is essentially a political group composed of white men predicated on the exclusion of the lower class, women, and people of color (1993, 15). She discusses the merits of multiple publics as opposed to one, saying having multiple public spheres is more feasible in a stratified society (1993, 14).

The politics of exclusion, related to the public sphere and public space, are intrinsically linked to discussions of illegal public art such as graffiti because graffiti and graffiti-producing communities are excluded from public space. When creating public art is meant to serve as a way for artists and communities to assert their existence in the city, graffiti artists and their communities are excluded from doing so, as public space, though coded as belonging to all, does not belong to subaltern communities including the lower class and people of color, which are the groups most often associated with graffiti. Rather, public space belongs to the mostly white upper class, a group that holds much power in society and therefore holds the most power over public space. However, the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, a private organization, aims to
represent subaltern communities within the city, which may appear to give these communities
some power to lay claim over public space. This is partly true, as Mural Arts collaborates with
local communities to design and paint the murals that will represent them. However, Mural Arts
still has the power to decide who will be represented and where.

Space is polarized between being public and private—however, how equal is this divide?
Southworth bemoans the loss of “public life, of face-to-face interaction among strangers in
public spaces” due to the decline of urban public spaces and the deterioration of the distinctions
between the public and private as more and more public activities happen in private spaces
(2014, 39). There are not many truly public spaces left, as public spaces that are coded as
belonging to everyone often are not. Simpson says that even the city streets are not free or
democratic spaces, as they are domesticated, purified, and privatized “so as to exclude
non-consumers who are deemed to detract from the experience of that space,” in other words, to
exclude the lower class and minorities (2011, 418).

Because graffiti artists are excluded and censored from being able to lay claim to public
space, they are not able to assert their existence within the cities that they reside in. This means
that the streets and street walls don’t necessarily belong to the communities that reside within
those streets. On the other hand, murals funded by private nonprofit organizations such as the
Mural Arts Foundation are seen as acceptable within public space, and are even encouraged as
they fit within the confines of the “domesticated” street and are meant to beautify the city. Even
though the murals are often meant to represent lower class and minority communities, they are
still funded by private organizations and represent the increasing privatization of public space.
If graffiti artists are being censored within the “public” spaces of the city, how can they combat this censorship and what would their rebuttal indicate? Caldeira writes about graffiti and social inequalities in São Paolo and says that graffiti can serve as an intervention in a public space that transforms and articulates the profound social inequalities that the graffiti community faces (Caldeira 385). So, when a graffiti artist paints graffiti onto a wall while being fully aware of the illegality of the act, they are reaffirming their existence as “marginal and transgressors and speak from this position, they make strange an order of things, expose the flaw in its system of partitions, and open a dissensus about distributions” (Caldeira 2002, 416).

In conclusion, the kinds of public that are able to lay claim to public space are tied to the power of their producers. Public art produced by private organizations such as the Mural Arts Program is legal due to the fact that its murals are subsidized by private organizations. This implies that the city bureaucrats and organizations have more of a right to lay claim to public space than low income communities do, as graffiti, which is most associated with low income communities and minorities, is not legal within public spaces.

IV. The Institutionalization of Public Art

Graffiti was declared to be illegal in Philadelphia in 1984, but public art culture in Philadelphia has continued to change since then due to the institutionalization of public art. The institutionalization of public art is important because it affects who gets to legally be a public artist (i.e. who gets to lay claim to public space), what communities are represented in the permissible public art, how they are represented, and the nature of the cityscape in general. Furthermore, it’s important to examine how these organizations choose which communities are represented in public art. However, even though private organizations like the Philadelphia
Mural Arts program aim to highlight underrepresented communities in the public cityscape, they are still a private organization who lay claim to public space--therefore, the institutionalization of public art leads to this controlling of public space by private organizations, which can be detrimental to public culture.

To augment this argument, I will be drawing heavily from Cher Krause Knight’s book *Public Art: Theory, Practice*. Knight explains that like graffiti, murals explore the idea of “communal” ownership of public spaces that are being increasingly privatized (2008, 137). “Communal” ownership can refer to the shared values of communities, which is relevant to murals as they often aim to record local events and people and reflect the cultural and collective values of a community. Organizations like the Mural Arts Program attempt to facilitate “communal” ownership of murals as they actively collaborate with the communities represented in the murals in the design and painting process. However, the Mural Arts Program is still a private organization that holds power over this “communal” ownership.

Knight says that organizations like the Mural Arts are meant to reach effective means by harnessing “private energies for the public good,” implying that Mural Arts murals could be beneficial for the whole city. Indeed, the Mural Arts website states that they aim to “create art that transforms public spaces and individual lives” (Mural Arts). For example, the mural “Peace Wall” in the Grays Ferry neighborhood was proposed after the racial violence in the neighborhood made national headlines. The mural, which features hands of all shades converging, symbolizes the community’s commitment to ending racial division. Holleran states that arts institutions recently have begun to market their art “not as merely expressing political viewpoints but as actively contributing to a political dialogue that will remedy problems
associated with urban life,” similarly to how the Mural Arts website states that the mural helped the residents to “find common ground through art, becoming a symbol of hope and unity” (2014, 16) (Mural Arts). Holleran says that this is problematic because this implies that urban problems can be solved by restructuring and changing urban space alone rather than remaking and addressing power structures that cause urban problems in the first place (2014, 16).

The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program also holds “community paint days” that allow for the community to come together to help paint a mural. This kind of community participation, especially in a public art form, has become an expectation in “urban regeneration” in the past few years (Sharp 2007, 275). While discussing the idea of community participation to help improve a city, Sharp elaborates that it has become a touchstone for for contemporary urban policy in its attempts to provide a sense of collective identity and ownership. If community mural production is a part of “urban regeneration”, this implies that graffiti is seen as urban degeneration. However, the institutionalization of art in this context may serve to address urban problems, even though murals may not be the most effective medium through which to do so.

As organizations like the Mural Arts Program regulate street art and graffiti in the city and label murals as addressing and perhaps even helping to solve urban issues, the discourse around urban problems is shifted towards a language that emphasizes design and community empowerment as opposed to better city governance and infrastructural improvements (Holleran 2014, 15). However, even if murals were only solution to urban issues, their immutable nature prevents them from being able to address urban issues as they shift (Knight 2008, 142). Therefore, it is difficult for murals to adapt to public space as public culture naturally evolves. Although organizations like Mural Arts can and do plan temporary works, this is just one
example of how the private controlling of public space interacts with and can affect public culture.

In summary, the institutionalization of public art can lead to a decline in public culture, as it advances the phenomenon of private organizations controlling public spaces (For example, it has led to the diminishing of graffiti culture in the city). However, this is often meant to be a positive thing, as organizations like the Mural Arts Program attempt to elicit constructive community dialogue and social change through the art that they produce. Still, urban issues cannot be combated through visually changing urban space through murals alone, as they must be targeted at their roots, which are constructed socially.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve provided an overview and description of the major themes that I will be delving into throughout the rest of this thesis—the illegality and legality of public art, public art’s claim to the cityscape, and the institutionalization of public art. I have also provided an overview of why public art is inherently tied to class segregation, public space within the city, social politics, and urban anthropology in general—in addition to being a visually interesting cultural phenomenon.
CHAPTER 2: Mural Case Studies

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide a brief visual and contextual analysis for some of the Mural Arts Program’s most impactful and venerated murals, mainly drawing from interviews I conducted with staff artists and materials written on the Mural Arts Program website or written by Mural Arts staff. Through doing this, I am constructing a conceptualization how the Mural Arts Program interprets its own murals and how they have impacted city of Philadelphia. As the Mural Arts Program has developed over the years, it has increased its commitment with working with various communities to develop murals as its main goal has shifted from eradicating graffiti to community-based mural-making. According to the mural artists, the community mural process is an incredibly rewarding experience and that they can generally see improvements regarding a community’s cohesion or general well being. The Mural Arts Program has erected murals in nearly every neighborhood in the city, each chosen to address particular social issues or honor or memorialize certain individuals are respected within the neighborhood. Currently, the Mural Arts Program has a competitive application process through which different communities can apply to have a mural painted in their neighborhood. However, before Mural Arts developed into the internationally renowned organization that it is today, the process was simpler and most of the murals and their locations were personally chosen by Jane Golden, the organization’s founder. This was the case with the following mural:

II. Dr. J by Ken Twitchell (1990)

At nearly three stories high, the Dr. J mural isn’t the Mural Arts Program’s tallest mural, but it is its most revolutionary and impactful mural in terms of the program’s development. This
mural was one of the Mural Arts Program’s most revolutionary murals not only because it established a new level of artistic quality, but also because it was the first Mural Arts mural that was painted on parachute cloth instead of directly onto the wall of a building (Mural Arts Program). Dr. J was first painted in pieces onto large squares of parachute cloth that were then adhered to the wall’s surface, and the smooth surface of the cloth allowed the mural to feature incredible realistic detail ("Dr. J").

Nathaniel Lee, a Mural Arts staff artist, described the use of parachute cloth for the Dr. J mural as “the big gamechanger” for the organization (Lee 2017). David McShane, another Mural Arts staff artist, said that the overall response to the Dr. J mural was, “really powerful, and it opened up the window of what murals can do” (McShane 2017). The mural was truly transformative not only for the Mural Arts Program, but also for the rest of the city, as it helped the program receive money for the production of hundreds of other Philadelphia murals as it established a new level of respect for murals in the city due to its elevated artistry. This is because Golden raised money for her old friend, mentor, and nationally acclaimed California
artist Kevin Twitchell to paint the mural, knowing that his artistic talent would fulfill her ambitious vision.

Jane Golden described it as the program’s “breakthrough mural,” as it was painted in 1990, when the Mural Arts Program had not yet garnered the respect and reverence that it holds today. The mural also has a very commanding presence, due to Dr. J’s powerful stance, confident gaze, and elegant suit in the mural. The artist, Kevin Twitchell, even painted a shadow behind the full-length portrait, making it seem like Dr. J is almost three-dimensional. Golden said, “It shows that murals have the expectation to be great. The level of expectation was raised. The art snobs, people who’d been looking down at our murals, started to change. There was a ripple effect-- foundations and grants started to emerge” (Mural Arts Program).

When Jane Golden brought her old friend and mentor Ken Twitchell to Philadelphia from California to paint Dr. J, she felt “restless and desperate” to improve the quality of the murals and felt that Twitchell was the man for the job. She said, “We knew we had to push boundaries. The goal was to try to integrate superior artwork with a subject that touched the community in a special way” (Mural Arts Program). Twitchell, who is known for his larger than life portraits (which he refers to as “monuments”), agreed to make Julius Erving the subject of his first work outside of California on the condition that he could paint the celebrity in a suit instead of a basketball uniform (Henninger 2016). He decided to do this in order to portray the basketball great as more of a man and a role model than simply another well-known athlete (Mural Arts Program).

The Dr. J mural is so revered that it is the only Mural Arts work that has been painted into the background of another mural (the panorama on the Spring Garden Bridge) (Henninger
It is respected by the community, and “local residents, who maintain a small park in front of the mural, claim that the real Dr. J had tears in his eyes when he saw the complete portrait for the first time” (Mural Arts Program). Whybrow says, “the experience of art, like the experience of the city, is embodied. It is dependent on the participating entities who engage or interact with art [...] who are, therefore, as much producers as consumers or recipients” (2011, 15). Although the members of the community where the Dr. J mural may have not been involved in the mural creation process, their positive reaction and engagement with the mural, as well as the positive reaction of other viewers, helped to elevate the then-new Mural Arts Program’s reputation.

III. Jackie Robinson by David McShane (1997)

Jackie Robinson is a mural located in North Philadelphia on 2803 North Broad Street, a major corridor (Broad Street) where many people can easily see and enjoy it. Its location also happens to be near Connie Mack stadium, which is where Robinson used to play. The mural is on the side of a house owned by Marilyn Porter, the director of the Brownstone Life Skills Center and a local community activist. About the mural, she said, “The mural has been a blessing to our community’s self esteem. Our residents

Figure 7: David McShane, Jackie Robinson, 1997, Philadelphia, photograph © Steve Weinik. (https://www.muralarts.org/artworks/jackie-robinson/)
who signed the petition for the neighborhood improvement now feel a sense of ownership and responsibility” (Mural Arts Program).

The process of how this mural came to be chosen and conceptualized is interesting because it was also created during the earlier days of the Mural Arts Program. At that time, there was no competitive application process that communities had to go through to murals--rather, Jane Golden would look for communities that she thought would benefit from the murals or she would produce murals commissioned by private commissioners. I interviewed the artist of the mural, who shared that *Jackie Robinson* was commissioned by a black businessman named Bruce Llewellyn who was the owner of a local Coca Cola bottling company and a personal friend of Jackie Robinson and his wife, who later attended the mural’s unveiling). Llewellyn insisted that the mural be placed somewhere where many people would see it, and therefore had a role in the choosing of its Broad Street location.

The artist of the mural won the position by being in the “right place at the right time,” in his words. Jane mentioned that she was in the process of producing a Jackie Robinson mural when he was meeting with her about somebody else, and he told her that he would love to be the artist for the mural and showed her his many baseball paintings. Golden then hired him to do the mural, and it ended up being the artist’s first “marquee piece and the first piece that [he] was routinely recognized for and that people could relate to. The Jackie Robinson mural is situated in a largely African American neighborhood, and the artist said, “I loved being able to do something that was about a role model to people [...] What it represented was giving voice and light to some things that happened in our past that are still happening in terms of racism [...] and wanting to try to put a light on that and try to say something about it and hopefully make the
people aware”. Philadelphia is considered to be one of the cities where Jackie Robinson received the most discrimination, and some view the mural as a way for Philadelphia to acknowledge and combat that (Wack and Resnick 2016).

The Jackie Robinson mural didn’t rely as heavily on community involvement as some other murals of the Mural Arts Program. The artist said that most of the community involvement in the mural consisted of “meeting with the woman who owned the house who happened to be a neighborhood activist and we had a conversation about the mural and what it might be and I went home and designed it”. The artist said that Marilyn, the owner of the house, disapproved of his first mural design draft because it included too much of the catcher, Yogi Bera, so the artist cropped some of him out to have the mural focus more on Jackie Robinson. After the artist made this change, Marilyn showed her neighbors and everybody approved of it and it was ready to go. Therefore, the community aspect of this mural was not so intensive. This was not uncommon because this was when the Mural Arts Program was still in its early stages, as it was when the Dr. J mural was created.

The artist made some very intentional artistic choices in the mural’s design that he explained to me when we spoke. He said that he chose to do the image in black and white “literally as a metaphor for the tension there” between black people and white people. He also said that he chose to paint the image in black and white and greys to mimic the black and white newspaper photos and television screens that many people followed Jackie Robinson’s baseball career through in the past. He also said that he tweaked the photo that he based the mural on, as in the original photo Robinson’s helmet was still on and his face was in shadow and one of his fists was pointing down. The artist said, “I thought for the image it would make it interesting if
his hat was blowing off so that his face was clearly visible and that his fist was sort of raised up so that it’s more as a symbol of power”. The fact that the artist included the Black Power symbol, associated with the Black Power movement and the Civil Rights movement, is interesting because the Mural Arts Program is a part-city organization that tends to not be overtly political. I will delve into this further in my next chapter. In respect to community response to the mural, the artist said that the mural was well-received, sharing that he believed this not only because of what individuals in the community said to him but because of the absence of graffiti on the mural. I will also discuss the idea of the absence of graffiti as a positive sign and a sign of respect in my next chapter.

IV. *Peace Wall* by Jane Golden and Peter Pagast (1997)

*Peace Wall* is a mural located on 1308 29th Street in a neighborhood called Grays Ferry in South Philadelphia. I had never been to Grays Ferry before I went to see *Peace Wall* and was immediately struck by how different it was from Center City in Philadelphia--it is mainly occupied by old row houses and small shops, and it is clearly not an affluent neighborhood. As a white-passing person, I felt out of place as I walked through the neighborhood and stood in the small park where *Peace Wall* resides, as it is a mostly African American neighborhood, knowing that its
residents could tell that I was clearly an outsider. Still I spent several minutes looking at the mural and taking pictures of it while thinking about the neighborhood’s and mural’s combined history.

The mural *Peace Wall* was conceptualized when Jane pitched a mural to the community after years of racial tension and violence in Grays Ferry. In *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell*, a book edited by Golden, Kevin Spicer, a man who grew up in Grays Ferry, speaks about his own perception of the neighborhood in the 1970s, saying that some blocks were safer than others and “You learned quickly around here where you belonged, and where you didn’t” (Golden et al. 2002, 51). Jim Helman, another Grays Ferry resident, said that the racial tension rose from two dueling community groups claiming to speak for the neighborhood, one composed of white residents and the other of black residents (Golden et al. 2002, 51). Despite the alleged riots that shook Philadelphia in the early 1970s that left the city in a wake of racial tension and fear, the people of Grays Ferry, despite their tense history, lived in relative peace throughout the 1990s until violence erupted (Golden et al. 2002, 52).

In February 1997, a group of white men in Grays Ferry left a beef-and-bar party at St. Gabriel’s roman Catholic Church and ran into two black men, who were the son and nephew of Grays Ferry resident Annette Williams (Golden et al. 2002, 52). The men began to fight and the situation escalated into more violence when the white men smashed the front windows and door of Williams’s home in addition to punching her and calling her racial slurs (Golden et al. 2002, 52). Three weeks later, two black men were arrested and charged for shooting and killing a white teenager during a robbery at a pharmacy in Grays Ferry (Golden et al. 2002, 52).
After these events, the neighborhood was suddenly forced into the national spotlight and its residents fought for change, advocating for racial equality. A protest was held by thousands of African Americans in the neighborhood and was even attended by the then-mayor of Philadelphia, Ed Rendell (Golden et al. 2002, 52). Grays Ferry United was created, an organization led by Lillian Ray whose mission was to bring the neighborhood back together and “forge peace between whites and blacks” (Golden et al. 2002, 52). Around the same time, Jane Golden, the founder of Mural Arts, alongside other community organizers, went door-to-door pitching a mural for the community (“Peace Wall”). Lillian Ray and the rest of Grays Ferry United decided the mural was a good idea, so Jane Golden presented several sketches to them, resulting in the decision that mural would feature interlocking hands of all shades (Golden et al. 2002, 55).

Cynics doubted that the mural would ease any racial tension (Pitock 1999). Charles Reeves, a Grays Ferry resident, stated that he didn’t think that the neighborhood needed any more reminders of its problems, “especially not some painting implying a warm, fuzzy togetherness that just didn’t exist” (Golden et al. 2002, 54).

Despite the skeptics, the mural conducted surged ahead. Hands of locals were photographed and the image was projected onto the wall. Over the course of six weeks, the mural was painted by Golden, Dietrick Adonis, and Peter Pagast. The mural features eleven hands that represent...
neighborhood residents of all ages in a star-like form of outstretched arms that gather in the middle (Westerman 2000, 179). The lower right corner of the mural features words of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God,” and this is significant because the neighborhood is highly religious (Westerman 2000, 179). At the mural’s dedication, a white minister and black minister were photographed embracing each other as the ceremony began, demonstrating the unifying and peaceful power of religion in the neighborhood and in the mural (Westerman 2000, 179).

Since its completion, the mural has stood as an icon of peace for the neighborhood (Dagnelli 2013). Jim Helman, a Grays Ferry resident, stated that the mural is “a vivid display that the strength of our community is in the diversity of our resident, residents of every faith and belief, of every economic level, and of every ethnic origin” (Golden et al., 61). Lillian Ray, the leader of Grays Ferry United, stated that despite the continued economic decline of the neighborhood, Peace Wall has never been vandalized or attacked by graffiti.

Indeed, when I went to Grays Ferry to visit the mural, I spotted no traces of graffiti or vandalism near it. The mural resides in a small park which is across the street from a couple of basketball court where several neighborhood children were playing. Although the mural may seem clichéd to some and to me at first, I thought it was
interesting that it was still able to in a way transform the neighborhood and help, at least a little, to unify it. Racial tensions in the neighborhood had been at an all-time high before the mural’s creation, and since then have seemed to improve. As I looked at the mural and surveyed its surroundings, I couldn’t help but think of the neighborhood’s tense history and the effect that the mural had on this tension.

V. **Common Threads by Meg Saligman (1998)**

*Common Threads* is one of the world’s largest murals and perhaps the most accomplished in Philadelphia. At over 8 stories high, the mural is astounding not only in its size but in its striking appearance and intriguing content. It is located in Center City on Broad Street and Spring Garden Street near Suburban Station, and faces the street so that anyone who drives or walks by will inevitably catch at least a glimpse of it. The building it is painted on is situated in a parking lot that was empty when I went to see the mural, as was the street, presumably because it was a cold and windy day. Although the mural is one of the Mural Arts Program’s older murals, it remains to be one of its most iconic murals as well and has been restored more than once to
retain its original luster. It is also one of Mural Arts’s most expensive murals with the original production cost at $40,000 and restoration costs at $20,000 (Sharpe 2011).

The mural depicts young people copying postures of porcelain figurines, with each pair painted in the same scale (“Common Threads”). The inspiration for this came from the artist Meg Saligman’s grandmother, who kept an impressive collection of figurines in her house. The young people copying the postures of the figurines are local city high school students from Benjamin Franklin High School and the school for Creative and Performing Arts (Golden et al. 2002, 122). To decide which students to feature in the mural, Saligman obtained permission to photograph students at the high schools and through a sequence of three photography sessions, she selected fifteen people to be in the mural (Golden et al. 2002, 122). After selecting the fifteen final students, she held additional photoshoots so that she could include the students’ portraits in the mural’s design as accurately as possible.

In these subsequent photoshoots, Saligman asked the students to pose as if they were figurines. She liked Tameka Jones’s pose so much that she made her the centerpiece of the mural. Saligman said, “Tameka is a timeless figure. When I asked her what she would do if she were a figurine, she did that pose. I thought she looked kind of classic” (Golden et al. 2002, 122). Tameka stands at the center of the mural’s activity in

Figure 12: Meg Saligman, Common Threads, 1998, photograph by the author.
an almost meditative state, and has been described as carrying a “Mona Lisa-like expression” (Golden et al. 2002, 121). The figurines and people depicted in the mural carry similar thoughtful expressions which suggests that “despite the gap in time and circumstances, people are not so different from one another (Pitock 1999).

Saligman had clear intentions in mind when she asked the students depicted in the murals to pose as figurines. Her goal was to demonstrate the shared aspects of different cultures and epochs, and she said that mural aimed to “bring out the classical beauty of these city kids. And I was hoping that people would make the connection. The worlds of the figurines and these young people seem so dissimilar, but there are common threads that tie them” (Westerman 2000, 180).

Saligman regards *Common Threads* as her finest and most enjoyable achievement so far (Golden et al. 2002, 119). About mural making, she said, “I’m obsessed with painting large. It’s what gives me my kick [...] I did my first mural for Anti-Graffiti in 1989 and just knew that this was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. How many people can say they fell in love like that? (Golden et al. 2002, 119). Golden also holds the mural in high esteem and said, “I love that mural. I think it was life-changing for our program,” presumably because it was the largest
mural that they had ever made, and because it continued to elevate the Mural Arts Program’s standards of artistry (Warner 2015).

VI. Finding The Light Within by James Burns (2012)

Finding The Light Within is a Mural Arts mural located near UPenn’s campus in Philadelphia at 120 South 30th Street. I had trouble finding the mural when I first went looking for it because when I followed directions to its address listed on the Mural Arts website, the mural was nowhere to be found. For a few minutes I wandered up and down the bridge where the mural was supposedly located when I spotted it on the street below, a few blocks away. I was surprised by how hidden the mural was-- you can only face it head-on if you enter the parking lot where it’s located, as it does not face outwards towards the street. However, the search was worth it-- the mural is a grandiose size and beautiful and interesting to look at with various portraits and themes that are open to examination. It features a boy stranded in the middle of an open body of water, presumably sinking or drifting away in a small rowboat, as another boy is throwing him a life ring to save him. The main action is surrounded by large quilt that features the faces of the suicide victims it is commemorating, and the people holding the quilt are the family and friends of the suicide victims who also helped to
What I found most striking about this mural, after researching it, was the community that it created, represented, and honored.

The mural was conceptualized within the Mural Arts Program’s Porchlight Program, which “focuses on achieving universal health and wellness among Philadelphians, especially those dealing with mental health issues or trauma” (Mural Arts Program). To make *Finding The Light Within*, Mural Arts partnered with the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to combat suicide and honor suicide victims and their families (“Finding The Light Within”). The issue is especially pertinent to Philadelphia as the rate of suicide attempts among public high school students in Philadelphia is almost twice the national average at 12.9 percent versus 6.9 percent. While shedding light on youth suicide, the mural also provides a voice for suicide survivors and attempters and their families and friends by creating a community around the issue (Williams 2011). The production of the mural took place from 2011 to 2012 and included not only the creation of a new community around suicide production through participatory public art, but also storytelling and art workshops and a storytelling website. The website, created by Jonathan Singer, an assistant professor of social work at Temple University, provided a space where people can anonymously
share stories about surviving the loss of a loved one to suicide or helping someone through a suicidal crisis (Mohatt et al. 2013, 2).

This mural helped to create a community in addition to representing the suicide victims and their families by relying heavily on community engagement. At this point in the Mural Arts Program’s history, all murals heavily relied on community engagement, and their website claims “Every mural starts in the community” (Mural Arts Program). In fact, Finding the Light Within engaged more than 1,200 community members in its production (Mohatt et al. 2013, 3). The community was involved in the production process from start to finish, by helping to conceptualize ideas for the mural, painting the mural itself, and attending the mural’s unveiling. I conducted an interview with the artist of the mural, who discussed the beginnings of the mural with me and said that his first questions about the project were, “What does a mural about suicide look like? How do we address suicide in a way that we can bring something beautiful to it?” He then said that over time, the beauty that he found was “just really in the network of people” that the mural created (Romano et al. 2016).

Burns said that the themes laced within the mural were conceptualized during a large community discussion which served as a base for the tight-knit community that the mural would eventually create. He said that people who had been affected by suicide and anyway were invited to participate in the
discussion and that “a lot of the conversations were about being underwater and having this feeling of [...] just complete helplessness” (Romano et al. 2016). He added, “When we have opportunities to sit down with community members and discuss what matters to us, I think that having that shape the work is incredibly important, but being in the room for that experience is sometimes more important than what actually ends up going on the wall” (Romano et al. 2016).

After community discussions where conversations about being underwater and helplessness were prevalent, the mural’s design featured a boy on a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean who is being thrown a life ring by another boy. The idea of the life ring came from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention’s logo, which features a life ring and who were also involved in the production of the mural. The mural also features a large quilt that wraps around the composition and that portraits of all of the people were involved with the project are on the quilt in various ways. About the quilt, Burns said, “In some ways it represents the network of individuals who were there to support people in their time of loss and it also memorializes people who are lost” (Romano et al. 2016).

When discussing the location of the mural, Burns admitted that, “it’s not as prominent as I would like it to have been but it is on a facility that deals with mental health issues and challenges” (Romano et al. 2016). Therefore, the location of the mural is somewhat appropriate,
Despite its seeming obscurity, Burns was positive that the location of the mural correlated with its subject matter, stating, “If you had tried to find a wall in Center City and told the wall owner what the topic we were dealing with was, you would have had an experience that would have been daunting.” In a way, the location of the mural mirrors the stigmatization and erasure of issues related to suicide and mental health. However, Burns concluded that the imperfect location of the mural was overlookable, saying “it was less about a mural, and more about being visible and being impactful. I think that transcends the location of the mural--the image of the mural itself--it’s more about the emotive things that happen throughout that process” (Romano et al. 2016).

**VII. Conclusion**

The public nature of murals makes them accessible to everyone who lives in or frequents the communities in which they are situated. Miles says that because public art acts in the public realm, its critique necessarily extends to a series of overlapping issues including the diversity of urban publics and cultures, the functions of public space, operations of power, the role of officials and the role of officials (1997, 1). In this chapter, I have provided several short case studies for murals that the Mural Arts Program has created and I have described their creation process and the ways that they interacted with the communities within which they situated. In my next two chapters I will be analyzing the deeper implications of why certain communities or people are chosen to be highlighted in murals, the importance of the public nature of murals, and the act of the Mural Arts Program claiming public space to paint their murals.
CHAPTER 3: How Murals Build and Interact With Communities

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I will be concentrating on how the Mural Arts Program sees itself, drawing upon the information that I gathered from the seven Mural Arts Program employees I interviewed. How do these employees understand the ways the Mural Arts Program interacts with and builds communities, and the methods through which they do so? To answer these questions, I will discuss topics such as the communal ownership of public space, the politicality of murals, the accessibility of public art, and how the Mural Arts Program funds and chooses the topics and locations for their murals. I will also contextualize their understanding of the work they do within literature by theorists such as Habermas, Douglas, Bourdieu, and several others. As I do this, I aim to highlight the unintentional exclusions and unexamined assumptions that color their activities in Philadelphia. Ultimately, I argue that the Mural Arts Program provides a platform for low-income and minority groups to express themselves in the public sphere and participate in the communal ownership of public space, but as they choose which communities to highlight, they are inadvertently exclusionary. Furthermore, they employ their higher amounts of social and economic capital to ultimately decide on a mural’s message and design and therefore are exerting their own control over public space and the cityscape.

II. The Community Mural Application Process

The Mural Arts Program has a section on their website for community mural applications, where communities can submit mural ideas to ask the Mural Arts Program to come to their community and work with them to create a mural about a particular subject or person. Regarding how they choose which community mural applications to accept, a Mural Arts
employee said, “What we’re looking for is if people have a wall that is visible and it’s in good shape and that their request is seen as something that’s open to the community--it’s not just one individual’s agenda.” She also shared that unfortunately, many people submit requests for people who have died, “but they may have only been important to the person who put in the application and not the community in broad [...] We don’t want to make a city of memorials” The same employee also lamented the fact that the mural application is extremely competitive, sharing that they generally get about eighty applications per year and only five will go through. She said that the number of murals chosen is limited by capacity and money because “murals are not cheap--even in a small mural, the minimum is $15,000.” Therefore, the Mural Arts Program chooses which community mural applications to follow through with, highlighting certain communities and leaving others “behind.”

II. Mural Funding

The Mural Arts Program is a part-city organization, so they receive a good amount of funding from the city in addition to receiving money from partner organizations. Although the Mural Arts Program obviously does not have the funds to create an unlimited number of murals for the city, they do receive quite a bit of city funding that covers a great portion of the organization’s costs. In 2016 alone, they received $490,401 from the city for employee compensation (including the Executive Director, her assistant, members of the mural crew, a reception manager and two muralists); they also received $1,125,615 to lead community mural projects. These community mural projects are held in collaboration with “youth, formerly and currently incarcerated individuals, residents receiving behavioral health services, community members, neighborhood-based organizations, city-wide institutions, and city agencies (Golden
One employee shared, “We’re a part city and part private organization. Our foundation is in the city, the city gives us several million dollars a year to do our work, they give us the building that we are in [...] And so we don’t have to pay for our building, we don’t have to pay for the lights, the electricity, the heat [...] all these things are covered by the city.” She also shared that the director Jane Golden’s budget when she started Mural Arts was around $150,000, and now it’s about 10 million dollars including the money they receive not only from their city allocation but also from private organizations. The program is also partially private because it receives money from organizations including the Department of Human Services and various other city agencies. In fact, the Mural Arts Program has a partnership with the Department of Behavioral Health called the Porch Light that aims to destigmatize mental health issues and mental health treatment.

III. Community Building and Communal Ownership

The Mural Arts Program fervently emphasizes its commitment to working with and bringing communities together on its website, and unsurprisingly, the topic of community-building through mural making was popular throughout the conversations I had with the Mural Arts employees I interviewed. Many of them spoke about how communities are often invited to participate in the conceptualizations of the murals designed for them and how murals are generally respected and enjoyed by the communities in which they reside. They also mentioned that some of the communities even claim ownership of the murals, due to the fact that they oftentimes help to conceptualize and even paint them. One staff artist said that he felt the Mural Arts is good at integrating itself into the communities in which the murals are placed, saying “It’s more ownership by the community and it’s not feeling like some outsiders are just
coming in and dropping some artwork on them.” He claimed that because the Mural Arts Program engages with and holds conversations with the communities they paint murals for, they cease to be outsiders. Other artists cited similar ideas, and one said about a dedication for one of his murals (an event to celebrate a mural’s unveiling), “I’ll have little eight-year-old kids come up and be like ‘Oh my goodness, I painted that part,’ and yes it’s true, like ‘Oh, I painted Martin Luther King’s face,’ […] And years later they’re coming back from college and they’re still like ‘Oh my goodness, I did that one.’”

Knight’s theory that murals explore the idea of “communal” ownership of public spaces that are being increasingly privatized is particularly relevant here, as the artists stated that their murals allow the communities to reaffirm their ownership over “public” spaces in their neighborhoods (2008, 137). However, one could argue that the “communal” ownership of public spaces that the murals augment could encapsulate not only the community members, but the Mural Arts staff artists, the Mural Arts funders, and various other Mural Arts employees involved in the mural-making process. Therefore, even though the community members are able to participate in the mural-making process to reaffirm their ownership of their “public” spaces, the Mural Arts Program staff also share this ownership over the neighborhood’s “public” space where the mural lies because they are in charge of the mural’s design, funding, and location.

Although the Mural Arts Program seeks to integrate itself into and communicate with the communities they work with as openly as possible so that they can have a productive and collaborative mural-making process. One artist shared, “We try to be sensitive in the communities where we work. [...] We try to do our part not just as artists working in communities or cultural travelers, but it’s also about addressing some of the immediate concerns
of the community and I think we all as an organization try to do our best with navigating.”

However, the fact remains that they are still inserting their ownership into the same spaces they are supposedly giving the communities they work with ownership of. Furthermore, they are choosing which issues in Philadelphia to highlight and discuss, as most of their murals give prominence to various community issues or memorialize important community figures, therefore inadvertently leaving some issues in the dark or ignoring the needs of other communities. For example, one artist shared that the Mural Arts Program has recently had to deal with challenges in South Philly regarding the Cambodian community and the Vietnamese community due to their collaboration with the Vietnamese community.

According to an artist I interviewed, a mural was created with the Vietnamese community that addressed the issue of gambling, which is a prevalent issue in the Vietnamese community. Gambling also happens to be a prominent issue in the Cambodian community, but they were not contacted to be a part of the mural, so they were upset that they hadn’t been included in the community mural process because the topic was also relevant to them. According to the artist, the Mural Arts Program had simply been unaware that the Cambodian community would also be relevant to the project, so their exclusion from the project was unintentional and the Mural Arts Program is currently trying to resolve the current tension that has resulted from this. The artist also shared that the Cambodian community “wanted to be engaged in some sort of conversation with what their community is dealing with. So there’s a demand, I guess, for issues to be addressed, and sometimes murals end up being sort of points of contention [...] All of a sudden we become sort of this fulcrum and maybe we didn’t set out to deal with this particular issue but here we are involved in this.”
Although employees of the Mural Arts Program appear sincere in their desire to engage with communities and to highlight issues that are relevant to them, it seems that such tensions are unavoidable. Critiques of Habermas’s idea of the public space are relevant here. Habermas posits it as a space where citizens can come together and discuss public issues, yet as critics such as Fraser have pointed out, this public sphere is predicated on exclusion. Even though the Mural Arts Program provides outlets where community residents can come together and discuss their issues to visualize them into a mural, they also choose which communities to highlight, so they inevitably, and often unintentionally, leave other communities out. It is true that lower class, women, and people of color are not excluded from the public sphere (as they were during the time described by Habermas’s model). Because the Mural Arts Program tends to make murals for lower class and minority communities, certain groups are highlighted and certain groups are not, not only because the Mural Arts Program has limited funding and staff, but because they are interjecting themselves into communities that they are not necessarily familiar with and are therefore unaware of the issues that some communities face or even unaware of the fact that some communities exist. In the case of the Mural Arts Program choosing to engage the Vietnamese community in a community mural about gambling even though the Cambodian community also deals with the same issue, the artist I spoke with shared that they were simply unaware of the fact that the Cambodian community also had a problem with gambling. As much as they make an effort to integrate themselves into communities to create lasting change, they start the process as outsiders and are unable to choose projects with a completely holistic view as they simultaneously cater to the city’s and private funders’ preferences.

IV. Murals as “Urban Regeneration”
In addition to speaking about how the murals are created with the communities, several of the Mural Arts staff discussed the effects of the murals on the neighborhoods themselves. One employee said, “It’s been proven by studies that murals affect safety because if a mural’s on a corner and people are paying attention to it then they’re also looking at the guy who might be trying to stand in front of it and sell drugs or whatever they’re doing. So people who are doing those kinds of negative things stay away from corners where artwork might be drawing attention to them.” She also stated that the recidivism rate for people who participate in the Mural Arts Program’s Restorative Justice Program¹ is very low, meaning that most of them don’t return to prison. In addition to arguing that murals can make a neighborhood safer, one Mural Arts staff artist posited that murals can encourage the neighborhood’s inhabitants to take better care of their surroundings. He said that murals are “often in a low-income, like a depressed, neighborhood, and when you go into a depressed neighborhood, you put up a mural that honors the people who live there who are so used to being put down.” He added, “When you lift them up, it makes a huge impact because you have this gorgeous piece of art that’s telling stories, that’s important to them, and it becomes like a keystone [...] You’ll notice there’s less trash around it and then you’ll notice the houses around it have fresh paint jobs themselves and people are fixing their broken fences [...] the neighborhood really turns around.”

In addition to placing murals all over the city, the Mural Arts Program also has a strong education program. One artist said that it’s important that their education program engages with young people because when the school system in the city has to make cutbacks, it’s usually the

¹ The Mural Arts Restorative Justice Program gives current inmates, probationers, parolees, and adjudicated juveniles the opportunity to learn new skills and make a positive contribution to their communities. The Program’s webpage says that this is “to repair the prior harm they may have caused. They receive art instruction, work on new murals, and perform other community service work, and their constructive contributions help to shift community perceptions.” (Mural Arts Philadelphia)
arts that is the first to go. He added, “It’s like the Philadelphia public school system has had this
great thriving art program in its history, it’s usually something that has been fairly meager [...] So
the fact that there’s a city program that comes to your community or maybe does come to your
school or rec center that offers a creative outlet to a lot of kids who wanna engage is also pretty
awesome.” He then said that the Mural Arts Program can show kids that if they want to pursue
“being creative in some way, it’s not impossible to do that,” and that it can help cultivate their
innate creativity in general.

Sharp says that as a mural attempts to provide a sense of collective identity and
ownership, community mural production is seen as a part of “urban regeneration” (2007, 275)
The Mural Arts employees I spoke would most likely agree with this statement, as many of them
spoke of how murals can make communities safer and improve them in general. However,
viewing murals as “urban regeneration” implies that they are renewing, improving, or removing
parts of a community that may be considered disorderly or unsafe. For example, something that
came up several times in my interviews with the Mural Arts employees was the way that the
presence of murals can decrease or even eradicate graffiti in a community. Additionally, many of
the Mural Arts staff artists I spoke with noted absence of graffiti on their murals as a sign of
respect for the murals while discussing how murals can change communities. One artist said
about a mural he painted about Jackie Robinson, “It’s always been a mural that was
well-received, like I never had to go back and remove graffiti from it, or it was never tagged or
anything like that. So I assume in that neighborhood that people kind of respected the mural
because they respected both Jackie Robinson as a role model and Marilyn as a community
person” (Marilyn was the community organizer who owned building where the mural was
Other mural arts employees also mentioned the absence of graffiti as a sign of respect for the murals, and some expressed surprise at the fact that murals don’t get tagged more often. The fact that the absence of graffiti is lauded goes to show the hierarchy of the different kinds of public art—murals are seen as the most acceptable, whereas the presence of graffiti is interpreted as negative, as its absence is seen as positive. This has many social implications, as graffiti is usually created by lower-class or minority groups, whereas murals are usually created for lower class-or minority groups by organizations like the Mural Arts Program. Additionally, murals represent a collective and officially sanctioned statement about the “community,” whereas graffiti is more associated with an individual claim for public recognition via the “signature” of a tag.

In addition to “improving” neighborhoods, murals can also help to cultivate a community’s culture. One Mural Arts staff artist spoke about how his *Jackie Robinson* mural lead to various neighborhood activities. The artist shared that Marilyn, the owner of the house where the mural was painted, used the mural as a way to teach local kids about role models, saying, “She ended up doing little talks to them about Jackie Robinson and she ended up having an Afro-centric crafts and fashion kind of stuff [...] She had an African market on weekends occasionally that she would do in that fenced-in lot next to the mural.” According to the artist, Marilyn was grateful to have the mural and decided to use it to “spearhead” the various efforts and activities she wanted to carry out in the community. Another artist claimed that murals influence a community’s culture in that they “establish a character or tone for the neighborhood in some ways and where they’re located. Yeah, they [...] create a personality.”
Holleran says that claiming that murals “improve” neighborhoods is problematic because it implies that urban social problems can be solved by making changes to public space rather than addressing power structures that cause social issues in the first place (2014, 16). However, the Mural Arts Program does engage with the communities beyond placing murals into the communities’ “public space”. It attempts to address the social issues at their root, if there is any, by hosting workshops and classes in the communities and involving the community in every step of the mural-making process. By hosting various community workshops and classes in the communities they interact with, the Mural Arts Program attempts to address social issues at their root instead of positing the art of murals alone as a solution to community issues. However, community workshops and classes can only go so far to address serious issues like suicide, which is an issue related to mental health and the lack of mental health treatments and facilities, or poverty, which is an issue grounded in class segregation and social discrimination.

In some cases, murals don’t only “improve” communities, but they “create” communities. One artist said that he has “done projects that tackle some of the social challenges that we face nonspecific to our city but as human beings.” One of these projects was a mural about suicide awareness called Finding the Light Within, which I discussed in detail in the previous chapter. About the project, the artist shared, “It was a year and a half long project and it was probably the most emotionally challenging project I’ve ever been involved in. But it was heavily rewarding to provide a venue for people who lost a teenager or people who lost a spouse or people who attempted suicide to all come together and sort of create a discussion around what it is and how do we address it.” Although this mural was not meant to address or improve a particular neighborhood, it was meant to highlight and improve the wellbeing of a specific community not
in terms of locality but shared experience-- suicide victims and survivors and their families. As it highlighted the community, it brought the community members together through various paint days and discussions about the mural’s design, therefore creating and solidifying a community that had been previously dispersed and fragmented. One Mural Arts employee shared, “My daughter was a teenager at the time, she had a couple of bouts of suicidal ideation, you know, and being a part of the project really changed her life. It hasn’t been an issue with us since,” and added that she was forever grateful to the Mural Arts Program for helping her daughter. From my conversations about this particular mural, I learned that the community mural process can be highly emotional and rewarding for its participants.

V. Can Murals Be Political?

Many of the mural arts staff that I spoke with were proud of the fact that the Mural Arts Program does not shy away from addressing tough topics, saying that the program has engaged with topics such as suicide, gambling, addiction, homelessness, and more. However, the employees that I spoke to were also very hesitant to label any murals as political. One of the artists I spoke to painted the *Jackie Robinson* mural in 1997, which was painted to commemorate the 50th anniversary of when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball. He said that he loved being able to make a mural about someone who was a role model to many people, and “what it represented was about giving voice and light to
some things that happened in our past that are still happening in terms of racism and that kind of thing, and wanting to try to put a light on that and try to say something about it and hopefully make the people aware.” He also mentioned that Philadelphia was the city that Jackie Robinson felt “treated him the worst in terms of racial slurs and that kind of thing,” which added another layer of importance to the mural.

When discussing the mural’s design, the artist said he decided that he wanted to showcase the image from the moment Jackie Robinson stole home during the world series. In the actual reference photo that the artist used to paint the mural, he said that Robinson’s helmet was still on, his face was in shadow, and one of his fists was pointing down. The artist said, “I thought for the image it would make it interesting if his hat was blowing off so that his face was more clearly visible and that his fist was sort of raised up, so that it’s sort of more as a symbol of power, and you know, that kind of thing.”

However, when I asked the artist another question in which I mentioned that the Jackie Robinson mural sounds like it is more political than some other murals due to these visual aspects, the artist replied, “Essentially that mural was really meant to honor Jackie Robinson. It wasn’t meant to be political or anything like that.” I was surprised to hear that even though the artist intentionally included the Black Power symbol in the mural, he didn’t intend for it to be political and was even hesitant to acknowledge that it could be a political mural.

Many of the artists that interviewed spoke along similar lines, saying that the Mural Arts Program murals aren’t meant to be political. The artist of the Jackie Robinson mural said, “We don’t engage directly with politics, or pointing at politicians and saying, ‘You’re making this mistake,’ or ‘We don’t like the policy,’ or whatever.” He said that political messages like that are
often negative, and that more positive messages should be spread. Another artist said that the message of the murals are sometimes become muted or softened because so many people have to approve it, saying, “So community art tends, because it’s like art by community, it’s not edgy, you know there’s always someone in the group who does not want to be confrontational [...] and takes out the strong political message, most of the time it’s not edgy.” Another artist said, “I don’t think they steer away from addressing real issues in society. I just think they stay away from [...] being too political about it, and placing blame and things of that nature. Yeah.” Every Mural Arts artist voiced ideas in a similar vein, saying that the Mural Arts Program does not shy away from difficult or controversial topics, but that they don’t approach these topics in a “political” way, mainly because they can’t make any overt political statements as a part-city agency.

I was a little surprised that none of the artists would say that their murals could be political, and think that it might be important to mention that 3 out of the 4 mural artists I interviewed are white men who may not have to think about social issues as often as minority groups have to. Ferguson and his conceptualization of the “anti-politics machine” are relevant here, as the Mural Arts Program and its staff artists address political topics in their murals but still refuse to label them as political. This depoliticization of political issues is significant. Ferguson describes the “anti-politics machine” in Lesotho, a small landlocked country in Southern Africa upon which he conducted his study. He describes the “anti-politics machine” as Lesotho’s “development apparatus”, positing that it “is not a machine for eliminating poverty that is incidentally involved with the state bureaucracy; it is a machine for reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power, which incidentally takes ‘poverty’ as its
point of entry” (Ferguson 1990, 256). He elaborates, “Alongside the institutional effect of expanding bureaucratic state power is the conceptual or ideological effect of depoliticizing both poverty and the state” (1990, 256). Similar to Lesotho’s development apparatus, the Mural Arts Program engages with lower-income communities, but as it addresses these communities’ political issues through murals and then labels these murals as unpolitical, it inherently depoliticizes these political issues. For example, when the artist of the Jackie Robinson mural told me that the Black Power fist in the mural was not meant to be political, he is depoliticizing an important political symbol from the civil rights movement. Furthermore, as the Mural Arts Program does this, they are in a way expanding the exercise of state power, as they are a part-city organization who are claiming space in various low-income and minority communities in the city, even for the sake of “communal ownership” including the communities as well.

Someone I interviewed from the street art community speculated, “I think it would be harder for them to be explicitly political, they’re a part city agency so they have to please a lot of people and then another part is that there’s [...] a fundraising apparatus. I think that 60-70 person of their funds come from private donations so they’re trying to please a lot of people.”

Even though Mural Arts engages with low-income and minority communities, bringing them into the conversation when it comes to mural conceptualization, design, and painting, the messages that the murals feature need to be filtered through several steps of approval. The origins of the mural’s messages may come from the communities themselves, but the final messages have to be approved by the city and various other people at the Mural Arts Program, possibly skewing or softening the message. Simpson says that city streets aren’t free or democratic spaces because they are domesticated and privatized to exclude “non-consumers”, or
the lower class and minorities who may not participate in a street’s economy (2011, 418). It is important to distinguish between state agencies and corporate interests here, but there are parallels to be drawn between who participates in the government and who participates in corporate interests, as city bureaucrats are more likely to be able to afford to participate in a street’s economy than low-income individuals. Although the Mural Arts Program conceptualizes their murals in a democratic way, making sure to include the communities in the conversation, the process isn’t truly democratic the city and funders for the Mural Arts Program will always have the final say. This hierarchical approval process reiterates the social discrimination and class segregation that is prevalent in the city. Although low-income groups are heard and considered, the needs of the funders of the murals will always be prioritized in public space because they hold more social capital.

VI. Murals and Class

Several of the mural artists that I spoke to said that what initially intrigued them to murals was their public and accessible nature. One artist spoke about his childhood and said that one of the things that drew him to murals was the issue of class. He shared, “My dad was a plumber who raised eight kids [...] So it wasn’t like we spent a lot of time in galleries or museums or around framed paintings that were considered priceless commodities or anything like that.” Because the artist felt that “highbrow” forms of art were inaccessible, he chose to be a mural artist because, “as a guy that was raised a working class person, I felt like it’s an art form [...] that is attempting to engage people from all sorts of cultures and classes and sectors of society and trying to be inclusive as possible and it tries to give a voice to people who don’t necessarily normally have a voice.” Therefore, because this artist grew up in a low-income family who
couldn’t afford to visit private galleries to view art, he finds the accessibility of art to be important, and believes that anybody should be able to experience art no matter their social standing.

Another thing that I noticed during my interviews is the fact that mural artists tend to have more of a formal arts education than street artists. All of the muralists I interviewed went to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (including the aforementioned who grew up in a working class household) and made connections with the Mural Arts Program while they were studying there. Bourdieu says that cultural capital is convertible into economic capital and that it “may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications” (1978, 46). He further explains that the institutionalized state of cultural capital refers to an individual’s academic credentials or qualifications, saying that “cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications is one way of neutralizing some of the properties it derives from the fact that, being embodied, it has the same biological limits as its bearer” (1978, 46). Therefore, mural artists with formal arts education hold more cultural capital than street artists without a formal arts education, which makes it easier for them to secure positions with organizations like the Mural Arts Program.

One could also argue that the Mural Arts Program artists and staff hold more social capital than people who make public art independently and not with a part-city part-private organization, such as street artists or graffiti artists. Bourdieu defines social capital as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [...] which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity owned capital” (1971, 51). Therefore, he would argue that the Mural Arts employees’ membership to the Mural
Arts Program augments their social capital, and perhaps even that people with more social
capital would have an easier time finding jobs at the Mural Arts Program.

DiMaggio says that “if high culture facilitates mobility, popular culture provides the stuff
of everyday sociability” (1987, 444). Therefore, if we say that social and cultural capital are
associated with high culture, which would give Mural Arts artists, staff, and funders more social
mobility, then popular culture, which could encapsulate public art, provides everyday sociability.
Murals may be funded by the city and private organizations, but they are viewable by all—they’re
not exclusive, but they can be exclusionary in that they can’t represent every community in the
city who wants a mural. However, their publicness could make them a part of popular culture.

VII. Mural Artists’ Pride and Individual “Style”

The class position of the Mural Arts Program staff artists is also important to take into
account here, as many of the artists I spoke with were able to receive a formal arts education,
which elevates their social capital. The artists ultimately decide on the design of the mural (after
getting it approved by their superiors) and will even sometimes paint over work that was
completed during volunteer paint days to achieve their desired look. One artist I spoke with said
that his community paint days are a way for him “to have a huge group of volunteers do a lot of
work very quickly.” The artist said that for these paint days, he takes the original mural design
and breaks up all of the colors and shades to create “a paint-by-number like you would find in a
hobby shop or an art supply store.” This is so that any volunteer can participate in a paint day no
matter their artistic experience, as all that is expected of them is to fill in a shape in a
black-and-white pencil drawing using paint from a tupperware container with a corresponding
number, mixed by the artist. However, after the community paint days, the artist shared that they
“take what the volunteers have done and that becomes my undertaking.” He added that to finish up the painting, he puts his “blends” on top of the sharp edges painted by the volunteers’ painting, saying, “They don’t make soft blends, so someone’s face will look like a robot until all of the blends are in and then it looks like the person it’s supposed to look like.” Therefore, in some cases, the artist will touch up the murals after a community paint day to “fix” work that is done by volunteers who may not necessarily be skilled artists.

The same artist shared that sometimes a volunteer will happen to be a good painter, and in that case “I actually just let them use my materials and the original design and they paint it as best they can and they get it really close to how I want it. But everybody’s stroke is like their fingerprint, it’s like their signature. So I want his artwork to look like my artwork so I always go over and touch it up and make it my own. And sometimes they’re a better painter than I am and it’s like that’s so gorgeous, but it’s not my look. And I feel bad and I always apologize to them because they put so much heart into it.” With this, the artist acknowledges that his need to touch up the artwork after a community paint day is not necessarily always linked to needing to “fix” work done by unskilled artists.

This is because the artist, and many other murals artists I spoke with, take pride in cultivated a distinct “style” that is identifiable through their murals. In this case, the artist prioritizes his own personal style over the community mural-making process. This prioritization of the artist’s personal preferences relates to Bourdieu’s idea that the dominant classes inherently have a “superior” taste, and that these differences in taste preference can be used to perpetuate social inequality and solidify class differences (1984,6). This is because murals artists (at least all of the ones I spoke with) hold a formal arts education and therefore most likely hold more
cultural capital than the residents of the low-income and/or minority communities in which they intervene. The artist who discussed painting over other community residents’ work said that his style is “very painterly, based on old oil-painting styles” -- a style that surely fits the taste of the dominant class due to its classical nature. However, in addition to over-painting due to his individual taste preferences, the artist also overpainted to maintain his own distinct, recognizable style, a desire inherent to the bourgeois fetish of artistic originality.

Lizardo argues that in addition to these cultural tastes being determined by one’s network relations and social standing, they also are used to form and sustain those networks (2006, 778). As mentioned above, all of the mural artists I interviewed attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, therefore their tastes, relevant to their social status, helped them formulate connections with the Mural Arts Program. Lizardo also says, “highbrow culture taste leads to a denser network of strong ties, and popular culture taste leads to a denser network of weak ties” (2006, 786).

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Mural Arts Program mural selection and creation process may not be as democratic as it advertises itself to be, but the program has still done a lot of important work to highlight various low-income and minority communities in the city and their issues. Although it’s impossible for the program to accept all of the community mural applications they receive, making the program rather exclusive, they engage with the communities with whom they choose to create murals with purpose and depth. Although the Mural Arts Program chooses where and with whom to create their murals and must have the murals approved by their funders, they still do important work that should be celebrated. However, we can celebrate this work while
acknowledging the class and political tensions that inescapably arise when the program excludes communities and dictates how to represent others. The program ultimately represents lower-income and minority communities on the program’s own terms, and some murals artists seem to take as much pride in their own individual style as in their community involvement.

Regarding the community building work that the Mural Arts Program does, one artist said, “And all of this stuff I’m talking about right now, you don’t get that in street art, right? You don’t get that in graffiti. You get that with this more formal structure which has a lot of different arms.” While he is correct in that murals are more community oriented and usually involve community engagement while street art is typically an individualistic endeavor, this is not to say that the program’s “formal structure” is perfect, although it certainly is efficient as the program has given Philadelphia its reputation as the city with the most murals in the world. This leads into my next chapter, where I will discuss the differences between mural art and different kinds of public art including street art and graffiti.
CHAPTER 4: The Public Art Hierarchy: Murals, Street Art, and Graffiti

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I seek to examine the hierarchy of street art as my interviewees understood it and why they view the different kinds of public art that are painted onto walls (murals, street art, and graffiti) with varying levels of respect, legitimacy, and enjoyment. To perform this analysis, I heavily draw upon the interviews I conducted with three people from the Philadelphia street art community (two street artists and one street art photographer who runs a major street art blog and who has played a major role in bringing the Philadelphia street art community together). The street art photographer, while not an artist himself, has been in contact with most of the artists in the Philadelphia street art community and was able to provide me with a unique perspective. I will also continue to draw upon the interviews I conducted with people who are affiliated with the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. As I analyze the public art hierarchy, I will engage topics such the categorization of art, public space, the inherent politicality of street art, art accessibility, class segregation, and the absence of graffiti from the conversation. Ultimately, I argue that the hierarchization of the public art is inextricably linked to class discrimination and social discrimination, and the categorization of different kinds of public art as “tasteful” or “distasteful” is not so much about the aesthetics of the work as it is about who created the work.

II. Public Art “Genres”

I aim to unpack how the art classification systems surrounding public art in Philadelphia create and rank the genres of murals, street art, and graffiti, and how the communities surrounding these genres interact amongst themselves and with each other. To do this, I will be
drawing upon DiMaggio’s discussion of socially constructed “genres,” or categories, of art. The first genre I address here is the category of murals, which in Philadelphia are mostly created by the Mural Arts Program. According to the interviews I conducted, murals are at the top of the hierarchy of public art that is painted onto walls, as I gathered that they are generally more revered and validated by the general public than street art and graffiti are. As the only “legal” kind of public art that is painted on walls in the city, murals are also the most respected and lauded as legitimate, due to their funding (which is extremely necessary as murals can cost tens of thousands of dollars) and relationships with various city organizations.

On the next level of the public art hierarchy would be street art, an art form that can encapsulate anything from stickers, to wheatpastes, to sign-making, to yarn-bombing, to elaborated painted pieces—as long as it is unaffiliated with any organization, as street art is always illegal. According to an artist I spoke with, street art is generally respected by the wider community, although its illegality is common knowledge, so it is generally not perceived as “legitimate” art as murals often are. Finally, graffiti would be at the bottom of this public art hierarchy. Graffiti generally consists of tagging one’s name in spray paint, and the more impressive and visible its location, the more reputable it is amongst the graffiti community—however, graffiti is the most stigmatized within the community at large, especially by city bureaucrats and other members of middle and upper classes. Throughout this chapter, I will elaborate on why these different kinds of public art are
viewed and treated so differently from the viewpoints of Mural Arts Program staff and people from the street art community.

III. The Street Art Community and “Public” Space

Mary Douglas says, “uncomfortable facts which refuse to be fitted in, we find ourselves ignoring or distorting so that they do not disturb these established assumptions. By and large, anything we take note of is pre-selected and organized in the very act of perceiving” (1966, 46). Although street art definitely encapsulates its own genre, the edges of this genre seem unclear due to the multiple kinds of street art. Unlike murals and graffiti, there is more than one kind of street art. Murals are always painted onto a wall, graffiti always consists of a signature in the form of a tag, but street art can appear in almost any medium. Therefore, this broad category makes for a shortage of “uncomfortable facts,” due to its inclusiveness. Visconti et al. say, “By overthrowing the established visual structure, artists embody Mary Douglas’s theory of dirt as “matter out of place” and the traditional overlapping between cleanliness and order,” therefore confirming Douglas’s idea that dirt is in the eye of the beholder and that rival positions about what is clean and what is dirty can coexist (2010, 3). In a way, street art could be considered to be “clean” as it is not as stigmatized as graffiti as it may still be considered to be “tasteful” to city officials, maybe because of its aesthetics but also because it is not associated with the low income communities or minorities like graffiti is. In that sense, street art is acceptable in public sense despite its legality because it is created by mostly white people who hold a certain amount of social capital due to their whiteness. On the other hand, street art may also be considered to be “dirty” by city bureaucrats simply due to its illegality, and therefore it occupies this intersection between murals and graffiti.
The street art community in Philadelphia is described as tight-knit and friendly by most of its members I spoke with. One seasoned street artist said, “I’m well-known and everyone knows each other.” Another artist who was newer to the street art scene shared, “The Philadelphia street art scene is extremely welcoming and really big. I mean, there’s some stickers and wheatpastes where I couldn’t even tell you the name of the artist [...] It’s pretty hard to even remember all of them to begin with.” The street art photographer I interviewed shared that the street art community is “pretty robust” for many reasons, including that Philadelphia has a lot of artists in general due to its relatively low cost of living and number of art schools. This is not to say that the majority of street artists receive a formal arts education, as they do not, but moreso to highlight the fact that Philadelphia attracts many artists and that it is not difficult to find an artistic community to connect with in Philadelphia.

Although the street art community is generally described as friendly and cohesive, the street art community members I spoke with placed a large emphasis on the importance of how street artists interact with each other in public space and the importance of respecting one another’s work in public space. Speaking more about the street art community, one member said, “It’s very welcoming and it’s very supportive, as long as you don’t cover up somebody else’s work. Just don’t cover up somebody else’s work, and don’t be rude, or self-centered, or whatever.” Another community member mentioned that it is sometimes difficult to do this, sharing that “It’s hard to find places to put it that’s not like abandoned buildings [...] so there might not even be any place for your work, and that kind of thing, you can easily upset other artists.” Elaborating, the same street artist said, “Once I covered up someone’s graffiti tag and that just, I mean I don’t want to belittle that art form but it looks like scribbles to me. You know,
it’s with spray paint and they’re just tagging their name, and I once covered a portion of a tag and they yelled at me on Instagram.” Although this street artist seemed to be aware that covering other street artists’ street art is considered to be wrong within the community, she was hesitant to recognize graffiti as meriting the same level of respect. This further propagates the idea that graffiti is on the bottom of the public art hierarchy, as it is respected as other kinds of public art because it is the most associated with the lower class and minority groups.

Although street artists don’t presume that they own the “public” space where they are putting their art, they still posit that they have some ownership to the space where the art is after it is painted, and they demand that this space be respected. As they do this, they are asserting their membership of “public space,” therefore positing they have as much of a right as anyone to dictate how public space in the city should look. One street artist I spoke to acknowledged that many “public” spaces coded as belonging to everyone are actually private, saying “You just have to be careful of where you put it, you know? Make sure it’s not on someone’s private property. And by private property I mean like a home. Because technically everything is private. The abandoned buildings, they’re still owned by somebody, that’s still private property.” In saying this, she is acknowledging that
she has the right to express herself in public space and even in others’ private properties, as long as she does not transgress into specific kinds of public properties like private homes.

Another artist said that although street artists are aware that their work is illegal, it’s not something that they actively worry about. The street art photographer I interviewed shared, “Though something might technically be illegal, maybe it’s not morally cared about much. So for example most of the artists I document do their work on abandoned structures in the city so for better or worse, maybe for worse, I don’t know, Philadelphia has a ton of abandoned warehouses and abandoned homes under construction.” It is important to note here that even though some street artists may not “morally” care about the illegality of street art (meaning that they do not feel guilt for performing the allegedly illegal act of street art), the safety of a street artist may depend on their identity--for example, a street artist of color may have to worry more about the consequences of putting up an illegal piece of work than a white street artist would. My interviewees pertaining to the street art community were all white, and one informed me that most of the street artists that they are familiar with are white as well.
Therefore, a white street artist may not seem to “morally” care about the illegality of their art because they can afford to do so. They are not taking a risk by disregarding city laws due to the relationship between whiteness and law enforcement, as their whiteness makes them less likely to be arrested or even reprimanded by the police.

One street artist I spoke with, whose primary medium is sticker art, told me that even though she may not “morally” care about the illegality of street art, she was nervous to put up her photos when she was just getting started because she was scared that she would be admonished by the police. She told me about how she usually goes about putting up her stickers, sharing, “Typically I just have an envelope, I keep my purse filled with stickers as I’m going about my day or my night in different parts of the city. If I see a place that already has the stickers, that’s like the key, you wanna go where other people have gone because that kind of tells you that [the stickers] have been there for a while so the chances are that your work will stay up there for a little while at least.”

The same artist mentioned that there are particular neighborhoods that are more welcoming to street art than others. She shared, “Fishtown is where I put most of my work in [...] But Queen’s Village, don’t even try [...] People there would yell at me. I was yelled at only when I was first starting in the fall of 2015. It was in Center City on Walnut and it was just a little old
lady who was just yelling at me about how it’s vandalism and my response was just like, ‘I’m sorry, you can take it down if you don’t like it.’” The artist also directly addressed the morality of making “illegal art” and said, “I’ve had friends who’ve said, ‘Don’t you feel bad because it’s vandalism?’ And I’m like, it’s just a sticker. Nothing I do is permanent. Even wheatpaste isn’t permanent. If it lasts a long time, the weather will eventually get to it and it’ll peel off, you know?” Therefore this artist does not feel guilty about illegally putting up street art because it is more ephemeral. However, her experience as a sticker artist is unique as stickers are not as sturdy as wheat-pastes or paint or other kinds of street art, although wheatpastes can be torn down quickly even if they do not deteriorate as naturally as stickers.

One street artist shared with me that she sometimes felt limited regarding where she could put up her work, even though she works alone and can technically put up work wherever she pleases, as long as she respects the space of other street artists. This artist said that the Mural Arts Program is beneficial to their artists because it gives artists access to communities that they might not otherwise have access to, as they place emphasis on integrating themselves into the communities that they work with. She added that she does not put up work in residential areas that she’s not familiar with or a part of, because she does not want to feel like she’s intruding into a community that she’s not affiliated with. She said that she is especially aware of this as a
white person, and said, “I don’t want it to be seen as, what the hell are you doing in my neighborhood doing this thing.” Therefore, the Mural Arts Program may be more effective in creating a “communal” public space than street artists can be, as street artists typically work alone whereas the Mural Arts Program makes a diligent effort to integrate itself into and collaborate with various communities.

However, this does not necessarily mean that street artists are always restricted to putting up work in their own communities. One artist said that in the past several years, the Mural Arts Program has been hiring artists from the Philadelphia street art community to work with them. He said that when the Mural Arts Program began, they only worked with the same handful of artists, but over the past five years, “they’ve been keen to pull and call on street artists they’ve seen to do commissioned murals.” He also mentioned that some street artists who work the Mural Arts Program continue to do their illegal pieces even while painting commissioned murals. Therefore, street artists have various options when it comes to laying claim to public space if they choose to work with organizations like the Mural Arts Program while concurrently doing their own illegal work. In my previous chapter, I mention that critiques of Habermas are relevant to how the Mural Arts Program excludes certain communities while simultaneously excluding others. Similarly, as the Mural Arts Program selects various people from a subaltern community (the street art community) to highlight, they are simultaneously rejecting other members of the community. They continue to critique “illegal” art, yet find it acceptable when “illegal” art aesthetics are legitimized by them when they hire street artists.

IV. The Politics of Street Art
Zohlberg posits that when city dwellers and passerby see graffiti or street art without planning to as they navigate the city, “the spell of reality is temporarily broken as they are forced to confront the artist’s alternative reality” (1990, 93). This “alternative reality” that Zohlberg mentions can refer to a couple of things. Firstly, it can be connected with how when a random passerby sees a piece of graffiti or street art, they are forced to confront the existence of the lower class and/or minorities in the city that illegal forms of public art are often associated with, which is inextricably tied to the realities of structural discrimination, poverty, racism, and class segregations. Secondly, the alternative realities that Zohlberg mentions could consist of the messages in the graffiti or street art itself--so for example, if a passerby was to see a piece of art made by the street artist I interviewed that addresses violence or abuse towards women, the passerby would be forced to confront this “alternative reality.” Therefore, this unavoidable confrontation and acknowledgement of alternative realities make street art and graffiti effective to spread political messages. When discussing what drew them to street art in the first place, an artist I interviewed shared, “It was kind of to push people out of their everyday monotonous experience [...] And everything in our environment is pretty tepid, like it’s all brown or gray, it’s all kind of blah. So I just wanted people to walk around the corner, the same corner they walk around everyday, and all of a sudden by jolted out of their everyday experience and have a piece of art that they would be able to see.”

When street art forces someone to confront an “alternative” reality, they are being forced to hear the viewpoint of an alternative public sphere. Fraser critiques Habermas’s conceptualization of a single public sphere that is exclusionary towards women and people of color and instead proposes multiple public spheres, saying the “idea of participatory parity is
better achieved by the multiplicity of publics than by a single public” (1993, 18). In addition to constituting its own genre, street art could also constitute an alternative public due to its illegality.

In my previous chapter, I discussed how the artists at the Mural Arts Program were extremely hesitant to label their work as political, even when their murals contained explicitly political content (for example, the Black Power fist in the *Jackie Robinson* mural). The street artists I spoke with, on the other hand, were quick to label their work as political. Lewison says, “The best street art and graffiti are illegal. This is because the illegal works have political and ethical connotations that are lost in sanctioned works” (2008, 127). One artist said, “From its origins, street art and graffiti have been pretty political. I also think the act of doing it illegally on the streets in any city is a political act in itself.” Another artist similarly spoke about the politics of street art, pointing out that the act of transgressing “public space” is political. She also mentioned that she believes that street artists, and all citizens, have the right to express themselves into public space, adding that because she pays taxes, she should be able to lay claim to public spaces in the city. She shared, “We ‘own’ these public spaces yet there’s all this bureaucratic-like red tape for us to actually utilize them even though we’ve paid for them and we own them. But you know, we’re kind of
socialized to just understand that we don’t take advantage of them. And I think street artists’ idea is that no, this is our public space and this is our city, and we’re gonna put our message out there. So I think it’s inherently political.”

When I asked the street artists I interviewed if they felt that murals had the same capacity to be political, they said no, citing that the Mural Arts Program is a part-city organization and a lot of people have to approve mural designs and messages. One street artist said that one of the appeals of street art is that it can respond more quickly to political events because it’s much easier to produce quickly and pieces may last for a short amount of time. One Mural Arts Program employee also mentioned the ephemerality of street art in comparison to murals, sharing that the amount of time it spends on the street is what differentiates murals from street art and graffiti to her. Knight posits that murals are unsuitable solutions to urban issues as their immutable nature prevents them from being able to address urban issues as they shift (2008, 142). Therefore, perhaps street art and graffiti provide more suitable and effective strategies to address urban/political issues as quickly as they arise.

For example, the street art photographer I spoke with was recently involved in collectivizing the street art community in a protest against the inauguration of the most-recent president-elect, Donald Trump. The protest was called “Signs of Solidarity” and took place during inauguration weekend, and consisted of about fifty street artists who contributed posters or banners displaying anti-hate messages. Interestingly, the street artists teamed up with local businesses to hang up the signs and banners fighting against the hateful rhetoric spewed by Donald Trump’s campaign by asking the local businesses if they would display their banners on the street. Therefore, although the street artists created the signs and banners, the signs and
banners most likely wouldn’t be able to be considered street art due to the fact that they were hung legally. The organizer of the protest shared, “We wanted to work with businesses because we got the sense from the community at large that it wasn’t just the young activist-y artist types who were pissed that Trump was president, I mean everyone was.” The fact that they teamed up with local businesses in a way made the signs and banners more “legitimate” in their eyes and in the eyes of the viewers, as the messages weren’t only coming from “young activist-y” street artists, but from business owners as well.

In addition to discussing organized street art protests such as “Signs of Solidarity,” the street artists I spoke with spoke about their own street art that is construed as political. One street artist said shared her political street art is oftentimes perceived as angry even though she herself does not interpret it in that way. She shared, “My passion might be perceived as rage [...] I have some work that says, ‘Get mad, get loud.’ I guess that can sound like rage. My most common one is ‘We all need to be heard’ and ‘Hear me, see me,’ and that’s kind of like a demand [...] So, I mean, my response to that is kind of like, I didn’t think that it was coming from a place of rage, I thought it was coming from a place of truth. So you know, I’m trying to be as raw and authentic and as real as possible.” In demanding for her voice to be heard, this artist is asserting her right to take up public space.

The street artist photographer I spoke with also discussed some specific pieces of street art and shared that he thinks that the most effective piece of political street art was done by a yarn-bomber who knitted a pink bikini on the Frank Rizzo statue outside of City Hall, which he photographed. He shared, “It only lasted five minutes, the guards were kind of laughing and letting it happen, and when it was done, they were like, ‘Did you get your photo?’ And we said
‘Sure,’ and they cut it off.” It is important to note that both the street art photographer I interviewed and the street artist who knit the pink bikini are white, which may be why they were not more harshly reprimanded by the guards who were watching. The street art photographer even describes that the guards were laughing at the spectacle rather than reprimanding the artist immediately. If the artist had been a person of color, the situation most likely would have played out differently. Furthermore, because the guards made sure that they were able to take the photo, the guards were implicitly approving the artist and street art photographer to circulate the image through virtual public realms, even though the piece was not acceptable in the actual public realm.

One of the street artists I spoke with said that the political street art is important because in her opinion, it is unavoidable as it exists in public space where anyone can see it. The artist described her street art as very political, saying “I like to make work that also talks about issues that women have experiences with, like violence or abuse or things like that, and I think that it kind of allows people to have somewhat of a platform to talk about it if they didn’t feel comfortable about talking about it before.” Regarding the unavoidability of street art, she shared, “And the fact that it’s not in a gallery, it’s on the street. So it’s not like you have to go

Figure 25: Unknown artist, unnamed wheatpaste, 2012, Philadelphia, photograph © 2012 Conrad Benner. (https://streetsdept.com/2012/10/20/feminist-for-a-lack-of-a-better-word-wheatpastes-popping-up-all-over-philly/)
seek it out, it’s like I’m shoving it down your face and in your throat and you’re going to deal with it.” However, as mentioned earlier, street artists tend to put their art in certain places in the city where they feel that the art is less likely to be taken down-- for example, in certain neighborhoods, or even specifically on abandoned buildings or certain walls. Therefore, city bureaucrats and other individuals who dislike “illegal” art forms can avoid street art if they do not frequent these specific areas in the city. Caldeira, who writes about the politics of street art and graffiti in São Paulo, discusses how spaces of sociability and spaces of circulation of people from different classes are different. She writes, “Certainly, these people encountered each other in public, especially downtown, but there were many things that guaranteed separation and allowed a certain inattention to the other. There were different systems of circulation: public buses for the working poor and private cars for the middle and upper classes; the front door and the social elevator for the latter and the backdoor and service elevator for the former [...] There was also a certain subservience from the subaltern that was assumed by the upper classes: an expectation that they would know their place” (2002, 388). Caldeira then adds that the withdrawal of many of the upper classes from the center of the city is associate not only with the fear of crime, but with the democratization of the city. Although wealthy Philadelphians may not have withdrawn from the center of the city, there are clear parallels between São Paulo and Philadelphia regarding Caldeira’s discussion of how different classes inhabit different spaces of sociability and spaces of circulation. Therefore, the street artist who shared that she thinks that political street art is especially effective because of its public and unavoidable nature is correct in that political street art is unavoidable only for the classes that inhabit the spaces of sociability and spaces of circulation where the art is situated. Wealthy Philadelphians, on the other hand,
could easily avoid political street art if they avoided the neighborhoods where street art is prevalent, which they may do naturally anyways due to their different spaces of sociability and circulation.

V. Accessibility of Street Art

The street artists and many of the Mural Arts Program artists I spoke with shared that one of the reasons that they like making public art is because it is accessible to anyone. One street artist shared, “Another effect I would like to have is making art accessible. I think that fine art is exclusive and it shuts a lot of people out. I think a lot of people are uncomfortable going to institutions of fine art.” Therefore, street art has a democratizing quality, as it provides every city habitant with the possibility to view, enjoy, and learn from art. However, Caldeira’s discussion regarding the different spaces of sociability and spaces of circulation that different classes inhabit is relevant here because although street art is accessible to everyone, some may choose to avoid it.

In addition to street art and graffiti being more accessible than art in a museum or gallery because of its public placement, the street art photographer I interviewed argued that it is also far more accessible in its content. For example, if a street artist wants to portray a political message in their art, they don’t need to hide, weaken, or mute their message—they can be as direct as they would like, making their messages accessible to everyone. One artist shared, “You don’t necessarily need a big art background to like a cool graffiti tag or to see a wheat paste of Donald Trump cutting off the head of the Empire State Building without knowing what it means. So I think it is much more accessible not only in its content but in its placement.”
The street artists I spoke with also spoke to the importance of the accessibility of art for the artists themselves. One artist shared, “I think a lot of people who don’t have access to art class or whatever need street art, need these places to be able to practice their skills, to be able to display work and possibly get attention for their work in ways that they would be excluded from otherwise.” Street art is also far more affordable to produce than murals are— as murals can cost tens of thousands of dollars, they often require organizational support and outside funders, whereas “a wheat paste is literally just your time, the cost of paper, and then you buy wheat and boil it, so ten dollars.” However, it is important to note that street art is more accessible to white artists who do not have to worry as much about being reprimanded about the police, despite its low cost. Street art can be dangerous to practice for artists of color, and is therefore less accessible for them.

VI. Street Artists and Mass Mediation

One of the artists I interviewed worked in advertising for seven years previous to becoming a street art photographer. He insisted that there are many similarities between street art and advertising, and that these mediums can achieve similar purposes. He pointed out that similarly to how Budweiser has ads on bus shelters and billboards, street artists can dispel their own messages by prolifically putting their own art and messages out on the streets. Comparing the effectiveness of political street art messages to the effectiveness of advertisements, he shared, “I don’t think advertisers would spend billions of dollars a year on bus shelter ads and ads around the city if they didn’t benefit from them, and you know of course they’re trying to benefit their profit book.”
Street art is ephemeral, but it is heavily documented by photographers such as the one I interviewed on blogs or on Instagram. The street art photographer I interviewed said, “There’s sort of an immediate payoff for doing a really awesome piece in the street that gets attention. Not only is it rewarding in that maybe people start following you on Instagram, you can get a bunch of people photographing it.” A street artist also shared that most street artists maintain fairly public presences online through websites or Instagrams to showcase their art and even sometimes cartel sites where they can sell their art. An artist shared, “Instagram is like the street art ‘thing.’ Like, everything for street art, I’ve been contacted to collaborate with artists through street art, I’ve contacted other artists to tell them I love their work.”

Unlike street artists, graffiti artists don’t have websites or Instagram accounts. The street art photographer I interviewed mention that this may be because their audience is more niche, saying that graffiti writers “oftentimes want to impress their graffiti fans, want to sort of practice their skills but aren’t necessarily very interested in having a big public presence.” Graffiti artists may be wary of having a big public presence because graffiti is much more stigmatized that street art is, due to the fact that it is associated with the lower class and minority groups. According to a street artist I interviewed, graffiti artists are also more likely to be targeted by the police. Therefore, publicly associating themselves with their work, online or otherwise, could put them in danger due to graffiti’s stigmatization.

Street artists, on the other hand, can publicly associate themselves with their work because they are mostly white. Their art is less stigmatized not only because of its aesthetics, but because it is made by white artists. Therefore, it is not as dangerous for them to have Instagram
accounts or websites that blatantly announce who they are and what their street art looks like, as they do not have to worry as much about the repercussions.

**VII. Street Art and Class**

Some of the Mural Arts employees I interviewed weren’t particularly fans of graffiti, and even one of the street artists I spoke with expressed a distaste for graffiti. Bourdieu says that social subjects are defined by their taste, and that their social standing defines their taste (1984, 6). Therefore, people who express a distaste for graffiti are most likely speaking from a social standing that makes them think that graffiti is distasteful, due to the fact that it is strongly associated with the lower class and minority groups. Additionally, a person with a higher social standing would most likely not have a taste for graffiti as they have been conditioned to enjoy more “classical” artworks. Zohlberg elaborates on Bourdieu’s concept of taste and says that dominant classes are inherently deemed to have a superior taste because taste preferences are cultural signs that can be used to maintain social inequality and reinforce class differences (1990, 15). Therefore, the city bureaucrats’ and other individuals’ distaste for graffiti can work to reinforce the class differences that make them view graffiti as distasteful in the first place.

I also argue that taste can determine how people make distinctions between street art and graffiti. A street artist I spoke with said, “I think that people [...] decided to elevate what they like by calling it street art and calling what they don’t like graffiti.” Elaborating, he shared, “I’ve seen really cool graffiti tags, like half block long graffiti called ‘street art’ just because the person viewing it liked it.” Even the name of graffiti is stigmatized enough for people to assume that they won’t like it when they see it—therefore, it can be confused for street art if a person deems it to be aesthetically pleasing and does not want to admit to enjoying a piece of graffiti.
due to its associations with the lower class and minority groups. One of the Mural Arts employees I spoke with shared that she thinks graffiti is acceptable only if the community “buys into it or enjoys it or wants it there,” saying that murals are beneficial and aesthetically pleasing to communities because they are created with the community’s input and collaboration.

She then shared her own issues with tags in her office in Center City, saying, “I have a big glass brick window in the back and people tag it all the time. And it makes my business look junky; it’s not really beautiful tags, it’s usually just weird black spray paint that says something that you can’t even figure out what it says.” In this case, this Mural Arts Program employee is saying she enjoys particular “beautiful” kinds of graffiti tags, but not graffiti tags that are “junky” or painted with “weird black spray paint.” Douglas’s argument of dirt as matter out of place is relevant here, as she says, “Dirt was created by the differentiating activity of the mind, it was a by-product of the creation of order” (1966, 198). The employee I spoke with believes that there is a certain way that graffiti should look so that it can fit into her idea of what acceptable graffiti is. If it does not, then she deems it as “junky,” as “weird,” as “dirt,” not only because of its aesthetic appearance but because of the communities graffiti is associated with.

She posited mural-making a suitable solution for graffiti problems, sharing, “I think it it’s just people writing their names in spray paint and people don’t like it and it’s a nuisance, and it makes the place look junky, then I think it’s a great opportunity for Mural Arts to come.”

Although the Mural Arts Program has been viewed as a “solution” to graffiti in the past, as it was originally created to be the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network to encourage graffiti and street artists to engage in more productive and legal forms of public art, such as murals, they have recently begun to sponsor graffiti-like projects. One Mural Arts Program employee shared that
they recently had a project called “Open Source” for which they asked people from all over the
world to work with them, some of whom were graffiti and street artists who were paid to do their
signature work. The same employee said, “We have some really nice graffiti art now in a number
of places in the city that have been approved, the walls have been approved. It’s not like you’re
going to get a spray can of paint and just do it, it’s professional art.” In saying this, the employee
implied that art is only “professional” or “legitimate” if it is made with an organization like the
Mural Arts Program and funded by the city and private organizations. Although the aesthetics of
the graffiti are similar, graffiti is only deemed to be acceptable by some people if it’s funded and
legalized by a program like the Mural Arts Program.

VIII. Graffiti and its Absence from the Conversation

Although I was able to conduct interviews with prominent members from the
Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and the Philadelphia street art community, I was not able to
find any graffiti artists to interview. Even the street artists I spoke with confessed that they did
not personally know any graffiti artists but that they were well-connected with other street artists,
enlightening me to how disjointed the two communities are. There are a few reasons for this. The
street art photographer I spoke with mentioned that the graffiti community is very small and
insular and that graffiti artists tend to not publicly advertise themselves or their work using
online platforms like street artists do, as graffiti artists usually don’t have websites or Instagram
accounts. Therefore, in addition to the community being small, it does not make itself easy to
contact, making it less likely for someone in the street art community to know a graffiti artist
than another street artist, of whom there are many with websites and Instagram accounts. One
street artist shared that graffiti artists are “pretty low-key, they don’t put their name out there, so
it’s not like I can message them and be like, hey, I’m gonna send you an email and we’re gonna be friends.”

Another reason that a street artist provided to me is that graffiti is a niche art form that isn’t very easy to pick up as street art can be, due to the fact that it is difficult to learn and the work can be grueling while street art does not necessarily require a specific style or set of skills. One street artist shared, “I just think that it takes a very specific artist, a very specific writer, to want to write their name over and over again for a decade and to really master it [...] graffiti can take years and years to master, I mean it’s not easy to control a can, it’s not easy to come up with your style, and there’s not really a ton of great places to practice.” This specificity also lends to making the graffiti community smaller and therefore less accessible to an outsider, like me or the streets artists I spoke with.

The street art photographer I spoke with also shared that the graffiti community may be more insular due to the fact that they are more likely to be admonished for their illegal artwork than a street artist would. He shared, “If there’s a stigma to any of this, it’s specifically to tags and graffiti. I think out of all the illegal art in public space including graffiti and street art, graffiti writers are the most at risk of getting fined, getting put in jail, getting arrested [...] I think whether that risk is real or perceived, they feel it.” This may be related to the fact that graffiti is often associated with the lower class and/or minority groups. One street artist shared that many of the other street artists in Philly are not people of color, and elaborated that most street artists are mostly white people and that’s why they’re not afraid to associate themselves with their work and have public websites and Instagram accounts even though their work is technically illegal. The street artist added, “I’ve been looking to collaborate a lot and be a lot more intersectional
with my work and my collaborations but I have to realize that it’s a lot easier for me to come out
on a Sunday afternoon and put up work illegally than it would be for a person of color to do the
same thing.”

Mary Douglas says that dirt is matter out of place that should approached “through order”
(1966, 50). Using this viewpoint, graffiti would be seen as “dirty” due to its transgressiveness,
and it is combatted “through order” in the form of city officials and city laws. Wuggenig
augments this argument and posits that in addition to existing outside of the norms of cleanliness
and order within a public space, graffiti reinforces norms such as structural discrimination and
class segregation, as its existence and the reaction it provokes speaks volumes to who is welcome
to exist in public space and who isn’t (2009). Caldeira argues that even though the graffiti artists
she studies are aware that they exist as transgressors on the margins of society and that their art is
stigmatized and even rejected, they are not expecting this to change. About the graffiti artists she
studied in São Paulo, she said, “They conceive of their performances as practices explicitly
belonging to and located in the margins. As they reappropriate spaces left over from urban
fortification, they take social inequality for granted and thus naturalize it. Their practices expose
inequality but do not imagine that they will diminish it.” If we assume that graffiti artists in
Philadelphia take the same stance, this would explain why they don’t advertise themselves online
like street artists do and why they maintain such an insular community--because they accept their
positions as the transgressors. However, as previously mentioned, they could also be less willing
to openly associate with their art as graffiti artists are the most likely to be admonished for their
illegal art.
When a person deems graffiti as distasteful, or suggests that graffiti, in certain situations, should be removed or combated with murals, they are making a statement about who belongs in public space and who does not. Related to how many of the Mural Arts Program employees expressed a distaste for graffiti or expressed relief to the absence of graffiti, Shobe and Banis say, “anti-graffiti organizations and city governments often promote the fear and chaos” that are thought to be promoted by phenomena such as graffiti and vandalism in the first place (2014, 589). This is because graffiti writers, who deviate from accepted norms of behavior and deviate from the notion of what is an acceptable public artist, are “portrayed as outsiders by official city rhetoric and thus deemed ‘out of place’” (2014, 589). Although the Mural Arts Program began as the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network, eradicating graffiti in the city is no longer its main goal. However, because many of the Mural Arts staff expressed a distaste for graffiti and mentioned that the absence of graffiti near or on murals is a sign of community improvement, it is safe to assume that Mural Arts still holds anti-graffiti values that may further stigmatize graffiti in the city.

IX. Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve discussed the different kinds of street art and the communities that surround them, how street art exists in public space, the politicality of street art, the absence of graffiti from the conversation, and more. However, the underlying topic, and the title of this chapter, is definitely the question of how and why street art is hierarchized into different categories. Basically, the answer is manifold, but has to do with the fact that public art and its categorizations are inextricably linked to class discrimination and social segregation. Murals are generally the most respected because they are inevitably tied to the city government and
therefore to upper classes, as most murals in Philadelphia are funded by the Philadelphia Mural Arts Foundation which is supported by the city and other wealthy donors. Street art and graffiti, on the other hand, are less respected, but still have a hierarchy in themselves. From what I gathered from my interviews, many of the street artists in Philadelphia are white, and this is why they are able to have websites and Instagram accounts and associate themselves publicly with their illegal work. They don’t have to be as fearful of the consequences of being reprimanded, as they know they will not be victims of institutional racism that could include unsafe or unjust encounters with police.

I asked the street artist I interviewed who shared that most of the street artists she knows are white if she knew anything about the demographics of the graffiti community in Philadelphia, and she replied that she had no idea. This absence of graffiti artists and their art from the conversations that the greater public art community has and the online presence that many other public artists hold is representational of how they are marginalized in society. Many of my interviewees shared that graffiti is the most stigmatized kind of public art, but none of them mentioned why this might be, other than citing that in general people consider graffiti to be uglier than street art. Therefore, the reason that people label graffiti as distasteful is not only because it’s illegal, but because they may not like how it appears visually, as certain individuals’ taste (for example, city bureaucrats’ taste) may not be accustomed to it. Furthermore, its visual and conversational marginalization is reflecting of the social marginalization its artists face, and its existence on the street forces passerby to confront this reality that they may not necessarily want to think about.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I focused my research on the public art of Philadelphia, a city nicknamed the “City of Murals” because it has more murals than any other city in the world. I looked at the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and examined why and how it has led to the proliferation of murals in Philadelphia and participated in the stigmatization and decline of street art and graffiti. I also looked at the street art community and examined how street artists conceptualize their art and their community. I began by giving a brief overview of the history of murals and street art in general and in Philadelphia. Next, in my literature review, I introduced scholarship relevant to murals and street art, dividing my analysis into three sections. In my analysis, I posited that the legality and of public art is inextricably linked to class segregation. I also discussed how street art interacts with the city and public sphere to elaborate on this argument. Finally, I explored the institutionalization of public art in order to provide some context and parallels to the Mural Arts Program. Next, I discussed who I interviewed, how, and why in my methodology section.

In my first chapter, I looked at various specific murals in Philadelphia created by the Mural ARts Program, and I illuminated how the organization quickly gained money and momentum as its standards of artistry were elevated. I also discussed and explained the Mural Arts Program’s community mural process.

In my second chapter, I concentrated on how the Mural Arts Program conceptualizes itself, drawing up interviews that I conducted with the Mural Arts Staff. I argued that although the Mural ARts Program provides a platform for lower-income and minority groups to express themselves in the public sphere, they are still exclusionary in that they choose which groups to highlight, and they ultimately exert their own control over public space.
In my third chapter, I introduced the different kinds of public art as constituting their own "genres" and examined how their artists conceptualize these genres. I argued that public art and its categorizations are linked to class discrimination and social discrimination.

Above all, I examined how murals and street art exist in relation to the politics of public space, and I argue that different kinds of public art are respected and seen as "legitimate" to various degrees not because of how they appear aesthetically but because of who makes them. Although this thesis is about mural and street art, the underlying question that I aimed to tackle was regarding who is allowed in public space and who isn’t. My first question when I first conceptualized of this thesis was, "Why are some kinds of public art legal while some are illegal?" The question of illegality runs far deeper than I first anticipated, as I discovered that the criminalization of marginalized art like graffiti reflects the marginalization of people who are associated with graffiti (the lower class and minority groups). I also discovered that street artists in Philadelphia are mostly white and publicly associate themselves with their illegal street art vis-à-vis online platforms like Instagram or their own personal websites, as they are not as stigmatized as graffiti artists due to their higher social capital and white privilege. Regarding the Mural Arts Program.

If I were to do anything different, I would wanted to interview members of the graffiti community in addition to members of the street art community and the Mural Arts Program, as I discussed and analyzed graffiti using the information that I gathered through various texts and the interviews I conducted. I believe that voices from the graffiti community would helped me provide a more comprehensive view of the public art scene in Philadelphia today. However, as the street artists I spoke with pointed out, I would have had a hard time finding a way to contact
graffiti artists as they do not advertise themselves publicly on online platforms like street artists do, and as I’ve said before, I think their absence from the conversation was symbolic for their elusiveness from the public eye.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


