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Contested Spaces And Artistic Places –
The Aestheticization of Wall Space in LA's Arts District

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Geography

by

Jamie Zoe Malot Chantry

2021

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Contested Spaces and Artistic Places –
The Aestheticization of Wall Space in LA’s Arts District

by

Jamie Zoe Malot Chantry

Master of Arts in Geography

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Juan Herrera, Chair

Art occupies a controversial place in processes of gentrification. The role art has in gentrifying neighborhoods plays out uniquely in Los Angeles where cultural erasure is prominent through practices of ‘white-washing’ in a city dense with public art. ‘White-washing’— where artists, property owners, and municipal actors paint over particular artworks—is juxtaposed to the large-scale anti-gentrification protests led by activist groups in Boyle Heights fighting against ‘artwashing’— the process by which developers and artists appropriate and aestheticize markers of urban decay in order to market real estate to consumers seeking an industrial backdrop through beautification projects, such as those promoted by the LA Arts District (ADLA). This paper examines how public art, specifically murals, street art, and graffiti art, create territories of

contestation and how certain aesthetics, identities, and histories are revealed through the artworks that are created, contested, and censored. I ask how power relations take shape and influence socio-spatial representations made visible and invisible through the enactment of certain policies such as mural moratoriums and ‘white-washing’. I approach public artworks first, as creative and theoretical spaces—sites of epistemological inquiry—by examining the content and aesthetics of the art in the LA Arts District; and second, as a lens into how muralists, graffiti artists, and street artists engage in territorializing practices that both resist and reproduce inequalities associated with gentrification.

Keywords: Art, aesthetics, art districts, gentrification, territory, territoriality.

The thesis of Jamie Zoe Malot Chantry is approved.

Helga Leitner

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University of California, Los Angeles

2021

DEDICATION

To my parents, Dr. Caroline Chantry and Jim Malot for their unconditional love and support in the pursuit of this degree.

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Introduction

[Reporter] “Do we call this art?”

[Dustin Shuler] “Yeah”

[Reporter] “Why?”

[Dustin Shuler] “Because I’m an artist, and I’m doing it”¹

Art can be controversial, as it often sparks dialogue between conflicting ideologies and identities. The presence, or lack thereof, of certain identities and aesthetics through visual arts represent tangible forms of power. The general onlooker may not question how public art came to appear on their city’s walls, but the process by which these walls are painted is a highly territorialized act contested by disparate actors that are unevenly positioned in this process. Determinations over the aesthetics of public artworks in cities does *not* occur on neutral terrain: polemical negotiations create contestations over belonging, identity, and representation in urban neighborhoods. In Los Angeles, these are negotiated between artists coming from an array of backgrounds, property owners that provide permission for and/or commission particular artworks, community members, non-profit art organizations, and municipal bodies that regulate public artworks via the city’s permitting process. This project examines how processes of gentrification in concert with city mural ordinances create mechanisms of marginalization and erasure through the regulation of public artworks.

I utilize public artworks, specifically murals, street art, and graffiti art as a lens to analyze how artists engage in the production and contestation of urban space. The production of space and the production of art are inextricably linked and are deeply political projects (Lefebvre,

¹ Transcribed from a video news clip from the 1970’s about the artwork of Dustin Shuler, an artist from the LA Arts District retrieved from the documentary film ‘Tales of the American Hotel’ produced and directed by Pamela Yates and Steven Seemayer regarding the notorious American Hotel at the heart and center of the Arts District that housed artists for decades and is now a boutique hotel. For many I spoke with the changing ownership of the American Hotel marked the end of the Arts District as a place for artists. It’s interior and exterior walls has served as a canvas for the changing artworks for decades. Currently painted on its Southern Wall is ‘La Abuelita’ by El Mac, Nuke, and other members of UTI painted in 2013 (Figure 8).

1993; Luger, 2017). Even the categorization of particular artworks as murals, street art or graffiti art is contested and highly disputed among artists. Muralism is immersed within a long tradition of Chicana and Latina community art production that tends to be brush-painted and depict an ethno-cultural narrative. Graffiti art tends to be aerosol-based, text-driven, and highly specific to its local spatio-temporal context. Street art, on the other hand, tends to be less culturally specific, aerosol-based, and generally painted by artists from more privileged backgrounds, some of who travel internationally to paint in Los Angeles. These categories are fluid and while I risk over-essentializing their inherent characteristics I do so because artists construct these different categories of art to demarcate street artists as separate from Chicana/Latina graffiti artists and muralists.² In Los Angeles, both graffiti and mural practices are heavily steeped in Chicana and Latina influences and emerged in response to historical marginalization by mainstream and hegemonic forms of representation. These artistic trajectories are embedded within a political discourse *in* and *of* the streets— a phenomenon commonly referred to as ‘*qué opina la calle*’ (what does the street think) (Chaffee, 1993). Scholars and artists note the emergence and the production of Chicana visual art stems from the 1960’s in conjunction with the revolutionary cause of the Chicano Movement which saw art as a mechanism to claim space and as a way to reinterpret and celebrate Chicana culture (Villa, 2000; de la Loza, 2011; Cordova, 2017; Davalos, 2017; and Gonzalez et al., 2019).

Historically excluded from museums and ‘mainstream art’, Chicana and Latina artists created alternative spaces for art production *in* and *for* the public through practices deemed legal

² I will generally specify which style I am speaking to, or refer to them as public artworks if I am speaking on them collectively. Although using public artworks may imply public funding which is not always the case for the artworks I am referencing; referring them as Independent Public Artworks also implies they are independent from capital or state interests, which many are not. Schacter (2015) discusses the fluidity of these label as well as their flexible application to artworks.

and illegal. The shifting (il)legality of public art production in Los Angeles can be traced through the series of mural ordinances implemented throughout the city. The more challenging it was to attain a mural permit the more murals were painted illegally, causing an overall decrease in public art production.

This project traces the sense of loss voiced by long-time Chicax and Latinx graffiti artists and muralists as they and their works are displaced through processes of gentrification and shifting municipal regulations. Its focus is a geographical area in Los Angeles called the Arts District, which has been developed and promoted by city developers and planners as the premier arts neighborhood in the city. This has resulted in the displacement of long-term residents, artists, and particular artworks. I also draw attention to the artists that resist this displacement by emplacing themselves and their art within the Arts District as they recode and remap places of belonging.

Long-term Chicax artists and residents of the community allege that as the LA Arts District (ADLA) gentrified, the art on its walls became less historical, political, and culturally identifiable. I reveal how property owners and municipal actors enact policies and practices that privilege particular artists and aesthetic practices within the Arts District. This negatively impacts Chicax, Latinx, and Indigenous representations as the public art becomes more restricted. Additionally, property owners, developers, and the city increasingly commission street artists for large public works in order to attract business to the area. This corresponds with arguments that highlight arts and artists as contributors to gentrification and displacement (Florida, 2003; Lees et al., 2008; Matthews, 2010). Recent scholarship has examined the different ways in which the arts are employed by governing entities for inner-city revitalization, tourism marketability, arts-led development (Schupbach, 2003; Brooks & Kushner 2007;

Chapple et al 2010; Christiaanse, 2012 Grodach et al., 2014), ‘creative place-making’ in ‘creative cities’ and ‘spectacle-cities’ (Karvelyte, 2011; McLean, 2014; and Zhang 2018, 2019), as well as how artists contest these trends (Woodworth, 2015; Oakes, 2019; Luger and Ren, 2018; and Hawkins, 2019). Art, in other words, can both advance and resist officially promoted urban spatial forms.

In the Arts District, public artworks illustrate attempts to both reproduce and challenge hegemonic representations advanced by the city and developers who seek to reshape space through particular aesthetic regimes. Spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre’s works on claiming spaces of the everyday through acts of resistance, and imaginative actions more generally, inspires the discussion in this thesis. I claim that art plays a mediating role in the production of space as a spatial language that gives shape and color to the racial and class struggles inscribed in space. Similarly, scholar Jason Luger (2017) states: “Art creates the urban realm; art helps to change, and sometimes to destroy it. Art and the city are constantly being made, and re-made, operating within and helping to shape the currents of power at various scales, fixed in territory and moving across space and time” (Luger, 2017, p. 230). The city is constantly evolving through dynamic forms of urban processes and because of the ephemerality of murals, graffiti art, and street art which often last from a few days to a few years their role in the production of urban space is in constant flux.

This thesis explores the following question: how do artists continue to (re)make and (re)visualize urban spaces? I analyze how artists, through their artistic and aesthetic forms, stake claims to particular places— a process scholars have described as territoriality. I am not using territory simply as defined or bounded space, but rather territoriality as a spatial practice of making claims of belonging. This is in line with Delaney’s (2005) definition of territoriality:

Territorial configurations are not simply cultural artifacts. They are political achievements. Territoriality, then, is much more than a strategy for control of space. It is better understood as implicating and being implicated in ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world – ways of world-making informed by beliefs, desires, and culturally and historically contingent ways of knowing (p. 12).

Discussions surrounding territory and art tend to focus on cities' policing of 'tagging' and graffiti art; the criminalization of graffiti; white-washing or removing graffiti through various abatement programs; or the claiming of territory between different graffiti artists and their crews³ (Lay and Cybriwsky, 1974; Bloch, 2019; and Landry, 2019). Territory has traditionally been understood in relation to state power, or notions of the state as a container of society, which Agnew (1994) poignantly termed the 'territorial trap' (Agnew, 1994, 2005; Sassen, 2013). More recently it has been expanded to include practices of 'territoriality', which are processual, dynamic, and fluid (Sack, 1986; Painter, 2010; Duff, 2010; Giesecking, 2015). Although governmental actors certainly police what narratives and particular aesthetics are painted and made visible in the Arts District, they are by no means the only agents involved. Moving beyond them opens up what can be considered acts of territoriality. In this thesis I am concerned with the agentic ability and territorial behavior of artists who create symbolic meaning by visualizing particular aesthetics rather than as a means of delineating sole control over a particular area.

Focusing on territoriality reveals how agents, in this case artists, claim space through acts of painting walls, covering up other works with their own, or 'buffing' (covering up art with white paint). Artists in the Arts District described their practices and behaviors in territorializing language, engaging in "battle[s] for that turf" and describing their walls as "a battleground"⁴.

³ Many graffiti writers and graffiti artists are a part of 'crews', sometimes multiple crews for both purposes of anonymity from the state and recognizability among each other [graffiti artists]. Graffiti artists create their own individual or crew based signia or 'tags'. For further discussion on the criminality of graffiti and crew politics see Davis (2008); Schacter (2014); Bloch (2019).

⁴ Collected from a series of interviews including artists, community members, and DCA staff between March – August 2020.

One community member in the Arts District described contestations over wall space as “territorial between the artists and their walls”.⁵ These negotiations signal contested claims over place and belonging through the projection of what Jacques Rancière terms as the ‘territory of the visible’. A key theorist on politics and aesthetics, Jacques Rancière (2004) describes ‘territory of the visible’ as the occupation of systems of representation through aesthetic sovereignty. Street artists, muralists, and graffiti artists that ‘occupy’ wall space in the Arts District are battling over what aesthetics and systems of representation are made (in)visible within the district. According to Rancière, aesthetics, along with style and systems of representations, is the “delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible... ‘aesthetic practices’ is a form of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’” (2004 p. 8). Through their aesthetic choices artists produce systems of representation. I argue that murals, street art, and graffiti art create territories of contestation that determine which histories and identities are valorized through the art that is created, contested, and censored in the Arts District.

Methodology

In this thesis I center works of art by examining the changing content, style, and aesthetic traditions of the artworks and their role in (re)producing and resisting processes of gentrification. I treat artworks as creative and theoretical spaces – sites of epistemological inquiry – and as activist spaces by examining the content and the implications of certain aesthetic choices. The importance of examining art or an image, as a site of epistemological inquiry is articulated by art

⁵ Interview with member of the arts community in the arts district involved mural and street art production and documentation in the Arts District, as well as some of the negotiations between property owners, graffiti artists and street artists. Interview conducted August 2020.

historian Kency Cornejo (2015, 2017) who argues that art needs to be foregrounded and treated as an *epistemological contribution*. Cornejo points to erasure and invisibility of certain narratives as a colonial practice enacted through controlling cultural memory and asks what art and artists can offer to ongoing decolonial debates. As I argue in this thesis, the (re)visualization of identity and place through public art can combat oppressive restraints on cultural knowledge production. I ground interpretations of artworks by examining the context in which they are produced. Geographer Gillian Rose stresses the importance of taking images seriously as sites of cultural production and encourages active engagement with visual materials through what she terms a ‘critical visual methodology’. This practice emphasizes the contextualization of an image by examining the politics of its production. In this vein, I conducted a series of interviews with artists and city officials, and paired it with policy and media analysis. Furthermore, I attended meetings where public artworks were discussed and approved by the city.

The various actors involved in public art production in the LA Arts District include: municipal agents via the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) and its permitting and approval process for public artworks outlined in mural ordinances; property owners who either provide permission for and/or commission particular artworks to be painted on their walls; community members who participate through either their involvement in non-profit organizations specific to the Arts District such as Cartwheel Art and Artshare or by voicing their opinions in publicly held meetings required for DCA approval; and of course, the artists. I reviewed the City of Los Angeles’ changing mural ordinances from the early 2000’s to the present, attended DCA meetings June-September 2020, and reviewed archived notes from previous DCA meetings to better understand the review and approval process under the current and previous mural ordinances.

I interviewed artists painting public artworks in and outside of the Arts District, community members involved in the art community through organizations, Cartwheel Art and Los Angeles River Artists and Business Association (LARABA), members of the LA Arts District Business Improvement District (ADLA), and staff from the DCA. These semi-structured interviews were 15 in total ranging between 1-3 hours each. These interviews contextualize the production of the public artworks, highlight the viewpoint of the artists whose works appear in this paper, and inform and influence how I read public artworks produced in the Arts District. I acknowledge my own positionality and interpretive lens as a white researcher studying gentrification.

A limitation with this project was lack of access to street artists, many of whom are not local to the area, making my thesis more heavily focused on the perspective of Chicax and Latinx muralists and graffiti artists. The selection of artworks I chose to analyze and include in this paper was influenced by the artists and community members I interviewed who highlighted particular artworks during our conversations⁶. Interviewees working for art organizations and city departments preferred to remain anonymous for the sake of privacy and to encourage honest answers around controversial topics. I keep the artists I interviewed anonymous as well because of the illegality of non-permitted artworks and the historic and potential criminalization for producing non-permitted work. The exception to this is if the artist's work both appears in this paper *and* is permitted.

In this paper, I begin by providing context behind the establishment of the LA Arts District and its proceeding processes of gentrification. Secondly, I describe how the art has

⁶ For example, Figure 7 was mentioned by five interviewees and referenced as representational of older styles of work in the Arts District. Figure 10 was mentioned by three interviewees, one mentioned the establishment of the Arts District Brewery as contributing the drastic gentrification that took hold of the Arts District in the 2010's.

gentrified and become aestheticized. Third, I demonstrate how artists resist this aestheticization by creating territories of contestation on the walls of the Arts District. Lastly, I ask how does the city through its mural ordinances influence the aestheticization of the Arts District?

LA Arts District

“There is no Arts District anymore except in name. But it used to be called the Arts District... because artists lived there.”⁷

LA Arts District represents the classic tale of gentrification. Located in downtown Los Angeles between Little Tokyo and the Los Angeles River (Figure 1), it is the earliest *designated* arts district, stemming from the mid-1970’s when Los Angeles introduced a new zoning ordinance to establish a “commercial and artwork district,” that became a live-work neighborhood for artists (Chapple et al., 2010, originally from American Council and for the Arts, 1979). The region was primarily used for agricultural purposes until the late nineteenth century when railroads and manufacturing began to take over the area to meet the shipping and transportation needs of Los Angeles. By the early twentieth century, Southern Pacific Railroad, Santa Fe Railroad, and Union Pacific all had depots, transportation buildings, and warehouses in and around the current neighborhood. The establishment of railroad infrastructure spurred industrialization, including the manufacturing of clothing, furniture, printing and publishing materials, machinery goods, rubber, and automobile parts. In 1922 the city officially re-zoned the downtown area to eliminate all residential housing and increase room for manufacturing and retail (Arts District LA, 2018).

⁷ An artist and activist living in the Arts District since the 1990’s and previously a part of the Los Angeles River Artists and Business Association (LARABA) that sought to keep artists within the area by streamlining artists for affordable housing in the Arts District. They detailed the struggles in retaining spaces and affordable housing for artists within the area, and expressed dismay at the lack of success and frustration with the absence of cooperation by the city and developers in the process.

However, with the shift from rail transport to trucking and the growing size of manufacturing plants, businesses began to relocate to Commerce and Vernon. In the 1970's, artists began to move into the vacant warehouse buildings and converted them to art studios and gallery spaces, in response to being priced out of the increasingly expensive Hollywood and Venice areas that boasted strong art scenes. Similar to other cities, artists expanded cultural tourism by establishing art galleries and large works of public art as part of inner-city revitalization schemes that aimed to encourage the infiltration of the 'creative class' leading to more institutionalized government sponsorship through renewal programs.⁸

In the Arts District, artists continued to conduct unlawful 'loft conversions', which intensified until 1981 when the city recognized the issue and established the Artist-in-Residence (AIR) program. This program legalized the transformation of formerly industrial spaces to art spaces. The establishment of the Arts District, which included zoning changes and the legalization of industrial conversions facilitated the continued conversion of loft spaces in the early 2000's by Arts District-based development companies, including the conversion of the 110-unit Toy Factory in 2005 and the 104-unit Biscuit Company Lofts structure in 2007. These two buildings were catalysts for increased transformation and gentrification through intensified 'loft conversion'.⁹

⁸ This process is similarly described in previous works that detail the contentious relationship between art and gentrification from Zukin (1982) to Grodach and Foster & Murdoch (2014); for comprehensive review see Matthews (2010).

⁹ Guzman, Richard. "How a neighborhood transformed in the downtown L.A. Arts District." *Los Angeles Daily News*, October 28, 2016.



[Figure 1] Arts District Business Improvement District (BID) Map. Retrieved from the Arts District Management Plan 2017.

In the LA Arts District area, the art scene flourished throughout the 1980's with the opening of art galleries such as the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). This still exists today as an exhibition and performance space. The thriving scene prompted art activist Joel Bloom, the area's "unofficial mayor", to successfully petition the city to designate the area as an Arts District in the mid-1990's. The LA Arts District was then established as a Business Improvement District (BID). This formally recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization (Figure 1) is named the Arts District of Los Angeles Business Improvement District (ADLA).

Property owners in the district contribute financially to the ADLA's goals of improving the neighborhood through hired 'safety teams', 'clean teams' and community beautification

programs. The ADLA ‘clean teams’ and ‘safety teams’ patrol the area every day and do systematic sweeps. As soon as they see graffiti they remove it.¹⁰ A central goal of BIDs is to make particular places attractive and more marketable through beautification programs.¹¹ This is particularly true for ADLA as it encourages muralists and street artists to reshape the built environment by visually reinforcing the distinctive character of the Arts District. However, this distinctive character has been drastically changed through the evolution of murals and street art that are painted on building walls as the neighborhood gentrifies. As artists are displaced, the particular aesthetics of their artworks is also pushed out.

The ADLA promotes tourism by highlighting attractions in the LA Arts District with distinct categories of ‘retail’, ‘eating and drinking’, ‘bar and nightlife’, ‘recreation’, ‘galleries and museums’, and ‘murals’. These features, associated with ADLA’s goals of economic improvement through the recruitment and retention of businesses and a focus on tourism, define the district as characterized by commercial consumption. An interviewee encapsulated this by describing the area to me as a “gentrifier’s Disneyland”. The Arts District has increasingly housed many commercial arts businesses, raising concerns around the displacement of community members and pioneer artists in the process. In response, they rallied together by establishing the Los Angeles River Artists and Business Association (LARABA), an organization that seeks to keep artists within the area by promoting affordable housing in the Arts District. Due to the rapid gentrification and displacements of Black and brown residents and artists occurring in the area, this is particularly challenging task and has been largely

¹⁰ Based on interview I had with a member of the ADLA in July 2020 who detailed the process for graffiti abatement where community members or property owners can call the city to have graffiti removed. However, part of the purpose of the ADLA is for a faster response to these calls, but also preventative measures by removing graffiti when they see it. They do not remove ‘unlawful’ or unpermitted murals, street art or graffiti art pieces, but rather ‘tags’ by graffiti writers.

¹¹ This is done by establishing distinctive borders and a bureaucratic mechanism for an organization to provide these services, funded through fees paid by property and business owners within the designated area (Mitchell, 2003).

unsuccessful. One artist in this organization, a long-term resident of the Arts District, detailed the struggles in retaining spaces and affordable housing for artists, and the roles the city and developers play in the process:

“The real estate market and the fact that the community has gone from being a sort of bohemian down to heels arts community to now being an upscale residential community, we call it 'lofts for lawyers'...It's changed. It's changed so much that it's unrecognizable from what it used to be. I mean, I would like to see the Arts District be what it used to be, which is highly diverse, you know, economically [and] highly diverse racially... That's also something that [a developer] doesn't want. They don't want to see Black and brown faces all over the community. They want to see young faces all around the community.”¹²

This rapid change in the Arts District fueled large-scale anti-gentrification protests in neighboring Boyle Heights in 2018, due in part to fear that art galleries spilling over from the former would spur gentrification of the predominately Latinx/Chicanx neighborhood (see Figure 1).¹³ Indeed, a graduate from an art institute in the Arts District that I spoke with referred to the East Side of the LA river just across the bridge as the “new arts district”.

Anti-gentrification protests were led by activist groups Defend Boyle Heights and Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAD). Specifically, they were protesting the opening of art galleries in the area, including Chimento Contemporary, MaRS, 356 Mission, and UTA Artist Space – all of whom have since left. As one artist succinctly argued in an LA Times Article: “The relationship between art and gentrification is an urgent issue for the art community to discuss and should be further explored”¹⁴

¹² Interview conducted in July 2020.

¹³ The LA river cuts through these two neighborhoods, which are connected by the 4th and 6th Street bridges.

¹⁴ Romano, A. & Franke-Ruta, G (2018). “A new generation of anti-gentrification radicals are on the march in Los Angeles – and around the country”. Retrieved from [https://www.yahoo.com/news/new-generation-anti-gentrification-radicals-march- los-angeles-around-country-100000522.html](https://www.yahoo.com/news/new-generation-anti-gentrification-radicals-march-los-angeles-around-country-100000522.html).

The Aestheticization of Wall Space - “They are pretty much gentrifying our walls”

As the Arts District gentrified there was a noticeable shift in the aesthetics of the public artworks. Aesthetic practices are forms of visibility, occupying a place from a standpoint relevant to the community (Rancière, 2004). Jacques Rancière defines aesthetics as the “specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships” (Rancière, 2004, p. 4). In this section, I delve into the aesthetic transformation and the implications of such shifts for the neighborhood.

The aestheticization of public artworks in Los Angeles’ Arts District foregrounds how artists shape contested understandings of belonging, representation, and identity. By aestheticization, I mean the shift in form, function, style, content, and aesthetics of the public artworks. Although it is disputed on how to clearly categorize artworks as either murals, street art, or graffiti art, my interviews made clear that there has been a significant shift in the style and content of the public artworks in the Arts District. This aestheticization of wall space is overwhelmingly shaped by more depoliticized and commercial visual representations. Artists I talked with described the change as “less historical”, “less political”, “less ethnic” and “less cultural”, due to the erasure of traditional murals and graffiti art and an increase in more commercial and marketable form of street art¹⁵. As one artist explained to me, this shift in aesthetic style led to “the gentrification of wall space” from culturally-infused graffiti and mural art to more “Instagramable” and mass produced street art forms¹⁶. Another artist, who identifies as a Chicana graffiti artist/writer, put it this way:

“[It] is really difficult to encompass all the differences, all the details about graffiti art because even amongst ourselves, [it is] a huge topic of debate. It’s like if you are a

¹⁵ Selected from a series of interviews from artists and community members conducted March 2020-August 2020.

¹⁶ Described by long-standing Chicano graffiti artists in the Arts District. Interview conducted in March 2020.

graffiti artist or, are you a graffiti artist, or are you a graffiti writer. If you're a writer, should graffiti only be done illegally? If you paint on the wall legally does that qualify as a graffiti artist? If you're an art center graduate and you use aerosol art, if you do you use an aerosol can and you paint letters, does that qualify you as a graffiti artist? Do you do graffiti art on canvas? Is it no longer graffiti art because it's not on a wall? Same thing with murals. What really defines a mural? Is it a mural because it's painted with the brush or is it a mural because it depicts a story or is it not, or is it not a mural because it doesn't depict a story?"¹⁷

Street art is challenging to categorize, though it tends to be larger-scale, more image based, less text based, and devoid of singular cultural identifiers (see Figures 5 and 6 for 'street art' styles and Figures 2-4 and 7-9 for mural and graffiti art style). Artists often blend styles to create unique forms and aesthetics. Most of the long-term Chicax artists I interviewed described a general rise in street art at the expense of graffiti art and muralism. One Chicax graffiti writer/artist who has been priced out of the area, lamented this privileging of street art in the following fashion:

"Street art and graffiti art, street art is "cute" and "Instagrammable"... between graffiti art and street art there is this dissension... sort of an animosity. A lot of graffiti artist resent a lot of street artists and a lot of street artists aren't fond of graffiti artists. One of the main reasons for that is because street art, they are *gentrifying our walls*. There is a displacement of wall space, because most of the walls are being given to street artists because it's more likely to have someone take a photo in front of this [street art] as opposed to in front of my name... a lot of business owners opt to have street artists as opposed to graffiti artists because this generates more foot traffic, more foot traffic equates more business"¹⁸.

Business owners are opting for more street art style artists that are hired because of their digital and social media following at the expense of Latinx/Chicax graffiti artists and muralists who have been painting on these walls for years. Animosity arises from the sense of loss of wall space that is used for different purposes. Street art has the intent to be photographable

¹⁷ Quote taken from a discussion of the artworks seen on a mural tour of the LA Arts District given by a local graffiti artist in March 2020; however, all artists whom I interviewed mentioned some form of changing aesthetic of the public artworks from the graffiti art and mural art being "hijacked" by street art/artists and the shift in artists being commissioned for pieces within the Arts District.

¹⁸ Ibid.

(“Instagramable”) and appeal to large audiences, which is one of the reasons it tends to be featured more and more on the wall space within the Arts District (for examples see Figures 5 and 6).

Changing aesthetics in the Art District is associated with ‘creative city’ strategies, where building owners are opting for the more ‘street art’ style and artists to increase marketability. The shift in style, content, and intent of public art is what Rafael Schacter (2014) referred to as a move from ‘place making’ to ‘place *marketing*.’¹⁹ Thus newer street art demonstrates the ‘spectacularized’ arts scene and other ‘creative city’ strategies adopted by city officials with global city aspirations who select ‘world-class’ artists and commission larger works of art on the street to attract tourists and residents and create cultural assets for neighborhoods.²⁰ This logic is articulated by a graffiti artist turned muralist I interviewed who grew up in South Central LA and began his career as a graffiti writer in high school in the 1980’s. He describes his work as “urban chicanismo,” which is a prominent LA style of graffiti:

“[The] first signs of gentrification [is] when the traditional cultural murals [disappear; they] are the first ones to get hit. Because cultural murals, whether it's of Black Panthers or César Chávez or of Aztecs or anything, they immediately have imagery of a certain identity, of a certain cultural connection. So they [developers] want to remove that first. So if Koreatown is going to be gentrified, they're going to remove anything that looks like a mural that has Korean history. If Chinatown's going to be gentrified they're going to be removing any dragons because that's the identity of a culture...any location where they want to make it hip and cool they get rid of anything that has culture, Native Americans. Keep the cowboys, but no Native Americans”²¹.

¹⁹ Practices of graffiti, in which often unauthorized symbols are inscribed in the urban landscape can be an important form of ethno-cultural expression and empowerment by creating a sense of belonging through ‘tagging’ (writing one’s name or ‘tag’) throughout the city (Grant, 2018; Bloch 2019). Also, scholars examining muralism have documented the role of muralism as a place-making practice and ethno-cultural expressions, particularly *Latinidad* (Villa, 2000; Davis, 2001; Jacoby, 2009; Jackson, 2009; Ríos et al, 2012; and Cordova, 2016).

²⁰ For further discussion regarding ‘creative city’ strategies such as city branding, art biennials and events, and art districts see: Karvelyte, 2011; Ren, 2017; McLean, 2014; Oakes, 2019; Zhang 2018, 2019; Luger and Ren 2018.

²¹ Interview conducted in August 2020.

As this statement suggests, gentrification in the Arts District has led to not only the displacement of artists from the area, but displacement of a particular aesthetic tradition in the public art works. The artists, the art, and the community are inextricably linked. The loss of Chicana/Latina community members through gentrification is inextricably linked to their culturally identifiable aesthetic being systematically removed from public spaces. Figures 2-4 offer examples of this aesthetic which visualize Chicana and Latina cultural elements and iconography, including the Pachuco cross and the praying hands referencing the ties to Catholicism in Latina and Chicana communities, color tattoos in a particular tattoo script, and a few Spanish phrases including 'mi vida loca', *my crazy life*. There are also prominent LA elements, including the Hollywood sign, the downtown LA skyline, a "fallen angel" (for Los Angeles) and the 6th street bridge. The 6th street bridge connects the Arts District to the predominately Latina and Chicana neighborhood immediately across the bridge. The bridge has been described to me as a protective barrier against gentrification as well as a "life-line" for neighborhoods east of the LA river. As you can see in these prior works there are significant symbolic ties to the Latina and Chicana community residing within and near the Arts District.



[Figure 2] In the alleyway of Hauser & Wirth building that houses an art museum and the high-end Manuela restaurant. This was a full wall production made by tagging crews including ICR, inner-city rebels, although it has many layers of different artists' works. Photo taken by author in March 2020.



[Figure 3] Hauser & Wirth building. This one is on the side of the Hauser Wirth and Schimmel building that houses an art museum and the high-end Manuela restaurant. This was a full wall production made by tagging crews including ICR, inner-city rebels, although it has many layers of different artists' works. Photo taken by author in March 2020.



[Figure 4] Hauser & Wirth building. This one is on the side of the Hauser Wirth and Schimmel building that houses an art museum and the high-end Manuela restaurant. This was a full wall production made by tagging crews including ICR, inner-city rebels, although it has many layers of different artists' works. Photo taken by author in March 2020.



[Figure 5] Street art painted by Kim West on the south-east wall the Hauser & Wirth gallery complex. Photo taken by author in August 2020.



[Figure 6] 'Angel Wings' street art painted by Colette Miller. Photo taken by author in August 2020. Painted on the outside of the Art's District Co-op, which is a retail shop providing large open space with separate sections allotted to certain artists selling their crafts including jewelry,

clothing, and paintings. Collette Miller commented that a lot of the street art was really “dark”. In response she wanted to create something that was “positive and hopeful” and put her first pair of wings across the street from the American Hotel in 2012. The wing project has become an Instagram sensation.²²

Changes to the Hauser and Wirth building and developers’ choices regarding what long-term Chicana murals were maintained offer a prime example of how the gentrification of wall space marks shifting aesthetic styles. Long term Chicana artists highlight shifts in style and content to underscore the changes gentrification brings forth. They argue that the style preserved and showcased emphasizes aesthetics rather than content. The result is that historical narratives, cultural identity, and political statements become marginalized by a process in which selective murals and graffiti art (such as depicted in Figure 2) are aestheticized and appropriated for middle-class, white consumption. This is also referred to as the process of ‘artwashing’. BHAAD uses ‘artwashing’ to describe the process by which developers and artists appropriate and aestheticize markers of urban decay in order to market real estate to consumers seeking an industrial backdrop through beautification projects such as those promoted by the LA Arts District and by the opening of art galleries, a process feared in Boyle Heights. This is similar to Brandi Summers’s conceptualization of aestheticization that she examines in her book *Black in Place* (2019). She shows how the urbanization and gentrification of H Street in Washington D.C. marketed and aestheticized blackness through the use of iconic images and peoples associated with blackness in America but without the presence of black people who had been systematically displaced by gentrification.

²² Transcribed from an interview with Collette Miller an artist from the LA Arts District. Retrieved from the documentary film ‘Tales of the American Hotel’ produced and directed by Pamela Yates and Steven Seemayer regarding the notorious American Hotel at the heart and center of the Arts District.

In the Arts District this is exemplified by the murals along the big gallery complex, the Hauser and Wirth building (depicted in Figure 5). The walls that wrap around what is now Hauser and Wirth previously housed many Chicax murals that have since been white-washed. Hauser and Wirth did keep a segment of the artworks in the alley (Figures 2-4). However, these relatively “tame” murals are used to decorate the herb garden of the high-end restaurant, demonstrating how the Chicax murals become aestheticized for middle and upper class consumers rather than as a socio-cultural form of expression. As a long-time Arts District resident noted:

“For instance, there was a big mural there by Mr. Cartoon for years. It was an angry clown. Mr. Cartoon's 'Angry Clown'. And it was a terrific mural. It was just gorgeous. It lasted for probably 10 years. But when Hauser and Wirth bought those buildings they painted over that and they painted over all the murals on 2nd Street on the back of their building. They preserved the murals in the alleyway [depicted in Figures 2-4] So that's changed, you know, obviously all those murals are gone. And then what remains is fairly tame and cleaned up.”²³

This event highlights the role of property owners in de-territorializing spaces with culturally specific forms of art and the impact changing ownership through gentrification can have on art by influencing what art is removed and what remains. The swift removal of Mr. Clown demonstrates how quickly a mural that was maintained by the community for 10 years can be discarded in processes of gentrification. The aestheticization of graffiti art to be more palatable for white, middle class consumption is also noted by a graffiti artist turned muralist who I spoke with. He grew up in East Los Angeles in the 1960's and has seen the change in graffiti culture and style. In our conversation he highlighted some of the distinctions between graffiti and street art while drawing attention to who determines what is considered “real art”:

²³ An artist and activist living in the Arts District since the 1990's and previously a part of the Los Angeles River Artists and Business Association (LARABA) that sought to keep artists within the area by streamlining artists for affordable housing in the Arts District. Interview conducted in July 2020.

“They're even trying to separate the street art vs. graffiti art, there is like a little campaign calling ‘graffiti is not street art’, this is not “real art”. So, because what's happening even within that genre, is that they're doing shows ‘Beyond the Streets’ at the MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] and now there is a graffiti art museum in Miami and there are a lot of, you know, the TV shows trying to bring out the history of graffiti. But they always tend to go with street art, because it's less threatening, it's the less complicated, because the *real* graffiti art has gangs, has violence, has fights, has crews, has drugs, has alcohol, has parties, has vandalism... has mayhem and they don't want that. They want the fun part of graffiti art but not the rawness of it...[However] a lot of graffiti artists are saying street art is fake, it's not real graffiti.”²⁴

Here attention is drawn to how art is embedded within the socio-cultural world it emerges from.

Artworks are “implicating and being implicated in ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world – ways of world-making informed by beliefs, desires, and culturally and historically contingent ways of knowing” (Delaney, 2005, p. 12). The same artist highlights an

affiliation/association between graffiti crews and gangs, especially in the 1940’s and 1950’s.

However, in recent years artists have made a concerted effort to distinguish contemporary graffiti art from gang violence while still referencing its historical influence.²⁵ Despite this dissociation, many mentioned different waves of increased criminalization of graffiti in Los Angeles and how this disproportionately affects graffiti artists of color rather than street artists. This disparate treatment by law enforcement exacerbates animosity between graffiti artists and street artists:

“So street artists, they're using the term ‘street art’. And they're calling themselves street artists... Street artists have a tendency to come from privileged backgrounds... and they're coming into the hood, and they're calling themselves street artists and using the term ‘street art’ yet they've never been exposed to the elements in “the streets”. They never had a claim to a bridge. And they've never fallen off a bridge, they've never been harassed by cops and [have] never been arrested”²⁶

The artist is pointing out some of the classed and racialized distinctions between street artists and

²⁴ Interview with a graffiti artist that started his career as a graffiti writer in high school in the 1980’s in Los Angeles whom now tows the line between graffiti artists and traditional muralist. Interview conducted August 2020.

²⁵ Based off several interviews with graffiti artists conducted from March 2020- July 2020.

²⁶ Part of the discussion and introduction to the artworks seen on a mural tour of the LA Arts District given by a local graffiti artist in March 2020. However, all graffiti artists whom I interviewed mentioned some form of interaction with law enforcement either through harassment or arrest while painting in their earlier careers, which is why in most instances the artists I interviewed are anonymous.

graffiti artists and how this is perceived, criminalized, and policed differently within the Arts District. Most graffiti artists I spoke with recalled harassment from law enforcement at some point in their careers. One Chicano artist retold a story of being arrested while painting a wall in the Arts District that he and his crewmates had permission to paint. This also highlights the art cannot be separated from peoples' experiences, and the social context, which informs the art that is produced.

Some graffiti artists involved in the process of shaping earlier aesthetics of the Arts District are more established Chicana and Latina artists, with strong influences from Chicana and Mexican muralist traditions. All the graffiti artists I interviewed were raised in East Los Angeles, which is predominantly Chicana/Latina and referenced the murals there as strong influences in their own art. The aesthetics associated with the former Arts District are heavily influenced by Chicana and Latina cultural elements and iconography. One of the oldest murals in the Arts District, titled '*Undiscovered America*', is representative of this "older" aesthetics. It is rich with Chicana/Latina and Indigenous iconography and history. '*Undiscovered America*' was designed in part by Joseph 'Nuke' Montalvo and organized by Helen Samuels. It is inspired by Indigenous knowledge passed through oral traditions from Native populations from 'Alaska to Argentina'.

'*Undiscovered America*' was originally painted by Earth Crew in 1992 and recently restored in 2017 by some of the original painters from Earth Crew, including Joseph "Nuke" Montalvo, Erick "Duke" Montenegro, Benjamin James Frank Jr., and Rogelio "Angst" Cabral. The aerosol mural was one of the first murals done solely by graffiti artists and to be done with spray paint with more stylistic content associated with traditional Mexican/Chicana muralism. It was funded by the city, so one of the rules for the piece, produced at a time when graffiti

abatement policies were being pursued in LA, was that signage of the graffiti names or crew names such as LOD ‘Lokes on Dope’ or K2S ‘Kill to Succeed’ was not allowed, so the artists created a new crew, Earth Crew 2000. Earth Crew, which consists of five different crews within Los Angeles, continues to provide support and recognition for local graffiti artists²⁷.



[Figure 7]. ‘*Undiscovered America*’. Originally painted in 1992 and restored in 2017. Photo taken by author in August 2020. Photos of original available in the Robin Dunitz archives collection as USC. Restored by some of the original painters from Earth Crew, including Joseph “Nuke” Montalvo who help design the piece with Helen Samuels who coordinated the submission through SPARC. Other Earth Crew members include Erick “Duke” Montenegro, Benjamin James Frank Jr., and Rogelio “Angst” Cabral.

²⁷ Interview conducted with one of the principle artists, Joseph ‘Nuke’ Montalvo behind the original design and restoration along with Helen Samuels. Interview conducted in July 2020.

Joseph ‘Nuke’ Montalvo was inspired by Mexican American and Indigenous identities and resistance to colonial erasure. Motivated by civil unrest caused by the Rodney King trials in 1992 and the quincentennial celebration of Columbus's arrival to the Americas in 1992, Montalvo wanted to incorporate Indigenous oral traditions he learned while serving as a Native American youth council, and from the exchange programs that he and other Earth Crew members participated in with tribes from Canada and the United States.²⁸

“Here was a chance for me to exemplify what I was. I'm Mexican-American, I'm Chicano. And I cannot deny that 1992 while the world was celebrating Christopher Columbus' arrival to the Americas, which he never made. He never came and “discovered” America, my mural was an anti-Columbus mural. That Earth Crew mural was an anti-Columbus, quincentennial celebration anti-mural in 1992... we basically covered South to North America Indigenous accomplishment that were part of American society that had been overlooked. So, example, Olmecs/*Olmecas* that I have on the mural, the Olmecs were like one of the mother civilization of Mesoamerica... colonial education sweeps Indigenous culture and advancement under the rug. So these elders that I had been around told me about these stories... Lakota were telling me about the Olmecs... all the images on the wall are attributed to direct oral tradition from Indigenous elders. All the knowledge I had acquired for that mural, had all been through word of mouth, whether it be from the Cherokee or the Iroquois or the Ojibwe or the Chumash here from California. Never forget that Indigenous people used to live here”²⁹.

Earth Crew’s aesthetic choices and practices create a strong sense of cultural identity through their use of Indigenous iconography, staking claim of wall space and belonging within the Arts District and within Los Angeles. The choice to visualize oral histories in graffiti art points to the intent of the piece to educate and inform onlookers to the narratives and representations all too often left out of textbooks, museums, and galleries. Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa also recognizes and valorizes the realities and knowledge produced by Indigenous peoples that have

²⁸ From 1989-1992 Earth Crew had done a series of cultural exchanges with graffiti artists in Mexico City with organizer Carlos Morgan, leader of the organization of Popular Youth Council/*Concejo Popular Juvenil (CPJ)*. Through these exchanges there was a transmission of knowledge, but also a particular aesthetic, furthering the connection between Los Angeles artists and Mexican and Indigenous aesthetics.

²⁹ Interview conducted with one of the principle artists, Joseph ‘Nuke’ Montalvo behind the original design and restoration along with Helen Samuels. Interview conducted in July 2020.

too often been marginalized or erased through colonial practices and the transformative capability in art in decolonizing knowledge and re-imagining reality:

La negación sistemática de la cultura Mexicana-chicana en los Estados Unidos impede su desarrollo, haciéndolo este un acto de colonización. As a people who have been stripped of our history, language, and pride, we attempt again and again to find what we have lost by digging into our cultural roots imaginatively and making art from our findings (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 48)

In reference to her own work as an art-activist and other Chicana artists who create art that “recovers” and “recuperates” historical and Indigenous knowledge, she argues that this involves “making aesthetic interventions that subvert cultural genocide” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 59).

Undiscovered America visualizes narratives of Natives from ‘Alaska to Argentina’, interweaving space and time through the rich use of symbols and iconography. Featured prominently on the left is the Colossal Stone Head of the Olmecs from Tenochtitlán and the four-part red, white, black, and yellow Lakota medicine wheel. On the right you have the burning of sage in an abalone shell, a spiritual tradition along with the Mayan Calendar embedded within a rendering of the cosmos. Other prominent symbols include the turtle in the center, the serpent on the bottom left, and maize on the top right. The central tree has roots extending into and from the cosmos, interweaving different spaces. The mural depicts space and time as constellations with a throwntogetherness associated with decolonial representation of space and time, offering an alternative spatial and temporal imagination or geographic imaginary to that presented in Eurocentric, anthropocentric versions of history and spatiality. It is rich with Indigenous iconography narrating stories by seamlessly blending into one another, rather than separating into starkly chronological segments. This produces a narrative simultaneously cutting across a myriad of stories where space and time are intimately connected. This temporal and spatial simultaneity though the visualization of Indigenous history is a part of a decolonizing practice,

creating a ‘decolonial future’ which art historian Kency Cornejo states, “delinks from a Western rationality of time and space in the making of decolonial epistemologies” (Cornejo, 2017, p. 21). The representation of Indigenous identity as seamlessly unbounded, yet *emplaced* within the Arts District, and within Los Angeles, stakes a claim of belonging of Native peoples. The trees, the maize, the mountaintops and other elements of natural landscape are a reminder of the original caretakers of what is now Los Angeles, what is now California, and thus stake a claim of belonging.

Art, like any form of knowledge, constructs narratives through material arrangements of signs, images and aesthetics that configure an ‘aesthetic regime’, a hegemonic style of representation which aligns with ‘regimes of historicity’ (Rancière, 2004). In other words, the aesthetic choices of the artists in ‘*Undiscovered America*’ are a form of resistance to colonial erasure of Indigenous histories and colonial systems of representation and aesthetics. As Joseph ‘Nuke’ Montalvo stated, “doing murals in the neighborhood are our first line of defense” against the erasure of Indigenous history, narratives, and imagery.³⁰ The gentrification of public artworks and displacement of wall space, from graffiti art to street art, motivated Montalvo to restore ‘*Undiscovered America*’: “It’s weird now that the whole district is gentrified and hip and all that, restoring that mural was a way of reintroducing myself to that community and putting on check Space Invader from France, Banksy from England [famous street artists]”.³¹

Another aerosol mural production involving members of graffiti crew UTI ‘Under the Influence’ including Montalvo, that displays Indigenous visual culture is ‘*La Abuelita*’. This mural was designed and painted by Miles ‘El Mac’ MacGregor, in collaboration with UTI and Nuke. ‘El Mac’s’ style and body of work demonstrate a respect for elders and intimacy with

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

humanistic elements, creating contours of wrinkled skin through an innovative artistic technique that involves freezing aerosol cans. His work demonstrates deeply humanistic content with a subtle “political slant to it”.³² At the base of the mural are elements of the Los Angeles urban landscape featuring the 6th street bridge and the downtown civic center with ghostlike figures emerging from its streetscape. The central image of Martha Gorman Schultz, an Indigenous elder, rises from the streetscape claiming the presence of Indigeneity from and within Los Angeles, making a socio-spatial demarcation of cultural belonging within the Arts District and Los Angeles.

Figure 9, an artwork created by graffiti artist, ‘Syntek’, also demonstrates a demarcation of cultural belonging by depicting the hand gesture popularized by Estevan Oriol, a photographer known for capturing and documenting the Chicano gang culture, style, and aesthetic. The association with Chicanismo was crucial in creating and defining the LA style of graffiti: “And that's where we created the original LA style by incorporating the Chicano flavor, the street flavor of the gang, the gang influence of the graffiti of LA, which is now very recognizable as LA Graffiti...”³³

³² Interview with member of the arts community in the Arts District involved in the mural production process. Interview conducted in August 2020.

³³ Interview with a graffiti artist that started his career as a graffiti writer in high school in the 1980’s in Los Angeles, accredited as one of the graffiti artists that established the LA style of graffiti whom now tows the line between graffiti artists and traditional muralist. Interview conducted August 2020.



[Figure 8] *La Abuelita*. Painted by LA-born ‘El Mac’ (Miles MacGregor) who celebrates the feminine, elderly, and indigeneity in his works; he is heavily influenced by the Chicax/Latinx cultures of his neighborhood. The mural is based on photographs El Mac took of the artist Martha Gorman Schultz, who is a Navajo blanket weaver from northern Arizona.³⁴ Notice all the Los Angeles architectural background including the bridge, the civic center, and portions of LA downtown’s skyline. Photo taken by author in February 2019.

³⁴ Information retrieved from interviews with community members and artists involved in the production of the mural including Joseph ‘Nuke’ Montalvo. Interviews conducted July and August 2020. Information also retrieved from Miles ‘El Mac’ McGregor’s website <https://elmac.net/murals-outdoors/985>



[Figure 9] This work was done by graffiti artist 'Syntek'. It is based off of the gesture popularized by a 1995 photo by Estevan Oriol. Photo taken by author in February 2019.

Different aesthetic traditions that artists deploy signal contested claims over place and belonging through the projection of a 'territory of the visible'. The emerging aesthetic that is described as "less historical", "less political" and less "ethnic" coincides with the erasure and replacement of traditional murals and graffiti art with street art. This is motivating graffiti artists and muralists to resist the erasure of the older 'aesthetic regime'. Traditional muralists have "become an advocate for murals [that] are being damaged. Murals are being whitewashed during gentrification...some of them were replaced, one mural that had too much culture in it... They [urban developers/planners] want to neutralize all of that, they want to get rid of any identity of

culture.”³⁵ On the other side of the divide, property owners and developers who want to make the neighborhood more marketable and palatable ‘buff out’ or white-wash older artworks, often without giving the 90-day warning notices required by the Visual Arts Rights Act (VARA), a rarely enforced federal law.³⁶ As the neighborhood gentrifies the changing aesthetics of public artwork become more noticeable, at the same time that Chicana/Latina and Indigenous artists experience restricted accessibility to spaces that serve as platforms for historical narratives and artistic expression.

Territories of Contestation –

As I have shown in the previous section artists figuratively and materially use the tactic of claiming space as a form of place-making in efforts to assert a particular socio-cultural belonging (Figures 2-4 and 7-9). In the Arts District, muralists, graffiti artists, and streets artists demonstrates that aesthetics are both political and territorial through conflictual negotiation of artistic expressions via the contested use of wall space. In this section I reveal how acts of territoriality by artists create ‘territories of contestation’ by making explicit connections to spatial claims of belonging within particular places through the use of culturally identifiable iconography and aesthetics. Specifically, I focus on how Chicana and Latina artists make visible a sense of belonging through Chicana/Latina and Indigenous iconography, imbuing place with

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ This has been expressed to me a number of time over the years including from artists in the Mission District in San Francisco. Also mentioned in an interview with DCA staff in August 2020. Similar processes of erasure are described in newspaper articles about Highland Park in LA, San Jose, and Chicago. See Gumbel, Andrew. "Whitewashed': how gentrification continues to erase LA's bold murals." *The Guardian*, January 26, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jan/26/whitewashed-how-gentrification-continues-to-erase-las-bold-murals>; del Castillo, Amanda. "Historic Mural de la Raza painted over in San Jose, community outraged." *ABC News*, August 31, 2018. Retrieved from <https://abc7news.com/san-jose-mural-painted-over-outrage/4115162/>; and Hijazi, Jennifer. "Who fights for public art in the face of gentrification?" *PBS News*, December 28, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/who-fights-for-public-art-in-the-face-of-gentrification>.

meaning and belonging for the community.

This expression of place-making is also an expression of territoriality. Territoriality is “place-making, with a focus on places of meaning and belonging” (Duff, 2010, p. 888). Many authors (Sack, 1997, Painter 2010, Duff, 2010, Giesecking, 2015) have noted the connection between territory and place: “in creating a territory we are also creating a kind of place” (Sack, 1986, p. 19). As Giesecking states: “territories can be found everywhere” and we constantly navigate different ‘territories’, linking the ‘role of place as territory’ and the meaning of place as constitutive to territorial configurations (Giesecking 2015, p.7). When groups associated with a certain identity (racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation) deploy a territorial strategy to create a distinctive identity to a place through place-making practices, it accentuates the importance of place by making claims of belonging within particular spaces:

The establishment of place, through renaming, through the *claiming of territory* and so forth, may also be a significant stake in the establishment of political identities... Such struggles over place, and the meaningfulness in and of place returns us to the... recognition of the relational construction of space and of identity, ‘place’ must be a site of negotiation, and that often this will be conflictual negotiation (Massey, 2004, p. 7, emphasis added).

In the Art District, the site of negotiation occurs through contestations and claiming of wall space by practices of painting, buffing, and covering each other’s artworks.

The artwork painted along the Hauser and Wirth building (Figures 2-4) is juxtaposed to newer street art (Figure 5) along the eastern side of the complex. This was painted by Kim West, an art center graduate, who has become known by the polar bear icon on the upper left.

According to one Chicax graffiti artist I spoke with, she came in with a scissor-lift and began painting over the previous artworks on the wall. She uses a “dripping” effect of blue and green paint in her work. The use of “drips” has caused graffiti artists to paint over some of her other

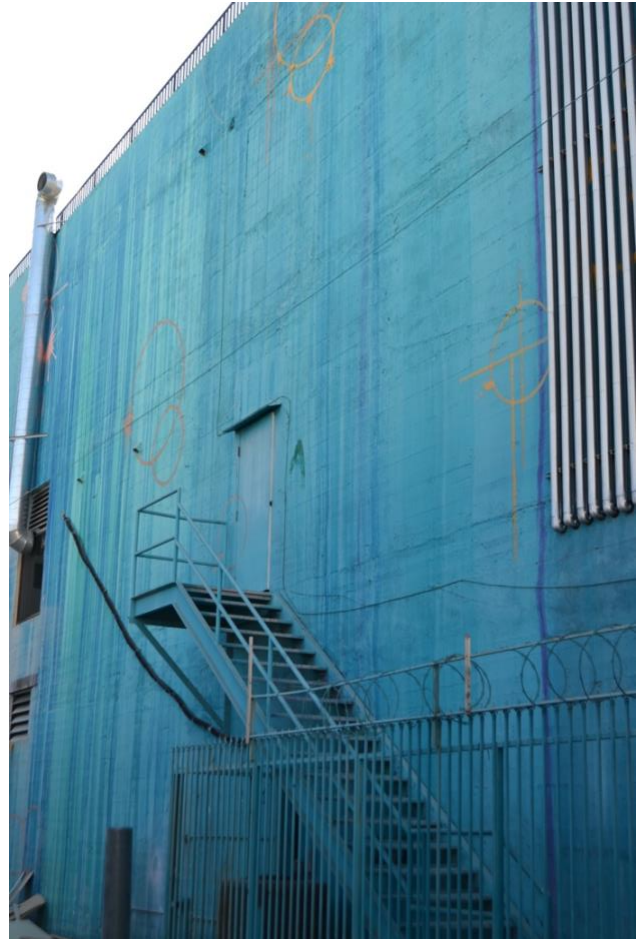
artworks in the area³⁷. Visible drips used to be frowned upon within the graffiti community because it demonstrated a lack of can control. However, “Drips have become synonymous with graffiti art... now we have taken the power back of the drips because drips were used by street artists to help validate them and give them that street edge and street credibility”³⁸. The animosity and competition among street artists and graffiti artists is playing out on the wall space as they paint over each other’s pieces, creating territories of contestation.

In the wake of land and property struggles as a neighborhood gentrifies, murals, street art and graffiti art are used by artists to claim space and create a sense of place through aesthetics. Public artworks create the link between place and identity. Changes in the city’s cultural and physical landscape that occur during gentrification impact perceptions of place and identity (Diaz, 2013). The proliferation of hundreds of murals demarcated by Chicanx and Latinx cultural elements and iconography creates a highly visible form of territoriality. The territorial demarcation by the community through the use of murals, graffiti art and street art creates signifiers of belonging to a specific group or ethnic population (Chaffee, 1993), leading Chicanx graffiti artists to express “This is where we can have ‘our gallery’.”³⁹ The prevalence of characters and images important in the Latinx/Chicanx culture in the artworks included in this paper offer a signifier to those in the area who ‘own’ the walls regardless of property ownership.

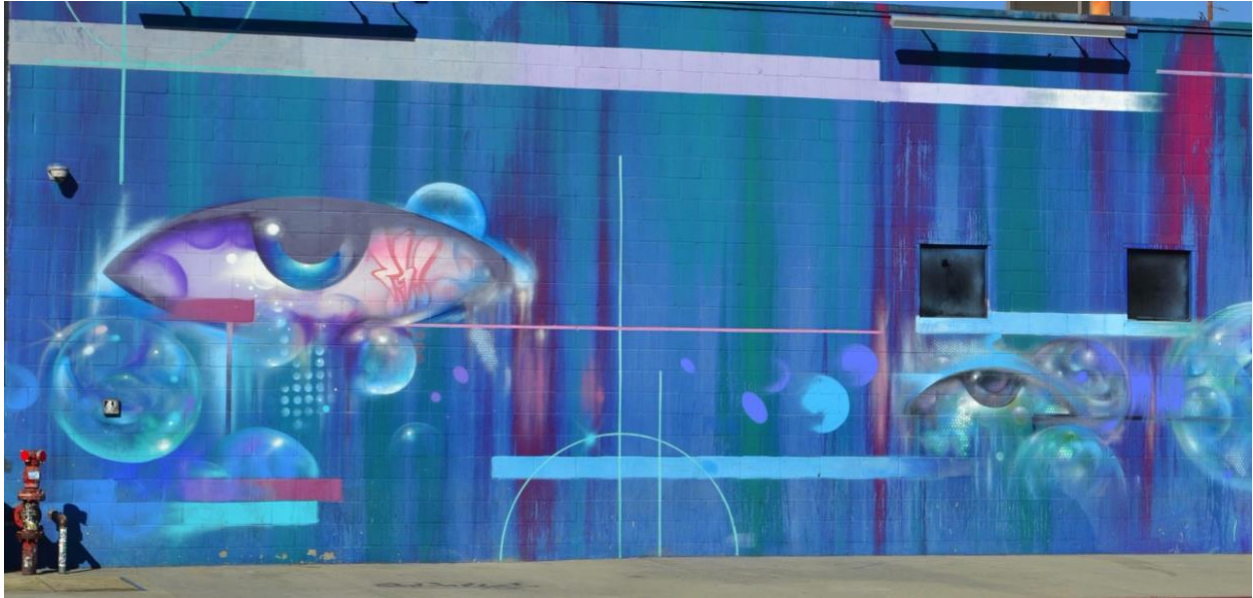
³⁷ Rafael Schacter’s book *The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti* (2013) has a brief discussion of the use of drips in street art.

³⁸ Quote taken from a discussion of the artworks seen on a mural tour of the LA Arts District given by a local graffiti artist in March 2020, however, all artists whom I interviewed mentioned some form of changing aesthetic of the public artworks from the graffiti art and mural art being “hijacked” by street art/artists and the shift in artists being commissioned for pieces within the Arts District.

³⁹ Interview conducted with one of the principle artists, Joseph ‘Nuke’ Montalvo in ‘Undiscovered America’. Interview conducted in July 2020.



[Figure 10]. The outside walls of the Arts District Brewery. Painted by local graffiti artists Risk. Risk demonstrates the distinctive style of the drips in his artworks. Photo taken by author in August 2020.



[Figure 11]. Painted by graffiti artists Risk in the Arts District. Photo taken by author in August 2020.

Mural Moratorium- The Politics of Aesthetics

Negotiations over the ‘territory of the visible’ plays out not only between street artists, graffiti artists, and property owners but also involves municipal actors. City-wide mural ordinances have determined the (il)legality of public art productions in Los Angeles. The mural ordinance that was in place from 2002-2013 is commonly referred as the mural moratorium because it halted mural production. Examining the mural moratorium prompted me to ask: what role did the mural moratorium and current mural ordinance have on the aestheticization of the Arts District? As this section reveals, the city permitting process is responsible for shaping aesthetics through the approval process for artwork on any public facing building.

Artists, as well as community members I interviewed, expressed that the public art, whether it be murals, street art, or graffiti art has become more restricted and regulated in the

Arts District in comparison to the 1990's. Art space, I was repeatedly told, became more restricted and regulated through gentrification and the mural moratorium.

“So back in the day, I think there were a lot more artists. Artists...just going out there, like ‘I’m going to install this art piece today or I’m going to do this mural’ and people just did it... I think it has more to do with the fact that there just aren't as many artists, as we once were, but the mural ordinance does play a piece, does play a role... as an additional layer of deterrence.”⁴⁰

Artists, like the one quoted above, lamented these restrictions and longed for the time when they were able to freely paint on walls. The decade long moratorium on mural production made it increasingly difficult to attain permits and increased city-wide practices of ‘buffing’ or ‘white-washing’ graffiti art, street art, and murals. A 2011 *LA Times* article estimated 300 murals were painted over during those years, frustrating artists as well as property owners who commission the murals.⁴¹ During the moratorium there was stricter enforcement against street art and murals that did not have permits, and an increase in citations of property owners with non-permitted murals on their buildings. Widespread white-washing and censorship was prevalent during this time, one of the artists I interviewed claimed: “Every time I would try to put up a piece it would be covered up.”⁴² Implementation of the moratorium forced artists to contend with the ephemeral nature of their works as control of visual aesthetics became increasingly institutionalized through city-wide mural ordinances.

⁴⁰ Interview with member of the LA Arts District Business Improvement District (ADLA). Interview conducted in July 2020.

⁴¹ Winton, Richard. "L.A. to draw a finer line on murals; City Council is revising a 2002 law regulating the artworks as commercial signage." *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2011.

⁴² Interview with one of the graffiti artist in the Arts District. Interview conducted in March 2020.



[Figure 12]. Saint Laurent Mural in the Arts District. Photo taken by author in August 2020.

One DCA member I interviewed suggested that confusion over the categorization of mural art is why “the city had all the issues with the removal of artwork during the moratorium [and] why you lost a lot of murals”.⁴³ The unclear definition of a ‘mural sign’ within the 2002-2013 mural ordinance created a misunderstanding that resulted in the citation and removal of hundreds of murals and street art by the Building and Safety Department which regulates commercial advertisements. Art murals began to be lumped into this category due to a series of mural advertisements that were painted in the city. For example, Figure 12 although a mural, is also an advertisement for Saint Laurent. Other mural advertisements that were produced and

⁴³ Interview with Department of Cultural Affairs staff member regarding the previous and current mural ordinances and the permitting process. Interview conducted August 2020.

subsequently covered up were the Miller Lite mural painted by artist Risk, and a Converse ad painted by artist Ron English.

The community outrage at the loss of hundreds of murals in the city prompted the councilmember representing the Arts District, Jose Huizar, to make a motion in 2008 to stop the citing and removal of unpermitted murals. He also urged the council to pass a new mural ordinance that recognized the cultural value of murals:

“There has been a significant increase in the issuance of citations relative to murals which are painted on private property. The citations ultimately result in the murals being removed from private property...These murals are an integral part of cultural expression in the City of Los Angeles”⁴⁴

Huizar’s motion in 2008 also called for a new permitting process that would protect and preserve murals that were being white-washed. This set in motion the process that would establish the new mural ordinance in 2013 that created the municipal regulation of public artworks with the goal to record and protect city approved artworks.

Many artists expressed satisfaction with the removal of the mural moratorium, but also reservations and frustrations with the new permitting process under the current mural ordinance established in 2013. This ordinance establishes the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) as a regulatory authority for approval for any ‘Original Art Mural’ on private property:

The Department of Cultural Affairs shall have the authority to determine that an application for an Original Art Mural or Vintage Original Art Mural meets all of the applicable registration requirements as established in the Mural Ordinance Administrative Rules....[These] regulations will provide reasonable protection to the visual environment by controlling the size, height, spacing and location of such displays. That the public will enjoy the aesthetic benefits of being able to view such displays in numbers and sizes that are reasonably and appropriately regulated ⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Motion submitted by Councilmember, 14th District Jose Huizar to the Planning & Land Use Management on March 25, 2008.

⁴⁵ Ordinance No. 182706 amending sections of municipal codes outlining definitions and requirements to attain permits for “mural signs” which passed in meeting of the Council of City of Los Angeles on Sep 4, 2013.

Outlined in the ordinance are also requirements for any public facing artwork whereby artists must submit an application with renderings of their proposed artwork, identify a wall, provide signatures from the property owners, hold public meetings where renderings of their proposed artworks are presented for feedback, and then present their work for approval from the Department of Cultural Affairs commissioners in another public meeting.

This laborious process and the implementation of the new mural ordinance has affected the aesthetics of artworks, according to artists I interviewed. As a Chicano graffiti artists turned muralist who previously worked for the DCA explained to me:

“Our cultural affairs, who was trying to save murals at the same time, in the attempt to save them, they destroyed them. They [artists] don't want to deal with it, so you still have a lot of people just painting alleys. So the ordinance did good, but it also did bad. In the intent to protect the murals that were there, it sort of halted, the progress, the movement, or even the idea, it almost gave the last death sentence to traditional classical murals. They're gone, and it did give rise to the instant pop culture street mural that people see nowadays because, you know, these are supported by, you know, marketing people... even your small companies want to promote [their companies].”⁴⁶

The intention of the new ordinance was to preserve murals by establishing regulations that would lengthen the life-span of public artworks. However, it has also received criticisms that the permitting process is overly regulatory and censoring public artworks: “The minute you start asking, that you have to have a permit, and it has to be approved, you are censoring it [art]. Indirectly, but you are censoring it.”⁴⁷ Not having a permit creates fear among muralists, and the approval process and promise of liability for two years has deterred many artists⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹. This is particularly true for those with less socio-economic resources who are deterred by the

⁴⁶ Interview conducted August 2020.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview with member of Arts District BID (ADLA). Conducted in July 2020.

⁴⁹ Interview with a graffiti artist that started his career as a graffiti writer in high school in the 1980's in Los Angeles, accredited as one of the graffiti artists that established the LA style of graffiti whom now tows the line between graffiti artists and traditional muralist whom used to work at the DCA. Interview conducted August 2020.

professional language, process, fees, and other requirements. Some are “commissioned with permission”, meaning they do not go through the city process for approval and are done with just the permission of the building owner, which makes them “illegal” in the eyes of the city. This route is preferred by many due to the difficulty artists have in attaining a permit from the city.

“You see anybody that wants to administer by creating regulations or creating an onerous permit process, basically what they want to do is control it, for whatever reason. Usually it's political. They make it a more powerful entity. And obviously, controlling how murals evolve in a community like Los Angeles could be a powerful thing... the use of public space. And that, the use of public space is obviously an issue that relates to murals.”⁵⁰

The regulation and permitting process, I argue, is an expression of territoriality by way of withholding permits and white-washing artworks without permits. Put simply, the mural ordinance informs what is made (in)visible in the Arts District. As one long-time resident of the Arts District who previously worked for LARABA quoted earlier in this paper noted:

“It's become much more restricted. It used to be that, you know, I mean back in the day when I moved into the Arts District, only about 50 percent or less of the buildings were being used for things. The rest of them are sitting there abandoned or they were filled with artists and buildings that were filled with artists or that were abandoned [were] blank canvases for people to paint on. And so people painted on, you know, what we used to call free walls [where] anybody can go up there and put anything they want on that wall. It's a free wall. And, you know, the thing about a free wall is you respect the work of the other artists while it's fresh. There aren't very many free walls left... It was really an incredible space... There were free walls, all over the city, they're mostly gone now.”⁵¹

Remarking on the previously unrestricted spaces for art production and the slow enclosure of these artistic spaces around the city, he also links this with the loss of innovation of public art production, stating: “the passion is gone, I would say much of what was great about the emergence of the mural scene, the energy and the artistry that was on display on a lot of the walls of the art streets. It's all gone.”⁵² Although elements of free walls (i.e. unrestricted spaces) still

⁵⁰ Interview conducted in July 2020.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

exist on the outskirts of the Arts District they are found further and further from the center of Arts District: “Indian Alley is still there, there's still a little corner of protests... [meaning] Indian Alley is basically a spot where maybe just a small group of artists put 'in your face' content... Indian Alley is a place where they can express it”⁵³. Spaces such as this have drastically decreased and only remain on the outskirts of the Arts District, usually behind a gate and not highly visible or trafficked. In contrast, in the 1990’s, before the mural moratorium, walls in the Arts District were treated as ‘free walls’ where anyone had access and could paint— illegally, but safely.

As the Arts District gentrified and the mural ordinances took hold the aesthetics, identities, histories, and narratives portrayed in the Arts District changed. The aesthetic elements as well as the selection of artists is now regulated and approved by the city. This is what Jacques Rancière describes as the ‘distribution of the sensible’, in which the visibility of the particular aesthetics inscribes “specific hierarchies and exclusions... The aesthetic regime of the arts disrupts this apportionment of spaces” (Rancière, 2004, p. 40). Hierarchies and exclusions produced through bureaucratic decisions and gentrification governs how socio-spatial representations revealed through the murals, graffiti art, and street art are created, contested, and censored. The aestheticization of the Arts District and decisions on *who* is able to see *what*, *where*, *how* and *why* are highly political and shot through with power relations that are enacted through policies such as mural ordinances and practices of white-washing.

⁵³ Interview with member of the arts community in the Arts District involved in the mural production process. Interview conducted in August 2020.

Conclusion

The aestheticization of wall space in the Arts District demonstrates the contested process through which certain artistic styles and community voices are made visible while others are made invisible as the neighborhood gentrifies and new actors contribute to the ‘territory of the visible’. As artists and artworks continue to be displaced and artworks are increasingly regulated particular artistic potentialities are foreclosed. The aesthetic regime in the Arts District is both a system of oppression privileging tame, non-ethno-cultural specific art, and a site of social and political struggle. Acts of resistance to maintain the Chicana and Latina sense of place is crucial for the struggle against gentrification and the gentrification of public art forms. When asked about the restoration process for ‘*Undiscovered America*’, Joseph “Nuke” Montalvo detailed the strong collective effort by the community to restore the wall. Originally painted in 1992 the mural was in need of restoration more than 20 years later because it had been significantly tagged. As the curator, Joseph Montalvo wanted to bring it back to life and re-establish his and its presence in the gentrifying neighborhood. After unsuccessfully seeking funds through the city, he took to social media and was able to get the support needed through community members and from the long standing art organization Artshare across the street. Various stakeholders provided supplies and funding for the project, coming together to paint and to help the Earth Crew artists restore the artwork in 2017. Thus this mural was preserved (while many others are not) through collective action by those seeking to maintain the Latina and Chicana presence in the gentrifying neighborhood. These actions are integral to the anti-gentrification movement in conjunction with the protests as the artists seek to re-signify the meaning of place and defend the priorities and imaginaries that are being contested (Leitner et al., 2008). This is also the motivation behind the anti-gentrification protests erupting in Boyle Heights, and artists

in the Arts District who paint over the artworks of commissioned street artists, or circumvent the city's approval process to produce their art without permits.

Territories of contestation in the Arts District can be discerned through an analysis of artworks that are created and destroyed. Referencing muralism in the Mission District in San Francisco Annice Jacoby (2009) states “muralists claim a territory of pictorial anarchy rich with social and spiritual upheaval” (p. 30). Tactics of artists and cultural activists – legal and illegal – that “take over public space” and “reclaim the streets” (Jacoby, 2009) are not only creative acts but also acts of resistance against specific forms of (in)visibility. Visual contestation occurs not only through the negotiation and occupation of wall space by a given artist/artwork, but also the chosen aesthetic elements depicted in artworks. Aesthetics are a form of pictorial territoriality that create visual contestations upon the walls. Contestation always involves “multiple spatialities” that “make new geographies... Thus, it is vital to theoretically and empirically investigate the simultaneity of such multiple engagements with (and imaginaries of) space, and how different spatialities are coimplicated” (Leitner et al, 2007, p. 20). There is need for further research that seeks a better understanding of the nuanced role of the arts in reproducing and resisting inequalities shaped by gentrification, and the ways in which certain institutions promote specific forms of (in)visibility as well as the pathways that are being carved out through creative forms of disruption. We must take seriously the presence of distinct and emerging socio-spatial imaginaries through artistic expressions and engage in how artists (re)visualize identity and belonging in public spaces.

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