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## Street Art, Decorum, and the Politics of Urban Aesthetics

Andrea Baldini

Nanjing University; NJU Center for Sino-Italian Cultural Studies, andrea.baldini@nju.edu.cn

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Volume: Special Volume 8 (2020)

## Street Art, Decorum, and the Politics of Urban Aesthetics

*Andrea Baldini*

### Abstract

In the last forty years or so, authorities across the globe have appealed to the notion of *decorum* to justify authoritarian policies of urban control. Such a notion is distinctly aesthetic insofar as it deals with good taste in matters of appearances and behavior; decorum is about what we should or is appropriate to see and do in public spaces. When considering how deeply discussions and policies of decorum shape our daily lives, it is surprising that aestheticians have largely ignored the city as a subject of inquiry. In this paper, I examine the heretofore largely overlooked link between the city's decorum, as a key notion in political discourse, and the discipline of aesthetics. At a general level, I show that the urban landscape is a domain where politics and aesthetics merge. More specifically, I argue that street art should be conceptualized as a subversive response to the authoritarian aesthetics that is embedded in political discourse about decorum. Street art injects into the urban landscape a dose of spontaneity. In doing so, it turns upside-down the exclusionary strictures of dominant politics of decorum that admits as appropriate, and perhaps beautiful, only the authorized and the sanctioned. By creating temporary zones of spontaneity, street artists invite us to imagine alternative ways to use the city.

### Key Words

Banksy; decorum; graffiti; Rancière; street art; urban aesthetics

### 1. Introduction

On November 3, 2018, Dario Danti, a former member of Pisa City Council, was fined €100.<sup>[1]</sup> The ticket clarifies the nature of his violation: Danti was sitting on the stairs of Santo Stefano Church located in Cavaliere Square, a historic place in the center of the city of the Leaning Tower. Many may very well be surprised in reading about Danti's case; it seems to go against common understanding of the uses of Italian piazze. And yet, he violated just one of the recently approved laws aiming at controlling uses of public spaces in Pisa.

In October 2018, members of the newly elected Pisa City Council passed a series of laws aimed to promote public decorum.<sup>[2]</sup> Such laws significantly restrict the range of acceptable behaviors in public spaces, with most activities other than walking (Figure 1), including sitting on the grass in green areas or occupying public space with food or beverages, punished with a fine. Prohibitions also extend to the use of private property insofar as it is now illegal to rest on the steps outside of an apartment building in Pisa, even if you own it. If violations happen in specific zones of the city, the offender may also incur a forty-eight hour removal order, preventing that person from entering the urban perimeter.



Figure 1: Silvia Sagone, Ponte di Mezzo in Pisa (2019). Photo courtesy of the artist.

The case of Pisa is far from being an exception. In the last forty years or so, authorities across the globe have appealed to the notion of decorum to justify authoritarian policies of urban control. Such a notion is distinctly aesthetic insofar as it deals with good taste in matters of appearance and behavior. Decorum is about what we should or is appropriate to see and do in public spaces. It is about judgments in matters of urban aesthetics.<sup>[3]</sup> Discussions and policies of decorum shape our daily lives at multiple levels, including social, political, and cultural. For its relevance, which transcends its artistic implications, it is surprising that aestheticians have largely ignored the city as a subject of inquiry.

In this paper, I examine the heretofore largely overlooked link between the city's decorum as a key notion in political discourse and the discipline of aesthetics. At a general level, cutting through the debate between autonomists and heteronomists, I show that the urban landscape is a domain where politics and aesthetics merge. The notion of decorum, on its part, rather than a neutral expression of functional considerations about how to effectively manage the city, is value-laden: It expresses a specific and distinctly authoritarian political conception of urban aesthetics that significantly shapes the nature of public spaces and their legitimate uses.

Within this understanding of the politics of urban aesthetics, I develop an analysis of an art-kind the nature of which essentially connects with the city's appearances: street art. More specifically, the paper argues that street art should be conceptualized as a subversive response to the authoritarian aesthetics that is embedded in political discourse about decorum. Street art injects into the urban landscape a dose of spontaneity. In doing so, it turns upside-down the exclusionary strictures of dominant politics of decorum that admits as appropriate, and perhaps even beautiful, only the authorized and the sanctioned. By creating temporary zones of spontaneity, street artists invite us to imagine alternative ways to use the city. This, in turn, suggests more effective strategies for living satisfactory urban lives. Section 2 examines how, in its nature, the aesthetics of the city is also essentially political. Section 3 discusses the aesthetics of decorum, with a focus on its authoritarian and exclusionary nature. Section 4 shows that street art functions as a corrective to the aesthetics of decorum, by reinserting spontaneity in the urban landscape. Lastly, I offer a conclusion.

## **2. The struggle for visibility: politics and aesthetics**

How do aesthetics and politics intertwine? For most philosophers, the relationship that connects those two domains is contingent.<sup>[4]</sup> On the one hand, aesthetics primarily has to do with matters of appearances and judgments of the beautiful, especially in art and nature. Politics, on the other hand, deals essentially with power, justice, rights, and all those issues that connect with our collective lives. We can certainly think about one in the absence of the other. In this sense, there seems to be nothing that intrinsically connects those two domains.

Of course, in some cases, those two domains intersect. The most obvious examples are politicized art and aestheticized politics.<sup>[5]</sup> The former refers most clearly to artistic practices,

such as propaganda or protest art, where aesthetic means are explicitly used to convey a certain political message.<sup>[6]</sup> The latter uses forms of aesthetic expressions as tool for creating political identities and dealing with internal conflicts. And yet, in both cases, one could, in principle, discern the aesthetic from the nonaesthetic, namely political, features of an artifact, behavior, or event.

This conception of the distinction between aesthetics and politics underlies an important philosophical debate investigating autonomous and heteronomous accounts of the judgment of taste.<sup>[7]</sup> For autonomists, when judging artistic or natural beauty, aesthetic properties are the only focus of attention. Heteronomists make room for nonaesthetic functions, as features significantly influencing our judgments. However, in spite of their opposition, both approaches are grounded on the assumption that one can, in principle, discern between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic.

The city offers a special context where it is not possible to vindicate, in principle, such a distinction. In effect, matters of urban aesthetics are, at the same time, as much about appearances as they are about politics. Within the city, the aesthetic and the political become essentially intertwined. And for this reason, urban aesthetics, which philosophers have largely overlooked, deserves special attention. How a city looks—or, perhaps better, what one can more broadly perceive within the urban landscape—possesses an intrinsic political significance.<sup>[8]</sup> In the city, appearances are political and, as we shall see, an essential terrain of political struggle. Call this phenomenon the politics of urban aesthetics.

In order to develop my analysis of the politics of urban aesthetics, let me introduce some key notions that French philosopher Jacques Rancière develops in his work. There, he offers, among other things, a subtle critique of contemporary politics. He believes that today's general understanding of politics and its activities is reduced to what he calls "political realism."<sup>[9]</sup> According to this view, politics is merely about administering, in the most rational way, resources while resolving conflicts. For Rancière, this is the framework orienting current elites when managing modern societies and their needs.

Political realism, Rancière tells us, appeals to rational necessity as a primary motive for political decision and action: It is "the absorption of all reality and all truth in the category of the only thing possible."<sup>[10]</sup> In other words, when facing difficult and controversial decisions, elites justify their preference for a

certain course of action by describing it as the best choice from a rational point of view. Declaring war, exploiting natural resources, or accepting significant levels of economic inequalities are defended in terms of instrumental rationality.

As Joseph Tanke aptly puts it, political realism is “ideology that claims to be beyond ideology.”<sup>[11]</sup> Realists justify their decision by appealing to pragmatic considerations that refer to invariable aspects of our societal lives: human nature, the laws of economics, the nature of globalization, and so on. Those decisions, realists claim, are mere rational calculations maximizing overall utility. They are *not* to be intended or interpreted as choices driven by a certain conception of the public good but as value-neutral optimal assessments based on hard evidence.

Rancière’s critical discussion of political realism unveils the agenda that underpins this doctrine: legitimizing the expansion of the market and its domain over all aspects of human life.<sup>[12]</sup> Hiding behind the mask of efficiency, political realists’ aim is to favor specific groups that directly profit from a pervasiveness of the logic of profit. If political authorities manage and implement realist policies, corporations are the primary beneficiaries of such decisions. And one need not be a radical Marxist to accept that most critical aspects of our global world are largely sustained by reasons of corporate profit. Our incapacity to deal with global warming is perhaps the most obvious and certainly most ominous example.

To this conception of politics as management of specific interests, Rancière opposes a more radical and basic notion. In his view, politics primarily has to do with processes of inclusion and exclusion from the public arena. In this sense, the real and most fundamental political struggle is not directly related to decisions about those specific courses of actions that a society should select. Rather, it has to do with determining those groups that can express themselves in public spaces and are therefore able to participate in the political lives of given communities, countries, and states. For Rancière, politics is about identifying “the community that speaks” in the public arena.<sup>[13]</sup>

The key notion that Rancière uses to conceptualize this basic sense of politics is that of the “distribution of the sensible” (*le partage du sensible*).<sup>[14]</sup> Such a technical term refers to, among other things, the set of social norms that includes habits, customs, traditions, and also positive laws regulating what can be perceived in the public spaces of a given society. In other

words, those social norms determine those forms of expression and behavior that one can see in public.<sup>[15]</sup> And this access to visibility has a crucial impact at the level of political inclusion. What is invisible to the public eye is the politically marginalized, that is, those groups that are excluded from political consideration and full-fledged participation.

The distribution of the sensible is where politics and aesthetics essentially meet.<sup>[16]</sup> Really, access to visibility is literally a matter of appearances. When considering the distribution of the sensible from this particular perspective, one can arguably claim that the set of social norms regulating what can be seen and perceived in public spaces does not merely identify what is beautiful, proper, or an expression of good taste in any reductive sense of the aesthetic.<sup>[17]</sup> To the contrary, those norms also shape visibility, that is, appearances in public spaces. And, as Andrea Mubi Brighenti convincingly argues, visibility is an intrinsically political dimension that, in conclusion, has to do with matters of political participation.<sup>[18]</sup> Invisible groups are excluded from fully entering the public sphere.

*Urban* public spaces are of particular interest when thinking about matters of political inclusion and participation, at least for the two following reasons. First, as of 2018, the majority of people globally (55%) live in cities. In Northern America, the percentage goes above 80%, while in Europe it is just below 75%. Projections anticipate that, by 2050, 68% of the world population will live in urban areas.<sup>[19]</sup> Second, cities are traditional centers of diversity. This, in turn, coupled with the spatial proximity that urban centers impose on its inhabitants, makes social relations in cities always antagonistic.<sup>[20]</sup> Conflicts about political inclusion and exclusion are more likely to emerge in urban settings. For the specificity of the city from the point of view of conflict, a deeper understanding of our global world cannot ignore the politics of urban aesthetics. In particular, a sustained philosophical analysis of its central notion of decorum is long overdue. Such a discussion is also instrumental in understanding recent artistic trends of urban creativity, as we shall see in the last section. In the following section, I expand my analysis of just that notion.

### **3. Decorum, aesthetic control, and political exclusion**

Decorum became a central concern of political elites in the late 1970s.<sup>[21]</sup> Under the umbrella of decorum, we find all sorts of regulations and laws that authorities use to determine appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in cities' public spaces.

And norms of decorum do so precisely by defining what can or cannot be seen or, more generally, perceived in the urban landscape. In this sense, they directly tackle the distribution of the sensible. Norms of decorum then significantly shape matters of political inclusion and exclusion, thus engaging with the urban politics of aesthetics.

Essentially, policies of decorum are generally about certain prohibitions targeting behaviors in urban public spaces that are considered inappropriate, such as eating, resting, or sleeping in openly accessible areas, whether publicly or privately owned; consuming or selling alcohol; camping; and marking visible surfaces. All of these regulations push out of public sight certain actions and ways of being in the city. In doing so, policies of decorum do not simply beautify the urban environment, which could be a *desideratum* for most people. Through a form of aesthetic control, they impose a certain distribution of the sensible. This, in turn, results in the *de jure* marginalization of certain groups of individuals that have preferences, ideas, and needs diverging from those of the authorities when considering uses of public spaces.

Again, the discourse of decorum is generally understood as political. However, it is important to emphasize that the notion of decorum is also distinctly aesthetic. It basically refers to what should be considered an expression of good taste; that is, norms about public decorum are, among other things, trackers of aesthetic value. Taste basically is that particular faculty that allows one to detect aesthetic properties, as Frank Sibley argues in his classic discussion of the concept of the aesthetic.<sup>[22]</sup> However, contrary to much orthodoxy in philosophical aesthetics, such a notion is far from being politically innocuous. In effect, it directly regulates what the appropriate uses of public spaces are. In urban aesthetics, decorum becomes an aesthetic-political notion.<sup>[23]</sup> In the city, discussions about good taste are not only *de facto* but also *de principio* essentially connected to politics, in Rancière's basic sense of the term.

When looking at the reasons that politicians offer in favor of contemporary politics of decorum, Rancière's conceptual framework again comes in handy. In effect, political realism enters the picture as a strategy for justifying norms that regulate matters of urban taste. Principles grounding policies of decorum are generally not vindicated, in regards to some standard of beauty that perhaps many would find disputable. Instead, facts about human nature and economic necessities are mentioned as ultimate justifications.<sup>[24]</sup> First, violations of decorum, authorities tell us, are (allegedly) connected to serious crime:



That is how human nature empirically functions. Wilson and Kelling's *broken-window theory* informs this motivation. According to this view, minor signs of urban neglect and decadence, such as a broken window left unrepaired or an instance of graffiti, create favorable conditions for the emergence of criminal behavior and increased violence.<sup>[25]</sup> Second, lack of decorum “depreciates the value of the property,” authorities claim, as laws of economics tell us.<sup>[26]</sup>

Here, it is interesting to notice that justifications of policies of decorum kick aside the aesthetic ladder, if you wish. In other words, though aesthetic in nature—they are about appropriate appearances—those principles that, for instance, prevent people from sitting or sleeping on a public bench are justified in nonaesthetic ways. This adds a further layer to the connection between the political and the aesthetic domains in urban aesthetics: Prosperous (good) ways of living are related to certain urban appearances, and vice versa.

In spite of their popularity, both claims about human nature and economics that are generally offered for justifying the implementation of policies of decorum are false. Let me explain why, by beginning with the second. The idea that a lack of decorum negatively affects property value is certainly controversial. Fluctuations in real-estate market are driven by multiple factors, and it is far from obvious that the presence and traces of behaviors considered violations of decorum necessarily have a negative impact on property value. In most cases, it really is very difficult to counterfactually separate causes from mere concomitants.

Let me just offer a clear counterexample to the claim under consideration. As mentioned above, one of the main targets of dominant politics of decorum is graffiti and street art (Figure 2). And yet, for a strange turn of events, the presence of works done by famous street artists has been driving prices up.<sup>[27]</sup> For instance, an advertising campaign has been trying to convince Banksy to paint the walls of Ferrol, a city in Galicia, Spain, as a way to raise property values in the area.<sup>[28]</sup> While not ignoring that Banksy and other famous street artists are special cases, the following claim seems reasonable: Property value need not drop in the presence of unsanctioned and unauthorized behaviors.



Figure 2. Fra32's throw-up somewhere in Pisa.  
Photo courtesy of the artist.

It is also controversial whether minor violations of decorum lead to serious criminal offenses. Wilson's and Kelling's understanding of public order and crime is "essentially a speculative hypothesis."<sup>[29]</sup> As many studies show, there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting their views and, *a fortiori*, supporting what appears as a dogmatic acceptance of dominant views in urban aesthetics.<sup>[30]</sup> There is no clear connection between disturbances of the city decorum and serious offenses. The broken-window theory exaggerates urban fears and anxieties while promoting authoritarian policies of control, in the absence of an actual need.

Besides being grounded on an empirically questionable view, authorized discourse about decorum also raises at least another important concern that requires attention. Dominant policies of decorum are distinctly exclusionary. Consider again the example of Pisa. Some reasonably argue that the mayor's policies target the following groups, in particular: immigrants, university students, certain subgroups of the urban youth, and the urban poor. Such groups are statistically more likely to engage in those behaviors that current regulations prohibit. More affluent groups can go to bars or private venues of some other kind to sit, relax, and engage in leisurely activity. However, those regulations push economically disadvantaged groups out of sight. This is a consequence of the economic sanctions that discourage people from using public spaces as they wish or by literally removing violators from the boundaries of the city. By removing their physical presence, those groups are also removed from the political arena.

What we see at play in Pisa is far from extra-ordinary. Similar legislations of urban decorum are at work in most – if not all – cities around the globe. From New York to Singapore, passing through London and Bologna, decorum is the key word when speaking about a certain facet of urban aesthetics. In all those contexts, decorum embodies an aesthetics that is distinctly

exclusionary by targeting primarily underprivileged groups.<sup>[31]</sup> “By-laws dealing with decorum [all aim], more or less implicitly, at barring the visible homeless, the poor and other marginalized social groups from the gentrified city centres.”<sup>[32]</sup>

By strictly controlling acceptable activities in public spaces, policies of decorum also erode conviviality even among members of non-marginalized groups. Freely using public spaces for leisurely activities is key to community building. After homes and work venues, places such as piazzas, squares, streets, and parks provide an ideal context where to meet at little or no cost others.<sup>[33]</sup> This, in turn, is crucial for building and sustaining inter-personal connections. By imposing severe restrictions on uses of public spaces, policies of decorum are threatening public places and their function.

Through the authoritarian control that they exercise on the urban citizen, regulations of decorum tend to erode spontaneity in urban everyday interactions. In the last few decades, plenty of research has shown the close connection between eclectic uses of public spaces and satisfactory urban lives.<sup>[34]</sup> According to prominent theorists, such as Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte, the goal of cities is to provide the conditions for positive spontaneity that is linked to the joy of being in public.<sup>[35]</sup> Carefully managed urban spaces, many agree, “create urban life that feels commercialized and homogenized, without a sense of authenticity.”<sup>[36]</sup> By preventing spontaneous uses of public spaces, politics of decorum creates Disney World like environments: clean, safe, but fundamentally inauthentic. To state it as a slogan, decorum is killing our urban public spaces. In the following section, I explain how street art counters such a negative tendency, by questioning policies of decorum.

#### **4. Street art and spontaneity**

Policies of decorum had importantly targeted modern graffiti since their early days. Even today, writing and other forms of street art are critical focuses of such policies.<sup>[37]</sup> This is not mere chance. In effect, motivations behind aggressive anti-graffiti policies that different cities around the globe adopt are clear. Street art is grounded on an understanding of and an attitude toward urban public space that are at odds with those informing policies of decorum. Creating street art depends on the possibility of freely using the city’s visible surfaces, in spite of regulations, laws, and norms about appropriate behavior and suitable appearances in urban aesthetics. With its works, street art hijacks and appropriates the urban landscape, if only

temporarily. In this sense, an analysis of the politics of aesthetics as I developed above is essential to develop a full-fledged understanding of that specific urban art-kind.

As an artform that directly and explicitly engages with norms about visibility in public spaces, street art essentially connects with Rancière's distribution of the sensible. Among scholars interested in urban creativity, Martin Irvine is arguably the first one to conceptualize street art in terms of Rancière's key notion. [38] By building on Irvine's insight, in my previous work I argue that street art essentially engages those norms in distinct ways; it subverts them. In effect, street art subverts the city's order of visibility insofar as it transgresses social norms regulating uses and functions of urban space. [39]

As we have seen, an important aspect of dominant hierarchies of urban aesthetics revolves around the notion of decorum. By appealing to such a notion and its utilitarian implications, authorities justify a tight control on forms of expressions in the public domain, while favoring corporate interests with its regulations. As a spontaneous gift created by freely using urban space, street art calls into question that imposed order at least in two senses. First, street artists express themselves freely, that is, in ways that exceed those official styles and visual languages that the authorities allow. Second, genuine works of street art refute the logic of profit that drives modern metropolises and one of its foundations, that is, private property. [40]

With their colorful forms and witty designs, street artists introduce a splash of unprompted creativity in our urban lives, the visual equivalent of an improvised jazz solo on the city walls (Figure 3). This, in turn, challenges policies of decorum in urban aesthetics while effectively contrasting their exclusionary nature. As outsiders, often criminalized and persecuted, street artists literally broaden the spectrum of groups and individuals allowed to express themselves in urban public spaces. It is in this sense that street art provides us with an antidote to the strictures imposed by political realists: It shows us alternative and more spontaneous ways to use urban public spaces.



Figure 3. Throw-ups at the Pisa train station.  
Photo courtesy of the artists.

In general, philosophers interested in spontaneity and the arts emphasize the aesthetic relevance of skillful spontaneity.<sup>[41]</sup> For instance, Andy Hamilton argues that, in spontaneous musical creations, such as jazz improvisations, “emotional expression ... is more *direct* than in its composed counterpart.”<sup>[42]</sup> As legendary jazz pianist Bill Evans suggests, something similar could be said about spontaneous forms of visual art.<sup>[43]</sup> Styles of painting, such as Chinese ink painting, do not allow for corrections. In turn, this makes deliberation impossible. As a result, the gestures of an ink painter are instinctive in ways that are powerfully expressive.

However, when looking at street art, the aesthetic significance of spontaneity also acquires a political undertone: As previously argued, within the context of urban aesthetics, spontaneity acquires an aesthetic-political nature. With their uncontrolled interventions in the urban landscape, street artists do more than creating beautiful or enjoyable forms. They *de facto* participate in the political struggles over those who are allowed to express themselves in public space and those who are excluded from doing so. The appreciation of street art’s appearances connects the domain of the aesthetic with that of politics, by touching exactly upon questions of decorum, good taste, and the distribution of the sensible.

Many philosophers, theorists, and practitioners of street art recognize the political significance of street art’s spontaneity. In my work, I show that it is crucial for imbuing street art with subversive power.<sup>[44]</sup> Sondra Bacharach focuses her attention on how such an unregulated attitude towards the city landscape characterizes street art as essentially unsanctioned and unauthorized.<sup>[45]</sup> In turn, this makes illegality a paradigmatic, though not necessary or sufficient, feature of this art form, as Tony Chackal points out.<sup>[46]</sup> Kurt Iveson shows that these creative varieties of urban expression are among those tactics

that counter-publics deploy, among other things, to re-familiarize with alienated spaces in the city.<sup>[47]</sup>

Street artists bring to the streets an aesthetics of unconstrained self-expression that carries within itself political significance. As writer Phibs says, graffiti is “a crime against property and society ... its energy and motivation, its spontaneity and immediacy.”<sup>[48]</sup> The *jouissance* that accompanies the creation and appreciation of a work of street art is not purely a form of individual enjoyment. It is an act that, within the context of the modern city, becomes of public relevance, as a form of resistance against authoritarian tendencies in guiding urban aesthetics.

By being acts of subversion—acts that question the dominant policies of decorum—street artworks and graffiti significantly show that such norms are not necessary. In this sense, the political significance of the subversive aesthetics of street art cannot be reduced to that of juvenile acts of vandalism. With their works, street artists are not merely discharging their anger. There is something much deeper here at play. Examples of street art demonstrate that there are alternative ways in which the aesthetics of the city could be administered and regulated.

As scholars working on social resistance convincingly argue, the possibility to show that social norms could be different is key to political change. And, among the different tactics that contemporary movements of political opposition exploit, so-called carnivalesque strategies appear very effective in doing so.<sup>[49]</sup> Through the use of laughter, irony, appropriation, and satire, such strategies turn current norms and laws upside down, “making strange,” as Foucault would say, what appears familiar.<sup>[50]</sup> By doing so, they allow us to reimagine our practices and their hierarchies in ways that are possibly more inclusive and flexible, thus allowing for a higher degree of spontaneity in the use of public spaces.<sup>[51]</sup>

A growing trend in the literature on street art conceptualizes these urban art forms as carnivalesque strategies of social resistance.<sup>[52]</sup> By rejecting, in humorous ways, the politics of urban decorum, street artists liberate us, if only momentarily, from the authoritarian control that such hierarchy imposes on our urban lives. Street artists show a certain fearlessness towards those in power. By overcoming fear, street artists create chaos where there is usually order, thus ridiculing “the symbols of power and violence [that are] turned inside out.”<sup>[53]</sup> And, in turn, this chaos liberates us from the authoritarianism of political realism and its aesthetics of decorum.

Street art brings to life, in the medium of aesthetic transformation, a conception of the city and urban life that Italian writer Italo Calvino sets forth in one of his famous works. In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino describes the idea of a city that challenges dominant conceptions of urban decorum. Rather than a tightly controlled entity, the urban utopia is “made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals ... discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed.”<sup>[54]</sup> Ideal cities are then fragmentary arrangements of individual and competing interests, desires, and preferences, according to Calvino. For their complexities, urban lives are necessarily messy. Imposing a strict order on them may very well amount to their destruction. Politics of decorum are exactly doing that: limiting in serious ways the joy of being spontaneous in public spaces. And, with their urban aesthetics of subversiveness, street artists are bringing back some of that spontaneity into the city.

## 5. Conclusion

Politics is a distinct domain of human action. And yet its boundaries are not set by politics alone. In this paper, I have emphasized how the foundational moment of the political rests on decisions that are also aesthetic in nature. When looking at political communities, inclusion and exclusion are determined primarily through decisions that have to do with appearances, that is, with what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible. Being legitimate to appear and express oneself in public spaces also amounts to being seen and heard. That is the basis of political participation. Authorized discourse of decorum tends to expel from political participation not only marginalized groups but generally all those that are not willing to accept the logic of the market as principally governing our communal lives. Against the strictures of such an authoritarian control, street art is reclaiming through its spontaneity everyone’s right to be heard: clean walls, voiceless people!<sup>[55]</sup>

Andrea Baldini  
[andrea.baldini@nju.edu.cn](mailto:andrea.baldini@nju.edu.cn)

Andrea Baldini is Associate Professor of Art Theory and Aesthetics at the School of Arts of Nanjing University and Director of the NJU Center for Sino-Italian Cultural Studies. His interests focus on how creativity can transform our everyday practices by adding layers of ethical and political meaning. He has published extensively on philosophical issues related to urban arts. Recent articles appeared in the *Journal of Visual*

*Culture and The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. In 2018, his monograph *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law* has been published by Brill. He is also Delegate-at-Large of IAA.

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## Endnotes

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[1] "Multato l'ex assessore Danti che sfida l'ordinanza," <http://www.quinewspisa.it/>, accessed October 4, 2019.

[2] The newly elected administration justifies the pro-decorum legislative shift in Pisa by appealing to the conditions of neglect that afflict parts of the city. The opposition is critical of this explanation, claiming that the official narrative is just a scaremongering tactic to attract political consensus.

[3] The concept of decorum significantly overlaps with similar notions, such as discretion, sociability, politeness, tact, and taste. Arguably, the first discussion of these matters can be found in Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*. Traditional accounts offering a suitable conceptual background for the present discussion include, among others, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Baldassarre Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Thomas Hoby (New York: AMS Press, 1967); Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954). Recently, Ossi Naukkarinen has developed an interesting conceptual analysis of the notion of tact that sympathetically resonates with my view. In particular, his emphasis on the intrinsic conservative and authoritarian nature of tact and similar notions offers an informative precedent to my discussion. See Ossi Naukkarinen, "Everyday Aesthetic Practices, Ethics and Tact," *Aisthesis. Pratiche, Linguaggi E Saperi Dell'estetico* 7, 1 (2014): 23-44.

[4] For an informative summary of the debate on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, see Thijs Lijster et al., "Politics," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly,



2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),  
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/>.

[5] Desmond Manderson, "Here and Now: From 'Aestheticizing Politics' to 'Politicizing Art,'" *No Foundations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Law and Justice* 13 (2016): 1-16.

[6] Of course, it is difficult to provide an exact definition of politicized art, the boundaries of which are blurred, as Rancière's account of aesthetics and politics clearly shows. Here, I am leaning towards an intentionalist take on politicized art, where some agent intentionally creates art whose primary, if not sole, purpose is promoting a certain political agenda.

[7] Owen Hulatt, ed., *Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[8] Here, I focus primarily on the visual dimension of urban aesthetics. Such a choice is a consequence of street art's medium profile that primarily targets our vision. However, I am not implying that urban aesthetics has only to do with matters of visibility. For an informative discussion on the relevance of other perceptual fields in urban aesthetics, see, for instance, Matthew Mullane, "The Aesthetic Ear: Sound Art, Jacques Rancière and the Politics of Listening," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.4895>; Katharine Wolfe, "From Aesthetics to Politics: Rancière, Kant and Deleuze," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4 (2006), <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=382>.

[9] Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[11] Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 46.

[12] Rancière, *Dis-Agreement*, pp. 112-13.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[14] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

[15] For a systematic discussion of social norms, see Cristina Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Cristina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure,*

and *Change Social Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[16] Tanke, *Jacques Rancière*, pp. 1-2.

[17] Wolfe, "From Aesthetics to Politics: Rancière, Kant and Deleuze."

[18] Andrea Brighenti, "Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences," *Current Sociology* 55, 3 (2007): 323-42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392107076079>.

[19] <https://www.un.org/>, accessed October 7, 2019.

[20] Jo Beall, "Urban Governance and the Paradox of Conflict," in *Megacities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*, ed. Kees Koonings and Kirk Kruijt (London: Zed Books, 2009), pp.107-119.

[21] For an early discussion of decorum as a political priority, see Nathan Glazer, "On Subway Graffiti in New York," *The Public Interest* 54 (1979): 3-11.

[22] Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *The Philosophical Review* 68, 4 (1959): 421-50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2182490>.

[23] I introduce the notion of aesthetic-political discourse with reference to street art in Andrea Baldini, *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 18, 24. My discussion here develops those ideas in a more general sense.

[24] See, for instance, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nograffiti/html/executiveorder.html>, accessed October 9, 2019.

[25] James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, "Broken Window: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *Atlantic Monthly* 249, 3 (1982): 29-38.

[26] <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nograffiti/html/executiveorder.html>.

[27] The commercialization of street art and graffiti introduces interesting complications at a philosophical level, especially in terms of demarcation. For a discussion of this issue, see Baldini, *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law*, chap. 3.

[28] Natasha Davies, "Artist 'convinced' Banksy Will Answer Plea to Make Neighbourhood Beautiful," *bristolpost*, August 23, 2017, <http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/>.

[29] Ronald Kramer, "Political Elites, 'Broken Windows', and the Commodification of Urban Space," *Critical Criminology* 20, 3 (2012): 229-248; ref. on 243, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-011-9137-9>.

[30] See, among others, Alex S. Vitale, *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Bernard E. Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Nathan W. Link et al., "Reversing Broken Windows: Evidence of Lagged, Multilevel Impacts of Risk Perceptions on Perceptions of Incivility," *Crime & Delinquency* 63, 6 (2017): 659-682, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128714555606>.

[31] Joe Doherty et al., "Homelessness and Exclusion: Regulating Public Space in European Cities," *Surveillance & Society* 5, 3 (2008): 290-314, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v5i3.3425>.

[32] Maurizio Bergamaschi, Marco Castrignanò, and Pia De Rubertis, "The Homeless and Public Space: Urban Policy and Exclusion in Bologna," *Revue Interventions Économiques. Papers in Political Economy*, 51 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.4000/interventionseconomiques.2441>.

[33] Ray Oldenburg offers an influential analysis of public spaces and their possibilities of community building. See *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, 3rd edition (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1999).

[34] See, among others, Jeffrey Hou, ed., *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2010); John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, eds., *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008); Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens, eds., *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2007).

[35] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961); William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, DC: Conservation Foundation, 1980).

[36] Carl Grodach and Renia Ehrenfeucht, *Urban Revitalization: Remaking Cities in a Changing World* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 170. See also Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[37] I defend the view that graffiti is the original and most radical form of street art. See Baldini, *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law*, pp. 9-10.

[38] Martin Irvine, "The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture," in *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, ed. Ian Heywood et al. (London: Berg, 2012), pp. 235-278.

[39] I argue for this claim in previous works. See, among others, Andrea Baldini, "Street Art: A Reply to Riggle," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, 2 (2016): 187-191; Baldini, *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law*. For sympathetic views, see also Joe Austin, "More to See than a Canvas in a White Cube: For an Art in the Streets," *City* 14, 1-2 (2010): 33-47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810903529142>; Sondra Bacharach, "Street Art and Consent," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 55, 4 (2015): 481-495, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayv030>; Sondra Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets: Street Art and Epistemic Injustice," *The Monist* 101, 1 (2018): 31-43, <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onx033>.

[40] Baldini, *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law*, p. 7. See also Irvine, "The Work on the Street," p. 252. For a discussion of gift-giving as transgressive in capitalist societies, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 27.

[41] Andy Hamilton, "The Aesthetics of Imperfection," *Philosophy* 65, 253 (1990): 323-340; Andy Hamilton, "The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 40, 1 (2000): 168-185, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/40.1.168>.

[42] Hamilton, "The Aesthetics of Imperfection," 339. Emphasis in the original.

[43] Miles Davis, *Kind of Blu* (New York: Columbia, 1959), sleeve note. As cited in Hamilton, "The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection," 178.

[44] Baldini, "Street Art: A Reply to Riggle"; Baldini, *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law*.

[45] Bacharach, "Street Art and Consent;" Sondra Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets."

[46] Tony Chackal, "Of Materiality and Meaning: The Illegality Condition in Street Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art*

*Criticism* 74, 4 (2016): 359–370,  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12325>.

[47] Kurt Iveson, 'Cities within the City: Do-It-Yourself Urbanism and the Right to the City', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, 3 (2013): 941-956,  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12053>.

[48] Cited by Kurt Iveson, *Publics and the City* (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 136.

[49] Louise Amoore and Alexandra Hall, "The Clown at the Gates of the Camp: Sovereignty, Resistance and the Figure of the Fool," *Security Dialogue* 44 (2013): 93-110; Marieke de Goede, "Carnival of Money. Politics of Dissent in an Era of Globalizing Finance," in *The Global Resistance Reader*, ed. Louise Amoore (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 379-391; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[50] Michel Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," in *Michel Foucault: Politics Philosophy, Culture Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. L. D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 152-156.

[51] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets."

[52] Andrea Baldini, "An Urban Carnival on the City Walls: The Visual Representation of Financial Power in European Street Art," *Journal of Visual Culture* 14, 2 (2015): 246-252,  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412915592883>; Lu Pan, "Who Is Occupying Wall and Street: Graffiti and Urban Spatial Politics in Contemporary China," *Continuum* 28, 1 (2014): 136-153,  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2013.854867>; Tijen Tunali, "The Art of Resistance: Carnival Aesthetics and the Gezi Street Protests," *ASAP/Journal* 3, 2 (2018): 377-399,  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0031>.

[53] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), p. 91.

[54] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 164.

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