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Aesthetics of zero tolerance

Emma Arnold 

Zero tolerance policies against graffiti are rooted in moral panic and ‘broken windows’ theory, forging connections between illegal interventions in the city and social disorder. While these connections are now widely recognised as unfounded, they persist in anti-graffiti policy. Versions of the New York model of zero tolerance against graffiti were instituted with unique severity and with some peculiarities in Nordic cities such as Oslo, Stockholm, and Helsinki in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Strict policy rarely has the intended effect of ridding the city of graffiti and other unwanted expressions. Undesirable interventions persist despite intense media and education campaigns, graffiti removal schemes, harsh punishments, and even modicums of censorship. The Norwegian capital of Oslo implemented a policy of zero tolerance against graffiti in 2000. Taking Oslo as its focus, this paper strives to uncover aesthetic consequences of such policy and looks for indications of what makes the zero tolerance city distinct. Drawing upon psychogeographic and photographic fieldwork conducted in Norway between 2013 and 2017, four potential consequences emerge: the creation of aesthetic tensions; the presence of buffed and negated spaces; changes in graffiti style and form; and differences in the scale of street art. This paper concludes by proposing that cities allowing for more agonism and tolerance may enable more meaningful and democratic creative expression of its citizens, leading to more diverse and vibrant urban aesthetics.

Key words: aesthetic politics, agonism, graffiti, psychogeography, street art, zero tolerance

Zero tolerance policies against graffiti are multifaceted and though they vary by jurisdiction generally revolve around attempts to control and eradicate illegal interventions in the city. Interventions are portrayed as being ugly and unwanted, perceived as symbolic of social disorder, condemned as being physically and economically damaging to property, and cited as costly to remove. Zero tolerance has its foundations in ‘broken windows’ theory which associates graffiti with anti-social behaviour and other serious crimes. The theory is attributed to Wilson and Kelling (Wilson and Kelling 1982) and has been highly criticised, in large

part due to its lack of robust empirical foundation, particularly with regards to graffiti (Kramer 2012; Young 2014). Strict policies developed initially to control practices of graffiti writing and tagging but the same logic applies similarly to the varied practices of illegal or uncommissioned street art. Despite its goals and diverse implementations, zero tolerance has hardly been successful and does not rid the city of graffiti and other expressions. It may instead worsen the quality and increase the quantity of what authorities might consider the most undesirable of interventions (Iveson 2009; Shobe and Banis 2014).

What then does a city with zero tolerance against graffiti actually look like? Taking the city of Oslo as its focus, this study strives to uncover aesthetic consequences of strict anti-graffiti policy. This research looks at what is present and what is not and discusses what makes the zero tolerance city distinct. This paper draws upon fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2017 using a methodology that pairs psychogeography with photography (see Arnold 2019 for a more in-depth discussion of this methodology). Using graffiti and street as a vector or proxy through which to navigate space, I walk and attempt to get lost in the city in ways reminiscent of the Situationist *dérive* or drift. The Situationists were urban theorists and avant-garde artists active primarily in the 1950s and 1960s in Paris. The *dérive* is one of their most widely adopted urban experiments (Smith 2010) and is a mode of exploratory and aesthetic urban walking intended to disrupt one's routine navigations through the city, the walker becoming literally and/or figuratively lost. The *dérive* was conceived as a form of anti-art (Careri 2017), simultaneously challenging the commodification of the art world and confronting the capitalist ordering of urban space. Walking in this way without predetermined routes is meant to encourage the feeling of 'psychogeographical effects' in the city (Debord 1958; Bassett 2004; Smith 2010; Pyyry 2019; Careri 2017). The Situationists' artistic experiments of disruption and subversion are in some ways reflected in the practices of graffiti writers and street artists. The use of the psychogeographic drift is thus a poetic as well as pragmatic choice of method with which to explore illegal artistic practices in the city. The methodology is also interesting for the manner in which it mirrors the ways graffiti writers and street artists navigate the city, ways which are inherently geographical (Ferrell and Weide 2010; Arnold 2019). Psychogeographic walking is aesthetic, and is especially caught up in the act of looking (Bassett

2004; Arnold 2019). Photography is consequently often used in connection with psychogeographic fieldwork (see Bridger 2013; Murali 2016; Pyyry 2019). Composing and taking photographs is part of the analytic process for this study, with analysis happening in the moments of image framing and capture. This in-the-field analytical process is consistent with trends in nonrepresentational urban research in which photography can also be understood as performative and sensorial and not only a means of documentation (Pyyry 2019). Photographs provide not just evidence of graffiti and street art but also of the visual context, and additionally demonstrate how integral the street and the city are to the meaning of works. The amassing of thousands of photographs allows for analysis of spatial and aesthetic patterns after fieldwork.

During the course of fieldwork, I walked over 250 kilometres in the Norwegian cities of Oslo, Bergen, and Stavanger with the bulk of this fieldwork having taken place in Oslo. Analysis is based upon these psychogeographic and photographic walks. This methodology enables a unique perspective on the city, one that engages very directly with the spaces and materialities of the city. This aesthetic approach is unique in studies of zero tolerance policy, which have otherwise had a tendency to focus more upon criminological and political economy aspects of policy using methods such as discourse analysis (Cresswell 1992; Shobe and Banis 2014; Kimvall 2015) and policy analysis (Høigård 2007; Iveson 2009; Young 2010). Though research has problematised zero tolerance as a policy approach, the literature has not extensively explored the aesthetic implications of such directives. This paper describes four potential aesthetic consequences of zero tolerance against graffiti that have emerged during fieldwork in Oslo, suggesting that aesthetically driven policy has potentially unintended consequences for the visual landscape of the city. These include the creation of aesthetic tensions, the presence of buffed and negated spaces,

changes in graffiti style and form, and differences in scales of street art. An aesthetic approach is important given that policies on graffiti and street art are necessarily concerned with aesthetics, and those involved—media, public, politicians, policy-makers—are ultimately engaged in making aesthetic judgements of various kinds. Aesthetics are additionally of interest in discussions of urban politics given that they play an increasingly important role in how cities control and manage public space.

Aesthetic politics

Politics and aesthetics are difficult to separate, perhaps inseparable according to Rancière (Vaughan 2012). Connections between space, politics, and aesthetics are of increasing interest in urban research (Dikeç 2005). The relationship between aesthetics and politics is a complex theoretical area, connected to notable theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière (Mouffe 2007; Benjamin 2008; Tavani 2013; Papastergiadis 2014; Lampert 2017). The connection between aesthetics and politics can be understood in different ways depending on one's understandings of aesthetics and of politics. Urban geographers are beginning to draw on Rancière's political theories (see Dikeç 2005, 2016; Davidson and Iveson 2015) to understand how cities can be understood as 'political entities' (Davidson and Iveson 2015, 543). Rancière contends that politics can be understood as a 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2005, 2006) and an aesthetic politics emerges in the disruption of the sensible. As Dikeç explains, Rancière enables 'an understanding of politics as the disruption of normalised coordinates of sensory experience and habitual practices of sense-making' (Dikeç 2016, 38). These theoretical discussions, while complex and beyond the scope of this paper, make important connections between urban aesthetics and politics that underpin this study.

Contemporary aesthetic politics have links to processes of neoliberalism and the city makes for an ideal setting in which to explore these connections. These politics are concerned with presenting cities in a certain way, striving for the creation of spaces that reflect order and control. This careful management of space assists in the branding and marketing of cities (Kramer 2015), making them attractive to investors and tourists alike. These aesthetics have been referred to as neoliberal aesthetics and aesthetics of the middle-class (Pow 2009), aesthetics of exchange-value (Kramer 2015), and aesthetics of authority (Ferrell 1996). They are often linked with politics of exclusion (Pow 2009) and discourses of order/disorder (Cresswell 1992, 1996). One of the criticisms of these aesthetic imperatives is that they lead to a homogenising of cities and a loss of social diversity, so much so that cities begin to look increasingly similar (Kramer 2015). These processes are linked to aesthetic judgements, which as written about by Kant or Bourdieu, are known to have connections to taste and class. Indeed, class relations are produced and reproduced in these aesthetics (Kramer 2015). Policies concerned with urban aesthetics may be considered revanchist and include a range of initiatives from the implementation of hostile architecture to various anti-homeless measures to initiatives related to the creative city. Thörn (2011, 989) refers to these as 'soft policies of exclusion', not for their leniency or gentle qualities but for their 'elastic and fluid' ways of exerting power in the city.

Oslo is home to approximately 660,000 residents and though a small city, it is one of Europe's most rapidly growing capitals (Savage 2014). Its steady growth since the 1980s is partly attributable to Norway's offshore oil discoveries while its prosperity is best evidenced in the urban landscape through waterfront developments at Aker Brygge, Tjuvholmen, and the former industrial area of Bjørvika. There has been an aesthetic turn in urban policy-making in Oslo that can be linked to amendments to the

federal Planning and Building Act (Planning and Building Act § 11-9 2008). Changes to the law in 1997 introduced a new focus, advocating that aesthetics should be ‘emphasised more strongly in planning and construction work’ (Planning Department 1997). The city of Oslo soon after implemented its *Beautiful City – Action Plan on Aesthetics and Good City Architecture* in 2004 (Oslo City Council 2004). Oslo has since experimented with varied policies for controlling the aesthetics of urban space, many of which have been openly criticised. There was the long eleven-year ban against skateboarding, ending only in 1989, linked to concerns over health and safety (BBC 2016). More recently, the attempted banning of begging in public space via proposed legislation met with much resistance (Røstvik 2015). The initiative sought not to address the deeper social issues and inequalities of public begging, mostly by Roma minorities, but to erase their presence from public space. Hostile architecture—such as benches specially designed to preclude sleeping in public—were similarly met with public and political criticism (Berg 2015; Gedde-Dahl 2015; Skjetne 2015). There was also the earlier large-scale clearing of an area called Plata adjacent to Oslo’s central train station, which involved the moving of individuals, many of whom were drug users, away from a highly visible public space. The Plata area was visible to visitors arriving into the city from the airport by train. This relocation was condemned for not dealing with underlying social problems (Folkvord 2007) and arguably only moved the problem to other parts of the city (Eriksen 2014; Møller 2014). The Plata area is incidentally adjacent to one of the largest urban developments in Norwegian history, the redevelopment of the aforementioned waterfront area and former industrial area Bjørvika. This area is where the iconic and modernist Opera now stands (Hofseth 2008; Smith and von Krogh Strand 2011), where the new municipal library Deichmanske Biblioteket and the new Munch Museum are currently being

built. It is where the Barcode high-rises now stand in an attempt to give Oslo a modern European skyline (Godø 2014) and not far from where the sleek new residences of Sørenga, complete with expansive new public outdoor swimming area, have also been built. Coinciding with increased national wealth, some link the origins of this growing concern over the image of the city explicitly to the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer. It is this high-profile international event which is frequently cited as coinciding with changing discourses on graffiti within the city (Korsvold 2002; Høigård 2007).

Zero tolerance against graffiti

The aesthetic politics of graffiti and street art is most pronounced in the foundations of the ‘broken windows’ theory, widely recognised as spurring moral panics around graffiti. The theory characterises graffiti as an aesthetic signal or signifier, a visual cue that suggests that crime is present and that the space where it is situated is dangerous. The aesthetics of graffiti may then be understood as an ‘explicit signifier’ (see Kitchin 1998), becoming synonymous with danger and acting symbolically as a force of exclusion. While these highly politicised discourses that suggest this signifying have been scrutinised by many scholars (Young 2010, 2014; Kramer 2012, 2010; Kimvall 2013; Shobe and Banis 2014; see Iveson 2009), it nonetheless stands that certain aesthetics and visual presences can indeed lead to a production of space with tangible affect/effect. While this production of space is based upon aesthetic understandings that may be inaccurate and misinformed, they are nonetheless real and become a basis for policy.

Grffiti and street art are ubiquitous in the contemporary city (McAuliffe 2012), having origins in the 1970s and 1980s subcultures of American cities like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia (Ferrell and Weide 2010; McAuliffe 2012; Young 2014). Both graffiti and street art take meaning from and use

urban space for their work, characterised by ephemerality and illegality, and are in many cases policed similarly. Graffiti has specifically been the subject of strict policing in many municipalities, inspired by the New York model of zero tolerance of the 1990s. Such strategies categorise all illegal markings as being unacceptable and anti-social and make speculative associations with other criminal offences. The specific laws which graffiti writers or street artists break vary depending on jurisdiction but hinge on themes relating to property damage, criminal damage, and vandalism (Young 2014). Zero tolerance allows for a broad policing of any intervention carried out without permission. Yet, it is difficult to pinpoint precisely what is meant by zero tolerance against graffiti as it is understood and applied differently in different contexts. Zero tolerance could be understood as part policy, part ideology; a collection of attitudes and mechanisms with the general goal of eradicating graffiti (Iveson 2009; Høigård 2011; Kramer 2012, 2016; Kimvall 2015). Zero tolerance policy does not distinguish between good graffiti and bad graffiti (Iveson 2009), nor between graffiti and street art. Aggressive policing and punishment, from high fines to prison time, tend to accompany zero tolerance. The presence of anti-graffiti industries, which may include private security firms and graffiti-removal industries are also common (Kramer 2012). It is a regime that comes with intense education campaigns, with close ties to media, shaping public perception and understanding of graffiti and street art (Cresswell 1992). Many authors have explored zero tolerance policies as they have manifested in diverse jurisdictions. The New York origins of the approach have been notably explored by Cresswell (1992, 1996) and by Kramer (2010, 2012, 2016). Shobe and Banis (2014) have written on zero tolerance in San Francisco, while Shobe and Conklin (2018) compare similar abatement strategies in San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland. Young (2010) has critically explored zero tolerance regulation in

Melbourne. Although the findings of these studies vary, they converge on the idea that zero tolerance is not a desirable means to regulate graffiti and police public space.

Nordic zero tolerance

Graffiti has become a globalised culture and the ways in which it is policed have been similarly globalised. Graffiti is very frequently framed as a problem; ‘whether the problem be disrespect, disorder, or a more general dis-ease with the aesthetic quality of urban, and to a lesser extent, rural landscapes’ (Halsey and Young 2002, 166). This is no exception in the Nordic countries. Criminologist Cecilie Høigård has undertaken the most significant study of zero tolerance and graffiti in Norway. Her study, published as a book called *Street Galleries*¹ presently available only in Norwegian, is a staggering work comprising qualitative and quantitative methods and analyses, conducted over a ten-year period between 1990 and 1999 (Høigård 2007, 2011). The end of the 1990s in Oslo saw a shift to intense anti-graffiti discourse and the introduction of aggressive anti-graffiti campaigns with zero tolerance being adopted officially in 2000 (Oslo City Council 2000; Høigård 2011). The shift in policy reflects changes in perceptions of graffiti by Norwegian authorities prior to the Lillehammer Olympics in 1994. Authorities wished to present a certain image of Norway, one thought to be compromised by graffiti along the train route from Oslo to Lillehammer (Korsvold 2002; Høigård 2007; Holen and Noguchi 2012). Oslo’s war on graffiti preceded the existence of a graffiti ‘problem’ and reactions and punishments have been cited as disproportionate and exaggerated (Høigård 2007; Holen 2009).

Cities commonly look elsewhere for policy inspiration and for examples of best practices. Associated with certain policy models, for example creative city policies, policy mobility is facilitated by constellations of experts and practitioners (Peck and Theodore 2010).

Policies tend not to move as a whole but in ‘bits and pieces’ (Peck and Theodore 2010, 170) and are habitually transformed or mutated in the process. These permutations are reminiscent of the children’s game ‘Broken Telephone’² and are perhaps inevitable outcomes as experts, context, and geography changes. Zero tolerance policies travelled from New York City to various other municipalities (Wacquant 2009; Kramer 2012; Young 2014) and is said to have been introduced to Scandinavia through the media in the mid-1990s (Ellefsen 2011; Kimvall 2013). The zero tolerance of New York—very specific to the politics and conditions of a city in crisis—is not the zero tolerance that manifested in Norway and other Nordic countries like Sweden and Finland. Policies were implemented in comparatively much smaller cities not affected by the same extent and severity of crime and socioeconomic challenges of New York in the 1990s. Policies became stricter in the Nordic context, undoubtedly influenced by the efficiency and efficacy of strong welfare state governance. Indeed, some of the peculiarities of Nordic zero tolerance may have some links to the governance of these countries. Høigård writes that ‘the welfare state is actively contributing to creating the new version of zero tolerance’ (Høigård 2011, 314–315). Welfare ‘regime and ideology’ contribute to neoliberal aesthetic policy-making founded on ‘old traditions of cooperation and consensus among the elites in the city’ wherein authorities, real estate developers, business owners, and different political parties work harmoniously toward similar goals (Thörn 2011, 996). Though zero tolerance policing on a wide range of issues has been exported many places (Wacquant 2009), there are some specificities of the Nordic model of zero tolerance with respect to graffiti. These include some surprising elements of severity and censorship that move beyond that of the New York model. These specificities are better understood not just as differences in policy but also as discursive differences; that is, the

creation of a zero tolerance discourse reminiscent of Cresswell’s (1992, 1996) descriptions of discourses of disorder in New York. It is worth noting that there is a distinction between the discourse of zero tolerance and anti-graffiti discourse. Most cities are in fact host to some degree of anti-graffiti discourse, with tagging receiving the brunt of criticism. Rather, the discourse of zero tolerance is associated with other more concrete measures, which serve to reinforce what might be considered an ideology and not simply a policy (Kramer 2010; Kimvall 2015). Such measures include practices of censorship, media campaigns, education and outreach targeting youth, regulation of spray paint and other materials, refusal of permits for legal walls and murals, outright banning of legal walls, in addition to aggressive buffing, policing, and punishment. This is what is perhaps interesting about Nordic interpretations and implementations of zero tolerance, which also involved ‘intensified social control and labelling’ of those practising graffiti (Ellefsen 2011, 109).

Though the Nordic approach is a relatively understudied area, Kimvall (2013) offers valuable insight from Stockholm. Kimvall (2013) describes Scandinavian zero tolerance as motivated to make urban space feel safe and to protect youth from the perceived dangers of succumbing to a criminal subculture. The methods for doing so have included ‘intensified removal of graffiti, stricter legislation, special police squads and para-police working with intelligence organizations to prosecute suspected graffiti writers’ (Kimvall 2013, 102). Legal graffiti was also included in this criminalisation (Kimvall 2013). In Sweden, the national government increased penalties for graffiti writers in 2004 and gave police the authority to ‘carry out “preventative body searches” even without prior suspicion of committed crime’ (Thörn 2011, 992). Penalties similarly harshened in Oslo, facilitated by the collection of photographic documentation and censoring of every tag made and allowing for exponential accumulation of fines (Oslo City Council

2000). Get caught writing your tag and you could be faced with fines for each tag on record in the robust databases of the authorities. Oslo Sporveien—one of the city’s public transport operators—has been a major advocate against graffiti and active in collecting data on graffiti and involved in prosecuting graffiti writers (Høigård 2007). Though 96.2% of the thousands of cases against graffiti writers in Oslo were dismissed, those that went ahead received ‘harsh punishments, unconditional prison sentences and large compensation orders’ (Høigård 2011, 313). The most notable example of this is the case of the Oslo graffiti writer who in 1996, at the age of 18, received a prison sentence of one year and an exorbitant fine of 225,000 Norwegian kroner, a punishment deemed barbaric by Høigård (Korsvold 2002).

Policy regimes on graffiti have fluctuated since graffiti first arrived in Norway in the mid-1980s. Oslo’s war on graffiti was most intense between the years 2000 and 2007 though the height of zero tolerance was preceded by an intense political and media discourse which laid the foundations for strict zero tolerance. This discourse portrayed graffiti as a problem that needed to be solved and eradicated from the urban landscape. It is Rune Gerhardsen, head of the City Government of Oslo from 1992 to 1997, who is maligned for moulding public opinion of graffiti in the city (Aamodt 2005a, 2005b; Case 2005; Høigård 2005). Gerhardsen spearheaded the *Taggerhue* campaign, which was visible in print media, in public space on subways and trams, and in trailers shown in the cinema. The *Taggerhue* campaign is considered one of the extreme tactics of the zero tolerance regime—though it precedes the official adoption of zero tolerance as policy—and is a particular standout from this period of graffiti politics. The term ‘taggerhue’ translates literally as ‘tag head’, a manufactured and derogatory term implying that those who perpetuate graffiti are senseless. The campaign featured the image of a young

man who in the place of a brain had an empty space that rattled when shaken; making a sound similar to that of the small ball bearing that bounces inside the interior of an aerosol can to mix the paint. This was part of the *Stopp Tagging* campaign, which also involved sending fake fines home with 8th grade students (Gerhardsen 2005) as a scare tactic and way to educate youth and parents on the financial repercussions of illegal graffiti. The impact of such campaigns on the public imagination should not be underestimated. Such imagery reinforces misinformed ideas on the philosophies and practices of graffiti as forms of creative expression as well as perpetuates the myth of the young, male vandal. Barthes wrote of the death of the author in 1967 and, in essence, public campaigns of this nature result in a symbolic death of the graffiti author as politicians rewrite and create their own versions of the practitioners of graffiti: young, male, criminal, aggressive, even violent. The ‘myth of the male vandal’ has benefited politicians, particularly in contexts of strict policies against graffiti in which portraying writers as aggressive and male has facilitated public support for wars on graffiti; wars which are both costly but profitable (Iveson 2010; Kramer 2012). They also effectively write women out of the picture, and graffiti and to some extent street art, are consequently framed as the pursuit of boys and young men (Macdonald 2001; Pursley 2012; Gélinas 2013; Pabón 2013).

Policy is now shifting in Oslo, reflecting changes in public opinions and acceptance of street art. Street art is increasingly recognised for its cultural and economic value (Mulcahy and Flessas 2016) perhaps having something to do with street art’s marketability, easy commodification, and visually figurative nature which facilitate transition into elite spaces of the gallery and private spaces of the home. Large commissioned works such as murals made by well-known international artists are also attractive for urban renewal and revitalisation projects, as

well as for marketing the city. Oslo has recently developed a *Street Art Action Plan* (Oslo City Council 2016) modelled after Bergen's comprehensive plan on street art from 2011 (Bergen City Council 2011; Grasdal 2015). It is unclear how this ambitious new policy will fare, especially in light of the legacy of zero tolerance. Despite shifting attitudes, disdain for graffiti persists and the city's policies against tagging will remain firmly in place even as the street art plan is implemented (Oslo City Council 2011, 2016). This new action plan is characteristic of creative city policy-making as goals of the policy include positioning Oslo as a street art capital (Oslo City Council 2016), one which would attract tourists and spur economic growth. Interestingly, the plan also strives to establish street art as a legitimate art form. The first point of the ambitious 16-point plan makes this the primary goal of the new policy: '1. Acknowledge street art as a full artistic expression equal with other visual arts' (Oslo City Council 2016). The ways that the municipality intends to do so unfolds in the subsequent 15 points, covering a range of directives including streamlining permitting processes, organising street art festivals, adopting softer attitudes toward intervention on temporary infrastructures such as fences around construction sites, and engaging youth through education and public commissions. It is a strange ambition for a municipality—positioning itself as arbitrator on what is or is not art—though it betrays how the municipality has historically understood practices of urban art (i.e. that it is not art). Though it may not appear so at face value, this genre of policy-making has many ideological commonalities with the zero tolerance approach. Within the heart of both policy strategies lies the aesthetics of neoliberalism, where economic growth and private interests are very much at the core, promoting a certain aesthetic for the city in which the logics of the elite spaces of the gallery are supplanted onto the spaces of the city.

Aesthetics of zero tolerance

Zero tolerance policies against graffiti make strong aesthetic judgements on what is beautiful and what is ugly, what is acceptable and what is not in public space. When used as justification, these types of judgements obfuscate what these policies effectively set out to do: exert power, control public space, and establish a certain aesthetic order in the city. Anti-graffiti policy of this kind rarely achieves its goals despite the discourse it fosters and the implementation of severe penalties. Zero tolerance against graffiti has a number of consequences though the eradication of graffiti is not one of them. The following discussion outlines four potential consequences of strict zero tolerance policy upon the aesthetics of the city. These findings emerged from fieldwork conducted in Oslo between 2013 and 2017 and offer a snapshot of how policy may affect urban aesthetics of the city in unforeseen ways. Though there are undoubtedly diverse consequences, aesthetic and otherwise, which may vary depending on local context, this discussion is limited to four which have become clear in examining the Oslo case. One of the most blatant findings is that zero tolerance does not eliminate graffiti from the urban landscape. As can be seen in [Figure 1](#), graffiti is an ever-present aesthetic throughout the city. While there are spatial variations in its concentrations, graffiti is far from eradicated. The following sections use photographs³ from fieldwork to describe the more specific and nuanced findings from this study.

Aesthetic tensions

Sharing the same physical space on the exposed brick wall of a building in the Oslo neighbourhood of Bislett are two conflicting images (see [Figure 2](#)). In the upper right, two large advertisements for Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) are mounted, framed, and presented much like pieces of art in frames by JCDecaux. In the lower left, tags by



Figure 1 Zero tolerance policy does not rid the city of graffiti (2014)



Figure 2 Aesthetic tensions between outdoor advertising and graffiti (2015)

graffiti writers Skog, Vik, and Xo are spray-painted above the roof of a small garage. Although both sets of images are in some sense forms of promotion, the advertising occupies a legitimate and legal space while the graffiti occupies a contested and illegal space. Advertisers pay for images to be prominently displayed, building owners and advertising agencies earn profit, while the graffiti writer neither pays for permission nor generates income. In fact, the graffiti writer may incur high penalties if caught.

The presence of these two conflicting images create an 'aesthetic tension'. These symbolic tensions arise when outdoor advertising is given permission and precedence in the city while graffiti, originating from impulses for creative expression and occupying the same spaces, are heavily controlled. In other words, the advertising is 'in place' while the graffiti is 'out of place' (Cresswell 1996), creating a visual tension. These tensions hint at the inherent complexities of the visual urban landscape and its policing. Scholars working on issues around graffiti often turn their attention toward outdoor advertising (and vice versa) at some point for this very reason (see Cresswell 1998; Iveson 2012). These two aesthetics are compelling to write about together simply for the fact that they are both present and prevalent in so many cities, that they share similar goals of ubiquity and visibility, both imparting signs upon the city and sharing many of the same spaces. That they arise from such distinct practices and ideologies makes them even more interesting to discuss in tandem. Despite their distinctions, the prevalence of one aesthetic (advertising) with the attempted suppression of another (graffiti) arise from a similar root cause: an increased neoliberalising of urban space.

Though such tensions likely always exist in urban space, they are potentially heightened in a context of zero tolerance. While advertising and graffiti frequently share the same space, they share very different rights to be there and originate from divergent points of power. Focusing graffiti debates on ideas of

beauty and ugliness, as policy-makers have tended to do, detracts from the greater context of policing and control of public space. Advertising in the urban landscape, after all, could very easily be described as possessing negative aesthetic attributes in terms of content and preponderance, not to mention their more detrimental ideological functions that reflect and produce social meaning (Blloshmi 2013). Outdoor advertising is not in every space, but it is in everyday space, found in prime corridors of movement; strategically placed, prominent, and highly visible. In some respects, outdoor advertising borrows many techniques from the practice of graffiti. One of the goals of graffiti writing is 'getting up', to be visible throughout the city in many places, repeating and writing your tag. This idea of 'getting up' (Castleman 1984, 20) is also present in the strategies of outdoor advertising. During advertising campaigns, the same image may be found throughout the city in many spaces and in some cases repeated immediately adjacent to each other. Advertisements—because they originate from positions of power and money (Cresswell 1998)—have distinct aesthetic advantages over graffiti in the city. Advertisements are generally far larger, more highly visible, more complex and colourful, and many come with their own source of light. They are far more aesthetically dominant, an effect which may be more extreme at night. Differences of scale between advertising and graffiti are also common, with advertising habitually larger in comparison to graffiti. The dominance of advertising structures is evident in Figure 3, where billboards advertising forthcoming apartments have been installed directly over a graffiti mural. This aesthetic supposition can easily be read as a display of power and supremacy, suggesting that the advertisement is more important and more valuable than the mural that it is obscuring. The advertisement spaces were quickly augmented by tags, text, and stickers; and these small transgressions can be understood as challenging this supremacy.



Figure 3 Advertising for new residences installed over a graffiti mural, subsequently edited with stickers and graffiti (2015)

Zero tolerance may unwittingly create aesthetic tensions in the city, which reify an aesthetic hegemony in urban space that privileges corporate images of advertising over creative and political expression. Another example of this can be seen in [Figure 4](#). The sexualised content of the advertisement is also revelatory over the types of images that are tolerated in public space. Others note the contradiction between allowing for advertising and disallowing for graffiti and street art in Oslo. *SplitCity Magazine*, an online Norwegian underground art magazine, poses the following question: ‘How can it be expected that one should learn to accept advertising as something rewarding and positive for the community, but that graffiti and street art are perceived as the opposite?’ (*SplitCity 2017*). While graffiti remains strictly regulated, outdoor advertising is only likely to increase in the city as long-term public-private partnerships become more common. A recent agreement between the city of Oslo and Clear Channel,⁴ for example, ends only in 2030 and will result in a dramatic increase of over

700 advertising surfaces in the city. The contract is worth 750 million Norwegian kroner ([Hauger 2018](#)).

Buffed and negated spaces

Graffiti removal, commonly referred to as buffing, entails a variety of methods, all with the intention of erasing the presence of graffiti. Both physical and chemical means are habitually employed to remove graffiti from an array of surfaces. Graffiti removal schemes—which tend to arise in strict policy regimes ([Kimvall 2014](#); [Kramer 2012](#))—enable building owners to pay and subscribe to graffiti removal services provided by private firms in partnership with municipalities. *Stopp Tagging AS* is Oslo’s principal graffiti removal firm, offering services to private, public, and commercial buildings throughout the city. *Stopp Tagging AS* is a privately held company and is the city’s contractor in the campaign to ‘stop graffiti’, removing graffiti within 48 hours. Its work with the city is characteristic



Figure 4 Aesthetic tensions between sexualised outdoor advertising and graffiti (2016)

of public-private partnerships common in the entrepreneurial city (Harvey 1989). Their website offers the service of ‘removal and purification’, noting ‘tagging is removed because it is ugly and unattractive’ (Stopp Tagging AS 2017). The partnership is with the city’s Agency for Urban Environment (Bymiljøetaten) and through a website—Taggefri Fasade—property owners can subscribe to the graffiti removal scheme with subscription costs paid as a fixed monthly fee depending on the length of facades.

Buffed surfaces are rarely returned to their original state and something is often left behind. Ghosted images of tags remain visible from ineffective physical or chemical removal or beneath blocks of rolled on paint, at times still legible beneath muted or mismatched hues. The traces of these attempts at erasure have both political and aesthetic implications. On one hand, these erasures are an enacting of the graffiti politics of the city. The marks left behind serve as a reminder that these expressions are not

wanted and not tolerated, that these expressions or transgressions are out of place. It is a visual signal that graffiti does not belong, that they will be removed, and are evidence of the graffiti removal industries that tend to emerge and thrive under zero tolerance (Kramer 2012; Kimvall 2013). This may be seen as a dialectical process. It is a dialogue or argument, in essence, being carried out visually between authorities and graffiti writers in the spaces of the city. Examples can be seen in Figures 5–7.

There is also an aesthetic implication as something is in fact created. This is addressed in the humorous but politically pointed short avant-garde film *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*, directed by Matt McCormick. The film, based upon the ideas of artist Avalon Kalin, suggests that the remnants left behind in the process of graffiti removal carried out by municipal workers are a type of subconscious art: the municipal workers themselves being frustrated artists. The film suggests that the marks left behind by graffiti



Figure 5 Buffed graffiti, ghosted tag still visible (2017)

removal are a continuation of modern art movements, hinting at aesthetic commonalities between buffed surfaces and the works of modern artists such as Rothko, Rauschenberg, and Malevich. The film proposes three different stylistic forms of graffiti buffs: symmetrical which entails geometric shapes; ghosting which follows the shape and form of the original tag; and radical which does not seem to follow any particular form or pattern (McCormick 2001; Scofield 2002;

Aitch 2004). While the film is tongue-in-cheek, there is definitely substance to these arguments and these stylistic variations of buffing can be observed in many cities where graffiti removal is undertaken. These buffed and negated spaces are a recurring visual presence heightened under zero tolerance. These aesthetic findings are consistent with those in other studies, and Shobe and Banis (2014) describe this relationship between graffiti writers and abaters as symbiotic.



Figure 6 Painted-over graffiti, creating a negated space along a wall (2017)



Figure 7 A selection of buffed graffiti (2017)

Graffiti style and form

Despite the globalisation of graffiti culture, places do develop their own styles of creative expression. Kramer (2015) uses the example of Auckland where, to illustrate this very point, he suggests that graffiti murals are highly site-specific in their references to New Zealand culture. It is possible then for local stylistic or thematic aesthetics to develop. This may be especially so for more representational or figurative pieces that may reference local culture or issues. Local politics may also affect graffiti, in content but also in form. Strict anti-graffiti policy can lead to changes in graffiti form (Iveson 2009). This change in form may be with respect to quality or proficiency of tags, affected by time pressure or lack of places to hone skills. It may also result in the emergence of new techniques. Tags scratched or etched into plastics and glass of windows of public transportation and public infrastructure is one such example (Iveson 2009).

The phenomenon of ‘trashy tagging’ and the development of an Oslo graffiti aesthetic is anecdotally reputed to have developed in response to zero tolerance. Though this style of graffiti writing is representative of

only a few graffiti writers in Oslo, its practice suggests an artistic, stylistic, and political response to a history of harsh graffiti politics in the city. By making tags that are ‘messy’ and difficult to interpret, this ‘trashiness’ may be a deliberately transgressive response to how the municipality together with private firms expeditiously cleanse the city. The phenomenon of trashy tagging is somewhat tenuous and requires some careful consideration as there is scant writing on the practice and its links to zero tolerance. What distinguishes trashy tagging from other forms of tagging is that it purposely strives to be illegible (though it still entails an aesthetic balance). In Oslo, the most notable examples include tags by Skog and Fuckers (see Figures 8–10). These are not the carefully stylised letters characteristic of wild style graffiti writing and such forms break free of stylistic graffiti convention.

The terms ‘tag’, ‘tagging’, ‘tagger’ have negative connotations in Norway and they are considered to be political and media constructions, terms ‘coined by the media’ (Olsen 2013). Norwegian art historian Jo Brochmann, in his book on the practices of tagging, characterises much of Oslo’s tags as ‘trashy’, arguing that this style dominates



Figure 8 Example of 'trashy tagging', featuring various writers (2016)



Figure 9 Graffiti by Piv, Skog (2015)

the city's graffiti landscape. He suggests that 'trashy graffiti policy' leads to 'trashy graffiti' (Brochmann 2014). Brochmann refers to

trashy tagging as something provocative, likening the rough aesthetic to punk and DIY culture, and writing that that the



Figure 10 Contrasting graffiti styles (2017)

letters do not look ‘good’ (Eikås 2014). Some of his descriptions are possibly overly interpretative and more in line with art criticism. It seems unlikely that graffiti writers are, for

example, making conscious considerations on classic postmodernism. While the forms and expressions of graffiti in public space are certainly open to interpretation,



Figure 11 Photographing a 1945 photograph of the Norwegian royal family, ripped from a magazine and taped on a window (2014)

Brochmann suggests that trashy tagging elicits an emotional response related to the violation of property rights and claims that this emotional elicitation is not unlike other forms of contemporary art and sees this provocation as something important (Eikås 2014). The link between ‘bad policy’ and ‘bad graffiti’ is better attributed to Norwegian criminologist Cecilie Høigård, who suggested in her rigorous study that harshening graffiti policy had tangible effects on the quality of graffiti (Høigård 2007). Rather than this being solely a consequence of not being able to practice skills, however, this may also be a deliberately transgressive artistic and aesthetic choice.

Scales of street art

While zero tolerance originally set out to control graffiti, the practices of illegal street art are also affected. It is a lot of walking—over 250 kilometres to date in Norway—to come to a conclusion as seemingly pedantic as: some things are bigger than other things. Yet when it comes to the expressions of

street art, it seems that zero tolerance might indeed have some influence on scale. This is not only with respect to physical size of works but also to the level of renown of artists and the scale of local subcultural scenes. Street art scenes—which municipalities have more recently begun to recognise as lucrative and attractive forces for creative urban branding—may fail to develop in such policy climates. Oslo is not a city known for street art nor for producing street artists. Though one could attribute this simply to an issue of population given that Oslo is a small city, Bergen is even smaller and is home to an impressive number and calibre of urban artists. The most well-known of Norwegian street artists seem to have had their beginnings in Bergen, rumoured as a consequence of Banksy once visiting the city in 2000 and inspiring a generation of highly-skilled stencil artists like DOLK and PØBEL (Hundevadt, Madsen, and Eiklid 2013). Bergen has been comparatively more responsive to graffiti and street art trends, evident in the city’s comprehensive municipal plan on graffiti and street art implemented in 2011 (Grasdal 2015).



Figure 12 Eye-bombing: stickers of hand-drawn eyes strategically placed on a section of downspout (2014)

Because of high penalties and risk, time pressure exists equally for street artists as it does for graffiti writers, meaning that smaller and more ephemeral works are likely favoured for pragmatic and not only artistic reasons. This is evident by the works that are present—small and made *a priori* rather than *in situ*—but also by types of works that are notably absent. There is not, for example, a proliferation of large wheat-pastes or stencil works in Oslo as might be seen in other cities of comparable size. While illegal or uncommissioned street art exists in Oslo, works are typically small and especially ephemeral. These small works primarily include stickers and small sculptures. There is someone who rips out pages of magazines and tapes them up with small squares of tape; mounted frequently on windows and smooth surfaces to which

tape will adhere (Figure 11). There are a number of ‘eye bombers’; those who place eyes in various places in the city creating humorous and very site-specific interventions (Figure 12). There are small plaster seahorses, hand-painted different colours, which can be found all over the city upon electrical boxes and in doorways, their plaster forms sometimes beheaded (Figure 13). Similarly sculptural, there are the small but pervasive ceramic tiles that bear the text ‘Sign Here’ with an arrow pointing downward, a suggestion for graffiti writers to leave their mark perhaps. They are hand-drawn in marker in graffiti style and are some of the most prominent and widely distributed pieces in Oslo (Figure 14).

The absence of certain art practices is equally notable. Large stencils and



Figure 13 Small hand-painted plaster seahorse in the company of various tags (2014)



Figure 14 Ceramic ‘Sign Here’ tile with obliging graffiti (2017)

wheatpastes are not common in Oslo but when they are present, they have usually been created by visiting international artists, likely made in conjunction with legally commissioned works carried out in the city. Examples include the stencil work of French artist C215 (Figure 15) and the work of Italian artist Alice Pasquini. Shifts in street art policy in Oslo favour grandeur. Municipalities tend to prefer large pieces of urban art, for example murals by well renowned international artists. While new muralism trends may have begun with street artists scaling-up and working legally, it is now common to see studio artists moving their practice into the streets. This is reflective of what Martyn Reed, founder and curator of the Nuart Festival in Stavanger, refers to as ‘post-street art’ (Nuart 2016). Almost exclusively very well-regarded international artists have made the large and impressive murals of Oslo, which are mostly located in the neighbourhoods Gamlebyen, Grønland, and Tøyen (see Figure 16 for an example adjacent to an empty lot where new apartments have since been built). While their work is undeniably impressive and highly skilled, it is large art by large artists. The website for VisitOSLO—the official marketing organisation

for the city of Oslo and a ‘company with shareholders from the city’s travel trade and commerce’—now includes a guide to street art with an interactive map of ‘the best street art and graffiti’ in the city. The map, incidentally, only includes links to large commissioned murals and the few legal graffiti walls of the city (VisitOSLO 2017).

Conclusions

Zero tolerance does not produce urban aesthetics concurrent with the policy’s ambitions. The zero tolerance city is not one without graffiti or other illegal markings. Instead, illegal creative expressions persist, though muted and mutated by policy. Through the aesthetics that persist, we can read the graffiti politics of the city. While the problematics of zero tolerance have been explored by many authors, there has been little study of how such policy affects the aesthetics of the city. In this way, this research contributes something novel to writings on graffiti, street art, and zero tolerance policy, suggesting that policy might have a range of unforeseen aesthetic implications. Through psychogeographic and photographic fieldwork conducted over several



Figure 15 Stencil work by French artist C215 joined by American artist TMNK in a recessed doorway (2014)

years in Oslo, four aesthetic patterns emerged. Firstly, zero tolerance leads to and heightens aesthetic tensions in the city, particularly between graffiti and outdoor advertising. Secondly, buffed and negated spaces become more common in the urban landscape in regimes of strict control against

graffiti. Thirdly, changes in graffiti style and form develop and fourthly, differences in the scale of street art occur. These four qualitative categories make a strong case for how policy can influence urban aesthetics in direct and indirect, though likely unintended ways. Aesthetic tensions emerge



Figure 16 Mural by Polish artists Etam Cru (2014)

symbolically through the allowance of one aesthetic (advertising) and the suppression of another (graffiti). Though different policy instruments are responsible for the allowance of advertising and the attempted suppression of graffiti, they originate from shared tendencies in urban governance that prioritise a certain aesthetic order of the city while undoubtedly also maximising profit through lucrative public-private partnerships. The traces left behind through graffiti removal also arise through the actions of public-private partnership, with graffiti removal industries that emerge in these policy climates leaving buffed and negated spaces that even in erasure still communicate, subtly but powerfully, the place of graffiti in the city. While these two first findings relate more directly to the political economic aspects of zero tolerance policy, the latter two findings relate to how graffiti writers and street artists express themselves creatively under such regimes. The impact of policy on artistic expression is curious, and this paper suggests that changes in graffiti style and form—specifically the practice of ‘trashy tagging’—seems to occur as an

explicitly transgressive artistic response to ‘bad policy’. Street art is similarly implicated, and the scale of street art works is affected with illegal works being small and ephemeral and legal works favoured by the city being far larger in comparison. Street art subcultures may also fail to self-organise under such policy as risk may be considered too great. Creative expression is also hindered by the ways in which zero tolerance operates temporally, with artists working under greater time pressures and works removed expeditiously. Zero tolerance does not prevent creative illegal expression then, but instead influences the ways in which one can and chooses to create. These four categories are representative of the aesthetic politics of graffiti and street art that may emerge under zero tolerance, and are concurrent with the findings from other research divined by other methods. The aesthetics of zero tolerance are complex and it is unrealistic and perhaps reductionist to suggest that the findings of this research are definitive or necessarily universal. Zero tolerance, after all, is not universal in its implementations. Consequently, the manifestations of such policy are likely

highly site-specific, influenced by the nature of the policy measures instituted, in turn affected by the aesthetic, economic, political, cultural/subcultural, and geographic context and the influence of local actors. More research in diverse cities is needed to better understand the aesthetic implications of policy, not just on graffiti and street art but on other critical urban issues as well. This study is a departure point then, offering other scholars some direction for future research. Although the methodology is not described in depth here (see Arnold 2019), the paper demonstrates the potential for the use of aesthetic practices such as psychogeographic walking and urban photography for developing theory and exploring the aesthetic politics of the city. There are limitations to such an intensive and embodied methodology. It is time consuming, requires ease of mobility, photography skills and experience with visual methods, and is unpredictable. Nevertheless, its inductive nature assists in uncovering unanticipated findings that may go otherwise unexplored. It is also an excellent complement to other more traditional qualitative and quantitative methods.

While this paper helps to understand how urban aesthetics are changed by zero tolerance policy, it is important to also understand how these findings are significant on a more theoretical level. Zero tolerance acts upon what Cresswell (1992, 1996) and McAuliffe (2012) refer to as 'moral geographies', which pass judgment on what is considered appropriate or not in certain spaces. More than merely making aesthetic judgements, zero tolerance attempts to annihilate agonistic spaces, purporting to be responding to an anti-graffiti consensus of the public. Variations of this consensus are echoed in different milieus, especially when individuals describe their often strong disdain for tagging. It is an opinion so widely held that it seems unnatural that so many should agree on this singular point, uncommonly converging on a widely shared aesthetic judgement. Just where does this consensus come from and why is it problematic? Such

agreement is 'at least in part, a creation of city leaders and the agencies they oversee' and 'the tendency among city leaders to create and shape public perception is most evident during the anti-graffiti campaigns that they orchestrate' (Kramer 2012, 301). It is engrained in the mechanisms of zero tolerance policy, built by the city and perpetuated by the media, providing citizens with information on the 'destructive' and 'anti-social' nature of graffiti. The characterisation of graffiti as an aggressive, male, territorial, anti-social, inner-city problem associated with violence, drugs, and other crimes is something largely spurious and constructed. It is important to consider just who profits from zero tolerance policies. Zero tolerance, for example, has been very profitable in Sweden for security companies and graffiti removal industries (Kimvall 2015). Private interests, businesses, real estate owners, and public transportation companies frequently benefit and profit (Kramer 2012). It is these very elite groups whom Thörn (2011) suggests are involved in the making of policy concerned with aesthetics of order.

Zero tolerance takes away not just a right to the city and the right to use and appropriate space but also the very right to question authority and express alternative political views. Can we have policy that instead allows for expression in the city, that makes allowances for transgression, and which tolerates, well, a bit of chaos? Though not referencing graffiti or street art specifically, Mouffe advocates for 'a widening of the field of artistic intervention with artists working in a multiplicity of social spaces outside traditional institutions in order to oppose the program of the total social mobilization of capitalism' (Mouffe 2013, 87). Artists 'have an important role to play in the hegemonic struggle' and 'can help subvert the existing configuration of power' (Mouffe 2013, 104). This has always been the purview of art (Mouffe 2013). It is impossible to have consensus without exclusion (Mouffe 2007). What graffiti and street art may do is in fact destabilise what Pow

(2009) refers to as neoliberal aesthetic hegemony. Transgressions call into question the dominant policing and aesthetic judgements of authorities. When zero tolerance is enforced, an apparent consensus designed by authorities leads to a post-political condition in which any space for meaningful debate diminishes and the fact that other opinions exist on the use of space in the city ignored. Removing spaces for agonism and friction generates this aesthetic hegemony. Public-private partnerships between municipalities and outdoor advertising agencies mean that advertisers have privileged access to spaces of the city. This limits and stifles not just creative but also political expression, inhibiting citizens' abilities and opportunities to express differing political opinions in the spaces of the everyday.

Anti-graffiti policy is not simply an aesthetic issue. In the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, Norwegian rapper Whimsical writes that to 'reduce the debate around tagging to questions of aesthetics is narrow and arrogant' and argues that media do not ask the right questions; that the debate around tagging in Oslo should not be about what is pretty or ugly. Concern should be about how to have an open and democratic city in which a multiplicity of voices are heard and included (Whimsical 2008). Through a variety of measures, zero tolerance robs citizens of their right to the city and of their right to intervene in the everyday. Intervening in the everyday, as the Situationists suggest, is an important means of challenging capitalism (Pinder 2009). A simple revocation of such policies will not likely 'fix' issues of access to urban space. This is because zero tolerance, as some have suggested (Kramer 2012; Kimvall 2015), is more ideology than mere policy. This ideology is finely intertwined with the threads of capitalism, of neoliberal urban governance, of privatism, and in the patriarchal power relations prevalent in both the private and public spheres.

This critical look at zero tolerance against graffiti in Oslo and the aesthetic implications of strict anti-graffiti policy is not about

advocating and endorsing all graffiti and street art. It is not even about legalising such practices. Doing so would merely involve creating a 'mirror image' of current regimes of anti-graffiti policy (Iveson 2010, 28). Iveson's argument that the flipside of zero tolerance is no better is best evidenced by new trends of institutionalised street art and the development of street art policies and plans. Their motivations are similar though their aesthetic outcomes differ. They both result in a homogenising of urban aesthetics, erasing informality and difference in the aesthetics of the city. Rather, it is about allowing for something in between and opening up certain spaces for tolerance seems to be key. Following a discussion with several Oslo graffiti writers, Holen (2013) suggests various measures for softening attitudes, something quite distinct from legalising the practices (Holen 2013). These include opening up certain spaces for legal graffiti including subways, public parking lots, electricity boxes, wooden fencing at construction sites, and other elements of public infrastructure. Instead of zero tolerance, Young (2010) suggests a form of 'negotiated tolerance' in Melbourne, a zonal approach that would prohibit graffiti and street art in some areas of the city but allow for it in others. Shobe and Banis (2014, 604) similarly advocate against zero tolerance and recommend policy that is more 'place-attentive', better taking into consideration local concerns.

Striking balance between order and disorder can be difficult as 'some friction is central to genuine democracy, whereas too little or too much is not' (Byerley and Bylund 2012). It is about striving to find space in between 'good and bad' (Bylund and Byerley 2014, 140). Indeed, 'in our post-democracies where a post-political consensus is being celebrated as a great advance for democracy, critical artistic practices can disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character' (Mouffe 2007, 13). The aesthetic significations of

graffiti and street art still need challenging in the public eye. A careful and considered re-writing of what graffiti and street art aesthetically signify is paramount to developing informed and meaningful urban policy. We need to continue to re-write the signifiers, to invigorate the public imagination. Graffiti and street art need not be read as unwanted and ugly, but may be read more importantly as agonistic visual representations that affirm and assert democracy in the city.

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Notes

- 1 Any translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.
- 2 'Broken Telephone' is a children's game that begins with one player whispering a message to the person next to them. Sitting in a circle, the message is passed on in whispers until the last person receives the message and announces it aloud to the group. Each time the message is passed on, it changes slightly until by the end it is generally unrecognisable.
- 3 All photographs have been taken by the author in Oslo between 2013 and 2017.
- 4 Clear Channel and JCDecaux have been competing for such lucrative contracts in Oslo. Clear Channel currently has a monopoly on advertising in the city, with agreements in place with Oslo Sporveien: one

of the city's main public transportation operators. According to Hauger (2018) outdoor advertising growth was nearly 25% in 2017 (Hauger 2018).

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