

Public Art Dialogue

ISSN: 2150-2552 (Print) 2150-2560 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpad20

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**To cite this article:** Andrea L. Baldini (2026) Ontological Metamorphoses in the Street: How Street and Official Public Art can Metaphysically Transform into Each Other, Public Art Dialogue, 16:2, 225-244, DOI: 10.1080/21502552.2026.2694017

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2026.2694017

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Published online: 25 Aug 2026.

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*Public Art Dialogue*, 2026
Vol. 16, No. 2, 225–244, https://doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2026.2694017

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# ONTOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSES IN THE STREET: HOW STREET AND OFFICIAL PUBLIC ART CAN METAPHYSICALLY TRANSFORM INTO EACH OTHER

***Andrea L. Baldini***

Beginning with the recognition that street art and official public art are genuinely distinct, opposing art kinds—the former constitutively driven by social subversion and the latter by programmatic civic integration—this article challenges a widely held, implicit premise among public art theorists: that an artwork's categorization within this taxonomy is permanently fixed at the time of production. By examining the trajectories of prominent public artworks, including the heritagization of Banksy's *Migrant Child* and the popular recoding of Visbal's *Fearless Girl*, I argue that shifts in public attitudes and tracking practices toward a work cannot be dismissed as mere interpretative variance. Instead, they represent genuine ontological metamorphoses. Drawing on Ásta's conferralist framework of social ontology, I show that street art and official public art are conferred social categories whose assignment is contingent on the context-bound tracking practices of evaluating publics. Finally, rather than treating public friction as an administrative nuisance, I investigate the emancipatory potential of this ontology in the context of cultural policy and urban governance. I introduce the concept of *ontological superposition* to theorize structural deadlocks in which an artwork is concurrently sustained in conflicting categories by competing publics. Consequently, this model deprives top-down institutional mandates of their perceived "natural" authority and returns aesthetic determination—in a Rancièrian sense—to the city's inhabitants.

Keywords: Street art; public art; social ontology; ontology of art; artistic intention; cultural policy

## *INTRODUCTION*

In contemporary art theory, street art and official public art are widely acknowledged as two different, opposing kinds of art. The dominant scholarly

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consensus describes the former as constitutively subversive and characterized by an unsanctioned, ephemeral nature, whereas the latter is thought to function through programmatic civic integration supported by institutional authority and engineered for permanence. However, the real-world trajectories of two of New York City's most prominent public artworks effectively shatter a widely held, often implicit, premise in this literature: the idea that an artwork's classification within this taxonomy is fixed at the time of production.

In 1989, Arturo Di Modica surreptitiously installed *Charging Bull* outside the New York Stock Exchange without authorization. Although an illicit intrusion into public space, the work was soon embraced by the city and came to stand as a symbol of Wall Street itself—an unauthorized gesture transformed into a paradigmatic instance of official public art. By contrast, Kristen Visbal's *Fearless Girl* was commissioned by State Street Global Advisors and installed in 2017 with official approval. Despite its official status, the statue was received as a defiant intervention: placed overnight in front of *Charging Bull*, it was widely read as a challenge to Wall Street's patriarchal culture and celebrated for its rebellious stance, acquiring the functional aura of street art.

By revealing that how we respond to works in public space may fundamentally change across time, these cases invite a more radical question: Are we dealing merely with shifts in interpretation, or do artworks themselves undergo ontological transformations—passing from street to official public art, or vice versa? In this article, I argue for the latter view. I show how such metamorphoses are possible and suggest that recognizing them has consequences not only for appreciation and understanding, but also for cultural policy.

To be clear, my objective is not to dissolve the structural boundaries between street art and official public art, nor to invalidate existing taxonomies. Rather, I demonstrate that these categories can be preserved without treating them as permanent, unchangeable essences fixed at the moment of a work's production. Grounded in contemporary social ontology, I maintain that street art and official public art are conferred social categories, whose existence and membership depend on the context-bound attitudes of evaluating subjects.

Drawing on Ásta's conferralist framework, as we shall see, an object counts as street art in a given context only when evaluating subjects confer on it the status of a *subversive deed*.[1] Consequently, iconic works like *Charging Bull* or *Fearless Girl* can genuinely acquire or lose that function over time based on how they are tracked and responded to. Such shifts in collective uptake do not represent a mere interpretive variation, but a radical ontological metamorphosis of the artwork itself.

A first methodological note is required regarding my examples. While the analytic tradition in which I was trained generally relies on abstract thought experiments to isolate variables, such cases often fail to capture the complex,

real-world dynamics of urban spatial politics. To demonstrate the efficacy of my view, actual examples are far more apt. However, specimens discussed here are intended as illustrative paradigm cases and are not meant to do philosophical heavy lifting. Whether my analyses of these specific examples are contingently wrong is therefore irrelevant to the soundness of my argument. Furthermore, because street and official public art reception are rarely documented in traditional archives and play out on social media, I often rely on online ethnography.[2]

A second methodological specification concerns the nature and scope of this inquiry. This text operates at the intersection of aesthetics, social ontology, and critical theory. I am providing a descriptive framework whose utility is ultimately determined by its real-world application scenarios. What drives my work is not simply conceptual clarity, but the development of theoretical tools that allow us to uncover urban spatial dynamics. I see oppressive trends that many have pointed out as threatening not only public space, but social life: the co-optation and institutional kidnapping of spontaneous creativity,[3] the commercialization of culture and the erosion of public discourse,[4] and the increasing limitation of people's right to the city.[5] Understanding the ontology of artworks in public, I believe, is a necessary precondition for change.

The second section discusses how recent scholarship suggests treating official public art and street art as separate but related subcategories of the broader genus public art. The third section discusses case studies in which the public reception of street artworks changes over time, focusing on the conceptual difficulties that emerge where street artworks function as official public art. To handle these difficulties, the fourth section offers the article's central ontological conferralist paradigm, arguing that these changes are real metamorphoses in an artwork's category. The fifth section broadens the analysis by examining official public art that becomes street art through social recoding. The sixth section applies this approach to cultural policy, introducing the idea of superposition to explain how diverse groups might vehemently debate the categorization of public artworks.

## *A TAXONOMY OF PUBLIC ART*

In his seminal work "Beyond the Public Art Machine," Peter Bengtsen addresses an issue that had previously received little attention: whether street art could—or should—be considered a form of public art.[6] Patricia Phillips's famous critique of the "public art machine," the bureaucratic apparatus that governs the production of monuments, memorials, and other works traditionally associated with public art, served as inspiration for his reflection.[7] Dissatisfied with the conformity and mediocrity promoted by current selection

processes, Phillips proposed an "expanded and provocative definition of public art, one [based on] independent 'guerrilla' activity as an alternative to institutionalized commissioning."[8] These projects appear to be capable of generating the type of engagement that distinguishes "truly public art."[9]

Nonetheless, as Bengtsen indicates, Phillips did not regard graffiti as a viable remedy for stagnation in public art. He underscores that she merely alludes to the art of the urban signature, depicting it as a detrimental element that influenced the dominant policies of urban aesthetics based on authoritarian notions of decorum.[10] This appears to contradict Phillips's advocacy for guerrilla activity as a provocative form of public art. In effect, she exclusively referenced authorized projects, such as Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler's *Half Slave, Half Free* (1987), to exemplify the trend she was advocating in her article.

In response, Bengtsen argues that spontaneous, unsanctioned works such as graffiti are ideal candidates for art that can "spark controversy and encourage public debate"—the very hallmark of authentic public art.[11] He promotes a reevaluation of public art theory, endorsing a notion that extensionally encompasses both authorized works and unsanctioned public expressions, including street art and graffiti. These, in effect, "continuously provoke an active public debate and … arguably represent precisely the sort of individual expression and independent thinking that Phillips and other agents within the field of public art theory call for."[12]

The Danish art historian does *not*, however, collapse the distinction between official and spontaneous forms of public art: in effect, he adds, street art is a "*specific type of public art*,"[13] which essentially differs from its institutional—or *official*—counterpart by virtue of being unauthorized: "[A]ny unsanctioned artwork," he writes, "has the potential to pull us out of our routines and increase our awareness of our surroundings."[14] Unexpected intrusions into public space, such as street art, provide opportunities for interaction while also challenging spatial order, if only ephemerally. They pose immediate concerns about who can act in the city, what they can create, and why. These works' unpredictability, reflecting that of the street, adds to their meaning.

In contrast, Bengtsen accurately asserts that official public art is intricately integrated within institutional structures, governed by planning, scheduling, and curation. Unlike street art, which is spontaneous and frequently concealed in plain view, official public art is curated and easily accessible, often encountered through structured and guided experiences. It typically appears in places where it is expected, such as parks or public squares, and is frequently listed in guidebooks or maps.[15] As a result, it is well known to the general public and lacks the element of surprise or discovery that distinguishes street art. This

institutional context shapes the artwork's function, its public perception, and its broader cultural significance.

Other prominent scholars in the field of street art studies have distinguished between street art and official public art. Sondra Bacharach, for example, emphasizes the importance of "aconsensuality" in separating street art from official public art.[16] While the latter is typically created with the approval of authorities and is frequently embedded within institutional frameworks, the former is, by definition, unsanctioned and defiant. Bacharach contends that street art, due to its aconsensual nature, essentially challenges the viewer's perception of public space, urging a reconsideration of its functions. She underscores the constitutive political and activist roles of unsanctioned works in challenging urban space, contrasting them with the more passive engagement offered by official public art.

Ulrich Blanché, for his part, explicitly builds on Bengtsen's distinction, proposing a definition of street art based on its self-authorized nature.[17] Blanché defines street art as a performative, ephemeral space in which artists interact directly with public surfaces without formal consent, as opposed to official public art, which is typically sponsored, funded, and protected by government or institutional bodies: "Official Public Art" he writes, "is commissioned, or it was installed either with the consent of the property owner or retrospectively declared legal by the property owner."[18]

In my own work, I further develop this line of thought by capturing the constitutive feature of street art in terms of subversiveness.[19] I contend that subversiveness refers to how these works have the potential to challenge what Jacques Rancière refers to as the "distribution of the sensible,"[20] that is, social norms governing what can be perceived in the public spaces of a given society. In other words, street art disrupts expectations about the uses and functions of urban localities, calling into question who has the authority to shape its visual and symbolic order. In this sense, subversiveness marks the core value of street art, distinguishing it from official public art and accounting for its distinctive power to unsettle the routines and hierarchies that govern the city's life.

This strand, aligning with Bengtsen's lead, argues that street art is defined by its structural independence from institutional frameworks. This, in turn, has important implications in terms of value and meaning: because street art is unsanctioned, self-authorized, or subversive, it is capable of generating and fostering radical forms of genuine public engagement that are not engineered by or embedded within preordered and controlled forms of social interaction, as is common with official public art. This perspective, which I also endorse here, is arguably the dominant one today.

At this point, it is helpful to pause and organize systematically the insights gathered thus far. Bengtsen's central claim, that street art should be understood as a distinct type of public art, invites us to acknowledge the existence of a higher-level category of *Public Art* (capitalized to avoid ambiguity). As I elaborated in my taxonomy above, we can characterize Public Art as a category grouping all works of art that constitutively exploit public space to generate a specific kind of dialogical social engagement.[21] Within Public Art, we can distinguish at least two subcategories—or types, kinds, or forms: on the one hand, *official public art*, which consists of artworks that are institutionally commissioned, sanctioned, and frequently embedded within the bureaucratic apparatus of cultural governance, typically valued and promoted for their aesthetic merit, civic beauty, or community relevance; on the other hand, *street art*, which consists of unsanctioned works that subvert public space hierarchies.

This taxonomy provides a solid conceptual framework for distinguishing street art from official public art while recognizing their common ground as forms of Public Art. However, these categories are not statically isolated; their boundaries are diachronically fluid. In practice, individual works transition between categories as evolving legal, spatial, and institutional contexts reshape how those pieces are socially judged and functionally defined. In the next section, I begin by looking at works of street art that arguably have transformed into official public art. My broader claim is that such changes cannot be accounted for as mere interpretative/epistemic shifts. As I will argue in the fourth section, they demand a stronger ontological explanation.

## *WHEN STREET BECOMES OFFICIAL*

In her work, Bacharach highlights an interesting phenomenon concerning the perceived status of some works of street art. She correctly points out that some street art superstars, such as Banksy or Blu, are unable to create aconsensual art due to their fame, arguing, "Even if such works were made aconsensually, it is highly likely that, *had* the owners known that their property were to be the canvas for a work of street art by certain well-regarded street artists, then the property owners *would* have consented."[22]

Bacharach clarifies a further layer of this phenomenon: not only does the fame of certain artists affect how we look at their new works, but it may also change how we look at their previous ones: Consent for some pieces may arrive *post-festum*.[23] Governments or institutions may retroactively authorize unsanctioned works—for example, by negotiating with property owners to preserve them—so that pieces created without approval are now protected. This is precisely the trajectory of works such as Di Modica's *Charging Bull*; Banksy's

*Migrant Child*, in Venice, Italy; and *We Overfeed Our Heroes Until They Explode* in Lund, Sweden.

In effect, after being removed "for obstructing traffic without a permit,"[24] Modica's *Charging Bull* was awarded a temporary permit due to public outcry. Banksy's *Migrant Child*, which was painted without permission on the outer walls of a palace in Venice in 2019 as a protest against Italian immigration policies, quickly became a tourist attraction: in May 2026, it had become a spectacle at the Venice Biennale, parading throughout the waterways of Venice before being reattached by Zaha Hadid Architects to the façade of the palace, which is now the property of Ifis Bank.[25] As Bengtsen argues in a recent essay, *We Overfeed Our Heroes Until They Explode* has also undergone a categorial shift: the first iteration of the work, created in 1984 by John Fekner and Don Leicht, consisted of an unsanctioned stencil and spray-paint text on a metal door at Lund City Hall in Lund, Sweden. Forty years later, from 2022 to 2024, Fekner revisited the project with Brad Downey, creating a permanent metal relief version on the same location—this time officially commissioned.[26]

However, Bacharach maintains that such shifts do not necessitate a fundamental transformation of the artwork's category. Her reasons are threefold. First, the artist's intention is decisive: if a work was created as street art, it remains so regardless of subsequent authorization. Second, classifying it as official public art prevents us from recognizing key characteristics of street art, such as its susceptibility to alteration, damage, or destruction, and the importance of its endurance—which is expected for works in official public art—as evidence of tacit community acceptance.[27] Third, treating it as official public art obscures its constitutive ephemerality: street art is created with the expectation that it will evolve, deteriorate, or vanish, and this transience is central to its meaning.[28] According to Bacharach, retroactive consent changes how works are treated but not what they are: they remain street art, even if misidentified as official public art.[29]

Let me address each of her points in turn, offering counterarguments. First, let us discuss intentions. Unfortunately, aestheticians in the analytic tradition like Bacharach frequently use intentions as a panacea or silver bullet when confronted with contentious artistic issues. Although this may be a useful move in some cases, I do not believe it can be decisive here.[30] One way to express my objection in a motto is as follows: Whose and which intentions? Artists have multiple, often contradictory intentions, which may very well change over time. More importantly, relying solely on them to define categories would render theorizing unnecessary. Bacharach's theory, like any other compelling theory, allows us to see and understand works in ways that go beyond what artists explicitly claim.

Many of the figures she portrays as prototypical "street artists," just like Banksy and Os Gemeos, it should be noted, actually refer to themselves as graffiti writers—which need not be synonymous.[31] Others, such as Alicè, do not

see an essential discontinuity between sanctioned and unsanctioned works.[32] Di Modica did not consider *Charging Bull* to be street art, despite the fact that it was aconsensual and defiant, and Zhang Dali, arguably China's first street artist, sees his production as contemporary art rather than street art.[33] Some street artists even wish for their work to be restored and preserved.[34]

Upon examining the preceding statements, it becomes evident that Bacharach is ensnared in a double bind. The first horn contends that if we must accept different intentions to solve classificatory problems, her theory is fundamentally flawed. The second claims that if we only accept the intentions of those who agree with her theory, then her reasoning is circular. Both options are undesirable and demonstrate the impossibility of treating intentions as decisive in this specific case.

Regarding her second and third points—those concerning street art's exposure to alteration and its ephemerality in contrast with official public art—I contend that, in both cases, Bacharach is ultimately making a normative claim: that we *should not* treat street art as official public art. Fine—but empirically, this is what actually happens. We witness radical shifts in how works are treated: they are erased, canonized, or turned into spectacle. Think of *Charging Bull*, where the artist had institutionalization in mind, or *Fearless Girl*, originally a corporate statement.

The challenge is not to dismiss these changes in attitudes and treatments by appealing to some idealized conditions, but to theorize about and describe them. What happens to works that receive *post-festum* consent or at some point are judged as subversive interventions demands an account that does justice to these facts. Whether these transformations are ethically or politically problematic is a separate question; as I argue in the sixth section, that—once again—cannot be determined in the abstract, but is rather contextually assessed by involved subjects.

My central point here is that these shifts in legal, spatial, or institutional status can engender a radical change in how an artwork is socially judged and functionally defined. When a piece of street art like Banksy's *Migrant Child* is legally protected or enclosed, it may very well (although not necessarily) cease to exist as a subversive deed because institutional intervention reconfigures the properties to which the public responds. In the next section, I look at how these changes are ontological.

## *SOCIAL ONTOLOGY AND SHIFTING IDENTITIES*

To counter the criticisms outlined in the previous section, Bacharach or another opponent may resort to some form of perennialism: the argument that an artwork's properties are fixed entirely at the moment of creation, implying that subsequent evaluative shifts are merely contingent matters of reception

that do not track genuine ontological change. On this view, which is dominant in art studies circles, claiming that Banksy's *Migrant Child* or Di Modica's *Charging Bull* have actually transformed into official public art, is simply a categorial mistake or a loose *façon de parler*.

To address this concern, however, we must precisely identify what ontological kind a work of street art actually is. Recently, Andrea Borghini and I have argued that commonsensical object-centered ontologies reducing street art to its tangible outcomes, or *what is done* (e.g., a mural or a stencil), fail to capture the complexity of the practice's modes of appreciation.[35] Borrowing Clark's classic framework, we introduce three ontological dimensions of works of street art rooted in agency: the physical object (*the done*), the performative act of creation (*the doing*), and the subversive achievement itself (*the deed*).[36] Each of these aspects sustains a different appreciative practice.

In our view, the deed is—or should be—the primary focus of appreciation. This subcultural mode of appreciation, shared by many practitioners, audiences, and curators (such as Angelo Milano's defunct Fame Festival and Martyn Reed's recent reorientation of Nuart[37]), prioritizes interventions that challenge dominant hierarchies of visibility and authority in urban space. Street art interventions are therefore interpreted within this framework as counterhegemonic deeds that actively subvert authorized space, rather than as surface decorations or cultural assets. In contrast, official public art does not exhibit this teleonormative impulse to reclaim visual territory and reconfigure urban visibility in opposition to corporate or state control.

The institutional kidnapping of *The Migrant Child* is a striking case in point for the stakes of our different ontological categories. We argue that if the value of the art lies just in the physical thing (*the done*), then Banksy's choice to take on considerable legal risk rather than work safely in a studio would appear nonsensical. In contrast, if the emphasis of appreciation were solely on performance (*the doing*), subsequent corporate appropriation would be insignificant. The current controversies about its heritagization and musealization give an abductively essential insight: the work was fundamentally meant to be appreciated as an attempted *deed*, and its capitalist absorption is the corporate-induced inability to remain so.

This understanding of street art as a deed is consistent with the major explanations in the literature reviewed above, including that of Bacharach. As she puts it, the "activist spirit" that wants to confront "both authorities and the mainstream status quo" is a constitutive feature of the practice, and this kind of teleonormative orientation makes these urban works "defiant and subversive."[38] What sets this type of urban art apart from other types of creative expression, including official public art, she says, is that street art functions as "an intervention to change the way the world is."[39]

The question now becomes what it means exactly for a work of street art to operate as a *deed*. Crucially, a work's capacity to change the status quo cannot be determined solely by the localized mechanics of its production—just as I cannot unilaterally decide that the soup I cooked is a true *ribollita*.[40] As mentioned, Bacharach somewhat recognizes this limitation when discussing street art superstars, whose works are immediately perceived by residents and property owners as valuable cultural assets (*the done*) rather than subversive interventions. Subversiveness is in effect rather a socially ascribed function—one that is fundamentally responsive to, and evaluated against, shifting social norms regarding the authorized use of public space.[41]

Bengtsen clearly recognizes this point, contending that the subversiveness of street art is fundamentally response-dependent—a "perceived status" conferred through individual or collective assessment rather than some form of legal or other kind of fact determined at production. Most viewers cannot tell whether a piece was authorized; what matters is that it appears spontaneous, defiant, or subversive in its urban context. It is precisely because of this perceived status that street art interventions "question the order of public space."[42]

Ásta's conferralist framework of social ontology can accurately explain Bengtsen's response-dependent "perceived status." She conceptualizes social categories as "conferred properties" arising from certain responses.[43] According to her, a social property is not an intrinsic feature fixed onto an entity at its creation; rather, it is ascribed to a particular as a result of a group's stable dispositions to respond to that particular in specific ways within given contexts.[44]

The application of the conferralist model to street art produces two key insights that are fundamentally at odds with object-centered accounts of the practice. First, it shows that the subversiveness of a work does not simply result from physical or historical facts established at production. For Ásta, a social property is grounded in local judgments of physical facts, and these judgments give rise to new social realities. In our terms, recognizing subversiveness does not mean pointing to fixed material properties (the done) or the legal status of the generative performance (the doing). Rather, for a work to be a subversive deed is contingent on a context-dependent judgment about those facts. The material object or the performance alone cannot determine the conferral: it depends on some attitudes of interested subjects.

Second, Ásta's framework is radically context dependent. She contends that conferring a social property depends on tracking certain base or grounding properties.[45] Importantly, characteristics like being unauthorized or spontaneous serve as the grounding properties for the conferral of subversiveness, but they are not necessary nor sufficient. Similarly, exhibiting certain sexual

traits may normally ground the social conferral of a specific gender in certain scenarios, but possessing such attributes is not a necessary or sufficient condition in all situations.

The case of a street art superstar like Banksy well exemplifies context dependence. Even when a piece is unauthorized—a property that would usually ground a status of subversive deed—the artist's significant institutional and market fame might supersede that fact in the categorial conferral. The public and property owner(s) may perceive the intervention not as a rebellious act of territorial reclamation (the deed), but rather as the appreciated emergence of a valuable cultural asset (the done). As Bacharach also concedes, Banksy's celebrity can completely negate the subversive potential of the rebellious act.

The identity of a work of street art as subversive deed, therefore, is never ontologically fixed at production; it is an ongoing, context-bound social status that must be granted and negotiated through the fluctuating dynamics of public space. On his side, Di Modica's persona, his claims about his motives, the content and nature of the work, as well as its place of installation, all acted as base properties for subsequent denial of the status of subversive deed to his *Bull*, in spite of being unauthorized.

The story of *We Overfeed Our Heroes Until They Explode* is useful to comprehend the possibility of diachronic ontological transformation. Its change in legal standing, among of course many other facts, plausibly functioned as a base property to review its categorial nature, and to decide a fresh conferral of the social property of being a work of official public art. Now, here the point is subtle but vital. The change in legal nature is *not* in my view what caused the ontological transition: that would be to subscribe to some form of social determinism that does not do justice to the messiness of human life. Such a modification is still significant, and it may have influenced how participants responded to and classified the work.

This scenario therefore indicates that, while social conferral is sometimes a one-time occurrence (e.g., being married), in many other circumstances, it requires being sustained through constant renegotiation. The identity of a food item, for example, is never permanently frozen; what we identify as *Parmigiano Reggiano* today is radically different from what it was a century ago, and goods that were once classified under a single category can dynamically divide or convert into something else entirely.[46]

A work cannot qualify as street art understood as a subversive deed because of a one-time judgment: such a judgment must be sustained across time. When an intervention loses its counterhegemonic capacity, it turns ontologically into a different kind of entity, connected to a different appreciative practice. Embracing this shifting categorization is not a symptom of bad

classification; rather, it is a theoretical requirement if we are to describe our social reality as it is, not as an idealization.

In the following section, I show how the same mechanism can work in reverse, when official public artworks become street art.

## *FROM OFFICIAL TO STREET*

This shifting of categories from street art to official public art is not unidirectional; the same mechanism of social conferral can function in reverse, tracing the times when works of official public art are reevaluated through changing societal norms and understood as subversive deeds. This reevaluation means bestowing on them a new ontological position, that of street art. Importantly, this change underscores a basic characteristic of social ontology: the mere fact that an artifact is designed to belong to a specific category or has institutional recognition does not imply that these characteristics will determine its ontological classification.

Instead, the judging subjects are working inside a certain temporal and spatial context, actively selecting a *sui generis* set of traits as the ground or base for their categorization. The ontology of the work remains contingent on the particular properties the subjects choose to track and privilege, because identical material properties do not entail identical assessments in various situations. Where the aggregate response prioritizes social norm disruption over legal or institutional status, categorization may very well go into an unexpected direction.

This inverse tendency is exemplified by Visbal's *Fearless Girl*. The sculpture, as mentioned, had been commissioned by a big financial institution as part of a corporate campaign and had all the legal, economic, and institutional markers—the typical grounding properties—to expect its classification as official public art.[47] But its popular responses fully decoupled its categorization from these production facts.

Rather than tracking its institutional credentials, judging subjects turned to other features and elements, in particular its symbolic posture in opposition to Di Modica's *Bull*, and considered Visbal's piece as a subversive deed: they arguably assigned to it the status of street art. In a moment of carnivalesque inversion, the crowd's response transformed the corporate statue into an act of resistance, over and beyond the legal facts of the sculpture.

In discussing reactions to the piece, American author M. M. Devoe wrote, "'It's art vs. commerce,' some declared. 'It's women against the moneyed establishment.' 'Youth against age.' 'Girls against predators.'"[48] A simple search on Instagram for the hashtag #fearlessgirl yields thousands of photos of Visbal's

statue with politically charged captions. For instance, user @heerapix writes commenting on a photograph of the statue facing the *Bull*: "Don't fear. Towards to [*sic*] global peace and harmony!"[49] Even Di Modica saw *Fearless Girl* as a confrontational intervention hijacking his work rather than a neutral corporate monument.[50]

When Visbal's statue was later moved in front of the New York Stock Exchange in 2018, the relocation certainly affected its relational properties: no longer did she address the *Bull* directly. But, I want to emphasize, this transfer did not automatically or mechanically lead to a change in the work's category: the ontological shift does not merely depend on a new institutional fact, but on a revised judgment about facts. Without the antagonist, *Fearless Girl* appears to be a corporate message rather than a subversive deed: "[I]t's a quieter statement [representing] the growing role of capital in shaping corporate behavior."[51]

Similarly, Antony Gormley's *Sculpture for Derry Walls* shows that facts about a work's official production do not determine the context-bound judgments of a work's publics. His three cast-iron Janus-like sculptures, in effect, were institutionally designed as part of an authorized public art program to reconcile the multiple Nationalist and Unionist identities of Derry/Londonderry as monuments of peaceful coexistence. Gormley here did not plan to be defiant.

Nevertheless, the artist's intended framework was entirely disregarded by local stakeholders after the installation. Rather, Protestant and Catholic subjects tracked highly specific locational properties. Because of the ambiguity of these properties—the site has negative historical memories for both communities—subjects assessed the sculpture to be a subversive deed: a provocative, unauthorized "intrusion on 'hallowed ground.'"[52] As a result, the work was publicly attacked: youngsters "were throwing stones and sticks and then spitting on the sculpture."[53] Finally, it was set on fire.

In both cases, the legal and institutional status did not decide the category of the artwork: it underwent an ontological turn because the power to select the grounding attributes is in the hands of social dispositions, not institutional mandate. In the following section, I apply this theoretical framework to the material reality of urban governance to show how a conferralist ontology can support inclusive real-world cultural policies.

## *TOWARD AN EMANCIPATORY ONTOLOGY OF PUBLIC ART: CULTURAL POLICY AND ONTOLOGICAL SUPERPOSITION*

As anticipated, what I present here is more than just a descriptive social ontology exercise; it is also emancipatory.[54] It acknowledges that social realities are

constructed by power relations, coercion, and hierarchies, rather than being predetermined. While these social constructs influence human agency and even blind us to our own oppression, they remain fundamentally changeable.

This article directly questions the neglect of cultural institutions in the comparatively new field of emancipatory social ontology. Of course, the exclusionary tendencies of the art world are well established. But I want to focus on another dynamic that derives from cultural policies that regulate public space. Cultural institutions manage oppressively public creative expression. In effect, municipal and institutional actors often enact regulations with little consideration for the citizen's role in decision making.

A first consequence of my perspective at the level of cultural policy is that it identifies the public's responses as constitutive in determining the category of a work. Artistic classification is not a natural or fixed institutional fact. It is a social conferral depending on subjects' responses. This framework strips "natural" authority from oppressive institutions, and shows that dominant categories are essentially contingent, sustained through ongoing practices, and therefore can then be challenged and undone. As Foucault claimed, "[A]s soon as we no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible."[55]

A second key implication of this framework is the ontological significance of public discourse. If we assume that artistic categories are permanently fixed at the time of production, then passionate societal debates over whether a controversial work constitutes official public art or street art—and how it should be treated thereafter, whether through meticulous material preservation or by being left to fade as an ephemeral mark—would boil down to a simple assessment of prior historical facts. In such an idealized paradigm, one side of the debate would be factually correct and the other wrong.

In contrast, the emancipatory social ontology articulated here fully acknowledges the power of popular opinion in actively shaping the urban environment and advocates for the people's right to the city. Under this lens, public discourse and community response play a constitutive role in defining our urban landscape, both symbolically and literally. Rather than dismissing public friction as a bureaucratic error to be corrected, this viewpoint reveals that the public's sustained uptake contributes to an artwork's metaphysics.

The acceptance of ontological conferral, in turn, provides a strong theoretical foundation for developing inclusive cultural policies. Instead of delegating governance to the highly problematic, top-down figure of the "expert" or municipal bureaucrat, this model advocates for bottom-up mechanisms that return aesthetic power—in a Rancièrian sense—to those who should legitimately yield it: the people themselves.

To illustrate these relationships, consider Banksy's *Migrant Child* in Venice. The key issue here is that the fate of a piece of Public Art should never be reduced to a simple scholarly or bureaucratic exercise in determining what the work is or is not. The shared urban sphere does not allow for value-neutral technical decisions about a city's aesthetics or public space management.[56]

For this reason, how Banksy's piece was and is treated, as well as whether it should undergo an ontological transition into official public art, should have been openly debated. Instead, local political and financial elites aggressively appropriated and weaponized the artwork as a marketing ploy, with no public confrontation. The people of Venice were never actively involved in these decisions, which took place purely within top-down institutional circuits, completely bypassing the people who inhabit the space.

A second example demonstrates the importance of my perspective for cultural policies from a different angle. In 2001, street artists Pao and Linda painted a mural on the walls of a playground on Cesariano Street near Sempione Park in Milan. Although technically unauthorized, local residents and their children accepted the vivid murals as official public art, playing a significant role in the community's aesthetic life. In 2015, a group of volunteers—some outsiders, others generationally separated from those protesting the intervention—whitewashed the artwork in the spirit of urban decorum, resulting in a heated debate between local parents and municipal zealots.[57]

This erasure reflects a larger structural violence in urban governance: the continuous denial of residents' right to determine the visual appearances of their own neighborhoods. As Alison Young has strongly stressed in her critique of restrictive zoning rules, communities around the world are increasingly deprived of the right to choose what appears on their walls—whether public community spaces or private property—due to coercive, top-down policies.[58]

This oppressive monopoly, I believe, needs to be challenged. By demonstrating that an artwork's category and function are social conferrals decided by the tracking and uptake of the people who live in the place, my model provides the theoretical foundation for dismantling authoritarian zoning regimes and advocating for more inclusive regulations. The aesthetics of the city are not a natural or technical fact to be engineered by experts or dictated by state mandate; the people's voice should play a constitutive role in molding the urban environment.

The controversy over Pao and Linda's mural, in which public opinion is strongly divided, presents a further theoretical qualifier. What happens when a conferral is actively contested? In these cases, the issue cannot be reduced to a simple matter of administrative fact-checking or epistemological uncertainty. The problem is not a shortage of information; rather, the disagreement is

essentially over which social facts have emerged. The disagreement is about the piece's very ontology.

To make sense of this genuine structural stalemate without limiting social life to idealized harmony, I introduce the concept of *ontological superposition* as a powerful conceptual metaphor. A highly contested Public Artwork exists in a state of metaphysical superposition in the same way that a quantum system exists in numerous states simultaneously until a measurement is taken. This represents a true ontological suspension, which has enormous implications for cultural policy.

In effect, superposition is a useful conceptual tool because typical notions such as "contestation" or "conflict over legitimacy" only explain the political activity of disputing parties, leaving the Public Artwork as a passive, fixed entity. "Epistemic ambiguity," on its part, mistakenly indicates a lack of clarity or data, while "liminality" denotes a mere transitional, halfway point between two established categories. In contrast, superposition represents a genuine impasse in metaphysical terms, in which the Public Artwork is appraised in a plurality of ways by valid and yet competing tracking practices of different publics.

In reality, when a city must decide on concrete courses of action—such as enforcing precise requirements for material preservation, ordering a bureaucratic removal, or resolving copyright disputes where a work's legal status is wholly dependent on its artistic category—we are compelled to make a clear decision. In urban governance, ambiguity is not practically operational. By framing the conflict phase as a superposition rather than a mere misunderstanding, we can ensure that all opposing viewpoints in the public realm are given full, equal ontological attention prior to action. The final institutional judgment then appears not a neutral revelation of what the artwork "always was" but rather a politically charged ontological conferral.

## *CONCLUSION: ONTOLOGY, AGENCY, AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY*

What if public dispositions, attitudes, and judgments of a piece of Public Art drastically change? What if an act of spontaneous urban creativity is heritagized, musealized, and turned into a local cultural asset, no longer functioning as a subversive deed? In this article, I have argued that these questions are not only theoretical conundrums but have a fundamental political relevance that is often overlooked. Traditional approaches that see Public Art classifications as permanently established at creation eventually deny city inhabitants agency, confining debates about urban development and cultural policy to a

professionalized discourse governed solely by art-historical and bureaucratic experts. The outcome is an elitist capture of the visual landscape, a dynamic that alienates urban inhabitants from their city.

A conferralist framework, in contrast, dismantles this top-down imposition. I have argued for a form of emancipatory social ontology whereby the very nature of Public Artworks constitutively depends on the responses and tracking practices of the publics that live them. To be a work of street art or official public art is not an immutable essence fixed in the past, but a conferred social status that must be actively sustained over time. This continuous tracking opens up a space for diachronic metaphysical shifts. If we are to free public spaces from the strictures of oppressive zoning regulations and institutional mandates, that liberation must start with our understanding of social reality itself: the common human gaze has the power not only to create, but also to change and reclaim our common visual world.


## *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

My deepest intellectual debt goes to the late Joseph Margolis and the late Susan Feagin, both of whom, in their own pioneering ways, defended versions of the historicist and ontological views that shaped my early thoughts during my doctoral research, and which I expand on here; I only wish they could have seen this article. I am extremely thankful to Peter Bengtsen for his assistance and suggestions throughout the project, Andrea Borghini for his crucial metaphysical advice, and Pamela Pietrucci for many years of discussions about reception, meaning, and public art. I thank the two anonymous reviewers at *Public Art Dialogue* for their valuable suggestions, which helped me improve the article greatly.


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[12] Bengtsen, "Beyond the Public Art Machine," 67.
[13] Bengtsen, "Beyond the Public Art Machine," 70. Emphasis original.
[14] Bengtsen, "Beyond the Public Art Machine," 76.
[15] Bengtsen, "Beyond the Public Art Machine," 77–8.
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[17] Ulrich Blanché, "Street Art and Related Terms," *Street Art and Urban Creativity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1.
[18] Blanché, "Street Art and Related Terms," 34.
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[22] Bacharach, "Street Art and Consent," 489. The presence of a Banksy on private property can burden owners with unwanted attention, additional graffiti, and restrictive heritage listings that carry negative financial implications. These complications challenge Bacharach's account. My perspective accommodates a more nuanced understanding of street art's rebellious charge, which can persist—or even amplify—within contexts of partial authorization or ambivalent consent. I thank Peter Bengtsen for pointing this out. Emphasis in original.
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[26] Peter Bengtsen, "We Overfeed Our Heroes Until They Explode—A Public Artwork Forty Years in the Making," in *Dates Doors Then & More*, eds. Elin Aspeklev, Peter Bengtsen, and Åsa Nacking (Lunds konsthall, 2024).
[27] Bacharach, "Street Art and Consent," 489.
[28] Bacharach, "Street Art and Consent," 490.
[29] Given the material and contextual differences between the original 1984 stencil painting of *We Overfeed Our Heroes Until They Explode* and its later metal relief, one might wonder if they constitute distinct works. While Bacharach would likely separate them, I follow Bengtsen's view of the piece as a single, unified trajectory spanning forty years. Much like Leonardo's *Last Supper* retains its identity despite its material surface being nearly entirely replaced over time, artworks are complex meaning structures where physical shifts do not strictly break numerical identity. I thank Peter Bengtsen for this insight.
[30] One might take a radical anti-intentionalist stance against Bacharach by claiming that intentions never fix a work's category. However, such a view introduces a highly contentious philosophical burden requiring an argument that, as far as I know, no one has ever produced—and my intuition is that it cannot be done. As a counterexample to radical anti-intentionalism,

consider Tania Bruguera's *Arte de Conducta*, where the work's category constitutively depends on the artist's intentional framing, insofar as she invented the practice itself.

[31] The relationship between graffiti writing and street art remains a contentious and much-debated issue, which I will not address in detail here. For discussions of this topic, see, among others, Blanché, "Street Art and Related Terms"; Baldini, "What Is Street Art?"

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[40] Andrea Borghini, "What Is a Recipe?," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 28, no. 4 (2015): 719–38. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-015-9556-9.

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## *AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS*

CRediT: **Andrea L. Baldini**: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## *DISCLOSURE STATEMENT*

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


## *FUNDING*

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