Introduction to section mixed media and public art

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Abstract

This entry introduces the encyclopedia's section on Mixed Media and Public Art, two broadly defined domains in which questions of conflict and heritage take center stage. It lays out some of the main ways in which conflict, in its various forms, is represented, thematized, triggered, staged, and negotiated in mixed media and public art as well as adjacent forms of cultural expression in which art and activism are often entwined. The entry presents the main themes that the contributions to this section broach and highlights some of the overarching preoccupations that connect these entries despite their wide geopolitical range—from Greece to Pakistan and from Lithuania to Argentina. Mixed media and public art, it is argued, can reinforce conventional approaches to heritage and in some cases even spark discriminatory, exclusionary practices involved in heritigization. But these forms of cultural expression can also open up

new, experimental expressive modalities that push the limits of traditional approaches to heritage geared at conservation, and inspire novel, dynamic approaches, approaches that reckon with marginalized subjects excluded from processes of canonization and elitist views on heritage. They can accomodate the complexities of intersecting contemporary crises (humanitarian, political, environmental) that call for new (at times anthrodecentric) approaches to heritage; move beyond reductive, stereotypical modes of representation; and turn "heritage" into an agonistic arena on which different voices can confront each other, opening up the future to different, alternative scenarios.

Introduction

Conflict and confrontation can take a variety of forms, ranging from peaceful protest to military violence. Differences in scale and form notwithstanding, at the center of any conflict is a demand for change. In this context, mixed media forms of artistic and cultural expression and public art—broadly defined in order to include forms of artistic expression, performance, and creative interventions in public space often combined with protest and

activism—provide arenas on which these demands are voiced and negotiated. The dynamic and performative character of such mixed media and public art interventions, as well as their often ephemeral nature, sets them apart from monuments and memorials in public space: while the latter are usually (semi-)permanent, stable constructions designed to commemorate individuals and events, often with the purpose of canonizing them, the former tend to bring forth multiple, often marginalized, perspectives and worldviews and open a space for debate and contestation of dominant narratives, sometimes also in interaction with well-known heritage sites, monuments, or memorials (see also ▶ Agonistic Spaces and Safe Spaces in Monuments and Public Art for Communities Sharing Trauma and ▶ Introduction to Section Contested Memorials and Commemorations). This negotiation often goes hand in hand with a search for new languages to address new realities produced by conflict as well as envisioned for the future.

Hence, while it might seem that in times of urgencies dictated by conflict there is no time for preoccupations with art or heritage, numerous entries collected in this section demonstrate different ways in which mixed media and public art as forms of heritage come to be employed across different political regimes and contexts. ▶ Borderland Poetics against New Colonialisms: Assam, Kashmir, and Central India, for example, focuses on poetic practices in three different borderland regions in present-day India as means to critique and resist the forces of an ethnonationalist hegemony. Similarly, as the entry ▶ Military Dictatorship in Argentina and the Struggle of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo shows, public artistic interventions are often part of protest movements that effectively oppose oppressive, dictatorial regimes and unveil their (past or present) crimes, making space for alternative histories of the oppressed and the disappeared. ▶ Postsocialist Transitions in Eastern Europe as Contested Heritage, in the meantime, engages with narratives of transition as mediated across museum spaces, film, television, and literature, highlighting their role in identity formation in societies undergoing regime change. Finally, ▶ Neomelodica: Processes of Heritage Making Inspired by Italian Organized Crime offers a

pertinent example in which cultural musical production gives voice and agency to marginalized elites at the same time as it partakes in extra-legal structures. Yet, considering that mixed media and artistic interventions in public space often emerge from or spark public conflict, they often also draw attention to productive forms of conflict or instances where contestation and conflict are necessary ingredients in a democratic agonistic arena for the negotiation of divergent positions and voices (Mouffe 2005) through which alternative, more inclusive futures may emerge.

This introduction gives a brief overview of the different roles mixed media and forms of public art and activism come to play in reconfiguring heritage both at the time of conflict and in its aftermath. The entries collected in this section give detailed analysis of specific case studies across geopolitical contexts from the Global South and North that illuminate the complex intersections of heritage and conflict through forms of cultural expression that often push the limits of conventional approaches to heritage and open up new understandings of it.

Heritage in/as Conflict Through Mixed Media and Public Art

Representation

Media plays a central role in shaping public perception of conflicts, viewed from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Francisco de Goya's series of sketches *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820) can be considered one of the early examples documenting a modern conflict through mixed media representation blending word and image (Chute 2016, 39–68). This role is today most frequently assumed by photography and moving image, often providing a source of instantaneous witnessing when shared through news and social media outlets (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009; Giannakopoulos 2016; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017). For their audiences, mixed media and public art objects can thus function as both sources of information and means of witnessing an event from a distance. In their combined role of representation and documentation (cf. Davies

2020), these objects are often used to call for affective engagement and mobilize public support (see, for example, ▶ Comics and Conflict). In a nutshell, while media give shape to the ways in which we perceive conflict, relegating certain objects to news or artistic domains places very different demands upon them. Where news media are perceived as carrying factual information, artistic practices come in to open spaces, perspectives, and debates, to raise questions and to ask for responses.

The distinction between news media and art is, of course, by no means absolute or reducible to a simplistic opposition between fact and fiction. The factual information that news media convey is integrated in narratives (through text, image, and other media), which are charged with ideological perspectives and subscribe to specific regimes of representation. News narratives, political rhetoric, and even religious narratives often infiltrate each other, especially in our "post truth" era, producing particular understandings of the past, present, and future, often with dangerous ramifications. As shown in the entry ▶ Popular Christian Eschatology and the Imaginaries of Empire in Contemporary Greece, for example, "End of the World" narratives, propagated by charismatic monks and clerics, have infiltrated non-religious media, popular culture, and political rhetoric alike, often feeding ethnonationalist aspirations and even visions of mass destruction.

The difference between news media and art that interests us here, and motivates our particular (though not exclusive) focus on the latter has to do with art's freedom to experiment with forms, perspectives, and discursive configurations that may not only reinforce but at times also muddle dominant modes of representation and envision alternative subject positions and forms of agency, which news media—as a more fixed and strictly regulated discursive nexus—preclude. Popular news media tend to favor clear-cut modes of representation that fit neatly in existing identity categories, positions, and dominant discourses. For example, against the backdrop of the so-called migration crisis that has been unfolding since 2015 in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war, news media have, generally speaking, oscillated between the trope of the "victim" or "threatening agent" for displaced people. In the former trope, which subscribes to a humanitarian regime of representation, displaced people are commonly depicted as passive, agentless victims in need of saving (often by magnanimous Europeans) rather than autonomous, desiring subjects with their own projects and aspirations (Çelik 2015). The trope of the "threatening agent" represents a more aggressive regime of representation that typifies rightwing and populist news media: the pro-Brexit anti-immigration poster depicting a "horde" of migrants "invading" Europe and the United Kingdom, captioned by the words "Breaking Point," is an exemplary visual staging of this trope (Stewart and Mason 2016). As De Genova et al. (2016) argue, these representational tropes can easily slide into each other. The impact of the iconic photograph of dead 2-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi—washed ashore in Turkey in 2015—on turning dominant discourses on migration toward the humanitarian "victim trope" is a striking instance of such a slide (cf. Gedgaudaitė 2021, 175–214).

Taking the 2015 declared "migration crisis" in Europe as an example, forms of mixed media and public art are often set up as political interventions calling for attention, yet the functions and implications of their intervention vary greatly. Some subscribe to dominant representational modes, enhancing, for example, the trope of victimhood in the name of humanitarianism. Indeed, as can be seen in ▶ Artistic Responses to Cross-Border Migration: "Nation for Two" entry, European artistic production that addresses migration is dominated by photojournalistic types of representation aimed at documenting the plight of refugees with the purpose of sensitizing public opinion. The value of documentation notwithstanding, artworks can also offer complex and nuanced responses to humanitarian, sociopolitical, and other crises by mobilizing fiction and the affordances of various media beyond the function of documenting. They can, for example, explore the entwinement of crises that are commonly perceived as distinct, such as the migration and environmental crises, as the entry ▶ Migration, Art, and Environment in the Mediterranean aptly shows. They can project utopian visions of a borderless world while using formal

strategies to stage the obstacles and hardships subjects face in their migratory movement, as does Chaja Hertog and Nir Nadler's moving-image-based artwork "Nation for Two" (see ▸ Artistic Responses to Cross-border Migration: "Nation for Two"). They can be inclusive and attentive to the local histories of a site and its inhabitants while also (wittingly or not) effectuating other forms of exclusion and the erasure of different kinds of heritage (see ▸ Visual Heritage of Crisis on the Walls of an Athenian Neighborhood and ▸ Politics of Heritage Conservation in Karachi). And they can intervene in a sociopolitical reality by veering *away* from the aim of representing "reality" toward fictional, weird, and speculative modes of expression or forms that pry open different experiences of reality and visions of the future. Such fictional modalities are increasingly being mobilized in forms of public protest, as activists and engaged citizens seek new ways of voicing discontent in situations where oppressive regimes or neoliberal governmentalities curtail civic freedoms and shrink public space (Boletsi 2024). To mention just one example, in recent years, women from Ireland, the USA, Argentina, and elsewhere have been wearing the scarlet cloaks and white bonnets of the handmaids from Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel the *Handmaid's Tale* to protest policies negatively affecting women—most notably the revoking of women's reproductive rights (Beaumont and Holpuch 2018). Forms of public protest and artivism that mobilize fiction to address new, dystopian realities that people are asked to accept as a "new normal" often draw inspiration from literary and artistic traditions.

Preservation
Preservation is a key concern that emerges at the time of conflict with regard to heritage, including art objects. Where possible, certain valuable artefacts can be transported to a different place deemed safe. As an example, during the Russo–Ukrainian War, in 2022, a number of valuable paintings have been transported to other countries, where they have been exhibited to raise awareness and support (e.g., in the exhibition *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine 1900–1930* consisting of artworks rescued from Kyiv's National Museum of Art displayed in Brussels,

Vienna, London, and elsewhere). In cases where move is impossible, as with large monuments or buildings, heritage is prone to damage and destruction, and cross-media documentation in photography, video, or painting might become the sole available record to witness its presence. The 2015 destruction of monuments in the ancient city of Palmyra by the ISIS during the war in Syria is one recent example that has caused much public outrage (Hanink 2017, 8–10).

Questions of heritage are particularly complex when it comes to transient artforms or forms of expression, such as street art and other forms of art, artivism, and interventions in public space. Video clips of protest songs using mixed media collage aesthetics or poetry performances during public protest events—such as the widespread performance and dissemination of the poem "If I Must Die" by Palestinian Refaat Alareer, killed in December 2023 in an airstrike by the Israeli military—may be captured in the moment and become viral but can just as quickly disappear from the public arena. Such artforms and their shifting modes of dissemination, e.g., through social media, call for new understandings of heritage, archiving, and preservation (see also ▸ Introduction to Section Digital Heritage and ▸ Introduction to Section Archival Heritage).

Debates around the heritagization of street art are particularly pertinent in that respect, as they challenge the limits of common understandings of heritage. Heritagization of street art—when it is understood in terms of preservation of specific street artworks considered to hold a certain (aesthetic, historical, political, or other) value—sets implicit or explicit norms determining which works are worth preserving. As a result, it may have unexpected downsides, such as the intensification of the "art versus vandalism" hierarchical opposition (▸ Visual Heritage of Crisis on the Walls of an Athenian Neighborhood). Declaring or recognizing a public site as heritage—be it a transient art form such as street art or an architectural structure or other site of historical and cultural significance—is by no means a neutral or innocent gesture but can be inflected by violent histories, neocolonial practices, neoliberal market forces, political ideologies, and social or racial

discriminatory practices. Furthermore, as discussed in ▶ Politics of Heritage Conservation in Karachi, the heritigization process can result in numerous evictions and displacement of low-income street vendors and shopkeepers under the guise of the site's preservation. This example showcases the tacit forms of elite urbanism at play in heritigization of public sites and the discriminatory violence and "spatial cleansing" it can entail. These examples serve not only to pinpoint the pitfalls and ideological stakes involved in the battleground that heritage is but also to inspire alternative understandings of heritage. These include bottom-up approaches that go beyond an elitist logic of preservation by officials and city planners to involve diverse voices and recognize the "common worlds" of marginalized inhabitants as embodiments of intangible heritage that warrants safeguarding (see ▶ Politics of Heritage Conservation in Karachi).

Mixed Media and Public Art in Post-conflict Societies

If during conflict art objects are mobilized to gauge support for one or other side, in the aftermath of conflict, the ways in which it will be remembered becomes a key concern. The historical significance of a particular event and the roles played by different actors involved—intrinsically linked with the social identity of particular groups—take center stage in determining the ways in which to commemorate the past. In this context, past protest movements can serve as forms of intangible heritage that resonate in the present. As shown in the entry ▶ Military Dictatorship in Argentina and the Struggle of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo—a group of mothers and grandmothers of disappeared detainees who stood up for years against the terror of the dictatorial regime (1976–1983)—this movement has grown into a global symbol of struggle for human rights and has become part of a transnational heritage of protest that resonates in the present. The protest movements of the 1960s hold a prominent place in this global heritage paradigm too. ▶ Youth Movements of the 1960s in Post-war Greece illuminates a complicated local chapter in the transnational nexus of movements that unfolded during this formative decade. ▶ Comics, Revolutionary Struggles, and Activist Lives and ▶ Memory of Feminist Conflicts in Contemporary Comics entries are two more examples where mixed media—graphic novels in this case—both document past activist practices and provide means for future activism.

Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memories* (2009) is one of the most influential frameworks to discuss the role that remembering past conflicts can play for developing solidarity networks across different groups and geographical borders. Rothberg discusses the ways in which Holocaust memory has been employed in struggles of decolonization, using a wide range of cross-media case studies—literary works, sketches, and films. He later develops this work in *Implicated Subject* (Rothberg 2019), discussing the positionality of people who do not fall into the category of victim or perpetrator, two most frequently discussed positions when it comes to conflict (see also ▶ Introduction to Section Remembering Actors: Victims, Perpetrators, Communities, Bystanders, and Beyond). In this context, art objects can provide a meeting point for diverse groups with divergent views and a means to explore painful history (see, for example, ▶ Monuments and Memorials in Kalavryta, Greece: Ethnography and Artistic Research).

As time passes, the relay of remembrance is passed from one generation to the next. To address the role and responsibility of those who come after the conflict, Marianne Hirsch's (1997, 2012) term "the generation of postmemory" has been particularly significant: while Hirsch developed this approach in reference to the children of Holocaust survivors, it has since been applied to discuss many other post-conflict societies across the globe. Postmemory refers to the structure of transmission of memories to those who might not have directly experienced the events remembered and yet identify with them as if they did. Hirsch distinguishes between familial and affiliative postmemory to refer to family and other groupings, such as generation or a particular social group. Mixed media objects are at the core of her theoretical framing, especially family albums as a

discursive meeting space between generations (see ▶ Family Album of Difficult Pasts Across Media). Alison Landsberg's (2004) framework of prosthetic memory should also be mentioned here as it further develops the thinking on memory's different affiliative links in post-conflict societies by discussing mixed media case studies, especially in museum spaces.

In both Hirsch's and Landsberg's approaches, artistic practices are discussed as performing a reparative gesture, restoring justice to the worlds lost to conflict, even if only in a symbolic way. The process of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Erll and Rigney 2009) is key in understanding how the practice of such reparative justice takes shape: old media artefacts and any remains still bearing witness to past conflicts, even if only discreetly, are repurposed to produce something new, which is then used to make sense of past conflicts in newly shaping societies and address their preoccupations. Even archival materials originating from repressive regimes are often repurposed through these practices, thus finding a new discursive place in post-conflict societies for problematic heritage (see, for example, ▶ Family Album of Difficult Pasts Across Media and ▶ Second World War Amateur Soldier Photographs as Witnesses and Heritage). At times, the process of documenting media histories in and of itself is employed as a vehicle for narrating difficult histories, such as in the case of *Talking about Trees* (Gasmelbari 2019) and *The Cemetery of Cinema* (Diallo 2023), two documentaries where the history of cinema serves to speak of the histories of Sudan and Guinea, respectively. Media in this case might provide the only refuge for certain stories, even when all that is left are deteriorated film reels in long-abandoned facilities. The entry ▶ Excavating Crisis Narratives in Greek Film Archeology lays out how the emerging field of "film archaeology" can offer a different approach to cinematic responses to another crisis-scape— the Greek government debt crisis (2009–2018), an approach that veers away from questions of *representation* of crisis to delve into those factors that determine the production and perception of the medium itself in crisis-contexts and the ways its

history manifests in the crisis-ridden present and shapes visions of the future.

Having discussed the role of mixed media and public art as heritage in conflict and post-conflict societies, it is important to emphasize that artistic objects act not just as a means of representation of a specific conflict but also as a springboard for reshaping one's understanding of and reconfiguring perspectives on a specific event. Dominic Davies (2020), for example, traces the way in which Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* provided a conceptual vocabulary to address the Holocaust and its legacies across comics studies, Holocaust studies, memory studies, and trauma studies. He persuasively argues that "the ways in which *Maus* has been written *about*" played a central role in "the *production* of those narrative and cultural forms that we now use to discuss, represent, and document trauma" (Davies 2020, 5). This hints at the indispensable role of art in constructing the heritage of a traumatic event such as the Holocaust, which has time and again been deemed "unrepresentable." As the entry ▶ Representing the Holocaust: Ethical and Semiotic Concerns shows, artistic representations of the Holocaust are not representations in the mimetic sense, but *performative*: they help audiences *experience* a traumatic event for which no language existed, "*for the first time* in its representation." Art is therefore the means by which an arguably unrepresentable event becomes part of our heritage. The case studies we discuss in this introduction and 20 more entries collected for this section provide further examples on the ways in which mixed media and public art shape the ways we perceive, construct, and remember past and present conflicts in the hope for a more just future.

Summary

Mixed media and public art play an important role shaping perceptions of ongoing conflicts as well as remembering the conflicts of the past. This entry discusses a variety of roles mixed media art objects and public art assume in this dialectical process, focusing particularly on representation, preservation, and memorialization of conflict as

well as on conflicts over their significance as cultural heritage in the present.

Competing Interest Declaration The author(s) has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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