Conceptualising 'creative resistance' — Urban art, social cohesion, and political commentary

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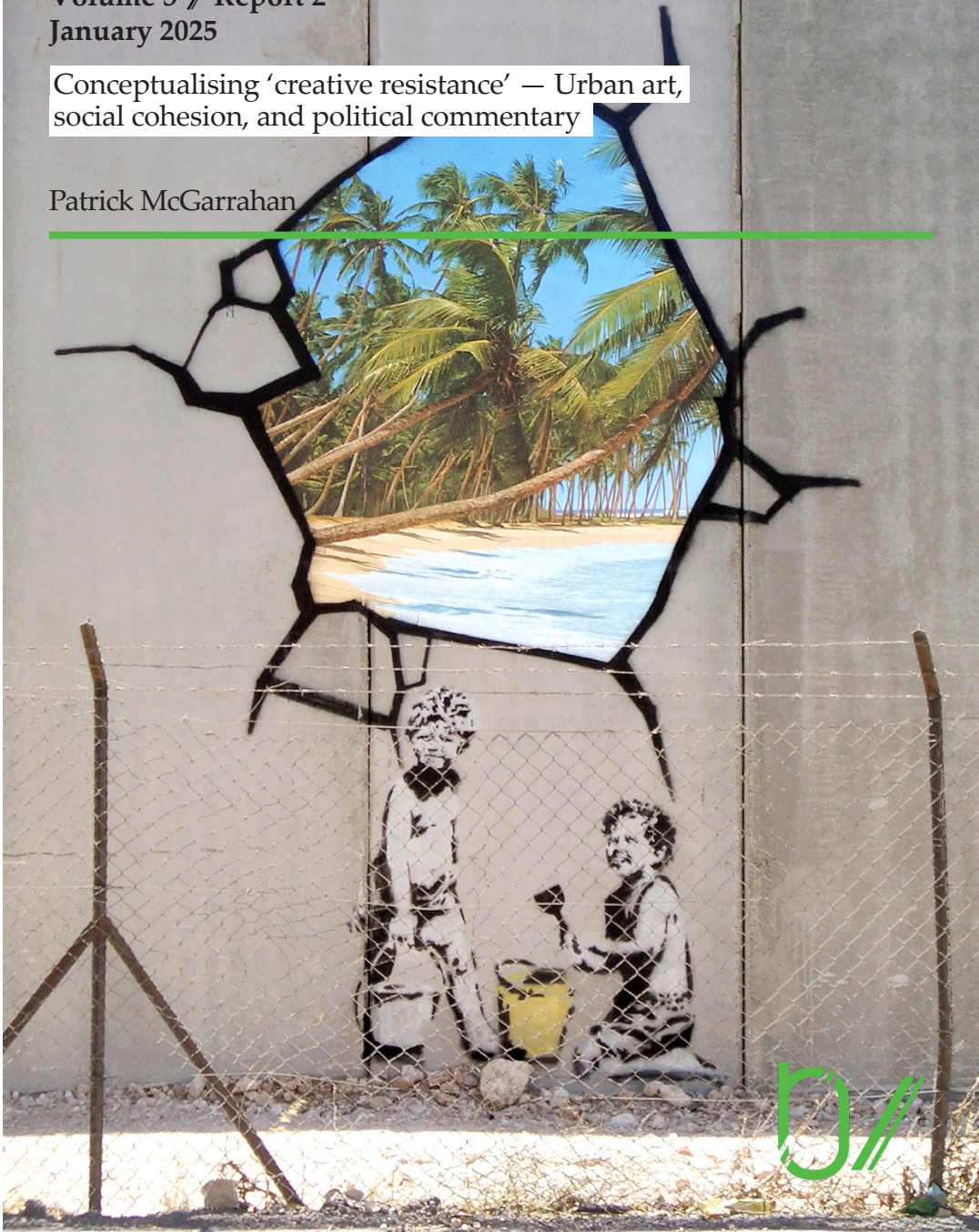
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Cover: The Segregation Wall, Palestine, 2005 - Courtesy Banksy

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Foreword

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Patrick's thoughtful gaze upon the contemporary city evokes the great John Berger, who famously argued that "every city has a sex and an age which have nothing to do with demography." Continuing in this distinguished tradition, Patrick finds in each individual city—and in the city as a broader, holistic concept—not just tension or hopelessness, so often associated with urban life, but rather the possibility of resistance, particularly the kind that harnesses creativity.

In this highly original and concise report, Patrick explores collective memory, moving across diverse urban landscapes: the West Bank's Separation Wall, the Portuguese city of Aveiro, and case studies of 'doing politics' across continents—from Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa—culminating in an examination of resistance during and despite neoliberalism's sucker punch. This is, as Patrick aptly describes it, a constellation of arguments—and a magnificent one at that. It is a deeply original take that brings us full circle to the old adage that "city air makes us free." Only this time, through Patrick's lens, city air is refreshed, collective imagination is reinvigorated, and the possibility of resistance emerges anew.

The contemporary city, though heterogeneous from context to context, is an enigma for the twenty-first-century geographer — cities serve as sites of socio-spatial exchange, as hubs of modernisation, and as agglomerates of people, all with differing visions of change and progress (Fuchs, 2012). Cities also act as meeting points between scales, as places of interaction between national, regional, and municipal decision-makers and their constituencies, which are themselves fraught with differences along cultural and demographic lines (Shatkin, 2007). Therefore, it is within the city fabric and its constellation of stakeholders that inequality and conflict emerge, especially as cities become increasingly tethered to a global capitalist economy (Pinson and Journel, 2016). Understandably, the question that twenty-first-century researchers and policy-makers face is how to resist urban inequality. In the following work, I propose an alternative, and indeed more radical, form of resistance that hinges on the harnessing of creativity — especially artistic expression. In a growing body of scholarship that highlights this urban creative resistance, authors make a point of differentiating between 'urban art,' 'street art,' and 'graffiti.' in this report, I tend to use 'urban art' — a broader "umbrella term" that better encapsulates the various motives and media practised by artists, as well as their differing styles, narratives, histories, and geographies (Radosevic, 2013, p. 7). I also feel that 'urban art' avoids the murky and pejorative connotations of 'graffiti,' which is often synonymised with vandalism, lawlessness, and the dissolution of social order — all pre-conceptions that this work hopes to dispel.

The following report illustrates the different outcomes of urban creative resistance — which, I will argue, include (i) the creation and entrenchment of collective memory, especially among the historically underrepresented and excluded; (ii) an everyday form of 'doing politics' embodying localised dissidence to national or supra-national decision-making; and (iii) the ushering in of the post-neoliberal city, where entrepreneurialism, privatisation of public space, and commodification of nature are questioned and, ultimately, re-imagined. I build these arguments on case study examples from the Global North and the Global South, attempting to subvert a Western bias in my analysis. Finally, I extrapolate, theorising about the agency, and the responsibility, of urban artists and other 'creative resisters' to facilitate the 'sustainable, inclusive, and just city' of the future.

(i) On creative resistance and 'collective memory'

In this first section, I interrogate the role that creative forms of resistance play in entrenching collective memory into the city socio-material fabric — particularly among communities that have been traditionally underrepresented and excluded. Defining 'collective memory' has been the subject of substantial debate across disciplines, and the term has been caught up in something of an academic quagmire related to semantics — particularly, whether it refers to "memory in the group" or "memory of the group" (Wertsch, 2009, p. 646; emphasis in original). In this report, I sustain the latter, where 'collective memory' represents an aggregated form of remembering that transcends atomised individuals and is practised at the group level (Wertsch, 2009). Wertsch and Roediger (2008) elaborate, describing collective memory as an active and discursive process — "more like a space of contestation than a body of knowledge" (p. 319). This would seem to imply that, for the geographer, understanding the acts of memory-making is as important as describing their outcome (i.e., the memories themselves). Therefore, I use this foundation as a launching point to argue that urban art serves as a mechanism of collective memory-making. What sets art apart from conventional forms of resistance (e.g., protest, lobbying, rebellion) is that it is uniquely "entangled in materialities, affects, politics, senses, places and experiences" (Castro et al., 2023, p. 13). In essence, art straddles the boundary between the physical and the psychological, and it provides an outlet for representing past experiences (memories) and future visions (dreams) in a material form. Therefore, art spatialises collective memory — it acts as the vehicle to remind of a community's presence and to enable its memory to carry on in the urban world. However, it also adds the artist's unique perspective to the memory. Therefore, each work of art — and its individual voice and narrative — pushes and pulls on the community's collective memory, expanding the "space of contestation" and resisting the tendency to be shouldered into exclusion (Wertsch and Roediger, 2008, p. 319).

I illustrate these conceptualisations with a case study example from the Palestinian West Bank. Particularly, I turn your attention to the 'Separation (Segregation) Wall,' a 708-kilometer border between the Israeli and Palestinian territories first erected at the turn of the twenty-first century (Fraihat and Dabashi,

2023). The 'Separation Wall' has been the object of substantial academic critique — authors describe it as e.g., a "shifting colonial frontier" (Weizman, 2007, cited in Busbridge, 2017, p. 375), and as a "barrier in the way of any kind of development and contiguity" in Palestine (Thawaba, 2011, p. 141). However, the Separation Wall has been a major site of artistic resistance in Palestine, and it represents an important element in the development of Palestinian collective memory. I draw your attention to several works of art on the wall. In one image (see Fig. 1), two white armchairs sit opposite each other in a living room scene, positioned in front of a colourful mountain landscape with blooming flowers and a snow-capped peak. In another (see Fig. 2), two children play in front of a makeshift fissure in the wall. The hole reveals a tropical beach with a tepid tide and low-hanging palms, clearly meant to reflect a tranquil scene in some far-off land. In a third (see Fig. 3), a young, pony-tailed girl is lifted off of her feet by a bouquet of eight balloons, seemingly transported to a distant place sheltered from war and deprivation. These vignettes create a "space of commemoration," honouring Palestinians' presence and ensuring their right to return (Hasan and Bleibleh, 2023, p. 5). Further, they invite a "space of imagination," a place in which to protect memories from the harsh reality of the outside world (Hasan and Bleibleh, 2023, p. 7). Jegic (2019) argues that the artwork disrupts the "very raison d'etre of the wall" as a structurally violent presence — it facilitates the dissemination of personal narratives, histories, and visions, and enables the co-creation of a de-colonial knowledge for the Palestinian people (p. 1). He points to several instances where the artwork is accompanied by symbols of peace (e.g., the dove, the olive branch), Arabic inscriptions of 'sumud' ('steadfastness'), and English memos of e.g., 'live free or resist' which spatialise Palestinians' memory of home and contest the settler-colonial "status quo" that dominates in their homeland (Jegic, 2019, p. 9).

In a change of pace, I quickly draw your attention to a second example from the Portuguese city of Aveiro, nestled between the larger metropoles of Lisbon and Porto. The city sits on a saltwater estuary and was traditionally dominated by the fishing industry; however, in recent years, it has become a hotspot of tourism. Simões (2023) describes Aveiro as "an open-air art gallery," where residents have inscribed pictures on the city's streets and buildings that tell stories of fisherfolk and commemorate local heroes (p. 1). She describes the scene as a form of

"cultural identity (re)construction" — a way for locals to ensure the persistence of their traditional maritime identity despite the rise in tourism and the changing, transient newcomer population (Simões, 2023, p. 1). Together, these examples — of Palestine and of Aveiro — illustrate the integral role that urban art plays in entrenching collective memory and resisting community marginalisation in the rapidly changing context of the twenty-first-century city.

Figures 1 to 3: Scenes from the 'Separation (Segregation) Wall' in the Palestinian West Bank.

(ii) On creative resistance and 'doing politics'

In this second section, I describe the use of urban art as an alternative form of 'doing politics,' whereby artists use their work to contest decision-making at national or supra-national levels. Urban art often semiotically embodies political messages, demonstrating the artist's disillusionment with or disdain for political officials, particular policies or relationships, corruption, exclusion, or tyranny (Ryan, 2017). However, what differentiates urban art from other forms of political commentary is its everyday and ephemeral qualities. Urban art is often produced spontaneously and on small spatial scales, lacking the premeditation required to organise large protests and rebellions. Furthermore, it is often transient, relevant to short-lived political cycles and painted over by other artists at later points in time (Ryan, 2017). It is these qualities that have led authors to argue that urban art is a day-to-day form of political action ('doing

politics'). I will illustrate this using two case study examples — first from Latin America and then from sub-Saharan Africa, regions that are decidedly different but that have both struggled to configure stable post-colonial states and that have shared similar expressions of political resistance through art. I reflect first on Bogotá, Colombia, a city renowned for its vibrant cultural identity but with a history punctuated by conflict between politics and the arts. The 1970s saw the mobilisation of guerilla movements in Bogotá — groups of irregular, paramilitary forces deployed to contest dominant police or military authorities (Sullivan and Jones, 2021). These factions were popularised by young Colombians frustrated with the country's partisan politics and the lack of social progress accomplished by the national government. Interestingly, the guerillas used street art as an ad hoc forum intended to engage the general public in political dialogue. For instance, in 1976, the guerillas asked the public to determine whether Jose Raquel Mercado, a union official accused of facilitating American imperialist interests in Colombia, should be executed. The public was encouraged to submit their opinion by inscribing 'yes' or 'no' in paint on city walls (Dabène, 2019). In the 1980s and early 1990s, artists re-mobilised city walls to protest cartel violence, to promote peace, and to challenge the government's weak interventions against organised crime (Dabène, 2019). Between 2002 and 2008, artists in Bogotá again used their work to challenge the 'false positives' scandal — when the national government encouraged the extrajudicial murders of thousands of disadvantaged Colombians wrongly accused of being guerilla fighters (Griffin, 2023). A famous mural erected in Bogotá (see Fig. 4) portrays the Colombian officials responsible for the scandal with the number of deaths attributed to them inscribed above their heads. The banner reads '¿Quién dio la orden?' — 'Who gave the order?' — effectively shaming the regime and denouncing the decision-making processes that facilitated the scandal. Finally, in 2011, a sixteen-year-old boy was executed by Bogotá police for engaging in street art (Griffin, 2023). The event sparked artists to again take to the walls, protesting the continued extrajudicial violence in Colombia and the country's tireless tendency to prop up undemocratic officials at the expense of civilian welfare. These events have influenced the lenient stance of current President Gustavo Petro (an ex-guerilla) toward urban art. In 2018, Petro conceded that the stifling of artistic expression through such means is antithetical to democracy and counter-productive to the country's progress (Griffin, 2023). Therefore, over time, urban art in Bogotá has come full circle — from its use

in guerilla movements, to its role as an anti-violence apparatus, to now be synonymised with democracy — it has remained entrenched in Colombia's political realm. It is clearly an everyday form of 'doing politics' — a way for the general public to understand, contest, and influence politics — and a tool for nation-building that hinges on creative production.

Here, I shift my focus and compare the Colombian experience to sub-Saharan Africa. In a thesis dedicated to the topic, Thiel (2017) reflects on similar practices of mobilising urban art as a "counter-hegemonic practice" — specifically, as a form of civil agency against autocracy in the African post-colony (p. 12). As in Bogotá, the arts in sub-Saharan Africa represent a discursive apparatus of political action — a "vehicle for participating in debates about governance and popular sovereignty" (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009, cited in Thiel, 2017, p. 22) and as a non-violent way of making known the community's frustration with undemocratic practices. This is particularly relevant to Sudan after 2019 when authoritarian leader Omar al-Bashir was removed and a military junta was established. In the five years since the coup, art has proliferated on street corners, on buildings and billboards, and on social media networks, dreaming of a world not embroiled in "a tapestry of sociopolitical misfortunes, economic embargoes, censorship … [and] stringent religious edicts" (Dahir, 2019). I draw your attention to one example (see Fig. 5) painted on the wall of a morgue in the country's capital Khartoum. The artist has inscribed a corpse's hand whose grey, outstretched fingers are tagged with a label that reads 'missing' in English. To the right of the image is the word 'anger' in Arabic. The work serves to contest the military government's brutal grip on the country, particularly its response to a peaceful protest in 2019 when armed forces murdered over 100 civilians (Burke and Salih, 2019). The image of the corpse reminds the public of the bodies that remain inside the morgue, an act of injustice characteristic of the post-Bashir regime (Roussi and Lonardi, 2021). I have to wonder about the juxtaposition of the English and Arabic languages — is, perhaps, the word 'missing' a cry to Western governments, multi-lateral agencies, and humanitarian groups to intervene? If so, this would seem to give credence to the idea that urban art targets national and supra-national politics. The image of the corpse is surrounded by Arabic phrases, presumably inscribed over time by members of Khartoum's public,

offering words of agreement with the author's work — therefore, as in Bogotá, the wall has become a spatialised form of political dialogue. Returning to ideas that I proposed in section (i), it could again be argued that this work — as well as the various other examples of urban political art in Khartoum and Bogotá — serve to materialise and entrench collective memory. They highlight, deconstruct, and contest traumatic experiences; they bring community members together under the banner of a common cause; and, importantly, they immortalise the community's presence — despite turbulent and undemocratic regimes.

Figure 4 (above): A mural in Bogotá challenges the 'false positives' scandal that murdered thousands of Colombians.

Figure 5 (left): A mural in Khartoum protests the brutality of Sudan's military government. The artist is shown in front of his work.

(iii) On creative resistance and neoliberalisation

In this penultimate section, I reflect on the mobilisation of creative resistance to contest economic transformation in the city — particularly urban neoliberalisation. I then describe the use of art to advance post-neoliberal ideals in the twenty-first century. Neoliberalism describes "a set of intellectual streams, policy orientations and regulatory arrangements that strive to extend market mechanisms, relations, discipline and ethos" (Pinson and Journel, 2016, p. 137). Neoliberalism surfaced as a political apparatus in the years following the Second World War and is associated with the de-regulation of industry, the promotion of free-market capitalism, strong individual will, and the retracted influence of the state (Biebricher and Johnson, 2012). In a neoliberal society, economic progress is pushed forward by corporations and firms, and 'success' hinges on maximising individual satisfaction. Therefore, the uptake of neoliberalism has fostered a global entrepreneurial spirit, where individuals are free to pursue their own destiny — or, as Lane (2023) summarises, where "people receive what they deserve" (p. 42). Neoliberalism remains hegemonic as an economic regime and public policy instrument, but it is increasingly tethered to pejorative connotations in social science discourse. Academics take issue with neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism, its over-extension of market influence, and its unequal agglomeration of wealth. Biebricher and Johnson (2012) argue that neoliberalism sustains 'structural violence,' where oppression and inequality unfold programmatically across social structures, thereby preventing a particular group from realising the same power, potential, or freedom as another. This is because the fundamental dogma of neoliberalism — that every individual is at birth born with the same potential and that people 'get what they deserve' — fails to account for structural differences in the opportunities and resources available to particular groups. Therefore, neoliberal agendas reiterate structural violence by enabling those with resources to more easily and extensively access success, at the expense of those without. The outcome is that, foundationally, neoliberalism cannot be detached from inequality.

The mainstreaming of neoliberalism has substantively influenced the economic structure of cities, which serve as hotspots of industry, commerce, and

globalisation. Pinson and Journel (2016) suggest that "cities are basically cradles of neoliberalization" (p. 139). Harvey (2007) agrees, pointing to the obvious wealth disparity coupled with the sectioning-off of public space seen in neoliberalising cities across the world. He writes that "the [neoliberal] city is being dissolved into micro-states of rich and poor" (p. 12). Therefore, the city provides a lens through which to understand and contest neoliberal formations. Interestingly, a growing body of literature focuses on the role that creative resistance could play in challenging urban neoliberalisation. Gonçalves and Milani (2022) argue that urban artists use their work to contest unfavourable changes like increasing privatisation, commercialisation, and class stratification in cities. This is logical if we consider urban art done illegally — for instance, works scrawled on walls or fences. In this case, urban artists take objects which are designed to keep out or section off the public and turn them into a canvas. This act effectively makes a public space out of a private one — the art which is produced on these surfaces becomes a site of dialogue between the artist, the public, and city authorities as well as a place of exchange within the public as it views, interprets, and disseminates the art through social media. Khurana (2017) reflects on this idea in a changing India, arguing that urban art acts as an apparatus of social integration in cities like Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru where development is increasingly centred on neoliberal trajectories. Urban art has also been seen as a way of resisting gentrification — a by-product of neoliberal agendas where lower socio-economic neighbourhoods are invested in and revitalised, raising local property prices, attracting wealthier buyers, and displacing original residents. Abram (2024) highlights the city of Ljubljana — the capital of Slovenia — which has since 2006 followed a neoliberal model of urban planning. The result has been the privatisation of public spaces, the "pedestrianisation" of historic areas, and the reclamation of post-industrial spaces — all designed to turn Ljubljana into the "most beautiful city" (p. 43). Abram (2024) describes this as a "neologism for gentrification" — a motto for capturing tourism investment at the expense of the lower-income communities pushed out by the rising costs of living (p. 43). In response, artists took to the city streets, painting bold, angry messages on historic buildings and city walls — subverting perceptions of Ljubljana as 'clean,' 'charming,' and 'beautiful' and challenging the deeper, unjust, and tourist-oriented economic models guiding the city's development.

(iv) On my final remarks — stencilling a way forward

Finally, I draw together the constellation of arguments that I have developed in previous sections by commenting on the role that creative resistance might play in the 'sustainable, inclusive, and just city' of the future. This requires me to take a step back and reflect on the feasibility (and ethics) of co-opting creativity for developmental purposes at larger spatial scales. On the one hand, I have illustrated that creative resistance contributes to (i) the development of collective memory, (ii) to the contestation of prevailing political bodies, and (iii) to the re-configuration of neoliberal models that dominate in the twenty-first-century urban psyche. However, as Johnston (2015) reminds, urban art often has a pedagogical component, intended not just to challenge, but to teach — "to enable a nuanced understanding that may ultimately lead to social change" (p. 182). Juxtaposing examples from Cairo and Belfast, he argues that urban artists foment the greatest change when they take on the more mature role of the "critical pedagogue" (Johnston, 2015, p. 182). This brings me to the conclusion that to actualise the 'sustainable city' of the academic imagination, the onus should not be creative resistance per se — but on creative pedagogy. Therefore, urban art should continue to question and contest, but it should also explain, imagine, teach, and empower the general public to engage in independent action of their own. Clearly, this means that the 'sustainable, inclusive, and just city' of the future hinges on formalising and strengthening the dialogue between artists and their audiences to co-produce innovative streams of knowledge and develop praxes of change.

I conclude with a final disambiguation — negotiating the idea of the 'creative city' as a soft policy framework for urban planning. In recent years, municipal decision-makers have adopted a novel approach to creative resistance — that is, by joining forces with the artists and stifling 'resistance' by encouraging and commissioning it. The point of this is to fast-track socio-economic development by emphasising the 'creative economy' — essentially, by advertising the city's cultural capital and increasing investment through tourism. Proponents go as far as to argue that the 'creative city' shows unique potential to reverse economic decline and to "promote government spending rather than tax cuts

as incentives for job creation" (Cohendet, Grandadam and Simon, 2009, p. 91). Understandably, this raises concerns about the commodification of resistance — in essence, the paradox that what was intended to challenge prevailing economic and political regimes is now sponsoring these very agendas. Novy and Colomb (2021) take this critique further, arguing that 'creative city' discourse leads to the re-appropriation, exploitation, and degradation of local culture. Fittingly, they point to 'hip hop' culture in America — where what began as a statement against the disproportionate socio-economic disadvantage of black communities has over time been re-articulated, mainstreamed, and homogenised by decision-makers to market their cities as 'hip,' youthful, and artsy. This brings me to a final conclusion — that the 'creative city' should not necessarily be conflated with the 'sustainable city.' Agency must remain situated with artists and their audiences, who should continue to feel empowered to challenge unjust, unsustainable, and undemocratic practices and to explore, imagine, and teach about alternative futures through their work.

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