MuseumsForward

Under the bridge: attitudes on vandalism of public art In Seattle, Washington

Taylor Schoenfeld

Abstract

Many busy cities are full of public art, but who owns the art and what happens when it is defaced? This study aimed to expand current understandings of public perceptions and attitudes towards vandalism of public art. Sixty-five members of the public were interviewed at four sites of public art in King County, WA, including *Ebb & Flow*, *Columnseum*, SODO Track, and the Fremont Troll. People were asked about their thoughts and feelings around recent vandalism of these public artworks. Findings suggest that few people know that public art is indeed owned by the public, and that people have mixed feelings towards vandalism and whether it should be cleaned from public art. The study has implications for caretakers of public spaces who are interested in reducing maintenance efforts and costs.

Keywords

public art; vandalism; street art; graffiti; attitudes; perceptions

Committee Chair

Jessica Luke

Committee Members

Steve Badanes; Willow Fox

Accepted: June 7, 2024

Published: June 7, 2024

Introduction

Public art is just that, the public's. It is our art, collectively. Public art is any work in any media whose form, function and meaning are created by artists for places accessible to and used by the public (Palmer, 2016). For example, the Washington State Arts Commission (ArtsWA) boasts a collection of over 5,000 public artworks that can be found in 1,300 buildings and campuses across the state. When the State of Washington constructs a new building, half of one percent of the construction cost is reserved for art ("Public Art," 2019). The Art in Public Places program (AIPP) purchases and cares for artworks throughout Washington ("Public Art," 2019). Artists are selected by ArtsWA in partnership with local committees, from a roster of pre-qualified professional visual artists.

Public art collections like these are not like most museum collections, which are kept in climate-controlled conditions. Rather, works of street art and public art are usually installed outside where they are subjected to rapid weathering, and us, the public. Graffiti is not a new phenomenon; people have been defacing public art throughout history, since ancient Pompeii (Shobri et al., 2017). For example, a rare bronze sculpture of former Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin sits in Fremont, a neighborhood of northwest Seattle. It has been there since 1996, after being found and transported from the former USSR. The Fremont Chamber of Commerce describes the Lenin Statue as "…a symbol of an artistic spirit that outlasts regimes and ideologies, and as tangible proof that art does outlive politics." This artistic spirit is further demonstrated by frequent vandalism, often in the form of red paint on the statue's hands. When individuals feel that their values are not represented in the art installed in their physical spaces, vandalism can become an outlet for people to say what they feel is not being said.

On the other hand, vandalism can be used to damage communities. Artist Jasmine Iona Brown's works titled "Black Teen Wearing Hoodie: Reading Pedagogy" is displayed on walls up and down 12th Avenue in downtown Seattle and depicts her son doing ordinary things. This work has been repeatedly vandalized, with body parts torn off the wall and graffiti promoting white supremacy. Even if public art does reflect community values, one person can easily destroy or alter it. This article describes a research study designed to better understand attitudes towards vandalism of public art so that community values may be better represented through public art and preserved in ways that mitigate maintenance costs and efforts for museums and other caretakers of public cultural objects.

There is economic value in culture

Armstrong (2019) makes the distinction between graffiti and street art as an issue of intent. Graffiti Writers or 'graf' writers tag and paint illegally, and generally do not associate themselves with art. In this context, writing refers to stylized lettering. Street Art has anti-art origins and is derived from graffiti as a response to the criminalization of graffiti. It can be helpful to be taken seriously as a street artist with demonstrated experience as a graffiti writer. Both share anti-establishment motivations and a sense of urgency. While graffiti attacks the environment, street art respects and glorifies it.

Many perspectives exist in the public conscience, and the perceived meaning of sanctioned art varies from person to person. Luckerson (2018) examines murals in Detroit and describes the possibilities for public art as a community rallying point, a magnifying glass for the marginalized, or simply a paycheck. Businesses can use street art to claim power over spaces previously held by graffiti art while promoting their own values in public. Sitas (2020) observes that culture has been recognized as having economic merit. Culture has become a currency in our urban spaces where the power of paint translates to marketing. Graffiti art styles can be utilized by municipalities in the form of stylized murals to curate spaces that advocate cleanliness. Despite the theoretical understanding of culture that legislators, architects, and planners use to design spaces, the contextual reality of culture is defined differently by all people who interact with art in public spaces.

Street art as an instrument of gentrification

Harris et al. (2020) researches the overlooked methods used by white residents in gentrifying communities use to take control of public spaces away from youth of color; by calling non-emergency lines and removing unwanted symbols of ownership in the form of graffiti. Lennon (2023) recognizes graffiti's role in gentrification as an outlet for "those left behind." Most gentrification research focuses on who is pushed out, but for those who stay street art is a way to express feelings of frustration. Shobri et al. (2017) discusses how graffiti is a form of illegal vandalism which can be viewed in a negative light, but the styles of graffiti art are used in Malayasia as a tool in urban beautification. Who decides what art goes where?

Ambiguity and neutrality can cause frustration and motivate vandalism

Works of public art serve as physical markers of social and political interests. High visibility in public spaces afford public art power and influence as described by Doss (2018). Street art is subversive and can be used to send a message to a real or perceived establishment in ways that are sanctioned or not. Communities interact with public art in many ways. Graffiti is one which is often met with shock and awe when it sends a strong message. Hadley et al. (2021) defines ideological vandalism as "the purposeful defacement of a symbolic object for the sake of conveying a political message" and discusses the value of vandalism as a tactic to draw attention to a specific grievance or gain publicity for a general cause (p. 1). Knight and Senie (2016) have assembled a collection of case studies to chart the influence of key ideas and theories on public art. Artists' philosophies in the context of public art are discussed through the lens of real-world occurrences. Michele H. Bogart presents the example of how former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (term of office 2001-2013) embraced public art as an economic engine and revitalizing force. While people fight about what matters to them, public art that is considered banal or unobtrusive is dismissed, ignored, and neglected.

Motivations for committing art vandalism are varied and uniquely different from other forms of vandalism (Salomon et al., 2018). Mental health issues, envy, or simply destructive behavior are some of the surface explanations. Contemporary research recognizes four underlying motivations for art vandalism: 1) political agitation, 2) ego-centric publicity-seeking, 3) religious convictions, and 4) the belief that an exhibit does not constitute 'art' (Salomon et al., 2018). The Routine Activities Theory (RAT) posits that three perpetually recurring factors must converge in time and space: 1) motivated offenders, 2) a suitable target, and 3) the absence of a capable guardian or guardians. Salomon et al. describe museums as both physical and social guardians in this context.

Noble & Pixel One Productions (2003) is a film documentary that explores attitudes and opinions of graffiti writers in Vancouver, British Columbia in a series of interviews. Some writers are subversive for the sake of personal notoriety, while others put up their art to reflect community. Palmer (2016) explores the question "What does public art *do* for urban parks, and for its publics?" and asserts that beautification of and enlivening public spaces is an important factor in increasing people's awareness, enjoyment, and appreciation of their environment. However, public art has been so depoliticized that in many cases it

becomes "individual aesthetic insertions that are not considered a substantial component of the social, cultural, political and economic fabric of the urban environment" (Palmer, 2016, p. 209).

Addressing public concerns through public art is beneficial to communities

Cartiere and Zebracki (2015) define public art broadly as including sculpture, performance, activism, social engagement, place-making, monuments and memorials, and a range of other artistic practices that are difficult to categorize but share the common ground of existing in and for the public realm. This includes private works that are in public view, and what may be considered temporary installations. Cloonan (2018) argues that preservation of cultural heritage is more challenging today than it has been since World War II. War, natural disaster, vandalism, and neglect are some of the factors endangering public monuments. It is critical for an increasing number of stakeholders to work together to face these threats from a broad context.

Lévy-Leboyer (1984) observes that vandalism is primarily committed by white males under 25 years of age, but most vandalism studies fail to recognize the broader behavioral context of the phenomenon. Vandalism does not occur in a vacuum and is an aspect or consequence of a wider syndrome of attitudes and behaviors. Vandalism is an attempt at communication and participation that manifests as destructive behavior, it is not meaningless senseless and willful damage and destruction. It is important to develop procedures for more appropriate behaviors to achieve social interaction. Through a series of case studies, MacNamara (2013) determines that vandalism of public art not only transforms the original work, but elevates it. Wei et al. (2021) examines public participation projects intended to revitalize preservation efforts for cultural heritage objects. This research shows that a majority of the public often has a completely different awareness and/or feeling about cultural heritage objects in their neighborhoods than the cultural heritage professionals think they have or think they should have. Objects are often taken for granted, grudgingly accepted, or not even noticed when placed in communities by authorities. This illustrates the need for professionals to consider and accept public feelings.

Terms

Vandalism is causing physical damage to or writing on any public or private property without permission:

> "The FBI has defined vandalism as "the willful or malicious destruction, injury, disfigurement, or defacement of any public or private property, real or personal, without consent of the owner having custody or control, by cutting, tearing, breaking, marking, painting, drawing, covering with filth or any such other means as may be specified by law or ordinance" (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1979). According to the British Criminal Damage Act of 1971, a vandal is "a person who without lawful excuse destroys or damages any property belonging to another, intending to destroy or damage any such property or being reckless as to whether such property would be destroyed or damaged" (Griffiths and Shapland, 1980: 11)"(Lévy-Leboyer, 1984).

Washington State Law Pertaining to Vandalism:

> (1) A person is guilty of malicious mischief in the third degree if he or she: (a) Knowingly and maliciously causes physical damage to the property of another, under circumstances not amounting to malicious mischief in the first or second degree; or (b) Writes, paints, or draws any inscription, figure, or mark of any type on any public or private building or other structure or any real or personal property owned by any other person unless the person has obtained the express permission of the owner or operator of the property, under circumstances not amounting to malicious mischief in the first or second degree. (2) Malicious mischief in the third degree is a gross misdemeanor. (*RCW 9A.48.090.2C GRAFFITI: Malicious Mischief in the Third Degree.*, n.d.)

Street Art is unsanctioned or sanctioned art (sculpture, performance, activism, social engagement, place-making, monuments and memorials and other artistic practices) that exists in or for the public realm, whether public or private, temporary, or permanent.

Graffiti is unsanctioned writing in public. It can be considered a form of street art, but many graffiti writers do not consider themselves artists.

Graffiti has also been argued as the simplest and most essential form of self-publishing (Armstrong, 2019). If someone feels like they have something timely and important to say, a reason to be noticed, there is no need to wait for a publisher, or a council, or an interview, when writing on a piece of private property without permission is so accessible. (Armstrong, 2019)

"Graffiti" means unauthorized markings, visible from premises open to the public, that have been placed upon any property through the use of paint, ink, chalk, dye or any other substance capable of marking property (*Chapter 10.07 - GRAFFITI NUISANCE CODE | Municipal Code | Seattle, WA | Municode Library*, n.d.).

Public art is available to all, publicly owned, temporary or permanent. Activism is sanctioned or unsanctioned action intended to spread awareness or incite change.

Methods

Study purpose

This study was designed to better understand attitudes towards vandalism of public art so that community values may be better represented through public art and preserved in ways that mitigate maintenance costs and efforts for museums and other caretakers of public cultural objects. The study was guided by three key research questions:

What is the public perception of public art?

How is vandalism of public art perceived?

How aware are people of maintenance or preservation of public art?

This study used a descriptive survey design to collect data from people near vandalized public artworks. A total of 65 adults were interviewed at 4 outdoor public art installations in King County, WA.

Research sites

The 4 outdoor public art installations were selected to represent a range of art types and vandalism problems, and included a) *Ebb & Flow*, a 230-foot kaleidoscopic mural on the inside of Wayne Tunnel on the multi-use Burke-Gilman Trail in Bothell that had spray paint and a sticker put over its dedication plaque; b) *Columnseum*, a 10-acre park and ride painted with simple shapes that reflect natural elements that had illegible graffiti tagging as well as papers with “Free Palestine” pasted on the painted support columns that connect Seattle’s

Roosevelt, Ravenna, and Green Lake neighborhoods; c) SODO Track, a two-mile rapid transit corridor leading into downtown Seattle with murals painted on the backs of local business buildings, many of which have been tagged with spray paint; and d) The *Fremont Troll*, a massive mixed media statue of a troll holding a Volkswagen Beetle located under the north end of the George Washington Memorial Bridge in Fremont with multi-colored chalk or pastels marked in streaks on the arm.

Sampling

At each of these public art installations, people near the work who appeared over the age of 18 were approached and asked if they were willing to participate in the study. One hundred seventy five people were approached; 65 agreed to participate. Data were collected at sites between the hours of 1:00pm and 5:00pm on Tuesdays or Fridays from late January to early March 2024.

Participants

A total of 65 participants were interviewed for this study. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 82. Most participants at *Ebb & Flow* in Bothell were between the ages of 50-70, lived nearby, and visited often.

Data collection procedures

Once a participant agreed to be part of the study, they were invited to sit at a table with chairs set up near the art. Interviews consisted of questions about art and vandalism to gain a broader perspective on how we interact with public art (see Appendix A for the interview guide). When asked about perceptions of vandalism, participants were shown images depicting how that artwork had been vandalized in the past (see Appendix B for interview photographs). Interviews lasted approximately seven minutes in length, and were audio recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai.

Data analysis procedures

Data were analyzed by coding participants' responses to each question. Responses were grouped and analyzed in Excel using statistical operators to identify patterns and trends in the communities' interests in public art and the tensions with vandalism.

Perceptions of public art

How do people describe public art?

Study participants were asked to describe works of nearby public art that had been pointed out to them by the researcher. Roughly half of participants (49%, n=35) correctly identified the work as public art. One participant at *Ebb & Flow* said,

> "It's a tunnel, but it's also authorized public art. It is an example of public art authorized by whomever. It has been kept that way. Graffiti is public art too in a way, but it doesn't make any sense to me, I can't understand [or] decipher any of the messages."

One third of participants (32%, n=23) described the art as an effort to beautify spaces, like bridges, that are not typically considered artistic. One participant described *Ebb & Flow* as follows: "I like it. Cheerful. Takes an otherwise ugly place and makes it beautiful. [The] Artist is expressing a part of themselves."

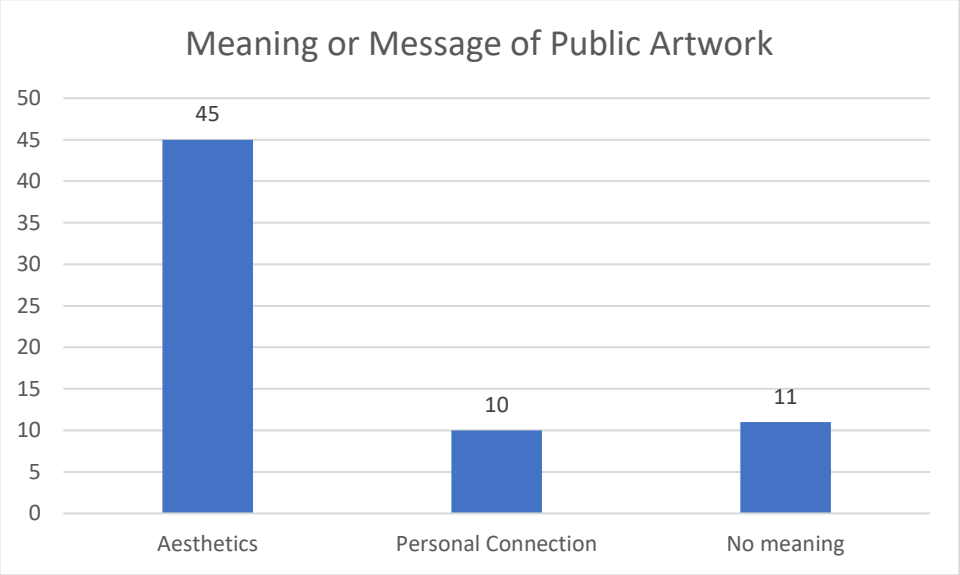
Sixteen percent of responses (n=11) indicated that participants did not know what they were looking at. For example, when asked to describe *Ebb & Flow*, one participant who had reportedly visited the site 250 times in the last five years said, "I never paid attention to it. Bright." Some participants at *Columnseum* assumed the painted colors were more utilitarian than aesthetic. When asked what it is and how to describe it one participant said, "I don't know. Colorful shapes in a parking lot." Another said, "I don't know. Markers that signify what part of the lot you are in." and someone else said, "I-5. Poles trying to be different." One participant described the SODO Track murals as, "Reflective of culture, maybe a struggle and happiness. Something nice to look at when there's other things not so nice to look at around town." Another appreciated them as, "Street art, not graffiti."

Many participants mentioned the graffiti when they described the public art: "I think we need more of it [graffiti]. I think it would attract a lot more people because that's something that's unique to cities. That is the allure of the city, people from the country don't see that. It is one of the main attractions whether you want to believe that or not."

How do people describe what public art means to them?

Participants took multiple messages and meanings from the public art (see Figure 1). For example, when asked what the message of the SODO Track Murals were, and what they mean on a personal level, one participant responded, "There's so many. Happy, I cry, sometimes connects with a song I'm listening to or a moment I'm in. I don't like museums and pretentious over exuberance of classism, but this feels like something you get to experience [and] live with." Another said, "I always appreciate another artist's work at any level. A blank wall is boring but that wall you can look at for a few minutes and appreciate it. Somebody really took the time to put that there."

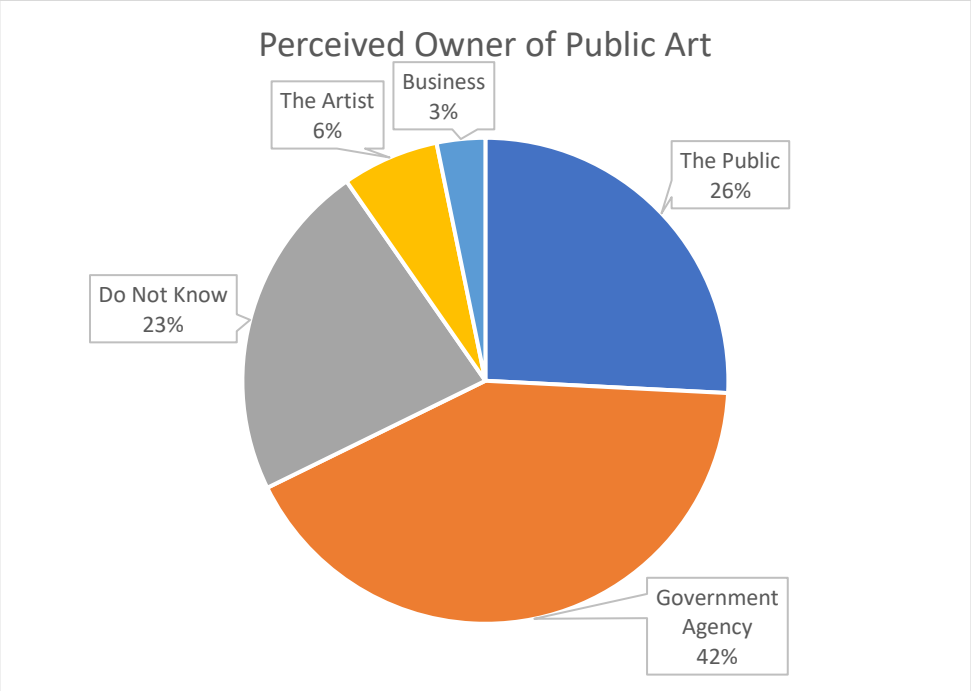
Figure 1: Participant's perception of the message or meaning of the artwork (N=65).



Who do people think owns public art?

Study participants were asked who they thought owns the art at each site. Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses, with only 26% (n=62) indicating a belief that these publicly accessible works of art are owned by the public.

Figure 2: Participants' perceptions about who owns public art (N=62).

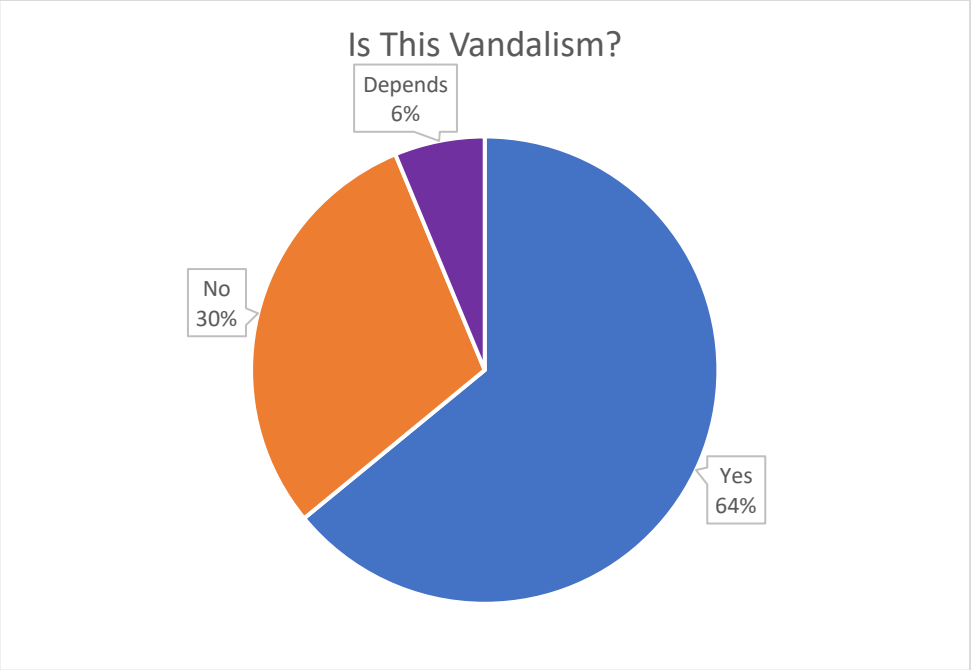


Perceptions of vandalism of public art

What constitutes vandalism?

Participants were shown images of how the public art sites had been vandalized recently, and asked whether they considered those instances to be vandalism or not. Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses, with 64% (N=64) of responding participants saying they did consider it to be vandalism, 30% (N=64) saying the instance was not vandalism, and 6% (N=64) saying it would depend on factors like the artist's wishes or intent, or the intent, permanence, or message of the vandalism. One participant at the *Fremont Troll* explained how colored chalk on the arm of the troll sculpture is not vandalism: "For me it's a sense of scale. They're not hurting anything. It will wash off, no harm done permanently." Another participant said, "It looks like chalk, isn't it? I think it's part of it. It doesn't look like spray paint, it looks like chalk which washes off. That's more public art to me right there, unless it's damaging." When looking at the same picture, another participant explained how the chalk is vandalism: "The artist did not intend for it to be graffitied. Why express it on another piece of art, as opposed to a wall?"

Figure 3: Participants' perceptions of what constitutes vandalism (N=64).



Overall, most participants considered the instances shown to be vandalism because they obscured the original art, detracted, or distracted from the art, or did not look like they matched stylistically with the sanctioned art. *Ebb & Flow* is a brightly warm-colored mural on both internal walls of an underpass on the Burke-Gilman Trail. A sticker and a line of orange paint remain on the official plaque. Some believed the original artist did not intend for anything to be added, and that is what qualified vandalism. For example, one participant said,

> "What I get out of it [*Ebb & Flow*] is…a sense of appreciating life and enjoying life, because of the bright colors and there's some animals in there, and I do think there's probably some Native American aspects to it which I really respect. I think it's the least we could do; have some memory of the fact that we just took everything away and destroyed their way of life…If it were the other way around [National Parks sticker on a Tesla/Fascism sign] then I might not think it was vandalism…To me that [vandalism] means you're supporting the capitalistic consumeristic, white dominated…"

Another participant said, "It's someone's opinion that doesn't belong out on public art or something we're proud to have. That's one person's opinion compared to all the other opinions…"

The type of graffiti and/or stickers made a difference in people's determination of whether an instance constituted vandalism. For example, some people did not see the occurrences of graffiti or stickers as vandalism because it functions as a mode to communicate in a type of public forum. For these participants the original work is transformed through the process of conversation with the community. In the words of one participant, "It's on the artwork but not covering the main idea. It's in the background. They're not defacing the main imagery, that would be different." Another participant responded, "I actually saw that, it made me laugh. The fact that it's on that thing [plaque] posted by the city, I don't know it kind of makes it ironic to me. It's not like anyone owns that specifically in my opinion, so it's just kind of interesting." Another person said, "At least you can remove it. If you want to express yourself so be it. It didn't damage the painting."

Many interviewees accepted seeing graffiti in their daily lives and are used to looking past it. One participant at *Ebb & Flow* explained, "I think of vandalism of something else besides a small sign posted. I probably wouldn't notice that." Someone at SODO Track explained how placement affects perceptions of vandalism of public art, "It looks like tagging, but they were respectful of the art by putting it in a blue space. I can effectively ignore it."

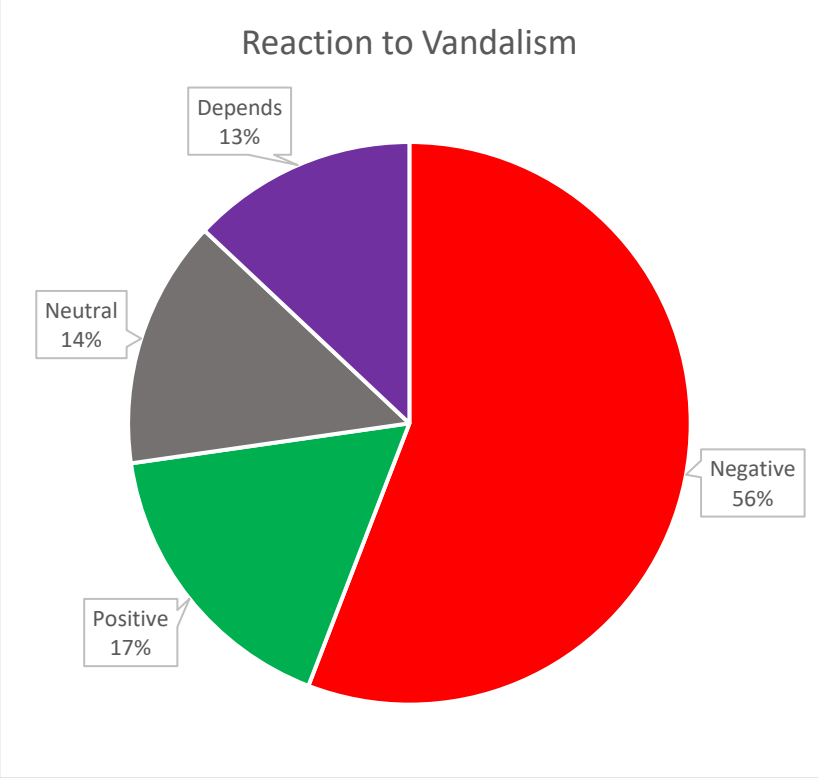
People's reactions to vandalism

When shown pictures of instances of vandalism at four public art sites, over half of the participants viewed them in a negative light (see Figure 4). One participant at *Ebb & Flow* explained the sticker and spray paint on the plaque: "It's Shameful. [A] willful trespass on public space. Our culture now needs to safeguard these public spaces and it's unfortunate that we need to be watchful all the time."

Reasons for positive reactions to vandalism included not seeing it as vandalism but as an addition to the artistic community conversation, agreeing with the message, and feeling that it was more interesting than the public art it covered. People who saw artistic merit in vandalism, or believed it took significant time to create, were less likely to have negative reactions to it. Many people indicated no strong feelings because it is so commonplace in everyday city life, it is a reality whether enjoyable or not. One participant at the SODO Track Murals said, "I've seen a lot of graffiti in my time, so I don't pay 100% mind to it unless it really impresses me and it's unique." Another explained their reaction to graffiti vandalism on the SODO Track murals as follows, "I wish I could say disappointed, but it's normal." A participant at

Columnseum said, “I feel used to it, don't notice it [vandalism] unless there is something unique. The building up the street is constantly tagged and the bank owns it, so they constantly paint over it and in a couple of days it's tagged again.”

Figure 4: Participants’ reactions to vandalism of public art (N=65).

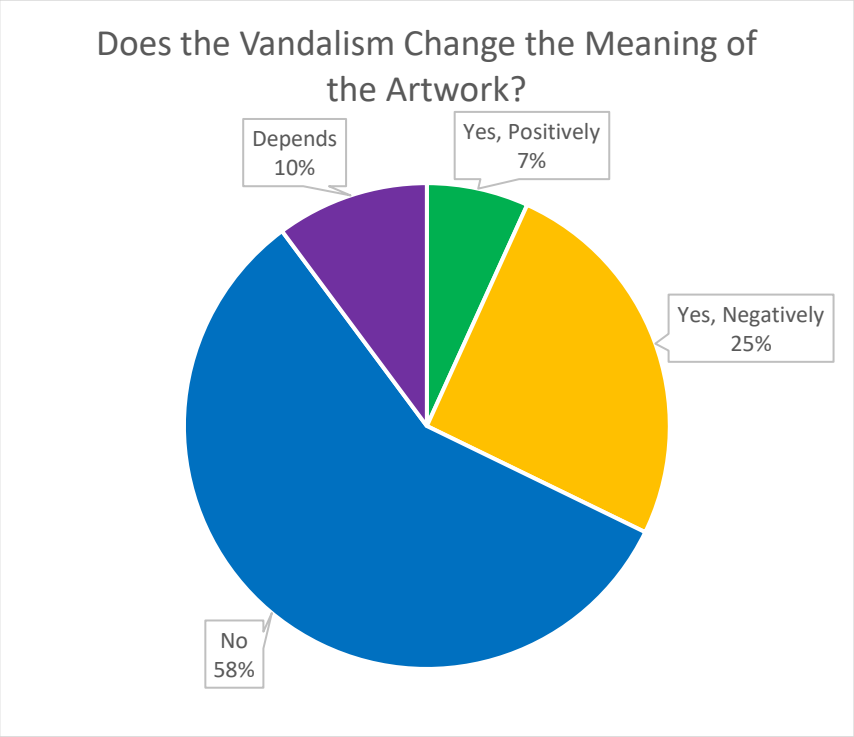


How does vandalism change the meaning of public art?

For most people, even when unsanctioned additions to public art happen, it did not change the original message or meaning behind the art (see Figure 5). People tended to look past vandalism until it started to overtake the underlying public art. A participant at *Ebb & Flow* explained, “It can [change the meaning] if it's covering large sections, otherwise I try to ignore it and try to not let it negatively affect me.” When asked if the vandalism changed the meaning of the artwork another participant at the same site said, “No. I still try to think of what is underlying. I am always happy when they fix it.” For many, the original meaning of the artwork itself affected whether vandalism changed its meaning. One participant at *Columnseum* said, “Here, no [effect]. If the public art had more of a meaning the graffiti would affect it more.” Another participant at *Columnseum* said, “Depends on the graffiti, if it blends in and isn't offensive then it's fine, but just a scribble no [change in meaning].” 7% (N=59) saw the instances as adding to the

public art. One participant at SODO Track explained, “It can add to or elevate the original artwork.”

Figure 5: Participants’ feelings about how vandalism influences the meaning of the artwork (N=59).



How important is vandalism to public art as a societal issue?

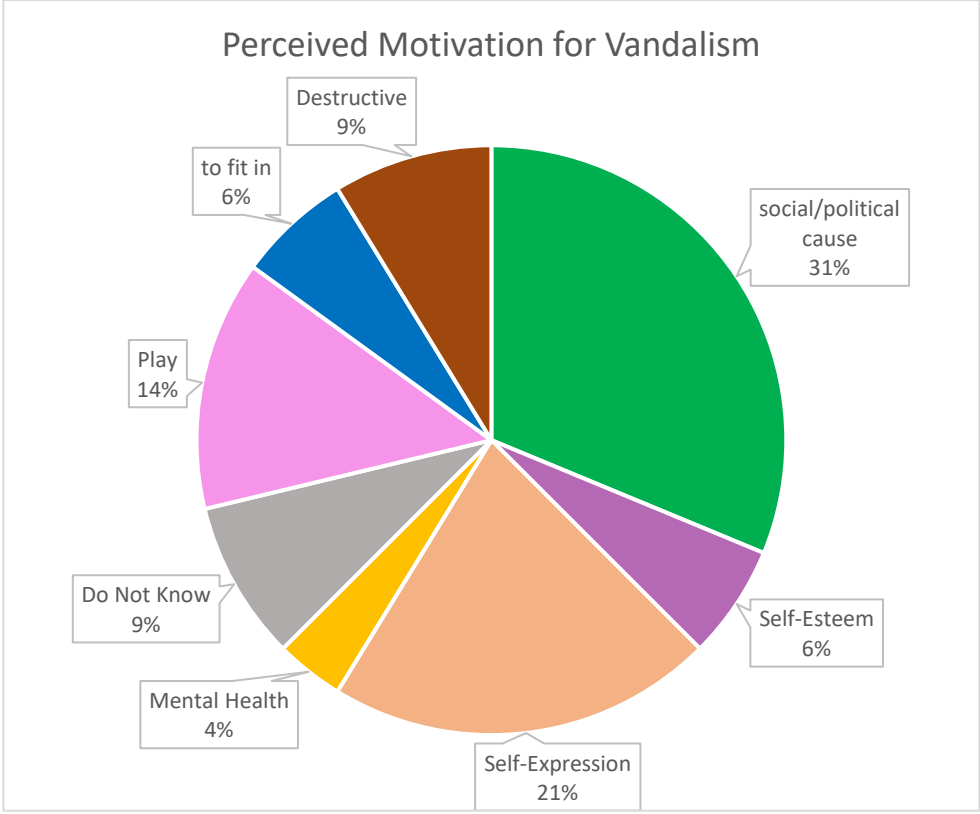
Participants were asked to rate how important they thought the issue of vandalism of public art was, on a scale from 1-5 with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important. The average rating was 3.2 out of 5. For self-described artists, the personal importance of this issue was generally higher, between 4 and 5 out of 5. Many participants were frustrated that vandals chose public art as their creative space, as opposed to a blank wall. One participant at *Columnseum* said, “I prefer the taggers create art, rather than spray paint the art.” Someone at *Ebb & Flow* said, “I look past it [graffiti], it's always there.” Another at the same site said, “I'm not lying awake because of it, but I notice…”. Many participants considered vandalism as a symptom of deeper, more important societal issues, as one person at SODO Track explained: “I know crime, healthcare, homelessness, and mental health are important, but so is respecting somebody's property, art, and work.” Another response from SODO Track was, “Graffiti can reflect

community values and has its place, but not on top of other art unless you're trying to protest a politician or something, there's merit to that."

What did people think motivates vandalism of public art?

Many participants responded with a belief that multiple motivations for vandalism probably exist simultaneously (see Figure 6). When asked why someone would tag the painted columns at *Columnseum*, one participant responded, "Depends on the person. Political reasons, for a thrill, it's a way to be in a community, to put their art out where people can see it." The most common perceived motivations for vandalism are a) to voice a social or political cause 31% (N=80), as an outlet for self-expression 21% (N=80), and boredom in people, usually children, who vandalize as a form of play 14% (N=80). Boredom in adults experiencing homelessness was also cited by several participants. Another participant explained the motivation for tags at *Columnseum* as, "Boredom, especially with the homeless. For some of us, like me I haven't worked in eight years... There's nothing I'm interested in."

Figure 6: Participant's thoughts about what motivates vandalism (N=80)

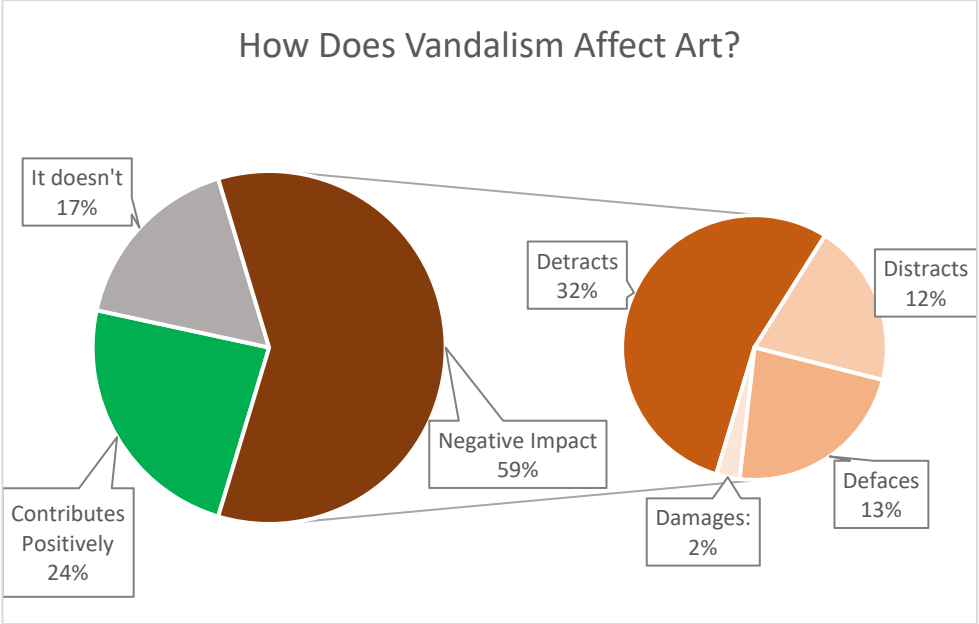


Awareness/understanding of maintenance/preservation of public art

How did people think vandalism affected the art itself?

Participants were asked how they thought vandalism affects the artwork and 59% (n=40) of responses indicated vandalism had a perceived negative impact on the artwork (see Figure 7). Seventeen percent (n=12) did not believe the vandalism shown affected the artwork as one participant explained, "I don't know that it affects the art necessarily. I think people can see past it. For me it's just disappointing. Like a stain on a shirt." Twenty four percent (n=16) of responses indicated a perceived positive contribution to the artwork. One participant described SODO Track: "[Graffiti] can be transformative. It might add to it for me." A participant at *Columnseum* said, "I don't see any graffiti, it's part of the artwork."

Figure 7: Participants' perceptions of how vandalism affects public art (N=59). -

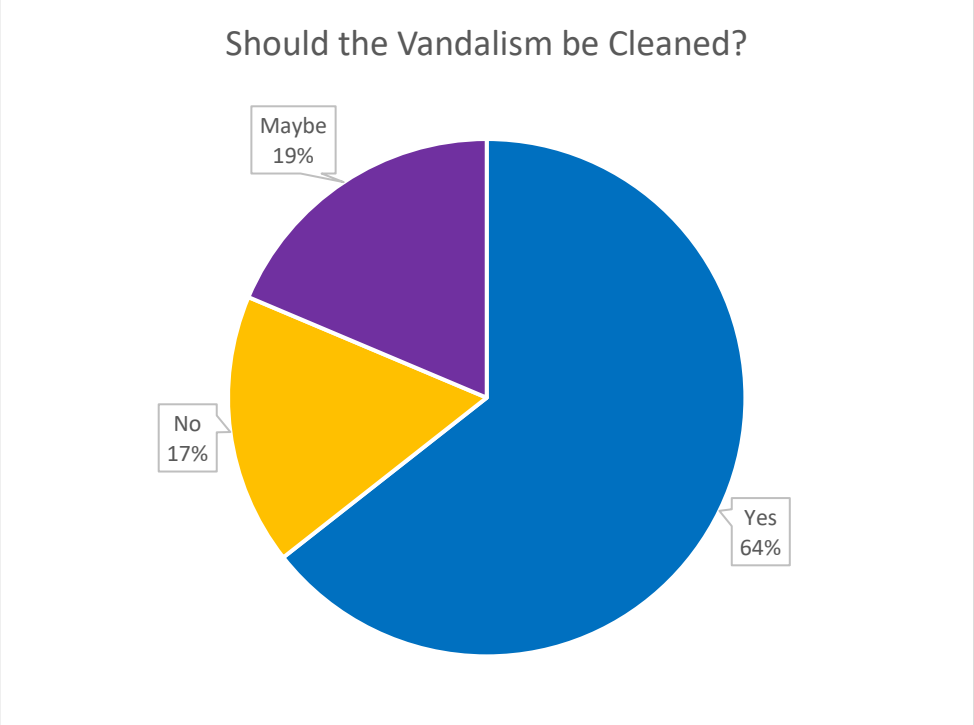


Should vandalism to public art be cleaned?

Most participants believed the vandalism should be cleaned from the public artworks, simply because it had been marred (see Figure 8). Those who said maybe said it would depend on factors such as the amount of vandalism, size of the work of art, or frequency of the vandalism present on the artwork. When asked if the vandalism should

be cleaned, one participant at *Columnseum* said, "If it is a positive message, it might be good to leave it there." Another at the same site responded, "It depends on how much I like it." Some participants referred to the Broken Window Theory as a reason to clean it, while arguing that resources could be better used in other, more important areas like public safety. Broken Window theory emphasizes physical environments' impact on human behaviors, as opposed to approaches that emphasize social identity and group culture. Broken Window Theory posits that the presence of any vandalism, no matter how small or minor creates an environment where vandalism becomes sanctioned and as a result, increases in frequency and salience (Thompson et al., 2012): "Resources could be used in other areas…The Neighborhood Broken Window concept, yeah I think it should be cleaned up." For some, cleaning depended on how much they enjoyed the occurrence of vandalism, both the message and the aesthetics. Some believed that only the artist held authority to decide whether or when it should be cleaned.

Figure 8: Participants' perceptions of whether vandalism should be cleaned (N=59).

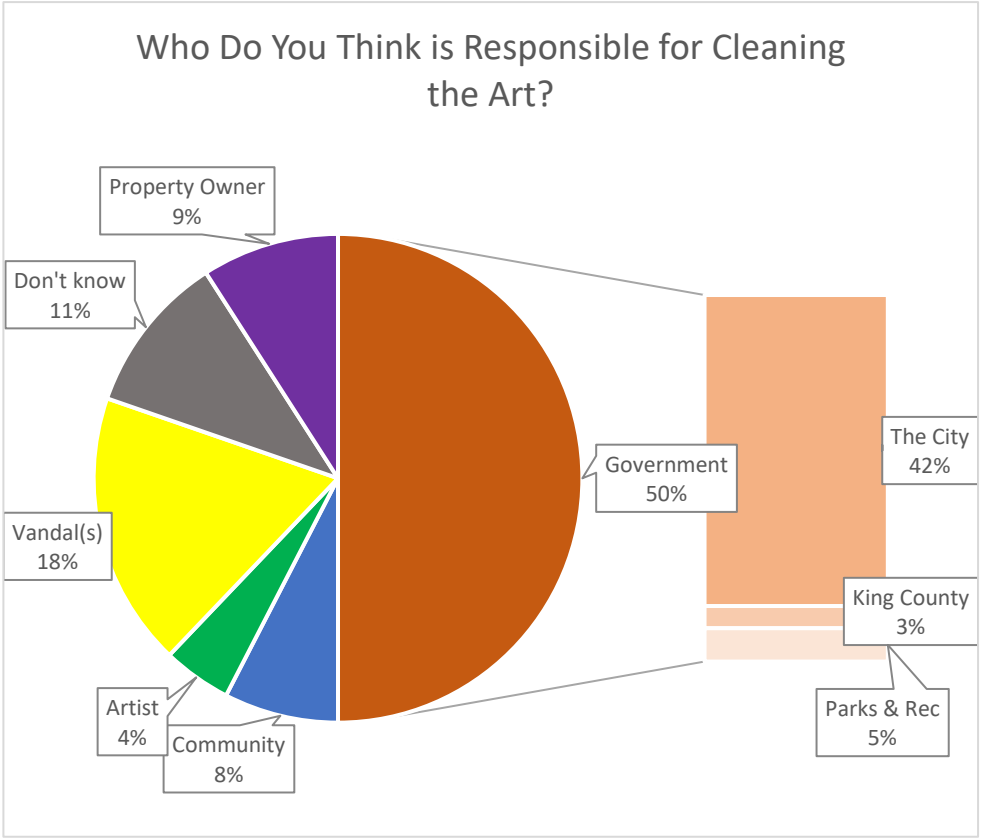


Who do you think is responsible for cleaning public art?

Figure 9 displays the distribution of responses when asked who is responsible for cleaning public art. Half of the responses (50%, n=33)

indicated a belief that some government agency was responsible, most often as just "the city". Eighteen percent of responses (n=12) indicated a belief that the perpetrators of the vandalism held a responsibility to clean it but catching them is unrealistic. One participant at *Ebb & Flow* explained, "Ultimately the person who did it [is responsible for cleaning it], but it's probably going to fall on the city or whoever owns the tunnel." Another at the same site said, "The vandals, but that's unrealistic." Only 4% (n=3) believed the original artist is responsible for cleaning the artwork, and 8% (n=5) believed the community is responsible for cleaning the artwork. When asked if the SODO Track graffiti should be cleaned one participant said, "Only by the artist that did it." When asked who is responsible for cleaning the graffiti at SODO Track, another participant said, "Whoever has that color paint. If I had that color blue and I felt inclined I [would] do it. The business might have the paint."

Figure 9: Participants' perceptions of who should clean vandalism from public art (N=66).



Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of people's attitudes towards different kinds of vandalism inflicted on a range of public artworks across King County, Washington. The findings of this study reinforce the understanding that vandalism of public art is generally viewed negatively by the public, but it can also serve an important role as an agent of civic participation.

What is the public perception of public art?

Most participants thought the works of public art in this study were owned by a government agency or 'the city.' Only a quarter of participants knew that they belonged to the public. Stewards of public art and public spaces have a responsibility to make them not only accessible to all, but welcoming and safe: "Public spaces ought to be democratic spaces, and states with a history of racial injustice must imagine new futures that render visible racial inequities and seek to resolve them" (Hadley et al., 2021, p. 26).

Public art that incorporates street art style, like the murals at SODO Track, can make places happier, prettier, more welcoming, interesting, and safer for communities. Sitas (2020) showed how a graffiti-led hip-hop project can transform a neighborhood through cultural means that do not involve gentrification: "Despite dominant practices of market-led gentrification, culture-led regeneration does not in itself imply economic development for existing propertied elites" (p. 838). In general, research suggests that public art is seen as beautifying space; people appreciate the aesthetic qualities of it (Shobri et al., 2017). This is confirmed by the findings of the current study.

How is vandalism of public art perceived?

Study participants had mixed feelings about the vandalism of public art. On the one hand, many described the images shown in interviews as vandalism because it looked different stylistically, in a way that is less consistent with sanctioned art and more so with graffiti. What's more, over half of the sample reacted negatively to the vandalism shown in interviews, saying it made them feel sad, mad, disrespected, disgusted, and bad.

Thompson et al. (2012) describe Cohen's six types of motivations for vandalism as a) damage committed to obtain property or money, b) to achieve sabotage, c) for the sake of voicing a social, political, or other cause, d) to enact revenge, e) for play, or f) to express rage or frustration, along with five overlapping motivations which are: a)

gaining or sustaining membership within a 'deviant' group through anti-social acts that reinforce group membership, b)self-esteem, c) self-expression, d) to disrupt the order of authority, and e) enjoyment and the rush associated with the illegality of the behavior. Results from this study confirm Cohen's types, since participants felt vandals were likely motivated by a social or political cause, self-expression, or play.

On the other hand, some participants felt that vandalism too was a form of self-expression. This mirrors sentiments from existing graffiti research that describes all paint in the public, sanctioned or not, as interaction in a larger community:

> "While it is easy to fall into the graffiti/street art divide, we need to see how all of the paint on these specific walls bleed into each other and operate within racialized, neoliberal contexts. And more specifically, how those who are spraying these walls (whether they are paid artists who are brought into a neighborhood or those who illegally catch tags under cover of night) interact among the larger neighborhood's ecosystem" (Lennon, 2023, p. 243).

Many participants expressed a belief that only the artist had the authority to decide whether to clean graffiti from a work of public art. This view is also seen in the literature: "There is a public interest in viewing, analyzing, and debating the content and significance of their ideological vandalism. The anti-racist graffiti of public art statues contributes to this venture. So too should intellectual property law" (Hadley et al., 2021, p. 26-27). If we can make public art spaces feel like they are for everyone, it may reduce motivation to vandalize them:

> "Often people feel excluded from the world of art because, like a foreign language they cannot speak, they also cannot understand what artists are trying to communicate. Just as misunderstandings between cultures and ethnicities can have devastating repercussions, so can the misunderstandings between an artist and a viewer. To act violently towards an artwork is as fruitless as it is to act violently towards a human being. Unless a work of art is completely destroyed by an act of vandalism, so that it must be removed from the public's view, vandalism does not devalue a work of art, rather, such acts only stand to

increase and affirm an art works value" (MacNamara, 2013, p. 55).

How aware are people of maintenance or preservation of public art?

Many participants believed any vandalism should be cleaned up simply because it was on top of the art. Some believed the original artist held the responsibility and authority to remove or repair vandalism, and others thought some government agency should be responsible for cleaning and maintenance of the sites. But overall, most participants admitted they had not really thought about these issues before being asked about them. This is consistent with other studies, for example conducted by Wei et al. (2021).

People who felt a sense of ownership over the public art also felt a sense of responsibility as part of a community to clean or rectify the artwork, as long as it was not the original artist's intent to provide a collaborative community art space through the work. This too is consistent with findings from relevant literature: "Although there seems to be a sort of public ambivalence to these objects, it was found that the threat of a change in the situation often resulted in emotional reactions, especially when the public felt that a decision had been made without consulting them" (Wei et al., 2021). However, contrary to Wei et al., this study found that the public overwhelmingly appreciated environmental improvements, even when performed by unknown agents.

Implications

Practice

The findings of this study suggest high potential for community-driven public art cleanups as ways to not only keep our shared spaces safe and beautiful, but also help create more inclusive communities overall (Harris et al., 2020). As policymakers, urban planners, and community-based organizations interested in creating more inclusive communities design public spaces that embody elements of the cultures, histories, and struggles of longtime residents of color, while also incentivizing the preservation and construction of diverse, multigenerational housing, along with implementing programs to preserve and grow minority-owned businesses, they help maintain a

variety of commercial options and affordability levels in gentrifying neighborhoods.

Art is everywhere and it should reflect anti-racist community values: "Policymakers and planners should also take advantage of the power of parks to bring together diverse communities… parks and recreation programs that promote positive interactions between people of different races/ethnicities might help reduce discriminatory policing in the medium and long term." (Harris et al., 2020, p. 10). People want to be involved in, or at least informed on the art around them. Salomon et al. (2018) found that the public's goodwill and involvement in looking out for each other's property is just as vital to the life of a cultural institution as a good security system and is one of the strongest methods in reducing crime: "It is suggested that community art engagement activities, free art education seminars in art museums and at public education facilities, and seminars with topics on art vandalism and art theft may foster this type of protective community by enhancing positive attitudes and knowledge of art… A multitude of voices from community stakeholders has the ability to advocate for security policy changes to safeguard art" (Salomon et al., 2018, p. 13).

This study echoes calls from previous literature for community engagement: "… Incorporate art vandals' motives into the development of security practices… we advocate for engaging both the art and residential communities in the fight against art crime" (Salomon et al., 2018, p. 13). By allowing members of the community to claim agency over works of art in public we can work together to create and maintain art that positively reflects our collective values. The concept of a legal free wall has been employed in many places including SODO to offer a hypothetically controlled and contained space for graffiti expression without fear of legal repercussions. A free wall approach to community cleanup and curation of public art may help reduce instances of racist, destructive, or hateful vandalism. One self-described graf writer who participated in this study expressed motivation to paint over other's graffiti on street art that they deemed disrespectful. There is potential for graffiti art to overflow from a sanctioned free wall into unsanctioned public space, but the benefits of creating more community stakeholders may help manage the content of street art. Many museums use a talkback strategy in exhibits to ask visitors about their feelings or perceptions of a given topic. Sicky notes or digital posters made by museum guests are often displayed on gallery walls, and while most are earnest and genuine in their messages some oversight is always required from museum staff to edit and delete obscene or otherwise unwanted responses. If artistic graffiti that is

thoughtfully placed and not hateful is allowed to stay up, vandals can be converted to artists and stewards of culture, investing in public art rather than defacing it. While a community based free wall approach to public art cleanup would generally self-regulate, maintenance, editing, and re-painting by a neighborhood art council or county agency would be necessary to keep the space appropriate for all. When the people who interact with public art every day are offered a chance to be a part of it, chances are they will help advocate for and preserve it.

Research

Recommendations for future studies include asking the same interview questions at a broader sample of sites in King County, with both a greater diversity in types of vandalism and different mediums of public art, to expand the perspectives revealed in this study and compare them with other parts of the country, then the world. One of the most difficult aspects of the study of art vandalism lies in capturing the perspective of the vandal. Studies that provide insight into the stated motivations of graffiti artists and other vandals who attack public art would help inform the results from this, and many other studies: "... we recommend that an analysis of art vandals' self-stated justifications be conducted... Art can be perceived as exclusively for the privileged, upper class and thus these crimes do not warrant much sympathy" (Salomon et al., 2018, p. 13). It is important for future studies to accept that many barriers stand in the way of sanctioned public art, and some people feel the need to express themselves through vandalism of public art: "Analyses of urban cultural politics need to pay attention to the hustles that exist at the intersection of cultural policy and cultural practice, and at the juncture of the legal/illegal and mainstream/subversive" (Sitas, 2020, p. 839).

References

Armstrong, S. (2019). *Street art*. Thames & Hudson.

Bryan, M. (2018, August 14). *Tearing down a Black teen: Seattle artwork repeatedly vandalized | Cascade PBS News*. https://crosscut.com/2018/08/tearing-down-black-teen-seattle-artwork-repeatedly-vandalized

Cartiere, C., & Zebracki, M. (2015). *The Everyday Practice of Public Art: Art, Space, and Social Inclusion* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315737881

Chapter 10.07—GRAFFITI NUISANCE CODE | Municipal Code | Seattle, WA | Municode Library. (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2023, from https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodeId=TIT10HESA_CH10.07GRNUCO_10.07.090SE

Cloonan, M. V. (2018). *The Monumental Challenge of Preservation: The Past in a Volatile World* (1st ed.). The MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8163.001.0001

Doss, E. (2018). The Elephant in the Room: Prejudicial Public Art and Cultural Vandalism. *De Arte*, *53*(2–3), 4–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043389.2018.1481909

Hadley, M., Hook, S., & Orr, N. (2021). Ideological Vandalism of Public Statues: Copyright, The Moral Right of Integrity and Racial Justice. Griffith Journal of Law & Human Dignity, 9(2), Article 2. https://griffithlawjournal.org/index.php/gjlhd/article/view/1229

Harris, B., Rigolon, A., & Fernandez, M. (2020). "To them, we're just kids from the hood": Citizen-based policing of youth of color, "white space," and environmental gentrification. *Cities*, *107*, 102885-. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.102885

Knight, C. K., & Senie, H. (2016). *A companion to public art*. Wiley, Blackwell.

Lenin Statue. (n.d.). *Fremont, Seattle - Center of the Universe*. Retrieved November 21, 2023, from https://fremont.com/lenin-statue/

Lennon, J. (2023). Aversive racism, gentrification, and graffiti studies. *Dialogues in Urban Research*, *I*(3), 240–243. https://doi.org/10.1177/27541258231204009

Lévy-Leboyer, C. (1984). *Vandalism, behaviour and motivations*. North-Holland.

Luckerson, V. (2018, October 18). *The Rise and Risk of the Mural Economy*. The Ringer. https://www.theringer.com/2018/10/18/17989192/mural-economy-street-art-detroit-graffiti

MacNamara, A. M. (2013). *The Effects of Vandalism on the Value of Artworks in Public Collections* [M.A., Sotheby's Institute of Art - New York]. Retrieved November 20, 2023, from https://www.proquest.com/docview/1519315438/abstract/CD51DD8B0BA34B39PQ/1

Noble, C. & Pixel One Productions. (2003). *City space*. Pixel One Productions.

Palmer, J. (2016). Why Public Art? Urban Parks and Public Art in the Twenty-First Century. In *The Everyday Practice of Public Art* (1st ed., pp. 208–222). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315737881-13

Public Art. (2019, May 13). *ArtsWA*. https://www.arts.wa.gov/public-art/

RCW 9A.48.090.2C GRAFFITI: Malicious mischief in the third degree. (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2023, from https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=9A.48.090.2C%20GRAFFITI

Salomon, K., Roelfs, D. J., Schroeder, R., Morrin, P., & Begley, J. (2018). Art Vandalism and Guardianship in US Art Institutions. *Arts*, *7*(3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts7030023

Shobri, N. I. M., Sakip, S. R. M., & Daud, N. (2017). Public Perception Towards Graffiti Art in Malaysia. *Advanced Science Letters*, *23*(7), 6203–6207.

Sitas, R. (2020). Creative Cities, Graffiti and Culture-Led Development in South Africa: Dlala Indima ('Play Your Part'). *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *44*(5), 821–840. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12894

Thompson, K., Offler, N., Hirsch, L., Every, D., Thomas, M. J., & Dawson, D. (2012). From broken windows to a renovated research agenda: A review of the literature on vandalism and graffiti in the rail industry. *Transportation Research. Part A, Policy and Practice*, *46*(8), 1280–1290. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2012.04.002

Wei, W. (Bill), Heerema, H., Rushfeld, R., & van der Lee, I. (2021). Issues in Conservation—Three Value Moments in the Public Perception of Cultural Heritage Objects in Public Spaces. *Collabra: Psychology*, *7*(1), 21935. https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.21935

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Recruitment Script:

Hello, I'm a graduate student at UW, doing my thesis research on people's thoughts about public art, like this here [pointing to the work]. Do you have a few minutes to talk with me?

Are you okay with me recording this conversation?

1. Do you know what this is [pointing to the work of art]? How would you describe it to someone who doesn't know anything about it?
2. Who owns it?
3. What does it mean to you? What is the message? (Social, Political, etc.)
4. Here are some images showing things that have happened to [work of art] recently. Would you call this vandalism? Why/why not?
5. Is vandalism here different than other places in Seattle? If so, how?
6. What do you think about the surrounding environment? (Barriers, Landscaping, etc.)
7. What is your reaction to an instance like this, when a piece of public art is [vandalized or whatever other word/description they used]?
8. Why do you think someone would do something like this? What's their motivation?
9. Does the [vandalism or whatever other word/description they used] change the meaning of the work of art for you? If so, how? If not, why not?
10. How do you think this kind of [vandalism or whatever other word they used] affects the art itself?
11. Should it be cleaned up, in your opinion?
12. Who do you think is responsible for cleaning it?
13. How do you think it is maintained?
14. On a scale from 1-5, where 1 is not at all important and 5 is extremely important, how important is the issue of vandalism of public art to you? Explain your rating.

[End of Script]

Appendix B

Interview Photos

Photo 1: *Ebb & Flow*. A round orange sticker with black block text reads, 'SUPPORT FASCISM BUY A TESLA' on top of orange spray paint on a National Park Service plaque on the mural in the tunnel.

Photo 2: *Columnseum*. A stylized tag in black spray paint partially covers the yellow paint at the bottom of a highway overpass support pilar.

Photo 3: *Columnseum*. Twelve pieces of paper are pasted over the yellow paint of a support column in the shape of a landscape oriented rectangle. The design is a Palestinian flag with the word ‘free’ repeated in the top stripe and the word ‘Palestine’ repeated in the bottom stripe. The middle stripe has large sylized font displaying the message ‘Free Palestine’.

Photo 4: SODO Track Mural. Black and white spray paint tags over the negative blue space at the bottom of a mural depicting natural and geometric shapes.

Photo 5: The *Fremont Troll*. Multi-colored scribbles cover the left arm of the troll figure.