Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ujcp20

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To cite this article: Bilquis Ghani (2020): Culture and conflict: Kabuli art as public pedagogy, Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, DOI: 10.1080/15505170.2020.1832002

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2020.1832002

Published online: 30 Nov 2020.

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JOURNAL OF CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY
https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2020.1832002

Culture and conflict: Kabuli art as public pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Kabul is a city that has experienced years of war and devastation. Through the ruptures to culture, Kabuli[1] artists are using their art practice to rebuild their city. As a public pedagogy, the artworks produced in the streets of Kabul reflect the intersection of activism, education, and creative expression. This article will look at how two sources of public art, Shamsia Hassani and ArtLords, are creating transitional spaces within the city.[2] Through their art praxis, they make sites of contestation and deliberation. The incidental-ephemeral publics that encounter them and their work as they pass are invited to engage with the work and the process of art making. The site, thus, employs visual and performative tools to nurture discursive moments in which citizens can engage with artists about the future of their city and the construction of identity. The article will present the aspirations of these street artists and their art practice, arguing that it is a form of public pedagogy. They reflect the hopes and fears of the inhabitants who simultaneously love and fear their city.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 March 2020
Revised 30 July 2020
Accepted 30 September 2020

Introduction

> *Kabul is in two extremes; Kabul is a very beautiful city because of being able to observe everything like of all the kind of mentalities and all that, but also yeah it's the love and hate relationship we have with the city.*
>
> *(Sadaf*, participant interview, 3 March 2018)*

Kabul's precarious security and safety situation permeates through the streets and shapes the tension felt by its publics. Even so, there is also a side to Kabul rarely experienced. The public art practices of Shamsia Hassani and ArtLords reflect the aspirations and activities of a generation of Kabuli artists who, through their art praxis, work to reclaim their city. Challenging the binaries of subversion or acquiescence, artists navigate their contextual realities and bring audiences together through discursive spaces created by their art in the street. I conceptualize the publics that encounter public-art in Kabul's streets to be incidental and ephemeral and

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argue that in the moment of encounter, incidental-ephemeral publics exist in an aporetic space of possibility.

Sadaf*, the writer and activist quoted above, resides in Kabul. She identifies the dual sides of Kabul, one of hope and one of fear, reverberating with a sense of expectation. One expectation that it may erupt into chaos, the other that peace may well be just around the corner. Creativity and innovation exist amidst the potential at any moment for violence and chaos. Yet in the face of challenges, artists have created spaces of public pedagogy. In Kabul, these sites of creative output occur despite, or perhaps because of, sites of violence.

This article considers two examples of artistic praxis in contemporary Kabul and is the product of interviews conducted late 2017 and early 2018. The activities of a group called ArtLords and a young woman named Shamsia Hassani are public displays of mural art. By presenting the views and values of Kabuli artists, this article's dual purpose is to offer a nuanced and considered entry point into life in Kabul from the perspective of young artists and to introduce the concept of the incidental-ephemeral public as a point of encounter and public pedagogy.

My argument is that the experiential dimension of publicness combines with spatiality and temporality to create the incidental-ephemeral public which employs the moment of enchantment as precondition to publicness, even if momentary. As such, this article combines the experiential dimension of publicness with spatial and temporal attributes. I explore the contextuality of publicness and publics, before exploring the dual sides of Kabul the city. I then explore art as public pedagogy in the Kabul context; finally, I suggest that we consider the incidental-ephemeral public as the intersection of pedagogy through the affective reach of public art. I contribute to conceptualizations of publicness as a nonphysical place which potentiates "human togetherness" (Biesta, 2012, p. 684), amidst the possibility for chaos.

The artists

ArtLords are a group of young Kabuli men and women who use Kabul's many blast walls as their canvas. Blast walls are large, thick concrete walls, commonly known as a T-wall in Afghanistan, which have become increasingly abundant in Kabul. They are placed around government buildings and residences (in affluent areas) to protect against bombings. The walls represent a division in Kabul society between those who must navigate daily violence and those who have the means to be shielded from it. The blast walls also act as constant reminders of the precarity of Kabul's safety and security. Artlords use these surfaces for stencil art which is projected on the walls, so that passersby can easily contribute to the work too, the second example is

of a female graffiti artist named Shamsia Hassani. Shamsia's works depict images of women in Afghan dress, often with various musical instruments in hand. Shamsia is acutely aware that her presence, too, in the street is considerably more pronounced. As an anomaly in the streetscape, she knows that both the space she inhabits as a woman and a graffiti artist, and the work she leaves behind, are politically and socially disruptive. She compares this to being a man, explaining the dangers she faces, "Sure if I was a man I could stand there, nobody bothers men, whatever they do everyone is proud of them but for women it's much more difficult and that's how I started graffiti" (participant interview, 10 January 2018).[3]

ArtLords and Shamsia employ distinctly different approaches to creating murals, but both use the materiality of Kabul as their canvas to express the intangibility of experiences. While street art and murals have a long global lineage,[4] in recent times following decades of conflict, its utilization by ArtLords, Shamsia, and others, serves as new ground for exploring alternative ways of being. Artists and groups like ArtLords and Shamsia act as social agents, or what Gramsci (1971) called "organic intellectuals," who, as products of their social and political contexts, are best positioned to navigate it.[5] For them, the sites of art they create are not intended to be consensus raising in the way that Habermas defined public spaces. Rather, they create "agonistic public spaces" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 213). For Mouffe, public spaces are not spaces of consensus but "where the different hegemonic projects are confronted" (p. 213).[6] In essence, Kabuli artists offer new subjectivities, through expression, demonstration, and activism. Within the folds of this subjectivity echoes the experience of war and the navigation of its presence in the mundanity of the every day.

Kabul's nascent, dynamic street art scene contributes to its character and reflects conversations between inhabitant and space. Through the examples of ArtLords and Shamsia Hassani, the legacy of war comes face to face with the artistic reclamation, or reconceptualization, of public spaces, amid continuing insurgent struggles, and political uncertainty. In his melancholic account of Istanbul, Orhan Pamuk recounts the tug and pull of Istanbullus[7] maintaining "their Eastern particularism" but that "even a mild objection [by a Western writer] would break their hearts and wound their nationalist pride" (2005, p. 213). Pamuk captures a tension between a will to adopt aspects of Western modernity, such as secularism and the centrality of the individual, and a desire to preserve cultural heritage, that resonates with the Kabul context today. This tension is symptomatic of a push to globalize and engage with the world, and the pull to preserve heritage, upon which hangs the lineages of faith, family, and community.[8] Yet, the Kabul context offers an example of how this binary is no more than an oversimplified reification, which has embedded within it the colonialist

assumption that the South's societies and cultures are stagnant through time (Narayan, 1997).[9]

ArtLords co-founder, Omaid Sharifi expresses that his parents' generation knew a Kabul that was freer, contrasting this with his own life, "my stories are all from the time of war, violence, and like my kids would only hear that, nothing else." For Omaid, it is through art that he can carve out peace amidst the ever-present potential for danger. Leveraging art's transformative potential, he says, "to see that image on a street of Kabul, this itself is one of the biggest statements you can make" (participant interview, 2 February 2018). Through culture, daily existence becomes inscribed upon tangential mediums, able to be witnessed by passersby.

Shamsia's depictions of women through her street art challenge the structures tied to gender and power. As she expresses,

> I wanted to work more on the topic of women because I had seen there are not a lot of women around for example you go to offices and there aren't many women. You go to school, to uni, there weren't many women, in society. That's why I said we will bring women into society again. (Participant interview, 10 January 2018)

In an environment where women's movements are highly monitored, Shamsia's work conveys her claim to the city, captured in Carrington's (2009) reference to graffiti more broadly as, "a complex dance around identity, power and belonging" (p. 419). In addition to the risks to physical safety that Shamsia experiences, she represents a rupture in the everyday, a moment of dissensus for passersby. This moment of Rancierian dissensus, conceptualized in the case for Kabul as the encounter between the viewer, the artist and the artwork, creates potential for political action. It occurs when "the reigning configuration between perception and meaning is disrupted by those elements, groups or individuals in society that demand not only to exist but indeed to be perceived" (Panagia, 2014, p. 96). I take this to reflect a public pedagogy which is disruptive in that it "creates sites of struggle in which images, discourses, canonical themes, and commonly accepted understandings of reality are disrupted" (Dentith et al., 2014, p. 37). The works of both ArtLords and Shamsia use the materiality of the city to self-narrate, in essence, it is the act of "writing oneself into existence" (Carrington, 2009, p. 420).

Publicness and publics

The rupture caused by war has created moments of paradox and a period of transition and becoming. The art, the performativity of the space, the viewers who pass, and the context of Kabul and its streets together form the "cultural texts" upon which a discursive relationship between strangers is nurtured (Sandlin & Milam, 2008, p. 328). Kabuli artists navigate complexities of self and surroundings through their art. Artists, as a public in

their own right, interact with the public at large and a two-way discursive relationship is cultivated, in which each bears witness to the other's action, their operations are decentered and collective. Artists are engaged, not only in representation, but in construction and meaning making. As such, more than just communication, art is reality construction and generative. Freire's explanation places the individual in context and rings particularly true here,

> Such awareness of oneself and the world, however, is not the result of a purely private choice, but of an historical process in which object societies, some more rapidly than others due to the structural transformations they undergo, reflect upon themselves and perceive themselves to be dependent. These moments, which characterize the transitional stage of such societies, are both problematic and creative. They testify to the emergence of the masses and to their clamouring presence in the historical process in varying degrees of intensity. (Friere, 1972, pp. 14–15)

Artist likes Shamsia and ArtLords, navigate "the transitional stage" to create opportunities in which they, the city and its publics become entwined through the publicness of their work and the ease of access they offer. Painting on a blast wall in a Kabul street is an inherently political act, just as is the figure of a woman playing an instrument sprayed on a wall. By being present in the street, these encounters with artists and their art are designed with community and togetherness in mind. Biesta (2012, 2014), suggests three modes of public pedagogy: pedagogy for the public, pedagogy of the public,[10] and pedagogy for publicness. Favoring pedagogy for publicness, he defines publicness as, "a concern for the public quality of human togetherness, and thus, for the possibility of actors and events to *become public*," adding this to be expressed as, "forms of political *existence* … in which action is possible and freedom can appear" (p. 23 author's emphasis). Biesta's (2014) conception of publicness acts as a bridging of education and politics, but one not restrained to formalized institutional avenues. Publicness, as a place for civic action (Biesta, 2012), connects the artist and the physical city as components of each other and harbors potential for further theorizing about the pedagogical process of street art.

This conceptualization of publicness through a pedagogy for publicness has been broadly applied. Cooper and Sandlin (2020) employ Biesta's conceptualization through a new materialist lens in their study of street art in Melbourne, Australia. They suggest that street art hosts agentic potential, rendering "pedagogies as relationships" (p. 434), and further expand relationality beyond the human-human to the human-non-human. This parallels Alfred Gell's *Agency and Art: An Anthropological Theory* (1998), in which he explains, "The immediate 'other' in a social relationship does not have to be another 'human being'" (p. 17). Also based in Melbourne, Bellingham et al. (2019) use Biesta's (2012) suggestion for learning outside of formal institutions. By introducing the notion of educational

consciousness, how people look at education, they explore public knowledge as contextually situated, democratically accessible and reflective of locale. Both studies focus on Biesta's (2012) "pedagogy in the interest of publicness," with the latter arguing against the incursion of neoliberalism in formal educational settings, and positioning knowledge construction in the hands of people and their creativity and experiences (p. 78). The authors define bodies of knowledge as: "land, kin and knowledge, temporality and gentrification, and education, history and time" (Bellingham et al., 2019, p. 82). In another application, based in north America and Australia, Caris and Cowell (2016) employ Biesta's (2012) theory of public pedagogy to develop the concept of "artistic citizenship," a form of community based citizenship in everyday artistic settings which "chooses art as a form of playful creative action" through which alterity can be explored (p. 467). They present three examples of art practice in which the artist and spectator are co-creators. With a focus specifically on situation art which is generated within particular locations and its facilitation in creating public spaces, Caris and Cowell (2016) approach the artists' context as "a central influencing factor" (p. 479). The intervention between audience and artist at the moment of encounter allows "certain practices of citizenship to emerge" (p. 469). Like Biesta, these studies favor a public pedagogy as concern for publicness, over pedagogy of or for the public. As such, they conceive of publics at the nexus of teaching and learning.

Biesta's conception of public pedagogy for publicness can be applied in a decidedly alternative setting, namely, the streets of Kabul, where peace and war, hope and fear, coexist. In the Kabul context, the public, or audience, encounters art in spaces where they expected rupture, weighed with memories of recent conflicts. The rupture may be in the form of physical broken walls, or symbolic as in the concrete blast walls as indicators or reminders of the persistent potential for violence. The expectation and the reality of the art site are at odds, eliciting an emotional response (Sandlin & Milam, 2008, p. 335). The encounter as a moment of dissensus reflects where the art and the praxis of art as pedagogy meet. Ellsworth (2005) approaches pedagogy as the experiential process of knowledge as it is made. The experience, explains Ellsworth, is "of being radically in relation to one's self, to others, and to the world" (p. 2). The city, the artist and the public intersect at the site of the art, creating a language of affect that is experienced rather than spoken or heard (Ghani & Fiske, 2019), in activist, experimental and demonstrative ways (Biesta, 2014, p. 23).

The publicness of the art and the art process employ modes of address that circumvent spoken, written, or visual language. As physical bodies in experiential space, both artist, context and publics become part of the performance of creating art, and meaning, on the street, "rather than as

tangential *learning styles* that merely accompany the 'real' education inherent in language" (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 351, author's emphasis). The face-to-face-ness of public art reflects an encounter in which the other is felt and experienced. As a public space, the street offers the opportunity to make new meaning, without the scripts of home, work, or school weighing on the context. As Hickey (2006) adds, "it is the street that exposes us … to the multiple discourses of the urban environment" (para 11).

Approaching pedagogy experientially allows a melding of subjectivities – from audience, to artist, and each as intersections of publics. That spectator become part of the space marks a transition from passerby, to bystander, to being implicated in the production of the work. It is this "detournement," or turning around, "wherein people begin seeing their individual lives as intertwined with others' lives and with social issues, and begin enacting 'civil labour', which involves individuals engaging politically with the commons in order to increase the social capital of everyone" (Sandlin & Milam, 2008, p. 341). More than a physical presence, the audience now embodies the message as part of the process of making the art. The process is relational and immersive. The audiences, having shed passivity, are now part of the spectacle and have an audience of their own. In essence, they are "implicated in the constitution of the work" (Hein, 1996, p. 3). In conferring meaning, and engaging with the work, the encounter between public and art becomes intrinsically political.

In an expression that captures the aporetic space[11] between creation and destruction, "a condition of radical possibility" emerges (Burdick et al., 2014, p. 4). Kabir explains,

> you can actually create culture, you can cultivate it. It's so tangible here … And that's nice, and the other thing … I just love that two days in Afghanistan aren't the same and you can't predict anything, what is around the corner and I really don't want to predict it. So sometimes when I leave the office, I go and I'm driving and I'm just looking at the car next to me and say, hmm, maybe it will just blow up near me. (Participant interview, 3 January 2018)

Kabir's embrace of the unpredictability of the everyday includes the possibility of death and yet his, almost lighthearted, reference to this possibility is offered in the same breath as the possibility to create culture.

Noorjahan, a writer, reflects on art in Kabul,

> it is not necessarily quote-unquote 'high art' but it is very very vibrant and it is very, I think, full of energy and there's a lot of life, and that's so contradictory for Kabul which has the highest rate of civilian deaths in the country … It's a lively city and there are concerts you know, in the summer there are concerts on weekly basis, there's festivals … and I really have come to love and appreciate that part of Kabul. (Participant interview, 18 December 2017)

In both Kabir's and Noorjahan's accounts of Kabul, there is love for the city despite the violence. As such, the absence and presence of violence

exist side by side and is navigated by artists who act as pedagogs, with a vision, responsive to their surroundings. Like Kabir, Noorjahan couples the creative process and a violent underbelly to life in Kabul, termed as competing forces of life and death. The vibrancy and potential that they and other artists express about Kabul are paradoxically linked to the violence and precarity of the city, like two cities in one. The possibility of death and the potential for creating anew both exist in the streets of Kabul.

The rigidity of contextual realities is intimately understood and carefully navigated by social agents. As competing ontologies of agency and structure, objectivism, and subjectivism, these binaries become overly reified concepts. Artists' praxes neither reflect acquiescence to the status quo nor are they expressions of overt subversion. Rather, their interactions with their city are a complex and relational dynamic. Grange (1999) refers to "intelligence-in-action" to conceptualize this relational dynamic between city and inhabitant. For Grange, the act of learning is immersive in that it is "a unified process of thinking, feeling, willing, and doing that takes place within social existence and not outside it," warning against a, "disembodied intellect standing apart from its concrete circumstances" (p. 159). It is this "urban praxis" which Kabuli artists engage to reach out and communicate, to mobilize symbolism and nurture moments of disruption and meaning making.

Negotiating through context, Shamsia and ArtLords transform the streetscapes they inhabit with their works, not just esthetically, but as opportunities for reflection and discourse in public spaces. By using the daily rhythm of the city, artists are able to go to their audiences rather than await an audience to see them in an exhibition space. The street provides the accessible space for publics to emerge. No tickets need to be bought, no cultural capital leveraged, no specific "uniform" or dress code, this incidental-ephemeral public can be anybody.

Kabul, the city

In Kabul, artists navigate anomalous sites in the city, exercising a right to the city, which is not entirely without condition but nevertheless reflects a desire to work with the city for the city. Art becomes the vehicle through which ways of being can be explored, the city forming the spaces where strangers can meet. It is in the physical spaces of the city that artists, as culture makers, can "resurrect a language of resistance and possibility [which] embraces a militant utopianism" (Giroux, 2003, p. 98). For Landry (2008), urban centers are "neutral territory" in which they can "function as showcases for creative ideas and activities generated in all parts of the city" (p. 120). Greene (2000) adds, "We also have our social imagination: the

capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools … " (p. 4). As an exercise in reclamation, artists embrace their city, through the hope and the fear. But Landry warns that, "the city as an arena of public space and exchange of ideas is threatened by recent trends toward the privatization of public space" (2008, p. 120).[12] The blast walls, which now consume much of Kabul's cityscape, have proven lucrative for the private companies who sell them to government, international NGOs, and to private clients. The walls symbolize private spaces spilling into the street, blurring the boundaries between the public and private, all the while creating demarcations between them.

Beyond the physical space and the physical bodies that inhabit it, the city functions like a living organism, complex, intersecting, and dynamic. In its belly, it holds social and cultural meanings, symbols and signifiers, the hopes and aspirations of its people, the narratives it shapes, and the tensions and fears that rupture it. The city, Kabul in particular, imbues imageability, an ability to provoke an image in every witness (Lynch, 1960), particularly with the crumbling buildings that echo its rich history set amidst its towering mountains that contour its perimeter. Through the mental form the city takes in the eye of its inhabitants, physically and symbolically, the city takes shape, and can be re-envisioned.

In *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebrve asks, "Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched?" (p. 11), to which he responds that indeed the space of the city embodies social relations, but not in passivity. Artists actively impact the city as the city impacts them. For Lefebvre, inhabiting the city is to, "take part in a social life, a community, village or city" (Lefebrve, 1996, p. 76). The reclamation of the city as a space for co-creation and collaboration, in which its inhabitants have some say in the contours of the spaces they inhabit, is a conceptual response to the lack of control that so often permeates the streets of Kabul. As such, artists conduct an act of active citizenship and an expression of ownership. For Harvey (2008), the right to the city refers to "a right to change ourselves by changing the city" (p. 23). Conceptualized as a human right, Harvey (2008) identifies the right to the city as a common right to exercising collective power.

Yet Kabul is not like those cities theorized by Harvey or Lefebvre in this sense. It has an air of instability which reverberates through its streets. It is a city immersed in the liminal, between what it could be and what it was. Recent and continuing wars mingle with a public navigating the banal and the everyday. Public pedagogy in Kabul is about social cohesion, trust, and reclamation of the public, as space and as a people. In Kabul, the public is not only in danger of being consumed by commercial entities, as in the

cities referred to by Lefebvre or Harvey, but also as spaces of contestation between forces who have the means for significant violence. Even the blast walls which have proven lucrative for private companies symbolize war, social mistrust, and insecurity, as much as they do commercial interests.

Persisting safety concerns and grabs for power have an undeniably silencing effect on the inhabitants of the city. This becomes evident when participants reflect on fear. Homaira, a young visual artist, succinctly expresses that, "The situation in Afghanistan is not good. Everyone fears for their lives" (participant interview, 24 January 2018), or Jamila*, another young contemporary artist who uses oil paint on canvas, explains that she feels the fear holds her back, "from a security point of view, I'm fearful. If I'm living in a safe environment, I'll have the courage to work and to fight against common beliefs but because of these safety issues I can't fight wholeheartedly" (participant interview, 10 February 2018). Here, is an interplay between fear and the city. Looking at crime and the potential of crime as causes of fear, Bannister and Fyfe (2001) tie fear of the city to declining urban culture as it "impinges upon the well-being of a significant proportion of the population" (p. 808). Kabul's blast walls signal the potential for violence and add yet another layer of fear in physical tangential form. It is, therefore, pertinent that it is upon these walls, as seen and unseen social demarcations, that street artists paint over, erasing the gray concrete reminders of the city's precarity.

As artists they have the tools to reconceptualize the physical and social architecture of the city, through their art. A desire to impact change through cultural products is expressed by Kabir, co-founder of ArtLords, "this is my dream to turn Kabul into the street art capital of the world" (participant interview, 3 January 2018). For Kabir, there is a sense of desire for Kabul's future and a sense of control in shaping its trajectory toward that future which is manifest in the art. He sees Kabul as contributing to the world, as a place with much to offer. In its relationship with global currents of discourse, artistic, and otherwise, Kabul wields the potential to be more than a war zone. The nexus of a will to progress and the rich heritage of culture is manifest as art on blast walls throughout the city. It reflects the birth of a new urban life which, in the face of precarious security and significant safety concerns, continues to reclaim the commons. Existence in Kabul through the physical presence of the artists as well as through their art is, therefore, reclamation of public spaces. The city streets, "those sites and symbols of democratic protest and politics" (Bannister & Fyfe, 2001, p. 811), become commons that foster encounters between people.

It is between the interstices of what was and what is, that what could be is born. Rather than just cultural products as esthetic mediums, art reflects the cultural representation of a new generation of Kabuli artists. Their

creative products are the tool with which they share their intent to heal the rupture left by years of war. Yet, in doing so, they create their own ruptures to structures that they want to see changed. Art in many ways contributes the narratives of its creators to the mosaic of the city. Thus, through the ruptures created by art, new ways of being emerge.

Art as public pedagogy in Kabul

Public pedagogy offers a democratizing and counter cultural avenue, particularly in consideration of the Kabuli artists participating in this study. Savage (2010, p. 109) sees public pedagogy for its potential counter-hegemonic properties, a position which sits in contrast to Giroux's assertions that public pedagogy, particularly corporatized mediums such as "advertising, television, film, the internet, video games and other popular press" (2004, p. 77), extend the agenda of corporates and the governments who prioritize them above the citizenry.[13] In the Kabul context, the assumption that there is a homogenous public, an assumption identified in Giroux's argument (Savage, 2010), becomes uniquely problematic. The socioeconomic homogeneity required for public pedagogy to reflect corporate interests becomes untenable in the Kabul context. Indeed, the binary between public pedagogy as a commercial versus a counter-hegemonic medium is a simplistic one. They do not fit within a binary of subversion or acquiescence. ArtLords who work with governments to create murals for social and cultural betterment represent a case in point. So too are Shamsia's images of young women which contend with the established culture of Kabul. They are modestly dressed, often in dresses that resemble traditional Afghan designs, with headscarves in the popular style of the girls in the street (with a little hair showing). But they are also depicted as feeling, existing and present in the street. Shamsia's murals not fit within a subversive or acquiescent binary. They never meet the eyes of the spectators yet they experience the street like the passerby and they share their fears and hopes.

Although, I anchor my argument here on Giroux's assertion that education occurs beyond the institution of schools and extends into cultural spaces, I define public pedagogy in terms more amendable to Savage's conceptualization. With particular focus on cultural products, pubic pedagogy carries the potential for broadening the landscape of possibility. As, "disruption and transformation of dominant and constraining cultural, political, economic, historical, linguistic, theological, and ecological configurations," public pedagogy in the Kabul context can offer a medium for negotiating through rigidity and fear (O'Malley & Roseboro, 2010, p. 641). As such, these spaces carry educative force, both to contest and to conform,

but mostly importantly to create dialectical opportunities. A politicized public, having encountered alterity through the art, experience new visions for their city.[14] In the streets of Kabul, otherwise war-weary cityscapes are reimagined in active reclamation by artists through their art. Upon the walls and destruction of Kabul's streets, and the weight of its violent history, artists inscribe their declarations of identity and culture.

The sites on which Shamsia and ArtLords work become sites of engagement through art. The street space becomes a site of public discourse. Hickey (2006) defines the street as a transitory location, the space between end points (para. 1). By creating anchors, spaces or moments which capture a publics' attention, the flow of people as they pass is disrupted. Sandlin et al. (2011), explain that, "although some informal spaces reinforce dominant culture, others create 'counterinstitutional' spaces in which the educational activity of artwork, performative display, and other pedagogical modes contrasts with the established culture" (p. 348). Even if at times it is shunned, the work and the site have created a moment of counterculture. For ArtLords whose works often have social and political meaning explicitly presented in inscriptions next to the work, it is ironic that they are often found on the outer public facing walls of government buildings. This occurred almost by accident, as Omaid reflects:

> There was a lot of resistance. For example, at the beginning, so, if I would ask a person to give me the permission to paint the pair of eyes on their wall of the ministry, the ministry would think that, "Okay, if these pair of eyes are on my wall, it means that I'm corrupt," so they will not let me paint them. The first mural, they did not know about it, that it's about fighting corruption. I used my personal connections, and a friend was the secretary to the minister, and we went there and we asked her help. She was generous enough. She got us the permission and, the moment it was out there, then they realized, "Oh, my God"… They sort of fired their own rifles at themselves. But what happened after a year when ArtLords was quite famous and everybody wanted to associate themselves with us, then this completely changed. The ministers were calling us to paint these murals because it turned out to be that, if you had these eyes on your walls, it means that you're fighting corruption. (Participant interview, 2 February 2018)

Both Shamsia and ArtLords repurpose space, transforming it into didactic space, which "connects our inner selves to people, objects, and places outside ourselves" (Sandlin & Milam, 2008, p. 326, see also Ellsworth, 2005). The image of the concrete barriers, symbols of both those privileged enough to have them for protection and the need for protection in Kabul, compromised the Kabul that Omaid wanted and were "making Kabul look like a prison." Like Omaid, Kabir expresses his distaste for, "these ugly walls. What you can do actually… for me, it opened a space for reflection. And to put something on it, and then have a conversation about it." Both express a desire to call to esthetics to transform their city from a concrete

prison to an opportunity for discourse about the many challenges its people face. For Shamsia, her graffiti is a fight against the ongoing war in people's minds,

> What's the point of hanging a picture on a wall inside? And I thought I will work on the walls outside! At that time there were many war-torn walls, old walls, broken walls and I thought 'Ok, all of these are bad memories of war for people, these ruined walls and if I draw on these then the bad memories will be cleaned from their memory they will not be reminded of the war'. That's why it's good to have an artwork so people don't see the ruined walls anymore and they see artworks instead. (Participant interview, 10 January 2018)

Shamsia takes her art to the streets because that is where her message belongs and the publics for whom she creates the art can encounter it. Like ArtLords, Shamsia shapes the city both by what she adds to it, and what she removes from it. The ruins she refers to, as spaces which people can encounter art unexpectedly, become sites of pedagogical exchange where, "Bodies have affective somatic responses as they inhabit a pedagogy's time and space" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 4).

The ArtLords leverage the street, which Hickey identifies as "a site of knowledges and discourses, in constant interplay and renewal, presented to us as we pass by" (2006, p. 5). They convert the site into a space of discourse and they invite passersby to participate in their messages and visions for the future (Fryd, 2007, p. 23). The banality of the everyday and its non-art activities meet art praxis and artists in the streets of Kabul through the murals of Shamsia and ArtLords. Their art is public, political, and pedagogical. Although, they navigate a city full of violent potential, and even as they seek to create change through their art praxis, in the street they create moments of hope. It is this hope, like distraction, which ruptures the buzzing tension in the city. The art site is a space and moment in which the seriousness of the everyday is disrupted. Bakhtin's words about the carnivalesque shed light on what this means for Kabulis, "Seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and delivers us from them" (Bakhtin in Morsen & Emerson, 1990, p. 96). The opportunity to participate in beautifying a blast wall, a part of the streetscape, is an opportunity to resist hopelessness.

Omaid shares his intent to see his work create social and cultural ripples. He explains, "Art can give you this opportunity that with … one painting, with one animation you are really targeting all these people and sort of trying to change their conscious" (participant interview, 2 February 2018). He expresses the intentionality of the work he and ArtLords do to "push against" the expectations of the audience (Gaztambide-Fernández & Matute, 2014, p. 56). Public pedagogy in this context captures the spatial and temporal relationship into which passersby enter, unintentionally and

momentarily, and in which they are challenged to construct a different reality. As artists on the street, they suture the expected and unexpected, the everyday and the anomalous, the art and the non-art, the art and its audience.

The incidental-ephemeral public

Kabuli public art suture's parts of the city together, acting as a contour of the cityscape with its own publics. Savage (2014) identifies three types of publics, namely, political, popular, and concrete. The political public belongs to a common political field (p. 81). They are commonly what are referred to when the public at large is mentioned. The popular publics are less spatially bound and are defined by "processes of cultural distribution and consumption" (p. 84) such as popular culture. Savage's concrete publics are bound by spatial borders and can include suburbs or libraries (p. 86). Savage's categorizations are not intended to represent sealed and siloed publics, but porous overlapping boundaries. The conceptualization of publics suggested by Savage help to understand the experience of each public and their interaction with the world and each other.

To Savage's three categorizations, I would suggest a fourth, the incidental-ephemeral public, which combines the spatial, temporal, and experiential dimensions of publicness.[15] However, like Savage, I do not intend for it to exist on its own. This incidental-ephemeral public, as the name suggests, has no intention to be at the site of the work, nor any interest to stay and engage, and yet pass by Shamsia or ArtLords, by accident, being present at a point of dissensus. A suturing occurs of a viewer, possibly resistant, with a concept reflected with spray paint on a wall or its female artist on a ladder in a public space. The moment is short lived but potentially impactful. Bearing witness to the site of the work, however, ephemeral, they now share a common memory of it. The incidental-ephemeral publics are not invited, but they are welcome.

Kabuli art transforms a space and creates, alongside the artwork, its own public. The incidental-ephemeral public are anchored by the art, as they are interrupted by it (Biesta, 2012), which makes the site stand out from its surrounds, a disruption to the ebb and flow of the streetscape. The space and the public become each other's pedagogs. The publicness of the art in the street demands the attention of passersby who in turn become part of the art piece. Without the streetscape, it is a different piece of work. As such, the incidental-ephemeral public is part of the scene, and the artwork.

In Kabul especially, the ever-present potential for "magic" or mayhem creates a city throbbing with all sorts of potentialities. The street is "a space that is inhabited, yet common, invested with multiple meanings and

ownerships simultaneously" (Hickey, 2006, para. 11). Shamsia articulates the potentiality of the street,

> that's why graffiti has the highest risks because, not just in Afghanistan but in other countries too, because artworks that are in the street can very quickly change people's minds. Wherever it is, it will influence. If it was in an exhibition, then maybe someone will go to the exhibition and see it, but when it is in the street, everyone sees the piece. And if something is written on it, it should inspire people, for example the texts that are written, if they are political, *it can completely change people*. That's why, everyone is scared, they don't allow anyone to do graffiti. (Interview participant, 10 January 2018, my emphasis)

Shamsia articulates a clear political vision. Through her art she converts space into an experiential zone of counter-publics, a portion of the streetscape that is made exceptional in the context of its surroundings. In Kabul, this is especially pronounced, given that its surroundings often betray the scars of war, a backdrop that makes the esthetic and pedagogical character of art even more distinct. The intentionality of the artist to create a space that "can completely change people," where pedagogy for the public is nurtured, meets the incidental learner. For Shamsia who might spend several hours on a street mural, and as a woman, both she and her artwork are anchoring events. In Figure 1 below, Shamsia's artwork on the wall to the left of the photo captures the attention of the passersby. In the background, a crumbled building frames the right of the photo. As incidental-ephemeral publics, passersby are met with the mural unintentionally, and although, they are unknown to each other, they belong to a moment together.

The boundaries of the incidental-ephemeral public are defined by the contact zone, the point at which the artists' intentionality and the viewer's unintended attention meet. In a sea of people and street humdrum, the artists' bodies at the work site are amplified, and the moment reflects the borderlands between war and peace.

The incidental-ephemeral public exists outside of consciousness, given its unintended momentariness, without discriminating between gender, race, age, etc. Incidental-ephemeral publics are therefore democratizing in that they create discursive spaces of participatory parity in which a multiplicity of publics exist and meet. They are spaces in which gender, class, and ethnicity are not bracketed (as in Habermas's public sphere), but eliminated given the anomalous space they encounter in a moment of aporia. Within the street, distinctions matter and continue to hold valence, particularly for young women who are continuously subject to street harassment. However, at the site of the artwork, in that ephemeral moment of encounter in which affect circumvents language and reason, all are welcome to engage. The attention of the viewer is directed away from the street and focused into the contact zone. "By such experiences we are not only lurched out of the

Figure 1. Shamsia's artwork on a wall in Kabul. Image provided by and reproduced with permission from Shamsia Hassani.

familiar and the taken-for-granted, but we may also discover new avenues for action. We may experience a sudden sense of new possibilities, and thus, new beginnings" (Greene, 1995, p. 379). For ArtLords whose female volunteers can be seen on ladders contributing to murals, they help to create spaces where male allies can use their social capital to encourage participation. Omaid describes the responses of the, often male, audiences who come upon a mural in development:

> I think they really like it. At first they are a bit surprised, because it's something very, very new for them, but then later on I think they appreciate the fact, and they just try to make a conversation with the ladies, sort of support the whole idea of it. (Participant interview, 2 February 2018)

Omaid's effort to transcend difference comes through clearly here. The ephemerality of the experience facilitates a momentary distance from the social disparities that Kabulis experience. The tightly regulated interactions between unrelated women and men in particular are momentarily disrupted by ArtLords' use of art in the service of nation, appealing to a national pride, to bring people together. Incidentally, it would be male passersby who are most likely to stop and engage with the scene. They are invited into an experiential space which, as Greene (1995) explains, "Participatory involvement with the many forms of art does enable us, at the

very least, to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines, habits, and conventions have obscured" (p. 379). In this distance, multiple publics meet to create a discursive sphere shaped by a shared experience of an anomaly in the street. In the interstices of the "comprehensive public sphere," which Fraser problematizes for its implicit enforcement of some over others, the incidental-ephemeral acts as an alternative to hegemonic spaces, what she calls "*subaltern counterpublics*"[16] (1990, p. 67, author's emphasis).

At the site of the artwork in the street, the incidental-ephemeral public, who are also part of the "public-at-large" (Fraser, 1990, p. 68), respond to the artist's enactment of their cultural identity through the lens of their own. The streetscape can, thus, be viewed as the contact zone of identities and worldviews and the site of art as an opportunity for discursive exploration, enactment, deliberation and contestation. At these sites, the public domain is converted into a space where, "learning often takes on a subtle, embodied mode, moving away from cognitive rigor commonly associated with education and toward notions of affect, esthetics, and presence" (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 348). The street lends the artist "spaces that provide a site for compassion, outrage, humor, and action. Such pedagogy disrupts processes of injustice and creates opportunities for the expression of complex, contesting, and subaltern perspectives" (Brady, 2006, p. 58).

Conclusion

As Biesta (2014) suggests, if we take public pedagogy to be defined as the connection or intersection of education and politics, and as a pedagogical approach, which exists outside of and in spite of institutionalized systems of education, then, the works of Kabuli artists, which seek to challenge, change, and begin, must be included.

My treatment of cultural production as a pedagogical process which incorporates the city as a dynamic contributor to the performance of making art is just one example of the work that young artists are doing to rebuild and reclaim their city. In response to public pedagogies that socialize and normalize dominant narratives of identity, artists invite passersby to engage with them in sites of contestation and deliberation. The streets of Kabul come alive, like the artists themselves whose hopes and struggles beautify the "ugly walls" of war-torn Kabul.

Artists have broad cultural horizons which they leverage to stretch and renegotiate their immediate world. Indeed, the street is more than the physical but the canvas upon which artists inscribe their hopes and challenge their fears. As an area of the world still experiencing conflict and daily violence, Kabul is inherently a political space, in implicit and explicit ways. The daily

banality of the activities of life and the incursion of moments of violence exist alongside each other, and the city's people have learnt to navigate these conditions. A sense that anything is possible, peace through chaos and chaos through the peace, permeates through the cityscape.

Members of incidental-ephemeral publics meet at the art site and, leveraging the affective contribution to precognitive processes, talk across difference. Here, there are discursive opportunities for contestation or deliberation. This "pushing against" offers a pedagogy from the fringes (Gaztambide-Fernández & Matute, 2014) with its own publics who are tied together unintentionally, if only momentarily, not by space or time, but by both at once, experientially. Grange (1999) explains, "time in the street is the continual collision of the past and the future with the present" (p. 109). The examples of the ArtLords and Shamsia's works act as meaning making opportunities through anchoring moments where passersby can be at once in the present, the past and the future.

That people will come together as "a public" is not inevitable. Through artists, the city's commons become spaces for publics to be formed. Artists engage in a public pedagogy that reclaims the commons and offers alterity to otherwise war-weary people and streetscapes. As both physical and political spaces, the public art site is a reminder that the struggle for peace and safety is shared by all Kabulis.

Notes

1. *Kabuli* refers to people from Kabul. For a detailed definition of Kabuli, see Issa and Kohistani (2007, pp. 56–57).
2. ArtLords projects in Kabul can be viewed through their Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/ArtLordsofAfghanistan/) or their website (https://www.ArtLords.co/). Shamsia is part of a group called Berang Arts. Her works can be viewed on the Berang Arts Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/BerangArts/) or her own website (http://www.shamsiahassani.net/)
3. Since the global Covid-19 pandemic, Shamsia has moved her work primarily to indoors.
4. This lineage spans the Paleolithic era murals found in southern France, the Egyptian hieroglyphs, Diego Rivera's mural art which sparked the mural movement in Mexico in the twentieth century, the African American civil rights mural movement, and so forth.
5. This has also been applied to different mediums of creative expression. Gershon (2010), for example, argues that musicians are public intellectuals because music permeates our lives, it is inherently public, and because it contains knowledge.
6. Mouffe (2013) defines hegemonic practices as, "Those practices of articulation although, which a certain order is created and the meaning of social institutions fixed" (p. 210).
7. Istanbullus is Pamuk's word for residents of Istanbul, much like the use of the word Kabuli for people residing (or originating) in Kabul.

8. I concede that this is an artificial binary and need not be simply oppositional. Rather, culture, as a dynamic and resilient source of values, often adapts to capture the zeitgeist of society.
9. Narayan (1997) refers to this as the “colonialist stance,” defined as “a Western tendency to portray Third-World contexts as dominated by the grip of ‘traditional practices’ that insulate these contexts from the effects of historical change” (pp. 48–49).
10. Pedagogy of the public is comparable to Paulo Freire’s conscientization (Biesta, 2014, p. 22).
11. My use of the aporetic space is inspired by its use by Burdick et al. (2014), who refer to Derrida’s position on aporia as representing a productive space and the potential to know between knowing and not knowing, between question and answer (pp. 1,3,4). I use it here to reflect the liminal and interstitial spaces between the will to create amidst the fear of chaos. It is art’s functioning within aporetic space that can make us uncomfortable enough to question.
12. The reduction of *truly public* spaces has been the focus of much works (Biesta, 2012; Giroux 2003; Harvey, 2008; Marquand, 2004; Sennett, 1993). Bauman (2001), for example, identifies the incursions of the private sphere upon an ever shrinking public.
13. Giroux (2004) does express the role of culture as “crucial terrain for theorizing and realizing the political as an articulation and intervention into the social, a space in which politics is pluralized, recognized as contingent, and open to many formations” (p. 78).
14. See also O’Malley and Roseboro (2010) who refer to this as the “pedagogical hinge.”
15. See Christensen-Scheel (2018) who, in her discussion of the Tate Exchange, suggests that art may have its own public (p. 115).
16. Fraser points out that counterpublics can be either benevolent or malevolent but that they nevertheless “help expand discursive space” (1990, p. 67).

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Dr. Lucy Fiske, Dr. Chrisanthi Giotis, Cale Bane, and Ferdinand Dickel for their considered feedback and support.

Declaration of interest

No conflicts of interest

Funding

This article is not funded.

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