

**Rewriting Public Memory: Artistic Interventions and the Politics of
Representation in Urban Public Spaces**

by

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ABSTRACT

Monuments, landmarks, commemorative festivals and similar forms of historic representations are inherently controversial because in order to have meaning, they must adopt a position about the past. When sited in urban public spaces, these symbols are prone to contestation as a result of diverse user populations and changing social climates. What is to be done with these symbols is the central topic of this dissertation.

There are many avenues by which communities contend with contested representations. Permanently rewriting public space—through removal, vandalism, or supplementation—is the most frequently adopted action. My position, however, is that communities should consider a more socially and environmentally sustainable alternative: rewriting public memory rather than public space. I argue that the meaning of historic representations is always unstable and impossible to fix; therefore, how a representation is interpreted can be massaged through interventions that make no permanent physical alterations to the symbol itself but have lasting effects on public memory.

In this work, I develop a comprehensive theoretical framework that introduces a way of thinking about sites of contestation that can lead to developing timely and meaningful site-specific interventions with the goal of rewriting public memory. Borrowing from contemporary social theory and cultural studies, I present this framework in three parts: production, deconstruction, and intervention. Production is based on Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* and suggests how the material and social conditions of urban space disclose when contestation is present. The second component of analysis draws on Derridian deconstruction and demonstrates how a careful analysis of the story being told by a landmark reveals what narratives it is repressing or omitting. Intervention adopts tenets from De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* to propose how those repressed or omitted narratives might be revealed through "tactics" that leverage the rhetorical concepts of *kairos* (seizing the right moment in time) and *mētis* (achieving the greatest effect with the least amount of effort).