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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Morrison, Chandra. (2017) Public art replacement on the Mapocho River: Erasure, renewal, and a conflict of cultural value in Santiago de Chile. [Space and Culture](#) ISSN 1206-3312

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Available in LSE Research Online: November 2017

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Pre-Publication Accepted Manuscript

Forthcoming in *Space and Culture*

(Accepted: 17 August 2017)

**Public Art Replacement on the Mapocho River:
Erasure, Renewal, and a Conflict of Cultural Value in Santiago de Chile**

Chandra Morrison

Abstract

On 18 January 2011 the Museo Arte de Luz opened along Santiago's Mapocho River. Developed by artist Catalina Rojas and the Santiago municipal government to mark Chile's 2010 bicentenary, the light-art museum proposed to revitalise the river as a public space by converging heritage, contemporary art, and citizenship. Yet controversy lurked behind the newly gleaming lights: museum preparations included the erasure of several large graffiti murals painted along the canal walls. This article examines how the installation of the Museo Arte de Luz systematically removed graffiti muralism from the Mapocho River, drawing out deeper cultural tensions entangled in this aesthetic dispute. It analyses three interconnected discourses about the museum's desired impact on the river – environmental regeneration, historical restoration, symbolic recuperation – to illustrate how the erasure corresponds to official narratives of renewal. Ultimately, through its contradictions, this public art replacement raises important questions about public authority and cultural value in Chile.

Key Words

graffiti erasure, muralism, Museo Arte de Luz, cleaning, cultural heritage

Emergence and Erasure

On 18 January 2011 the Museo Arte de Luz opened along Santiago's Río Mapocho, a light-art museum that projects colourful imagery onto the sunken river canal. Brainchild of visual artist Catalina Rojas, the initiative was facilitated by the Municipality of Santiago and financed by Grupo Enersis, the country's largest electricity company, to mark Chile's 2010 bicentenary. Twenty-six elevated projectors, permanently installed on the river's southern bank, lit a distance of one kilometre between the Pío Nono and Patronato bridges for four continuous hours each night during

the first year and subsequent editions of the project. Running adjacent to the Parque Forestal, the new outdoor museum extended along a highly visible and central stretch of the river, connecting Barrio Bellavista – Santiago’s bohemian nightlife district to the north – with the neighbourhoods of Bellas Artes, Lastaria, and Plaza Baquedano, together composing the city’s cultural core. Drawing local crowds and international attention to the emblematic waters running through the heart of the Chilean capital, the Museo Arte de Luz proposed to revitalise the river as a public space by converging heritage, contemporary art, and citizenship, transforming the Río Mapocho into the world’s first river illuminated with art (“Presentación,” n.d.).

Yet controversy lurked behind these newly gleaming lights. Coinciding with the museum’s opening, the Santiago municipal government removed over 200 meters of murals painted along the same stretch of the river. This erasure targeted a series of large-scale and highly developed works by some of the city’s foremost graffiti artists: the duo Aislap’s giant sleeping figure painted in June 2009; a collaborative piece depicting Grin’s architectural and Saile’s figurative styles completed in November 2010; and a panel of Piguán’s abstract portraiture originally from 2007 (with Desoo) and updated in December 2010 (with Bus) just weeks prior to the mass deletion. These, alongside several other murals painted by Grin in the adjacent Providencia *comuna*,¹ had come to define the river’s image, turning it into a prominent tourist attraction. Despite Piguán, Saile, and Grin actively painting the riverbank over the preceding months, none of the artists received notification of plans for the museum’s installation or the murals’ impending removal. News of the erasure only broke as a fresh coat of grey paint enclosed upon the Mapocho’s colourful walls.

The mural eradication generated immediate public attention, sparking debates on social and mainstream media about the cultural value of the murals and the complicity of the museum in their destruction. Several commentators argued that the artworks could have coexisted easily along the river, the murals visible by day and the light-art by night (Cuevas and Aravena, 2011). Yet city officials had overlooked this potential compatibility in their quest to create a free cultural platform that opened the riverside to the arts community (“Presentación,” n.d.). Their professed intentions of artistic inclusivity and public accessibility stand in marked contrast to the exclusion of the graffiti muralism which, up until its untimely demise, had already begun to fill the Mapocho’s walls with colour and draw spectators back towards the river’s edge. This act of erasure did not merely remove the existing murals; it sought to replace them with a *different* public art, to redefine the very image of the river.

This article examines how the installation of the Museo Arte de Luz systematically removed graffiti muralism from the Mapocho River, teasing out deeper cultural tensions entangled in this aesthetic dispute over the river image. Central to this discussion are the various kinds of meaning assigned to the river as a highly symbolic feature of Santiago's geography that contributes to the construction of urban and national imaginaries. Specifically, the article analyses three interconnected discourses about the museum's desired impact on the river: environmental regeneration, historical restoration, and symbolic recuperation. To do so, I turn to the discursive frameworks used in promotional materials and in statements by Catalina Rojas, the visual artist behind the project, to envision the museum as a public artwork and to describe the Río Mapocho as an emblematic site.² Although little direct acknowledgment of the murals appears in official narratives, much can be inferred from the disjuncture that emerges between these rhetorical-textual descriptions and visual documentation of the river preparations captured in photographs and videos. Pursuing a reading of deviations and absences, this analysis illustrates how the ideas of renewal espoused by the light-art project also correspond to a logic of erasure.

Unique in its direct substitution of one form of public art for another, this incident allows for exploration of underlying political and social forces driving such image alterations in the urban environment. Close attention to the process by which the museum was conceived and constructed reveals how aesthetic enhancement of the riverside ties to wider societal debates about heritage, identity, and politics. This mural conflict offers insight into longstanding and ongoing tensions in Santiago between independent (or autonomously produced) public artworks and those aligned with institutional frameworks.³ Accordingly, it speaks to broader concerns within public art scholarship about dimensions of power implicated in the production and legitimisation of divergent artistic manifestations in the public sphere, and the effects of social inclusivity and urban regeneration such interventions actually achieve (Hall and Robertson, 2001; Pollock and Paddison, 2010; Sharp et al, 2005; Zebracki et al, 2010). Ultimately, through its contradictions, this curious incident of public art replacement raises important questions about definitions of public authority and cultural value in Chile.

Cleaning the River: Environmental Regeneration

A short video uploaded to Youtube on 6 January 2011 captures a rare public acknowledgement of the graffiti eradication by one of the museum's chief visionaries. Filmed by urban artist Saile, *Graffiti Erased from the Mapocho River*⁴ records an encounter between Catalina Rojas and the artists whose

murals the museum replaced. With the frame centred on Rojas, seated outdoors on broad cement steps, she gives an explanation, a public apology of sorts, for the murals' removal. Speaking simultaneously to the gathered graffiti artists and the camera, Rojas seeks to justify the presence of her installation by asserting that the riverside, as a public space, should be open to everyone (in Saile, 2011, 1:45). Deeper insight comes to light, however, when she shifts away from proclaiming her right to occupy the site and insists that, despite outward appearances, the painting over of the graffiti murals did not directly correlate to the light-art installation. Instead, Rojas suggests, the erasure corresponds to an ongoing government plan to clean the Río Mapocho:

Deep down... I agree with you, that you could think that... that obviously my project is behind this [...] I want to tell you that one thing they've been working on for a long time is to clean the Mapocho riverbank, to clean the Mapocho's waters, and with that comes a whole established programme to recuperate this public space which is a national monument. (in Saile, 2011, 0:25)

Although her phrasing seeks to distance the museum preparations from the mural removal, the timing of the river cleaning betrays Rojas's words. Suddenly springing into action on 4 January following years of stagnation, city officials initiated the Mapocho cleanup a mere two weeks prior to the museum's inauguration. Even more telling are the shirts worn by workers contracted to clean the canal. With the words "Light-Art Museum Project" clearly written across the back of their uniforms (Rojas, 2012, 5:43), their bodies establish a direct connection between the cleaning activities and the museum installation. Still, Rojas's alignment of the mural eradication with environmental regeneration of the site is revealing. This rationale frames the clearing of the walls not simply as preparation of a neutral background for the light-art projections, but as tied to a larger environmental project that intends to transform the riverside back into a space for civic use and consumption. Weaving together cultural and environmental renewal as mutually dependent and beneficial beautification projects, cleaning becomes the precursor to the Mapocho's social improvement.

The river revamp was coordinated by the Ministry of Public Works in conjunction with Proactiva Medioambiente Chile, the organisation responsible for initial preparation and future maintenance of the museum site. Cleaning activities were well documented with action shots appearing in promotional materials as a visual strategy to denote the area's transformation. A primary example occurs in the project's short documentary, *Video Museo Arte De Luz 10 Minutes*, uploaded to Rojas's Vimeo account and embedded on the museum's official website. In a segment recounting the steps required to prepare the river for the light-art installation, Rojas once again highlights the need to

remove trash from the receded basin. She concludes this statement by describing the municipal government's assistance with this and other technical preparations as a "tremendous gift [...] to the city of Santiago" (Rojas, 2012, 5:42). As Rojas narrates, the video deploys a sequence of four shots that show Proactiva employees engaged in diverse cleaning activities before culminating with an image of the newly manicured Mapocho. The first three depict the collection of rubbish and the taming of overgrown shrubs inside the canal. The last scene, by contrast, zeros in on the cleaning of the wall itself. Positioned in parallel to the river's edge, the camera films a uniformed worker as he scrapes the containment wall with a flat metal tool, leaving the viewer uncertain as to whether his hand is ridding flecks of dirt or flakes of paint from the suspiciously pigmented surface.

The ambiguity posed by this footage, however, is resolved in the lead photograph of an article published on the Plataforma Urbana website on 5 January. "Cleaning and the Light-Art Museum Project on the Mapocho River" announces the beginning of the river cleanup in preparation for the museum's opening, an initiative driven, it suggests, by the idea that a clean public thoroughfare is the pathway to cultural advancement (Equipo..., 2011a). Despite making no mention of the murals in the text, the article's content is illustrated with a photograph of three men dressed in Proactiva gear using long-handled rollers and buckets of grey paint to eliminate vestiges of colour from the embankment. So direct was the photograph that the same lead image appeared in a follow-up article – under the modified title "Graffiti and the Light-Art Museum on the Mapocho River" – published five days later to acknowledge public backlash against the graffiti erasure, omitted from the first reportage (Equipo..., 2011b). Read in its original context, this photograph positions the clearance of graffiti murals as the route to achieve a 'clean' aesthetic for the river. In fact, both the film and the initial article point to an emergent pattern structuring the museum's ecological impulse, in which rhetoric about trash removal is visualised through the elimination of the existent muralism.

The conflation of cleaning trash with clearing murals speaks to well-rehearsed anti-graffiti discourses. These views position such markings as "matter out of place" that, through their inappropriate location, pollute the urban landscape (Douglas, 2002 [1966]). Rojas's statement cited above underscores this sentiment: her evaluation of the river works as composing a gift from the government to the city not only affirms the beneficial value ascribed to the cleaning activities, it concurrently *devalues* the cultural contributions of the murals, reclassified as trash, as matter out of place, in need of elimination. As a strategy to reorganise the environment through displacement, cleaning creates an impression of order by realigning visual and material content with the desired "aesthetics of authority" – to borrow Jeff Ferrell's (1996) apt phrase – purging unwanted or

unauthorised elements that challenge the dominant narrative and distribution of power (Morrison, 2013, p. 201). The Mapocho preparations similarly reorganise the surrounding environment to assert a new perception of control over the river by replacing unauthorised images with those sanctioned by the state – both in the form of light-art projections and the neutralised containment walls. The dramatic visual contrast of ‘before’ and ‘after’ the graffiti removal thus appears to affirm official claims about the museum’s ability to renew the riverside. More cunningly, the immediacy of this surface treatment obscures deficits in more substantial, less readily perceptible purification of the polluted waterway. Blurring aesthetic and ecological concerns, the image of mural removal comes to visualise not only the efforts but the *effects* of cleaning trash from the river.

In the context of this environmentalist framework put forth by Rojas and the museum, it is all the more ironic that several of the removed murals specifically spoke to improvement of the riverside as a public resource and championed socio-ecological themes. Grin’s solo and collaborative works, especially, strove to inspire public awareness about the Mapocho’s oft-neglected condition. This thematic appears most overtly in two of Grin’s earlier works located further up the river, both iconic examples of the recent river muralism before their subsequent demise at the hands of the Providencia government soon after the erasure in the Santiago *comuna*. His mural with the DVE Crew, entitled *Navigable Mapocho*, from 2007 commented precisely on the persistent pollution of the river, echoing broader civic demands for a clean urban waterway available for public use. A variation on this environmental concern emerges in Grin’s solo piece of a sunbathing woman: lounging on a towel and reading a book as if at the beach, her bikini-clad body resuscitates the riverfront as a site for leisure. Such understated ecocriticism continued in his later collaboration with Saile, where Grin’s fantastical architectural imagery paints a vision of future possibility for the Mapocho. The mural positions urban design (via architecture just as through creative endeavours of a smaller scale) as a way to recalibrate the relationship between urban society and its foundations in nature. Collectively, Grin’s paintings encourage the spectator to reconsider their preconceptions about what the river can be as a public, social, and ecological space.

In an interview published in *Joia Magazine* on 22 September 2010 – less than four months before the murals’ deletion – Grin spoke of his desire to care for the Mapocho as motivation for painting the river walls:

Cities are formed because there are rivers and it’s a shame to look at the state of our Mapocho River to see just how much people have forgotten it. We [graffiti artists] at least

paint the river. We take the time to get to know it, to go down and attempt to do something for the river. It's not much. But at least it's something. (in Meruane, 2010)

Exceeding the impact of the murals' imagery, for Grin the very act of painting revalorises and re-imagines the riverside. The power of this performative spatiality lies, in part, in the social intonations of the painting process. Graffiti artists' descent into the river basin to paint its walls is a dually physical and social positioning. Taking the time to know the river also implies a willingness to interface with homeless dwellers, drug addicts, and other marginal figures that seek refuge beneath the bridges' shadows. Giving visibility to the recesses of the river, graffiti artists paint an imagery that obliges curious spectators "to look at what they don't want to see" (Pérez and Sandoval, 2011). It is precisely from this stance of marginality, speaking for and from the underbelly of society, that Aislap's portrait of a man sleeping rough along the riverbank makes its social critique. Annotated with the words "material poverty, spiritual wealth" written to its side, the mural emblazons the river's edge with a question of social values, reflexively posed back to the spectator, upon confounding normative valuations of wealth and poverty in wider society.

The museum, by contrast, proposes to 'fix' the Mapocho's image problem as a receptacle for material refuse and the socially refused. Rojas's desire to rectify the river's "very negative energy" is as much a question of appearance as it is of use (in *Mujer Impacta*, 2015). This same affective evaluation resurfaces when the Mayor of Santiago Pablo Zalaquett described how the Museo Arte de Luz, as an "unprecedented artistic and cultural platform," would counteract the river's depreciation by correcting the sensory experience and sense of insecurity encountered at the canal (in "A contar...," 2010). Conflating the repulsion of bad smells and unsightly debris with fear of corporeal danger, both Rojas and Zalaquett paint an image of the (pre-museum) Mapocho as a site in need of rescue. Salvation of the river's sensibility, according to this logic, requires removal of the excess(ive) environmental elements that accumulated in its basin and colluded in widespread evasion of the riverside over so many years. In other words, by clearing the river of its (visible) contamination from pollution, poverty, and painting, environmental regeneration allows the Mapocho to be restored to its natural, its original, condition.

Clearing the River: Historical Restoration

An assertion made by Rojas in both videos discussed above gives insight into this drive to revise the river in a more authentic aesthetic. In the official documentary she describes a desire "to rescue [*rescatar*] such an emblematic place" as motivating the museum's intervention in the Río Mapocho

(Rojas, 2012, 1:06), a sentiment reiterated when explaining to the graffiti artists about a need “to recuperate [*recuperar*] this public space which is a national monument” (in Saile, 2011, 0:47). Here, the incentive for the Museo Arte de Luz is announced in a language of recovery, ascribing the project with a recuperative ability that responds to the Mapocho as a site of collective importance. A level of causality emerges between the two statements, so that recuperation of the river – through cleaning, through the museum installation – allows for its patrimonial status to be more fully realised. Even more than for its capacity as an environmental resource, the Mapocho is worthy of ecological care *because of its historical value*.

Indeed, the Río Mapocho occupies a central role in the history of Santiago as the foundation around which the city emerged and expanded, its colonial founding in 1541 by Pedro de Valdivia predated by indigenous and Incan settlements in the fertile river valley. For the Mapocho’s more recent designation as communal heritage, however, it is not the flow of water but the firmness of stone walls that embodies the river’s modern historical imaginary. These physical structures contain and guide the waterway as it cuts across the Chilean capital. With plans first proposed in 1873, initial canalisation between the streets Pío Nono and Manuel Rodríguez concluded in 1892, extending to further segments over ensuing decades (Castillo, 2009, pp. 46-48; Piwonka, 2008, pp. 73-74). This ambitious infrastructural project strove to reform the relationship between nature, society, and the urban landscape in order to redraw Santiago in the image of a ‘modern city’ (Castillo, 2009, p. 48). Flowing from a wave of hygienist thought, the Mapocho’s reengineering materialised the latest ideas about urban progress and public health as it bridged the waters long dividing the north and south of Santiago. Canalisation tamed the river, subduing the high human and material costs inflicted by the persistent overflowing of its borders.⁵ These works, though, did more than exert control over the force of nature; they provided an opportunity to influence the public character of the city. Beyond ridding the area of invasive settlements and unsightly waste endemic to the river’s edge, the stabilisation of the waterway also generated new public spaces out of land reclaimed from the adjacent riverside (Castillo, 2009, p. 47; Piwonka, 2008, p. 74). A nascent public purpose for the Mapocho was realised through the formation of the Parque Forestal to its southern border, with a preliminary planting of trees taking place in 1895, and the construction of the now-iconic buildings Palacio de Bellas Artes, Palacio de Tribunales, and Estación Mapocho to honour Chile’s 1910 centenary (Castillo, 2009, p. 48). Taming waters and furnishing public spaces, the containment walls came to symbolise these mutual effects of the Mapocho’s canalisation, further enforcing a social disciplining of the riverside upon redefining its public imaginary (Castillo, 2009, p. 48). The

stonework lining its borders, therefore, delineates the river's patrimonial status, aligning its material and aesthetic traits to a particular idea of the city.

This blend of physical and social purpose bears striking resemblance to ideas put forth by Rojas and the Museo Arte de Luz more than a century later. With the museum just as with canalisation, environmental regeneration of the Mapocho equally aims to engender a new social environment at the riverside. Complementing the preservation ambitions of the river cleaning, the museum installation further proposed to pave the way for the Mapocho's public revitalisation, achieved specifically through artistic intervention. This vision is summarised in a short digital clip used to promote the project. Narrating over a computer-generated simulation of how the future lighted riverscape might appear, a commanding male voice announces the transformational power of the museum: "In the heart of Santiago's civic district, the Mapocho River is now transformed into an artistic landmark that will give new life to the surrounding environment" (Rojas, c.2010, 1:21). Contrary to initial appearances, these two discourses – of the river's preservation and rejuvenation – do not stand in contradiction to one another. Rather, they reiterate the bifocal vision advanced under the Mapocho's canalisation, where structural restoration (in this case, to restore its aesthetic) works in tandem with renewal of the river's public purpose. The idea of 'giving new life' to the river fulfils a complementary historical aim to re-discipline the social character of the Mapocho, to reinstate a certain type of public river image.

As its walls become saturated with colourful imagery, its banks filled with spectators drawn by the museum's public attraction, the Mapocho's renewed vitality would appear to emerge directly from qualities of the light-art itself. Such an assertion is reiterated by artist Mario Toral when describing positive effects of the Museo Arte de Luz on the urban landscape. What is striking in his statement is the way he directly relates the impact of Rojas's artwork to the condition of the walls upon which they shine: "She brings a new art to ancient walls, walls filled with history" (in Rojas, 2012, 3:34). Here, the infusion of coloured light affords these surfaces a new lease of life, utilising the latest technological advancements to create a digitised muralism updated for the twenty-first century. Toral's description positions light-art as drawing out the history of the walls, as illuminating their historical significance by allowing the public to see their story anew. Historical value of the stonework, in this light, is augmented through its artistic reinterpretation.

The linearity of the museum's narrative is disrupted, however, upon reintroducing the removed graffiti murals back into the equation. Conceptually, these two artworks are remarkably similar. The

projection of lighted imagery onto architectural façades intervenes in their perception in ways akin to their painted precursors. Graffiti muralism, too, filled the river walls with colour and, in prescient anticipation of the museum's revitalising effect, already attracted diverse publics and international attention to the river. With photographs widely disseminated on travel blogs and other media platforms, the paintings' presence positioned the Mapocho as a top tourist attraction and consolidated Santiago's reputation as a prized destination for Latin American street art. The irony of this replacement is not lost: the painted murals, just as those made of light, equally composed a free and accessible public art, which swayed public attitudes and gave new social life to the river through artists' reinterpretation of urban surfaces to expose other forms of meaning and ways of seeing in the cityscape. Instead, their disparate fates point to a question of mediality, the way that material differences shape the precise interface of each artwork with the historic surface. Tactile and clinging to the stony façade, the murals impose a "chronological pollution" that appears to contaminate the historical clarity of the wall (Hamann, 2008). Their pigments are seen to deface the original visage and undermine its historical value, as additives chronologically and chromatically incompatible with conservation conditions where perceived material and aesthetic continuity signal a site's authenticity and "its state as an unchanging representation of some preserved past" (Burdick and Canessa, 2015, p. 736). Under this premise, the *immateriality* of light-art projections becomes 'more compatible' with preservation of the original stonework, bathing the wall in colour without leaving the residual markings of aerosol and latex paint.

The discrepancy between these material and conceptual arguments becomes even more confounded when observing the precise location of the graffiti murals along the containment wall. Clearly observable in photographs, these murals were, in fact, *not* painted on the historic stonework. Rather, they adorned large, flat concrete panels that appeared after the construction of the Autopista Costanera Norte in the early 2000s. Extending along the Mapocho's northern border, the Costanera Norte forms Santiago's first urban motorway system built and operated by a private company under a concession contract from the government ("Descripción," n.d.). It comprises of integrated aboveground and underground motorways, including a six-lane tunnel several kilometres in length that passes through the Bellavista neighbourhood. During construction in the river zone in question, portions of the original canal wall were removed and never replaced following completion of the road works. Instead, the de-stoned areas were sealed over with swathes of cement, a quick material fix certainly at odds with historical preservation of a national monument. Having ruptured the wall's sustained material authenticity well in advance of the 2011 mural dispute, the prior

infractions of these private works divulge the ample persuasion of wealth and power in delineating conditions of continuity and change in the urban landscape.

Just as visual documents expose misplaced assumptions about the murals' location, photographs are also revelatory about aspects of the cleaning process. Most pertinent, in light of the above revelations, are peculiarities about the removal of Aislap's sleeping figure. While grey paint concealed the majority of the body extended across a long cement panel, the outermost tips of the head and toes were oddly omitted from the cover-up. Curiously, these untouched extremities are the only part of the mural that had drifted onto the adjacent stones – precisely the canal surface under preservation. These remnants are not consequence of sloppy workmanship or mere oversight; they reflect a deliberate omission. Lingering, offset against the whitewashed concrete, this vivid pigmentation testifies to the murals' forced removal, magnifying the artistic cleansing that took place. Its residual status no longer contaminates the wall; it affirms the museum's control over the river image. As such, the continued presence of these markings throws into question the presumed correlation between cleaning and conservation. If cleaning is initially framed as a path to restore the ecological, historical, and public value of the river, then selective cleaning suggests a more symbolic assertion of power over the surface aesthetic (Morrison, 2013, p. 197). After all, clearing the riverbed of garbage, of extraneous or out of place materials, leaves the Mapocho to be filled with other content, narratives, and meanings.

Cleansing the River: Symbolic Recuperation

Quite literally, the Museo Arte de Luz and its light-art fill the Mapocho River with a new image. And this image takes shape most explicitly in *Chile in the Light*, created by Rojas as the museum's inaugural exhibition. While Rojas frames the museum as a "tribute to the city" (in "A contar..." 2010), her artwork composes an ode to the nation. Comprised of 104 digitised slides depicting scenes originally painted on canvas, *Chile in the Light* embarks on a voyage from the northern-most Atacama Desert to the dense forests of Patagonia, envisioning the country's natural riches, industrial wealth, and cultural richness ("Exposición..." n.d.).⁶ Deliberately iconographic in their selection, the images coalesce into a picture of Chilean national identity. Marking the bicentenary, *Chile in the Light* speaks directly to objectives for the museum to recuperate the Río Mapocho as a national monument, its message reinforced through the relationship established between the light-art and the river basin. Bathing the emblematic waters and walls in its colourful light, the installation transforms the *columna vertebral* [backbone] of Santiago into a vessel, a foundation, for this

proposed national narrative. The definition of the imagery is refined precisely by its site-specificity: having restored the riverside's 'authenticity' through cleaning, the Mapocho's patrimonial status works to legitimise the museum's projections onto the canal. The site and the artwork mutually reaffirm the (historical) value and (narrative) legitimacy of the other.

Further reinforcing its symbolic location in the urban geography, the museum occupies a privileged position in Chile's social landscape, situated in a network of institutions, media, and public figures that bolster its vision. The museum received institutional support from the Bicentenary Commission and National Monuments Council, two official bodies assigned with the purpose (and power) to define the heritage, memory, and identity of the nation. Such backing does more than envisage the museum in the image of these institutions; their affiliation reinforces the museum's own discursive sway over the renewed river imaginary, yielding the content of Rojas's artwork near canonical stature. Media partnerships with Chile's major news outlets (including *El Mercurio* and TVN) further ensured mainstream dissemination of a deliberate public message, lending authority and uniformity to descriptions of the museum reaching the wider populace. This mapping of power relations emerges most explicitly at the Museo Arte de Luz's official opening. A public party on the eve of 18 January marked the conclusion of yearlong bicentenary commemorations with the lighting of *Chile in the Light* over the river. During the event, three figures of prominence took to the stage to speak: Pablo Zalaquett, Mayor of the Santiago Municipality; Pablo Yrarrázaval, President of Enersis, the electrical company funding the initiative; and Sebastián Piñera, then President of Chile (Rojas, 2012, 6:44-7:27). The performance staged a powerful triptych, merging state and private interests, political and economic capital, to redefine the social meaning of the Río Mapocho. The succession of speeches culminated in the men standing closely aligned, together with Rojas as the project's creative visionary, forming a semi-circle behind a green podium as Piñera's hand pressed down upon an oversized button to ignite the line of lights that would leave the river awash in colour.

Steeped in ideas of national unity, the event's overriding message was summed up by a short phrase spoken by the President minutes earlier. Addressing the crowd gathered at the Mapocho's border, his presence glowing against the pitch-black sky, Piñera expressed his gratitude "to participate in this great public celebration in which together we are lighting our Mapocho River" (in Rojas, 2012, 7:15). This brief line echoes sentiments repeated throughout the museum's promotional materials declaring the river's illumination as reclaiming a national symbol: *nuestro río Mapocho*, our Mapocho River. These three simple words convey a gesture of inclusivity, an allusion to public provenance and possession. Just as Grin adopted this same phrase to call upon a sense of collective

responsibility for the river's care, Piñera employs *nuestro río Mapocho* to instil a sense of collective ownership. Yet, the vision of this inclusive framework is refracted, filtered through a lens of renewal, itself a condition sustained by the assessment of value and by a marking of differentiation. If the museum installation is to be seen as a milestone, as a definitive moment that breaks the linear story of the Mapocho into one of 'before' and 'after' (Zalaquett in "A contar...", 2010), then this also necessitates a severing from the current river image, reconceived through its erasure. When the promotional video declares that, "river, we're coming to get you" (Rojas, 2012, 7:31), this communal agenda returns to an idea of the museum as a vehicle to *rescatar* and *recuperar*, to rescue and recuperate the riverside, to imbue it with renewed cultural value. The proposal to recover the river as a space of culture relies, implicitly, upon the exclusion and disqualification of a prior way of being, required to validate the move towards a different reality. This further illuminates the impassioned pronouncement of *nuestro río Mapocho*: a recuperation penned not only in ecological and historical terms, but underpinned by a reclamation of symbolic meaning.

This symbolism is better understood once placed in relation to the river's role within the Chilean cultural landscape. Its walls bear testament to a history of public painting from the mid-twentieth century onwards,⁷ as the rise of political mural brigades in the mid-1960s gave birth to a uniquely Chilean muralism movement (Bellange, 1995; Rodríguez-Plaza, 2011). While these murals reached deep into the outskirts and *poblaciones* of Santiago, the Río Mapocho equally emerged as an important site with two murals in particular becoming symbols of this era. Anticipating the imminent proliferation of mural brigades, the first appeared in 1964 painted by artists Luz Donoso, Carmen Johnson, Pedro Millar, and Hernán Meschi in support of Salvador Allende's presidential campaign that year. Located in front of the Vega Central market, the mural paid homage to progressive leaders and figures of national industry (workers, miners, farmers) integral to the popular imaginary (Castillo, 2006, pp. 68-74). A second mural produced in 1972 by the Brigada Ramona Parra covered nearly 450 metres, this time next to the Parque Forestal, using their iconic graphics to mark 50 years of the Communist Party in Chile alongside a history of the national workers' movement (Castillo, 2006, pp. 118-131). Notably, both murals used their exposure on the Mapocho to narrate a version, a vision, of the nation's history to the wider public – not unlike Rojas's installation for the Museo Arte de Luz.

As protests returned to Santiago's streets in the 1980s, the Mapocho again stood as a symbolic stage for social struggle when the Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (CADA) – leading figures of the *escena de avanzada* – said "no more" to political violence and oppression by unfurling a banner spelling out

“NO+” next to a picture of a revolver, hanging, if only momentarily, over the canal’s edge to denounce 10 years under the military regime (CADA, c.1983). Following Chile’s return to democracy in 1990, acts of resistance gave way to declarations of existence as the disruptively prolific writings of a graffiti youth grabbed hold of the Mapocho walls. Their markings claimed space and visibility for a generation of young people dismissed by wider society as disaffected, as apathetic, as delinquent, who found themselves suppressed systematically by the pervasive classism and sharpened inequalities that shaped democratic realities. Growing in scale and sway, the graffiti murals of the 2000s extended the Mapocho’s creative lineage. Six decades of accumulated art actions have inscribed the embankment with alternative meaning and purpose as a public platform, open to individuals, like Grin and Saile, to imagine a different urban image. Seizing the river’s preferential location, these diverse artists re-centre voices of the political left, the social margins, and the cultural underground within the cityscape and collective consciousness. This publicity becomes even more meaningful in a country where mainstream media historically aligns with the conservative right: words on walls, like social media, can create alternative information channels that attend to interests beyond those of socioeconomic elites (Burdick and Canessa, 2015; Saavedra, 2014). Thus, these *marcas crónicas*⁸ – markings both chronic and as chronicle – iterated on the Río Mapocho make visible the plurality of ways of seeing and being in the city, a position evocatively allegorised in the multiple eyes and fragmented faces of Piguán’s painting, looking in unison back into the eyes of the public.

Yet the river’s history of artistic appropriation entangles in a story of erasure, taking its most extreme form following the events of 11 September 1973. The military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet was also a coup of aesthetics (Errázuriz, 2009; Errázuriz and Leiva, 2012). Alongside prohibition of public gatherings and widespread censorship, in the first month of taking power the military junta carried out an aggressive whitewashing campaign in the streets of Santiago, with the widely-known murals on the Mapocho riverbank becoming some of the first walls reduced to grey (Errázuriz, 2009, pp. 140-144; Trumper, 2016, pp. 164-165). Their elimination of visual traces of the political left sought to disinfect the city of its recent socialist past by realigning the urban aesthetic with the values of a different politico-cultural ideology (Errázuriz, 2009, pp. 140-141).

Unsettling reverberations between the regime’s cleaning operation and the river maintenance by the Museo Arte de Luz were quickly picked up. Critics decried the Mapocho removal as the first mass erasure of popular murals since the dictatorship. Nor did it go unnoticed that this controversy came less than one year into the first conservative national government since the 1989 plebiscite vote

ousted Pinochet from office. Drawing together the actions of Piñera and Pinochet, the erasure's timing made its cultural undertones unmistakably politicised. The perceived gravity can be garnered from descriptions adopted by dissenting voices to denounce the mural removal as a cultural assassination (Cuevas and Aravena, 2011), a graffiticide, and an anti-cultural act (Palmer, 2011). These wordings all evoke an image of mass extermination, large-scale and calculated in its repercussions.

The replacement of unregulated graffiti murals with a more institutionally-aligned public artwork enacts a transfer of power. It enables the social elite to reclaim, symbolically, the image of the river, taking the Mapocho back after its decades-long history as a key site of dissident-radical-alternative public expression and voice, with *brigada* muralism and *avanzada* performance art preceding its current graffiti occupation. Such politico-aesthetic alteration also alludes to a farther reaching erosion of the river imaginary. It washes over the canal's ephemeral history as "a site of repression and resistance" (Trumper, 2016, p. 195), obscuring an intangible heritage made present through the imagery repeatedly inscribed onto the embankment. The museum replicates such artistic presence while reconfiguring its meaning; its bright lights and whitewashed walls reduce the different ways of remembering and organising the past to a singular narrative. Upon granting new life to the Mapocho, the Museo Arte de Luz cleanses the river image of these other histories, as stories 'out of place' in the official narrative reflected in the water's surface.

Replacement and Revaluation

At the heart of this mural controversy exists a dispute over the symbolic power of the Mapocho River, its meaning in the spatial and social landscape of Santiago and the cultural-historical narrative carried by its waters. Achieved through environmental regeneration, historical restoration, and symbolic recuperation, the new river image created by the Museo Arte de Luz depends as much on ideas of renewal as on acts of removal. Indeed, more than rid the embankment of excess(ive) markings, the erasure of graffiti muralism enabled its substitution with a different public art. As teased out in this article, however, the replacement of murals with light-art abounds in contradictions. The museum filled the river with colour while clearing colourful imagery already lining the walls; it aspired for artistic inclusivity and public accessibility while only permitting certain types of artists and artworks within its vision of an open riverside; it enhanced the canal's patrimonial value while obscuring other cultural histories manifested in the same space. This paradox arises yet again in Rojas's impassioned argument for creating art in public: "Art needs to

seek out people, rather than people needing to seek out art. I believe that art should be found in everyday spaces, where people are walking, riding bikes, that's where art should be" (Rojas, 2012, 8:12). Advocating for the power of public art and silencing urban muralists in a single stroke, the gulf that emerges between the Museo Arte de Luz in rhetoric and in action exposes more than just hypocrisy. What this public art replacement discloses, in effect, are disparities in definitions of public authority and cultural value in contemporary Chile.

For one, it attests to qualitative concerns about the publicness of public art, in which conditions of production matter as much as an artwork's accessible location (Sharp et al, 2005, pp. 1003-1004). Staging a direct confrontation between independent and institutional artworks, this incident highlights the symbolic potency of art in public spaces. Not only does the substitution of painted murals with lighted projections draw attention to the way diverse public art forms generate differing, even conflicting, processes of urban regeneration and remembering (Hall and Robertson, 2001; Sharp et al, 2005); it exposes the systems of power, patronage, and politics underpinning the installation of these urban (re)visions (Pollock and Paddison, 2010; Zebracki et al, 2010). As the Museo Arte de Luz illuminates, the use of public art to enhance and revitalise the urban environment is neither a neutral nor apolitical act. Such aesthetic modifications align the cityscape with a distinct set of cultural values that validate and promote a particular public narrative and urban imaginary.

The 2011 Mapocho conflict and the debates it generated also foreshadow broader recalibrations of 'the public' in Santiago that would occur over the next years, all of which question, in diverse ways, the role of everyday citizens in imagining the city's past and future. Only five months later, massive student protests erupted onto city streets to demand a different balance of power between government, private interests, and civil society, and to challenge entrenched structures of inequality shaping Chilean democracy. This questioning of public authority coincides, too, with renewed concern about the determination of *patrimonio cultural* (Consejo..., 2016), in which contentions over (multi)cultural heritage surface repeatedly at the interface of historic architecture and ephemeral cultural productions, like political graffiti or murals, in their role as an alternative historical register (Burdick and Canessa, 2015; Trumper, 2016). The outburst of support for the Mapocho murals further points to shifts in public perceptions about graffiti art in the 2010s, shedding longstanding associations with delinquency and vandalism for a more positive social imaginary as part of Santiago's dynamic cultural landscape. With hindsight, this mural controversy arises as a moment of

anticipation, a foretelling of deeper societal tensions about to rupture the surface of the urban image with a new public vision.

Still, the complete disregard for the graffiti murals in the museum's planning and installation speaks volumes. In relegating the murals to (visual) pollution, conceiving their removal as part of an environmental project to regenerate the river's ecological and historical authenticity, this classificatory act designates the activities and aesthetics of graffiti muralism as 'not belonging' on the Río Mapocho, despite its longstanding presence and wider public acceptance. The extent of this devaluation is, once again, acutely exposed through a disjuncture between words and images captured in the museum documentary (Rojas, 2012, 3:11). The scene unfolds to the sound of a displaced narration, continuing the line of thought from a previous sequence filmed in Rojas's studio where she describes the river as surface for her artwork. Onscreen, the shot switches to footage of Rojas lingering midway across a bridge while she surveys the river basin as if imagining, as the voiceover suggests, the Mapocho's future lighted image. What stands out in this scene, however, is the visual information subtly captured in the background. Pausing on this blurred image, the distinct shapes and colours of Grin and Saile's mural emerge, sitting, strikingly, in Rojas's line of sight. With the camera focused on Rojas in the foreground, the mural appears hazy, its filmic condition suggesting a status as inconsequential background noise. This screenshot invokes an unnerving revelation: that the mural erasure arises from a more totalising negation, with the paintings omitted from dominant visions of the river even as their presence persisted. Blinded to the work of these fellow artists, perhaps Rojas showed no concern for the museum's destruction of the murals because she simply did not register their existence, their colours, their history, their cultural value.

Questions of cultural value – of the worth assigned to diverse cultural expressions and who has the power to make such valuations – are a matter of public interest. In their widely circulated letter contesting the mural removal, Sebastián Cuevas and Pablo Aravena point to the erasure's profoundly *public* impact: "Those affected are not just the artists, but our city, its inhabitants, our culture, our national imaginary, and all of us who dream of a diverse and culturally developed Santiago" (2011). Their concerns highlight the wide-reaching implications of this public art replacement as an act that extends far beyond aesthetic revision. At stake in this controversy is more than a dispute over how to remember and narrate the past; it also concerns – as so tellingly visualised by the graffiti murals once lining the Mapocho River walls – an ability to imagine what society can become.

Notes

1. Greater Santiago divides into 37 *comunas* [communes], a local administrative division.
2. My analysis also draws on ten years of researching graffiti art in Santiago de Chile, including several periods of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2008-2010 and 2015. Although I was not present in Santiago at the time of the 2011 mural removal, I was informed immediately of this incident by local graffiti artists and closely tracked developments and responses to this and subsequent erasure controversies, in addition to engaging in follow-up correspondence with several of the artists involved.
3. This differentiation corresponds to a view from graffiti and street art scholarship conceiving of such interventions as “independent public art” created beyond established or normative modes of authority (Schacter, 2014, p. xix).
4. All Spanish to English translations are my own, including most quotations cited in this text.
5. This perpetual flood risk reflects the particular climatic and geographical features of the Mapocho River, in which several tributaries converge and receive significant snowmelt from the Andes Mountains before passing through the centre of Santiago (Piwonka, 2008, p. 65).
6. Images of *Chile in the Light* can be viewed on the museum website, <http://museoartedeluz.cl/chile-a-la-luz/>.
7. Rodney Palmer’s chapter “The battle for public space along the Mapocho River, Santiago de Chile, 1964-2014” (2016) details artistic occupation of the Mapocho walls prior to and following the 2011 erasure addressed in this article.
8. The phrase *marcas crónicas* references photographer Kena Lorenzini’s documentation of clandestine public writing on city surfaces in 1980s Chile.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Saile, Grin, los Aislap, and Sebastián Cuevas for their generosity and assistance at various stages of my research on graffiti art in Santiago de Chile over the past decade; their insights and their artwork contributed greatly to the development of this article.

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