

Power of paint: Political street art confronts the authorities

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Abstract

In the context of Spain's economic crisis, waves of protests have transformed the streets of Spanish cities into sites of place-specific spatial activism. City space has been shaped through protest, marches, squatting and street art. During Spain's austerity years, street art has become an important part of political participation. Based on artists' interviews and on my visual ethnographic research in the Spanish cities of Madrid (2013–2016) and Valencia (2016), this paper seeks to illuminate how political street art forms a part of social expression toward the authorities. Street art is a media through which artists can question decision-makers and challenge policies made by statesmen. The examples of political street art highlight how creative contestations become barometers of dissatisfaction and how street art confronts institutional power. Ultimately, political street art is argued in Spicca and Perdue's (2014) term as 'spatial citizenship' producing more polyphonic space.

Keywords: Political Street Art, Protest, Political Participation, Visual Ethnography, Spain

1. Presenting the scene:

Prime Minister in political turbulence

Walking on a narrow street in the neighborhood of Lavapies, which is an active painting zone in Madrid, I suddenly saw a painted dog between two store doors.

The dog had a plasma display in his head. My interest was provoked immediately by this particular work and this painting felt like a puzzle I had to resolve (Figure 1).

Mariano Rajoy became Prime Minister in 2011, about three years after the Spanish economy collapsed. To improve



Fig. 1. A dog with a plasma display in his head. Artist unknown. Photographed in Madrid, May 2014.

Spain's economic situation, Rajoy has implemented vast cuts on public services, including education, health and social care and impaired employment rights and conditions. The effects of these actions have had an impact on the daily lives of the citizens, who then began to protest against these austerity measures. After six years of practicing fierce austerity politics, Spain is still struggling economically, socially and politically. The unemployment rate at the end of 2016 was the second highest in Europe (Eurostat, 2017) and a large number of protests and demonstrations are held in Spain every day.

Several corruption charges against Rajoy's immediate entourage and party members have diminished his popularity, and the unpopularity of the Prime Minister has grown during his administration period. By the end of 2016 about 76% of the Spaniards respected him very little or not at all as a politician (CIE, 2017: 60). The dog in Figure 1 refers to Rajoy's unpopularity. In February 2013 Rajoy held a press conference about his party's Partido Popular members' alleged corruption and bribery charges. What was not expected by the journalists, was that Rajoy presented his speech via a plasma display in front of the media. During his press conference The Prime Minister did not accept any questions from the journalists. He was present in the same building just a few meters away but in another room. The headlines from this press conference was not the content of Rajoy's speech but the use of plasma display which was interpreted as "craziness" and "medieval" towards journalists (Periodista Digital, 2013). The press conference turned into an historical event.

The word 'dog' in Spanish language is 'perro' and is used as a negative description of a person. Perro refers to 'worthless, unpleasant and rotten person'. The passers-by who know about Rajoy's exceptional press conference are able to catch the meaning of the wall painting. The image does not need any words to clarify the painter's deep disapproval of the Prime Minister's actions. For me, as an outsider of Spain, figuring out the meaning of this painting started to reveal itself by typing 'plasma display Spain' in Google search.

A different piece about Mariano Rajoy was placed on a building in another popular street art district of Malasaña in Madrid. Compared to Figure 1, this poster is easier to place in its context: Rajoy's face is recognizable and the artist has

left clues for passers-by to catch the meaning of the work. Clues — the European Union's flag on the shirt collar and the big canines — indicate that the poster is a commentary on Rajoy's austerity measures. This reading is confirmed with a text 'menos es menos' (less is less) (see Figure 2). During Spain's financial crisis the European Union has demanded Rajoy's government to implement more austerity measures in order to pay Spain's foreign debt. Rajoy's structural adjustments have affected the Spanish welfare state especially on pension, health care and education. Also, due to Rajoy's labor reform, the average annual salaries have fallen back to year 2001 levels (Barbero, 2015: 271). With more than a third of children at risk of poverty, Spain is one of the worst developed countries in childhood inequality. The rate of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Spain has increased by 5% between 2008 and 2015 and is now one of the highest in Europe (Eurostat, 2016: 2).



Fig. 2. Menos es menos (Less is less). Artist: Noaz. Photographed in Madrid, April 2013.

The poster in Figure 2 is a work by Noaz who is a Madrid born and based artist. Most of his works could be classified as political or social street art. His focus during the last few years has been on EU politics and Spanish administrative actors¹. Noaz says his works target the political establishment and especially people whose “ideological or economic interests ruin the lives of those who have the least” (Archivo de Creadores de Madrid, 2010).

Noaz’s poster is a comment to the series of austerity measures Rajoy has implemented: Spanish people have less jobs, less money and less high-quality public services. There seems to be no end to the cuts that the Spanish government is making. In Figure 2 Rajoy has a cross in his forehead which I assume is a reference to the Catholic Church. Mariano Rajoy’s right-wing, conservative party has a close relationship with the Catholic Church. Commentary from the artist himself, Noaz, supports my interpretation:

The Spanish state is non-denominational and the Catholic Church should not be present in public institutions. Yet its coexistence within the legislative, judicial and executive powers as an accomplice has carried out the most conservative legislative decisions we have had in Spain over the last 38 years. Currently many members of the government, like judges and prosecutors of the Spanish State, belong to the Catholic sect of Opus Dei. The image of Mariano Rajoy with the cross responds to the characteristic that distinguishes this government from the previous one: now the influence of the Church is more direct. The hyena face (scavenger predator) represents our president: after its passage all that it leaves behind is carcass and death. A health care less and less equal and with less quality. An educational system emphasizing support on the private rather than the public sector. Teachers with less tools and equipment and with poor academic level.²

The poster is provocative: the prime minister Rajoy is portrayed as a predator. It is indicating that Rajoy makes cuts from the Spanish citizens in the name of the EU in an unjust manner and with drastic outcomes. Rajoy’s actions result in Spaniards having ‘less’ of everything. Due to Rajoy’s austerity implementations the proverb ‘Less is more’ does

not apply here. These two examples of street art (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) which I have presented above illustrate that different forms of street art can provide an opportunity to question the decisions made by the Spanish prime minister.

2. Political crises and street art in Spain

Ryan (2017: 5) describes political street art in the following manner:

a loose category for interventions whose creative and material use of street is in some way tied to their political meaning... it holds that to be political is not just to express political expressions but rather to be oriented toward society and to engage with its variegated terrains of power³.

I also agree with de Neve and Olteanu (2011: 79) who have stated that street art is used as a form of political participation in “order to clearly and briefly present or comment on political positions”. I include in the definition of political street art also an objective to “influence public opinion, policy, or government decision making” (Waldner & Dobratz, 2013: 378).

Many researchers before me have studied the relationship between street art/graffiti and political crisis. For example Goalwin (2013) has analyzed the situation in Northern Ireland; Hanauer (2004/2011), Rolston (2014) and Peteet (2016) have focused on the issues on the West Bank; Abaza (2016), Khatib (2013) and Smith (2015) have paid attention to the Arabic Spring; Tsilimpoudini (2012/2015) and Tulke (2014) have both researched street art in Athens during times of crisis.

In Spain, political street art has a long history as a communication tool in times of political changes. There are recorded examples from the beginning of the last century (see Chaffee, 1993: 38–65). Activists, artists and participants of social movements have always been aware of the political power of street art. Different street art forms, from posters to murals, have been utilized to express political ideas, to make claims and project opinions. Political street art has been present during periods of political turbulence such as dictatorship, elections and in the birth of Spanish democracy.

The latest boom in political street art in Spain began with the financial crisis in 2008. As I have demonstrated elsewhere

(see Tolonen, 2016), political wall writings, street art and graffiti cannot be considered as being separate from the rise of the anti-austerity 15M-movement in Spain. For example, political stencils had an important communication role in the ongoing movement. They have been used as tools to inform, activate as well as mobilize people and to strengthen the collective spirit (Tolonen, 2016: 214–224). Crisis can also motivate people to begin creating political street art. Madrid-based street artist Por Favor started painting street art because of the 15M-movement: “First, I was pasting posters in favor of 15M, but soon I needed to say in the streets what I was thinking” (Por Favor, 2015).

Political street art establishes new alternative spaces into the city. As Youkhana (2014: 174) describes it: “Thereby,

the artists reframe a public debate and sensitize for social drawbacks and political conflicts in order to challenge the hegemonic discourses and to mobilize a broader public”. This is important especially with issues that are excluded from the media. The Spanish public service media is struggling with its media transparency since it has both political and economical ties with the Spanish government (Arriza Ibarra & Nord 2014: 73, 81). This complex relationship has had an effect on the World Press Freedom Index of Spain. Spain was ranked at number 29 and the government was criticized for exercising an unusually bold control over the news program of the state radio and TV (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Some street artists see this situation as a motive to spread criticism toward the political elite through their work: “The Spanish mass media is completely controlled by the



Fig. 3. Portrait of Rita Barberá. Artist unknown. Photographed in Valencia, October 2016

government” (Por Favor, 2015). In Spain, political street art has established its place as a medium for communication and contestation.

3. Target: Valencian Mayor Rita Barberá

At some point in their careers city authorities all around the world seem to be keen on trying to buff city walls. Spain does not make an exception to this. For example, former Madrid Mayor, Ana Botella, wanted to get rid of graffiti by pushing through restrictive legislation and hardening sanctions for illegal graffiti. As a reaction to this, Madrid-based artists formed a group called Ana Botella Crew. The group created pieces based on photos of Botella and criticized the mayor and her statements (ABC 2011; Ana Botella Crew, 2013)⁴.

Also the former Mayor of Valencia, Rita Barberá⁵, was determined to clean up the streets of Valencia. During her governance she organized systematic buffing operations in the city but the painters and artists fought back:

As soon as the pieces were covered over with grey paint, several more would soon pop up to the same spots. It was impossible for them to overpower us. It was a war between Valencian painters and Rita Barberá. But since we were determined not to surrender, the city authorities finally gave in.”⁶

Rita Barberá was a popular subject to street artists not only because of her anti-graffiti attitude but also because of her colorful political career. She was, among other things, investigated for money laundering. Valencian artists and writers have dedicated pieces to Rita. The messages in some works are faster to catch than others. For example, a small stencil of Rita Barberá in the old city of Valencia, in a popular nightlife street, is located in a small corner near ground level (Figure 3). By the staining and the odor in the corner, it is easy to confirm that Rita’s portrait seems to be designated as a urinating spot.

Rita Barberá is the topic of another noteworthy piece too, even if not so obvious. The mural is by Valencian street artist Escif. The painting in El Carmen, in the old city of Valencia, is unavoidable for the passers-by. It is a car with the text: ‘Todo lo que sobra’ (Everything in excess). (Figure 4)

The story behind Escif’s work is that Rita Barberá had her own personal car parked for free for more than two decades in the city premises. The car was parked in a garage from 1991, which was the beginning of her period as mayor. During this time, the car was not used at all, it just stood there in the same spot. When photographs of Barberá’s dusty car with flat wheels came out, some members of the Valencian town hall wanted her to pay the parking fee for the 23 years and called the car a symbol of Barberá’s way of ruling: “She does not seem to make any difference between the public and private funds or property and continues to take personal benefit from most of the situations” (El Diario 2014).

Escif’s piece ‘Everything in excess’ is yet another comment to the ones in political power: even in the era of economical crisis the political elite can afford to have a car without using it. They are also exploiting the public assets in order to make private benefits. The mural was made in March 2015⁷, but due to cuts in the anti-graffiti program in an era of financial crisis, the works tend to have a long lifespan. The piece does have some tags on the edges of it and when looking closely, it seems that Escif himself has recently done some touch-ups to the mural. Escif continued with the ‘Everything in excess’ theme and built a life-size replica of Barberá’s car and burnt it as part of the traditional Valencian festival, ‘Las Fallas’ (The Falles)⁸. The original idea of the celebration is very fitting to Escif’s work — to burn all things that are no longer needed.

Valencia’s former Mayor Rita Barberá may also be the only politician in the world to have a graffiti color named after her. In 2016 the Spanish graffiti color company Montana Colors released a new graffiti paint in order to remember Barberá’s attempt to buff the city of Valencia. The idea for the naming came from Escif and it is an appropriately grey color called Gris Rita (Rita Grey). It is “an ironic tribute to the Mayor Rita Barberá who was responsible for the disappearance of countless amounts of graffiti” (Montana Colors, 2016).

These two street art pieces that I have introduced above criticize the same person, Rita Barberá, but in a different way (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). The image used in Figure 3 is based on a photograph of Barberá but the reading relies heavily on the location of the work. The content in Figure 4 – a car with a text ‘Everything in excess’ – is probably incomprehensible for most passers-by and it needs some



Fig. 4. Todo lo que sobra (Everything in excess). Artist: Escif. Photographed in Valencia, November 2016.

background information in order to reveal the rather complex meaning of it. Still, both pieces illustrate the ways that street art confronts institutional power. Furthermore, Figure 4, if partly painted with color 'Rita Grey' as I suspect⁹, takes another stand. By painting the city of Valencia with grey – as Barberá intended – Escif is also demonstrating how the color can be used in the city in a more sophisticated way than buffing grey blocks into the walls.

4. Last but not least: King Philip VI and his sheeple

Near Valencia's main beach La Malvarrosa in the historic fishermen's quarter of Cabanyal, I spotted a human figure whose head is replaced by a power plug. The text around it contains Spanish words 'país' (country), 'borregos' (sheep) and 'rey' (king) but I had difficulties understanding the overall meaning of it (Figure 5). It seemed I had yet another puzzle to solve.

Street art and graffiti pieces often play with slogans or sayings. The text in Figure 5 is actually a twist from an old proverb that says: "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king". This saying refers to difficult situations in which "someone with only a few skills is in a better position and more successful than those who have none" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017). The word 'el enchufado' means 'plugged in' but in slang it is also an expression that refers to a person who gets something "without a merit, because he knows someone or by family favoritism" (see e.g. ELL, 2016).

The stencil in Figure 5 is based on a portrait of Spanish King Felipe VI in his General Captain of the Army uniform. The artwork seems to be an exact copy of the king's official photograph with his royal medals and ribbons (see e.g. Casa Real 2014). In the stencil the head of Felipe is replaced with a power plug. This seems to suggest that the current Spanish king has gained his status only because he was born as a son



Fig. 5. En el país de los borregos el enchufado es el rey (In the country of sheep, the well-connected is the king).
Artist unknown. Photographed in Valencia, November 2016.

of King Juan Carlos I. It was in no way measured or tested if he was particularly capable for this powerful position. Kings are not selected by democratic elections, the position is inherited by blood. The word 'el enchufado' refers to this.

The Spanish form of government has not always been monarchy. It was a republic between 1873–1874 and 1931–1939. In 2014 when former king Juan Carlos informed about his abdication in favor of his son Felipe, questions about the future of the Spanish monarchy were raised. There were demonstrations both on behalf of the 'Third Spanish Republic' as well as the monarchy. Around 36–44% of the Spaniards supported the Spanish republic. During the financial crisis the Spanish monarchy has received questionable publicity, for example on Juan Carlos 10,000 euro-a-day hunting safaris and Felipe's 10-year-old daughter's 100,000 Euros annual salary (see The Guardian 2014a). Almost two-thirds of the Spaniards wanted a referendum on the future of the

monarchy but it was rejected by prime minister Mariano Rajoy. He appealed to the Spanish constitution which would have needed a legal revision in order to execute a referendum (see The Guardian, 2014b).

The handwritten text around the stencil calls Spaniards 'sheep' (see Figure 5). Sheep is used as a metaphor for 'mindless mass'. The artist behind the work is taking a stand both questioning the reasoning of the Spanish citizens and the competence of the ruling King Philip VI. It is as if the artist is disappointed in the Spaniards' lacking their own will to think and accepting blindly the blood rights of monarchy. The text is written in blue to emphasize the royal 'blue' blood. The work in Figure 5 is a pro-republic piece that reveals what the creator thinks about monarchy and its supporters.

5. Manifesto: Street art is street politics

The recession has turned Spain into an interesting observatory point from which to analyze street art during times of economical, social and political crisis. During my ethnographic field trips in Madrid and Valencia, a number of questions came to my mind about the relationships between statesmen, street artist, and political participation. As seen in the analysis of the artworks (Fig.1–Fig.5), street art poses alternative political understandings that are not present within conventional media outlets.

Waldner and Dobratz (2013: 377) describe graffiti as “micro-level political participation” and I include political street art in this definition too. I see political street art as bottom-up activism that creates more polyphonic and therefore more democratic space. I also agree with Ryan’s (2017: 8) statement that political street art can be an alternative way of doing everyday politics. It is a way to take part in the political debate and to contest those in power. Generally speaking, political participation is divided into legal forms (e.g. voting, petitions, boycotts) and illegal forms of action (e.g. illegal demonstrations, sit-ins, squatting buildings) (Christensen, 2011: 16). Unauthorized political street art can be seen as an illegal form of political participation (Kopper, 2014: 444; Tolonen, 2016: 31–32). The objective is to have an impact on people: “Political participation is understood as actions conducted by citizens in order to influence decisions on different levels of the political, economic and societal system” (de Neve & Olteanu, 2011: 77). Therefore, many street artists do not just paint randomly, they set objectives for their political pieces.

As illustrated in this paper’s artworks, austerity measures and corruption scandals have had an effect on the credibility of Spanish political representation. Citizens have brought out in the open their dissent toward the ones in power by protesting. I would call political street art in Spicca and Perdue’s (2014) term spatial citizenship. Usually citizenship is seen as a set of rights and responsibilities. Spatial citizens attempt to produce a more democratic environment by reclaiming space. Unauthorized political street art is a way of achieving it. It expresses thoughts, ideas, dissatisfaction and demands justice. The idea of citizenship containing illegal and lawbreaking attributes which political street art contains, is slightly radical. On the other hand, Isin (2008) claims that sometimes citizenship might include questioning laws, even

violating them in order to convert passive citizenship into an active one.

This paper seeks to reveal some of the relationship between street art and politics. The artworks that I have presented serve as a diagnosis for political confrontations. As I have stated elsewhere (Tolonen, 2016), writers and street artists can have different kinds of motives for their work. Political street artists are often strongly politically motivated and have a need to express themselves in the difficult socio-political situation that Spain is currently facing. Artists are not necessarily active members in political parties but they want to manifest with their pieces that they have a clear political message. This message is usually undermining the ruling powers, and against the discourse submitted in the mainstream media. (Tolonen, 2016: 223; see also Tulke, 2004: 105) Strongly politically motivated artists, like Noaz and Escif, whom I have introduced in this paper, are well known and their works respected by others so their pieces do not usually get painted over. Therefore, political pieces made by well-known artists tend to last longer on city walls. In this sense, this illegally reclaimed space is communicating and having an impact on people for some time.

Returning to this paper’s original claim – political street art confronting institutional power – the issue of street art’s communication power becomes a central consideration. Political street artist Noaz has stated: “I hope to make some kind of an impact on everyone. The advantage with the street is that you can reach 100% of the public and you can use the simplest and the most effective codes of communication” (Archivo de Creadores de Madrid, 2010). Ultimately, I think political street art offers a tool to analyze the mode of the citizens’ views on political representation and serves as a platform to practice spatial citizenship. Political street art pieces are like small bombs – spray can bombs as illustrated around King Felipe in Figure 5 – saturated with meanings of dissent.

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Notes

1. For more detailed collection of Noaz's artworks see Noaz's profile on Instagram. www.instagram.com/noaz
2. Street artist Noaz. An interview via Messenger. 28/2/2017. Italics mine.
3. This article does not make any judgment of the artistic qualities of the works presented in this paper. I focus on unauthorized political street art for three reasons. First, I see authorized street art as a part of official city space that is planned by authorities. Second, authorized street art includes elements that restrict both freedom of speech and freedom of expression. For example location, size, technique or/and content of artworks are prior decided by city authorities. Third, I argue that unauthorized street is an equal media: it is difficult to define the ethnic background, gender, social status or age of artist nor these factors have hardly any effect on who can create it.
4. For detailed analysis of Ana Botella Crew's actions see Luis Menor (2015). www.urbancreativity.org/journal-volume-1--2015.html
5. Rita Barberá was the Mayor of Valencia from 1991 to 2015. She passed away in November 2016.
6. Anonymous Spanish street artist. An interview in Spain. 22/10/2016.
7. As documented in Escif's blog: Street Against. www.streetagainst.com/category/relatos [Accessed: 7/3/2017]
8. The video of burning the replica: Cremà Falla Mossén Sorell-Corona 2015, 3:05min., video, March 25, 2015. www.youtube.com/watch?v=-n3SMXEPWkg
9. It is almost impossible to confirm the exact colors Escif uses in his artworks by looking at them. He does seem to use a lot of color grey in his pieces. For more examples of Escif's works see his blog: Street Against. www.streetagainst.com

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