

Creativity and territory: The construction of centers and peripheries from graffiti and street art

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the meaning of the dynamics of artwork production that graffiti and street art artists currently do from its conception of territorial centers and peripheries. The city is seen as a place of conflict and the territory as the local space where it manifests itself. For graffiti writers and street art artists the city stands symbolically as the largest street of all, as a large canvas production. These are visions that respond to processes that the members of graffiti and street art respect and legitimate. The city is the great goal to win (its places, its physiognomy, but also its symbolic spaces), it is a space of resistance and construction of citizenship, a place of belonging to be marked and delineated as a symbolic space of territorial appropriation.

The present document takes the PhD research developed by the author under the PhD in Cultural Management and Heritage at the University of Barcelona. It seeks to approach the creative processes of analysis, legitimacy and valorization in graffiti and street art and, as a case of analysis, the researcher has chosen the cities of Barcelona (Spain) and Montevideo (Uruguay). It was established, as empirical domain of analysis, discourses from 44 graffiti writers and street art artists of the mentioned cities, taking into account some relevant dimensions of their practices: valorization, legitimacy, recognition, professionalization and technical specialization, among others.

Keywords: Graffiti/street art, creativity, city, territory, centers/peripheries, Barcelona/Montevideo

Introduction

The city is presented as a space of conflict, crisis and permanent construction, of social interactions with competing interests and, in many cases, contradictory. It appeals to a conception of a city that must be conquered, “as an initiatory adventure that everyone has the right to live” (Borja, 2003: 32), which tends to a progressive privatization of the public space (Delgado & Malet, 2007), closely linked to consumption and to social issues such as exclusion and insecurity. In this context, where there are fewer areas for socialization and coexistence, they appear processes that restrict the emergence of an active citizenship or collective projects. From these interruptions, it is in the local territory

where real possibilities of exchanges with the community open towards generating spaces of coexistence and sociability. The territory is understood as an expressive space of everyday life of those who live in it, it prints the socio-historical traces of the individuals who live there, determining their essential characteristics within a specific habitat (Borja, 2003; Rocco, 2005; Rocha Furtado & Vieira Zanella, 2009; VV.AA, 2015). Thus, it translates the daily lives of its inhabitants, building a heterogeneous symbolic space from the conflicts created by the diversity of its population. Tensions generated by individuals who live there build a material space shaping the social coexistence. As a result, it gives a differential appropriation of physical space and social inequalities are strengthened (Filardo et al., 2008; Méndez,

2007; Pradilla Cobos, 1997; VV.AA, 2015). In this sense, it is not only recognized as a specific geographical area, but it involves objective and subjective components of its people regarding their participation in local spaces.¹ The exploration of their characteristics will mean the recognition of the needs and demands arising from that territory, allowing us to understand the complex social network that emerges from there (social, cultural and economic processes). The choice of graffiti and street art (through the territory and the public space that delimits it) is defined, among other reasons, by seeking to impact on and involve the city inhabitant, and to “break” with its everyday space (Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974). In the territory, the power struggle appears between those who live the city as a collective creation and those who want to control their dynamics, as an appropriation of a “geographical and symbolic (space) and as a territory of social practices” (López, 1998:188).

The main objectives set out in this article, from the above mentioned, are to discuss the conception that graffiti writers and street art artists make about the production of artwork, from the delimitation of the territorial centers and peripheries. It is understood that this production does not respond merely from a geographical cut, but is driven by binding decisions on how they imagine and live the city from their artistic practices. For such purposes, the development will focus on two contexts, Barcelona and Montevideo, although the analysis can be extended to other cities that produce street art. Also, it will seek to explain how they structure and determine a geographical map of street art, taking into account the creativity processes they develop and the decisions they take to give continuity to their practices.

Methodological Issues

To develop the present research, a qualitative methodological approach was taken (Taylor & Bogdan, 1994) and, for the gathering of information, interviews were used (Blanchet & Masonnart, 1989) of a focused type (Colognese, S., Bica de Mélo, 1998). Visual documents (Valles, 1999) and observation technique (Blanchet & Masonnart, 1989; Guber, 2005) were added as secondary sources.

¹ Whether through public or private institutions or organized civil society.

In total, 70 interviews were conducted, of which 44 correspond to graffiti writers and street artists from Barcelona and Montevideo. The rest were conducted with art gallery owners who sell this type of work, stakeholders specialized in the study of these urban expressions, public administration agents focused on public spaces and urban planning, and private project agents of urban creativity and murs lliures. Also, Photographic and audiovisual records of graffiti and street art in those cities were taken. There were approximately 17000 Photographs, of which 4000 belong to different private funds (donated) and 13000 were taken directly. Similarly, the researcher undertook some tasks as a participant observer such as territorial routes, and day and night tours, looking for graffiti and street art. Finally, the researcher joined some graffiti writers and street art artists collectives in their street outputs.

For the selection of the interviewed artists, it was taken into account, as a starting point, those graffiti writers and street artists that were closer to the public space of the city and further from the art market; those with intermediate relations with the public space of the city and the art market; and those working away from the public space of the city and close to the art market. Likewise, it took into consideration their place in the actual moment of the graffiti and street art scenes in Montevideo and Barcelona; the legitimacy and valorization they receive from the members of these groups; the legitimacy and valorization they have from galleries that sell works of graffiti or street art and how they are recognized by private projects working in the area of urban creativity. Moreover, the researcher considered, as a third block of criteria, the level of professionalism, creating three criteria: 1 (professional), 2 (on the road to professionalism) and 3 (not professional). Finally, the references cited are: B (Barcelona) and M (Montevideo). The accompanying number corresponds to each particular interview.

Graffiti and street art: concepts under construction

There is no unanimously accepted theoretical definition of what is graffiti or street art. Conceptually, there may exist certain approaches, such as street art (Gabbay, 2013; Herrera & Olaya, 2011) or urban art (Abarca, 2010; Canales Hidalgo, 2008). From other perspectives, these urban expressions could be approached as a type of art or as an artistic line, such as contextual art (Ardenne, 2006) or relational art (Bourriaud,

2008). There are no agreements in this regard, nor from the most formal art market positions, nor from those that arise from the world of graffiti and street art (Klein, 2012). Indeed, many members of these groups are not recognized as artists, even if they are considered as professionals (Menger, 1999, 2009). Also, some authors understand these practices as ways of making art illegally in public space (Calogirou, 2010; Schacter, 2013) from the changes experienced in the public space of the cities, but not all graffiti or street art is done illegally (Klein, 2014). In fact, nowadays, they develop creative strategies to legitimize their practices despite being them illegal actions. For example, some graffiti and street art artists avoid complaints from neighbors or police reports by building and generating convincing speeches to prevent conflicts. For instance, they pose as students from the Faculty of Fine Arts and they simulate they are doing their practical courses, and so they legitimize and institutionalize their practices.

Moreover, the durability of the work was central on the origin of the expression, becoming a major element in defining graffiti and street art as ephemeral urban expressions; but the permanence of time became relative to new technologies, the internet and digital cameras. What “before” looked passing and transitory, it is now perennial and eternal. For example, the legitimacy games among the graffiti artists that raided the subway art (Castleman, 2002; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984), in 1970s in New York, took the durability of the work as one of its most important components. This item was part of that getting up (Castleman, 2002), so necessary to achieve appreciation, respect and legitimacy as a member of a subculture or counterculture group of the prevailing hegemony (Becker, 2009; Moreau & Alderman, 2011).

The street and the construction of regional centers and peripheries

For graffiti and street art artists, the city stands symbolically as a large canvas production, a monumental work that is never finished. These visions respond to the dynamics that members of graffiti and street art communities respect and legitimate. From the respect for these internal codes of coexistence, their experience as graffiti writers and street artists will have presence in the large canvas mentioned. “There are always codes, the street has its codes. Like life, street painting has codes.” [artists\M25]. Making new

walls, sharing or covering them are three of the dynamics of intervention being carried out by members of street art. It is a city that constantly mutates, that is conquered (Borja, 2003) because it is understood as a space of resistance and construction of citizenship, as a place to belong, to be marked and delimited as a symbolic appropriation of territorial space: “Montevideo, I was born here and I live here. And it is my city” (artists/M19).

On a second level, the city gives space to the street as the material destiny of intervention. It is the most direct and primitive contact that the graffiti writer or the street artist understands that he or she owns to express and to represent their view of the world through their work, then the social networks will circulate their instances of legitimacy. Part of the collective of graffiti writers and street artists performs artwork in public space because it is based on the idea that the city/street belongs to everyone. “That’s normal, it is the street, the street is free” (artists/B2). Under this slogan, they build their internal rules between chance, the codes that arise from the very genesis of the expression and the watchful eye of contemporaneity. The confrontation over the use and appropriation of the territory approaches different borders: the place of private advertising in public space, the role of historic buildings and monuments, the construction of the concept of heritage and its role in the current urban context, the impact of architecture in the management of public administration and their view over the city and the place that is given to other forms of art in public space, among others.

“(…) the street is everybody’s, people use it as they want. I do not know, it’s a little difficult, isn’t it?, to defend one thing. For me is art, for me is on the street and it is a language and a way to express themselves.” [artists\B5]

“For me, the street belongs to everyone, is neither of who makes tag, nor who does urban art, nor who does nothing. The street belongs to everyone. It is a shared space. (...) I find it amazing. I love that there is this contradiction and we must live with this issue.” [artists\M2]

In general, part of the collective of graffiti writers and street artists understands that the street acquires more color and life by the existence of these artistic practices; they feel they give a “battle” - through practice - against the city’s agony and



Fig. 1 Granada, Photo by Ricardo Klein

frustration. In short, against the “gray” that symbolically permeates the city. That is, there is an aesthetic contribution but they also seek the joy of the people when they see their works, they link street art with that emotion and the feeling of happiness. So this expression in the city is to communicate something and “basically, to give gifts to people who are sad every day, getting up at 5 am to go to work.” [artists\M10]. These visions do not respond to a specific type of society or a particular contextual model. From this place, the contribution is always positive and fulfills a social role with the inhabitant. They understand that there is a drop in the public space and through these practices they provide new morphologies to the city. Through their actions, they reconfigure materially and emotionally the urban gaps emerging in the city. These processes do not occur only with the street art of Barcelona and Montevideo, we can find them in cities such as Buenos Aires, Lima, Berlin, Porto, Granada, Bristol or Paris.²

² Perhaps right now the most important European city at graffiti and street art level.

Also, from their perspective, the city is dynamic and changing, fragmenting however many times they need it. This territorial redistribution is explained from their interventions and how the public administration, and the local districts, apply the rules of social coexistence in the public space. Because in Barcelona there are “much more rigid regulations in the district of Ciutat Vella than in the Nou Barris district. Gràcia is very complicated also, by the issue of urbanization” [artists\B2]. In these logics of artistic production, the building of territorial areas of the city disappears according to the binomial centers or peripheries. These spaces engage and resignify from intentions and interests that graffiti writers and street artists have as a target for intervention. From their point of view, the illegality of intervening in the public space in the city center is transformed symbolically in a legal aspect in territorial peripheries, although formally it continues to be an illegal practice. One of the few exceptions where centers and territorial peripheries remain per se is when they take



Fig. 2 Berlin, Photo by Ricardo Klein

the risk of doing artwork with a high police control in the public space. In this way, the graffiti writers and street artists consider that there are necessary costs in order to obtain (and appropriate) empirically a territory with symbolic and material disputes.

These fights for the appropriation of place are not only generated in the tension between graffiti writers and street artists and the public administration (police); part of the group of graffiti writers and street artists also promotes these practices:

“in Barcelona, the artistic level is impressive, in terms of styles. Because here only paints the people who are really passionate about; because people who painted for fashion, now it is not possible, that is, it is nearly impossible to paint in Barcelona, the passionate one is the only who paints, the old and the new that have guts, or the new ones who still they have fines of 3,000 and 4,000 euros and they are ok. The day

something happens to them, it will come up. “Should I keep doing this?”, “Is it worth?” And surely they will say “no, it is not worth”, “it’s been fun”. [artists\B13]

What they always aim for, beyond near or territorial distances between centers and peripheries of the city, is the searching, the gathering and the production of walls with high visibility of the work. The centers always attract. An action that decentralizes these territorial productions are the conventions of graffiti, usually performed in the peripheries of the city. These coordinated activities mobilize and activate the territory for the artwork production and a recognition of other territorial areas that are not part of the nerve centers of the city. To be part of a crew also contributes to the division of the territory, the number of members allows them to multiply the number and the breadth of obtained spaces, especially in cities with characteristics like Barcelona, where it becomes extremely difficult to paint without being found by the police. An alternative possibility is to paint on the



Fig. 3 Buenos Aires, Photo by Ricardo Klein

framework of private projects that manage “free walls”, but part of the collective disagree on making work in areas with such characteristics: legal walls, managed by a private project, giving personal data, etc.

“I do not have to ask anyone’s permission to paint. I mean, I prefer to ask permission from a man on his blind and to be able to paint it, than to go to a legal wall, paint it and the next day someone has deleted it. Because it will come another person that will paint it, so it is cyclical, those are the legal walls. I am not convinced about that. I paint on the street and what I paint on the street are mostly blinds, abandoned places, to rent or whatever, and then I go and I paint them, namely, I paint them illegally. But I go there during the day and I wear my clothes like I was doing a good job and there it is.” [artists\B5]

In any case, the search is to go to the peripheries of the city or even out of it, finding vacant building lots, tunnels, bridges



Fig. 4 Montevideo, Photo by Ricardo Klein

or abandoned factories are a constant in this regard. The street becomes an open air auction where its buyers are the graffiti writers and street artists who do not pay money for obtaining each place.

These starting points and daily walks build and display a



Fig. 5 Lima, Photo by Ricardo Klein

geographical (and familiar) map for future works in the public space. The repetitiveness of their local tours produces observations that help to find possible areas to act. These territorial markings become their menu of options to intervene. They conceive the walls as an extension of their eyes, which is why not all the city walls are equal, only those who can convey a certain sense will be taken into account. For instance, those places that achieve high visibility in public space (for example, because of the high number of



Fig. 6 Lima, Photo by Ricardo Klein

people and transport that can pass through there) are the most looked to be painted. These tours translate a map of urban geography that each graffiti writer or street artist is outlining with their work through the city. The different tours, at least the initial ones, leave footprints around the artists' everyday places: their home, their workplace, their neighborhood, among others. "If I had a map and I put together all the drawings, I will make a good tour of all the places I was." [artists\M10).

There is no necessary coordination between the chosen wall and the sketch that will be stamped on it. Nor is there a creative correlation in this regard. The priority is the wall to select, the hardware where to paint the artwork. Likewise, other relevant factors will be taken into account as part of the creative process: the light (natural and artificial) that converges on that wall, the materials and colors that the artist has at that time and, ultimately, the number of people who pass by.

Even if it is a common place to walk, the number of people walking on that area is one of the key variables to choose

the final place. While there is an idealization that street art is generated in all neighborhoods, the fact is that these expressions are done in targeted areas of the city. Beyond the circumstances at the time, graffiti writers and street artists see the territory as having a wide range of possibilities for the creative impulse, they live the city as the natural center of operations for the creation of artwork.

In their movements, there is always the intention to win the territory, to discover and somehow to make it their own, which ultimately stands as a space power. Even, sometimes, to avoid losing it to other colleagues, they generate initiatives more related to street craftiness than creative activity. For instance, they write on the chosen walls the word "reserved" or they make a very simple work (a bomb in two colors, for example) to indicate, symbolically, territoriality and ownership. The walls they select stay marked as an advance for future and more complex artistic interventions, although in some cases they eventually decide not to touch them. For some artists the walls speak, they feel that public space invites them to intervene, creating, somehow, metaphoric relations based on the need to mediate with their practice



Fig. 7 Barcelona, Photo by Ricardo Klein

in the city. While being an owner is an abstract concept of territory, it becomes empirical when it comes to walls located in more local territories, containing neighborhood identity. The neighborhood where they live is the home outdoors.

“Of course, when you decorate your home, you put a picture here because it is good or you put a plant there because it is good, it is the same. Your neighborhood wants a good look...” [artists\M1)

Many times the dialogue with neighbors enables them to achieve that “owning” of the physical space of the city. The basic prerogatives are two as the conquest of territory: i) because he or she is the first to arrive and ii) because he or she made a work on “conditions”, i.e. considered with certain value for the group and for the expression itself. From these views, for a high exposure level wall it will be difficult to be maintained in the public space with only two tags, or a little worked bomb. In brief, it is everything about unwritten codes of respect, which hovers between members of graffiti and street art communities but is never told orally, among other reasons, because it is not necessary. Those who feel part of these groups know this primordial rule of expression: one must respect to be respected. Afterwards, will come, or not, legitimacy, recovery and prestige.

Conclusions

The practices of graffiti and street art have been feeding back processes related to the most local experience of expression, with dynamics that link with the global movements of creation. Part of the transitions generated by those members who seek and pass through the path of professionalization is precisely to go out of those closest limits to their first experiences of street intervention.

This global movement, that transcends the local scene, sometimes results in collaborative projects between artists from different countries. In some cases, the relationship among international artists is greater than with their colleagues in the local scene. They join a common search to consolidate and share aesthetics, to keep doing projects to strengthen transnational dialogues, identifying logics of every local town and moving them to an imaginary global city, adapting to each one the project itself, a singular work dialoguing with multiple cities at once. Because Barcelona, Buenos Aires or Bristol are not the same.

The discoveries and territorial conquests by graffiti writers and street artists build an understanding of the possibility that a member of one group paints in a territory that already has an owner. It is for this reason that contradictions or tensions over shared territories can be generated. The collective will begin to question the legitimacy of an artist that always paints in the same areas and new views of valorization will be built about their place as a street artist. Because stagnate is synonymous with immobility, and who stands still loses visibility. In some cases, the greater the areas of presence, the greatest respect is achieved among their peers. These power and ownership games are constant. In old school graffiti writers, this view is more evident and there is no discussion of this rule. Perhaps for the street artists, especially the muralists, this visibility is obscured by other interests, for example, the concern to accomplish work of higher quality than previously realized. In this consists a desire to keep evolving, as the internal jargon of the group says. The expansion of the artwork in the city results in the spread of the work of each graffiti and street artist. In summary, as previously mentioned, this is the reproduction and growth of the personal ego.



Fig. 8 Montevideo, Photo by Ricardo Klein

Moreover, to access and work in conquered territories they must request permission, or they have to be invited by some of the graffiti writers or street artists that “own” them. But these dynamics are circular, that is, on the one hand they make the invitation; on the other, the whole group does not travel throughout the entire city. As large movements in the territory are not always generated, no tensions are created in relation to the uses and occupations of the spaces. From the view of the members of the group, sharing a wall is more than to paint together for a Photo. It is a time of community, to feel comfortable while you paint for a common purpose. And this is achieved only by working on other things that do not strictly relate to the mural intervention. That is why many artists highlight the friendship that unites them, in many cases, prior to the start of the graffiti or street art adventure. An example of this is the “train” experience. It

is practically impossible to carry out an intervention in this regard without full confidence among its members. They are extreme situations because they know that if the police arrest them, it will be a negative point for their positioning, legitimacy, appreciation and respect in the internal dynamics of the expanded group. Being arrested by the police is not synonymous with more prestige; on the contrary, it is a symptom of not having prepared well enough the intervention strategy, and therefore they go down few steps with reference to their peers.

Finally, it is understood that the graffiti writer and street artist is a global artist. While there are territorial references that are direct to the production of work of each of them, they do not belong exclusively to the local sphere. It is an art that can be performed in one’s place of residence and

elsewhere in the world. These processes brought new dynamics to the professional field for urban artists, work no longer accumulates or focuses exclusively on the local level. For many, it is a global art form, where the production of work can occur anywhere – even the search for new areas of creativity can emphasize the need for movement.

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