

Graffiti, Street Art, and Culture in the era of the Global City: The Ana Botella Crew case

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Abstract

What is the role of art in the reinforcement or rejection of current models of public space management in our cities? To answer this question, we must attend to the ties of all artwork with public institutions, and whether or not it questions the dominant order. In this article, I will focus on the works of the Ana Botella Crew, a group of artists from Madrid, as an example of “artivism” that challenges the City Council’s management of public spaces in Madrid. My aim is to explore how useful internet tools can be to articulate artistic interventions that challenge the hegemonic uses of public space, in what Sassen has called the global city.

Keywords: Graffiti, Culture, Public space, Internet, Hegemonic urban models.

1. Introduction

What is the role of art in the reinforcement or rejection of current models of public space management in our cities? To answer this question, we must attend to the ties of all artwork with public institutions, and whether or not it questions the dominant order. Unlike official public art, both graffiti and street art, far from showing satisfaction with its aesthetic, offer a radical and different point of view of the city. We are talking about artistic interventions that invite us to look at the other side of the urban landscape, in which citizens play an active role by building, repairing,, and imagining the public space. The role that the internet plays in some of the initiatives related to street art is key, especially if we want to understand their political dimension, and the way they challenge the dominant order. As we shall see, internet provides very useful tools to articulate ideas that challenge the strict regulations that determine the use of public spaces.

In this article, I will analyze the works of the Ana Botella Crew (ABC), a group of artists from Madrid, as an example of “artivism” that challenges the City Council’s management of public spaces in Madrid. ABC’s work is based on collab-

orative actions through the web in order to mock the figure of Ana Botella, who pushed through an extremely restrictive legislation on graffiti as town councilor for the environment in 2009 (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2009) The ABC developed its projects in a climate of great hostility towards graffiti projected by the local government in Madrid. This hostility has not only meant the creation of a new and restrictive legal framework, but also institutional messages that refer to the hiring of graphologists to identify graffiti artists and to make it easier to establish sanctions. There was an immediate reaction to all of this –in just a few weeks- the ABC group was formed, willing to fight for a space in the streets of Madrid (see Figure 1.).

My aim is to explore how useful internet tools can be to articulate artistic interventions that challenge the hegemonic uses of public space, in what Sassen (1991) has called the global city. To do so, I am going to discuss the case of Madrid by trying to answer two questions: 1) what is the role of virtual tools in articulating these initiatives? 2) How can we interpret this from a political perspective? To do this I will use the following structure: First, I will discuss the role of culture in the hegemonic urban models, in order to explore the

way that practices such as graffiti and street art connect with these. Secondly, I will study the public management of graffiti and street art, carried out by local governments, emphasizing the aspects where there is “zero tolerance.” Thirdly, I will analyze the specific case of ABC, exploring the use they have made of the internet to develop their collective actions, combining online and offline activity. Finally, I will discuss my findings.

2. The role of culture in the new hegemonic urban models

We are living in the context of great changes in Western cities. The paradigm shift from an economy based on the manufacturing industry to one based on the service industry is not only reshaping the economic and business spheres of our urban environments, but also the social sphere (Sassen, 1991) and its public spaces. These changes have created emerging conflicts between the motivations related to private and public interests. It is not easy for local governments to harmonize the interests of capital with democratic legitimacy (Deutsche, 1996). That is why, as some authors state (see Zukin, 1982 and 1994; Deutsche, 1996; Ferrell, 1996; Delgado, 2007; and Kramer, 2011), it is increasingly common to find urban areas where private interests prevail over the public interest. Conflicts between the private and the public are often silenced under the veil of stability and “consensus” (Mouffe, 1999). This leads us to the question: What is the role of art in the reinforcement or rejection of current models of public space management in our cities? To answer this question, we must attend the ties of all artwork with public institutions, and whether or not it questions the dominant order.

Deutsche (1996: 56) defines official public art as:

a practice that is within the built environment, is involved in the production of meanings, uses and forms for the city. With this capability, you can help reinforce the consent to the renewal and restructuring which is historically the form of the advanced capitalist urbanism.

The idea of an art that reinforces the official model of public space is something that Deutsche (1996) related to beautification, which is dominant in cities like New York. This notion of “beauty,” or the symbolic organization of public space under a certain aesthetic and social order, leads to a process of

exclusion in which everything that does not fit the dominant aesthetic model is stigmatized or destroyed.

Unlike official public art, graffiti and street art, far from showing satisfaction with this aesthetic, choose a radically different use of the city (Caldeira, 2010). We are talking about artistic interventions that invite us to look at the other side of the urban landscape, in which citizens play an active role by building, repairing and imagining public space. These interventions show us new ways of living this urban landscape (Young, 2014: 94).

The cultural dimension, by becoming a resource (Yúdice, 2002), has turned into one of the main ways to extract economic benefits from public spaces. This is achieved thanks to the “symbolic economy” (Zukin, 1994), or the ability to produce using the symbols and spaces of culture; and what Logan and Molotch (1987) called “growth machines.” Culture has three basic uses in this context: a) Attracting capital flows; b) Establishing a new social order; and c) Regenerating the degraded urban fabric.

1.1. Attracting capital flows

According to Harvey (2001) the competitive logic of capitalism entails a tendency to monopolization. In urban areas, once these monopolies have been imposed, they compete to attract capital flows in the form of investments. These monopolies have a contradictory nature: they compete under the coordinates of globalization, leading to large doses of homogenization, and at the same time, they compete by highlighting the uniqueness and authenticity of their territories, in order to show characteristics that distinguish them from other competitors. One of the key tools to highlight the uniqueness of each territory and that, therefore, functions as a magnet for tourism (Zukin, 1994), is cultural heritage (monuments, museums, art, etc.). This is where what Harvey calls “collective symbolic capital,” based on the concept developed by Bourdieu, is activated. The paradox beneath this is that the continuous use of collective symbolic capital, whilst creating elements of distinction, motivates a homogenization in the international context. This process generates a circular logic of homogeneity and distinction in which the more cities try to escape, the more they will be trapped.

, As Hervey (2001: 433) asserts, that is why:

to not destroy uniqueness completely, as it is the basis of the appropriation of monopoly rents, capital must support a form of differentiation and allow divergent, and to some extent uncontrollable, local cultural developments, that can antagonize with the stability of its own accumulation process.

This is what Smith (2012) has called an appropriation of the aesthetic of the “new urban frontier,” that is, wealthier classes (re)conquering space at the expense of the social majority, which is comparable to the legendary conquest of wild and virgin lands in the Far West. The appropriation of the aesthetic of these “territories” has a symbolic dimension; it highlights the domination of patrician classes over popular classes. Nevertheless, it also has an economic dimension, encouraging the use of popular subcultures for commercial purposes. These practices have divorced the social context (Zukin, 1994) whilst stealing the potential conflict from it. However, this context will maintain a certain “subversive” aesthetics in order to be attractive. “The Capital’s problem is finding ways to absorb, subsume, commodify and monetize such differences in order to accumulate the monopoly rents they generate” (Harvey, 2001: 433).

2.2. The establishment of a new social order

Culture is not only used as a resource to obtain profit, it can also serve to establish a new social order by redeveloping public space. We have already mentioned the concept of “symbolic economy” to refer to the way public authorities can generate both symbols and spaces. This concept played an important role in the late 1970s, mainly due to the transition from an economic model based on the industrial sector to one based on the service industry. In this context, culture is placed in the center of urban development and will be considered an “economic asset” and “a valuable generator of marketable city spaces” (Garcia, 2008: 113). A strategy of “symbolic economy” we may recall is what Zukin (1994) calls the “Disneyfication” of public spaces. In fact, Disneyworld is a perfect example of the management of public space under these parameters, which apply to theme parks in a unique way: privatization of management, visual coherence, and social control.

First, we must recall the fact that the commitment to a model of management based on privatization has its origin in the US during the decade of the 1970s. At that time, funds from

city coffers were decreasing, progressively enabling the private sector to enter in municipal management. The case of New York was striking: the fiscal crisis that hit the city mid-decade (Harvey, 2007) served as a pretext to reduce the weight of the public sector. This led to the deterioration of public services, particularly suburban transport (Austin, 2001). This process meant that:

the collective space -the public space- was being represented as a commodity. Even when you do not pay for it, [...] the public space has been integrated into the commercial space, thereby promoting corporate values (Zukin, 1994: 260).

Secondly, the symbols and images generated from public institutions aimed at creating a visual coherence or aesthetic sanitation led to the reinforcement of a new model of public space. Now, what some authors have called an “aesthetic of authority” and an “aesthetic of fear” would prevail. The first concept “embodies an affection for authority, a pleasure in the way property looks when it is under the firm control of its individual, corporate, and government owners” (Ferrell, 1996: 180). The second concept refers to how culture is “capitalized for eventual privatization and militarization of public space” (Zukin, 1994: 11). The Disneyworld model is not only important because it confirms the importance of cultural power to apply effective social control, but because it offers a model of privatization that handles social diversity. This provides a framework of meaning to the city (Zukin, 1994) that replaces a model of coexistence with the market (Delgado, 2007; see also Balibrea, 2010).

2.3. Regeneration of degraded urban fabrics

One of the major phenomena that have favored urban regeneration processes is what is known as gentrification. Based on the concept of the “urban frontier,” Smith (2012) makes an exhaustive analysis of the economic and social processes through which international capital has transformed cities in recent decades thanks to the conquest of space. In recent times, we have witnessed how the wealthiest classes have “recaptured” the degraded urban centers after years of economic disinvestment and institutional neglect.

To talk about the role of culture, and more specifically art, in the process of gentrification, we must highlight the work of Deutsche and Ryan (1984). These authors emphasize that

the economic impact caused by artists and art galleries is not positive in the communities in which they operate. They actually reinforce the process by which people who are most in need must move in favor of the wealthy classes. In many cases, street art has a main role rather than a secondary one. Abarca (2009) has analyzed its role as a regenerator for processes in the urban sphere. One of his main theses is that street art provides a dose of “authenticity” which is stripped of all the “unfriendly” aspects associated with graffiti.

3. The governance of graffiti based on “Zero Tolerance”

Graffiti and street art, as autonomous artistic practices, face the institutional pressure of local governments that are permanently concerned about having everything that happens in public spaces under control. This pressure is applied through two different channels: prohibition, involving the prosecution and punishment of any artist working in the streets without authorization; or institutionalization, which would entail the cooptation of the practices carried out by these artists. This dichotomous and ambivalent way to address graffiti and street art can be classified as schizoid, not because of the contradictions in its objectives, or the strict control of any dissenting artistic practice, but by its practical consequences: on one hand, prohibition, persecution and punishment, and on the other, promotion of graffiti and street art as standard artistic practices.

Under the prohibitionist perspective, graffiti is understood, not as a matter of aesthetic nature, but as a real social problem (Ferrell, 1996). The social and political classification of a problem is always a collective construction directly linked to the perceptions, representations, interests and values of the actors involved (Subirats, 2008: 126; see also Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Public authorities take this approach with the firm intention of building a problem, a moral panic (Cohen, 2002), thereby drawing a clear line between the desirable and the undesirable, between “them” and “us” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009) and setting up a space in which the identities created must cope antagonistically (Lauclau and Mouffe, 1987). All this is well inserted into what Mouffe (2013: 299) calls the “moralization of politics” where the “opponent is not defined in political but moral terms,” and the consequence of this is that “these opponents cannot be seen as opponents but as enemies.”

Indeed, denying any democratic legitimacy to the opponent in this case, the group of graffiti writers and therefore denying any possible dialogue, has been the standard pattern followed by local governments since the first tags and pieces appeared on the walls of Philadelphia and New York. This moralistic approach to conflict has its corollary in creating an ideological basis that underlines the hegemonic narratives against graffiti and, by extension, against all unregulated artistic practice in public space. Their principles are based on the theory of broken windows, established by James Wilson and George Kelling in an article they published in 1982 in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In it, they asserted that disorder, through the metaphor of a broken window, was an embryo from which serious criminal activity is generated.

Thus, the proliferation of behaviors indicative of neglect would lead to the flourishing of serious crimes and, consequently, would negatively impact on life in the community “An unchecked panhandler is, in effect, the first broken window” (Wilson and Kelling, 1982: 5). Therefore, we would be facing two categories of disorder: social, which could include behaviors such as “loitering”, littering, drinking in public, begging or prostitution; and physical, which includes abandoned buildings, sidewalks with trash, or graffiti (Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006). Indeed, graffiti, under this approach, would contribute to the physical degradation of a given space and, therefore, be a clear example of disorder.

Despite the soundness of such claims there is no empirical evidence to support the theory of broken windows (Harcourt, 1998; Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006; Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999) nor that the consequent zero tolerance policies would determinedly contribute to reduce violent crime (Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006). On the contrary, other measures that do not imply a fight against disorder seem to have a direct effect on reducing crime. These include collective efficacy, defined as the merger of social cohesion through the expectation of society’s active control of public space (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). In a study developed in the city of Chicago, Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) were able to confirm that disorder has a modest correlation with serious crime, but this was more connected to the characteristics and background of each quarter. These decisive factors for crime, which have nothing to do with disorder, seem to be both a structural disadvantage and an attenuated collective efficacy (Sampson and Raudenbusch, 1999:

638). Zero tolerance policies, far from being effective, have managed to blame the individuals who have suffered successive socio-economic crisis in cities like New York.

How is it possible for a theory with such a lack of empirical evidence to be so successful among the public authorities many large cities? The answer to this is its utility to implement policies that have contributed to establishing a particular economic model in a significant way (Kramer, 2011). This model is based on what Logan and Molotch (1987) have called Growth machines. These machines are based on the linkage between the public sector, through local political elites, and the private sector, mainly composed by corporate and financial elites, to extract economic benefits from land use at the expense of the residents (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Harvey, 2001). The ideology that accompanies these growth machines is what Kramer (2011) has called privatism. This term refers to the role of the public sector as an enabler for the flow of capital towards the private sector through tax incentives and the creation of a specific infrastructure. There seems to be a clear correlation between the logic of growth machines and privatism and the way in which the political elites respond to practices such as graffiti (Kramer, 2011: 13). Growth machine interventions, despite their dysfunctional consequences in social terms, are remarkably functional from the real estate market's perspective (Smith, 2012).

4. The Ana Botella Crew case

4.1 Madrid, Global City

In recent years, the aim of public authorities to place Madrid in the global context, has led to the progressive financialization of its economic model. This has led to the emergence of a new economy of advanced services that has reshaped the business of the city in favor of the interests of international capital (Rodríguez, 2007). The pressure of economic globalization, and the hegemony of neoliberal thinking, has made local governments adopt strategies to strengthen local economic competitiveness in a global context. Thus, the main role of cities would not be to ensure a certain level of social cohesion but to promote local economic growth, often at the expense of generating greater inequality and socio-spatial segregation (Blanco and Subirats, 2012: 21). This process has also had an impact on a new configuration of

public space for two reasons: it encourages a purely commercial logic (public space as a place of transit for potential consumers) and it implements a new model of development based on the standardization and individualization of ways of living (Calvo, 2007). All this has its counterpart in the field of culture. The municipal authorities in Madrid inextricably connected culture to the development and wealth of the city (Carrillo, 2009: 201).

Closely related to this is the construction of infrastructures that serve as major exhibition venues, as well as the organization of major cultural events to revitalize local economies (Evans, 2005; García, 2008; see also Cocola, 2009). These initiatives are often developed without adequate long-term planning, which means that there is not a "balanced distribution of benefits, nor socially, nor spatially" (García, 2008: 112). In addition, betting on the architectural spectacle of the "cultural city" effectively endorses a model that is detrimental for more local, accessible and creative cultural provision (Costa and Lopes, 2013). Therefore, it is detrimental to the cultural practices and experiences associated with the daily life of the communities that some authors, such as Evans (2005), have identified as key for the development of social projects in the community. The district of Lavapies in Madrid is a paradigmatic case. As Carrillo has stated (2009), while most of the social, cultural and political spheres of the neighborhood were dismantled, large and oblivious cultural containers for the cultural dynamics of the district were built. Good examples of this are the cultural center La Casa Encendida, the Valle Inclán theatre or the extension of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

4.2. The paradoxical management of graffiti and the artist response

The policies developed by the Madrid city council in recent years regarding graffiti fit perfectly in this schizoid category: on one hand, zero tolerance, but on the other, the promotion of events that are aimed at assimilating graffiti and street art as standard artistic practices. There is an anecdote that perfectly exemplifies this dual drive. In 2007, only two years before the new legislation and the rise of ABC, a couple of street artists, Asier and Murphy, painted several murals in the capital of Madrid in response to a statement of Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón, the former mayor of Madrid: "We must put an end to this false expression of any kind of artistic atti-

tude." On one of these walls, which the mayor soon ordered to be demolished, Ruiz-Gallardón was represented with the ironic slogan, "Gallardon loves graffiti." The paradox here is that the same artists who represented Ruiz-Gallardon were also awarded prizes in the Young Artists' Competition organized by the Madrid City Council, and it was the mayor who had given them a check for 3,400 euros (El Mundo, 2008).

In any case, how did ABC articulate their actions? It was under collaborative and reticular logic. Using their Flickr account, they disseminated a template with Ana Botella's signature (see Figure 2.) for any internet user to download. The action, therefore, was raised by a leading group but could be executed by any person with internet access. Thus, connectivity, interactivity, and collective creation become fundamental concepts in order to understand their actions. To the concept of collective creation, we must add the concept of "carnival," in which personal identities are replaced by other identities (see Figure 3.) assumed in performative processes (Carrillo, 2004).

In that sense, ABC is heir to a tradition of collaborative practices developed in recent decades in the capital of Spain. Among them, we can mention those carried out by the Preiswert Arbeitskollegen (Unalienated Working Society) group, who raised a number of situationist actions throughout the 1990s (Pujals, 2004; Carrillo, 2009). The most frequent interventions of this group consisted in the dissemination of ironic political messages in public space using templates and sprays (see Figure 4.). Another important reference is Sabotaje Contra el Capital Pasándose Pipa (SC-CPP), that developed, among other things, the initiative YO-MANGO (détournement of the name of the Spanish textile brand MANGO) that consisted in "kleptomaniac guerrilla" actions in big stores (see Figure 5.). That is, actions that, through the theft of small items, aimed at denouncing the consumerist inertia of today's society. The most important aspect of their activity, apart from the use of irony and sense of humor, is the use of the web to deposit and collectivize the tools or information inherent in their actions for general use (Carrillo, 2004).

4.3 New forms of street art through the internet

Manuel Castells uses the concept of informational capitalism to refer to his contemporary model of the intensification of

informational flows and the multiplication of multidirectional communications. In this context, some "activist" groups have made the most of the possibilities that the new expansion of ICT has offered (Carrillo, 2004) in order to stand against the new values that informational capitalism has entailed: competitiveness, hyper-individualization and the atomization of social life. These works have led to the proliferation of proposals that are committed to collective action, in opposition to the idea of individual artistic genius. Thus, the factors of collectivity and anonymity constitute defining features of the latest form of activism on the web. Therefore, the actions of ABC are heirs to this tradition, as they oppose light and nodal collective action to the bureaucratized, uniform, and centralized machinery of public institutions. They not only defied the repressive actions of Madrid's local government but also, above all, the ideological values it represents.

ABC articulates its activity by combining online and offline action. Their online activity uses the Zapatista's strategies to connect with net art, a "tactical" challenging of the greater powers combined with the channels of the information era (Castells, 1997). On the other hand, for their offline activity, ABC's actions combine graffiti related strategies (tagging, getting up, etc.) with typical street art strategies (use of templates, conceptual sophistication, détournement, etc.). As a result, we have a hybrid that combines the best aspects of both practices, foremost amongst which is their defiance of the rules for the use of public space.

It is important to note that ABC's actions, although imbued with a clear intention to challenge the local government, merely highlight their position of weakness against them. Madrid City Council, because of its inability to read social reality and see the demand for other ways of political participation beyond the traditional electoral channels (Blanco and Subirats, 2012), has failed to articulate other means of participation that go beyond cooptation and submission to the institutional channels. This condemns all social or cultural actors who do not want to submit to the dynamics of persuasion, assimilation, and standardization imposed by the local government to endure their own systematic coercion. This means that alternative responses of opposition to the institutional order have been placed in the field of what Michel de Certeau (2001: 367) called tactical, understanding that this concept includes actions in which the lack of a defined place to establish rules is an essential characteristic:

The lack of this place undoubtedly allows mobility, but requires a greater ability to adapt to the vagaries of time by instantly catching the possibilities of each moment. They need to be vigilant to make the most of the failures, and the particular junctures that open while monitoring the authorities.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed the role of culture in hegemonic urban models and in the ways that local governments manage public spaces. We can find three main tasks: First, culture plays a key role attracting capital flows in form of tourism and investments. Secondly, culture can strengthen a particular social order in public spaces. Thirdly, culture has been manipulated skillfully as a tool for gentrification in degraded neighborhoods. I have also analyzed the role of certain artistic practices in challenging the dominant urban models and the management that local governments have undertaken of these practices. Graffiti and street art can be found within these practices that operate outside the traditional channels of the art system. Governance of local governments typically responds to a schizoid dynamic: at the same time it prohibits, pursues and punishes, it also co-opts and normalizes.

The Broken Windows Theory of Wilson and Kelling (1982) set the theoretical foundations for zero tolerance policies. Although empirical evidence has not confirmed their thesis, many municipal governments have followed it faithfully. We find the explanation of this paradox in the utility of this theory for the process of privatization and profit extraction regarding public assets, which is related to what Logan and Molotch (1987) have called "growth machines." Zero tolerance has not stopped artists and graffiti writers, who have continued to defy the dominant social and aesthetic order in cities through all kinds of strategies. Here we analyzed the case of a group of artists called the Ana Botella Crew, who, in response to an upsurge of the public administration of the City of Madrid, invited anyone that wanted to participate to do so by filling the Spanish capital with the signature of the former city councilor for the environment.

What is the role of virtual tools in the articulation of these initiatives and, therefore, antagonizing the hegemonic urban models? Alternatively, what is the role of online action in the development of offline activities and in the achievement of the goals set by these initiatives? As we have seen, Inter-

netthe internet offers possibilities related to collective, non-hierarchical and reticular action. To which we should add the festive and carnival component, where humor and sublimation allow us to scoff at the identity of those who represent the symbolic capital of order. By using virtual tools, in this case Flickr, the group was able to multiply the presence of Ana Botella throughout the whole world in an easy, cheap and accessible way. This is what allowed their actions to reach, in a very short period, a much larger audience than if a limited group of people had executed them. The fact that their actions were quickly exposed in a Flickr profile gave them a multiplying effect. The platform thus fulfilled a dual function: 1) The dissemination of the materials and tools necessary to execute the actions, and 2) demonstrating the results and reinforcing the idea of ubiquity.

What are the political conclusions of all this? It is true that we can classify this initiative in what Michel de Certeau has called the field of tactics, that is, that area in which the lack of power to define the rules forces you to use the loopholes that can favor the articulation of an action that challenges the dominant order. Adopting a tactical role towards the established power is a result of what Chantal Mouffe calls the moralization of politics, that is, the refusal to provide political entity to the opponents of institutional power. Because of this, they will not be considered adversaries, but enemies. The management of the local government of Madrid shows that politicians, far from providing graffiti writers and street artists with a political entity that would enable them as interlocutors, refer to them as a moral entity as if they were a social evil that must be eradicated.

The way that public authorities impede the right of certain social and cultural actors to show their disagreement regarding the ways in which our public spaces are managed should alert us to the poor quality of our democracy. The guarantee that the votes obtained in the process of electoral participation provide should not be a blank check that allows governments to shirk their obligation to explore other forms of participation in public life. In short, it is not only the right of graffiti and street artists to intervene without authorization in the street that is at stake which would open another vector of analysis but the right of citizens to articulate democratic ways of responding to the dominant political, social and cultural order, as well as the right to have institutions, that far from being an adversary, are allies in these processes.

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Figure 1. Action of ABC



Figure 2. ABC template for stenciling



Figure 3. Members of ABC with masks of Ana Botella



Figure 4. Action of Preiswert Arbeitskollegen



Figure 5. One of the "logos" of YOMANGO