From Graffiti to Street Art: How Urban Artists are Democratizing Spanish City Centers and Streets

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In Spain, public space is treated as the property of the State as opposed to a communal space shared by everyone. City councils dictate, to an excessive degree, what activities can and cannot occur in public space. Two exaggerated norms are the prohibitions against line-drying of clothes on balconies as well as sleeping on public benches. The notion that public space belongs to the State and not to the people reinforces the institutional value placed on private property and property ownership, and the division that such a value creates between the haves and the have-nots. When public space is increasingly regulated by the State, an unscripted way of living based on sharing and social interaction becomes problematic if not impossible. In order to reactivate spontaneous social cooperation and unexpected engagements with the cityscape, street artists interact unrestrictedly with the built environment instead of accepting the imposed, fixed relations of private property and normalized codes.

In the last decade, the control of public space has been central to Spanish urban renewal policies. The city councils of Barcelona, Valencia, and Bilbao have passed laws that foment an orderly, safe, and sanitized public space in order to improve communal living and civility, and thereby attract tourists and
investors. These new laws have criminalized, among other practices, graffiti and urban art. The city councils have also invested millions of euros a year to remove graffiti from city walls (Jarque). The impetus for such actions is the broken windows theory of James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, and, more recently, the findings of Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Linda Steg. The broken windows theory argues that disorderly and petty criminal behavior begets more such conduct, and that if signs of public disturbance like graffiti and vandalism are removed from urban space, further minor unlawful acts can be curtailed. The success of Rudy Giuliani’s campaign to clean up Times Square in New York in the 1990s is heralded as proof of the effectiveness of urban initiatives based on the broken windows theory, and has spawned imitators worldwide. Keizer, Lindenberg, and Steg have provided further empirical support. After conducting six field experiments, they concluded that:

Signs of inappropriate behavior like graffiti or broken windows lead to other inappropriate behavior (e.g., litter or stealing), which in turn results in the inhibition of other norms (i.e., a general weakening of the goal to act appropriately. (Keizer)

The implication is that a city government, in order to stop the spread of disorder, must eliminate graffiti. That may be true. However, if politicians do not address the underlying social and economic problems that lead to graffiti, the mere removal of tags from city walls will not be sufficient. It will be a repetitive, futile act that will require large sums of public money. According to Escif, a graffiti and street artist from Valencia, “graffiti es una agresión a la ciudad y a sus políticas” (Escif). It is a way to get the attention of politicians and exclaim that the poor and marginalized matter in the city. The origins of the graffiti movement lie in hip hop culture, which began in New York in the sixties. Graffiti was a way of protesting the urban policies that had failed to take into consideration certain sections of the city. The City of New
York allowed neighborhoods like the Bronx to decay and the quality of life of its inhabitants to deteriorate, and this feeling of abandonment led to a general rage against the city. Graffiti was an expression of that rage. Paradoxically, urban planning, which once facilitated the decline of neighborhoods, which, in turn, led to graffiti, now seeks to prevent the further worsening of communities by eliminating graffiti.

While I agree that Spanish city governments should be interested in stopping the spread of urban violence, I disagree with the methods. In addition to removing tags from urban space, poor and marginalized neighborhoods need to be revitalized. A more positive and tight-knit community could be developed through the construction of parks, schools, community centers, and art studios, the conversion of vacant buildings into green spaces as well as the organization of public events that celebrate national, regional and local holidays. Another tool to stop the spread of disorder is to combat the idea of property. While graffiti most certainly subverts authority, it also, ironically, reproduces the norm of property and the hierarchy of institutions. Street artist Frágil, who has painted in Barcelona, Madrid and Bilbao, points out:

El grafiti con el espacio es muy exigente. Es muy conservador con el espacio . . . En el sentido de que si tú has pintado un sitio, ese sitio te pertenece . . . al final se está reproduciendo un poco todo la ideología de la propiedad privada, de la posesión. Siendo un movimiento underground, en principio pues es como anti-sistema de alguna manera, y que reproduzca los mismos vicios del sistema, es sorprendente. (Frágil)

In the world of graffiti, as in the political world, there is a battle for space. This battle is shaped by a fixed hierarchy based on a mix of form, quality, seniority, and respect. On the scale from a tag (the graffiti artist’s signature in one color), to a throw-up (a signature with two colors, one for the background and the
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other for the outline), to a piece (any signature that is more elaborate than a throw-up), it is only permissible by those who do graffiti to paint over a tag or a throw-up and only if what is being covered is considered inferior. The value of a tag or throw-up depends not only on the quality but also the number of years the graffiti artist has been painting and the respect he or she has in the graffiti community. Like Frágil, Escif criticizes graffiti’s privatization of space and argues that “no puedes luchar contra la privatización del Estado, privatizando tú desde abajo la ciudad” (Escif). Despite agreeing about graffiti’s hypocritical stance vis-à-vis the privatization of space, Frágil and Escif differ with regard to graffiti as a closed code. Frágil echoes the criticism that graffiti is irritating because it is only understood by the graffiti artists themselves. Escif counters by maintaining that the most interesting part of the graffiti movement is precisely its utilization of closed codes. He explains:

Siento que es más interesante que no contase nada, a que contase algo porque al final es una protesta visceral. Es una protesta que está detrás de un discurso no construido. Es una protesta que sale de la vida real de la ciudad. No hay una manipulación posible porque no hay una construcción de ese discurso, pues eso no puede ser controlado. Molesta mucho más que cualquier construcción. (Escif)

Graffiti’s power resides in the fact that it does not communicate anything. By being a closed code understood only by those in the graffiti community, it transcends any attempt to control it. Destructive at its core, graffiti is the symbol of the failure of modernist urban planning.

In contrast to this destructive power of graffiti, there is a constructive method of engaging with the city. Based on my personal interviews with Spanish street artists Dr. Case, Olivia, Frágil and Escif, I have concluded that there are several key differences between street art and graffiti. The evolution of graffiti to street art mimics the maturity of the artists themselves.
Graffiti in Spain tends to be practiced by irresponsible adolescents whose only interests are to draw attention, express angst, and fit in with their group of friends. Dr. Case makes clear: “El grafiti en España nunca ha sido un mundo de bandas ni muy violento. Ha sido más un mundo de pintar, de salir por ahí. Pero nunca ha habido muchas peleas callejeras” (Dr. Case and Olivia).

Street artists, on the other hand, are usually older, well educated, and financially self-sufficient. For example, Olivia, who studied *Bellas Artes* and has a job as a textile designer, began intervening in the city as a street artist when she was 35 years old. As a result, the impetus for interacting with the street is not so much teen angst as the desire to take advantage of spaces in the city in order to reflect on the city itself. Unlike graffiti, street art intends to communicate and send a message. It is also very ephemeral and does not seek the permanence of graffiti but, rather, welcomes the intervention of other artists. In fact, street artists want their work to interact with that of others. For them, street art exists, as Frágil puts it, “para que se desaparezca” (Frágil). With regard to form, street art consists not only of spray-painted content, but also paste-ups, stencils, and stickers. The need to be integrated with the city moves street art from the walls lining train tracks on the city outskirts, where graffiti in Spain is typically found, to the city centers.

Street artists’ necessarily close relationship with the street has led many of them to develop an attitude in favor of free and open interaction and against closed, fixed discursive relations of binary oppositions. Street artists move through the city making connections that are normally discouraged, such as between private and public space, self and other, and subject and object. As these artists interact with the built environment, both city and self are continually altered. Dr. Case describes this transformative experience by stating that when you begin to intervene freely with the city, “sientes una relación mucho más cercana con el espacio, con las paredes y con todo” (Dr. Case and Olivia). The deepened identification with the city
manifests itself in a heightened communication between built environment and urban artist. The street seems to acquire a voice that the artists are able to understand and to which they are able to respond. That is, the city becomes co-creator of artistic content when, as Escif explains, you are able to establish “una negociación entre la pared y tú” and find “ese punto medio entre lo que tú quieres y lo que la pared necesita” (Escif). When such an open relationship is continually cultivated, the city becomes less a space of social control and more a space of unexpected connections. Olivia reveals that her unlimited and ungoverned interaction with urban space has transformed her perception of the city:

Yo, ahora, desde que pinto hace cuatro años voy por la calle de otra manera. Para mí la ciudad ya no es lo mismo. Ni la miro como la miraba antes. Ahora no veo ni puertas ni ventanas. Veo marcos para poner cosas. Pero, no solo a mí. Le pasa a la gente a mi alrededor. Mi madre, un súper fan, siempre me dice “he visto una puerta no sé dónde.” (Dr. Case and Olivia)

The acting out of unrestricted engagement with the city on the part of street artists is contagious, and therein lies its strength. The perception of the city as continually open to alteration has the potential to spread from urban artists to the greater population, and to reactivate and democratize Spanish public space. This type of innovative urban intervention requires a new body that is not solely a physical body, but one that is at the same time a network of constantly recombinating links between the material world and the virtual world of ideas. The defining characteristic of the new body of the street artist is its register of co-existence between the street, self, and art.

The new body that street artists are modeling is one that I call the emergent urban body—emergent, because it is constantly in a process of being created again and again, and urban, because it lives in the city. Dr. Case’s 2012 project Symbiosis—Artists
Figure 1. “Escif” from Symbiosis—Artists with Character by Dr. Case. Courtesy of Dr. Case.

Figure 2. “Olivia” from Symbiosis—Artists with Character by Dr. Case. Courtesy of Dr. Case.
Figure 3. “Frágil” from Symbiosis—Artists with Character by Dr. Case. Courtesy of Dr. Case.

Figure 4. “Dr. Case” from Symbiosis—Artists with Character by Dr. Case. Courtesy of Dr. Case.
with Character best exemplifies the metamorphic quality of the emergent urban body. In this experiment, Dr. Case took pictures of graffiti writers and street artists, digitally removed their faces from the photographs, and replaced them with the countenances of one of their creations, thus merging the physical bodies of the artists with the imaginative, symbolic faces of their fictional characters.

In so doing, as the etymology of the title of his project, symbiosis, suggests, the material and the symbolic “live together” in the emergent urban body (Symbiosis). The original impetus for the project was Dr. Case’s obsession with documenting urban art on the Internet. Part of the documentation that he was compiling was photographs of graffiti writers and street artists caught in the act. Because these acts are illegal and can carry fines of up to 3,000 euros in Spain, urban artists wanted Dr. Case to find a way to hide their faces. Instead of using large pixels to disguise identity, a technique employed in police photos and videos, Dr. Case decided to fuse art and artist. The metamorphosed heads of the street artists in Dr. Case’s Symbiosis are the pictorial equivalent of street art monikers, the false names that street artists give themselves. Both the pseudonyms and the mutated heads hide the identities of street artists while at the same time revealing certain heightened marks of identity. The blurring of the boundary between artist and art in Dr. Case’s project mimics the street artists’ continually evolving relationship with their exterior world. Subjectivity for the emergent urban body is a process of perpetual interaction with people, places, things and ideas. On the continuum going from street artist to world, there are different points, two of which are the street artists’ assumed name and character. At any given moment, the flows and connections along the continuum can be reassembled in new ways. Olivia is a case in point. The object of her artistic work, Olive Oil of Popeye fame, drove the choice of her moniker. Olivia felt attracted to Olive Oil because, as she clarifies, Olive Oil was: “una imagen que me encantaba
de siempre y el nombre lo tenía muy claro cuando empecé a hacer street art. Me iba a llamar Olivia. Físicamente tengo cierto parecido y me sentía identificada con ella” (Dr. Case and Olivia).

The fixed subject/object divide is clearly loosened and obscured here. Olivia, the artist, is radically open to Olive Oil, her art, in such a way that the interaction between the two is a process of unrestricted commingling: Olivia functions less like a body and more like a bundle of networked relations connecting herself with Olive Oil, that is, the organic with the non-organic, and the material with the immaterial. In other words, Olivia is not solely body but also ecology of relations whose subjectivity is in a continual process of becoming. Also, not only is Olivia’s subjectivity in a continual process of becoming, so are the subjectivities of her Olive Oils. Olivia explains:

Empecé a utilizar las Olivias como una base para luego crear con ella otros tipos de personajes. Bueno, más que disfrazarse, lo que hago es que Olivia se convierta en otras cosas. Mujeres que o admiro o me gustan. Pueden ser mujeres que han existido o no. (Dr. Case and Olivia)

Some of Olivia’s converted Olive Oils that have been seen in Barcelona’s Ciutat Vella are Frida Khalo (Frilivia Khalo), Marie Antoinette (Marie Oliviette), Botticelli’s Venus (Venuslivia), Madame Butterfly (Madame Olifly), the Virgin of Guadalupe (Virgilia de Guadalupe), Amy Winehouse (Oly Winehouse), Queen Latifah (Queen Olifah), and My Fair Lady (My Fair Livia) among others.

As Olivia and Dr. Case, Frágil and Escif can attest, street art can be quite labor intensive. It often calls for five layers of paint and the entire process requires approximately twenty minutes. That is a luxury that urban artists do not have any more in Barcelona, for the following two municipal ordinances criminalize graffiti and street art: the Bylaw for the Uses of Urban Landscape (1999), and the Bylaws for the Means to Foment
Figure 5. “Frilivia Kahlo” by Olivia in Barcelona. Courtesy of Olivia.

Figure 6. “Marie Olivette” by Olivia in Barcelona. Courtesy of Olivia.
and Guarantee Communal Living in Public Space (2005). The fine of up to 450.76 euros for the infraction in the first bylaw is superseded by the second with fines up to 3,000 euros. As a result, street art in Barcelona that was once very detailed and meticulously crafted is now being replaced by quickly and poorly executed pieces; and/or stickers, paste-ups and posters. Urban artists like Olivia and Dr. Case prefer to work at home calmly and create their art. Then, they go out into the street with their papers and paste them. It is less stressful and if the police catch an urban artist with paper and a bucket of glue, it is not as bad as if they were to catch an artist with a spray can because, according to Dr. Case:

La policía cuando te coge pegando un *poster* tiene más permisividad que si te coge con un bote de espray. El bote de espray se relaciona más con el grafiti, algo que lleva más años y la gente tiene claro que es ilegal. Cuando pegas un *poster*, aunque es muy similar a lo que estás haciendo—es un uso ilícito del espacio público—, tienes más permisividad porque no lo ven tan negativo por no haber pasado tanto tiempo para que la gente lo perciba como algo malo.

Olivia agrees and states that to be seen on the street with an aerosol can is like being seen with a pistol. She exaggerates, but the point is well taken. Barcelona is serious about eliminating graffiti. For example, in many cities, temporary walls that are up during construction but later torn down are full of graffiti because governments do not want to waste money covering up impermanent structures. However, Barcelona paints those walls grey because it is a fight that the politicians want. It is a psychological move whose purpose is to show urban artists that they mean business.

Because public space is so controlled in Barcelona, Dr. Case and Olivia paste their art on the doors and shutters of the private property of communities of neighbors, mainly in the central neighborhood of Ciutat Vella. The municipality cannot
fine them for putting up stickers and posters on the private property of homeowners, who may or may not appreciate the gesture. If the point of street art is to democratize urban space, a valid question is the following: Why do Dr. Case and Olivia have more right to the city than the homeowners? When public space, a communal space shared by everyone in which anything can happen, is treated by the State like private property, it makes sense to reclaim and liberate the space. However, putting graffiti or street art on people’s homes without their consent is, at least in this author’s opinion, disrespectful. Escif offers some insight into the internal conflict that many street artists suffer and a possible answer to who has the right to the city:

Cuando una noche pintas una persiana, que me ha pasado varias veces, y al día siguiente voy a hacer la foto y me encuentro con el señor del local borrando con un pincel lo que yo he pintado esa misma noche, me voy con un dolor del estómago pensando: ¿quién soy yo para interponerme? ¿Quién soy yo? Como poniéndome por encima de ese señor. Claro, al final, la imagen de la calle creo que está bien que sea desde abajo y no desde arriba. Entonces, creo que igual tenemos el mismo derecho tanto el señor, como yo, como cualquier ciudadano a utilizar esos espacios. Pero pudiendo utilizar espacios que no molestan a nadie. Es decir, espacios que son del ayuntamiento, espacios que están abandonados o en desuso. Lo veo más interesante que estar molestando a alguien que realmente no me ha hecho nada. (Escif)

For Escif, a truly democratic urban space is one in which everyone has the same right to use the street, including the adjacent walls, shutters, and doors, both private and public. He agrees with Dr. Case and Olivia that, ideally, urban space should not be privatized. Frágil’s earlier comment that street art is made to disappear suggests that urban artists defend the momentary appropriation, utilization and enjoyment of urban space and not only expect but encourage others to alter the space after they have used it. However, Escif, when given the option, prefers not to paint private property, not out of respect
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for private property, but out of respect for neighbors. Part of me sympathizes with Dr. Case and Olivia’s situation. As someone who has walked the narrow, winding and often claustrophobic streets of Ciutat Vella, I find the colorful street art on private doors and shutters to be aesthetically intriguing and energizing visual reminders to be radically open to life, take risks and multiply connections. However, I also recognize that placing physical street art on private property also causes unnecessary confrontations between neighbors and street artists. While I concede that Dr. Case and Olivia should respect neighbors and stop pasting physical posters on private property, I do not advocate that they stop producing street art. Rather, I maintain that they and other Barcelonan street artists should invent new, less invasive ways to intervene in those same spaces.

Escif’s point of view, that public, abandoned spaces should be painted instead of private property, is very much influenced by the urban setting and the laws of his hometown, Valencia. The Municipal Ordinance of Urban Cleaning stipulates that “se prohíbe toda clase de pintadas en la vía pública” (“Ordenanza municipal de limpieza urbana” art. 41.1). Nevertheless, it makes an exception for the following: “Las pinturas murales de carácter artístico realizadas sobre las vallas de los solares, para las que será necesario la previa autorización de su propietario” (art. 41.2a). In the central Valencian neighborhood of Carmen, there are many empty lots in disuse. In contrast with the paste-ups and posters that Dr. Case and Olivia attach to the shutters and doors of Ciutat Vella in Barcelona, Escif has painted 40 to 50 elaborate murals in Carmen, many of them in the various empty lots.

Even though Valencia is governed by the conservative Partido Popular, Escif is able to paint so extensively because, paradoxically, it is easier to do street art in Valencia than in the traditionally socialist and, in principle, less conservative Barcelona (For 32 of the last 33 years, Barcelona has had a socialist mayor). The politicians in Valencia do not support
Figure 7. “Recortes” by Escif in Valencia. Courtesy of Escif.

Figure 8. “Esperando la tormenta” by Escif in Valencia. Courtesy of Escif.
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graffiti, but they do not know how to combat it. The criteria used to determine what is graffiti and what is street art, that is, the criteria used to determine what to erase and what not to, is very ambiguous. In addition, this responsibility is delegated to the city cleaning crews. Based on article 41.2a of the Municipal Ordinance of Urban Cleaning, the cleaning crews are directed to only erase and to grey out vandalous graffiti and urban art, and to leave artistic paintings. Unfortunately, very subtle and elegant art has been erased and very radical letters have been left. Nevertheless, it is admirable that Valencia is at least trying to respect artists.

Barcelona has developed a more systematic way of controlling public space. According to the Bylaws for the Means to Foment and Guarantee Communal Living in Public Space, any graffiti or street art that is visible in public space requires the authorization of the City Council. Since its passing in 2005, the application of the law, which falls within the scope of each of the ten districts, has been uneven. Some districts like Ciutat Vella have been very strict, whereas others like Gràcia and Horta-Guinardó have been more lenient. The growing point of contention has been the steel curtain doors of businesses. In 2007, several young people, with the authorization of local business owners, painted eleven steel curtain doors with graffiti in the Raval neighborhood of Ciutat Vella. They participated in a graffiti project known as “Donem color a les persianes” [Give Color to the pull-down steel commercial curtain doors] whose aim was to create a tighter intergenerational relationship between the youth of the Raval neighborhood and adult business owners. Twenty-two young people were paired with various urban artists to learn graffiti techniques. They created designs and presented them to the participating business owners. After reaching an agreement, the young people then painted the business owners’ pull-down steel curtain doors with graffiti and street art. GREC (Grup de Recerca i Estudi dels Conflictes), an independent collective dedicated to the investigation and study of conflicts, bestowed
their Second Annual 2007 NAFENT Prize, an award given
to the project that best promotes cohabitation and conflict
resolution in an urban setting, to L'Associació Educativa Integral
del Raval for “Donem color a les persianes.” The NAFENT Prize
is partially funded by the Barcelona City Council. Two years
later, the same city council that recognized graffiti, if indirectly,
as a potential tool for social transformation and encouraged the
painting of commercial doors began a campaign, “Las persianas
limpias,” offering monetary incentives to business owners to
cover up the graffiti and paint their doors a uniform green. The
Barcelona City Council invested 900,000 euros of the 2009–
2010 budget to pay for 50% of the initial cleaning costs and two
years of maintenance if the shopkeeper signed a maintenance
contract of two additional years (“Ofensiva contra las pintadas”).
Much more than a campaign of financial assistance, it was an
awareness-building campaign. Regardless of whether merchants
applied for the money, the Barcelona City Council reminded
business owners that Article 41 of the Bylaw for the Uses of
Urban Landscape stipulated that it was the responsibility of the
shopkeeper to maintain the pull-down steel curtain doors free of
graffiti and street art, and if they did not comply with the bylaw,
they would be fined up to 600 euros (Pauné). The institutional
crack-down occurred mainly in Ciutat Vella, the city center that
attracts tourists and investors.

Despite the new push for compliance, many business owners
disagreed with the Barcelona City Council’s strategy to rid
the pull-down doors of what the latter deemed “unsightly”
tags. Since the passage in 1999 of the Bylaw for the Uses of
Urban Landscape and its reinforcement in 2005 by the Bylaws
for the Means to Foment and Guarantee Communal Living
in Public Space, the city has actually gotten uglier according
to the business owners. Fearing the new fines, graffiti writers
create fewer artistic pieces and more rushed tags resulting in
the proliferation of bad “art.” To counter this proliferation,
merchants saw a value in collaborating with graffiti writers and
street artists instead of alienating them. By allowing urban artists to paint highly elaborate murals on their pull-down doors, the shopkeepers realized that they could reduce if not eliminate the tags because among graffiti writers there is a code of conduct that prohibits the tagging of pieces. Initiatives have appeared ranging from *Persianes Lliures* and *Enrotlla’t* that do not charge store owners for painting their doors to *Graffic Impact, Axe Colours*, and *Berok* that require payment.

Bilbao, a city located in the Basque Country, has a very controlled public space much like that of Barcelona. It is not due, however, principally to an attempt to create a city brand, but, rather, is connected to the long history of violence in the streets by the terrorist group ETA. If a street artist paints something in public space in Bilbao, the following day it is painted grey by the municipality’s street cleaners. Bilbao is unique in that there is an underground art scene as well as a violent underground political separatist movement. Each group expresses itself in similar ways. They use equivalent aesthetics. For example, they both paint stencils and design posters. As a result, the municipality does not make a distinction. All unauthorized representations in public space are treated equally. Hence, in Bilbao, it is truer than in Barcelona that being caught with an aerosol can is like being caught with a pistol because ETA members make pro-ETA graffiti. In his 2005 project, “Espacio prohibido,” Frágil sought precisely those spaces in Bilbao that had been painted grey by the municipality, and either affixed a poster with the words “Espacio prohibido” along with the yellow and black markings traditionally used by the police to outline crime scenes, or stenciled yellow and black frames that enclosed the greyed-out spaces.

No one would have imagined that a graffiti artist or street artist would ban himself from using public space. Frágil was allowed to paint in a prohibited space by appropriating the codes of authority. He marked prohibited space by doing exactly what he was not supposed to. Interestingly, another street artist
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painted inside one of Frágil’s “Espacio prohibido” frames. The next day, the government of Bilbao painted the interior of the frame grey, thus covering up the other street artist’s figure, but left Frágil’s frame untouched.

Just as Frágil appropriated the codes of authority, they, also, misappropriated his codes. They mistook his artifice and his criticism for truth, for what he was saying was true. Those spaces, in fact, were prohibited.

For Escif, in Valencia, the most interesting element about working in the street is not the art but the street. The fact that art happens in the street demonstrates that street art is possible. Instead of passively accepting the barriers that politicians try to impose from above, Escif believes that the progressive privatization of space should be continually questioned. For example, on a wall on Cádiz Street that extends 30 or 40 meters behind which there is an abandoned lot, he wrote in oversized letters “Esta pared es mía,” but did not sign it.
Figure 10. “Espacio prohibido” with other street art in Bilbao. Courtesy of Frágil.

Figure 11. “Espacio prohibido” with other street art greyed-out by the City of Bilbao. Courtesy of Frágil.
A person walking by would wonder, Whose wall is it? Did the owner of the wall write that so that no one would paint it? If he or she did, it would be a contradiction because the wall was painted to prevent it from being painted. Why has that message appeared there? Many people pass in front of the wall every day. However, according to Escif, the owner of the lot never walks by. Who owns the appearance of the wall? Why should the appearance of the wall pertain to the property owner who never sees it? This type of artistic intervention keeps the interpretive field open with regard to urban space and its possible uses.

To conclude, Barcelona, Bilbao and Valencia all have passed municipal ordinances that restrict the practice of graffiti and street art. Despite a similar stance, the application of the bylaws varies from city to city. Valencia is the easiest in which to do street art for two reasons: 1) the abundance of empty lots in disuse in Carmen, the city center; and 2) the fact that artistic murals are a legal exception to the criminalization of graffiti and are, hence, permitted in such spaces. As a result, there are many examples of large scale, spray-painted street art in Valencia.
Bilbao, on the other hand, is hyper-vigilant of its public space because it wants to avoid street violence linked to the terrorist group ETA. Instead of beautifully crafted artwork, such as that found in Valencia’s Carmen, the Casco Viejo of Bilbao is lined with greyed-out walls. Nevertheless, like Valencia, Bilbao honors the exceptions written into its bylaws concerning graffiti. In fact, every year the city council organizes a competition known as “Bajamos la persiana” in which street artists compete for monetary prizes for the best artistic pieces painted on the steel pull-down doors of businesses located in the Casco Viejo. Out of the three cities, Barcelona has the most controlled public space. Even though the Barcelonan anti-graffiti laws allow for exceptions, the city does not exercise them as frequently as do Valencia and Bilbao, and when permission is granted, it is not accorded in the city center, but in the outskirts. For example, Difusor, a collective that encourages communication in public space through graphic means, has obtained authorization from the Barcelonan City Council to repeatedly fill an eight square-meter wall on Abd-el-Kader Street in Guinardó, a working class neighborhood approximately six kilometers from the city center, with graffiti and street art. The project is known as Open Gallery. Difusor is also collaborating on another initiative, Open Walls, a network of legal walls to paint. To date, there is only one wall in Barcelona designated as part of this future project, and it is located in the Mundet Tunnel underneath the Ronda de Dalt ten kilometers from the city center.

Despite Escif’s assertion that art is still possible in the street, it is undeniably becoming more difficult than twenty years ago. At the same time that street art is being kicked from the streets, its aesthetics are being increasingly seen in and on private homes and businesses. Tired of the persecution, many graffiti writers and street artists have turned to the growing field of professional graffiti. Clients pay for personalized art on exterior and interior walls of their homes or businesses, and on any sort of object like a skateboard, a motorcycle helmet or a canvas, to name a few.
In addition to the legal space of commissioned work, museums offer another alternative. Dr. Case and Olivia have exhibited at the Barcelona art space Miscelanea, Escif recently opened a major show at Pictures On Walls in London, and Frágil’s work has been seen in Espacio Espora in Madrid.

The future of street art on the street, however, is not commissioned graffiti or museum pieces, but, rather, projected images. Instead of aerosol cans, stencils, glue and posters, innovative graffiti writers and street artists are beginning to wield laser pointers and projectors. Tags can be temporarily drawn on buildings with lasers, and any image can be projected. The advantage is that built environment is not affected. The projectors, generator, video mixer, and personal computers needed to send the writings and representations to the walls are easily transported in customized bicycles. Because there are no laws that prohibit vehicles in the streets, and because no structural damage is caused to the buildings, the artists cannot be fined. Urban communication and the sharing of ideas in public space, once threatened endeavors due to the municipal ordinances, now have the potential to enjoy a renaissance until a new law is written. New open-source technologies in the hands of street artists are once again democratizing Spanish city centers and streets. One such group of forward-thinking artists in Spain is Telenoika, a Barcelona-based collective of DJs and VJs who specialize in creating audiovisual urban interventions. Although the days of street art as we know it are limited, new forms are continually evolving. Telenoika’s projects include those that remain faithful to the original ideals of street art, the need for spontaneous social cooperation with passers-by and unexpected engagements with the cityscape, and those that diverge from said ideals. Telenoika’s 2008 project RehAVilitació was an inventive entanglement of video, sound and built environment that emphasized unrestricted interaction with Spanish urban space. The name of the project, RehAVilitació, is a Catalan word-play exchanging the “ab” of rehabilitació [rehabilitation]
with the “AV” of audiovisual. Telenoika attempted a temporary rehabilitation of an abandoned lot in the neighborhood of Gràcia through an audiovisual intervention. By projecting videos denouncing real estate speculation in a space that had been affected by such practices, the collective both educated passers-by and stimulated dialogue among them. The projected videos included pertinent laws and statistics, and images of people moving within the exposed outlines of the former rooms of the demolished building as well as audio of people who had suffered from real estate mobbing, a type of bullying on the part of real estate developers who pressure renters and owners to move out of their homes so that more expensive, luxury accommodations can be constructed. Telenoika’s more recent focus has moved from audiovisual attacks like RehAVilitació to audiovisual architectural mapping, a new field that it has helped to create and develop. Audiovisual architectural mapping, through the simulation of projected shadows and graphics, transforms the façades of buildings into something completely different. That is, Telenoika hacks the façades of buildings by imposing a visual remapping of the surface in order to tell stories using sound and image. Although audiovisual architectural mapping has its origins in the audiovisual attack, it is not a spontaneous and unexpected engagement with the cityscape. In fact, it has the blessing of city councils, for it has been used to inaugurate and commemorate public buildings. Nevertheless, Telenoika’s innovative work points to the potential that laser pointers and projectors have for street art in the future.

Notes
1. For a more complete analysis of the origins of graffiti, see Gastman and Neelon.
2. Traditionally, graffiti has been a world made up mainly of men. Street art, on the other hand, is populated by many women.
3. See “Ordenanza municipal de los usos del paisaje urbano de la ciudad de Barcelona,” Articles 19.1 and 41.2.

4. See Ordenanzas de medidas para fomentar y garantizar la convivencia ciudadana en el espacio público, Article 20.

5. See “Ordenanza municipal de los usos del paisaje urbano de la ciudad de Barcelona,” Art. 117.1a.

6. See Ordenanzas de medidas para fomentar y garantizar la convivencia ciudadana en el espacio público, Article 21.

7. See Ordenanzas de medidas para fomentar y garantizar la convivencia ciudadana en el espacio público, Article 20.2.

8. The ten districts of Barcelona are Ciutat Vella, Eixample, Sants-Montjuïc, Les Corts, Sarrià-Sant Gervasi, Gràcia, Horta-Guinardó, Nou Barris, Sant Andreu, and Sant Martí.

9. For the laws concerning graffiti and street art in Bilbao, see “Ordenanza municipal de limpieza urbana,” Articles 140–142.


Works Cited


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