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What about graffiti?

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Graffiti is an art practice that can be found in almost every city on the planet. Since, the end of the xx century graffiti artists have been painting walls in our cities, and by doing so, they have generated particular ways to inhabit, to build and to understand the city in a context where globalization, mass media and internet are constantly modifying the urban space. Locally, the intervention of graffiti has affected the relation between citizens, city administrations, artists and the high art sphere. Therefore, this work analyzes the graffiti production of six different artists from two cities in Latin America: La Havana, Cuba and Bogota, Colombia. Focusing principally in understanding the interconnection, in Havana and Bogota, between particular urban policies, graffiti and how these cities are imagined and represented. To finally conclude that, graffiti allows artists and citizens to participate in the construction of the city, outside the frames imposed by the nation/state or the neoliberal market, even if only as part of an imaginary conception of each space.

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Introduction

This writing has its beginning in a particular idea. The idea that the analysis of graffiti production can help us to understand how the visual space of contemporary Latin American cities have changed since the turn of the century, and how this has an effect over people's life. Graffiti is an art expression that generates particular ways to inhabit, to build and to understand the city in a context where globalization, mass media and internet are constantly modifying the urban space. This is so, because graffiti art has to negotiate between the materiality of the city and its symbolic imaginary. Since the 1990's graffiti production has been building a particular visual culture by constantly reshaping Latin American cityscapes, which has produced different consequences on each particular city. Such as, a constant production of graffiti art in the public space, a new relation between graffiti artists and house owners or the citizenship in general, art tours focused on graffiti, among others.

Hence, the objective of this work is to analyze the graffiti production of six different artists from two cities in Latin America: La Havana, Cuba and Bogota, Colombia. Nowadays, city governments have particular policies in relation with graffiti art. Hence, the analysis of graffiti that this work presents is grounded on the supposition that the physical and symbolical intervention of graffiti in the city, gives citizens and artists the possibility to participate on how each city is materially built and symbolically represented. Likewise, graffiti intervention influences the understanding of the art work in relation with the cultural policies of each city and the art market. Therefore, the principal focus of this work is to establish that, there is an interconnection in Havana and Bogota between particular urban policies, graffiti and how these cities are imagined and

represented. The importance of this interconnection lies in the fact that graffiti allows artists and citizens to participate in the construction of the city outside the frames imposed by the nation/state or the neoliberal market, even if only as part of an imaginary conception of each space.

According to Caldeira (2010) and Guarnizo (2010), NYC and Philadelphia graffiti styles reached Latin American cities at the end of the century. Cities like Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Mexico and Bogota, among others, were taken by a graffiti movement that filled the walls of these cities with tags, stencils, bombs; throw-ups, signatures, stickers, masterpieces, mural paintings, etc. Young people learned about graffiti from shared images and websites on the internet (*Fatcap (1998)* and *Art Crimes (1994)* played a principal role in sharing graffiti pictures from around the world and preserving them), from Hip Hop CD covers and through artists traveling to Latin America in search of new spots where to paint. In each city, local painters developed their own styles, adapting aesthetics and ideas from USA and Europe to their own contexts and experiences. They used the materials they had at hand (like glitter, graphite, latex, paint; found their own motivations (to write their names the greatest number of times expending the less amount of money, to make the best wild style in a contest that implies to paint for 3 nights, three different spots in the city, etc.), their own color palette and tags, and suddenly big and small cities rapidly ended full of graffiti.

At the same time, graffiti became a problem for governments in Latin American cities, which were fighting to erase all kinds of painting from the streets because of their illegality, officials acted under the conviction that public walls are under private or state control, and, therefore, any unauthorized intervention in those spaces of the city was a crime. Over the

past decade, and despite these circumstances, and the fact that graffiti painting has become a relevant force in the art market, advertisement and tourism, city governments have begun to search for new institutional ways to deal with graffiti artists and their productions. They are setting new protocols of censorship and of graffiti legal status. Graffiti has a double identity as both an art creation and a punishable crime. Because of this, not the city administration, not citizens or artists can ascribe graffiti into a completely defined practice or to a unique frame of ideas, and therefore it is impossible to create regulations that are not contradictory for a democratic society. Graffiti is an irony to the modern city because it incarnates the wishes of the media city, culturally vibrant, meanwhile, at the same time, it challenges private property and the ownership over the urban space's fabric. Hence graffiti reveal the tensions that are configuring the global city (a supposedly democratic space, open to culture and invention, where every citizen can participate of the advantages of capitalism and freedom), in local communities. At the same time that graffiti problematizes the work of art and its insertion in the art sphere and the art market, graffiti challenges ideas of city intervention, censorship, democracy, legality, punishment and private property. Thus, the study of graffiti as a creative practice is very productive to understand how contemporary Latin American cities are being configured.

I will follow the ideas of Biron, where the essence of the city is both matter and representation:

Cities are especially charged sites of contested meanings. They are symbols of technological achievement and modernization, but their flaws and internal contradictions erode popular belief in "progress". They bring large numbers of people together in physical proximity, but they also increase social alienation and

types of exclusion. Cities live in real space and time, and they are made of real material objects like concrete and bricks. However, they carry meaning only through the ways in which people live in them, imagine them, and represent them (15).

Under these ideas, there are two main argumentative lines that are going to guide the understanding of graffiti in this work: The Latin American city as a creative arena, and art as a market system. The first part of this work deals with the contemporary Latin American city. The second part discusses graffiti as a global practice. The third part analyzes Bogota and Havana as particular urban spaces, leading to an examination of the different graffiti artists to understand the influence of graffiti in the city space.

Chapter 1

Cities as cultural arenas and the tourist experience

Gorelik (2007), Canclini (2001) and Sassen (1999), among others, have shown how, with the connection of Latin American cities to the global market, art and culture have become key elements to produce identities, generate capital and shape the physical and symbolic space of the city. Cities, as Beatriz Jaguaribe argues, “have gained relevance outside the framework of the nation-state and have, more than ever, become creative arenas of new lifestyles, political agendas, technical and cultural innovations and forms of consumption” (66), this has had a great impact in the relations between people and their urban scape, because the nation state is no longer a frame of reference to think about their own identity.

For Adrián Gorelik, urban policy is now influenced by the market and it seems that the limit between market and policy making banishes under globalization (260). Latin American cities have been reconfigured as consequence of, and to be part of, this global market economy. This has an impact on the communities that inhabit urban spaces, in particular because income distribution is unequal, and as Dávila states: “transnationalism does not lead to the eradication of national, ethnic and racial boundaries but to a heightening of differences; and that it highly favors finance and capital over people, unless they are part of upscaling globalizing classes and groups” (*Culture* 15). For Dávila, tourism is one of the industries where inequality becomes more apparent. Tourism industry configures a space exclusively for consumer desires that are usually those of an international middle class; and this configuration gives preference to consumer needs above the ones of local communities (Dávila, *Culture* 15).

Bárcena Ibarra and Byanyima use Oxfam data to assert that by 2016 Latin America remains the most unequal region in the world, where, by 2014, 10% of the population owned 71% of the region's wealth. According to the United Nations, 82% of Latin American population lives in urban areas and two thirds of their GDP comes from services and industrial goods produced in cities (Muggah and Szabó de Carvalho, 'Latin America's cities'). Under these circumstances, local communities have found themselves in the middle of an unfamiliar urban space that in many ways is hostile to their desires and possibilities.

Across Latin American cities, politicians, governments and businesses have encouraged policies based in a neoliberal capitalist model, to developed a service market to promote tourism and foreign investment. In order to achieve those goals, culture has been wildly used (not only in Latin America but worldwide) as a magic tool to improve the circumstances of the city. Culture has become a commodity with transactional values and a set of businesses that orbit around it, for example, Havana city has become a principal touristic destiny to buy art, and the Havana Biennale is at the center of this offer. And although La Havana Biennale is an institutionalized event of the government, artists outside the event take advantage of it to sell their work. At the same time in Bogota although graffiti is free and it is everywhere, there are people doing graffiti tours for which they charge to tourists. Under this line of thinking, there is no unique definition of culture and it is not clear how culture improves the social fabric of the city, although it is clear that culture elements can be produced (from heritage historical sites, through monuments, museums, sight-seeing to narcoculture architecture and customs; regional dances, traditional cuisine, clothes; books, movies, paintings, shows; etc.), used and sold in the market for revenue.

Under these conditions, public and private creative industries usually pay less attention to the educative role of the arts, because it is more profitable to promote the market value of culture (Evans 180). Culture has also become important to city development not only because of its capacity to generate a small enterprise economy, but because it has been used in urban regeneration, to reinforce cultural identity and to sustain social responsibility: “Both third-way politicians and conservatives are only too happy to enlist inexpensive artists to solve problems caused by their own neoliberal policies. Community centers, small schools and medical facilities are dismantled under the guise of crisis and efficiency, and artists may now try to repair the holes in the social fabric” (Gielen 287). Of course, in the case of graffiti, artists are only considered artists and are allowed to exist in the global city if they can generate value. To generate value, graffiti artists can’t disrupt the ideological order of the city, therefore graffiti is still a crime. In the neoliberal economy, culture is just valuable if there are consumers willing to pay for it, therefore culture has to become a consumable good, a commodity that is consumed in the space of the city. But because the city is all the experiences available in it, the city becomes a commodity through tourism.

Tourist places need to be produced by a set of qualities that makes them desirable for consumers. For Urry and Larsen (2011) *the tourist gaze*, as the expectations and ideas that people have about a place, is the one that makes possible the construction of a desirable place for tourism. One of these expectations, that is key to build a notion of desirability, is the difference between people’s everyday environment and the object of *the tourist gaze*, that is, the tourist space (13). Tourist places need to be unique by performing distinctive features that make them different from anything else. They are the epitome of difference, because the important part of the tourist experience is to feel the difference in your own

flesh. So, tourist places are not only providing a service, they are providing the fulfillment of desire for a life experience. Therefore, tourist places are a particular kind of objects/spaces created to be gazed upon (Urry and Larsen: 55).

Following Urry and Larsen's idea, each particular city should provide the particular life experience that each tourist is asking for, but *the tourist gaze* implies a set of ideas already preconfigured about the particular experiences that are possible to live in a particular place and therefore, tourists are also asking places, to living individuals and entire communities, to remain static and truthful to the idea that the gaze is expecting to see. Graffiti then becomes an instrument that can be used to support the gaze, or to disrupt the imaginary by building a new relation between people and the city.

Chapter 2

Graffiti as art and art as commodity

Within this study, I consider graffiti as those paintings or signatures made on walls that can be openly seen from the point of view of people in the streets. I specifically single out those graffiti paintings which are relaying political slogans, or tied up to gangs marking a territory, or to football fans cheering for their team. The drawings that interest me, and that have been named as graffiti come from a movement that started in New York city and Philadelphia in the late 60's (Austin 231), when young people took spray cans and markers to paint their signature in every surface they could found (Naar 2007). While some scholars, such as Waclawek (2011), Gottlieb (2008) and Riggle (2010), differentiate graffiti from street art in relation to its aesthetical development and their participation in the high art sphere, I want to use the term graffiti in a broader sense, following Gartus, Klemer and Leder (2015), which includes both graffiti and street art made illegally on the streets, even if later artists become ascribed to high art.

According to graffiti artists, graffiti is an art practice which has as its final aim to paint as much as possible on a city, thus, graffiti artists paint regularly on the streets. Each artist decides what to paint using particular styles and materials, the medium is always the public wall but to paint constantly is a basic requirement to be a graffiti artist. Although graffiti is made anonymously, graffiti artists use a pseudonym to paint because an important part of this practice is the social scene where it is developed. Since graffiti is made on the streets everybody can see it and this visibility, the visibility of a particular

signature or style, is key to legitimate the work of a graffiti artist among the graffiti artists living or passing by in a particular city.

In its origins, Graffiti is forbidden, it goes against law and establishment and all graffiti artists are well aware of this reality, in fact, most of them are graffiti artists not in spite of the illegality of graffiti but because of it. Therefore, even when in many cases graffiti is not showing adherence to an explicit political discourse to do graffiti is a political action in itself, as the graffiti artist Stinkfish claims:

Graffiti shows the world that fails. It shows a society full of unfair laws that do not even manage to stop someone who wants to work in the streets. Cities are painted from top to bottom with graffiti because opposition is needed. Graffiti is not going to save the world but at least if I go out and understand that my ideas do not belong to anyone else, I do on my own (Stinkfish, 2012).

While the graffiti movement implies a number of people painting the streets of different cities in Latin America from Mexico to Argentina: Cancun, Oaxaca Quito, Lima, la Paz, Valparaiso, etc. Graffiti artists are by no means organized into an institutionalized movement. They come from all social classes, educational backgrounds and interests; they are a diversity of people painting walls. They create alliances, collectives and sometimes gather in festivals and exhibitions. They stay connected via Internet, Instagram, Facebook, or Flickr where they share their work. But they do not function as an organization. Likewise, graffiti artists do not represent or share any political position beyond defending the freedom of painting wherever they want.

The street is the place of graffiti, which makes of graffiti an element visible to everyone that is looking, and therefore a powerful media that allows freedom of speech.

Graffiti is ephemeral, changing and instantaneous. Graffiti is not an overarching narrative, it does not have a fixed ideology, but it does make use of particular aesthetic concepts and this generates an identification with the category known as art. Graffiti is changing and modifying itself constantly, artists use new materials all the time and for different reasons (Gottlieb 130). Nonetheless, street walls are fundamental for graffiti and in doing so, graffiti appropriates spaces from within exclusion by re symbolizing public space, because as Baudrillard argues, graffiti artists:

They territorialize decoded urban spaces a particular street, wall or district comes to life through them, becoming a collective territory again. They do not confine themselves to the ghetto, they export the ghetto through all the arteries of the city, they invade the white city and reveal that it is the real ghetto of the Western world. (79).

Roger Taylor argues that, “what makes art, art, is no more than the conferment of the label ‘art’ by the appropriate social process” (24). For Stewart, the object of art is made by “a process whereby consumer culture, which is literally in the business of inventing arbitrary value and circumscribing intrinsically, takes up what is ‘not valuable’ precisely to reinforce the structure of that gesture of articulation” (162). Hence, according to both scholars, art existence and its value depends on the agreement of different social actors who hold the power to validate certain objects as part of a category known as art. Graffiti then is a problem that cannot be ignored in the art world because it removes the artistic object of the kingdom of commodification (graffiti is a creative practice that uses the same elements that are used to produce art but can’t be art because it cannot be sold), while revealing the work of art as a commodity: “Radically taken up as both crime and art, graffiti

has, in recent years, been the site of a conflict regarding the status of the artist and the art work on contemporary culture” (Stewart 162).

Beyond the ideas of legality and illegality conveyed by a graffiti or a legal mural made in relation to art production, there is an important difference between both creations. This difference is based on the intention of the artist and its relation to the materiality of the city. It is so, that, for graffiti artists any place in the city is susceptible of being painted; graffiti artists are not expecting any remuneration beyond putting their work out there. The aesthetic development of graffiti is tied to the medium: the wall. The expertise and quality of graffiti works comes from the artist’s experience in working outside, on the streets, no matter what rules or policies are governing the city. The city in itself is the canvas, and this idea entails a completely different set of values from the ones assumed by an artist that has a wall commissioned and can paint under the warm embrace of law (Stinkfish. Personal interview. October 2013).

Graffiti aesthetics are principal for its development, and this is in part why graffiti is so important as a contra cultural view of the arts. Graffiti is clearly an aesthetic practice with specific styles and technics as the stencil, printed papers, the engraved, the drawing, etc (Castro et al, 43). Notwithstanding, although some of its aesthetics elements come from the traditional notions of art, graffiti is produced outside the art circuit and art institutes. It is very interesting the way in which people learn to do graffiti: broadly speaking people start painting in a group or crew, in this group the new graffiti artist learns the different techniques and the toy (the name given to beginners in the graffiti world) starts to develop his own style. Meanwhile, graffiti artists are always wandering around the city looking walls to find the work of other artist in order to evaluate it, and thanks to the Internet this

happens not only in a local sphere but also on a global level (Stinkfish, Bombing Science). Thus, graffiti artists develop aesthetic knowledge through being aware of art techniques and their evolution in the graffiti sphere. At the same time artists are very aware of that they are living in a media world. I think that it is at the place where these elements meet, in that border, where graffiti is born.

There is another reason for which graffiti aesthetical freedom is important for citizens, artists and the city as a life entity. Boris Groys argues that, politics in the contemporary world are presumed to be politics of inclusion, which have as its aim to prevent the exclusion of political minorities. But there is a problem, inclusion can only be possible if the form in which excluded minorities desires are expressed is not suppressed by any higher aesthetical values. Therefore, only if all aesthetic expressions are regarded equal it is possible to resist exclusion. Furthermore, due the fact that the diversity of images presented by mass media images is very limited, we are unable to recognize difference, because we only have the comparative frame work of mass media (14-15). Therefore, graffiti is a cultural production that empowers those who practice it, but graffiti also creates something else: new aesthetic alternatives that lead to the possibility of recognition and acceptance of the difference, and by doing so, graffiti challenges the hierarchies established in the art circuit, which makes of graffiti a democratic tool.

Chapter 3

Graffiti, walls and Bogota

Bogota in the xxi century is a clear product of the conjunction between globalization and neoliberal politics, where, as Adrián Gorelik argues, more and more politicians and managers choose urban marketing to guide urban policy in times of globalization; a circumstance that vanishes the boundaries between politics and marketing (260). Hence, Bogotá is a city where market and politics have developed their own agendas in order to promote tourism and foreign investment within the neoliberal politics of the Colombian state. According to the GINI index, Colombia is one of the countries in Latin America with the biggest income inequality in the world (Alsema 2016), a reality that is reflected in the economic and social difficulties of the people who live in the city. Colombia also has the highest number of internally displaced people in the world (Højen 2015); and Bogota is the city that receives the highest number of displaced people in the country. Also, in the past years, the city has had high levels of political corruption.

Recent city governments have made the effort to create a more democratic city by supporting programs for vulnerable communities and new artistic and cultural spaces. Even so, the high concentration of the political power in Colombia in the hands of a neoliberal elite has led to the silencing of opposition and citizenship by murder, major threats, the dismissal of opposition from public offices and by impeding forms of civic expression. Likewise, the media in Colombia is limited and mostly controlled by the private enterprise, there are only four television channels in the country, from which two, the ones that reach more people, are private; and there are only two national newspapers. This circumstance

has made of the walls of the city an important communication tool (Hogar 2009). Bogota's citizens barely earn enough to survive in a city that is more expensive every day. Over population, lack of planning and poor public transportation produce very long hours of commute between work and home. Citizens also are afraid of the streets because of the insecurity and the violence generated by poverty and war displacement. Meanwhile, the market generates new shopping centers that had replaced the street as the place of gathering.

Graffiti began in Bogota in the late 70s and 80s, and was characterized by political slogans that were transformed into murals. The movement was heir to May 1968 in Paris. It was a graffiti linked to the pamphlet, bound to anti-imperialist political slogans. It was made by leftist groups, guerrilla, political and student movements, and the political meaning was more important to them than any aesthetic concern (Tellez 25). The movement gradually became the way for youth to express dissent in an unequal and conservative society. It broadened from members of revolutionary groups to include others who sought a way to express themselves by painting the walls. However, by the early 90s, partly due to the demobilization of guerrilla groups and the decline of leftist groups in Colombia, graffiti largely disappeared from the walls of the city (Silva Telles, in "Memoria Canalla").

Style and aesthetic elements became the principal concern for new graffiti artists when the global graffiti arrived in Bogota in the late 1990s. During this period Bogotá started development plans focused on build a more modern city. In 1998 Enrique Peñalosa became mayor, the goal of his campaign was urban design. According to his ideas the city needed a complete physical renewal to become a more equal city. With the public resources

left by the previous administration, and a citizenship prepared to the change his government started to build parks, schools, libraries, hospitals, sidewalks and a new bus system. The public space became the battle flag of his administration and the city was changed into a giant construction site.

In the xxi century, the demolition of hundreds of buildings on the main roads of the city left hundreds of empty walls exposed. Hundreds of canvases throughout the length and breadth of the city to be painted by graffiti artists. Since then, whether it was because of the increased spaces for artists to paint due to the city's development or because of a growing movement of artists, graffiti became more visible in the city. This new visibility facilitated an exchange and comparison of work amongst graffiti artists. Style and aesthetics were developed in new ways and using new materials under the basis of the 1990's graffiti heritage.

Since mid-2000 the renewal of the city has been affected by corruption and bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the graffiti movement continued to grow and graffiti started to be seen as a tool by members of the city government to promote culture, citizenship and as a way to fight against violence and discrimination. Thus, the city government started to give money to initiatives that used graffiti in order to achieve those ends and to finance graffiti projects. Of such policies emerged programs and initiatives as *Graffiti Mujer*, *Memoria Canalla*, *the graffiti of Hip Hop al parque*, *The Foundation Arteria agreement*, *the Scholarship: Urban artist residency with a local community for Ink Crew*, and *the Scholarship Urban Artistic Intervention on 26th Street*, among others. The relation between the city government and graffiti artists reached a new stage in 2012, when the city

government decided to summon a *Mesa Distrital de Graffiti* to generate agreements with the graffiti artists in order to regulate their practice in the city.

The law #075 of 2013, based on the agreements reached by the Graffiti District Board, made of Bogota the most amiable city in the world to paint graffiti. After this law, graffiti artist are not the same as criminals, they are allowed to paint in different spots of the city and even if they paint in illegal places they cannot be arrested by the police (Zas, 2015).

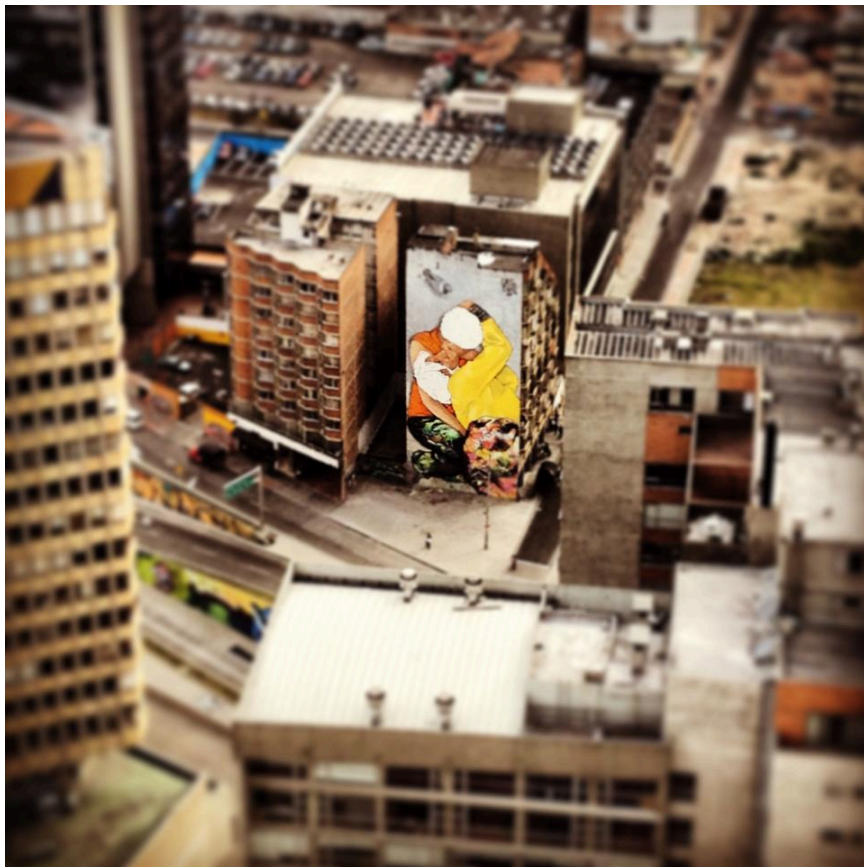
While graffiti has become a powerful movement in the city with significant government support, graffiti artist are by no means organized into an institutionalized movement, and not all of them agree with, or were consulted by the city administration in the development of the new policies. But they create alliances, collectives and sometimes gather in festivals and exhibitions which have produced a significant impact on the city. One example of the kind of temporary alliances created by graffiti artists is the fight for laws in favor of graffiti. This fight started as several individual initiatives that, through collective communications, were supported by different artists. Artists were galvanized in 2012 when a new graffiti law was passed in order to punish graffiti, treating graffiti artists as criminals. Before, on August 9th, 2011, graffiti artists realized how vulnerable they were in front of law and the police when a young graffiti artist, Diego Felipe Becerra, was killed by the police in Bogotá. His death has been ruled a murder that was subjected to police cover-up, who tried to pass Becerra off as a criminal. Police officials have been investigated the case and some of the perpetrators have been imprisoned for covering up the crime. The death of Diego Felipe produced a convergence between graffiti artists and public opinion, all repudiating the violence of the police.

At the same time that graffiti captured the attention of the city government and its citizens, it also captured the attention of the market. Graffiti has become a commodity in Bogota in many ways, and although this is not new in the graffiti sphere, it produced the necessary pressure for the city administration to think on what graffiti means for the city. The idea of graffiti as a practice compatible with the development of a city is incongruent with the role that citizenship is supposed to assume in front of graffiti. Graffiti is illegal, therefore we as citizens should repudiate it. Still different mayors such as, Luis Eduardo Garzon (2004), Samuel Moreno (2007) and Gustavo Petro (2010) as well as cultural institutions that are part of the city government, such as IDARTES (Instituto Distrital de las Artes) and la Secretaría Distrital de Cultura, have recognized graffiti as a practice of cultural importance. They recognize its value as:

a communication channel for marginal and excluded groups. As a practice that helps to think about the meaning of what the public is; and to improve the urban landscape by making the city a live scenario of alternative and ephemeral art and culture (Gómez).

But they do not make clear how graffiti makes people better citizens and which kind of culture graffiti is building or which are this marginal and excluded groups. I argue that the strategies used by the city government to promote graffiti are an attempt of the city government to control and regulate the kind of visual development that graffiti have been built in the city, a visual culture based on multiplicity. If the statements raised to justify the use of graffiti by those institutions are not clear, its actions to develop graffiti in certain way can give us a clue on how government aims to re signify the graffiti practice.

The mural below is called the *Beso de los invisibles* (*The invisibles' kiss*) and was made by the graffiti crew MDC. This graffiti mural was sponsored by IDARTES, under the 2013 Stimulus District Program, which created a scholarship to finance graffiti projects in specific walls on Bogota's 26 Street. The 6 of august of 2013, the city's anniversary, five giant graffiti murals including *The invisibles' kiss* were inaugurated during a big event. The 26 Street became an icon of the new policies of the administration regarding graffiti.



GRAFFITI EL BESO DE LOS INVISIBLES.
BOGOTA
PHOTO BY MDC.



GRAFFITI EL BESO DE LOS INVISIBLES.
BOGOTA
PHOTO BY MDC.

The 26 Street has always been a main street in the city, connecting the airport to the rest of the city as a kind of entryway or door to Bogotá, and its renewal was one of the focuses of change that started in the 2000s. The street is particularly relevant given the growing role of tourism in the economy of the country and the city. This street ended up being the visual representation of all that was wrong with the city and the system at the end of the 2007 when the construction work was stopped due to corruption. There was no way in which the city government could cover up the theft of the city resources in front of the empty spaces, the debris and the gray colors; Stinkfish, for example, used those walls to visualize corruption.

BOGOTA
PHOTO BY STINKFISH



BOGOTA
PHOTO BY STINKFISH

In 2013 when the construction works of the 26 street, that were delayed for two years, are almost finished, the city government started to search ways in which to re signify the street. The 26 Street became a space of contested meaning. The graffiti murals in the

26 Street, in special the invisibles' kiss, show us the multiple layers that build the relation between the physical spaces of the city and its attributed meanings. One of those meanings is what the city government is expecting for us to see and to do:

Through these selected interventions is sought encourage a responsible practice of graffiti, create educational activities around this plastic practice in Bogota ... The result of this scholarship also promotes new relationships between pedestrians and public space, and at the same time it aims to improve the quality of urban (Gómez 2013)

The 26 Street became the representation of the city, and if in the past the street and therefore the city was the image of corruption, bad administration and chaos, now the walls are covered up by beautiful images full of color. The past is erased; the scars are cover up. The citizenship can now forget the mistakes of the past, forget that the politicians have robbed the city, forget that the police killed a graffiti artist. Street and artists are now under the all embraced custody of the market the law and the state.

Citizens are allowing to look, but what they are looking has been selected by the juries of the grant; none of them a graffiti artist. Graffiti then is reinterpreted as new practice, one closer to "high art" and urban design than to a contra cultural movement. Bogota's city government is expecting of us that we, as citizens, accept graffiti in a specific and unique way: as a responsible artistic practice with a specific aesthetic and whose function is to embellish the city. Those murals can be interpreted as an attempt to use graffiti in order to produce images for tourism. A way to make of Bogota a giant museum, to brand the city as a graffiti destiny, as Stinkfish argues:

It was not meaningless that the street that was painted was the 26th Street. The road connecting the airport with the city center. It is preferable for some to have "beautiful murals" to have "ugly graffiti" that nobody understands. That is the issue, because what for some is a "support" for others is: "these beautiful painting we support," and these "ugly painting we chase", paint by day and about nice topics, "cheveres", "cultural", "youth", "social" and above all "paint here, because here is where you can do it, not there (Stinkfish, interview with the author, 2013).

In this way, the city government is producing what Vandana Shiva calls the *Monocultures of the mind* where: "The one-dimensional field of vision of the dominant system perceives only one value, based on the market" (Vandana 144). hence, diversity is destroyed under the commercial logic of "what is not useful is vicious". In that way, the graffiti that not possess the required standards, namely that graffiti that is not a "beautiful" mural, it is not allowed in the city.

The invisibles' kiss pictures a man and a woman kissing each other. The drawing is very simple, figurative; there is not abstraction. The wall is completely integrated to the design. It is no more a wall but a street where people are kissing next to a pigeon. The shirts of the two people are of a single color, yellow and orange, maybe red, but their pants are another story. Their pants are full of lines of color. We cannot be sure if those lines are creating a figurative design, they are like scratches of color, representations of the graffiti *Wildstyle*. The drawing is a copy of a photograph, a journalist shot of the kiss between two homeless during the visit of the Colombian president to the Bronx, a famous neighborhood where most homeless people in Bogota lives.

The mural is not a complete copy of the photograph, it is a reinterpretation of the image and it seems to dispossess it of its entire political and social context. The “ugly” is eliminated. The street full of homeless disappeared, and the homeless that are kissing are not homeless any more, basically they can be any couple. The only thing that remains of the fact that the image is taking place in the street is the pigeon and the grey color of the street in the back. This creates new meanings. If the photographic image was focused in a love image between two homeless people, and in that way, it was interpreted by most of the media¹. The image created by the graffiti artists alludes something that it is not supposed to be: people lying on the street kissing, having pleasure. Of course, that is acceptable in a place where people literally live on the street and by homeless people that are outside society, but in the rest of the city that action would be punished or at least prohibited. Therefore, the fact that the mural depicts what it could be any couple feeling desire and having pleasure by kissing each other is a suggestive image for a conservative and catholic society as the Bogota society, more if it is painted in a wall of 300 hundred square meters.

This mural let us see how visual culture creates wholes, escapes in front of the co-optation of significance. The policies of the city government in relation to graffiti are the result of the negotiations that graffiti and graffiti artist have being accomplishing over the years. Graffiti is still illegal, and the city administration is expecting that graffiti artists paint in certain determined spots and in certain way. But graffiti artists know better, they know that the complete regulation of graffiti is never going to be possible. Graffiti is not

1 Forero Barón, Fabían. “Historia de una foto de amor en el ‘Bronx’”. El Tiempo, May 3, 2013. http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/bogota/ARTICULO-WEB-NEW_NOTA_INTERIOR-12777605.html

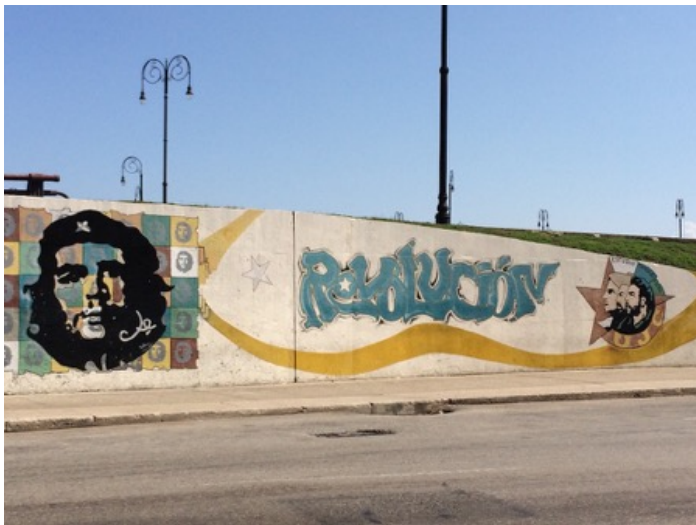
only nice murals in determinate spots, graffiti are tags, trough ups, pieces, marks, signatures and an infinity of ways in which walls are painted in the city. Also, graffiti is one of the few cultural manifestations present in Bogota that is completely aware of the new global role of the city; and that is raising new global relations and communities beyond a consumption market, although not completely outside of it.

Chapter 4

Havana, art and graffiti

Havana's graffiti is very unique due to the circumstances of Cuba, it almost does not exist. There is a constant image created internationally that Havana is desirable as a cultural space because its static environment makes it look like frozen in time (Fernandez 94), and with the opening of USA-Cuba diplomatic affairs Havana city is redefying itself and its future in the global cultural arena.

In Havana both graffiti and murals about the revolution have always been allowed; in fact, any kind of art production is allowed if it has government approval (Fusco 90). However, meanwhile graffiti has been fighting for its existence in cities all over the planet, Havana walls are mostly empty. So, why is there so little graffiti in Havana? How come Latin American urban walls are full of graffiti and Havana's are almost empty? Why Havana city is not a fertile ground for the graffiti movement? If graffiti has always been recognized as a way to fight censorship, why Havana's artists are not using it?



GRAFFITI PROMOTING CUBAN REVOLUTION.
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

To ask why people are not doing drawings, tags, signatures, marks and murals on the streets of Havana, that is, to understand that graffiti is almost a nonexistent practice in Havana is also to recognize that Havana citizen's relation with the city and with art production is unique compared to other Latin American cities. It is clear that Cuba's regimen has shaped Havana's cultural sphere in a particular way (Fusco 84). State control, institutionalization, censorship; scrutiny, vigilance, lack of recourse; education, support, promotion and tourism have created a particular way of understanding and approaching graffiti.

In Latin America, the capital cities of the Latin American countries have always been the center of cultural production and the case of Cuba this is not different. Havana is the center of Cuba's cultural development because there is where most resources (education, galleries, theaters, editorials; artistic circles, libraries, bookstores, cinemas and buyers) can be found (Block 10). In the 90's, due to the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba entered a period of economic crisis, that is not yet over, named "el periodo especial". The impossibility to be part of the international market due to the blockade imposed by the United States left Cuba with few economic possibilities. Since then, Cuba started to rely on international tourism for economic revenue (Fernandez 9).

Tourism became the main source of income for Havana during the 90's; at that time, the government developed facilities and hotels to fulfill tourists' requirements (H. Taylor 120). The scarcity lived during the first years of "el periodo especial", and the lack of access to consumer goods affecting most Cubans today, contrasts deeply with the variety of products that tourists can find in the island. Since the 90's, a double economy has existed, one based on foreign currency and other on local currency, where the access to

hard currency (dollars) implies remittances from other countries (principally from family members or friends living in the USA) or working with tourists (Taylor 123). Cultural industry in Havana has many advantages and it has been principally benefited by tourism revenue. In fact, to be an artist in Havana is to belong to a privileged class that, in contrast with artists working in other Latin American cities, can make a living of just selling their art (Taylor 123; Block 10).

This situation has given a particular strength to culture production in Cuba, principally to visual arts (due to the new relevance of art as investment, and the growth of this global market in the last decades), and to music which is widely consumed in the US-Latino music market. Since the 1950's, the Cuban communist state has promoted free education, health care and shelter for its citizens. As part of these policies the Cuban state has generated a collection of institutions whose aim is to support the development of culture and art (Fusco 10). At the beginning of "el periodo especial" (1990), a generation of Cuban artists was already internationally recognized as a part of an artistic movement called: "New Cuban art". They represented the golden era of the revolution, which, during the 80's was characterized by a relatively economic stability. These artists, educated in the schools supported and created by the communist government, produced innovative and critical art projects that questioned the status quo of Cuban communist society, and opened Cuban art to new aesthetical approaches and media (Price 7; Fusco 10; Camnitzer 172). Also, the Havana Biennale (its first edition was held in 1984), the cultural event that attracts more tourists to the city, was becoming a recognized and highly respected international art event.

Although the communist dictatorial regime in the 60's and 70's was particularly severe with art that was not at the service of the revolution, 80's art innovations and criticism to

the state were at first tolerated, to later become punished through isolation of political artists from the art sphere. Because the Cuban state at the time was the only employer of artists (schools, galleries and jobs in the cultural sector have been until recently under state control), isolation from the art sphere also meant economic isolation. The final control tool used to censor artistic work was to send artists to prison, in that way eradicating any possibility of diversity. The artists of the “New Cuban art” movement created politically critical art by doing spontaneous interventions, happenings and performances in public spaces. Art performance became the medium of preference for these artists because of its relation between the corporeal body of the subject (artist) and the political space where the actions are presented (the street, the public space); and because when the performance was concluded there was no physical evidence of a material object that revealed their political position (Fernandez 138-139; Fusco 29).

The day to day reality in present Havana, and the strong relation between Cuban art and the international market has forced the state vigilance apparatus to rethink its observance over art production. This doesn't mean that there is not censorship or state control: it means that now is more difficult for the state to justify and to apply censorship. Under this prospect, it is clear that Cuba's art sphere is more aware than other art circuits in the world of the networks of power that influence the art market, because for Cubans art is not an alluring creation made by an artistic genius; for Cubans art are material objects that can be sold in the streets, in galleries or in shops if the quality of the product is good and costumers are interested. Following Arlene Dávila (*Latinizing* 1999), Latin American art is important for the international market, but Latin American productions are not at the same level of western European or American art. Latin American art is a category that

refers to particular ethnic ideals and to particular nations. Therefore, Latin American art is not only an aesthetical object, it is a cultural and political category used to promote a particular national image and national interests in the global world, like tourism.

Havana conventional art scene is very prolific compared with many other Latin American cities. Although cities as Sao Paulo and Mexico City have developed an art scene highly appreciated internationally, and as consequence, Mexican and Brazilian's art collectors have built a solid international market for their national artists, art remains a product to which only a small part of the population has access (High and middle-high class). Meanwhile for low income social classes art is basically nonexistent. Although, it is true that many cities have developed programs that include free access for all citizens to cultural houses, museums and cultural events; it is also true that being part of the art world beyond mere spectatorship requires a whole process of validation by the culture industry in each country. This is not different in Cuba, but due to the strong promotion of education and culture by the Cuban government and the importance of art as a way to solve economic problems, art has permeated all layers of Havana's society (H. Taylor 161). I have never been or hear of other place in the world where it was really desirable for a big part of the population to become an artist, because people can earn more money doing art than working in other professions.

This institutionalization has generated a particular way to understand art and to project its role in an economy dependent almost exclusively on tourist revenue, where the global market of art is the principal objective to be reached. Art as a source of revenue is an alternative for many citizens who have access to an artistic education of high quality that is also free. Thus, the institutionalization of art in Havana makes artistic productions

dependent on the international market of art and tourism; which at the same time determines what kind of aesthetic production is desirable and which is not. The creation of a specific set of ideas that frames Cuban art is particularly important, because this set of ideas is *the tourist gaze* that is observing Havana. Therefore, Havana city is seen by tourists as a permanent art referent, as the place of Cuban art, reason why for Margarita Gonzales, a curator at the Havana Biennial, during the Biennial the whole city becomes the museum (Gonzales, Margarita. Personal interview. June 2016).

The relevance that the market has for art in Cuba beyond an aesthetical interest, which is not my intention to analyze (I am not interested in how good Cuban art is), is related to the fulfillment of a particular desire that Havana is in conditions to provide to tourists: “the tourist gaze romanticizes, monumentalizes, and eternalizes everything that comes within its range. In turn, the city adapts to this materialized utopia, to the medusan gaze of the romantic tourist” (Groys 102). There is a particular iconography of Havana life as the cultural space per excellence: the mythical place where revolution triumphed over a decadent capitalism represented by gambling hotels and a violent oligarchy that exploited the poor and ignorant. By now there is universal literacy in Cuba, education is free and is recognized internationally by its quality. The proliferation of highly educated quality artists, in a paradisiac island in the Caribbean, that is the last bastion of communism in the west and therefore it preserves itself as it were the past (Fernandez 94), makes Havana the perfect setting to consume art. Tourists are not just buying the art object but buying the experience itself. We have to keep in mind that art in Havana is very cheap and the tourist city, with its galleries and its “Cuban style” is *Old Havana*, a UNESCO cultural heritage site characterized by its colonial architecture and that looks into the sea; and *El Vedado* a

beautiful neighborhood that conserves the architectonic ensemble of Cuba's modernity before the revolution. Havana as the perfect tourist set is only possible because of its particular history, which makes of Havana a unique real place, principal requirement for the tourist to be able to live a unique experience (Urry and Larsen 22-23).

In the appreciation of the Cuban government, Cuban visual and plastic art (Paintings, videos, sculpture, conceptual works) has become as an element to attract foreign eyes to the communist Caribbean island, principally to the capital city. This has been facilitated by the existence of a variety of hierarchically connected institutions in the city. All of them directly depend and answer to the government. These institutions support the whole productive chain related with the production, promotion and commercialization of Cuban art. They work in contemporary Havana under different focus with a central aim: to build a strong market for Cuban cultural productions. Also, with the opening to new economic models, there are private initiatives that are starting to support art exhibitions and to commercialize art.

El Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño de la Habana (The Provincial Center of Plastic Arts and Design) can be thought as the first institutionalized stage where young artists begin to exhibit their work. Of course, that the center is under the ward of the state means that it also controls art exhibits: "Our mission is to guard, in the good sense of the word, and to supervise methodologically all events related to visual arts in the city. We approve, legitimize and organize hierarchically the exhibitions projects in the city" (Ramírez, Ernesto. Personal interview. June 2016).

Until 2012, only state initiatives could commercialize in the strict legal sense visual arts in the city. This has changed under Raul Castro's government, that allowed private

initiatives to exist. Even so, art production is still strictly institutionalized, only artists that studied in the state art schools can belong to the UNEAC (Union of artists and writers from Cuba), and to be part of the UNEAC is the only way to participate in certain galleries and art projects in Cuba (Gonzales, Margarita. Personal interview. June 2016). On the other hand, art institutions in Havana are built by a number of people whose jobs are to decide what is art and what isn't, and what it is good and bad art in relation to particular aesthetic ideas. But beyond the institutions dedicated to promoting culture, there is the Cuban state and with it another set of instructions whose work is to censor and control the political discourse produced on the island; basically, the state controls and supervises what people can or cannot say in relation to the government. Even so, as in the case of the artist *El Sexto* of whom I will be talking later on in this article, the international market of art and the global art sphere can exert political pressure that allows censored artists to have access to galleries and promotion. At the same time, because customers are expecting certain particularities of Cuban art, art production in Cuba is configured to reach those expectations.

La Fábrica de Arte Cubano (Cuban Art Factory) is the perfect place to understand the relation between Cuban productions and the cultural market. In fact, La Fábrica de Arte Cubano can be seen as a scale model of what Havana is intended to be as a cultural city. La Fábrica de Arte Cubano was born in 2014 as an exhibition place, concert venue, bar and cultural center in Havana's *Vedado* neighborhood. It has everything for all tastes. It opens only at night from Thursday to Sunday. Art exhibits run at La Fábrica for a 3-month period after which La Fábrica remains closed for one month. This time is used to curate new exhibits and to develop a new program accordingly to the events that are taking place in

the city (Rodríguez, Rosemary. Personal interview. June 2016). During the day, La Fábrica de Arte works as a place to promote culture in the neighborhood, thus, kids can assist to free workshops where they learn music, dance, and art.



FAC (FÁBRICA DE ARTE CUBANO)
SIDE VIEW. EL VEDADO, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

The admission fee to La Fábrica de Arte Cubano is 5 dollars for tourists and it is cheaper for locals. The building is huge and belongs to the Cuban state. As its name implies it was in the past a Factory that has been adapted for its new function. They have 3 bars, all of them serve snacks and drinks at a relatively fair price for Havana. The bars are managed by private individuals; they pay some fees to La Fábrica to function there. La

Fábrica gets revenue from the entrance fee and from the bars, but its real source of maintenance is the Ministry of Culture. La Fábrica has a whole cultural agenda: music, theater, dance, films, art; design exhibitions, any cultural expression can be presented if it is approved by the curators. To plan its 3-month agenda La Fábrica has different curators and experts in all cultural fields. Visual art exhibitions in La Fábrica are dedicated to promoting young artists whose work is exhibited for first time and artists without any academic background. When La Fábrica first started to do art exhibitions, those were exclusively of Cuban artists, but by now it has become an internationally recognized cultural space, so curators are now accepting proposals from international artists. At the same time, although La Fábrica doesn't have a permit to sell art, it has become an intermediary between artists and buyers.

Institutionalization of Cuban art has two sides, the first, as I mentioned above, the intense control over art production (aesthetically and narratively), promotion, and sale of Cuban art. The second, the important support that the state gives to cultural and art initiatives, which makes it possible for artists to have studio spaces, grants, travel support, exhibition spaces, and a number of advantages that only recognized artists or rich artists can afford in other parts of Latin America or even in cities such as New York. Although not every artist in Cuba has as its principal source of revenue the sale of its own art work, and probably it would be a good idea to have statistics about artist professionalization in Cuba compared with other cities in Latin America, Cuban cultural institutions are in charge of developing real work opportunities for artists, and they seem to be doing a good job in this sense. Artists in Cuba compared with their colleagues in other parts of the world have the possibility to make a career supported by the government. As Margarita Gonzales said:

I have compared the CV of Cuban artists to the ones of artists from countries that are selected for the Havana Biennial, you get to see that Cuban artists have exhibited their work more, have participated in more art residences, usually they have a stronger CV than their counterparts from other parts of the world at the same age (Gonzales, Margarita. Personal interview. June 2016).

The final result of these policies is the existence of a very large number of artists, some of them supported and legitimated by cultural institutions; most live or move to Havana if they are from other parts of Cuba, because it is there where it is possible to make a living off their work (Block 10). Here is important to say that beyond censorship policies, the people who work in cultural institutions in Havana are truly interested in creating opportunities for the largest number of artists possible, even with the very limited capacities of the Cuban state. It is undeniable that there are veiled and complex racial and social inequalities in Cuban culture that can be reflected on who is supported or not by the institutions, but this is not the subject of this article and my knowledge on that is limited. What it is important for the aim of this work is to understand that it is not possible to think about Cuban art productions without looking at the relations between artists and their political and social reality, and this means to understand Havana city as a tourist space focused on art promotion. This particular relation between artists, the market and the space of the city influences directly the notion of graffiti in Cuba, and its resignification by the Cuban art world.

Alain Reyes (2002), talking about graffiti in Cuba argues that, what is called graffiti in the rest of the world is called muralism locally, because artists don't use spray cans. I don't think that Reyes' idea is completely accurate. Graffiti as the movement of people

painting constantly in the streets, under a global shared esthetic has not existed consistently in Havana, if it has existed at all. Although there are some people painting in the streets, a few of them are doing graffiti; the subtle difference between graffiti practice and to do some painting in the streets shows the particular way in which art has become part of Havana's city culture. To better exemplify what I am trying to convey I will look at three different artists in Cuba, El Sexto, Yulier and Luis Casas, and three graffiti artists in Bogota, Bastardilla, Stinkfish and MDC Crew, in order to comprehend what is understood for graffiti in Havana and in Bogota, and what it has to do with the space of the city and the world of art.

Why is there almost no graffiti in Havana? Havana is a city full of art, you only need to walk downtown Havana to find more galleries in one neighborhood than the galleries of many Latin American cities together. The number of state institutions working on the promotion of art is enormous in front of the population of Havana and of Cuba itself. Initiatives as Havana Biennial and La Fábrica de Arte Cubano, among others, are recognized internationally as places where art novelty and quality can be found. Havana is a principal tourist destination for art and that implies that Havana behaves in a specific way in order to give tourists what they came looking for. As a reward Havana became the place where Cubans can participate of the capital brought by foreigners, in a country that has a very low income (Evans 15). Only certain citizens can be part of that exchange, and artists belong to one of the groups more favored by that situation. Art is a business in Cuba and Cubans understand the importance of art as a cultural capital and as a material good.

Although the economic situation is very complicated in all the country due to the USA blockade and the lack of a productive economy, there is something distinctive of

Cuba compared with many other Latin American countries, that is, the principal place that the Cuban government has given to the development and promotion of art and culture. In the case of Cuba and its uniquely disadvantaged economy, art production needs to be controlled, so, it can only be legitimated by the institutional sphere, thus, the art supported and validated by an institution is the “real Cuban art”. Therefore, Cuban art is a highly institutionalized space affected deeply by Cuba’s political situation: “It happens to me that I can see that we are very conditioned by politics. It is like if you don’t talk about it you can’t transcend either in favor or against the regime. Even outside the country people listen to you more when you have a political voice” (Casas, Luis. Personal interview. June 2016).

In this sense, the question is how to deal with censorship and aesthetic ideals when at the same time art consumers are not only Cubans, but mostly tourists of capitalistic societies all around the world? The final answer is that art in Cuba is now subjected to the taste imposed by the market of art. At the end, even artists that are against the Cuban regime are tolerated if they became part of the art’s production system. For some young artists, there is nothing new happening in Cuban art due to the current cooptation of art by the institutions of culture. This situation is completely understandable under the tight agenda that Cuban institutions have been developing for artists: it starts at the art institutes where young artists and curators are educated, and it ends up with the requirements of the international market of art, which implies a new kind of censorship.

Graffiti as a movement has been nonexistent in Cuba for a number of reasons. First, the difficult communication due to the lack of internet between Cuba and other countries has hindered the exchange of aesthetic ideas and images about graffiti. Second, the lack of art supplies is a problem in front of the ephemeral and volatile presence of graffiti art in

the streets. Why to spend time finding supplies if the work can be erased or damaged very quickly? Third, probably artists prefer to spend the small amount of money they earn in producing cultural goods that they can sell to tourists, instead of painting for free on walls. For an artist as Yulier's, to paint on the walls of Havana is not to do graffiti but to place his paintings in a spot where people are going to get to see his work; so, in that case his paintings are an investment because they operate as advertisement.

Finally, due to the institutionalization of art and culture, and through political ideas inculcated in art education, aesthetical interventions in the urban space in Cuba tend to be read as art; and art needs to make itself useful under a communist regime, even if this utility is to make political opposition. So, graffiti is used in relation to the politicized urban space to, either, protest against Castro's regime using graffiti as performance; or by using graffiti as the way in which artists can present their work outside galleries. Also, the graffiti movement does not exist in Havana because it is unnecessary as an artistic expression. If at some point graffiti is a cultural production that empowers those who practice it by using public space in a creative way, and by generating new aesthetic alternatives that lead to the possibility of recognition and acceptance of the difference (Groys 14-15), and by doing so it challenges the hierarchies established in the art circuit; graffiti then becomes a democratic tool. However, by now the market and the art sphere have a big influence on graffiti art, which means that freedom of production becomes relative to the relation of each artist with its particular market.

Chapter 5

El Sexto, Yulier and the graffiti guy



A TAG BY EL SEXTO. *EL VEDADO*.
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

El Sexto is a Cuban artist that called the attention of news media and the international community when, in December 2014, was arrested by the Cuban police for preparing an installation/performance criticizing overtly Castro's dictatorship. He spent 10 months in jail when he attempted to release two pigs with the names of Raul and Fidel Castro in the central park of Havana.

Before that intervention, since 2009, on many walls of Havana city the name of El Sexto started to appear painted as a stencil tag. From 2009 to 2012, El Sexto started to become recognized as a very prolific graffiti artist due to the big number of El Sexto tags found throughout the city; and because of videos posted online where he was painting graffiti meanwhile conveying his political ideas criticizing the Castro regime. El Sexto is

the name that the artist Danilo Maldonado took to call public attention on Cuba's dictatorship and the lack of freedom of expression. El Sexto was invented as a character in reference to the name that the Cuban government gave to a group of five Cuban prisoners in USA who were elevated to national heroes: The Cuban Five. At that time, Castro's government was asking for their liberation, so, El Sexto as a name was a challenge to the government questioning the attention to the "martyrs of the revolution" when the rest of the people in Cuba live under difficult economic conditions and are equally censored (Maldonado). The use that Danilo Maldonado gives to his tag is very clear: "So then El Sexto (the sixth One) came to represent the Cuban people. Anyone can be El Sexto, an elderly person, a child: We are all El Sexto. It's not just a tag, it became something bigger than me" (Maldonado).

From the beginning of his urban interventions, the use of his tag was related to a political statement, El Sexto was not the way in which the artist wanted to protect its identity as Danilo Maldonado, but it was the way in which to call attention to a political idea that he defended. El Sexto is recognized as a graffiti artist by art critics, the press and the international community, but its graffiti practice is reduced to the making of a tag in Havana as a political statement, and in that way, call the attention of people to his political art performances. While graffiti artists are interested in hiding their face (Stinkfish, *Hide*), Maldonado makes of graffiti performance art. The continual appearance of Maldonado in different videos on the internet, principally in his webpage, shows us his graffiti work as something unlike the graffiti movement in Latin America, because for him the important part of his work is not the style, but the performance and the visibility of his body placing a political statement in the streets.

Maldonado's CV that is on his web page states that his works is: "Marketing art, the name that I give to the set of tools that I use to project myself. These tools include public art, graffiti, performance, street interventions, advertising" (Maldonado, *CV*). His strategy was the opposite of what any graffiti artist does. As I said before, graffiti is illegal and graffiti artists according to the state are criminals, therefore none of them wants the police or other people to get to know who they are in everyday life, and that's why they use a pseudonym². The perfect example of this is the graffiti artist *Banksy*, who has become world famous with his/her graffiti stencils (sometimes entire walls are taken from the streets to be sold in auctions), while his/her identity still remains a secret.

For El Sexto to paint in Havana's streets is not problematic in the sense that he is not damaging private propriety, or doing an illegal act, in fact, for him the illegal action is to talk against the government not to paint the wall. In one of his videos he states: "Here walls are not anyone's, and if they belong to the state, I am the state" (El Sexto. Interview by Dominique Bonessi. *Art Beat*, March 2016). To understand El Sexto's use of graffiti we have to look at the relation between art and politics produced by the Cuban revolution. According to Coco Fusco, the Cuban state has developed a system dedicated to the education of artists and to promote their art, but at the same time has created a very sophisticated system committed to the vigilance and control of artists and art productions (34).

During the 80's, the artists that were part of the movement called "New Cuban Art", specially the artist collective "Arte Calle" (Street art), presented performances and

² There are two main reasons why graffiti artists create a name for themselves, first to be recognized as creators of a particular work. Second, because, even when the game is to place a distinctive mark all around the city to get to be known, his citizen identity needs to stay hidden in order to prevent fines or get arrested.

happenings to overtly criticize the government; they used streets and public spaces to express their nonconformity with Cuban state policies. In the beginning, inspired by NYC graffiti artists they were anonymous, but their aim was not exclusively to challenge public space by doing graffiti, they wanted to exhibit their work and to show their particular political ideas through their interventions on public places (Fusco 162). Thus, unlike graffiti artists, they used their physical presence in their art. For Fusco, it is not possible to think of art in Cuba without thinking in its linkage with the political environment of the country, and this becomes clear when we think about graffiti. The collective “Arte Calle” is recognized in the Cuban Art sphere by art critics and curators as an important artist collective in recent Cuban history. Although they were inspired by graffiti artists, they did not develop particular pseudonyms or signatures, or a particular graffiti style; they presented themselves, in person, as artists challenging the art establishment and the government. Basically, because their art had political connotations that weren’t acceptable for the establishment, one of the only ways they found to display their work was by doing public performances on public spaces.

El Sexto spent 10 months in a Cuban prison not due to his crimes against private or public property, but for an accusation of “desacato agravado” (aggravated contempt), a figure used by Castro’s regime to punish attitudes against the leaders or high officers in the government. El Sexto was released from prison because the political pressure that many Cuban artists, supported by the international community, put on the dictatorship. After being released, El Sexto was allowed to fly to Miami where he had the opportunity to make the exhibition “Pork” at the Market Gallery on South Beach (February-March 2016). In this exhibition, he finally presented the performance that took him to jail. El Sexto followed

the teachings of “Arte Calle”, his political art couldn’t have a place in the intricate network of control and censorship that it is part of culture institutions in Cuba, so he used his graffiti interventions as a performance, making of graffiti not a way to create something else but as the work of art itself, and that is the reason why he needed to show his identity. Maldonado’s art is configured as direct opposition to Castro’s dictatorship control over Cuban society, and in this sense, he is not a graffiti artist, he is an artist that, through performance and paintings, is doing a personal opposition to a political system. In the case of El Sexto, graffiti is being re-signified as a performance, but graffiti is not and has never being a performance, even if it implies a physical presence in a public space. This is so, because graffiti artists are not interested in showing the activity of doing graffiti, their interest is to paint on the wall. In fact, graffiti aesthetical interest is closer to drawing and painting than to performance. Graffiti artists love illegality, and that’s why they work at night, when people are not looking.

Painting graffiti on Havana’s streets that don’t express a direct criticism to the Cuban government seems to be a fairly easy job. A big part of graffiti works that can be found on the streets of *Old Havana* and *El Vedado* has been made by foreign graffiti artists. It is easy to recognize them because some are important figures in the world of graffiti, as 1up, a German crew that flies every year to paint in Havana’s walls (tags, bombs and wild style). Stinkfish (who uses stencils and spray paint to create faces full of color), Rodez (wild style); Os gemeos (a Brazilian group that paints human figures) among others; the less recognizable artists write the place where they come from, which is a usual practice among graffiti artists when they are painting in cities that are not where they live.



GRAFFITI BY 1UP CREW. *OLD HAVANA.*
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.



GRAFFITI BY STINKFISH. *OLD HAVANA.*
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

The Havana Biennial is the most important cultural event in Cuba, and it is one of the most important Biennials in the world. Contrasting with many Biennials where particular curators are invited to develop particular works, the Havana Biennial has its own team of curators; for each Biennial, they pick a specific topic. Through a year period of research around the world (each curator is assigned to a specific region of the planet), the Biennial committee invites artists to develop a work of art related with the specific topic of the Biennial. The 9th Havana Biennial, *Dynamics of the Urban Culture*, was dedicated to art in the streets, and because of that, different graffiti artists were invited to work on Havana's Streets. For the Havana's Biennial curator's public interventions on streets are seen just as art, therefore graffiti artists can be chosen to participate in a prestigious event dedicated to high art; it is clear that for the art sphere in Cuba graffiti in Havana is not understood as a criminal activity as in many other cities.



TAGS BY 1UP CREW AND OTHERS.
OLD HAVANA.
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.



STENCIL BY SKE
OLD HAVANA.
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

Yulier is a Cuban artist that shares a studio with other three artists in downtown Havana at El Paseo del Prado, a very important tourist spot in the city. Yulier is currently one of the most, if not the only, prolific urban artist in Havana as he also recognizes (Yulier. Interview by Luz Escobar. *Translating Cuba*, March 2016). Like El Sexto, for Yulier to hide his identity is not important, in fact Yulier is his real name and he uses it to sign his paintings. Yulier's art work can be recognized not only by his signature but by his particular aesthetic style, large human silhouettes made with black ink on a solid one-color background, expressing different emotions through their faces. Yulier is clear about what kind of artist work is important for him: "it all starts in the studio, the workshop and the canvas" (Yulier. Interview by Luz Escobar. *Translating Cuba*, March 2016). His work is not directly concerned with the wall or the street as part of his aesthetic development.

Yulier's aim at painting on the streets is to make his work visible because from his point of view it is the best way to exhibit his work: "I presented several projects in galleries and exhibitions, but I was marginalized. In the best case, they told me, I would have to wait a few months" (Yulier. Interview by Luz Escobar. *Translating Cuba*, March 2016).

Although Yulier's paintings are preponderant in Havana's streets, unlike El Sexto, Yulier has never been pursued by Cuban police. They know who he is and where they can find him, not only because of the clear visibility of the signature in his work, but because the entrance of the studio where he works has several of his unmistakable big paintings on it. The paintings made by Yulier on the streets of Havana are there as a way to display and promote his artistic work, thus, they are located in *Old Havana* streets and they can be understood as a map that guides people looking for art to his art studio.



PAINTING BY YULIER
OLD HAVANA.
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

YULIER'S ART STUDIO
PASEO DEL PRADO.
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.



Graffiti could be very prolific in Havana because the government does not have enough resources to paint over and over again Havana's walls; so, many of the graffiti made on the streets remains there for years. Yulier, talking about one of his few encounters with the police when painting on the streets says, "They have sent out three police patrols and nothing happens. They came predisposed, when they got out of the car and looked at the piece, and listened to my explanation they called on the radio and said: 'The boy isn't doing cartoons, it has nothing to do with politics'" (Yulier. Interview by Luz Escobar. Translating Cuba, March 2016).

Luis Casas is a graffiti artist from Havana, unlike El Sexto or Yulier he paints the streets using a pseudonym. Sometimes he uses different names, for him to have different signatures is a game that he uses to renew his relation to the streets but, according to him, this is only possible in Havana because there is almost no graffiti:

I don't sign it, or when I sign it I always change the signature. That is also one of the problems when there is no graffiti and for this reason you want to do it all, it is counterproductive because people think we are two different people. In a place with more graffiti you have to make clear who you are, but here it doesn't matter, there is nothing here (Casas, Luis. Personal interview. June 2016).

Thus, his work remains attached to his signature of the moment but not to his person. He considers himself a graffiti artist. He paints on the streets because he wants to do it, he uses stencil, stickers and other different materials depending on their availability and the kind of work he is doing, but also on the material that he has available at the time. The most important part of his work is that it is made for the streets; he is very aware of the medium that he is using.

Luis Casas' work is not explicitly political in the sense that it doesn't raise any direct criticism of the Castro government; but it is political in the sense that he is using graffiti to convey his own ideas and aesthetics, exercising his own creative freedom to intervene the streets. He is not interested in the promotion of his art work either, there is no way to know he is the one that is painting. He has a job as a designer and that is how he makes money to live and to pay for the artistic work that he makes on the streets (Casas, Luis. Personal Interview. June 2016). The problem of doing graffiti on Havana's streets is not the direct intervention on the physical space of the city, but the censorship related with

ideas against the Castro regime: “These graffiti was made in a state store, they didn’t know I was going to paint. I made it on 10-20 minutes and then I went away. When I passed by the next day it had been erased, for them the problem was the concept, a man with wings about to fly” (Casas, Luis. Personal interview. June 2016).



STENCIL BY LUIS CASAS
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY LUIS CASAS.



GRAFFITI BY LUIS CASAS
EL VEDADO.
HAVANA, JUNE 2016.
PHOTO BY LUIS CASAS.

For Casas, certain images are clearly interpreted by the government as a threat, this idea implies that art's content in Cuba under Castro's regime is highly controlled, therefore, public art intervention in the streets is usually ignored as vandalism but recognized as art. The Cuban regime is interested in the promotion of Havana city as an open cultural space, thus any kind of art is accepted insofar its content doesn't question the status quo. As Luis Casas puts it talking about one of his works: "That graffiti is basically legal because it was developed during the Havana Biennial; so, when someone was going to erase it I told him that it was done during the Biennial" (Casas, Luis. Personal interview. June 2016).

Luis Casas, Yulier and Miguel Leive, a muralist artist and designer, agree that there are just a few locals doing graffiti on Havana's streets. It is clear that certain conditions are needed for graffiti to flourish, even when it is an illegal practice. Graffiti has always been a global movement; graffiti artists really want to paint walls so they do graffiti wherever they go. Likewise, due to its social features, graffiti is a practice that implies sharing: more mature artists teach new ones, and sharing pictures about works on the streets has been a very important tool for the development of the different aesthetics and styles that can be found locally. Internet has been ideal for graffiti ideas to spread because as I said before, webpages as Art Crimes facilitated picture sharing in a global scale, and the contact between artists from different countries. Thus, the relatively new access to internet, that remains very restricted, and the lack of a strong communication network between Havana and the rest of the world is one of the factors that had affected the development of graffiti. Casas and Leive agree that doing graffiti in general don't produces any kind of concrete results and this is clearly other reason why people are not doing graffiti on Havana (Casas,

Luis and Leive, Miguel. Personal interview. June 2016). Cuba is a place where consumer goods are scarce, very scarce, and to find painting or any art materials implies a challenge:

They are really adverse conditions in every sense. Politics, the state, even the possibility to find your own materials is very difficult, there is nothing. Time then becomes very important. If you look at the history of prices and income you realize the problem. There is neither a place where you can steal. It is not the same to paint with a spray can or a paint roller, and it depends on the quality of the paint, it is not going to be as fast as with a spray can (Casas, interview 2016).

The economic conditions of Havana, principally the difficult access to paints and art supplies complicates graffiti production. Although other Latin American cities have high levels of economic inequality and poverty, graffiti artists have surmounted those conditions, many times developing new technics and using a diversity of materials that have made their work different and relevant for the global graffiti scene (Caldeira 97). At the same time in the 90's, during the hardest period of the Cuban economy, Cuban art was prolific and original, even with the lack of art supplies or because of it. The problem for people doing graffiti in Cuba is not only the challenge to find art supplies, it is the fact that to do graffiti implies a lot of work without any visible or tangible reward. Graffiti artists spent their time and their money painting walls and they don't get anything in exchange; there is not an artistic practice closer to the romantic ideal of "art for art's sake" than graffiti:

People start with a lot of impetus, after a while they realize that it implies much effort, spending in materials for something that at the end is useless. So, it is like people run out of gas. People start doing very interesting stuff and then get tired

and go on to do something else, that happens a lot” (Leive, Miguel. Personal interview. June 2016).

Just a few graffiti artists became famous enough to participate in the art market and get some revenues from their work, and even when this happens there is always a lot of time and free work behind, because to become famous in the graffiti world artists need to paint a lot; it is a process that takes years:

If you sing Rap you become famous, people want to buy your songs, people see you and they ask you for autographs, people pay you to do concerts. If you are a skater, people are also looking at you, you get to be cheered and acclaimed. When you are doing graffiti, the idea is that you are invisible, people cannot see you, so, where is the reward on that?” (Casas, Luis. Personal interview. June 2016).

Graffiti is not a market good, it is not made to be sold nor it can be easily sold. Graffiti can be reproduced in photographs and many graffiti artists have become part of the art market by selling their work on canvas; but for Cuban artists to place their work in a gallery or in the market of art it is not necessary to do graffiti. Ideally, graffiti is an artistic creation that exists for its own sake and, in this sense, it cannot be part of the High Art sphere. Graffiti doesn't need to be approved by experts or accepted in any particular way; graffiti is not a commodity, and 'Art' is 'Art' in part because it can be bought and sold (Shiner 127). The idea of commodity is very important for the concept of art in the world, but we usually forget this, we have learned a romantic idea that places the genius of the artist as the substance of art; Cuban artists in this sense are less naïve and more pragmatic, art is art but, also, it is a commodity.

Chapter 6

Bastardilla, Stinkfish and the Crew

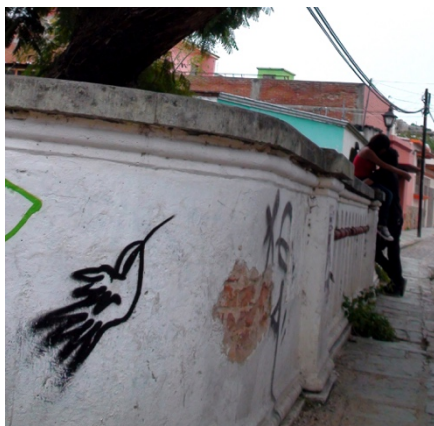
Bastardilla is a Colombian graffiti artist who prefers to be known by her art and not by who she is. Her artistic name comes from the name of the italics font in Spanish, *Bastardillas*. In the work of Bastardilla, we see the use of a figurative drawing that is very plastic in the sense that it seems molded into the wall. We can see the versatility of the proposal by its continuous movement from small to large formats. Sometimes her drawings elongate to fill entire walls, sometimes times they become tiny to fit in the smallest places. It is a very aesthetical drawing, beautiful and very aware of the media, of the wall, thus we find the use of strong, bright colors and the Glitter, because the light of the streets at night is limited, and the materials used are accorded to the intention (Bastardilla in Drost, 2011). The artistic proposal of Bastardilla is an example of how the graffiti practice questions the realm of art. The works of Bastardilla that we see in the streets of the city do not have any economic value; they cannot become an object of desire because they already belong to us.

The perfect example of how graffiti subverts the notion of commodity in the art object are Bastardilla's *Hummingbirds*. These *Hummingbirds* can appear in any place of the city and although its main shape remains, its aesthetic elements are in constant change. This changeability is the trace that shows the pattern left by human labor. It is through the difference in the development of the same figure that we understand that someone is behind the concept, the aesthetics decisions and in the material making of the image. We recognize then, that the same artist has being painting in different places; and moreover, sometimes we come across that anonymous artist.

The repetition of the same graffiti, as in the case of the hummingbird, in this case, comes face-to-face with advertising, branding and consumption objects; and while it appropriates his own nature, its repetitive nature, subvert the meanings of consumption desire for a price. The repetitive sign is no longer the object or the slogan reproduced ad infinitum with commercial ends; now the reproduction has a different meaning than an economical one. Therefore, the graffiti images made by Bastardilla invite us to interpret them, and in this way they reshape our attitude of indifference toward the city, it is an invitation to look, to be present, to recognize and to apprehend the space.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
BOGOTA, 2014.
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
BOGOTA, 2013.
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
BOGOTA, 2014.
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org.

GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
MANIZALES, 2014.
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
INDIA, 2014.
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org.

Social critic characterizes Bastardilla's works. This critic is not literal but it is constructed by a symbolism that is established by its chosen subjects and its aesthetical development. Thus, the use of the Hummingbird as symbol has its own political significance and is related with an African short story:

One day a terrible fire was sparked in the forest. All animals, frightened, watched the disaster helplessly. Only a small hummingbird went looking for a few drops of water to throw them with its beak above the flames.

After a while, the armadillo said angrily:

- "Hummingbird, you're crazy! Do you think that with four drops of water are you putting out the fire?"

- The hummingbird replied:

- I do not know, but I do my part."³

In relation with that story the Hummingbird is a political statement that conveys a take of position in front of the problems of our societies. The Hummingbird painted all over the city and in different parts of the world, where the artist has been, is a local symbol that by its dissemination becomes global. In this way Bastardilla recognize her work and herself, as part of a global community and its political statement is not a local call but a call to acknowledge the agency of people in the world.

In Bastardilla's work *Los Durmientes*, the politic dimension of her work became more visible and more important in regard of the circumstances of a country as Colombia; a place that suffers of a lack in the visualization of the difference and were representation its signed by a very specific discourse that frames communities, persons, and social classes in a static and silent manner. Its political significance is key to society because as Jacques Ranciere argues:

Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render

³ "Un día, se provocó un terrible incendio en el bosque. Todos los animales, asustados, observaban impotentes el desastre. Sólo el pequeño colibrí se fue a buscar unas cuantas gotas de agua con su pico para tirarlas encima de las llamas.

Al cabo de un rato, el armadillo le dijo, enfadado:

-« Colibrí, ¿estás loco! ¿Crees que con cuatro gotas de agua vas a apagar el fuego?"

El colibrí le respondió:

- No lo sé, pero yo hago mi parte."

cuento africano – Rabhi, Pierre in Bastardilla. org <http://www.bastardilla.org/blog/page/18/>.

visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals (Racier 25).

Not only Bastardilla paints the streets challenging directly the system by subverting the function of public space, but also, she represents the difference in a very unique aesthetic style. *Los durmientes* depicts diverse human figures, sometimes by themselves sometimes accompanied by others, painted in the wall in such a way that they seem as sleeping on the streets.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
INDIA, 2014.
PHOTO BY
www.latimesblogs.latimes.com



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
BOGOTA, 2013
PHOTO BY
www.arteycallejero.com



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
BOGOTA, 2015
PHOTO BY
www.woostercollective.com



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
BOGOTA, 2014.
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org.

This work not only portrays a reality of the city that people tend to ignore: the homeless that more and more, since the last 30 years and due the violence in the countryside, inhabit the streets; but it does in a way that subverts the static and unique meaning attributed to them. We see that her *durmientes* are all different, they are not “los indigentes” in plural, each one of them has different identities and thus, we are called to

recognize the individuals. Their different facial features and patterns of their dresses are a call to the passers to see that those who sleeps on the streets of the city are not “the poor”, but that they are people who belong to different communities, born under different cultural traditions and that came from diverse geographies.

The facial expressions of *Los durmientes* are generally placid and peaceful, what gives us a sense of tranquility, of intimacy; of being at home and in this way these graffiti reconfigure the notion of the streets as a dangerous and insecure place. This feeling of insecurity is very common in several cities in Latin America due economic inequality, and it generates a phenomenon that Teresa Caldeira has called “the aesthetics of security”, which are the bars, walls and barriers created in order to separate residential houses or apartment buildings from the public street (Caldeira 97). Public space is perceived as a space of transit and danger, and not as a common space of gathering or reunion. In this kind of city, private space dominates urban devolvement, what in turn generates exclusion through the placement of new walls, new walls that graffiti artists can paint. *Los Durmientes*, then, overthrown the limits between the private and public sphere. Streets became the space of the private with all the intimacy that sleep implies (Bastardilla in Nadja, 2011). Therefore, public space becomes again the space to be inhabited, the space of the community. Graffiti appropriates spaces from within exclusion by the re symbolization of the public space.

In the women whose mouth is covered by their own hair, another work by Bastardilla, we find a question for the place of women in the society and its voice. As Bastardilla had said about this work: “it is an image that refers to the hijab worn by Muslim women, but likewise could be men with long tresses” (Bastardilla en Rosini, 2012). We

can say men and woman are closed their own mouths, and in this way Bastardilla is signaling asking about the actual freedom of speak that our societies give to us, and our responsibility in that situation. This work not only is questioning Colombia citizens, but it is a work that can be understood all over the world, in fact, in different countries *Bastardilla* has left these drawings, and by doing so, she makes those cities participate of a shared message as with her *Hummingbirds*.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
PALESTINA
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
BOGOTÁ
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
MADRID
PHOTO BY
www.escritoenlapared.com



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
BOGOTÁ
PHOTO BY BASTARDILLA
www.bastardilla.org

Women issues are very relevant in the work of Bastardilla, a large part of her drawings is related with women and make reference to the violence and the invisibility of women in our societies. In the video “Discover the art of Bastardilla” produced by La

Maison du Directeur and Camera Talk Productions, she talks about this matter, and how one of the intentions of her work is to make visible the pain and the sadness. She argues that we live in a society that only admires happiness, comfort and success, and thus, any feeling related with something different generates discomfort and uneasiness. But sadness and pain are part of life and those feelings also help to form our character and whom we are and therefore it is a feeling that should not be neglected. For Bastardilla all feelings are important, and for her is important to make visible and to acknowledge their existence, principally the existence of those feeling that mass media try to forget. In doing so, Bastardilla is also acknowledging existence of injustice, violence and pain; a pain caused in part by the social system that we have built. In fact, the pretention that everybody should have a perfect happy life by ignoring pain is one of the reasons why many cases violence against women is silenced and ignored.



GRAFFITI BY BASTARDILLA
MILANO
PHOTO BY
www.wallsofmilano.blogspot.com

The actions of Bastardilla are not limited to the production of images in the walls of the city, as well as many other graffiti artists in Bogotá, Bastardilla participates in the construction of public politics. Hence, she has participated with her painting in events related with the visibility of women and gender issues. And also, together with Stinkfish and other graffiti artists through the collective Hogar, made the exhibition “Memoria Canalla” based on the graffiti history in the city and its importance as part of Bogotá’s memory. The work of Bastardilla shares a concern for the place of the people in the world, our being, our feelings, and in this sense, is non-conformist because it’s not about to find a rational solution to our problems, but instead is about to accept that we live in a world that is not entirely rational, and that feelings and the inner self cannot be ignored by the society; it is about showing that we are beyond the absolute pretention of rationality in which western culture is based.

Stinkfish is an artist born in Mexico who lives in Bogota, his works are now around the world and his artistic proposals have been exhibited in diverse galleries. Even so, he remains painting in the stress because his real interest is to produce graffiti as he argues:

Graffiti is my work, understood as fun, detached from money. The common logic is to work in order to earn money. Graffiti can break that logic and still remain as work. The recurrent question is: ‘yes, but how are you going to find money to live?’ For me to live is to paint graffiti and what happens meanwhile I am doing it. You can live I many ways doing Graffiti. (...) I participate in projects that emerge from graffiti, sometimes festivals, and exhibitions and from there I take the means that I need to live (Skintfish, Interview by author, 2013).

One of the most recurrent works of Stinkfish along the city are the portrait of people's faces. These faces normally are based on photos taken by the same artist or of old pictures that he finds in the street or in magazines. The drawing is very realistic and normally is made in black and yellow. Stinkfish, lights this faces by creating patterns of color that born from the eyes or the mouths of the people. Sometimes, depending on the wall, the color brush grows bigger to fulfill entire walls. People depicted can be anyone, without relation to its origin, age or gender. The artist, under its own criteria, makes the choice.



GRAFFITI BY STINKFISH
PHOTO BY
Stinkfish. Flickr

According to Walter Benjamin, Scott McQuire and other scholars, the city is the place of the multitude, of the crowd. Therefore, the principal characteristic of the modern city is anonymity (McQuire 133). Likewise, due the amount of stimulus produced by the city and our necessity to not be overwhelmed by them, our experience of the city is fragmented, thus, the metropolis is the locus of forgetting, the site of dissolution of remembering into dull amnesia (Gilloch 1996). The work of Stinkfish subverts this idea by

creating recognizable faces of anonymous people and calling our attention to focus our gaze in the colors that frame the images.



GRAFFITI BY STINKFISH
PHOTO BY
Stinkfish.



GRAFFITI BY STINKFISH
PHOTO BY
Stinkfish. Flickr

The fact that the faces depicted in Stinkfish works are from anonymous people of around the world gives a new meaning to the idea of being a citizen. First, it shows the importance of people by signaling that there is no need to be a famous character or an important hero, as in the case of the statues that are raised in commemoration of important citizens, in order to acknowledge a person as part of the community. Secondly, it shows that boundaries between national frontiers are not stable and have never being because beyond a given citizenship we are all people. This happens because he depicts people of different origins, different times and different ages in Bogota and diverse cities around the world. The importance, in Stinkfish faces, of the careful development of the particular facial expressions of people, makes of feelings (like sadness, angry, calm, happiness or even the expressionless of people sleeping) one of the central elements in his depictions; thus, the race, gender or age of its subjects lost importance. His images are in first place humans to whom we can identify within the human diversity. This put us in a global scale. The faces from all around the world make us to acknowledge the city as a global space, interconnected with the entire world and with a past that is a human heritage.

Other important quality of Stinkfish's drawings that is related with the display of feelings through the facial expressions is the beauty that it is possible to find in feelings. This can be related with the assertions of Bastardilla about the importance of pain; because clearly Stinkfish work is related with human emotionality and the possibility to accept that all feelings are part of human life and that there is an inherent beauty in them. In this way Stinkfish work counteract the false notions of humanity sold by advertising and mass media.

While you Sleep Crew (*Mientras Duermen Crew*) is a graffiti collective integrated by four artists: *Cazdos*, *Yurika*, *Zas* and *Eckson*. They do tags, throw ups, and murals, some of them for advertising companies. Their work is based on the signature of their pseudonyms in different styles. Mostly what it is known as *Wildstyle*. This style was created by north American artists and it is based in the intertwine of letters that end in arrows in order to signal the speed and fluidity of graffiti.

Each one of the group members has developed a characteristic style. As Susan Stewart signal when talking about this particular style of graffiti: “The forms are the personal signature of an individual style, designed to be read by a particular audience in particular ways (Stewart, 165). This particular design is what I want to remark of the productions of MDC. I am not going to analyze a particular work of MDC; my intention is only to analyze some of the characteristics of the kind of the graffiti that they do.

If Bastardilla and Stinkfish have develop a figurative drawing clearly understandable for those who look, the writing of signatures is other language that should be apprehended before being understood. It makes of the city a place where a secret language is developed, remarking in this way the infinite number of local communities with particular characteristics that inhabit the city.

The use of a particular language shows the multiplicity of cities that we inhabit and that overlap to each other; cities that we must decipher in order to comprehend. Tags, throw ups and murals became the signals of a map that graffiti artists develop in its wander through the city. But even if we cannot grasp the complete meaning, graffiti, as the art professor Lucas Ospina states became:

Part of the secret map that some citizens use to navigate a city that became stranger and hostile. It doesn't matter that the trace is small, medium or big; beautiful or ugly; a template or a heavy gauge; critical or ornamental, graffiti is a human gesture of public response to the madness of aesthetic bureaucracy and state rot (Ospina, Translated by the author, 2012).



GRAFFITI BY MDC
PHOTO BY
MDC, Flickr



GRAFFITI BY ZAS
PHOTO BY
MDC, Flickr

The symbols become a recognizable mark for passers, therefore, the anonymous painter stop of being anonymous and acquires an identity as the producer of the symbol. The artists became the signature itself, making a new way of branding. The multiplicity of styles produced within the signatures generates an aesthetic diversity that asks for attention and interpretation. The person who looks needs to become an active viewer in order to create significance, thus, the symbol, the signature, plays with the notion of a branding that generally transmits a complete meaning and that only requires a passive observer. The citizen must become an active observer to assimilate the symbols that appear in front of he or she, and even so, due the complex codification of the language it is possible that the symbols as a whole remain inaccessible; even so, its qualities, as the shape and the color, can be more easily apprehended. This is one of the reasons why this kind of graffiti is the less accepted by the citizenship; it makes people and institutions uneasy because it's difficult understandability.

According to graffiti artists, graffiti is over all a game whose purpose is to paint as many walls as possible. It is an activity that causes enjoyment, fun. It has certain rules and to achieve a particular style is one of the more important qualities of graffiti making. The other artists judge the quality, the cleanness and the drawing and it's under those qualities and by the capacity of painting as many places as possible that an artist receives recognition. It is not only to write graffiti but how it is written. The signature it's not by itself but also by the style in which is depicted; aesthetics then became a mayor quality of the game.

The role of MDC is important in Bogota because of these qualities. Its members have developed particular technics for which they are recognized; they have mastered a

particular way of writing that have given them an important role in the development of the style of graffiti that is made in the city. The fact that graffiti is a game signals one way in which graffiti subverts the meaning of the city. For graffiti the city is no longer the place of the market or of the institutions, not even of a static community; it reads the city as a playground. By reading the city as a playground graffiti artists live the city in a different way in which normally is lived by most of the citizenship: a space of transit between work, home, and shopping places.

Graffiti artists then became shapers of the city. If for Walter Benjamin, the *flâneur* and the detective were characters in the search for “the individual traces” of the city, in that way were capable to see what others cannot see (McQuire 47). Graffiti artists are not only *flâneurs* and detectives, (they are capable to see the diverse faces of the city because in order to do their work they need to be complete aware of all that surround them) but they go beyond the observation and became designers by intervening directly in the city. They dedicate their wandering to search walls or spots to paint, like they call them. For them, the city is not only horizontal, they can see it in its multiple dimensionalities, there is no high or bottom that it cannot be reach.

It is from those actions that the name of MDC born, *While you Sleep (Mientras duermen)*, signals the other face of the city, the one that appears mostly at night (because is the night the one that protect the artists from the eyes of the vigilance and control of the police and the other citizens), when the city became a playground for only a few; while most citizens are safe behind the walls set up to protect the privacy of their homes from the dangers of the streets.

The graffiti made by MDC generates other city, one that shows the complexity of the urban space, the different meanings, the multiplicity of its inhabitants and the actions that they develop in the space. The fact that graffiti is seen as a game by its participants makes of graffiti an expression of culture, because as Johan Huizinga argues in his book *Homo Ludens Study of the Play Element in Culture*:

Play presents itself to use in the first instance: as an intermezzo, and *interlude*, in our daily lives. As regularly recurring relaxation, however, it becomes the accompaniment, the complement, in fact and integral part of life in general. It adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual –as life function-and for society by reason of the meaning that it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function (Huizinga 9).

For citizenship and for institutions the graffiti painted by MDC is a kind of graffiti that only can exist when it is developed through murals. Tags and throw ups are problematic because at first sight are interpreted as chaos and vandalism. I think that this kind of graffiti, and also because it is in itself the base of all the graffiti movement, is very important because it allows the possibility to think in a city directly shaped by people. This graffiti represents the unlimited possibility of difference meanwhile makes of the city the place of creativity and inventiveness; makes of the city the place of the culture.

Conclusion

The purpose of this work was not to do an exhaustive analysis of graffiti, because that is something that is almost impossible to do given the qualities of graffiti and the number of artists that are painting. The analysis that I made here is not intended, neither, to be a complete analysis of the artists; it is only a sketch of how to analyze this kind of art. I only wanted to show, through the analysis of some works and through some of the ways in which graffiti is produced, the relations that graffiti builds in Bogota and la Havana are producing particular ways to understand the city.

As Tone Hansen argues, “art, culture and design once again have become means of control over ‘public’ urban spaces” (17). Graffiti is where the materiality of the city and our imagination about it comes together in order to produce the ways in which we live and understand the city. I would like to state that the reason why graffiti is important as a contra cultural or antiestablishment movement is not because it goes against the established regulations of society, but because it rebellion is based in creation. The artists are capable to engender new visual imaginaries through aesthetic freedom, and this is a key element in the construction of more egalitarian and democratic societies.

At the same time, if the graffiti movement is prolific in Latin American cities is not because Latin American cities are more democratic than Havana city in cultural terms, or because artists have more access to spray cans; graffiti is still a crime everywhere in Latin America. The fact that art and artistic creation are part of everyday life in Havana city and that all citizens can be part of it, contrast with the lack of opportunities that most Latin American cities present on this respect. There are few opportunities for artists to produce

and to show art in Latin American cities, but there are thousands of empty walls; gray, cold and ugly walls that just call to be painted. Artists are searching a way to participate in the creation of the cultural capital of their cities. If cities are now cultural arenas of international importance, if there are millions of eyes watching in order to be seduced, artists want to be part of that media city. They want they work to be seen.

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