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'Graffiti takes its own space'

Negotiated consent and the positionings of street artists and graffiti writers in Bogotá, Colombia

Gabriel Ortiz van Meerbeke and Bjørn Sletto

The politics of graffiti and street art are often described in binary terms: criminalization of graffiti enhances its oppositional potential; its legalization destroys its counter hegemonic essence. In order to add nuance to this binary understanding of street art and graffiti, we examine the complex responses of street artists and graffiti writers to Decreto 75 ('Decree 75'), an ordinance deployed by the mayoral administration of Gustavo Petro between 2011 and 2015 to formally regulate street art and graffiti writing in Bogotá, Colombia. In contradiction to previous policies that criminalized this subculture, this new legal framework promoted so called 'responsible and artistic' graffiti and street art, in part to support the ideology and political priorities of the Petro administration via muralist tropes long common in the Latin American city. We also examine the heterogeneous reactions of artists to this more permissible governance approach, drawing on interviews, photography, and active participation in the street art community in Bogotá. Since most research examining graffiti as a mode of contestation has been conducted in cities where street art and graffiti writing is criminalized, the case of Bogotá illuminates the implications of decriminalization strategies for the politics, practices, and meanings of contemporary graffiti and street art.

Key words: graffiti, street art, street capital, urban planning, Bogotá, Colombia

Introduction

Street art and graffiti writing are global yet highly contested cultural phenomena (Ferrell 2017). Despite the ubiquity of street art and graffiti writing, most cities still criminalize this artistic practice (Ferrell 1996; Snyder 2017; Young 2017), implementing various forms of zero tolerance policies (Landry 2017; Lamazares 2017; Lombard 2013; Shobe and Banis 2014; Young 2010) which rely on increasingly military forms of deterrence and policing (Iveson 2010). At the same time, however, the emerging

discourse of the 'creative city' (Florida 2008) under neoliberal urbanism is prompting a reconceptualization of street art and graffiti writing, leading to more permissive approaches towards graffiti and street art even in cities with zero tolerance policies (Schacter 2014). In areas denominated as 'creative districts,' selected street art and graffiti are approved in the hope of increasing the attractiveness of these neighborhoods to young professionals (Evans 2016). This development, in turn, may lead to increases in property values and the displacement of the original low-income residents,

paradoxically making street art and graffiti signifiers of gentrification (McAuliffe 2012; Zukin and Braslow 2011).

In order to strategically deploy street art and graffiti for economic development, even in cities with zero tolerance policies, officials designate 'free walls' where street artists and graffiti writers can develop complex murals without fear of prosecution. Known in the sub-culture as 'halls of fame' (Halsey and Pederick 2010), such free walls discourage practitioners from doing illegal pieces (Craw et al. 2006). Cities also foster public events such as art festivals to promote creative districts as a site for artistic expression. This approach is perhaps best exemplified by the Street Art Festival in Wynwood, Miami, where city officials and real estate developers invite renowned street artists and graffiti writers to paint murals in previously derelict industrial areas (see Schacter 2014). However, by permitting graffiti and street art 'to exist when it ceases to be itself' (Halsey and Pederick 2010, 97), free walls and street art festivals function as insidious forms of control. As street artists and graffiti writers strive to make a living from their art either by selling prints (Dickens 2010) or by producing 'legal walls' (Kramer 2010), such mainstreaming serves to incorporate urban art into dominant productions of neighborhood 'character,' fostering troubling relationships between urban art, the creative city, and processes of gentrification (Dovey, Wollan, and Woodcock 2012; McAuliffe 2012; Schacter 2014b; Zukin and Braslow 2011).

In order to better understand the contradictory impacts of more permissible governance approaches on the graffiti and street art community, scholars call for situated, case-study based ethnographic work that carefully considers both policy discourse as well as the tactics deployed by artists (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017; Austin 2010; Iveson 2009; Iveson 2017; Kramer 2016; Ross 2016; Schacter 2014a; Young 2013). Perhaps the best example of such a grounded approach is Alison Young's work (2010), where she critically reflects on her attempts to implement

new policies towards graffiti and street art in the city of Melbourne. The plan spearheaded by Young proposed three different spatial classifications: areas of zero tolerance where any markings on public space would be promptly erased, areas of limited tolerance where graffiti or street art would be either removed or maintained depending on the wishes of the property owners, and finally areas where graffiti and street art would be tolerated and where practitioners were expected to 'self-regulate' (Young 2010, 104). Unfortunately, this strategy was never implemented and instead '(t)he model of negotiated tolerance ... was rejected by the City of Melbourne: self-regulation was to be replaced by Council regulation; limited tolerance by zero tolerance' (Young 2010, 113).

Informed by this call for grounded case study-based approaches to understanding the complex articulations between policy strategies and artistic practice (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017; Austin 2010; Iveson 2009; Iveson 2017; Ross 2016), in the following we present the case of Bogotá, Colombia, which has experimented with a model similar to that suggested by Young (2010) and thus provides a critical test case for such a policy of negotiated consent. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of the 'field of cultural production' (Bourdieu 1993) and the concept of 'street capital,' inspired by Bourdieu and developed by Sandberg and Fleetwood (2017) and Shammass and Sandberg (2016), we examine the complex responses of differently situated practitioners to the 'negotiated consent' strategies implemented via Decreto 75 (Decree 75) under the administration of the left-wing mayor Gustavo Petro during 2011-2015. By conceptualizing the street art and graffiti community as a 'cultural field,' we suggest that street artists and graffiti writers deploy 'street capital' (Sandberg 2008) as they consider the appropriate response to policies of negotiated consent. In the specific case of Bogotá, graffiti writers and street artists leveraged their possession of 'calle' ('street'

in Spanish), i.e. hard-earned experience with violent repression of their art (see Dovey, Wollan, and Woodcock 2012), as they contested the meaning and role of graffiti and street art under this more permissible but also more insidious approach to government control.

Our discussion is based on 12 weeks of participant observation and in depth-interviews with 20 graffiti writers and street artists in summer 2015, the last year of the Petro administration. This particular moment in Bogotá's history saw intense debates concerning the nature of street art, graffiti, and muralism playing out in art galleries and art shows but also on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram (Avramidis and Drakopoulou 2015). One of us actively engaged in these critical dialogues both in virtual space and in Bogotá as an active member of the Lavamoatumba street art collective, which allowed us to build rapport and trust with our interviewees. Also, following Armstrong (2006) who sees street art as a 'quiet layer of visual culture' which is best captured within the 'space between people's footsteps', we traversed Bogotá with a camera in order to capture the physical manifestations of the new policy of negotiated consent. Our photographic research resulted in more than 2,000 images of the multitude of murals, tags, throw-ups, and wheat-pastes that 'ornament' (Schacter 2016) Bogotá's walls, many of which were put up during this period of intense artistic production in the early 2010s. By deploying such 'an anthropological and visual lens' (Stewart and Kortright 2015), our active participation in the street art and graffiti community coupled with observations, photography, and interviews provided us with an intimate view of the world of street art and graffiti during the early implementation of Decree 75.

In contradiction to previous attempts to criminalize graffiti writers, Decree 75 sought to formally regulate graffiti and street art through 'the responsible and artistic practice of graffiti.' Decree 75 was approved after several months of deliberation between

graffiti writers, street artists, and city officials, making Bogotá one of the first major cities to institutionalize a more permissive stance towards graffiti and street art. As Evans suggests, condoning "high" street art' (in contrast to 'unpopular' graffiti) is most common in cities where 'economic decline and social political fragmentation' has deterred city officials from clean-up strategies and strict enforcement of zero tolerance policies (Evans 2016, 179). In this sense Bogotá is not unique, and places such as Palestine (Peteet 2016), Athens (Avramidis 2015), Lisbon (Evans 2016), Sao Paulo (Caldeira 2012; Lamazares 2017; Morrison 2015), and Santiago de Chile (Morrison 2015) are all good examples of 'saturated cities' (Morrison 2015) where both citizens and city officials find it necessary to tolerate street art and graffiti simply because it is everywhere. However, Bogotá became the first major city to implement a formal, city-wide decriminalization strategy. The new legal framework not only allowed for public sponsorship of large scale murals but, more importantly, reversed the logic of the previous zero tolerance policies. Instead of forbidding all street art and graffiti except in certain allowed areas, the city shifted to allowing graffiti everywhere except in sites where it would not be tolerated.

However, while the new permissiveness towards street art and graffiti exemplified a more moderate approach to governance, the promotion of 'responsible graffiti' by the Petro administration profoundly unsettled the street art and graffiti writing community in Bogotá. Some graffiti writers and street artists applauded the liberal measures adopted by Petro's administration, while critiquing the aesthetic quality of the pieces that were produced. Others, meanwhile, became proficient in navigating the new competitive process for state sponsorship (see also Brighenti 2010), strengthening hierarchies in the urban art scene between well-connected and lesser known artists. And some well-established graffiti writers and street artists who built their fame under the repressive, zero

tolerance policies prior to the Petro administration critiqued the policies of negotiated consent, while, in an ironic twist, assuming a disciplinary role in policing the 'rules of the graffiti game' (Bourdieu 1993; also see Dovey, Wollan, and Woodcock 2012).

That is to say, from the perspective of graffiti and street art as a mode of counterhegemonic contestation, legalization undermines both its oppositional meaning and the oppositional identities of graffiti writers and street artists. Conversely, the criminalization of street art and graffiti serves to reproduce practitioners' conceptualization of their own work as a means of resistance (Ferrell 1995) or transgression (Caldeira 2012; Cresswell 1996). The discourse of criminalization is internalized by practitioners who claim that their activities by necessity *must* be illegal (Bloch 2016a), which suggests that criminalization in fact serves to foster more graffiti and street art (Ferrell 1996). Graffiti writers and street artists will seek to acquire fame or 'get up' (Castleman 1982; Lachmann 1988) by investing more time and economic resources in creating larger and more daring pieces (Ferrell and Weide 2010). Thus, when Austin (2001, 268) asks, 'what writer, if given the option of painting trains without fear of getting caught or buffed could refuse?' we found that in the case of Bogotá, quite a few artists would, in fact, reject such an offer of legalization because they have internalized the illegal and unsanctioned nature of their art.

Terminology plays a central role in this contestation regarding the meaning of street art and graffiti in Bogotá and beyond. In the following, we use both the terms 'street art' and 'graffiti writing' to underscore that these are two distinct aesthetic practices, each with its own codes and forms of (re)production. Scholars who have attempted to define these terms have been flummoxed by the complexities of these subcultural practices. Jeffrey Ian Ross, for example, argues that despite their stylistic differences—graffiti is letter based and tends to be illegible to those outside the graffiti community

whereas street art tends to be recognizable images—these two aesthetic practices are by their very nature illegal (Ross 2016). As Young (2017) argues, graffiti is typically constructed as criminal, especially in its most basic form, the tag (Snyder 2017), while street art is often elevated as a form of art in what she calls a 'process of cultural legitimization' (Young 2017). At the other end of the spectrum we find muralism, which Schacter (2017) differentiates from street art and graffiti writing due to its role in the aesthetic of the 'creative city:' murals are always sanctioned, legal, and commissioned either by public agencies or real estate developers. Furthermore, murals have been used by some municipalities as a means to cover up street art and graffiti with some degree of success (Craw et al. 2006), even though there are cases where graffiti writers have 'bombed' iconic murals (Bloch 2016b).

In our essay, we use 'graffiti writing' and 'street art' together in order to refer to unsanctioned and uncommissioned works of art in public spaces, typically on underpasses, retaining walls, and building façades, and 'muralism' to refer to public art that is sponsored and financed by state agencies. These distinctions are inherently inconsistent and fail to capture the nuances of these artistic fields and their practitioners. Street artists or graffiti writers may create 'illegal pieces' that the public assumes, either due to their pictorial qualities or their size, were commissioned or sanctioned. Practitioners may create a commissioned mural one day and write graffiti the next. As we illustrate in the following, it is this slippage between indeterminate and contested categories that allows different sorts of practitioners to bypass or bend the conditions of Decree 75.

Decree 75: Bogotá regulates graffiti and street art

The first street art in Bogotá was produced in the 1970s by students of the Universidad

Nacional, Colombia's National University. Inspired by the slogans that appeared on the walls of Paris during the 1968 protests (Silva 2014), these pieces were typically short and witty messages sprayed with a single color, or, as in the case of Luis 'Keshava' Liévano, in the yellow, blue and red of the Colombian flag as a way to emphasize his critique of the Colombian state.¹ In the 1980s, graffiti started appearing in the streets of Bogotá thanks to the efforts of rappers who were inspired by the music videos, album covers, and movies emerging from the North-American hip-hop culture (see López 2016). These artistic practices were never formally regulated, allowing the police to apprehend and abuse street artists or graffiti writers caught painting a wall. For example, as G explained in an interview with us, a police officer once arrested him, seized his cans, and sprayed them all over his face and clothes, telling him that this way he would 'finally learn'. In most cases, the police would confiscate their materials and detain street artists or graffiti writers overnight.

In 2010, Bogotá city council attempted to regulate graffiti and street art for the first time, drafting an ordinance to 'ban any graffiti on walls, façades, lighting posts and furniture located in public space' (Proyecto de Acuerdo 291 de 2010). Echoing Wilson and Kelling's (1982) 'broken window theory' (for a critique, see Harcourt 2009; Wicherts and Bakker 2014), council members linked graffiti with vandalism, arguing that graffiti was largely responsible for the deterioration of Bogotá's Bus Rapid System (BRT) infrastructure. However, the political crisis gripping Bogotá at this time prevented the approval of this ordinance, and a subsequent, proposed law intended to 'regulate the production of graffiti in the capital district' (Proyecto de Acuerdo No. 127 2011) also failed to pass city council. In 2008, Samuel Moreno Rojas had been elected mayor of Bogotá, bringing the recent history of innovative urban renewal projects under the leadership of mayors Antanas Mockus and Enrique Peñalosa (see Berney 2010) to an

abrupt end. Soon after his inauguration it was revealed that Moreno was awarding public works contracts in return for bribes, and he was eventually arrested after embezzling funds allocated for the construction of a new BRT route along 26th Street, a major road in Bogotá. While Moreno was awaiting trial, the interim Mayor, Clara López, signed Acuerdo 482, an ordinance intended to 'establish the norms for the practice of graffiti in the Capital District' (Acuerdo 482 del 2012).² The ordinance required that the mayor's office define where graffiti and street art could take place, thus laying the foundation for the negotiated consent policy to be developed under the subsequent mayor, Gustavo Petro, a former member of the militant guerrilla group Movimiento 19 de Abril.

Soon after Petro assumed office, the tragic police killing in 2011 of the 16-year-old graffiti writer Diego Felipe Becerra who tagged as Tripido came to profoundly shape the administration's policies towards graffiti (Brodzinsky 2013). Becerra's lawyer demonstrated that the police had fabricated evidence about his death, trying to portray the young artist as a robber rather than a graffiti writer. The case gained public attention as a symbol of corruption in law enforcement (El Tiempo 2015; Orozco Tascón 2015; Revista Semana 2011) and highlighted the need to regulate graffiti and street art, not only for purposes of public safety but also to protect the well-being of the city's youth. Brighenti (2016) refers to this event as a 'chiasm point': 'such was the popular outrage that the entire municipal policy with respect to graffiti changed dramatically' (Brighenti 2016, 162).

In 2012, during the first year of his administration, Petro formed a 'Mesa Distrital del Graffiti' (Graffiti District Board, or MDG in its Spanish acronym) to draft a new policy towards graffiti and street art in Bogotá. The MDG brought together representatives of different city agencies including Culture, Government, Sports and Recreation; Environment; Planning; Urban Development

(IDU for its acronym in Spanish); Public Space Office (or DADEP); and the District Arts Institute (IDARTES). However, although the board reached out to graffiti writers and street artists, only 50 attended the first public meeting, and later, participation by artists gradually declined. In fact, according to Nicolás Palau, then working as legal representative of the Culture Office, by the end of the deliberation process few or no practitioners were attending the public meetings. Some graffiti writers and street artists felt that their participation in the MDG was mere tokenism, or, even worse, a means for authorities to collect personal information in order to facilitate their surveillance of the graffiti and street art community. One street artist, N, told us that he got into an argument in one of the MDG meetings because he refused to sign with his real name, using his tag instead. In the case of A, another street artist, he recalls that:

'At the beginning I went and kind of helped out a lot. Many of the pioneers of graffiti went to those meetings, but we later realized that they wanted to control graffiti a lot, and then many began to abandon this gimmick. ... So then I stopped [attending the process] because I say that graffiti cannot be measured, like, graffiti is difficult to control, and maybe their objective is to have a list of all graffiti writers to control them and then tell them where they can and cannot tag.'

However, despite the lack of support from the biggest names in Bogotá's urban art scene, the MDG process went forward with the aim of designing a radically new policy approach. In an interview, Palau told us that:

'After several meetings with them [street artists and graffiti writers] and different discussions where the Culture Office backed the graffiti writers against the Planning Office, which was really responsible for spearheading the legal process, the idea was to radically shift the approach: whereas before, everything was forbidden except a very few cases where it was explicitly authorized, the purpose of the new legal framework was to

authorize [street art and graffiti everywhere] except where it was explicitly forbidden.'

As Palau's recalls, two different factions emerged through the public engagement process leading up to Decree 75. The Office of Culture alongside IDARTES pushed for maximum liberties for street artists and graffiti writers, while the Planning Office and DADEP sought to restrict the number of places where graffiti and street art would be permitted. As a result, Decree 75³ was not as progressive as some of the members of the MDG, including Palau, had hoped for. Even though Decree 75 is ostensibly designed to 'promote the artistic and responsible practice of graffiti,' a closer reading reveals that most public spaces are off limits to graffiti artists. According to Palau, the initial plan to 'authorize (street art everywhere) except where it was explicitly forbidden' was significantly watered down because different offices called for particular prohibitions: IDU wanted to exclude posts, tunnels, and bridges; Planning, invoking safety reasons, wanted to exclude the road system. The law ultimately excluded many of the surfaces where graffiti could potentially be done.

A key feature of the new ordinance is that it does not make a clear distinction between street art and graffiti, but rather defines graffiti as any temporal markings in public space that do not include company names or logos or other attempts at *publicidad* ('publicity; advertising'). The ordinance also provides support for pedagogical strategies that serve to promote 'graffiti' as a cultural and artistic expression. Additionally, it allows practitioners, or 'authors' as they are defined in the decree, to intervene in private properties if they have written permission from the owners. Finally, Decree 75 classifies graffiti writing as a 'petty crime' punishable with modest 'corrective measures' ranging from verbal warning to a form of 'restitution of the public space,' to a fine. These measures explicitly forbid police officers either from retaining street artists and graffiti writers or from confiscating their materials, which is a

significant change from the previous regime that tacitly allowed for repressive measures simply due to a lack of clear regulations.

Don Popo's protest: painting 26th Street

In 2013, a year after Decree 75 was approved, a peculiar event further transformed the graffiti and street art scene in Bogotá. After performing in Bogotá, the international pop star Justin Bieber decided to graffiti an underpass on 26th Street. This avenue connects the airport with the rest of the city and was already a hot spot for street art and graffiti. His entourage was escorted by police officers, leading to a public outcry and prompting the Petro administration to quickly issue a statement saying that Bieber's graffiti was illegal (Caracol Radio 2013a). Yet at the same time, Petro congratulated the police officers for 'protecting' the pop singer, arguing that 'not taking care of such a renowned figure would have been disastrous for the city's image' (Caracol Radio 2013b). Becerra's parents, however, pointed out the injustices laid bare through this case (El Espectador 2013). While a pop icon's graffiti signified that Bogotá was becoming a 'global, creative city', local artists were harassed and even murdered by agents of the state.

The negative reaction to the Petro administration's uneven treatment of graffiti writers and street artists was not restricted to media coverage. Soon after the Justin Bieber incident, Jeyffer (Don Popo) Rentería, an Afro-Colombian activist who uses hip-hop as a tool to empower impoverished communities, launched a protest via Facebook, writing: 'We are taking the 26th Street underpass. Twenty-four hours of graffiti for our right to the city, freedom and right to life' (Don Popo 2013). The next day, 200 graffiti writers 'bombed' 26th Street in the same area where Bieber had done his graffiti, leaving it full of pieces and throw-ups (see Figure 1). As Don Popo told us in an interview,

'the police arrived, they did nothing, but what were they going to do? They arrived with the intention of engaging us but you could feel their shame, like with the tail between their legs. Man, those 24 hours were pure graffiti. After a while the media arrived, however the next day the biggest satisfaction came when Andrés Felipe Becerra's father visited us.'

In a later, widely shared op-ed in the major Colombian newspaper *El Espectador*, Don Popo explained how Mayor Petro had ordered the police to let the graffiti writers and street artists express themselves freely (Don Popo 2013). This unprecedented moment highlighted the inherent tensions of Decree 75: the pieces and throw-ups that ornamented 26th Street (Schacter 2016) with the reluctant approval of the police were the antithesis of the 'responsible and artistic graffiti' that the Petro administration was trying to promote.

Repainting 26th Street with political murals

Despite the ostensibly permissive attitude towards graffiti, the Petro administration was trying to harness street art to serve its political agenda through murals created by street artists and, in some cases, by accomplished graffiti writers. From 2012 to 2015, IDARTES's budget increased 7-fold as the agency oversaw the development of 48 large and medium scale 'urban interventions' (López Correal 2015). Because of the highly managed process involved in developing these interventions, these pieces are best understood as 'murals,' as defined by Halsey and Pederick:

'The term mural gives a substantial clue as to the politics involved in such a project. It must have a largely pictorial element, it must reflect a 'community mindedness', it must refrain from overtly political statements, it must be aesthetically 'pleasing', it must reflect the traditional elements of design, it must be meticulously planned, it must minimize all risks to artist(s) and the public, it must fit the environs. In short, it must not be graffiti.' (Halsey and Pederick 2010, 84–85).



Figure 1 Throw ups and tags on 26th Street following the protests initiated by Don Popo. This graffiti was later replaced by one of the largest murals in Bogotá. Photo by Gabriel Ortiz.

However, while most state-sponsored murals in Bogotá may be 'aesthetically pleasing,' many also carry explicit political messages, reflecting a long Latin American tradition of using street art and graffiti for political ends (for a historical perspective see Chaffee 1993; for a more recent analysis see Ryan 2016; for the use of stencils as a political tool see Kane 2009). In 2013, IDARTES put forward a call for proposals for one medium-scale and five large-scale murals for 26th Street in keeping with the 'pedagogical and promotional strategies' of Decree 75. One of the murals that emerged from this competition was created by the Bogotá Street Art collective. As the name of their collective suggests, these are street artists who mostly began their careers producing illegal, political stencils, but who now deployed this technique to create a mural that denounces the dangers of mining in Colombia—all with official state support under Decree 75 (see Figure 2). This appropriation of aesthetic techniques for ideological purposes is also evident in the mural created by the two graffiti writers Chirrete and Ark,

also located on 26th Street. Their mural spells 'MEMORY,' commemorating the 4,150,000 victims of forced displacement due to Colombia's internal conflict (see Figure 3). In 2014, the new Decree 632 called for an even more extensive urban design project on 26th Street, including murals, in 'recognition and remembrance of the acts and victims of violence' and 'the full reparation to the victims of the recent and past violent history of the country' (Decree 632 2014). Other murals on 26th street are more subtle in their political messaging, presenting themselves at first glance as apolitical and merely 'aesthetically pleasing' works of art. For example, while the mural painted by Vertigo Graffiti was inspired by a photograph of a homeless couple kissing, the crew added a colorful background filled with tags and throw-ups in the bottom of the mural to project a pleasing 'graffiti aesthetic' (see Figure 4).

The fact that most of these murals carried a political message that reflected the ideology of Petro's leftist government did not go unnoticed by the street artists, graffiti



Figure 2 Mural done by Bogotá Street Art in support of miners. The stencil on top-left corner reads: 'Water is more valuable than gold'. Photo by Gabriel Ortiz.

writers and muralists who we interviewed. As M, a wheat-paste artist, suggests: 'Petro or the government in power uses the walls to promote itself'. And as U, a self-identified muralist, reflects on Petro's speech during the inauguration of one their murals:

'... in the end we understand how he is taking advantage of the graffiti boom in Bogotá, [using] all that artistic potential to gain approval for ... a state policy. And for what? To give his own government more visibility and to gain acceptance. In his speech he says: 'It is not that progress in cities only means filling them with concrete, big concrete infrastructures ... but progress also means color.' He then put this in a more colloquial language and simply said: 'let's make rivers of color for this city'.'

As the Petro administration used muralism to promote progressive policies while fostering an image of a creative, global city, street artists and graffiti writers faced new direct and indirect controls, including censorship and the covering of their tags and pieces with murals. In fact, in 2015 IDARTES

selected the very location of Don Popo's protest to create one of the largest murals in Bogotá. One year later, Ink Crew, which is composed of prolific and experienced graffiti writers, produced a mural which ultimately covered up most of the throw-ups and pieces of this particular spot⁴ (see Figure 5). As F, a participant in Don Popo's protest, says about this paradoxical appropriation of street art and graffiti for ideological purposes:

'Of course there were those pieces that were painted in a self-managed manner, but now comes the city and gives money to paint murals and it always ends up happening that it is other people but us who end up painting. So it is curious, well this is a parenthesis, but they [IDARTES] have already chosen a couple of our walls [where they had done large scale illegal pieces].'

Such buffing of graffiti to make way for officially sanctioned murals is naturally frustrating to experienced graffiti artists, despite their support of the politics behind the mural. A, a prolific bomber who has painted on 26th Street several times but whose work has



Figure 3 Mural done by Ark and Chirrete Golden commemorating the 4,150,000 victims of forced displacement due to Colombia's internal conflict. Photo by Gabriel Ortiz.

been covered up twice, once by a mural sponsored by IDARTES, recounts:

'... once with a friend called _____, from Soacha [a satellite city of Bogotá], I painted a month ago there on 26th Street. A normal day without an event or anything, just on our own. It took us a whole day, cleaning the wall, scraping it, and painting it and such. Two days afterwards some dudes, well from the UP [a political party founded by the Communist Party and the guerrilla movement FARC] covered our wall like that. But I'm going to recover it again, because that graffiti spot is mine. I took it, polished it, did everything and then these dudes took advantage of that and covered it.'

Furthermore, the Petro administration imposed bureaucratic requirements for 'large scale graffiti' (the categorization used by IDARTES) that are impossible for most artists to meet. As IDARTES' calls for mural proposals in 26th Street stipulate:

'Financial support is provided to four contestants who have proven experience in

performing large-format works - between 100 square meters and two hundred square meters - that can guarantee the execution of quality works of art ('de calidad plástica') in an organized and safe manner, and fulfilling the budget.'⁵

Not surprisingly, the IDARTES requirements led to the exclusion of street artists and graffiti writers who, even if they have been working for many years, cannot 'prove their experience' since their art is illegal and ephemeral by its very nature. Many submissions to IDARTES competitions are rejected because forms are not properly filled out. Even after being selected, one artist we interviewed had to hustle at the last minute in order to obtain the necessary proof of her experience. This bureaucratic process, in turn, leads to an insidious form of self-censorship, as artists tactically cater to the ideology of Petro's leftist agenda in order to access public resources. While street artists and graffiti writers might agree with the politics expressed in the murals sanctioned by the Petro administration, whether this is banning bullfights, granting inalienable



Figure 4 26th Street saturated with tags, throw-ups, and murals. The mural titled 'The Kiss' (El Beso), created by Vertigo Graffiti based on a photograph of a homeless couple kissing, can be seen in the back. Photo by Gabriel Ortiz.

rights to water, or promoting the use of bicycles, they might have preferred to use that space to create their own *Wildstyle*

piece with no ideological content. In the words of the wheat-paste artist M, 'city officials say 'we will give you these materials but



Figure 5 The mural created by INK crew on the site of Don Popós Protest. The members of this crew are all accomplished graffiti writers who regularly bomb Bogotá. This could explain why, three years later, no other street artists or graffiti writers have painted over the mural. Photo by Gabriel Ortiz.

you have to paint this subject for me.' Similarly, Z believes that

'... it's like graffiti is Petro then Petro is graffiti, but what the hell is the next mayor going to do? So no, I've never liked that ... and you take a look around Bogotá and you'll see all the murals have a message. [With an ironic tone] So they paint this mural on 26th Street that says 'Peace will come.'

As the Petro administration sought to co-opt counterhegemonic expression through divisive constructions of (politically) responsible murals in contradiction to aesthetically inferior graffiti or street art, and as the throw-ups and pieces produced during Don Popo's protest were covered up with Petro's murals, street artists and graffiti writers felt empowered to take over more streets. Given the sheer amount of street art and graffiti produced in Bogotá during this time, it was impossible for police officers to differentiate between sanctioned and unsanctioned pieces, thus effectively blurring the line between illegal street art or graffiti and state-sponsored

murals. Despite the attempted disciplining under Decree 75, Bogotá became a 'saturated city' (Morrison 2015), as most of the walls lining major avenues are now covered with some form of graffiti, street art, or mural.

Responding to Decree 75: the restructuring of the cultural field

Although the passage of Decree 75, Don Popo's protest, and IDARTES' mural campaign led to a proliferation of street art and graffiti in Bogotá, this saturation obscures the constant contestation over the surfaces of the city. As practitioners responded to Decree 75 and engaged in the increasingly complex street art and graffiti scene, the intensifying debate surrounding these aesthetic practices (Noticias Caracol 2015; Revista Semana 2015) led to a fundamental restructuring of this 'field of cultural production' (Bourdieu 1993).

Bourdieu has deployed the concept of the field of cultural production to analyze the

ways in which differently situated actors leverage their 'cultural capital' as they vie to structure meanings and priorities within their respective fields, such as literature (Bourdieu 1996), art (Bourdieu 1993), or philosophy (Bourdieu 1991). According to Bourdieusian thinking, the authority and access of cultural actors to the 'specific profits that are at stake in the field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97) are contingent on the amount of 'cultural capital' that they possess. Thus '(t)he literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces. The network of objective relations between positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their position (i.e. their position taking), strategies which depend for their force and form on the position each agent occupies in the power relations' (Bourdieu 1993, 30).

Of particular relevance to the Bogotá case is Shammas and Sandberg's (2016) reading of Bourdieu's work. Suggesting that marijuana dealers deploy 'street capital' (Sandberg 2008) in their contestation over the 'street fields' where they operate (Sandberg and Fleetwood 2017), they argue that the concept of cultural capital can be extended to subcultural practices and even criminal activities. In the case of Bogotá, we suggest that street capital is epitomized in the expression 'calle,' which refers to the experience and skills that some graffiti writers and street artists are said to possess, while others do not (see Dovey, Wollan, and Woodcock 2012), and that the 'positions' within the graffiti and street art community prompted by the quick passage of Decree 75 were determined, in part, by the amount of 'calle' or street capital possessed by the various actors in the field.

However, the positioning of actors is complicated by the different forms of street capital in the various 'sub-fields' of the graffiti and street art community. Graffiti writers have their own 'principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu 1985) of what constitutes a well-executed throw-up 'bombed' with spray paint, but under the policy of negotiated

consent they are forced to compete with street artists or muralists who use stencils or brushes to paint the same wall. Experienced graffiti writers, who grew up bombing the city under threat by the police and thus carry significant street capital, argue that graffiti is only 'true' if it is illegal. They complain that the negotiated consent policies provide 'toys' (inexperienced writers) with easy access to large walls. However, even given such favorable conditions and the opportunity to paint desirable walls, these inexperienced artists fail to produce high-quality pieces. Such contestation over the relative notoriety and value of artistic practices is integral to 'the space of conflict and competition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 17–18) in any field of cultural production, as it shapes the distribution of cultural capital and determines the benefits accruing to each of the differently situated players.

Ultimately, we suggest that the struggles within the graffiti and street art field spurred by Decree 75 resulted in the restructuring of the graffiti and street art field into four categories of practitioners: 1) a clique of mostly self-identified muralists who quickly learned how to navigate the new bureaucracy and obtain commissions; 2) famous street artists and graffiti writers who resist any accommodation and self-censorship; 3) artists who tactically take advantage of state resources but then use them for their own uncommissioned works of art; and 4) up-and-coming artists who are not able to navigate the bureaucracy but who take advantage of the more tolerant attitude of authorities to 'put up' pieces, which, in the opinion of experienced graffiti writers and street artists, are of poor quality.

The clique of muralists

A small clique of artists, most of whom have formal training in the arts, self-identify as muralists and are best positioned to take advantage of the public resources provided for large-scale pieces. A good example is N,

a muralist who started her career producing uncommissioned pieces but, after being apprehended by the police, decided to do only legal walls. She does this either by participating in *convocatorias* (calls for proposals) or by asking the owner of the wall for permission to paint her murals. In N's words,

'They call us graffiti writers and we don't like that. Our style is closer to Diego Rivera, Siquieros or Orozco [México's most renowned muralists]. All of those things that are more complex and with a deeper meaning but that are equally anti-establishment (contestatario).'

N has misgivings about the graffiti writing culture, particularly after a local graffiti crew painted over one of her IDARTES-sponsored murals. On another occasion, after her art collective had won a call for proposals, city officials asked them for evidence that they had '3–5 years' of artistic experience. According to N, this request was prompted by other street artists who had brought a complaint to IDARTES, questioning her collective's experience. 'The problem is that the graffiti scene is very envious,' N says. 'They just can't stand other artists succeeding on the streets'.

As art collectives and muralists learn how to navigate the bureaucracy, they gain advantage over other street artists and graffiti writers and begin to monopolize public resources. By winning *convocatorias*, practitioners gain practice but also proof of their experience, which improves their portfolios and helps them win future calls for proposals or commissions by other public agencies. For example, when U's art collective submitted a design to a *convocatoria* for the first time, he says, they 'won fair and square without knowing anyone from IDARTES'. However, when they submitted again in response to a call for proposals, they knew how to navigate the process and they were also known by staff at IDARTES. His art collective won the call and today, his murals along with those of a handful of other recently prominent muralists dominate the large walls

in Bogotá. Despite these unintended consequences of the policy of negotiated consent, these artists argue that they were simply following the rules of the game by catering their artistic production to the Petro administration's political ideology. As we were discussing this issue with E, another street artist, he simply shrugged, arguing that 'at the end of the day, it's all about putting up pieces. So if those artists know how to work the system, good for them'. Or in L's words, 'dude, there are people who bomb, some who tag, others who do these sick walls, and then there are artists who create these amazing murals because they win calls for proposals. We all need to live off something.'

The famed street artists

Another group of street artists and graffiti writers take the diametrically opposite position to that of the muralists. Having worked on the streets for more than ten years without any official protection, suffering heavy policing, prosecution, and buffing, these artists distrust any institutional support. As Stinkfish, an internationally renowned Colombian graffiti writer, wrote in his blog entry in response to Decree 75: 'There is nothing more false, nothing more unreal, graffiti is not an artistic practice and the most responsible way to do it is far from institutions, decrees, sponsorships, prizes and calls for proposals.'⁶

However, while Stinkfish and other famed Colombian street artists and graffiti writers support the idealized view that street art or graffiti is only 'true' if it is illegal, it is important to consider their position within this particular field of cultural production. As in the case of Banksy, Stinkfish never reveals his identity but is internationally acclaimed and his stencils fetch thousands of dollars; he has even put on shows in collaboration with the Prada fashion house.⁷ By acquiring a dominant position within the graffiti and street art field through their years as anonymous street artists, plying their art in the shadows under

zero tolerance policies, artists such as Stinkfish have managed to convert their street capital into monetary capital (see Bourdieu 1986). Now, in order to protect their position within the field, they seek to defend the particular meaning of 'true' street art and graffiti that led to their fame.

Other street artists are quick to point out this contradiction, as Santiago wrote in response to Stinkfish's blog entry: 'I have read a lot of arguments, and I share the premise that graffiti is illegal and anonymous ... Certainly (Stinkfish's entry reflects) a passionate feeling. However, this is also a path that tries to order, standardize and polarize something that has never been ordered or standardized.' It is easy for an international artist with their own merchandise who lives off the 'new world tourism of muralism' to criticize street artists who tap into public resources, Santiago continued. To put it differently, after years of working illegally, Stinkfish is now firmly established at the top of this field of culture production. Because of his privileged position, he and other famed street artists and graffiti writers have less need for the financial resources afforded by public agencies. Instead, these artists assume a paradoxical position within the culture field of graffiti and street art. While making a living off this supposedly counter hegemonic artistic expression, they seek to police the game and reinforce the notion of graffiti and street art as an exclusively illegal practice.

The tactical practitioners

While more purist street artists and graffiti writers share Stinkfish's strongly held position, many practitioners are ambivalent. Most interviewees were torn between the original premise of their art as illegal expression and the role of murals in furthering their political worldview, evincing nuanced and complex perspectives on the negotiated consent policies. As D, who started as a writer in 2013 and who now is an independent business owner, says:

'Look man, let's say I have to have two positions. One is personal and the other one is as a graffiti writer. Personally I'm a leftist and love some of the initiatives of [the Petro administration] ... The downside of the situation is that they try to institutionalize and create rules [*reglamentar*] for graffiti. They now even have a directory with the names of all graffiti writers.'

This database of practitioners was a point of contention for most street artists and graffiti writers, even those supporting the Petro administration. Anyone who accepts commissions or participates in calls for proposals needs to give up their alias, a difficult decision for street artists and graffiti writers working within a tradition of anonymity. Echoing D's sentiments, most of our interviewees respected and supported the economic social programs of this left-wing mayor, but at the same time, could not fully condone the policies that sought to control their art. F, for example, who entered the urban art scene 15 years ago under constant threat from the police, says that he backed Mayor Petro's policies and financial support for large-scale murals. At the same time, however, while F and many other writers ideologically support Petro's administration and even participate in calls for proposals, they nevertheless continue their original, unsanctioned graffiti practice. Many interviewees who won calls for proposals still ply the streets at night and create throw-ups and illegal pieces. Z, who collaborated on one of the largest murals in Bogotá, says about the difference between sanctioned muralism and unsanctioned graffiti:

'I don't have a preference. They are two very different mediums, right? On the one hand you have the murals, getting the permits, creating a heritage for the city, which can only be accomplished in conditions that start to diverge from graffiti, with the definition you would find in a dictionary ... On the other hand, you have illegal graffiti, which is always very fresh, and by this I mean that it doesn't matter where you do it, you always have fun doing it and it always disrupts the space where

you do it . . . I think both have very different aims, however they both add to the city (*construyen ciudad*).'

Z's position reflects the fluid nature of graffiti writers' identities, belying the binary understanding of graffiti as either counter hegemonic cultural expression, or not graffiti at all. While Z is a prolific graffiti writer, he has also completed massive, state-sponsored murals, tactically taking advantage of state resources. Even graffiti artists who have never done murals still appreciate the benefits of collaborating with city agencies. As D explains about street artists who participate in calls for proposals:

'I'm perfectly aware that I can pull off a sick mural with my crew and give the District [city administration] what it wants. Yet I won't be betraying my own ethic because I go out and do [also do] graffiti . . . So let's say we play the game and apply to one of IDARTES calls for proposals, I get selected, obtain resources, improve my portfolio because you get to do sick murals, but then I go on with my life and invest the remaining resources as any other graffiti writer would.'

D's and Z's comments reflect the struggle for position in the graffiti and street art field, as these accomplished artists tactically accept the new conditions brought by Decree 75 but at the same time celebrate the illegal nature of graffiti. In order to achieve their current status within the urban art scene, practitioners learned their craft under threat from the police and never asked permission to put up their pieces. After years of operating under these conditions they not only accept the illegality of their actions: they see it as essential to their practice. As C, a prolific wheat-paste and sticker artist, suggests: 'The *true* graffiti school is to do illegal pieces anywhere'. Or in T's words: 'Given that [graffiti writing] comes from the streets, which is a public space, it is in some sense an anarchist action'. Therefore, any institutional attempt to break the fundamental meaning of graffiti is likely to be challenged. In the words of P,

who sees a danger in making graffiti too easy for the new generation of artists,

'A small opening followed the call for mural proposals and let's say that one thing led to another: there were some super legitimate permits for some walls but then other youngsters [*chicos*] simply claimed other walls for themselves, and Mayor Petro didn't do anything, and no one else did anything, so you have these free walls and the 26th Street became a referent for graffiti, street art and urban art. But in a sense this to me seems like a negative thing.'

'Why?'

'Because you do not give spaces to graffiti, graffiti takes its own space. One has to go out and hunt the walls. And graffiti can only be where there was no graffiti before.'

Chicos and means of learning

P's comments suggest that, from the perspective of accomplished graffiti writers, Bogotá's policy of negotiated consent benefits inexperienced and young practitioners the most. When established graffiti artists speak of Decree 75 'giving spaces' for graffiti, they refer to what are known as 'chicos' (youngsters) or 'toys,' i.e. novices who, as experienced writers see it, are taking advantage of the new permissive policies instead of properly learning the art and taking the same risks as older graffiti writers. Several of our interviewees argued that to learn their craft, graffiti writers need to work on the streets under insecure conditions instead of simply painting sanctioned murals on commission or on free walls. P, who has been a graffiti writer since 2003, says about the protests on 26th Street: 'I think that was just some kids whining because they were too scared to go out on the street and paint illegal pieces'. S, who started 'bombing' the city twelve years ago, concurs, saying that the event 'was youngsters trying to reclaim their rights, but that's not really graffiti'.

However, these graffiti writers not only complained about the change in the 'rules of the game' but also criticized the aesthetic qualities of many pieces done under these

new regulations. According to experienced practitioners, because younger writers are able to do pieces and throw-ups without much risk of sanction, they are not producing aesthetically pleasing work. Suggesting a profound connection between the illegality of the pieces and their quality, D thinks that

‘If 30th Avenue [another highway saturated with urban art] was buffed more regularly it would have been a dope spot, because this way young artists would have realized that those spaces are not supposed to last for a long time, that graffiti is supposed to be ephemeral, and that they are not walls for practice (*practicadero*). Rather, those spots are so important and commanding that you have to do pieces or graffiti that meet the grandeur of those spaces.’

In other words, while practitioners like D have internalized the illegality and ephemeral nature of graffiti, they still assume it to be a ‘stylish crime’ (Ferrell 1996). As the measures adopted by Mayor Petro allowed any artist to paint without fear of persecution, these policies of negotiated consent also reconfigured the struggle over the city’s walls. Now, inexperienced writers are able to paint in locations that were once tacitly reserved for experienced graffiti writers, including D and most of our other interviewees. Ultimately, Decree 75 made Bogotá a city saturated with urban art (Morrison 2015), paradoxically making it more difficult for accomplished writers to find clean spots where they can create impressive pieces.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Decree 75 made Bogotá a world-wide referent for street artists and graffiti writers, a status that appears to have survived the end of the Petro administration. In January 2016, the neoliberal politician Enrique Peñalosa replaced the left-leaning Gustavo Petro as mayor and promptly proclaimed graffiti ‘a blight on the city,’ fueling speculation of a resumption of zero tolerance

policies (Finn 2016). Large murals located in the historical district in the center of the city as well as unsanctioned pieces on underpasses are now being buffed, signaling that the policies of negotiated consent, with its limitations and benefits, are under threat. Nevertheless, as of this writing in mid-2018, Decree 75 is still in effect and the significant changes it brought to the graffiti and street art field are still keenly felt. Even though Peñalosa is not openly implementing policies of negotiated consent and police repression has picked up, graffiti and other street art still saturates the city’s walls, making Bogotá a *de facto* open air gallery which is attracting significant numbers of international tourists (Gill 2018; Wulfhart 2015).

However, the contours of the graffiti and street art community today are not the same as before the passage of Decree 75. As street artists and graffiti writers responded to the new, more permissible negotiated consent policies stemming from the MDG and Decree 75, the very meanings of these aesthetic practices became subject to negotiation as graffiti writers and street artists struggled for position in their field. These heterogeneous positionings of artists and writers illustrate the necessity of a nuanced rather than binary understanding of street art and graffiti as counter hegemonic cultural expression. As we examine the urban art scene in Bogotá during the years 2012–2015, we find the emergence of complex and unstable constellations of up-and-coming graffiti writers, established muralists, and street artists and graffiti writers who, at times, assume disciplinary roles within this cultural field as they defend what they view as the essential meaning of graffiti as an illegal form of expression. Other artists, meanwhile, stripped graffiti of its meaning by developing their art and amassing fame within a post-industrial ‘logic,’ i.e. in an urban context that inherently lacks ‘the capacity to provide a space for unsanctioned activity, for a freedom of expression that impacts the surfaces of public property’ (Halsey and Pederick 2010, 97). However,

most street artists and graffiti writers tacitly supported negotiated consent policies, taking advantage of public resources if they were able to do so, or, if not, appropriating walls once reserved for more experienced writers under previous hierarchies. Regardless, at night most street artists and graffiti writers are still 'hunting for walls,' as P puts it, reflecting their ambivalence towards authority and their complex positionings within the graffiti and street art field.

As most cities still pursue policies and practices of zero tolerance or at best promote muralism, it is important to learn from new and more lenient approaches, such as the one Alison Young (2010) attempted to implement in the city of Melbourne. While Bogotá is by no means an exception, as evidenced by the tacit permissibility towards graffiti in other, saturated (Morrison 2015) places and cities such as Palestine (Peteet 2016), Athens (Avramidis 2015), Lisbon (Evans 2016), Sao Paulo (Caldeira 2012, Lamazares 2017, Morrison 2015), and Santiago de Chile (Morrison 2015), the MDG, Decree 75, and its concomitant pedagogical strategies provide a critical case to understand the implications of new forms of control through formal policies of tolerated consent. Petro's strategy to tolerate yet simultaneously co-opt these aesthetic practices profoundly altered the graffiti and street art scene. The city's approach to participatory policy-making via the MDG elicited contradictory responses from the graffiti and street art community, brought more advantages to some members of this cultural field than to others, and led to the mainstreaming of graffiti and street art to serve the development of a creative and cosmopolitan Bogotá (Dovey, Wollan, and Woodcock 2012; McAuliffe 2012; Schacter 2014b; Zukin and Braslow 2011). The policy to permit graffiti and street art only 'when it ceases to be itself' (Halsey and Pederick 2010, 97) also fueled new divisions within the graffiti and street art community, threatening the radical essence of this counter hegemonic practice. As Bourdieu suggests, the 'state' or the bureaucratic field will always seek to referee the contestations

playing out in the different fields of cultural production. Indeed, the bureaucratic field's ultimate goal is to impose the 'vision of legitimate divisions' (Bourdieu 1989, 22); that is, to actually define the groups within any particular field. By seeking to define what counts as 'responsible and artistic graffiti,' the state via Decree 75 sought to impose such 'legitimate divisions' within the street art and graffiti field.

Ultimately, the state's intervention in the graffiti and street art field through Decree 75 profoundly altered the cityscape of Bogotá, prompting struggles over the meaning of 'true' graffiti and ultimately restructuring this field of cultural production. The Bogotá case reminds us, therefore, that graffiti and street art are dynamic aesthetic practices that are constantly evolving, requiring a nuanced approach to policy-making that considers the different forms of street capital, meanings of graffiti and street art, and interests of different groups of practitioners.

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Notes

- 1 In the recent 'La beauté est dans la rue' ('Beauty is on the streets') exhibit sponsored by the French Embassy

- in Colombia, several posters produced during the revolts of May 68 were shown next to a Kieshava piece. One of the slogans that this veteran street artist created in his signature yellow, blue, and red colors simply stated, 'Más Poesía, Menos Policía' (More Poetry, Less Police).
- 2 For an English version of the agreement access: http://www.culturarecreacionydeporte.gov.co/sites/default/files/agreement_482_2012.pdf
 - 3 For an English version of the law access: http://www.culturarecreacionydeporte.gov.co/sites/default/files/decreto_75_2013_traduccion_Decree_graffiti.pdf
 - 4 A video showing the mural painting process can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/157936115>, accessed 23rd June 2019
 - 5 The conditions outlined in the call for proposals can be found here: <http://www.idartes.gov.co/es/convocatorias/quienes-somos>, accessed 24th June 2019.
 - 6 To see the complete article in Spanish, see: <https://stinkfish.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/la-ciudad-que-falla-apuntes-sobre-graffiti-en-bogota/>, accessed 24th June 2019.
 - 7 There is an online catalogue of the show where one can clearly see the work done by Stinkfish: <http://2x4.org/work/105/prada-spring-summer-14-fashion-show-milan/>, accessed 24th June 2019.
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