

War Bugs: Street Art as Performed Discourse in Bogotá

by Geoffrey Wilson

This paper questions the position of urban art in contemporary culture and its continuing ability to act as witness for and to urban subcultures. Urban art has undergone a paradigm shift in recent years—once widely considered the vandalism of delinquents, sections of society have begun to accept graffiti, stencils, stickers, and other urban works to be legitimate art worthy of preservation, prompting the art world and some politicians and communities to designate legalized spaces for urban art to be created and/or publicly displayed, while a growing number of street artists are creating works specifically for the established art market. What has become clear to me in the course of my research is that the existing literature on street art inadequately defines and theorizes street art as it is practiced today. There are two principal reasons why I believe much of the existing literature needs correction: first, nearly all of the literature analyzes street art as a kind of writing, while I believe it is best understood as performance; second, some of the foundational work on street art is now outdated due to fact that urban art as a form has continued to develop and morph since its modern inception in shifting socio-political contexts, and yet, recent academic work continues to rely on outdated theory, most notably that of Baudrillard's essay, "Killing Kool, or the Insurrection of Signs." In so doing, much of the literature tries to fit a dynamic multifaceted art form into convenient categories. Street art is better understood as engaging in a discourse which not only challenges hegemonic narratives, but contests the very means by which meaning is conveyed. In this paper, I will be arguing largely by way of example. However, to pick and choose examples from the vast production of a globalized art movement is perhaps a bit disingenuous; herein I will highlight a single artist whose work defies attempts at definition, and displays an active engagement with social and

political power structures and the symbols they control. DjLu is a street artist who has been working in Bogotá Colombia since 2005. His urban art project, which he calls “Juegasiempre,” meaning “always play” or “play forever,” is an ongoing critique of political and social realities in Bogotá, in Colombia, and around the world.

The first problem with the existing literature on street art is that, for the most part, while academic analysis and theorization focuses on the works as a form of writing, interviews and documentaries with artists reveal a strong focus on the act of creating the work—the embodied, temporal performance required for its making¹. Authors like Joe Austin, Mark Halsey and Alison Young, Ronald Kramer, and Amardo Rodriguez and Robin Patric Clair all explicitly refer to street art and the process of its making as writing. During the explosion of graffiti in New York City in the 1970s, the graffitiists called the work writing and themselves writers. At the time, nearly all of the graffiti consisted of words, usually pseudonyms, scrawled across walls and subways in spray paint, and so it is understandable that Baudrillard referred to graffiti as writing in his 1975 essay. However, calligraphic embellishment grew and symbols and images began to appear in the work of graffiti artists. Over time, the theoretical approach to graffiti as writing became increasingly insufficient, whether or not the artists in question were still calling themselves writers. It would not be true to say that all theorists have resorted to the outdated language of writing. Sonja Neef in particular has made a significant break with earlier analysts by looking specifically at graffiti as a performative, akin to a speech act. While Neef’s work broadens the theoretic frame from which we are able to understand urban art, her work has focused mostly on applying Baudrillard and Mieke Bal to newer work. Her work doesn’t significantly focus on the process of creating urban art and the performance that this process becomes once it enters public space. It is the public act of creating the art which is often the most

¹ See for example Banksy’s *Exit Through the Gift Shop* or Johnsen, et. al. *Inside Outside*

significant element of street art. For example, the artist who self-identifies as Pigeus in the documentary *Inside Outside* says, “I’m just doing this like an extreme sport. Like urban mountain-climbing, you know?... You get the adrenaline kick, climbing to the top, going through hell, but you leave your name, your mark.” This description by Pigeus highlights the idea that many urban artists value the performance of the creation of urban art or graffiti. The mark that is left behind is as much proof of an accomplishment as it is an artistic expression. It is this disconnect between existing theory on urban art and the accomplishment or performance evidenced by urban art and graffiti that I hope to address.

The act of creating street art is a performance first in that it is an act done in public, although very often almost entirely out of the public’s vision, yet the residue of that performance is present, that is, the artwork is present, and its very presence brings to the mind of the viewer its creation. The work of art cites its own creation, it recalls the body of the artist, much in the same way that, for example, the Sistine Chapel recalls the body of Michelangelo, that is, one can hardly gaze upon the ceiling of that magnificent chapel for more than a few moments without reflecting upon the difficulty overcome in the creation of the work. While it is true that all art may be understood to greater or lesser extent as a performance in the same way, my contention is that urban art ought to be understood in this way. Unlike almost any other type of art, urban art takes place in the streets. The process of creation is potentially visible to the public. Furthermore, the fact that some street artists place themselves at risk of being arrested by the authorities is qualitatively different from the method of production of other art forms. Interviews with street artists reveal that many of these artists earn their reputations not only for the quality or quantity of their work, but also in the elements of risk and inventiveness legible in their physical location within the cityscape.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor makes a useful distinction between the archive, in which she includes everything that leaves at least a semi-permanent record, and what she calls the repertoire—those systems of memory, signification and meaning making which are performed, passed from one individual to another, one group to another, one generation to another, without ever being inscribed into the archive. With the very rare exception street art cannot be said to belong to the archive. Therefore, street art, the vast majority of which wears away, is painted over or scrubbed out by authorities, belongs to the repertoire. Furthermore, Taylor uses the word scenario to describe the repetition of same storyline within or across cultures. Many urban artists have recognizable themes or motifs that reoccur throughout their body of work. While some graffiti artists leave behind simple their tags—their names or pseudonyms—in a distinctive calligraphic style, others deploy meaning laden iconography or political slogans in their work. Urban artists also borrow and build off of one another’s work, sometimes in a literal sense as they paint over portions of preexisting work, but leave portions visible and in intentional dialogue with the new work. In this way, the work of many urban artists can be understood as a scenario—a kind of repeated storyline which develops its own language and terminology.

Terminology in the urban art world is in a constant state of flux, much like urban art itself. So, what is this *street art* and how is it different from *graffiti*? In a recent article, Nicholas Riggle makes what I believe to be the strongest attempt to define street art as opposed to graffiti. His definition is that a work is street art “if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning” (246). That is to say, a work is only street art if the use of the surrounding architecture is a necessary component of the meaning of the work. Take, for example, the work by DjLu in figure 1.1. We see DjLu’s signature “war bugs” stenciled onto two walls. The wings



Figure 1.1. Photo by DjLu

of the bugs have within them assault rifles, visually linking a swarm of bugs to the presence of military weaponry as if to suggest that guns are as prevalent as insects in this equatorial country. Guns may also be interpreted as a pestilence or plague upon society. DjLu has engaged with the architecture of the walls, over-spraying red paint along the tops of the walls. The resulting drips of red paint on a white background evoke the violence inevitably produced by an overabundance of weapons within society.

Furthermore, what appears to be damage to the wall in the background has been treated in the same manner as the tops of the walls, with red paint dripping out of a hole in the wall suggesting a bullet hole. Thus, the artist's engagement with the architecture is an important part of the meaning of the work. The walls themselves contribute to the production of meaning.

Figure 1.2 is a more recent work by DjLu: you can see the war bugs repeated now as a background to the young boy giving the middle finger to the presence of razor wire in the local neighborhood. The youthful face of the figure is in stark contrast to the obscene gesture, while the razor wire is a clear symbol of power and control. Next to it is a kind of dialogue bubble, this time visually linking guns with money. Within



Figure 1.2. Photo by DjLu



Figure 1.3. Photo
by DjLu

this work there is an inherent critique of the relationship between money and weapons, regardless of one's subjective interpretation of the work as a whole. Furthermore, I suggest that without the presence of the razor wire, one of the many layers of meaning legible in the work becomes obscured. However, in figure 1.3 we see a single "war bug." This instance does not fit Riggle's definition of street art, as the surrounding architecture is irrelevant to the work, and he would therefore define this as "graffiti."

And yet it is a reiteration of the same scenario by DjLu, a scenario repeated hundreds of times across Bogotá's urban landscape. I have deliberately borrowed Taylor's term in describing DjLu's "war bugs," because it is through this concept of the scenario that DjLu's work can be understood as a discourse. Hayden White asserts "a discourse is regarded as an apparatus for the production of meaning rather than as only a vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent" (qtd. in Graham Jones, 42). DjLu's pictograms, "war bugs" among many others, construct new subjective meanings through the superimposition or spatial relationship between recognizable symbols. Therefore to classify a single pictogram such as the "war bug" in Figure 1.3 as categorically different from the works in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 is to deny the fact that all three are working in concert with each other. The "war bug" scenario is repeated hundreds if not thousands of times across Bogotá's visual landscape, establishing and embellishing on potential interpretations of the image and in this way acting as a "apparatus for the production of meaning" in line with White's description of a discourse.

Evan Roth has discarded the attempt to differentiate graffiti and street art, arguing that street art is an extension of graffiti (*Geek Graffiti*), and that it is more useful to follow two terms widely used by street artists themselves: the word *bombing* is used to describe those works in

which quantity and speed of production are prioritized. This category includes tags, small single- or double- layer stencils, stickers, and other quickly producible works. *Bombing* artists are ostensibly out to make a name for themselves not necessarily through the quality of any individual work, although this is certainly a factor, but more importantly through the high visibility of a body of work. Visibility comes not only through the quantity of repetitions, but also through the choice of locations. Bombs placed in highly visible public spaces, especially hard-to-reach locations, bring extra street cred. Single-layer stencils such as the “war bug” in figure 1.3 would be considered *bombs*, as they are easy to put up very quickly. The second category of street art is known as *piecing*. These are larger works, requiring significantly more time to create. Piecing is more closely related to the traditional art world, where the more formal qualities of the piece are emphasized in its evaluation, although here again, visibility is highly valued. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 would be considered *pieces* by DjLu. DjLu’s larger pieces average four to five hours to create, although some of his commissioned murals have taken as long as two weeks. Roth’s theoretical approach to the two different categories of street art, piecing and bombing, is undermined by artists like DjLu who are working in both categories. DjLu is particularly problematic to this delineation of categories since he often uses the pictograms visible in his bombs as background or adornment in his larger pieces. Thus, an analytical approach which invents categories and attempts to describe the attributes of those categories, fails to accommodate artists whose work blurs the categorical lines.



Figure 1.4. Photo by DjLu

DjLu's work superimposes symbolic images, which bears witness to the link between the symbols and destabilizes the way in which we decode those images. By asserting alternative meanings to symbols, DjLu's work engages with the means of production of meaning as opposed to merely making a statement. For example, on the right side of figure 1.2 is another of DjLu's scenarios, money and guns; figures 1.4 and 1.5 are examples of DjLu's repetition of this particular scenario. Figure 1.5 of course continues to defy attempts to define street art since it is not located in the street.

DjLu is clearly conscious of the agency certain symbols can have, and he is making a deliberate intervention in the way in which these symbols contribute to the process by which we understand the world. Certain symbols have clearly defined meanings, some of which are controlled by state or local governments. In figure 1.6, DjLu has usurped one of the most prevalent types of signs at the government's disposal. DjLu's link of symbolic images, which together work in concert to critique late capitalism is present in nearly all of the individual stencils which he has replicated in various combinations across Bogotá's visual landscape. This is the repertoire through which DjLu is attempting to alter the way we see and relate to the world around us.



Figure 1.5. Photo by DjLu



Figure 1.6. Photo by DjLu

A question which arises, particularly in relation to my title, is: to what extent can these artists be considered counter-cultural in view of the fact that the art form has become increasingly accepted by state structures, and perhaps even more importantly, those ultimate arbiters of taste— galleries and museums? No longer is visual recognition the claim to fame for street artists, many have also broken

successfully into the mainstream art world and have created versions of their work for galleries by replicating their street art style on canvases or other media. While this may be the case, it continues to be an exception to the rule. DjLu, for example, has created t-shirts and even shoes which are available on the commercial marketplace, but recognition of his work continues to come from his visibility in Bogotá, and photographs of his work which have been uploaded to websites such as Flickr. Bogotá has become a mecca for street artists since 2011, when the mayor of the city designated certain of the city's walls as legal spaces for street artists. This of course directly challenges street art's status as a counter-cultural voice. It is an act of assimilation by the state- legalizing, legitimizing, and thereby exercising a new element of control over the work that is being created. The city quickly earned a reputation for its liberal stance and street artists from around the world flocked to Colombia to get in on the action. Meanwhile, the locals have taken advantage of the fact that it is now possible to create massive works in the public eye, occasionally even posting videos of themselves creating works, and in those cases street art has

become explicitly a performance, and some artists like DjLu have crossed over into more commercial ventures, marketing everything from buttons to shoes.

Despite new commercial opportunities, the growing acceptance/ legalization/ commodification of urban art has not yet co-opted the counter-cultural narrative. In most cases, the most prevalent type of street art continues to be graffiti tags, and while tags can occasionally contain political messages, the principle message of taggers continues to be the simplest message: "I am here." Graffiti and street art is dominated by artists from marginalized sections of society and continues to be a voice and a representation for these populations within the urban topography. The visual landscape in public urban spaces is predominantly controlled by government or religious interests and corporate branding, and as such the visual landscape has become a mouthpiece for powerful and wealthy institutions which leaves no room for response. Street art repertoires seek to interrupt this visual field, contesting the narratives of powerful interests by super-imposing performed discourses over the urban topography. In this way, street art continues to maintain its position as witness to and for urban counter-cultures even as the form itself evolves and integrates into the global cultural marketplace.

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