

MAKING MEMORY ON THE WALL: CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN BOGOTÁ

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Within the context of the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrilla group, different versions of the past and present are discussed among the Colombian people. Bogotá's many street artists engage in this process by expressing their critique of the social and political situation of the country on the walls of the city. These perspectives become part of the contested construction of collective memory. In this article, I therefore explore the ways in which memory can be constructed through and with street art. Instead of treating the image as a transmitter of a message, I want to analyse the various ways in which street art and memory can be related based on different examples from ethnographic fieldwork. I will show how we can think about the construction of collective memory on the wall by analysing street art as testimonio, as palimpsest, as lieux de mémoire, and as practice.

I like to think I have the guts to stand up anonymously in a Western democracy and call for things no-one else believes in – like peace and justice and freedom.
– Banksy

Pared blanca, papel de necios.
– Hernán Cortés

Wandering through the streets of Bogotá one could easily get the impression of having inadvertently entered an outdoor art gallery. The Colombian capital's walls are covered in colourful murals, stencils, and writings produced by the city's vivid street art and graffiti scene. This scene has been active for decades. Under the administration of mayor Gustavo Petro (2012-2015), however, it has truly blossomed thanks to a very open policy regarding the execution of street art on the city's walls. At the same time, in recent years, the peace negotiations between the government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) and the country's largest and oldest guerrilla group, the FARC-EP, have further spurred an explosion of graffiti and street art with conflict-related themes in many parts of the country, including the capital. In the latter, which has enjoyed more than a decade of relative peace, street art often serves as a reminder of the fraught political situation in other parts of the country; this public visual language thus fulfills what Mancini has described as street art's political/community-building intention, fusing 'subversive reclamation of space with populist political leanings' (2019: 30). The walls of the city have become a space to negotiate different versions of the past and present, thereby contributing to the construction of a collective memory (Halbwachs, 2012). In this essay, I want to propose four different ways in which street art can be understood to comment on, relate to, or actively create memory rather than simply transmitting a supposedly singular message. These four modes of memory creation demonstrate that street art is part of an active, ongoing process of dialogic, historical production, for I suggest that it functions as testimony, palimpsest, lieux de mémoire, and as memory-making practice. While the focus in this article is on street art with relatively obvious relations to the Colombian conflict, I hope my proposition will be useful in other contexts and for other forms of urban art, as well.

LA VIDA ES GRAFFITICANTE

Rarely are there better opportunities to launch a visual intervention into public space than in Bogotá: a decree promulgated in 2013 by then mayor Gustavo Petro clearly defined the circumstances under which graffiti/street art¹ would be considered illegal, thereby offering a range of areas in which it would not be prosecuted. The law furthermore emphasised the educational and beautifying qualities of graffiti and street art for public space (Decreto 75 del 2013). In this legal gray area and atmosphere of public appraisal, police have since generally turned a blind eye to the sprayers. These unique circumstances have made Bogotá a mecca for urban artists from all over the world, and it comes as no surprise that one of the city's most famous attractions – beside the world famous gold museum – is a street art and graffiti-focused city tour.

However, not everybody is happy with the boom, as it also raises several fundamental questions about the definition and self-understanding of the street art and graffiti scene.² In the definition of Armando Silva, graffiti is characterised by marginality, as the works mostly express messages that cannot be included in other circuits of communication; anonymity, because graffiti usually appears without any hint of its author(s), or with (collective) pseudonyms; spontaneity, as graffiti is generally done rapidly, a result of a desire to express oneself quickly with an occasional writing; staging, understood as the choice of a site imbued with meaning outside of the graffiti itself; the precariousness of the work, referring to the low cost

of materials and their easy transportation; and finally, its fleeting nature, since there is no guarantee for its permanence (Silva, 1987: 31ff).

These characteristics connect the categories of street art and graffiti, but they also reveal their differences, most notably concerning their spontaneity, velocity, precariousness, and in some cases anonymity. All these are of course difficult to apply to larger murals. Taking into account smaller stencils or stickers as part of street art, however, diminishes the differences between the two. Silva himself puts a stronger emphasis on operational, rather than pre-operational characteristics in graffiti, that is, for him staging, precariousness and velocity play a more important role than marginality, anonymity, and spontaneity. This leads him to disqualify street art as graffiti, because it tends to liberate graffiti of its ideological conditions (Ibid., 40, see also Figueroa Saavedra, 2017). But 'ideological conditions' are then limited to external factors and no attention is paid to the artist's intention behind the image. In Bogotá, artists furthermore refer to themselves as *graffiteros* no matter if what they engage in are large murals, more or less elaborate stencils, tagging, bombing, or other forms of urban art. They share the idea of participating in the design of urban space as a political posture of free expression (as for example advocated by Silva, 1987 and Figueroa Saavedra, 2014 and 2017). Many artists, be it in street art or graffiti, emphasise their wish to actively create their visual environments, often opposing the commercialisation of urban space and its occupation with advertisements. *Writing*³ then becomes a way of reappropriating urban space, independent from the images' actual content (see Martín Barbero, 2008). In parts of the Colombian community's discourse, a dividing line between the two is, therefore, more likely to be drawn on the basis of aesthetic considerations rather than respective political positions.

A very common question in this context is whether the beauty of an image is at odds with a political message: by showing 'ugly' realities in a 'beautiful' way, does a message lose its power? This conflation of ugliness with politics confuses shock with the creation of opinion. Furthermore, it limits the possible effects of the image to a simplistic idea of linking beneficial impact to the representation of realities, thereby reducing the manifold possibilities contained within a visual work to mere documentation. A famous example that mixes up beauty and horror is Banksy's painting on the border between Israel and Palestine. The impossibility of reconciling the beauty of the artwork with the horror of the border regime represents, for Brassett, a permanent paradox, which can be found in many of Banksy's artworks – and which undergird the work's successful impact (Brassett, 2009: 244). The murals considered below will support the argument that aesthetics do not diminish politics.

What is more, the political aspects of graffiti greatly exceed the limited idea that graffiti's message is only linked to its documentary – indeed, textual – qualities; in other words, to what can be seen *in the writing*. As Stinkfish, one of Bogotá's most famous street artists, has put it, doing graffiti is an inherently rebellious – and thus political – act:

It's an irrefutable message, political like no other: here I am and I exist above this system that undoes and kills him who is not part of its logics, here I am painting these streets when I want and how I want to, no matter how many watchmen, how many police officers, and how much CCTV there are; if tomorrow

I'm gone, thousands more will be there.⁴
(Bahamón y Meza 2010)

It is in this direction that Baudrillard's interpretation of tagging as Anti-discourse should be understood: 'it is a rejection of any syntactic, poetic, and political elaborateness' (Baudrillard, 1978: 26). The disregard for elaborateness, however, does not equal surrendering political intentions.

As a means of engaging in politics, graffiti has a long history in the Americas. Several examples can be found already in the writings of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, like the quote of Hernán Cortés from 1521 cited at the start of this essay. The phrase 'White wall, paper of fools' was written by Cortés himself on the walls of his home, closing a debate that had taken place there about the division of the loot from the conquest of Tenochtitlan (Rama, 1984: 52f).⁵ Walls have continued to be places of public exchange of opinions, especially on political matters, but they also tell stories of conquest – both by conquerors and the conquered. A common denominator in these early writings and today's graffiti, following Álvarez, is their 'desire to denounce' (2009: 110). Famous examples of this include, of course, the monumental murals produced by Diego Rivera in the 1920s in the context of the Mexican revolution, and the images of Augusto Sandino during the military dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua in the early 1930s. Graffiti also played a role in resisting the military dictatorships of the Southern Cone (Chaffee 1993). Especially during election time, it is also very common to see painted facades expressing support for local candidates. And even though these cannot be considered graffiti in the strict sense elaborated by Silva, they too speak of a tradition of writing political messages on walls.

As Silva pointed out, Bogotá's graffiti scene can be contextualised within a global development that has two culminating moments: graffiti during May 1968 in Paris, with its anti-authoritarian and macro-political references, and the New York scene during the 1980s, which problematised urban space and emphasised micro-political aspects (Silva, 1987: 24). In 1970s Bogotá, with the rise of the urban guerrilla M-19, a new style developed which worked to incite public discussions on the walls, in a way reflecting the discussions of the times of Cortés (Gordon, 2015: 56). Today, the murals along Bogotá's bigger avenues draw heavily on questions of inequality in a globalised world, incorporating discourses of social justice and environmentalism, as well as indigenous cosmologies, and the country's ongoing armed conflict. This is why scholars such as Ryan (2017) see street art as having a direct relation to the formation of public opinion. Moreover, through the deployment of political topics and messages, graffiti and street art can even become, or evoke, prosthetic memories (see Landsberg, 2004), memories which can be transmitted through generations without people sharing the actual referent.

MAKING MEMORY ON THE WALL

That street art and graffiti can be tools for memory-making enterprises is not a new idea (c.f. Chaffee, 1993 for Spain, Argentina, and Brazil, Peteet, 1996 for Palestine, or Kaipainen, 2007 for Argentina). Especially their core characteristics, spontaneity and velocity, as well as their precariousness allow for a great flexibility in the elaboration process. Marginality, anonymity and staging point to the inherent potential of communicating memories otherwise not represented in the public arena. Finally, their inherently fleeting temporality puts them at the centre of an embattled

collective consciousness, in which different perspectives on the past struggle for attention. The *graffiteros* then become what Elizabeth Jelin has termed 'memory entrepreneurs' (Jelin, 2002: 33), in that they engage in this struggle by creating comments on what to remember.

This activist approach in the academic discussions of memory is a Latin American specialty, and expresses itself not only in theoretical works that conceive of memory as a battleground and focus on the promotion and protection of human rights. It is also reflected in the fact that most of its protagonists have directly witnessed and experienced the respective regimes whose contested memories they produce and analyse. For many Latin American countries, Benjamin's considerations of history as a state of siege are very acute, as is evidenced by the amount of references to the dictatorship or military governments' pasts in election processes all over the continent. Furthermore, the end of the Pink Tide in most parts of Latin America has reintensified the debates about what to remember. The works of Bogotá's street artists reflect these movements on the walls of the city.

In the following, I will limit myself to discussing street art that features memories related to the armed conflict. But rather than seeing the artworks as emitting messages on what to commemorate, I want to look at the complex relationships evolving around the practice. To do so, I borrow four concepts related to memory as cultural expression: First, I want to look at street art as *testimonio*, that is, as enunciating a specific memory of the past from a subjective point of view and with the aim of creating solidarity. In my second example, I will analyse murals as *lieux de mémoire* in both the literal and the symbolic meaning of the term. Thirdly, I will treat street art as palimpsests, focusing on the possibility of multiple layers in its elaboration, and by extension the memories evoked by it. Finally, I want to interpret street art as a commemorative practice, this entails both understanding the elaboration of the artwork as a commemorative act, but also plays on spray painting itself as a commemorative practice.

STREET ART AS TESTIMONY

The *testimonio* is commonly conceived of as a textual genre, 'a novel or novella-length narrative, produced in the form of a printed text, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts' (Beverly, 2008: 571). Other authors, such as George Yúdice, have argued that the specific characteristics of the genre are to be found rather in its recognition of a responsibility to enunciate in a voice, or in writing, the plight of subaltern groups or classes in order to change their position in relation to the institutions that distribute value and power (Yúdice, 1992: 212).⁶ This articulation of subaltern views or experiences is directly linked to one of the core principles of street art, which, following Mancini speaks 'to and for the community within which it exists, in messages that are both overtly critical of existing repressive power structures and encouraging and representative of the communities they represent' (2019: 32). What is more, many *graffiteros* understand graffiti and street art themselves as media of the marginalised, which have the potential to initiate discussions about the past and the present. Tóxicomano, a collective from Bogotá, state it like this:

We try to make something simple out of communication; discourses finally are for the elites. We like simplicity,



Figure 1. Mural about internal displacement in Colombia. Ark. Bogotá, Colombia, 17 May, 2013. Photograph ©Hendrikje Grunow.

Figure 2. Mural about the victims of the union's movements. Bastardilla. Bogotá, Colombia, 14 March, 2013. Photograph ©Hendrikje Grunow.



Figure 3. Mural about the victims of the Unión Patriótica. Chirrete Golden. Bogotá, Colombia, 17 May, 2013. Photograph ©Hendrikje Grunow.



a phrase easy to digest. In the beginning, everything [we did] was critique, but lately I like to reiterate the easy message, with the idea of creating a space in the minds of the people.⁷ (Morales Rivera, 2012)

The *graffitero's* works – understood as testifying to the state of emergency being the historic rule, rather than the exception – reflect Benjamin's wish to 'bring about a real state of emergency' (1968: 257). Yúdice emphasised this aspect of testimony: 'The testimonio can be understood as a representation of struggle, but its most important function is to serve as a solidary link between different communities. Thus, its cultural politics cross established frontiers and identities to benefit a democratic transition'⁸ (Yúdice, 1992: 230). The visual expression of a common story of oppression serves here to unite different communities (those painting, those viewing, and those represented – none of which can, or has to be clearly separated from the others); this public commingling opens a space of discussion, or at least calls attention to the contested nature of history.

Memory-making through images is a difficult task, because, as Brassett noted, '[w]hile Banksy can control the kinds of messages which 'go out' from his website and other 'products', there is little that can be done about either how his work is reported in the media or how people receive his work' (Brassett, 2009: 234). Of course, this approximation runs contrary to the understanding of the *graffiteros* who work in the streets not as a way of transmitting a message to the spectators, but rather as a means of initiating a dialogue on topics that they believe should have greater visibility and weight in public discourse. The problem of reception equally affects written *testimonios*, but nevertheless the stories of oppression have to be told. As Rolston and Ospina have argued with regard to murals all over Colombia, 'artistic expression may be the first step for victims and survivors in rebooting their sense of humanity and dignity' (2017: 31). **An example of this are the murals in figures 1, 2, and 3.**

STREET ART AS LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE

In the context of the 475th anniversary of the Colombian capital, there have been several initiatives to beautify the city. Among them was a contest for scholarships for the realisation of laboratories to create and construct memory with a focus on the rights of the victims of the conflict. These have been advertised by the city's Institute for the Arts, IDARTES, and in compliance with the Ley de Víctimas (Victim's Law) of 2011. In article 33 concerning the participation of civil society and private entrepreneurs in reparations, the law states that:

The law recognises that the efforts for transition which materialise the rights of the victims, especially that of reparation, involve the State, civil society, and the private sector. To this measure, the National Government will design and implement programmes, plans, projects and politics that have as objective the involvement of civil society and private entrepreneurship in the attainment of national reconciliation and the materialisation of the rights of the victims.⁹

It is this 'attainment of national reconciliation' which lies at the heart of the project elaborated by APC. The Animal Poder Cultura (APC) Crew are a collective of several

artists, three of whom engaged in the project to beautify the Plazoleta de la Memoria at Avenida Calle 26, directly adjacent to the Centre for Memory, Peace and Reconciliation (see figures 1, 2, and 3). The initiative, which is part of the Eje de la Memoria, combines the active construction of *lieux de mémoire* with an imperative to reappropriate urban space. It is therefore no wonder the *graffiteros* were eager to take part in the enterprise. In the words of Baudrillard, 'they [graffiti] territorialize the decoded urban space – this or that street, this wall, that quarter come to life through them, become a collective territory again' (Baudrillard, 1978: 28). As a consequence, we need to read the city's memorial landscape, like graffiti, as something that comes into being and disappears in the day-to-day in many languages, and many different materials (Martín Barbero, 2008: 219).

The development of the three murals comprising the project incorporated three open councils, in which the *graffiteros* developed the images in accordance with representatives of victim's organisations, the city's Office for Culture, Recreation and Sports, and the interested public. The three themes elaborated in these councils are the victims of the union's movements, the victims of the Unión Patriótica, and Colombia's over four million internally displaced persons.¹⁰

The open councils took place on March 2, 17, and 30, 2013, respectively, and were accompanied with commemorative events including presentations and music. They aimed at 'establishing alliances and dynamic interactions which result in innovative creative processes that visualise the complex of the victim's rights, generate processes of conscious realisation among the citizenry in general, and contribute to processes of integral reparation of the victims'¹¹ (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 2012: 3).

What makes the three murals into *lieux de mémoire* has to do with two aspects: first, they are *lieux* in a very obvious way, as the physical space they occupy is an actual plaza. In addition, they are situated just across the Centre for Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation, making them an extension in public space to the archival and educational work that is done there. Secondly, the topics contained in the graffiti create a discursive space to remember and to express public experiences. As Pierre Nora himself has put it, '*lieux de mémoire* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional' (Nora, 1989: 18f). The murals that I am discussing display these qualities accurately. They are material sites because they are painted walls, they symbolically repair the victims of the internal armed conflict, and they help create a (functional) open, public space. But more importantly, they comply with 'the most fundamental purpose of the *lieux de mémoire* [which] is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial' (Ibid.; see also Rolston & Ospina, 2017: 41).

STREET ART AS PALIMPSEST

Close to the Centre of Memory, Peace and Reconciliation and the three murals is another, even more fitting example of street art as *lieux de mémoire*. The mural shows the face of Jaime Garzón, a famous Colombian comedian who was killed on August 13, 1999. He engaged in political comedy and developed several of his characters by doing interviews with important figures in the Colombian political landscape, including presidential candidates, paramilitary leaders,

or family members of assassinated opposition politicians. His most famous impersonation was Heriberto de la Calle, a shoe shiner from the barrio with a toothless smile, who would confront his interviewees in a charming and humorous way with direct statements that were widely held to be true, but never spoken out loud. His interviews were generally a success, because Garzón was able to lift the fog up from one or another corruption scandal, and helped viewers engage critically in what politicians said. He was able to speak about issues in a simple language, close to the people, while protecting himself with the aura of the one who's just repeating the rumor. Apart from his political comedy, which always aimed at raising a critical consciousness and educating his viewers in a culture of peace, he also engaged as negotiator in several operations to end guerrilla kidnappings (see Salazar Isaza, 2011).

His assassination, in a way, was the story of a death foretold, as he received death threats after exposing paramilitary brutality and their connections to high ranking politicians. The news came as a huge shock to many people and is frequently remembered by them with the words of a TV host, who, on the day of the assassination, finished his presentation with the words '*hasta aquí los deportes, país de mierda*' (or 'those were the sports news for today, shit country'). The reference to 'shit country', combined with the smiling face of Jaime Garzón, were the most prominent features of the old version of the wall (**figure 4**), elaborated by the MAL crew in 2010.

In 2013, the wall was repainted during an urban art festival on the occasion of Bogotá's 475th anniversary. Originally, it had been assigned to an Argentinian street artist called BICROMO, who had planned to paint it over. But public demands, articulated both on the street and on social media, made him reconsider and cooperate with the members of MAL. The image of Garzón was then reincorporated into a new framework, imitating an emblem. The slogan was amplified and transformed into '*...hasta aquí las sonrisas, país de mierda...*' ('...those were the smiles for today, shit country...'). The wall is one of very few sites of commemoration for the comedian, and it was especially the residents of the barrio that urged the artists to keep his memory alive. This has become an increasing concern for MAL, as Camilo, one of the members told me in an interview:

Lately, we have become more aware of this, that these images can last for a while, that you can create collective memory from graffiti. It's a weird contradiction, because graffiti is usually very ephemeral, but it can become something that is remembered.¹² That's why we started to call the project *Mala Memoria*, because there are people who have no idea who Jaime is.

And the story of the mural doesn't end there: After a small majority of voters rejected the peace agreement between the Colombian state and the FARC-EP on October 2, 2016, the MAL crew again repainted the wall. In this redoing, the face of Jaime Garzón was not kept intact, but instead the wall was painted over with a different character of Garzón's named Dioselina Tibaná, a maid for high ranking politicians. They added the slogan '*La paz a fuego lento*' ('simmering peace') to illustrate how the peace process takes more than the negotiation of an agreement between the government and the guerrilla group, and instead has to be communicated and negotiated with the citizens as well (see **figure 5**).

The concept of the palimpsest can very fruitfully be applied to reading and interpreting configuration of urban areas, as Andreas Huyssen (2003) has shown for Berlin. While originally, much like the *testimonio*, the term was used for textual objects only, it also illustrates the layering of memories in material sites. Thinking about the incorporation of Jaime Garzón's face, and the changed quote on the mural as a palimpsest, helps to discern how nuances in memory overlap in the conflation of layers that comprise the image. Nonetheless, the example also bears witness to a trend in aestheticising memory. The once central and therefore radical '*país de mierda*' became a minor comment on the side of the image in the first redoing of the work, turning the focus toward the commemoration of Garzón rather than on a comment about the state of the nation, and in the third version, it has disappeared completely.

The wall as a palimpsest exemplifies the quest to commemorate Garzón's legacy. As Peteet has observed, 'one could read the battle of the walls much the way an archeologist reads stratigraphy – layer by layer – each layer of paint indicating a partial and temporary victory in an ongoing battle' (Peteet, 1996: 139). The battle around memory is, of course, not only fought in the streets, but the unique potential of street art and graffiti provides a key site in which fraught contests over memory can be staged, thanks to the accessibility that its position offers in the public sphere. In the case of the mural of Jaime Garzón, each layer of paint represents another facet of the comedian's oeuvre and each of these facets comments differently on the current political situation. This illustrates very poignantly the way that memory works: Jaime Garzón's memory is kept alive through the recourse on his work from the past as a perspective on the present.

IN MEMORIAM FELIX THE CAT

That graffiti and street art are ideal means of keeping memories alive can be illustrated with another example, the death of Diego Felipe Becerra, a 16-year old sprayer working under the name of Trípido, and who was famous in the community for his paintings of Felix the Cat. When he was fatally shot in the back by a police patrol on August 19, 2011, his death impacted the community in a fundamental way.

While generally, there is no guarantee of permanence for any graffiti, those done by 'Trípido' became exceptions to this rule after his death. Felix the Cat did not disappear. On the contrary, he multiplied since others started to paint the iconic cat in tribute to Trípido's violent death. Occasionally, new *graffiteros* or those not familiar with local stories accidentally paint over one of his works, or they are whitened out by the authorities, so the city is an ever-changing canvas where '*even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins*' (Benjamin, 1986: 255). Yet, Bogotá's *graffiteros* are conscious historians that go out and recuperate whatever wall is lost. The bridge of Calle 116 with Avenida Boyacá has become a *lieux de mémoire* for Felipe Becerra, where family and friends gather annually to commemorate his death and invite the *graffitero* community to spray the bridge (see **figure 6**). Several of them have repainted walls with either Felix the Cat, or a portrait of Diego Felipe in front of one of his works that was written over (Caracol Radio, 2015).

A consequence of his shooting has been a further institutionalisation of graffiti and street art and its incorporation into strategies of urban development. Along the lines of the example of the murals for memory by the



Figure 4. First version of the Jaime Garzón mural. MAL crew. Bogotá, Colombia, March 1, 2013. Photograph ©Hendrikje Grunow.

Figure 5. Third version of the Jaime Garzón mural. MAL crew. Bogotá, Colombia, 15 March, 2017. Photograph ©Hendrikje Grunow.



Figure 6. Pedestrian bridge in memoriam of Felipe Berra. Various artists. Avenida Boyacá with 116th Street, Bogotá, Colombia, 18 January, 2017. Photograph ©Hendrikje Grunow.

APC crew, the death of Felipe Becerra has intensified collaboration among the *graffiteros* and sparked debate about their legal situation. The organisation of *graffiteros* in the District's Round Table, and the establishment of Decree 075 of 2013 are an outcome of this process. In the direct aftermath of his death, a legal agreement was formulated, which assigned legal and illegal places for it (see Acuerdo 482 de 2011, article 3-5). These declarations bear witness to a conscious re-elaboration of urban art as artistic practice for the benefit of the people, and, furthermore, they speak to the increasingly legalised ambience in which *graffiteros* enjoy a growing amount of security even if their activities remain at the limits of legality. Everything else would seriously contradict their self-understanding, yet, anything less can become deadly, as the case of 'Triplido' has shown. But the assassination of Diego Felipe Becerra not only changed the legal situation for *graffiteros* in Bogotá. As Toxicómano has mentioned in an interview, the attention that his death generated in the media also changed public opinion about spraying more generally (Sánchez, 2016). In consequence, the situation of *graffiteros* in Bogotá has evolved in that it made half-legal what had previously been lethal. As Diana Taylor noted, 'while performances as such may not topple governments, [they can] strengthen the networks and communities that can bring about social change' (2006, 83). In the case of Bogotá's *graffiteros*, this change comes in the form of institutionalisation, but also widespread acceptance among the general public. Street art can thus be understood as a memory-making practice in two ways: the repainting of Felipe Becerra's portrait, or Felix the Cat, is an active re-inscription of his memory into the urban landscape *and* it brings the community together to work toward a common goal, commemorating the history of their movement.

NOT EVERY IMAGE CHANGES YOUR LIFE

On an early Wednesday afternoon in April 2013, I walked down Avenida Caracas, about twenty blocks north of the historic city centre. The street was busy as always, crowded with official and unofficial busses, taxis, private cars, one or two daring cyclists. The smog and the noise were almost unbearable, but I had an appointment with Yurika MDC, who was painting a wall close by and who had invited me over to chat. He has a very special style of spraying, nothing like the iconic stencils and paste-ups I have investigated here, but a tremendously elaborate and incredibly colourful repertoire of tags he paints in several parts of the city, often on request. When I reached the place, the sidewalk was filled with dozens of cans in all colours of the rainbow. We sat down on the sidewalk and looked at his work and he asked me whether I liked what I saw. I admitted that I didn't think I understood, and he answered that sometimes, you can't understand everything. That sometimes the things painted in the streets were more like music, which, even without understanding its lyrics, can take us someplace else. But then again, not every song transports us elsewhere, just as not every image changes our lives.

The potential to change 'our lives', or rather, the social and political realities in which Colombians currently live, is part and parcel of the appeal of urban art. It caters in a unique way to Walter Benjamin's preoccupations about narratives of progress that consider oppression not as the historic norm, but the exception. This is why Benjamin insisted on attempting to bring about a real 'state of emergency': 'In every era the attempt must be made anew

to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it' (1986: 255). Graffiti and street art in Bogotá have this potential, in articulating a shared narrative of oppression, not only by visualising it, but already in the very act of spraying. The dangers of (over-)institutionalisation are real, but so are the dangers of continued oppression, both through the city's policies concerning graffiti (see Finn, 2016), and for the memories they invoke.

The multifaceted ways in which street art intersects with memory can help us stop thinking about the image as only an emitter of messages. Rather, these works suggest that street art should be considered as part of a larger web of relations between artists, walls, passers-by, wall-owners, urban space, spectators, paint, state functionaries, and other persons and things as well as mediators in contexts and the construction of meaning(s). All of these intersecting valences ultimately might affect each other in ways that are not necessarily linear, and which may be unpredictable. The memory work done by and through street art expresses itself in different realms, four of which I have proposed here. In testifying, or telling a different story *differently*, urban artworks are able to create solidarity among a heterogeneous population without subjugating this heterogeneity to a norm. The layering of paint symbolises a layering of perspectives, building upon one another. Street art is able to create spaces, even monuments, because it can 'stop time, [...] block the work of forgetting [and] immortalize death' (Nora, 1989: 19). Finally, the rebellious act is also a form of ritualised commemoration that strengthens community ties and might ultimately be able to bring about the social and political change so desperately wanted by many Colombians.

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- 1 There is no distinction between the two in legal documents.
- 2 See for example Stinkfish, 2013.
- 3 It is much more common to refer to the fabrication of street art and graffiti as writing, rather than painting. While this mostly refers to text-based graffiti, there is no need for textual meaning. Tags, combinations of letters, signs, and numbers, are examples of this practice which critically engages with advertisement-overcharged spaces.
- 4 *Es un mensaje contundente, político como ninguno: aquí estoy y existo por encima de este sistema que anula y mata al que no pertenece a sus lógicas, aquí estoy y pinto estas calles cuando quiero y como quiero, por más vigilantes, por más policías, por más cámaras de seguridad que existan; si mañana no estoy miles más estarán.* (All translations are mine.)
- 5 Following Rama, the 'fools' are those who write on materials that haven't been intended for writing – thereby inscribing the history of graffiti within a context of colonial aspirations to civilise (Rama 1984, 54).
- 6 In addition, Yúdice underlines the amplification of the genre to other forms of mass communication, which include corridos, newspaper articles, television, and even posters (Yúdice, 1992: 228).
- 7 Tratamos de hacer de la comunicación algo muy sencillo; los discursos al final resultan ser para las élites. Nos gusta la sencillez, una frase fácil de digerir. Al comienzo todo era crítica, pero últimamente reitero el mensaje simple, con la idea de lograr un espacio en la mente de las personas.
- 8 El testimonio puede entenderse como representación de lucha pero su función más importante es servir de vínculo solidario entre diversas comunidades. Así pues, su política cultural atraviesa fronteras e identidades establecidas en pro de una transformación democrática.
- 9 La presente ley reconoce que los esfuerzos transicionales que propenden por la materialización de los derechos de las víctimas, especialmente a la reparación, involucran al Estado, la sociedad civil y el sector privado. Para el efecto, el Gobierno Nacional diseñará e implementará programas, planes, proyectos y políticas que tengan como objetivo involucrar a la sociedad civil y la empresa privada en la consecución de la reconciliación nacional y la materialización de los derechos de las víctimas.
- 10 This number has increased to over six million by 2015 (NRC/IDMC 2015).
- 11 ... propiciar alianzas e interacciones de las que resultan procesos creativos innovadores y que visibilizan la problemática de los derechos de las víctimas, generando procesos de conciencia en la ciudadanía en general y aportando en los procesos de reparación de las víctimas.
- 12 The MAL collective are conscious about the implications regarding the increasing heritagisation of their work. They see changes to the mural critically and have for now refrained from making further changes, as the demands from the community, but more so from the city government, go increasingly against their political ideals of independent and marginal street art practice. See Bonadio, 2019 and Hansen, 2018 for discussions of authenticity and appropriation by the community in street art practice and conservation. For a brief history of the mural, see La vuelta al día, 2017.

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