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Graffiti, Street Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory for Graffiti and Street Art Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to develop an anthropological theory for the study of graffiti and street art. Although the field of graffiti and street art research (GSAR) has gained exponential multidisciplinary academic recognition, few anthropologists have examined these practices from an explicitly anthropological perspective. Addressing this gap, the article proposes an anthropological approach for observing graffiti and street art not as mere passive objects of research, but as active subjects — thereby shifting the focus from what graffiti and street art *are* to what they *do*. It further argues that considering graffiti and street art as subjects implies taking into account not only what they do — their agency — but also what they *say* — their discourses — and what they *want* — their desires. Building on this theoretical argument, it proposes some methodological insights based on ethnographic fieldwork in Comuna 13 of Medellín, Colombia. In doing so, it aims to offer a theoretical framework and methodological tools to GSAR scholarship for exploring graffiti and street art through an anthropological lens.

Keywords

Street Art agency; discourses; desire; anthropology

1. Introduction

In this article, I propose an anthropological theory for the study of graffiti and street art. Although graffiti and street art research (GSAR) has increasingly emerged as a multidisciplinary and rapidly expanding field that has attracted growing international attention, few anthropologists (e.g. Phillips, 2019; Schacter, 2016) have engaged directly with the phenomenon or examined it through an explicitly anthropological lens. In this context, it seems to me both relevant and necessary to develop a distinct anthropological theory for the study of graffiti and street art. In what follows, I first provide a brief literature review, beginning with the anthropology of art and then turning to GSAR. Based on this overview, I formulate an anthropological theoretical framework for GSAR and offer some methodological reflections grounded in my ethnographic research in Comuna 13 of Medellín, conducted between 2022 and 2023 for my PhD in Social Anthropology.

2. The Anthropology of Art

Art has interested anthropologists since the very beginning of the discipline. Nineteenth-century British anthropology had already included 'primitive art' within its evolutionist framework (Frazer, 1925; Tylor, 1871). In this framework, the art objects of so-called 'primitive cultures' were used to characterize the early stages of human cultural evolution, in contrast with the supposedly more advanced one of the West. In the United States, Franz Boas (1927) also examined art in non-European contexts, although he firmly rejected simplistic evolutionary models. In Australia, the ethnographic works of Spencer and Gillen (1927) offered extensive accounts of the material culture, including art, of Australian Aboriginal societies. In Latin America, figures such as Manuel Gamio (1920) in Mexico, Fernando Ortiz (1934) in Cuba, and Gilberto Freyre (1962) in Brazil had already developed detailed analyses of the art of Indigenous populations. During this period, anthropology maintained a close relationship with museums. Many anthropologists actively contributed to the creation of major ethnographic collections in institutions such as the Smithsonian, the Peabody Museum, the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, and the Berlin Museum.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, an increasing separation took shape between mainstream and museum anthropology. In Britain, evolutionary theory faced significant criticism. Describing societies through isolated traits and ranking them along a scale from simple to complex came to be viewed as a limited theoretical approach. The shift toward the structural functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and Malinowski (1979) led to the study of material culture being seen as too closely tied to evolutionary theory, and therefore not aligned with the changing priorities of the discipline. In the United States, anthropology evolved in a more holistic manner than in Britain. The four-field model — socio-cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics — enabled the study of material culture to persist in an intermediate space between archaeology and socio-cultural anthropology. Even so, American anthropologists produced relatively few studies on art during the first half of the twentieth century (Morphy and Perkins, 2006). In Latin America, anthropology developed in close dialogue with the political and cultural projects of nation-building and decolonization (Poole, 1997). The rise of indigenismo positioned Indigenous art and material culture at the center of debates about national identity (Andrade et al., 2024).

These paradigm shifts in mainstream anthropology led to its gradual separation from museum anthropology. The problem was that within museum anthropology objects classified as 'art' were evaluated according to Western aesthetic standards and detached from their original cultural meanings. Art came to be understood as a distinct Western construct, lacking an equivalent concept in many other societies. During this period, which extended up to the 1960s, most anthropologists regarded art as an artificial category. In response, subsequent discussions — reinvigorated by a resurgence of interest in the study of art — focused primarily on the effort to construct a definition of art that could be applied cross-culturally and thus not biased by its Western origins. For example: "art objects are those with aesthetic and/or semantic attributes (but in most cases both) that are used for representational or presentational purposes" (Morphy, 1994: 655). The objective of these definitions was to make the category as broadly applicable as possible without rendering it meaningless. The point was that anthropology is not simply the study of objects labeled as 'art' by Western art history or the international art market. Art-making is a distinct form of human activity that encompasses both the creator's creativity and the ability of others to engage with, respond to, or utilize objects as art. "The category of art is fuzzy, involving a series of overlapping polythetic sets that contain objects differing widely in their form and effects" (Morphy and Perkins, 2006: 12). A further shift occurred in the late 1990s with the publication of *Art and Agency* by Alfred Gell (1998). In this groundbreaking book, Gell proposed a radical reconsideration of the anthropology of art and, while facing some criticisms (Morphy, 2009), has been regarded as one of the major contributions to the anthropology of art (Hoskins, 2006). It is not my aim here to revisit the flaws and limits of his theory in detail; rather, what matters is to ac-

knowledge that the merit of *Art and Agency* lies in having redirected anthropological attention from cross-cultural categories of art toward the agency of art objects: their social effects as entities embedded within a system of relationships (Sansi, 2015). "The 'action'-centered approach to art is inherently more anthropological [...] because it is preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process" (Gell, 1998: 6). Starting from this premise, Gell delves into explaining how, and to what extent, art objects act upon human beings and possess agency. Drawing on diverse sources from Europe, Polynesia, Melanesia, and Australia, he analyzes the emblematic case of the Asmat shields from southwestern New Guinea. These shields, displayed in various museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, are considered paradigmatic examples of 'tribal art' due to the images painted or carved on their surfaces. Gell reveals that, in Asmat society, the images on the shields were not intended to provoke an 'aesthetic' appreciation but rather to instill terror in enemies, thus playing a crucial role in the psychological warfare of headhunting. Based on Walter Benjamin's concept of mimesis (Taussig, 1993), Gell argues that the designs on the shields, by representing the emotion of fear, functioned as 'false mirrors', reproducing the same feeling of terror in those who observed them. Advances in neuroscience support this idea by demonstrating that emotions represented in an image activate neural circuits in the observers as if they were experiencing those same emotions (Freedberg and Gallese, 2009). In this sense, artworks are agents because they act upon people, produce social effects, participate in a system of relationships, and therefore possess agency. The task of the anthropology of art would then be to understand the social effects of artworks — not what they *are*, but what they *do*. In short, Gell's anthropological theory of art is a theory that considers artworks as persons.

3. Graffiti and Street Art Research (GSAR)

The first publications on graffiti and street art came primarily from photographers and journalists during the 1960s and 1970s, focused on the New York–style graffiti that developed alongside hip-hop culture. These early accounts were largely documentary in nature, aimed at capturing the aesthetic and social dimensions of the movement rather than analyzing it through a scientific lens. Some early exceptions of scholarly engagement can be found in the writings of Jean Baudrillard (1976) and Roland Barthes (1979), whose reflections on signs, symbols, and urban writing anticipated later theoretical approaches; and, in Latin America, in the works of Néstor García Canclini (1977) and Armando Silva (1992), who incorporated graffiti into their studies on urban imaginaries. However, the first 'academic wave' of graffiti and street art scholarship, as identified by Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi (2016), emerged during the 1980s. Communication scholars, sociologists, and historians such as Craig Castleman (1982), Richard Lachman (1988), and Josh Bushnell (1990) began the study of graffiti and street art by focusing on the practitioners, examining the 'deviant careers' of writers as well as the different subgenres of wall writing. The 'second wave' arose in the 1990s with works such as those of criminologist Jeff Ferrell (1993) on the Denver graffiti scene; anthropologist Susan Phillips (1999) on gang graffiti in Los Angeles; or sociologist Nancy Macdonald (2001) on the gendered identities of practitioners in London and New York. These works paved the way for the 'third wave' during which the number of academic publications grew exponentially. For instance, scholars have explored the territorial configurations of graffiti and street art (Brighenti, 2010); their ties to mechanisms of spatial regulation and liminality (Campos, 2009); their progressive incorporation into the art market (Young, 2016); and their material reshaping of the urban landscape (Schacter, 2016).

Beyond these and other significant contributions, the main trend of this period appears to have been an effort to rethink and redefine the very terms graffiti and street art themselves — terms that had become insufficient to account for their stylistic and cultural dynamism. During this period, numerous definitions and attempts to categorize, delineate, and distinguish graffiti from street art appeared. For example, graffiti and street art were initially regarded as illegal acts. Thus, from this perspective, graffiti has been described as "words, figures, and images that have been drawn, marked, scratched, etched, sprayed, painted, and/or written on surfaces where the owner of the property (whether public or private) has NOT given permission to the perpetrator" (Ross, 2016:

1); while street art "refers to stencils, stickers, and non-commercial images/posters affixed to surfaces and objects (e.g., mailboxes, garbage cans, street signs) where the owner of the property has NOT given permission to the perpetrator" (ibid.). Although the unauthorized nature of graffiti and street art is often emphasized, some scholars also use these terms to refer to authorized works (Kramer, 2016). Other authors focus more on the forms, techniques, and content rather than on the issue of legality or illegality. According to Waclawek (2011), for instance, the two styles differ in visual and material terms: graffiti centers on rendering the artist's name and are typically created with spray paint or markers, whereas street art places less emphasis on lettering, focusing instead on recognizable and accessible imagery produced through a wide range of media. Another interesting debate is that between the philosophers of art Nicholas Riggle and Andrea Baldini. The former closely relates street art to the street: "an artwork is street art if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning" (Riggle, 2016: 246), emphasizing its ephemeral and accessible nature, and positioning graffiti as a distinctive style within the broader category of street art. For the latter, however, focusing on ephemerality and accessibility fails to adequately account for the subversive value of street art, insofar as it challenges accepted norms of visibility in public spaces (Baldini, 2016).

Yet, despite these and other attempts to conceptualize graffiti and street art as distinct expressions, there remains a prevailing awareness that their boundaries are blurred and that defining them in a simple and precise way is a difficult task. As Jeff Ferrell (2016: xxx) acknowledges, "complexity and confusion are essential components of contemporary street art and graffiti." Building on this awareness, Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi (2016: 3), call for a 'fourth wave' of academic studies on graffiti and street art — one less concerned with defining what graffiti and street art *are* and more focused on capturing what they *do*, or in other words, their agency.

4. An Anthropological Theory for Graffiti and Street Art Research

The most recent debates within GSAR seem to resemble those already advanced in the anthropology of art: from an effort to define, to an attention to the social effects— to what street art and graffiti do, to their agency. I suggest that shifting the focus to the agency of graffiti and street art entails considering them not merely as objects of research—passive by definition—but as entities endowed with agency, that is, as subjects. I believe that the discipline best suited to provide both the theoretical perspectives and the methodological tools to do so is anthropology. In what follows, I will outline an anthropological model applicable to GSAR—a model for observing graffiti and street art not merely as passive objects of research, but as active subjects. I will do so by relating Alfred Gell's theory of art objects agency, previously discussed, to the image theory of visual scholar William J. T. Mitchell. After that, I will add some methodological insights drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork in Medellín.

William J.T. Mitchell (2005), a visual culture scholar and leading figure in the so-called pictorial turn, in his influential book *What Do Pictures Want?* proposed a fascinating and innovative perspective for approaching images—one that, as Mitchell himself acknowledges, is compatible with that of Gell. Much like Gell, Mitchell suggests conceiving of images as living organisms—as subjects. However, rather than focusing on what images do, on their social efficacy and agency, he asks what they want, shifting attention from action to desire. "Images are like living organisms; living organisms are best described as things that have desires" (Mitchell, 2005: 11). According to Freud and Lacan, desire arises from lack. By focusing on the desire of images, then, not only their strength, power, and efficacy are considered, but also their needs, vulnerabilities, and deficiencies. Thus, echoing the questions posed by Fanon ("What does the Black man want?") and Freud ("What do women want?"), Mitchell asks: "What do pictures want?" This shift in perspective entails a movement from a model of dominance to one of subalternity. If images are subjects, they are subaltern subjects that must be invited to speak for themselves.

Integrating Mitchell's perspective, which invites us to give voice to images and to explore their desires, with Gell's emphasis on agency and social efficacy, allows for

the construction of a tripartite model for the anthropological study of graffiti and street art. So, pretend that the piece in front of you is not a mere object but rather a subject. The first task is to invite it to speak, to grant it a voice, and to ask: *what does it say?* On an equal footing with other subjects, this one too has desires, dreams, and motivations. The second task, then, is to inquire: *what does it want?* Finally, like any other subject, it acts within social reality and generates effects—it possesses agency. Hence the third question: *what does it do?* There may be multiple ways to approach these three questions, but from an anthropological standpoint, there is ultimately only one: through ethnography.

4.1. **What does it say?**

The walls speak. Graffiti and street art we encounter on city walls often speak to us — they tell stories. According to Silva (1992), graffiti constitute a kind of "urban language" that can be used to characterize urban societies. A distinguished ethnographic example of this approach is provided by Susan Phillips (2019), who, through graffiti, reconstructs the history of marginalized groups in Los Angeles, revealing an untold narrative of the city. Graffiti and street art can thus serve as means of learning about the historical, social, cultural, and political particularities of the city or neighborhood in which they appear (Riga, 2025a). For instance, in Comuna 13 of Medellín — one of the urban areas most affected by the Colombian internal armed conflict — graffiti and street art narrate stories about the conflict from the perspective of local inhabitants. When I was there, residents used to say that the walls speak through street art images: they tell stories of death and violence, but also stories of dreams and hope. As LaVoz, a local rapper, once explained: "It's important that today the walls speak, because before they only received gunshots. Now they tell stories — the same stories my friend can't tell because he died young. Today, those stories are told in a painting." Across Latin America, graffiti and street art have often been regarded as forms of political communication (Ryan, 2016) and as crucial vehicles for giving voice to segments of the population that would otherwise remain unheard (MacWilliam, 2013).

But how can we listen to these stories? Graffiti and street art, of course, do not literally speak; they borrow their voices from others. The first voice we should listen to is that of their producers: the artists. Through interviews with artists, it is possible to explore their communicative intentions, if any, and what a specific piece is meant to convey. For example, in Comuna 13, during a walking interview with Jomag, a young local artist, each time we passed one of his pieces, he would begin his description with the same formula: "This piece speaks about this… that other one speaks about that", as if the artwork itself were speaking. However, given the illegal, or at least ambiguous, nature of graffiti and street art, identifying each artist can be a difficult task. To overcome this challenge, in Comuna 13 I relied on the help of local *Graffitour* guides. After the conflict, Comuna 13 underwent a process of massive touristification, driven in part by a dense network of local guides who narrate the neighborhood's history through graffiti and street art. During fieldwork, I participated in several of these *Graffitours*, recording the guides' narratives and photographing the artworks. Listening to these narratives allowed me to learn about key aspects of the past, present, and future of the comuna, opening a window onto its social world. These graffiti tours are becoming increasingly popular in cities around the world. Participating in them can offer researchers an important methodological opportunity. On the other hand, such tours are not available in every city. Thus, beyond artists and tour guides, there are other people we can turn to in order to make graffiti and street art speak: city dwellers. This is, for example, the approach of Sarah Awad (2017), who conducted interviews with pedestrians to explore the meanings they attributed to graffiti in Cairo after the 2011 revolution. It follows that graffiti and street art speak through multiple voices. The possibility of listening to these multiple voices, or the necessity of selecting which ones to listen to, will depend on the specific contingencies of each research project, situated within its particular context. It is, however, equally important to acknowledge which voices are being listened to, and for what reasons, as well as to critically engage with the contradictions and tensions that may arise from such choices.

4.2. **What does it want?**

Graffiti and street art do not only speak; they also *desire*. The concept of desire, long confined to the realm of the unconscious, has more recently been reconceptualized as something that emerges through social and discursive activity (Billig, 1997). Drawing on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), discursive psychologists have reframed desire not as an internal psychological mechanism but as a phenomenon actively constructed through everyday social and linguistic interactions (Cameron and Kulick, 2003). At times, graffiti and street art become the languages through which artists give form to and express their desires. Elsewhere, I refer to this as a "distributed desire" (Riga, 2025b). The notion of 'distributed person' is an anthropological concept that challenges the idea of a single, self-contained individual by suggesting that a person's agency is spread across both social relationships and material objects. For instance, in his essay on the gift, Marcel Mauss (1950) considered the gift as an extension of the person who gives it—a part of the self remains enclosed within, or distributed through, the object. Building on this idea, Gell proposed that art objects could likewise be understood as extensions of the artist, through which the artist's agency is distributed. Gell regarded the agency of the art object as a secondary form of agency— one that it acquires only once it becomes entangled within a network of social relations. Anthropologists Roger Sansi and Marilyn Strathern (2016) have pointed out the limitations of Gell's conception of agency as an exclusively human matter. Strathern (1988), for example, proposed that the "distributed" or "divisible" person does not necessarily originate from a single human being but may instead encompass assemblages of humans and nonhumans in multiple forms, without any pre-established hierarchy of agency. Building on these discussions, I suggest extending the notion of distribution from the domain of action to the realm of affect: what is distributed through artworks is not only the artist's agency but also their desire.

We can analyze how artists' desire is distributed across graffiti and street art by participating in their artistic activities, exploring their creative processes, and engaging with them through both informal conversations and structured or semi-structured interviews. This can reveal how artists use visual expression not only to communicate messages or denounce injustices but also to materialize personal and collective desires. I realized this during a graffiti class at Casa Kolacho, one of the most important artistic associations in Comuna 13. During the class, the teacher, La Crespa, began by saying that graffiti and street art are not made solely to decorate or beautify, but also to express feelings and desires. Much of the street art in Comuna 13, in fact, materializes and manifests the artists' desires rather than their agency—which, as I later discuss, far exceeds that of their human creators. As Jeihhco, the director of Casa Kolacho, explained to me, what they sought through their artworks was to build a bridge between the past and the present, with the goal of creating a better future. Thus, many of the artworks in Comuna 13 that refer specifically to the past—in addition to denouncing the military operations—were also intended to build a collective memory in order to help the community strengthen the social bonds fragmented by the trauma of conflict. The artworks, therefore, by reproducing episodes from a collective and shared past, embodied the artists' desire to produce art oriented toward the collective well-being of the community. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that in many global contexts, graffiti and street art have been progressively co-opted by public institutions within the framework of neoliberal urban policies and city-branding strategies (Tsangaris, 2022). These processes not only can reshape the meanings and purposes of artistic practices but also redirect the very desires that artists articulate through their works. Consequently, ethnographic research must remain attentive to how artists' desires are adapted, negotiated, or placed in tension with structural forces and political or economic actors. Examining these dynamics allows us to understand not only how desire circulates through artworks but also how it is constrained, redirected, or reconfigured by broader regimes of power.

4.3. **What does it do?**

Finally, graffiti and street art also act within social reality, produce effects in people's lives, shape and transform urban environments; in short, possess agency. Contemporary anthropologists grapple with the increasingly prevalent discussions around 'object agency'. These dis-

cussions are driven by various interconnected currents in contemporary social theory, including the material turn, the ontological turn, and posthumanism (Hornborg, 2021). The political theorist Jane Bennett (2020: viii), for example, invite to take seriously the vitality of things, meaning the capacity of things "not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." As discussed above, within the anthropology of art, Gell applied object agency theory specifically to artistic objects. Within his framework, the main task of anthropology is to study the social effects of art. This means that an anthropological theory applied to the study of graffiti and street art must necessarily take their social effects into account. How can this be done ethnographically? The most immediate answer is to do so from the point of view of the 'audiences': residents who live in neighborhoods, streets, or areas where graffiti and street art have become part of public space. For example, in Comuna 13, I conducted walking and photographing interviews (Irving, 2017) with residents, particularly with those who were outside both the artistic movement and the tourism industry. Walking together through the *comuna* facilitated the co- production of a situated and emplaced knowledge — a form of knowledge that emerged from the very urban spaces we were traversing. This is because physical immersion in a place helps the interviewee to elicit experiences, memories, and sensations related to that particular place: "our memory of what we experience in place is likewise place-specific: it is bound to place as to its own basis" (Casey, 2000: 182). During the interviews, it became clear that Comuna 13 was distinctly marked by a 'before' and an 'after': a before of death and suffering, and an after of life; and that, street art was one of the main elements that contributed to this transformation (Riga, 2025c). Residents often said: "street art had turned the *comuna from a place* of death into a place of life" or "street art gave life to the *comuna"*, thus attributing to it profoundly active, *poietic*, and transformative capacities. This relates, on the one hand, to the capacity of street art to improve the appearance of public spaces, re-signifying them and helping residents to re-inhabit them; and, on the other hand, to its power of attraction, which has contributed to the current process of touristification that has inevitably changed the residents' everyday reality (Riga, 2024). In brief, in Comuna 13, street art has contributed to setting in motion complex social and urban processes that have inevitably produced concrete effects in the lived experiences of residents. In this sense, in Comuna 13, street art possesses an agency even more powerful than that of its human creators. Nevertheless, each research endeavor requires particular attention in order to relate the effects of graffiti and street art to the specific historical and social particularities of each situated context.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have articulated an anthropological theory—or rather, an anthropological approach—for studying graffiti and street art, applicable to different geographical contexts. The core of this approach is to observe graffiti and street art not as objects of research, but rather as subjects. This implies attempting to answer three questions in relation to each specific piece: 1) What does it say? 2) What does it want? 3) What does it do? Answering the first question aims to analyze the 'discourses' of the artwork—what the artist intended to communicate, or how the work is mediated or received by the public. To do this ethnographically, we can rely on interviews with the producers—the artists; the mediators—those who work with it, such as tour guides; and the public—the broader audience. The second question seeks to trace the motivations behind the production of the artwork. To do this, we can participate in the artists' activities or conduct more formal interviews. Equally important is to consider how the individual motivations of each artist participate in, negotiate with, or come into tension with the neoliberal policies of global cities, which are increasingly employing graffiti and street art as city-branding strategies. Finally, the third question aims to analyze the broader social effects that the artworks produce in the specific context where they appear. To do so, it is essential to engage with the public—particularly with those who inhabit and experience, on a daily basis, the urban spaces where graffiti and street art take shape. This approach allows us to observe graffiti and street art not merely as passive objects of research, but as active subjects—entangled in dense networks of meanings and relationships, and

participating in social action. By addressing what graffiti and street art say, want, and do, we can gain a deeper understanding of their role in shaping political claims, collective hopes, and urban experiences, but also of the tensions, contradictions, and conflicts among the different actors involved. Ultimately, this framework enables a more holistic and situated analysis of graffiti and street art as active agents within the lived realities of contemporary cities. With this, I hope to offer GSA scholars new possibilities to analyze graffiti and street art through an anthropological lens.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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