

Teaching urban intervention, learning to see the city anew

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<http://urbanario.es/clase>

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Although uncommissioned public art, often referred to as urban art, has been around for more than three decades, it's only now being wholly assimilated by society and by the art system, and researched in depth by academia.

The most subtle and constructive discipline in urban art is urban intervention. Going beyond the graphic identity-based, serial endeavors of graffiti and postgraffiti, it consists of independent and anonymous works. Each of them is product of a process in which the artist studies the physical and social aspects of a particular location, and, based on this observation, generates an action that adds elements to the landscape or modifies existing ones. It consists, therefore, in a dialogue between the artist and the context.

For the last six years I've taught urban intervention in different workshops, including a permanent class in the Fine Arts Faculty of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. The exercise has proved to be an invaluable tool for the shaping of the student's personal vision. It forces the student to look at its surroundings, both physical and social, in a new light, to ask himself about the conventional meanings and uses of urban elements, and to generate a response that enriches the environment in some way.

The following text is a look at the accumulated experience of these years of teaching urban intervention, the limits and potentials of the practice, and the different ways it can help enrich the personal perspectives on life of students of different profiles.

Appart from my academic education in Fine Arts, I've practiced different forms of urban art since they started to appear in Spain during the decade of 1980, and therefore know their praxis and scenes from first hand experience. Because of this double background, i was commissioned to teach a yearly four-month class about urban art, that is part of the Bachelor's Degree of the Fine Arts Faculty I work in. The class is part lectures, in which I teach to differentiate and appreciate the different currents in urban art, and part workshop, in which the students develop an urban intervention project. This practice has led me to teach week-long workshops elsewhere, that follow a similar, but reduced, structure.

Because the term *urban art* has no clear meaning, and is often used to refer to very different practices, it is necessary to start by proposing a brief taxonomical structure. We are, first of all, in the field of public art. Here we understand public art as that art that takes place in the street, or anywhere else outside of the spaces where one expects to see art – that is, the gallery, the museum or any other white cube. Many works of public art happen unofficially, without approval from the entities that control public space. That kind of production can be referred to as *independent* public art, as opposed to *official* public art.

The huge difference between official and independent public art lies on the necessary methodology of each. Official public artists get permissions and budgets, but at the cost of having to reshape their messages in order to pass official filters, and of having to deal with impossibly long bureaucratic processes. Independent public artists need to pay for their own tools, and their practice is never fully permitted so they need to work covertly and use lightweight materials of ephemeral nature, but they can put out their message with no external selection or filtering, as soon as they decide they want to.

Most of independent public art is graffiti, the game of repeatedly writing a name, be it a simple signature or a huge, elaborate mural. This tradition was created in the early seventies by children and adolescents in the subways of New York, and was exported worldwide in the eighties. Graffiti has very clearly defined methodological rules and a fixed and cryptic visual vocabulary, and is practiced to attain the respect of the fellow practitioners, while the rest of the passers-by – who have to see it, but cannot understand it – are simply ignored as an audience. Inspired by the energy and immediacy of graffiti, young art students of the eighties and subsequent decades have taken their imagery outdoors, in what can be called *postgraffiti*. Postgraffiti artists use a wide and heterogeneous range of languages and methodologies, and aim to communicate with the general public.

Urban intervention is a third form of urban art, much less widely practiced than graffiti or postgraffiti, but comparatively very visible in the specialized media. We use the term *intervention* in a site-specific sense: each piece originates from a particular context, and comments on it in some way, giving physical form to a dialogue between the artist and the city. Even though graffiti and postgraffiti always, to some degree, react to the space they appear on, their identity-based nature means most of the creativity tends to revolve around the part the artist puts forward. The practice of urban intervention, instead, freed from the use of any identity, focuses exclusively on the context. The resulting pieces are, necessarily, of very diverse nature.

Many urban intervention artists have started out practicing the peer-acceptance, adolescent game of graffiti, then started to consider the general public as an audience and experimented with postgraffiti, to eventually dispense with any self-referential graphic identity. This progressive turn from the self to the social runs parallel to the maturing process from kid to adult.

In an educational context, the practice of urban intervention has proved to be an invaluable tool for the students to shape their personal vision, and a way to encourage their social involvement: it makes the student look at its surroundings, both physical and social, in a new light, to ask himself about the conventional meanings and uses of urban elements, and to generate a response that enriches the environment in some way.

The practice of urban intervention carries a social responsibility with it, which is a key aspect here. The workshops being held by institutions, the students have, of course, to limit themselves to actions that cause only temporal and very limited property damage, if any at all. But the motivations to limit the scope of possible actions go far beyond legal needs, and stem from ethical principles instead. The core idea is that public space is everyone's personal space, and to act in it is to interfere in people's personal spaces, without them having asked for it. It is therefore essential that interventions are never invasive and always socially constructive.

As good an educational principle as this obviously is, there was an initial fear for it being a cause of detriment to the possibilities of the workshop. The limitations have, however, – as limitations often do – proved to be an endless spur for resourcefulness and creativity. But even

more important is the fact that they channel the student's attention back into the context again: being denied the use of most additive materials such as paint – which often come up as the easy way to give form to an idea in public space – the student is compelled to inspect the context more closely, in search of a way to produce the intervention within the proposed limits. In light of the results, the students have so far made clear that there is an endless amount of possibilities within the limits of a creative involvement with common space that is not subject to control, but is socially responsible.

It is often the case that the students, after being exposed to the different forms of urban art during the lectures, propose projects that fall into the description of postgraffiti, that is, a plan for reproducing outdoors a certain image or images they have come up with. Because their education – as everyone else's – includes an enormous consumption of advertising, it is only natural that they tend to think in identity-based, propagation-based terms. It is the tutor's role here to make the students start by listening to the context. The golden rule would be, if the piece can be installed in different locations without the locations clearly affecting the meaning of the piece, then no process of re-evaluation of and dialogue with the context is taking place, and the project is, therefore, not taking advantage of the potential of the workshop.

This link with the context doesn't have, however, to take the form of a very literal or explicit comment. Instead, it can consist in a subtle formal or conceptual relation (see the work by Blanca Gracia). There only needs to exist an evidence that whatever the student has come up with, it is the result of a process of observation that has brought him into some degree of intimacy with the context. As a matter of fact, the quality of the artistic product is of secondary importance here. It is the process that has to be up to the proposed standards, because it is in the quality of the process, not of the product, where the educational potential lies. This has led to widening the scope of the accepted kinds of artworks to include pieces that refrain from actually intervening in the context, and consist only of photography and video – or any other way of gathering documentation from the context. See the works by Esperanza Arquero, Alejandro Lii, Juan de la Rosa, Raquel Trueba or Laura Suárez.

Through six years of experience, it has become clear that this exercise can be a real eye-opener for students. The effects vary widely depending on the students' profiles, but there is a common experience of learning to see the city anew in some way, of being able to adopt new, even radically new points of view about the whole of public space, and, by extension, about life in general. It is very gratifying to teach people who wouldn't ever had thought about intervening in their own environment, as is the case of most middle-aged people and most people of conservative profiles, because most often, they have never before allowed themselves to give an alternative look at their own daily environment, and therefore the potential of the exercise is specially wide on them.

At the diametrical opposite of the spectrum, there are other students who have plenty of experience of the street – often because of their participation in some street subculture, and who have already developed alternative views on it. Graffiti writers are the students who best exemplify this case, as the practice of graffiti involves understanding and intensely living the physical landscape of the city in a radically different way. Nevertheless, as rich as those alternative perspectives can be, they are of course limited in their own ways. The workshop is, therefore, also effective on students of this profile, who not only find illuminating viewpoints, but also get the chance to reflect upon their own activity – something wholly absent in the culture of graffiti, and to experiment with more constructive communication tactics. See the works by Adrián Cañizal, Alejandro Díaz, Diego Encinas or Dosjotas

Among the most valuable changes I have seen happen in the students is an increased awareness and inconformity about the issues of public space. This is very necessary, given that the politics of public space in many big cities are getting farther away from any human-centered model, and tend more and more towards car-centered structures, privatization and control: control of public space, as in pervasive CCTV cameras; privatization of usable public space, as in parking meters, and outdoor cafeteria tables instead of public benches; and privatization of visual space, as in pervasive outdoor advertising. The works by Francisco Martín or Santiago Cortizo exemplify this tendency.

In order to further enrich the potential of the experience, I regularly publish selections of the pieces produced in the workshops – accompanied with brief critical texts of my own – in a webpage. There have been plenty of positive reviews from publications worldwide, both digital and printed, and some works have appeared on mainstream books. The fundamental reward, nevertheless, both for me and for the many students i've had the pleasure to share the experiment with, lies in the numerous things we've learned about our own urban space.

As the theories of the Situationists and of many others have described, the impositive social, architectural and urbanistic structures we live among tend to mechanize our way of navigating the city, while the prevalence of outdoor advertising and signage make our attention grow protective filters that further mechanize our experience of public space. The practice of urban intervention is an exercise in liberating from these conditionings, a shift from the functional and the inert to the unexpected and, above all, the magical.