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## Image *versus* writing: from post-graffiti and murals' assault to graffiti's scriptural riposte in Madrid, Spain

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### Abstract

The 2010s have witnessed the rise of a new aspect of street art on the world stage: institutionalized murals. Downtown Madrid is no exception, though the mural scene there remains less developed than in some other European cities like Saragossa or Paris. Forsaking its graffiti forbear's emphasis on writing, this new trend embraces instead the power of imagery. Meanwhile in the walls of central Madrid, the writers are showing a new resilience with a variety of strategies that will ensure that the written word survives the ascent of the image in street art. This leads to a plastic discord juxtaposed—graffiti and mural, illicit and sanctioned, word and image—in an urban art scene in constant flux.

**Keywords :** Street Art, Resistance, Writing-Image, Graffiti, Murals, Combat

### 1. Introduction

In *La conversación mural, ensayo para una lectura del graffiti*<sup>1</sup>, Joan Garí stresses that the European school of street art tends to favor a verbal component—words and phrases—in contrast to the American model. It seems, however, that it may be time to revise this statement made in 1995, long before the advent of sponsored murals. The current state of affairs represents the culmination of a long, slow progression in street art towards an ever-greater emphasis on imagery, as evidenced in the city of Madrid by the rise of the icon since the late '90s, as well as the poster, the drawing, and the mural.

In the last decade, Madrid has welcomed an array of new sponsored initiatives such as fairs and festivals which have helped to expand the influence of the urban art paintings, nibbling away at the place of the graffiti. Graffiti writers must then develop tactics to minimize the visibility of those images and interfere with their original message in a relentless artistic conflict that amounts to no less than a battle for survival in the streets.

### 2. «In the beginning was the word...»

The genealogy of street art shows that the tag, a kind of signature inked again and again on urban surfaces, is at the origins of this artform. Tagging might be considered an embryonic form of graffiti<sup>2</sup>, in use since the birth of this

phenomenon in the 1970s in the United States. At the end of the '80s, Madrid began to be overrun by tags. First appeared the "autóctono" (native) graffiti, also called "Flechero" graffiti, urged by the artist Muelle. Gradually, the signature became thicker and bigger to achieve more visibility and complexity. Then, in the 90's, Hip Hop related graffiti, inherited from the United States came to Madrid, dividing the writers into two groups: the "autóctonos" and the "Bboys." In both the Spanish and American practice, the alphabetical code is the founding principle of contemporary street art.

Moreover, the name of the artist is often surrounded by what might be called the "paratexti"<sup>3</sup> of graffiti: an ensemble of micronarratives that enrich the signature by calling out another artist, his/her "crew," the year the work was made, sometimes even a meta-commentary on the outcome of the work itself. These layers of expression begin to grow in complexity as the work is erased, struck out, or scribbled over by passers-by or other artists. The wall then becomes a true dialogical medium in which writing calls for more writing and a complex message is held in a single, condensed signifier.

### 3. However is graffiti purely writing?

Image and writing are often found in opposition: the image is foremost a signifier of plastic meaning, while writing is the signified, a meaning expressed in alphabetic form. A word



Figure 1 - EGY, Madrid, Spain (December 2017)



Figure 2 - Eltono, Nuria Mora, Madrid, Spain (February 2017)



Figure 3 - Eltono, 2015, Calle Espoz y Mina, Madrid, Spain (February 2017)  
and Figure 4 Los Reyes del Mambo, 2017, Madrid, Spain (October 2017)



tells a tale and an image shows the tale. This idea is still problematic in street art, despite attempts to draw graffiti and the mural farther apart.

Graffiti can thus seem as any other kind of writing. The reality is of course more complex, as the word's etymological tie to the Greek γράφειν (*gráphein*) reminds us: the term consists of several semes, including “draw” and “write.” Graffiti is a signature in graphic form, an exploration borne of the interplay of style, colors, outlines, and so on. Graffiti lets itself be seen before being read, appealing to the plastic materiality of writing and threatening our Western, logocentric conceptions. In order to read and utter it, the passer-by must understand the language of graffiti, which blends alphabetic and iconographic awareness.

The mural, descendant of graffiti, has exaggerated the visual nature of the original signature, even more than post-graffiti in Madrid in the 2000s. The two artforms could be likened to two members of the same family, born in two different generations, now waging a merciless war on the walls of Madrid.

#### 4. The rise of the image in the street art of Madrid

From the 2000s onward, Madrid has witnessed an evolution in graffiti towards practices which distanced themselves from the signature, widespread in the city as unpopular. As with Keith Haring and Gérard Zlotykamien before, some writers have developed new tactics in Madrid in order to stand out in the alphabetic thronging of the “linguistic ghetto”<sup>4</sup> formed by traditional graffiti. The artist Eltono gave up writing in 1999 in favor of an icon that echoes his signature, the tuning fork: “I realized that my work was suddenly much more noticeable.”<sup>5</sup> This figurative motif has grown in abstraction and has been fed by and mingled with Nuria Mora's key-symbol (see Figure 2).

The streets of Madrid between 2000 and 2010 thus became a truly dynamic laboratory in which artists like Suso33, Nano4814, Remed, and others blended tagging, graffiti, and post-graffiti with iconic, narrative, and abstract features. Since 2010, graffiti has been in Madrid as in the rest of the world as the age of the mural, a logical transformation of iconographic graffiti wherein the painted image has grown in size and visibility. Three murals by Sam3 (*Viento*, *Hoja* and *Siesta*) and one by the Italian artist Blu appeared in 2010 on the Manzanares river banks.

Downtown Madrid remains, nonetheless, relatively

untouched by the incursion of the mural, in spite of its many festivals and fairs that celebrate street art and imagery: *Persianas Libres* from 2010 (renamed *Pinta Malasaña* from 2016), *C.A.L.L.E* since 2013, and the contemporary art fair *Urvanity* in 2017. Among other examples are Eltono's 2015 mural shown in Figure 3, one by Los Reyes del Mambo in 2017 shown in Figure 4, another made by Sabek, Kocel and YesJM the same year and four new paintings made in February 2018.

The annual festivals have given rise to a sea of paintings on storefronts in the neighborhoods of Lavapiés and Malasaña,<sup>6</sup> a source of tension with graffiti writers. While there are obvious territorial implications, likewise, at play is the essence of street art itself. Festival paintings are measured against a set of aesthetic criteria and selected by a jury where those judged most pleasing are awarded prizes. Despite their massive expansion throughout the urban landscape, their reasonable size (the artists use ladders or trash cans, not cranes) leaves room for a graphical jousting between graffitists and street painters.



Figure 5 GUOS, La Latina, Madrid, Spain (May 2017)  
“Graffiti = dirt and destruction. Find beauty in museums. Guos”



Figure 6 Moneyless, 2017. C.A.L.L.E Lavapiés, Plaza de Arturo Barea, Madrid, Spain  
(September 2017- December 2017)



Figure 7 Virginia Montesinos, 2017. Pinta Malasaña, Malasaña, Madrid, Spain, May 2017

### 5. Graffiti's scriptural riposte

Compared to the image, writing is guilty in the eyes of the law and civil society: outside of an advertising context, it is usually relegated to the margins of the city—bathrooms, schoolrooms, vacant lots. It has become even more so reprehensible since the coming of the age of the mural due to the mural's claim to municipal beautification, graffiti answers with a damning of traditional aesthetics (see Figure 5).

This new order, bound to an art in continual renewal, feeds the tensions that exist between the various grades of urban art. Graffiti is responding in the face of the onslaught of the image in Madrid's territory, and it refuses to yield its place (see Figures 6, 7, and 8).

In this war of walls, first-generation (tag-graffiti) and the new generation (post-graffiti) stand opposed. Graffiti tries to cover the paintings, in order to suffocate the new generation and to take revenge on the image.

Like in an advertisement, the text appears below the image. Its goal here is different, however, since it seeks to interfere with our perception of the painting and send a dissonant message. Owing to its size, a painting would seem to have the upper hand in the public space, but with this change, it is the writers who have the last word, until their graffiti is covered over by the city authorities or by another painting. The image, in fact, feels no need to fight for its life, and indeed it is invited every year to cover up the "scribbling" of graffiti.



Figure 8 Manolo Mesa, 2017, *Urvanity*. Campo de la Cebada, Madrid, Spain  
NAOR, 2018 (February 2017-October 2017-March 2018)



Figure 9 Hyuro, 2016. *Reciprocidad*, Madrid Street Art Project por la igualdad mujeres-hombres, Calle Embajadores, Madrid, Spain SEARZ, 2018 (February 2017, March 2017, March 2018)



Figure 10 RUSO, 2017, La Latina, Madrid, Spain May 2017- December 2017

## 6. Conclusion

As bellwethers of the ebb and flow of the street art scene, walls become meeting places, centers of tension and of territorial reappropriation among the different schools of urban art.

This tension is quite young compared to a more timeless struggle: the turf wars waged by writ against writ, between tagger and graffitist. Since a signature functions as a person's alter ego<sup>7</sup>, to attack (scratch out, cover over, plagiarize) a tag or a work of graffiti is to strike at that person's very self. The twin urban discords between writing and image and writing and writing are well illustrated by the artist RUSO (see Figure 10).

In the first photograph, the pseudonym covers over the mural with a symbolic message "Fuck Art," while in the second graffiti overlays the tags that had invaded it, turning the first assertion into "Fuck Toys."

In any case, this generational conflict, a child of changing times, might be seen like a lack of respect and tolerance, a harmful reaction from the writers. On the contrary it can be seen as a natural and healthy process to restore balance between illegal and institutionalized work, between a non-conformist attitude and an art in accordance with the general taste, between «destruction» (to use Guos' term) and creation, between writing and image in the urban space.

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- <http://www.escriতোenlapared.com> (Guillermo de la Madrid, Co-Founder of Madrid Street Art Project)
- <http://www.spanishgraffiare.com> (Felipe Gálvez)

### Notes

1. Garí, J. 1994. *Análisis del discurso mural. Hacia una semiótica del graffiti*, PhD Thesis, Valencia University, E.
2. See Abarca, J., 2010, who develops this idea in *El postgraffiti, su escenario y sus raíces: graffiti, punk, skate y Contrapublicidad*, PhD Thesis, Complutense University, Madrid, E.
3. «Paratext» is a concept developed by the literary theorist Genette, G. 1982. *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Le Seuil, coll. «Poétique», Paris, F.
4. Baudrillard, J., 1976. «Kool Killer ou l'insurrection des signes», in *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Gallimard, Paris, F. The idea of "linguistic ghetto" was developed by Baudrillard in reference to the alphabetical density created by graffiti.
5. Eltono, 2012. *Line and Surface*, Stickit, Utrecht, NL, p. 8.
6. To be convinced of this, one only must take a quick glance of the past Pinta Malasaña and CALLE editions: <http://pintamalasana.com/> and <http://xn--lavapis-gya.com/CALLE/>
7. In 2011, in an interview with Fernando Figueroa, Luis Cabrera and Felipe Gálvez, the writer CHETE says: «[...] yo mi firma veo que era un poco proyección de mi mismo» that is to say «I believe my signature was a little bit like a self-projection», [http://www.spanishgraffiare.com/entrevista\\_a\\_chete.html](http://www.spanishgraffiare.com/entrevista_a_chete.html).