COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Political critique in Madrid's urban art scene: from the late '90s until now

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the political messages painted on Madrid's walls by urban artists from the beginning of this artistic and political movement (the end of the 1990s) to the present day. We developed an extensive field-work that has helped us to create the first compilation of the key political messages of urban art in Madrid, based on an exploratory research approach complemented by the use of social media search. This descriptive and documentary approach was followed while keeping in mind that a wall is a public channel open to all and an outstanding method for expressing any political opinion with the greatest amount of visibility. Over the time span analyzed, the investigation discovered 15 urban artists with political content in their artistic production. The findings indicate that the political theme of these artists' works focuses primarily on condemning the Spanish government for current issues such as corruption or the economic crisis, as well as past events such as the Iraq War. Other recurring themes include social criticism of municipal policies and the living conditions of underprivileged groups such as refugees and beggars, as well as support for feminism and critiques of the rapid gentrification process of certain historic Madrid neighborhoods, such as Malasaña and Lavapiés.

Keywords
urban art, politics, Madrid, message, communication.

1. Introduction

The terms art and politics are inextricably intertwined. Throughout history, art has been a conventional way of voicing popular opinion.

Avant–garde art movements reintroduced the reflective thought process that defines art, as well as critiques of art institutionalization and mediatization. New social and political circumstances have aided artists in reorienting their creative processes by seeking out new techniques. As a result, this search has aided the development of artistic creation as a tool for action and social penetration, as well as political communication (Pérez Rubio, 2013).

The development of political communication in modern democracies following the introduction of new forms of communication (internet and social networks) has been remarkable. These new forms of communication first emerged in the 1980s, and they gave people a greater ability to respond to the acts of politicians and candidates. Art is one more of those response options and it is in this context that we are going to study Madrid urban art.

Activists can now become communicative actors by creating and distributing their own content with a great deal of autonomy thanks to technological advancements. Nowadays it is possible for them to circulate their own topics and frames in the hopes of constructing their own critical narrative. Many urban artists have used self-mediatization processes (Cammaerts, 2012) to articulate their concerns and serve as a counterweight to the ruling elites (Fuchs, 2014). Self-mediatization is one of the most critical areas of action in online political advocacy, since it focuses a large portion of its tactics and activities (Gerbaudo, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014).

There have been several synergies between social media and urban art in the last decade. Both have developed into independent and collective modes of expression. Both have led to an exponential increase in public awareness about urban art.

Social networks have brought two main advantages to this awareness phenomenon: artists can quickly publish photographs of their works, and audiences can find them through the artists' personal accounts and brands. As a result, social media has become a particularly effective platform for urban artists' messages. Instagram has established itself as the go-to site for disseminating this phenomenon. While many artists have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr, the ease with which artists can post images on Instagram, as well as the creation of simple apps, has made it the most popular network among artists (Danysz, 2016; Nolasco, 2017).

The first examples of the dissemination of Madrid urban art through social networks date back to the early twenty-first century. The beginnings were initially based on Guillermo de la Madrid's blog, *Escrito en la pared* "Written on the wall" (2006-2017), who took photos during his walks around the city to preserve and share the works he discovered. De la Madrid began the intangible conservation of this form of art at a time when media interest for it had not yet started. His blog has over a thousand posts, but it began to lose relevance in 2012, as artists in Madrid began to post their interventions on social media platforms such as Instagram.

Other blogs from that time were *Urbanario*, by Javier Abarca, professor of a course focused on urban art at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Complutense University of Madrid. Abarca also taught several students who would later be a new wave of artists, including *Dos Jotas* "Two Jacks." Another blog was *Spanish Graffiare* (www.spanishgraffiare.com), which was mostly devoted to graffiti but also featured photographs of modern art from interventions dating back to 2002; and Chordi Barceloneta's *Madrid Mon Amour* (madridmonamour.blogspot.com). These three blogs became the start of the Internet's spread of Madrid urban art.

According to Abarca (2011), the network was the independent and massive communication space in which visions of urban art other than the official ones (which normally focus on their illegality) could find a spotlight, as he notes in one of the interviews conducted for his research on the topic.

As a result, the Internet has acted as an outstanding outlet for urban artists. In this context, it has also been an amplifier of his anti-power political messages.

The public space, where politicians and people communicate, is no longer strictly dominated by the media. A relevant number of scholars (Casero-Ripollés & Feenstra, 2012) argue that the media is being disintermediated. These scholars suggest that a broader spectrum of influences has opened up, encouraging people to intervene more frequently and effectively in the communication process. Also in this line, Castells (2009) argues that the network society has enabled the emergence of "mass self-communication" as a counter-power to the media, i.e., anyone can now spread personal messages on the Internet and gain local, national, or even global influence in exchange.

Urban artists are individual broadcasters in search of repercussion, and urban art with a political message is a form of expression against power that uses a platform other than the media. Urban art makes use of public spaces to condemn the policies of the ruling government.

2. Urban art and political messages

We understand urban art as the artistic phenomenon that usually occurs in the public environment without permission, has an ephemeral nature, develops a great variety of techniques and aesthetics, and has a clear intention of communicating with the citizen (Abarca, 2010; Fernández Herrero, 2018).

Its origins are linked to graffiti, but it soon presented clear differences with it. Graffiti is fundamentally based on the repetition of a signature using stylistic codes and is mainly aimed at those who know these codes. Since the end of the nineties, urban art started integrating a series of novelties that are distinct from graffiti: different techniques, new aesthetics, original icons, and images of all kinds. However, the main difference was that its message began to be addressed to a wider audience. In other words, it was no longer a closed code.

Additionally, the intention also changed respect to graffiti, as it was not a matter of ego and bravado anymore, but rather a desire to communicate with the citizen. Today its great growth and evolution have led to the creation of new artistic manifestations such as urban muralism and innovative projects, which are in most cases collaborative.

The birth of urban art has its antecedents in Daniel Buren, Richard Hambleton and Pignon-Ernest, during the sixties of the 20th century. However, it will be from the eighties when it begins to progress as an artistic trend. Its initial development as a movement is contemporary with graffiti and occurs as a consequence of it. Thus, at first the term *postgraffiti* was used (Abarca, 2010, p. 386). In the American context, the New Yorkers Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring stand out. Basquiat began writing messages of social critique under the pseudonym SAMO.

The idea of incorporating messages aimed at the general public distances urban art from the purest form of graffiti. Haring began by painting characters with an aesthetic close to the comic with chalk and continued with themes focused on making social criticism on consumerism, AIDS, or technological alienation. Shepard Fairey created stickers and posters with the face of the wrestler André the Giant through the east coast of the USA and, little by little, the images of him became known worldwide. The international expansion of this phenomenon was rapid; the French artist Space Invader intervened in sixty-seven cities around the world, among which London, New York, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris and Tokyo stand out. The well-known artist Banksy has also played a fundamental role in the development of urban art because he has managed to make it become a worldwide media phenomenon.

The arrival of urban art in Spain is intrinsically related to the city of Madrid, hence the choice of this city as a field of study for this research, and is contemporary with the global expansion of this artistic trend. Despite being clearly inserted in an international trend with numerous characteristics in common, we intend to find out if Madrid urban art presents any particular identity traits, especially related to the local theme of some of the works.

Armando Silva (2014) points out that just as there is a need for channels of expression in the media, there is also a need for a means of expression separated from the institutional and business sphere. Such would be the case of graffiti and urban art. The criticism that develops in urban art distances itself from conventional discourses and traditional ways of participating politically.

It should be noted that *street art* is a means of communication and, therefore, can be used as a social reporting tool. It usually transmits a subversive message that questions everything established and the system. It incites social struggle, political criticism and occasionally simply personal reflection. In this sense, Balkan Kru (2016) argues that urban art should change the world and make it a better place. Kru (2016) stresses that it is important for urban artists to put pressure on politicians to solve problems.

Thus, most of the authors agree in underlining the characteristic of urban art as a political claim mechanism (Lewisohn, 2008; McCormick, Schiller & Sena, 2010), although there are others, such as Pejac (2015), cited by Bárcena (2015), who define it rather as "a form of expression, opinion and commitment."

The presence of urban art created by the members of a neighborhood minimizes social inequalities of all kinds, allows a new visualization of the environment that deserves the attention of public powers, who should be interested in smoothing the differences between the inhabitants of a city, and at the same time it undermines the role of violence in that environment (Bascones, 2009).

The urban art interventions that seek to convey a message of political criticism or social awareness are innumerable and have occurred all over the planet. Let us remember that the well-known Banksy became world famous when he painted on the wall of the Israeli West Bank barrier, with the aim of giving visibility to the situation in Palestine, achieving great media coverage thanks to the general press of many countries.

Given the enormous magnitude of this phenomenon that is taking place simultaneously in all large cities around the planet, we have decided to focus on the case of the city of Madrid in order to make an in-depth analysis.

3. Methodology

The analysis of a newly developed phenomenon that is still in the early stages of evolution is a difficult task to take on. Not only because of the scarcity of available data, but also because of the dependence on a constantly changing theoretical framework. Furthermore, the lack of adequate terminology and taxonomy does not allow its definition with precision. These circumstances taken together with the fact that studies in the social sciences and humanities often require the combination of several methods, led us to conclude that, both due to the type of study and the circumstances that surround it, it was necessary to address the problem from different approaches that should be alternated and carefully chosen according to each research phase.

In the first phase, an exploratory or preparatory investigation has been used. As the researchers Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh claim, "it is the type of research that is involved in addressing a problem / topic / subject about which little is known [...]. The research work will need to examine which theories and concepts are appropriate, developing some new if necessary, and also examine if existing methodologies can be used. It is obvious that it implies pushing the frontiers of knowledge in the hope of discovering something useful" (Phillips, Pugh, Amat, & Crespo, 2008).

In the second phase, our compilation had a mixed character, since it was necessary to combine documentary research and field research, following the criteria of Zorrilla (1993, p. 43). First, an in-depth documentary study was made based on the search for documentation focused on the geographical area of Madrid, which was really complex due to the dispersion of the information and the difficulty in locating it. In this phase, social networks, especially Instagram, turned out to be the most direct way of knowing the trajectory of the artists involved. In this network, 30 profiles of urban artists were found.

During our field work process, which consisted of the *in situ* search through the streets of Madrid and the search in the networks (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Flickr), 42 artists were found with a presence in the streets of Madrid during the period of time that this research considers: from the late 90s to the present.

The lack of order and the arbitrariness of the publications on online platforms required a laborious work of analysis, selection and ordering of the information. After this work, 15 artists were selected, as they were the ones that had interventions with a significant level of political criticism; with these artists, the body of the present investigation was constituted.

Observing the lack of a space from which urban artists could be easily accessed, we decided to develop the *Museo Virtual de Arte Urbano* ("Virtual Museum of Urban Art"), a tool to centralize this information that can serve as a reference in the future for artists, as well as researchers and society in general interested in learning about this movement. The greatest challenge in the design of this platform and in the ordering of the information has been to generate a valid taxonomy for classifying the works produced by a new artistic phenomenon for which there is no pre-existing classification.

Both for the cataloguing for the Virtual Museum of Art Urbano, and for the analysis carried out in this research, the works have been organized according to the following criteria: the type of intervention carried out (independent urban art, collaborative project, muralism); according to the type of artistic expression (abstraction, *artivism*, neo-pop figuration, conceptual art, figurative expressionism, illustration, art with a message, Op-art, surrealist aesthetics); depending on the technique and/or material used (poster, sticker, spray, paint, yarn bombing, recycling material, mosaic, sculpture, mixed media); according to its location and according to its author.

The 15 artists in this research are within the classification of "art with a message" and they exhibit a predominance of the political theme in their artwork.

This methodology, which combined the fieldwork with the search on the networks, allowed us to experience first-hand the encounter with the real artwork, against the experience and implications that its transmission through online means supposes. In addition, during the field work, images were collected, which then have served to graphically illustrate this research and that will allow, in the future, to visualize works destined to disappear in a short period of time. All this work is not reflected in this article, but in the doctoral thesis from which it is extracted.

The research has also mixed a quantitative and qualitative research methodology, since the main objective of the present study is not only to bring together the works of urban artists from Madrid during the period of time studied, but also to be able to describe the urban art scene of Madrid approaching it from different perspectives so that we can know about the motivations of the artists, the social reflection of their works, their relationship with the future of the city and the communication process that has served as the engine and transmitter of this movement.

As researchers Taylor and Bogdan state, "qualitative research is inductive [...]. In qualitative studies researchers follow a flexible research design, they begin their studies with only vaguely formulated questions" (Taylor & Bogdan, 2000, p. 20). This has also been the case for the present study. Once the information obtained from blogs, websites and other publications on the specific cases of urban artistic interventions that had taken place and were taking place in the city of Madrid had been ordered, an inductive research process was carried out based on the analysis of the particular cases (works, artists, neighborhoods, etc.) in order to present a general panorama of the main characteristics of urban art in the city of Madrid.

All used sources have been of maximum solvency. The publications on social networks (mainly Instagram) made by 30 of the artists who have performed regularly on the Madrid scene have been analyzed; as well as the publications carried out by organizations and individuals dedicated to the dissemination of urban art (*Madrid Street Art Project* or *Urbanario*) and the communication developed during different events related to the subject has also been attended (*Pinta Malasaña* or *Muros Tabacalera*).

Finally, with the idea of studying how information about urban art reaches the uninterested citizen (that is, those who do not search the internet for content related to the subject, nor are they a follower of artists' social networks), we have analysed the presence of street art in the generalist written and audio-visual press. Regarding the generalist written press with a national circulation, *El Mundo* and *El País* have stood out as the newspapers that have published a greater number of articles about urban art. In addition to the written press,

audio-visual formats for television or for the Internet have played a prominent role in the dissemination of urban art, highlighting programs such as: *Desatados* ("Unleashed"), *La Aventura del Saber* ("The Adventure of Knowledge"), and *Cámara abierta 2.0* ("Open Chamber 2.0"). Regarding programs specialized in urban culture, the following stand out: *Con visado de calle* ("With a street visa") and *Ritmo Urbano* ("Urban Rhythm").

To complete the information, when it could not be accessed in any other way, direct sources have been used. Interviews have been carried out with some of the artists studied in this work and with some scholars and other agents involved in the movement. The interviews have greatly enriched the research, since subjects with clearly differentiated profiles were chosen, which has allowed us to obtain various views from very different perspectives.

Therefore, the research has been descriptive. The focus of the study is a phenomenon that is still developing at the present time, since although street art began a little more than two decades ago, it is at present when it has gained more relevance and it is in the last years when urban muralism appeared. According to Yves Bordeleau, in descriptive research, the inquiry aims to answer the questions who, what, where, when, how many (Bordeleau, 1987), that is, several elements are studied although they are not necessarily causally related. In the case of the present study, the following topics have been investigated: who are artists work in the city, where do they perform, since when has urban art been made in Madrid and how many artists, works and street art events have taken place in the city. This has been done in order to capture a *panorama* that aims to be a faithful description of the art that has taken place in the urban environment of this city.

4. Analysis

4.1. *Urban art in Madrid: political themes*

Leaving aside the interventions that focus exclusively on plastic and aesthetic aspects, there are a large number of works by urban artists in Madrid whose primary intention is to communicate an idea related to political criticism and/or social awareness.

Among all the works analyzed, a series of topics related to politics stand out: criticism of the Government for current issues (Iraq war, corruption, economic crisis, municipal policies, etc.), the visibility of the living conditions of the most disadvantaged groups (immigrants, beggars), support for feminism or denunciations of the rapid process of gentrification in some historic neighborhoods.

Common themes with other cities of the planet are also addressed, such as sustainability and climate change, but it must be noted that this type of complaint is not very frequent among artists from Madrid. There are some cases, such as Isaac Cordal's small sculptures to reflect on inaction about climate change, but they are an exception.

4.1.1. Political critique

Critique about politics and politicians is one of the favorite themes of Madrid urban artists, which is logical if we take into account that urban art is a phenomenon that arises within the counterculture.

At the beginning of 2000, several artists took a stand against the Government, especially due to its support of the US position during the Iraq war.

It is worth making a special reference to the creator known as Noaz, who was very active in spreading messages of a political nature during the first decade of the millennium. This artist primarily used spray templates to graphically reflect his ideas on the city. In a 2002 interview with Spanish Graffiare, he stated that he was not really making art but rather embodying a message. "We have never considered ourselves to be graffiti or spray template artists, but rather urban activists" (Gálvez, 2002).

His name comes from one of his first campaigns in which he criticized the position of the political party PP and its leader back then, José María Aznar, as they were in favor of the Gulf

War. The campaign was termed NO AZWAR, and from the shortening of that came the nickname of Noaz.

In the following years, Noaz addressed other campaigns, always with a clear message of criticism of the ruling class. One example of this are the series of templates titled *What do the rulers think?,* which he spread profusely throughout the city. In these interventions a monkey was seen in a thoughtful attitude.

The denunciation of political corruption has been another of the most recurrent themes among urban artists in Madrid. In this topic, templates such as *Sherlock in search of the safe B* from the Yipi Yipi Yeah collective, fit perfectly. These templates showed the famous character Sherlock Holmes chasing for money bills. The group published a photo with this intervention on its Instagram account accompanied with the phrase *Sherlock discovers evidence of safe B.* This happened in October 2015, when the former treasurer of the PP, Luis Bárcenas, had denounced the illegal financing of the party.

This group of artists regularly uses characters taken from the social imaginary to make their criticisms. A good example of this is the campaign they did in 2016 focused on the figure of the fortune-teller Nostradamus. The famous character appeared making predictions of what was to come, which in the case of Illustration 404 consisted in the annunciation of a path that led to unemployment.

During 2013, when the effects of the 2008 economic crisis had spread, other artists also addressed the issue of unemployment, such as El Rey de la Ruina ("The Ruin King", born in Corretllá, Barcelona, in the eighties), who published a single CV with the messages: "I'm looking for a job" and "I'm still looking for a job."

Political criticism also encompasses complaints about municipal actions. PorFavor ("Please"), an artist from Madrid who began in urban art as a result of his participation in the 15-M movement, carried out the campaigns: *Social dining room* and *Pensioner's Home*. The artist inscribed the first sentence (social dining room) on garbage containers and the second on the backing of street benches. The viewer's encounter with the phrases is truly shocking and highlights the scarcity of dining rooms and meeting places for retirees. "Please" considers that urban art vindicates public space as a place to denounce social injustices. In the micro-documentary *Trazos Urbanos* ("Urban Traces") he affirms the following regarding his art: "It helps me to get out all that indignation that you accumulate with the news" (PorFavor - Trazos Urbanos, s. F.).

In the same line of criticism of municipal policies, Jonipunto made ten interventions in ten squares in Madrid, with the objective of simulating a countdown. In the first template he depicted a complete bench, and in the successive interventions the same bench started losing the legs, to later on lose the planks, until its eventual disappearance leaving only the screws as a trace of its prior existence. The series invites the citizen to explore the city by promoting a conscious walk. The idea being that cement, asphalt and commercial interests have been increasing in cities to the detriment of social meeting areas and leisure spaces such as squares and gardens; an idea that is also a common topic in urban art. There is a general agreement among more than a few artists that municipal policies are to blame for this reality.

Ampparito (Madrid, 1991) is an artist who transforms everyday elements into metaphors of real situations. In one of his three interventions carried out in Villaverde for the *Arte para todxs* project of 2017, the artis addressed the demand of residents for an improvement in their transport network. One of the interventions was titled *On the 483 possible ways to make a metro*. In his social networks, he explained that the idea arose in support of the demand of the neighbors who had received a negative response to their request on having a subway in the neighborhood. For this reason, he painted 483 lines in different shapes that measured exactly one meter each (www.ampparito.com, s. F.).

Another issue within political criticism reflected by Madrid artists is the complaint against the global surveillance of citizens carried out by institutions. This theme was already

one of the characteristic ideas of street art because it had been approached on numerous occasions by the world's best-known urban artist, Banksy, with a very similar message to the ones that have been seen in Madrid after. The great wall of SpY on a huge dividing wall as part of the *Proyecto Tetuán* ("Tetuán Project") is a good example of this. In this wall, SpY placed dozens of cameras that did not monitor anything but made the passersby feel observed.

The most explicit message in this sense has been provided by the artist Dos Jotas with his signs of "Vigilaos los unos a los otros, como yo os he vigilado," an image that he published in his twitter with the English translation: "Watch one another as I have watched you"(@ dosjotas2js, Twitter).

This artist is also the author of one of the most critical interventions with political leaders in general. This intervention was a fierce complaint done by printing phrases on garbage cans. The phrases were taken from statements of public figures in different media that had generated controversy at their time. By reproducing them on the garbage cans, Dos Jotas clearly communicates his opinion about the content of those phrases: they are garbage, and, in addition, he immortalizes the phrases and prevents them from falling into oblivion by providing an invitation to the reader to reflect on how quickly news are forgotten.

4.1.2. Social awareness

One of the most recurrent messages linked to politics in urban art in Madrid is the support for the most disadvantaged population, especially for undocumented immigrants or illegal immigrants. This type of message is generally found halfway between political criticism and the desire to give visibility to the living conditions of this group (raise social awareness or consciousness).

The artist who has achieved a more personal aesthetic language with this theme is Gviiie. Under a large mural made by Hyuro on gender equality, Gviiie made an intervention with his characteristic language in which a flag of the Community of Madrid surrounded by thorns could be seen. This performance seems to be a couple of another intervention he carried out in the same neighborhood in which he represented a passport surrounded by a fence of thorns while tears of blood dripped all over the environment.

Gviiie also supported the low-income immigrant's collective with an intervention made on his Instagram account published on May 28, 2018 with the following comment: "To all of our neighbors who do not have the same rights and who are persecuted and harassed." The uploaded photo referred to the case of Mame Mbaye, an illegal street vendor who died of a heart attack after a long run to flee from the police in the Lavapiés neighborhood. The great controversy that this event raised resulted in a great neighborhood mobilization that gave visibility to the precarious situation in which the immigrant population lives in Madrid.

Picture 1: Gviiie. Lavapiés, Madrid. 2019.

Source: Own screenshot.

Gviiie was not the only urban artist to cover this case, as for example the artist known as Concreto ("Concrete") chose the same theme for the closing that he painted on the occasion of the *C.A.L.L.E Lavapiés* meeting. Likewise, the Yipi Yipi Yeah collective had addressed this issue with interventions such as the one made on a Stop sign transformed in such a way that the white line simulated a fence with human figures trying to cross it.

Yipi Yipi Yeah also has several very impressive interventions related to social awareness linked to childhood, such as the templates made in the Chueca neighborhood in which you could see two starving children under the phrase *Morituri te salutant*. These are works that tried to get the citizen out of the comfort of his daily life to promote reflection, especially about the treatment we give to the weakest.

Jonipunto carried out a series of interventions called the *Carabolas* (started in 2014), which consisted in the creation of simple characters with children's features inspired by comic aesthetics. These characters were used to convey messages of social and political criticism. The interventions were carried out in many different neighborhoods: Tetuán, La Latina, Lavapiés.

In 2015, he wanted to give visibility to the terrible situation that was occurring in Syria. Just after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, he created the work *Nubes y bombas bajo el mismo cielo. Siria. Francia* ("Clouds and bombs under the same sky. Syria. France"), where the protagonist character, totally unprotected, tries to take find refuge from the bombs. The year 2015 had been the year of the Syrian refugee crisis, more than 3,500 deaths had already been counted and that number continued to rise during the following year (about 5,000 deaths).

In the summer of 2016, he made several interventions of Carabolas trying to swim, drowning, or clinging to a saving plank to survive, all of them alluding to the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. The title of the series could not get more illustrative of the artist's intention: *Way to Europe*.

Another of the artists who has worked on this theme is C215, who is actually called Christiam Guémy. Born in 1973, he is a self-taught artist of the first generation of urban artists who, in the beginning, developed his art by experimenting with various techniques. The templates to portray anonymous characters have become his hallmark. He himself tells how he began by reproducing his daughter's face as a sign of affection, to end up portraying beggars, homeless people, refugees... that is, the most disadvantaged in society. On San Roque street in the Malasaña neighborhood he made two interesting interventions. On both sides of the same door, he made two faces from two points of view, and as is typical of this artist he chose an anonymous character, in this case a beggar, to end up creating a work of great expressiveness capable of recreating a complete life through wrinkles, expression lines and a look that catches the attention of the passerby.

Picture 2: C215. C/San Roque. Malasaña. February 2018.

Source: Own screenshot.

4.1.3. Gentrification and touristification

The phenomenon of gentrification is linked to the evolution of urban art in almost all cities. In the case of Madrid, the neighborhoods with the greatest presence of street art (Lavapiés and Malasaña) have undergone rapid gentrification and have evolved towards an even faster process of touristification. Given the connections that these processes usually have with urban art, it is a common concern of many of the artists who tried to criticize the system with their art but ended up becoming tools of that same system.

Dos Jotas (Madrid), one of the most ingenious artists on the current scene due to his extraordinary ability to adapt to the context, reflects in his works what are the problems that the city is facing. His art is close to the postulations of conceptual art that developed in the seventies, by which the idea and the intellectual reflection about the work is more important than the resulting artistic object. In fact, this artist has repeatedly commented on his opposition to the "aestheticisation" of the object, because of his fear that it could lead to a trivialization of the idea to be transmitted.

> It is something personal, a position, I think that a political and committed work can lose its conceptual and social power when it is excessively aesthetic or spectacular (Sue975, 2018).

Dos Jotas, through ingenious interventions, uses the semiotics of municipal signage to deal with the problems that the rapid increase in tourism in historic areas of the city is generating. During 2017, he resorted to hacking signs using stickers to modify the hotel signs that indicate their category, which were measured with "€" instead of stars. According to Dos Jotas, the center has become a "great hotel for tourists," with a disproportionate rise in rents that has caused an exodus of traditional residents to other neighborhoods on the periphery.

Tourism has been growing exponentially over the last few years. Specifically, in 2017 (the year of Dos Jotas interventions), according to FRONTUR, from January 1 to May 31, more than two million tourists arrived in the Community of Madrid, registering a growth of more than 20% compared to the previous year. This circumstance, together with the proliferation of tourist rental apartments, has resulted in a great transformation of the most central neighborhoods. In the ironic campaign *Área de juegos turísticos* ("Tourist Games Area"), the artist wants to invite reflection on the type of tourism that is reaching different areas of Spain. A type of tourism related in many cases to the consumption of alcohol.

One of the best-known artists of Madrid's urban art scene, el Rey de la Ruina ("the King of the Ruin"), also made an interesting work for the 2014 initiative *Muros Tabacalera*, in which his unique "Acid-Pop" style could be seen under the slogan "Gentriffiti." This image has acquired a symbol status thanks, among other things, to the fact that the authors of the book *First we take Manhattan* decided to use it for its cover. In this book, published in 2016 with the subtitle *Destrucción creativa y disputa de los centros urbanos* ("Creative destruction and dispute of urban centers"), they talk about the rapid process of gentrification that is taking place in many neighborhoods (in the case of Madrid, Malasaña and Lavapiés are analyzed) and the role that urban art plays in all this process.

In 2016, along the same lines, participating in one of the open days organized by the association "The artists of the neighborhood", this artist wrote in large letters: *"rent in peace"* to give visibility to the discomfort of the neighbors by the exaggerated rise in the rental price of homes and described it like this on his social networks: "The result of this dynamic is the death of the neighborhoods fabric, the closure of historic shops and ultimately the DEATH of our neighborhoods." In this way, the formula "rest in peace", so typical of cemeteries, is transformed here into an allusion to the death of the authenticity of the Lavapiés neighborhood due to the advance of excessive tourism that the King of Ruin attributes to real estate speculation.

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Political critique in Madrid's urban art scene: from the late '90s until now

On gentrification, the artist Maz painted a wall in Lavapiés following the narrative that is usually displayed in comics. The story begins in the upper corner with a beggar asking for change and little by little they follow the steps of a deterioration process, from abandonment, the arrival of youth, destigmatization, gentrification, until, according to this artist, the excessive speculation leads to its destruction.

Picture 3: Maz. Lavapiés, Madrid. 2019.

Source: Own screenshot.

4.1.4. Feminism

During this research it has been possible to verify that in recent years the subject of feminism has become one of the most recurrent ones tackled by urban art, probably because it is of maximum importance in our current society and in the media.

Within this topic, the King of Ruin has also managed to turn another of his interventions into a symbol: the great dividing wall of Lavapiés in which he imprinted Rosa de Luxembourg's phrase "Socially equal, humanly different, totally free," which has been one of the most reproduced and shared images on social networks by the feminist movement.

With its characteristic vibrant color, the urban artist made this composition as a tribute to all women who have fought for equality, using the phrase of the thinker in the pictorial space itself. In enormous dimensions, his icon par excellence, the heart, becomes the fundamental element of the message, since, according to the artist's description, it symbolizes "the strength of values and the beauty of the struggle for a more humane world" in juxtaposition to the broken dagger that alludes to the fall of the patriarchal order. This image has not only become a feminist symbol, but it has also helped transform the image of urban art from an act of vandalism to an art committed to social values.

Within the same call by the City Council in which the King of Ruin made this mural, the Argentine artist Hyuro, known internationally for her support for gender equality, also carried out a large mural on this topic. In this composition, titled *Reciprocidad* ("Reciprocity"), the absence of heads of both figures prevents identification beyond the stereotypes with which society identifies both genders. According to the artist's own explanation: "This wall talks about gender equality, thinking about this concept of gender from a broader and more pluralistic perspective. It downplays the biological condition of the individual, respecting the choice that each person makes regarding their condition as a man, woman or of a non-binary gender" (Nimo, 2016).

Picture 4: *Reciprocidad* ("Reciprocity"). Hyuro. Lavapiés, Madrid. 2018.

Source: Own screenshot.

Regarding murals with a clear feminist message, the Lavapiés' wall that Doa Oa and Maz collaborated on stands out for its narrative character. Female figures of different ages represent tasks and jobs that women have traditionally performed: the housewife, the old woman, the young woman who reads, the mother who breastfeeds her baby… all of them coexist in a mural with a color range reduced to green and pink. Events such as the 8M strike appear in the center of the mural in explicit support for feminism and below you can see the strike of the *cigarreras* ("cigarette women"), women from the neighborhood who stood out in the past for their combative character.

Picture 5: Doa Oa y Maz. Lavapiés. 2018.

Source: Own screenshot.

One of the most original interventions in support of feminism has been carried out by the artist Tejelaraña. Her real name is Adriana, a neighbor of the Lavapiés area. She has been the main representative of *yarn bombing* (decoration of furniture with knitting or crochet) in our city. The artist started out alone as Tejelaraña, but soon her partner Álvaro joined the project.

This artist finds a way of communicating with the neighbors with her way of intervening the urban space. According to her statements, she wants passersby, when they see her works, to wonder who has been able to take the time and trouble to do all that, because her main motivation is to make them smile. She chose the yarn bombing technique because "it fuses the private and the public space. Take the rugs from the living room to the street. The feeling that someone works unselfishly long hours to improve a shared element: pure politics" (Ms. Wonderly, 2012). From July 2013 to January 2014, the artist participated in the *Entretejiendo*

conference, organized by Economistas sin Fronteras, Intered, Museo del Traje, Bichus and Tejelaaraña. There were six meetings to learn more about the history of feminism and specifically about the *Las Manuelas* project. Las Manuelas are a group of weavers from the rural areas of Puno in Peru who set up this project to share experiences among weavers and defend the rights of women. The meetings culminated in a joint intervention: covering the statue of Clara Campoamor to draw attention to the work that this woman carried out in defence of universal suffrage. The intervention was accompanied by a letter of thanks to the suffragette, which was addressed to curious spectators who wanted to know about her life.

5. Conclusions

Throughout history, art and politics have had a symbiotic relationship. Urban art with a political message is a clear example of this relationship because it is a form of expression against power that is expressed through a medium other than the media (or social media). Instead, it uses public spaces to criticize the ruling elite's actions.

Although its original mode of expression is distinct from traditional communication channels, urban art interacts with them too, especially with social networks. Its evolution has been fueled by social media, which have given artists a previously unimaginable space for their interventions, allowing them to act as a spokesperson for their own political messages.

Criticism of corruption, opposition to war, criticism of municipal actions and laws of urban growth, and legislation on immigration and the living conditions of the most vulnerable are among the political concerns discussed by the artists examined in this research.

A large number of creators who use art to do politics have been identified during the time covered by this research (from the beginnings of urban art in the 1990s to the present). In our study we focused on a sample of fifteen urban artists who exemplify the basic themes of political criticism carried out in Madrid with their interventions. These artists included Noaz, Yipi Yipi Yeah, El Rey de la Ruina, Por favor, Jonipunto, Ampparito, SpY, Dos Jotas, Gviiie, Concreto, C215, Maz, Hyuro, Doa Oa and Tejelaraña.

Some themes in Madrid's urban art have elements in common with those in other parts of the world, such as the alienation caused by new technology or support for refugees and immigrants. On the other hand, some topics are unique to the city, specifically those that refer to political critique, gentrification and tourism in the city's most central areas, as well as topics representing the desire of capturing the idiosyncrasy of some Madrid neighborhoods. On this note, Muelle is a figure admired for creating indigenous graffiti.

Since there are hardly any specific studies on what each city's peculiarities are, it is uncertain to what degree street art has local characteristics. The metropolises of the five continents share influences from the same artists, since the Internet has created a global network in which everything is available to everyone.

The artists analyzed this paper employ a wide range of techniques and languages. In terms of artistic trends, the creators often connect with related 20th-century artistic currents such as *Expressionism, Abstraction, Pop Art, Surrealism, Situationism, or Op-Art*. In terms of techniques, a great variety was found, ranging from stencils, spray, paint, mosaic, sculpture and recycling to yarn bombing.

Urban art in Madrid, as in other metropolises on the planet, shows the feelings of some artists who consider that the streets are a space to freely spread a message to the citizen and promote a change that improves the society. This communication between artist and society happens directly, without the intervention of any institutional medium. In general, most of the performances connect with current affairs and media interest.

The urban artists who perform in Madrid have also used their art to promote greater public social awareness on issues such as the precarious situation faced by immigrants' communities or the homeless. As a result, urban artists in Madrid have broadened their political critique across a wide repertoire of themes. This fact leads us to strongly affirm that

the works under consideration in this study have an additional value and meaning beyond their intrinsic artistic qualities.

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