

Anthropology and the City. Street Art in Medellín's Comuna 13: A City-Making Practice and an Ethnographic Tool*

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Abstract: Urban anthropologists are shifting from traditional approaches that treated the city merely as the "object" or "context" of research, focusing instead on the city as a dynamic process, shaped and reshaped by city-making practices implemented by its inhabitants. This paper analyzes street art as both a city-making practice and as an anthropological tool for studying contemporary cities, not as "object" or "context" but as dynamic processes. The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2022 and 2023 in Medellín's Comuna 13. The purpose of the research was to study the impact of street art on the residents' life experiences. Drawing on walking and photographing ethnography, the research employed a novel method leveraging the local practice of the *Graffitour*—a guided walking tour based on narrating Comuna 13's history through street art. The author participated in 10 *Graffitour* sessions, recording the guides' narrations and photographing street artworks. This article will present five of these street artworks, along with their respective narrations, each reflecting a different period in Comuna 13's history. Analyzing these five street artworks will provide readers with an image of Comuna 13 not as a static object or a mere context but as a dynamic process, while simultaneously revealing street art as a powerful resident-driven city-making practice. While street art is a globally widespread form of artistic expression, its deep contextual and situated characteristics can offer novel avenues for studying complex urban phenomena. Nevertheless,

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its potential for anthropological understanding has yet to be fully explored. This paper proposes to fill this gap by offering urban scholars new and fascinating possibilities to study contemporary cities through the lens of street art.

Keywords: Comuna 13, street art, urban anthropology, visual anthropology, walking ethnography.

Antropología y ciudad. Arte callejero en la Comuna 13 de Medellín: una práctica para hacer ciudad y una herramienta etnográfica

Resumen: actualmente, los antropólogos de lo urbano han comenzado a alejarse de las aproximaciones tradicionales a la ciudad como un simple “objeto” o un “contexto” de investigación, para dar paso a un enfoque que entiende la ciudad como un proceso dinámico que es configurado y reconfigurado por las prácticas de *hacer ciudad* de sus habitantes. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el arte urbano como una práctica para *hacer ciudad* y una herramienta antropológica para estudiar las ciudades contemporáneas en calidad de procesos dinámicos y no como simples “objetos” o “contextos”. Este análisis se basa en el trabajo etnográfico de campo que se llevó a cabo en la Comuna 13 de Medellín, Colombia, entre 2022 y 2023. El propósito de la investigación era estudiar el impacto del arte urbano en las experiencias de vida de los residentes de la comuna. Para tal fin, el estudio se valió de la etnografía de los caminos y la fotoetnografía para implementar un método novedoso que aprovecha e integra la práctica local del *Graffitour* — un recorrido guiado, el cual narra la historia de la Comuna 13 por medio del arte urbano—. El autor participó en diez de estos recorridos, durante los que grabó las narraciones de los guías y fotografió las obras de arte urbano. En este artículo se presentan y analizan cinco de estas obras —cada una de las cuales encarna un periodo particular de la historia de la comuna—, así como las narraciones que las acompañan, con el fin de permitirles a los lectores observar la Comuna 13 más como un proceso dinámico y menos como un objeto estático o un simple contexto. De manera paralela, el texto busca destacar el arte urbano como una poderosa práctica mediante la cual los residentes *hacen ciudad*. Más allá de su extendida popularidad a nivel mundial como una forma de expresión artística, el arte urbano tiene unas profundas características contextuales y situadas que aportan nuevas vías para el estudio de fenómenos urbanos complejos; sin embargo, su potencial para la comprensión desde la antropología está aún por explorarse. En este sentido, el artículo busca aportar a ese vacío y ofrecerle a la academia nuevas y fascinantes posibilidades para el estudio de las ciudades contemporáneas a través del lente del arte urbano.

Palabras clave: antropología urbana, antropología visual, arte urbano, Comuna 13, etnografía del caminar.

Antropologia e cidade. Arte de rua na Comuna 13 de Medellín: uma prática para fazer cidade e uma ferramenta etnográfica

Resumo: atualmente, os antropólogos do urbano começaram a se afastar das abordagens tradicionais da cidade como simples “objeto” ou “contexto” de pesquisa para uma abordagem que entende a cidade como um processo dinâmico que é configurado e reconfigurado pelas práticas de *fazer cidade* de seus habitantes. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a arte urbana como prática de fazer cidades e uma ferramenta antropológica para estudar as cidades contemporâneas como processos dinâmicos, e não como meros “objetos” ou “contextos”. Esta análise se baseia em um trabalho de campo etnográfico realizado na Comuna 13 de Medellín, Colômbia, entre 2022 e 2023. O objetivo da pesquisa foi estudar o impacto da arte urbana nas experiências de vida dos residentes da comuna. Para tanto, o estudo utilizou a etnografia de percurso e a fotoetnografia para implementar um novo método que aproveita e integra a prática local do *Graffitour* — um percurso guiado que narra a história da Comuna 13 por meio da arte urbana. O autor participou de 10 desses tours, durante os quais registrou as narrações do guia e fotografou as obras de arte urbana. Neste artigo, são apresentadas e analisadas cinco dessas obras — cada uma delas representa um período específico da história da comuna —, bem como as narrativas que as acompanham, a fim de permitir que os leitores observem a Comuna 13 mais como um processo dinâmico e menos como um objeto estático ou um simples contexto. Paralelamente, o texto procura destacar a arte urbana como prática poderosa por meio da qual os moradores fazem cidade. Além de sua ampla popularidade em todo o mundo como forma de expressão artística, a arte urbana tem características contextuais e situadas profundas que oferecem novos caminhos para o estudo de fenômenos urbanos complexos; no entanto, seu potencial para a compreensão antropológica ainda não foi explorado. Nesse sentido, o artigo busca contribuir para essa lacuna e oferecer à academia novas e fascinantes possibilidades para o estudo das cidades contemporâneas por meio das lentes da arte urbana.

Palavras-chave: antropologia urbana, antropologia visual, arte urbana, Comuna 13, etnografia do caminhar.

Urban anthropology is a relatively recent field of study. It was not until the 1970s that anthropologists, traditionally specialized in the study of “other cultures”—that had to be sought in distant and “exotic” locations—began to turn their interest to cities and urban phenomena within their own societies. They started by carving out a space for themselves in academic departments, writing texts and manuals, and organizing meetings and conferences, from which diverse reactions and debates arose. A key controversial debate has centered on whether urban anthropologists should engage in anthropologies *of* the city—where the city is the “object” of research—or *in* the city—where the city is considered the context of research rather than its object (Fox 1977, 1972; Gulick 1989; Jackson 1985). In recent discussions, the limitations of both approaches have been highlighted. An interesting critique is raised by Salcedo and Zeiderman (2008) who argue that anthropology, both *of* the city and *in* the city, run the risk of “reifying” the city and considering it a mere physical thing. Thus, according to the authors, if on one hand, doing anthropology *in* the city means treating the city as a pre-existing spatial container, a fixed, stable, and taken-for-granted object, on the other hand, doing anthropology *of* the city ends up doing something paradoxically similar, since the researcher imagines himself or herself as outside the “object” of study, the city, which remains as an entity in itself. Instead, they suggest, along with anthropologists like, for example, Michel Agier (2020), viewing the city as a dynamic, constantly-changing process and focusing on the inhabitants’ practices of city-making.

Building on this debate, in this paper, I will examine street art as both a significant city-making practice available to inhabitants and an ethnographic tool useful for researchers to observe the city as a dynamic process. This analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Medellín’s Comuna 13, between May 2022 and April 2023, as a PhD student in anthropology. The aim of the research was to understand the effects of street art on the lived experiences of the residents. However, beyond this primary focus, during fieldwork, I realized that street art, on one hand, enabled me to observe Comuna 13 not merely as an “object” or “context” of the research, but as a dynamic process shaped and reshaped by the residents’ city-making practices; on the other hand, that street art itself can be considered a powerful city-making practice available to residents.

In the first section, I explore the literature concerning the concept of street art, aiming to identify a definition that best describes street art in Comuna 13. In the second section, I provide a concise geographical, demographic, and historical overview of Comuna 13. In the third section, I introduce the *Graffitour* as the methodology that allowed me to understand the dynamic changes in Comuna 13 through street art. In the fourth section, I showcase five street art pieces. Through their analysis in the following section, I discuss how street art can be considered a practice of city-making and how it can help us comprehend some of the historical, political, social, and cultural dynamics, processes, changes, and adaptations of contemporary

cities. With this, I hope to offer urban anthropologists new and fascinating possibilities for studying contemporary cities through the lens of street art.

Street Art

The term “street art” is commonly associated with Banksy, the famous British artist who popularized it in the 1990s and 2000s. Today, it is widely recognized as a legitimate artistic expression and is widespread in cities around the world. Over the past decades, it has captured increasing attention from the public, law enforcement, the media, the art market, cultural institutions, and scholars across various disciplines, turning it into a consolidated field of study. However, despite its growing recognition and legitimacy, the definition of street art remains a subject of ongoing debate. This growing academic interest has generated a multitude of definitions, which have only added complexity to the issue (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017; Fransberg, Myllylä, and Tolonen 2021; Ross 2016; Ross *et al.* 2017; Taylor, Cordin, and Njiru 2010; Waclawek 2011; Young 2016; Zaimakis, Pavoni, and Campos 2021). As Jeff Ferrell (2016) concludes, the very essence of contemporary street art lies within its inherent complexity and ambiguity.

An interesting and controversial approach through which to address the problem of defining street art arises from an article by the philosopher Nicholas Ruggle. According to the author, a work of art is “street art if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning” (Ruggle 2010, 256). Ruggle emphasizes that utilizing the street inherently involves a commitment to both ephemerality and accessibility of the artwork. This framework offers the advantage of positioning street art as a broad and flexible artistic movement that encompasses various forms and practices of artistic expression, all of which share a similar material use of the street as public space. However, it has also raised some criticisms. For example, Sondra Bacharach (2015) argues that defining street art through its reliance on urban space excludes works that, while originally street-based, are now frequently displayed in galleries or viewed online (Blanché 2015). Similarly, Baldini (2016) contends that emphasizing ephemerality and accessibility overlooks the subversive potential of street art to challenge conventional norms of visibility and engagement in public spaces.

Building on this ongoing debate, I propose to refine the Ruggle’s definition of street art to include these critiques and to better describe its manifestation within the specific context of Comuna 13. Street art, in this revised framework, encompasses: all artistic expressions that arise from the street and are characterized by ephemerality, accessibility, and subversion. This expanded definition enables a broader and more flexible understanding of street art as a collective ensemble where different forms of artistic expressions coexist. Its three main characteristics are: accessibility (street art in Comuna 13 is readily available to a broad audience), ephemerality (the works in Comuna 13 are likely to change or disappear over time), and subversion (street art in Comuna 13 has the transformative capacity to visibly subvert the

appearance of urban spaces). This approach will allow for a comprehensive exploration of how street art functions as a dynamic and wide-ranging element within the urban landscape of Comuna 13. While conceiving street art as a broad and flexible artistic movement, my research specifically focuses on those practices that involve the creation of artworks on the walls of public spaces.

Comuna 13

Comuna 13, also known as San Javier, is one of the 16 administrative districts (*comunas*) of Medellín, the capital city of the Department of Antioquia. Medellín is situated in the broadest section of the Aburrá Valley along the Central Andes Mountain range. The city spans an area of 382 square kilometers and is bifurcated by the Medellín River. As of 2023, it is the second-largest city in Colombia by population, with an estimated 2,499,080 residents. Historically marked by high levels of violence, Medellín has seen a significant decline in crime rates over recent years, a transformation sometimes referred to as the “Medellín miracle” (Maclean 2015). During the late 20th century, Medellín was notorious for being one of the world’s most dangerous cities. Statistical analysis reveals that the percentage of homicides among total deaths escalated from 3.5% in 1976 to 42% in 1991, subsequently decreasing to 7% by 2006 (Cardona *et al.* 2005). The homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants rose from 44 in 1979 to 338 in 1991, before dropping to 47 in 2008 (García *et al.* 2012). The peak homicide rate in 1991 was over 35 times the threshold for what the World Health Organization categorizes as epidemic violence (UNDP 2014). This surge in violence was largely attributed to the activities of drug trafficker Pablo Escobar and his cartel, along with the paramilitary, guerrilla, popular militias, and state forces. The prevalence of violence during this period led to its characterization as banal (Pécaut 1999). Comuna 13 was once considered the most dangerous of Medellín’s comunas.

Located in the central-western periphery of Medellín, Comuna 13 limits with Comuna 7 Robledo to the north, Comuna 12 La América to the east, Corregimiento de Altavista to the south, and Corregimiento de San Cristóbal to the west. It covers 74.2 square kilometers and is subdivided into 23 neighborhoods. The terrain is notably rugged, particularly towards the western end where its elevation reaches approximately 1,650 meters above sea level. Certain neighborhoods, such as Las Independencias I and II, are situated on steep slopes, classified as high-risk areas. As of the 2020 census, Comuna 13 had a total population of 140,758: 67,704 males and 73,054 females.¹ Socioeconomic conditions vary, with a significant portion of the population living in lower socioeconomic strata. According to the 2019 Multi-dimensional Index of Living Conditions (IMCV), Comuna 13’s index score of 49.0

1 Contrato interadministrativo N°4600043606 Municipio de Medellín – EMTELCO, proyecciones de población realizadas por el Demógrafo Edgar Sardi. Medellín, 2015. https://www.Medellin.gov.co/irj/go/km/docs/pccdesign/SubportaldelCiudadano_2/PlandeDesarrollo_0_17/IndicadoresyEstadisticas/Shared%20Content/Documentos/ProyeccionPoblacion2016-2020/Perfil%20Demogr%C3%A1fico%202016%20-%202020%20Total%20Comunas.pdf

was below the city average, ranking it twelfth in terms of living conditions among Medellín's urban *comunas*. The demographic breakdown of housing shows that 34.6% of homes are classified in the very low economic stratum, 36.9% in the low economic stratum, 21.8% in the lower middle economic stratum, and 6.6% in the middle economic stratum.² Employment metrics reveal an unemployment rate of 14% and an occupation rate of 57%.³ These figures indicate a challenging economic environment, compounded by a literacy rate that surpasses the municipal average of 3.45%.⁴

Comuna 13 developed during the 1940s and 1950s, as a result of forced displacement affecting peasant, indigenous, and Afro-descendant populations from regions such as Chocó, Urabá, and Baya de Antioquia (SISBEN 2020). At the time, Colombia was undergoing a period of violent clashes between supporters of the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, a conflict that came to be known as *La Violencia* (1946-1858). This era resulted in the forced displacement of approximately 2 million people, mostly from rural areas to cities (Oquist 1978). With the ongoing influx of new arrivals, those initial settlements gradually turned into *barrios de invasión* (invasion neighborhoods), informal settlements built without any urban planning or legal authorization. Like many *barrios de invasión* across Colombian cities, these too were completely forgotten by the State, lacking access to essential public services, transportation, proper infrastructure, and security. This environment provided fertile ground for the emergence of Popular Militias in the late 1980s, followed by the arrival of armed insurgent groups (guerrillas) in the mid-1990s, who began to compete for control over the territory and to exert military dominance over the civilian population (Centro de Fe y Cultura 2021). Intending to dismantle illegal armed groups and assert its authority, between 2000 and 2002, the Colombian government launched 24 military operations, turning Comuna 13 into the battleground of an urban war. Two of these operations are especially notorious for their indiscriminate violence against the civilian population: *Operación Mariscal* and *Operación Orión* (Amnesty International 2005). The latter, conducted in collaboration with a far-right paramilitary group, succeeded in driving out the guerrillas but at a significant human cost, resulting in numerous civilian casualties, injuries, displacements, and disappearances. While some view *Operación Orión* as a necessary step towards restoring government control (Drummond, Dizgun, and Keeling 2012), others emphasize its detrimental effects, including mass killings, forced displacements, and the erosion of community cohesion (Bernal-Franco and Navas-Caputo 2013).

2 Comuna 13: San Javier Ficha de Caracterización Departamento Administrativo de Planeación Subdirección de Prospectiva, Información y Evaluación Estratégica. <https://www.Medellin.gov.co/irj/go/km/docs/pccdesign/Medellin/Temas/PlaneacionMunicipal/Publicaciones/Shared%20Content/Documentos/2021/Comuna%2013%20San%20Javier-Ficha%20Informativa%20.pdf>

3 GEIH 2019. <https://microdatos.dane.gov.co/index.php/catalog/599>

4 Author base don data from ECV 2013. Revisión y Ajuste Plan de Desarrollo Local Comuna 13 – San Javier. 2015-2027. https://www.medellin.gov.co/ndesarrollo/wp-content/uploads/archivos/PDLS/pdl_C13.pdf

In 2008, Medellín's municipal government initiated a comprehensive urban renewal project. Among the most significant interventions in Comuna 13, undertaken during the Alonso Salazar and Anibal Gaviria administrations, was the revitalization of public spaces through the construction of parks, schools, libraries, universities, and an escalator in the Las Independencias I. Concurrently, the streets of Comuna 13 began to be occupied and inhabited by street artists. Dancers, DJs, rappers, and graffiti artists began to animate the public spaces with performances and visual artworks, many of which depicted and shaped the community's history and collective memory (Restrepo Cadavid 2013), while at the same time, serving as catalysts for commercial and tourist activities (Gaviria Puerta 2019). Indeed, since the mid-2010s, neighborhoods like Las Independencias I and II have emerged as prominent tourist destinations. According to the Medellín City Hall, they rank among the city's main tourist attractions, with a reported influx of 1,663,461 visitors in 2022. Many of these tourists explore the neighborhood through the *Graffitiour*, an "aesthetic, political, and historical" guided tour (Pérez 2018).

Graffitiour

210 ■ The *Graffitiour* is a guided walking tour through Las Independencias I and II, primarily operated by a wide network of local guides, although a smaller contingent hails from other parts of Medellín, other Colombian cities, or even from abroad. These guides, diverse in age and gender, may be formally affiliated with registered organizations or tourism agencies, operate informally, or even work as occasional guides supplementing their main income with tours. Guides typically wait at two main locations: the San Javier metro station and the "main" entrance to Las Independencias I. They begin offering *Graffitiours* to passersby around 9 or 10 am continuing until 5 or 6 pm. Alternatively, they can meet pre-booked visitors at designated times. Tour itineraries demonstrate variations in duration, cost, and content, ranging from 30 minutes to 4 hours, with fees varying from a voluntary contribution to 100,000 pesos. Despite some little variations in the route, most *Graffitiours* follow a winding pedestrian path, built as part of the escalator project, roughly covering 1.5 kilometers, crossing the hillside of Las Independencias I and II. The landscape is characterized by a dense network of narrow, steeply inclined streets, alleys, and staircases, flanked by self-constructed, two- or three-story buildings. Approximately halfway along the route, six escalator sections connect the lower and upper segments of the pedestrian path. While crossing this pedestrian path, the tour guides organize a series of stops, including street art exhibitions (break-dancers, freestylers, etc.), as well as visits to various art galleries, museums, souvenir shops, bars, cafes, restaurants, street vendors, etc. However, the core element of the *Graffitiour* lies in the thematic interpretation of the street artworks. The guides delve into a broad spectrum of topics depicted in these artworks, primarily reflecting real, historical events that have impacted the community's past. However, discussions may also extend

to contemporary social or political issues and broader concepts such as equality, freedom or peace, etc.

The *Graffitiour* offers a dynamic learning experience through movement, sensory engagement, and bodily immersion in the environment. Acknowledging the body's role in this process, it can be seen as an embodied form of learning. Scholars oriented towards phenomenology underscore a particular understanding of human experience rooted in perception and bodily engagement (Ihde 1990). Thus, phenomenological inquiry delves into experience as embodied within space and time, emphasizing the interplay between experience and movement (Sobchack 2004). Edmund Husserl, the pioneer of modern phenomenology, recognized the centrality of bodily kinesthetic movement in human experience (Landgrebe 1973). According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), a prominent figure in French phenomenology, bodily movement not only engenders experience but also fosters a unique form of knowledge. This perspective is echoed by Edward Casey (1993), who argues the existence of an "emplaced" knowledge, a kind of knowledge that emerges from the place itself. In this framework, the *Graffitiour* can be conceptualized as a means of generating embodied and "emplaced" knowledge, directly emerging from the environment, through the walls, while in motion. Given these characteristics, the *Graffitiour* can be compared to the method of walking (and photographing) ethnographies.

Anthropologists have traditionally conducted much of their research on foot, as evinced by the works of Marcel Mauss, William Foote Whyte, Jane Jacobs, Colin Turnbull, Elijah Anderson, Pierre Bourdieu or Michel de Certeau (Pink *et al.* 2010). However, only recently has walking been considered an ethnographic technique in its own right, a shift largely catalyzed by publications such as "Fieldwork on Foot" and "Ways of Walking," by anthropologists Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (2008, 2006). Rooted in phenomenology, their aim is to "embed our ideas of the social and the symbolic within the immediate day-to-day activities that bind practice and representation, doing, thinking and talking, and to show that everything takes place, in one way or the other, on the move" (Ingold and Vergunst 2008, 3).

These works have opened new methodological pathways, leading to the emergence of walking (and photographing) ethnographies. This approach has gained traction in studies exploring the experiences and challenges of specific locales (Hogan 2011; Irving 2017; O'Neill *et al.* 2002; Pink 2007; Shortell and Brown 2016). The idea is that walking through a particular place enables participants to relive memories associated with that location—a notion supported by Casey (2000, 182), who refers to "place memory" as a memory "bound to place as to its own basis." This participatory method, where participants shape the route and the narrative, subsequently guides theoretical analysis (Irving 2017).

Photography has been integral to anthropological research, pioneered by figures like Alfred Cort Haddon, Franz Boas, Baldwin Spencer, and Frank Gillen (Jacknis 1984; Morphy 1996). Bronislaw Malinowski also incorporated photography into his extended fieldwork approach (Young 1998). From the 1970s onwards,

photography began to meet the demands of scientific-realist approaches (Edwards 1992). The postmodern turn of the 1980s paved the way for visual methodologies to gain acceptance, as scholars recognized the subjectivity inherent in all forms of representation, whether textual or visual (Pink 2013). This recognition, along with the new possibilities introduced by technological developments, led to a surge in visual anthropological works during the early 21st century (El Guindi 2004; Grimshaw 2001; MacDougall 2005; Pink 2006; Rose 2021), consolidating the field of visual anthropology. Visual anthropology generally encompasses two parallel objectives: the anthropological analysis of existing media (such as films, videos, photography, drawings, etc.) and the production of anthropological media (including ethnographic films, videos, photography, drawings, interactive media, etc.). In this sense, visual anthropology provides both methodological tools and strategies for presenting results (Chiozzi 2000). In this study, the analysis of street art aligns with one of the key activities of visual anthropology, as described by anthropologist Marcus Banks (2001): the examination of pre-existing visual representations.

During my fieldwork, I applied the methodological approaches of walking and photographing ethnographies to the *Graffitour*. The *Graffitour* not only served as one of my primary means of accessing Comuna 13 but also as a key methodological tool. Upon arriving in Comuna 13, one of my first steps was to approach the *Graffitour* guides, who were stationed either at the entrance of Las Independencias I or at the San Javier metro station. I first introduced myself, explained my role as a researcher in the comuna, and requested information about the *Graffitour*, inquiring about the possibility of recording the tours in audio format. I made this request cautiously, concerned that it might be seen as inappropriate, impractical, or potentially burdensome to the guides. However, I was relieved to find that they never expressed any objections or irritation.

In total, I participated in 10 *Graffitours*, some in groups and others individually, with various officially registered, informal, or even occasional guides, both men and women over the age of 18, all of whom were locals. Working primarily with locals was a key selection criterion, as the aim of my research was to understand the effects of street art on the lives of the inhabitants. The number of *Graffitours* was not predetermined. I decided to stop at ten due to data saturation—when it became evident that additional *Graffitours* would not yield new insights. During the *Graffitours*, each guide addressed approximately the same fifteen or twenty street artworks. I basically listened to the guides as we walked, recording their narrations in audio format, while also taking photographs of the artworks. All guides were offered financial compensation, though a few chose not to accept it. Before beginning the *Graffitours*, all the guides signed an informed consent form, allowing me to record their narratives and disclose their true identities, in line with the ethics committee of the university that approved the research. However, after transcribing and analyzing the recordings, I realized that the guides' narratives occasionally touched on sensitive topics. To ensure their safety, I ultimately decided to withhold their true identities and exclude any identifying information from all publications.

The guides generally receive information about each artwork directly from the artists via WhatsApp groups or through direct interactions. Information for new artworks may take some time to circulate among the guides. For older artworks, particularly those depicting real historical events (such as the ones discussed in this paper), their interpretations are gradually “assimilated” and shared among family members, friends, or colleagues, eventually solidifying into a form of collective understanding. While this understanding may not be universally acknowledged across the entire community, it is at least recognized within the network of guides, community associations, and broader artistic and cultural movements. However, while the core storyline remains consistent, individual guides often personalize their narratives, emphasizing certain details or omitting others, based on various factors: their personal histories and experiences, whether they were present in the neighborhood during the events being described, their level of involvement, educational background, language skills, personal interests, current mood, the degree of empathy they establish with tourists, their level of fatigue, etc. In contrast, when artworks depict more abstract concepts, there is more room for personal interpretation, leading to narratives that may differ slightly from one guide to another.

Participating in 10 *Graffitiours* was a dynamic, immersive, and exhausting experience, that profoundly deepened my understanding of the impact of street art in Comuna 13. First of all, the tours were physically demanding, as the steep streets and hot weather often required navigating challenging terrain for 3 or 4 hours under the sun. Beyond the physical effort, building rapport with the guides and paying close attention to their insights was essential. Each *Graffitiour* provided new perspectives, observations, and challenges. The guides’ willingness to share their knowledge and experiences, as well as their openness to answering my questions or exploring specific aspects in greater depth, was central to the research. However, beyond the tour days, I spent much of my remaining time in Comuna 13, visiting local shops, cafes, public spaces, cultural and artistic associations, events, or simply walking the streets. I often engaged in conversations with residents or artists, some of which revealed how street art not only represented the past but also shaped the community’s present-day and future aspirations. As one resident said: “All this street art represents who we are now—not delinquents, but people focused on art and culture.” Spending an extended period of time in the comuna also allowed me to witness how the neighborhood itself changed over time. Given its inherent ephemerality, street art changes or is modified over time, continually transforming the urban landscape. The artworks I present in this article, for example, were completely replaced toward the final months of my fieldwork. Due to time constraints, I decided not to consider them, and perhaps revisit the matter in the future.

In a previous contribution (Riga 2024), I explored the transformative impact of street art in Comuna 13 by analyzing five distinct artworks. Here, I will examine an additional set of five pieces: “El Salado” (Figure 1); “El Convite” (Figure 2); “La Muerte” (Figure 3); “El Condor” (Figure 4); and “El Arte” (Figure 5). I selected these

five because they best serve the article’s objective: to examine how street art can be employed in anthropological inquiry to capture the unique and specific historical, social, economic, and cultural dynamics of urban process; and how street art, as a city-making tool, actively participates in and propels ongoing urban changes. Each artwork is accompanied by a corresponding narration. These narrations are direct quotations by the guides, recorded during the *Graffitiours*, and are integrated with discussions with residents and artists, which I recorded in my field notes. After transcribing the ten recordings, I initially grouped together every narration related to each artwork. Once I had organized the ten narrations for each artwork, I crafted a coherent and chronological narrative by incorporating details and specificities found in some transcriptions but absent in others, and so on. I also added to the narrations with insights from conversations with other participants, and, in some case, my own observations.

Exploring Street Art

Figure 1. El Salado



Source: Picture taken by the author, Medellín, 2022.

This artwork was painted by Chota. It depicts an enslaved indigenous woman. Her story is rooted in the town of Santa Fe de Antioquia, a municipality near Medellín that was once the capital of Antioquia, where the Spanish conquerors trades

indigenous slaves—some of whom managed to escape—until the second half of the 19th century. The woman's hair captures the path those slaves, lacking paper maps, used to etch onto their scalps. That path led them to the outskirts of Medellín, where, in 1840, they founded what is considered the oldest neighborhood of Comuna 13: El Salado, named after the salt mine and saltwater river it was developed around. Salt and mining provided a crucial livelihood for these early settlers, enabling them to engage in trade in the region and continue to flourish. They also specialized in pottery, focusing on the fabrication of clay jars commonly employed for storing salt, such as the one placed by the artist beneath her nose.

Talking about the past of the comuna, Jomag, a young graffiti artist told me:

Comuna 13 has historically grown because of its diversity of cultures, ethnicities, ways and perspectives of life, and ways of relating to one another. Today, some of this diversity has been lost. For me, it's important to acknowledge these graphics, to recognize these pre-Colombian symbols, and to understand that they are part of our heritage. We, as artists, need to bring them out to the public so that people can recognize that this is ours and that it belongs to us. (September 18, 2022, Medellín)

Figure 2. El Convite



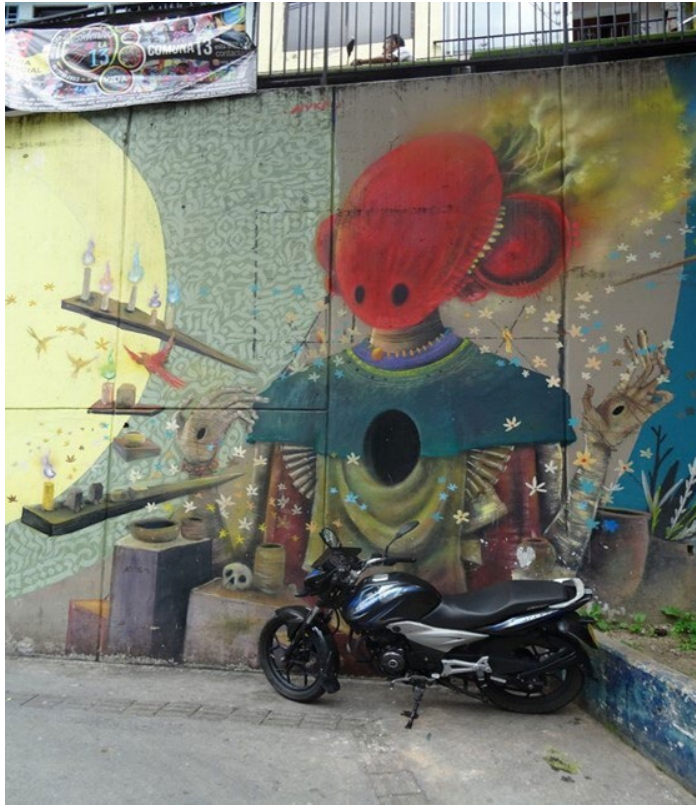
Source: Picture taken by the author, Medellín, 2022.

Let's us fast forward 100 years, to a time when peasant, Afro-descendant, and indigenous populations, displaced by *La Violencia* from regions such as Chocó, Urabá, and Baya de Antioquia, began to "invade" this sparsely populated, marginal area of Medellín. This apparently female figure emerges from the roots of the previous enslaved indigenous woman, adapting to the changing community. Her skin is composed of wood, the main material used in constructing the initial dwellings, while her crown consists of bricks, a material that progressively replaced wood. She wears four large earrings, within which the artist, YessGraff, has reproduced four different moments in the history of the comuna. On the upper left earring, the artist portrays the river meandering through a barren, uninhabited valley, with a few scattered trees lining its banks. In the lower section, there is the river with the few dwellings of the early settlers scattered here and there on the mountain-sides. In the upper earring of her right ear, there are two men wearing traditional Antioquian hats, accompanied by a shovel, hammer, saw, and a water pipe. These symbols represent the *convite*; a widespread practice in the Antioquian countryside until the displaced peasants brought it to the city. The term *convite* generally indicates a gathering of workers who provide services in exchange for food, but, in fact, it was much more than that. It was a community and collective practice of self-construction. Therefore, when it came to planning construction projects, whether they involved buildings, houses or infrastructure such as roads or staircases, the materials were occasionally provided by the government, or sourced from within the community; men usually provided the labor force; while women prepared meals, often a *sancocho paísa*, which served as a "means of payment" for the workers who gathered for communal dinners at the end of the working day. It was through the *convite* that those initial scattered houses on the mountain edges became an intricate urban fabric composed of a multitude of colorful and disorderly one, two, or three-story houses, as depicted by the artist in the lower earring of the right ear.

Jeihhco, the "director" of Casa Kolacho, a well-known cultural and artistic associations in Comuna 13, confirmed the relevance of the *convite* within the comuna:

The *convite* is something very local, very rural. In the countryside, it was used to clear paths. Whether it was for building a road or a structure, everyone—primarily men, but often women as well—would contribute, with the women usually preparing *sancocho*. That meal helped build an entire generation of houses, roads, streets, and stairs. This neighborhood was full of *campesinos*, many of whom were displaced people who had come to the city from the countryside. (July 11, 2022, Medellín)

Figure 3. La Muerte



Source: Picture taken by the author, Medellín, 2022.

From the two, almost comforting, female figures, we transition to a faceless character steeped in a dark atmosphere. This artwork, painted by Nuka, embodies the pain, suffering, violence, and death that marked a dark chapter in Comuna 13's history. His face is covered, for the violence in Comuna 13 has struck indiscriminately, claiming innocent lives without regard. A hole pierces his chest, mirroring the void left by the violence in the whole community, a void that haunts both victims and perpetrators. A necklace of large-caliber bullets adorns his neck, a stark reminder of the weapons that empowered the various armed groups that filled the void left by the State. Because the State's absence in these self-built invasion neighborhoods resulted not only in a lack of basic services, transportation, or proper infrastructure, but also in the absence of public safety. This neglect fostered a rise in crime, with murders, thefts, prostitution, drug trafficking, and so on. In response, some residents armed themselves beginning in the 80s, forming Popular Militias, to deal with their own security needs. However, in addition to taking on security concerns, even strictly prohibiting marijuana use, for instance, the Popular Militias soon began engaging in other illegal activities, such as extorting shops and homes, a

practice known as *vacuna* (vaccine) because it was as painful as an injection. Starting in the mid-1990s, control by the Popular Militias gave way to the arrival of counterinsurgency armed groups—*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP); *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN); and *Comandos Armados del Pueblo* (CAP). These groups perpetuated the cycle of violence through intense firefights and established territorial control by imposing invisible borders. These exist in several urban centers in Colombia and are intended to divide the territory among illegal armed groups, thus recognizing their jurisdictions to carry out criminal activities. Crossing an invisible border was very dangerous, as it could result in an attack or even death. In addition to the pain imposed by these armed groups, the local population began to be stigmatized by the rest of the city, as depicted by the artist through the perforations in the hands of the character. They were often denied access to jobs or study opportunities outside of the *comuna*. The *comuna* remained under guerrillas' control until the early 2000s. Between 2000 and 2002, the Colombian government, intending to assert its presence, launched 24 military operations, turning the *comuna* into the battleground of an urban war. The last one was *Operación Orión*, which took place on October 16, 2002, under the government of Alvaro Uribe with the collaboration of a far-right paramilitary group, the *Bloque Cacique Nutibara*. The operation included two Black Hawk helicopters borrowed from the U.S.A. After 3 days of crossfire, they managed to eradicate the guerrillas, but at a high cost in terms of civil casualties, injuries, disappearance, and displacement. The reported toll included 17 homicides committed by the Public Force, 71 homicides committed by paramilitary groups, 80 wounded, 12 people tortured, 370 arbitrary detentions, and 6 forced disappearances. After the operation ended, paramilitary forces maintained control of the *comuna*, reportedly with the approval of the Uribe government, for an additional three years, until their demobilizations in 2005. As documented by testimonies from demobilized paramilitaries and survivors, over the next three years the paramilitary forces engaged in a brutal campaign of violence against the civilians. Hundreds of people were murdered, tortured, raped, forcibly detained, and disappeared under the false pretense of collaborating with, or being members of, the guerrillas. Estimating an exact number is not an easy task. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) maintains a database indicating that over 400 people remain missing, probably buried in the *Escombrera*, the largest urban mass grave in Latin America. The artist sought to commemorate the victims through those lit candles and the small wheeled houses positioned on the wooden table.

As testified by Julieth, a resident who directly experienced the conflict:

The war here was super horrific. Sometimes we'd wake up and find 10, 15, even 20 people dead. It was extremely harsh, really tough. During *Operación Orión*, so many people were involved—the militias, guerrillas, paramilitaries, the army, the police, everyone. Many people lost their lives; some were killed, others dismembered—they were killed with chainsaws, tortured, their fingernails ripped out. This neighborhood was very dangerous. (July 18, 2022, Medellín)

Figure 4. El Cóndor



Source: Picture taken by the author, Medellín, 2022.

The next artwork, painted by FateOne, traces the outline of a condor. With wings outstretched, a human face emerges at the center below. The face belongs to Luis Arturo Holguín, one of the most prominent social leaders in Las Independencias, who lost his life due to the conflict. He made a significant contribution to the community, providing both labor and materials for construction projects. He also founded a free community restaurant to provide food for the children of the neediest families. Today, some of those children are adults, some of them work as *Graffitour* guides and always remember him with gratitude and a smile on their faces. His face is emerging from the opening of others. These are the multiple facets that a leader must have. The wrinkled and gray face represents the strength and wisdom that comes with age. The yellow face represents charisma, the blue face, knowledge, and the one that looks up is the spiritual facet. Above the head of the condor there is the cap of a spray can, symbolizing the art that many children have embraced as an alternative to violence, encouraged by social leaders like him. Indeed, in the aftermath of the conflict, the community refused to give up and instead sought to rebuild the social fabric fragmented by the trauma of violence. For example, among the various organizations that emerged to promote collective actions as an alternative to violence, the following stood out: Juegos Cooperativos para la No Violencia, Jughandi, Corpades, Caravana por la Vida, Realizadores de Sueños, Corporación Sal y Luz, Red Cultural Expresarte, Asociación de Mujeres Las Independencias, Mujeres Caminando por la

Verdad, la Red Élite Hip Hop, and Son Batá (Alzate 2010). Some of the collective actions carried out included: *La marcha de los pañuelos blancos* (The March of the White Handkerchiefs) on May 21, 2002, during *Operación Mariscal*; *La marcha por la vida y la dignidad humana* (The March for Life and Human Dignity) on July 13, 2002; the caravan *Porque los límites no son frontera* (because borders are not limits) in 2008; the festivals *En la 13 la violencia no nos vence* (In Comuna 13, We Don't Bow Down to Violence) in 2004 or, as it was called the following year *Revolución sin muertos* (Revolution Without Deaths) organized by the Red Elite Hip Hop; and activities in sports fields, among others (Alzate 2010). These myriad of cultural, political, artistic, and sports associations have demonstrated enormous community strength in Comuna 13, motivated by the will to overcome the dark past. However, among these, community-based art undoubtedly stands out as a driving force for change.

As Ciro, a young artist member of Casa Kolacho, stated:

As artists, we began standing on a corner and changing its usual dynamic. Corners had always been owned by thieves, criminals, and armed groups, but from that moment, those corners became the artists' corners. We started occupying the public spaces, of Comuna 13 where they used to leave dead bodies. We began offering breakdancing, graffiti, and freestyle classes, and little by little, people started approaching to these spaces. (July 25, 2022, Medellín)

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Figure 5. El Arte



Source: Picture taken by the author, Medellín, 2022.

The last image emphasizes the impact of street art in Comuna 13. The artist, PerroGraff, depicts another young female figure. She is listening to music through her headphones. Around her are the colors of the art that have contributed to transforming the *comuna* and the lives of its inhabitants. Her face is tinged with a blue hue that fades away like a mask being removed. This mask once hid her face, but thanks to art, she was able to take it off, raise her head and move on. The conflict may have destroyed many things in Comuna 13, but life goes on. Here, art has been the spark that has kept the flame of hope alive. The artist wanted to show how, through art, the community, and especially the youth, have found the strength to overcome the challenges imposed by the conflict and move towards a better future.

After the paramilitaries demobilized, a wave of street artists swept through Comuna 13, reclaiming its public spaces. While the *comuna* had always harbored artistic talent, the conflict had severely limited their possibilities to express themselves. A turning point came in 2002, the year of the brutal *Operación Orión*. Yet, amidst the devastation, Red Elite Hip Hop, the first hip hop network in Comuna 13, was born. This group of artists aimed to transform their reality through art. They wrote protest songs, established hip hop schools, and organized events, parties, and festivals. Meanwhile, the once-grief-stricken walls of the *comuna* blossomed with vibrant colors and powerful images. Before these artistic interventions, the walls displayed the grim realities of war: bullet holes, victims' bloodstains, and threatening messages scrawled in red or black by armed groups, instilled fear and helplessness in the community. But then, street artists adorned the walls with oversized, colorful letters intertwined with faces, birds, elephants, and a kaleidoscope of other images and colors, replacing those menacing messages. Streets, corners, and public spaces—once considered havens for gang members, thieves, armed actors, and even dumping grounds for bodies—were revitalized by street artists. MCs began improvising rhymes, DJs spun music, and breakdancers filled the air with their energy. The community, initially wary of these expressive newcomers, gradually came to understand their mission. While the government and armed groups offered them bombs, helicopters, and machine guns, the street artists offered records, dance floors, spray cans, and microphones. Street art became woven into the daily life of the inhabitants. People began to step out of the trauma of conflict and death and embrace a more vibrant and hopeful reality.

Larger canvases emerged in 2011 with the construction of retaining walls for the new escalators. Street artists seized the opportunity, transforming these walls into vibrant artworks, most of which captured the history of the *comuna*. These artworks became the foundation for the first *Graffitiour* on August 11th of that year. A visiting American congressman, seeking information for a report on *Plan Colombia* and *Operación Orión*, contacted the MiSangre foundation, run by the famous Colombian rock star Juanes, requesting a guide for a visit to Comuna 13. The foundation, aware of Red Elite Hip Hop's presence in the *comuna*, reached out to the group. Two members, rapper Jeihhco and graffiti artist PerroGraff, met with the congressman.

While the congressman sought insights into the *comuna*'s history, Jeihhco and Perro wanted to showcase hip hop, and used street art to narrate the history and memory of Comuna 13. This is how the *Graffitiour* was born. The *Graffitiour*'s popularity grew in the following months and years. Initially catering to journalists, researchers, and students interested in the phenomenon, it eventually attracted tourists drawn to the revitalized Comuna 13. Faced with an influx of tourists, the community initially retreated, feeling a sense of intrusion. However, a resident named Don Luis saw an opportunity. He transformed rooms in his house into a michelada business. His success inspired others. Soon, homes were being repurposed, and restaurants, bars, art galleries, and shops began to appear. Today, the main viaduct alone boasts around 250 businesses. Undoubtedly, art-driven tourism has become a powerful economic force for Comuna 13. Once ravaged by violence, the *comuna* is now a vibrant tourist destination, receiving 1,663,461 visitors in 2022, and allowing many inhabitants to improve their living conditions.

Nevertheless, despite the undeniable economic benefits of mass tourism, it has also introduced new challenges and contradictions, which are today the subject of ongoing debates within the community. In recent years, for example, there has been a disturbing rise in child begging. Numerous local organizations are trying to combat this phenomenon by warning tourists not to give alms to minors who are often encountered along the *Graffitiour* routes. At the same time, mass tourism has brought about challenges due to the constant influx of people and noise, prompting some residents to relocate to other areas. An additional contradiction is that the influx of capital brought into the local economy is only benefiting few sectors of the population, while the vast majority of Comuna 13's inhabitants still live in extreme poverty. Comuna 13 is made up of 23 neighborhoods, and the tourist area is concentrated in just a few of these, particularly those surrounding Las Independencias I and II. Finally, some organizations, such as *Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad*, an association of women victims of the conflict, are concerned that the surge in tourism has in some way led to a distancing of the public opinion from their claims and political struggles. These associations perceive that while art initially served as a vehicle for memory and resistance, with the rise in tourism, their political claims have been replaced by purely commercial purposes.

As Doña Socorro, a prominent social leader of Comuna 13 and founder of *Asociacion Mujeres de Las Independencias* (AMI), declared:

What is transformation? Is it change? There is still no change in Comuna 13. This is not transformation; it's commerce. If there were transformation, we wouldn't be asking for donations, there wouldn't be poverty, there wouldn't be children begging, and there wouldn't be abused women. (February 16, 2023, Medellín)

Street Art as Both an Ethnographic Tool and a City-Making Practice

Comuna 13's story is a saga of transformation, etched not just in time but in the very surface of its public spaces. Indeed, the five street artworks presented above, provided valuable insight into Comuna 13's complex history, significantly enhancing our understanding of its dynamic changes and shedding light on its residents' multiple struggles, communal practices, adaptations, and the intricate interplay of historical, social, cultural, and political forces. Street art has allowed us to observe Comuna 13 not merely as a static "object" of research or a passive backdrop; rather, it has emerged as a dynamic, ever-changing process shaped by both external and internal actions and interventions.

Street art transported us back in time to 1840, to the foundation of the first neighborhood in Comuna 13, El Salado (Figure 1). It showed us how those first sparse settlements of Indigenous people, escaped from slavery, developed around a salt mine that provided them with an important means of subsistence. After that, it took us forward 100 years, to the time of displacement during *La Violencia* (Figure 2). It showed us how those initial settlements rapidly transformed, through *convites*, into an intricate urban fabric composed of a multitude of colorful and disorderly brick houses. The scene then shifted to a harrowing period of suffering, which lasted from the 1980s until the 2000s (Figure 3). Violence, conflict, and death gripped the civilian population. Various armed groups, military operations, and the dominance of paramilitaries fueled the brutality. Assassinations, kidnappings, executions, tortures, rapes, disappearances, and forced displacements shattered the social fabric of the community. However, the next image (Figure 4) offered a glimmer of hope, showcasing the community's collective actions towards healing and resistance. Exemplified by the efforts of social leaders like Luis Arturo Holguin, these actions and practices aimed to rebuild the social fabric and provide new generations with an alternative to violence. One of the most powerful among these alternatives was undoubtedly street art (Figure 5). It helped the community move beyond its traumatic past and, through art-driven tourism, aspire towards a more prosperous future. However, tourism also brought new challenges and contradictions, highlighting that street art, while a powerful tool for change, should not be romanticized or considered a definitive solution to all issues.

However, street art not only illuminated the dynamic history of Comuna 13 and the city-making practices employed by its inhabitants, such as the *convite*, but also emerged as a potent city-making practice in its own right. Street art has fully contributed to the processes of change and transformation that have recently occurred in Comuna 13. Initially, street art, resurfacing following the demobilization of paramilitaries, gradually helped residents to reclaim and re-inhabit public spaces. These spaces, once deemed hazardous and inhabited by armed actors were filled with artistic expressions. So, street art, by altering the aesthetic appearance of public spaces and

the activities taking place within them, laid the groundwork for the transition from a space dominated by armed groups to one appropriated by local artists: “a space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group” (Lefebvre 1991, 165). Over time and with the development of the *Graffitour*, street art laid the groundwork for another transformation, one that involved the transition from a space that was appropriated to one that was touristified. Geographers have coined the term *touristification* to describe the process by which urban spaces are modified to accommodate the needs of visitors and the interests of the tourism industry (Knafou 1996). While touristification has brought new economic opportunities for some residents, it has also brought about new challenges and contradictions. The community’s ability to address these emerging challenges and keep shaping their environment in alignment with everybody’s needs remains a topic of ongoing inquiry.

Conclusion

Urban anthropologists have recently revisited one of the discipline’s traditional debates regarding whether to pursue anthropologies *of* cities or anthropologies *in* cities. Acknowledging the limitations of both approaches, contemporary urban anthropologists are less focused on the city itself—both as an object of research and as a research setting—and are increasingly directing their attention to cities as processes and to the city-making practices implemented by their inhabitants. In light of this debate, I propose that street art stands out as a particularly evident and effective city-making practice available to residents. By analyzing five street art pieces in Comuna 13, I illustrated how street art has served as a powerful means of making and remaking the city but also how a systematic study of street art can provide a fresh and innovative lens for analyzing contemporary cities as constantly changing processes.

This study contributes to the broader dialogue on urban transformations in Colombia and beyond, resonating with similar experiences in other regions where street art functions as a catalyst for social and economic change. In many urban settings, particularly those marked by marginalization, social inequality, or political conflict, street art has emerged as a powerful medium for reclaiming public spaces by transforming neglected or stigmatized areas into vibrant cultural hubs or tourist destinations. Cities like Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, or Naples have similarly witnessed the role of street art in transforming urban spaces and attracting international tourism. While mass tourism attracted by street art often brings economic advantages, it can also lead to contradictions, injustices, and additional challenges. At the end of the day, this study establishes street art as a key element that can trigger complex urban processes, as well as potential contradictions and additional challenges. Given its ability to trigger these processes through the physical and material transformation of public spaces, I consider street art one of the most concrete and effective city-making practices available to inhabitants, from the bottom-up.

Conceiving street art as a city-making practice implies that it can also function as an important tool for anthropological inquiry, useful for observing the city not as the object of research, nor simply as its context, but as an ever-changing process. The widespread prevalence of street art in cities around the globe makes it a valuable subject for investigating urban contexts in diverse geographic locations. However, its deeply contextual and situated characteristics can enable the exploration of the historical, cultural, political, and economic singularities of each specific urban context. This could also provide a basis for comparative urban studies using street art as a focal point. Yet, while walking tours where local guides share the city's or neighborhood's story through street art exist in some places, they are not widely available everywhere. Therefore, it is up to the researcher's creativity and skill to find the methodological and analytical keys to study the city through street art.

In conclusion, some questions remain to be addressed: How is street art, as a city-making practice, related to, or influenced by, the particular broader political and economic structures? What are the social and political implications of street art as a form of city-making? Can this approach be replicated or extended to other urban contexts? Can street art be used to conduct comparative studies in different scenarios? What are the limitations and potential biases of such approach? I believe this perspective holds significant and fascinating promises for studying the intricacies of urban life as it unfolds through the lens of street art. Yet, further investigation is necessary to refine the methodology, explore its applicability in diverse cities, and fully understand the broader implications of street art as a tool for both urban analysis and social change.

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