

# The Energy Of A City

**How can one define the border between Street Art and Vandalism?**



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## **Abstract**

What makes Graffiti and Street art different from random vandalism?

The worldwide popularity of Street Art not just among young people is the consequence of an art form that has been producing a rich variety of works, which value has been demonstrated by the impact they have on other forms of visual culture including their success within the art system and market. In spite of this, it is still possible to debate on the beauty of Street Art and to label it as vandalism because of the way it affects private and public properties within the cities.

My work aims to demonstrate that the actual value of Street Art is strictly related to its unique ability to visualize the energy of a city and its inhabitants by creating some sort of organic connection between the two. To do this, I moved from the direct observation of two different cities, Bogotá and Belfast, where I have been collecting photographs of Murals, Street Art and Graffiti pieces, which I took myself while visiting.

## Introduction

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s a revolution took place in the streets and industrial areas of the city of New York, which spread across the country and later on across the entire world. It was a visual attack towards society and its antics, fought against anonymous urban architecture to reaffirm the value of identity. Graffiti writers invaded the streets with their words of rebellion, pushing the authorities and claiming that the walls of their city were their canvas.



1. Graffiti on a Train, New York

Whether their purposes were economical, political or social, they all had one thing in common: their work was addressing a broad audience, broader than any art language did before.<sup>1</sup> From an anarchist impulsive form of underground communications, Street Art became a more complicated phenomenon, often interlaced with the official art world and its market.

Under the eyes of the law, Graffiti and Street Art are categorized as vandalism, and often it can become a punishable crime. This is not only because people believe that they damage properties and deface beautiful buildings, but also because they advertise unpredictable concepts. Nevertheless, street artists tend to work in neglected neighbourhoods and old buildings, often preferring rundown walls for the location of their works.<sup>2</sup> The success of artists such as Keith Haring and Banksy has demonstrated that Street Art can be as valuable and

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<sup>1</sup> Lewisohn, Cedar. *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*. New York, 2008, pp.

<sup>2</sup> Seno, Ethel, Carlo McCormick, Marc Schiller, and Sara Schiller. *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. N.p.: Taschen, n.d. Print.

formally beautiful as influential in terms of visual culture. Eventually the line that separates vandalism and art has blurred into the unknown.

Despite the quarrels between art and vandalism, there are many cities around the world that have been awarded with an incredible energy. The streets of these cities, such as New York, Berlin, Paris, London, Melbourne, Bogotá, São Paulo and Belfast, are not defaced, but are beautified with streams of meaningful words and bright colours. Their vitality has become famous all around the world, as their atmosphere captures more and more people.

What can support the idea that street art has been and it still is playing a significant role in the life of a city? How can this art form stay out of the galleries and go beyond the mere definition of vandalism? In order to answer, I decided to analyze and compare two very different examples. By walking through the streets of Bogotá and Belfast, I was able to experience a connection between the physical aspect of the city and its people. I contemplated the idea that the street art is part of the city's life and while exploring the two cities I took hundreds of photographs in order to collect material for my work. Afterwards I reviewed and selected what I had managed to capture and contacted a Colombian Street Artist, known as Stinkfish, for an interview via e-mail.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, it became clear to me that Street Art can become an important and distinctive feature of a city by celebrating the life of its people, its culture and its history.

## Street Art

Any unsanctioned art that is developed and exhibited in the streets and public places can be defined as Street Art.<sup>4</sup> Usually street art is connected to the place where it is located and it can be culturally specific. While street art forms part of a place, graffiti tends to be more

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<sup>3</sup> I found his e-mail while searching on the Internet for more information about him – he owns a blog where he documents all his works. See appendix for the complete interview in Spanish and its English translation.

<sup>4</sup> "Street Art." *Street Art Definition*. Artrepublic, n.d. Web. 27 Feb. 2013.  
<[http://www.artrepublic.com/art\\_terms/39-street-art.html](http://www.artrepublic.com/art_terms/39-street-art.html)>.

universal, its characteristics in terms of message and formal qualities are similar all over the world. Although graffiti has barely anything to do with context and location, as it is an independent language used to communicate between crews, it was and still is used as a way of claiming property over an area or district – a concept similar to territorial marking, which suggests the need and claim for an identity.



2. Graffiti, Bogotá

On the other hand, street art aims to communicate with a broad range of people and embraces the city. Moreover, another interesting difference between Street Art and Graffiti is the fact that street artists often prepare the work before putting it onto a wall. This can be seen in the process of making a stencil piece<sup>5</sup>, where the artist must create the stencil before using it on a wall. Graffiti writers do sometimes prepare detailed sketches before painting a wall<sup>6</sup>, however, their works are far more spontaneous. When it comes to street art, there is a lot of thought put into each work, whether it is to comment on society, on politics or to simply commemorate the people of a city and their culture.

While graffiti writers mainly use free-hand aerosol paint to produce their tag works and designs, there are many different techniques and media that street artists have adopted through

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<sup>5</sup> A Stencil is a thin sheet of card, plastic, or metal with a pattern or letters cut out of it, used to produce the cut design on the surface below by the application of ink or paint through the holes (Oxford Dictionary). For more information and examples see Howze, Russell. *Stencil Nation: Graffiti, Community, and Art*.

<sup>6</sup> For some example of sketchbooks, see Manco, Tristan. *Street Sketchbook*.

the evolution of street art aside from only using spray paint. The techniques include mosaic tiling, stencils, stickers, street installations, 3D art, stop motion animations and many more.<sup>7</sup>



### 3. Space Invaders, Paris

Moreover the variety of media that is used is endless, as any material or object can be used. There are many works, carried out with different techniques, which have stood out from the rest and remained in history. An extremely interesting one is called Space Invaders, which originated in Paris and later on started to appear in other cities around the world. Space Invaders were created using the technique of tiling and were placed in many different locations such as, avenues, squares and monuments.<sup>8</sup> Another street artist that became famous for his originality is the Italian artist, Blue, who created stop motion animations.<sup>9</sup>

Other street artists' works reassemble more conventional styles of art, such as the Italian artist Alice Pasquini, whose pieces are incredibly expressive and formally beautiful.

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<sup>7</sup> For some examples, see Shove, Gary. *Untitled III: This Is Street Art* and Bou, Louis. *NYC BCN: Street Art Revolution*.

<sup>8</sup> For more information and examples of Space Invaders see the Official Website: <<http://www.space-invaders.com/som.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> Blue's videos can be watched online: <<http://www.blublu.org/sito/video/001.html>>.



4. Alice Pasquini, Rome

Nonetheless, the most popular medium has always been spray paint and still is, whether used on its own or combined with other media. Stencil turned out to be an incredibly efficient and popular technique. In fact, it is a distinctive characteristic of Banksy, one of the most famous street artists in the world. The British artist creates his pieces in such way that they interact with the location, his works have often the purpose of commenting on social and political issues, and his relationship with the streets is evidenced through his works.<sup>10</sup>



5. Banksy, Boston

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<sup>10</sup> *BANKSY: Wall and Piece*. London: Random House, 2006. Print.

The success that Street Art had upon the world relies on the fact that it is approachable by anyone. This was already been one of the main concerns of the Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886-1957), who stated, “Mural art is the most significant art for the proletariat.”<sup>11</sup> While clearly expressing his political position, he declared that conventional forms of art are not accessible to everyone and referred to the educational function of art. Day by day, people are freely able to appreciate the concepts portrayed on the walls of their city. In the same way that advertisement manages to obtain a large audience, Street Art communicates directly with a broad range of viewers.

## The Energy of a City

The captivating capital city of Colombia, Santa Fé de Bogotá, is full of incongruity between its potent skyscrapers and its colonial historic churches and between its innovative avenues and its stone streets. The contrast of its futuristic and traditional architecture, its international and commercial environment, its conventional art and street art and, its people enhance the charm of this euphoric city.<sup>12</sup>

Bogotá has a prosperous colonial tradition with a variety of nationally well-known landmarks from that time period. One of the most important ones in the city is called *La Candelaria*, which is the oldest district in Bogotá. The historic neighbourhood is full of Old Spanish architecture and many of Bogotá’s museums and galleries. However there is something more special than conventional art museums and galleries, which is the large amount of street art works featured in its streets. While walking along the streets of this district one can contemplate various styles of street art, however one of its most interesting aspects is the contrast between the traditional styled houses and the colourful and modern designs. This

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<sup>11</sup> D. Rivera. “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art” quoted in Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Malden, MA, 2003, Page 421

<sup>12</sup> Harme, Bonnie. "Bogota, Colombia." *South America Travel*. About.com, n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2012. <<http://gosouthamerica.about.com/cs/southamerica/a/ColBogota.htm>>.

contrast can be seen in the following photograph, which displays a small humble white house blessed with vibrant colours. The simple house was rendered fascinating by the contrast between the painting and its humble façade with wooden door and windows.



6. Bogotá, 2012

Another example of how old houses are brought back to life, displays a large yellow tree that has been painted on the façade of a small red house.



7. Bogotá, 2012

Again, the bright design stands out from its surroundings. In addition to hosting incredible designs that beautify the old streets, *La Candelaria*, also hosts significant artworks that go beyond the mere design and give insight into not only the distinctive aspects of the Colombian people but also their culture and environment. The walls its houses are used to express vitality and represent the essence of the Colombian people. In the following photograph, the design on the wall of an old coffee shop portrays the combinations that can be seen in Colombia, modern skyscrapers, typical houses, nature and most importantly, the complexity and the beauty of the people.



8. Bogotá, 2012

The visual diversity of the city curiously seems to mirror the fact that Colombia is the second country with most biological diversity in the world, as it home to approximately 10 percent of the Earth's species.<sup>13</sup> This makes the people of Colombia extremely proud, thus it is celebrated in many ways including through street art. Such pride is reflected in Nomada's work, which portrays a rare and beautiful type of beetle.

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<sup>13</sup> "Colombia: Environmental Profile." *Colombia: Environmental Profile*. Mongabay, 6 Feb. 2006. Web. 06 Jan. 2013.



9. Beetle, Nomada, Bogotá, 2012

The insect is portrayed magnificently with mostly vibrant hues of blue and blends of pink, purple, yellow and green. Moreover it is given vivacity through the use of white highlights all around it, boosting its imposing presence from the bright red background and the other components of the design. It is greatly detailed with both realistic and abstract patterns. The use of spray painted lines is accurately smooth and rhythmic, emanating energy. The beetle represents more than the mere insect: it embodies the vitality of Colombia.

In a different way, the mural in photograph below ironically conveys one of the most famous traditions of Spain, which until 1810 colonized Colombia.



10. Unidentified Mural, Bogotá, 2012

The piece displays the body of a matador with the head of a bull, perhaps signifying that the antagonist eventually became the protagonist. Although these are just mere considerations, it could be said that this is an example of political and historical commentary.

Another example of how street art is related to the identity of the inhabitants is a painting carried out in a surrealistic style. The melancholic tone, presented in this piece, is rare in the streets of Bogotá, and its meaning could be unclear, if analyzed out of context. It is small and was probably painted with acrylic rather than spray paint. Two little boys are sitting down on the floor between two streams of faceless pregnant women.



11. Unidentified Painting, Bogotá, 2012

The painting could possibly comment on the way mothers keep having children but neglect them due to their emotional or economical instability. The look in the children's eyes in the painting emits a deep sense of sadness and loneliness. Despite the negative connotation of the painting and its quality, it still reflects Colombia's society and instigates thought.

These examples show how Street Art might reach the people of a city, reflecting their cultural, social and political situations in an effective way, due to its accessibility and freedom. The connection between Bogotá and its Street Art goes beyond the mere visual value. The streets of the capital are charged both positively and negatively with words and figures that address either the issues that haunt Colombia or its wonders and most loved aspects. Their significance is rooted in that direct and profound relationship between their content and the place for which they were created. Apart from the diversity of styles and quality, I believe that successful street art must be site specific.

Among the many artists that are featured in the streets of Bogotá, Stinkfish and the Toxicomano crew have stood out, due to their expression of extremely relevant aspects of their country and its people. Their identities are, for obvious reasons, kept anonymous.

## **Stinkfish**

The streets of Bogotá have been granted with beautiful and colourful portraits produced by Stinkfish. There is no concrete information about his background, except for the fact that his parents were Colombian and that he moved back to Bogotá in 1985.<sup>14</sup> He started his career as a street artist at a very young age, as he felt a true connection with the streets of the city. Although he has different types of influences in terms of images, artists and visual culture, he states that his “main source of visual references is the street itself, what happens there, the people he sees, the conversations and the graffiti.” In addition, he confesses, “From all the things I like to do, I love walking and see what happens around, no matter the day, the place or the hour.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Stinkfish." *GeoStreetArt*. GeoStreetArt, 12 May 2011. Web. 01 Oct. 2012.

<<http://geostreetart.com/theblog/stinkfish-interview/>>.

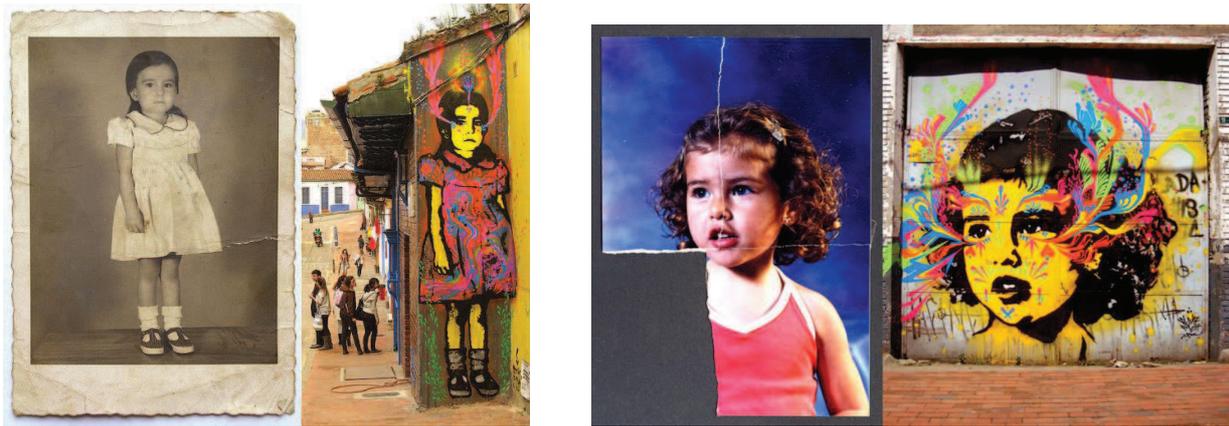
<sup>15</sup> Stinkfish: Personal Interview. E-mail to the author. October 2012. See appendix for the complete interview in Spanish and its English translation.

Stinkfish demonstrates and transmits a true connection with the city, its streets and its people through his works. His style is unique and can be easily distinguished. His works mainly consist of portraits of people reproduced on large scale by combining stencil with free spray painting to create explosions of colours and recurring patterns. The subjects of his portraits are always of people he does not know. Stinkfish always carries his photographic camera and take pictures of random people down the street, without them noticing. Sometimes he finds subjects for his works by collecting lost photographs lying in the streets while he walks. This is a further bond with the people of the city: his artworks portray the people of who walk along the streets every day.



12. Stinkfish, Bogotá, 2012

The photograph above was taken in a street in *La Candelaria* far from the centre and it displays one of Stinkfish's works. The little girl is unusually portrayed in full body and is directly looking at the viewer, which led me to assume that Stinkfish himself did not take the original photograph and that it was probably one of the many photographs he found. The following photographs confirmed my assumption.<sup>16</sup>



13. Stinkfish's Murals with Original Photograph

Moreover, another particularity of his subjects is the fact that he mostly chooses children for his works. Although he has produced portraits of people of different ages, the majority consists of children. The reason for this is that he faithfully believes in children<sup>17</sup>.

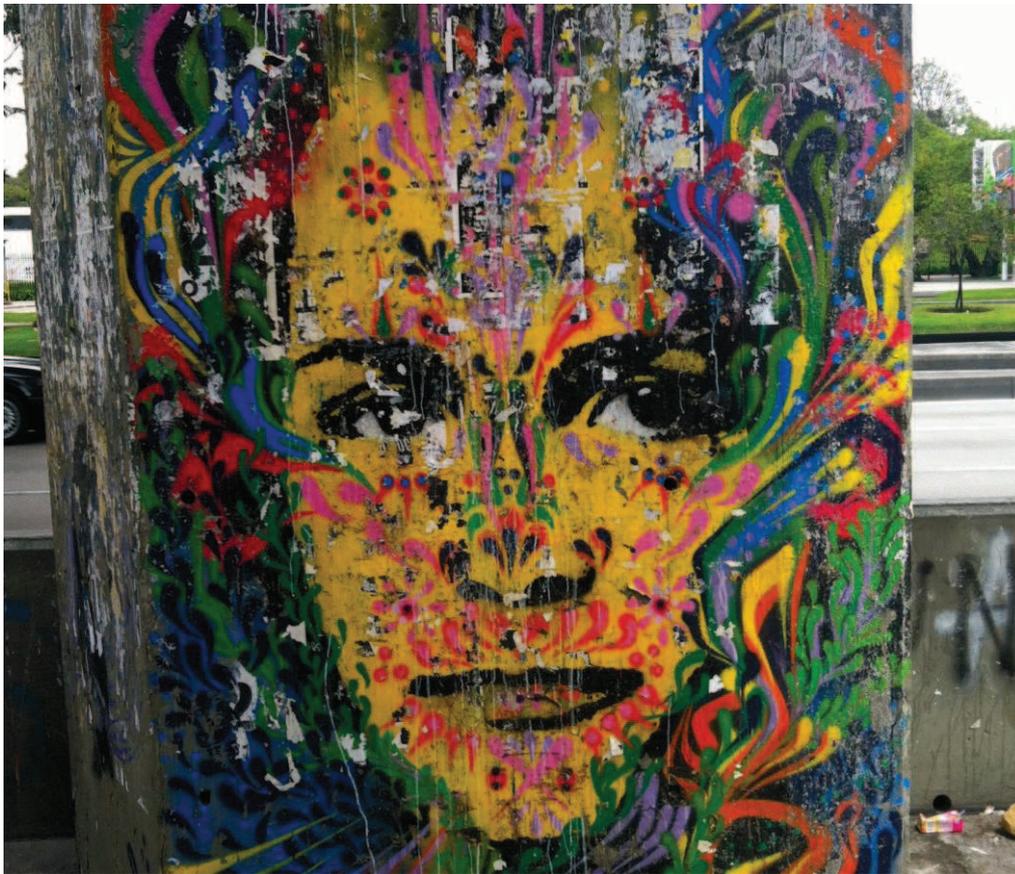


14. Stinkfish, Bogotá, 2012

<sup>16</sup> For the sources of Stinkfish work see Works Cited – Photo Credits

<sup>17</sup> Stinkfish: Personal Interview. E-mail to the author. October 2012. See appendix for the complete interview in Spanish and its English translation.

One of his most beautiful works is located in *La Candelaria* and portrays a little boy. The colour combination is vibrant and powerful as he uses different hues of orange, green, pink, purple and yellow. The use of colour is somewhat tropical and grants vitality to this piece, allowing it to reflect the essence of the Colombian people and the South American atmosphere. Although the boy is not smiling, his gaze does not transmit sadness. Another one of his artwork can be seen in the following photograph, which displays the portrait of a young woman. Even though the painting was partially defaced by advertising posters, the power of the result is still evident because of the rich variety of patterns and the very expressive eyes.



15. Stinkfish, Bogotá, 2012

Stinkfish often works cooperatively with other street artists and crews, in particular with an artist named Bastardilla. Stinkfish and Bastardilla met in 2005 and since then have undertaken a few projects together with other crews.



16. Bastardilla and Stinkfish, Bogotá, 2012

Aside from creating a group called “HOGAR”, which researched and documented different expressions and actions occurring in the streets of Bogotá, they also created murals together.<sup>18</sup> One of their splendid murals is located in *La Candelaria* and combines one of Stinkfish’s portraits with Bastardilla’s designs.<sup>19</sup>

## Toxicomano

Toxicomano is a street crew that produces large murals, which comment on different issues regarding society, the government and sometime even human nature. Their description on their Flickr page states that they “are responsible for fighting stupidity, ignorance, morality, faith and order, by the means of visual attacks”.<sup>20</sup> This is an example of how street art might comment on the political and the social issues of its location, addressing the everyday people. Formally, their works are mostly black and white and monochromatic, possibly for the purpose of being bolder and more straightforward, with a language that seems more related to graphic design than to painting. Often their murals are so large that they are impossible to be captured all in one photograph. An extremely large one, displayed in the following photograph, is

<sup>18</sup> "Stinkfish." *GeoStreetArt*. GeoStreetArt, 12 May 2011. Web. 01 Oct. 2012. <<http://geostreetart.com/theblog/stinkfish-interview/>>.

<sup>19</sup> “Stinkfish x Bastardilla x Ink Crew New Mural In Bogotá, Colombia.”

<sup>20</sup> Toxicomano Callejero. *Flickr*. Yahoo!, Oct. 2008. Web. 27 Dec. 2012.

situated in *La Candelaria* and in order to properly analyze it and understand it, one must do so in sections.



17. Toxicomano, Bogotá, 2012

This particular work was produced using different kinds of paint and a colour combination of shades of grey, hues and tints of red, black and white. There are multiple specific messages within this particular mural, which address several issues such as the lack employment and work ethics, the exploitation of workers and the government's misuse of money and power. These are explicitly presented through a combination of stencilled images or writings.

Moreover there are details in the background that portray weapons under the form of common objects in the Colombian culture, such as a fly or a pineapple; this can be seen in the photograph below.



18. Toxicomano, Bogotá, 2012

In addition, the mural displays realistic stencils of the people who suffer in consequence of the issues Toxicomano fights against.<sup>21</sup> The following photograph is another example of Toxicomano's works.



19. Toxicomano, Bogotá, 2012

<sup>21</sup> For more details on this specific mural please see: "Mike's Bogota Blog." *Toxicomano's Massive Mural*. <<http://mikesbogotablog.blogspot.it/2012/01/toxicomanos-massive-mural.html>>.

Compared to Stinkfish, Toxicomano are less intimate and deals with more general problems using an international – and I would say less personal – visual language. In spite of this, their works too show a very strict relationship with the city and its problems.

## **Street Art as Public Art Heritage**

The largest city of Northern Ireland is Belfast, the capital. Although it is also known for its industrial achievements and its importance within the country, the city is probably more famous for its period of religious and political conflicts, called The Troubles. In the Sixties, the population of the city started splitting in half between the Nationalists/Republicans, who wanted to be independent from Great Britain, and the Unionists/Loyalists, who were loyal to the monarchy. There were innumerable clashes between these two sides of the Belfast's population, which also divided in terms of religion between the Catholic and Protestant church, and consequently there were many deaths. Between the late Sixties and the new millennium, over a thousand and five hundred people were killed in the various outbreaks.<sup>22</sup> Peace walls, which partly still exist, were built in order to maintain order during the conflict and separate the loyalist side of the city from the republican one.

Nowadays Belfast is covered with murals that have become its symbol, as they depict its historical issues regarding The Troubles. There are many different types of murals around the city, which express the distinct points of view that co-existed in the 1960s onwards. They were painted in the years of the conflicts and often celebrate the paramilitary groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, Ulster Freedom Fighters and the Ulster Volunteer Force or even honour the people who lost their lives.

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<sup>22</sup> "The Belfast Blitz Is Remembered." *BBC News*. BBC, 04 Nov. 2001. Web. 07 Feb. 2013.



20. Republican Mural, Belfast, 2012



21. Battle of the Somme, Loyalist Mural, Belfast

There are many murals around the city, which celebrate different historical events, commemorate several historical Irish and universal icons, portray Irish myths and beliefs or even reflect present day issues.<sup>23</sup> Their visual language is diverse and definitely owes more to propaganda art and muralism than to Street art.

<sup>23</sup> Information given by a local gentlemen



22. Republican Mural, Belfast, 2012



23. Unidentified Mural, Belfast, 2012

Street art just came later as a natural consequence of muralism. Belfast's peace wall also hosts incredible graffiti art. Even though some of its sections have been demolished, there are still kilometres of wall present throughout the city where graffiti writings and designs have been increasing and evolving to eventually become a significant symbol of the city.



24. Peace Wall, Belfast, 2012

Hundreds of people contributed and still contribute to its decoration by adding graffiti writing, peace related images and quotes, simple signatures and dedications. This is the reason why that wall seems to contain and emanate the positive energy from the people who obtained freedom from the conflict, the people who fought and lived through tragedy, the people who were told all these stories and facts through their childhood, the people from a generation who raised from the ashes.

Eventually, the municipality of Belfast officially recognized its murals and street art as a part of its heritage. The city was embellished by the history and many different beliefs of its people. The beauty of Belfast's murals does not rely just on their formal quality, but on the power of their significance in terms of history and social values. Now because of this, the city is imbued with special energy that attracts and fascinates people from all over the world. The murals and peace walls have become valuable for the city not as reminder of its history but even as touristic resource.

## Conclusion

Street art has evolved from the mere expression of protest and fight for identity to a living representation of a place. Because of its direct and organic connection with the architectonic texture of a city, the personal expression and the appropriation of anonymous areas render Street Art truly significant, allowing the possibility to visualize the energy and the essence of a place, its core. Each piece is strongly bonded with its location not only in terms of aesthetics but also in terms of iconography and meaning. In most cases, street artists take into deep consideration where they create their works. Banksy and Stinkfish are well aware of the potential of a location and responsible for their interventions.<sup>24</sup>

If each city is basically a living system, where the presence of inhabitant faces that of walls, streets and buildings, Street Art is what exists in between. It is what connects people and architecture and what contributes in creating an organic unit. Street artists are aware that what they create is a temporary link. As time passes their works constantly evolve, they may be modified by the other artists or just vandalized, removed and covered. Street art is just a living creature that constantly changes to remain coeval with the people.

Street Art is an urban environmental phenomenon, which differs from vandalism because of its formal quality and its site-specific significance, that most of the times keeps it away far from private properties. Although street artists steal a part of public properties in order to fulfil their personal artistic goals and force people to become their audience, they grant the city with something, which is far from being mere vandalism. Would *La Candelaria* be as vibrant and culturally symbolic and representative of Colombia's people without its street art? Would Belfast be as mystical and historically emblematic without its murals and street art? The

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<sup>24</sup> Stinkfish states "From the beginning I liked places that have high visibility, high traffic streets at any time of day. It also influences the type of wall, texture and condition. I prefer the old walls, with accidents, cracks, and moisture, walls that have an interesting visual history." "Stinkfish." *GeoStreetArt*. Geo Street Art, 12 May 2011. Web. 01 Oct. 2012. <<http://geostreetart.com/theblog/stinkfish-interview/>>.

walls of both cities would either be blank or truly vandalized by mere scratching. There would be no colours, no emotion, no energy and no life.

Even though Street Art has widely demonstrated its potential and is definitely not a form of vandalism, legalizing and protecting the works, would only hinder great part of its charm. Street Art's beauty relies in its freedom and its unpredictable visual appeal.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the case of Belfast is a good example of how Street Art value can be officially recognized.

Street Art should keep on narrating the history of a place and charge it with an incredible atmosphere by exposing hypocrisy, revealing opinions but, most of all, it should be change continuously to fully celebrate life.

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<sup>25</sup> Banksy's documentary, *Exit through the Gift Shop*, confirmed my opinions in regards to this concept. One of the main characters of the movie, decides to open a gallery with Street Art pieces, however the gallery defeated the true meaning of Street Art, rendering it ineffective.

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10. Unidentified Mural, Bogotá – Personal Photograph, July 2012
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20. Republican Mural, Belfast – Personal Photograph, August 2012
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22. Republican Mural dedicated to republican hunger striker Bobby Sands, Belfast – Personal Photograph, August 2012
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24. Peace Wall, Belfast – Personal Photograph, August 2012