

**HERNANDO BLANDÓN GÓMEZ<sup>1</sup>**

DOI: 10.15290/CR.2022.37.2.05

The Pontifical Bolivarian University,  
Medellín, Colombia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5291-1007>

# Street art and protest under pandemic conditions in Colombia: A visual semiotic approach

How does meaning enter the image?  
Where does that meaning end? And if it ends  
What is beyond?  
(Barthes 1986: 30)

**Abstract.** This article engages in a visual critical semiotic analysis of Medellín street art and its interpretation as political action in the Colombian social mobilisation of 2021. I explore three epistemological turns towards a descriptive and contrastive methodology to contextualize street art and its transformative potential. Firstly, the spatial turn leads us to understand how space and street art function as a framework of life and conflict that challenges viewers socially and politically. Secondly, following Peirce's ideas, I reinterpreted some images. I explain how they function as theoretical objects related to indices, signs and symbols. According to Mitchell's image turn, the image functions as a significant semantic unit. Thirdly, I read the political turn based on Rancière's works in which he equates the political and the aesthetic as an act of visibility, always existing together at a conceptual and substantive level, and with which emancipation is objective. The article does not try to argue whether street art has a transformative power as this has been widely discussed in the literature. The article looks at street art that appeared in the context of the social mobilisation of 2021-2022, and partially in the context of the recent pandemic as a social transformation, the fact of which was proven by the recent elections.

**Keywords:** aesthetic learning, dissensus, social mobilisation, social transformation, spatial aesthetics.

1 Address for correspondence: Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana Circular 1 No. 70-01, Bloque 10, Medellín, Colombia, e-mail: [hernando.blandon@upb.edu.co](mailto:hernando.blandon@upb.edu.co)

## **The background: Nothing to lose**

Because of its duration and amplitude, the armed civil conflict in Colombia continues to affect all sides of life in the country (Giraldo Forero 2005; International Center for Transitional Justice 2009; Gaitán 2002; Restrepo 2005). The fundamental questions of distribution of wealth, social and economic opportunities, access to health services, and questions of the dignity of life, security of life, and development, both collective and personal, are behind the conflict. Any armed conflict is a question of power relations and expands in all dimensions: the State, legal and illegal military, and economic groups. It is not an abstract conflict, though. The most vulnerable social groups are affected socially, politically, economically and materially. The practice of modern states, as Foucault argued, is to “exploit numerous and diverse techniques to subjugate bodies and control the population” (Foucault 1990: 140). The pandemic created extreme conditions that manifested, according to Giorgio Agamben (2020), the growing tendency to use the state of emergency as a standard paradigm of government, enhancing and justifying the structural violence and normalising it. Within these circumstances, Colombia witnessed a major civil protest and its violent oppression in April-May 2021.

The strike was triggered by a controversial tax reform that increased the value-added tax on public services for middle- and upper-income households. Coupled with the health reform proposal, it sent people into the streets on April 28, 2021. Over 80 days, millions of citizens in cities like Medellín, Cali, Bucaramanga, Bogotá, Pasto, and others marched against the reform proposals, social inequalities, the current government – growing together and articulating in solidarity the mechanisms, origins, and expressions of social inequality. Violent oppression became the trigger, the last straw.

Amnesty International (2021) claims that at least 100,000 people were forcibly displaced or confined because of the ongoing conflict, particularly affecting the rights of Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants in Colombia. National Strike 2021 raised the problem of systemic violence again. In the context of the National Strike, there were numerous reports of excessive use of force by the security forces against peaceful protesters, particularly in Cali. Police arbitrarily detained and tortured protesters, and reportedly engaged in sexual and gender-based violence against women and LGBTI people. At least 100 people sustained eye trauma due to the unlawful and excessive use of less lethal weapons by members of the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD). Killings and threats against human rights defenders reached alarming levels, as evidenced by NGOs and observers (e.g., <https://www.temblores.org/>). The protests started as pacific and gradually became better and better organized. This demonstrated significant solidarity among neighbourhoods, social and political organizations, artistic and youth groups: students, peasants, Indigenous people, afro-Colombians, women, and young artists, the

population of the informal sector or unemployed formed the active body of the protests, people with nothing to lose.

The Strike was not an isolated event but another step in the worldwide counter movement to the dominating power, such as the Occupy Movement, for example. The Strike contributed to the spatial symbolic decolonization worldwide with such actions as the demolition of the statue of Jiménez de Quesada on May 7 in the historic centre of Bogotá by the Misak, one of the indigenous peoples of Colombia.

From Virginia to New Mexico, protests over police brutality have brought hundreds of years of American history bubbling to the surface. [...] The boiling anger that exploded in the days after George Floyd gasped his final breaths is now fuelling a national movement to topple perceived symbols of racism and oppression in the United States, as protests over police brutality against African Americans expand to include demands for a more honest accounting of American history. (Mervosh, Romero, Tompkins 2020: n.p.)

Bourdieu (1997) speaks about the systemic symbolic violence that is more “pernicious” as it is well hidden in our everyday life, social architecture, and material-discursive surroundings. Being able to confront it requires a certain level of sensibility and knowledge. It is challenging to confront also because of “the tacit complicity of those who suffer it and also, often, of those who practice it to the extent that one and the other are not aware of suffering or practicing it” (Bourdieu 1997: 22). Likewise, Didi-Huberman writes:

To criticize violence, one must describe it (which implies that one must be able to look). To describe it, one must dismantle its artifacts and “describe the relationship,” as Benjamin puts it, in which it is constituted (which implies that one has to be able to dismantle and reassemble states of affairs). (Didi-Huberman 2014: 35)

Following this line of thought, I want to focus on activism, an artistic and socio-political approach that shows new action elements of the new emancipatory processes with their creative wall sentences and cross-border symbology. I argue that it breaks the social-political culture of representation, assuming a new constructive and social-political participatory role with practices such as strikes and barricades among artistic wall paintings, and the creation and recreation of new signs and political symbols in the Colombian strike. I argue that subjectivity works together with images of the public space in citizens’ minds, making them more aware of the political reality of socio-political emancipation.

## **Spatial turn: Street art**

Cities are spaces of coexistence of social and political life in a territory; people's ways of living, finding their essential characteristics within a specific habitat (De Certeau 1998; Harvey 1996). Only by walking, looking, and looking again can the urban space and the territory be understood, that is, expanding the sense of reading and interpreting the street artwork. Citizen, time and space come together to allow the understanding of the urban images.

In my university-level semiotics class lab, I take my students to the streets to live the city and understand it as a place of action for everyday experiences. I invite them to read and feel the city as a space that offers all types of knowledge and understanding of reality that is different from the scientific explanation. Contrasting images and counterforces are explored in the discussion, contesting the existing discourses both spoken, written, said and felt. The spatial turn acts as a binder of aesthetic thought, leading it towards reflecting on the visual messages exhibited by the city and its subjective interpretations.

Pedragosa (2014) defines the spatial turn as a fact that is already visible in the forms of current responses to the question of how to inhabit the world, the recovery of subjective experience for the appropriation of space by an aesthetic and emotional experience through images and culture, like a living space. The spatial turn allows images to be integrated from the observation of the field of the urban area, to dominate the landscape of the plural world, where some visions do not invalidate the others; still, between them, they give each image a place in the picture collage of the reality that we want to address. The lived space is a field of representation of reality and consciousness that leads us to the recovery of subjective experiences. In this sense, the multitude of phenomena around spatial perception, awareness of space, and the value of subjective, emotional and personal elements of the experience of each one of us in public space allow the viewers to make their interpretation (Pedragosa 2014: 15).

Based on my walking experience with my students, I can argue that the observant walker can see how the city hides layers of realities artificially constructed by differentiated spaces, divided by signs, signals, and symbols for different human groups in a temporality-determined geographic territory. The town does not refer to a specific reality but to a fact represented differently by many consciences that inhabit it and turn it into a space lived as a reality. If public space is the citizen space of representation and consciousness, one of those layers of constructed realities, full of social, emotional and political meaning, is street art.

## **Image turn**

Understood as a visual expression of feelings and emotions (Goodman 1981), urban art, like any art, can affect, influence, and change individuals and society (Tunali & Erdi

2021). It has a long history of being at the forefront of movements for social justice and political change; by challenging longstanding traditions, it sustains ideas, provokes different perspectives, and turns it into a space lived as the reality that inspires plural understanding.

For Peirce, art as a visual language is full of multiple indices, signals and signs open to interpretation, unlike symbols governed by a rule, convention or agreement between users (1974). Applying street art as a medium, the artists express their ideas by creating visual codes and dialogues in which the triadic relation message-spectator-consciousness works to obtain visibility. In this sense, street art as a social practice is the most local experience of artistic expression to obtain open-air visibility. It stands for the relationship between the tangible and the intangible, and between artworks, citizens and their demands. The coexistence of street art and citizenship enables this artistic approach and an ephemeral artistic practice to become part of visual culture both as form and content – by expressing, enunciating, and/or denouncing local social and political problems, in a word, as a scene.

Rancière's notion of a scene is another useful concept for understanding art's transformative work. A scene is a theoretical entity, a method of equality as it destroys the hierarchies between the levels of reality and discourse and the usual techniques for judging the significant character of phenomena (Rancière 2012). The scene is the direct encounter between the particular and the universal; the complexity of levels of signification is transversal to the layers of discourse.

In a scene, the thought and the image are no longer distinguished (Rancière 2012: 100). Different scholars (Andrzejewski 2017; Bacharach 2015, 2018; Baldini 2018; Bartolomeus 2012) emphasize how street art becomes and simultaneously generates social collective and individual dissensus – “consists in the rejection of every difference that distinguishes between people who ‘live’ in different spheres of existence, the dismissal of categories of those who are or are not qualified for political life” (Rancière 2015: 77).

Colombian social mobilisation emphasizes how street artists engage in the social dialogue between the discursive elements through displaying controversial images and slogans, and facilitate and sustain it, so becoming the grassroots for critical pedagogical practice. The composition offers an aesthetic-political argument; every line, piece and colour enable visual reasoning to be profoundly and efficiently situated using its strategic location. Street artists use urban commodities as a screen to elevate a graphic scream that would put in motion transformation of the viewer.

This mobilisation questioned symbolic referents on which –supposedly– the society and its system have been built. In this strike, every painted wall works as a graphic scream to rethink democratic values such as justice, freedom, equity, respect and democracy, among other matters. It is a visual that enunciates a socio-political

resignification between the artist, spectators as protagonist readers versus the State normative. One action supports, encourages and explains the other.

Leo, a First Line artist<sup>2</sup>, explained how his artistic collective chooses the location for a specific reason: “Visibility, personal reasons or just the strategic location of the place are of major importance.” The artistic interventions try to provoke the viewer. Leo and his partners’ goals are to create an experience in the spectator’s mind, provoking an intellectual or emotional reaction, transforming the space perception and its meanings, to achieve the political message in an aesthetic way to touch the conscious subjectivity that Peirce (1988) defines as tradition and Rancière (2012) the dissensus. According to Peirce (1988), radiation is built with our beliefs and habit working together. What the pattern depends on is when and how it causes us to act. As for the when, every stimulus to action is derived from perception; as for the how, every purpose of an effort is to produce some sensible result.

Considering the above, it is possible to state that aesthetic protests can create dissensus between citizens’ common sense and the political to create new understandings and political meanings. For Rancière, a social actor is a multiplicity of social actors, and the critical question is to find out what they can do without a hierarchical principle. This principle of hierarchy is what Rancière (2012) defines as the distribution of the sensible: “the distribution of the sensible refers to the ways of seeing, doing, saying and making visible the existence of a common and the cuts that define the places and the respective parts” (p. 100). This sharing of the sensible decides the degree of the visible or perceptible of the subject on the scene of the world, and it finds who can have or take part in the communal. The most significant aspect of this concept of visibility is the articulation between art as an aesthetic fact and politics. Politics, the philosopher continues,

[...] happens when those who have no time take the time to present themselves as inhabitants of shared space and to show that their mouth also emits a word that enunciates the common and is not just a voice that talks pain. This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, of the visible and the invisible, noise and speech, constitute what this paper calls the distribution of the sensible. (Rancière 2006: 103)

Politics occurs when a citizen looks into the urban space and evaluates the urban space and contexts where street artworks are exhibited, their content and aesthetic qualities as line, colour, composition, balance, time and harmony, but also the ways a

2 One of the main actors that emerged during the situation was the so-called first line, a generally youthful popular expression that confronted the public force and the paramilitaries with stones and hand-made shields that constantly attacked the mobilized society, thus generating a purpose of care of the population and its community exercises developed in various points of resistance.

street artist or a collective follow their creative processes: inspiration, imagination, idea, sketching, planning, remaking and showing.

## Scenes

For this semiotic and hermeneutic route, I will explore the wall painting signs and symbols with Peirce, then with Mitchell's (2009) ekphrastic analysis, and finish by reaching Rancière's notion of dissensus.

Eco (1992) argues that the first thing an artwork says is said through the way it is made. Thus, the scratch on the institutional wall and the stencil on the street seek to connect and relate to the ordinary citizen, enquiring about their feelings, social posture and, finally, overcoming the aesthetic fact, their social and political thoughts. Through social exchanges, we acquire, transmit and perpetuate the knowledge, beliefs and values that allow us to share a common conception of things and others. In this sense, this reconstruction of reality, this representation of reality that takes on a truth value for each of us, is above all social, elaborated according to our characteristics and shared by a group of people who also have them. Representation for Peirce (1996) is an object which stands for another so that an experience of the former affords us a knowledge of the latter.

There are three essential conditions to which every representation must conform. It must, in the first place, like any other object, have qualities independent of its meaning. It is only through knowledge of these that we acquire any information concerning the object it represents [...] In the second place, representation must have a real causal connection to its object. [...] In the third place, every representation addresses itself to a mind. It is only in as far as it does it that it is a representation. The idea of the representation itself excites in the mind another idea and so that it may do this some principle of association between the two ideas must already be established in that mind. [...] (Peirce 1996: 306)

The condition then is that the sign must be able to connect the words with the things represented; that is, if it is not possible, descriptions and consequent interpretations are not a sign. Continuing with this logic, Mitchell's image turn (2012) explains that there is no essential difference between images and words; moreover, there is no opposition between those languages: art and texts, nor between the relation between an artist (an individual that speaks and sees) and the artistic work (an object that can be seen and is mute). This relation built a meta-imagen between the image and the ekphrasis, linking both symbolic languages and significances, making visible how the aesthetic discourse is interpreted linguistically towards a reflection whose objective is a political reflection in the open urban space.

Language can be used to describe representative figuration and the other way around. Description, narration, exposition and other acts of speaking are not exclusive to a media; they are not specific, and do not belong to a particular medium; both languages can transform a passive image into a textual living creature and vice versa (Mitchell 2012: 144). This notion incorporates the possibilities of work from the transdisciplinary, which does not imply the dissolution of its objects in those of other social disciplines, but the “construction of articulations – mediations and intertextualities – that make its specificity” (Martín Barbero 2002: 217).

In the following section, I will present activism and dissensus notions, and then discuss the three scenes, developing a possible semiotic interpretation of artworks cases in the social-political Colombian crisis.

## Activism and Dissensus

Misak Avenue in the capital city Bogotá, Parque de la Resistencia in Medellín, and Puerto Resistencia in Cali are today the icons of the resignification of those cities that are titled rebel cities, we can say now, cities that belong to rebel countries, according to Harvey (1996), cities that are territories of the second independence.

La Calle Grita [The street screams] collective painted the walls in different Colombian cities in response to the violent oppression hidden by the state and its institutions. The graffiti artists focus on the nodes of social confrontation: they move from privatized spaces of the owned mass media to public areas and streets. The size of graffiti increased significantly – protesters were creating murals, reconfirming those silenced. The roads are huge messages that could be read from the helicopters that permanently surrounded the demonstrations, and harassed, monitored, and attacked people. Here are some examples applying the semiotic analysis to reveal the process of the Rancierian dissensus notion at Resistance Park.

Figure 1. Resistance Park in Medellín, April 2021. At <https://bit.ly/3un1ys5>



Pandemic activism did not differentiate artists from non-artists. Street art as a plastic expression became a form of logical, political and emotional communication. It is understood as political and aesthetic creation with a social objective: to put the political problem in the eye of the beholder, in short, a call to conscience. Each image, line, letter, and drip of paint expresses the loss of future opportunities, poverty, misery and exclusion through symbolic engagement. Collectives of young artists, students, workers and organizations build a scene of resistance for mobilization encoded and promoted with the murals. Here are some examples:

Figure 2. First line: Strength to the indigenous guard.

Author: unknown. Resistance Park, Medellín.



First line students painted these graffiti at Resistant Park in April 2021 (Figure 2). Figure 3: The Assassin State speaks directly to the state as an institution that itself is criminal, guilty of man slaughter, but goes unpunished. Figure 4, during an intervention made by the president at the Agora convention centre in Corferias, in which, when referring to the current situation in the country, he had a “lapse” and said “because that Colombia with a capital P is the one we need.” Polombia? Social networks do not let anything go by, and President Iván Duque is currently the main subject of memes in the country due to his most recent mistake, so the protesters use the error in signifying what many have considered President Duque’s incapacity.

Figures 3 and 4 at Resistance Park. Authors: unknown. Medellín



Figures 5 and 6, Resistance Park, Medellín. A murder-state graffiti and long-live resistance flyer. Authors: unknown.



Figure 5, painted with manuscript letters, acts as an emotional testimony in the Assassin state. Figure 6 is a fascinating piece. The stand-up figure represents an indigenous person from Misak wearing traditional costume with open wings that support the mountain ranges; the territory of the graffiti closes with the arch made by the slogan “Long live the resistance” that touches the sky, and clouds symbolize eternity. The message is a powerful continuity: from the ancestors to the present to the future.

### Scene 1: The National Symbols without Fear

This poster, created by artist Juan Fernando Vélez, mainly circulated on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.

Figure 7. National Strike: Without Fear. Author: Juan Fernando Vélez, 2021.

Courtesy @Juanfvelezg



If art seeks to create meanings, the artist puts into circulation one of the signs and symbols of Colombian culture to challenge the established truths and offer a new interpretation of the image as content (Eco 1992). The premise is that a picture can only be understood from a particular perspective: that of the observer.

The image presents three stripes of colours referring the viewer to the colours of the Colombian flag. The tricolor stripes of the image invoke the sense of belonging to a country, to a nation. The flag provokes in the viewer a call to think about the homeland. Each colour stripe represents, symbolizes, synthesizes, and represents key elements of the country's wealth and national identity, which makes us Colombians. Yellow indicates the nation's gold and wealth, blue represents the two seas surrounding Colombia's maritime borders, and red signifies passion and pride as a Colombian citizen.

What is interesting about Velez's work is that the artist proposes the decision made by the front-line protesters to invert the position of the Flag and the national emblem. This decision has a socio-political meaning, reinforcing the idea of rage, tiredness and unease. Starting with the pandemic and through the protests, many households and the protestors used the Flag upside down to symbolize the distress and rage Colombians felt.

Figure 8. Colombian National Emblem



Velez's artwork plays with the spectator's memory and citizen values, implicit within the national symbols, to indicate that something is not right, something is not working in the country, politically, socially, and much less economically. Colombia is upside-down, the State is made wrong.

The scene shows an inverted flag. The red stripe covers the blue line of resources and the yellow bar of gold and prosperity; this inversion of the patriotic symbols, in moments of protest, symbolizes the bloodbath that covers the country, of the murders of social leaders, young students and women, among others; the blood is spilled over the country, evidencing the Error 2021 of the State against the less favoured population in its health and tax reforms.

By invoking the inverted Flag tricolour, the artist confronts the observer with civic, formal and emotional content. He presents a requirement, a call to think and reflect on the homeland, the country. By the time the observer looks at the artwork, the use of the symbol claims, requests and exhorts the viewer first by an act of respect that goes through the body in the presence of institutionality. In this piece, the flag representation comes into play in the semiotic sciences of prosody, understood as the space of personal interaction with the message; kinesics refers to body movements such as the facial expressions, postures and gestures of the viewer when observing the work, and proxemics refers to the concept of personal space and the appropriate distance between work and viewer.

The National Flag, as a patriotic symbol, is used during critical moments of national life, making its presence mandatory; in the same way, the artist summons the citizen to participate in a solemn act. Its powerful symbolic call confronts the observer to immediately think about the notion of homeland. Any Colombian citizen feels summoned; his

emotion is linked to the extended object, awakening innumerable reactions, according to the empathic feeling or not with the symbol, in this case with the situation of the national strike and its demands.

The artistic work presents the words PARO NACIONAL (The National Strike) in the red stripe. The red colour enunciates the seriousness of the matter, and the colour symbolizes the blood spilled by the death of victims of the strike. The fact that it is located in the upper part of the artwork indicates the relevance of this stripe as a solid visual shout containing the work's title. According to the non-governmental organization Temblores (2021), which carried out a verification of complaints and triangulation of information, it was established that between April 28, 2021 and June 26, 2021 at least 4,687 cases of violence by the security forces occurred, not including cases of disappearances, which are still underreported. Among these cases, the organization explained, it was possible to identify 44 homicides whose alleged aggressor was a member of the security forces, 1617 victims of physical violence, 82 victims of ocular aggressions, 228 victims of gunshots, 28 victims of sexual violence, nine victims of gender-based violence, 2005 arbitrary detentions against demonstrators, 784 violent interventions in the framework of peaceful protests, and 35 cases of the use of Venom weapons by Esmad<sup>3</sup>. Alarming figures, considering that protest is a right to which citizens should have access without being exposed to violence.

The artist writes the word RABIA (Anger) in the blue stripe, which evokes a communal feeling. This text clarifies a national emotion, closing the circle about this socio-political situation and clearing the message. The feeling that encompasses the human rights groups that make up the protest shows their indignation and exhaustion with the excesses and abuses of a neoliberal government with pretensions of monarchy.

The yellow stripe contains the words SIN MIEDO (without fear). The artist uses exaggeration with the typographic text as a visual and conceptual resource, thus paradoxically implying that fear no longer exists, that neither the Esmad bullets nor the persecution of the police, and even the fear of dying from COVID 19 amid the pandemic can suppress the indignation and the right to demand justice and equity in a country dominated by a corrupt administration.

Finally, considering the semantics, we find in the centre of the work a hint – the words Error 2021. The artist points out the year of the State's reform proposal as a consecutive numeral and qualifies it as an error with the date because it is not the only one there is. It is an index that adds to the different arbitrariness of the government in power against the working class. From the symbolism of colour and semantics, the work builds a

3 ESMAD is an anti-riot unit that was created in 1999 during the government of Andrés Pastrana in one of the most acute periods of the war in Colombia. It reports to the police and is attached to the Ministry of Defence. Although it was founded under a transitory decree by former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), Duque's political godfather formalized it and created the course that trains the agents of this unit.

network of meanings and questions for the observer, forcing him to watch, think, and then take an ethical position, a political decision that includes agreement or disagreement; it must say that millions of Colombia people agree with the government.

From the pragmatic point of view, the artwork *Paro Nacional Rabia sin Miedo*, by Juan Fernando Velez, relates the image-text with the spectators by confronting their social, civic and ethical values, inviting them to die for their rights without fear. At the same time, it appeals to the political by summoning expressions of citizen empathy, cooperation and solidarity so that the citizen-observers respond to this image that symbolically denounces the socio-political malaise of the country, which is what Rancière calls the dissensus.

## Scene 2: Street Art, The Killer State

Figure 9. Murder State graffito, Author: Fuerza Graffiti collective , Medellín, 2021. Courtesy by Fuerza Graffiti. See more at <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/mural-estado-asesino-y-otros-graffitis-que-han-sido-borrados-article>



The graffiti community of Medellín painted the walls of San Juan Avenue in Medellín with the words “Murder State” – ESTADO ASESINO on May 3, during the demonstrations for the National Strike, and police violence was denounced and documented by human rights organizations. The mural lasted less than a week, as it seems that members of the Army erased it in the early morning of May 8. As well as this one, other murals mentioning the security forces were left for memory<sup>4</sup>. The size of the work is impressive, reaching about 800 metres.

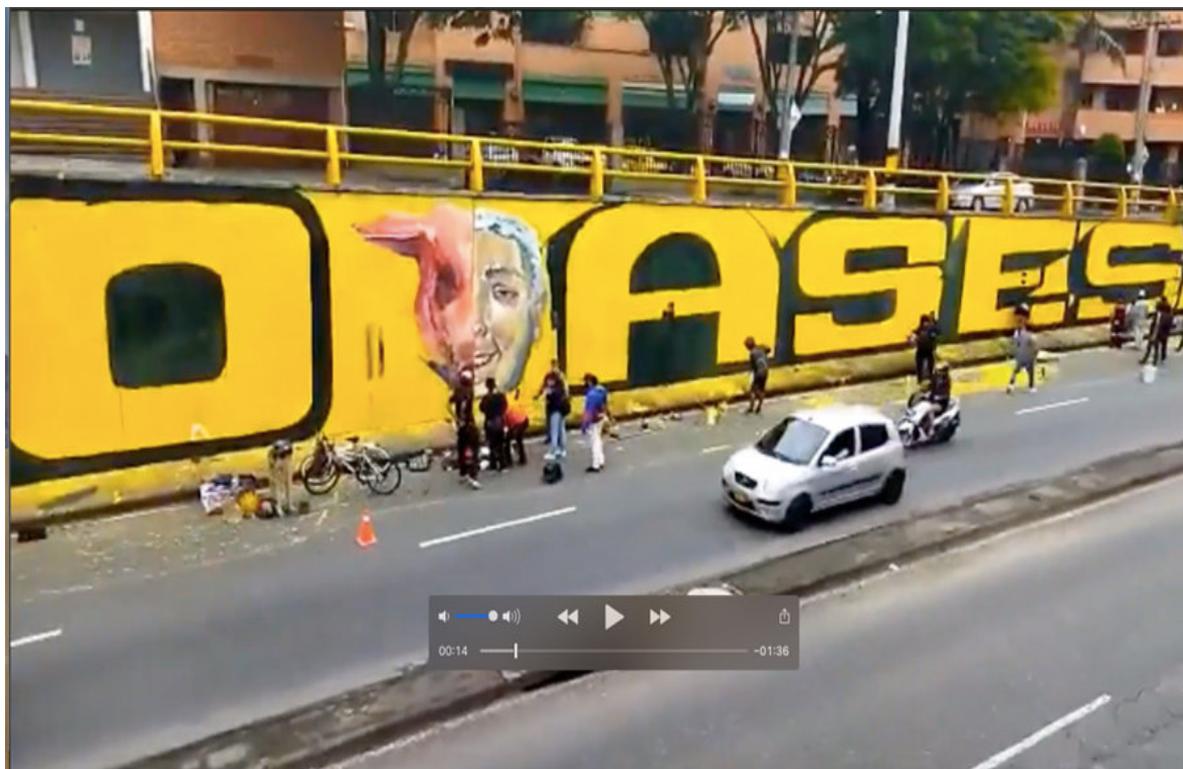
The colour range appeals to those used in patriotic symbols, such as the flag and the nation of Colombia. The blue colour is replaced by black to enhance the volume of the text image and symbolize the dark panorama that the country is going through. As in Velez’s work, the colours seek to take hold of the viewer’s gaze, no matter whether they are in a car or walking, to urge questioning.

The phrase challenges the passer-by; it forces them to take a socio-political stance; no one is spared to reflect on this statement. First with themselves and then within the political crisis. No doubt, even those who do not feel committed or called, or ignore the vast message made a political, ethical and moral decision by silence, omission, or supporting the strike. This text-image is a micro-story; it represents a country in a state of defencelessness, a people subjected to the power of the corrupt. However, what is beyond this story? There are the stories of those who participate in the political scene, no longer as protagonists but as spectators: women, men, young people, students, boys and girls who observed, listened, felt and interpreted the actions and speeches of the street artwork and who processed their interpretations of the text-image: The Assassin State in the privacy of their mind, homes or offices.

Spectators are ethically responsible, said Arendt (2007). Responsibility must be differentiated from moral guilt because guilt is always personal and non-transferable, while political responsibility is collective. Arendt explains that the spectator as a narrator is someone who observes reality, feels it, and judges it; that is, they interpret it from their experiences, dreams, ambitions and desires, and narrate it to create an opinion and, in some cases an adhesion to specific actions and discourses. They are a narrator acting in the public space. Two conditions must be met for there to be collective responsibility: 1) The spectator embodies desire, oppression and power, 2) The spectator also manifests a critical attitude, conflictive in itself, towards politics understood as narration or discourse (Arendt 2007:152).

4 At <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/mural-estado-asesino-y-otros-graffitis-que-han-sido-borrados-article/>

Figure 10. Murder State. Author: Fuerza graffiti collective, 2021. Image from a video. Courtesy of Fuerza Graffiti. See more at <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/mural-estado-asesino-y-otros-graffitis-que-han-sido-borrados-articulo>



The central part of this artwork is the face of the Colombian president Iván Duque, divided into two parts: the left part, before the word STATE, presents the head of a malicious pig, reminding the reader of the nickname “Porky” that has been given to the president from the beginning of his government, meaning that the murderous State is the pig. The second half, which precedes the ASSESSIN text, is a figurative image of a smiling Iván Duque, signifying his ironic performance as the one directly responsible for the murderous State that this text image denounces. It is interesting how the shadow of the A completes the pig's right ear, configuring the literary murderous pig, among other possible understandings. The pink colour materializes the tone of the message, connoting real pig skin and trying to show the president's weakness.

The aesthetics make visible from an image-text a socio-political reality in the country context. The citizen understanding exercise of all provokes the reaction with different views and opinions, expanding the interpretative and political possibility of the citizen observers and, therefore, the disagreement. The potency of the discourse of this image-text can be interpreted in the speed with which it was erased by the city's military forces and other citizens who were questioned by this graffiti, causing both dissents as the truly political fact proposed by Rancière (2012).

## Cali scene: The raised fist

Figure 11. Raised left fist symbol in Puerto Resistencia in Cali.  
Authors: Puerto Resistencia community. At <https://bit.ly/3qGjzAE>.



The origin of this symbol or gesture is unclear. Its use in trade unionism, anarchism and the labour movement had begun by the 1910s. The metaphor of a fist means that the hand is something more significant than the sum of its parts. In the United States, a clenched fist was described by the magazine *Mother Earth* as “symbolical of the social revolution” in 1914. Fist-based iconography can be seen in early propaganda for labour organizations, such as in a famous cartoon of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a revolutionary American union. The general iconic idea was to show how the first mass can confront power. A first-line artist said that the vast huge raised left fist symbolizes our sovereignty as a country and is a symbol of resistance and struggles for a better nation with social justice. The monument, over 10 metres high, was built by protesters of the national strike in the Puerto Rellena sector, now named Puerto Resistencia, in eastern Cali. The figure has been named “Monument to the Resistance” and represents the national support for the protest in Colombia. The statue was made in 17 days by young people who were part of the Front line; however, the boys had the help of engineers and builders.

Unlike the wholly closed fist, this Colombian protest hand has open fingers holding the word resistance over the colours of the Colombian Flag as a message of unity in the feeling of indignation and struggle. People from Cali built the symbolic hand. Still, it also symbolizes that it was made with the support of all the Colombian people, pushing at the same time a heartfelt tribute to the victims of the strike, expressed by a young man named Juan<sup>5</sup>, spokesman of the protests in that region of Cali.

Viewers can see over the Colombian fist symbol a series of images of helmets, books that denounce the dream to access study, indigenous faces, and young Afro-Colombians excluded from the labour system. Soccer balls appeal to the right to recreational and sporting spaces; also hanging from the fist are some rocks used by protesters to defend the territory from state forces. All these images refer to the young victims of police violence and others killed during the protest.

Likewise, the raised fist has around it a protective frame of shields, pierced by bullets, of some young people of the front line fallen or disappeared by the government forces in complicity with paramilitary forces. The faces of men, women and young people who have disappeared give life to the raised fist. These images cry out to stop the violence, corruption, and lack of opportunities in health, education and employment suffered by the Colombian people.

This community symbol evidences the dissent as a political fact against the tax and health reform. The logo expresses weariness of the neoliberal policies against people without opportunities, thus the slogan “they messed with the wrong generation,” that is to say, with those who have nothing to lose. Dissensus is understood as transformation

5 At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDo165z7tV0>

in the political culture with a new critical generation that hopes for change and believes in it. Finally, the spectators can complete the idea of emancipation by realising what world they are constructing (Rancière 2008).

## Conclusions

The article discussed the visible significance of selected artwork in the context of the social mobilisation in Colombia in 2021. While the article mostly focused on visual representations, it is important to remember that they were part of a massive artistic mobilisation and simultaneous with other forms of expression such as musical performances, dance expressions, open-air concerts, theatre groups in the streets, artistic collectives in all modalities, symphonic concerts and neighbourhood concerts performed with the lids of pots by ordinary people expressing solidarity with the protests, the outraged citizens who came out in the silent nights to speak up, that is, the vast majority of ordinary citizens who felt that it was the moment to participate, to become visible in their demands. Art mobilised, summoned, and rescued from the silence produced by fear; an immense majority expressed their discontent as active actors or spectators who acquired a civic conscience.

By reading the artworks, the transient, walking spectators become “an emancipated community, a community of narrators and translators” capable of making the work of art their own and actively tracing the scope of its metaphors (Rancière 2003: 11). A fact that is fulfilled with the strategic use of public spaces by street art, their dimensions, and their call for the national institutional colours that summon the filial sense for the homeland by those who have nothing to lose.

That is why the essential task of critical art will not be to oppose the reality but to provide strong metaphors in a new perception and understanding of the real. A job that must not only be done in the field of an art but with society beyond any frontiers: this is where it is possible to elaborate and propose a polemic common sense that shows other links between words and things (Rancière 2008: 111).

The changes facilitated by activism produce unrest, disagreement and transformation. New objects and subjects arise, altering the shared sensibility; in this way the spectator is able to experience the transformations between the public (urban art) and the private sensibility (consciousness), allowing the appearance of new rationalities and realities that question the tradition and conventional ways of thinking and being in it, and lead towards emancipation. Colombia was not the exception.

## References

Agamben, G. 2020. L'invenzione di un'epidemia. *Quodlibet*. <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>.

- Amnesty International. 2021. Colombia, 1 July, [www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/southamerica/colombia/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=cpc&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI4v4juTa9wIVgYnICh3H9QRxEAAAYASAAEgK0afD\\_BwE](http://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/southamerica/colombia/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI4v4juTa9wIVgYnICh3H9QRxEAAAYASAAEgK0afD_BwE).
- Andrzejewski, A. 2017. Authenticity Manifested: Street Art and Artification. *Rivista di Estetica* 64: 167-184.
- Arendt, H. 2007. *Responsabilidad colectiva*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Bacharach, S. 2015. Street art and consent. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55: 481-495.
- Bacharach, S. 2018. Finding your voice in the streets: Street art and epistemic injustice. *Monist* 101: 31-43.
- Baldini, A. L. 2022. What is street art? *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LIX/XV, no. 1: 1-21.
- Bartolomeus, L. 2012. Street art in Indonesian social and political life. Guggenheim Blogs (blog), 17 October, [www.blogs.guggenheim.org/map/street-art-in-indonesian-social-and-political-life](http://www.blogs.guggenheim.org/map/street-art-in-indonesian-social-and-political-life).
- Bourdieu, P. 1997. *Razones prácticas. Sobre la teoría de la acción*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- CIDOB, Barcelona Center for International Affairs. 2022. Conflicto en Colombia: antecedentes históricos y actores, 1 January, [www.cidob.org/en/publications/documentation/dossiers/dossier\\_proceso\\_de\\_paz\\_en\\_colombia/dossier\\_proceso\\_de\\_paz\\_en\\_colombia/conflicto\\_en\\_colombia\\_antecedentes\\_historicos\\_y\\_actores](http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/documentation/dossiers/dossier_proceso_de_paz_en_colombia/dossier_proceso_de_paz_en_colombia/conflicto_en_colombia_antecedentes_historicos_y_actores).
- CTJ, International Center for Transitional Justice. 2021. *An overview of the conflict in Colombia*, 10 September, [www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Colombia-Conflict-Facts-2009-English.pdf](http://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Colombia-Conflict-Facts-2009-English.pdf).
- De Certeau, M. 1998. *Culture in the Plural*, transl. T. Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- De Rosa, A. S. 2012. *Social Representations in the Social Arena*. London: Routledge.
- Dickinson, E. 2021. CRISISGROUP. [www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/090-pandemic-strikes-responding-colombias-mass-protests](http://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/090-pandemic-strikes-responding-colombias-mass-protests).
- Didi-Huberman, G. 2014. Como abrir los ojos. In: Farocki, H. (ed.) *Desconfiar de las imágenes*, 13-14, Buenos Aires: Caja Negra.
- Eco, U. 1976. *Tratado de semiótica general*, transl. C. Manzano. Madrid: Lumen.
- Eco, U. 1992. *Obra abierta*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta.
- Foucault, M. 1990. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage.
- Fuentes-Navarro, R. 2008. La comunicación desde una perspectiva sociocultural: acercamientos y provocaciones 1997-2007 (“La comunicación desde una perspectiva sociocultural ...”), Guadalajara: ITESO.

- Gaitán, G. 2002. Orígenes de la violencia de los años 40. In: Once ensayos sobre la violencia. Bogotá: CEREC/Centro Gaitán. [www.ongscolombianas.net/gaitanismo.origenes.htm](http://www.ongscolombianas.net/gaitanismo.origenes.htm).
- Giraldo, J. F. 2021. Colombia in armed conflict? 1946-1985. *Papel Político* 18, December, Bogotá, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 43-78.
- Goodman, N. 1981. *Languages of Art*. Brighton: Harvest Press.
- Harvey, D. 2013. *Ciudades rebeldes: Del derecho de la ciudad a la revolución urbana*. Madrid: Ediciones Akal.
- Kotsko, A. 2020. Giorgio Agamben: 'Clarifications.' *An Und Für Sich* (blog). March 17. [www.itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/](http://www.itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/).
- Martín-Barbero, J. 2002. *Oficio del cartógrafo. Travesías latinoamericanas de la comunicación en la cultura*. Santiago de Chile: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Mervosh, S., S. Romero & L. Tompkins. 2020. Reconsidering the Past, One Statue at a Time, *The New York Times*, June 16, [www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/us/protests-statues-reckoning.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/us/protests-statues-reckoning.html).
- Mitchell, W. J. T. 2012. Teoría de la imagen. *Ensayos sobre la representación verbal y visual*. Madrid: Akal.
- Pedragosa, P. 2014. Decir el lugar: Topología. In: M. Llorente (ed.), *Topología del espacio urbano*, 33-55, Madrid: Historia del arte y de la arquitectura. Quoted in Pau, 2014:15.
- Peirce, C. 1988. *La fijación de la creencia*, transl. José Vericat. Navarra: Universidad de Navarra. [www.unav.es/gep/FixationBelief.html](http://www.unav.es/gep/FixationBelief.html).
- Peirce, C. 1873. *Collected Papers. Logic. Chapter 5*. Indiana University School of Liberal Arts.
- Peirce, C. 1996. *La ciencia de la semiótica*. Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión.
- Platón. 1988. *Las leyes*. Ed. José Manuel Ramos Bolaños. Madrid: Akal.
- Rancière, J. 2003. *El destino de las imágenes*. Paris: La Fabrique.
- Rancière, J. 2006. *El odio a la democracia*, transl. I. Agoff. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu.
- Rancière, J. 2008. *El espectador emancipado*. Buenos Aires: La Fabrique.
- Rancière, J. 2012. *El método de la igualdad. Conversaciones con Laurent Jean Pierre y Dork Zabuyan*. Buenos Aires: Bayard.
- Tembloros. 2021. Informe final. [www.tembloros.org/\\_files/ugd/7bbd97\\_10674d3f5b324b6abe45fad8b1083b7b.pdf](http://www.tembloros.org/_files/ugd/7bbd97_10674d3f5b324b6abe45fad8b1083b7b.pdf).
- Tunali, T. & G. Erdi. 2019. Art and the city: Urban space, art, and social movements. *LE STUDIUM Multidisciplinary Journal* 3, 25-30.

\*\*\*

**Hernando Blandón Gómez** is a graphic designer who obtained his MA degree in Colombian literature in 2003 and his Doctoral degree with distinction in 2019, in the field of

Philosophy at the Pontifical Bolivarian University, Medellín, Colombia. His research focuses on the study of the image and the meanings of spatial semiotic and political relations. Other academic interests include the study of semiotic perception in art and graphic design.