

URBAN INTERVENTIONS IN A GLOBAL CITY: DISSENSUS, CONSENSUS AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE STREETS OF LONDON

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ABSTRACT *In this article I analyze urban interventions as communicative practices that can become visual "scenes of dissensus", i.e. political disruptions made by emerging voices. In three of the cases I present, activists use a variety of tactics and techniques to make their claims be seen on the surfaces of the city. These actions can generate diverse meanings and have different impacts. One of the cases confirms that corporate discourses can appropriate urban interventions, showing that important contemporary urban expressions such as graffiti and street art might turn into consensus, as part of the increasing phenomenon of the commodification of urban space. I will conclude by stressing the importance of approaching urban interventions as creative practices that reflect and (re)produce the movement, the complexity, the ambivalence, and the contradictions that are inherent to everyday life in global cities.*

KEYWORDS

URBAN INTERVENTIONS, VISUAL COMMUNICATION, DISSENSUS, CONSENSUS, AMBIVALENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to identify and analyze the emergence and meanings of visual interventions in various urban spaces in London. During a period of ten months, different kinds of urban interferences such as tagging, stickers, stencil art, graffiti, etc. were observed, collected and analyzed, in order to understand this communication phenomenon within a broader socio-cultural context and to detect their potential for consensus and dissensus. In the cases I discuss in this article, individuals and groups used different tactics and techniques – creative, aggressive, ironic – to make their claims be seen and heard; and these actions can bring new meanings, multiple effects and consequences.

The article is structured in five sections. First, I argue that city surfaces are communication media and that urban interventions must be understood as communication practices and, therefore, as spaces for subjectivation. Second, I unpack the concepts of consensus and dissensus as discussed by Jacques Rancière (1995; 2009; 2015) to analyze the phenomenon. In the subsequent section, I outline the methodological issues relating to my research, including selection of case-studies. After presenting and analyzing the cases, I develop a broader analysis of the phenomena considering the ideas of consensus, dissensus, appropriation and ambivalence. In the last section, I present research findings and articulate the concepts in order to discuss the practices of intervention as political actions and scenes of dissensus.

MEDIA, MEDIATION AND URBAN COMMUNICATION

The whole is not immediately present in this written text, the city. There are other levels of reality which do not become transparent by definition. The city writes and assigns, that is, it signifies, orders, stipulates. What? That is to be discovered by reflection. This text has passed through ideologies, as it also 'reflects' them.

Henri Lefebvre, in *Right to the city* (1996)

Mediation, a concept proposed by Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987) is a crucial constituent of everyday life (Silverstone, 2002) and can be understood as a place between culture, communication and politics which puts logics of production and consumption, industrial formats and cultural matrixes in a dialectical relationship to each other (Lopes, 2014). The contemporary city can be approached as a place of mediation, as a complex system where meanings constantly circulate, through multiple technologies in diverse institutional and social contexts, constituting and being constituted by culture(s). For Silverstone (2002), mediation is both social and technological as it depends increasingly on the media presence in everyday life and the crucial role media and communication technologies play in our lives. Media facilitate and structure spaces for communication, interaction and action. We can understand a medium as material entity, an ambiance and a frame, as each medium has its scope and limitations, which allows and constrains certain forms and kinds of discourses.

Myria Georgiou explores the concept and characteristics of the mediated city in *Media and the City*. She understands the mediated city as “a place where we might come together to clash but also to communicate” (2013: 29), and is attentive to the dynamics of the mediated city when people make their claims: “the meanings of city space shift in times of crisis and as the mediated city space becomes a space for reflection and demand for change” (*ibid.*: 150). The author discusses the “intriguing manifestations of media culture that link consumption and creativity to identity, community and politics” as well (*ibid.*: 29).

Urban surfaces can be considered as some of the most pervasive media in everyday life. Cities are spaces for subjectivation and identification processes as images, texts and interactions on urban landscape offer standards and values of social institutions. These processes are not, however, predetermined or fixed, they are riddled with tensions and negotiations over cultures, values, norms and rights. People are enmeshed in discursive power relations in tension between subjugation and autonomy; action and resistance. Besides this, the everyday practices of interaction are complex – and not easily captured by dichotomies. Hence, there are many ways through which city dwellers see, consume, act and react towards urban discourses in everyday life. We construct our identities and subjectivities in relation to others; and this is a reflexive communication phenomenon. Urban surfaces interfere in the way we see ourselves, in the way we live and experience the city, which carries marks, traces and signs of other people’s lived and shared urban experience.

I understand urban surfaces as the exterior part of a city, in a broad sense. The surface is what is visible, sensible, in an aesthetic way: what can be caught by the visual and tactile senses in our everyday experience in the city. It has to do with appearance and emergence, as it is the external layer of the city: walls, signs, facades, urban furniture, roads, bridges, and buildings that can be covered by paint, steel, glass, tiles, wood, brick, paper, *etc.* Urban surfaces are designed and built according to purpose and function: they cover, hide, and protect the inside, but they also show it (*e.g.*, a shop window). The materiality of the surfaces (such as texture, color, size, shape, position, decay, *etc.*) can carry meanings, provoke feelings and reveal relations. Any surface is a potential canvas and can be used as a place for communication, expression, and visibility. Therefore, surfaces separate and also connect. Being exposed and vulnerable as a skin, urban surfaces are not static, they change as cities and societies are transformed.

Being in a global city means being immersed in an intense variety of urban discourses. Facades, shop windows and construction hoardings are the media for corporate communication, as well as sites for graphic, typographic and iconographic interventions by commissioned or uninvited artists and activists. Despite the prohibition and regulation of unofficial discourses, the global city is the place for heterogeneity, where individuals and groups from different social strata are, at the same time, linked and separated. There is a constant dialogue about the physical and symbolic occupation of houses, avenues, squares, marquees, and corners. Cities are polyphonic places where multiple voices can be heard in a chaotic concert of large and small players.

Urban communication, as all other forms of mediated communication, tends to be asymmetrical. The most evident discursive constructions allowed in the streets are the speeches of the market and the state. These are the actors who can afford (or are responsible for) the visual occupation of public spaces. Nevertheless, people do subvert the uses and functions of the objects in everyday life, as discussed by Michel De Certeau (1984). Those practices are marks of the weak, whose clever activities respond and attack the places of power in a very fixed enemy territory. De Certeau uses the term “strategies” to name the activities of the strong and “tactics” to those of the weak in order to stress the difference between the two in terms of power and type of action. A strategy is linked to dominant institutions, it is the given structure; tactics are the practices in everyday life that depend on opportunities as the weak have to act with creativity and astuteness in the domain of the strong, in a “tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would you place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it ” (De Certeau, 1984: 31).

An important characteristic of urban visual communication, both legal and illegal, is that these interactional practices speak about a certain time and a certain place, highlighting contemporary tensions and struggles, reverberating current issues at stake in society, showing the claims made to urban centers. Urban dialogues are marked by relations of power, but at the same time they always entail the possibility of action and resistance. Many urban inscriptions try to overturn, reverse or even ridicule the speech of the powerful, in a kind of revisited culture jamming.

Some interventions may show a desire of transformation in the direction of a more egalitarian, more tolerant and less exploitative society. Others may point to a prejudiced and aggressive view towards marginalized groups, for example. Although many of the urban interferences such as graffiti, street art, jamming *etc.* may offer an antagonist response to hegemonic discourses, not all of them should be considered progressive just because of their illegality, sense of humor or creativity. Some practices of jamming advertising and propaganda also reinforce prejudices and conservative points of view (Cammaerts, 2007; Corrêa and Salgado, 2016). Besides this, advertising has historically incorporated the aesthetics of cultural jamming, thereby unjamming the jam.

Considering and agreeing with these approaches I presented above, this article aims to contribute to the debate about contentious (and – in some cases – coopted,) interactions through urban interventions in the mediated city, connecting the concepts of dissensus and consensus (Rancière, 2015) to the ideas of authenticity, ambivalence (Banet-Weiser, 2012) and contradiction (Georgiou, 2013). With this article, I also intend to contribute to the discussions about visual protests and activism related to gentrification and migration issues.

DISSENSUS AND CONSENSUS IN THE STREETS

Rancière (1995; 2009; 2015) foregrounded the concept of dissensus in order to understand situations whereby the order is disrupted by someone who was not supposed to be part of a discussion. The discussion Rancière proposes is related to the limits of political and private life. As such, whoever draws the line between them has the power to define what can be publicly discussed or not, what has less or more importance in the life of a community, a city, a country. In his view, 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).

The author proposes a particular definition of “politics” and “police” as opposing concepts. Rancière’s definition of “politics” considers its disruptive character, its capacity to collapse the order by changing the way things were usually perceived, *i.e.*, the distribution of the sensible. In this sense, politics is related to aesthetics, as it consists in the public emergence of those who had no voice to take part in the poetic, creative and intellectual work. Therefore, art and politics can be emancipating given the fact that they can create – or at least point to – a new world, a new way of existence and sharing the common: “It [politics] begins when they make the invisible visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the ‘common’ of the community” (Rancière, 2015: 147).

The author understands the “police” as the hierarchical distribution of the sensible in which subjects have specific and determined places. In this sense, formal politics (constituted of parties, state, government as well as formal opposition, unions, *etc.*) is part of what he would name the police order, where everything and every person have their determined place. There is no lack or surplus in the police order, as the police order happens through divisions and partitions of *who* can speak and *what* can be said. In opposition to dissensus, considered by Rancière as the essence of politics, consensus is a process that shrinks the political space, reducing politics to the police. Consensus does not mean that everyone agrees in every issue, but that there is an agreement about the way the sensible is distributed, *i.e.*, about who has and who does not have the right to speak and to be recognized as a voice that counts.

It is argued here that “consensus” and “dissensus” can constitute key concepts to read, interpret and analyze urban contentious interactions. Written and performative interferences are communicative practices that may show scenes of dissensus, marking a new distribution of the sensible. In this case, the autonomous subject, who creates and is created in the gaps, invents a scene that has contingent, situational, aesthetic and political aspects. Furthermore, illegal and even aggressive practices of urban interference are subject to appropriation, normalization and invisibility, approaching what Rancière defines as consensus. Looking at the multiple and ongoing dialogues which take place in the city, one can observe that dissensus and consensus are continuously performed, sometimes in a situation where both types of relation are present, and the boundaries

between them can become blurred and are continuously changing. These reflections lead to the main research question: considering that, in contemporary global cities, dissensus tends to become consensus through commodification and appropriation, what are the impacts and results of urban interventions in a larger – and political – sense?

METHODOLOGY

London's identity is associated with its historical, economic, political and military power; strongly connected to a symbolic power (Georgiou, 2013), which makes it an iconic global city. It is a culturally rich and diverse place, very suitable to ground a research about urban visual communication. In *World City* Doreen Massey (2015) stresses that London holds a hegemonic position at the heart of the establishment of neoliberalism. Quite often, decisions and actions taken in London have material consequences in other parts of the world. The author also describes London as a radical and progressive place that has been a focus of migration, which makes the metropolis a "home to an astonishing multiplicity of ethnicities and culture" (Massey, 2015: 9). She adds that the capital of the UK is one of the richest cities in the world but at the same time it has acute and growing inequalities. As in many other global cities, London points to the paradoxes of living (in) the global city, which for some privileged can be "enormously pleasurable" but for others "a site of serious deprivation and despair" (Massey, 2015: 11).

The empirical research material was not predetermined, but defined inductively during the research conduct. The chosen methodology was an ethnographic exploration of the streets of London, during which attention and openness to the visual dialogues taking place at the street level was central. The spatial limits for the research were drawn alongside London transport zones, privileging zones 1 and 2. My search for discursive interventions was inspired by the idea of "flânerie" in Walter Benjamin (1997; 2004) who was, in his turn, inspired by Charles Baudelaire's (2007) "flâneur", a dandy wanderer aesthetically affected by the cosmopolitan experience. Georgiou (2013: 18) stresses that "flânerie" was not a practice of aesthetic explorations for Benjamin: he sought to understand the city "as a site of struggle, as an unequal place", and also as a "point of meetings of difference". My method consisted firstly in experiencing the city through long walks, without previous planning, but with attentiveness to the environment and, especially, to the visual traces of struggles and antagonist interactions.

Through this practice I learned to choose, beforehand, regions and streets where interventions could potentially be found: the more deprived and less surveilled ones, less central and therefore more likely to receive interventions. Some of the choices had previously been made, as had I known in advance that I could find urban interventions in regions such as East / Northeast London (especially Shoreditch and Hackney Wick) and South London, known as focal points of street art, gentrification and, consequently, urban media studies in London. Once in these sites, I freely explored the streets during my walks. In this sense, my method was also inspired by the Situationist practice of the "dérive" (drifting), as proposed by Guy Debord (1956): "[t]he spatial field of a *dérive* may

be precisely delimited or vague, depending on whether the goal is to study a terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself". Thus, the drifts methodology instilled in me awareness of the urban landscape and of its possible – although unpredictable – findings. The research methodology was intertwined with the conceptual and theoretical framework, as the attention to the tactics of the weak over the strategies of the powerful (De Certeau, 1984), as well as to scenes of dissensus and consensus (Rancière, 2009; 2015).

During the period of analysis, approximately 2,300 images of urban interventions in London were produced. From the collected empirical material, I made a first selection according to technical criteria of quality, intelligibility and appropriateness to the research question. The materiality of the recorded interventions (such as texture, size, material, contrast, color, etc.) was also considered, as they could reveal the tools used to write, paint, daub, spray, stick, draw. These visual aspects of the writings were important for the impact, the visibility, the legibility and the discursive argumentation. This observation was significant to the analysis as these elements are also indexes of the intervention practices; suggesting who (and how) did them. The selected images, about 400, were printed and cut. In order to obtain an overview of the empirical evidence, I spread this material on a large desk and, for three weeks, the construction of possible groups for analysis was tested in this stage of redesigning and reinvention of the corpus. Through these procedures, it was possible to detect regularities, peculiarities and differences between the recorded interventions (Figure 1).



▲ Figure 1.
Around 400 images were printed and organized in groups
for analysis according to thematic patterns.
Source: Author, 2016

A similar and inspiring methodological approach is the “iconology of the interval”, a method of image analysis created by the art historian Aby Warburg (Rampley, 2012). His methodology consisted in organizing large panels¹ according to common elements, similarities and various connections between many images. These sets of images were mobile and changeable. For Warburg, the analysis was in the space between one image and another. The iconology of intervals is not an end in itself; it helps identifying content as well as setting a historical problem by connecting images and collective memory. Thus, the image analysis should consider both the text and the context.

In addition to the analysis inspired by the “iconology of the interval” method, a useful complementary methodology was the Discourse Analysis (DA) which was focused more on the visual aspects of the interventions. This perspective defends the idea that the verbal or visual discourse should not be observed independently, or detached from the historical moment, the power structures and the lines of force in society. Every discourse brings the underlying ideological, historical and political construction that is current in its time. This context, in its turn, is constructed and understood in the clash of the discourses. Norman Fairclough (1992) proposes a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and understands that social actors, through discursive practices, can reproduce and transform structures of domination, challenging domination and ideological frames, resisting and reconfiguring them.

Considering that discursive practices shape society and are shaped by it, CDA claims that theorizing language is also a way of intervening in it and in the social structure. The DA and CDA approaches have important points of convergence: the object of study of any discourse analysis is never only the text/image, because the discourse exists within the relations of power, social institutions, identities, ideologies, etc. Therefore, as a premise, I consider that urban discourses are intrinsically related to conflicts in a certain time and place, showing which issues are worrying, affecting and engaging people in public discussions. Reading the claims in the streets, the investigation sought to explore the tangling of texts and contexts, going beyond the inscription itself. The questions for the analysis related to the content of the inscription were: 1) what is this person or group claiming, 2) does the intervention point to a struggle, and 3) what can the intervention reveal about the tensions in London?

After grouping the images in clusters according to thematic patterns, I could detect nine main issues at stake in London between September 2015 and June 2016: austerity, Brexit referendum, refugees/migration, gentrification, gender (mostly feminist interventions), race/racism, use of public resources, preservation of local cultures, surveillance/privacy. As I predicted, I could find fewer interventions in the richest areas, e.g., West London. Nevertheless, some of these contentious themes were distributed rather equally among London regions, being found in many different parts of the city: Brexit, refugees/migration, feminist interventions, and surveillance. I could find more interventions about gentrification, local cultures, and race in areas where the population

¹ See more about Warburg's Bilder Atlas Mnemosyne at <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/collections/warburginstitute-archive/online-bilderatlas-mnemosyne> (Accessed 06 June 2018) and at The Warburg Institute (School of Advanced Study, University of London), Woburn Square, Bloomsbury, London.

was more diverse. Among these issues, I chose to analyze in this article four cases of urban interventions related to refugees/migration and gentrification, concentrating the study on the images reproduced here.

FOUR CASES OF VISUAL INTERVENTION IN LONDON

Four distinct, but also somewhat inter-related case studies were analyzed. In each of these cases, dissenting discourses challenged previously existing consensual discourses and spaces in London, provoking different reactions and results. Official and counter-hegemonic discourses interacted in a contentious or more harmonious context. Three of the interventions were found in East London areas where processes of gentrification are very noticeable (Shoreditch and Hackney Wick). The fourth intervention was situated in Knightsbridge, in the affluent Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. What they have in common is disruption – or attempts to disrupt – in a given urban landscape. Each one of the four cases have a specificity, but also present features in common, which was a criterion for choosing them for analysis.

Spraying and insisting in Hackney Wick

The first case is situated in the northeastern region of London, an area close to Hackney Wick overground station and the River Lee Navigation Canal. Since 2012, this area has been rebuilt and the main constructions were the *Olympic Park* and a huge shopping center called *Westfield Stratford City*. The region of the new buildings has a strange and arid atmosphere. Nevertheless, the area is becoming attractive to newcomers because of the new infrastructure as well as due to lower house prices, given the fact that it used to be (and still is) a poor region of London. Along the canal, in a more alternative spot, it is possible to come across cafés, galleries, art centers, breweries and a bohemian scene that points to a process of cultural effervescence and gentrification of the region. Sharon Zukin (2010: 8) explains that these changes are called gentrification “because of the movement of rich, well-educated folks, the gentry, into lower-class neighborhoods, and the higher property values that follow them, transforming a declining district into an expensive neighborhood with historic or hipster charm”.

During the period of data collection, a building was being constructed in the area and dark green hoardings were protecting the construction site. These temporary protective structures were used to promote a corporate visual identity, displaying the logo, information about the project, etc. However, these canvases were not left as they were before; they also became a canvas for dissensus: red, white, yellow paint was sprayed over the logo and information, and sentences were written over the hoardings. I visited the place in different times to record these written interactions, which revealed a repetitive and alternate conversation between the official branded discourse and the social actors who practice dissensus.

The first interventions in Hackney Wick were registered in October 2015. In February 2016, there were no visible unofficial inscriptions anymore, only signs of new paint which

looked like patches in a darker tone covering some parts of the hoardings. In July 2016, the surfaces were all overwritten again, showing that the symbolic struggles are ongoing processes, based on insistence, resistance and repetition: the hoardings are painted, then interfered with graffiti, the company covers it with ink, and it happens again and again. The cycle of branding, interference, erasure, rebranding shows that none of the sides gave up the fight for this physical and symbolic space. They know the panel will be painted and erased again, and this is part of the dynamics of the place.

I understand “insistence” as the repeated denial to accept something, especially when it comes from a more powerful actor, such as a corporation or an institution. The strong have the material resources to produce a message once and then to reproduce it over and over again – this is a common strategy in marketing, advertising, and propaganda. In a different way, the insistent individual is the one who does not seem to care how many times she practices an act – not by reproduction, but by coming back and acting again, in spite of the intervention's ephemerality.

In this case, the repetition is a tactic of the weak. It might not be a clear political action, but insistence can be read as one of the features of resistance. The stubborn repetition, in this case, is the aspect that constitutes a scene of dissensus as the struggle for physical and symbolic space is a constant process, without a solution or a winner. The problem of disruption is not solved by means of effacement as the written interferences always come back, like an ironic and endless game.



▲ Figure 2.
Interventions in Hackney, London.
Source: Author, 2015-2016

Fusion and consensus in Shoreditch

Another example of using construction hoardings as a canvas for dissensus could be found in Shoreditch, a region in a much more advanced state of gentrification and commodification than Hackney Wick. Shoreditch is also located in East London, between the boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets. In about one decade, the area transformed from place with a strong Asian migrant presence, mostly Bangladeshi, into a bohemian area with bars, cafés, vintage and designer shops, most of them managed and owned by young white middle-class newcomers.

In recent years, the area has seen the construction of numerous high-rise buildings marketed at wealthy newcomers. *The Fusion* is one of them. On the construction hoardings, its visual communication enacts an appropriation of the graffiti aesthetics using them as a way of illustrating and approaching the building to its surroundings. The colorful graffiti composes a pattern that fades into black in a gradient effect that works as a background to display the logo and the sales phone number. The typography emulates hand-painted numbers, so that the corporate communication would not appear too different from the "urban" character of the neighborhood.

In this case, tagging and graffiti are not *against* the new building, but are used as a visual communication and marketing strategy which attempts to fuse the "shabby-chic" character of the area and the "luxurious" features of the new flats. Nevertheless, on the building's website, the aesthetics of tagging is not present: its design brings a clean and sophisticated atmosphere. The promotional material published online² points to the advantages of living in the area, using expressions that suggest the idea of diversity (cf. "eclectic, suited to every individual's taste", "mind-boggling variety", "an open book to tourists"); of contemporariness and modernity (cf. "fresh", "trendiest", "culture that inspires trends", "fashion"); of liveness (cf. "exciting, urban"). Two dissonant but revealing words are used to describe the area: "ingenuity" and "unique", which stresses its character of authenticity.

The advert praises Brick Lane, a street famous for its diversity, street art and graffiti. The advantages are linked to the consumption of customized clothing, affordable vintage and designer pieces, rare and collectable vinyl, etc. Food is also an attraction of the street, which has "market food stalls" as well as "chain restaurants and smaller cafés bringing together larger and local communities with a variety of tastes". We could read this phenomenon as an example of consensus in the city. As Rancière (2015: 79) points out, consensus consists in "... the attempt to dismiss politics by expelling surplus subjects and replacing them with real partners, social and identity groups and so on. The result is that conflicts are turned into problems to be resolved by learned expertise and the negotiated adjustment of interests."

Marketing discourse repeatedly tries to incorporate languages of marginalized groups, which provides the illusion of carrying a certain form of spontaneous originality. Companies know that their audiences are becoming increasingly media savvy and resistant

² Available at: <http://www.galliardhomes.com/The-Fusion> (20/03/2017)

to the consumption discourses which dominate advertising in mainstream *media*. Thus, there is a constant search (called coolhunting or trendspotting) for whatever may be seen as authentic; and one way of achieving this is by intersecting corporate communication with urban expressions. The aesthetics of the diverse street has been widely used to add authenticity, youth, and informality to products and services. Consequently, the boundaries that separate the illegal and transgressive practices from the illustrative, decorative and commissioned street art are blurred, especially in a place like Shoreditch where ethnic diversity and the related tensions make the place more attractive to tourists and middle-class consumers in general.

This phenomenon influences the experience people have when visiting cities. Today tourists are offered street art tours not only in London, but in many other cities. Instead of traditional sightseeing of historical monuments, the attractions of these tours are the marginal, the transgressive and creative expressions of graffiti and tagging on the canvas of urban tapestry, usually located in neighborhoods where immigrants, poor and non-white people live – or used to live. As Stuart Hall (1992: 23) reminds us: “there is nothing that global postmodernism loves better than a certain kind of difference: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic, as we say in England, ‘a bit of the other’ (which in the United Kingdom has a sexual as well as an ethnic connotation)”.

Likewise, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012: 104) points to the racial aspect of the phenomenon when she states that “[s]treet art, mobilized by the early legitimization of hip-hop as popular music, attractive to middle-class, white, suburban audiences as well as the working class and people of color, emerges in the 21st century as a ‘white hot commodity’”. The aesthetics of urban interventions brings to the place a valuable atmosphere of *authenticity*. This aligns with Zukin (2010: 4), who argues that “[i]n the gentrified and hipster neighborhoods [...], authenticity is a consciously chosen lifestyle and a performance, and a means of displacement as well”.



▲ Figure 3.
Construction hoardings in Shoreditch.
Source: Author, 2016

(Anti) gentrification and ambivalence in Brick Lane

In global cities worldwide, as well as in smaller historical towns, issues and struggles about housing and gentrification are present today. This contemporary phenomenon leads to tensions and conflicts regarding the commons and the complex use of public and private spaces. According to Rancière (2015), dissensus is precisely a disagreement about the boundaries between what is public and what is private. The issues about gentrification, as in many other urban problems, relate to the relationship and disjunctures between public and private life: the rise of rents affects where and how people live in the city. This can be seen as a private and individual problem, which would need to be solved by, for example, trying to raise the household income or moving to a less expensive area in the city or to another city altogether. However, when individuals and groups get organized to discuss and protest about the issue of gentrification and rising costs, it becomes a public problem and concern. The struggles against gentrification and real estate speculation are inscribed in this effort to make visible this contemporary phenomenon of displacement in some neighborhoods in London, a city, as Massey (2015) argued, of acute and growing inequalities.

In September 2015, protesters attacked a hipster café in Brick Lane, East London. As already pointed out above, both the area (Shoreditch) and the street (Brick Lane) are famous for their cultural diversity and consequent “authenticity”. The population of Shoreditch is still very diverse, but the rents are increasing at a rapid pace, making it harder for the former and remaining locals to live there. Owned by two white, good-looking, tattooed, and bearded twin brothers from Belfast, *Cereal Killer Café* has provoked controversy since its opening in December 2014, as the high prices were considered outrageous, especially because it is located in one of the poorest regions in London. Activists and even the press have pointed to the discrepancy between the two facts, arguing that local residents could not afford to eat at the café³. In this context, trendy *Cereal Killer Cafe* was chosen as the target for a public protest, which was organized via a Facebook page called “Fuck Parade”.

Besides the Facebook page, the group used stickers on lampposts to mobilize people into action. On the evening of the protest, the anti-gentrification activists were wearing pig’s head masks and torches that scared some customers who were inside the café. The protesters threw red paint and daubed the word “scum” over the windows, as they considered the shop a symbol for gentrification. A few minutes after it started, the event was on Twitter and other social media. It was also reported on by major UK newspapers some hours later. The day after, the red paint that remained on some parts of the facade did not contrast much with the graphic style of the café’s logo and illustrations. In an area known for graffiti, street art and interventions, that paint could be part of the café’s visual identity, which already had references of informality, such as loose baselines, retro typography, bright primary colors, etc. The protests did not seem to have disturbed the business too much, on the contrary. A photo published in *The Guardian*, where a young woman shows the café’s window to tourists, suggests that the *Cereal Killer Cafe*

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2869969/Excruating-encounter-hipster-twin-Cereal-Killer-cafe-challenged-selling-bowl-cornflakes-3-20-one-London-s-poorest-areas.html#ixzz4oap98C7s> (01/08/2017)

facade became a sightseeing spot as a result of the protests. The place has become more interesting and attractive as it was the stage – and a reason – for performative struggles. Ironically, the episode gave the café a touch of authenticity and belonging to a new configuration of the neighborhood. Although violence, noise and protests are not desired characteristics for a business, the event seems to have added more layers of value to the commodified region. Months later, splash-shaped stickers could be seen at the café windows, advertising its products and facilities. Again, the aesthetics of protest was appropriated and commodified.



▲ Figure 4.

Sticker for the protest. Windows with red paint and promotional splash-shaped stickers.

Source: Author, 2015

The girl and the gas in Knightsbridge

In the night of 23-24 January 2016, Banksy made one of his artworks in the rich area of Knightsbridge, London. He used a wooden construction hoarding located opposite the French Embassy to criticize France's treatment of refugees in Calais by referring to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, one of France's most popular historical novels which can also be read as a humanitarian manifesto. In the famous preface to the book, Hugo (1909: 3) writes: "so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless". Banksy reproduced the worldwide famous drawing of a poor and young Cosette, used to market the musical of *Les Misérables*. This production has been very successful in France, UK and USA for more than three decades and it has been the longest-running musical in London.

The location of the intervention was highly symbolic, as it criticized the use of tear gas by the French police against refugees and migrants in the "Jungle", a large encampment in Calais. The iconic figure in the mural had tears coming from her eyes and, as in the poster, a torn French flag as a background. Although the upper part of the artwork was similar to the musical visual identity, its lower part showed the sprayed image of a gas cloud coming from a can with the initials CS, another name for tear gas. The mural portrayed the fragile

Cosette – representing the poor, the weak, the refugees, the migrants – as a victim of the violence perpetrated by the French police forces.

This street art piece adds layers of meaning as it manages to evoke simultaneously a classic French novel, a world famous musical and a repression practice. Like many other urban interventions, he did about controversial political issues, Banksy's work is ironic and bitter. The juxtaposition of the contrasting elements (the girl and the gas) portrayed the incoherence between the widespread acclaimed ideals of humanism and the actual practices of inhumane treatment of those who are excluded.

This mural is mainly an urban work of art, and can be considered very daring regarding the highly surveilled space it was placed in. Nevertheless, the intervention did not end with the mural: in the left corner of this urban canvas, a QR code was placed, which led to a video on YouTube showing scenes of the police attack at the camp in Calais. In this sense, the whole image can also be seen as a lure to draw the viewer's attention to the video. Banksy's work is an example of the complexity of urban interactions and of convergence (Jenkins, 2006). In this transmedia urban communication, the artist used alternative and complementary media resources to communicate, reinforce and prove what he had to say. These were his tactical tools operating in the domains of the strong (De Certeau, 1984).

Banksy's work, although covered and removed on the same day that it appeared, was the most reverberated and probably the most successful in its political aim to call attention to the treatment that refugees were receiving in Calais. This intervention was also the most "professional" one: done by a notoriously anonymous artist, it was reverberated in the mass media in the UK and abroad. At the same time, it is also the most branded and commodifiable intervention, because just as his other works, the hoarding he painted is worth a fortune on the art market.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

My observations across London between September 2015 and June 2016 and the collected images revealed important themes of contention, *i.e.* the following issues were found to be in evidence in the streets: austerity, Brexit referendum, refugees/migration, gentrification, gender, race/racism, use of public resources, preservation of local cultures and surveillance/privacy. Regarding the communication between the social actors, there are many forms of interaction taking place at the street level. One of them is the communication between the "writers": the official institution, the company and the jammers, for example. But, as interventions happen in open spaces, the dialogue also includes the general public: both the institution and the jammer are talking to publics. They are using the street as a canvas and as a screen for their discussion. Even when the intervention is addressed to a corporation or to an individual, it seems to be aimed at the general public too. Most of the times, artists and activists work *in situ* but seek to receive social and mainstream media publicity, reverberation and a wider visibility to the artwork and also to the cause – when there is one.

Observing the urban surfaces' materiality, I noticed that many interventions were done over hoardings originally made for protecting construction sites from view and unauthorized access. These structures are also a separation device, as they prevent the contact between the general public and the workers; and between the public and the private space. Besides its primary function as a shield, they are also used to display warning and information signs as well as marketing and promotional messages. As seen in three of the four cases I presented, activists extend and subvert the purposes of construction hoardings, using them as canvases for urban interaction. I believe that the large number of inscriptions found over this kind of surface is not a coincidence, but a sign that hoardings work well for this kind of interactions for particular reasons. If compared to walls, windows, doors and facades, hoardings are cheap structures that can receive paint and other interferences without much damage to their function. They are not seen as valuable private property; hence, using them as canvasses for contentious communication is a kind of compromising, respectful and obedient transgression. Even when writing provocative or counter-hegemonic discourses, the individuals, artists and activists seem to avoid permanently damaging the actual properties. Besides, the transitory character of the construction hoarding makes it also an almost perfect base for transitory claims to the city.

Interventions against corporate and state communication are not a new phenomenon. Rhetorical strategies such as parody and criticism of advertising, as well as the appropriation of these counter-hegemonic speeches, have been part of the capitalist dynamics and neoliberal rationale. There is also an especially ambivalent and intertwining relation between transgressive street culture and the phenomenon of commodification of the city's space; and this is linked to class and race. As Banet-Weiser (2012: 106) observes, "in creative cities that develop alongside processes of gentrification, "urban" street art signals a desirable racial presence to wealthy investors and tourists rather than actual raced, undesirable bodies". In the same vein David Harvey (2012) notes that singularity and transgression are valued as they break the homogeneity of the production of goods. The dynamics for the functioning of capitalism in contemporary life needs dissensus, as it tends to be appropriated, normalized and even sold as a mark of authenticity and originality.

Looking back at the cases observed, I tend to consider the protest against *Killer Cereal Café* in Brick Lane, as a scene of dissensus, precisely due to the fact that a subaltern group forced a visibility through disruptive tactics. Their claims against gentrification were somehow heard, as the action highlighted the issue in the media and made it an object of public debate. In spite of this visibility, however, the actual result of that direct action was uncertain and presumably not very successful: as we could see, the process of the city's commodification can rather easily appropriate and neutralize protests.

In Hackney Wick, the people who sprayed paint over the hoardings also forced a visibility in the urban landscape, in ideally sanitized spaces; controlled by other pictorial and verbal speeches. These inscriptions also referred to the process of gentrification, but in a kind of nonsense way. Although this might be read as simple noise, I consider that

their presence and especially their insistence is a way of producing scenes of dissensus and politics through nonsense and humor. The ephemeral speech of unauthorized urban interventions are temporary and volatile, but can also embed resistance, marked by audacity and creativity. Maybe because of its enigmatic or nonsense character, opposite to the neoliberal criteria, consumer culture cannot absorb some of the urban expressions that remain marginal.

The Fusion, in Shoreditch, on the contrary, was a case of hegemonic voice that not only illustrates the aesthetic and political consensus and appropriation of East London; but also dilutes the creative character of graffiti, transforming it into a kind of decorative accessory for a luxurious building.

In Knightsbridge, Banksy's work is an example of vicarious counter-hegemonic voice. The artist is not speaking about his own experience when he addresses issues like wars, refugee camps, etc. His oeuvre highlights the point of view of the weak, of gay people, of children, of migrants, of the poor. Even considering that Banksy's work challenges hegemonic institutions, Banet-Weiser (2012: 94-95) sees the street artist as "a brand in and on himself" and a neoliberal "free enterprising individual". His audacious act of making his protest art in such a rich and surveilled area adds value to his intervention, in a sort of authenticity that comes with transgression and illegality.

In this article, I chose to analyze four specific cases of interventions in London, in three different areas. All these cases raised awareness regarding important issues that have been central in discussions about the urban context in the UK and beyond, namely the phenomenon of gentrification and tensions regarding migrants/refugees. Both topics reflect struggles about spaces and are directly connected to ideas of displacement, of migration, of people moving and being moved from one place to another, searching for something, escaping from something, looking for a better life. These two processes – gentrification and migration - have points of crisis, but are not isolated nor inscribed only in a determined time and space, as they are part of the history of cities and of people who live (in) them.

Returning to the research question I proposed, seeking to understand the impacts and results of the urban interventions in a larger – and political – sense, I believe there is no definite or "right" answer, as the concrete impact is not measurable. By studying these and other cases of urban inscriptions, I could see that dissenting voices are undoubtedly weak, not only because of their limited scope of action in urban spaces but also because of the dynamics of appropriation and commodification that are constantly trying to neutralize them. Looking at London and other global cities, we can observe that, unfortunately, in spite of interventions and protests, gentrification is a fast and strong phenomenon and migrants and refugees are continuously refused entry and/or kept on the fringes of society.

The evidence shows that, in the end, almost nothing escapes the neoliberal rationale as the appropriation undermines and assimilates many kinds of protest and critique in

urban interventions. Nevertheless, I do not believe it can completely neutralize them, as these interventions show that the “distribution of the sensible is never secure” (Tanke, 2011: 72) and that discourse can carry maintenance or transformation (Fairclough, 1992). In this sense, when causing small symbolic disruptions – and persisting in doing so, individuals and groups make politics. There are important contradictions in all the cases analyzed in this article, at different levels: the multiple combination of words and images in the streets often constitutes ambivalent discourses, showing critique and appropriation. Adopting an extended concept of dissensus, I argue that the practice and the presence of the interventions can configure (in themselves) scenes of dissensus.

I conclude by stressing the importance of approaching urban interventions as creative communication practices that reveal tensions, power relations, dissensus as well as consensus taking place in global cities. They comment on current issues, sometimes contributing to public debate about crucial questions. They interfere not only materially, but in the way we understand and make sense of ourselves and of the physical and symbolic world. The city is a site of lived, interpreted, mediated, shared experiences. These usually banal inscriptions are important to the city, to the society and as objects of research. Urban artists and activists – be individuals or groups, organised or not, famous or anonymous, making occasional or regular interventions – can become political, showing the uneasiness, the discomfort, the lack and the excess of contemporary life. They can reflect and produce the movement, the instability, the insecurity; as societies are not fixed. They are always in the making, in the writing.

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URBANE INTERVENCIJE U GLOBALNOM GRADU: NESLAGANJE, KONSENZUS I AMBIVALENCIJA NA ULICAMA LONDONA

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SAŽETAK *Ovaj rad analizira urbane intervencije kao komunikativne prakse koje mogu postati vizualne „scene neslaganja“, odnosno političkog remećenja koje iniciraju novi glasovi u društvu. U tri prezentirana slučaja aktivisti upotrebljavaju različite taktike i tehnike kako bi se njihovi zahtjevi vidjeli na površini grada. Takve aktivnosti mogu generirati razna značenja i imati različite učinke. Jedan od slučajeva potvrđuje da korporativni diskursi mogu prisvojiti urbane intervencije, što pokazuje da važni suvremeni urbani izričaji, poput grafita i ulične umjetnosti, koji su dio rastućeg fenomena komodifikacije urbanog prostora, mogu dovesti do konsenzusa. U zaključku se ističe važnost pristupanja urbanim intervencijama kao kreativnim praksama koje odražavaju i (re)produciraju kretanje, kompleksnost, ambivalenciju i kontradikcije koje su inherentne svakodnevnom životu u globalnim gradovima.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

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