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Street Art & Activism: Blu and the Politics of Public Space

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Abstract

This thesis discusses street art as political and aesthetic activism that interrupts the established regimes of visibility, meaning, and authority in the public space. Moving beyond its aesthetic or subcultural aspects, street art is positioned as a mode of communication that can work on the level of discourse, perception, and spatial argument. This thesis will examine the Italian graffiti artist Blu, whose massive, unauthorized murals confront capitalism, institutional authority, social injustice, and environmental degradation, and opposes commodification and institutionalization. Through discourse analysis, the thesis discusses the role of scale, site selection, temporality, and visual distortion as rhetorical practices that change urban spaces into spaces of critical practice. The works of Blu are also interpreted as epistemic interventions, establishing the temporary conditions of counter-visibility and alternative production of knowledge, bringing out the political and ethical aspects of the public space. This thesis highlights the conflict between resistance and co-optation and demonstrates how street art can lead to thoughtfulness and challenge the prevailing urban discourses.

Keywords

Street Art Activism, Public Space Reconfiguration, Epistemic Justice, Anti-Capitalist Spatial Practices, Discourse Analysis

Street art has emerged as one of the most visible forms of social commentary and political participation within contemporary urban space. What was once primarily associated with subcultures, illegality, and vandalism has developed into a complex artistic and communicative practice that operates at the intersection of aesthetics, politics, and public life. Streets in modern cities are no longer merely spaces of transit; they function as sites of manifestation, antagonism, and collective identity formation. Through visual interventions, street art directly interferes with the social meanings and power relations that shape urban space, challenging dominant narratives and institutional control over visibility and expression. Since this thesis aims at analysing the Italian street artist Blu, whose works are intentionally and explicitly rich of political and ideological flavour, basing this elaboration on an equally politically characterized literature production appeared as a consistent approach to interpret the Italian artist works. Blu is one of the most significant figures in contemporary European street art. Active since the early 2000s, Blu is known for his large-scale, unauthorized murals that appear on abandoned buildings, peripheral

neighbourhoods, and politically sensitive sites across Europe and beyond. His practice is characterized by an explicitly anti-institutional stance: Blu consistently rejects commissions, galleries, and museums, and has repeatedly resisted the commodification and institutionalization of street art. Instead, he produces monumental works without permission, addressing topics such as capitalism, consumerism, institutional power, social inequality, environmental destruction, and political violence. Blu is therefore a particularly relevant case study for examining how street art can function simultaneously as aesthetic production and political activism within public space. Blu is chosen as the subject of this thesis because his practice exemplifies a sustained and coherent engagement with public space as a site of political struggle. While artists such as Banksy and JR have seen their practices progressively integrated into museum exhibitions, commercial markets, and authorized urban interventions, Blu has maintained a deliberate distance from institutional frameworks, insisting on the autonomy and site-specificity of his work. As such, Blu's works offer a productive lens through which to analyse how street art may be interpreted as a tool to reconfigure public space and generate alternative forms of political communication outside institutional regulation. Based on the Italian artists' works, this thesis explores how some authors interpret the intersection of street art and activism, examining how visual practices in urban settings can operate as tools not only of political critique and spatial reconfiguration but also of epistemic justice. Street art occupies a transitional position between illegality and legitimacy, enabling artists to intervene in public discourse without institutional mediation. Both the artist and the cited scholars appear to converge towards the possibility to reintroduce visibility into contested urban environments, and that street art can disrupt dominant narratives and produces alternative modes of communication within the city. Within this framework, Blu's murals intervene in everyday urban life by confronting viewers with images that demand political interpretation rather than passive consumption. Many scholars concentrate on the origins, techniques, or cultural legitimization of street art, for instance studies on subcultural graffiti practices[1], documentation of street art's visual and material features[2], or analyses of its relationship to law and spatial regulations[3], while less attention has been given to its activist dimension and its role as epistemic resistance in public space. Studies often focus on street art's transition from subcultural practice

[1] Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture.*
[2] Konstantinos and Tsilimpounidi, *Graffiti and Street Art.*
[3] Young, *Street Art, Public City.*

to institutional recognition, overlooking how specific artistic practices continue to diverge from this trajectory. This thesis addresses this gap by offering a close, contextualized analysis of Blu's murals, focusing on how imagery, scale, location, and temporality engage directly with the social and political realities of the spaces in which they appear.

The central research question guiding this thesis is: *How does Blu's street art practice operate as a form of political and aesthetic activism that reconfigures public space and challenges dominant socio-political narratives?* To address this question, the thesis draws on theories of public art, activism, and public space. Street art is approached as a communicative and political practice that intervenes directly in urban environments. Concepts such as epistemic justice, place-making, and the tension between artistic autonomy and institutionalization provide the theoretical tools for analysing Blu's work. These frameworks allow for an examination of how visual practices contest whose knowledge, experiences, and struggles are made visible in public space. Methodologically, the thesis is embedded within discourse analysis and emphasizes the situated nature of Blu's interventions. The analysis considers the relationship between the murals and their specific spatial, social, and political contexts, focusing on how meaning is produced through visual elements, site selection, and temporal vulnerability. By examining selected artworks, the thesis explores how Blu's aesthetic strategies convey political urgency and critique through their integration into the urban fabric. The thesis is structured as follows. The first part outlines the theoretical framework, introducing key concepts related to street art, public space, and political activism. The second part discusses the methodological approach and analytical tools employed in the research of the thesis. The third and main section presents the case study of Blu, offering detailed analyses of selected murals to demonstrate how his practice reconfigures public space and produces political meaning. The conclusion reflects on the implications of these analyses for understanding street art as a form of political and aesthetic activism in contemporary urban environments.

Street Art, Public Space, and the Politics of Visibility

Street art has developed from an illegal subcultural practice into a legitimate cultural and artistic form that impacts directly on the public dimension of urban space. Originally associated with anonymity, subversion, and vandalism, street art has increasingly gained recognition within artistic, academic, and institutional frameworks. This process of legitimization, however, has not

been linear and raises broader questions concerning property, authority, and the role of public space in contemporary cities. Early forms of graffiti and street art were deeply rooted in subcultural identities and often emerged from marginalized urban groups seeking visibility and recognition. In cities such as New York, Paris, and Berlin, graffiti functioned as an artistic form of socio-economic marginalization' protest. Over the time, this practice attracted the attention of curators, scholars, and municipal programs, leading to its gradual acceptance as a form of cultural communication rather than mere vandalism. As American philosopher David Carrier suggests, this shift reflects a broader transformation in the mediation of artistic value, moving from the private authority of the museum to more open and accessible spaces of display.[4] At the same time, this transition introduces a fundamental tension: once street art becomes legitimized, it risks being absorbed into the same institutional and economic structures it initially sought to challenge.

This tension between autonomy and co-optation is central to understanding street art as a form of public art. German philosopher Hilde Hein distinguishes between art placed in public space and public art that actively engages with its social and spatial context.[5] From this perspective, street art derives its meaning not from permanence or institutional validation but from its embeddedness within specific urban environments. Its impermanence becomes a constitutive feature rather than a limitation, opposing the monumental and static character of traditional public art. Street art operates through process, temporality, and participation, confronting institutional authority by remaining unstable and context dependent. Beyond its aesthetic dimension, street art actively reshapes urban space. Murals have been employed in processes of urban regeneration, community involvement, and place-making, often contributing to the construction of civic identity and collective memory. At the same time, such practices may be instrumentalized within strategies of aesthetic gentrification, transforming visual resistance into cultural capital. These contradictions expose the contested nature of public space and raise questions about who determines visibility and legitimacy within the urban environment. The politics of visibility play a crucial role in this dynamic. Visibility entails the right to appear, to speak, and to participate in public discourse. Within this framework street art intervenes in this process by providing alternative platforms for marginalized voices and by disrupting dominant visual narratives of urban life. Operating within a space that is simultaneously accepted and forbidden, street art occupies a liminal position

[4] Carrier, "Museum Skeptics", 51-73.
[5] Hein, "What Is Public Art?", 1-7.

between legality and illegality. This ambiguity enhances its capacity to provoke engagement and transform viewers from passive consumers into active participants, particularly through practices of documentation, circulation, and online dissemination.

These theoretical perspectives, although pervaded by a significant ideological angle, provide a useful framework for analysing the works of Blu. His murals exemplify the contradictions inherent in contemporary street art, navigating between resistance and institutional recognition, visibility and erasure. By intervening directly in urban space, Blu's practice foregrounds the political dimensions of public art and exposes the mechanisms through which meaning, authority, and visibility are negotiated within the city. This section therefore establishes the conceptual groundwork for examining how Blu positions himself to express a form of street art that operates within and against the structures that define public space.

Street Art: Activism and Epistemic Justice

For interpreting street art, some scholars adopt traditional analytical frameworks based on spatial and urban theories[6], visual and aesthetic categories or cultural studies.[7] Within this context, relatively less is done on how street art is functioning as a tool of knowledge production and of political contestation in the public space. Much of the reviewed work on street art takes an ideological and theoretical approach to this practice focusing on its symbolic, political, and epistemic features, as opposed to tangible social impacts and material outcomes that could empirically be measured in the lived urban and social environment. Since this thesis discusses street art by focusing on Blu's practice as a form of political and aesthetic activism, which functions at the level of representation, visibility, and "epistemic struggle", the literature it will explore represents the more functional framework of analysis. Philosopher Sondra Bacharach[8], American-Canadian philosopher Quill Kukla[9], and art historian and sociologist Peter Bengtsen[10], drawing with full hands from the Anglo-American philosopher Miranda Fricker[11], do not assume that street art directly creates social change: they theorize how it may disrupt dominant discourse, redistribute interpretive authority, and make spaces in which other forms of knowledge can be

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[6] Gariso, *Graffiti, Street Art and Public Space Regulation.*
[7] Jeffrey Ian Ross, *Routledge Handbook.*
[8] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets", 31-43.
[9] Kukla, "Street Art".
[10] Jürgens, "Peter Bengtsen: Researching Street Art".
[11] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 1-185.

formed in public space. These interpretations are closely related to the objectives of this thesis, which are not to evaluate the material impacts of street art on policy outcomes or on societal behavioural change, but to a certain extent examine how street art may be viewed as a political intervention on the level of discourse, perception, and spatial meaning-making. This is why the cited literature was carved out to focus on conceptual and ideological representations that take into consideration the critical and provocative capacity of street art, its boundaries and how vulnerable it may become to co-optation by mainstream culture. Without offering an empirical proof of societal change or influence on the community, the above-mentioned authors interpret street art as an act of critical practice that aspires to disrupt the prevailing regimes of visibility, authority, and meaning.

According to Bacharach, street art functions not so much as aesthetic production but as political action, transforming the walls of the city into spaces of social commentary and alternative knowledge production.[12] Street art can then be understood also as a form of epistemic engagement that challenges dominant structures of visibility and authority. Rather than operating through institutional channels, street art introduces alternative ways of knowing and communicating in public space, destabilizing established hierarchies of who is entitled to speak, be seen, and be believed. As Bacharach suggests, street art is not solely an aesthetic intervention but an epistemic one: "…street artists make acts of resistance with their art. Street artists attempt, through their art, to do something about the world: they want to change the world with their artworks, literally!"[13] Bacharach conceptualizes street art as a form of "epistemic activism" by drawing on Fricker's distinction between "testimonial and hermeneutical injustice"[14]: testimonial injustice occurs when individuals are denied credibility due to identity-based prejudice, while hermeneutical injustice arises when collective interpretive resources are insufficient to make sense of certain social experiences. Street art, following Bacharach, can intervene in both processes by providing visual and conceptual resources that allow marginalized perspectives to become visible within public discourse.[15] The aconsensual nature of street art production is central to this epistemic intervention. Because it is produced without authorization, "this kind of activism is made possible because of street art's aconsensual methods of production—it is made on property whose owner has not

[12] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets", 40.
[13] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets", 33.
[14] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 4.
[15] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets", 35.

provided consent… that transforms the art-making process into an act of political and social protest."[16] Through anonymity, ephemerality, and public accessibility, street art blurs and disrupts hierarchies and boundaries between artist and viewer, professional and amateur, elite and mainstream culture. Operating outside institutional mediation, it redistributes epistemic agency, shifting epistemic passivity into epistemic participation by inviting passersby to interpret, negotiate, and contest meaning directly within everyday urban space. The street thus becomes a site of collective interpretation, where knowledge is co-produced through public engagement rather than expert mediation.

Kukla builds on this perspective by framing street art as a form of place-making and anti-capitalist spatial activism.[17] According to the philosopher, street art "constitutes space rather than just adorning or defacing it,"[18] reclaiming walls and infrastructures shaped by privatization and neoliberal governance. This spatial intervention is fundamentally communicative, transforming the city into a site of dialogue where meaning is negotiated collectively rather than imposed institutionally. The temporality and vulnerability of street art, its exposure to weather, erasure, and repainting, further position authorship outside regimes of property and accumulation, emphasizing public space as a fluid and contested domain. In an interview with Anna-Sohpie Jurgens, Peter Bengtsen similarly situates street art within broader forms of social and environmental activism.[19] Street art emerges as a visual response to processes of alienation, commodification, and ecological degradation in contemporary urban life, noting that "given ongoing issues like unsustainable consumption, pollution and climate change, it is not surprising that artists… would feel the need to comment on the state of affairs."[20] By embedding critical narratives within everyday environments, street art contributes to localized awareness and reflexive engagement. At the same time, Bengtsen cautions that the increasing commodification of street aesthetics risks neutralizing their critical potential, as forums once dedicated to discussion become focused on "buying and selling urban art products."[21] This vulnerability to co-optation raises critical questions about whether epistemic justice is achieved or merely attempted through street art. As Bacharach observes, once street art becomes institutionalized or aestheticized, it risks reproducing forms of

[16] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets", 33.
[17] Kukla, "Street Art".
[18] Ibid.
[19] Jürgens, "Peter Bengtsen: Researching Street Art".
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

epistemic injustice by detaching knowledge production from the communities and contexts in which it emerged.[22] In such cases, institutional validation can reinforce the very epistemic hierarchies street art seeks to challenge, turning dissent into spectacle and political critique into consumable culture.

Following the theoretical framework summarized above, one could conclude that epistemic justice can be achieved through street art since, among other factors, it facilitates the amplification of marginalized voices and the establishment of new interpretive resources. It is very difficult, in fact, relative to the effects on epistemic justice, to establish a rigorous cause-effect relationship stemming from street art and even harder to measure street art's contribution to it. Street art, indeed, is hardly sufficient, per se, to accomplish epistemic justice. Rather, it can be better conceptualized as a continuous effort, one that is always at work, although threatened by commodification, institutionalization, and selective visibility processes. Epistemic justice, in the sense that Bacharach understands it, is not the problem of representation itself but that of recognition, the recognition of the legitimacy of other knowers and other forms of knowing.[23] The fact that it can be anonymous, immediate, violates the limits of class, language and formal education and thus, it is a democratized visual form of communication. Equally, Kukla points out that the temporality of street art, its exposure to weather, erasure, and repainting, is a version of authorship that is non-possessive and is less likely to be accumulated by capitalism.[24] Moreover, street art is by construction successful in bringing marginalized narratives into the city, since most of the times this is the stated purpose of street artists although it must be admitted that, as outlined by the cited scholars, it can be subject to appropriation, decontextualization or aestheticization. Furthermore, the political and civic sensitivity that street art aims at fostering and provoking, might not necessarily result into enhanced power of the marginalized portions of society or into actual social transformation. A mural may help make an issue more visible but not necessarily changes the ranking of the authoritative credibility to speak on that issue and it may not necessarily ensure that the affected communities will be heard and consulted thereafter. Here, and to some extent, street art can contribute to the creation of the pre-conditions for epistemic justice to prevail, but without fully achieving it, not even at theoretical level. It indeed creates instances of contest and

[22] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets", 42.
[23] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets", 41.
[24] Kukla, "Street Art".

alternative knowledge, yet it cannot per se reconfigure structural inequalities of credibility, representation, and interpretation. Street art can be interpreted as a place of epistemic struggle, but not necessarily an emancipatory practice. It can have a potential to act in such a function because of the temporary spaces of counter-visibility and public discourse that it can occupy. The fulfilment of epistemic justice lies in broader societal circumstances such as having sustained political movements, communal interest, civic passion and disposition to hear. Differently stated, street art has the potential to facilitate the development of epistemic justice having in mind, though, that its contribution to this endeavour remains very hard to measure and its entrance needs to be maintained by continuous group actions.

Methodology and Analytical Approach

This thesis adopts discourse analysis as its methodological approach in order to examine how Blu's murals operate as political and aesthetic interventions in public space. Rather than treating street art solely as visual imagery, discourse analysis allows murals to be approached as communicative acts that construct meaning, articulate positions, and intervene in broader socio-political debates. Blu's works are therefore analysed as visual discourses that address themes such as capitalism, institutional power, environmental destruction, and social inequality. Discourse analysis examines how meaning is produced and contested and how statements maintain or disrupts power relations within specific social contexts. In the case of street art, discourse analysis extends beyond written language to include visual elements, spatial placement, scale, repetition, and symbolism as components of meaning-making. Blu's murals do not merely represent political ideas but actively stage arguments within the urban environment. As suggested by professor Stephanie Taylor "discourse analysis usually refers to a research approach in which language material, such as talk or written texts, and sometimes other material altogether, is examined as evidence of phenomena beyond the individual person."[25] Elements such as distorted bodies, hybrid figures, exaggerated proportions, and recurring symbols are analysed as strategies through which Blu constructs critique, directly relating political themes and spatial contexts. It can be interpreted that discourse analysis makes it possible to trace how Blu positions figures such as institutions, systems, and collective bodies within visual narratives that confront viewers in everyday urban space. By occupying public walls without authorization, Blu's murals disrupt established regimes of

[25] Taylor, *What Is Discourse Analysis?*

visibility, positioning the viewers in active interpretative role. This methodological approach does not treat meaning as fixed or universal. Instead, it acknowledges that the interpretation of street art remains open and contingent upon context. By analysing Blu's murals in relation to their imagery, placement, and political references, discourse analysis provides a structured way to examine how meaning is proposed rather than imposed. This allows the thesis to move beyond general claims about the power of street art and instead focus on how specific visual strategies operate within particular urban situations. By employing discourse analysis as the primary method, this thesis is able to connect theoretical concepts such as activism, epistemic justice, and public space directly to the analysis of Blu's works. The following case study applies this approach to selected murals in order to examine how Blu's street art functions as a form of political and aesthetic activism within contemporary urban environments.

Blu and the Reconfiguration of Public Space

Blu is one of the most influential contemporary street artists working in public space since the early 2000s. Active across Europe, Latin America, and the United States, he is known for producing large-scale, unauthorized murals that engage directly with the political, economic, and social conditions of the sites in which they appear. Blu has consistently rejected institutional mediation, commercial galleries, and the commodification of street art, insisting instead on the primacy of context, temporality, and public accessibility. His distinctive visual language, characterized by elongated figures, exaggerated proportions, and continuous metamorphosis between human, animal, and mechanical forms, functions as a critical tool through which abstract systems of power are rendered visible and tangible in everyday urban environments. Blu's street art practice is therefore not simply a matter of producing images in the city; it is a sustained intervention into the politics of public space. His murals operate as visual discourses that disrupt the daily routines of urban life and confront passersby with imagery that refuses to remain neutral or decorative. Through scale, location, and a symbolic vocabulary grounded in excess and deformation, Blu constructs spatial arguments that critique capitalism, social inequality, environmental destruction, and political violence. These arguments are not mediated through institutions or galleries but are embedded directly in the material and social fabric of the city itself. Public space is transformed into a contested arena in which power relations are exposed, challenged, and renegotiated through visual means. Blu's working method plays a central role in

the political force of his murals. Using paint rollers attached to long poles, he produces images that often cover entire building façades. This technique enables a scale that overwhelms architectural boundaries and dominates the viewer's field of vision. The resulting monumentality is not simply aesthetic; it functions as a visual metaphor for the systems Blu critiques: capitalism, institutional power, and militarized violence, which are similarly expansive, intrusive, and difficult to evade. The scale of Blu's murals transforms walls into sites of confrontation rather than decoration. From a discourse-analytical perspective, scale operates as a rhetorical strategy: the image does not politely invite interpretation but imposes itself upon the urban landscape, demanding and capturing attention. The viewer is compelled to engage with the work simply by inhabiting the city, and, as Bacharach argues, "…his aconsensuality in the public arena transforms the art-making process into an act of political and social protest."[26] This forced encounter is central to Blu's reconfiguration of public space, as it collapses the distance between art, politics, and everyday life.

One of Blu's most significant murals, *Lo Squalo Capitalista del Carmel* (The Capitalist Shark of Carmel, Fig.1), was painted in 2009 on an abandoned building in the Carmel neighbourhood of Barcelona. Visually, the mural depicts a gigantic shark composed entirely of banknotes (Fig.1.1). Its mouth is open, devouring smaller human figures and symbolic elements associated with labour and exploitation. The shark's exaggerated scale overwhelms the building façade, creating a stark visual imbalance between predator and prey. The spatial context of the mural is crucial to its meaning. Carmel is a neighbourhood historically shaped by social marginalization, uneven urban development, and limited institutional investment. The choice of an abandoned building is not incidental: the architecture itself becomes part of the discourse. The decaying structure materializes the consequences of economic exploitation in spatial form, linking financial abstraction to lived urban neglect. From my interpretation, the mural constructs a narrative of domination and vulnerability through visual hierarchy. The shark's physical dominance mirrors the dominance of financial capitalism in contemporary society. Capitalism is not represented abstractly but embodied as a monstrous force that consumes both people and spaces. The wall functions as a rhetorical surface where global economic power becomes visible at the scale of the neighbourhood. The mural stages capitalism as a spatial actor, revealing how financial systems shape not only markets but also cities, housing conditions, and social life. Importantly, meaning is produced through the interaction of image and site. The mural does not

[26] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets", 33.

simply depict exploitation; it stages it within a specific urban environment shaped by inequality. The viewer encounters the work not in a neutral gallery but in a neighbourhood marked by abandonment, forcing an interpretation grounded in lived spatial experience. Blu's consistent use of marginal urban sites, abandoned buildings, neglected walls, and peripheral neighbourhoods, are defining and distinctive features of his practice. These locations are not neutral locations but active components of meaning-making. By intervening in spaces shaped by disinvestment and exclusion, Blu links visual critique to concrete urban conditions. In *Lo Squalo Capitalista del Carmel*, the abandoned building functions symbolically as a discarded body within the capitalist system. The mural thus critiques not only abstract economic systems but also their material consequences: gentrification, spatial inequality, and the uneven distribution of resources. The wall becomes a stage where political and economic power is visualized through the lived reality of the city. This spatial anchoring distinguishes Blu's work from institutionalized art practices. The meaning of the mural is inseparable from its location and social context. Within this perspective, as Kukla suggests, the artwork operates "as a tool in resisting the capitalist commodification of space, and in creating anti-capitalist alternative spaces."[27] It exists as a situated statement that intervenes directly in the social life of the street, transforming public space into a site of political discourse.

A recurring visual strategy in Blu's work is transformation and metamorphosis. In murals painted in Berlin and in the animated film "MUTO" (Fig.2), figures continuously shift between human, animal, and mechanical forms. Bodies dissolve, merge, and reassemble in endless cycles of mutation. Limbs become weapons, torsos turn into machines, and identities collapse into abstract matter. Visually, these unstable bodies resist fixed meaning and coherent identity. From a theoretical perspective, metamorphosis functions as a form of visual argumentation. In this regard Blu's work is illustrative of Kukla statement that "the role of street art is not additive but transformative"[28], therefore redefining the understating of bodies, power, and shape. The body, indeed, is not presented as a stable subject but as a site of conflict shaped by external forces. This instability reflects experiences of alienation, dehumanization, and loss of agency within contemporary political and economic systems. The social contexts of these works, often post-industrial or historically divided cities, intensify their discursive force. Through continuous transformation, Blu visualizes how capitalism, militarism, and technological control deform

[27] Kukla, "Street Art".
[28] Kukla, "Street Art".

human life. It could be argued that discourse analysis reveals how meaning is produced through motion, distortion, and repetition rather than narrative clarity. The viewer is confronted with bodies that no longer belong fully to themselves, embodying systemic violence in visual form.

The figure of *Hombre Banano* (Fig.3) is one of Blu's most striking recurring motifs and serves as a concentrated critique of global capitalism. Visually, the figure fuses a human body with a banana, collapsing the distinction between labourer and commodity. The image is deliberately grotesque, exaggerating the absurdity and violence of economic reduction. The banana is a banal, everyday object, yet it carries deep historical and political connotations. It evokes the history of monoculture agriculture, and labour exploitation in Latin America. By placing this symbol in public space, Blu connects distant systems of extraction to the everyday consumption practices of urban viewers. From a discourse-analytical perspective, *Hombre Banano* constructs the body as a site of economic inscription. The fusion of flesh and commodity visualizes how capitalism transforms human beings into resources that can be packaged and sold. The mural does not merely depict exploitation; it embodies it. The body becomes a consumable object, exposing the violence embedded in global supply chains. The image also implicates the viewer: the banana is a familiar fruit, commonly consumed without reflection. By making the commodity-body visible, Blu disrupts habitual consumption and forces an encounter with the hidden labour, environmental damage, and historical violence embedded in everyday goods. In his conversation with Jürgens, Bengsten claims that street art "…can influence the viewer and bring about positive behavioral change… communicate environmental messages and raise public awareness of environmental issues."[29] In this sense, *Hombre Banano* functions as a discursive intervention that transforms ordinary urban space into a site of ethical confrontation. Blu's resistance to commodification is not only expressed through imagery but also through the temporality of his work. Exposed to weather, vandalism, and institutional removal, his murals resist permanence and ownership. This vulnerability is central to their political meaning, positioning them outside traditional regimes of preservation and accumulation.

Blu's most recent animated film, *Gaza* (Fig.4), being based on his own mural named Gaza in Geneva, Switzerland, extends his critique of global power into the realm of contemporary geopolitical tensions. Responding to the ongoing genocide in Palestine, the mural foregrounds civilian vulnerability, blocked humanitarian aid, and the silencing effects of political agreements

[29] Jürgens, "Peter Bengtsen: Researching Street Art".

that exclude Palestinian voices. Visually and spatially, *Gaza* reclaims public space as a site of political memory and protest. By bypassing institutional mediation, the film speaks directly to the viewer, refusing the normalization or erasure of violence. The walls become a platform for truth-telling, transforming the city into a space of transnational solidarity. From a theoretical perspective, *Gaza* operates as a visual counter-discourse that challenges dominant regimes of visibility. It raises epistemic questions about whose suffering is recognized and whose voices are excluded from public narratives. The mural Blu took inspiration from, named *Gaza* as the animated movie, constructs a symbolic bridge between viewers and the Palestinian people, making global injustice present within local urban space. Across his body of work, Blu positions the viewer as an active participant in meaning-making. Encountered during everyday routines, walking, living, the murals demand interpretation outside curated frameworks, and as Sondra Bacharach notes: "This forces the public to evaluate the art and its ideas for what they are, and the public must confront that art and the ideas for which the art stands, day in and day out, regardless of whether they accept it or not."[30] This forced engagement transforms the city into a discursive field where political meanings are negotiated rather than passively consumed. By refusing institutional mediation, Blu insists that political meaning is not the property of museums or galleries. His murals reconfigure public space into a site of critical engagement, where dominant narratives are visually challenged and alternative discourses emerge. The city becomes a living canvas for dissent, where art is not merely observed but experienced as part of urban life.

In 2016 in Bologna, Italy, Blu painted over his own murals that had been removed and shown in an institutional exhibition organized and curated by Genus Bononiae, the most relevant city museum. Visually, the museum decision replaced complex imagery with flat grey surfaces, transforming absence into a statement. From a discourse-analytical perspective, Blu's erasure functioned as a form of speech. By destroying his own work, the Italian artist challenged institutional narratives that frame street art as collectible cultural heritage. The act reaffirmed the primacy of context, community, and temporality in meaning-making, echoing Kukla who defines authorship outside of property and property-free street art, arguing that the worth of street art was not its preservation or commodification but, in its placement, and temporality.[31] It therefore exposed the tension between resistance and institutional recognition, demonstrating how

[30] Bacharach, "Finding Your Voice in the Streets,", 41.
[31] Kukla, "Street Art".

oppositional practices risk being neutralized through aestheticization, institutionalization, and market absorption.

To answer the research question: *How does Blu's street art practice operate as a form of political and aesthetic activism that reconfigures public space and challenges dominant socio-political narratives?* this thesis concludes that the Italian artist's practice of street art is only partially an act of direct social action, since it represents more an act of reworking the sensory, symbolic, and epistemic dimensions of the urban space. His murals are spaces of refusal and sign-making, that confront the neutrality and passivity of the city and reveal its political nature. The practice of Blu shows how street art can serve as a political intervention by use of aesthetic strategies based on context, scale, and vulnerability able to influence the way urban spaces are perceived, experienced and understood. The work of Blu helps then capturing a deeper insight into the idea of street art as an activity existing on the border of tension between resistance and co-optation, presence and disappearance, critique and aestheticization. His murals offer a strong and ideological view to the possibilities and restrictions of street art as a method of urban activism because they are convincingly rooted in the material conditions of the city. That Blu does not provide his public with tangible solutions may be thought of as a limitation of his political and civic passion: instead his practice demands that conflict, inequality, and exclusion should be visible over and over again, reasserting the importance of creative practice as a critical instrument for provoking public conscience and asking questions around the meaning of public space.

The practice of street art by Blu provides a strong example of how artistic intervention in the city can work at the same time both as aesthetic production and political action. This thesis has demonstrated how Blu's murals can be viewed as positioned visual interventions that aim to destabilize the public space by modifying regimes of visibility, perception and meaning in particular urban settings. The work of Blu directly interferes with the daily spatial experience of the city using scale, site selection, symbolic distortion, and temporality with the intention of interrupting habitual modes of seeing and moving through urban spaces. The selected works' analysis shows that the murals created by Blu may not just occupy the space, but represent an attempt to also actively transform the perception and interpretation of the space. The artist's intervention in empty buildings, marginal neighbourhoods and both socially and politically sensitive locations, aims at highlighting his view on the material implications of economic exploitation, institutional authority and global violence. In Blu's vision, by blaming capitalism,

militarism or consumerism, these interventions turn spaces of transit and of neglected confrontation and thought into tangible elements both corporealized and spatialized. In this regard, the work of Blu is not a depiction of abstract political or ideological principles but rather epitomises the quest for spatial argumentation within a city. Notably, this thesis does not imply that the murals created by Blu have a direct production of dialogue, community creation, and social transformation. Instead, it demonstrates in what ways his practice provides to the public, and in particular to the marginalized portion of society, a perspective that enables the conditions in which such processes can become possible. The rejection of institutional mediation and the acceptance of ephemerality make the public space a discursive arena upon which viewers are invited and provoked to participate as active interpreters instead of passive spectators. His murals can be politically interpreted and morally thought over, yet their impact is contingent, temporary and circumstantial. By considering the work of Blu through the lens of epistemic justice, and adopting a pragmatic and realistic elaboration of his works, his artworks could be thought as an epistemic artistic ambition rather than the actual achievement of epistemic justice. His murals present visual stories to the public space and challenge established regimes of visibility and revelation of forms of suffering, exploitation, and marginalization that are often ignored or normalized in mainstream culture. Nevertheless, as the analysis has outlined, these interventions can not warrant long-term political agency or structural societal and political change. Rather, they act as instances of counter-visibility that disruptively propose alternative modes of knowledge.

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Illustrations

Fig.1 - Blu, *The Capitalistic Shark of Carmel,* 2009, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 25m, Intersection of Carrer del Santuari and Carrer de la Gran Vista, Carmel neighborhood, Barcelona, Spain.

Fig.1.1 - Blu, *The Capitalistic Shark of Carmel,* 2009, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 25m, Intersection of Carrer del Santuari and Carrer de la Gran Vista, Carmel neighborhood, Barcelona, Spain.

Fig.1.2 - Blu, *The Capitalistic Shark of Carmel,* 2009, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 25m, Intersection of Carrer del Santuari and Carrer de la Gran Vista, Carmel neighborhood, Barcelona, Spain.

Fig.1.3 - Blu, *The Capitalistic Shark of Carmel,* 2009, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 25m, Intersection of Carrer del Santuari and Carrer de la Gran Vista, Carmel neighborhood, Barcelona, Spain.

Fig.1.4 - Blu, *The Capitalistic Shark of Carmel,* 2009, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 25m, Intersection of Carrer del Santuari and Carrer de la Gran Vista, Carmel neighborhood, Barcelona, Spain.

Fig.1.5 - Blu, *The Capitalistic Shark of Carmel,* 2009, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 25m, Intersection of Carrer del Santuari and Carrer de la Gran Vista, Carmel neighborhood, Barcelona, Spain.

Fig.1.6 - Blu, *The Capitalistic Shark of Carmel,* 2009, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 25m, Intersection of Carrer del Santuari and Carrer de la Gran Vista, Carmel neighborhood, Barcelona, Spain.

Fig.2 - MUTO, A short film by Blu: an ambiguous animation painted on public walls. Made in Buenos Aires and in Baden (fantoche), 2008, https://youtu.be/uuGaqLT-gO4?si=y0CVB1VDONN4UYxo, 1:35.

Fig.2.1 - MUTO, A short film by Blu: an ambiguous animation painted on public walls. Made in Buenos Aires and in Baden (fantoche), 2008, https://youtu.be/uuGaqLT-gO4?si=y0CVB1VDONN4UYxo, 2:16.

Fig.2.2 - MUTO, A short film by Blu: an ambiguous animation painted on public walls. Made in Buenos Aires and in Baden (fantoche), 2008, https://youtu.be/uuGaqLT-gO4?si=y0CVB1VDONN4UYxo, 4:17.

Fig.3 - Blu, *Hombre Banano*, c. 2005, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 30m, Avenida Bolívar, Managua, Nicaragua.

Fig.3.1 - Blu, *Hombre Banano*, c. 2005, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 30m, Avenida Bolívar, Managua, Nicaragua.

Fig.3.2 - Blu, *Hombre Banano*, c. 2005, Spray paint on wall, 10m x 30m, Avenida Bolívar, Managua, Nicaragua.

Fig. 4 – Blu, GAZA, a short film by Blu: an animated mural painted in public walls, 2025, Geneve, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RbnXt28alk , 0:22.

Fig. 4,1 – Blu, GAZA, a short film by Blu: an animated mural painted in public walls, 2025, Geneve, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RbnXt28alk , 2:56.

Fig. 4.2 – Blu, GAZA, a short film by Blu: an animated mural painted in public walls, 2025, Geneve, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RbnXt28alk , 4:50.

Image Sources

From Fig.1 to Fig.1.6, from Fig.2 to Fig.2.2, from Fig.3 to Fig.3.2, and from Fig.4 to Fig.4.2 have been extracted from the following website:

"BLU – Just Another WordPress Site," accessed January 26, 2026, https://blublu.org/b/