

**Abstract**

This article proposes an analytical framework that complements the well-established anthropological focus on the agency of art objects by shifting attention to their desire. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Comuna 13, Medellín (Colombia), it explores how the desire of local street artists—rather than their agency—is distributed through their artworks. Conducted in collaboration with the artistic collective Casa Kolacho, the research involved participation in their graffiti school, interviews with artists, and close analysis of selected murals. The findings suggest that these artworks express a desire to connect past, present, and future: preserving memory, celebrating transformation, and envisioning new possibilities. By foregrounding desire over agency, the article offers a temporal lens through which to understand how art shapes lived experience and collective imagination in contexts of urban change.

**Keywords**

Street Art; Comuna 13; Desire; Agency; Futures

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## Introduction

Between 2022 and 2023, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Medellín's Comuna 13 for my doctoral thesis in social anthropology. Formerly regarded as one of Medellín's most dangerous districts, some neighborhoods within Comuna 13 have recently undergone profound urban and socio-cultural transformations, attributable also to the vibrant local street art movement. The aim of my research was to examine the role of street art images in the transformations of Comuna 13. To some extent, the goal was to explore the agency of street art images—what they produce in the comuna, or, in short, what they do. To achieve this, I conducted extensive in-depth interviews with a diverse range of participants, including residents, community leaders, artists, tourism agencies, local merchants, members of associations or NGOs, and representatives of municipal councils. Concurrently, I reviewed secondary sources, such as Medellín's urban development plans, tourism flow data, academic articles, newspaper reports, and non-governmental organization reports, among others. The analysis of these data revealed that street art images have played a pivotal role in shaping Comuna 13's transformations, driving complex processes related, for example, to the resignification and reappropriation of public spaces by residents, alongside phenomena like gentrification and touristification, thereby demonstrating a powerful capacity to act (Riga 2024). However, discussing this issue with the artists, I realized that street art images did not merely 'receive' agency from human agents but acted autonomously, in ways that transcended the agency of their creators. Rather, what the artists distributed through street art images was not primarily their agency but their desire. In this article, I propose an approach that enriches the emphasis on the distributed agency of art objects—a central theme in contemporary anthropological scholarship—by foregrounding the underexplored dimension of the distributed desire of art objects. Attending to desire broadens the approach focused on the social effects of art, toward an exploration of elements related to motivations, aspirations, dreams, and hopes. Within the context of Comuna 13, the desire embedded in street art images offers interesting insights into how communities harness street art to interpret the past, navigate the present, and envision possible futures.

Graffiti and street art are widely recognized as sophisticated forms of artistic expression, extensively disseminated across global urban landscapes. Academic interest in these practices emerged in the 1980s, when scholars from diverse disciplines began to establish Graffiti and Street Art Research (GSAR) as a consolidated field of study. Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi (2017) delineate three distinct academic waves and propose the emergence of a fourth. The first wave primarily explored the interplay among graffiti, subcultures, and authority (Bushnell 1990; Castleman 1982; Lachmann 1988). The second wave adopted theoretical frameworks to examine graffiti in its plural forms, moving beyond individual pieces to consider broader contexts, including territoriality (Brighenti 2010), spatial control (Keith 2005), and liminality (Campos 2009), among other dimensions (Ferrell 1993; MacDonald 2001; Phillips 1999). These studies often prioritized the agents—their motivations and identities—over the material artifacts themselves (Brook and Dunn 2011). The third wave, exemplified by Ian Ross's *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (2016), shifted focus from the agents toward

discussions aimed at defining and distinguishing graffiti from street art (Kramer 2016; Ross 2016; Waclawek 2011). These debates were often characterized by a set of binary oppositions, such as criminality versus creativity, vandalism versus art, and illegality versus legality (Schacter 2016), thereby underscoring the ambiguous and fluid nature of both practices (Ferrell 2016). Other recent scholarships reflect another dual ambiguity: that between a romanticized street art versus an instrumentalized one. On one hand, particularly in Latin America, street art is often analyzed as a medium for collective action, denouncing state or armed injustices, preserving memory, or fostering community resistance (Milton 2014; Raven 1993; Rolston and Ospina 2017; Ryan 2016). On the other hand, other studies have examined its domestication within the conventional art market and its role in neoliberal urban policies, where it serves as a strategy for urban renewal, tourism, or gentrification (Hewitt 2011; Markusen 2006; Schacter 2014; Tsangaris 2022; Young 2016). These discussions, including my own work, focusing on the social, political, cultural, and economic effects of street art and graffiti, align with Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi's (2017) call for a fourth wave—one that examines not what street art and graffiti *are*, but what they *do*, their agency.

The question of the agency of graffiti and street art fits more appropriately within anthropological debates. The issue of object agency is increasingly prevalent in contemporary anthropological discussions. These discussions are driven by various interconnected currents in contemporary social theory, including the material turn, the ontological turn, and posthumanism (Hornborg 2021). In the 1990s, Alfred Gell's (1998) influential theory specifically addressed the agency of art objects, laying the groundwork for a radical reconceptualization of the artworks—no longer as a text to be deciphered through semiotic frameworks, but rather as an agent involved in social action. Thus, the task of the anthropology of art would be to study the social effects of art objects—not what they mean or represent, but what they do. As Roger Sansi and Marilyn Strathern highlight (2016), Gell's theory, although groundbreaking, remains constrained by the assumption that agency is an inherently human capacity, that is merely distributed into the object. According to Strathern (1988), for example, the 'distributed' or 'divisible' person does not necessarily originate from a single human individual but may instead consist of assemblages of human and non-human, configured in multiple ways and without a predetermined hierarchy of agency. In Comuna 13, street art images have contributed to triggering complex social and urban processes, related to the resignification and reappropriation of public spaces, as well as to the phenomenon of gentrification and touristification (Riga 2025a; 2025b), demonstrating an agency far more powerful than that of their own human creators. Thus, by engaging in conversations with the artists, I realized that what they distributed into the images was not so much their agency, but rather their desire. This implied that understanding the agency of images solely from the artists' perspective would have been problematic; it was necessary to extend the gaze to the public who engage with the images in their everyday lives. What could instead be grasped from the artists' perspective was not necessarily how they distributed their agency through the images, but rather how they used the images to give shape to and manifest their desire.

While the distributed agency of objects is a prominent theme in contemporary anthropology, distributed desire of art objects remains considerably less explored. The issue of desire in relation to objects, particularly images, has been notably raised by visual culture scholar William J. T. Mitchell (2005). Like Gell, Mitchell conceptualizes images as living entities, akin to subjects. However, rather than examining what they do, their social effects, Mitchell urges scholars to consider what they want, thereby shifting the analytical focus from agency to desire: "Images are like living organisms; living organisms are best described as things that have desires" (Mitchell 2005, 11). This reorientation toward the desire of images entails an inquiry not only into their power and efficacy but also into their deficiencies, needs, and lacks. So, drawing on Fanon's question, "What does the Black man want?" and Freud's query, "What do women want?" Mitchell asks: "What do pictures want?" Philosophers and psychologists have produced an extensive body of literature on desire, and attempting to comprehensively trace all its connotations here would be a formidable and unnecessary endeavor. In general, the concept of desire is associated with wants: "desire can refer to what one wants" (Marks 1986: 2). However, beyond this general definition, what I am trying to stress here is how desire has transitioned from being conceptualized as something rooted in the unconscious, internal, and unobservable to a social construct that can, therefore, be studied ethnographically. In Sigmund Freud's foundational work, human behavior is understood as the product not only of conscious and rational calculations but also of unconscious processes. These unconscious processes shape also our desires. Jacques Lacan (1998) associates desire with absence, loss, and lack, positing that it is inherently oriented toward the absent or unattained. In contrast to both Freud and Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) conceptualize desire geographically. They view their task as mapping the conditions under which desire becomes possible and tracing its movements, actions, and connections. This theory has had a significant impact on discursive psychology. Discursive psychologists argue that phenomena like desire, traditionally understood as 'internal processes', are, in fact, constituted through social and discursive activity (Billig 1997). These works demonstrate that desire is not a result of internal, unobservable psychological processes but is actively constructed in discourse during everyday activities (Cameron and Kulick 2003). From this perspective, desire is not confined to the unconscious but is instead a socially constructed phenomenon, expressed by real people using specific language within concrete social contexts.

I will now discuss how street art images in Comuna 13 can be understood as a specific language used by artists to express and manifest their desires, and how their desire, rather than their agency, is distributed in their artworks. Before doing so, in the first section, I provide a brief overview of Comuna 13. In the second section, I describe my entry into the field through my encounter with the cultural and artistic association Casa Kolacho. In the third section, I analyze how artists' desires are distributed in the images they create, and how these desires extend across a timeline that connects the past, present, and future.

## Comuna 13

The case of Comuna 13 has attracted significant interdisciplinary scholarship, both locally and internationally, contributing to a deeper understanding of its history, transformation, and current challenges. Recent studies have explored the impact of political conflict (Escobar Gómez 2023; Phillips-Amos 2016; Rojas-Páez 2018), the new transportation infrastructure (Cunnif 2020; Reimerink 2018), informal urbanism (Dolan 2020; Samper 2012; Schwab 2018), gangs (Drummond et al. 2012), community organizations (Navarro and Urtado 2022; Ramírez Suárez 2023), cultural associations (Garcés-Montoya and Acosta-Valencia 2023; Pérez Torres 2021), street art (Álvarez Domínguez and Trachana 2022; Aristizábal Gómez 2021; Rolston and Ospina 2017), and urban-social transformations (Griffin and Young 2023).

Comuna 13, or San Javier, is one of Medellín's 16 administrative districts. Located on the central-western outskirts of the city, it borders Comuna 7 (Robledo) to the north, Comuna 12 (La América) to the east, Corregimiento de Altavista to the south, and Corregimiento de San Cristóbal to the west. Spanning 7.42 square kilometers, it is divided into 23 neighborhoods and characterized by rugged terrain, with elevations reaching approximately 1,650 meters above sea level. As of 2020, Comuna 13 had a population of 140,758, consisting of 67,704 males and 73,054 females. A significant portion of the population lives in lower-income strata, with most homes classified between very low and lower-middle income. Comuna 13 was once considered the most dangerous district in Medellín, one of the most dangerous cities in the world (Cardona et al. 2005; García et al. 2012).

Comuna 13 expansion began in the 1940s and 1950s, driven by the forced displacement of rural populations during *La Violencia*, a period of intense conflict between supporters of Colombia's Conservative and Liberal parties (SISBEN 2020). Displaced *campesinos* gradually settled in the area, forming *barrios de invasión*—informal neighborhoods built without legal permits and therefore lacking public services, proper infrastructure, and security. By the 1980s, faced with escalating insecurity, local residents began organizing themselves into armed groups known as *Milicias Populares*. However, the situation worsened in the mid-1990s as Comuna 13 became a battleground for insurgent groups such as the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), the ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*), and the CAP (*Comandos Armados del Pueblo*), all vying for control of the territory and imposing military rule on civilians (Centro de Fe y Cultura 2021). To regain authority, the Colombian government conducted 24 military operations between 2000 and 2002, transforming the comuna into an urban war zone. The last of these operations, *Operación Orión*, became infamous for its indiscriminate violence against civilians. Carried out with the aid of the paramilitary group *Bloque Cacique Nutibara* and two U.S.-supplied Black Hawk helicopters, the operation eliminated guerrilla forces but at a devastating human cost. Estimates suggest that 17 civilians were killed by the military, 71 by paramilitaries, 80 were injured, 12 were tortured, 370 arbitrarily detained, and 6 forcibly disappeared (Amnesty International 2005). However, the expulsion of the guerrillas, despite the high cost paid by the population, did not mark the end of their suffering. Between 2002 and 2005, the paramilitaries, with tacit approval from

President Álvaro Uribe's administration, consolidated their control over Comuna 13 through brutal acts of violence, including murder, torture, and forced disappearances. According to the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (JEP), over 400 individuals disappeared from Comuna 13 during this period, many of whom are believed to be buried in *La Escombrera*, considered the largest urban mass grave in Latin America. Although some argue that *Operación Orión* was necessary to restore state authority (Drummond et al. 2012), others highlight its devastating consequences for the civilian population (Bernal-Franco and Navas-Caputo 2013).

Despite this violent history, residents have worked tirelessly to rebuild their community, responding to trauma with creative strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and resistance (CNRR 2016). Various organizations emerged to promote collective action as an alternative to violence, including Juegos Cooperativos para la No Violencia, Jughandi, Corpades, Caravana por la Vida, Realizadores de Sueños, Corporación Sal y Luz, Red Cultural Expresarte, Asociación de Mujeres Las Independencias, Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad, and Son Batá (Alzate Zuluaga 2012). One of the most influential was Red Élite Hip Hop, founded in 2002 as the first network of hip-hop artists in the comuna. Motivated by a vision to transform Comuna 13 through art, the group started to write protest songs, establish community hip-hop schools, and organize parties, events, and festivals, such as *In the 13, Violence Does Not Defeat Us*, in 2004, and its sequel *Revolution Without Deaths*. Meanwhile, public spaces in some neighborhoods of the comuna transformed into vibrant venues for hip-hop artists—breakdancers, DJs, and rappers—while graffiti artists began creating numerous murals reflecting the community's history and collective memory (Restrepo Cadavid 2013). In 2011, two members of Red Élite Hip Hop, rapper Jeihhco and graffiti artist PerroGraff, used these murals to narrate the history of Comuna 13 to a visiting U.S. congressman preparing a report on *Plan Colombia* and *Operación Orión*. From this, they conceived the Graffitour, a guided tour of the comuna's murals. Initially attracting journalists and researchers, the Graffitour grew to draw waves of national and international tourists, becoming a key factor in Comuna 13's emergence as a major tourist destination. By 2022, Medellín's City Hall reported 1,663,461 visitors, cementing its status as one of the city's primary tourist attractions. During this time, Jeihhco, PerroGraff, and six other artists branched off from Red Élite Hip Hop to establish Casa Kolacho, an artistic and cultural association based on using creativity and art as forms of resistance against the violence carried out by state security forces, paramilitaries, guerrillas and criminal groups (Feixa et al. 2022; Pérez Torres 2021). Today, Casa Kolacho plays a central role in both the local art scene and the organization of the Graffitour, contributing significantly to Comuna 13's ongoing transformation.

## Casa Kolacho



**Figure 1** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Claudio Riga, 2022

On May 8, 2022, I arrived in Medellín from Bogotá to begin my fieldwork in Comuna 13. I settled in an apartment in Comuna 12's Santa Lucía neighborhood, 1.5 kilometers from the San Javier metro station, the main gateway to Comuna 13. Part of my methodology was based on walking ethnography. Widely used in urban studies (Campa 2016), this approach has proven particularly useful in studies that address the experiences or issues related to specific urban locations (Ingold 2010; Irving 2007; Pink 2007; Shortell and Brown 2016), as well as in research on graffiti and street art (Phillips 2015; Young 2016). So, each day, I walked through some neighborhoods of Comuna 13, wandering without a fixed destination in order to observe and photograph the life unfolding around me and to engage in spontaneous interactions with the people I encountered along the way. During one of my first walks, I came across the artistic and cultural association Casa Kolacho. I was certainly already aware of their influence on the comuna, but there were still many aspects of their work that were not entirely clear to me. Thus, motivated by a genuine interest in learning more, I decided to reach out and ask directly whether they would be interested in participating in the research. I arrived at Casa Kolacho on a Tuesday around 9:30 in the morning (FIGURE 1). No one was around when, suddenly, from a window to the left of the main door, I saw a guy, about 35 or 40 years old, making coffee. I nervously walked up to the window and introduced myself: "Hey, good morning. How's it going? I'm a PhD student in anthropology, doing research on street art in Comuna 13.

I'd love to chat with you, learn a bit about Casa Kolacho, and maybe do some interviews..."; "Hey, man. Sorry, I've got a meeting in 15 minutes", he responded somewhat hastily. "Oh, no worries. I'll be here for a year, so there's no rush," I said. "That's good. Well, if you want, you can come on Saturday at 11 a.m. We're giving a graffiti class, and afterward, we can chat for a bit," he said before disappearing into the rooms of the building (FIGURE 2).



**Figure 2** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Claudio Riga, 2022

So, the next Saturday at 11 a.m., I went back to Casa Kolacho for my first graffiti class. Once there, I felt a bit lost, not really sure what to do or where to go, so I just hung out outside and waited. After a while, I spotted the man I had spoken to on Tuesday—who I later discovered was Jeihhco—pointing to a door on the right side of the entrance: "The graffiti class is there!" So, I stepped into the room, where eight people—some young, others older—were gathered around a table, focused on a guy in his 30s sketching on a whiteboard on the wall. I stayed off to the side, not wanting to interrupt the class, until Jeihhco came in and invited me to join the group. "I didn't want to bother," I said. "You're not bothering, don't worry," he replied. So, I sat down with the group and introduced myself. The guy drawing on the whiteboard introduced himself as PerroGraff and said he was covering for La Crespá, the usual teacher, who couldn't make it that day. The class was about 3D letters. So, Perro walked us through the technique, then asked us to practice as many as we could on paper, starting with our Tag. "Excuse me, could someone lend me some paper and a pen, please?" I interrupted. "Sure, here you go," Shurak, a member of Casa Kolacho, replied, handing me some paper and a pencil. Finally, I could begin practicing my Tag, which I quickly came up with (FIGURE 3). When the class ended, around 1 p.m., I waited outside, hoping to catch Jeihhco, but after a while, I was told he'd already left.



**Figure 3** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Claudio Riga, 2022

Since that first class, I kept visiting Casa Kolacho—attending graffiti classes, joining some of their Graffitours, conferences, art exhibitions, events, parties, and concerts, or just dropping by for a coffee and a quick hello, which usually turned into hanging out with whoever was around. During these visits, I had the chance to chat with Jeihhco and others, explaining my project and its different aspects in more detail. I also made it clear that I was happy to help with anything they needed. I suggested I could teach an anthropology course, give a presentation on my research, or even share the results publicly. At one point, Jeihhco and I talked about collaborating on a brochure that would tell the story and meaning behind the graffiti and murals in their Graffitours. But in the end, none of this materialized, probably because of other priorities. However, over the course of the year, while participating in their activities and events, I also had the chance to interview several members of Casa Kolacho, like Jeihhco, PerroGraff, Jairito, La Crespa; as well as other artists not directly related to them, like Jomag, TreceDoce, and LaVoz.<sup>1</sup>

As Jeihhco detailed during our interview, Casa Kolacho was founded in 2013 by seven artists who had separated from the Red Élite Hip Hop. The name of the association comes from Kolacho, a young rapper, and community leader tragically murdered by a paramilitary in 2009. Today, it is a well-established and structured organization that involves a diverse range of actors, each fulfilling distinct roles and responsibilities. The core group, so to speak, is composed of approximately twenty members, in charge of planning, organizing, and managing all activities and events, through continuous meetings, gatherings, and internal discussions. At no point did I attempt to access these spaces, as it didn't seem entirely appropriate for someone like me, a stranger at the time,

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<sup>1</sup> All participants signed an informed consent form in which they could choose whether to take part anonymously or not, withdraw at any time without their identity being disclosed, participate in the analysis and writing process, review drafts, and receive any potential publications.

to intrude upon their internal organizations. At a broader level, there are the Graffitour guides and hip-hop teachers. However, some of the twenty core members mentioned above also take roles as guides or teachers. The guides number around fifty. They are paid based on the tours they conduct and rotate to ensure that all have the opportunity to work. The Graffitours are offered in two shifts, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, with meeting points at the courtyard of Casa Kolacho or the upper exit of the San Javier metro station. The cost is 40,000 Colombian pesos (approximately 10 dollars), and tours are available in both Spanish and English. The hip hop schools are divided into four disciplines: graffiti on Saturdays at 11 a.m., breakdancing on Saturdays at 1 p.m., rap on Saturdays at 3 p.m., and DJ on Sundays at 2 p.m., each lasting two hours. They are primarily aimed at children, adolescents, and young adults, though anyone can participate for free. At a third level, there is a variety of artists, technicians, photographers, social workers, journalists, students, and researchers, among others, who, although they are not formally part of Casa Kolacho, support or witness its activities and events. Most of the activities and events, such as conferences, exhibitions, book presentations, concerts, etc., are free for participants. Casa Kolacho is financed primarily through income generated by the Graffitours, public grants provided by Medellín City Hall or the national government, private funding from non-governmental organizations such as Comfama (*Caja de Compensación Familiar de Antioquia*), and sales of souvenirs, clothing, hats, books, drinks, food, and more.

### Graffiti School

During a year of fieldwork, I attended graffiti school almost every Saturday. Typically, between 10 and 20 people participated, most of whom were children or teenagers. Most of them were residents of the comuna, while a minority of one or two people came from other areas of the city or were foreigners residing in Medellín. The classes lasted two hours, from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and were held in the auditorium previously mentioned or in the outdoor courtyard. When the classes were held indoors (FIGURE 4), they typically focused on practicing letters or images on paper with pens, pencils, or markers, and occasionally on the walls using spray paint. When the classes were held outdoors (FIGURE 5), we typically painted with spray paint, mostly freehand, and occasionally using stencils, on panels set up along the side of the courtyard. When drawing on paper, the main goal was to develop manual skills and cultivate a personal style, with a particular focus on our own tag, but also on other elements like characters, figures, and landscapes. When painting on the exterior panels, the primary goal was to refine our spray can techniques and develop manual skills to trace precise lines in various sizes. Our focus was on painting our tag, aiming to reflect the style we had practiced on paper, but also other letters, words, simple lines, figures or characters. In the outdoor classes, we usually worked in groups of three to five people, whereas indoors, we more often worked individually. Typically, the classes were taught by La Crespa, although other artists occasionally substituted for her. All the classes were characterized by a pleasant, relaxed, and informal atmosphere. Everyone was invited to participate, and everyone was willing to help those who were falling behind, although sometimes it was possible to work

independently or take a break without facing any issues. At the end of every class, Casa Kolacho offered us a snack, which often consisted of fruit juices or soda and sandwiches or desserts.



**Figure 4** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Claudio Riga, 2022



**Figure 5** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Claudio Riga, 2022

Most of the classes were predominantly focused on practical training. Graffiti art, much like other art forms, is primarily learned through hands-on practice and embodied engagement. It represents a form of embodied learning, where skills are not acquired

cognitively but through the continuous repetition of bodily movements. In this sense, it is a technique of the body. The concept of “technique of the body”, already introduced by Marcel Mauss (1934), involves viewing the body as “the first and most natural instrument of the human being.” In fact, the body is the main instrument of the graffiti artists, more important than the aerosol itself, which becomes an extension of their hand. To acquire the ability to draw lines accurately and bring the final image to life, the graffiti artist must dedicate years of practice to developing the sensitivity necessary to press the nozzle of the aerosol and release the paint with the appropriate intensity depending on the type of surface. During these years of practice, the graffiti artist forms an increasingly intimate and personal relationship with the spray can, until the skill to use it becomes almost automatic and pre-reflective. For a novice like myself, instead, determining the optimal posture, the appropriate distance from the wall, and the precise pressure required to create lines of the desired size and free from imperfections proved to be a challenging task.

However, to bring the final image to life, the use of aerosol alone is not enough. The graffiti artists must commit their entire body and senses. They start with the eye to determine the best position and distance from which to draw the lines according to a previously prepared sketch. In some cases, especially in murals, they may use a grid composed of words or numbers that provide the coordinates for the lines. In other cases, especially in graffiti, the grid is less common, and the lines are drawn freestyle. When starting the work, the artists must position themselves in front of the wall, ready to move to the right or left, or to climb a ladder if the wall is particularly high. When releasing the paint, they may bend their knees or stretch their arm upwards, as well as rotate their hips and shoulders to find the best angle. Simultaneously, they must place the nozzle of the spray can at the correct point and distance from the surface, apply pressure with the finger on the nozzle, and may need to move the hand, wrist, arm, shoulder, chest, hips, legs, knees, and even feet, depending on the size of the line or the part they need to fill with color. The best results will depend on the best coordination of all the body parts involved.

In the magnified scope of the graffiti gesture, writing affords the writer an opportunity to impress the individual shape and vitality of the body’s motor power onto the contours of the cultural sign. Yet if the writer performs the motion repeatedly, his own body will eventually be inscribed, the muscles and ligaments physiologically altered, by the gestural routine that expresses and confines his body at the very same time (Noland 2009: 1).



**Figure 6** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Claudio Riga, 2022

However, it was during a specific episode when, as often happens in ethnographic research, I suddenly understood something more about the world of graffiti artists. During a class, after painting my Tag on one of the exterior panels (FIGURE 6), I had to cover it up to make room for another student. After that, I stood a little aside when Shurak came over and asked me: “Did they cover up your graffiti?” – “Yes, it lasted about 5 minutes” I replied. Shurak, smiling: “Ephemeral art!” – “Better that way, because it wasn't that good”, I said. “But did you enjoy the process?” he asked. “Yes, I did!” This brief exchange helped me realize the reasons behind graffiti artists’ commitment to the ephemerality of their work. What matters to them, in most cases, is not so much the final product but the process that leads to the final product. The issue of graffiti and street art as a process rather than a product is a classic theme in graffiti and street art research. Jeff Ferrell (2016), for example, highlights how graffiti and street art, by their very nature as public and often illicit, also incorporate a particular set of practices and experiences—to the point that they can be considered a form of performance art. He further elaborates on this point by citing an interview with SheOne, a British graffiti artist: “I never really worry about the final image, I paint graffiti for the process, it is only important while I am actually making it” (Ferrell 2016, xxxiii). This attitude could be compared to that of alchemists or craftsmen as considered by Tim Ingold (2013). According to Ingold, the work of these two figures is not based on a hylomorphic model, meaning from the perspective of someone who stands outside the work and only observes the beginning and the result, but follows a morphogenetic model, which takes into account what happens in between, during the whole production process. Graffiti artists, like alchemists and craftsmen, do not see the materials for what they are, but for what they do; they do not see the piece as a fixed object, but as a process,

always in the making to become something else, and at least in the case of graffiti artists, they enjoy this process.

Nonetheless, beyond this embodied learning, some classes addressed additional aspects of graffiti, such as its history, origins, and potential as a professional career. For instance, one class led by Jeihhco focused on entrepreneurship. During this session, participants were tasked with coloring pre-printed drawings on paper, assigning them a title, determining their dimensions, and estimating a price. This exercise, rather than practicing drawing skills, aimed to instill the idea—particularly among younger participants—that art, while a passion or hobby, can also serve as a viable professional path in the future. On other occasions, lessons about graffiti extended to broader life skills. For example, one day, a student struggling to draw a hand left it unfinished. Observing this, La Crespa encouraged her to persevere and not be disheartened by initial challenges, emphasizing: “Drawing something difficult teaches you discipline in life, and this discipline can be applied to overcoming challenges in other contexts.” In another class, La Crespa also highlighted the role of emotions in the artistic process and the unique capacity of art to convey human feelings that are often difficult to articulate through verbal communication.

The feeling of helplessness, melancholy, disillusionment, anger, are emotions we can't express with words, but through drawing, we can give them a form. How could we express the feeling of sadness in a mural? How would this feeling be graphically represented? Murals are made to express, not just to decorate.

This is how La Crespa introduced the class: artists create images not merely for decoration but as a means of expressing their emotions and sensations. Over the course of a year of fieldwork, I realized that the artists of Comuna 13 use images not only to express their emotions but also to construct and manifest their desires.

### **The Artists' Desire**

The practices and actions of the artists from Casa Kolacho, particularly those directed at younger generations, reflected their social and political commitment to the community, extending beyond the mere creation of art for its own sake. The following statement by Jeihhco effectively conveyed their desire to collaborate with youth in building a better future together.

Everything we do—the Graffitour, the songs, the graffiti, the school—is all in favor of memory, to use that memory and connect with it to move toward the future. So, Casa Kolacho is a connection between the past and the present, to build a better future.

According to Jeihhco, Casa Kolacho acts as a bridge between the past and the present, built upon the desire to shape a better future. Philosophical accounts of desire often emphasize its intrinsic connection to temporality. “Desire is the immanent present/not-yet relation between people and their creativity, between potentiality and

actualization" (Wariboko 2022, 79). Similarly, philosopher Martin Hägglund (2012) argues that time is the very condition that renders desire intelligible: desire never fully coincides with its object because both subject and object are separated by a temporal gap. "Without a temporal delay there would be no desire, since there would be no time to reach out toward or aspire to anything whatsoever" (Hägglund 2012, 3). Desire, then, is always oriented toward what is not yet—toward the future. Paul Ricoeur (1979) illuminates how human experience of temporality is structured through narrative. Narrative allows us to structure past and present events in a way that opens onto the future. "Thanks to its episodic dimension, narrative time tends toward the linear representation of time in many ways: first, the 'then' and 'and then,' which provides an answer to the question 'what next?'" (Ricoeur 1979, 27). In this sense, street art can be understood as a visual and narrative medium that articulates the temporality of desire. For the artists of Casa Kolacho, it becomes the means through which past and present are woven together as the precondition to orient the future toward a desired direction. Indeed, in Comuna 13, both images explicitly referencing the past and those depicting the present are oriented toward the future. Images of the past, for instance, want to construct a collective memory to support residents in strengthening social bonds fragmented by the trauma of conflict, enabling them to heal and overcome that trauma, and serving as a reminder to prevent its recurrence in the future. The images of the present, relating to those of the past, want to emphasize art as the primary instrument that has facilitated the transformation of Comuna 13, thereby presenting it as a tool for social change. Although there are no images that explicitly portray the future, the desire to provide youth with alternatives to violence and to utilize tourism as a mechanism for local economic improvement is distributed throughout the entire corpus of images. Yet these future-oriented desires are not without tensions. As Lauren Berlant (2011) argues, sometimes the hope for a better future may become entangled in conditions of structural precarity, resulting in what she terms "cruel optimism." In Comuna 13, the artists' desire to utilize art for the benefit of the community must contend with the unintended consequences of touristification and gentrification, which risk perpetuating the very inequalities they seek to address. In this light, street art images, by triggering and participating in these complex processes, demonstrate an agency that extends well beyond that of their individual human creators. The central force animating the artists' visual production is not reducible to *agency* in the traditional sense—understood as the capacity to act or effect change—but rather to *desire*, conceived as a temporal and relational force. While agency implies an intentionality that is often immediate and instrumental, desire is rooted in the experience of temporal deferral and the ongoing tension between what is and what is not yet. When Casa Kolacho's artists weave together past and present through street art images, they are not merely asserting influence over the public space (as agency might imply) but also inscribing a future-oriented longing into their imagery. The images do not just act—they also *reach*, they *aspire*, they *hope*. In this sense, the images become repositories of desire: they organize temporal experience in order to sustain a collective aspiration for a different future. What is "distributed" across the images, then, is not simply the capacity to intervene in the world (agency), but the temporal and affective structure of desire itself. Below, I will

analyze how the artists' desire is distributed across images along the three temporal dimensions: the past, the present, and the future.

## The Past



**Figure 7** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Jomag, 2022

This photograph (FIGURE 7) was taken by Jomag, a young artist from the comuna, while he accompanied me during an interview as we walked through the neighborhood. As we paused in front of the artwork, he described it as his reinterpretation of a historical photograph. On the right side of the mural, there are the *lavanderas* (washwomen). Jomag explained that the first settlements in the comuna emerged around a salty river, which gave the name to the earliest neighborhood: El Salado (The Salty). In the center of the mural, there is a depiction of *convite*. *Convite* was a rural self-construction practice in which the entire community would contribute either money or labor for construction work. Jomag pointed out that through this practice the urban fabric of the comuna gradually developed over time. On the left side, there is an analogy between people and plants, illustrating how, “people, like plants, are buried, but sometimes also cut off”, in Jomag's words. He then continued:

This mural talks about the agricultural roots of the comuna because we were a land of many campesinos (peasants). Comuna 13 originally came from campesinos, and it has gradually developed that way. Over time, this has been somewhat lost, but it is still a part of our heritage. We need to show it to the public so people can understand that it belongs to us. That's why I've worked a lot with these symbols. There are many social and relational topics tied to campesinos, and these can be brought up for discussion with the people who walk by and see this artwork.

This, like other images on the walls of Comuna 13, depicts scenes that clearly reference the past. In portraying the past, they want to construct, shape, and share a collective memory. The concept of memory emerges as particularly significant within the context of Comuna 13. As Jomag himself explained: “Most rappers and graffiti artists in Comuna 13 have engaged with themes of memory, so the majority of our thematic axes revolve around it.”

Recently, in the field of 'memory studies,' there has been increasing interest in exploring the interconnections between cities, space, and memory (Adams and Larkham 2022; Badilla 2020). “Places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present” (Hayden 1997, 46). These studies emphasize how collective memory is intrinsically linked to a city's spatial configuration through urban elements such as monuments, squares, and street names. The same applies to street art images. In Comuna 13, images referencing the neighborhood's 'foundation' and highlighting its rural origins want to establish a kind of 'founding myth' – a narrative that justifies the basis of the existing society. Émile Durkheim (1912/2013), one of the pioneers of 20th-century sociology, argued that any society must maintain a connection with its past in order to preserve social cohesion and foster a sense of community. By recalling the neighborhood's foundation, these images seek to help residents identify with a shared past, thereby reinforcing the social fabric that has been fractured by the trauma of conflict.



**Figure 8** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Claudio Riga, 2022

However, among the images referencing the past, in addition to those depicting the foundation of the comuna, there are others that more specifically address the themes of conflict and violence. The photograph above (FIGURE 8), taken by me while participating in a Graffitour, depicts an elephant—an animal known for its mnemonic abilities. As explained by some Graffitour guides, this image wants to invite the community to remember the victims of the conflict and honor their memory. By remembering the victims and recalling that trauma, its intention is, on one hand, to assist the community in the grieving process, and on the other hand, to prevent such events from recurring in the future.

Some artists believed that the significance of their work was to help the community undergo a “catharsis” and “to forgive.” As PerroGraff stated:

That was the first impact: helping people heal and have a catharsis. When people forgive, they transcend in a big way because they let go of all the hate and burdens weighing on their soul. It was beautiful because we started creating catharsis with families, remembering, listening to people, and letting them tell their stories... We began helping people heal and understand that the neighborhood has so many positive things.

In many regions of Latin America affected by violence and conflict, murals honoring victims have emerged (Diéguez 2013; Milton 2014; Wilde 2013). These memorials often provide a framework and legitimacy for individual and familial grief (Winter 2014). Grieving is generally a personal and individual experience; however, the atrocities of political conflict necessitate a different, more public form of commemoration. Studies on the Holocaust have illuminated the challenges of conveying such experiences to audiences who neither witnessed nor lived them, as well as the limitations of language to express them (Strejilevich 2006). This can have catastrophic consequences. Trauma, when not articulated and incorporated into a narrative, struggles to be overcome and transformed into memory. The antidote lies in a communicative mechanism that enables the traumatic event to be assimilated and distanced as memory. As Maurice Halbwachs (1980), a pioneer of collective memory theory, stated, “memory requires language.” When language fails in this mechanism, artistic expression can serve as a substitute (Scarry 1985). In Chile, for example, women victims of General Pinochet’s dictatorship found a way to recount their untold stories through the creation of *arpilleras*—textile images—as a new way to think about and represent stories that could not be told in words (Mani 2011). In Colombia, a significant number of murals directly address political issues, the prolonged conflict, and the emerging peace process, articulating the memory of violence and victims’ demands for recognition, reparation, and justice (Rolston and Ospina 2017). Beyond this, these murals often serve as permanent reminders of past crimes, aiming to prevent their recurrence (Torre 2002). The Italian writer and anti-fascist partisan Primo Levi (1989), after his liberation from Auschwitz concentration camp, wrote: “All those who forget their past are condemned to relive it.” As rapper LaVoz told me: “Comuna 13 has a history behind it, a dark history. If we tell it, it’s not to be part of it but to prevent its repetition.”

Evaluating whether these images have tangibly influenced residents—by strengthening community bonds, aiding in the processing of conflict-related trauma, or contributing to the prevention of its recurrence—is a complex task that cannot be addressed solely from the perspective of the artists. To meaningfully engage with this question, I conducted extensive, in-depth interviews with local inhabitants, particularly those who were entirely unaffiliated with the artistic movement. On the other hand, what emerges from the artists' testimonies is a clear articulation of their desire: to reconnect the community with its peasant roots, to facilitate processes of collective catharsis and forgiveness, and to narrate the Comuna's violent past as a means of forestalling its repetition. This desire is not only expressed verbally, but also materially inscribed in the esthetic and symbolic elements of the images themselves. For example, the image depicting key episodes from the Comuna's past are explicitly designed to foster a sense of shared memory, while the image of the elephant—a traditional symbol of memory—functions as a visual exhortation not to forget. These visual interventions reflect the artists' desire more than a straightforward exercise of their agency.

## The Present



**Figure 9** Medellín, Colombia. Photo by La Crespa, 2022

Images referencing the past want to build a collective memory in order to help residents rebuild the social fabric, process the trauma of violence, and remember the military operations to prevent their recurrence. However, other images, like the one above (FIGURE 9), also refer to the past but to a more recent past, one that blurs into the present. This picture was taken by La Crespa during a walking interview through the neighborhood. As she explained, this image is characterized by an urban style, clearly more closely related to the Hip Hop movement. This image, like others, wants to

emphasize art as a tool of transformation, a transformation that took place in the past but continues to resonate in the present. Connecting with earlier narratives, they want to build a bridge between a past of violence and a present of “transformation”. As Jairito, one of the founders of Casa Kolacho, told me:

The Graffitour is a mirror of what we want to say. The tour tells the story of what happened here, because we cannot forget what happened. But we also show how through art we have transformed a population, a territory, how we have changed things through art.

Both artists and guides usually emphasized the word “transformation”, thus presenting art as a tool for social change. Consequently, the images carry a kind of narcissistic desire to present themselves as the central element in the “transformation” of Comuna 13.

A considerable body of research has examined how art can serve as a transformative force (Aumann 2022; London 1992; Lowe 2001), foster community building (Jones 1988; Simmons 1998), address community issues (Brown 1994; Fisher 1996), and drive social change (Becker 1994; Pacific 1998). Erich Fromm (1995), from the Frankfurt School, described “collective art” as a form of art capable of transforming society from “atomistic” to “communitarian”. A defining feature of collective art is its shared nature, because it allows individuals to experience unity with others in a meaningful, enriching, and productive way. Building on this concept, the notion of community art has emerged as a form of public art that is both “experiential and inclusive,” in which professional artists collaborate with others to create art that benefits the broader community (Raven 1993). The images in Comuna 13 exemplify a collective community process involving a diverse array of actors—artists, guides, residents, and others—thus transcending individual interests and personal artistic goals. These artworks are the product of collaboration, dialogue, negotiation, and power dynamics, all aimed at serving the community’s needs. Community art is often regarded as the “manifestation of an ideology”; what distinguishes it from public art is its long-term cultural and political aspirations (Dickson 1995). It is precisely this long-term ambition, as I will explore in the following section, that characterizes the images’ desire to shape the future.

However, street art—even when community-based—can produce unintended side effects that transcend the agency of the artists themselves. Research has already addressed how street art has undergone a process of domestication and neutralization, progressively assimilated into the conventional art market (Young 2016; Tsangaris 2022) and instrumentalized within the frameworks of neoliberal urban governance (Schacter 2014), where artistic practices are often reconfigured as strategic tools for urban renewal, tourism development, or as an element in processes of gentrification (Hewitt 2011; Markusen 2006). This also happens in Comuna 13, where street art—originally emerging as a community-based practice—has been progressively co-opted by Medellín’s public administrations to showcase the success of their public policies (Restrepo Cadavid 2013), as well as by external commercial and tourism sector enterprises that exploit it as a means of capitalist accumulation (Gaviria Puerta 2019). These processes have undoubtedly given

rise to internal contradictions, which are currently the subject of debate within the community. What emerges, however, is that street art images—while expressing the artists' desire to foster social transformation for the benefit of the community—may also contribute to processes of touristification and gentrification that favor institutional or commercial external actors, exhibiting a capacity to act that surpasses and, at times, transcends the agency of the artists themselves. Simply put, what the images *do* can somehow be different from what they *want*.

## The Future

The images in Comuna 13 want not only to remember the past and celebrate the present but especially to shape the future. On one hand, they seek to provide new generations with alternatives to violence; on the other, they aim to promote tourism as a driver of socioeconomic development, thereby enhancing the community's overall living conditions. A local rapper, TreceDoce, well explained these objectives: "We want to give children an alternative to crime and drug addiction so they can take a different path [...] and also create a better economic circuit, a trade route that benefits the community." A Graffitour guide further elaborated:

The project has many goals: we want kids and young people to engage in different, more constructive activities. But we also want to attract tourism, generate income, and for that, we have to innovate, create new and attractive things to keep visitors coming back.

Considering the issue of art as an "alternative to violence," Juan Diego Jaramillo Morales (2015), in his research on youth violence in Medellín's marginalized neighborhoods, cautions against falling into a "binary temporal trap", where it is assumed that music, dance, deejaying, or graffiti inherently serve as the antithesis of violence. Nevertheless, other studies in Medellín's marginalized neighborhoods indicate that while artistic activities may not directly counteract violence, they are nonetheless effective strategies for reducing and preventing youth violence (Mejía Betancur 2014; Pracher 2014). Broader longitudinal population studies further demonstrate that increased adolescent participation in artistic activities correlate with a lower incidence of criminal behavior (Bone et al. 2022). Numerous art-based intervention programs, such as those involving theater (Belliveau 2005), visual arts (Bickley-Green 2007), or expressive writing (Kliewer et al. 2011), have been developed to prevent and reduce delinquent behavior among teenagers. However, these programs often target identified "delinquent" youth, which can inadvertently stigmatize participants and limit the programs' accessibility to all adolescents in need. In contrast, daily participation in artistic activities is recognized as a proactive and inclusive strategy for preventing delinquent behavior in adolescents before it emerges (Bone et al. 2022). Statements by TreceDoce and a local resident confirm that in Comuna 13, the everyday engagement in artistic activities is perceived as a powerful and accessible alternative to violence:

The history of the comuna is marked by war. So much war, so much violence; many of us are alive by a miracle, and our salvation was hip hop. Otherwise, we would have been immersed in drug dealing, stealing, or armed conflict—that was our reality. When I was a child, I remember hearing constant gunfire, Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa. We always played in the street. I had friends who lost their lives at 12 because they made bad decisions. They saw a gun and thought they were invincible, but they were just kids with a pistol, and they got killed. I saw my friends die. I carried weapons because my friends showed me how. I learned to steal. But life teaches you through mistakes. Thanks to hip hop, we could change, and now I see that I can help others to change too.

Art, after violence, has been very important, especially for kids who are no longer on the corners looking at weapons or drugs but are drawing, dancing, or singing. For a mother, this means everything.

Regarding art as a “tourism catalyst and economic driver,” numerous examples across Latin America demonstrate how art, particularly street art, has been employed as a tool for attracting tourists and revitalizing the economy in disadvantaged and stigmatized neighborhoods. For instance, the “Puebla-Ciudad Mural” project in Puebla, Mexico, involved residents in an “aesthetic transformation” of the Xanenetla neighborhood to stimulate economic growth by promoting tourism (Checa-Artasu 2013). This initiative, led by the Tomate Collective—a group of architects and artists working in direct collaboration with the community—has become a model for participatory mural projects (Martínez-de la Peña 2015). Similar initiatives have been replicated in other Mexican cities and neighborhoods, including Campeche, Tamaulipas, San Cristóbal, Villahermosa, Morelia, Tuxtla, and Culiacán (Álvarez Domínguez and Trachana 2022). Other examples can be found in Brazilian favelas, such as Santa Marta or Villa Cruzeiro in Rio de Janeiro. The “Favela Painting” project, led by the Haas&Hahn group, transformed the facades of houses with vibrant murals, aimed at shifting perceptions of favelas as spaces of social conflict, attract tourism, and improve the economic conditions of residents (Linke and Buchanan 2021; Rahman 2014).

In Medellín itself, street art has gradually shifted from being illegal to being increasingly recognized, accepted, and used in institutional urban renewal projects with a tourism focus. For example, at the end of the 2000s, the Urban Development Company (EDU) launched the program “Medellín se pinta de vida,” renovating more than 4,000 house facades in various neighborhoods such as Santa Elena, Belén Zafra, Villatina, and also Comuna 13<sup>2</sup>. The Medellín Metro, in its “Museo Metro” program, has intervened with 30 artworks on the external and internal walls of Metro Line A, the T Tram, and Metrocable lines H, J, and M<sup>3</sup>. In 2023, the Mayor's Office of Medellín inaugurated “Constelaciones,” the largest artistic mural in the city, in the neighborhoods of Brisas del Jardín and San José de la Cima II in Manrique, enhancing it as a new cultural and tourist destination<sup>4</sup>. For

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.edu.gov.co/images/publicaciones/Libro\\_Medellin\\_se\\_Pinta\\_de\\_Vida.pdf](https://www.edu.gov.co/images/publicaciones/Libro_Medellin_se_Pinta_de_Vida.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.metrodemedellin.gov.co/al-dia/noticias/metro-de-medell%C3%ADn-presenta-su-primera-gu%C3%ADa-digital-de-murales-de-arte-urbano>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.medellin.gov.co/es/sala-de-prensa/noticias/constelaciones-el-mural-artistico-mas-grande-de-medellin-se-potencia-como-nuevo-destino-turistico-y-cultural/>

many participants, this acceptance and institutionalization of street art is also attributed to the influence of the artistic scene in Comuna 13 and the disruptive impact it has had on tourism throughout the city. As one resident told me: “The Graffitour paved the way; all of Medellín used to be gray, now it's full of murals.”

As I elaborate in another contribution, these images have effectively played a pivotal role in the “touristification” of Comuna 13 (Riga 2025c). However, their significance brings with it a critical challenge: the risk of losing their appeal. The primary concern is that the images may become repetitive, uninteresting, and unable to attract new visitors. As the guide observed, “We have to keep innovating, creating new and attractive things so visitors keep coming. The idea is for more people to come every day.” The ephemeral nature of street art aligns with this need for constant renewal to attract an ever-growing audience of tourists. So, with each new layer of paint, the images generate fresh narratives and memories (Connerton 1989), adapting to the community’s evolving context. Nevertheless, in their pursuit of attention, the images risk transitioning from instruments of memory and social transformation to mere elements of tourist entertainment and gentrification. I am confident that the collective strength the residents of Comuna 13 have demonstrated over the years will enable them to overcome these contradictions and work together to shape a better future.

## Conclusion

The initial impetus for my research in Comuna 13 of Medellín was to examine the impact of street art on the socio-cultural transformations of the Comuna and, by extension, on the lived experiences of its residents. In other words, the objective was to investigate the agency of street art images. However, by learning about graffiti at Casa Kolacho’s school, engaging with the artists’ daily lives, and conducting interviews while exploring murals, I realized that, alongside the agency of the images, I was beginning to delve also into their desire. In particular, I realized that what the artists were distributing through the images was not so much their agency, but rather their desires. Accordingly, their desire to structure the past and present in order to shape the future. Thus, the aesthetic and symbols of the images reconfigured a desire to reconcile a past marked by violence and political conflict with a present defined by artistic transformation, with the intention of orienting the community, especially the younger generations, toward a better future. On this basis, I propose enriching anthropology’s traditional emphasis on the distributed agency of art objects with a focus on the less explored issue of distributed desire. Attending to the desire of art objects can offer anthropologists a lens that captures art’s aspirational and affective dimensions, as well as how people envision and project possible futures through artistic expression. Moreover, relating desire to street art images allows for an exploration of art’s capacity to shape collective desires that are directly inscribed onto the built environment, contributing both to graffiti and street art scholarship and to urban studies. Building on these insights, future research could develop comparative studies across diverse socio-political contexts, such as other Latin American urban settings. Longitudinal studies could also track the evolution of desires expressed in artworks, particularly in communities undergoing rapid change.

Additionally, further investigation into the intersections between desire and other forms of material culture—such as public sculptures or urban installations—could inform urban planning, public policy, and community organization. This framework, focused on distributed desire, may serve as a complementary perspective to the well-established emphasis on agency. By expanding this inquiry, anthropologists can refine and extend this framework, paving the way for new insights into the interplay between art, desire, and the construction of possible futures.

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