

With, On and Against Street Signs On Art Made out of Street Signs

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Abstract

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), Michel de Certeau suggests the idea of a city in which there are, on one side, strategies of information, surveillance, control and infrastructure design laid out by the system and, on the other one, tactics defining the *how-to-do* of the users with regards to that system, that is, the operations by which they adapt them to align their own interests and needs. The texts allows us to examine the interventions of urban artists as a tactic characterized, as defined by De Certeau, as the harnessing of the system's resources (*making do*). This is more specifically translated into adaptability, development on a space they do not own, identification and utilization of the occasion (time) and the inventiveness of diverting time and resources (*shortcut* and *la perruque*).

In this work, we will take traffic signs of restriction and prohibition as one of the urban components that highlight the normativization of public spaces through the direct message of "NO" (not doing). Many artists have, in previous years, developed an interest in the artistic and symbolic possibilities of these signs and have developed works (tactics) as their response to them. Dan Witz (Chicago, 1957), Clet (Bretagne, 1966), Brad Dowey (Louisville, 1980) or DosJotas (Madrid, 1982) are good examples of this.

Key words: De Certeau, strategies, tactics, street signs, Dan Witz, Clet, Brad Dowley, DosJotas



Fig. 1 - Trenado, T. (Ed): NO Signs. Un ensayo fotográfico sobre el impacto de las señales de de restricción y prohibición (NO Signs. A Photo-Graphic Essay on the Impact of Restriction and Prohibition Street Signs), 2015

The present working paper picks up from a project led by Toño Trenado in 2015 as part of his Master's thesis on Art Books Publishing. The project consisted of the production of a book entitled *NO Signs. A Photo-Graphic Essay on the Impact of Restriction and Prohibition Street Signs*, and it was composed of photographs of street signs and public posters that included a negative order ("NO"/DON'T). Along with the photographs, there were three essays that addressed the nature of the mentioned written message from different perspectives. As an art historian, I worked on the aesthetic side of these public writings as well as their function and reception in the city space («Señales del NO en el espacio urbano: estrategias de prohibición y tácticas creativas de resistencia», «NO Signs in urban space: strategies of prohibition and creative tactics of resistance»). A few book samples were finished but the project was never brought to market nor was it distributed in any way since the texts arrived only into the hands of the four co-authors. This paper aims to be a review, extension and continuation of the text that was once part of this unreleased book. Most of the photographs were taken in Madrid, Paris, Lisbon

and New York by the main author. Other photographs were downloaded from the Internet. The lack of time to incorporate more self-made photographs or to request permission for publication before the submission deadline, along with the lack of financial aid, caused the project to remain unreleased.

1. Introduction. The City's Textscape

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*¹ (1980), the French philosopher Michel De Certeau conceives the urban space as a written text in which citizens carry out their daily routines. This narrative has the shape of a grid projected from above («a grid/net of discipline and vigilance», passim De Certeau), over which significant places unfold and develop. This leads the city to be used in a specific, determined way that allows for a series of correlated power relations to develop. The authors of this narrative, argues De Certeau, have been the cultural tradition of the past and, later, in modernity, the technocrats – also known as writers and producers – who design the urban space by means of informative and normative devices to regulate its use: «today, this text no longer comes from a tradition. It is imposed by the generation of a productivist technocracy. It is no longer a referential book, but a whole society made into a book, into the writing of the anonymous law of production» (XXII).

The concept of the city proposed by De Certeau has some similarities with the theories of other authors of his time, such as Jean Baudrillard or Guy Debord². Although in different ways, the three authors had witnessed the events of May'68³ and, as a result, they are probably responding to a concept of the city as a polarized space of confrontation for

1 - [Figure 1] The Spanish and English editions of De Certeau publications were used for this work, as indicated in references. Quotes are taken from the English version. All quotes where only the page number is specified belong to *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980/1984.

2 - Guy Debord, leader of The Situationist International (1957–72) claimed: «Urbanism is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its logical development toward absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into its own peculiar decor»; «The ruler's chief weapon was the written word [...]» (Debord Pars. 169 and 131).

3 - Debord as the direct instigator, Baudrillard as a participant and De Certeau as one of the first theorists analyzing the situation in *The Capture of Speech*, 1968.

class struggle: «The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices» (XVIII).

In this way, as opposed to the aforementioned technocrats-writers-producers, it situates the user-readers-consumers who, respectively, use, read and consume the city's artefacts and facilities⁴. However, despite the recurrent use of opposing pairs to explain his theories, De Certeau does not turn his attention to confrontations within urban space so often as he prefers to recreate himself in the observation and interpretation of intermediate places and actions. And this is where De Certeau's theories take on relevance; although a priori consumers - supposedly condemned to passivity and discipline - can be attributed a role of submission, what the author defends is precisely the opposite: in everyday life practice, the activities of using-reading-consuming (walking, working, using spaces, etc.) are a constant exercise of readjustment and negotiation for their own benefit. In other words, the ordinary man (like the artist) - to whom De Certeau dedicates his work and for whom he expresses deep admiration⁵ - is an active agent who, taking advantage of the *room for manoeuvre* left by the system, does not only not submit docilely to the structures of power, but also subverts them through small daily creative ruses.

In actual fact, the idea of the city developed by

4 - As previously pointed out, Baudrillard also shares this understanding of a modern city, as well as the approach of binary pairs related to reading: «The Factory, as the model of socialization through capital, has not disappeared today but, in line with the general strategy, has been replaced by the entire city as the space of the code [...]. The city is no longer the politico-industrial zone that it was in the nineteenth century, it is the zone of signs, the media and the code. [...] It is the ghetto of television and advertising, the ghetto of consumers and the consumed, of readers read in advance, encoded decoders of every message, those circulating in, and circulated by, the subway, leisure-time entertainers and the entertained, etc.» (Baudrillard 28-29)

5 - «To the ordinary man. To a common hero, a ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets. In invoking here at the outset of my narratives the absent figure who provides both their beginning and their necessity, I inquire into the desire whose impossible object he represents. What are we asking this oracle whose voice is almost indistinguishable from the rumble of history to license us, to authorize us to say, when we dedicate to him the writing that one formerly offered in praise of the gods or the inspiring muses?» (V).

De Certeau can serve as a framework for the analysis of all artistic practices developed in urban space because they imply a certain degree of their own use (customization) and exploitation (appropriation and recycling) of resources. For this study, however, we will focus on the signs, specifically those that carry a restrictive or prohibitive message because they represent by themselves the rigidity of the system. Perhaps for this reason, and because of their visual appeal, in recent years they have often been a point of interest in artistic practices that use them to question the order and management of public space through operations with, on and against them.

2. Strategies and Tactics

One of the axes around which the entire text of Certeau revolves is the concepts of strategy and tactics. By “strategy” he refers to the planning of actions by the authority to carry out a specific objective: «I call a “strategy” the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an “environment.” A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (propre) and thus serves as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, “clienteles,” “targets,” or “objects” of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model» (XIX).

In order to be effective, the planning aims at the visual conquest of space by imposing itself and integrating itself into the environment in order to become recognizable. According to this definition, the prohibitive and restrictive signaling plan of the administrations would correspond to this type of strategy by which the authority makes itself present in space by launching its set of noes from previously thought-out points and with a defined purpose.

On the other hand, the “tactic” is the response to the power strategy: «I call a “tactic,” on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a “proper” (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a border-line distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances.

The “proper” is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time —it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing.” Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities.” The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them» (XIX).

In other words, it is the method of reaction that counteracts the forces of the other. In this way, the tactic acts on the space of power previously indicated and delimited by the strategies, acting in the precise moment with audacity and ingenuity to achieve its goal which is the mockery, the parody or the questioning of the strategies and their signs. For example, as we will see later on, the appropriation of the formula and the tone of the message of a signal or its manipulation can be considered as a tactic of resistance aimed at mitigating the impact of the ban.

These two concepts of strategy and tactic serve as an anchor to understand the rest of the opposing binaries suggested by De Certeau, such as those referring to people: writers-readers, producer-consumer, technocrat-user, strong-weak; those referring to ways of doing: technique-craftsmanship, standardization/homogenization-customization and, finally, those concerning the space-time dimensions: space-time, place-travel, flat-motion. The analysis of practices related to tactic is more elaborate and it includes other concepts such as shortcuts or *la perruque* (diverting), or the use of time, which are included in the general concept of *making do*. These concepts are discussed below⁶.

3. Making do

3.1. Ortho(typo)graphy versus scribble

The Roman cities were the first to have a regular system of urban restriction signs. The public spaces – forum, square, and street – were also the first witnesses to a protest culture (anonymous pamphlets) and it is there where, therefore, we can find the first examples of spontaneous writings on city walls⁷.

6 - Following comparisons with Debord's theories, the concept of tactic and its relation to recycling techniques is close to the creative procedures of Situationist *détournement*, (*hijacking*).

De Certeau pays special attention to the development of the users' own writings, opposing, in some way, technique to craftsmanship (which we could extend to manual/gestural typography-writing). As we said at the beginning (section 1), the writing of the city takes the form of a grid (urban plan) in which we can read the lines of the streets. Thus, compared to a written page, the city is a carefully edited and measured page where straight lines abound. The authors of this system are absent and manifest themselves through codified and depersonalized styles, such as official signs, which rise with perfectly studied shapes, colors and standard lettering styles, and with which they direct life in the city.

These mechanical and fabricated typographies are read by the users when walking. But it is not a simple process of assimilation; as De Certeau explained, the daily practices of using public space, that is to say, the mere habit of choosing a route, reading or ignoring signs involves a series of decisions that constitute a creative process in and of itself. For example, when faced with the obstacle of a "Do NOT enter" sign, different actions can be improvised: detour, shortcut, change of route, or reinterpretation, etc. These actions do not necessarily have to result in a clash or confrontation but simply underline the infinite possibilities of the tactic: «And if on the one hand he actualizes only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order (he goes only here and not there), on the other he increases the number of possibilities (for example, by creating shortcuts and detours) and prohibitions (for example, he forbids himself to take paths generally considered obligatory). He thus makes a selection» (99).

It is at this point that De Certeau introduces the opposition between technique and craftsmanship; the users' routes through the technically-designed city involve the execution of maneuvers and breaks that respond to individual and unpredictable needs and whose steps result in the drawing of broken paths, rectifications, changes of course, turns, etc. and that contrast with the prefabricated space in which they move. Although anonymous, this writing-trail of the one who a priori was destined to be a mere reader, shares with the craftsmanship a unique and personal result.

7 - Throughout *Graphitfragen*. In *Una mirada reflexiva sobre el graffiti* (2009), Fernando Figueroa explains that the phenomenon of graffiti or painting can only arise in cultures where writing is widespread, citizen organization is governed by writing (posters, rules, etc.) and, therefore, it is accessible to the majority. That is, for a scriptural subculture to emerge there must be a scriptural culture.

In short, the official and fabricated writing of the metallic sign contained in a frame is opposed to the gestural (calligraphic) graffiti that overflows the texture of the street.

[Figure 2] De Certeau talks about this way of acting as "style" and he indeed considers graffiti a tactical writing over the official script of the city; a diverted version of official writings so graffiti and writings on walls are examples of subversion and reutilization of the public space: «[...] we could mention the fleeting images, yellowish-green and metallic blue calligraphies that howl without raising their voices and emblazon themselves on the subterranean passages of the city, "embroideries" composed of letters and numbers, perfect gestures of violence painted with a pistol, Shivas made of written characters, dancing graphics whose fleeting apparitions are accompanied by the rumble of subway trains: New York graffiti» (102).

3.2. Shortcut

As the reading activity is also writing production, the reader may end up using the street to develop his or her own messages or signs and thus recycle the space according to his or her needs at least temporarily. Therefore, in contrast with the durability and unambiguous message of the official writings that keep repeating their orders over and over again, regardless of the changing aspect of the street, the tactic has an ephemeral, open and spontaneous character. The visual simile that explains this contrast of writing methods is the shortcut.

The city is designed to be used in a certain way. For example, in a park, the paths to take or the areas where you should not walk are marked by the difference in materials (sand or grass). However, the walker can take shortcuts that allow him to reach his target more quickly, thus marking an unexpected path through erosion that draws a path of its own. [Figure 3] «As unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices [...] trajectories obeying their own logic. In the technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which the consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space» (XVIII). De Certeau uses this term as a metaphor for trickery and speaks of "shortcut styles", "shortcut as a way of thinking", or "reading the lines of a shortcut". The interpretation of these new paths (with tangible results or not) allows us to read the penetration of



Fig. 2 - Prohibition sign intervened/contested by hand, New York, 2015.



Fig. 3 - Shortcut drawn by erosion in a public park. Madrid, 2018.

the desires of another within the urban rationalist frame. The shortcut, in short, is an alternative way to achieve your own goal.

We also mentioned that street art shares with tactics the loan of languages and aesthetics to achieve its objectives. In this way, and contradicting the aforementioned technique-craftsman dualism, we can observe how art also takes materials and means from the official or legal information system (for example, advertising) to develop discreet practices that blend with the texture of the street. Although the tactic and street art are not necessarily illegal, both operate outside the law and both make use of fast and alternative techniques to street painting such as templates, stickers or posters previously designed and sometimes mechanically reproduced. This appropriation of the strategy method for the tactic is aimed at maximizing costs and results, reducing the time spent working in the street and, therefore, the risks. When talking about motivation behind the tactic, De Certeau constantly gravitates around the idea of taking the space, of removing an obstacle, of solving a problem or of adapting the environment to one's own desires, that is to say, of customizing. Street art operates in the same way with the city decorating it to leave a personal imprint in the dull grey asphalt jungle.⁸ Although road signs and their posts have been a common target of sticker artists and getting-up, [Figure 4] recently some artists have developed specific pieces for these stands. This is how the series of interventions on prohibition signs by the American artist Dan Witz ⁹(Chicago, 1957) seems to work. In an attempt to counteract the boring homogeneity of the signs and to claim the public space for personal use and to humanize it, the signs become portrait supports with proper names, such as *Sarah* (Dresden 2016) or human anatomy (feet, arms, etc.) or even self-portraits (*Self-portrait*, Brookling 2007) that can be considered as a more sophisticated version of the classic signature (*tag*) [Figure 5].

8 - According to Baudrillard, in the context of the alienation of the contemporary city, claiming identity is sufficient to carry out an act of transgression: «Under these conditions, radical revolt effectively consists in saying "I exist, I am so and so, I live on such and such Street, I am alive here and now". This would still be an identitarian revolt [...]» (Baudrillard 30). Baudrillard also compares the city walls to a body: "[...] without tattooing, as without masks, the body is only what is it, naked and expressionless» (36)".

9 - Dan Witz: <http://www.danwitz.com>

3.2. *La perruque*

The French term "la perruque" literally means "the wig" and refers to the work one does for oneself during the working day while pretending to work. It is not a question of stealing the product of working but of diverting the use of time, as well as the factory's or office's own resources such as uniforms, machines, computers or tools. As unsanctioned street art does, the *perruque* requires a tacit system of solidarity ('he expects that the other will take a turn a blind eye') and is never intended to make an immediate economic profit. «*La perruque* is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. [...] the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit» (25). Printing posters or stickers at work, ¹⁰designing them in the working day, using paper or adhesive from the company, in short, "disguising" what is in fact a creative activity of one's own are practices within the sphere of the *perruque*.

During 1999 and 2005, the US artist Brad Downey¹¹ (1980, Louisville) worked with Darius Jones (also known as VERBS or Leon Reids VI¹², 1979) intervening in the urban furniture of New York and more specifically, the signage. One of the tricks they used to keep a low profile and to avoid attracting the attention of passers-by was to wear work clothes to "make them work". In the photos of that time you can see them wearing the typical safety vests of the builders and they became a symbol for them. In fact, when in 2008 the book *The Adventures of Darius and Downey* (Thames & Hudson) was published, two vests were chosen to compose the cover [Figure 6].

The pleasure of satiating the creative drive and customizing the city allows artists to continue and take risks despite the retaliation.¹³. De Certeau considers the

10 - For example, the sticker artist Standard574 admits to have applied this in <https://thewhitebooks.wixsite.com/thewhitebooks/home/standard-574-italy>

11 - Brad Downey: <https://www.braddowney.com/>

12 - Leon Reids VI: <http://leonthe4th.com/>

13 - «The child still scrawls and daubs on his schoolbooks; even if



Fig. 4 - Prohibition sign intervened with multiple stickers. Florence, Italy, 2018.



Fig. 5 - Self Portrait. Dan Witz, Greenpoint, Brooklyn. 2007.



Fig. 6 - Brad Downey and Darius Jones dressed in working clothes while working on *Baby stop* 2003, Brookling, New York.

tactic of diverting (*la perruque*) an inevitable practice whose benefit, besides, lies in the introduction of the game element (calculation, risk, fun), essential for artistic creation, in everyday life. «In spite of measures taken to repress or conceal it, *la perruque* (or its equivalent), is infiltrating itself everywhere and becoming more and more common. It is only one case among all the practices which introduce artistic tricks and competitions of accomplices into a system that reproduces and partitions through work or leisure. Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of “making do.” From this point of view, the dividing line no longer falls between work and leisure. These two areas of activity flow together. They repeat and reinforce each other» (28).

4. The game and the law: Playing to break the rules.

4.1. Make time (to play)

De Certeau often compares the city and the tension between strategies and practices with the playing field. More specifically, he does it with chess, where the ability of the pieces to move is limited and constrained to the grid. «[...] as in a chess game in which the pieces, rules and players have been multiplied out to the scale [...]» (80). One of the clearest ideas derived from the definitions of strategy and tactic by De Certeau is the separation of the two practices in the control of space and time. On the one hand, the strategy has political legitimacy in order to impose itself visually on the space it owns, while the tactic, on the other, operates on an alien space and can only maneuver with the time factor: «[...] strategies pin their hopes on the resistance that the *establishment of a place* offers to the erosion of time; tactics on a clever *utilization of time*¹⁴, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that if you enter into the foundations of power» (38).

In one of his most famous extracts, De Certeau describes the image of Manhattan from the World Trade Center and reflects on the views of totalizing power involved in the bird's-eye views, panoramic skylines, or maps. The strategy states, «It is also a mastery of places through sight» (36). This overbearing and vertical view comprises all that can be owned by sight and closes the control of the space

he is punished for this crime, he has made a space for himself and signs his existence as an author on it» (32).

14 - *Establishment of place* and *utilization of time* are shown in italics in the Spanish edition, but in English we have left the italics because we want to highlight the two concepts.

by projecting the horizontal plane. In this visual conception and theory of the city, the users have an experience from within, at the street level, acquiring the shape of a moving track introducing, therefore, the time component.

The case of the artist Brad Downey is particularly revealing. On the one hand, he explains how what led him into the world of art was the practice of urban exploration of skateboarding (performative), rather than the practice of traditional drawing (visual art): «Ever since I was very young, I've always made drawing. But I think it was skateboarding that opened my mind: a bench is no longer a bench – it becomes an obstacle for self-expression. Skateboarding taught me how to be creative with my surroundings and question the fundamental function of things» (par 1, Nguyen & Mackenzie). On the other hand, when he explains his sculptures on the street (such as interventions on signs), he believes that, contrary to what you could think in the first place, time is (and not the space which they occupy or articulate), the main element that defines them. He describes this as the “time-sculpture”: «The sculpture is the time when the physical objects are being manipulated; the situation left after is not the work» (Brad Dowley)¹⁵. *Playing is what matters* (and not who wins or loses), the game for itself. The artist plays his game in the city calculating possibilities; on the board of an already-organized space, the time of the artist performs an incursion by taking advantage of an opportunity (the absence of surveillance, the calculation of risks, the chances of durability, the visibility etc.)

The tactic, we insist, is to take advantage of what there is as a board game where one moves; in this case a prohibition sign on which transforming its appearance, its materials, its red background, the white horizontal line and, from there, figure out how to manage to make fun out of it in an exercise of micro-peaceful resistance that causes a smile. This is precisely the essence of street art, to contribute in an ephemeral way by reusing elements of the architecture and the street furniture (collage, palimpsest); it is not created from scratch but rather adapted to the environment. For example, the tactical response of the French artist Clet ¹⁶ (Brittany,

15 - Here is the quote, a bit further developed: "Time is very important for me. I think time and sculpture are related [...] For some of my works, I use video rather than photography. There is a reason for this [...] The sculpture is the time when the physical objects are being manipulated; the situation left after is not the work, and I don't consider this action a performance» (Interview with Thomas Bratzke)

1966) towards the excess of regulations in the cities has given as a result a recycling of the prohibition signs that have made him famous worldwide. One of the interventions more simple technically, but with more conceptual strength, is that it superimposes onto the image of the Statue of Liberty a sign “forbidden to enter” in Manhattan [Figure 7]. Like Witz, Clet does not cover the signs by an integer (this would also be dangerous) because the tactic is not necessarily to cancel the entire message of the strategy but to establish a conversation with it.

4.2. To see and observe the law.

Rules are written and exposed publicly: they must be *seen* to be *observed*. By having the law set down in writing, it becomes a neutral witness that guarantees its application but

16 - Clet is possibly the most representative and prolific artist, within the genre of street art, on prohibition signs. In the center of Florence, the city where he usually resides and works, it is difficult to find signs without his interventions. Clet: <https://www.instagram.com/cletabraham/>

also leaves it *petrified*, that is to say, recorded independently of the natural and changing development of daily life, alien to the real use of the spaces where it is located and, therefore, at times, indifferent to common sense. Its exhibition fixed on the public space also leaves it open to the free interpretation of those who see it.

A careful look at the signs in different parts of the world allows us to deduce that they are not always universally or directly interpretable and that, on many occasions, they require knowledge of the cultural context in which they are located. For example, the regulations on pets, attire or practices such as spitting, making noise, eating gum, smoking or drinking alcohol are cultural variables whose public exposure and location manifest possible group friction. In other cases, prohibitions (both their content and their formulation) highlight very particular issues, revealing customs that emphasize differences in the perception of concepts such as authority, the law and its limits, *what can be forbidden*, or the individual responsibility and freedoms;



Fig. 7 - *Do not enter*, Clet, Manhattan, 2014

this is the case with written signs (more prevalent in the United States than in Europe where they tend to be more visual¹⁷), which are often found and which have no exact correspondence or meaning in Europe, such as the 'NO trespassing', 'NO cruising', or 'NO firearms allowed here' orders because they correspond to a very specific sense of public and private spaces, as well as to very specific cultural situations¹⁸. From his birthplace, Madrid, DosJotas¹⁹ (1982) reflects about prohibition signs in Manhattan in his work *DONT EVEN THINK* New York, 2014)[Figure 8]. The open city *par excellence*, where the Statue of Liberty has received and receives immigrants and tourists, is full of signs such as "NO loitering" or "No soliciting" that in short indicate that the city and its spaces are not intended for people in need, unemployed or idle. That's why DosJotas warns of false signs distributed around the city: *DONT EVEN THINK OF being poor here, come without insurance here, being free here, coming without a credit card here, etc.*

In addition, although the implementation of both law and urban signage are still emblems of civilization and developed societies, the written law, especially when it is of prohibition, always involves a certain degree of imposition on the relationship with its recipient (institutional grid). Both the normative trails of antiquity²⁰ and the signs of today are in the public realm, vertical and haughty. The work of the artist Brad Dowley consists precisely of reducing the value of this haughty position by breaking its verticality and rigidity to give them a flexible, organic and natural appearance. For example, in his sculpture *The tree* (London, 2005), the prohibition sign has been transformed into a tree whose trunk is slightly broken and from which branches and leaves emerge. [Figure 9]

Rooted in the value (in itself) of the fulfillment

17 - This is illustrated by the prohibition sign which, being the same in the United States and in Europe (round and red with a white stripe), also includes the message 'Do not enter' to reinforce it. On his website, the artist Dan Witz classifies his interventions and sheets of prohibition signs in US signs and European signs.

18 - This peculiarity of norms and differences with regards to other cultures has been briefly suggested for the purpose of this work but we believe that a monographic and extended study on this would be worthwhile.

19 - DosJotas: <http://www.dosjotas.org/>

20 - Since the Roman Empire, the custom having things written in public spaces continues.

of the written and historically-articulated law through a succession of "NOs" - "You shall not kill", "You shall not steal" - the space of our day-to-day is conditioned by the type of society we still are (preventive, repressive), and this reverts into forms of domination that become evident, before anything else, through their signaling devices that conquer the place and leave their control and surveillance strategies visible. For this reason, the signs are not usually expressed in positive terms and, on the contrary, they are presented in a preventive manner through the reminder of restriction and prohibition that revolves around "NO". In this way, and always negatively, the icon of "NO" multiplies in the cities and comes out in the way of the walker bombarding him with a constant message that we have assimilated, mitigating his aggressiveness only by force of habit. Consequently, a walk through the monologue of the street signs places us in the realm of order and threat, and leads us to a quasi-warlike setting: «The relation of procedures to the fields of force in which they act must therefore lead to a *polemological* analysis of culture. Like law (one of its models), culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence [...]» (XVII). The DosJotas' work *Prohibitions* (Madrid, 2008) [Figure 10] aims to make us reflect on the direct signs of prohibition in cities. The prohibition is applied to transcendental activities in the personal sphere that are not publicly visible: Do not err, Do not feel, Do not think, Do not doubt, or Do not be, and that belong to the human condition, so they are impossible to avoid.

DosJotas also addresses the possibility of articulating positive rules to remind us of our rights and the practicable options of space—"in this area you can play", "in this area you can walk the dog"—. *Permitido pintar* (Painting allowed), (Huesca, 2009) is an intervention on a forbidden parking sign that aims to reverse the message ironically. The message says as follows: "Painting is allowed on September 19. The rest of the year is illegal". The intervention highlights the permissibility of painting on a specific day of the year on which an urban art festival is being held, in order to point out the prohibition of doing so for the rest of the time, thus highlighting the fluctuating nature of the regulations, which are always subject to authority and never based on self-regulation. The management and use of street art from the institutions is a constant concern in the work of DosJotas, as is the use of urban space. In his work *Public Park*



Fig. 8 - *DON'T EVEN THINK*. Dos Jotas, New York, 2014



Fig. 9 - *The Tree*, Brad Downey, London 2005. Duration: 3 weeks. Anonymous installation.



Fig. 10 - "No sentir", *Prohibitions*, Dos Jotas, Madrid, 2008

(Madrid, 2014), he painted positive messages on the ground to encourage users to use the park in a truly recreational way: playing ball, *skateboarding*, or getting carried away without following the signs or itineraries marked. The intervention draws attention to the contradictions involved in the regulations of certain spaces designed a priori for play (freedom, recreation, flexibility) and as an oasis to escape to in the city, but which are so strictly regulated that they are barely different from the rest of the urban space (the use of the benches is restricted to sitting in a specific position, dogs cannot enter or cannot go unleashed or do their own thing, and playing ball is not allowed).

5. Conclusion

The messages of urban signage belong to a visual culture whose aesthetic potential we hardly notice but which is certainly worth reflecting on. Since the mid-twentieth century, artistic trends and frameworks of cultural analysis have proliferated, inviting people to find beauty in the absurd and unusual in everyday life, to the postmodern indulgence of urban wandering with no other direction than the pleasure of getting lost, and to the breaking down of borders between life and art. More recently, and with increasing acceptance in our environment, the phenomenon of street art has spread, forcing us to take the critical eye out of the monument and put it in other secondary devices.

Writing, signage and city are part of an emblem of civilization through which the relationships between the agents involved in public space are negotiated. “No” is one of the first words to be learned and is as tyrannical as it is libertarian because it serves both to restrain and to resist. Although the sign speaks to the user - “NOT (to do)” - they do not always achieve the goal of truly reaching the receiver. At best, they begin the conversation but do not establish dialogue; they make us feel recognized and challenged because they address us in the midst of the deafening and anonymous silence of the city, but the meeting turns out to be a mirage when the owner of these “NOs” is absent and uses a foreign, aseptic and unsuitable language. However, as we have seen, these milestones in the city can be resisted, challenged and tackled through tactics close to bricolage and collage to transform them into artistic objects that provoke a smile or that, at times, invite deep reflection with few means. De Certeau’s text allows us to analyze these tactics from the perspective of the aesthetics of tricks as an artistic operation.

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