

## “...and I want to paint it black!?”

### What strategies are there to undermine the reclamation of street art for profit and support public engagement for the interests of citizens?

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#### Abstract

*This working paper will unfold the methodological design of the PhD research project, Behind The Murals – A Participative Webdocu on the Motivations and the Reclamations of Street Art, with a focus on the incident when BLU repainted his murals at Berlin’s Cuvrybrache completely black. In contrast to BLU’s strategy – to erase his art so that it can no longer be made profitable by the investor of the lot or even by Berlin’s city marketing – I aim to investigate what other strategies against the reclamation of street art are imaginable. The main methodological question is, how is it possible to carry out this research in such a way that its results support the communities (potentially) affected by gentrification/touristification to gain a voice? The experimental methods of participatory video and digital storytelling will be applied with the target of producing a participative webdocu accompanied by a locally exhibited video installation.*

#### Keywords:

Street Art, (Re-)valorization, Displacement, Community Action Research, Participatory Video, Digital Storytelling



Fig. 1. Original BLU murals (Blogrebellen, 2014).



Fig. 2. Repainted BLU murals on the 11th of December 2014 in Berlin (Blogrebellen, 2014).

At the end of 2014, the street artist BLU repainted his two murals at Berlin’s Cuvrybrache completely black. It is said that the real estate company advertised their future apart-

ments with the view onto the murals and that BLU did not want to have his art being used for this re-valorization of the lot (Paranyushkin, 2014; Blogrebellen, 2014).

Even though the result – the loss of these murals – has been a sad event for the people who are connected to the Wrangelkiez (Kiez is the Berliner word for district), it is a well-fitting example for my PhD-project Behind The Murals – A Participative Webdocu on the Motivations and the Reclamations of Street Art. With attention to the event of the repainted BLU murals, I will unfold in this working paper the methodological design of my PhD project.

So what is the issue with the Cuvrybrache? It is a lot at the border between two popular districts of Berlin: Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain. It is directly connected to the river Spree and has a view onto the Oberbaumbrücke, a bridge often photographed because of its historic brick architecture. Besides having this attractive location, the Cuvrybrache is famous for its story, because for a long time it has oscillated between being reclaimed for the people or for profit.

In the 90s, after the re-union of the German republic, the first development plan for the wasteland failed. Because of its attractive location it soon became one of the places occupied by subcultural movements. 1996 the Yaam Club moved in and lifted up Berlin's reggae scene. In 1998, it was cleared because the former investor wanted to build a shopping mall. But the district itself disagreed and the Cuvrybrache remained a wasteland. In 2007/8, BLU painted the two murals that became an attraction for tourists, got printed on postcards, and were used for various marketing strategies. In 2012, starting as a protest camp against the BMW-Guggenheim-Lab, an unofficial housing area began to develop on the Cuvrybrache which sometimes got stigmatized as

Berlin's first favela. In 2014, after a fire broke out, the camp was cleared. And in the same year, some Wrangelkiez inhabitants started a petition that demanded that the BLU murals should be designated as a listed monument. This was a move against the developmental plans of the new investor of the lot, Arthur Süsskind, because his planned buildings would have hidden the view of the murals. The petition was signed by more than 7,700 people (Herr, 2014). Then something unexpected happened.

On the 11th of December 2014, BLU let his murals be repainted black. The reaction of the media was huge. A critique caught my attention. One blogger said that BLU's actions were not a statement against the reclamation of street art through real estate developers, but an acceptance of the failure of the creative scene. Furthermore, he wrote that this event shortcuts the potential debate about what happens when art is made profitable in such a way (Paranyushkin, 2014; Blogrebellen, 2014). Lutz Henke, the person who in the name of BLU repainted the murals black said that – in contrast – they wanted to make a statement not just against the gentrification of Berlin's districts, but also against the failed cultural policies of Berlin's government. One of his main critiques was the fact that artists are often part of the people who are displaced by gentrification and touristification. He demanded that the government implemented more instruments to safeguard the cultural scene against displacement and, therefore, provide more financial support for a branch that is so important for Berlin's development (Linke and Mösken, 2015; Henke, 2015).

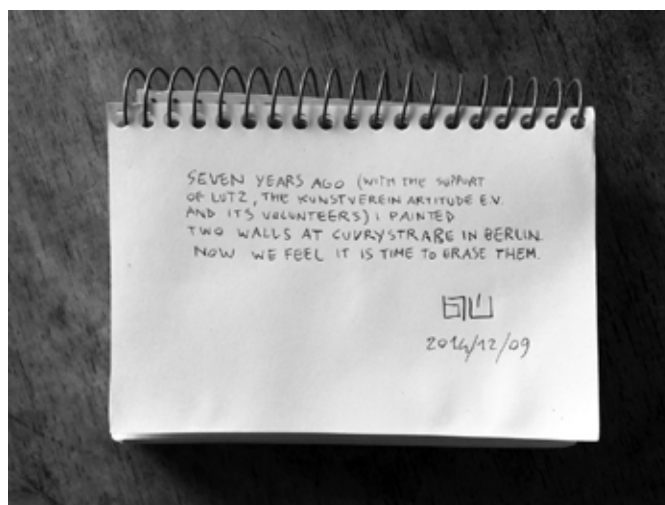


Fig. 3. Henke, 2015

When I visited the repainted murals, it caught my eye that BLU and Henke had left intact the words *your city* from the graffiti-writing *reclaim your city*, which was above one of the former BLU murals. It is open who it is that is addressed by this *your city*: The investors or the citizens?

The investor Arthur Süsskind plans that 10% of the apartments are meant for social housing while Berlin's *Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung* (the official city development office) demands 30% (Kopietz, 2015). This is the reason why there is still no agreement on the development plan for the lot. So, nothing is built on it by now.

But what do the citizens of the district wish would happen with the wasteland? This information is not accessible. So, it becomes obvious that the *Cuvrybrache* has an exemplary status for Berlin's housing problem, where especially the people (potentially) displaced by gentrification/touristification do not have a voice.

And here, *Behind The Murals* research can directly be introduced. In terms of a *Community Action Research* approach I ask the question of how the street artists whose art gets reclaimed and the citizens who are (potentially) displaced by gentrification/touristification can become part of my PhD research. Therewith, I aim to gather information about how the street artists and the inhabitants develop cooperatively their opportunities for action. I want to reflect on what results the methodological design may yield and if this is applicable for future approaches.

Coming from the experience from my former research for the documentary, *We Are The Others*, where I realized during postproduction that I would have liked to hand the camera to my interviewees to get their view onto its subject, I decided to develop a participative approach for my next research project. Here two issues arise which often occupy my mind. One is the question of how is it possible to democratize the research process. The second issue is the question of how is it possible to publish the results of the research in such a form that they reach a wider audience and can be used by the people for whom these results can be important visualizations of their issues. My answer is to combine for *Behind The Murals'* methodological design participatory video (see Gubrium 2013; Lunch 2006; Milne et al., 2012; White 2003) and digital storytelling (see Lambert 2013; Center for Digital Storytelling 2013). Therewith, I aim that *Behind The Murals*

will become a participative webdocu with an accompanying videoinstallation exhibited at a public space. By applying participatory video, I aim to conduct each research phase together with the street artists who are going to participate in the research. Here, I will focus especially on the participative, self-reflexive montage where the research process decisions taken can be represented. Through the application of digital storytelling, I aim that the later joining online users of the webdocu and the audience of the videoinstallation can partake in the project, too.

This methodological design will be carried out with reference to the above exemplified subject: The incident of the BLU murals is a perfect example for the potential reclamation of street art for the interests of profit since it can be used to re-valorize real estate – or even the reputation of a city – and, thereby, be successfully sold to attracted gentrifiers/tourists.<sup>1</sup> BLU's reaction against the reclamation of his art was to erase his murals. The evolving question is: Besides BLU's strategy, what other strategies can the participating street artists imagine? Are there other strategies that may give the (potentially) displaced community members the possibility to gain a voice? With the application of my methodological design to this subject, I aim to study if this kind of participative, self-reflexive and audio-visual approach is usable for other urban anthropological/sociological inquiries. Therewith, I seek to find answers to the often-raised critique against these kind of experimental approaches in terms of the objectivity of research. One way to address this is to see if *Behind The Murals'* results will add important aspects to theories on gentrification/touristification and displacement.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1) Here Andrej Holm's gentrification/touristification theory seems for me to be an up-to-date explanation for the ongoing developments in Berlin (see Holm, 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2011; and 2013). In general I will use for the subject of *Behind The Murals'* research theories that draw connections between subculture, art and gentrification/touristification (see Florida, 2004 and 2005; Glass, 1964; Ley, 2003; Lloyd, 2006; Reinecke, 2007; C. Schmidt, 2009; Thomas, 2009; Zukin, 1989 and 1995).

2) See Footnote 2. Here, I will focus on the gentrification/touristification theory of Andrej Holm.

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