

Self-designing protests

Exploring participatory design activism through the Colombian graphic (design) explosion

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the notion of participatory design activism to describe design interventions that fall in between participatory design and design activism, arising organically through self-organisation. Illustrated by three examples from the Colombian graphic (design) explosion, which occurred during the mass protests in 2021, a case is made to decentre the designer from the process, arguing that protests are instead (co)designed by a variety of actors. The nature of the interventions described show that participatory design can make a difference through its marriage to design activism. In this context, designers take a step back and allow others to use, appropriate and expand on their creative concepts, effectively self-designing the protest as well as its surrounding environment.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → Professional topics.

KEYWORDS

Participatory design activism, participatory design, design activism, Colombia, collective action

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1 INTRODUCTION

Originally centred on the democratisation of the workplace, participatory design (PD) has evolved to address issues in the public sphere [4], mainly attributed to advances in technology [16]. From its early application in human-computer interaction [19, 27] it has since branched out to other fields, such as healthcare [7, 11], education [20, 29] and sustainable development [12, 22], among others.

However, when expanding its scope from the relatively manageable context of work to addressing global societal challenges, which

include climate change, migration and authoritarianism [2], PD encounters several issues. First, many accounts on PD presuppose a clear 'designer' (and/or researcher) and 'user' role [3, 21], possibly due to PD's strong ties to human-computer interaction. Second, initiatives are often described from the perspective of the designer(s) [14, 35], implying that they are the ones who initiate the process, engage stakeholders to participate and bear the responsibility for sustaining it. Although these accounts are not problematic per se, they do position designers as the central figures in the process, guiding the design activities or interventions.

But what happens when participatory design meets collective action, where the boundary between designers and users becomes blurry and many work towards a common goal with no single actor in complete control of the process? The *explosión gráfica* or 'graphic explosion' in Colombia, which developed during the massive protests organized from Spring 2021 onwards, have given rise to a form of collective participatory design which is seemingly spontaneous in nature, spurred on by communication via social media. The term *design activism*, commonly understood as "design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change" [15], in our opinion is not sufficient to describe this phenomenon accurately, as it implies a structured designerly intervention. Instead, in the Colombian context, designers are part of a larger movement, relying on the participation of, and interaction with, the general public to accomplish their interventions and together push the momentum forward.

Using the participatory design activities during the Colombian protests of 2021 as examples, this paper aims to explore avenues which diverge from the common understanding of PD and design activism by proposing the notion of *participatory design activism*. This portmanteau suggests a form of PD (or design activism) which, instead of a carefully planned action, arises organically due to group dynamics and processes of self-organisation.

2 A GRAPHIC (DESIGN) EXPLOSION

In the past decades, Colombia has been immersed in a negative spiral of violence, corruption, narco-traffic and inner wars between Marxist-Leninist guerrillas, privately financed paramilitary groups and national military forces, leaving the country as one of the most violent and unequal places in the world [17]. The failure of president Ivan Duque, along with the Centro Democrático party and their supporters, to uphold the Colombian peace process agreements ratified in November 2016 as well as the perpetuation of various forms of injustice have led to a new age of discontent in Colombia [34]. Protests initiated by university students in October

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Figure 1: Garavato's fist appropriations (Image credits: ©Garavato (www.instagram.com/tavogaravato))

2018 and the national strike in November 2019 (referred to as #21N) gradually grew into larger demonstrations and escalated into more violent riots following the assassination of Javier Ordoñez, who was tortured and killed by the Bogotá police in September 2020 [30].

On 28 April 2021, a national strike was called out in Colombia, affecting all sectors. Despite the constant violation of human rights by state authorities [37], the strike continued for more than three consecutive months and expanded, creating a variety of collaborative activist narratives [32]. Moreover, the demonstrations were no longer small protests with a specific goal, organised by particular groups, such as students, syndicalists or left-wing (opposition) parties. Instead, they grew into the manifestation of various underlying grievances regarding the environment, human rights, poverty, inequality and corruption, aiming to realise a profound change in the country [32].

As a result of the demonstrations, a so-called *explosion gráfica* (graphic explosion) occurred, where artists and designers (co)created pro-strike graphic designs [1]. By distributing these visuals through social media, making them available to download as well as printing, distributing and posting them in the streets and strategic locations, the images have become iconic images of resistance, which, even with slight modifications, convey the same message, without changing its original meaning (see figure 1).

The deconstruction of symbols, images, logos and even sounds¹ is resignified by a collective resistance movement of artists and designers to denounce activities, such as those experienced during the national strike, finding a common identity in resistance against injustice [8]. Similar movements in São Paulo and Buenos Aires described by Martins [26], have used graphic language together with urban interventions as agents of social change. In the Colombian context, this sentiment was summarised by historian Diana Uribe, stating that "in Colombia's protests there is no precedent for this graphic explosion. . . it is a new way to express history"[1]. To understand where the origin of the graphic explosion lies, it is necessary to highlight those who have been at the forefront of Colombian graphic activism in the 21st century. Operating behind pseudonyms, trained or self-taught designers and artists, weary from the regular employment profiles offered in the traditional creative industry, have embraced this way of creative production as a response to social injustice using participatory ways of designing [18].

Notable design collectives in this context are *Puro Veneno*, *Dexpierte Colectivo*, *Indomito Lab*, *Brandalismo*, *Toxicomano*, *Garavato*, *Juega Siempre*, *Pirotecnia Negra*, *Ferizuku* and *Gran Om*, among others. These groups have been (co)producing graphics with strong

¹See for example: *Himno Deconstruido* – La Revolucionaria Orquesta Sinfónica (YouTube)

social messages, sharing them on their social media accounts and making their work freely available to be downloaded and/or printed by others. Although this practice has been occurring for some years before the protests, since 2018 it has become increasingly common, making the work carried out by collectives, artists and platforms an instantly recognisable and visible presence, particularly in street demonstrations.

Furthermore, the persistent reproduction of these images, both in the physical and digital realm, have led to the generation of a feeling of belonging, particularly among the younger population, who (co)produce, share, carry and/or allude to these visual expressions, integrating them as a part of their personal identity [8]. Omar Rincón, characterises this phenomenon as *coolture*, where the social outbreak has become a laboratory of new young narratives and aesthetics that express anger, but in a seemingly ‘carnavalesque’ manner. This manifests itself in unconventional ways of protesting, which include activities such as painting and cooking on the street and includes references to social networks, tv series, video games or memes. Furthermore, social media have become the digital memory of these activities, showing and recognising young people, acknowledging them as participants of the on-going social movement [32]. The popularisation of social protests through graphic propagation is a long-standing tradition [15] and is a vital practice, taking underlying collective desires to the streets and bringing together people with different motivations to face a common adversary.

3 THREE EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPATORY DESIGN ACTIVISM

Fueled by the protests, the graphic explosion, in turn, has become a source of inspiration for the protesters, becoming a cornerstone of their identity [31]. The participatory nature of the street protests and the scene that arose because of them, brings together active protesters as well as those who were not actively involved before, due to practices that could be considered as aesthetically disruptive [24] and which develop spontaneously, thereby further stimulating the creation of messages, designs and expressions.

The occupation of the street during the protests is the common way of expression in Colombia by historically excluded groups, such as indigenous people, ethnic Africans, LGBTQ+, youth or unemployed people, among others [32]. The street then becomes a means of communication, and through the participation of citizens, merges individuals into ephemeral collectives. Here, the street also functions as a space where activities are carried out by anyone with the desire to express themselves, regardless of the level of knowledge on media, techniques or even the actual outcomes. In this scenario, texts, images or designs become part of the public domain; as they have no owner, their message of resistance therefore becomes part of the protests’ collective memory. The following sections present examples of three activities that are common place during the protest, which use participatory design in an organic way.

3.1 Large-scale paintings

“Throughout the country, not only the walls, but also the roads, have been filled with murals and graphic pieces in which the violence of the State is denounced,

the demonstration is encouraged or a claim to the memory is made”.

– @sinsecuencia (Cartel Urbano)

Large-scale paintings, both during their creation and after their completion, have become meeting points and cultural nodes for the community. This typically involves an initial call to create a painting, put out by a collective, specifying a particular location in the city. In the surrounding area, communal kitchens pop up, serving food to protesters and collaborators, accompanied by live music performances by a variety of artists as well as exhibitions of posters, serigraphy or photography, which related to other protests. An example of this process is the intervention at Las Aguas Station in downtown Bogotá on 28 May 2021, which was the result of a call by the *33recetas* collective (see figure 2). Similar examples of this practice can be found in other locations in Bogotá, such as the Monument to the Heroes, Transmilenio portals (public transport portals), the National Park, the JEP Building (Peace Special Jurisdiction) and in many squares, parks and streets throughout Colombia.

Due to the large scale of the work, the community plays an active role by joining the designers and experts during these communicative actions and supporting them with labour and materials, but also actively participating in the activities carried out around the painting space. Although it was the collective who initially called for action and created the blueprint for the painting, it was the community who (self-) organised its joint execution and all other aspects surrounding the intervention, effectively designing the space of the protest.

3.2 Live screen printing workshops

“To begin with, the technique of poster design as a proposal for contemporary urban art and Latin American political art has been what has brought us together and which we have appropriated in order to manage the entire process from the reproduction of graphics in the technique of serigraphy and digital printing to street staging.”

– Caos Disfuncional collective

Between May and August 2021, several screen printing sessions were held, with designs alluding to the strike, called mainly by collectives and artists (*Puro veneno*, *Garavato*, *Xilotropico*, *Toxicomano* and *DJLU*, among others). Several of the workshops were carried out in independent bookstores or stores that actively supported the strike, but some were also held around popular gathering places, such as public transport portals, universities and public squares. In these activities, mainly communicated through social networks, the live reproduction of posters, screen printing or stamping garments was accompanied by other activities, such as the aforementioned community kitchens, large-scale paintings and live music.

The workshop organised by *Xilotropico* on 11 June 2021 demonstrates how designers work hand in hand with participants to reproduce their designs on various media, such as clothing, posters, prints, postcards, stickers, pins, buttons (see figure 3). These products are then shared or exchanged for food, protective gear or medical supplies, which enables the protesters to continue with the



Figure 2: Collective large-scale painting “We’re going to paint until they hear us”. Image credits: ©33recetas collective (www.instagram.com/33recetas/)

strike, creating a network of like-minded individuals. In addition, there were also talks and panel discussions organised by independent media featuring illustrators, artists and musicians, connecting them to a broader audience. In doing so, collaborative spaces were created where graphic expressions contribute to mutual exchanges in art, design, knowledge and aid.

3.3 Empapeladas or empapelatones

“Now we have learned to meet and support each other. Perhaps the knowledge of the terrain and mastery of the technique of pasting posters and acting as a pack strategy is something in favour that we are experiencing in this war game.”

– Caos Disfuncional collective

The practice of *empapeladas* or *empapelatones* involves the direct printing, stamping of designs on paper, in this case posters, which are then displayed on walls, mainly outdoors. Through social media, artists, designers or ‘ordinary’ people are requested to bring their own posters, compositions or graphics to ‘empapelar’ (to cover walls with posters) a specific place and thus create a collective

mural. Although this can be done legally², the illegal form has no restrictions on location, size and the message communicated.

An example of this practice took place on 19 May 2021 on a large wall outside of the Universidad Pedagógica (Pedagogic University) in Bogotá (see figure 4). Called by different street artists and independent galleries through social media, the activity developed around *la chaza grafica*, a self-made cart, constructed by street artist DJLU Juega Siempre, which functions as a itinerant graphic store where protesters can acquire posters and prints from different artists and designers for free.

Those who answered the call, contributed by bringing their own graphic materials to paste or used the posters provided by DJLU in his cart. In this instance, the selection of the space was important, as on same wall there was still a large *empapelada* against former president Uribe from the 2018 elections. The collective (re)design of this wall revolved around preserving the original piece from 2018 as a collective memory of resistance, while at the same time revitalising the wall by creating a new and larger piece around it, reiterating the legitimacy of the social claims of the 2021 graphic (design) explosion.

²The MAMBO (Museum of Modern Art of Bogota) featured a wall covered by posters with blank spaces where participants could write or paint messages alluding to the strike or Colombia.



Figure 3: Xilotropico's xylography stamping workshop. Image credits: ©Xilotropico (www.instagram.com/xilotropico)

In this way, both artistic groups and those who attended and participated in these encounters managed to redefine the usage of the walls and the locations, co-creating reference points within the protest. At the same time, they functioned as street galleries that bear witness to the diversity, creativity and abundance of graphic production.

4 DISCUSSION

It could be argued that these interventions could be considered as manifestations of design activism, creating agonistic spaces where power relations are made visible and can be contested [10] or *MootSpaces*, spaces 'owned' by groups or communities where they can freely co-design their futures [15], which in the case of the Colombian protests can be interpreted in a literal sense. Viewed through the lens of participatory design, they could be design *Things*, socio-material assemblies where different actors endeavour to reach a common agreement [5].

Although in some of the cases described, designers or artists were responsible for posting the initial calls on social media, the process did not necessarily follow their original intentions, nor were they in control of the events occurring afterwards. Therefore, the outcomes, whether it concerns large-scale paintings, screen-printed protest merchandise or *empapalated* walls, are owned by everyone and no one at the same time, since their realisation was a community effort.

As these interventions are not projects in the traditional sense, they do not have fixed stakeholders, nor is long-term commitment by particular individuals always necessary.

We would therefore like to argue that the interventions witnessed during the Colombian graphic (design) explosion, fall somewhere in between participatory design and design activism, as their spontaneous origins, organic development and ephemeral existence is not congruent with the best practices associated with the aforementioned disciplines. The cases described in this paper are organised and sustained in a different manner, which is more akin to the notion of *design coalitions* as defined by Van Amstel et al. [39], who suggest that in social movements, coalitions do not necessarily have to be result-oriented, as proposed by Manzini [23], but instead can also be rooted in feelings of solidarity and the practice of caring for one another. [13, 33] Furthermore, in this context, designers only have limited influence, due to the highly self-organised nature of the overall process.

Swann and Gelfi [36] define self-organisation as a collective determination by the participating individuals on how the organisation functions, which is underpinned by a participatory and democratic process. The authors note that the occupation of public spaces has been a common feature of recent protests, such as the 2011 Arab Spring uprising, with social media and other forms of horizontal communication playing an essential role in enabling

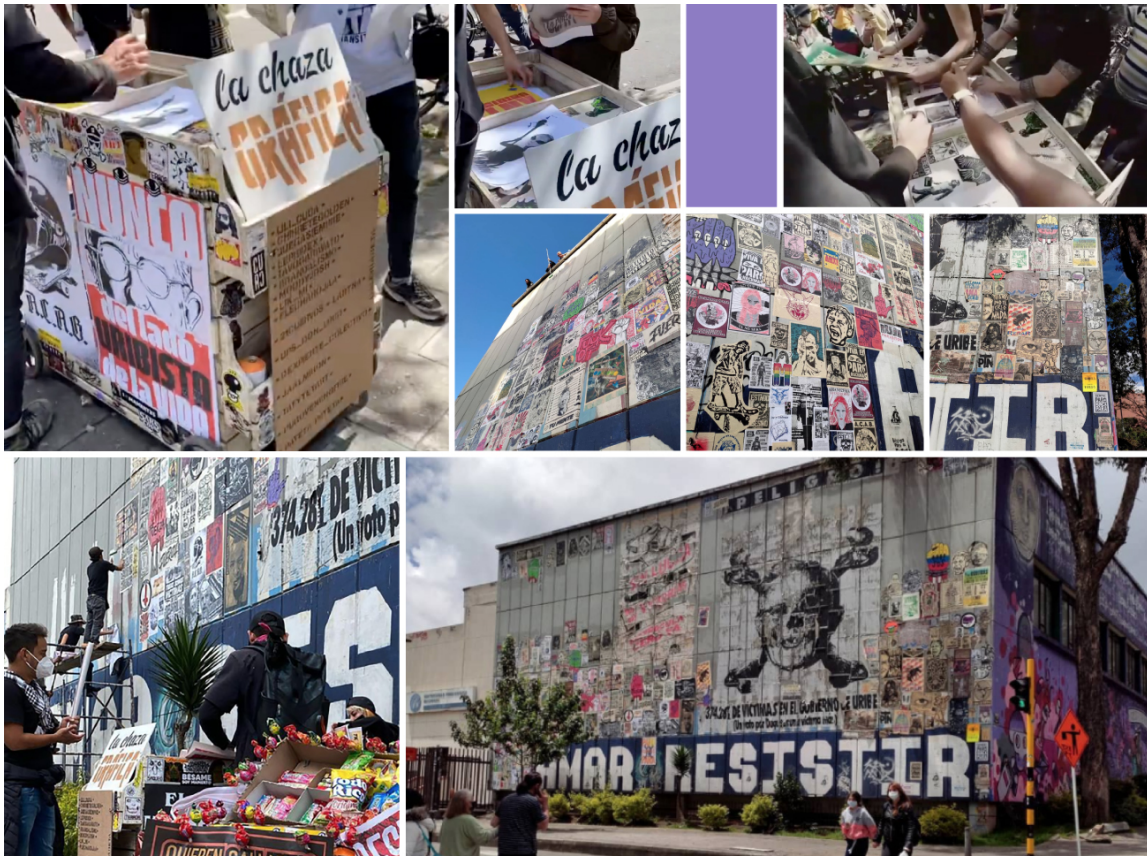


Figure 4: DJLU Juega siempre's chaza grafica cart and Universidad Pedagogica wall empapelada. Image credits: ©pca333 (www.instagram.com/pca333/) ©DJLU Juega siempre (www.instagram.com/juegasiempre/) and ©Galeria beta (www.instagram.com/galeriabeta).

the protesters to coordinate and (self-)organise their actions. The rejection of formalised organisational structures by activists is not surprising according to Nunes [28], since the internet has made it possible for social movements to operate outside these boundaries. Furthermore, as people are already accustomed to self-organising in their private lives, using this mode of interaction in the realm of political action is not a giant leap for most.

We believe that participatory design activism can address some of the concerns that have been highlighted by some authors. For example, Marques and Maass [25] have suggested that the analysis of spontaneous and peripheral design practices could challenge the coloniality of knowledge by the Global North, by proposing new perspectives, broadening the horizon in terms of approaches towards social transformation. Bødker and Kyng [6] argue that PD should concern itself with issues "that matter", pointing to PD's tendency to focus on producing (co)design processes and methods as outcomes, resulting in projects that lack real-life impact as well as PD's reluctance to engage with issues that are controversial and political in nature. Similarly, Smith and Iversen [35] note that PD emphasises design methods and tools aimed at pragmatic solutions over addressing political issues, knowledge production

and community transformation, seldomly surviving researchers' engagement.

Moreover, echoing the developments in PD in the past decade, participatory design activism should not per definition assume a central role for designers. In this, we agree with Thorpe [38], who acknowledges that design can be utilised as activism by various actors, other than designers. However, unlike Thorpe, we do not perceive designers to be solely responsible to frame and articulate issues in a creative or designerly way. The activities surrounding the graphic explosion in Colombia illustrate that collectives can use various ways of creative expression to successfully rally citizens to take the streets, but the eventual design, or manifestation, of the protest itself emerges organically, through the joint efforts of all those participating, and cannot be attributed exclusively to designers or artists.

The notion of participatory design activism is not intended to introduce yet another term, nor is it meant to criticise existing approaches to PD. On the contrary, we aim to broaden the horizons of both PD and design activism by presenting examples which do not neatly fit into the established frameworks, opening the discussion on the role of the designer in this context. As noted by Cetin [9], despite the fact that designers have the ability to address issues

through a variety of (design) solutions, their autonomy remains limited. Therefore, designers should be willing to relinquish control to others, thereby making the whole greater than the sum of the individual parts.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper aims to challenge common perspectives on participatory design and design activism by presenting three cases from the graphic explosion which occurred during the 2021 Colombian protests. These examples demonstrate that although designers' and artists' collectives play an important role in the organisation and initiation of activities surrounding the protests, they should not be considered as the main actors. In the example of large-scale paintings, the community was actively involved its co-creation and co-design of the space and activities surrounding the protest. Similarly, during the live screenprinting workshops, designers worked together with other participants to create collaborative spaces, where not only the graphic media produced in the workshops were exchanged, but also ideas, knowledge and (medical) assistance. In the empapeladas example, protesters brought their own graphic materials to enrich an existing wall piece, thereby both reflecting on the past and taking the discussion to the current situation, effectively co-designing a new work of art.

The examples of participatory design activism as witnessed during the Colombian graphic explosion point to ways that social injustice can be addressed by PD, and at the same time, show that design activism can be a collaborative effort. Regardless of which perspective is adopted, the design of a protest can occur spontaneously, without the necessity of designers being at the wheel. However noble the intentions, it is an utopian ideal that social change can be achieved by design alone, or that designers are somehow responsible for jumpstarting a social movement. Instead of framing design as a match that lights a fire, it should be perceived as the glue that binds everything together.

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