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**Puro Veneno Wall Posters, Colombia, South America, 2018 to Present**

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**Abstract**

Digital media takes the form of social protest, illegal wall posters, and even anti-social behavior among the streets of Colombia, South America, in the 21st century. While its glaring graphics and blasting messages may be associated with graffiti, in effect, the two styles diverge. Through duplication, manipulating, and printing images, which are then affixed to walls, the media participates in the historic glued-on wall notices and advertisements common in South America. A survey of such political statements made by Puro Veneno collective illustrate this relationship. The posters are compared to other contemporary Latin American social protest media.

**Keywords:** wall posters, political posters, social protest, Puro Veneno

**1. Introduction**

*1.1 Accepted Public Graphics or Illegal, Anti-social Behavior?*

Issues of defacing public spaces with graphics, both written and images, arose with an analysis of graffiti in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mostly centered in the United States of America (USA) and Europe, initial expressions splashed onto metro commuter trains and buses, and infrastructure such as culverts, fences, highway underpasses and bridges. Sociologists and art historians analyzed the artists, their motivations, as well as symbolism, words, gang affiliation, and attempts at communication. Authors argued about whether the phenomenon represented an art form or a crime.

Into this environment of appropriation of public spaces by non-invited individuals arose the artist collective Puro Veneno around 2018. A compilation of their publicly distributed images serves as examples for this evaluation. Reaction from the government and comparison with dearth of prosecution present the question of how the posters are received and perceived by mainstream society.

*1.2 Dialogue with whom?*

The wider social significance and implication of this issue consist of the dialog and dialectic of illicit street art's avoiding entirely the art or crime discussion. While commenting on election candidates, as well as elected and appointed politicians and military officers, the posters manifest election candidate advertisements. This style consists of commercial advertisements and notices while participating in the historic paper and glue wall poster tradition.

### *1.3 Relevant Scholarship*

Originating in 2018, Puro Veneno maintains various social media sites, from which it freely distributes its images under a Creative Commons license (Puro Veneno, 2024). It has also published a book with an online video version (Puro Veneno, 2019a,b). Thus, its digital presence serves to both define as well as disseminate itself. The following literature reviews analyze evaluate and comment on Puro Veneno's identity and art.

Using online sources, as well as other literature interpreting the posters, Chavez (2019) summarizes Puro Veneno's goals. These he concludes, constitute anonymous, collective actions of social change, articulating issues for the betterment of society and those typically avoided by political parties. He creates the term "artivismo" (artivism), or pragmatic art purposed for political and social change. Soon after, in another publication, Chavez (2020) identifies three of the artists, notwithstanding his assertion of their anonymity. Here, he continues the artivism analysis, specifying it expresses creating and participating in "art as a tool to transform reality". It is an art which sets up a critical dialog with society. Via artivism, Puro Veneno expresses a discourse with new media and tools within diverse scenarios (p. 26).

From a political analysis point of view, Lucero (2019) focuses on the group's origins in response to the 2018 election, which they claim was fraudulent. Likewise, the impact of the collective's injecting their images on paper, plastic and cardboard in public spaces is assessed. Here, wider social, legal and geographical concepts dominate the discussion. The digital technology phenomenon relates to dissemination efforts, as images are broadcast worldwide. This serves to spread the allegation of President Uribe's role in murders in the rural areas, among other political stances. Other posters assert the claims of government dispossession of lands and criminalization of social leaders.

Summarizing the group's profile from their digital media, Salas (2019) describes them as social and political dissidents who operate in public spaces. Rather than being collectives, their identity arises out of a totality of unknown: unknown members, unknown leaders, and unknown real names of participants. Salas sets the context as social protest posters, designed and purposed primarily to reach workers and popular culture. The aspect of disseminating information in support of its social protest stance distinguishes Puro Veneno from the multitude of other poster artists who challenge society's political institutions and norms.

While acknowledging Puro Veneno's engagement with digital media, Salas (2019) dwells primarily on street art, comprised of posters, or "cartels" of paper or cardboard. Indeed, these posters, affixed with wheat paste, use digital technology to produce the anachronistic paper form of the posters. Puro Veneno ranks among other similar anonymous collectives utilizing this media to propagate their social protest and political views. Salas then traces involvement of this media from 1968 student mobilizations and protests in France. See discussion below.

Interpreting street art of Bogotá within an historical perspective, Leal (2020) surveys wall art as well as three-dimensional, found object art. The artists use history in ephemeral objects and

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images in the streets to displace the public sphere, be it existing sculpture, fountains, walls, or highway underpasses, from their current meaning, and appropriate it for their own messages. This engenders social protest. Via these interventions, artists integrate the past with their ideology of the present and project it into the future. In this dialog, the artists criticize the status quo, i.e., the existing political structure.

According to Leal, existing political power and urban infrastructure owes its existence to longstanding, incipient, insidious and inherent lack of diversity, and embodies hegemony. Therefore, by engaging in street art, the artists counter hegemony. Quoting from Puro Veneno's (2019) own writing, Leal incorporates its street images among a city-wide survey. Through their graphics, Puro Veneno and the other artists proceed beyond social protesting and co-opting the city environment. Street art is not vandalism but rather a blowing up of accepted, unified, and homogenous historical viewpoints. I.e., the public's understanding of history, as well as contemporary politics, are changed via dialog the art initiates and sustains.

While not delving into Puro Veneno, Olave (2025) analyzes the effect of digital communications on the historically paper-printed Japanese cartoons, manga. From a contemporary Latin American viewpoint, the author interprets the digital pirating of published manga and its widespread distribution via the web as creating a wide-ranging culture which resists global capitalism. Translated into multiple languages and redistributed by a network of websites, social media and email, this manga form gives rise to its own genre. Through its paper print tradition of several hundred years, manga thus shares with Puro Veneno posters a transformation via digital technology. While the posters retain the wall location of their predecessors, their scope, production, and content derive from digital media. Likewise, both modern phenomena copy published, copyrighted images with impunity. While Puro Veneno's conveys resistance directly via graphics and text, Hacked Manga obliquely attacks capitalism via free distribution.

Describing Chile's media collectives' engagement with social protest marches and demonstrations, Veas and Navarro (2022) conclude they consisted, at least partially, in performative actions. This equates with promoting their own digital media presence/recognition online, as compared to battling for social justice. While self-described motivations include creating a historical record, they also incorporated guerrilla technology. Digital text countering government press releases was projected at night against public buildings. Thus, they and Puro Veneno shared alteration of public spaces, although the former avoided the pasted poster format. Similarities derive from absence of prosecution. In Chile, protecting the transit stations from vandalism took precedent.

#### *1.4 Style and Historical Comparison*

A comparison of the content and styles with political conflicts establishes Puro Veneno's communicative and persuasive, propaganda type motives. A dearth of criminal prosecution or rapid cover-up given defacement, and illicit installation on public and private properties imparts legitimisation. This is promulgated and facilitated by the digital poster format, which is printed

and glued onto walls, as an extension of the historic style of advertisement and notices in Latin America. The scale and imagery can be attributed to digital media.



## 2. Method

Poster content from public domain images generated by Puro Veneno are analyzed. Government reports are cross-referenced to verify some content. Likewise, political candidates and campaign issues complained about are researched. Their historical cultural context, applicable laws, use of language, and semiotics factor in. Sociologists and political scientists contribute and provide another context. Overall, the wall posters are compared to historic wall poster tradition, especially in relationship to symbolism. Government response, including non-prosecution, indicated a level of societal approval.

Themes include protests against foreign bank investments in Colombia, government agencies and personnel, military assaults within the general population, civilian deaths, and opposition to presidential candidates. Not having a monopoly within this ephemeral poster media, Puro Veneno joins other protests, political groups, political candidates, collectives, and commercial advertisements by utilizing public walls. Images were chosen from Puro Veneno's own digital online media based on their text and infrastructure being legible. Thus, they fulfill the role of a case study.



### 2.1 Data

The following are downloaded from Puro Veneno's social media (2024). These represent plastered or tacked-on posters, composed and printed with digital media. Other references without photos originate from media reports or other artists.

FIGURE 1.	FIGURE 2.
	
Stop sign on public street with political protest poster / (Puro Veneno 2024b)	Figure 2. Public street / Women, respect yourselves. Don't be deceived by a macho pig. What a liar, Robolfo. / (Puro Veneno 2024b) /

Figures 1 and 2 campaign against voting for Rudolfo Hernández, a presidential candidate who lost the run-off election against Gustavo Petro. Hernández was previously the mayor of Bucaramanga. A series of these same posters were affixed to the outside of a public transport bus (Puro Veneno, 2024). Without referencing any source to support the accusations of theft, the posters nevertheless comprise protected free speech against political candidates, indicative of most democracies. Figure 2 posters overlap painted graffiti, implying tolerance of this media, as well. Above the rows of Robolfo images, plastered prints, also composed with digital media, advertise a concert or performance.


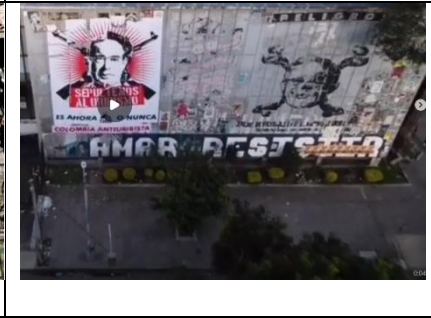
Puro Veneno holds no monopoly on this media, consisting of digital image composition, printed on paper or plastic with waterproof ink. Other collectives thusly participate in social protest messaging. Similar to Figure 2, these also are juxtaposed on public walls (#mujeres, 2024; #esahora).

FIGURE 3.	FIGURE 4.
	
<p>Public street, plastic poster / Education is not only money, the public universities need some complete reform of law 30, we are the antidote (Puro Veneno 2024b)</p>	<p>Public street / The police don't protect me. The police have assassinated 289 people in three years (2017-2019), only two found guilty. How fire scorches (Puro Veneno 2024b)</p>

Fronting a well-kept street with ornamental iron facing the sidewalk, a plastic printed poster lobbies for more money for education, Figure 3. There is no graffiti behind it, appearing as a whitewashed, vulnerable and virgin urban space. Figure 4 fronts a highway exit. Here, concrete barriers sustain graffiti behind the pasted posters. The repetition seen in Figure 2, a common installation method, becomes a trademark style, emulating the infinite retrieval provided by digital media.

No discernable source appears for Figure 4's "The police don't protect me" claim of 289 people assassinated by the police between 2017-2019. However, a search for public information results in relevant statistics. Using investigative journalism and government reports, a non-governmental organization compiles statistics on police and other perpetrators' alleged civilian murders (Indepaz, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2024). While the 289 deaths can be corroborated via these reports, a breakdown of suspects as well as victims implies involvement by other than law enforcement or the military. For example, paramilitary groups operating despite the peace accords are cited as perpetrators. Likewise, FARQ members and other insurgents agreeing to decommissioning of weapons and reintegration under the peace accords, are among those murdered. Statistics indicate culpability at: police 1%, army 5%, dissidents 1%, unknown 48%, ACG 1% (2018). Therefore, Puro Veneno's assertion remains unconvincing.

More accurately reflecting government reports, Puro Veneno's "Who gave the order ("Quién dio la orden") graphic also received widespread distribution and installation as a rolled-on wall mural, sometimes 15 feet long (Rodríguez, 2021). Its announcement of 6,402 extrajudicial killings of civilians by military forces originated in government reports (JEP, 2008; Movimiento, 2014).

<p>FIGURE 5.</p> 	<p>FIGURE 6.</p> 
<p>Figure 5. Street side wall of Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, (National Teachers University). We will bury Uribe and his political party / It's now or never (Puro Veneno 2024b). To live with gusto.</p>	<p>Figure 6. Street side wall of Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (National Teachers University). We will bury Uribe and his political party/ It's now or never / Danger, [political candidate] / Love to resist (Puro Veneno 2024b)</p>

Involving a major construction project complete with scaffolding, Figures 5 and 6 posters attack the political party of President Uribe. Uribe on the left, and his successor on the right of the split face. Figure 5 neatly arranges itself to align with and not obscure another protest poster. Spray paint and other poster detritus littering the wall behind the Puro Veneno posters affirm the permission given by the public teachers' university. Figure 6, the Uribe with cross bones, deteriorated, weathered state, adds the dimension of time to this media style and expression. Indeed, the stages of ephemerality affix inherently to this media. Data of civilian deaths

compiled from government reports is affixed below (JEP, 2008; Movimiento, 2014; Indepaz, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2024)

<p>FIGURE 7.</p> 	<p>FIGURE 8.</p> 
<p>Figure 7. Paper poster, public location, Manizales, Caldas / Dismantle the federal police / Assassins and thugs / Puro Veneno (Puro Veneno 2024b)</p>	<p>Figure 8. Grancolombiano Polytechnic / 3,374,231 victims, paper poster (Puro Veneno 2024b)</p>

Venturing beyond Bogotá’s city limits, Figure 7 and 8 posters continue protest what the group perceives as corruption in the government and law enforcement. ESMAD is an acronym for an elite, federal government police squad. Figure 8, by its title indicating installation at a private college, alleges corruption of what looks like former president Uribe, with statistics of civilian deaths. These statistics are compiled yearly, and are public information (Indepaz, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2024; JEP, 2008; Movimiento, 2014).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Paper Posters Legacy

A history of paper-plastered posters on the walls of Bogotá, and indeed throughout Colombia contribute to interpretation of contemporary 21st-century variations as seen in the Figures above. Considering street art prior to Puro Veneno's arrival on the street scene, Peñaranda (2007) traces the history of graffiti in Colombia beginning in the 1970s. In the process of evaluating and interpreting current graffiti in its many genres, he distinguishes it from commercial and political advertisements plastered on walls.

The compositions of the urban graffiti writer who spray paints clandestinely and mostly at night can't be compared to the painter of publicity ads or a group which on any given night tours

around the city attaching posters launching a new commercial product or a political campaign (p. 89).

More precisely, he defines graffiti as product of a counterculture, which questions societal power structures and threaten individual rights. Rallying points encompass hegemony, peace and violence, ecology, and government, which deceives the public with a black and white, absolutist world view. The essence of graffiti, he posits, is its illegality, with artists' clinging to self-identity as societal offenders. They basically manipulate reality with their own myths. As the penalties for breaking the anti-graffiti laws are minimal, Peñaranda considers the "vandalism" title an exaggeration (2007).

Salas (2007) situates wall art posters in an historic context. "Bogotá has, along the length of its streets, thousands of stories crammed on walls, posts, and building facades. The large majority of these are political publicity, commercial or religious, that are transported to our streets every time a new concert appears in the city, always in the run-up to elections, and when an old or young neighbor dies."

These he distinguishes from social protest posters. The most relevant surges of poster installations occurred in 1968 and the 1980s. Student protests in France in 1968 employed printing technology of its era, such as offset. These were compiled and published in digital format in the 21st century, and engendered a resurgence of this media in Latin America. During the 1980s, "movements" such as M19 (elsewhere classified as terrorists, Duzán, 1994, p. 4) and UP plastered streets with posters and messages of social protest, appealing to student groups.

He compares today's digitally manipulated design with the offset presses and silkscreens of this recent politicized past. Spanning this era into the present, Salas traces this street wall art to punk rock and other counter-culture concert advertising. These he names "illegal publicity" (p. 8). He props up this assertion with implication that graffiti is prosecuted. "From this stance among urban aesthetics, that which is chased by the police and the proprietors of the walls, we can meet many methods of seeing and understanding urban art, such as: graffiti, muralism, the sticker, stencil, and poster" (p. 2).

According to these reviews, plastered posters stretch only as far in retrograde as 1968. However, there are innuendos of a generic genre with an indefinite origin. Invoking public gatherings such as concerts, the perennial election, death in the community, and the rights of property owners, the writers suggest a collective consciousness pre-dating the 20th century. Given the colonies' urban planning centered around a plaza, which design persevered into the republic (ca. 1820), the wheat paste wall poster looms forefront in the imagination.

Even absent further rummaging through archives, conclusions of 55 years of wall posters plastered since the Paris student protests can be asserted. More relevant to ascertaining society's interaction with Puro Veneno's wall art are the Bogotá and Colombian scenarios, which describe

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merchandising, campaigning, and proselytizing running in the background, at the street level, independent of the digital age. Both the literature as well as the images evidence this.

### *3.2 Laws, Rules, Regulations*

Puro Veneno's street presence, via the posters, unfolds through deliberate confrontations, for which their legal-political context serves to offer up insight of the status quo. Towards this end, relevant laws are instrumental. In 2013, the city government of Bogota adopted tolerance for graffiti and initiated regulations. These designate blocks around Calle 26 as an acceptable graffiti zone. However, there are certain acceptable and non-acceptable locations and content for street art, which it refers to as graffiti. The ordinance includes a list of prohibited subject matter and locations, as follows.

No commercial or political ads/content are permitted. Drinking fountains, car windows, shop windows, telephone booths, banks, zoos, public transport, monuments, trees, government buildings, trees, and garbage trucks are off limits. Also, the ordinance imposes fines and other responses, such as recording the incident and artists as violators. In 2015, and 2016, amendments added more restrictions related to transportation byways such as roads, foot paths, bridges (except for underneath). It also established a democratically selected committee responsible for approving locations (Bogotá, 2013, 2014, 2015a,b).

Further protection of public buildings and spaces went into effect in 2016 via national government legislation. In 2019, these laws were challenged on the basis of free speech. The court ruled against the petitioners. In other scenarios, written permission from the owner allowed graffiti on private property which fronted public spaces. (Colombia, 2016; Constitutional Court, 2019).

Following the dissemination of "Who gave the order?" by way of poster installations and on social media, the military commanders sued its artists for slander and misuse of their portraits. The court ruled for the artists, as the posters merely contained truths, produced in fact by government reports (Rodríguez, 2021). The military, like any other citizen, had the right to paint over the murals in whatever public locations they are installed, such as fences across from the police academy. But the artists maintained their rights to continue to disperse and affix the images on the web and in situ. The issue of installation in public spaces was not addressed in the lawsuit or the court's decision. Court decisions in Colombia involving use of personal images in both civil and criminal cases have resulted in mixed rulings (freedomhouse.org 2020).

For the above images, the addresses within Bogotá of Figures 1-4 are unknown. Figures 5-6 consist of a public building. It is unlikely that these fall within the allowed graffiti zones.

Governed by these parameters, obvious violations arise. Figures 1, 4 and the side of the bus locations infringe upon the transit infrastructure. Figures 5 and 6 constitute public buildings. Figure 8, conversely, represents a private edifice, which may have granted permission for the posters. Figures 3 and 7 affront public spaces, obviously.

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### *3.3 Semiotics*

An analysis of Puro Veneno's interactions with society commences with semiotics within the collective itself. Following Peirce (1960) structural semiotics, the poster images express and consist of a "sign," created by the "signifier", the collective. The "object" is what is represented by or referred to by the sign. The poster's effect on anyone who experiences, views and interprets the poster is its "interpretant." Portraits of the target of their protest, military and political figures, or bureaucrats, such as prosecutors, consist of signs. E.g., "Who gave the order?"; "No a la narco-ficha Mancera"; "Justicia de narcofiscales/ elegido por la mafia" (Puro Veneno 2024a). The artists also create signs via numeric data and written text. The object of the numeric data consists of the statistics. The object of text refers to Puro Veneno's political slant. These signs intervene into human-built environment and sequentially and subsequentially change it.

The artists select images from mainstream culture of people and institutions, government operatives and bureaucracies, which they contest, protest, seek to change, and of data which they seek to disseminate. Some images are original, alluding to the same. These sources include government reports, government compiled data, public servants such as military officers' images/likenesses, politicians in office and those running for office, plus existing legislation and laws up for revision and/or vote. The interpretants consist of both the general public and those protested against. Likewise, the artists themselves assume the role of interpretants, as they participate in generating and installing the images and thereby also engage in interpreting and being affected by the posters.

Transformation of the written word and its content into Puro Veneno's symbolism emanates from Vygotsky's (1985) semiotic theories based on language. According to this method, language originates as individual thoughts. These thoughts then progress and take the form of spoken and written words in communication with other humans, in a social endeavor. This tangible, discursive utterance derives from and relies on societal contexts. Indeed, the words metamorphose according to context. Thus, words acquire their "sense."

"The sense of a word, according to him [Paulhan] is the sum of all the psychological events around in our consciousness by the word. It is a dynamic, fluid, complex whole, which has several zones of unequal stability. Meaning is only one of the zones of sense, the most stable and precise zone. A word acquires its sense from the context in which it appears; in different contexts, it changes its sense." (1985) 244-245, 248.

Thereby, the posters' design and symbols' impact depends on their location. The statistical information contained in the visual images and the words, calls to action, the desired political outcome, e.g., elections and legislation, funding, etc., rely on the street not only for communication but for creation of the symbol itself. The poster's surrounding environment meshes with its graphics to comprise and compose the symbol. The portraits in the posters transform from the individual bureaucrat, politician, and military officer to a persona subject to judgement by people in the street. In this regard, Puro Veneno was vindicated in the court order in the slander case (Colombia Court, 2019).

The environment in which the poster is located, and its supporting infrastructure, fuses with the symbol and alters it. For example, the side of a bus, a virgin whitewashed wall, a street light post or fence bordering on a sidewalk, or the broad side of a university building will mesh with the words and images in formation of the sign and symbol. This dynamic comports with the interpretation of protest art as intervening in the urban landscape and effecting transformation of its meaning.

Leal (2020) surveys installation art in public places, concluding they serve to protest the existing political power structure which created and maintain it. Public statutes, fountains, and even streets themselves and walls, are altered with, e.g., found objects and Puro Veneno posters. Because these alterations have historical references, they invoke the past and present while projecting into the future. They attach a new narrative to the location or edifice and re-signify it with the dialog from the protest. These installations thus become signs and symbols in Peirce's semiotics.

According to Ballester (2015), humanity participates in a continuum of altering three-dimensional societally generated structures, which he flags as monuments. From 200 C.E., this has consisted of a constant series of events. Among these incidents are toppling of emperors' statues upon defeat in war, blowing up religious sculptures at regime change, converting a mosque to a Christian church, hanging paper and cardboard signs around statues lobbying the government on ecological issues, and projecting holograms of interviews with soldiers on war memorials. These alterations effectively rewrite the contents of the monument, according to its setting, situation, and intervention into public space.

Thus, historically, alterations of public statuary have questioned their meaning, or at the minimum have transformed them. From the change of context flows the new reality, writ large to facilitate communication with the interpretants. Through the intervention of the artist, the symbols have changed.

With this analysis, Puro Veneno's street environments, fences, urban walls, and streetlight posts become the monuments into which the posters intervene. While serving to distribute information and calls to action, these rudimentary city infrastructures equate to monuments.

#### **4. Discussion**

While Salas (2019) asserts private property owners' rights to protection from graffiti, Figure 8 evidences private property granting permission for same. While the code prohibits graffiti on public buildings, Figures 5 and 6 evidence not only two construction-scale installations and one smaller, but underlying spray-painted tags. These implicate tacit permission. Further, these front a public thoroughfare. Figures 1, 2, 5, and 6 express political campaign statements, and therefore violate code. Likewise, posters on the side of the bus and the stop sign implicate transportation infrastructure violations. Public spaces in Figures 2, 4, 5, and 6, and at #mujeres (2024) and with their background spray paint, indicate a public dedication to allowable graffiti, although these

environs are not specified in the code as such. This corroborates Salas' interpretation that since Gustavo Petro became president, graffiti became accepted as expression of cultural and artistic unity and accomplishment by certain unnamed government agencies.

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