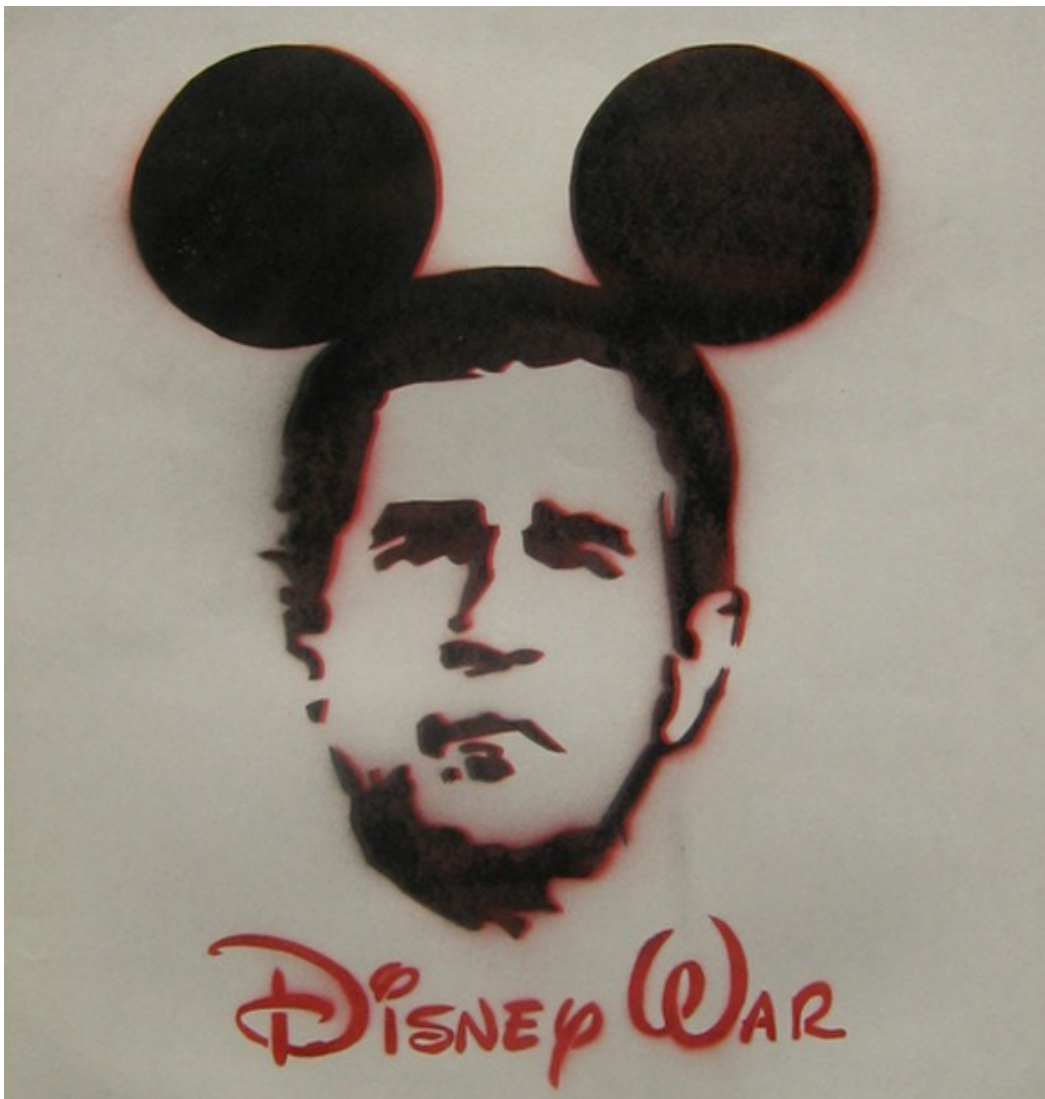


## Interview: GG from Buenos Aires Stencil

**bs.as.stncl** (buenos aires stencil) is a stencil collective comprised of two Argentine artists, known as **GG & NN**.

GG started painting with NN in 2001. Their first design had a huge impact, and was reproduced all over the world – the instantly recognisable combination of George Bush with Mickey Mouse ears. bs.as.stncl have gone on to collaborate with other artists and take over galleries and city walls throughout the world. In 2006, together with **rundontwalk**, **Malatesta** and **Stencil Land**, they opened their own urban art gallery called **Hollywood in Cambodia**.

In this interview, we cover 10 years of bs.as.stncl and a full decade of graffiti and street art in Argentina.



### Why not paint in the streets?

We started painting as bs.as.stncl after my work partner NN showed me his drawings and designs. The original idea was to create a series of t-shirts, but we felt a little overwhelmed by what was involved, it would have been a slow and complicated process.

We really liked two designs made by NN – George Bush with Mickey Mouse ears, and a 1950's woman bowling a bomb instead of a ball, coupled with the phrase "American Style". 9/11 had just happened, and the invasion of Afghanistan had been announced. The designs were created in response to these incidents.

So, although we'd originally created these stencils to paint onto t-shirts, one night after a few drinks we thought, "Why don't we paint these in the streets?". At the time, Argentina was in chaos. The spirit of that time was to get out there and make yourself heard. If you wanted to make a point you had to do something about it.



#### **A lot of artists started out during that period**

None of us were political activists. None of us had ever painted in the streets. I'm a graphic designer, NN studied printing at the Pueyrredón. We were both involved with art, but neither us had ever painted, either on or off the streets.

When you start painting outdoors, you pay more attention to the walls. I noticed there were a lot of other stencils around, but had no idea how long they had been there. We later found out that many street artists started painted at the same time as us.

We always painted the area where we lived. Our home base was NN's house near Luna Park. At night we would grab our stencils and paint the area where the banks were, which was abandoned at night. You have to try and imagine the scene – it's December 2001, there's just been a run on the banks, daily withdrawal limits were in place, all the banks are shuttered, there are news bulletins in the windows and plenty of people want to break in...

It was a unique moment in the country's history, and I guess we were lucky to be in that place at that time.





### **Hasta La Victoria...**

We started seeing paintings all over the Congreso area. We used to always remark, “There are other guys painting here too!”.

Eventually we got to know the other artists. We were contacted by Guido Indij from La Marca who had started to write a book – “Hasta La Victoria, Stencil”. He was getting in touch with other stencil artists, and put us in contact with them as well.

There were a number of other artists and collectives active at that time – rundontwalk, 220, Burzaco Stencil, Malatesta...





### HIC Crew

We realised we had a lot in common with the guys from rundontwalk (Fede and Tester). We listened to the same music. They ran independent punk record labels and I worked with punk record label as well (Radio Tripoli Discos). We had friends in common, and we ended up becoming friends ourselves.

We often paint together with them, and our work doesn't belong to one collective or another. When we paint together in the gallery ,(with Stencil Land and Malatesta) we're the Hollywood in Cambodia Crew. We all share an ideology towards painting in the streets. None of us sign our work. When we paint in the streets, I don't sign bs.as.stncl below my work, and neither do rundontwalk.

For me, painting is a way of demonstrating to the public that anyone can express an idea or emotion with just a few pesos. You don't need the millions that brands pay to be in the spotlight. You don't have to be a politician who pays people to paint his propaganda. You can go out alone and express yourself with a couple of pesos with a can of spraypaint, latex paint and a brush, or a stencil.

If I signed my works with my name, I'd be acting like a brand. My mural or painting would be a piece of propaganda for my name. This isn't something I want. Once you've finished painting, your work becomes a part of the street. Why should I put my name to it? I think it looks even worse when you see people putting their both name and their webpage by their work. It just seems like they want to be famous.

I never sign anything. If people really want to find me, eventually they will.





**A lot of people started painting letters and evolved from there**

There are a lot of people who started out painting letters. Tags, bombs, pieces and hip-hop style graffiti. But at the end of the day, they're really just painting their name. Fair enough, but it's not for me. Also, I don't get the codes of who is allowed to paint over who. Why not paint something better next to it and get more attention?

A lot of artists here have evolved their style over time. They experimented, found their own style and figured out what they wanted to say. Tec is a good example of this, as is Blu. Blu went on to do some incredibly original work. You also have neo-graffiti from artists like Jaz, Nerf, Mart, Poeta and Roma, who use abstract forms and lots of colour.

I guess it might be a question of age. Maybe after a certain age, you just get tired of just painting your own name.

We're painting less as we get older. We have other things to do. I have a four year-old son and other responsibilities.

Whilst we still paint in the street, we do it in a different way. We don't use small stencils anymore, neither do we repeat the same images over and over again. I get bored if I paint the same thing. I'm much happier painting a three or four metre piece these days. We put a lot more thought into what we're going to paint and what we want to say.

We also run the gallery, Hollywood in Cambodia, and that takes up a great deal of time. It's already been five years since we started.



### The gallery

It all started when we got a call from **Post Bar**. The two owners were planning on opening a bar, and were looking for a style. A friend had told them “Look, these guys are painting everywhere”, and he showed them the stencil book that Indji had made which was full of our work. He told them “Why don’t you call them and ask them to paint the bar? Then instead of having just another bar like everyone else, you’ll have a theme to your bar”.

To begin with, it was bs.as.stncl, rundontwalk, Stencil Land and Burzaco Stencil. There were eight of us but only half wanted to do it. My thoughts at the time were that if they weren’t going to pay me, I didn’t want to do it. The owners of the bar were going to make money out of the bar, so painting it for free was out of the question.

At one point NN’s girlfriend went up to the terrace and found two empty rooms. They were being used for storage at the time, but that’s when we had the idea came to put a gallery in there. It took a while to happen though. The bar opened, but it was over a year before we got everything ready as all of our energy was dedicated to the street.

What finally gave us the push to set up the gallery was the realization that if we didn’t do it, someone else would. And the last thing we wanted was to see someone with no relation to urban art coming in and running things. We didn’t want to end up having to negotiate with them to show and sell our works, so we decided to create a gallery where we could run everything according to our own rules.

80% of gallery sales come from foreigners. There are no collectors for urban art in Buenos Aires like there are in Sao Paulo for example. Tourists seem to value our art differently.

I think maybe this is because foreigners have a different perspective, having seen how things are in their own cities. They seem to value the collaborative work we do the most.

In Buenos Aires it's common for people to collaborate together in the moment. Murals are painted by groups of artists working together, instead of a having an eight metre wall divided up into sections where each individual artist takes an area. Also, it's common for us to collaborate over time. So I might paint something, and then months or years later someone else would add something else to my piece and make a new collaboration. That's not really something that you see in other cities.

### **Collaboration**

We met the artists from DOMA in 2004. I had gone to live in New York for a year, and met them at a show. DOMA had been painting stencils in the streets since '94, and I think there are still a few of their pieces left from that era.

The guys from DOMA introduced us to the artists from FASE, who were also really active at that point. For several years we collaborated and organized what we called "Expression Sessions". We would get together with 15 to 20 artists and paint a plaza with a big wall, and we would make flyers and publicise it like an event.

We invited people to come see us working to take the mystery out of it. We didn't want it to always be the case that people would only ever see something after it was painted, and they'd be left wondering when did they paint this? Who did it? How? Why?



### **Artistic exchanges**

In 2002 and 2003 stencils reached their peak. It seemed as if the whole world was making stencils, and everyone was sitting quietly at the corner of the street painting. It's just like anything else, there are always passing fads. After that, stencils went out of style after a while and a new style emerged that we call Muñequismo, which was characterised by the use of cartoon characters. Muñequismo took off in 2004 and spread throughout the city. The characters would often be life-size, around two metres tall.

Around that time a lot of artists came to Buenos Aires from other countries, and many of them ended up staying. The London Police came from Amsterdam, and they started asking the artists painting murals, "Why don't you paint them huge, like six metres tall? If you rent scaffolding, no one is going to check if you have permission".



Blu came to Buenos Aires to create his incredible animated graffiti. He introduced us to the technique of using extension poles. He was painting six metres tall pieces at the time. It was incredible to watch him paint, doing everything with just a huge long pole with a paint bucket six metres in the air.

I think one of the best things about the scene here is the [spirit](#) of this movement ([more on this here](#)). Artists share what they know, because they understand that everyone will use that knowledge to paint the streets.



### **From the street to the gallery**

People ask me if there's a contradiction in being a street artist and painting pieces for a gallery. I don't think it there is. For me, the logic is that if you create something great in the streets, eventually someone's going to notice it, like it and want to buy it. When they get to that point, they're going to come looking for you. It's part of the process.

Everyone needs to make money to live, and it's great to earn money doing something that you love. For me though, I think you should paint in the streets because you love it. You should give your art to the streets without expecting anything in return, other than maybe hoping that no one else will paint over you the next day.

Urban artists, street artists, mural painters and stencil collectives are all part of a worldwide artistic movement taking place in cities everywhere. The nature of urban life and the development of internet-based communications mean that you can always connect with what's happening on the other side of the world. It's easy for artists to get in touch with one another.

How many people are painting in the streets today, one hundred, maybe three hundred? Then think about everyone who paints inside – how many are there painting? Thousands. It would be a revolution if everyone who paints inside went out to paint in the streets. That would be incredible.

When we're in the streets, everyone can see what we're doing. Even people who aren't even remotely interested in street art will see art in the streets on their way to work. Maybe occasionally something will catch their eye and make them stop and take a closer look.





## Tolerance

I think the culture of tolerance towards street art in Buenos Aires exists partly because police have better things to do. Important things that keep them from getting bored and hassling us. There are kids running around snatching bags and robbing tourists, and then there's us – a bunch of older guys who like to go out and paint.

If I ever get challenged by anyone I just leave. I'll just say, "I'm sorry, I didn't know", and that's it. It's not like Berlin, where they'll give you a fine or arrest you. In Buenos Aires you don't have to worry about your empty spray cans being checked for fingerprints. And you don't have to worry about your art being buffed the following day.

I just hope it stays this way. I went to Sao Paulo once and it used to be the same situation there. But then the Mayor changed, his policies changed and suddenly they started covering everything up. It can happen like that, and it makes painting challenging. But sometimes it just forces people to experiment with new techniques, and seek out places to paint where they won't be painted over.



### The present and the future

Right now, we're all painting in **Pasaje Casacuberta** in Parque Patricios. A resident from the Pasaje called us up one day, and invited to come and paint her house. The neighbours really liked what we painted, and now out of fifteen houses in the passageway, we're painting ten. It's a great project, and we're all collaborating together, without any individual or collective identity.

The next project for bs.as.stncl is focused on painting revolutionary phrases in aerosol, with a stencil underneath suggesting that it's a legally created piece. Think of an anarchy symbol with a copyright logo next to it. We want to show the contradictions found in revolutionary statements that have been legalised and legitimised.





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