On the Concept of graffiti

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Abstract
In this article I present a series of reflections on the concept of graffiti. What begins as a critique of the ideological relation between "street art" and "graffiti" on the one hand and "center" and "periphery" on the other, unfolds as a schematic exploration of the relation between graffiti and social crisis. These theses argue that graffiti can and should be interpreted, and that this interpretation depends upon analyzing graffiti's character as both text and image. In doing so they explore graffiti in crisis across the American hemisphere, moving from "center" to "periphery" and back again. In the ruin of New York, the commune of Oaxaca, the explosion of Santiago, we catch a vivid glimpse of the social form and latent content of graffiti.

Keywords
Graffiti, crisis, New York, Oaxaca, Santiago, ruin, commune, explosion

Introduction
The following theses are an attempt to consider graffiti as concept. There is a tendency in the study of graffiti to think it in terms of localized cultural expressions of a global practice, wherein the expression is analyzed in detailed particularity while the general, global character is vague at best, a universalism too easily pronounced. The emergence of an ambiguous division between "street art" and "graffiti" is symptomatic, mirroring the attempts at a systematic theory of the maelstrom of capitalist development along the lines of "center" and "periphery." A critique of the limitations inherent to describing cultural practice in reflection of economic measure should proceed through the term marked for disposal. The logic of capitalist accumulation is to pile up the waste, the excess, the surplus, yet that excess becomes determinative. Capital digs its own grave. In like manner, the practice of graffiti cannot be forced through dismemberment to behave like "art," whatever art still means. The late Ecuadorian-Mexican philosopher Bolívar Echeverría's analysis of the epochal changes to the character of culture offers a critical approach to this problem. In "Culture in barbarism?" Echeverría describes how as "high culture" loses its ground and justification it does not vanish but seeks rather a redefinition and revised relation to the spontaneous, "lower" culture of everyday life, a relation or circuit that is no longer vertical but horizontal, not just a new function but a distinct order as yet tenuous and unformed (Echeverría, 2006). The uncertain relation between art and graffiti, we might say, corresponds to this movement. In such conditions, according to Echeverría, the traditional understanding of culture as localized expression becomes inadequate. Instead he offers a tentative definition of culture understood as a reconstruction of the discovery of new forms, new objects of social mediation, a reproduction that maintains the contingency of that moment of discovery and hence affirms the precarity of identity. "In the current epoch," Echeverría writes, "the repression of the creation of concrete forms and identities is countered, despite everything, by certain precarious advances of a new society in the making" (Echeverría, 2006). In another essay he gestures at one such precarious advance in an allusion to the "'wild aestheticization'" ["*estetización salvaje*"] of everyday life, a practice which suggests to Echeverría that "not all is lost" (Echeverría, 2019).

Many would argue that characterizing graffiti as wild or savage is regressive, aligned with the forces of repression. This is understandable. I refer to Echeverría's critical deployment of "*estetización salvaje*," a phrase placed in quotation marks to emphasize its ambiguity, because it evokes the contradictions or conflicts that are inherent to, determinative of, concepts. Echeverría does not hesitate to describe our condition as a return to or descent into

barbarism, yet the appearance of *savage* aestheticization brings him hope. The critical paradox points us toward conceptual understanding. If we do not find ourselves trapped by the catastrophe of history what hope can there be of escape?

I.

British scholar of Latin American culture Jean Franco wrote a short magazine piece in 1986 entitled “New York as Third World” (Franco, 1986). In Franco’s vision of the city, center and periphery are defined not by zones of development but by roving zones of postmodern warfare:

> The war zone is a racial zone and moves as Blacks and Latinos are pushed to the margins or are surrounded by bright new skyscrapers on which they are forbidden to write. Around them their houses burn in flames. (Franco, 1986)

Being “forbidden to write” on a building is a mark, for Franco, of the waging of war. Chasing that writing inside another building, recuperating the “revolutionary intuition” of graffiti by declaring it to be art, as Jean Baudrillard argues (Baudrillard, 1993), is another tactic of the same war, whether we agree with him about such intuition or not. Yet Baudrillard is unique in embracing the irrational, illegible character of graffiti, celebrating its “symbolic destruction of social relations” (Baudrillard, 1993). The tendency of those who came to its defense in and around its origin story in third world New York has been to adopt its designation as “writing” by its practitioners, then to continue to affirm its legible expression even as the name tags developed into wild pieces which were like a visual version of extended metaphor, allegories of those names which were nicknames to begin with. Joe Austin’s *Taking the Train* is exemplary both in its authoritative treatment of New York “writing” and in its exhaustive effort to shake loose the ambivalence and situate graffiti as a “cultural innovation,” as “a legitimate part of the national celebration” (Austin, 2002). Austin notes how *The New York Times*’ writers “found some value in ‘modestly written, sometimes revealing inscriptions,’ but the new writing was maligned as ‘pointless names and blobs that now disfigure the city in Technicolor’” (Austin, 2002). This revealing remark splits approval and disapproval according to legible text and illegible image, respectively. But the split is not confined to the reception of graffiti. Martin Jay has written on the denigration of vision in post-war French theory (Jay, 1993); W.J.T. Mitchell has described how the understanding of the relation between text and image has long been determined by fear of the image (Mitchell, 1986); and Susan Stewart, who insisted we understand graffiti as both art and crime, also wrote that neither Baudrillard nor Fredric Jameson “can escape the reifying function of the theory of postmodernism… whereby a surface is projected so that a profundity can be lost” (Stewart, 1991). Recovering that profundity becomes the mission of postmodern theory: turning away from this surface, simulacrum or spectacle, Baudrillard seeks refuge in the irrational, while Jameson seeks meaning in narrative. One of the projected surfaces of postmodern or Technicolor capitalism appears as Franco’s image of skyscrapers and fires. This monstrous image produces a congruent fear. Graffiti as we know it emerges with such an image contained within it, inseparable from its written message. The names can be read as allegories of surplus, of the anticipation of wasted life. Therefore when it comes to describing graffiti as creative or destructive, or as text or image, one must have it both ways.

II.

One of the stories told about graffiti’s development can be distilled to the move from marker to spray can. In the classical period in New York, so it goes, the growth went from getting up to wild style, from the tag to the whole train, the iconic figures Taki then Dondi. This seems to suggest writing as foundational, painting as the result of the intervention and adoption of new technology. The gestures encouraged by a pen and those demanded by the can are not equivalent. However obvious this may be, it is also overlooked. Maintaining the distinction appears to reinforce the narrative of qualitative leap from childish expression to mature cultural practice. In *Taking the Train*, Austin describes the process as the development of a prestige economy, where fame is won through competition, where the kings rise above the toys (Austin, 2002). The increasing popularity of *writing*, as Austin insistently calls it, leads to an “influx of toys” (Austin, 2002), those disparaged amateurs who neither spread their name around nor

cultivate a slick style. Those unserious kids who give writing a bad name. The tendency, evident with Austin as others, for scholars of graffiti to uncritically employ the term toy points toward graffiti and its scholarship's alignment with the dominant culture, the culture of domination. No pose of rebellion exempts from the cruelty of this dismissal. No theorizing of the rules of graffiti's game can conceal the fear of play contained in the epithet. It is illuminating to read in Austin that the influx of toys goes hand in hand with the rejection or expulsion or flight of women from writing, particularly because of how little consideration this exclusion is given for its role in the production of what he calls "the greatest art of the late twentieth century" (Austin, 2002). When Mari Myllylä and Jonna Tolonen discuss how the field of graffiti research has been "dominated by male academics who used to be or still are graffiti writers themselves" (Myllylä & Tolonen, 2023), this is what they mean. *Writing* then can easily look like a simple extension of the masculine command over the public sphere, casting the woman and child back to the home where they can gaze in the mirror or play with their toys, respectively, in private. But to point this out is nothing new (Macdonald, 2001). It is however worth noting that this image of the intimate is already contained in the marker and pen, in the privacy of it, in the home made out of play. In this sense *writing* and its *development* reflect the fear of the image of mother and child. This recalls Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, of the wounded, shamed, discarded. The abject is revolting, it repels us from ourselves (Kristeva, 1982). "The abject confronts us," Kristeva writes, "on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*," and on the other hand "with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her" (Kristeva, 1982). In the flight from abjection the falsity and violence of the division between public and private, its laws of property, are not transgressed but upheld. Yet this is far from the final gesture. And a walk down any city street will confirm what we suspected all along: it's not the kings but the toys who rule.

III.

The first interview in the film *Martha: A Picture Story* is with the mother of the brothers OSGEMEOS (Miles, 2019). She describes their compulsive scribbling on everything in the house as kids, even on the fruit in the fruit bowl. This obsession was turned loose after they got their hands on a copy of *Subway Art*. They describe annoying their mother with continual requests to translate from its pages. The domestic scene, a return to the abject, serves as introduction to the tale of photographer Martha Cooper rediscovering herself in others. Cooper returns us to this scene by flying to São Paolo, Brazil, from her home in New York, New York, a flight from center to periphery, or Global North to Global South, to hear about the profound effect of a work she made and then turned her back on. Cooper finds graffiti again as if for the first time, and is not a little shocked to find the cultural landscape much different from those days when she tooled around uptown shooting color for the *New York Post*. We are treated to a juxtaposition between the smug gallerist who might hang Cooper's work so long as she doesn't bring photos of smiling children, and the smiling adults of fledgling graffiti institutions opening their arms to her like an old friend. In the battle between art and street art, Marty chooses the latter, but still hangs her work in the gallery. The film is a tender portrait. After tagging along to shoot one of 1UP CREW's raids, she has a look at their photographer's images and immediately, poignantly, tells them, "You don't need me." But she still feels recognized.

One lacuna in the film is Henry Chalfant, the other photographer whose work, with Cooper's, comprised *Subway Art*. He is mentioned, he appears in an old film clip, but he is neither a participant nor a presence. Making the book involved chummy competition, we are informed, that's all. Chalfant of course didn't turn his back on graffiti, so his arc may not have cast the right light on Cooper. At any rate, what's significant about this is that only through a very brief comparison of their photographs, of their working methods, does photography appear as something besides what the photographer sees. Marty likes smiling children, Art prefers them unsmiling. Photography is only content, except in that moment of revisiting the difference between Chalfant's careful cut-and-paste framing of only cars and Cooper's capture of pieces out in the city, making their way. Then we catch a glimpse of form. And then it recedes, as it should in a documentary film about a documentary photographer. But this is the larger lacuna, the assumption of the document's reality. John Tagg has been a fierce critic

of the ideology of documentary in photography. "Like all realist strategies," Tagg writes, "documentary seeks to construct an imaginary continuity and coherence between a subject of address and a signified real—a continuity and coherence in which not only the work of the sign but also the effects of power of a particular regimen are elided" (Tagg, 2009). Documentary conceals its construction, elides its representation, claims a privileged access, direct to the source. No wonder then that the photography of graffiti is often considered simple documentation. Authentic evidence of exotic streets is delivered right to our hands. It is almost like having an experience. The contrast of Chalfant and Cooper is crucial not because theirs are the only forms but because it is often only through contrast that the form is noticed. A photograph is no mere preservation, rather it is composition in its own right. Graffiti is a participant. It emerged into a world already mediated by images, a world in which the development of photography, rather than aspiring to its place as an art, had rather altered all art forever, as Walter Benjamin noted back in the 1920s (Benjamin, 2002). Graffiti ornaments the photograph as much as any building. Just as the photo is no mere document but a construction, graffiti is not simply captured in natural repose but lying in wait to leap into the picture.

IV.

It is impossible to know who took the first photographs of graffiti. Brassaï's images of faces gouged into the stone of Paris in the 1930s tell us something by looking back at us; or, rather, they appear on the verge of whispering some mystery (Brassaï, 1968). These faces may be gathered into the genealogy of what became of street photography, a tradition to which almost all photos of graffiti belong. While this might be one way to regard such photos, it also presents an approach to regarding graffiti as an intervention within the tradition. In other words, we might readily ask what effect the surfeit of photographic images has had on the appearance and development of graffiti. But the reverse may prove more challenging: namely, how has graffiti altered photography? Cooper and Chalfant are just obvious examples. For Abraham Nahón, critic and scholar of the arts of Oaxaca, the history of photography unfolds as the history of a technology of domination turned against itself toward liberation. In Nahón's work, the image of passive, exotic, peripheral, apolitical, atemporal Oaxaca is shaken to its foundations by the rebellion of 2006, during which the very character of its images was irrevocably altered. These new images do not simply traverse the moments of danger in struggle but liberate the past from its nostalgic domination. *Images in Oaxaca* is grounded in the moment or movement of 2006, what has been called the Oaxaca Commune (Nahón, 2017). That summer, police repression of a teacher's strike sparked a popular rebellion that expelled the state government from its offices in the historic center, organized an alternative political form in the People's Popular Assembly (*Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca*, or APPO), built and defended some ten thousand barricades, took over television and radio stations, and painted the walls of the city, a UNESCO Heritage site, with a new and sudden discursive and symbolic force. Not only is the border between documentary and art photography traversed and reimagined, Nahón writes, but plastic arts, muralism, performance, graphic prints and graffiti converge with the photography of 2006. "The sensitive plates that suspend the image traverse a shared experience," Nahón writes (Nahón, 2017). And: "No image is isolated" (Nahón, 2017). Collected in the photography volume *Memorial de agravios: Oaxaca, Mexico, 2006*, which Nahón helped edit, are pictures of street battles and stenciled fists, barricade kitchens and fresh paint in decisive color but uncertain form. A familiar language of the image of protest and rebellion, that is, if one particular to Oaxaca, yet also seemingly opposed to the equally familiar images of the so-called urban decay out of which, we tell ourselves, graffiti emerged. Tracing a narrative of graffiti's international development is one thing. Describing what experience these images share, retrieving them from their isolation, is another. "A look against the grain can highlight the power of these images – dialectic and socio-telluric – that show us how experiences 'in rupture' are forged in a rebellious temporality against the time of domination and monolithic, centralized historization," Nahón writes (Nahón, 2017) Graffiti makes modest ruptures in the everyday, then fades once again into the landscape, then breaks forth again unexpectedly. Set side by side, arranged in a montage, the photos of graffiti in crisis may begin to resemble a bouquet.

V.

"*Vivimos una era del arte de montaje y desmontaje*," writes Nahón (Nahón, 2017): We are living in an era of the art of montage and dis-montage. But "montaje y desmontaje" could also mean "assembly and disassembly," in reference to editing or construction, but also, importantly, to the assembly or *asamblea*, the traditional and in 2006 suddenly new political form of the *pueblos* of Oaxaca. Graphics collectives formed during the Oaxaca Commune took on the assembly as an organizing practice; ASARO, the Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca, took it up in name as well. A traditional indigenous form of governance, the assembly has been described as horizontal and dialogic (Arenas, 2011), yet also dominated by men in the Oaxaca *pueblos* (Osorno, 2007), as well as not actually indigenous but instituted during colonial rule (Bartra, 2002). The "assembly of assemblies" that was APPO seems to have been both recognizable and something new. "What exactly was taking shape on or near the barricades in Oaxaca?" wonders Bruno Bosteels (Bosteels, 2014). At its peak there were some ten thousand barricades throughout the city: assembled and disassembled in turn. Likewise some of the graffiti from that year "survives" in photographs, but the majority of it is gone, held in memory if not lost to it, or buried deep within the cultural practice of Oaxaca, as Nahón argues. Norma Patricia Lache Bolaños has described this graffiti thus: "The images of guns and gunmen, of violent bloodstains, the indigenous faces, the kneeling, the pleading hands, the torn clothes, the bare feet, the real and painful poverty of Oaxaca, all come together and structure a discourse of strong images, of blood, of weapons, of pain: an aesthetic of violence" (Lache Bolaños, 2009). When such images are disassembled, buried, remembered or forgotten or stored in photographs, what happens to them, or rather what happens to those who were on the barricades in 2006? Are they in some sense disassembled too? In this question, rising out of the practice of the graffiti of Oaxaca, sparked by its history, the line separating aesthetics from politics breaks down. Forms are de-formed and re-formed. Graffiti is intimately tied to this formative deformation.

And it was the stencil, that most reproducible graffiti, which was most prominent in 2006 Oaxaca. One of the more iconic examples is Emiliano Zapata with a mohawk, or "Punk Zapata," by Yescka, member of ASARO. The revolutionary remixed, as in a collage. Collage could be described as montage with the cut removed. A stencil of a collage contains a shadow of the absent cut. *Un desmontaje*. If Zapata is a national figure, Punk Zapata declines to reaffirm the nation. Such a figure of disassembly corresponds to how Echeverría has described the emergence of figures of the "post-national nation": no longer "rooted," but "unstable or changing, polyvalent or imprecise, always in a game of various adaptations" (Echeverría, 2006). The image of the Oaxaca Commune would seem to share less with that of the Zapatista revolt than with those apparently spontaneous, largely urban rebellions that have defined political struggle across the globe over the last few decades. Whatever else it may be, graffiti has become an inseparable part of this image.

VI.

Moving further into the periphery can also return us to its center; or, as a phrase of graffiti photographed in 2019 Santiago declared: "Neoliberalism was born and dies in Chile" (Pérez Dattari, 2022). The hope sparked by the *estallido social*, or social explosion, that led to a constitutional referendum in 2022, would prove too optimistic, the referendum's defeat rather proving Charles Prusik's apt description: "Neoliberalism lives through its crises" (Prusik, 2020). Likewise the social pressure that helped produce the *estallido* long preceded the 30-peso rise in public transit fair that was the immediate cause for protest. "It's not 30 pesos, it's 30 years," read another oft-repeated line, referring to the period of "transition" to democracy after almost twenty years of military dictatorship. Even the motif of bleeding eyes that began to appear after the police started shooting protesters in the face with "nonlethal" ammunition, wounding hundreds and leaving many blind (Dragnic & Ferretti, 2020), can be seen to precede its appearance. The symbol of the eye was recognizable, compelling, because it contained more than the obvious. It can well be said that the cops, too, understood the symbolic power of their violence. Chilean author Lina Meruane was one of many who wrote about the *estallido* using "blindness" and "vision" as a metaphorical guide. In "Eyes Open" Meruane describes how a sign on the street reading "THE EGG LOOKED GOOD BUT IT WAS ROTTEN INSIDE" calls to mind how, as high school student during the final months of the dictatorship,

after being promised that "*happiness was coming*," the students replied by throwing eggs (Meruane, 2020). Those eggs exploded on the pavement, and "now it was our eyes that were exploding," she writes (Meruane, 2020). *Huevón*, a variation of *huevo*, or egg, has been described as "Chile's greatest addition to the Spanish language," and has dozens of variations in slang (Brennan & Taboada, 2014). Meruane's novel *Sangre en el ojo*, literally *Blood in the eye*, published in 2012, already makes use of this symbolic affinity (Meruane, 2012). The narrator's sudden blindness, watching her eye fill with blood in an opening section titled "*estallido*," becomes a broken, furious window onto the bodily memory of trauma by state terror and the rage at a future foreclosed, whether hers or her unborn or refused child. In the novel as in the graffiti, the bleeding eye becomes a symbol for the destructive character of social reproduction in neoliberal capitalism. Attempting to render the protesters and thereby the movement *abject* – disfigured, repulsive – the police instead enabled the production of a symbolic relation that plumbed depths far beyond the dictatorship. Such a symbol seems made for graffiti, as though it could only appear in that form, ornamenting walls and screens for a time before vanishing. Graffiti endures through precarity.

VII.

It remains to be seen in what way graffiti may represent one of the "precarious advances" gestured at by Echeverría as evident in emerging forms of culture. Echeverría understood culture as "the dialectical moment of the cultivation of [a given human group's] identity" (Echeverría, 2010) Such a moment carries great risk: "This critical cultivation of identity means, as far as we can see, the opposite of protection, conservation or defense; it implies going out into the open…, venturing into the danger of the 'loss of identity' in an encounter with others" (Echeverría, 2010). Does graffiti, as an expression of this society's crises, represent a "defense" or a "danger," a closing down or an open encounter? The question can only be answered in the particular case, but it can be asked in general. It can also be asked of our attempts to understand, or theorize, graffiti, to render its concept adequate. Take, for example, graffiti's often maligned vulgarity, its ugliness, its rough edges. What if rather than pushed to the side it were placed up front? It might then call to mind something Theodor Adorno once wrote: "There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand, that no one should go hungry anymore" (Adorno, 2020). Graffiti is coarse, it is vulgar, in precisely this fashion. It brings to riot and ruin alike the tender hues of "wild aestheticization."

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