On Urban Creativity in Argentina Over Time: The Need for Locally Contextualized Studies

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Abstract
Argentinian academic research on urban creativity is not recent. Since the 1960s, the area has developed through a combination of different disciplines and perspectives. However, the arrival of the New York Style Graffiti Writing in the 1990s marked a shift in the field, in as much as it brought new artistic practices and, simultaneously, new research on them. These changes were fertile ground for generating new theoretical frameworks. Considering these facts altogether, the field is now in a complex juncture: on the one hand, several new artistic practices have proliferated and continue to do so, and on the other hand, perspectives through which these practices are studied also emerge. The result is a heterogeneous field of practices and frameworks.

In this piece, we examine the way in which studies on graffiti and urban art emerged in Argentina -reshaping frameworks that used to be prevalent in the study of urban creativity. We also show a thread that has continued over time, even though it has been reshaped and reconstructed as a result of the dialogues with different perspectives and practices from other geographies.

Keywords: graffiti, urban creativity, street art, pintadas, public writing

1. Mapping Traditions

If we visualize current research on urban creativity in Argentina as a line or thread over time, we find that research on street art is not recent, yet it is still relatively scarce and not systematized as of yet. Specifically, if we compare the Argentinean situation with that of other countries, several differences emerge. First, in Argentina there was a gradual onset of the Graffiti movement, as opposed to a sharp and fast development in other geographies (Figueroa-Saavedra, 2006). Second, the rapid course the Argentinian scene has experienced in only a few years (dos Santos, 2019) can be interpreted as part of a cross-generative set of relationships established during the 1990s and beyond, due to the fact that several different artist-collectives sustained their work over time and were able to make visible these new (at that point) practices. Taking these two issues into account, we mapped local practices as they are understood by several different authors in their cultural, economic, political and geographical context, that is in a g-local perspective. We identified thus several different categories used over time by authors to describe what people did on city walls, mapping them by identifying the uses of the following terms: *pintadas*, political *pintadas*, signatures and self affirmative graffiti, political graffiti, clever inscription graffiti, football/ skaters / music bands graffiti and style writing. There is a mark in time, around the end of the 1960´s and beginnings of the 1970´s, where spray paint starts to be used. This technique introduces changes in the ways visuals, inscriptions and statements are made on the walls, and therefore it is taken as an important mark in time. In an earlier piece, we had identified and examined the different traditions that co-exist and influence each other (dos Santos, 2019).

A map that can explain some of those ongoing traditions since 1840, may look like this:

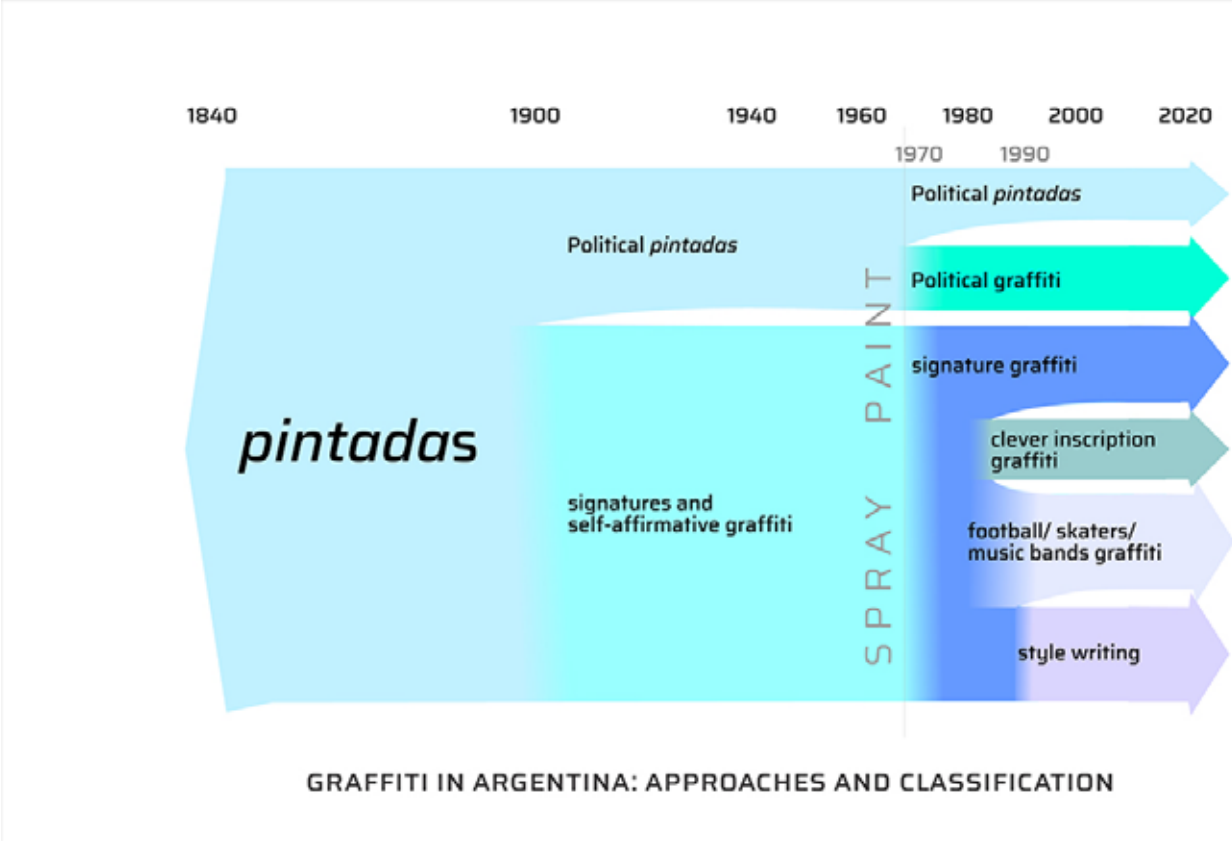

Fig. 1 – mapping traditions of public space inscriptions in Argentina since 1840

People made public space inscriptions -not only but especially- by hand and with paint. These forms of expression received the name *Pintadas* (literally, "painted"), and they´re political slogans or signatures on the wall.

2. Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual Models before the Graffiti of the 1980s

2.1 The practice of graffiti before becoming "Graffiti": Signatures and other records

We start by highlighting that different forms of signature graffiti have been present in our local context, at least since the 19th century. Such practices express a sense of belonging and a mark of identity, also related to self-affirmation and ties to the territories the artists inhabit, constructing them "as their own" through their signatures. Public writing has always taken place in our geography, as documented by Fernando Figueroa-Saavedra (2006) who has coined the expression of "native graffiti".

For a long time in Argentina, writings and drawings on walls and other surfaces were considered deviant and obscene behavior, typical of children and/or uneducated people. Such testimonies, however, "claim(ed) for themselves a place in the world of the expressible" (Montero Cartelle, 1990) and over time interest in them as a cultural expression emerged. The interest of the local academy was informed by curiosity for popular/subaltern culture and what lies outside the social norm, and consequently, wall painting and proto-graffiti were chosen as objects of study, from a folkloric and anthropological perspective (Chicote and García, 2009). This field of study considered graffiti to be epigraphy or *latrinalia*. Inscriptions were made by carving, chalk, coal and especially with brush and paint (See Figure 2).

This line of research focused on wall writing as a type of statement, close to the point of view that linguists would take in studying what is being said. Their orientation was thus close to linguistics, and these perspectives emerge

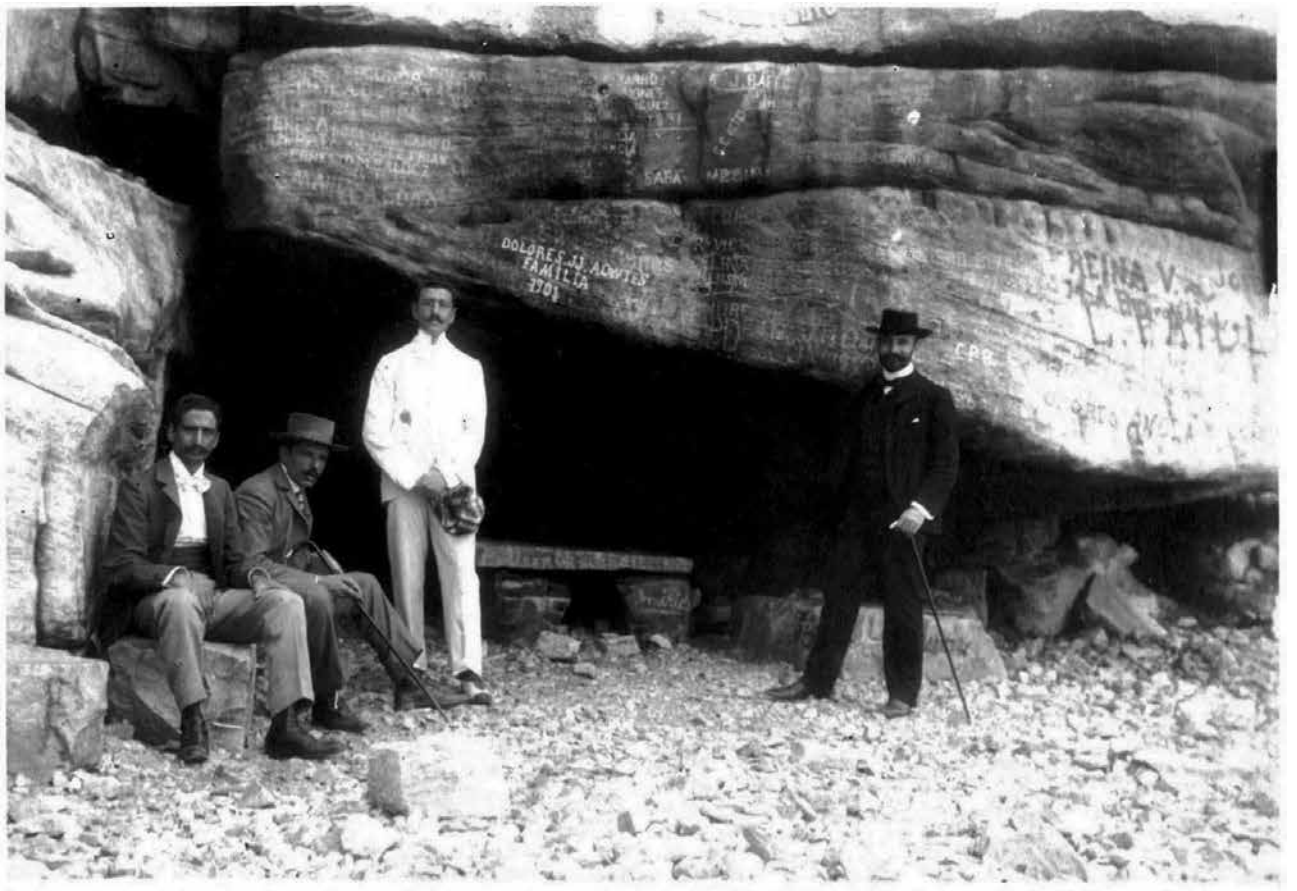

Fig.2 – Signatures in landscapes, Egaña´s grotto, 1910. Photo credit: Pablo Javier Junco. Source: http://fotosviejasdemardelplata.blogspot.com/2018/05/la-gruta-de-egana.html

in the first half of the 20th century in the area of el Río de la Plata. For example, the German anthropologist Robert Lehmann-Nitsche published in the 1920s a volume dedicated to erotic wall texts ("sicalípticos") that he collected in brothels and bars in the port area of La Plata, Buenos Aires province (Lehmann-Nitsche [1923] as cited by Víctor Borde 1981).

These early studies show that writing practices are rooted in the Argentine culture, and their most common traits are the signing of one's name on interior public spaces (bathrooms, schools, public buildings, and also prisons) and open spaces (for example, stones and trees on tourist sites), the writing of statements in regards to issues of the contemporary society, or the writing of jokes, puns and even sexual statements. These practices have survived as they were documented in some texts, both compiled and transcribed, or described, as parts of the urban landscape (Kozak, 2004).

However, and over time, political graffiti was also the best means to give voice to popular or dissident sectors that otherwise wouldn't have been heard. Argentina's political activity has always been intense, given the constant back and forth between democratic and authoritarian regimes in its history as a nation (Chaffee, 1993), and graffiti, wall painting and posters or signs are a tradition in our country.

2.2 From Political Writing to Self-affirmation

As documented by Chaffee (1993) and Kozak (2004), walls were arenas for conflict during the 19th century. Additionally, the signature graffiti (and its various subtypes) coexisted with another type of wall painting known as "pintada" (Gándara, 2002; Kozak, 2004 and 2009). *Pintada* soon turns to refers to explicit socio-political matters, and it is often combined with other practices such as painting murals or crafting sings and posters. Therefore, we find evidence that wall painting, signature graffiti, posters, and

Fig.3 – Historical *Pintadas* [political graffiti] from the Resistencia Peronista, *circa* 1974. Photo credit: Alfredo Alonso. Source: Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas (CeDInCI) http://imagenes.cedinci.org/index.php/pintada-de-la-juventud-universitaria-peronista-2

signs are all native, local traditions in Argentina, which have been labeled by the people who produce them: *pintadas*, *afiches*, *murales*. *This terms are* deeply rooted in our political traditions and are still used in the present.

During the proscription of Peronism and in late 1972 (when Juan Domingo Perón was preparing his return from exile), "pintadas" were widespread and considered of great importance. The inscriptions made by the "Peronist Resistance" survived through literature, almost as archetypes, reenacting events featured in the testimonies of those militants who, during the night, risked their lives for their ideals (Viale, 1973). Mythical slogans such as "Luche y Vuelve" [If we fight, he (our leader) will return] remain in the collective imagination through constant re-appropriation: "Painted on the walls as the most synthetic expression of the movement, the 'VP' became the foremost symbol of the resistance for more than twenty years" (Salas, 1994).

These historical *pintadas* are interesting because their format became a model for the "inscription" graffiti ("graffiti de leyenda") of the 1980s (Kozak, 2004), that parodies and recovers it as a discursive form: although inscription graffiti can include political themes, it stands apart from "pintada" because it lacks partisan ideological support and is not carried out spontaneously. In any case, we agree with Kozak when she states that graffiti is always a "political language", but one outside of political-party institutions.

These productions have been studied as manifestations of popular ideas and thoughts, records of times of political and social effervescence, on the one hand, and on the other hand, as records of daily thoughts, snippets of reality and humorous comments on daily matters. More recently, fields other than anthropology and folklore-studies have started to pay attention to these phenomena (Armando Silva, [1992] 2006; from a sociological framework or Lelia Gandara, 2002; from a semiotic perspective, for instance).

Fig.4 – Contemporary political *Pintada*. Candidate´s name in big letters, with the TWC Crew tag [a local crew] painted over. We can read "Guille ESCUDERO" candidate for City Major (La Plata, 2020). Photo: Laura dos Santos

2.3 Contemporary pintadas and political graffiti

Contemporary political graffiti coexists with other types of inscriptions and wall painting, as we already stated. However, it is often considered to be no different from the *pintadas*. In taking a closer look, we can identify characteristics that will allow us to establish a distinct category. For example, the "pintadas" are in support of a partisan political praxis, they are structured in specific ways, they are produced by organized brigades, supported by the political party who is stating a message, the materials are bought by these parties, and they may be also a part of a larger political action, for example, a mobilization, a march, a rally or a street-boycott. In other occasions, *pintadas* are used to dispute a geographical point with other parties or with the armed forces or the police. They are furtive actions, done mostly at night, to make a statement and leave a trace in a specific territory.

Political graffiti is used by several different people to express their personal beliefs. They may or may not be linked to a political party (usually they are not, at least not explicitly), and they are related to issues being discussed in society. For example, matters as legalizing abortion, the cruelty of poverty for certain sectors of the population, or themes related to social justice, are some of the topics displayed.

The political graffiti practices are also related to what we have called the "clever" inscription typology, in as much as these may refer to similar topics. The difference is that "clever" inscriptions usually make a pun on words, and use humor, many a time sarcastic humor, to call the readers´ and viewers´ attention.

Both the *pintada* and the political graffiti involve painting the names of public office candidates, so as to advertise them and also to *mark* territories, as land marks and limits wherein parties are constructing a political communicative strategy. Both the *pintada* and political graffiti were originally made by activists (so called *militantes* in Argentina) in order to establish their ideological presence within the city. Today, "professionals" carry out this work, and are even hired by political parties (Caminos, 2015; Sued, and Rodríguez Niell, 2011).

There is a special form of *pintada* which is made with brushes and lime-based paints and pigments, in large print letters filled with the colors of the political group. They generally have great dimensions and are accompanied by political and partisan posters on the walls, another common political practice. It is usually signed by a group that identifies multiple individuals, and frequently involves the use of nicknames such as "Patita" (little foot), "Tu trosko favorito" ("your favorite Trotskyist"), which signal the faction that is "positioning" the candidate, or the group that has completed "the job".

In addition to this type of "pintada", we can still find political-themed writings. They tend to be promoted by political parties that have organized themselves into brigades and spread their messages throughout different neighborhoods in an organized way, but they transcend the contemporary format of the slogan and giant letter mural. Depending on the socio-political situation, the use of "pintadas" is another way of installing dissent in the public spheres, emphasizing the political situation. Political groups carry out these actions, and they are also traditionally associated with libertarian groups. Anarchism as an ideology is made visible through alternative means of communication, among which graffiti is one of the most important ones. This type of libertarian [anarchist] graffiti is in tune with counterculture and counter-information ideas, so we regard it as a political *praxis* because of both its themes and its methodology.

Following is an example of political graffiti which we do not consider a "pintada". In this case, we can see the positioning the author is making about their (political) view, but they are not linking their statement to a political party *per se*, nor are they using a political party signature.

Fig. 4 – Anarchist graffiti. We can read "There is a time for everything... Anarchy is now". There is a signature graffiti also [LECO] (La Plata, 2019). Photo: Laura dos Santos

3. Native graffiti

The term *Graffiti* has appeared in local scientific literature from the beginning of the 20th century, as it was stated above, and originated in the field of paleography. Over time, new practices emerged and thus new perspectives were needed in order to understand and explain them. As practices evolved and proliferated, the term "graffiti" became semantically un-stable insofar as it encompassed divergent types of inscription.

Interest in graffiti throughout different time periods is evident from the variety of approaches to the subject: it is viewed as a means of communication, as an identity and self-expression phenomenon, and more recently, its artistic condition has begun to be acknowledged. As we said, the term was used for a long time in Argentina during the beginning and mid-twentieth century, as a way of referring to testimonial writing. The term "Graffiti", however, bloomed in the 1980s. In Argentina, at that point in time, the term graffiti started to be used to refer to mural inscriptions made by spray paint. These forms came after the censorship and the repression imposed by the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983, and graffiti was a new practice took up by the youngsters. Walls were the scenario for clever sentences, proverbs, signatures and poetry.

Finally, with the arrival of style writing in 1992, a new global imaginary of Argentinian cities will be configured. Since this practice was transposed from other regions of the world, style writing is spreading in our territory following a globalized model, but it has nonetheless acquired distinctive features (dos Santos, 2019).

Saying "graffiti" in Argentina does not denote the same that it denotes in other countries, which is why tracing a local, native history of the term and its application to creative activities, becomes crucial. This piece is an attempt to stabilize these local aspects and characterize them. We argue that this is one of the reasons why we can speak about "native" and "local" Argentinean graffiti.

3.1 Is it possible to speak of a "native¨ Latin American graffiti model?

We have pointed out the political nature of graffiti; local theoretical models ascribe it to a combination of two long-standing traditions and practices: the writing of dissident messages on the walls and partisan political advertising. Silva, the Colombian semiologist, has been studying graffiti and he is an unavoidable reference (Silva, 1987; [1992] 2006). His interpretation for Latin American graffiti is that locally it is marked by a legacy of protest and dissent from abroad, and also deeply rooted in local practices, in as much as his work lies in situating the studies of graffiti on a broad semiotic analysis, and thus he is careful in understanding the situated nature of the communicative network in which these texts are produced, circulated, are read and interpreted. A pioneer in the study of graffiti in the region, he proposed an intermediate option between the two other great models or paradigms: the Parisian graffiti of May 68 (or European model) and New York/style writing (or American model). For Latin American, Silva considers graffiti as a literary genre that draws from both high literature and popular orality, as a result of a middle-class well educated young generation that claims the streets in post- dictatorship (Silva, 2006). Hence, he states that although pictorial murals could be found Latin America, a tradition similar to New York graffiti did not exist, at least in terms of *style writing*.

It should be noted that in his research, developed outside folk or literary studies standards, questions regarding context become important because graffiti are placed within the socio-historical context. The statement that "we are living through the third great moment of Latin American graffiti" applies to Argentina, where such practices boomed after the last dictatorship. Latin America's political activism and social movements have always been characterized by visuality, and graffiti contributes to these as an important medium for expressing advocacy and spreading of ideas. Silva aimed to study graffiti within literary structures, and even though style writing is writing, he regarded it as distinct from texts (Silva, 1989).

It can be agreed that Argentina is part of the aforementioned third great moment yet it is necessary to understand that differences in graffiti writing practices call for specific, local studies. In accordance, our country has witnessed the rise of what has been called "graffiti de leyenda (ingeniosa)" [clever inscription graffiti], in which humorous statements as well as artistic forms are key elements and stand apart of the model of political, Parisian- like graffiti . In order to interpret these inscriptions, one must know the local

interpretative keys, because otherwise the meaning is lost. This is another reason why the study of local graffiti and pintada practices is needed, because it entails not only the study of what is said, or how the image is crafted, but what is the context for interpreting the messages and what are the range of keys for making sense of them.

3.2 Native "clever inscription" graffiti and signature

In the mid-1980s, a specific type of mural writing was gaining importance and differed widely from militant practices: it was called graffiti (plural 'graffitis') and became popular in Argentina (Kozak, 2004). They were mural interventions that shared some features with New York graffiti writing, such as the use of spray paint, anonymity (due to their illegal roots), and a sense of playfulness and identity/self-affirmation regarding young people.

It should be noted that signature graffiti was also practiced in our territory, although it did not display stylistic issues or generate competitive games like it did in North American graffiti of the time. This activity was deemed to take place outside of political communication, which is why it was referred to as graffiti, reserving the term "pintada" for partisan mural writing (Kozak, 2009), and it was associated with the use of spray paint. This was confusing given that many political slogans were done in spray paint and anonymously (Rodríguez, 2017). The difference is, overall, semantic and sometimes its limits are very much blurred. Again, this is another important reason why local, native forms of graffiti and *pintadas*, murales and posters, should be carefully identified, documented, studied and interpreted.

Given the relevance of all these different practices, the term graffiti possibly emerged in a time of academic interest on the subject-matter, trying to establish an overall concept

Fig. 6 – Native graffiti. "Clever sayings" ["Dying is not the issue; what is sad is to live in Argentina"] *circa* 1980. Source: http://r2003graffiti.blogspot.com/2008/10/borrador-1-de-historia-nacional.html

that would allow the building of a theoretical framework, emergent at the time. The profusion of this activity made a trend out of signature graffiti and clever sayings, which is why it is possible that, as with New York style writing, the media used scholarly terminology to refer to practices that differed from the old political 'pintadas' (dos Santos, 2019).

During the post-dictatorship period, the public sphere recovered freedom of speech. In this context, graffiti became a symptom of the need (and right) for expression that previously repressed sectors (mainly young people and teenagers) re-claimed for themselves. Painting, alongside with signing, became widespread as a means for reinforcing singular subjectivity and identifying personal spaces. Punk/rock movements were very involved in this practice (Vila, 1985) for example, and they mostly marked young people's socializing places, such as bedrooms, neighborhood corners, or skateboard parks, which were fully spray painted with personal names or band names. This practice was applied to personal school supplies, and afterwards schools became areas of intense graffiti activity (generally in bathrooms and other places outside the realm of adult control). Signatures (names and music bands) were predominant in Argentinian graffiti for a long time, rooted in our urban imaginary as the inscriptions that allowed a youthful and rebellious universe to circulate before the arrival of New York writing. It expanded the culture of the young population, who implemented advertising strategies in order to spread their counter-message. The genre had very close ties to literary modes, such as aphorism, quotes and rock poetry (Kozak, 2004).

The interest in the matter is evident from the translation of graffiti compilations edited by American historian Robert Reisner. This material came from his fieldwork (1967-1974) and it was translated into Spanish and published in 1971 and 1972. Its circulation was wide, even though grasping all the meanings was difficult due to translation mishaps. This compilation created an important precedent: later on, many collections of transcribed graffiti were published. All of them list clever sayings; unfortunately, they show no visual documentation. Such materials were created for a non-specialized public. Wall-less graffiti is reduced to mere phrases and aphorisms from popular and local humoristic literature.

Some years after Armando Silva developed his theory about graffiti, specialists Claudia Kozak and Lelia Gándara began to do it in the Argentinian context. Kozak thought of different "ways of reading the city" in terms of "expanded literature" and edited a compilation of graffiti that included visual evidence. Kozak understands that graffiti is mostly a youth practice that exposes the symbolic spheres of interest of the young: rock, soccer, television, games, and consumption habits. She also characterized it as an activity of self-affirmation, bonding, and anonymous expression that enables the subversion of certain social codes. Ultimately, and unlike political 'pintadas', graffiti is a personal way of expressing dissent and placing a direct message, delimiting territories of identity, and of course, making use of word play.

Signature graffiti is contextualized as "youth culture", overlapping with the end of the dictatorship and the return of the democracy that began in 1983, in line with what Armando Silva views as a historical moment of recovery of public space. Although all these spheres of activity are not limited to an age-defined segment of the population, it should be noted that for Kozak the concept of "youth" is not established by biological criteria but rather by cultural ones (Kozak, 2004; Kozak and Martyniuk, 2005).

This practice has become so relevant that both Kozak and Gándara have proposed a new typology that contributes to the field (given its degree of development and its insertion in the popular imagination, and because its practitioners are organized into groups): Kozak calls it "graffiti de leyenda (ingeniosa)" [(clever) inscription graffiti]; it had its "golden age" in the mid-1980s.

The emergence of important groups of graffiti artists such as *Los Vergara*, *Fife y Autogestión*, *Bolo Alimenticio*, *La yilé en el Tobogán* and *Secuestro* imposed a new type of graffiti, clever inscription graffiti. Produced by these groups (and sometimes others), it shared several features: they were clever and playful phrases, normally based on facts of public knowledge or in intertextual relation with popular sayings, advertising discourse, or propaganda and political slogans. These phrases ranged from the overtly funny to acidic ironic as a way of political intervention (Kozak, 2004).

Fig. 7 – Style writing. Piece and tags (La Plata, 2018). Photo: Laura dos Santos

Although the quotes of clever inscription graffiti have reached such a level of popularity that they ended up building an autochthonous model of Argentine graffiti, there are intimate or introspective signatures and messages that contrast with gang and soccer graffiti (Ferraresi and Randrup, 2009). That is the case of 'tumbero' graffiti (´tumbero´ is slang for delinquent), which coexists in different neighborhoods and whose presence is a trace of marginality.

In Argentina, the apparition of a New York-style graffiti was already evident in the late 1990s, and researchers began to consider it on the basis of existing theoretical models. As these pieces were hard to read signatures, they tended to be interpreted from a pictorial or artistic point of view. At the intersection of this problem, Gándara proposes: "graffiti may or may not contain written material, as well as it may or may not contain iconic material, but from a semiotic point of view it preserves the traces of that dual expressive quality: that of the verbally written and that of the pictorial, the drawing, the color, and the form" (Gándara, 2002).

4. Some final considerations

Taking into account that our collective imagination has produced models for testimonial writing that precede the practice of style writing, we agree with Figueroa Saavedra (2006) that it is improper to circumscribe and limit the use of the term graffiti to a single subtype. On the other hand, although the word *pintada* was used at the beginning to designate these practices, it was due to the way in which they were carried out: brush by brush, generally with tar. Further, although some inscriptions were also made with coal, chalk and s-graffito, paint prevailed.

In summarizing, the first model for native graffiti is made up of "pintadas", mostly political but also self-affirmative. The term "graffiti" was specifically introduced in the 1980s after censorship practically eradicated such activities, especially militant ones. The emergence of new forms of mural intervention in spray paint gave rise to a scene with unique characteristics, which received the name "clever inscription graffiti". Finally, in the mid-1990s, style writing was imported, but it began to cause some friction against the theoretical frameworks that had provided conceptualizations for graffiti practices up until that point. When style writing became widespread, access to a specific bibliography was very limited. Furthermore, seminal texts on the history of New York graffiti could not be consulted until very recently: in an exhaustive examination of the bibliographies of reference works, their absence is felt. This absence is still evident in most academic papers on the subject.

The purpose so far was to link Argentinian style writing with native writing traditions in public spaces, so as to overthrow the preconception of an "isolated", spontaneous, or local origin of "New York Style" graffiti writing. In parallel, we also traced academic research on current native graffiti scenes, and the need to continue building an interdisciplinary framework to do so.

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