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Art in Context: Murals, Graffiti, Street Art, and Activism in Contemporary Argentina and Ecuador

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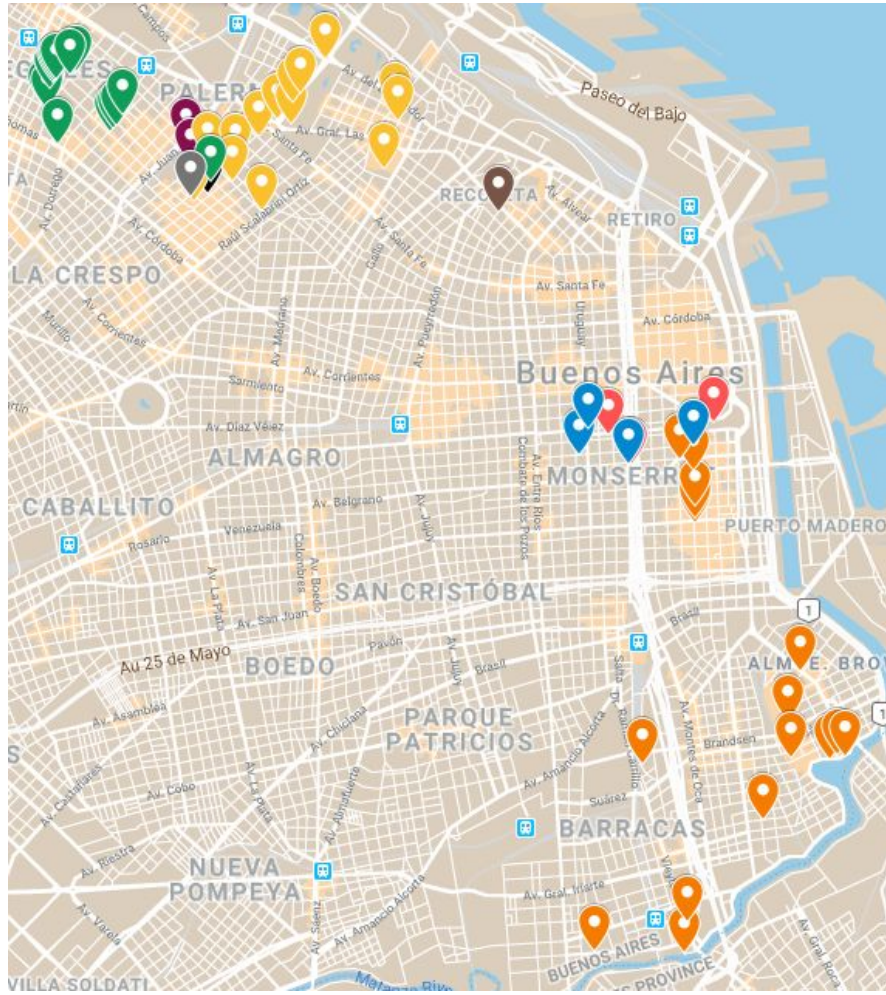
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Abstract

Creative activism in the form of urban art has flourished in Latin American political and social discourse since the famed Mexican Muralist movement of the 1920’s. Although there exists an abundance of scholarship which considers this particular artistic moment and the subsequent mural movements it engendered across the region into the 1960’s, there remains a dearth of academic study concerning both muralism and alternate forms of urban art—namely street art and graffiti—occurring thereafter and since the 1990’s especially. In an effort to fill the resulting scholarly lacuna, this presentation proposes several possible points of reentry for contemporary study as identified during fieldwork conducted in Argentina and Ecuador during the summer of 2019. In the most general sense these considerations can be categorized into two fields of inquiry: questions of change and continuity in artistic style, and reflections upon the efficacy of this urban art in enacting and maintaining meaningful political and social discourse within a larger overall media environment.

Methods

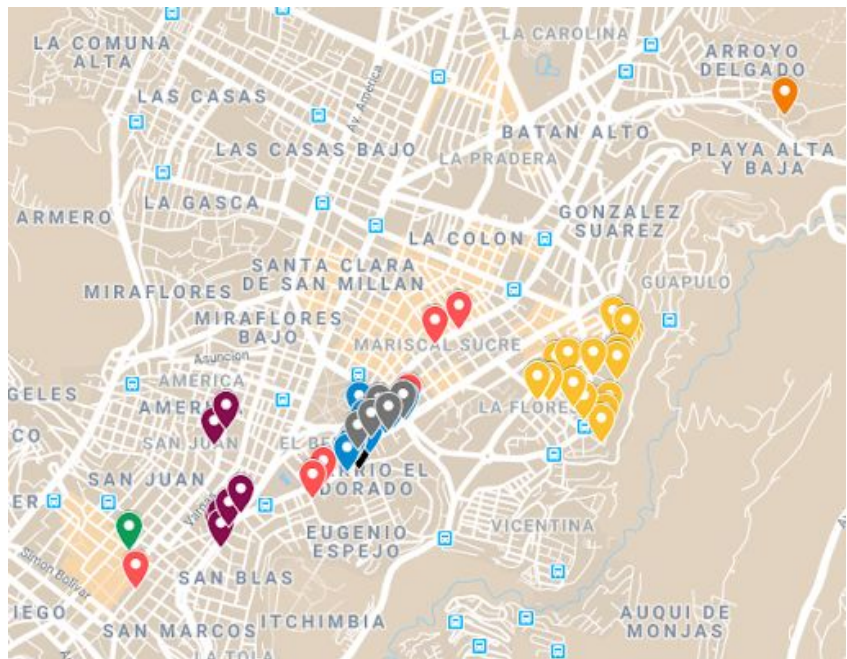
A substantial amount of preparatory work was necessary for the successful completion of this project. First, Buenos Aires and Quito were chosen from a list of eight possible fieldwork locations based upon their municipal significance, pre-existing urban art cultures, and contrasting national narratives. Once these cities were chosen, a list of relevant individuals/entities within each was drafted and eventually contacted with the goal of arranging in-person interviews and neighborhood art tours; these engagements comprised the majority of the field-work completed in each city, although some self-guided neighborhood tours proved fruitful as well. Photographs were taken of each piece of urban art considered, and their locations mapped for later reference. Below are the resultant maps compiled for each city:



Buenos Aires

Each pinpoint represents a unique location visited, and is color-coordinated such that all locations visited on a single day appear the same color. The straight-line distance between the two furthest points in each city is approximately seven miles in Buenos Aires, and three and a half miles in Quito.

Source: Google Maps, <https://www.daftlogic.com/projects-google-maps-distance-calculator.htm#>



Quito

Confirming Previous Scholarship

As political scientist Lyman Chaffee noted, urban art has historically been utilized by various entities to engage in political/social discourse because of its reputation as a form of “alternative media” (12, 16, 24); whereas traditional media forms (newspapers, radio, etc) have been wielded by governments as propaganda tools at various historical moments across Latin America history, urban art has typically connoted a certain “raw” and “authentic” quality supposedly representative of the “true” voice of “the people” in opposition to the worldview offered by propaganda.



The above pieces of urban art might be said to embody the “raw,” often anti-government sentiment historically ascribed to the medium. On the left, a mural by the Red Sudakas collective in the Monserrat neighborhood of Buenos Aires which depicts former president Mauricio Macri as a puppet in the hand of foreign (United States) interests; on the right, a piece of graffiti which reads “It’s time for the insurgency” in the El Belén neighborhood of Quito.

However, urban art worldwide has come to accommodate a wide variety of themes and essences, most of which are a-political in content and treat street art, graffiti, and muralism as primarily aesthetic/artistic/emotive. Or, put another way, urban art no longer needs to carry a political/social message, but can simply be creative or expressive for its own sake.



Two pieces of urban art that explore the medium’s aesthetic (as opposed to political) frontiers. On the left, a work of street art by an unknown artist in the Colegiales neighborhood of Buenos Aires; on the right, a mural in the San Juan neighborhood of Quito by artist unknown, although possibly Pastel or Bidel.

Lastly, it should be noted that urban art is being increasingly co-opted for commercial use across a variety of forms. For example, it is not uncommon to come across murals or works of street art which advertise an item or service. Similarly, in cosmopolitan neighborhoods one is likely to spot pieces of street art on the facades of restaurants or bars meant to connote a “chic” or “trendy” atmosphere. As anthropologist and curator Rafael Schacter has noted, this latter form often verges on “kitsch” because of its frequent depiction of pop-culture icons and its claim to the status of “art” without making any significant aesthetic statement (110).



Both of the above pieces of urban art by unknown artists serve as advertisements. The mural on the left, appearing in the Palermo neighborhood of Buenos Aires, advertises a forthcoming novel. The mural on the left, which reads “For a Mejía the stars are only the beginning” finds a home in the San Juan neighborhood of Quito and advertises the Mejía academy, the elite secondary school which appears behind the brick wall.

New Insights

As outlined, existing scholarship recognizes a variety of urban art forms, styles, and uses. What this scholarship neglects to consider, however, are the ways in which individual urban artworks interact with and rhetorically affect both other nearby artworks and the entire corpus of urban art existing within a metropolitan area. In Buenos Aires, for example, Peronist murals abut elaborate graffiti “masterpieces,” while in Quito socially-charged graffiti shares wallspace with murals celebrating elite schools. One potential scholarly intervention could question: does the juxtaposition between commercial (and specifically “kitsch”) urban art and politically/socially conscious urban art attenuate the ideological impact of the latter? To draw a relevant comparison, consider the growing concern over “news literacy” in the age of the internet. Government officials, policy makers, and media ecologists alike are becoming concerned by individuals’ increasing inability to discern quality information sources from “clickbait”; how should reputable news sources operate in a media environment that is becoming increasingly saturated with sensationalist nonsense or downright irrelevant material? Returning to our examples one may similarly ask: what does it mean for the political/social agitator when their urban art jockeys for visual supremacy between colorful advertisements and vapid pop-culture references which connote material well-being and/or social capital rather than the (often austere) reality of revolution?



At left, a Peronist mural surrounded by graffiti in Colegiales, Buenos Aires. At right, an obstructed piece of graffiti which reads “Don’t raise [the price of] gasoline” situated next to a mural which depicts well-dressed individuals flanking the message “To be punctual is to be Mejía,” in reference to the elite secondary school by the same name. It is worth noting that when the Ecuadorian government removed nationwide fuel subsidies (a decision which subsequently raised the price of gasoline two-fold) in October 2019 (about five months after this photograph was taken), mass protests waged largely by the indigenous working poor occurred which forced the government to flee Quito and settle temporarily in the port city of Guayaquil.

Curious examples of the aforementioned juxtaposition abound in Buenos Aires particularly. Why so? One explanation may be that urban art enjoys some degree of legality in Argentina, but not in Ecuador; when individuals don’t have to worry about being arrested for creating urban art, they can afford to create artworks that are expressive rather than politically charged. Although convenient, this explanation is incomplete; although urban art is illegal in Ecuador, enforcement of the law is rare and urban art collectives still operate in the open. Future scholarship may consider why this is the case, and to what extent legality determines an individual’s preference for choosing to utilize urban art as a communicative method over other media forms.



Urban art in Ecuador exists within a liminal legal space. On the left, murals painted over by government officials in the Floresta neighborhood; on the right, two artists completing an artwork in broad daylight within a stone’s throw of the nation’s capitol building.

References

Chaffee, Lyman G. *Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries*. Contributions to the Study of Mass Media and Communications. Connecticut, 1993.

Schacter, Rafael. 2017. “Street Art is a Period, PERIOD: or, Classificatory Confusion and Intermural Art.” Essay. In *Graffiti and Street Art*, edited by Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi, 103-118. New York, New York: Routledge.