

## The visual and social indeterminacy of *pixação*: the inextricable moods of São Paulo

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### Abstract

*The visual perceptions of most citizens on pixação have changed in recent years. I tackle the ways in which these inscriptions, São Paulo's (SP) signature, have remained both omnipresent and unreadable by the majority. The law has attacked unplanned interventions ignoring differences among several styles of expression. 2008 marks a starting point in the process of a germinating definition of pixação (also pixo) with visibility for its social protagonists, and with its corresponding corporeal negotiations –with a high point in Berlin's Biennial 2012. The above permits an analysis of potentialities: social, material, visual and conceptual. The general social lack of understanding that surrounds pixação allows for an exploration at both the expressive and impressive levels. These considerations aim to ponder these interventions as the search of these still massively unheard citizens to express their legitimate traces.*

**Keywords:** *pixação*, São Paulo, environment, language.

*[the just recognize one another] from their habits which remain austere and innocent, avoiding complicated and nervous moods [...]*

*in the seed of the city of the just, a malignant seed is hidden, in its turn: the certainty and pride of being in the right –and of being more just than many others who call themselves more just than the just. This seed ferments in bitterness, rivalry, resentment; and the natural desire of revenge on the unjust is colored by a yearning to be in their place and to act as they do. [...]*

*I must draw your attention to an intrinsic quality of this unjust city germinating secretly inside the secret just city: and this is the possible awakening –as if in an excited opening of windows– of a later love for justice, not yet subjected to rules*

Italo Calvino

### 1. Introduction

All spray-paint cans in Brazil shall be sold with the inscription “*Pichação* is a Crime” (*Pichação é Crime*). This enforcement (imposition) was stated by law in 2011 to differentiate two

styles of urban inscription: on the one hand, street-art (namely graffiti for locals) as a legitimate form of public art; in opposition to *pixação* that is considered vandalic, criminal, marginal and even dirty and violent. A great number of urban inscriptions attract the attention of Brazilian citizens. In a very material way, they mobilize people, resources and opinions.

In the following, I consider *pixação* as a force that produces strong reactions/moods on practitioners and public alike. I base my approach on two main theoretical sources. First I follow Becker's account (1982) on social worlds: to reach a specific goal people work and define situations in common together, and this may happen (or not) depending on the resolution of varied steps and understandings. This means that to understand *pixação* I shall take into account the different perspectives in play to give the most accurate picture possible. Second, social relationships are made up of both humans and non-humans. That is, objects also have a place and effect on society. So I will consider not only the general perspectives on *pixação* but also the way in which these material inscriptions affect people in situ. This proposal then considers “social relations in the vicinity of objects” as



Fig. 1 - Historical-political Legible *Pichação* with Spray, 1968

[Source: [memoriasdaditadura.org.br](http://memoriasdaditadura.org.br)]

well as “the way in which certain objects ‘fascinate’, and hence contain a certain ‘animism’” (De La Fuente 2010: 222, following Gell).

The aim of this presentation is, first, to understand *pichação* as a massive social phenomenon (and not merely a small group’s whim); and second, how a nonjudgemental framework can grasp these inscriptions and their practitioners as part of a city that is alive, along with its conviviality. All considerations are nurtured by a previous research (2012-2014) and fieldwork (2013) in which I walked the streets of São Paulo and saw all styles of urban art practitioners in action, and I also spoke with passers-by and the general public. Along the text, I will share detailed observations/images from my own experience in the streets as well as thoughts and common phrases that are voiced by these publics. Secondary material such as academic and journalistic texts, as well as filmed documentaries and interviews, was also reviewed. The text will follow this order:

- On *pichação* and graffiti
- On São Paulo (henceforth also using “SP”, or Sampa)
- On the bodily risk of *pichação*
- On the interpretations of *pichação* as letters/images
- Closing remarks

### ***Pichação* ≠ *Pixação*: São Paulo’s/Brazil’s Signature**

#### *Pichação*, from the Old Days

The word “pichar” has several meanings in Portuguese: draw a line, cross out, scratch, mess something up, or even pollute. That being said, it becomes clear that *pichação* “as a generic word” has been used over the years to evoke any spontaneous inscriptions that appear painted along a street. *Pichação* can be and is usually considered violent and a sign of protest. At least this is how most of the population perceives it.

In Brazil phrases on walls read “down with the dictatorship” in 1968. In that time, it was meant against the military dictatorship. Broadly speaking, the early *pichação* can be considered as part of the public expression that grew as from the 60s around the world. In the 70s, you could encounter several continuous blocks of spraypainted construction sites. Howard Becker (1982: 188-189) narrates reading interminable stanzas and giving them some thought with local academic friends just to conclude that there was no evidence of a political claim, maybe just some poet that decided to publish in an unusual platform. It was indeed a poetic time (Lorenzino 2009).

## 2. Pixação, what Most are Referring to

Nowadays, public interventions are ubiquitous in São Paulo. For the last two or three decades, the whole of Brazil has shared some of that graphic totalitarianism. How have these visual attacks come to an increase? Not without some major protagonists and landmark demarcations. In 1991, two young men traveled from SP to Rio de Janeiro only to leave a painted mark on the top of the Corcovado peak, the newspaper read: “Not even the Christ the Redeemer statue escaped vandalism” (Katz 2007). Upon painting, the two Paulistanos intentionally left their bus tickets to be identified as from São Paulo, and thus appear in the media across the country. The huge statue was chosen expecting the following social recognition. In 2010, again on the same statue (under restoration), pichadores attacked the figure a second time. “Those criminals will pay for what they’ve done. They will go to jail”, Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes was quoted as saying in O Globo newspaper. “Rio de Janeiro and Brazil do not deserve this” (Reuters 2010).

These situations present the law as fair against blind and insensitive crimes. There’s a lack of a unified ground of understandings, shared language, and common social goals. The antagonists: the so-called legal (useful) society vs the (so-called useless) outlaws. Here is a depiction of São Paulo and the visual impression it can give:

*violence against the population can be inferred as a result of [pichação’s] character: mysterious, phantasmagorical and omnipresent of the pichação that composes the urban aesthetics of a metropolis such as São Paulo.*

Pichação can be the cause of a feeling of fear and insecurity due to several factors: its form, as a secret linguistic code accessible only to the initiated; its

*presence, totalitarian and constantly ingrained in the urban property; its reproduction, continuous and mysteriously prolonged until dawn. Pichação also shows a pattern of lack of police surveillance; and as such, proof of insecurity because the pichador that climbs the marquise of a building to sign his war name, can easily break into that apartment to rob. (Spinelli 2007: 117. My highlight.)*

An emerging number of underdog *pixadores* have been gaining national visibility along the past 20-30 years, and the mass increases steadily. In São Paulo’s 2010 Biennial, *pixadores* wrote “down with the dictatorship”: implying against the “dictatorship” of the art world, and against the social world of the city from which they’re excluded. More than 40 years apart, these marks have had different collective connotations:

*[Nowadays pixação is] a popular Brazilian term that is actually written with CH and not with X, yet pixadores prefer to write it with X to differentiate it from other kinds of graffiti already in existence in São Paulo, such as the political graffiti against the Brazilian military dictatorship. Or more precisely, to stress that pixação isn’t actually a type of graffiti, but rather something entirely different (Choque 2009).*

Over the past ten years *pixação* has become ever more broadly stigmatized. This distinction was made in face of another polar element of Brazilian urban interventions that has been legitimized as art, that is: graffiti (=street-art), which are promoted and infrequently paid by private or public institutions. Since *pixadores* claim that they do *pixação* (X) in the following I shall use this term. This process of bifurcation had a first period of consolidation from the 1980s/1990s to 2004-2006 (Juárez 2014: 33-63). However, another parallel process arises.

## 3. Unique Styles/Settings. Social-Urban Environments

Poor, Marginalized *Pixadores*’ Context,

Individual Appearances

*Pixadores* have raised a growing claim in the last decade. I intend to show how *pixação* has looked for a visual and artistic place, and social and political validity as well. *Pixação*, or *pixo* as local “writers” like to call it, has been recognized as São Paulo’s signature (Wainer & Boleta 2006). *Pixação/pixo* is widely known and spread as a practice of

the marginalized people of the city. *Pixadores* are commonly documented to make ladders of 2-3 people to paint high from ground level –a practice named *pé nas costas*, that is literally: feet over back. They paint in high buildings, but at the same time they attack street high walls, fences, gates, windows, houses, parks, rocks, and all available surfaces. *Pixação* is visually recognized by designers and typography fans around the world, with books printed in France and now in Brazil as well. Some even argue that they've created an alphabet of their own. A *pixador* says that he doesn't in fact know how to read as any alphabetized person because he didn't complete his school studies; but he does manage to read *pixação* signatures: in the documentary *Pixo*, by Wainer & Oliveira 2009v (Year + "v" indicates Video reference. See Videography).

All recollections of how *pixação* began, reflect on the above mentioned history of previous interventions decades before. Some renowned *pixadores* from the 80s are remembered as part of the practice of writing in risky places and designing the first variations of letters inspired in different sources such as the typography used by metal bands' disc covers, the primitivism of the runes and a certain amount of inventiveness. For a long time, *pixadores* gained visibility among the general public and in the art worlds as well. To put a somewhat arbitrary time line dictated by general references, the increased visibility of *pixação* started around the 1980s. One of the most famous *pixadores* from the past, already deceased, was *DI* who got to paint famous buildings like the Conjunto Nacional, Ponte dos Remédios and Mansão dos Matarazzo; locations that gained him interviews in prominent newspapers and magazines from São Paulo (Chati 2011). In 1996, *DI* made a *pixo* at the SP Biennial; but even when he was frowned upon "he knew what he was doing and he believed in this" (Cripta Djan, 2010a). At the very beginning of the 21st century, some other interventions enjoyed media publicity too. In 2002, a *pixador* attacked the art work of Lenora de Barros, and in 2004 Diego Salvador (a.k.a. "Nãõ") executed *pixação* at the 26th Biennial (Araya López 2015: 208). Until then, all interventions had been carried out by *pixadores* acting alone. In 2008, that individual approach changed.

#### The Rising Collective Consciousness of Paulistano *Pixadores*

An ad intra (internal) war in Paulistan *pixação* took place between 1998 and 2008. In fights among the two main opposing grifes of *pixadores* "some people were even killed",

says Djan. He was one of those responsible for the pacification (Cristino 2012: 29) –but even with some years of truce, there's still plenty of rivalry in the inner cities of the State of São Paulo. The year 2008 marked a period of consolidation, or at least a starting point, for *pixadores* to unite in a new way: on the one hand, most of the rivalry subsided; yet on the other hand, a stance of the movement developed to an ever stronger political and artistic push. A series of these appearances strengthened *pixação* and gave it more visibility through the media to a more general, even international, public. In 2008, whether by chance or by causality, some vectors of intentions among *pixadores* began to converge. The *pixador* Rafael PiXobomb was about to finish his studies in art and had on task his final academic presentation. Together with Cripta Djan he decided to make a call to dozens of other *pixadores* to unite and attack the art establishment. The purpose was to show the libertarian and pure character of *pixação* as an art form. Since they intended for it to be authentic, they didn't ask for permission. The end-result: after the attack Rafael Augustaitiz (*PixoBomB*) was flunked and expelled from the arts school. Besides the attack in the Escola de Belas Artes, *pixadores* also intervened SP's 2008 Biennial –28th–, and the Galeria Choque Cultural. Djan explains that he invited everyone, using a handout, to unite in favor of *pixação* as a movement: "it was the first time after a long period in which *pixadores* got together just for the sake of *pixação*, with no confrontations about ego, all for *pixação*" (in Cantanhede 2012: 51-52).



Fig. 2 - Classic 21st Century *Pixação* with long, angular Lettering [Source: Benjamin Juarez next to Praça Roosevelt, São Paulo 2013.06.01]



Fig. 3 - *Xarpi Carioca*: Pixação as Rio de Janeiro's Style

[Source: Contra a Parede (Arakaki et al 2015v)]

On yet another step forward for *pixação*, in 2009 the Parisian Cartier Foundation –a major European art institute– invited Djan as well as other historical pioneer fellows of world urban art to the exhibition “Born in the street” (Né dans la rue). Another turn of cycle, *pixação* was present in the (2010) 29th Biennial of São Paulo. What did that curator say about *pixação*? “The Biennial is not capable of housing or understanding fully everything that is art.”

#### *Pixadores* Diversity in Brazil

Many documents and accusations show *pixadores* as low life, poor, lazy and what not (Cristino 2012, Cypriano 2012, Ferraz 2012, Kaz 2007, Reuters 2010). Video documentaries (Wainer & Oliveira 2009v) depict some lawyers and other professionals doing *pixo* as well, while trying to maintain a respectable life. The range of possibilities of what or who a *pixador* is varies according to whom you ask. In most of the cases, the memories of what *pixadores* mean for their own population and for the society in totum, is somewhat typified. *Pixadores* are counted by the thousands –mostly in capital cities such as SP, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and Bahia, to name but a few. They are a huge, powerful, numerous enemy of the law, of the police, and the rightists in society. In this context most people tend to take an extreme position: either in favor of *pixo*, or against. Those for legality are more into graffiti/street-art, those for illegality are for *pixação*. In sum, there are enough elements to speak of a common ground of *pixo* around the country. Nonetheless,

there are a myriad of differences among separate places along the whole of Brazil.

Together with SP, another important pole of *pixadores* is Rio de Janeiro. The calligraphic Carioca style of *pixo* is quite opposite: it's not straight and angular at all; in fact the somewhat cursive letters are made with a continuous trace of a spraying paint only interrupted when the tag is completed –just then the valve is released. Paulistano Cripta Djan has traveled in different regions of *pixadores* in Brazil, and says that each place has a *pixação* mood that is usually related to the style, humor and shape of the city it comes from. The Carioca signatures from Rio de Janeiro, for example, are more short-handed and with round forms: with a larger number of spray cans used instead of so much roll-painting. It is not the usual pattern to find someone that is not an underdog doing *pixo*. In Rio de Janeiro the middle-class and those living in favelas have historically and literally shared a common ground: the topography of the city merges the lower class living in hills with the upper class living in the valley. The former wants to enjoy the easy life of the other, and the latter wants to gain some street-wisdom (–ter contexto– Souza 2009). *Pixadores* from Rio de Janeiro are one of the most cohesive groups of the country, with less rivalry to the inside of the group, making periodic rap festivals and sharing a somewhat homogeneous respect for each other. They even have their own inverted name to call Carioca *pixação* as *xarpi* (by the inversion of pi-xar). But they suffer the same lack of understanding on the part of the general public.

#### 4. *Pixadores* Corporeal Engagement: with Others/City

##### How *Pixadores* Seek Visibility for Their *Pixos/Pixações*

*Pixadores* search for place and visibility: two parallel customs spring from this. The most important one is that they travel the city extensively by means of public transportation: above all from the periphery of the city, where most of the poorest live, and leave a mark in downtown, where it gains visibility for all citizens and not just for a portion. Secondly, *pixadores* also travel between their mutual “hoods” (slang for “neighborhoods”: *quebradas*) to leave their sign in more places out of their own land. There is no need to see in this a competition for territory: they’re not gangs in a common western meaning. It’s just part of getting outside a set environment (different from art galleries and commissioned street-art) and becoming ever more street-wise. Both characteristics merge to the idea that deserted places are not a hot spot for *pixadores*. Even when the desire for huge quantities of signature can occasionally use an isolated area, they are not by far the main target. In fact, the further a *pixador* can go, the better. Hence, for a *pixador* to travel to Rio and be recognized nationally is a great reward. The same applies to the chance to be seen at an international level. This is why it becomes relevant that *pixação/pixo* gets European recognition in France, in 2009. The key person in many of the above interventions is Cripta Djan Ivson.

#### 5. São Paulo Environments

A large metropolis like SP challenges the entire population. Everyone confronts long distances as obstacles to reach any point of the city. Some people move with the city more than others. In this financial center there is a high rate of helicopter-taxi trips. Fear and money are high stakes: executives travel by air avoiding the time and hassle of congested traffic, as well as any human contact in their trajectories. On the other side of the spectrum, the poorest people have to travel in slow, crammed, overcrowded metros, trains and buses for several hours every day. Young men, those who have no other merits than a motorcycle and their time, serve as transporters and get to know the flow of the streets from the very inside. The differences in this spectrum, then, are a matter of exposure: to dangers, to messages, to the unexpected, to not having better resources to move around the city.

The environment can imprison those who have no other choice but to cross it as a jungle. Personal environments

are created and handled in different ways and sizes. The environment of a person (or in biology, of a species) is made up of the region that surrounds an individual: the range of this Umwelt, following Von Uëxkull, depends on the distance from which it’s likely to receive attention. The problem is that this ‘potential bubble’ that surrounds the person can move, and can expand or contract according to each person’s behaviour (Goffman 1972: 248-256). A problem nowadays is that the rich mostly seek only to hide.

*While there is increasing violence, the result of a massive degree of social exclusion, this has pushed the wealthy inside their homes where they are protected by alarms, electric fences, surveillance systems, and armies of security guards. (Lamazares 2014: 328)*

And the poor are in a sense the most exposed but free. *Pixadores* move around showing what they do and defend their practice as legitimate. Even if all explanations seem to come short, they give their *pixos* a bodily defense: be it when running around the city, climbing buildings and people, or be it in confrontation with the police, angry neighbors, or at an art Biennial, such as that of 2012 in Berlin.

#### 6. *Pixação* at Stake in 2012 Biennial. Cripta

At the beginning of 2011, Cripta Djan was asked to participate in the 7th Biennial of Berlin (2012): “Forget fear”. A curator of the event, Joanna Warsza, spoke to Djan face to face in Brazil (Macruz 2012). He was summoned with a total of five other people to give a workshop on “politics of the poor,” but as the trip was not funded by Germany the group was slightly reduced. Eventually four took the plane self-financed through Brazilian agency MinC. Along with Cripta went three other *pixadores*: RC, also from the grife Cripta; William from Operação; and Biscoito from União 12. With them was the Brazilian academic and curator Sérgio Miguel Franco.

“You can’t demonstrate what *pixação* is in a workshop” said Djan (Ferraz 2012) explaining what he intended to show in the Berlin presentation. The Berlin church, site of the workshop, was covered with cloth: since its walls were not to get actually painted. The group of *pixadores* reached the naked walls. The organizers –says the *pixador*– despaired: the *pixadores* weren’t authorized to paint there. The simple response was: “Good, if it’s not allowed then we’re going to *pixar*”. At that point –Djan narrates– a heated discussion began between the Brazilians and the organizers and the latter threatened with calling the police. Djan considered



leaving with the other *pixadores*: “they couldn’t even handle five minutes of ink” reflected Djan (Macruz 2012), so why should the *pixadores* stay? Joanna insisted that they stay and hold a debate.

At that moment, the curator of the Biennial –Artur Żmijewski– soaked Djan in water. The *pixador* reacted in Portuguese: “Are you crazy? That’s physical aggression! We were attacking the wall!” The picture in the newspapers showed Djan’s reaction: soaking the curator back with yellow paint. After that, Żmijewski painted him back too. At that provocation, the *pixadores* began to hang from all sorts of places and to *pixar* the church entirely. And the curator was believed to have called the police –according to Djan. To cut a long story short, half a dozen policemen flew to the scene. Djan could only avoid getting caught because of his physical skill to escape the police’s grasp. In the middle of the struggle Djan speaks, first he says “no” several times. Then he lifts his arm to demand an explanation from those who invited him to the event. Meanwhile, a single policeman tries to pull him away. Djan stays in place and responds in Portuguese “Calm down” (Calma). In sum, what this *pixador* and the whole group knew before travelling was that it was not a risk-free invitation. The stakes were that he/they knew that *pixar* moves disruptive energies and that their legal integrity as well as their bodies were at risk, when climbing and when stopped/controlled. It’s not merely a matter of discourse, or art, or a political stance. The negotiations needed to *pixar* are multifold. One thing is common to all these actions in *pixação*: *Pixadores* get to manage and expand their own environment and interact with the public.

#### Body Climbing/Hanging: *Pixadores* Risking Life in High Buildings

The importance of taking a risk to gain visibility is more acute in the downtown areas of São Paulo. Galeria do Rock is a downtown 5-level shopping zone where *pixadores* and street artists in general get their supplies: from spray cans, rollers paints and brushes, to even a hair-cut, music, skates and clothes. This place is a strong social magnet, and the vicinity of the area is a heavily *pixo* intervened area. Due to the social activity surrounding Galeria Do Rock, it could be considered a *pixo* magnet. Across the street a tall glass building received *pixação*: a chosen place for extra visibility and for showing the “merit”/risk of the stunt both to the city in general and for other *pixadores* alike. *Pixadores* don’t take these interventions lightly, on the contrary, a proper

*pixo* is valuable for their community and they ponder several considerations. If a *pixador* is to paint a high building it is most likely that they will study several aspects before attempting it: such as best time of attack depending on night watch, the side of building that is most accessible to climb, and of course the best color to paint with depending on the color of the surface to make the *pixo*.

Most *pixação* is done in monochrome. However, *pixadores* do have a sensibility to choose proper paints and a sense of which color choice will enhance the visibility of their signatures. Epistemologically, the way in which a text is written and the surface they occupy are both equally valuable, in the semiological sense: “the writing surface is not just the background of writing; rather, it plays an active role in the creation and perception of writing” (Harris in Avramidis 2014: 88). Some *pixadores* purposely seek to compose the environment with color. When colors blend and become fluid the separation between text and image becomes more blurry, less evident, and the actors and works can explore that diffusion of boundaries.



Fig. 4 - Picture of High Contrast *Pixação*: White Paint over Black [Source: Benjamin Juarez from Galeria do Rock, São Paulo 2013.03.22]

### 7. Writing or Drawing? *Pixação*'s Ambiguous Nature

Potentialities of *Pixação*: Moving Beyond the Current Framework

Plenty has been said of *pixação*, that it has been political, poetic and vandalic. But it has also been said to be pacific, artistic and abstract; “the mute screech of the invisible”, “the revolt of the skinny”. It’s been said that the visual style of

*pixação* has a link with the primitive letters of Barbarians, or shares a resemblance with runes<sup>1</sup>. Above, I've mentioned the social implications of *pixação*. The current views on *pixação*, are basically two: ugly-illegal-incomprehensible, pretty-valuable-subcultural. On both, there's a monolithic underlying meaning. The latter values the city, and from it it takes its spirit, form, reality as is with defects and substance. The *pixadores* exist in the city as long as they can interplay with others. They know that not many approve of their *pixos*, but as they say: "we prefer to be hated, rather than ignored". What about aesthetic considerations? Can *pixações* (*pixação* pl.) be considered mid-way between letters and images? The inscriptions can be considered solely as forms, taking away the negative (or positive) social characterization. All texts have a discursive weight and a figurative one as well, as (texts-)images. I once showed pictures of *pixação* (without explaining context) to my brother Pato, a graphic designer. He appreciated them as sophisticated typography, as original abstract lettering. Canevacci (2009v) pointed in the same direction: *pixos* aren't simply strange letters nor filth, rather they carry an underlying and imagetic meaning to be decyphered, like a cryptic alphabet; adding that *pixação* is somewhat like an ideogram: "You have to discover its meaning, which is not only literal/alphabetical, but imagetic as well".

The city can be seen as a polyphony where countless participants converge in a crowded and noisy combination. To see SP through these eyes doesn't mean paying attention to *pixos* alone but seeing how it all speaks with the rest in that environment. None become the main protagonist of the concert, the decentralization allows for new experiences.

*Polyphony is a method that multiplies the researcher's glance, the style of representation, the presence of several subjectivities inside the text expressing their own voices. Polyphony is in the object (the fieldwork), in the subject (the ethnographer and the informants), and in the method (different styles of representation). (Canevacci 2012: IX).*

Interpreting words, drawings, paintings, figures and so on isn't all about cracking a code. Dialoguing with images can rather be allowing a flow of expressiveness to come out, even when it's not fully comprehensible<sup>2</sup>. This possibility could expand

the language of the city and the way in which we could live among the marks. It's not in fact all a matter of making the correct representation, but rather of expanding the language of possibilities, beyond a defined content (Karatzogianni & Robinson: 2010: 16). Are *pixo* letters or images? Why choose? On another realm of senses: the category of 'sound' is often split into two: 'noise', which is chaotic, unfamiliar, and offensive; and 'music', which is harmonious, resonant, and divine (Klett & Gerber 2014). The challenge at this point is to see not only the potential that each pole has but also the degree to which each extreme connects with the other forming a gradation. Björk (experimental singer-songwriter, multi-instrumentalist) is able to sing in such a way to form a continuum with her natural spoken voice: that is, there's not a distinguishable separation between when she speaks and when she sings. *Pixos* can be letters or images or in between. In any case, they communicate a mood.

## 8.Explorations of Boundaries in Colors, Forms and Space

To see *pixação* and experience its feeling, the most direct option is to walk through SP. Also one can see *pixo* through pictures, videos, and even texts. Representations of reality come at different levels: separating from the real thing can create a whole conceptual world, in words; or abstract, in a universal sense (*pixação* out of context), and even in



Fig.6 - Infinite Creativity Chart [Source: McCloud (1994: 51)]

1 - *Pixação* has several unfoldings, and it could be a limitation to fixate an analysis on just one aspect.

2 - Creativity isn't all about ex-expression but about im-expression too.





Fig. 5 - Pixação or Graffiti/Street Art? Sliks Abstract Explorations, [Source: Rafael Sliks at cargocollective.com]

shapes and colors that don't resemble but a mood. McCloud (1994: 48-53) proposes building a comprehensive map of languages in a triangular schema.

- Moving inside the triangle, on the horizontal representational edge: from realistic images to concepts, transforming images from sketches, into icons, and then to words.
- Moving inside the triangle, on the retinal left side edge: abstracting realistic-images to pictorial art, transforming images into abstract forms.
- I propose looking outside the triangle, to the conceptual right-edge: what happens if words are abstracted?

Moving up they singularize, personalize otherwise neutral letters. Moving further up they become unrecognizable, an unknown area.

This last edge is where the rare artist Mirtha Dermisache explored: scribbling lines in books and presenting them as art works. Ascemic writing it was called. However, the content wasn't textual but rather graphic. Here Barthes's attention got caught and defined this attempt as "neither

figural nor abstract" (Saccomanno 2004). I find that this writing style is very similar to that of *pixação* in the walls of SP and all Brazil. What would happen if more people would make this collective question out loud?

Any attentive passerby in SP can decipher the visual and social importance of *pixação*. For Chastanet (2001) the letters are unique because they have developed "a totally different imaginary calligraphy", up to the point of calling these inscriptions "calligraphic graffiti", and goes on to state that these inscriptions work through a "parallel prestige economy" where signatures in public spaces are "more about seeing than reading". The act of writing *pixação* implies that the lettering is not repeated automatically following a mechanic standard but with the craft and personality of a signature: the use of language forms and letters also involves committed training in "penmanship, calligraphy, and typography" (Chmielewska 2007: 149).

Sliks started signing in school. The (re)affirmation of his own signature gave him "the basic condition to exist", which applies, in his words both to graffiti writers and *pixadores*. His style has been connected with Jackson Pollock's, the

abstract artist. The common point between all practices was through his signature, his tag. The tag, together with handwriting, voice and other personal elements are frequently said to be unique. Each individual has a style, a manner on how to leave a trace. The personality is added to the textual content, and the text itself can become more imagetic when personal style is present. "Lettering, treated 'graphically' provides a mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound" (Eisner 2000: 10).

## 9. Closing remarks

The most incredible findings while in Brazil were to realize that: many people were pro-graffiti/street-art; graffiti/street art was not only tolerated but legal and promoted; an opposition underlay: people eventually added to be against *pixação*.

I explored elsewhere (2014) this historic construction of opposing terms –street art vs *pixo*. Here, I sought the way in which *pixadores* claim the importance of their signatures at several levels, and the stakes it involves to do so. This claim requires that all citizens see/read the city in a different way: a silent revolt against the lack of livable conditions that affect a great many. This requires for a negotiation of space and bodies with *pixadores* in a new light as well. How we see shapes, lights and colors is a matter of interpretation. The problem arises when the lens of interpretation are so biased that no alternatives appear. Whatever is presented as disorderly, non-patterned inscriptions is sensed as conveying an inhospitable desert. On the opposite, the organized, tidy city transmits a (too) calm and serene feeling.

There seem to be blinded views on the massive *pixação*. Blindness to the social presence of others as part of society. Blindness as to the conditions a large percentage of the local population lives in, and remains ignored, even despite the silent yet visible scream that is *pixo*. Numbness, or lack of awareness, as to what happens to a subworld that speaks to the entire city. An inability to see the city and its walls for what they are: divisor, more than unifiers. Hence, private property and ownership become unquestionable values, disregarding any other consideration.

In sum, I feel the periods *pixação* went through in the past five decades resemble those of a long Cold War. Since 2011, that confrontation became more heated because of the law getting harder on *pixadores*, who at the same time have raised and heightened their voices and traces to speak to the

city and world population, not without debate. Djan cut off his relationship with the worldly twin artists Os Gêmeos and considered them worms whose interest was "only to link up with *pixação* to promote their own selves as transgressors and discoverers of the movement (Djan 2010b). In Sampa (SP) one thing is for sure: "No surfaces go uncovered" (Ganz & Manco 2004: 19). What are the public's ears and eyes capable of interpreting and giving back? Beware of the double stream of exclusions: not only the majority scorns the periphery, but the marginalized create a full autonomous culture in their own right (Silva 2012). According to the German Biennial's curator Artur Żmijewski, he could make a "dialogue in colors" with *pixador* Cripta Djan as he said jokingly (in Cypriano 2012): one ended up yellow and the other blue. What are the growing moods –and views– that the walls and people favour? The seeds of the city continue to grow.

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