*Excerpt from*

"Overthrowing the Grey: the Effect of Street Art on Buenos Aires Culture"

# 1. Walls, Streets, and People

You're kneading empanada dough on the kitchen counter and listening to the news on the radio. Pessimistic, as usual—the economy is plummeting again, everyone's rushing downtown for yet another futile protest, and even the safest neighborhoods suffer armed robberies. It's a Tuesday afternoon, and the kids are at school. Your right foot is standing in a puddle of sunshine on the floor, your left foot in the soft blue shadows.

The doorbell rings. You flick the scraps of dough off your fingers, walk to the foyer, and open the front door. The twenty-something on the sidewalk has a tuft of messy dark hair on the top of his head, but he's buzzed the sides.

"Hola," he says. "I'm an artist, and I noticed you have a lot of graffiti on your house. I'd like to paint a mural over it." You notice a tote bag full of aerosol cans next to his feet. He has some kind of apocalyptic gas mask in there, too.

You frown a little. Somebody's always going door-to-door with the latest scam—or burglary. "How much will it cost?" you ask.

"Nothing; it's free. All I need is your permission to paint."

"You're sure it's free?"

"Absolutely." He pulls a notepad out of his pocket and flips it open to a chaotic sketch of a train, some triangles, a man with a yak's head. "I was thinking of painting this."

"Okay, sure," you say. He thanks you, and you close the door. You lock it. You walk back to the kitchen, thinking about taking the kids to the park this weekend. A stranger is currently spray-painting his abstract, existentialist self-expression on the outside of the house that cost your life's savings to buy, and you hardly even care. If anything, you're grateful.

Painting street art in Buenos Aires is just that easy.

The main ingredients for making a city: walls, streets—and people.

They are a funny combination. Concrete and asphalt, wood and stone, the epitome of rigidity and sharp angles. But people—people are soft, if not in skin then in their hearts, or in their resolution perhaps. Unpredictable people do not fit into blueprints or map grids. They make decisions based on desire and emotion. They love and hate, dream and remember.

So what happens if you let three million people loose in a seemingly endless stretch of right-angled efficiency? Who is really in charge—the walls, the streets, or the souls?

Graffiti is as old as civilization itself. Rome, Pompeii, and the Parthenon all have their ancient paint stains, according to street artist Blek le Rat (*Graffiti Mundo*). Art history courses usually begin by discussing the oldest art works known to still exist, the cave paintings—on cave *walls*. Even before we built walls, we were painting them.

But graffiti has picked up a bad rap somewhere along the way. It may be history in Rome, but almost anywhere else in the world it's just vandalism.

*Almost* anywhere else. In Buenos Aires, graffiti covers the walls as naturally as cars fill the streets. Buenos Aires harbors the typical scrawled names and curse words, smeared like garbage on the buildings, as well as more stylized tags, bright points that loop back on themselves and hardly resemble letters. But some of the walls here look different: they have *pictures* painted on the concrete. One-color stencils stamped across entire neighborhoods. Political slogans and satires. And colorful murals that look like they crawled out of art galleries, museums, and coffee shops to decorate the *outsides* of the walls instead of the insides.

They are everywhere—in subway stations, on houses, on the sides of abandoned or unfinished buildings. Some districts are running out of blank walls. Others don't look as much like coloring book pages, but the street art is always there, hiding just around the corner or tucked away by the train tracks. It has come to define the city; the tourists snap pictures of their favorite pieces, and the locals recognize the characters and styles that crop up again and again.

Whatever Buenos Aires used to be, that city has vanished. The past lingers on, as it always does, roaring and whispering its influence into the present, but many newer voice have changed the culture here, and one of them is street art. Buenos Aires is a new city every day.

This is an account of what street art is doing to Buenos Aires.

## 2. Erasing the Blankness

The walls of Buenos Aires were blank, and the voices of the people were silent.

The year was 1982, but as far as the Argentine government was concerned, it was already Orwell's *1984*. A military dictatorship had seized power six years earlier, and the leaders maintained they tyrannical control of the country by abducting and murdering anyone who spoke out against the government. "Silence is healthy," they advised the people—they wanted to prove to the world that under their reign, Buenos Aires would be kempt and quiet, utopian, without traffic noise or graffiti, as Juan Transmonte explains (M. Ruiz 149). No one missed the implied mandate to keep one's opinions silent, too. Graffiti wasn't just punishable by fines—it could be punishable by death.

But on the other side of the Atlantic, Argentine muralist Gerardo Cianciolo was beginning to probe into the questions of art philosophy, opening a discussion about art's commercial, aesthetic, and political values (D. Ruiz). Many of Argentina's artists may have been in exile in Europe, but they were thinking, dreaming, planning, and waiting. Instead of exterminating the people's creative ability, suffering stirred it up.

When the dictatorship crumbled in 1983, the graffiti revolution began (D. Ruiz). All the energy that had been building up in the quiet—the political rants, the

lamentations, the need for outlet and self-expression—burst onto the walls of Buenos Aires. The youths expressed their renewed feelings of hope and power through aerosol; "making political paintings during that time meant feeling the excitement of the reclaimed territory and the adrenaline of danger," as Juan Trasmonte says (M. Ruiz 149).

And so it continued for the next ten years, as *Graffiti Argentina* documents. The graffiti of that time rarely consisted of more than sloppy words slapped on the concrete; then it evolved into more elaborate letter graffiti. In 1992, twin street artists Os Gemeos from Brazil decided that it would be fun to paint a few murals in Argentina, so they took a vacation in Buenos Aires and doodled on a few walls (3). And the graffiti writers noticed. The twins went home soon afterwards, but during their short stay in the city they had redefined the use of aerosols in Argentina (3). The writers weren't just writing anymore: they began to *draw*.

Jaz, one of the first Argentines to develop urban art, tells the history of Buenos Aires street art in *Graffiti Argentina.* The Buenos Aires artists had to invent urban art on their own, completely detached from the influence of other cities' street art. They had no one to teach them, no examples to follow. And paint was scarce: stores didn't carry aerosol, so artists bought low-quality cans from random dealers in sketchy neighborhoods (4). These artists would spend hours unclogging caps, or nozzles, of spray paint cans so they could refill them and use them again (81).

But limited resources breed ingenuity (Lewisohn 65). No other city has paralleled the rapid development of street art in Buenos Aires, as street artist Teko details (M. Ruiz 31). Modern-day Argentine street art stands on par with the murals of any other major city in the world—cities whose artists enjoyed the benefits of better paint, a longer history of urban art, and an open flow of communication with international artists (31). The Buenos Aires artists, in contrast, mixed their own colors and invented their own styles (4). They had much to say, and they were determined to speak.

A nation is hard to stitch back together. When democracy returned to Argentina in 1983, the government knew exactly how to mend some wrongs—no more torturing and executing private citizens, for one. But other crises that the dictatorship had ignited were harder to solve, like the shattered economy. Year after year, the banks could not straighten out the country's ever-worsening financial knots.

In December 2001, panic triggered a bank run, and the limping economy finally collapsed altogether. Families lost two-thirds of their life savings. The people rioted in the streets, banging spoons against pots and pans, until the president resigned and fled from the Pink House in a helicopter. No one had the nerve to pick up such a broken, angry country; Argentina went through five presidents in ten days. The new year dawned on a national consciousness redefined by a second catastrophe. This time, the people emerged bitter and hopeless.

They painted cynical warnings and hateful complaints in the streets (Ross). Once again, the walls offered themselves up to a restless generation as a place where they could come and cry or yell at ruthless systems beyond their control. The graffiti and street art of Buenos Aires told not its history but its present, as the artists scratched out old messages and scribbled their thoughts about current events on the walls.

Just as the fall of the dictatorship had birthed an increase of graffiti writing, the economic crisis cued a surge in street art. In 2002-2003, urban murals transformed from an occasional phenomenon to a widespread obsession (Ross).

They changed in form, as well. According to Ross, a group of university students decided that they were tired of incessant pessimism. They wanted to cheer up their smoldering city. So they bought a palette of bright colors and covered a few buildings in simplistic, curvy cartoons. Their murals had no words and no message; they were young men using aerosol to paint children's daydreams on buildings for no other reason than because it was the opposite of the anger they had inherited. Another artist saw the infantile murals and emulated them. The style caught on, and muñequismo fell softly as snow to cover up the harsh and blocky graffiti that had gone before it.

And so street art grew. Many artists still use it to advance a certain cause, but others tap into its ability to impact people and spaces simply by its beauty. Urban art still includes messages and statements, but now it serves other purposes as well; muñequismo gifted street art with the capacity to touch the human spirit more directly, without the intermediaries of words. Muñequismo brightened the city and lifted people's spirits—maybe only for a moment, but one person at a time, it did.