

Oral Tradition and Heritage in the Practice of Graffiti and Street Art in Mexico City

While the now iconic book *Subway Art* inspired many writers internationally during the boom of graffiti in the early 1980s, the shared practice of graffiti writing in situ, in different cities around the world, also influenced many taggers and bombers. In the case of Mexico City, those who had lived for periods in New York and other larger US cities were key social actors in the local scene. The practice was also spread through books, fan magazines, and homemade zines, etc. Although the ways of documenting this cultural movement have shifted over the decades as this type of urban art became established, zines and underground publications still play a significant role in the subculture.

With the advent of the internet and particularly social media, the way of showing one's graffiti to the rest of the world changed, with an ever stronger focus on photographic documentation. Currently, it is possible to learn to tag, bomb, or make large format works from online social networks, rather than through more traditional face to face learning. Although the internet can be isolating, it also has the capacity to conjoin geographically separated networks: from the Mediterranean to the Brazilian favelas, and from Banksy's pieces, globally, to the streets where new African crews paint.

Having conducted 27 interviews with graffiti writers and street artists in Mexico City as part of my research, I have learnt that the practices of these artists – both as individuals and as crews – have changed or evolved over time in response to both endogenous and exogenous factors. Endogenous factors relate to such things as novice writers having to learn from their friends or local contemporaries how to master the techniques of using spray cans, how to make increasingly large pieces in increasingly difficult to reach spots, and how to evade the police. In the absence of 'graffiti schools', these are immersive experiences that are inherited in situ from generation to generation. Exogenous factors, in turn, relate to graffiti's ability to travel and reach other cities, countries, and continents, despite being a structurally sanctioned practice. In the past, it spread via heroic anti-system stories, which stand in an oral tradition and are a key part of graffiti culture.

Rubí Celia Ramírez Núñez
Dr. José María Luis Mora
Research Institute, Mexico City



Graffiti pieces by various writers, Mexico City, Mexico, 2021.
Photograph ©Rubí Celia Ramírez Núñez.

This brief essay is about how the oral tradition in the graffiti and street art movements has been consolidated as a transmitter of subcultural and practical knowledge. Although the practices throughout its history have changed, they are far from a fleeting fashion – on the contrary, they continue to strengthen over time. Oral tradition, by definition, is a way of transmitting knowledge, as it:


[...] educates new generations through stories, rituals, songs, dances, and paintings, cultural manifestations of great significance. [...] it covers aspects such as the family, the community, the forests, and the streets, that is, the world and the environment that surrounds people. (Silva Rivera, 2017: n.p.).

In Mexico, there are currently many active graffiti writers who first emerged during the second wave of contemporary graffiti in the 1980s. The places they would meet were initially public squares, for example the Tianguis Cultural del Chopo ('El Chopo') flea market in Mexico City, which was attended by young people aged 14 and over who generally hung out with friends from school. Another cultural arena which 'connected' new graffiti writers in Mexico in the '80s and '90s were the rock dance floors. The local transfer of knowledge among participants has been fundamental to give continuity to its tradition, one which, following the NYC style writing tradition, in Mexico City also often involved an important part of hip-hop culture, manifested in dance meetings. For Mexican graffiti writers of this period, it was common to share local styles and practical techniques, such as the mixing of colours from can to can. The graffiti writer 'Humo Sin Fronteras' (Humo Without Borders) was part of the second wave of graffiti in the metropolitan area of Mexico City in the mid-nineties. He reports that he has since directly or indirectly influenced several generations of emergent graffiti writers.

Mexico also has a rich history of muralism that predates the more recent rise of murals as 'street art' in cities all over the world. These older oral traditions, along with contemporary variants, continue to exert an influence locally. Indeed, there is often an emphasis placed on representing older traditions – or intangible cultural heritage – in contemporary murals. My interviewees reported that many projects subsidised with private and/or public resources seek to weave links between street artists and the communities where their murals are made. As artist The Nooks asserted:

Things happen, and you have to adapt to the contexts, to social movements, to what is happening [...] murals change lives, they change the environment, because you take on all those factors and aspects of that place where you are going to paint and not only of the neighbourhood, but of ethnicity, customs, colours, shapes, things with which the people who live there identify, because if not, I think what you are saying is a bit empty. If not the mural goes unnoticed, you do not unite people, it is very nice when people unite to take care of it, the same people value it, without you having to tell them anything, they simply do it because you are moving something, raising awareness.

Prior to painting the walls, most of the urban art creators in my empirical sample carry out research in the local communities to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the budget assigned to the project. In the transfer of knowledge between the community and the artist there is a strong reciprocity. When street artists interact for prolonged periods of time with a local community, the inhabitants are more likely to appropriate the murals and take care of them. My informants reported that their murals often become points of reference and in some cases, key meeting places for public life.



Leonardo 'Zukher' working on a mural co-produced with Hadestencil, Mexico City, Mexico, 2021. Photograph ©Rubi Celia Ramírez Núñez.



However, the social dynamics of Mexico City are disparate, since circumstances change from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. There are highly gentrified areas that are part of financial districts or areas of high capital gains; thus, the transfer of knowledge does not occur through the act of creating large-format murals, it only occurs in the periphery. Furthermore, the creation of state-subsidised murals as a way of 'recovering' traditions is, according to critics, prone to becoming a form of visual hegemony. According to Mirzoeff (2011), in cases like this, the right to look as a discursive practice and the freedom to look as an event of individual autonomy, may be disrupted.

Since its origins, graffiti has celebrated transgression, but this circumstance does not exempt it from carrying on the oral tradition of an urban culture that reflects the social, economic, and even political reality of young and older people who inhabit public space. Indeed, to know what is happening culturally in a place, it is very important to look at the rhythms people listen and dance to in public and private spaces, at what they paint in the streets, and what they exhibit in galleries open to new expressions. The knowledge that the graffiti writers and street artists I interviewed have shared with me stems primarily from their shared oral traditions drawn from their experience on the streets. Here, Humo Sin Fronteras reflects on this:

I lived with a lot of people who liked punk and I liked it because it was the rebelliousness and the rage and this thing of saying something and hitting the system and all those things. It was something that I intended. I mean, no way! So when I know graffiti I say: graffiti is the tool to change something in the street, right? To cause a mess. Something! Whatever!... So, I mean, I adopt it and I say: No way! I'm in charge of this mess.

Oral testimonies have helped me perform a complex analysis of what Geertz (1980) called the informal logic of real life. This essay is an open invitation to research graffiti and street art history by drawing directly from the shared experiences and memories of contemporary social actors immersed in these practices.





A mural by Amauri Esmarq, Mexico City, Mexico, 2021. Photograph ©Rubi Celia Ramírez Núñez.

References

Cooper, M. & Chalfant, H. (1984) *Subway Art*. New York: Henry Holt.

Geertz, C. (1980) *The Interpretation of Culture and the Culture of Interpretation*. Princeton: University Press.

Hermida Rosales, C. H. (2017) 'Tradición oral, forma eficiente de transmitir el conocimiento'. *Universo Sistema de noticias de la Universidad Veracruzana*, December 7, 2017. [Online] Accessed August 16, 2024. <https://www.uv.mx/prensa/general/tradicion-oral-forma-eficiente-de-transmitir-el-conocimiento>.

Mirzoeff, N. (2011) *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Silva Rivera, E. (2017) Conference paper. 2nd International Congress on *Evolutionary Thought, Veracruz University, in conjunction with the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the Center for Philosophical, Political and Social Studies 'Vicente Lombardo Toledano'*. November 29 to December 1, 2017.

RUBÍ CELIA RAMÍREZ NÚÑEZ holds a Masters in Government and Public Affairs from the School of Political and Social Sciences at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She is a political scientist and research coordinator at the Dr. José María Luis Mora Research Institute in Mexico City. The scope of Ramírez Núñez's research covers public space, citizenship, and local government institutions. Her publications 'El graffiti, un nuevo muralismo' (Graffiti, a new kind of muralism') and 'Nuevos muralistas exhiben el coraje del personal de salud' ('New muralists showcase the courage of health workers') in the *Revista Bicentenario* are the result of her focus on contemporary social and cultural actors through oral history.