

- SOCIALLY ENGAGED STREET ART -



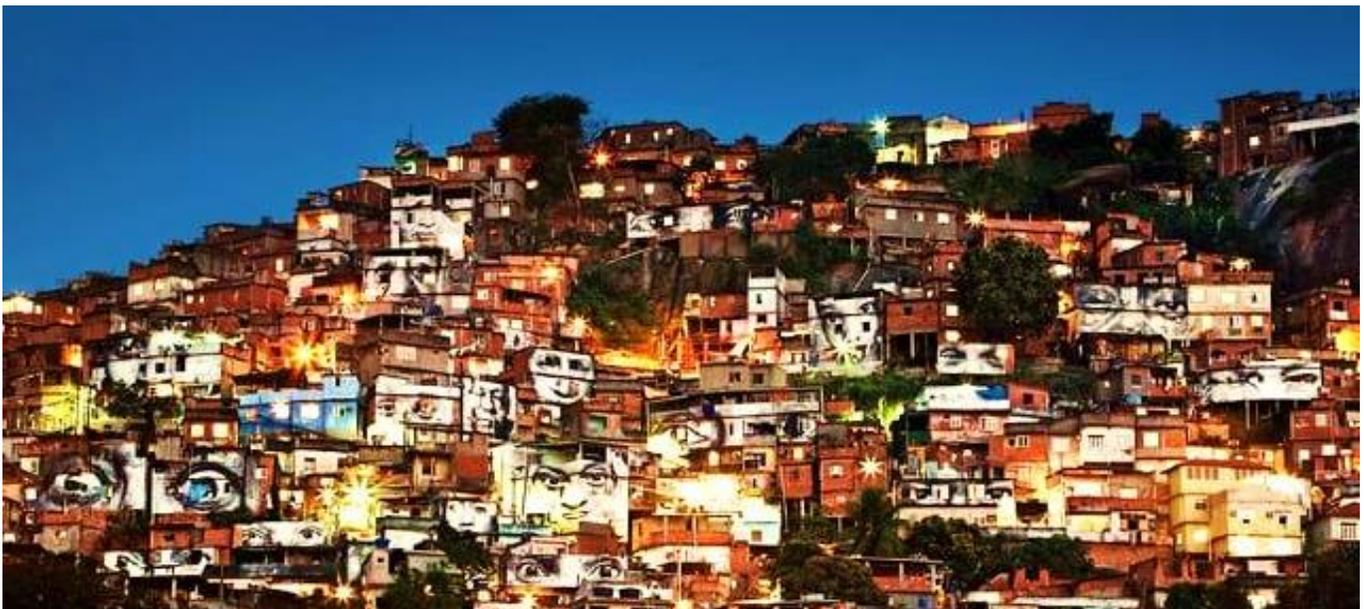
Las Etnias by Eduardo Kobra- Rio de Janeiro- 2016

Street art is a sort of catch-all term for artwork done in public places- sculptures, paintings, pasting images, projections, etc. It's not necessarily the same thing as graffiti, but is oftentimes done illegally. It began as a counter-cultural movement, but has developed into something much bigger than anti-establishment. Though there is a lot of debate as to how to precisely categorize street art, there seems to be three set parameters to qualify:

1. Placed in public space
2. Not advertising
3. Emphasizes spectator's situational encounter with the work

Street art is a means of reclaiming a space as public. Historic precedents potentially range as far back as Paleolithic cave paintings- the term "graffiti" taken from an inscription on a wall discovered at Pompeii. To some it's as simple as vandalism, and sometimes it's hard to see anything more than just that. However, when used responsibly, it's also an act toward reclaiming a space; especially "in-between spaces"- the spaces typically just passed through, and makes them noticed. The efforts of the artists operating in these in-between places have been a means of generating great social change numerous times in recent history. (Young 2014)

The following will be directed at specifically addressing examples of the significance these public advocates for awareness and change have had in places like Latin America where the graffiti of these "in-between spaces" can be the cry of an otherwise voiceless people.



Section from JR's Women are Heroes project- Rio de Janeiro- 2009

THE METHODS

There are as many forms of street art as can be imagined, but the most common forms of graffiti and street art generated in Latin America are as follows:



Tagging

A tag is the most basic signature, usually completed very quickly. They are often found in large groups like the one pictured, as a means of an individual or group of individuals designating a territory.



Toss ups

Toss ups are visually more developed than a simple tag, and take more time to complete. They are generally text-based and also serve as a signatory mark. This one is by Jolt- Denver, CO



Wildstyle

Wildstyle is a specific type of toss up with a characteristically aggressive and interconnected typography. This one is by Pesa-Albuquerque, NM



Pichacao

Pichacao is a system of cryptic writing, similar to runes- originally created in the 1940's-50's by spreading tar into large oppositional political slogans in public areas. Pichacao nearly disappeared in the 70's, but re-emerged in the 80's as a means of territorial marking by street gangs. Part of the dynamic of Pichacau graffiti is the challenge of its placement, usually spread across the entire façade of a large building. Today, it is largely condemned across nearly all areas of Brazilian culture. (Tristan

Manco 2005)



(Kunzle 1995) Stencils

Stencils can be simple single-layered pieces, or more complex with a variety of layering colors and values. The stencils themselves are typically labor intensive to prepare, but very quick apply. In Latin America stencils are commonly used in protest art because the speed at which they can be deployed minimizes risk of being caught, and the stencils can be used over and over again. They also make pieces with a lot of text easy to execute legibly and consistently. This one is *Camera Man and Flower* by Banksy.



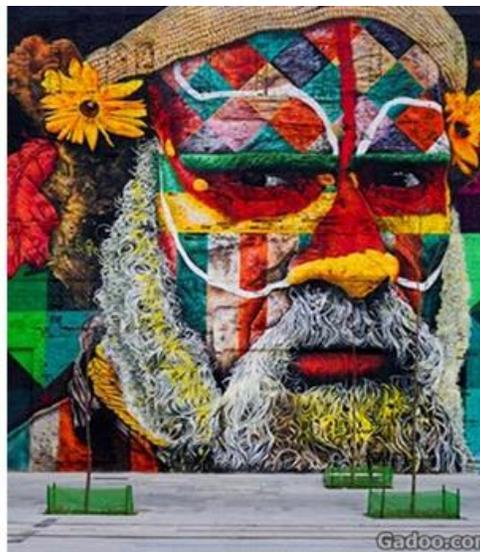
Wheat Pasting

Wheat pasting is popular because it's an easy way to place a complex image on a large scale. It can also be done cheaply. A simple wheat-based glue can be mixed and applied to paper, which can then be adhered to a wall. The drawback of wheat pasting is that the paper and glue don't last very long, comparatively. Pictured is Shephard Fairey placing an image during his *Obama Hope* campaign.



Stickers

They're very cheap to mass-produce and can be quickly placed nearly anywhere. The drawback here: they're stickers- not great for anything on a larger scale, and temporary.



Murals

This is what we will be looking at mostly. Murals are generally large-scale (sometimes extremely large-scale) paintings that can be very intricate, and can also incorporate the techniques listed above. Murals are a great way to draw attention, but for the same reason it's difficult to place a mural without having consent either legally or from a property-owner. This is a section of *Las Etnias*, completed in 2016 by Eduardo Kobra.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Street art democratizes the act of making art. According to American street artist, Swoon, “It is an act of interacting with and upon culture, not just commenting on it.” It is a platform that circumvents consensus or approval from any other social structure or political system. It becomes a voice for the unrepresented or disenfranchised. (Young 2014) (Klanten 2011)

The following sections will attempt to elaborate on both the magnitude and efficacy of a few specific examples of each of these motivations executed. The two primary areas we will be focusing primarily on are Nicaragua and the major cities of Brazil.



Roberto Delgado's *Martyr Gallery*, Esteli, Popular Center for Culture.

A CRY FOR JUSTICE! – NICARAGUA’S SANDINISTA REVOLUTION

Political art is the art created where it is unfashionable and when it is uncomfortable- legally uncomfortable, civically uncomfortable, humanely uncomfortable- Tania Bruguera (Klanten 2011)

In North American cities the connotations attached to graffiti and street art are typically tied to subcultures like street gangs. In Nicaragua, however, there is a much larger counterculture being represented.

Nicaragua has a turbulent political history marked by dramatic periods of social neglect, rebellion, and healing through different versions of colonization, autocracy, oligarchy, and democracy. Within these systems the “otherness” has consistently found graffiti and more formal street art the platform for their specific perspectives since the 1940’s. (Klanten 2011) This direct tie between social justice and street art can best be summarized by the following two quotes:

“For public justice to be served, victims of crime need acknowledgement of the harm caused. Aesthetics create a narrative to address this harm. Street art addressed the right to be heard beyond the intervention of social or political structures.” (Grierson 2017)

“In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it and the creation of a substitute universe. This also defines art. The demands of rebellion are really aesthetic demands.” - Albert Camus (Klanten 2011)

THE REVOLUTION



"We won, We Are Free, We Will Never Be Slaves Again!" - Bluefields- 1981

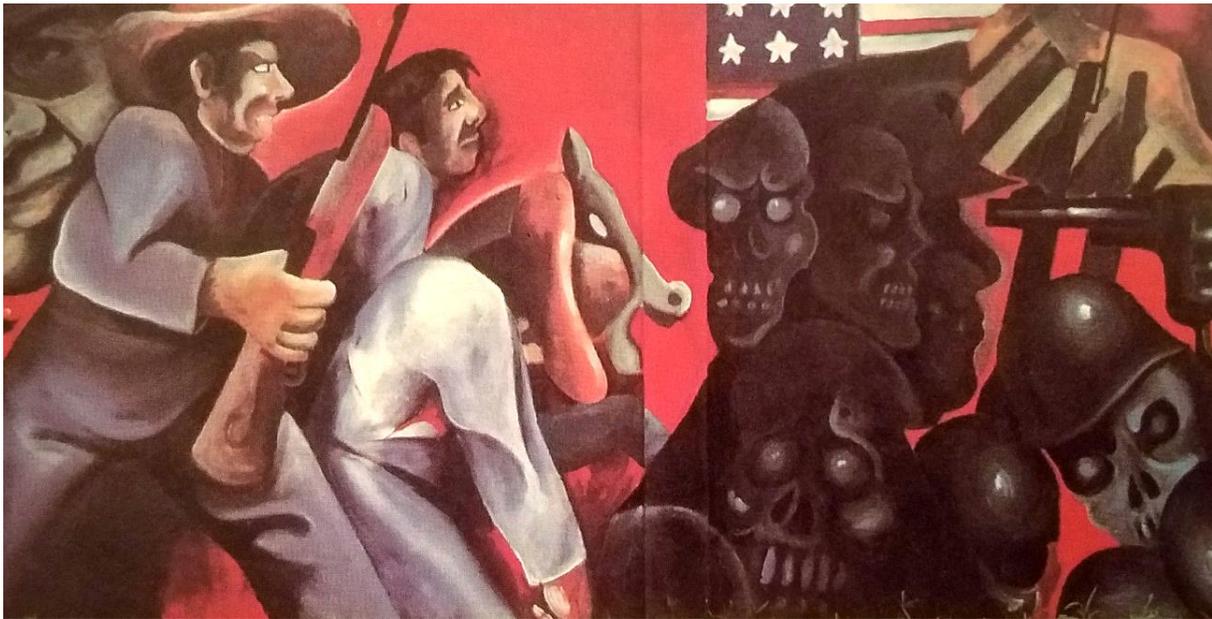
In 1979, a revolution was launched for Nicaragua's common populous to regain control of the government following Spanish colonization, foreign political destabilization, a civil war, and an oppressive dictatorship. This was the first influx of freedom of expression, experimentation, and recovery of heritage the people of Nicaragua had experiences for nearly 500 years. The name of this revolution was "The SANDINISTA Popular Revolution" (its supporters typically referred to as "SANDINISTAs") named after a populist revolutionary leader assassinated in 1934, Augusto Sandino. Hundreds of murals sprang up all over the country in an outpour of national pride and sovereignty. Nicaragua began to experience growth in all areas of its culture, literacy rates, and economic growth- all while fighting outside forces to solidify the SANDINISTA insurrection. (Kunzle 1995)



Augusto Sandino

A great resistance was generated by political systems that saw the success of the popular socialist revolution as a threat. The government of the United States was one of these political systems. For this reason, the murals themselves immediately became targets for anti-SANDINISTA forces, backed by the United States' Reagan Presidential administration. Julio Valle, Nicaraguan poet and art critic, addressed the situation as follows: "To erase the murals is to erase the beauty, the flights of fancy, and magic released by the liberation and utopic dreams of our people." The people of Nicaragua saw the defense of these murals as a defense of their own culture and freedom. These public messages served as proof of their democracy. (Kunzle 1995)

Beyond the destruction of the murals, in 1991 it became known that the American Reagan administration had been secretly and illegally funneled money into what became known as the "Contra", referring to the counter- revolution. Systematic efforts were made to undermine the stability of Nicaragua during the socialist SANDINISTA revolution, impoverishing the bulk of the nation by the late 1980's. The support provided to the Contra by the United States left Nicaragua with no means of defending itself without seeking help from the only world superpower not somehow allied to the U.S.- Russia.



Sandino Resists the United States, Managua, Tecnisa Garment Factory.

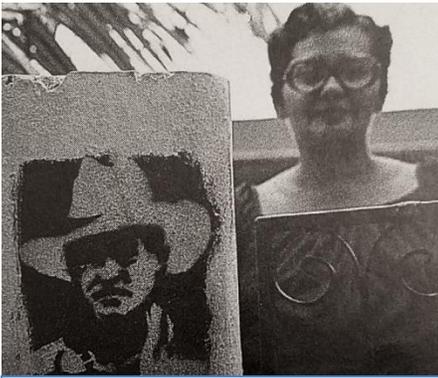
This turn of events dragged an already battle-weary and impoverished Nicaragua into the middle of the Cold War. Nicaragua's culture, economy, and autonomy are still recovering, with the International Court of Justice ordering the United States government to pay a \$17 billion indemnity for their role in the Contra-war. Nevertheless, a new puppet government had been installed (backed by the U.S.) which chose to forgive \$15 billion of the indemnity with the population of Nicaragua at 64% unemployed or underemployed. The national literacy rates, which had steadily climbed from 12% to 50%, began to fall as the newly privatized education system left the poor unserved. Books were burned, and art was censored as murals and other monuments destroyed. It was claimed for years that the most culturally significant event in Nicaragua was the annual Miss Nicaragua pageant. (Kunzle 1995)

THE MURALS

The remaining murals and photographs of those lost serve as a record of struggle throughout the entirety of the revolution, from the perspective of the Nicaraguan people- their celebrations, their dreams, their oppression, and their resentment. (Kunzle 1995)



Miranda Bergman, Marilyn Lindstrom, and assistants (*far left*) Woman with gun embracing flower; (*center*) learning about and building a new world on hope, friendship, etc.; (*far right*) children on a seesaw. Managua, Luis Alfonso Velasquez Park, Children's Library



This woman lost her son in the insurrection. Stencil, Managua,

Western culture, colonialization, and the establishment of their political oppressors. (Kunzle 1995)

The primitive aesthetic conveys a youth and newness as well as optimism for a new beginning and re-establishing a connection with those untainted sources of culture that can be specifically called “Nicaraguan”. There seems to be a collective curation for what will and will not be acceptably “Nicaraguan culture”, though the influence of other Latin American political muralists like Diego Rivera is undeniable. There is a shared interest in reconnecting with Pre-Columbian roots throughout many areas of Latin America. Nicaragua is no exception. (Kunzle 1995)

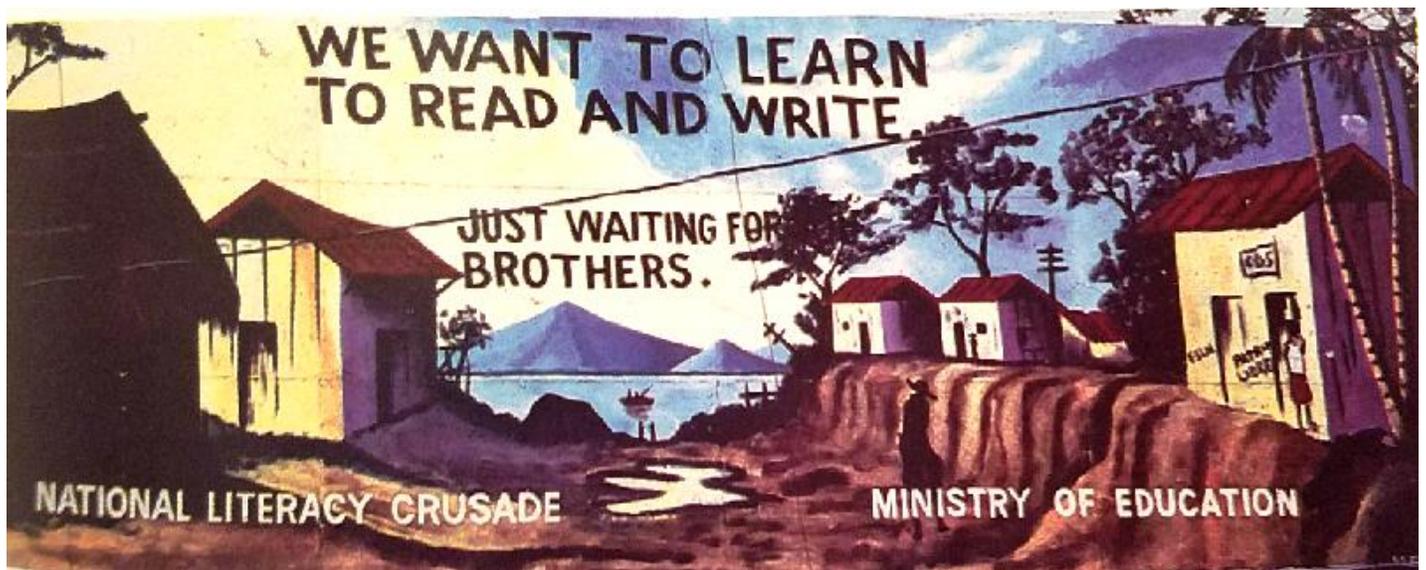
The Stetson hat was one of the earliest icons of the revolution (an item associated with the namesake of the revolution, Augusto Sandino- some of the original stencils still survive.

Nicaraguan street art is almost completely free from spray can art, more common in areas like Mexico. Throughout the revolution there was a conscious effort to avoid spray can art because the developed aesthetic would depoliticize the graffiti and its message. Unlike most almost all other areas of the world, Nicaraguan muralists consistently value the content of their work over its appearance- they are activists before all else. In many areas, a “primitivist” style is common- another conscious choice to represent freedom from the influence of



“Primitivist” style- *Defeat of Uncle Sam and a Somoza II*. Leon, Labor Union Headquarters.

Another interesting characteristic of the SANDINISTA murals is that they are never graffitied over. There seems to be a respect for whatever culture they have been able to generate. There also seems to be a respect and acknowledgement of the existence of oppositional beliefs being a part of the democratic nature of street art, even in a climate of such intense clashes of belief systems. The artwork seems to transcend antisocial anarchism itself. You may find graffiti with conflicting statements placed next to one another, but a mutual respect is maintained. (Kunzle 1995)



Literacy billboard in Bluefield

Following the political upheaval and successful revolution in Cuba, the “Cuban” style of graphic poster-like simplifications also became popular in Nicaragua. During the financial collapse of the late 1980’s materials for murals had finally become unavailable to the SANDINISTA. Recognizing the powerful role public artwork has in Nicaraguan society, arts organizations from all over the world (particularly conscientious artists from the United States) began to produce their own posters for the Nicaraguan SANDINISTA revolution. (Kunzle 1995)



“Cuban” style “Brigadistas (i.e., literacy volunteers) Yesterday, Reservists Today, Sandinistas Always!” Billboard Plaza 19 Julio, for 19 July 1981 celebrations.

Video: Proxy War in Nicaragua - US-Arms Deals with Iran I THE COLD WAR

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8lh9w_KCU

Video: What remains of Nicaragua’s revolution?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0dJoGU_jnI&t=30s

Video: Leon Nicaragua | Murals | Street Art | Solo Travel | Ep.6

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8k0l_i5r4Q

SOLUTIONS FOCUSED STREET ART

Socially aware street art doesn't have to be revolutionary. The Nicaraguan SANDINISTAs are a perfect example of the power art has to motivate and revolutionize in an official capacity, but street art can be something that works in a more gentle and nurturing way. The exact voice that seems to manifest in some places can take on a much more therapeutic role.

1. BRAZIL- SOCIAL EQUALITY

According to Brazil's Minister of Culture, Antonio Grassi, Brazil struggled to find a cultural identity in the early 1900's and became very "cannibalistic" of cultural influence- consuming what it could of influences from the West and otherwise. Street art in Sao Paulo originated in the 1950's and grew slowly during the military regime lasting from 1964-85. Because of the strict military rule, American culture was late to reach Brazil. (Konig 2013) (Schacter 2013)



Alex Vallauri



A remaining original Alex Vallauri stencil from the mid-80's

Brazil's early graffiti (1960's-70's) was strongly text-based, often made from Bossa Nova protest song lyrics. One of the pioneers in Brazilian street art was Alex Vallauri who adopted the use of stencils to imprint a collection of iconic symbols around Brazil. He became a cultural figure early in the development of street culture- some of his original stencils are still visible. His death on March 27, 1987 was declared the National Day of Graffiti in Brazil. Unsolicited street art is still technically illegal throughout Brazil, but Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro have become particularly relaxed about it, unless it is pichacao. (Tristan Manco 2005)

Most work in Sao Paulo today contains little writing, and a lot is conveyed through visual elements that engage a dialogue with society at large (with the exception of the Pichacao graffiti). Major themes are anti-capitalism and anti-consumer culture. Brazil has one of the world's largest economies, but also one of the world's largest income disparities. (Konig 2013)

Another source of disenfranchisement for certain populations comes from the sheer need to represent not only these indigenous cultures, but also the influence of the colonial Portuguese, African slaves, waves of Italian, Spanish German, Russian, and Japanese immigrants. Many times these individual cultural groups are the populations that become marginalized, and the role of the street artist, as we've come to see it, is to document the culture of the marginalized. (Tristan Manco 2005)

Video: Brazil: A Celebration of Contemporary Culture - Street Art

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGeWIT1JYks>

THE ARTISTS

ONESTO (Alex Hornest)



Brazil, 2016

Video: STREET-ART BRAZIL WITH ONESTO

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEnf80pPuLU>

Onesto relies on “fat bodies with oversized heads, with manes of hair combined with thin, fragile arms and legs. They are distinguished by clothing, objects, and gestures that identify them as police officers, graffiteiros, beggars, or gangsters... he inscribes the scenes of violence and poverty, and quite ordinary situations that unfold in the microcosm of the city.” He provides satirical commentary on the city, providing real insight, while also allowing it to make fun of itself. It’s exaggerations of reality provide comic relief in the midst of a population with serious concerns. (Konig 2013)

NUNCA (Francisco Rodrigues)



Sau Paulo

Nunca is an extremely controversial artists who relies on imagery of native cultures- Amazonian tribal designs, tattoos, West African gods, Catholicism. Symbolic, even in name, “nunca” means “never” in Portuguese. (Tristan Manco 2005)

Video: STREET-ART BRAZIL WITH NUNCA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8Z-TKi8L3g>



Sau Paulo

NAZZA STENCIL (Nazza Plantila)

Buenos Aires based artist Nazza Stencil, is another activist that sometimes works in areas of Brazil, though his work typically focuses on historical and contemporary crimes of the Argentine state- each work specific to an event or cause. (Schacter 2013)

Video: Nazza Stencil

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSY394kYtfM>



Buenos Aires



30,000 disappeared victims of a genocidal military coup – Buenos Aires

He chooses to work around the periphery of the city because it's more accessible to the people in need of representation as well as the media- the center of the city is more tightly controlled. Uses stencils because it's cheaper and quicker- Argentina can be much harsher than Brazil on artists seen to be committing vandalism. Like the Nicaraguan artists, he has always seen himself as a political advocate, and the "art" was always secondary- this is the case for many of the street artists in Latin America. (Schacter 2013)

2. BRAZIL- AN EFFORT TO HEAL



2014 World Cup
Mural- Rio de Janeiro

In times of deprivation, cultural objects can contribute to individuals within larger structures as evidence of the human spirit relating individuals through all backgrounds and contexts. The anonymous street artist becomes a voice calling someone into the immediate present to connect and understand their rights and responsibilities- legitimizing and empowering. (Grierson 2017)

While many street artists feel it's important that their work represents oppositional politics (as referenced so frequently above), others are motivated by generosity and healing. Contributing something to the cultural fabric of a physical place can be a therapeutic act. Culture is what provides physical places with identity and for an artist; building culture is like making a place into a home. (Young 2014)



Sao Paulo,
Brazil

Today Sao Paulo is the world's equivalent of 1970's New York in regard to street art- and is similarly growing from a politically motivated counterculture. Community initiatives have made more public spaces available to artists, and in 2007 public advertising was banned in Sao Paulo- allowing the visual landscape to belong almost exclusively to its street artists. (Konig 2013)



Staircase of Dreams- Sao Paulo

Brazil has strong cultures in dance, music, story-telling, arts and native crafts- they also have a strong street culture with its own specific graffiti, music, and dance which provides a voice for a systematically neglected section of society. The growth of hip-hop has paralleled the growth of street art, and many street artists are also break dancers. (Tristan Manco 2005)

Since the mid-80's graffiti artists from Brazil have been recognized for their talents, and invited to display their own specific version of their cultures all over the world. Brazils artists have become its unofficial cultural ambassadors.

THE ARTISTS

OS GEMOS (*The Twins*- Gustavo and Octavo Pandolfo)

Os Gemos provide a degree of detachment for the people of Sao Paulo by giving them a sort of overlapping parallel world. They seem to be taking the sentiment made earlier by Albert Camus very literally. Their figures parody all sides of humanity.



Mask Building- Sao Paulo

Figures of crippled, homeless, forgotten, terrorists, looters, criminals, and politicians all collide in a disdain for the inhumane world with an empowering sense of agency. Many references to folk tales and classic literature are applied as larger parables to contemporary Brazilian society. (Tristan Manco 2005)

Video: Os Gemeos: Inside the studio

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wtSSToJz2E>



*In High Seas
Everybody Flies-
Sao Paulo*



*Part of the Casa
Amarela Project- Sau
Paulo*

VITCHE

He has a cast of characteristic red, white, and black and the same cast of characters: birds and dragons symbolize various forms of freedom and life as the megalopolis that threatens to separate man from its primitive roots. His work tells the story of man, sometimes represented by a native warrior, dismayed by the smothering effects of the urban jungle- in defiance of our evolution. (Schacter 2013)



- Cambuci, Sao Paulo

He seeks to explore the “forgotten feelings” that have been swallowed by the “great dragons of civilization”. The world is presented as a circus (carnival aesthetic). He sometimes combines textile patterns, jewelry, fashion, and artifacts from local culture to uplift native culture. His work challenges it audience to “walk the tightrope and laugh at the dragon”. (Schacter 2013)



São Paulo - Vila Madalena: Beco das Cores



Cambuci, Sao Paulo- Vitché and Jana Joana

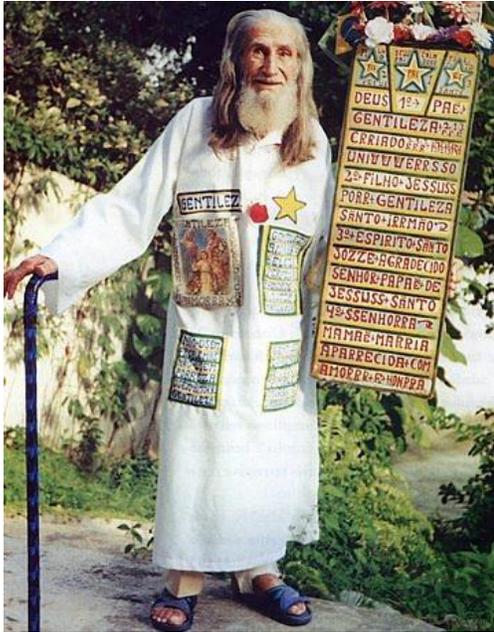
His work harkens back to the lost indigenous civilizations that existed harmoniously with the environment. Often works alongside his wife, Jana Joana, whose work is also intent on celebrating cultural diversity. (Schacter 2013)

Video: STREET-ART BRAZIL WITH JANA JOANA & VITCHÉ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEmSLxqVMd0>

PROPHET KINDNESS (Jose Dadrino)-

Prophet Kindness is a religious street painter. Completed 56 murals consisting of positive spiritual messages on the pillars of a stretch of a raised freeway until his death in 1996. The original murals were unfortunately painted over in gray, but they are being meticulously reconstructed in a project that began in 1999. (Tristan Manco 2005)



“This is the Profeta Gentileza who creates kindness with love and peace for a better Brazil and a better world. My children, don’t use problems. We use nature” – Rio de Janeiro



The “Prophet” believed to have had a religious vision at age 13, and spent most of his adult life advocating kindness for the sake of kindness across Rio de Janeiro. (Tristan Manco 2005)

Freeway underpass- Rio de Janeiro

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ganz, Nicholas. *Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2006.
- Grierson, Elizabeth M. *Transformations: Art and the City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Klanten, Gregor Jansen & Robert. *Art & Agenda: Political Art and Activism*. Berlin: Gestalten, 2011.
- Konig, Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther. *Street-Art Brazil*. Frankfurt: Schirn Kunstshalle Frankfurt, 2013.
- Kunzle, David. *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979-1992*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Schacter, Rafael. *The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.
- Tristan Manco, Lost Art, Caleb Neelon. *Graffiti Brazil*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005.
- Young, Alison. *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2014.