

Blind spot.

The transgressive fury of *Pixação* versus the art world.

I always seen it. It didn't feel right. It gave the, already, overly grey city a lurid aspect. But it made you look. It made you see what was always there on your daily route to work but you never noticed. In the big city you get blind from seeing too much.

We call it *Pixação* (say pee-sha-sah/on) back home. A kind of Graffiti¹ writing which was developed right there in São Paulo, Brazil. Latin America's biggest city. Some call it straight tag², because the calligraphy is straight, angular and upright. They bomb³ the buildings, walls, bridges and monuments with it. From top to bottom making you wonder how the Hell did they get there? That's the reason why it is straight. Because São Paulo is a vertical city and its high-rises are the calligraphy book on which the *Pixador*⁴ learns to write. You're taught to hate it. I found it somewhat cool, though. Other times I felt sad to see that old art deco building from the 50s tagged with black spray paint.

¹ J. Stahl explains that the term Graffiti as currently used appears for the first time in the 19th Century used by Archaeologists to differentiate established art from ordinary inscriptions on the walls of Pompeii. Baudrillard attributes to the rising of spray canned paint the phenomenon of Graffiti as we currently know it appearing concomitantly around the world in places like Paris during the 1968 riots and New York City in the late 60s. In NY it developed a particular style with tridimensional elements and colours which we commonly associate with the contemporary forms of Graffiti.

J. Stahl, *Street Art*, h.f. ullman publishing GmbH, Bonn, 2013, p.7

J. Baudrillard, 'Kool Killer ou a Insurreição pelos Signos', in *Gustavo Seraphim*, 30th November 2006, Original text from 1979. viewed on 7th August 2021, <http://seraphimfotos.blogspot.com/2006/11/kool-killer-ou-inssurreio-pelos-signos.html> . Translation: Fábio Marques Ferreira

² Term used within the Graffiti community for signatures written on walls in Graffiti style.

³ Term used within Graffiti community for covering a surface with inscriptions in Graffiti style

⁴ Name given to the writer of *Pixação* (say Pee-sha-dor).

They started in the 1980s. They were invisible to us, the middle class white people from the city. They were always there, but we refused to see them. We still do, that's why we put an asshole like Bolsonaro in the country's presidency. Because we're an excluding bunch of pricks of a people. They came out from where we never wanted them to come out from and they rubbed their existence on our faces. Spanking our part of town with spray paint. The first ones were inspired by the letters from heavy metal band logos. Which in turn were inspired by the ancient Rune alphabet. The language of the old barbarians passed on, and appropriated by the contemporary ones, straight into our days.

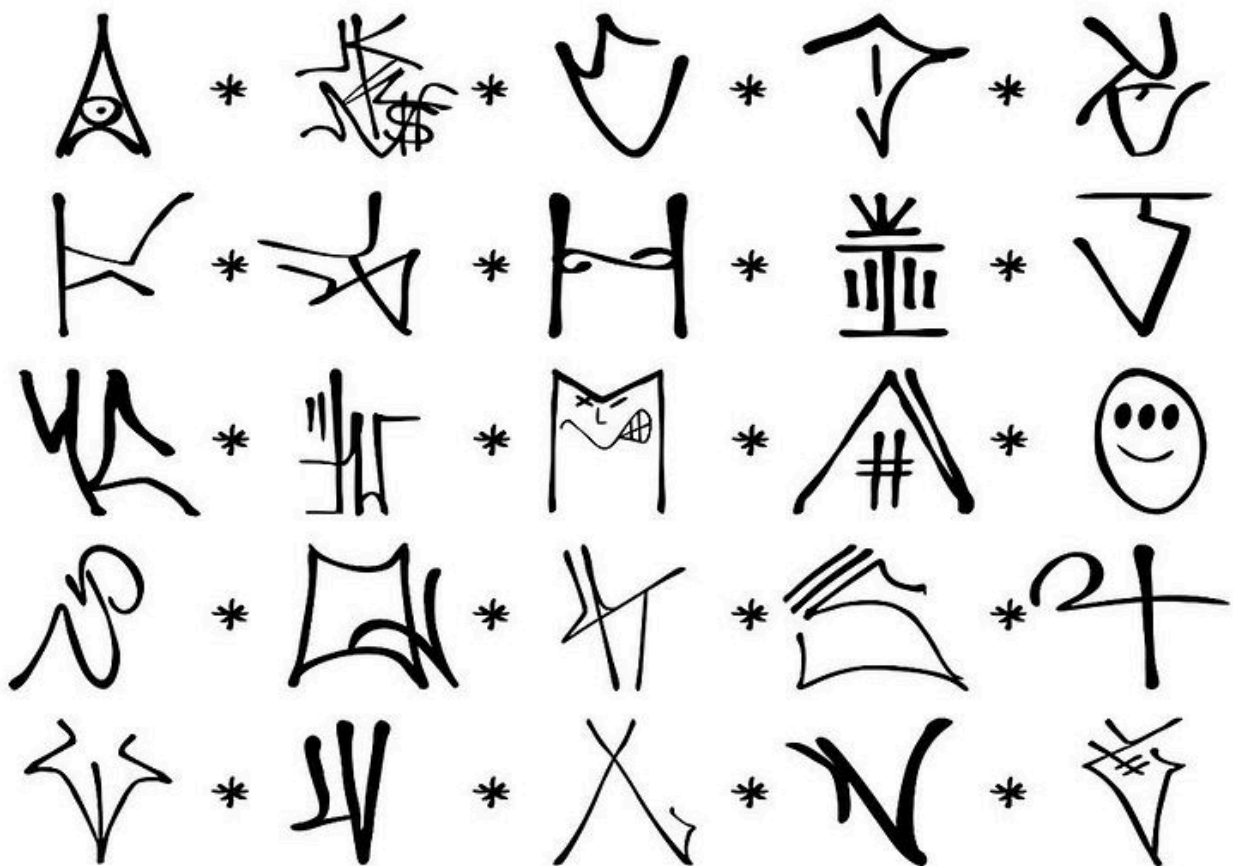


Image 1: Example of *Pixação* style alphabet using letterings from different writers and crews. Retrieved from: <https://www.instagram.com/vgcarastattoo/> Viewed on 9 August 2021.

But why would an art publication be interested in a kind of Graffiti which happens in the other side of the world? - Sydney's got Graffiti of its own and it doesn't particularly

attract the attention of art writers or theorists - Well, I don't know the answer to that one, but I can't recall any kind of art in which the artist believes in it so much to the point of getting killed by it. Ok, there might be a number of artists that poetically would argue they would die for their art. But I'm not talking about poetics here. Not even the concrete one. I am talking about reality as solid as the buildings a *Pixador* climbs with no climbing equipment in order to write on it and the life threat starts right there. As I mentioned before, we're taught to hate it. But it doesn't take much teaching in fact, because if you have a minimum of empathy, you will agree that it's pretty enraging to wake up in the morning and discover someone climbed over your balcony and sprayed it with some kind of hieroglyph. So it's pretty understandable that, if you're the fiery kind of person, you'd punch them in the face if you caught them red handed. Now again, in a nation such as Australia, it might be hard to understand, but in an socially unfair and exclusionary society such as Brazil, things get more radical and brutal, and often more violent. So it is a risky business to write with *Pixação* on someones wall, going to the extremes of getting thrown from a rooftop or even ending up shot.

But let's get back to the reasons why you would read about this. To add a bit of theory to this thread, academics like Sondra Bacharach would argue that there is a major difference between Street Art and Graffiti. The first one has a political dimension as it challenges the viewer to question their environment with often relevant topics to the circumscribed community where it is located. Graffiti in the other hand is basically a communication within a specific audience. It is made for other Graffiti writers and therefore lacks a political dimension with the surrounding society.⁵ To her, where the lines between Public Art and Graffiti are clear, Street Art occupies a space in between.⁶ Street Art might

⁵ S. Bacharach, 'Street art and consent'. *The British journal of aesthetics*, vol. 55 (4), October 2015, pp. 481-495.

⁶ Ibid, p.481.

resonate with art's role of raising questions and creating provocations on its viewers and by extension, impacting the world in fostering change. But if you follow Bacharach's model, Graffiti would fall under your curiosity radar. It distances itself very little from mere vandalism.



Image 2: Building in São Paulo, Brazil tagged with *Pixação*. Retrieved from [http://www.instagram.com mundo_rua_tattoo](http://www.instagram.com/mundo_rua_tattoo) Viewed on 9 August 2021

Pixação can not be dissociated from vandalism, it is one of its premises. It is also made for other *Pixadores* and is virtually illegible for the ordinary public. But it is inescapably political. And at this point it subverts Bacharach's analysis.

Rancière has already warned us that the politics happen in the daily events and in the micro level, it is the ordinary events which challenge the established order that will cause disruption in political hierarchies within society and become inherently political and therefore activist.⁷

Pixação has this dimension. It makes a bold statement in the Brazilian social order. One that makes the marginalised and invisible members of that society, be impossible to miss. After all, their writing is all over our faces throughout the city concrete. The *Pixação* field is inextricably in the domain of the street. It's actions deny any kind of hierarchy. Although highly collective - there are weekly meetings in traditional spots called *Points* where they gather to exchange tags in paper sheets and notebooks, and to plan attacks or just drink and socialise. They also organise themselves in crews and in even larger groupings which encompass many crews called *Grifes*. The 'attacks' - name given to the actual act of *Pixar* (infinitive form of the verb, say pee-shar) - are often in groups with watchers, climbers, and writers. Still, a *Pixador* can never speak for the whole community of *Pixação*. You might convince a *Pixador* to not tag a specific spot, but that doesn't mean the whole community will do the same, not even their *Grife* or crew. It is a very anarchic business. It is violent, but it is a violence against the limits of the city. Against the walls and monuments which demarcate social space. This could be an even more violent aggression which we never cogitate to question. Well, the *Pixador* does.

⁷ J. Rancière, 'Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to democratic disagreement'. *Substance*, (92), 2000, p. 3 - 24.

But it also challenges art and the art world. You see, it doesn't expect to be accepted or embraced or even validated. But it does want to create tension. Just as it does in the streets, it refuses to be ignored.

There are several iterations of *Pixação* with the art establishment but for this essay we'll delve into one of my favourites. The participation of 4 Brazilian *Pixadores* in the 7th edition of the Berlin Biennale in 2012.

The title chosen by the curators for that year's Biennale was 'Forget Fear' and its concept, in the words of Artur Zmijewski one of the artistic directors of the event, was "pretty straight forward (...) present art that actually works, makes its mark on reality, and opens space where politics can be performed."⁸

As early as 2011, Djan Ivson, also known in the streets of São Paulo as 'Cripta', one of the most prestigious *Pixadores* in town, had been contacted by the curatorial body of the Berlin Biennale through the intermediation of Brazilian curator Sérgio Franco, in regards to a possible participation of *Pixação* writers in the next year's edition. Four Brazilian *Pixadores* were invited - Djan Ivson, William, Biscoito and R.C.. In an article from the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo* from 2012, Ivson is classified as the new "darling of the arts market and fetish of curators who try to domesticate the fury of the streets into controlled actions in museums and galleries"⁹.

⁸ A. Zmijewski, '7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Politics', in *Berlin Biennale*. 2012, viewed on 8th August 2021, <https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/kataloge/1355/7th-berlin-biennale-for-contemporary-politics>

⁹ J. Wainer, 'Paulista 'picha' curador da Bienal de Berlim' (*Paulista 'Graffiti's' Berlin Biennale's curator*), in *Folha de S.Paulo*. 13 June 2012, viewed on 8th August 2021, <https://m.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2012/06/1104025-paulista-picha-curador-da-bienal-de-berlim.shtml>
Translation: Fábio Marques Ferreira

Pixação had been calling the attention of the arts world since a series of attacks to arts institutions occurred in São Paulo during 2008 when a group of *Pixadores* invaded an arts school during its graduation show opening night and covered internal and external walls as well as students' works, with *Pixação* in plain sight. A few weeks later, the underground art gallery *Choque Cultural* was also invaded and tagged inside and outside during business hours. In that same year, another group of *Pixadores* invaded São Paulo's 28th Bienal and tagged the whole second floor of the Bienal's building, which had been left empty by the curatorial body. Cripta took part in all of these actions. These interventions were seen with horror by spectators and broader society, and treated as acts of vandalism and crime.

The negotiation between the curators of the Berlin Biennale and the group of *Pixadores* was one full of dissent and misunderstandings. According to Cripta, they were approached by Joana Warsza one of the curators of the Biennale who invited them to think collectively of a way to include *Pixação* in 2012's program. In the end, the organisation decided to deliver a workshop with Cripta's group called 'Politics of the poor', proposal which the *Pixadores* never agreed with. In the meantime between the invitation and the realisation of the Biennale, the curatorial body practically backed off on the invitation to the *Pixadores* claiming lack of funds. In the beginning the proposal included the presence of 6 *Pixadores* which later were reduced to two. Finally, the organisation of the event alleged there were not enough resources to receive the *Pixadores* at all. A whole schedule of events throughout Germany and Europe had already been arranged by the group from the event's invite. Cripta, determined to go, as well as not willing to disappoint his mates, looked for fundings with Brazil's Ministry of Culture - the Brazilian equivalent to Australia's Council for the Arts - which ended up being granted. This way, the group made its way to

Berlin. The Biennale Foundation only provided accommodation for the group of 4 *Pixadores* within their own premises without the payment of any fees or commissions.

The *Pixadores* went to Germany decided not to deliver a workshop, but to announce that it wasn't going to happen. The venue organised by the curatorial body was Saint Elizabeth Church in Berlin, a heritage building which had been heavily damaged in World War II and, through fundraising and efforts from the local community, had been undergoing restoration. The indoors area of the building was still not repaired due to lack of fundings. The event's organisation covered the internal walls with plywood boards where the paintings and Graffiti would take place in order to avoid damages to the venue's structure.

According to Cripta, when Warsza became aware that the *Pixadores* would not deliver a workshop, she demanded that the group gave a demonstration of their practice. Cripta warned that *Pixação* was an urban intervention which only happened in the streets in the context of transgression and there was no way of performing a demonstration without transgression. During this deadlock between *Pixadores* and curatorial body, and while Cripta negotiated with the curators, R.C., Biscoito and William started to climb over the building's structure above the fencing, to great amusement of the audience. It was not until the first tag started to be drawn on to the heritage listed walls that conflict took place.



Image 3: The participation of the *Pixadores* in the 7th Berlin Biennale. Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pixoartatack/albums/72157630607333106/with/7584509462/> viewed on 9 August 2021.

The terrified curators threatened to call the police and tried to persuade Cripta to convince his colleagues and stop the action immediately since it was being performed outside the designated boundaries. Cripta in his turn argued that he had no authority whatsoever over any of his counterparts and that what they were seeing was exactly the demonstration they were asking for. If that was the prohibited area, that's exactly where *Pixação* should take place since it is a transgression. Artur Zmijewski then approached Ivson with a bucket filled with dirty water and threw it on him. Although Cripta couldn't speak a word in German or English, and neither Zmijewski knew any Portuguese, the

message was clear enough: You tag the building I tag you with dirty water. To Djan, though, that was physical aggression and unacceptable since a *Pixador* harms walls not people. He then walked towards a table, picked up a bottle of yellow paint and threw it on the curator. To which Zmijewski responded with another bottle of paint on Cripta. The public watched in silence. Many thinking it was all part of the event's program.



Image 4: The confrontation between Djan Ivson (Cripta) and curator Artur Zimijewski during the 7th Berlin Biennale. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pixoartatack/albums/72157630607333106/with/7584509462/> Viewed on 9 August 2021

After this confrontation, the *Pixadores* started to tag everything and the police was finally actioned. In Cripta's view, the curators took it personally, but there were no reasons for that. It was a political Biennale, criticising the system. Ironically, though, the organisers had to appeal to the system in order to detain the *Pixação*.

Zmijewski commented on the issue that what the *Pixadores* defined as transgression was nothing but “a self-promoting poverty politics of the Brazilian class struggle between rich and poor and it didn’t make sense in that context since the building belonged to a civil society whose sole objective is to raise fundings to recover historical buildings and open them to public cultural activities”¹⁰ The curator was probably right that the action was about self-promotion, but was naive to think that the Brazilians would distinguish a heritage site from a skyscraper raised with São Paulo's bourgeoisie Capital. To a *Pixador* there’s no such thing as good rich and bad rich.

After the police intervention, the group was released when members of the audience warned the authorities that they were invitees of the Biennale. The curatorial body did not intervene. The venue was closed indefinitely for a clean up. A local resident manifested the sentiment of the community “I still don’t understand what happened in this event, I’ve been living here for years and I feel like crying seeing how the church ended up. It took us years to renovate it.”¹¹ I told you before, it doesn’t take much to get feels about *Pixação*. One thing is for sure, though, you won’t be indifferent.

It is not my pretension to analyse the whole movement of *Pixação* from one isolated episode such as the participation of this group of *Pixadores* in a major international arts festival, but we can take a few things which are worth looking into.

¹⁰ F. Torres, ‘Marginais’ (*Outlaws*), in *Folha de S.Paulo*. 6 July 2012, viewed on 8 August 2021, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/fernandatorres/2012/07/1115637-marginais.shtml>
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¹¹ D. Moura, ‘Igreja pichada por brasileiros em Berlim está interditada por tempo indeterminado’ (*Church Graffited by Brazilians in Berlin is closed indefinitely for repairs*), in *Folha de S. Paulo*. 14 July 2012, viewed on 8 August 2021, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/paywall/login.shtml?https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2012/06/1104868-igreja-pichada-por-brasileiros-em-berlim-esta-interditada-por-tempo-indeterminado.shtml> Translation: Fábio Marques Ferreira

The *Pixadores* never had any intention to create a dialogue with the art establishment in going to Berlin. Neither that art institution really wanted to make friends with them, they were actually 'disinvited' from the event. Although the curatorial statement declared the Biennale was opened to radically different views rather than keeping a safe and dignified distance¹². When *Pixação* occupied its practical facet and transgressive attitude, the conceptual contestation of the system proposed by the curators had no other choice but to appeal to the very system itself to stop the savagery which took place. It is clear that *Pixação* extrapolated the limits of activist art.

The *Pixadores* weren't naive at any moment, either. They were performing the same role they play in the streets of São Paulo. One that disturbs the order of social rules and community. Their practice brings light to a polemic and litigious reality which might be a blind spot that not even the art world is willing to face. But just like it used to happen to me on my way to work back in the day, once you're confronted with it, you can't escape but see.

In time, the organisation of the Berlin Biennale legally sued Ivson and his group for damaging Saint Elizabeth church and demanded they bear the costs for the building's repairs. The defence alleged that the curators requested a sample of actual *Pixação* during the event and that's what they got. The court decided in favour of the Brazilians.

¹² Zimijewski, Op. cit. 2012.

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