

Literary cities and creative public spaces: an analysis of street poetry in Latin America and Europe

Ricardo Klein

UNIVERSIDAD DE LA REPÚBLICA
UNIVERSITAT OBERTA DE CATALUNYA
rklein78@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of street poetry (as a graffiti-like expression) in Latin America and Europe. My main objective is to discuss how this form of poetic intervention in public spaces builds dialogue with the city's inhabitants, in other words, how it acts as a tool to encourage reflections within urban spaces towards the constitution of new shared public spaces. Thus, this analysis is divided into three parts: (i) relationships generated in the city and its inhabitants in reference to street poetry; (ii) the place of 'activism' (the conjunction of street art and political-social activism) as a poetic expression in public spaces; and (iii) the role of social networks as channels for the dissemination and promotion of street art, in this case, a poetic assault. Finally, a qualitative methodology based on a set of interviews and on work with secondary sources (visual documents) was used for the analysis. Hence, I used photographs of street poetry taken in Latin America (Buenos Aires, Lima, and Montevideo) and in Europe (Barcelona, Berlin, Florence, and Porto).

Keywords: city, public space, graffiti, street poetry, activism, social networks.

Corresponding author: Ricardo Klein. Departamento de Trabajo Social. Facultad de Ciencias Sociales. Universidad de la República. Constituyente 1502, piso 4, CP 11200 Montevideo, Uruguay.

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INTRODUCTION

Street art first emerged in the late sixties and early seventies of the 20th century. It has a shared origin, both in Europe and the United States—probably not wanted or sought—with the events of May 1968 in Paris (Badenes, 2008; Gómez, 2015) and the aftermath that unfolded in the segregated

peripheries of cities such as New York and Philadelphia (Abel, 2008; Chang, 2014; Gastman and Neelon, 2011).

Regarding the former, Parisian students reclaimed popular knowledge and speech (aphorisms and *boutades* in current terms) which poetically,

philosophically, and humorously manifested itself through graffiti. The French graffiti of 1968, in which words took precedence and prominence over images, was based on popular-academic content. Over time, various forms of street interventions linked to graffiti were incorporated [into the style]; one of them was the emerging practice of ‘poetic assault’ street art, which consisted “of the writing of poetry on dull public spaces (e.g., walls, parapets, rolling shutters, mailboxes) to infuse them with lyrical and graceful content” (Visconti, et al., 2010, p. 514).

This article focuses on the role of this form of intervention, based on urban artistic practices (graffiti and street art), which herein we will refer to as ‘street poetry’, in Latin America and Europe. My main aim is to analyse the ways in which this form of graffiti helped build a dialogue with city inhabitants. As occurred in France in May 1968, these interventions prioritise words over figurative or malleable abstract art. Through a poetry that *makes one think*, they try to be a tool that generates transformative social reflection, contributing to the construction of a new shared public space.

As a guide to structure this analysis, I pose a series of questions: (1) How was the street poetry movement conceived? (2) How common is it, and what place does it have in cities as creative spaces? (3) How do public spaces interact with it? (4) What role do social networks play as articulating and collaborative spaces for these practices?

Likewise, a qualitative methodological perspective was taken when elaborating this work (Taylor, and Bogdan, 1994), which was based on a set of interviews carried out within the framework of the doctoral research entitled “*Sociología del arte callejero. Escenas del graffiti y el street art en Barcelona y Montevideo*” [The sociology of street art: the graffiti and street art scenes in Barcelona and Montevideo] produced between 2011 and 2016, in combination with other records from complimentary research projects still underway. Although the main analysis focuses on the case of street poetry, some of the

interviews correspond to graffiti and street art artists from Latin America and Europe who were not necessarily part of this line of investigation. They were included because, beyond the technical artistry used in these cities, they are also all aligned in terms of a series of agreements that are visible in these public spaces. Secondary sources were also used (Valles, 1999), specifically photography as a form of visual documentation (González, 2011). To date we have an archive of 23,000 photographs of graffiti and street art which I have captured in situ in multiple cities in Latin America and Europe. For this current article I have used images of Latin American street poetry from Buenos Aires, Lima, and Montevideo, as well as examples from Europe, Barcelona, Berlin, Florence, and Oporto.

POETIC DYNAMICS I: THE CITY AND PUBLIC SPACES

For street artists the city is, symbolically, a large canvas whose intervention is constant; a place that must be conquered (Borja, 2003) as a space of resistance and for the construction of citizenship. Later, that (idyllic) ‘city’ materialises in the street’s social urban space as the most direct place to represent its world views. Through their interventions, [artists] try to involve the city’s inhabitants (Delgado and Malet, 2007), and try to put public spaces into leading roles (Conklin, 2012; Duque, 2011).

Public spaces in cities are now starting to be valued again in terms of their participation as creative backdrops (Lash, 1997). Within this conjuncture, street poetry is consolidated as a democratic and democratising practice in cities. Nonetheless, in contrast with other forms of street art more closely associated with the visual arts, it is difficult to determine if the poetic assault contributes in the same way to the renewal of the urban surface. Although, symbolically, they play an important role in the construction of an alternative or countercultural city, in some cases street art practices themselves seek aesthetic change in the public space; in others, its transformative goal is diffuse (Klein, 2015).

Conceptually, street poetry aims to encourage the city's inhabitants to find it, to wonder what cities are, what they are like, where they are. In part, this is what Azmuto, the poet and daily

inhabitant of Berlin's streets, is doing. Through his words, he hopes to inspire people; [so that] the city becomes 'a city for everyone', a place of reading and thought.

Figure 1



Work by Azmuto (Berlin, 2015)
© Ricardo Klein

In Azmuto's case, the poetry's location does not necessarily generate a dialogue with its own content. As we will see in all the following examples, poetry and place need not necessarily correspond, and interpretative links are not necessarily always constructed between words and urban spaces. In reality, cities stand as the physical support of voices made into ideas, found in one of many parts that the urban infrastructure deploys, as can be observed in the following poetic phrases that Azmuto placed on two walls below the Berlin train tracks:¹

Figure 1 (in the centre in green):

Follow the tracks of happiness and you will become happy.

Arabic proverb

And also:

Figure 2 (in the centre in yellow):

Follow your heart, discover your potential and be ready for the greatest adventure of your life.

Figure 2



Work by Azmuto (Berlin, 2015)
© Ricardo Klein

The first of the examples is an Arabic proverb; the second are most likely be the words of Azmuto himself. In both cases, the message aims to impart happiness, and offers a message of encouragement and a desire that the person reading it should come to find their own path to personal fulfilment. There is no link between the physical support per se and the message in either of these two messages, although the objective of reaching thousands of inhabitants who transit through this public street space remains intact. A constant feature of this type of street art is that it places more emphasis on the message than on the work's supporting medium.

In these literary cities, poetry coexists (and dialogues) with other forms of street art. The heterogeneous urban aesthetic accompanies the journey of poetry and allows an exchange between the different architectures, forms of heritage, and cultural facilities which are given value through pamphlets, quotes, and aphorisms. Here I have given two different examples of cities in which street poetry is present: the walls of the train tracks of Berlin, with more urban-industrial aesthetics, and the city-centre areas of Porto, whose aesthetics are more historical and patrimonial.

1 Translated into English by the article's editorial translator.

Figure 3



Train tracks (Berlin, 2015)
© Ricardo Klein

Figure 4



City-centre (Porto, 2017)
© Ricardo Klein

This exchange between poetic assaults and cities is possible via different mechanisms. It can happen through the words of an anonymous poet who wants to get involved in the public space and decides to intervene in its infrastructures, but also through the visibility of recognised literati who are honoured in the city, thus making it a public space that becomes an 'open book'. One example is that of the poet Adam Martin (Lima, 1908–1985), a leading figure of

the Peruvian avant-garde poetry of the 20th century, whose voice can be heard on the walls of its native neighbourhood, Barranco, in Lima. His phrases appear in several areas and are part of the 'Underwood Poems', texts that would later be incorporated into *The House of Cardboard*, a book published in 1928. In it, the writer reviews his memories and impressions from his adolescence around the Barranco district as well as the detailing area's daily scenes.

Figura 5



Poemas Underwood I (Lima, 2015)
© Ricardo Klein

Figura 6



Poemas Underwood II (Lima, 2015)
© Ricardo Klein

Conversely, beyond reaching (or not reaching) an agreement on new ways of relating to the city, the aim of these practices was to break with the daily monotony of public space through these interventions, “*afirma el territorio pero desestructura las colecciones de bienes simbólicos y materiales*” [they affirm the territory but destroy the collections of symbolic and material goods] (García Canclini, 1990, p. 314). The physical and symbolic space of the urban infrastructure is reconfigured based on these to provide new signs and meanings for those who transit the city. In the case of Azmuto and his work, like other ways street poetry manifests itself, he is establishing a presence in the territory (Klein, 2013) in which different cultural-intervention centres participate within a framework of urban and social dynamics. As a result of the different processes that occur in cities, these manifestations then affect the installation of ‘artistic neighbourhoods’ (Rius-Ulldemolins, 2008). Examples of this from the last 30 years are the transformation of Kreuzberg in Berlin, Raval in Barcelona, and Palermo in Buenos Aires.

In principle, these approaches manage to draw attention to the breakdown of a standardised object within the features of the city. These dynamics play a strategic role in the face of urban change initiatives, which not only concern the linear relationship between these street practices and creativity, but also involve breaking up the daily backdrop of the city, its inhabitants, and the public space. This level of language allows new city designs to be generated and highlights aesthetic changes of urban design (Burnham, 2010).

POETIC DYNAMICS II: ‘ARTIVISM’ AS POETIC EXPRESSION

But, how should street poetry be understood in this context of recovering public spaces? One possibility is to conceive it as an ‘artivist’ activity (Felshin, 1995), understanding it as a synthesis resulting from the concurrence of street art and political-social activism. These initiatives stand out because their art is more militant (Vallazza, 2013) and through its work it promotes an awakening of collective consciousness

as well as the mobilisation of the city’s inhabitants. Its main objective is to provoke, through artistic-street interventions in public spaces, a paradigm shift within the city in search of change and of collective social transformation. As Delgado maintains, artistic productions derived in this way:

[are asserted as public or contextual art formulas as far as they manifest themselves in streets and squares, using them to caution and warn {the population} about potential traits which can cloak a variety of breaks and cracks, signs of the vulnerability of a socio-political system that {their authors} refute and disrespect] (Delgado, 2013, p. 69).

A street poetry project that could be considered as activist and that has transcended borders all over the world, is the mural-literary *Acción Poética* movement (hereon in referred to as Poetic Action). This arose late in the 20th century in Monterrey, Mexico, and is based on revaluating words to incorporate poetry into city landscapes. It is a communication vehicle centralised in poetic-literary activities. The written word is responsible for this transformation, by incorporating graffiti as part of a city that can be read and understood through its walls. The Poetic Action movement has impromptu and spontaneous representatives throughout Latin America. Despite their heterogeneity and the absence of an organic structure, in general, those who use this name respect a set of requirements suggested by the movement’s creator, Armando Alanís. These requirements are easy to comply with but not meeting all of them does not necessarily create tension or conflict between the movement’s members. There are four aspects to consider: (1) a specific typeface must be respected; (2) the graffiti must be created with black paint on a white wall; (3) the phrases should not have any political or religious content; and (4) the phrase used should be one of encouragement. Essentially, the movement was founded on these criteria.

For example, as we can see in the following photographs, although the walls painted by the Poetic Action collective in Uruguay do not respect

these four points, this did not create conflict or tension between them and its creator or with other Poetic Action members. Indeed, these situations very rarely occur, if at all; and if they do, it is not because

the local members of Poetic Action intended to do so, but rather, it is usually because of the physical characteristics of the physical support the work will be placed on.

Figura 7



Acción Poética Uruguay (Montevideo, 2016)
© Ricardo Klein

Figura 8



Acción Poética Uruguay (Montevideo, 2016)
© Ricardo Klein

It is also interesting to note that the place the intervention is performed in is always unplanned beforehand, as one of the founding members of Poetic Action Uruguay maintains when explaining which spaces they choose:

[We find walls because of the activities you do day-to-day while living, you work, you study, you move in the city, and you look around. {You} have a look at what walls there are, where you can {intervene}, when you start to look you start to think if you can paint {it}, and you start to choose] (Poetic Action Uruguay, Andrés).

Nor do these micropoetry mediations, in this case by Poetic Action Uruguay, generate conflicts with the city's inhabitants. This group (which operates especially in Montevideo and its surrounding areas) is very well accepted and are well known by the residents of the different neighbourhoods. Even when the intervention is carried out on a private house—in the language of graffiti, 'giving up a wall'—they ask the owners if they have a phrase they would like to place there:

[We talk with them there, and in that sense, people generally do not have any phrases {they would like to use}, or have not thought about it [...] then they ask you, "what do you intend to paint?"] (Poetic Action Uruguay, Andrés).

The phrases they paint are not usually related to their surrounding environment. They place more emphasis on an urban micropoetry which will reach the city's inhabitants, than on complex content corresponding to the action's physical location. This decision is closer to spontaneous expression than to a rational plan to define a poetic sense (or multiple senses) in public spaces. Its spirit could be summarised as follows:

[We choose the phrases among ourselves when we are already in front of the wall. They might be phrases by any poet you like, they can be phrases from a song, a phrase you invented, a phrase you heard, a phrase that your daughter told you, I don't know, whatever. When you're at the wall you say "well, what do we paint?",

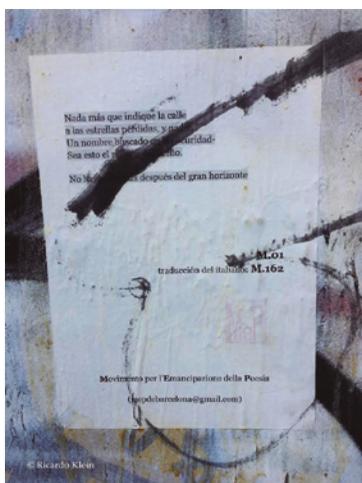
“Look, I like this one and that one, what about you?”, “I like this one and this one”. And it is done there as a consensus and more or less we all agree] (Poetic Action Uruguay, Andrés).

For example, the phrase “*A brillar mi amor!!!*” [Go shine my love!!!] (figure 8) is part of the song ‘*La Bestia Pop*’, by the now disbanded Argentine music group, Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota, popularly known as Los Redonditos or Los Redondos. As the Poetic Action member mentioned, a phrase can be extracted from a song, and in this case a lyric was chosen from one of the most influential groups in the early 1980s Argentinian music scene (Bennett and Peterson, 2004), whose influence reverberates even today. Despite no longer existing as a collective, one of its leads—Indio Solari—continues to perform these songs as a soloist, and thus maintains intact the aura of what has been baptised as the ‘Ricoteria mass’. This ritual process comes from the pilgrimage and sacrifice implied by attending one of their concerts—not because of their economic cost, but rather because of factors constituting part of a mysticism and ritual that the band had *sui generis*. For example, walking very long distances to the event

site to be among the hundreds of thousands of fans sharing [the experience] of one of their concerts. Although it is difficult to contextualise this phrase in a specific place in the city, the symbolic place that Los Redondos occupied for many represents a dialogue with the place’s inhabitants, especially with the generations born in the 1970s and up to the present. This “*A brillar mi amor!!!*” is not only synonymous with giving encouragement, it is part of a mystique and an aesthetic of being that transcends urban space.

Another example of activism that tries to generate an alternative creative network to diffuse contemporary poetry is the *Movimento per l’Emancipazione della Poesia* (MeP; the Movement for the Emancipation of Poetry). According to its creators, the MeP was born from a need derived from the contradictions produced by current societies. They take an anti-consumerist position and an attitude of continuous reflection, observing the realities that surround them and using poetry as a transformative tool. They are based on the active contribution of a heterogeneous group of collaborators who seek, through poetry, militant action in the city.

Figura 9



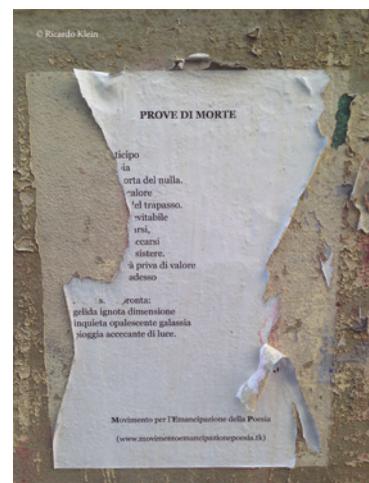
MeP (Barcelona, 2018)
© Ricardo Klein

Figura 10



MeP (Florencia, 2014)
© Ricardo Klein

Figura 11



MeP (Florencia, 2014)
© Ricardo Klein

It is precisely in public spaces that they focus their objective of meeting and interacting. The meeting takes place when a citizen stops in front of a piece of poetry that already forms part of a wall. According to the movement, beyond the results they can achieve with this dialogue alone, [we] are interested in making it possible: this is why we chose the streets as our primary place for publication] (MeP).²

As shown in the examples given here in the photographs, it is not only the poetic content that is democratised, but also that of public spaces; [this is then] replicated in cities so that their inhabitants can approach it from an implicitly literary point of view. Here I give the examples of Florence and Barcelona, although this movement is also present in other European cities:³

Figura 9

Più niente a indicare la strada
alle stelle perdute, e nessuno.
Un nome trovato nel buio -
sia questo l'approdo del sogno.
Non c'è altro oltre il grande orizzonte.

[Nothing more signals the road
to the lost stars, and to no one.
A name exposed in the dark -
Let this be the alighting of the dream.
There is nothing beyond the great horizon.]

And also:

Figura 11

Prove di morte
Morte in anticipo
vuoto di sabbia

2 The original quote is as follows: "Più dell'esito di tale dialogo, a noi interessa renderlo possibile: per questo abbiamo scelto la strada come primo luogo di pubblicazione". Translated into English by the article's editorial translator. See: <http://mep.netsons.org/beta/manifesto>

3 In figure 9, the original Italian version was found on the MeP website, while the Spanish translation was the one found and photographed. In figure 11, the text (in Italian) was retrieved from the MeP website; this was translated into English by the article's editorial translator.

davanti alla porta del nulla.
Perdere il tuo calore
è la mia prova del trapasso.
Quando sarà inevitabile
accettare il disfarsi,
impossibile attaccarsi
al desiderio di esistere.
La volontà sarà priva di valore
proprio come adesso
di fronte a te.
E così sono pronta:
gelida ignota dimensione
inquieta opalescente galassia
pioggia accecante di luce.

[Trials of death

Death before time
empty sand
afore the door of nothing.
Loss of your heat
is my proof of passing.
When it is inevitable
accept the break down
impossible to hold on
to the desire to exist.
The will lacks courage
just like now
in front of you.
And so, I'm ready:
icy unknown dimension
restless opalescent galaxy
blinding rain of light.]

This way of appearing in the city is how a movement that encourages citizens to reflect upon their surroundings, their surrounding context, and their constitution as social beings chooses to represent itself. In short, they are searching for a change in the prevailing order, using poetry as an emancipating tool.

The closeness between street poetry's phrases and its readers should always be present. This does not mean that content must necessarily be straightforward to understand. Many times, the literary format itself demands an interpretative effort on the part of the

person considering the work that, as part of a poetic game of its own, does not always even have to be interpreted at all. An example of this is the phrase “*Federico Manuel, te leo y me siento menos loco*” [Federico Manuel, I read you and I feel less crazy]. These words correspond to the surrealist poet Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos (Buenos Aires, 1939–1992), which at some point went from being a spoken phrase to written

Figura 12



Movimiento Petrushaus (Barcelona, 2018)
© Ricardo Klein

POETIC DYNAMICS III: ‘GLOBAL ART’ AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks now constitute a central communication vehicle for the reproduction and viewing of street art expressions from all over the world. Breaking away from the intermediate and territorial allows these practices to be placed within a closely interconnected and heterogeneous international scene. Likewise, digital photography has transformed one of the essential and original general characteristics of all street art: the ephemeral nature of the work in public spaces (squares, walls, etc.).

As shown in the different photographs presented here, the physical mobility of these artists has made it possible to find their work in different territories, as already seen with the Petrushaus Movement or with MeP. But, in turn—and photography has also played a central role here—street production has a timeless and solid position in virtual spaces. On the one hand, the internet and social networks have put street art on a map of transnational work where physical borders no longer matter.

word in a ‘paste up’; from an intervention recited in the voice of its author, to an urban intervention in cities including Barcelona, Berlin, or Buenos Aires. The Petrushaus Movement, an artist collective created by the Argentine artist Ale Giorgga, is responsible for this latter intervention. Common to both forms of poetry is the prominence they place on public spaces as places of seduction and of collective reflection.

Figura 13



Movimiento Petrushaus (Buenos Aires, 2017)
© Ricardo Klein

On the other, the opportunities this creates for interconnectivity between artists and their ‘alter’ (followers, street art enthusiasts, people passionate about poetry, individuals in the private sector that want to hire them, etc.) is exponential. For example, at present, Poetic Action Uruguay has almost 66,000 followers on Facebook (it has two fan pages); proportionally, this is a very high number for a country with such a small population (approximately 3.5 million people). Poetic Action Colombia has approximately 2,200,000 followers on its Facebook page, and the official Poetic Action page has more than 4,500,000 followers. In itself, Poetic Action is the movement’s brand; beyond whether its members know each other or not, this icon transcends borders and is gathering followers throughout Latin America. In a way, social networks have strengthened the concept of ‘community’ in the broader collective sense of street art.

In short, although these artistic manifestations were initially part of a local scene (Blum, 2001; Straw, 2004),

they have become increasingly recognised as ‘global art’. New technologies, the high level of professionalism some of its members have reached, and the impact that these artistic practices have had on their appreciation and legitimacy within the international art market have played an important role in this change. The development of the internet and of social networks have also made the amplification of work areas possible and has accentuated the networks of communication between artists and communities, be it locally or globally.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

As final words, we should remember that the aim of this article was to focus attention on the role that the form of intervention called street poetry has had in Latin America and Europe and how this poetic assault is situated within our everyday territorial environments.

We started by analysing the place occupied by cities and public spaces in forming dialogues between graffiti artists, especially the most poetic ones among them. Cities are considered as a creative scenarios that encourage the dynamics of understanding and exchange to be established between producing the street art and the inhabitants of the public space. This article gives examples of how different cities have paid special attention to

recovering the literary work of poets and writers by making them present on its walls with the main goal of breaking the everyday monotony of public spaces.

In the second section, we discussed activism (the conjunction between street art and political-social activism) as a form of poetic expression in public spaces. In this context, different transnational poetic movements stand out because they aim to awaken a collective consciousness in the city’s inhabitants. Among them, I cited Poetic Action, with its strong presence throughout Latin America and the Movimento per l’Emancipazione della Poesia (MeP) which focuses more on spreading contemporary poetry in Europe. Again, their main purpose is to generate reflection among the citizens around them and in the city in which they live.

Finally, the third dimension of this analysis focused on global art and the role currently played by social networks as channels for disseminating [information] and promoting their work. Interventions initially take place in physical spaces, such as the city’s walls, which are more local and territorial, and then they establish themselves on the global scene. Based on their presence on the internet, street artists acquire additional roles as producers of art capable of establishing new forms of communication with international audiences and, in turn, transnationally with other artists.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ricardo Klein (Montevideo) is a sociologist; he has a doctorate in the management of culture and heritage (Universitat de Barcelona) and is currently based at the Department of Sociology (Faculty of Arts, University of Porto). He is also a professor and researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences and on the Postgraduate Course in Cultural Management (Interdisciplinary Space) at the University of the Republic, a collaborating professor in the Cultural Management master's course (Open University of Catalonia – University of Girona), and a researcher at the National Research and Innovation Agency (ANII). His main lines of research are cities and public spaces, creative cities, art in cities, and cultural policies.

