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**VISUAL INTERVENTIONS IN PUBLIC SPACE – THE  
CITY AS ITS INHABITANTS' *OUEVRE*  
PIXAÇÃO, SEGREGATION AND REAPPROPRIATION  
OF URBAN SPACE IN SÃO PAULO**

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## **VISUAL INTERVENTIONS IN PUBLIC SPACE – THE CITY AS ITS INHABITANTS' OEUVRE**

### **Pixação, segregation and reappropriation of urban space in São Paulo**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Políticas destinadas a consolidar o estado de centro de controle da economia global de São Paulo, empenham-se em limpar os bairros centrais, representativos de todos os elementos que não correspondem à imagem, assim aprofundando as desigualdades e exclusões múltiplas que marcam a vida na metrópole. O espaço urbano é vivido como espaço de constrangimentos, interditos, regras e normas. A própria metrópole, apesar de ser um produto social, aparece como potência estranha, aparentemente fora do alcance da intervenção criativa por parte dos indivíduos habitando nela.

Neste contexto desenvolve-se a pixação, um estilo típico de intervenção visual nas paredes das grandes cidades brasileiras, originalmente praticada por jovens em São Paulo na década de 1980. Desde então pixadores espalham suas escritas estilizadas em qualquer tipo de suporte urbano, desde a periferia mais afastada até o topo dos arranha-céu do centro. Em São Paulo, pixadores de todas as áreas da cidade – jovens e maduros, mulheres e homens, provenientes das classes médias ou marginais – se encontram semanalmente em vários “points”, no centro e nos bairros. Assim criam uma rede de comunicação, colaboração e amizade, que supera múltiplos confines físicos e sociais. De outro modo, na mídia, bem como no discurso político e jurídico a pichação (aqui geralmente escrito com “ch”) é discutido como vandalismo, como uma “praga urbana” e um dos problemas mais urgentes a serem combatidos em São Paulo.

As assinaturas, distribuídos pelas fachadas da cidade geralmente não contêm conteúdo político explícito, senão os nomes estilizados de grupos e indivíduos. Nesse sentido, propomos de discutir a pixação como uma prática cotidiana resistente no contexto da segregação socioespacial e do policiamento

repressivo do espaço público na época neoliberal. Assim, a partir do caso da pixação paulistana, discutiremos os potenciais emancipatórios das intervenções visuais no espaço público. As redes de sociabilidade no âmbito da pixação (parcialmente) superam a segregação generalizada. E mesmo para os sujeitos mais marginalizados as práticas de apropriação discutidas podem ser a possibilidade de reestabelecer a própria condição de criador(a) do próprio ambiente cotidiano, constitutiva do humano.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** prática cotidiana resistente, pixação, São Paulo, intervenção visual no espaço público, graffiti

“They exist or not, they manifest and express themselves or not. They speak or do not speak. It is up to them to indicate social needs, to influence existing institutions, to open the horizon and lay claims to a future which will be their *oeuvre*.” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 163).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the outset of the 21st century, cities around the world are marked by the transition from the domination of industrial capital to financial capital. In this context, urban space has gained a renewed importance in the process of capitalist accumulation. As urban policies are primarily concerned with creating an appealing environment for business elites and large investments, cities are exposed to massive restructuring. So is São Paulo. The violent transformation of certain districts expels residents and deploys a homogeneous aesthetic standard. “Concrete and glass are used to create an image of the 'modern' in new buildings designed for service sector activities, while residential areas are shaped in condominiums.” (Carlos, 2015, p. 27).<sup>1</sup> Inequalities increase and repressive policies are applied to regulate public space. While Marx depicts the idea of the human seeing him-/herself “in a world that he/[she] has created” (Marx, 1968, p. 517), most Paulistans might have difficulties to recognise themselves in their urban environment. The city, though socially produced, appears as an “alien force” to those large parts of the population, which do not pertain to the urban elite. City dwellers are deprived of their condition as creators of the urban, reduced to a mere appendage of the urban machinery (see Marx & Engels, 1959, p. 468). Urban space is thereby perceived as a space of oppression and compulsions, devoid of unregulated, creative interventions.

Henri Lefebvre calls for the right to intervene and to appropriate oneself of the creation of the city, when he suggests “that in a rapidly urbanizing society, a quest for a life beyond alienation is now best understood as a struggle for 'the city' as *oeuvre*: a collectively produced work of art.” (Kipfer, 2009, p. xxxii). A city, thus, produced by its inhabitants who, in fact, produce themselves through creative engagement with urban space and with each other. It is in this sense, that this paper discusses the practice of *pixação* as an exemplary practice of (re)appropriating urban space.

## 2. SÃO PAULO – THE CITY AS ALIEN FORCE AND ITS REAPPROPRIATION

São Paulo is a torn city, a “fragmented corporate metropolis” – as Milton Santos appointed in 1990 (Santos, 1990) – a “city of walls” (Caldeira, 2000) characterised by “generalisation of segregation” (see Vasconcelos, Corrêa, & Pintaudi, 2013; Ribeiro, 2015, p. 175).

Paulistan middle and upper class live within enclosed spaces protected by walls equipped with guards, security cameras and eventually electric fences. The city's centre undergoes extensive policies labelled as “revitalisation”, “requalification” or “revalorisation” that, in fact, enhance inequality and multiple exclusions (Alves, 2015, p. 143ff; see Fix, 2007). In the 2000s, policies titled “Operation Clean”, “Integrated Operation Legal Centre”, or “Operation Suffocate” were applied to “clean” the centre by violently ousting homeless people, informal street vendors and garbage collectors (Fórum Centro Vivo, 2006). The peripheries, on the other hand, reach far into the city's hinterland. Spatial distance

1 All translations from Portuguese and German by the author.

combined with high prices of local transport make participatory access to the centre unattainable for the marginalised classes.

Paulistan critical urban theory applies neo-marxist, lefebvrian approaches to grasp the metropolitan experience. These theories offer a rich tool kit to analyse not only the multiple inequalities and exclusions manifested in capitalist urban space, but also the implied processes of the population's alienation from its city. Simultaneously it is proposed to consider the (potential) elements of reappropriation inherent to capitalist production of urban space.

Social inequality realises itself in differentiated access to the city, not to be understood as mere physical “may go”-access. If exchange-value-driven production of urban space deprives the popular classes – in particular however not exclusively – of the right to the city, this involves the individuals exclusion from the social production of the city, that is, the production of the human him-/herself through the production of his/her living environment (see Marx, 1968, p. 516f.). Thus, the city, though socially produced, appears to its inhabitants “as an alien fate”, not as their common product, “managed by them as their common wealth”, but instead dominating them (Marx, 1983, p. 92). As a result, urban space is experienced as a “space of constraints, interdictions, rules and norms” (Ana Fani Alessandri Carlos, 2013, p. 95). Access to the urban is reduced to functions of labour and consumption, the city dweller relegated to a mere existence as consumer and work force (see Marx, 1962, p. 217), “destituted of the creative activity, constitutive for the human” (Ana Fani Alessandri Carlos, 2013, p. 96). But, as Lefebvre puts it, while at the one hand there are “the forces that aspire to dominate and control space: business and the state [...], in the opposite camp are the forces that seek to appropriate space” (Lefebvre, 2011, p. 392). We will here examine one practice of appropriation of space that, developed in the specific context of São Paulo, might indicate towards and inspire practices in other urban settings.



## PIXAÇÃO

“Man is creative activity; he [or she] produces himself through his activity.”  
(Lefebvre, 2009, p. 136).

The word “pichação” derives from “piche”, Portuguese for tar or pitch. In today's parlance it means as much as “scribblings”, with a pejorative connotation. The modification of spelling from “pichação” to “pixação”, with no change in pronunciation, designates the specific subculture of pixação which arose in Greater São Paulo since the 1980s, and very soon in other major Brazilian cities. Ever since, pixadores spread their signatures across every conceivable surface in public space of Brazilian cities, from the centre to the peripheries. In Europe pixação is often referred to as a Brazilian form of graffiti. This designation is only of limited use, since in Brazil, there are forms of graffiti and street art, similar to those in North America and Europe – regarding techniques, stylistic patterns and eventually their adaptation by the art market. By contrast, pixação, in many ways, remains unique and deeply rooted in the specific context of Brazilian cities. Unlike political or humorous pichação (written with “ch”), which arose in the 1960s, pixadores write names of individuals or groups, usually devoid of an explicit (political) message. Soon they developed their own stylistic pattern and new techniques to “scribble” the hardest-to-reach and most emblematic walls of the city. The intricate typography which is usually drawn with black coating colour, evades hegemonic aesthetics – in contrast to New York graffiti of the 1970s, which soon took up elements from pop culture and advertising industries and was usurped by commercial culture itself. Even though pixação is nowadays present in public space of all Brazilian cities, Paulistan Pixo still enjoys the greatest visibility in the (international) public discourse. During the last years pixadores networked throughout different cities. Movies like “100 Comédia Brasil” (Cripta Djan, 2006) document their travels and meetings with pixadores from various cities. Yet, scientific interest in pixação stays largely limited to São Paulo and few other big cities like Rio de Janeiro (Coelho de

Oliveira, 2009, see 2015), Belo Horizonte (Pennachin, 2011) and Salvador de Bahia (Alencar, 2012). In the different local contexts very heterogeneous forms of pixação emerged, respectively adapted to the particular local circumstances. The lettering in Salvador da Bahia is often expansive and prolonged by curved lines, in Rio de Janeiro on the other hand it is compact and relatively small. São Paulo's urban landscape differs greatly from Rio de Janeiro or Salvador de Bahia, in particular by the level of verticalisation. Accordingly, the typography of pixação in São Paulo usually follows a straight horizontal line, trying to occupy all space available. In this way they accomplish best visibility and legibility at extreme altitude. Paulistan Pixo gained particular attention by the practice, common in São Paulo, to climb the façades of the centre's skyscrapers without any backup.

Social scientists and journalists have made ambitious assumptions about the motivation of pixadores. Articles on pixação lately published in European media bear titles such as: “The alphabet of anger” (Fischermann, 2015) or “São Paulo's 'angry' alternative to Graffiti” (Siwi, 2016). The pixador Dilan<sup>2</sup> objects to these lurid tales of disadvantaged youth motivated by its “anger against the city” (Siwi, 2016): “We love the city. Doing pixo we amuse ourselves.” (Telephone conversation, 10/01/2016). Alexandre Barbosa Pereira (2010) emphasizes that the majority of pixadores in São Paulo pertain to the marginalized classes and live in the “quebradas” in the periphery of the metropolis. It is certain that many young people from the periphery strongly identify with pixação. “Graffiti, art? I don't know much about that stuff. I throw my pixo on the wall!”, explains a teenager in the northern periphery during an art project (March 2015). In the 1980s and 1990s many pixadores worked as “office boys” (couriers) in the centre and met after work on the so-called “points”. These meeting places still exist today and provide pixadores, even those from the most remote areas, with the opportunity to meet, to exchange ideas, to get organised in “grifes” (crews of pixadores) and to joint for their nightly ventures. Every Thursday night hundreds of pixadores meet at the central “point do centro” – information is shared, stories told, “folinhas” (leaflets) are scribbled and exchanged, arguments, discussions and celebrations are performed... Other weekly “points” take place in more remote districts. Through the common practice pixadores have built up a network of social relations that integrates the entire metropolitan region. Even though the identification with the “quebrada” (i.e. one's origin in a poor peripheral district) and setting oneself apart from “the boys” (as members of the middle and upper classes are pejoratively called) are very present in the scene, it is important to note that pixadores are not an homogeneous group. Neither are they only male nor exclusively young, poor and of Afro-Brazilian origin.

### **Pixação in juridical and media-discourse**

“A spectre is haunting in Brazil – the spectre of Pixação.” (Tiburi, 2011, p. 40).

The philosopher Márcia Tiburi states Marx' and Engels' famous metaphor to underline how much pixação hits the sore spot of Brazilian bourgeois society, provoking debate, hate speeches and calls for harsh measures. Back in 1988, Mayor Jânio Quadros announced that he would punish pixadores with the “toughest severity”, predicting they would soon “scribble on the chain” (in jail) (Abrahão, 1988). In 1998 graffiti and pixação were subsumed under the new federal “crimes against the environment”-law as acts of “soiling”, “defacement” and “against urban order and the cultural heritage”. In an 2011 amendment to the law, graffiti was decriminalised, when performed with the intention to “artistically

2 Names changed by the author.

valorize” the painted object. Pixação remains a “crime against the environment”. Further amendment to increase prison sentences for pixadores are regularly claimed.

Commenting on the repression of Pixação Teresa Caldeira (2013) remarks that current cleansing policies in São Paulo, unlike the ones of late 19th century would not focus on to the bodies of the “dangerous classes” (Chalhoub, 1996), but on the mass of signs in the city. This argument may be approved only partially. As shown above, recent policies as “Operação Limpa” aim well at removing certain groups' bodies from public space of the central districts of the city. Using the example of pixação, the control of the signs (see Baudrillard, 1978; Caldeira, 2013) is surely an important endeavour of current policies. But even herein the control of the signs is ultimately exercised on the bodies of the subjects. While in Brasília laws to increase prison sentences for pixadores are debated, the question of the statutory penalty seems to matter little on the streets of São Paulo. In the “quebradas” even teenagers, who indicate to have made pixo only a few times, know what happens when they are caught: the famous “ink bath”. “If the cops come, you better get rid of your caps [valves of spray cans]!”, explains a young pixador (March 2015). Police painting seized pixadores' hands, face or genitals with their own colour is reported to be a common practice. Further abuse includes insults, slaps, threats, macabre “games” like “Russian Roulette” or even executions. In July 2014 the pixadores “Jets Ald” and “Abnormal Nani” that had been captured by the police and had surrendered, were shot in the upper floor of a residential building (Franzen, 2015)<sup>3</sup>.



### **Pixação as means of political protest**

3 On the common practice of extrajudicial executions in Brazil see Delgado (2009).

After the aforementioned murder, pixadores used their social networks, to organise themselves. In several demonstrations hundreds of pixadores and sympathisers departed from the weekly meeting point, to march through São Paulo's centre. Thanks to this mobilisation the case gained some media attention, which might have been decisive for the criminal proceedings being instituted against the officers involved. Yet they have not been condemned until today. In recent years, pixadores in São Paulo and other cities have organised themselves in similar occasions. Most recently, in May 2016 when, after the imprisonment of several pixadores in the city of Belo Horizonte, pixadores organised demonstrations, not only against the criminalisation of pixação, but also to protest against the impunity of crimes committed by the political and economic elite.

Besides applying measures typically used by social movements to claim their specific rights as pixadores, some of the actors of pixação are also actively involved in broader protest movements. It would be hasty to affirm that pixação thus became explicitly political. Rather, one can observe that, in some cases, pixadores' knowledge, techniques and resources have been harnessed for social movements. A crucial moment for pixadores political involvement were the nationwide protests in June 2013, which commenced in answer to the local government's plans to increase transport prices. The protest brought up to 3,000,000 people to the streets of Brazilian cities – in São Paulo up to 250,000 in a single demonstration (Secco, 2013). Pixadores participated in demonstrations, designed banners and wrote slogans of protest on the walls of the city.

It was in this context that the “Pixo Manifesto Escrito” (“Pixo Written Manifesto”) arose. This symbol is used by various pixadores, as – in contrast to usual pixo – its use is open to everybody, to undertake explicitly political interventions on the city's walls. The fact that these actions are detached from the individual pixador's identity, reduces the risk of political persecution, but also highlights the general social relevance of the supported struggles. Pixador Brito explains:

“The idea is that it [the Pixo Manifesto Escrito] should be something for all. Just as the symbol of anarchy. Something that has no owner. Who identifies with anarchy, knows what to do, right?! [...] At that time [in June 2013] everybody just went out and did it...” (Personal interview, 15/03/2015).

Since the protests of 2013 the Pixo Manifesto Escrito has been applied targetedly on demonstrations or actions in support of specific political struggles.





### **Pixação as resistant everyday practice**

“The practices of resistance are many and they emerge according to existing conflicts. They may consist in the simple act of transgression of laws and norms, or in participation in wider organizations“ (Ribeiro, 2015, p. 184).

Social scientists have repeatedly attempted to define the political importance of Pixação – as “the politics of the poor” (Franco, Djan Ivson Silva, Rafael Pixobomb, & Joanna Warsza, 2012), “urban protest” (Larruscahim, 2014), “an alphabet of class struggle” (Warsza, 2012) or struggle for “the visual right to the city “ (Tiburi, 2011). Indeed, the involved actors, applied techniques, personal backgrounds and motivations are most diverse. Therefore, by no means we intend here to establish a definite or universal interpretation of pixação.

Even though some pixadores have recently engaged in explicit political interventions, many indicate that their motivation is essentially to experience and enjoy (themselves in) the city. In this sense, we propose to discuss pixação not exactly as “class struggle” – at least not in the narrow sense – but rather as a set of resistant everyday practices. Practising pixação, adolescents and adults (contrary to the common belief, many pixadores are in their 30s or 40s) experience and live their city. They scour even those neighbourhoods that generally remain inaccessible to the social group or class they belong to. As pixador Dilan states:

“They put an electric fence, they put a camera, an alarm system, what ever... We will always try to leap them. This is why pixo is guerrilla. The city segregates itself further and tries to segregate us, but we climb over these walls and break this segregation.” (Personal communication, 15/02/2015).

In the context of “generalized segregation” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 140), pixadores move through and across segregated and enclosed urban space. By leaving their signs in apparently unattainable places, they emphasise possible transgressions of material and

social boundaries and, by doing so, indicate further paths towards the superation of segregation<sup>4</sup>.

“...and the network that we form through *pixação*”, Dilan evokes, “*pixação* connects all regions of São Paulo.” (Personal communication, 15/02/2015). While “urban enclavism” (Stavrides, 2016, p. 18ff) constrains city dwellers to live within their confined enclaves, *pixadores*' social networks, as described comprehensively by Pereira (2010), constitute a strong resistant torque. The relations established on the weekly “points”, enriched and reinforced by common experiences reach beyond not only physical but also social boundaries. Talking about an oldschool *pixador*, who is said to be “boy” – a “rich kid” –, Wilson, a *pixador* from the infamous Capão Redondo district in the poor south west of the metropolis, affirms:

“*Pixação* is an instrument in which all are united. Rich, poor, you may live in the periphery, you may live in the centre, that's what I think is cool about it... In *pixação* there are no exclusions, no racism, it is for all!” (Interview, 23/03/2015).

While it is clear that this optimist appraisal might fail to take existing competition and eventual conflicts between *pixadores* into account, it represents an important aspect of *pixadores* relations to each other and to the city as common habitat. Besides lines of class and eventually race, it is spatially bound identity that segregates city dwellers, even those who share common life conditions. Paulistans range of action is typically quite restricted. In contrast, *pixadores* do not just transit physical spaces that they might usually not have access to, but furthermore support intense relations with inhabitants of these territories. Moreover, they meet people from all over the city in the centre or, by establishing “points” in the periphery, create alternative centralities. Finally, they (re)appropriate centrality and the city as a integrated common habitat, by co-creating the city. They leave their mark not only within the tiny radius of their micro-local enclave, but meet up in the centre or distant peripheries to intervene in those spaces as well.

To use Ana Fani Alessandri Carlos' words *pixação* might be understood as a practice through which the individual regains some of the sociability lost in the exchange-value-driven city (Carlos, 2001). Consequently, the resistant potential of *pixação* lies in its impact on the relation between the practising subjects and their everyday urban living environment. While São Paulo as “city of walls” (Caldeira, 2000) appears, to most of its inhabitants, as an oppressive alien power, practices like *pixação*, we argue, might help to grasp the city as a collective social product, created and yet to be created by human appropriation.

4 As Lefebvre puts it: “[...] the possible is also part of the real and gives it a sense of direction, an orientation, a clear path to the horizon” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 45).



## CONCLUSION

Concluding we suggest that through practices of collectiv intervention in public space, even those parts of urban population who are largely excluded and condemned to invisibility might regain visibility in the cities public space. Furthermore, these practices might equip actors with resources and experience that proliferate their self-perception as political subjects with the right and ability to stand up for their cause or in support of related struggles, as it is the case of some pixadores in the last years.

Yet, in most cases pixação does not transport explicit political content, but signatures of individuals or groups. Its content therefore consists in no more – and no less (!) – than the performative proof of these individuals or collectives existence. Their existence, however, not as mere bodies moved around in the city between moments of wage labour, consumption and domestic reproduction. By leaving their mark in urban public space, pixadores express and promote their condition as subjects of urban society, that is, creators of their everyday environment and, ultimately, of themselves. By intervening visually in public space, we argue, urban dwellers might reappropriate the city as product of human creative activity (see Marx, 1968, p. 516f.). Thus, moments of pixação may give a glimpse of the city “as a collective work of art” (De Angelis & Stavrides, 2010, p. 28), the “perpetual *oeuvre* of its inhabitants” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 172).

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