# Faces of the City: A Photographic Essay

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# Faces of the City
## A Photographic Essay

*George Kafka*

As the privatization of public spaces, marginalization of racially and economically stigmatized groups and corporate domination of Latin American cities continues, there is a growing need to create spaces of resistance to counteract the homogenization of urban spaces.

Graffiti and street art create sites of resistance both in their aesthetic subversion of urban orthodoxies and in their political symbolism as acts of defiance. The photos in this essay demonstrate how artists across the continent are projecting the lives of disenfranchised populations onto the walls of the urban spaces which they inhabit and create, shining a light on groups whose right to the city is being denied.

By focusing on faces these artists bring what is truly human into direct conflict with the dehumanizing tendencies of corporate cultures that dominate. The gaze of a homeless man in Bogota or the glowing eyes of a shoe shiner in La Paz, for example, bring personal histories into spaces otherwise dominated by symbols of power and exclusion. In Buenos Aires, the artist RRAA.- paints over the faces on advertisements, pulling pedestrians out of consumerist daydreams with pastel pinks that encourage artistic inspiration and human connection. More simply, the scratch of a grimace where paint has flaked serves as a symbol of a 'past performance' – a mark of interaction between an individual and her environment.[1] Elsewhere indigenous faces adorn the walls where they are otherwise unrepresented, and silent screams shout defiance.

**Figure 1** Buenos Aires, Argentina. Artist RRAA.-. The artist paints over a face on an advertisement leaving only the eyes and mouth exposed. Since 2012 he has been modifying the ever-growing amount of billboards in Buenos Aires to critique the commercialization of public spaces.



**Figure 2** Buenos Aires, Argentina. Artist unknown. An individual intervention in urban space need not have the scale or intricacy of a Banksy or a Blu. This grimace scribbled onto a flaking façade typifies the wit and dynamism that graffiti brings to the city – in exuberant contrast to the controlled sterility of neoliberal urbanism.

**Figure 3**   La Paz, Bolivia. Artist unknown. Shoeshiners are a familiar sight in the public spaces of the Bolivian capital, yet these workers cover their faces as the job is seen as shameful. This portrait, with its dignified gaze through iridescent eyes, makes the shoeshiner appear as an anonymous guardian of the city – a masked superhero of quotidian urbanity.



**Figure 4**   Bogota, Colombia. Artist unknown. Artists in the La Candelaria neighbourhood often depict local characters on their walls, elevating ordinary people to a level in parallel with politicians and military figures who are made present in the city with statues and public portraits.

**Figure 5** Buenos Aires, Argentina. Artist unknown. When economic crisis struck Argentina in 2001 many communities in Buenos Aires banded together into *asambleas populares*, public gatherings providing a space for both social support and political protest. This mural commemorates the *asamblea popular* of the Chacarita neighbourhood and the empty-pot protests that characterized this period of unrest and uncertainty.
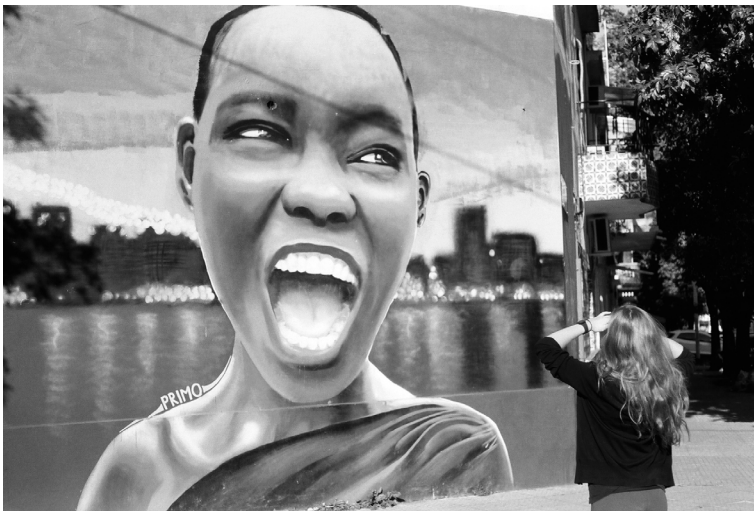


**Figure 6** Buenos Aires, Argentina. Artist unknown. Screams on a quiet corner of Colegiales; the passer-by cannot but be drawn into the visceral emotion of the depicted figure.

**Figure 7** Buenos Aires, Argentina. Artist unknown. Stencil of Giancarlo Esposito as Buggin' Out in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*. Like much of Lee's work, *Do the Right Thing* deals with changing community dynamics, racial tensions and gentrification – issues that permeate many neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires today.



**Figure 8** Buenos Aires, Argentina. Artist unknown. This stencil work conveys a profoundly personal sentiment; the young man's face portrays a variety of emotions ranging from panic to ambiguous uncertainty, familiar feelings for the modern city-dweller wrapped up in the chaos and overstimulation that the metropolis evokes.

**Figure 9** Buenos Aires, Argentina. Artist unknown. An anonymous mark left on the wall of the city serves to assert the artist's own existence in the metropolis.



**Figure 10** Valparaiso, Chile. Artist unknown. Indigenous faces adorn the walls in Valparaiso, raising the public profile of an increasingly marginalized community. Image also reproduced on front cover.

**Figure 11**    Valparaiso, Chile. Artist unknown.



**Figure 12**    Bogota, Colombia. Artist unknown.

## Notes

1   Jane M. Drexler and Michael Hames-García, "Disruption and Democracy: Challenges to Consensus and Communication," *The Good Society* 13 (2004): 59.