

Guisela Latorre. *Democracy on the Wall: Street Art of the Post-Dictatorship Era in Chile.* Global Latin/o Americas Series. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019. Illustrations. xvii + 230 pp. \$29.95, e-book, ISBN 978-0-8142-7700-3.



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Since October 2019, Chile has experienced one of the most important political and social crises after the dictatorship years (1973–90). This crisis has resulted in a countrywide revolt against low wages, high costs of education and healthcare, and the growing divide between rich and poor in a country considered one of the most unequal in the world. This revolt carries the social frustration of a country with a recent history of political and state violence. The end of the Chilean dictatorship had resulted in what Tomás Moulian (*Chile Actual: Anatomía de un mito* [1997]) called a “protected democracy” that deepened the neoliberal model cemented by the 1980s constitution that was implemented by force and repression during Augusto Pinochet’s civil-military regime.

As a backdrop to the months of demonstrations in public spaces across the country, following the so-called *Estallido Social* in 2019, the walls of cities began to scream their own artistic protest. The new murals proclaimed the accumulated rage of years of social injustice. At the same time, they spoke of the desire of Chilean street artists for a

better future, or what Guisela Latorre calls “visual democracy” in her book *Democracy on the Wall: Street Art of the Post-Dictatorship Era in Chile*.

Latorre’s book is a timely publication that coincides with perhaps one of the most transformative moments in Chilean democracy, a moment that has sparked a society-wide debate regarding the greatest challenges facing the country. This debate has resulted in a Constituent Assembly that now features gender parity, and ample space for indigenous populations and social activists not affiliated with any formal political party. Such interests are precisely the ones that Latorre documents and analyzes in the praxis and iconography of Chilean street artists since the 1990s.

Scholarly literature about Chilean art in the post-dictatorship era as a cohesive analytical category remains scarce. Thus, Latorre’s book contributes to the critical understanding of the characteristics of urban creative practices that emerged in Chile post-1990. It provides the first broad analysis of the aesthetics of the urban land-

scape while addressing the specifics of the historical, social, and political context of the period.

Latorre begins her narrative with reference to Jacques Derrida's notion of "democracy to come" to explain the potential of Chilean street artists to communicate and make visible in urban spaces the desire and constant striving for a more egalitarian society in a context where promises of democracy have largely failed. The central argument of the book is that street art and social justice have become nearly synonymous in Chile. Latorre describes how the muralism and graffiti that emerged as a political tool in the 1960s have, since the end of the dictatorship, converged to represent egalitarian visions of public space across the country, a perspective that is unique to this country's context. The book offers numerous examples as evidence of the role of the arts in making publicly visible the social, political, and indigenous struggles that the country has faced since its return to democracy, struggles that the media, politicians, and public figures have consistently tried to conceal.

The book's introduction contextualizes the theoretical concepts that are the basis of Latorre's argument, such as the aforementioned "visual democracy" and "democracy to come" as well as the political context of the dictatorship and post-dictatorship periods. It also includes a brief overview of the historical artistic precedents that provided the foundation and inspiration for street artists working in Chile since 1990. The overview describes the influence of the Mexican School of Muralism during the first half of the twentieth century in the country, which was made possible by the Mexican-Chilean governmental collaboration at the time.

The succeeding chapters follow a thematic approach that focuses on the most significant aspects of the development of street art in Chile. Chapter 1 discusses the resurgence of muralist brigades as part of the political campaign of Salvador Allende and the Unidad Popular political coalition of the

1960s and early 1970s. Ultimately, persecution forced these groups to disband or work clandestinely or internationally, in exile, during the dark years of the civil-military dictatorship. The chapter also focuses on two crucial brigades of this period, the Brigada Ramona Parra (BRP) and the Brigada Chacón, which have served as inspirations and learning resources for the new generations of street artists since the 1990s.

Chapter 2 discusses the phenomenon of *Museos a Cielo Abierto* ("open sky museums"), which were usually located in *poblaciones* in peripheral areas of Santiago and were "characterized by a high concentration of murals in close proximity to one another" (p. 25). These spaces were created by members of the communities and composed an artistic whole that generated meaning in the urban landscape. The chapter describes the Museo a Cielo Abierto de San Miguel and La Pincoya, with the analysis going beyond a discussion of representation in the arts to provide evidence of how art can constitute an effective tool for social change and urban transformation. Examples offered include how these open sky museums have triggered local authority partnerships to improve housing, sanitary conditions, and beautification of public spaces. They also promote a sense of belonging, cohesion, and pride in the community as well as the recognition of the history of these neighborhoods as an important aspect of community building.

The book clearly shows how the Museo a Cielo Abierto have helped these *poblaciones* become visible in the city in a context in which urban neoliberal policies have pushed for the precise opposite. That is, the displacement of the urban poor to the margins of the capital city of Santiago has served to conceal the unequal conditions that this portion of the population experiences daily. However, the chapter neglects to mention the historical connection between the BRP and the Museo a Cielo Abierto de San Miguel. One of the few murals that survived the erasure campaign and aes-

thetic censorship of the Chilean dictatorship was Mural 00: *Plaza La Unión*, painted by the BRP in 1971 at the Museo a Cielo Abierto de San Miguel. As its name indicates, this mural is the starting point of the Museo a Cielo Abierto de San Miguel, and its symbolic representation of resistance in many ways inspired this neighborhood project.

The next chapter shifts the focus to the emergence of graffiti art in Chile in the 1990s, centering on artists working mainly in Santiago. This chapter makes an important contribution to the documentation and analysis of the meaning of graffiti's intervention in a context in which the urban space is broadly controlled and monopolized by state and corporate interests. Chapter 3 also documents the heterogeneity of the Chilean street art movement and how *graffiterx* practice has fluctuated both from an individualistic to a common endeavor and from a political to a purely aesthetic artistic practice: "the self is always dependent on collective engagements for Chilean graffiti" (p. 130). In the cases of graffiti art created by artists from historically marginalized groups, self-expression in the public space necessarily takes on a political meaning: graffiti art serves as a public demand for greater visibility.

Chapter 3 also highlights the contextual differences between countries of the Global North and Global South in terms of facilitating this type of street art. While, in North America and Europe, *graffiterx* must struggle against strict regulations and criminalization of their practice, in countries like Chile, the ambiguous anti-graffiti laws and lack of law enforcement facilitate a less hostile perception of graffiti art. This has resulted in blurred boundaries between illegality and legality, which permits more opportunities for *graffiterx* to freely use the walls of streets for their work.

Chapter 4 offers perhaps the most important contribution of the book, particularly in the context of the rise of the Chilean feminist 8M movement over the last two years, which has drastically questioned the conservative and violent gender

politics in the country. In this chapter, Latorre draws from decolonial, Chicana, and black feminist thought as well as from the ethics of care literature to argue that Chilean *graffiteras*, through their collaborative practice and feminist work, challenge the capitalist and patriarchal culture of public spaces in Chile. By documenting the practice and meaning of these *graffiteras*, Latorre shows how their public art, in contrast to corporate marketing and advertising in the city, "seeks to create critically informed and empowered citizens who can deploy loving perceptions of others" (p. 137). This chapter features the work of five *graffiteras* who work in Santiago and Valparaíso and discusses how their strategically feminized iconography contributes to visual democracy by calling for gender inclusion in the often hostile and patriarchal atmosphere of the city.

The concluding chapter discusses the transnational dynamics of street art in post-dictatorship Chile that have expanded visual democracy beyond national borders. This transnationalism is defined both by the influence of *exiliados* who returned to the country post-dictatorship and by artists themselves traveling worldwide extending geographically their creative practices. These influences not only have brought international aesthetics and collaboration to the Latin American streets but have also migrated Chilean aesthetics to public spaces in Europe, North America, and other parts of the world. This chapter beautifully connects the book with the positionality of the author and her own transnational experience as a Chilean in the United States who migrated during the civil-military dictatorship. This chapter concludes by illustrating the important contribution of the author in bridging her academic research with pedagogy and engaged practice by bringing two street artists—Mono Gonzalez and Gigi—to Columbus, Ohio, to work with her students and the local community. This exercise facilitated the transnational transference of the radical and feminist pedagogies that take place in the streets of

Chile to the academic and social context of the United States.

One of the most critical social demands in Chile's current changing political scenario is the need for decentralization: for different regions of the country to receive more representation, resources, and political autonomy. In this sense, the author would have enhanced her argument by integrating mural and graffiti movements beyond Santiago to include Concepción, Valdivia, and Antofagasta, among others. Furthermore, the representation of the different regions across the country is central to our Chilean desire for “democracy to come.” Overall, *Democracy on the Wall* is an important contribution to the scarce scholarship on street art in the Global South and it shows how a scholarly endeavor can simultaneously represent a transnational and transformative personal, pedagogical, and community practice.

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