

## Radical insurgency in urban art: Considering pixação in Brazil

A arte urbana mais insurgente: O caso da pixação no Brasil

Insurrection radicale dans l'art urbain: Réflexion sur la pixação au Brésil

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### Abstract

This article examines pixação as Brazil's most marginalized urban art form and analyzes how it has created a platform for political action and visibility for youth in São Paulo's urban peripheries. Pixação is a form of visual intervention stylistically characterized by its straight and angular lines. Drawing on more than a decade of field research, this article identifies two major periods in the history of pixação. In the first period, pixação was primarily a form of competition among crews of pixadores – practitioners of pixação – for prominence and visibility. In the second period, pixação has carved out a broader space in the public arena, finding particular traction within the art world, although this relationship has often been challenged and subverted by pixadores themselves. The article's central objective is to examine how, even as the practice of pixação remains marginalized and criminalized, pixadores have leveraged it to achieve greater recognition in public spaces. In particular, they have found recognition in arenas that value what is termed pixação's "capital of marginality". The research demonstrates how the practice of pixação, as it intertwines with other political and artistic practices, has opened up pathways to new life trajectories for pixadores.

**Keywords:** pixação, graffiti, art, public space, capital of marginality

### Resumo

O artigo discute a pixação como a vertente mais marginal da arte urbana brasileira, que cria um espaço de visibilidade e ação política para jovens das periferias urbanas das grandes cidades brasileiras. A pixação é uma forma de intervenção visual muito presente na cidade de São Paulo, que se caracteriza por traços retos e pontiagudos. O artigo tem como base uma pesquisa de campo de longa duração realizada na cidade de São Paulo. Apresentam-se, assim, dois momentos da pixação. Primeiro, a competição entre grupos de jovens, estigmatizada como vandalismo, e, nos últimos tempos, como uma prática que tem encontrado maior espaço na arena pública e, em especial, no campo das artes. Esse espaço, no entanto, é também muitas vezes tensionado e subvertido pelos/as pixadores/as. O objetivo principal, portanto, é descrever como os/as pixadores/as encontram nessa prática marginal, estigmatizada e criminalizada um dispositivo de reconhecimento, em arenas públicas que valorizam o seu capital marginal. A pesquisa demonstra que a prática da pixação tem se desdobrado em outras atividades artísticas e políticas que permitem a muitos/as desses/as jovens construir novas trajetórias para as suas vidas.

**Palavras-chave:** pixação, graffiti, arte, capital marginal, arena pública

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## Résumé

Cet article aborde la pixação en tant que forme la plus marginale de l'art urbain brésilien, offrant aux jeunes des banlieues des grandes villes un espace de visibilité et d'action politique. Pratiquée intensément à São Paulo, cette intervention visuelle se distingue par ses traits angulaires et rectilignes. L'analyse s'appuie sur une enquête de terrain approfondie réalisée dans cette ville, examinant deux phases de l'évolution du pixação: d'abord, une pratique compétitive entre groupes de jeunes, stigmatisée comme vandalisme; ensuite, une réappropriation dans l'arène publique, notamment artistique, bien que souvent source de tensions et de subversion par les pixadores. L'objectif principal est de montrer comment ces acteurs transforment une pratique marginale et criminalisée en un outil de reconnaissance, valorisant leur capital marginal dans des sphères publiques. L'étude révèle aussi que la pixação a débouché sur d'autres activités artistiques et politiques, permettant à nombre de ces jeunes de reconstruire leurs trajectoires de vie.

**Mots-clés:** pixação, graffiti, art, capital marginal, arène publique

## Introduction

FIGURE 1

Pixação on a building in São Paulo's Centro neighborhood. N.B.: Pixações from pixadores Di and Dino.



Source: Author's archive.

Like any large metropolis, São Paulo's public space is defined by a dense visual landscape. This includes not only various forms of advertising but also the pervasive presence of graffiti and political pichações (spelled with "ch" rather than "x"), which are statements of protest written on the streets. The city's graffiti scene exploded at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, restyling the urban walls with poetic phrases.

According to Cristina Fonseca (1981), the graffiti of this period was notable for its wordplay, replete with irreverent puns and jokes. It was a kind of concrete poetry written on the city's own concrete. In her pioneering work on visual interventions in São Paulo's urban landscape, Fonseca highlights some of the period's famous phrases, such as Walter Silveira's "Hendrix Mandrax Mandrix" and Tadeu Jungle's "Ora H". Other forms of graffiti emerged in the same period, including the work of Alex Vallauri, considered one of the precursors of contemporary urban art in São Paulo. Vallauri is noted for his graffiti stencils, which Celso Gitahy (1999) called "mask style" (*estilo das máscaras*). By the middle of the 1980s, youth from the city's peripheries also began painting hip-hop graffiti, also known in Brazil as "American style", which would come to be the city's predominant aesthetic.

At the same time, *pixação*, or *pixo*, also began to emerge in São Paulo. *Pixação* is a distinctive style of visual intervention centered around practitioners' nicknames, or the nicknames of their crew as a whole. Here, I distinguish between the terms *pixação* and *pichação* to demarcate their distinct actors and practices. Where *pichação* describes a political phrase painted on a wall, *pixação* (pl: *pixações*), or *pixo*, describes a *name* painted on a wall, either of an individual or a crew. The terms *pixo* and *pixação* can also refer to the practice or the movement itself in more general terms. I use *pixador(es)* to describe the practitioner(s), and "to *pixo*" to describe the act of painting the city in this mode (I *pixo*, you *pixo*, we are *pixoi*ng). Although similar to tagging in some respects, Brazilian *pixação* has its own distinct characteristics, justifying the retention of the original term. Initially, these terms only inscribed the painting of individual *pixadores'* names, for example, Juneca, Bilão, or Pessoinha, but later expanded to encompass the painting of the names of *pixo* crews as well.

Since then, graffiti and *pixação* have come to define São Paulo's visual identity. Graffiti, despite being significantly repressed at its outset, has come to be accepted as urban art and a legitimate form of creative expression for the city's youth. *Pixação*, on the other hand, is routinely labeled as a form of visual pollution and is explicitly criminalized. These external perceptions have also come to define how the two forms of expression relate to each other, at times more aligned and collaborative and at others more distant and combative. Regardless, the extent to which both graffiti and *pixação* have modified São Paulo's urban landscape is undeniable, from the city center all the way to the most peripheral neighborhoods.

According to Lara (1996), São Paulo's most intense period of repression against graffiti was during its outset, when *pixação* didn't yet exist. Paradoxically, the rise of *pixação* fostered a greater public tolerance for graffiti. Graffiti would come to be contextualized in the art world, and thus to find a certain legitimacy in providing decorative or beautifying value to the city. In comparison, *pixação*, precisely because of the difficulty of classifying it, has only ever been considered a destructive act that degrades the urban aesthetic. Because the two mutually distinguish each other, *pixação* has always taken the brunt of public objection towards street art; it absorbs the animus that graffiti might otherwise arouse in contexts without *pixação*. As a result, *pixação* has long been considered a dirty and pollutant practice, while graffiti, in inverse correspondence, is a more beautifying one. This is partly because it is difficult to make sense of *pixação's* typography for almost anyone outside of its practitioners. It is neither quite art nor a form of drawing, and

considering that its stylized letters make it unintelligible to the majority of the population, neither is it an act of message-writing. In fact, one of the central complaints against pixação is the fact that most people can't understand what any given piece of pixação is trying to say. As a resident of a peripheral neighborhood once told me at a public debate on urban art, "They're not political messages, they're not trying to say anything. They don't mean anything".

Since 1998, under Law No. 9,605, the practice of pixação has been classified as an environmental offense. Article 65 of the Law, as amended in 2011, stipulates that "'pichar' or in any other way deface buildings or urban monuments"<sup>1</sup> is punished by a fine and a prison sentence of three to twelve months. The original 1998 text of Article 65, however, stated that "pichar, *write graffiti*, or in any other way deface buildings or urban monuments" (emphasis added)<sup>2</sup> was what would bring the penalties listed above. In both versions of the law, the legal term 'pichar' is synonymous with the practice that this article defines as pixação. The key here is that federal legislation did not initially distinguish between graffiti and pixação until the modification in 2011, when pixação became the focus (referred to in the text as pichação instead of pixação, and to picho instead of to pixo). In both versions of the law, the minimum sentence may be increased to six months when the object of vandalism is "a monument or is otherwise protected for its artistic, archaeological, or historical value"<sup>3</sup>. However, the revised legal framework establishes a critical distinction: graffiti ceases to be construed as a criminal act when it is executed with the property owner's consent and is deemed to contribute cultural or aesthetic value to the public or private space.

The Law was enacted in 1998 under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and amended in 2011 under President Dilma Rousseff, of the Workers' Party – the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). The law's alteration is indicative of São Paulo's turbulent relationship with street art, in which municipal administrations have alternated between more repressive and more supportive approaches. The PT has typically led supportive approaches, more interested in reining in and institutionalizing these practices through its discourse and policy – for example, running workshops to convert pixadores into graffiti writers – than out-and-out punishment. At all times, though, regardless of the degree of repression, the government has continually reinforced the distinction between graffiti and pixação. São Paulo's PT-run administrations have a tendency to value graffiti to the detriment of pixação; administrations of other parties tend either to persecute both practices indiscriminately, or to target pixação more heavily while still withholding legitimacy from graffiti.

The distinction between graffiti and pixação has also been defined by the specific context and history of Brazil and São Paulo. In most of the world, graffiti draws its inspiration from a hegemonic American style, which evolved from a straightforward practice of signature into, according to Ricardo Campos (2017, p. 5), "a more complex graphic expression from a technical and pictorial point of view". In São Paulo, however, pixação developed relatively independently of this influence, which has also led to its greater distinction in Brazil from what is conventionally labeled graffiti.

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<sup>1</sup> "Pichar ou por outro meio conspurcar edificação ou monumento urbano".

<sup>2</sup> "Pichar, grafitar ou por outro meio conspurcar edificação ou monumento urbano".

<sup>3</sup> "Realizado em monumento ou coisa tombada em virtude do seu valor artístico, arqueológico ou histórico".

Examining two specific municipal administrations reveals the broader historical dynamics between urban art and the state in São Paulo. Jânio Quadros, who was mayor of São Paulo from 1986 to 1988, repressed urban art indiscriminately. He even announced that he would arrest two famous pixadores of the era, Juneca and Bilão, in a publication in the *Diário Oficial do Município de São Paulo* – the Official Bulletin of the Municipality of São Paulo. The following mayor, from 1989 to 1992, was Luiza Erundina of the PT, and this was the first time a PT administration governed São Paulo. Under Erundina, the repression diminished, and there were even workshops to develop the artistic training of pixadores in order to convert them into graffiti writers. In PT's framework, they were exchanging depredation for legitimate artistic expression.

In other words, where the most conservative administration saw pichação and graffiti as visual pollution and, by extension, a criminal act, the most progressive administration attempted to distinguish art (graffiti) from vandalism (pichação). This back and forth is characteristic of successive municipal administrations: the more conservative developed anti-pichação campaigns based on moral panic and sensationalism, and the more progressive valorized graffiti but maintained restrictions on pichação.

This article presents the transformations of pichação in light of these municipal processes. The research draws on long-term and immersive ethnography (2001–2007), during which I closely followed pixadores' meeting points and interventions (Pereira, 2018). My first contact with pixadores occurred when I was still in secondary school in São Paulo's peripheries. There, I would see classmates sketching their tags in their notebooks, tags that they would later paint in the streets. Later, I discovered that they were pichações. During my undergraduate studies in Social Sciences, I gained a renewed interest in pichação, drawn by the unique relationship these young people had established with the city. The ethnographic fieldwork centered on participant observation at weekly gatherings in central São Paulo – gatherings that were forcibly relocated multiple times due to police repression. This core approach was supplemented by attending parties, conducting home interviews, and engaging in informal dialogue.

From the outset, I was very well received by the young pixadores. They saw me as a kind of mediator who could grant them the visibility they sought. Later on, after defending my master's thesis, I continued to research and publish on the topic, following the transformations that pichação underwent. Because of my long-term relationship with the community, some pixadores who had achieved recognition beyond the picho scene started contacting me to participate in lectures, debates, and exhibitions with them. This collaborative dynamic has since expanded, leading to my direct involvement in initiatives conceived by the pixadores themselves. A notable example is my role as curator for the 2019 exhibition "Dino," held at the Alma da Rua Gallery in São Paulo's Vila Madalena neighborhood.

FIGURE 2

Pixações on a building facing one of the pixadores' meeting points in downtown São Paulo.



Source: Author's archive.

The present work derives from this extended engagement with pixação. In it, I propose a division of the history of pixação in São Paulo into two major periods. The first period is more insular, marked by frequent disputes among groups of pixadores while pixoing the city. The second phase finds pixação engaging in a broader dialogue with other public arenas, particularly the art world, yet it retains the insurgent tension characteristic of the first period. Daniel Cefaï (2017) defines the public arena as a space that creates both the possibility of encounter and the potential for action. It is a space that can lead to “new opportunities for better living, both individually and collectively” (p. 140). In this second phase, then, pixação transcends its more insular communication, one exclusive to its practitioners, and achieves a broader role in representation and meaning-making. This division represents only one of several possible analytical approaches. Some pixadores, for example, draw distinctions based on technical and performance-based dimensions of pixação, defining one period by the popularity of pixoing neighborhood walls at street level, and a later period by the popularity of climbing up building exteriors and pixoing the roofline. My analysis, in contrast, proposes

a periodization grounded in sociopolitical meaning. This framework serves to highlight pixação both as a form that gives expression to urban marginality in São Paulo and as the foundation for an autonomous social network.

### **The first phase: Vandalism, peer recognition, and competition**

Pixação emerged in the 1980s from urban youth, mostly from poor and peripheral neighborhoods, spray-painting their names on São Paulo's walls. Over the years, however, it developed into a form of competition for visibility among groups of pixadores, or crews. The objective was to gain recognition for the crew's alias. The pseudonyms were written in highly stylized and rectilinear letters, aesthetically inspired by the typography of punk and heavy metal bands. Beginning in the 1990s, the competition centered on which crew could leave its pixação in the most places, with the greatest visibility, and with the highest risk. Soon, the main objective was redefined to pixoing the roofline of buildings, which involved great personal risk. Pixação thus became a competition among groups of young men to execute the most impressive feats. This is what I refer to as the first phase of pixação. At this time, there were few female pixadores, and those who did participate in the São Paulo scene faced significant prejudice and sidelining from their male peers.

The competition of the first phase established its symbolic foundation. It was a competition to see who could make their mark in the most places and the riskiest places. This created frequent conflicts between groups, both in symbolic terms of what and where they pixoed, and in terms of physical fights in the streets and meet-up points. On the walls, pixadores would cover over the pixos of their adversaries, a practice they termed an "atropelo", or a *run-over* (as in by car). To have one's pixo run over was, and still is, the ultimate insult, one that ratchets up tension and often leads to death threats and physical fights. These conflicts thus increased the danger of what was already an extremely risky practice.

Beyond these internal conflicts, pixadores faced external threats, including injury from falls or death at the hands of police and private security. In May 2017, for example, a pixador fell while climbing a building in São Paulo's Centro neighborhood. He landed on high-voltage wires and died. Two years earlier, in 2015, two pixadores snuck into a building in Mooca (a neighborhood in the east of São Paulo) pretending to be residents. They climbed up to the top floor to leave their pixo, but the building's superintendent noticed the intrusion and called the police. The military police arrived and killed the pixadores, claiming that they had been attacked and that the pixadores were armed and resisting arrest. According to a separate account, the military police killed the pixadores after they had surrendered and were already under arrest. Known in the pixação scene as Jets and Anormal, they were 32 and 33 years old<sup>4</sup>.

Clearly, then, pixação is not taken up lightly, and its practitioners are constantly subject to risks ranging from imprisonment to falling to their deaths. But for most pixadores, confronting these risks is nothing new. Due to the mere fact of being born in the city's peripheries, where there are few public services, they constantly face the threat of death or abuse at the hands of the police. As maps of violence in major Brazilian

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. <https://ponte.org/documentos-apontam-que-pixadores-foram-executados-por-pms>

cities consistently demonstrate, to be young, male, Black, poor, and a resident of the urban periphery significantly increases the chance of being a victim of homicide<sup>5</sup>. Pixação merely highlights the risks they already face due to their economic and social conditions.

The key elements of São Paulo's first phase of pixação are the steady increase of risk-taking and competition. Alongside peer recognition and the physical act of marking space, risk is one of the fundamental components of pixação's social dynamics and spatial displacement. Indeed, pixação is often understood, both internally and externally, through its risk-taking. For the general public, the most attention-grabbing and astonishing pixações are those painted high up on a building. Whatever their ire at the vandalism, people are always impressed by how pixadores risk their lives just to write their names.

FIGURE 3

**Pixações on a building in downtown São Paulo occupied by the squatter movement.**



Source: Author's archive.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.mapadaviolencia.org.br>

In this first phase, images of these youths and their pixações were frequently in the media, especially in print and television. These images played a dual role. On one hand, they amplified the stigmatization and repression of pixação by generating moral panic. Following Ferrell's (1993) discussion of graffiti and its criminalization in Denver, United States, they transformed pixação into a "crime of style". On the other hand, the mass media's sensationalism inadvertently served the pixadores' overarching goal: greater visibility and dissemination of their pixos. It was very common, for example, for the media to circulate photos and videos of pixadores hanging from buildings, making a spectacle of their risk-taking. Pixadores take pride in having images of their pixações published in mainstream media, even as it criticizes the activity.

In that sense, risk is fundamental to how pixação is represented in São Paulo, both by pixadores themselves and beyond. But it is not just at high altitudes that they are taking risks. In addition to the prestige of pixoing the top of a building, there is prestige in pixoing a restricted location and confronting its own ensuing risks. Beyond that, pixação carries even more diverse and idiosyncratic risks: on occasion, the police stop pixadores and paint their entire bodies with their own paint. Despite the repression and violence, the police are an important actor in how pixadores relate to the city. In the early 2000s, I frequently heard conversations about confrontations with the police: stories of arrests and narrow escapes. Pixadores would consistently recount to me tense encounters, involving the police, private security, building residents, and rival crews.

Campos (2013) employs the metaphor of the "modern hero" to describe street artists. This heroic vocation, he argues, requires the performance of extraordinary and highly dangerous feats, where transgressive risk and artistic creativity are inextricably linked. For pixadores, this heroic paradigm is realized through perilous urban expeditions, where the act of inscription constitutes the adventure. The pixação that remains is thus both the performance and its lasting monument within the urban landscape. Glória Diógenes (2013), researching Fortaleza, Brazil, pixadores' traversals of urban and cyber spaces, identifies risk as a fundamental concept in this practice, usually expressed through adrenaline, which she describes in this context as "the taste for the adventure of 'writing the right moment' [*escrever na hora*], of marking the wall" (p. 51).

In São Paulo, up through the mid-2000s, pixação's primary motivation was just that: competing to be the group with the most prestige, for taking the most risks and pixoing the most walls. These motivations began to change by the end of the decade, when several pixação crews made high-profile interventions in alternative and formal art spaces. This would usher in a new phase of pixação, in which a considerable part of its practitioners took on explicitly political and artistic postures. At the same time, they never abandoned the practices and motivations of the previous phase. This first phase enabled pixação to produce and accumulate what I term a "capital of marginality", a form of symbolic capital generated through the transgressive acts of poor, Black, and peripheral youth, who risk their well-being to imprint their stylized marks across the city. As I will explore in greater detail later on, this capital of marginality would come to be highly valued by certain spheres of the public, and especially the art world.

## The second phase: Political and artistic insurgency in the pixação movement

The year 2008 marked a turning point in pixação's relation with São Paulo's public arenas, and especially the art world. At this point, it shifted away from inter-group conflict and violence and towards the consolidation of a political and artistic movement. It is important to note that pixação had already been in dialogue with the art world in the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, and that internal conflicts did not suddenly disappear. As Leal and Campos (2022) have demonstrated, 2007 had already seen, for instance, the exhibition "Pixo, Logo existo" (I pixo, therefore I exist) at the prestigious Pinacoteca art museum. The authors also point out that some pixadores in the 90s were already claiming pixação as a form of marginalized art, including, notably, the pixador Di. Di was a legendary pixador from São Paulo who was killed in a bar in 1997.

In 2005, the São Paulo municipal-run Youth Coordination group also organized a series of dialogues with pixadores, a distinctly non-repressive initiative that stood in contrast to the city's otherwise punitive framework for addressing pixação. The municipal Youth Coordination group created the Street Art Forum with the aim of representing all forms of street arts, from graffiti to pixação to stickers to wheatpasting. The forum met weekly and began to articulate ways that these street artists could collaborate with the municipal authorities, such as planning cultural projects together. Although the forum would later center more around graffiti and somewhat abandon pixação, the municipal Youth Coordination's initial position was to accept pixação as a legitimate element of street art. This demonstrated a new attitude towards pixação that would become increasingly common amongst cultural spheres like visual artists and young intellectuals. They no longer saw pixação as mere filth and vandalism, nor as adolescent rebellion to be suppressed. In other words, certain minority sectors, with at least some degree of influence in the public arena, began to see pixação as a legitimate artistic expression instead of a problem. Through the same process of contextualization that had already legitimized graffiti, some began to understand pixação as a distinct mode of art, where youth from the urban peripheries used the urban landscape as their canvas. Additionally, Brazilian graffiti artists like Os Gêmeos were beginning to receive international acclaim for their work, which elevated São Paulo graffiti more broadly. In an indirect way, considering graffiti's complex relationship with pixação, this also elevated pixação.

During the mid-2000s period, art galleries Choque Cultural (Culture Shock) and Grafiteria opened in São Paulo's Vila Madalena, a neighborhood known for its vibrant cultural life. These were some of the first art galleries dedicated to displaying graffiti, and they occasionally displayed pixação as well. One of the galleries' artists Boleta, who identified as both a graffiti artist and a pixador, made significant strides in bringing a more serious, artistic analysis to pixação with his book *Ttsss... Pixação, the Vastest Art: São Paulo, Brazil* (Medeiros, 2006). Developed alongside visual artist Pinky Wainer, journalist Xico Sá of the Folha de S. Paulo newspaper, and photographer João Wainer of Folha de S. Paulo, the book featured imagery and writing that treated pixação properly as art.

After the publication of *Ttsss*, sectors of São Paulo's press began to perceive pixação in a new light. For example, in 2006, Eduardo Simões wrote an article for *Folha de S. Paulo* titled "The art of 'pixo'"<sup>6</sup>. The title itself demonstrates some of the concessions the media had begun to make in representing pixação, which they had so far only described as vandalism and delinquency that deserved harsher punishment. Pinky Wainer, one of the creators of the publishing house that released Boleta's book, described how much harder it was for pixação than graffiti to assimilate in Brazilian culture:

I think that graffiti is a lot easier to absorb. Graffiti has color; pixação doesn't. It is something that weighs on the city, it disturbs the city. No one really wants to have a work like that in their house. But art is disturbing. (Lemos, 2006).

This renewed focus on pixo drew the attention of journalist Nina Lemos (2006), who in another *Folha de S. Paulo* article titled "Barbaric invasions", wrote about street art's growing acceptance by a "modern" middle class that was connected with fashion, design, and the arts. Lemos expressed her amazement at seeing the "trendy middle class" side by side with pixadores at Boleta's book launch at the Galpão K event space. According to Lemos, some of the pixadores invited to the event pixoed all over the gallery. Pinky Wainer later wrote glowingly of this event, writing that it was "a true artistic manifestation"<sup>7</sup>.

It was in this context, when public spheres like art, fashion, politics, academia, and journalism were expanding dialogue with pixação, that pixadores first took collective action to strain relations with the art world, marking the beginning of their turning point. In 2008, at the dissertation defense for students of the Centro Universitário Belas Artes, the University Center for Fine Arts, one of the scholarship students known as Pixobomb invited his fellow pixadores to participate in his work. The action created enormous shockwaves and ushered in what I'm calling the second phase of São Paulo pixação. In this intervention, a group of pixadores burst into the exhibition space and pixoed over many of the other students' artworks. This act was documented in the film *Pixo*, directed by João Wainer and Roberto T. Oliveira. Considering pixação's logic of maximizing the visibility of their work, the documentary cameras were a significant motivation for the intervention. In other words, the pixadores understood on a strategic level that recording the act would probably produce a greater impact. True to their calculations, the feat sent huge shockwaves through the media and inspired a series of other combative and provocative public interventions in the art world. Also in 2008, pixadores stormed the Galeria Choque Cultural (mentioned above) and pixoed over the works being exhibited. Their aim was to question whether these gallery exhibitions truly engaged with the inherent transgression of street art. In the same critical vein, pixadores "atropelaram" ("running over") notable works of graffiti that had been officially authorized by the São Paulo city government. This act of overwriting was a direct confrontation with institutionalized street art.

Without a doubt, though, the most significant action of 2008, which in fact took advantage of a broader public discussion of art, was the intervention at the São Paulo Biennial. At the 28th Bienal de Artes de São Paulo, one of the floors of the pavilion was left empty – due, amongst other factors, to a financial crisis –

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ilustrad/fq2101200618.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/cotidian/ff2603200616.htm>

and the event came to be known as the “Empty Biennial” (*A Bienal do Vazio*). The same group of pixadores that had stormed the dissertation defense took it upon themselves to invade the pavilion and paint the walls of the empty floor. Although security guards intervened and called the police, only one pixador, Carolina Pivetta, was arrested. Notably, it was a female face that marked this important turning point in the history of São Paulo pixação, demonstrating how the male-dominated competition to achieve dangerous feats of the first phase was giving space to a more consolidated artistic and political movement with greater female participation. Pivetta’s case generated national attention, and the Ministry of Culture even took action to secure her freedom.

This event had a far-reaching impact, up to and including pixadores being officially invited to participate in the next São Paulo Biennial and in other national and international art events. Beyond the art world, pixação found a presence in various fashion lines as well as in the prestigious São Paulo Fashion Week. Here, pixo began to be assimilated as a visual signifier of street culture and marginality, or at the very least a more alternative dimension of São Paulo. Having gained greater legitimacy thanks to the “capital of marginality” it had accrued, pixação was increasingly incorporated into a certain cultural mainstream. This came to transcend the boundaries of the art world, and pixação now informs the aesthetics of various commercial initiatives – from advertising campaigns to streetwear brands to promotional material for television shows.

Pixo’s greater participation in the public sphere and art world opened new possibilities for pixadores, giving them the opportunity to construct new life trajectories (Velho, 2003). That is to say, inside and outside of their pixação practice, pixadores found new modes of performing, exploiting, and defining their realities. Even if many never planned to pursue a career in the arts, they at least now had a more diverse field of possibilities for constructing a discourse that legitimized their practice. Some took advantage of the newfound proximity to fashion to print their pixos on shirts and jackets. Elsewhere, and even considering their approaches were still quite combative and provocative, many pixadores found that they had much broader opportunities to expand their social connections and diversify them, creating new possibilities to amplify their voices, political positions, and active roles in urban life. They developed new contacts with researchers, journalists, artists, curators, politicians, and cultural producers. Even if they didn’t provide immediate material returns, this new network of relations led to greater symbolic recognition for pixação and its practitioners, and new opportunities to position themselves in the political life of São Paulo. More recently, there’s even a podcast featuring interviews about street art called *Pizza com Graffiti* (Pizza with Graffiti), which has created a discursive space for pixadores and graffiti artists to deconstruct the externally imposed dichotomy between graffiti and pixação<sup>8</sup>.

As a result of these transgressive and spectacular events, which forced their own contested participation in the art world, other spaces in São Paulo started to present and celebrate pixação. There were three especially notable exhibitions: one about the life and work of Djan, another on the life and work of Dino, and a third on the life and work of Di. Di’s career and work, as already noted here, was a landmark in pixação’s history. His peers consider him both São Paulo’s boldest pixador and a martyr. In June 2016, at

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/@pizzacomgraffiti>

the A7MA Gallery in Vila Madalena, the exhibition “#Di# ‘Pixo is human’” opened. It was an homage to Di, Edilson Macena de Oliveira. Born in 1975, he was an office worker from the peripheries of São Paulo’s Eastside. He died in 1997 at 22 years old, but his name lives on as one of the most important figures in pixação’s collective memory. The exhibition was curated by Sérgio Franco, co-curated by Enivo, and included the participation of Dino, another famous pixador and a friend of Di’s. The documentary *Di# To Pixo is Human* came out alongside the exhibition. It was directed by Bruno Rodrigues, an important pixador (pseudonym Locuras) in this phase of pixação, and was co-directed by Dino.

FIGURE 4

Opening of the exhibition #Di# *Pixo is Human*.



Source: Author’s archive.

On the day of the exhibition opening, pixadores from every part of the city came to celebrate Di’s memory. Along with images, newspaper clippings, and texts from Di himself, the gallery also had a blank building maquette that, over the course of the event, was pixoed by the attendees as a unique kind of visitor log. Di’s son was also present, greeting the visitors. This event, celebrating the life and work of a pixador from the peripheries of São Paulo, highlights how it can take a criminal act to bring inclusion and social recognition in a country with such extreme inequality. If he hadn’t become a pixador, Di might have been just a statistic, another young Black man from the peripheries who was murdered. Because he was involved in this unique cultural practice of marginalized youth, he instead became a celebrity, memorialized by his admirers. As such, pixação is not only a tool for reaching broader public recognition but also its own platform of mutual recognition.

## Marginality as a resource

Following Holston's (2013) argument about insurgent citizenship in São Paulo, *pixação* is a form of youth insurgency in a metropolis of the Global South. Because of this status, *pixação* has come to be classified as a more marginal and subversive practice than graffiti. Despite the criminalization and persecution, this capital of marginality granted *pixação* access to cultural and artistic spaces that had once been exclusive to graffiti. The two cases of *pixadores* participating in the São Paulo Biennial reflect *pixação*'s ambivalent character: in the first instance, in 2008, the *pixadores* invaded the Biennial to *pixo* it and were pursued by security guards and the police; in the second instance, in 2010, the *pixadores* were invited to participate as proper artists.

Using Roberta Shapiro's (2019) notion of artification, Leal and Campos (2022) describe *pixação*'s entrance into the art world as a dialogue with the processes of institutionalizing and mercantilizing urban visual interventions. For Leal and Campos, it is crucial to note the fundamental agency of these individuals and their collectives throughout this process. Ligia Ferro (2016) notes in a global study encompassing multiple cities that the process of legitimizing graffiti is marked by ambiguity. Its legitimization is in constant negotiation with its marginality, a push and pull mediated by graffiti's relationship with both governmental institutions and the art world. This is a key point for understanding *pixação*, which has never been completely institutionalized. Even in its institutionalized relations, *pixadores* continue to express dissidence and contestation, thereby reaffirming their agency. For example, at the 29<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennial, to which the *pixadores* were formally invited, *pixador* Cripta Djan *pixoe*d an installation from the artist Nuno Ramos without permission. Ramos's work included three live vultures in cages, and in reference to this and to a group of *pixadores* recently imprisoned in Belo Horizonte, Cripta Djan wrote "Free the vultures". Similarly, a group of *pixadores* was invited to the 7th Berlin Biennial in 2012, and led by Cripta Djan, they refused to lead a proposed *pixação* workshop that had been planned without their consent. Instead, they decided to *pixo* the walls of a heritage-listed church, generating enormous controversy in the international art world.

While this analysis focuses on how *pixadores* deliberately strain relations with institutionalized arenas like the art world, the more important point is how both sides benefit from their closer interaction. On the one hand, cultural actors like artists, fashion designers, journalists, and academics leverage *pixação*'s symbolic dimension of marginality to promote events or activities as dissident or counter-cultural. On the other hand, the *pixadores* gain a broader social recognition and even social inclusion by presenting their work in these contexts. In that sense, the point here is not so much to emphasize a shift from vandal to artist, which Leal and Campos (2022) already discuss, even if this is an important movement for some *pixadores*. Rather, I want to focus on the mobilization of *pixação*'s capital of marginality, a resource in high demand within certain sectors of the public arena. It was amid this mobilization that some *pixadores* began to see their practice as a political movement, which significantly diminished the disputes and internal conflicts of the first phase.

In her analysis of clubbing culture in England, Sarah Thornton (1995) describes how certain participants in the cultural scene were seen as more legitimate for holding greater subcultural capital. They had a greater knowledge of the scene and thus held some sway over its symbolic configuration. While also true of *pixação*

– there is indeed an internal recognition of subcultural capital – pixação also managed to generate a capital of marginality that holds value outside of the movement. This is especially true of the art world, academia, and certain political and social movements. Pixação’s capital of marginality is born of, and amplified by, the original division imposed between graffiti and pixação, whereby pixação became a more radical and marginal form of visual intervention. Pixação also has direct links with other important sites of political mobilization. Stemming from its connections with the urban peripheries and hip-hop, pixação also wields some of the capital of peripheral culture, street culture, and black culture, according to Macedo’s (2016) arguments about São Paulo hip-hop. In my field research in the early 2000s, some pixadores told me that they saw themselves as hip-hop’s most radical faction. So when pixadores dissent from the processes of institutionalization, they are proportionally increasing their capital of marginality. Their dissent makes them even more desirable to those seeking to leverage this capital, paradoxically increasing the possibility of their institutionalization elsewhere. Pixadores take advantage, then, of a process that Hall (1996) describes in cultural production, in which marginality becomes a productive space that not only creates new possibilities for the excluded but also affirms new questions of political subjectivity.

Mobilizing these elements of street culture, black culture, and peripheral culture, pixação wields a subversive and combative image that has come to be considered one of São Paulo’s most marginalized cultural forms. Following Peter Pál Pelbart (2003), who theorizes life as a form of capital for subaltern subjects, I propose the concept of capital of marginality to analyze pixação. This concept describes a reaction to cultural capitalism, in which the marginalized wield their lives, their greatest and only asset, to reaffirm their own self-worth. Instead of merely surviving, and despite the continued precariousness of their position, they begin living creatively, reevaluating and revaluing their lives to create new and unique cultural products. At the same time, pixadores’ using their own lives as capital is a means of survival and resistance in this context. José Valenzuela Arce (2019) uses the term “bioculture” to label the process Pelbart describes. The term highlights the centrality of the body in the process of control, submission, and resistance to power. São Paulo pixadores confront life and death with their dissident actions, and their bodies are the site of conflict. At one extreme, as Reguillo (2000) has demonstrated, the tools of biocropolitics control life and death through the classification and control of bodies. At the other, in a process Valenzuela Arce (2019) calls “bioresistence”, the youth themselves and their practices of constructing collective bodies, through irreverence and risk, create breaches in the control, seizing a life for themselves in the city.

In 2013, Cripta Djan, one of the most prominent names of São Paulo pixação for the political and artistic depth of his public interventions, described an international art event where he and his colleagues were asked their price to pixo a conventional painting canvas. His quoted price, one million dollars, stunned the interlocutors. Djan’s justification was incisive: “Would any other artist risk their life to make their art? We do”. Djan’s story demonstrates the radical affirmation that pixadores make of their lives against the necropolitics that prey on the young, poor, and black residents of Brazil’s peripheries. At the same time, Djan enhanced the symbolic value of his practice to the most political segments of the art world, a strategy that paved the way for his recurrent participation in future events.

In a context where their lives – marked by age, race, geographic location, class, and gender – are rendered vulnerable by necropolitical logic (Mbembe, 2016), pixadores leverage risk to perform agency. This performance, a reclaiming of authorship over one’s own existence, serves as a visceral affirmation of the persistent life force theorized by Pelbart (2003). By exposing themselves to the risks of pixação, they refuse to be mere puppets in the contemporary order of life and death, in which they are classified merely as vulnerable young people, at risk, and expendable. In his analysis of graffiti in Lisbon, Ricardo Campos (2013) frames this relationship with risk as an escape from pre-established narratives into the unknown: “These gestures are often an individual’s assertion of sovereignty over themselves, breaking free from the oppressive bonds of normal life to claim a new status beyond the ordinary” (p. 212). For their part, São Paulo pixadores call attention to their precarious lives by flirting with risk: the possibility of being injured in an accident or killed at the hands of a military police officer. Drawing attention to themselves in such a way, they are thus seeking visibility and social recognition beyond the pixação movement. Austin (2010), in his study of New York, contends that graffiti is a way of seeing, one that creates the possibility of alternate cities and ways of life. It does so by enabling social actors who are systematically excluded from the public scene to achieve visibility and voice. Elsewhere, Brighenti (2010), in his research in northeastern Italy, argues that while walls produce boundaries and control, they also provide a highly visible arena for public battles to take place. These theoretical insights find potent expression in São Paulo, where pixadores harness the city’s walls to express and to make their marginality visible. They loudly and publicly denounce the violence of their daily lives in the city’s poorest neighborhoods, rejecting the segregation imposed on them. Through this transgressive practice, they convert their accumulated capital of marginality into an occupation of public arenas far beyond the walls.

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