The battle for public space along the Mapocho River, Santiago de Chile, 1964–2014

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Introduction

Urban artists in the southern cone of South America habitually use combative language that expresses their intention tomar or to ‘take’ public space. For example, for Kat (aka Nekonekoteko) and Fede (aka Blablabuto), organisers of the radically alternative SABA (Street Arte Buenos Aires) urban art signifies taking the streets, reclaiming what is yours . . . an ‘attack’ on public space.¹ The artists known as t.h.e.i.c. of Colectivo Licuado of Montevideo (www.colectivolicuado.com) and Henruz of Santiago (www.henruz.blogspot.com, www.henruz.com) have conversed about how they like ‘to take a place’, Henruz putting the rhetorical question: ‘To take a space from what? . . . from nothingness, from publicity, from party political propaganda’.² This is a much more serious agenda than the humorous personal rivalries of ripostes and counter-ripostes between graffiti writers on city walls, such as that between the late King Robbo and Banksy in London, which characterise much street art in the Anglophone northern hemisphere.

While all the above-cited comments about taking public space — in the case of these graffiti artists painting walls and other surfaces in the street — were made in 2013, in Chile walls have been the vehicle for protest art for over a century. As Alejandro Mono Gonzalez (http://monogonzalez.blogspot.com) of the emblematic communist muralist collective, the Brigada Ramona Parra (BRP), has explained: ‘It is customary for the Chilean left to occupy public space since the foundation of the Chilean Communist Party in 1912: That is to say before the movement of Mexican muralism began.’³ This is one reason why it irritates Gonzalez that histories of Chilean street art begin with Mexican muralism; the other is that while most Mexican murals were painted indoors, most Chilean murals have been in the open air.

Such an historical perspective is not surprising coming from the founder of Chile’s greatest (but by no means only) collective of political propaganda muralists. It is more surprising coming from young grafitero Coas: ‘Here in Chile since the birth of the Communist Party there have always been artistic expressions in the street, the first of which was political muralism.’⁴
The abyss between political muralism and graffiti

Political Brigadas of muralists started to define themselves as such in the 1960s and their relationship to hip hop graffiti that began to appear in Chile from the 1980s has not been straightforward. According to protagonists from both sides, Mono González and Gustavo Arias (aka Lalo of the hip hop band Nueva York) there was an ‘abyss’ (‘abismo’) between the two subcultures and it is only since around 2008 there has been a convergence between political muralism and graffiti. Both sides recognise the enormous rift of the 1980s and 1990s. González explained in 2012:

There was a period, and it is very important to say so, and to recognize that it was a period, a product of the dictatorship, that there was a cultural vacuum in which there was an abyss between the brigadistas and the graffitero. That is only recently in the last three or four years there has arisen a sort of re-encounter between the graffitero and the muralist in which there is respect and recognition between one and the other. There started to be mutual recognition around the time of the centenary of the birth of Salvador Allende in 2008. Today the Open Sky Museum of San Miguel is very important because we have managed to bring graffiteros and muralists together.5

In a separate interview given in the same place on the same date, Arias indicated:

Until four or five years back there was quite a big abyss between brigade muralism and graffiti. It must be understood that brigadism has to do with the political world; and that there are local elections in Chile in 2012 and also presidential elections next year, in which many brigades who are not necessarily muralists but are merely propagandists, set about occupying walls and in this occupation of walls often they do not respect what is continually painted on the street; and I refer not only to graffiti but also to muralism itself, mural art. That is in that battle-machine, if you are in the street and see things by political propaganda brigades is when this abyss is produced, and there is resentment that many people from the political parties come and cover up what is there with mere letters and propaganda for their candidate. It doesn’t matter which candidate or who does it, no distinction needs to be made, because all candidates work in the same way, and this is pretty annoying to we who made the street scene, whether graffiteros or muralists. And fundamentally and constantly ever since the graffiti scene emerged, which is from the 1980s that it took off, there is this abyss. Now with Mono and with people who were part of the first phase of brigade muralism, brigadist as he calls it, and who also understand that there is an art behind graffiti, there has been this coming together. But at times such as this they alienate you once more, that is, it is not something that is absolutely exhausted. That is there is a good vibe with Mono, there is a good vibe with other authors of murals that are more classic, as they call it, more permanent, and the graffiti world, but the estrangement is not something that has completely come to an end.6

It is noteworthy that both González and Arias consider that the abyss between their respective subcultures was all but total until about 2007. In 2007, many would have agreed with a celebrated Chilean graffiti writer’s perception that the BRP were anachronistic, embodying ‘a different politics for a different time’. At about the same time, however, many second wave Chilean street artists expressed their admiration of the BRP (Palmer 2008: p. 60).

The best twenty-first-century example of individual street artists’ energies fusing into a revolutionary collective is UMLEM (Unidades de Muralistas Luchador Ernesto Miranda: Units of Muralists Fighter Ernesto Miranda). Miranda had helped found the Chilean MIR (Movimiento...
de Izquierda Revolucionaria: Movement of the Revolutionary Left) in 1956 (Salinas 2013). MIR is still active in its own right and its libertarian revolutionary ideology is one of the models for UMLEM. UMLEM has grown beneath the radar and is now more widespread in Chile than any political muralist collective, baring only the BRP, has ever been, with eighteen affiliated groups almost the length of Chile from the southern island of Chiloé, to Tocopilla and Arica in the far north of Chile (Palmer 2011: pp. 153, 157).

UMLEM was born on 11 September 2003, at a commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the military coup in Chile, Talcahuano, the port contiguous with Chile’s second city Concepción, an early heartland of their murals (Palmer 2008: p. 47). In their own words:

The reasons that motivated their founding were . . . that we were a group of male and female comrades who had hitherto been painting individually and within different aesthetic tendencies all however related to street art and moreover trying to deliver a message that would help to raise awareness through painting . . . The process which drives us to develop a particular aesthetic has its roots in the historical recovery of the Latin American muralist tradition, including the Ramona Parra Brigades, but also constructing our own aesthetic as a means of creating something new, together with the libertarian Project that we have been building for ten years now.7

UMLEM murals use planar colours within a black outline of the classic style of BRP muralism, and their style is further characterised by a spectrum limited to black, white and a range of reds and pinks – an anarchist palette, UMLEM’s libertarian project being informed by Bakuninian anarchism and its Latin American off shoots such as the FAU (Federación Anarquista Uruguaya: Uruguayan Anarchist Federation). UMLEM’s distinctive style is also recognisable by its infantile figures, intended to be accessible to all. We will in due course come across a specific example of a context for UMLEM’s libertarian project.

Widely recognised protagonist of the Chilean street art scene, Cekis, acknowledges that he still remembers the political murals of the BRP and other Brigadas,

which made a strong impression on me when I was a boy. I think the opportunity to help fill in a part of the design on a political mural forged in me a small but significant hope that someday I would be able to do it on my own in a different context.

(Ruiz 2011: p. 136)

Cekis is however adamant that street painting since 1990, influenced by contemporary western culture, is completely different from political mural painting; until the 2000s, in terms of actual intention the only thing that the brigades and muralists really had in common was to occupy public space.

Confluences

González has good reason to emphasise the importance of the Open Sky Museum of San Miguel, which is indeed a phenomenal coming together of muralists and graffiti writers and their target audience, resulting in the transformation of an entire neighbourhood (www.elmostrador.cl/cultura/2013/12/12/como-el-arte-salvo-a-una-poblacion-de-desaparecer).

Open Sky Museums such as that at San Miguel are important points of arrival for the Graffiti Mural. The Graffiti Mural is a twenty-first-century phenomenon of large-scale figurative murals

260

Rodney Palmer
that knowingly combine graffiti’s irreverence with muralism’s social content. The South American ‘Graffiti Mural’ has been developed in Sao Paulo, Santiago de Chile and Buenos Aires since around 2000, and shortly thereafter in Bogotá, Lima, Asunción and Montevideo. The ‘Graffiti Mural’ connotes large figurative walls by accomplished graffiti writers, some of them professionalised and the walls they paint willingly lended; however most of the strongest graffiti murals in Chile are on illegally appropriated walls, preferably ones easily visible by locomotive and pedestrian traffic.

Chilean propaganda Brigadas such as the BRP and Brigada Chacón calculated viewer numbers from buses, cars and the pavement and chose their walls accordingly in order to address a relatively mass audience (Castillo and Vico 2011; Sandoval 2001). These considerations are evolved in the sophisticated communication strategy of the graffiti mural, as Chilean conceptual street artist Claudio Drë explains: ‘Each work has a particular intention, on the basis of which one looks for the place in which to situate the piece. One analyses: Physical context, size, spatial situation, automotive routes, pedestrian traffic, distance, visibility, typographic shape when incorporating letters, etc. Often the wall might have elements around it which can be made good use of, to accentuate or emphasise the point that is being made.’8

A nice fusion of aspects of Brigadista principles and the freedom of graffiti is Santiago’s Brigada Negotrópica, formed by three siblings. ‘Negotrópica’ is their own neologism; of no fixed meaning. Since 2008 Negotrópica has painted unauthorised walls, and authorised murals, partly characterised by thick black outlines are handled with comic-strip agility, often in defence of animals. Tegri specialises in cats, especially tigers, in particular the Bengalese tiger, Pampa, murdered in Santiago’s zoo. The Brigada Negotrópica are equally comfortable participating at graffiti events and in collective brigade murals.

A significant confluence of recent years has been the institutional facilitation of public space in Santiago’s metro to individuals more accustomed to painting illegally on the street. Emblematically, Eugenio Heiremans (1923–2010), director of the Hospital del Trabajador on Parque Bustamente, enabled Mono González to realise a wrap-around mural for Parque Bustamente metro station. González and Heiremans friendship was unusual. Jorge Pintó, director of MetroArte recalls that Heiremans was politically exactly the opposite of the Communist González. Those present at the unveiling of González mural were struck that, without either of them abandoning their principles or changing sides, Heiremans and González could only find good things to say about each other, which felt to impartial viewers like ‘the start of a social accord’.9 A further measure of the conciliatory nature of MetroArte public art program is that Raúl Zurita, best known for his involvement in the clandestine CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte: Art Actions Collective), of which more shortly, was in 2009 writing in terms of stations as like embraces and as the new cathedrals (Las Nuevas Catedrales 2009). The bonhomie is starting to extend to graffiti writers as well. There have been obstacles to inserting graffiti art in Chile’s metro system, but in 2011 Cekis was invited to put a mural-sized work on temporary display in the Quinta Normal metro station, home also to Roberto Matta’s Verbo América. Cekis’s work is still there (Palmer 2015: pp. 187–189). In some contexts, there are steps on both sides to bridge the polarisation in Chilean culture since the early 2000s. In others, there is no letting go of the memory of Pinochet’s dictatorship; and, in the cause of undoing some of Chile’s marked social injustices, there are public spaces that are taken over and over again.

The Mapocho

The best Chilean example of a public space to be taken and occupied is the stretch of the Mapocho river that runs through central Santiago. For at least half a century, the lateral walls
of the Mapocho have been a battleground between political and then also graffiti murals on the one side, and authoritarian oblations in grey on the other.

All murals and other interventions here discussed were or are on the river’s northern bank, which broadly speaking can be compared to the Rive Gauche of the Seine in Paris, the South bank of the Thames in London, the Trastevere bank of the Tiber in Rome: being like all of the above the other side of the river from Santiago’s main political and financial institutions, and, like the Rive Gauche, incorporating Santiago’s bohemian quarter – Bellavista. The northern bank of the Mapocho hosts a fluctuating underclass population. Of course, murals painted on the north bank of the Mapocho are viewed from the South – at a distance easily visible both by pedestrians and from vehicles, the Mapocho being narrower than the Tiber, let alone the Thames or the Seine. The local municipalities along the river as its runs from east to west through central Santiago are: Upstream to the east Providencia on both sides, downstream to the west: Recoleta to the north and Santiago Centro to the south.

Murals became a main propaganda medium in support of Salvador Allende’s presidential campaign of 1964; the biggest and most effective of these were those on the breakwaters of the Mapocho, by the artists Luz Donoso, Carmen Johnson, Hernan Meschi and Pedro Millar downstream and downtown opposite Santiago’s Vega Central market, Gertrudis de Moses photographs of which are reproduced in Eduardo Castillo Espinoza’s masterly book on twentieth-century Chilean art and politics (Castillo 2006: pp. 71–73). The protagonists of the murals of 1964 realised, in Luz Donoso’s words, that beyond the murals themselves the best propaganda was to be there, painting. They considered the texts in the finished mural at the Mapocho to be less significant than its imagery. Nonetheless, the textual content, on Chilean history and the politics of its mineral resources from the 1886–1891 presidency of Jose Manuel Balmaceda onwards, can be judged to have been effective propaganda in the medium term. Its largest and most legible legend raised the growing cause of the Nationalisation of Copper (‘La Nacionalización del Cobre’) that would be achieved by Salvador Allende in 1971.

Propaganda Brigada painting diversified during the 1970 presidential campaign, for instance the socialist Brigada Elmo Catalan (BEC) formed in July 1970. From Allende’s election in September 1970 and during the following three years of the Unidad Popular government, the Banks of the Mapocho were extensively painted with figurative representations of the Chilean left’s ideals. In 1970, Luz Donoso, Pedro Millar and Hernan Meschi, together with Gregorio de la Fuente and José Balmes of the Universidad de Chile and others returned to the breakwaters of the Mapocho to paint a mural equating Allende with José Martí (Bellange 2012: p. 60). The most celebrated mural dating from the Unidad Popular government is The First Goal of the Chilean People (El Primer Gol del Pueblo Chileno), coordinated in November 1971 by Roberto Matta and members of the BRP at the then swimming pool of the underprivileged Santiago suburb of La Granja. However, as Eduardo Castillo has observed, the most visible product of Matta’s collaboration with the BRP colleagues was the mural painted by Matta, Mono Gonzalez, Juan ‘Chin-Chin’ Tralma and others at the start of 1972 stretching 450 metres along the central mid-town stretch of the Mapocho from the height of the bohemian district of Bellavista to the museum of Bellas Artes, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Chilean Communist Party. The mural assimilates Pablo Neruda’s verbal power and Matta’s surrealistic figures and the BRP motif of an extended – in this case fifty metre-long – arm, in an ideographic brigadista mural in the classic BRP style of profiles and symbols outlined in black (Castillo 2006: pp. 118–131).

Following the coup of 1973, in which Salvador Allende was overthrown by General Augusto Pinochet, all walls on the Mapocho were covered up with grey paint and The First Goal of the Chilean People obliterated beneath sixteen layers of paint (but, amazingly, the latter was largely restored between 2005 and 2007).
For the first decade or so artistic resistance to the military regime was mainly underground – in clandestine printed matter. Opponents of the regime started to organise themselves. 1983 is considered year zero of open resistance to the dictatorship. 1983 saw the formation of the Marxist Leninist guerrilla group FPMR (Frente Patriotico Manuel Rodriguez) which would realise attacks on Pinochet’s regime including an attempt to assassinate Pinochet in 1986: FPMR was listed as a terrorist organisation by the US State Department until 1999 when FPMR’s armed activity ceased (although as we shall see FPMR’s militant propaganda interventions continue). The Mapocho was the chosen site of a key moment in the emergence of public resistance. At 2.30 pm on 23 September 1983, members of CADA and other participants including Luz Donoso and Pedro Millar with experience of painting the Mapocho in the 1960s, unfolded from the northern bank of the Mapocho, on the stretch by the Vega, four canvases with the characters ‘N’, ‘O’ and ‘+’, and a revolver, plainly insisting on no more summary executions by the regime (Figure 20.1). In her essay of an intercontinental geographical scope that dwarfs this one, Cecilia Braschi has accentuated the participatory nature of the ‘NO +’ action (Braschi 2013: p. 184).

The fearless rejection of the regime in such a highly visible place proved to be contagious. From then on, during the rest of 1983, 1984 and succeeding years, the slogan ‘NO +’ would proliferate on Santiago’s walls. CADA’s ‘NO +’ action retched things up by explicitly incorporating the active participation of the community so much so that ‘it became the communal slogan of the anti-dictatorial community, as Robert Neustadt pointed out in his book CADA Día (Neustadt 2012: p. 68). The same book reports many assertions by members of CADA of their realisation of the part of the NO + slogan in helping to bring Chile’s military rule to an end. Diamela Eltit of CADA observed, ‘All the protest marches towards the end of the Dictatorship, without exception, were led by banners saying “No +”;11 for her fellow CADA activist, Raul Zurita, ‘NO +’ began in 1983 and ‘did not end until the defeat of Pinochet in
the plebiscite of 1989. Alas the background to the success of the NO campaign against Pinochet, of CADA’s ‘NO +’ and also of the roots of its emblem, the rainbow, in Chilean psychedelic graphics of 1967–1973 (Castillo and Vico 2011; Larrea 2008; Vico and Osses 2009), are both overlooked in Pablo Larrain’s otherwise tolerable film No: la película (Chile, 2012) that recreates the NO campaign.

The refrain ‘NO +’ would recur post plebiscite and post-dictatorship and continue to be a leitmotif in campaigns against the repression of Chile’s largest indigenous population and against profiteering education in Chile, including abroad in stencil interventions in Montevideo in 2012 by the Uruguayan CEIPA (Centro de Estudiantes del Instituto de Profesores Artigas), ‘NO +’ represión a estudiantes en chile, to return to twentieth-century Santiago de Chile: In the mid-to later 1980s, the Colectivo BRP, Chin-Chin and a new generation including Carolina del Rio and Beto Pastene emerged. Their clandestine murals on the Mapocho would last for a day or so before being concealed. By the later 1980s resistance to the military regime became increasingly visible, in 1989 the plebiscite was won and by the start of 1990 brjadistas the BRP and the BEC felt sufficiently empowered openly to make bajadas or group descents down wooden ladders to the banks of the Mapocho: The BRP did so in January 1990 to paint a mural celebrating sixty-eight years of the Chilean communist party. More significant than the mural itself was the action of a large group of people openly taking to the banks of the Mapocho for the day, an action that would soon thereafter be emulated by the BEC (Castillo 2006: p. 152).

Since 1990, the Mapocho, especially its down- to mid-town stretches, has once again become the stage for left-wing propaganda murals. Unsanctioned political murals of the 2000s included:

- 2006: A BRP mural to mark Fidel Castro’s eightieth birthday.

Unsanctioned political propaganda murals on the Mapocho are not the exclusive preserve of the Communists or of left-wing parties. In 2008, a mural was painted at the Mapocho in support of the abortive presidential campaign of the maverick philanthropist Leonardo Farkas (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Farkas_mural.JPG). Fittingly the mural was well upstream and uptown of the stretch of the river chosen by CADA, BRP and other radical groupings – by the Purísima bridge, the main bridge leading to Santiago’s bohemian Bellavista district, and just by Santiago’s pivotal Plaza Baquedano. The Purísima bridge is also the point at which three communes meet: Central Santiago to it southwest; lower-middle class Recoleta; and its east, straddling both banks, relatively uptown Providencia.

In the 2000s the Mapocho continued to be a favoured place for graffiti. In 2006, a little further uptown of the Purísima bridge, in Providencia commune, the Chilean graffiti crew, DVE (De la Vieja Escuela: of the Old School/Deskiziada Vida Escritora: Unbridled Writing Life) realised their masterpiece, of an imaginary Mapocho Navegable: Navigable Mapocho (Figure 20.2a). It combined distinctive contributions in painting by Grin (the illusionistic architecture), Cekis (the larger figure in the boat) and Sick aka 888 (the boat itself and the floating buoys in the river) with Nicole’s reflective mosaic mainly composed of shattered glass. In 2008, Grin returned to paint the Providencia stretch of the Mapocho opposite the Baquedano park with the aesthetic and humorous mural of a young woman in G-string only reading, as though on a beach (www.grin.cl; youtube.com/watch?v=5YHb4KkvxmQ); incidentally the very well
executed mural develops the theme of commenting on what the Mapocho is not, by imagining what it might be, even though its aim is not to make any point, but to entertain.

In 2007, just downstream of the *Purísima* bridge on the Bellavista stretch of the northern bank, Piguan, with Desoo, contributed a hedonic mural in which Piguan’s contribution was a multi-eyed figure of a type recurrent in *santiaguino* street art (www.flickr.com/photos/piguan; Palmer 2008: p. 117).

In 2009, in the midtown stretch opposite the Bellas Artes museum, another graffiti masterpiece was added to the Mapocho: The seventy-five-metre-long Pobreza material/Riqueza spiritual (Material poverty/Spiritual wealth) by the *santiaguino* duo Aislap (www.flickr.com/photos/aislaponer) (Figure 20.3a).13

In 2010 two more remarkable graffiti murals on the breakwaters of the Mapocho were created, relatively upstream on the Recoleta stretch of the river opposite Santiago central commune, Saile and Grin produced an extensive production of pictorial and architectural illusionism (www.Saile.cl; Palmer 2011: p. 127). In December 2010, inspired by the Aislap, Saile and Grin walls of the preceding year, Piguan revisited and improved the same stretch he had painted in 2007, this time accompanied by Bus. On a coloured background, economically and ecologically realised in water-resistant *látex*, Piguan and Bus portrayed women: Piguan evolving further the motif of faces with multiple sets of eyes – and indeed noses (Palmer 2011: p. 127).

In January 2011, the above-mentioned Aislap, Saile-Grin and Piguan-Bus graffiti murals on the stretch of the Mapocho opposite the Santiago commune were all buffed in brutally unaesthetic grey. The blanking was purportedly done to provide a neutral background for the Chile a la Luz light art projection of murals from the Bellas Artes stretch of the southern bank onto the surface of the river and its northern bank: Despite the latter being blank, the projected images were illegible. In the 2010s, any art that depends on using large amounts of electricity is misguided; while technically skilful use of low technology rollers, brushes and latex is proven the best medium for painting the Mapocho.

Allegedly, the buffing was done by the local government of Santiago central’s commune . . . even though the murals themselves were on the opposite Recoleta stretch of the northern
bank. The stretch embellished by Saile and Grin was left brutally ugly; the iconoclasts failed entirely to erase the memory of Aislaps’s ‘Material Poverty Spiritual Weath’, the top of the head and the bottom of the foot of which survived (Figure 20.3b).

The previous occasion that large stretches of wall painting on the breakwaters of the Mapocho had been erased was in 1973, when Pinochet’s military regime blanked a big, visually interesting BRP wall. A year into Chile’s first right-wing government since Pinochet, the strong anti-cultural echo was most unfortunate: ‘Horrible’, in the words of Pablo Aravena, maker of the film Next: A Primer on Urban Art (Canada/France 2005), and in recent years involved in developing Chile Estye, a documentary film on urban art in Chile (www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5jEH8Knl-4) and the eponymous web page (www.facebook.com/chilestyle): The coolest portal to hip Chilean graffiti and street art.

The catalogue to the Piñera-backed Chile a la Luz venture declared ‘It is important for us to take over the city, its parks and rivers’ (Chile a la Luz 2012: p. 46): A sentiment which it can safely be said is the common ground of all those vying for visibility (or erasure) public space. By the time the Chile a la Luz catalogue was printed in 2012, it was clear that the erasures were not limited to the bank opposite the Santiago municipality, but a more sinister ‘graffiticide’, DVE’s Navigable Mapocho, nowhere near where Chile a la Luz was projected, but upstream of the Bellas Artes from in Providencia, having also been erased later in 2011 (Figure 20.2b). The erasure of DVE’s Navigable Mapocho clearly gave the lie to the claim that the preceding obliterations were solely to provide a backdrop for Chile a la Luz or the work of the Santiago Centro Municipality alone. The graffiticide of 2011 focused political and hip-hop collectives on taking over the Mapocho breakwaters anew.

Piñera’s government of 2010–2014 will be remembered by many for the student protests of 2011 to 2013 on educación, especially educa$ión that is profiteering further education (Banda and Navea 2013; Tironi 2011). Education also became a main topic of Chilean street art. Against such a polarised background, neither political nor graffiti collectives were going timidly to accept authoritarian buffing of their work on the Mapocho. In 2012, political collectives and political brigades started to appropriate the Mapocho’s walls again. It was noticeable that graffiti murals occupied stretches of the breakwater hitherto the preserve of propaganda paintings

Figure 20.3a Aislap ‘Material Poverty/Spiritual Wealth’, Santiago de Chile 2009

Figure 20.3b Aislap ‘Material Poverty/Spiritual Wealth’, Santiago de Chile 2009, erasure 2011 (photo 2011)
and vice versa: A further indication, it might be argued, of the convergence of graffiti with political muralism. To mark the centenary of the founding of their party a broad spectrum of Chilean communists combined to paint a largely figurative mural of many parts – as many as in any mural since the BRP mural of 1972 – on the Recoleta bank, pretty much opposite the Bellas Artes (http://noticias.terra.cl/chile/comunistas-pintan-mural-historico-en-ribera-del-rio-mapocho; Palmer 2015: p. 176).

In the same year, the duo Agotok (2012) and the collective Los Oberoles (The Overalls) combined to paint the figure on enormous clothed but barefooted skeleton El Alambre (The Wire) on the Vega stretch of the Mapocho (Figure 20.4). Certainly, El Alambre is very specific to its site down on the Mapocho, as Ago and Tok explained in March 2013:

Tok: The Wire is about life on the Wire. In street terms a bloke who’s in a bad way, who’s destitute, who lacks the basics . . .
Ago: who has no shoes . . .
Tok: is said to be on the wire. If you are on the wire you are precarious. In a way the people who live down on the Mapocho live this life. They come up. They steal. They look for drugs and alcohol. An extreme life, surviving in the street with nothing, homeless, living under a bridge. So the skeleton represents that you are metaphorically resting, sleeping, with dogs by its side, and the Overalls did the ‘I see, hear, say nothing’ . . .
Ago: . . . the reaction of passers-by to common people.14

Also in 2012, colour returned to the stretch of the Mapocho just upstream of the Purísima bridge, with a degree of alternative institutional support. In February, Piguan painted a mural with the backing of ‘The Museum of Urban Art’ (http://tmoua.org/) – a worldwide organisation in which South American street art, by Chileans Inti and Los 12 Brillos, and Argentines Jaz and Nazza Stencil, features very prominently. Later in the same year, as part of the event ‘Hecho en Casa’ (www.facebook.com/pages/Hecho-en-Casa-Festival, www.hechoencasa.cl), vibrant colour returned to the part of Mapocho breakwater where DVE’s ‘Navigable Mapocho’

Figure 20.4 Agotok with Los Oberoles: ‘The Wire’, Santiago de Chile 2012
had been obliterated by grey the previous year, in the form of Chileans LRM and Charquipunk and Peruvian Elliot Tupac’s vibrant *Equilibrio* production (Lord K2 2015, p. 97; Palmer 2015, p. 177). Tupac left the Word ‘Equilibrio’ by way of reference to the Peruvian ‘Equilibrio Festival de Arte Urbano y Medioambiente en espacios públicos’, in which Charquipunk would participate in 2013: A sequence of events typical of self-curated street art events of the 2010s that empower the collective occupation of public space in a sequence of places. Tupac’s *Equilibrio* also became popular with santiaguinos on its own terms.

In 2013 it seemed likely that the Mapocho might be on course for being gentrified as a cycling route and/or an open-air museum. In one noteworthy instance, by dint of a double negative, the riverbank was in 2014 sanctioned as a site of urban art. In the main, however, far from being gentrified in 2014 the northern bank is as combative as ever and the site of occupations of public space by *Brigadistas, graffiteros*, Santiago’s underclass and revolutionary and separatist protest groups. The double negative, a marker in the transformed social position of graffiti artists, came in October 2014 when the mayor of Providencia groveled to Elliot Tupac, to apologise for her employees having buffed his *Equilibrio* as having been a mistake (www.t13.cl/noticia/actualidad/borran-mural-del-grafitero-elliot-tupac-en-el-rio-mapocho).

The intended target of the buffing was presumably the adjacent protest wall paintings in support of the hundred homeless people and their supporters who had, on 11 June 2014, taken the section of the breakwaters of the Mapocho either side of the *Purísima* Bridge. (http://eldesconcierto.cl/de bajo-del-puente-el-movimiento-de-pobladores-demanda-una-mesa-social-desde-las-ribere- de-la-pobreza). Special police groups with teargas attempted to disperse them (www.ahoranoticias.cl/pais/metropolitana/pobladores-protestan-en-ribera-del-rio-mapocho.html). However by mid-August the *toma y okupa* (taking and occupation) was well entrenched and supported by an UMLEM mural (Figure 20.5). Just as for communist muralists on the Mapocho in the 1960s a main aim was to be seen painting there, so for anarchic-libertarian groups in the 2010s more than the mural itself, the propaganda is primarily the occupation of the river bank; where in 1990 the BRP and BEC made their *bajadas* to the Mapocho for a day, the MPL (*Movimiento Pobladores en Lucha*: Movement of Settlers in Battle), supported by UMLEM and others, camped there for months.

Probably the most trenchant protest mural at the Mapocho in 2014 was that commemorating the Mapuche martyr Matías Catrileo (1985–2008) with the uncompromising legend ‘WE ARE NOT CHILEANS/WE ARE MAPUCHE/FREE MAPUCHE COUNTRY’ (Figure 20.6).

Remarkably, in 2014 the Mapocho is more taken over by anarchist-revolutionary propaganda murals than ever (http://muralesdelconosur.blogspot.com/): For instance, the prominent stretch of the northern bank immediately in front of the *Vega* being occupied by a long mural with big portraits of FPMR activists, Cecilia Magni and Raúl Pellegrin, both killed by Pinochet’s regime in 1988, naming suspects for their murder and calling for them to be brought to justice. In October 2014, a group of Brigadista painting collectives, among them the BEC, Brigada Laura Moya, Muralistas Pablo Vergara (MPV) and Brigada Negotrópica, met further downstream to paint murals commemorating forty years since the assassination of Miguel Enriquez, ex-secretary general of MIR (Salinas 2014: pp. 11–47).

In 2007 Brigadista murals seemed anachronistic to many graffiti writers; their main common ground the occupation of public space, both strands of street art remained socially marginal; and the northern bank of the Mapocho one of the locations from which they could project themselves, from an underground position, to a wide audience in central Santiago. Since then political and hip-hop street art have cross-pollenated in the graffiti mural (Palmer 2011: pp. 22–23; Palmer 2015: p. 16) to render the perception at the start of the 2000s, of collective *brigadista* art being
anachronistic, itself an anachronism. Concomitant with this harmonious convergence, brigadista and graffiti murals have together become socially acceptable: Notably in the San Miguel Open Sky Museum and in Santiago’s metro system. In contrast to the social accord of such officially sanctioned projects, the perennial resurgences on the Mapocho’s bank of politically subversive actions and wall paintings continue to be on chronically polarised Chile’s ideological frontline.

Figure 20.5 Housing protest featuring UMLEM mural, Santiago de Chile 2014

Figure 20.6 We are not Chileans we are Mapuche, Santiago de Chile 2014
Notes

1 Email to author, 1 August 2013: ‘el arte urbano significa tomar las calles, reclamar lo que es tuyo . . . un “ataque” al espacio público’.

2 Triangular conversation, Santiago de Chile, 13 August 2013, between Henruz, t.h.e.i.c. and Fitz of Colectivo Licuado, t.h.e.i.c: ‘me gusta tomar un lugar’; Henruz ‘¿Tomar el espacio público de qué? . . . de la nada, de la publicidad, de la propaganda política partidaria’. Note that t.h.e.i.c. is an acronym for ‘the happy end is coming’.

3 Mono González, interview with author, Santiago de Chile, 1 October 2012: ‘es el costumbre de la izquierda Chilena de ocupar espacio público data desde la fundación del Partido Comunista chileno en el 1912, vale a decir antes que inició el movimiento de muralismo mexicano’.

4 Coas, interview with author, Santiago de Chile, 5 December 2012: ‘Acá en Chile desde cuando nació el PC así hay siempre expresiones artísticas en la calle, la primera el muralismo político’.

5 González, Santiago, 1 October 2012: ‘Hubo un tiempo, y es super importante decirlo, y reconocer que fue un tiempo, producto de la dictadura que hubo un vacío cultural, en donde había un abismo entre los brigadistas con el graffitero. O sea recién hace algunos tres años o cuatro años se ha ido produciendo como un re encuentro entre el graffitero y el muralista en donde hay un respeto y reconocimiento uno con otro. Empezó a haber un reconocimiento por allí para el centenario de Allende [2008]. Hoy en día es muy importante el Museo a Cielo Abierto en San Miguel porque hemos logrado juntar graffiteros con muralistas’.

6 Gustavo Arias, Santiago de Chile, 1 October 2012: ‘Hasta cuatro, cinco años atrás había un abismo bastante grande entre muralismo de brigadas y el graffiti. El brigadismo hay que entender que tiene a ver con el mundo político. Y en esta época por ejemplo este año hay elecciones acá en Chile, el próximo año también hay elecciones de presidente, donde muchas brigadas que no necesariamente son muralistas pero que son solamente propagandistas, salen a ocupar los muros, y en este ocupar los muros muchas veces no respetan lo que se hace en la calle eternamente; y no me refiero solo al graffiti sino también al muralismo como tal, el muralismo arte. Así que en esa batalla-maquina muchas veces si eres de la calle y ves en la calle cosas de las brigadas políticas de propaganda, es cuando se produce este abismo, y donde se siente de que mucha gente de los partidos políticos vienen y tapan con letras no más y con propaganda del candidato. Da lo mismo cuál candidato, quien lo haga, no hay que hacer distinción, porque todos candidatos trabajan igual, eso a la gente quien hicimos el mundo de la calle, sea graffiteros o del muralismo, nos molesta bastante. Y a la raíz, eternamente de que apareció el mundo del graffiti, que es del 80 y algo en adelante que inició a partir el tema, que hay este abismo. Ahora con el Mono, y con gente que estuvo en la primera etapa que fue el muralismo de las brigadas, brigadista que lo llama él, y que entienden también que hay un arte detrás del graffiti, se ha producido este acercamiento. Pero en épocas como esta también te vuelven a ajenar, o sea no es algo que está totalmente estancado. O sea hay buena onda con el Mono, hay buena onda con otros autores del mural más clásico, como se lo llama, más permanente, desde el mundo del graffiti, pero no es algo que está totalmente acabado’.

7 Email from liaison personnel of UMLEM Santiago to the author, 30 December 2013: Las Unidades Muralistas Luchador Ernesto Miranda nacieron el 11 de septiembre del 2003 en Talcahuano en una conmemoración del 30º Aniversario del golpe militar. En sus propias palabras: ‘Las razones que motivaron su fundación fueron . . . que éramos un grupo de compañeros y compañeras que pintábamos desde antes de manera individual y bajo distintas tendencias estéticas pero todas relacionadas con el “street art” y además intentando entregar un mensaje que permitiera concientizar a través de la pintura . . . El proceso que nos impulsa a crear una estética particular tiene sus raíces en el escate histórico de la tradición muralista latinoamericana, incluyendo las Brigadas Ramona Parra, pero además construyendo estética propia como forma también de crear algo nuevo, junto al proyecto libertario que vamos construyendo ya desde hace 10 años.’

8 Claudio Dré, written interview, December 2012: Todo dependerá de las intenciones y el concepto. Cada obra posee una intención particular de existir, a partir de ello, se buscará el lugar idóneo para situar esta pieza de Arte. Se analizará el contexto físico, tamaño, situación espacial, recorrido automotriz, tráfico de las personas, distancia, visibilidad, tamaño tipográfico en caso de incorporar letras, etc. Muchas veces el muro puede poseer elementos a su alrededor los cuales se pueden aprovechar de mejor forma para acentuar o dar mayor énfasis a lo que se quiere plantear.
9 Pintó, interview, Santiago de Chile, 4 November 2013, ‘el principio de un acuerdo social en Chile’.
10 Castillo 2006, p. 70: ‘nos dábamos cuenta que la mejor propaganda era estar ahí, pintando’.
11 Neustadt 2012, p. 173: Diamela Eltit: ‘Todas las marchas finales durante la dictadura, todas sin excepción, iban encabezadas por pancartas diciendo “No +”’.
13 Tok: ‘El Alambre habla de la vida en Alambre. En dicho popular un tipo que está mal, que está en la miseria, que le falta lo básico.

Tok: se dice que está en el alambre. Si estás en el alambre, estás precario. En cierta forma la gente que vive abajo en el Mapocho vive esta vida. Suben. Roban. Buscan drogas y alcohol. Bajan. Es una vida en el alambre. Una vida extrema, sobrevivir en la calle sin nada, sin techo, vivir abajo de un puente. Entonces la calavera representa que está metafóricamente descansando, durmiendo, con algunos perros al lado, y los Oberoles hicieron el “No veo, no escucho, no hablo” ... Ago: ... la diferencia entre la gente transeúnte y de la común corriente’.

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