

“I’ve always been interested in popular forms of expression” - Interview with Ral Veroni

Since the end of the 80's, Ral Veroni (Buenos Aires 1965) has been developing a body of work both eclectic and coherent. His diversity of mediums and styles combine with certain themes; like Argentina, politics and personal survival, and always come paired with a humor at once innocent and sharp.

A visual artist and poet, from the very beginning Veroni used the streets to exhibit his works, whose common theme was usually found in the intersections between the underground and the popular. Here we revisit the last decades of street interventions in Argentina in his words.

by **Alejandro Guerri and Fernando Aíta**

Fighting asphixiation

When I began studying at the academy of Beaux Arts in '84, the situation for someone who was just starting to create art was really complicated in terms of access to art galleries. Today maybe it's easier but there are also a lot more spaces. We were coming from a stagnant social and artistic period, characterized by a lack of innovation and a reluctance to depart from the artists of the old vanguard. I had few options for exhibiting my art, but of course I needed to do it. So I found myself without alternative spaces for developing my art or creating an exhibition, and don't forget that there wasn't internet either. In order to fight this artistic asphyxia I came up with some of my own alternative techniques for diffusion: a poem written on paper and photocopied, then pasted to walls, screenprinting applied to non traditional mediums like paper money that had gone out of circulation, and stickers. Stickers for intervening in political posters, graffiti, stencils.

The references I was working with were Juan Carlos Romero and Fernando “Coco” Bedoya. Both friends invited me, as the “underground” poet, to their various activities. Romero was working with the group Escombros (Debris) and Coco with a group called *Museo Bailable* (*Dancing Museum*). This museum was really a sensational idea. Coco and Emei, his partner, brought artists together in a disco and for just one night everyone exhibited their works; there were painters, dancers, actors and poets, and after a few weeks the same thing was done again in another place. There was also an exhibition of street banners painted by artists who later hung them around Spinetto. After getting to know them it became easier for me to develop my own strategies.

The Street as a Gallery

The art world seemed to me to be really closed-off, especially in the 90's when everything was limited to a very few galleries and cultural centers, with works always displayed waiting to be

sold more than anything. I didn't see the development there that I was seeing in the music scene, in graffiti or in the poem of the barricade. I felt like there had been a terrible agreement made with society that kept artists painting alone at home and then afterwards bringing the artworks to a gallery where they would remain enclosed. The younger spaces in the museums were taken up by 45 year old artists. The need to exhibit and to find an alternative space was what brought me to the streets.

Today I still like the intensity that this space has. Breaking with the cycle and the traditional path. Art depends a lot on the legitimacy and the space where it is exhibited, who supports it, who the curator is, etc. In the streets you're at the whim of the weather, you're removed from any center of prestige and there does come a point when living without institutional support can work against you. But at 20 or 25 years old, I loved for things to be just that way.

The nomadic exhibition

I started to put up stickers all around the city during '90 and '91. They were adhesive screenprints that I would stick up in public places; telephone booths, bathrooms, around the transit system, elevators, revolving doors. They all had well defined forms, with characters from urban fables and bright colors that caught people's attention. I carried stickers in my wallet and stuck them next to the bell on the buses, which is the perfect place to see them right before getting off. It was a way of incorporating the popular custom of stickers made by rock bands into the visual arts. Just like in a catalog, I made an album of little figures with all of the designs from *The Nomadic Exhibition* and I also put together a booklet of the path, according to date, where I had stuck each sticker. In a totally egocentric move I turned the entire city into my own exhibit space.

A rebellious genre

I like graffiti because it's a rebellious genre of art. When I see graffiti nowadays and I compare them with those that I used to do, I feel like a medieval artist before the Renaissance. Graffiti now are incredible.

Buenos Aires is recognized as a mecca of graffiti. They say that a lot of artists come from other countries because the current municipal laws allow them to paint, and the owners of the facades of buildings give permission to paint murals at any time of the day. It's no longer a clandestine act.

Ten years ago, when the stencil boom happened, the quantity and quality of them really caught my attention, as well as the fact that books were being written about them. People like me or The Plan had stopped making stencils already a few years prior. What had started as isolated cases spontaneously became a whole movement.

Neo-Pompeyan graffiti

Graffiti is an English word that has been adopted globally, but the word itself comes from Latin and *grafito* is what graffiti is called in Rome. Pompey is unique in that, after having been buried under volcanic ash, a similar generation to that of current graffiti was conserved. So an entire testimony exists of a Roman city full of graffiti, but what's amazing is that these walls express sentiments very similar to current ones. After 2000 years it turns out that what is popular hasn't changed much.

You have the insult, the sexual curse, the announcement of a sexual conquest, the joke, the romantic declaration, the transcription of a phrase from Virgil. The substance of everything that filled those walls can still be found today, in the bathrooms of Constitución. If you subtract the place and language, you can see that the genre has maintained a certain style. Sexual offers (there were no telephone numbers) or posters that neighbors would put up with messages like "Mr. Dog: tell your boss' animal not to poop in front of my house", already existed in Pompey in the form of curses on those who peed or pooped in front of the owner's door.

I like to maintain a connection between the word and the image, between the idea and the way of conveying it. In the case of *Neo-Pompeyan grafitos*, I wrote lowclass poems to pair with the grafitos, with a sort of wink aimed at my own social class and at the Buenos Aires that lives in a sort of stinky cloud. Figures like Al Pedín, the muse of pointless actions or Destiny, the Absurd and Time, which were personifications applied to the image of graffiti, like someone who would draw gods in the back of a cave just for fun or out of boredom. I guess instead of the more modern graffiti what I really wanted to do was to work with the relationship between historical graffiti and popular graffiti.

Graffiti are really an aesthetic game: with writings and drawings that appear one over the other like the swarm of marks that appears on bathroom walls, where everything becomes a luck of palimpsest. In that I'm referring to those medieval documents that they would erase in order to use the parchment over again for new writings; and when you can still see the shadow of what was written before and in different layers. This chaos is one of the things I like the most about graffiti. In the case of *Neo-Pompeyan grafitos* I would scratch graffiti with a steel tipped tool – like they did in Rome – into the surface of water tanks; text, a drawing, another text. Later on I would introduce order to the material by writing it all out separately, uniformly, as if I were doing an investigation at an archaeological site.

In the face of death, we're all the same

In 1990, I began to work also with stencil graffiti. With these works appeared symbols that I incorporated over the years in other projects. For example with the figure "Pensar en eya" (Thinking about her), appeared the image of a head with bone crossing at eye level. The symbol represented the idea of the presence of death within our everyday actions. These graffiti were developing in parallel with my project of drawing on paper money that was out of circulation, which I was doing around the same time that I was playing with the genre of the "danza macabra" or the dance of death, that medieval tradition that was done to let the rich, the

powerful, the monarchy, the Pope, know that we are all the same in the face of death. There was some consolation in that message, as well as a moral lesson, like an invitation to modesty. I liked the idea of the dance of death applied to money that had been used as part of our escapades until some inflationary crisis arrived to devalue it, leaving it sort of dead, without value.

Indoor graffiti

In the 90's I found myself with problems that made it difficult to create graffiti. Because of the issue of security, neighbors were contracting private security guards because apparently the police weren't enough. A lot of those guards were unemployed workers and paramilitaries that had ended up stuck in the limbo that was created when the dictatorship ended. These were intense people, of course. After some not so pleasant meetings and to avoid a bad situation it occurred to me to offer indoor graffiti, and in order to maintain a connection with the street I started to paint them also on water tanks that could be seen from the front sidewalk, so they were like visible semi-public places even when I was doing them within a private property. This has a certain parallel with how things are today, where you can always go out and paint the front of someone's house as long as the owner has agreed to it.

Fight for Life

Whenever money starts to lose its symbolic power it's common to draw little mustaches onto the national heroes, or to write love messages, chain messages of luck, insults. In this way money recovers its material nature, it becomes again just a piece of paper, something to jot down popular expressions on. The circulation of money becomes another medium for communication.

I've done a lot of works with and on money, with drawings. I created the *Fight for life* series keeping in mind the hyperinflation of '89. Inflation was so accelerated then that the cost of things would change daily, to the point that the shopkeeper didn't want to sell in case the following day the sales price of the product became cheaper than what it cost him to restock it. Families received their salary and would spend it all on food to be sure that the money would last them to the end of the month, at least in food. Several years later, in 1994, with these memories in mind I started to draw on old bills. At the beginning I started drawing with ink on argentine bills that had belonged to my parents, my grandparents and me (bills that had lost their value before they could be spent). Later on I got excited and started to draw on bills from other places, like Germany, Russia, and latin american countries that had also suffered economic crisis and had to change their money several times. I turned the drawings into screenprints for better printing quality, and would exchange them for other old bills – without interventions – so I'd have material to continue drawing. That's how I got them back into circulation. Money is a universal language and this work ended up also being a game of

collective memory. People remember what their salary had been, or remember the money used during their youth and how much candy they could buy with it.

El Teatrito (The Little Theatre)

Though the *Teatrito rioplatense de entidades* can be read like a second version of *The fight for life*, it does have its differences because now I occasionally drawn on bills which are still in circulation. In this current project there are set characters, a troupe of “actors” with whom participate the Absurd – like the general director of the world - , Destiny, Time, Fear, the idea of the Nothing, and other personifications. These bills form part of a larger project which includes poems, artist books, graffitis, and in keeping with the current times: a blog.

The communication click

I come from a family of artists but in terms of the image I feel that my childhood was my biggest influence: comics, television, the covers of rock albums. When I went to the Beaux Arts academy, they told me about Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Warhol, and to me these were really foreign characters. My nationality was my childhood, with the “presences” of those that had raised me and who made the language of my generation. For example, when I was giving one of the figures from *The nomadic exhibition* to a friend it created within him a click, it triggered a common memory, where the title and the image were enough to deliver a shared message. This was, and still is language to me, something which one person has in common with another. It seems silly to say it, to say that language is what one person has in common with another, even though in the language of visual arts everything is fragmented, few things are what they seem and everything depends on the context of the pieces that make up the image and as such, moments of clarity are few and far between. In the case of *The nomadic exhibition* I thought that I could overcome this and be understood by others.

When I left Argentina, I thought that this language that I had didn't just belong to my generation, but that it was also very location specific, very local to my area for example, to the area around the Rio Plata. At that point I began to rework and to rethink my style. I went from creating popular and communicative art projects in the streets to making more intimate and personal works in the form of artist books. When I finally settled in Glasgow and decided that that would be my permanent home was when I started to debate what to do in a place where I didn't share the same memory or even the same language. Language is not just made up of the words themselves. In Buenos Aires someone will say something like “ea ea pepé” and even if you've never seen Carlitos Balá, you know what that person is talking about or at the very least you can figure it out pretty quickly. So then I started to work with symbols which I considered to be universal: the idea of the absurd, of destiny and time, in an attempt to share with the Scottish spectator something that transcends us and forms part of our lives. Though when I created Time, I made him as if he were a masked thief brandishing a hammer. I ended up placing him in the CGT (General Confederation of Workers) building and called it “Time, the original worker”. Another wink directed at my fellow citizens and which only a dedicated Scottish academic

specializing in peronism would have been able to understand. That was when I realized that I was inseparably part of my place of origin.

You can see more works by Ral Veroni at: <http://www.indeprintent.com/>

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