

**M.A. in Material and Visual Culture Dissertation**

**TITLE: LETTERS IN MOVEMENT.**

**The resistance of local hand painted lettering in Santiago, Chile.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this dissertation I follow the paths of relocation and transformation of hand painted lettering in Santiago, Chile, during the last 20 years. By doing so I aim to understand how they have been resisting their disappearance as consequence of development and globalization. I argue that in this process they have gathered people by attracting them with their viscous materiality. With these people the lettering have an intimate relationship, as they cover the surfaces of the city where the former move in their everyday lives. I analyze how within an intricate network of social interactions such as making or (re)using, they been materially transformed within their graphic style, turning to more complex and portable forms. Due to this they have been relocated from their original positions in the urban landscape to new surfaces, such as screens of television. I conclude that these strategies have allowed them to reserve localities in the city protected from the standards of globalization. Nowadays, in their painted, printed and digital forms, they are covering the walls of these localities, and from them wrapping the people that can now move from local to global medium in their daily paths.



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THIS DISSERTATION  
WOULD BE DIFFERENT  
IN OTHER TYPEFACE  
RATHER THAN TIMES  
NEW ROMAN.

(here was used Emiliana, by Tono Rojas and Kote Soto, 2001)



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## INTRODUCTION

In 2012 I contacted a sign painter in Santiago, Chile, to commission from him a personalized sign to decorate my room. This was not the traditional kind of commission that sign painters were used to receiving. However, during the past few years things have changed. I found myself among others that were asking a craftsman to make a sign related with my personal life in a way that resembles the lettering of traditional businesses of my city. And that made me wonder what was going on in those painted letters. From Santiago to London, this concern travelled with me. And this dissertation is the attempt to respond to it. Thus, this paper intends to explain to the reader (and myself) how the hand painted lettering and the graphic style to which it conformed, have been resisting the standardization of globalization, during the last two decades in Santiago, Chile.

The hand painted lettering has covered the urban landscape of Santiago since at least the second half of the Nineteenth Century, painted on walls, signs, windows or any other surface to sign or advertise goods and services. But especially during the last twenty years, the advance of development has meant the replacement of crafts in the everyday life of the city, by products made with machines from templates. This has meant an increasing standardization of the material culture based on models from USA or Europe. But by moving around the city and digital surfaces related with it, I could witness how the same hand painted lettering that yielded to that made by machines, for instance the printed signs designed by computers, are resisting their replacement. During the last twenty years, they have gathered people around them and together have been innovating within the style, by

adding complexity to their designs, and also by seeping them in the new technology used to design. These transformations have been accompanied by their relocation on new surfaces and places in the urban landscape. What results from this is the strengthening of a sense of authentic localness associated with some spaces of the city that are resisting globalization with different levels of permeability.

The main objective of this paper is to understand how that resistance has been articulated around the hand painted lettering and their style. It has the intention of understanding the intricate network of interactions among the lettering and the people called by them that include actions such as making, selling, buying, using, and reproducing, among others. To do that I am going to analyze the materiality of lettering, what makes them so attractive to the people involved in the process, where are they located, and the attributes that they share and that have been repeated in new surfaces and materials. I will follow the paths of relocation and transformation of the lettering and the style; in other words, follow the interactions of the network through the materiality of the lettering, considering the intentions of the main actors. This is an ongoing process, where so far it is recognizable that it is the production of a sense of authentic localness that I am going to consider.

Just like my experience in my fieldwork in Santiago, this paper is about movement. It is a narrative text that, especially at some points, might be far from a conventional academic writing. Informed by Taussig (2008) and Tilley (1994) I write convinced that movement and narrative are understanding, and that style is argument. So, along this text we will be moving attracted by viscosity of the letters through and with them by following their paths. This story is told as an exercise of distancing and approaching the lettering and their style,

just like people do in their quotidian lives. In my opinion images are as relevant as words, and that is why this story will be told with them. The pictures here shape with the words, the story told and my arguments developed on it. After walked around Santiago (and browsing on the internet) looking for hand painted lettering and any other lettering within the style, and taking hundreds pictures, I am confident in say that the substance of this lettering makes them sticky. This attribute is the reason that they gathering people. And it is by following these letters that I reached my four informants, and all the printed and digital material that I worked with. Lastly, the ideas of Alfred Gell (1998) are in the background of this text, especially in the central argument of a network of interactions involving people and artifacts in patient-agent relationships.

In closing, the interactions of the network are intricate, as I said above. Thus the separation of paths that I present here is an abstract exercise based on analytical purposes, the paths are not parallel; they cross at different points. In the first part, “On letters”, throughout its four chapters, I present the original artifacts within the graphic style. Chapter one introduces the hand painted lettering as animated entities; in chapter two, I invite you to move around the diverse localities of Santiago where they are spread; in chapter three, I introduce my informants that are part of the group of people gathered by the lettering; and in chapter four, I deepen my understanding of the lettering, from ideas of materiality of language. Along the three chapters of the second part, “On Movement”, I present the paths by which the lettering have resisted their disappearance from a position of authentic locality; it is about the projects that connect the people with the lettering. Chapter five is about how the lettering from their threatened position have caught the attention of scholars, and how they have reproduced them in visual constructions of abundance, delimiting

a particular definition of a style. On chapter six I follow two main ways that people have follow to keep creating artifacts within the style, and the material transformation that they have meant. Chapter seven focus on how the new uses of the lettering have localized them in new spaces, in a process that is producing new values about them. Finally, “The Crisis”, the concluding chapter that focuses on how all these paths are connected by the turning point of globalization and standardization threatening the locality of the hand painted letterings, and how they have acted as a defensive strategy in localness versus globalization.





## CHAPTER 1

### OPENING LETTERS

In June 2015 I travelled to Santiago, Chile, with the plan in mind of following letters around the urban landscape. I was not following just any letters, but the ones that are hand painted on signage. These letters are not isolated, but instead work in teams, occasionally in partnership with illustrations. As images they competed for my attention, showing themselves from different distances. In other words, I was looking for traces of hand painted lettering.

PICTURE 1.1  
"Comidas al paso", lettering painted on a wall of a corner-shop.



Along the streets that I walked I found hundreds of them in a variety of places and formats. At some point I felt a bit obsessed. It was just that this experience made me realize (Tilley 1994: 12) how present they are in the quotidian life of the city where I grew up. Moreover, by looking at them I realized that they were imposing themselves over my gaze. And that they were there with their character, ready to face me through it (Garfield 2011). Thus at some point it was not necessary to look for them; they just showed up advising what they could offer, each one in its own way.

On 6th July, for instance, I was on my way to meet one of my informants when from the opposite pathway of a busy corner a wall called to me (Mitchell 1996). It was big lettering

PICTURE 1.2  
The wall as canvas.







PICTURE 1.3  
The trick: guide lines to align.

painted in the eastern side of a house that noticeably offered food (Picture 1.1). It looked like a clear shop-window, but instead of being populated by objects the products were painted and magnified (Picture 1.2). In a local way the image announced to me that there were *Comidas al paso* (an idiom that might be translated as “Meals on the go”). The two large colored pictures joined to blue and red words expressed themselves out loud but in a friendly way. While transforming the white wall into a canvas, confidently they made the most of the space shared with the window and the door, being the biggest that they could to fit in. The colorful and iconic pictures stressed the presence of *hamburguesa* (burgers) and *mote con huesillo* (Chilean drink) by echoing the red words. The sans serif rounded shapes showed up in a big size, bold, mostly in capitals, wearing vivid colors that contrasted with the white background, enabling them to be read from afar. The colors also helped to dif-

ferentiate the suggestion of ‘take away’ and ‘eat in’ meals in blue from the detailed menu in red, and at the same time made them look lively. The italic reinforced this effect by introducing some movement without losing steadiness, and the different sizes of the letters (“POLLO A LA PLANCHA”, for instance) gave some rhythm to the image. Despite these characteristics, and the fact that the space in between the letters and the shape of them was never the same; there was a regularity to the whole. This was strengthened by the alignment of the words. As I was wondering about this – I must admit that I struggle aligning- I approached the lettering. Together with the wall’s texture I saw the variation in the saturation of color and recognized the brush. The presence of a painter was obvious. And his trick for the alignment was revealed: he drew lines to guide the position of the text (Picture 1.3). But at the same time that I discovered this, I realized that the pencil lines helped him but did not force the whole design. It seemed as if the painter just followed the upper and lower borders while the actual horizontal position of the letter drawn in the plane was adapted while it was painted (Picture 1.4). (Ingold 2000: 353).

**PICTURE 1.4**

*The guides do not force the design: c/n on pencil and on brush.*







PICTURE 1.5  
"Fading letters".

Whereas some lettering introduced themselves loudly, others did it quietly. On 24th June in a different area of the city I found a damaged white wall with its blue letters and picture fading away with time. It strongly called my attention as it seemed to me to be the perfect materialization of the process of disappearance of the hand painted lettering in Santiago. I had the desire to name them and 'Fading Letters' sounded natural, along with the idea that there was a story behind them (Picture 1.5). (Taussig 2008: 1)



PICTURE 1.6

As the blue falls its stayed in the background from its absence.

We met in a peripheral street in *barrio 10 de Julio* and it looked to be the only one doing businesses in a residential street. This lettering, just like *Comidas al paso*, used the imposed spatiality of the wall to layout an image that offered a service. Each element appeared in its place, well formed, as if they were distributed in a book: the title positioned to the upper-left delimited by the door, on the left the illustration, and on the right the main text. For some reason they looked naïve. Maybe it was the calm effect of the fading blue –that at the same time gave unity to the image incorporating the door. Perhaps it was the letters that shyly played with the upper and lower cases while maintaining their claim to reliability (for instance, in the rhythmic title ‘*VENTAS por MAYOR*’, or ‘Wholesales’). Or



maybe because of the touch of simplicity in the combination of the lower cases of rounded letterforms explaining that there was a workshop with tools such as lathe or milling cutter with the huge icon of a shock-absorber with some 3D effect that reminded me a school-book.

However, what captivated me the most of the lettering was its color substance (Taussig 2008), the fading blue that led me over the picture-like wall. It was the one that told me that the present words were simultaneously a layer of a past story waiting to be told; that the workshop had been closed for a while. That blue fascinated me. It was not just fading in a color sense, it was flaking in a special way (Picture 1.6). It is true that the white ‘background’ was also unequal and sometimes absent, letting me see the sand color of the plaster

PICTURE 1.7  
THE SIGN “POROTOS GRANADOS”, BY ZENÉN VARGAS.



PICTURE 1.8  
THE “A” GHOST.



or the gray of the cement exhibiting deeper layers. But the blue was special: as it fell the letters that it formed stayed in the background materiality as clues about how they were made. I would have guessed that they were stenciled rather than painted free hand, but no two were identical and the space between the letters was irregular. This revealed that even if they weren't painted with brushes, the stencil was still handmade.” But what made me most uneasy was why the area around the letterforms was not flaking as well? Why was the white not coming off too in those areas? What was it about that blue that could remain there even if it was from its absence? These questions remain in my mind.

A third case was a bright black sign that I found on 3rd July at “*La Tienda Nacional*” (The National Shop), in *barrio Lastarria*. It was brand-new, and confidently promoted “*porotos*

PICTURE 19

Hand painted letterings in a cabinet of La Tienda Nacional.







**PICTURE 1.10**  
The barcode on a hand painted lettering.

*granados*” (a typical Chilean recipe) in a traditional but modern stylish design (Picture 1.7). I was charmed by that contradiction. Its materiality and format were traditional: a sign painted with latex paint on a board of around 30 x 10 cm, easily findable among the hand painted signage of shops. The elements of the graphic design were also typical: lines, asterisks, and letters with shades. And the same might be said about contrast in the use of colors. But it was the combination of all of these that gave it a special appearance. How the craftsman contrasted vivid color over a black background was audacious for a hand painted sign. The use of a golden color for decorations was itself odd. Further to this striking presentation the letters added the sensuous movement of their traces. Without any illustration it was an attractive picture of painted words.

Besides, the brightness of the latex was in a way magic. Because of its materiality, and the opportunity I had to move the sign under the light, I could recognize the trace of the brush in different layers. The reflection of the light showed a deeper layer with a prior “a” in the

word ‘*granados*’, like a ghost, uncovering a trial and error painting process (Picture 1.8). The man behind all of this was the well-known Zenén Vargas, the most famous sign painter in Santiago that marks each sign not just with his traces but also with his tag: a diamond (that in this one was golden). I was in front of an ‘authentic Zenén’. And surprisingly it was offered in a shop cabinet as a commodity (Picture 1.9). It was a sign that it was no longer signage, but a design object with a code bar on its back (Picture 1.10). Even if it said so, it was not offering *porotos granados*. If you buy the sign you are not going to receive a meal, but instead, the sign itself. You will get a national product from a national shop: the movement of Zenen’s letters.

In closing, these were examples of the letters I was looking for. They reach you from their visuality (Merleau-Ponty 1996: 93). Their materiality is diverse and complex, but the movement of hands and tools like brushes (Ingold 2000: 352) that makes each letter unique is shared by all. Yet, as it can be inferred from these examples the hand painted lettering are moving, they are vanishing, changing their shapes, materials and contexts. If you walked around Santiago this is what you could see.



## CHAPTER 2

### MOVING AROUND

Through the streets of Santiago you can see the diversity of a big metropolis spread over a valley surrounded by mountains. The distance from development varies throughout its *barrios* (neighborhoods). As you go through them the walls show up as a mutating surface. It is not only the size and materials, but also what covers them. There, threatened with disappearance, the hand painted lettering compete with printed signs, murals, graffiti, tags, and posters.

**PICTURE 2.1**

Santiago, Nuñoa, Providencia and Recoleta in the general area of Santiago.



In this section I invite you to the areas of Santiago that I explored. We are going to move around<sup>1</sup> some *barrios* of the communes of Santiago, Ñuñoa, Providencia and Recoleta (picture 2.1). This on an imaginary walk -and sometimes cycling-, which should give you a sense of different localities within the city (picture 2.2). As we pass from one reality to another I will be offering my impressions of their character, atmosphere, people, architecture, or the visual representations on their walls. The presence of the hand painted letterings on them varies in intensity, so when it rises our pace will slow down, while over the other spaces we are just going to pass through.

Let us imagine starting from *Barrio Yungay* (pictures 2.2/1 and 2.3), the western zone of the route, in the commune of Santiago. Walking eastward through Compañía de Jesús we are getting into a spatiality that involves us. Everything seems quiet, there are no busy avenues and people walk by in straight streets with trees and old terraced houses of one or two floors. The facades are mainly colored in earth tones (red, pink, ocher, grayish blue). The atmosphere evokes images from a century ago, inhabited by the old neighbors who have been there forever, with young newcomers. If we wander for 10 blocks we find hand painted lettering on traditional businesses like corner-shops or barber-shops, hung or painted on walls or windows. They look natural here and cause us to reminisce about the past, yet printed signs, graffiti and others remind us that we still here.

The sense of a harmonic whole starts to decrease when we approach *Barrio Brasil* (pictures 2.2/2 and 2.4). It retains past elements such as the continuous facades of old build-

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<sup>1</sup> As I mentioned in the introduction, in this dissertation I follow the idea of movement as narrative understanding (Tilley 1994: 28). The fieldwork for this research was based on my experience of moving around Santiago following the hand painted lettering. Along those walks I saw the lettering that showed up through my movements by getting into my scope and from there touching me (Tilley 1994: 12; Merleau-Ponty 1996: 90-91, 93)

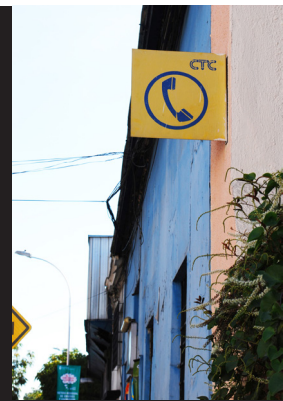


**PICTURE 2.2**  
The route that we are going to walk around

ings, but now these reach up four floors alongside new ones. There is more movement, and the amount of graffiti, murals and tags with political and cultural messages increase. The core of the barrio -*Plaza Brasil* and the homonymous avenue -, with brightly colored walls invites people to its bars, restaurants and gig venues. This is where the hand painted and printed signage is concentrated.

We continue our eastward way through Cathedral. Just 4 blocks from Av. Brasil, a highway pull us apart from any past reminiscence to enter the historical centre (pictures 2.2/3 and 2.5), a world where you may find anything. Loads of images compete and just few are hand painted lettering, so let us run through these high gray ducts that expose the pass of decades through their mixed styles, replete with noisy vehicles and pedestrians on their own daily missions.





PICTURE 2.3. VIEWS OF BARRIO YUNGAY



PICTURE 2.4. VIEWS OF BARRIO BRASIL



PICTURE 2.6. VIEWS OF BARRIO BELLAS ARTES - LASTARRIA

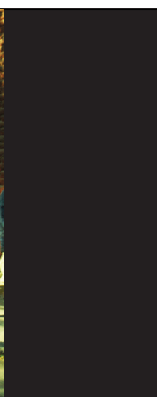
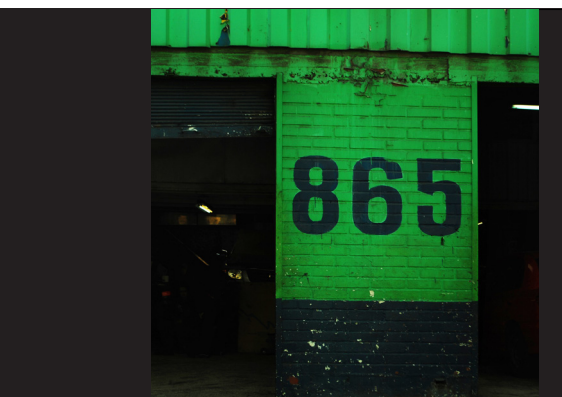




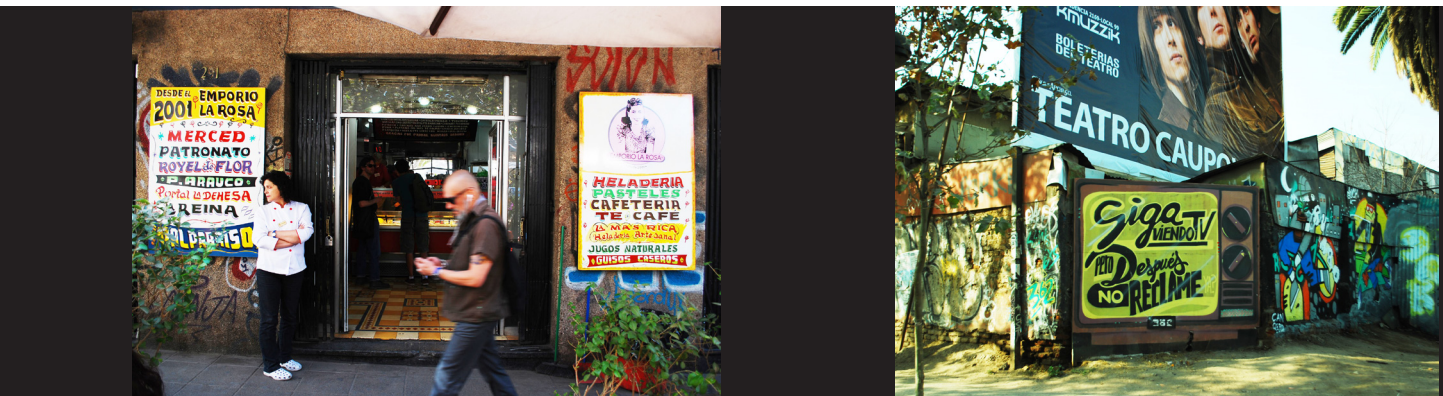
PICTURE 2.5. VIEWS OF HISTORICAL CENTRE



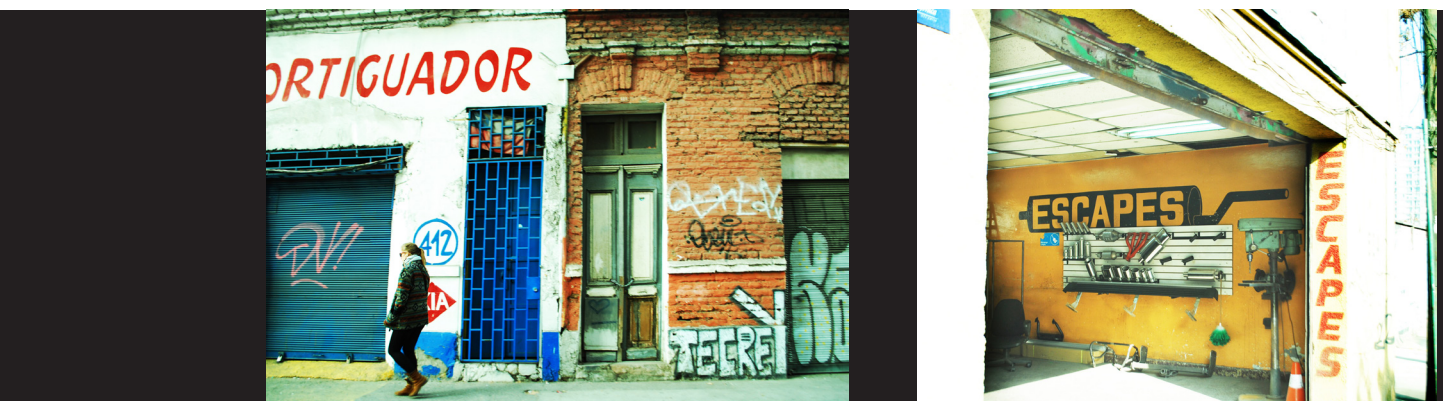




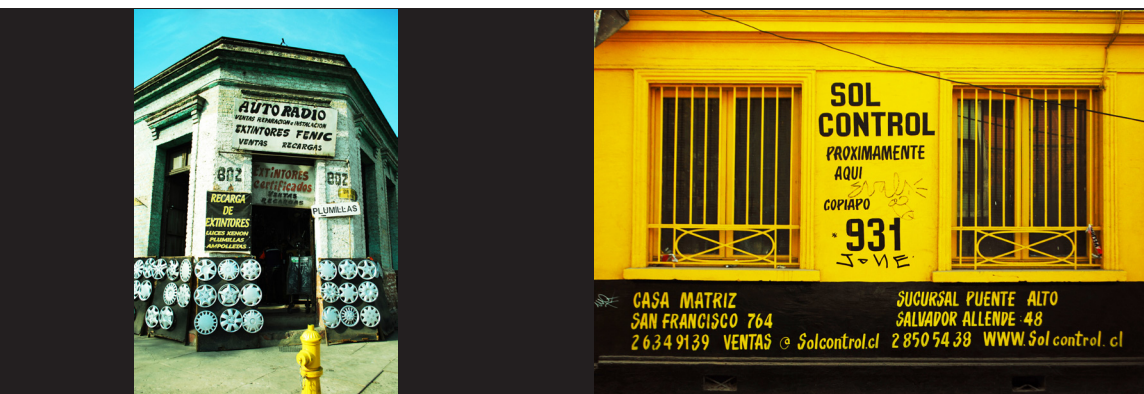




PICTURE 2.7. VIEWS AROUND AV. SANTA ISABEL



PICTURE 2.8. VIEWS OF BARRIO 10 DE JULIO



After 12 straight blocks eastward we need to slow down. Let us turn right, and immediately to the left in Merced. The greater presence of old buildings and trees, the pathways used as café terraces, and the more carefully designed signage, let us know that we are into *Barrio Bellas Artes/Lastarria* (pictures 2.2/4 and 2.6), the *barrio* of culture. Bordered by parks, its constructions are not higher than seven floors in gray, ocher, red, and white tones, serving as flats, hostels, offices and businesses. When we turn right in Lastarria we are finally moving into a space that breaks the gridded pattern of Santiago. Around the *barrio* some traditional shops remain alongside trendy independent ones of books, music, design and clothes; art galleries, museums and theatres; and restaurants, bars and cafes. Young Chileans and tourists walk around this mix of vanguard with local or retro strokes. This is noticeable in the diverse signage. Among it the hand painted signs highlight from their positions in restaurants such as *Chichinero* (with its popular local style), or *Emporio La Rosa* (that mixes local and vintage styles), and at *La Tienda Nacional*, the shop already introduced which specializes in Chilean products. They all use new bright colored signs like the ones painted by Zenén (above).

Going south from Lastarria we get out to the noisy Alameda, the main avenue that connects east and west. Let us cross it and cycle straight by Portugal for 8 blocks until the busy Santa Isabel (pictures 2.2/5 and 2.7), where we turn right westward over 18 blocks witnessing how high residential towers have crushed old terraced houses where hand painted lettering used to be, and leaving abandoned facades occupied by graffiti with social critic and tags. At San Ignacio we turn left southward.



Now we just need to walk 3 blocks, turn left in Copiapó, and a sense of tradition reappears. At the beginning the one-floor old terraced houses are invaded by several tags and some graffiti and murals. In between, some towers and cranes warn about change and replacement. But after 6 blocks we cross San Diego and get into *Barrio 10 de Julio* (pictures 2.2/6 and 2.8): along 14 blocks we see old houses turned to workshops and shops specializing in bargain car parts and repairs. This is a somewhat chaotic masculine *barrio*, a battle camp where laborers along with the signage compete for customers that pass in cars and walk by. In this saturated ambience, lettering collaborate in different formats, sharing visual attributes. First the walls painted in white and bright colors, with big contrasted words and numbers and sometimes iconic illustrations of the objects offered. Second, the shop fascias and other hanged or projected signs. The signage also stands on the pathways. And sometimes we can even find car parts wrapping trees or walls. Here the painted lettering are closely related to the printed ones, sometimes even serving the same shop.

That world is left behind when we get into the eastern and better-heeled zone of Santiago (picture 2.9). If we move fast along 10 quiet blocks northward under the trees of Av. Italia crossing the core of *Barrio Italia* (picture 2.2/7), in Ñuñoa and Providencia, we will not see hand painted lettering on the old terraced houses that today offer gastronomy, art, design and antiquities to hipsters and tourists. Yet if we walk beyond the stylish atmosphere, we could find some in traditional businesses or garages. It was here where I found *Comidas al Paso* (discussed above).

Let us cycle again, as it is better to hurry up. We have not much more lettering to look at. After 5 blocks by Condell (picture 2.2/8) we get Av. Providencia (the eastern part of Alam-

eda). There, let us turn left and ride westward over the Parque Balmaceda with the guide of Cerro San Cristóbal in the north, beyond Río Mapocho that runs on our right.

After 5 blocks, we turn right at the Pio Nono bridge, and in the clash of the communes of Providencia and Recoleta we get into *Bellavista* (pictures 2.2/9 and 2.10). This might be the only *barrio* in Santiago where you could find every type of person. We will go northward by Constitución until the foot of Cerro San Cristóbal to follow west by Santa Filomena. Around these wooded streets tourists, the homeless, residents, workers, peddlers, drug dealers, party people, persons from all social classes cross each other in their movements among bars, restaurants, clubs, gig venues, theatres, brothels, art galleries, universities, handicrafts shops and hostels, placed mainly in low buildings from 1900 onwards. But in this lively atmosphere, with music sounding in the streets and where the street art is noticeable, just a few hand painted lettering survive in the middle of a consequently diverse signage. There are still some traditional ones, but the signs that stand out are the ones painted by the famous Zenén for Galindo -a restaurant that calls tourists and Chileans with its national food.

If we keep going westward through Santa Filomena (6 blocks) the clubs and bars are replaced by cheap clothing shops owned mainly by Asian migrants. We are in the popular *barrio Patronato* (pictures 2.2/10 and 2.11), where loads of people come to find affordable trendy clothes. On buildings of two or three floors, among the printed shop fascias one could found some hand painted ones, some well maintained and others abandoned. Here tags and graffiti are still very present.

The graffiti and tags continue as we go westward by Santa Filomena to our final destination. Next to Patronato (2 blocks) there is the also popular *barrio* of *La Vega Central* (pictures 2.2/11 and 2.12), the main fruit and vegetable market of the city. It is a *barrio* with covered markets in sheds that spill into the surrounding streets that are full of cheap products such as flowers or groceries, and eateries. Thousands move around this area where new constructions exist beside old ones, and even the ruins of others, among products, dogs, cars and rubbish, all together producing a general and captivating effect of disorder. Sharing the space with posters glued one over the other, and printed lettering, the hand painted ones are present. They are fading in the ruins, covered by new ones, or bright and proud in other locations. They are in the pathways and in the narrow covered passages of thousands of stalls, on the fascias, on walls -painted or hung-, free standing in the streets, signing prices among the commodities, and so on. Along with the products and people, they generate a saturated colorful atmosphere.

Let us finish here and take some distance. As I hope you could recognize, there is a relation between the kind of locality in the city and the intensity of hand painted lettering in them. After my movements I recognized first, a more simply and traditional style on the lettering highly present in areas with traditional commercial activities settled in popular spaces as the *barrios 10 de Julio* and *La Vega*, or in *barrio Yungay* that shows up with past attributes. But, second, I could identify a transformed version that is emerging, one that is more complex and that uses brighter colors. This is especially located in neighborhoods where the commercial activity is related with Chilean people and tourists and that mix trendiness with local or past attributes, such as *Lastarria/Bellas Artes* (and a specific place in *Bellavista*).



PICTURE 2.8. VIEWS OF BARRIO 10 DE JULIO



PICTURE 2.9. VIEWS OF THE EASTERN ZONE OF SANTIAGO







PICTURE 2.10. VIEWS OF BARRIO BELLAVISTA



PICTURE 2.11. VIEWS OF BARRIO PATRONATO



PICTURE 2.12. VIEWS OF LA VEGA











### CHAPTER 3

## THE ONES GATHERED BY LETTERS

Along with being spread over the city, competing with other forms of visibility, threatened with replacement, the hand painted lettering are also interacting with people, so I looked for them (Gell1998). By following the traces of the former, I realized that from their endangered position they and their creators have gathered around them people from different professional worlds. Mainly from the world of design –and its varied associations with university/academia, market, marketing/advertising, journalism, or art/aesthetics-, at least from the 1990s, these people have joined the lettering and the sign painters in their social network, acting in different ways. They have all coincided in appreciating the lettering as an element of authentic localness. And by their acts they have transformed them in a process that has expanded the locations of their style. My informants come from this network.

The hand painted lettering first connected me with the people that made them. In Chile they are known as “*pintor de letras*” (letter painters) or “*letrerista*” (sign painters). As these names imply they are persons intertwined with letters or signs in the social network (Gell 1998: 20-21). Juan Cadena is one of the most famous sign painters in Santiago.<sup>1</sup> He has been called “El rey del cartel” (“The king of signs”, Guajardo, not published) and there is even a digital typeface named “Cadena” based on his letterforms. He has participated in workshops organized in universities, and gives interviews to students and researchers like me. He has been painting since the 1980s when he was initiated into the craft as a teenager.

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<sup>1</sup> We met on 3th July 2015, at his workshop in Paradero 18 of Av. Santa Rosa, San Ramón. I went there with Simón Ibáñez. The three of us shared near 3 hours, while Juan was working on his signs. We interchanged our points of view about the hand painted lettering from our different positions.



PICTURE 3.1  
Signs hung in the walls of Cadena's workshop.

After painting different sign formats in a big workshop, during the 1990s he specialized in the signage for the buses of the transport system of Santiago: the so called *Micros Amarillas* (yellow buses). As he was skillful and marked his works with a tag he started to be known not just in the 'micros world', but also among other people that had started to look at this craft (picture 3.1). In 2005 the old buses were gradually replaced by a new 'modern' standardized system: Transantiago. The painted signs were not needed anymore. But for Cadena, being a *pintor de letras* was a calling. So he kept painting signs for anyone that needed them. From his own workshop he creates confident that his distinctive quality is that he makes signs fast, and that he makes them beautiful, because of the letterforms and the illustrations well placed in the design. Moreover, he knows that he can do it with just his hands and tools and with no help from machines. And with these convictions, but also humble, he faces the relocation of his craft, from everyday production to the interviews and university workshops.

Secondly, as I explained above, the traces of this process led me to new designs within the style, artifacts that resemble the hand painted lettering in new formats. Salient are the “vernacular” typefaces, digital letterforms based on the painted originals. A cutting edge example of this route was the project *Tipografías Urbano Populares – TUP-*, developed by Tono Rojas and Kote Soto<sup>2</sup> as final project of their degree in Design in Visual Communication in UTEM, from 1998 to 2001. They faced the task from the critical position that a “Chilean” design was needed and not just a design “made in Chile”. For them the key was the reincorporation of local graphic elements into the spaces of professional designers or advertisers, as they were being left apart. To do it so they went to the source, the quotidian

PICTURE 3.2  
The 9 TUP.



<sup>2</sup> On 6th July 2015 I met them in their agency Filete in Julio Prado 1605, Ñuñoa, Santiago, Chile. This is near barrio Italia. I was in contact with Tono and it was with him that I arranged the interview, but as we were talking he interrupted me at some point to called Kote and invited him to share his opinion. The whole conversation lasted around 1 hour.

urban spaces of popular graphics, and there the lettering, but especially their letters, caught their attention. They selected some letterforms and transformed them into a set of digital typefaces, adapting them to the requirements of new technology, such as computers, used in design industry (picture 3.2 ) Expecting to surpass the lack of local elements in the new graphic made in Chile, they initiated the distribution of their set of typefaces via diskettes and then the internet. The plan was to put a key local element on the hands of designers so they might create local design. And the strategy worked; since then the TUPs have been acting in the public arena. On their side, Tono and Kote kept promoting the creation of local (popular) design mainly for teaching in universities, whereas the works of their graphic design agency *Filete* does not resemble so explicitly the popular locality.

In the third place, I looked for other ways to interact with the letters aside from creating new ones. For instance, there are people that are motivated by the graphic style who have

PICTURE 3.3  
Screenshot of [www.manosuelta.cl](http://www.manosuelta.cl)







PICTURE 3.4  
The frontis of La Tienda Nacional.

produced compilations, where they select and classify the images and words reproduced on them. Searching for lettering on the internet I found [www.manosuelta.cl](http://www.manosuelta.cl) (something like [www.freehand.cl](http://www.freehand.cl) referring to the handmade making), a website that made me think that someone was following the same traces that I was but with different intentions (Picture 3.3). He was Simón Ibáñez (its creator and administrator), a 26 years old designer who graduated 2 years ago with the same degree that the TUP creators did.<sup>3</sup> Like them, he is focusing on the ‘popular graphic’ and presenting it in digital terms. But in his compilation/catalog he enlarges the focus from hand painted lettering and their painters in Santiago to lettering from the past, designs of digital typefaces (including TUP and the link to down-

3 After contact him by internet, we met on 26th June 2015, at Paseo Bulnes, a pedestrian way that projected from La Moneda, government palace, to the south. We talked around 2 hours of different topics related with the phenomenon around the hand painted lettering. I joined him in a visit to Juan Cadena’s workshop on 3th July 2015.

load them) and books, and related international cases. For him the process that we are observing is one on the peripheries of the developed world. And in this sense the case of Chile is one among many. He recognizes some stylistic continuity among different countries of Latin America, considering the region as a whole of which Chile is a part. And he argues, it is important that we the Chileans recognize our own specificities, adopt a position, name our graphic, and meditate about the process and the importance of the graphic style in our society. For him the core of the graphic style are the persons behind the materiality, their stories, memories, lives, and he is dedicated to investigating and publicizing them.

My last informant also follows a non-creative but different way of interacting with the letterings. She is Gabi Villalba, a young architect that in partnership *founded La Tienda Nacional* (The National Shop, picture 3.4) aiming to create a space where Chileans can offer their products or access to them if they wish.<sup>4</sup> They opened this specialized shop in *barrio Bellas Artes/Lastarria* in 2011. She is an entrepreneur that seems to develop her project more because of personal and cultural principles than for money. There she works on various positions as owner, manager, designer of the shop's image and by selecting what is going to be offered in the shop. Not any object made in Chile is accepted. There are products from the cultural industries of music, film, books and design. It is a selection that mixes old stuff –such as turning wood toys that I remember from my childhood- with new ones, always oriented to Chileans and not to tourists. These are all mass produced objects, apart from one: Zenén's signs, such as the black one that I presented above.

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4 On 10th July 2015 I met her La Tienda Nacional, located in Barrios Bellas Artes/Lastarria. Surrounded by Chilean objects and people looking for products, with Chilean music filling the ambience, we were talking 1 hour about her experience and ideas about the shop, and also about the general process that I was studying. I also visited the shop in other moments, analyzing people, talking with the staff, and taking pictures.

To finish, what I have tried to expose here is, first, that my main informants are all representatives of groups involved in this process. As I hope it could be seen, their actions are diverse but gathered by the letterings. But the way in which this happened was somehow unintended in the original production of them. As we will see below, the hand painted lettering were mainly supposed to advertise services or goods. But these people related to design where captivated, and in a different way alarmed by a sense of their disappearance.





## CHAPTER 4

### ON MATERIALITY OF LANGUAGE

So far I have introduced the hand painted lettering which is spread over the diverse localities of Santiago, and the people gathered by it. Just like the word lettering itself contents “letter” on it, the lettering are constituted by articulated letters. They are a concrete fixed expression of language (Tilley 1991: 17-18). In a more precise way, they are words that we can see as a result of being drawn –in this case painted- letterforms (Alessio 2013). Hence, they could be understood from linguistics and be read looking for their meanings. However, as I tried to express with my Opening Letters, it was not the meaning of their words what caught my attention or the one of the people gathered by them, but their material existence as visual representations. Let us consider then the relationships between words and materiality.

Many have explored possible analytical connections between language and material and visual culture. On the one hand, related in different levels with Saussure’s linguistics ideas, scholars, like Panofsky or Barthes, have analyzed pictures or objects as entities with conventional meaning, “a code in need of decoding” (Pinney 2006: 132; Mitchell 1994: 25-27). From this linguistic turn, it has been stated that visual and material worlds are non-verbal languages, that is to say –following Saussurean definition of language- systems within which specific speeches are articulated with signs under shared norms. Central to this paradigm is the meaningful sign that emerges from the relation between signifier -a sensuous substance- and a conventionally defined signified -a concept associated-. (Saussure 1916, in Layton 2006:30 and Tilley 1991). Following these ideas, Tilley (1991) proposed to ‘read’ the carving rocks of Nämforsen in his search for meaning, understanding

them as ‘material text’. But, is it all about meaning?

On the other hand, it has been recognized that language can act beyond the linguistic meaning of its signs. As Bloch (1975) stated in his anthropological study of politics among the Merina society, speech acts are formalized not just in the choice of the vocabulary and its grammar, but also in the tangible existence of the words, in the choice of intonation, loudness and body gestures. Moreover, in speech “form affects content” (Bloch 1975: 5-6); and they exert “power through form” in a day-to-day basis (Bloch 1975: 12). From a different perspective Elias Canetti (1978) wrote in *The Voices of Marrakesh* a sensuous description of his experiences as a foreigner in Morocco. In his words it is eloquent how the sounds of a spoken language can captivate one beyond their linguistic meaning. For him words were “a marvelously luminous, viscid substance (...) that are beyond words, deeper and more equivocal than words”, they act upon him, were powerful (Canetti 1978: 23). The way in which speech was said affected his acts; that is why he could find himself rooted to the spot in a ring of listeners, fascinated by the rhythm of the sounds of unintelligible words that hang over them full of movement, the animated words of the storyteller, that can make even “one who understood as little as I felt great things going on there.” (Canetti 1978: 77)

Both Bloch and Canetti noticed the power inherent in the form through which the language is uttered as something that affects the hearer. What they referred to in sounds has also been noticed in the visuality of words. It has been said that written words are meanings fixed on the material surface of, for instance, paper (Tilley 1991: 16-17). But, again, there are different ways to write (picture 4.1). In his review of fonts, Garfield (2011) eloquently demonstrates how each typeface does more than being part of a linguistic sign. From their



PICTURE 4.1  
"Peluqueria" (barber-shop) on different signs found in Santiago.

form, these letterforms act upon the people in the streets, books, computers, and so on. They are not just passive signifiers (to put it in linguistic terms) useful because of their relation with the signified; they actually can change the meaning of words, and affect people social lives by guiding them home or attracting them into shops through their elegant or modern attributes (Garfield 2011). Just like intonation, loudness and gesture, the letterforms can be embellished with colors and shades that give them depth, ornaments and movement. This is what Botnik and Raja (2011: 50) explained about the hand painted signs in India that were made

“personal by the hand and eye of the sign painter. (...) In the streets, letterforms take on shapes of anthropomorphic life -sophisticated, three-dimensional, visually complex expression. The sign painters have turned letters into forms, with possibility of formal expression and nuanced meaning around each linguistic corner”.



PICTURE 4.2  
The bond between Juan Cadena and his sign.

Although both materiality and meaning are part of language, it is from the former that the words can be animated and be part of a distributed social agency (Gell 1998). In the lettering that I am following the objectifying powers of visual and verbal representations are interacting (Mitchell 1994: 3-5; Tilley 2006: 61), as they are pictures composed by embellished texts. But in the social life of Santiago –especially in the actual context affected by the changes of globalization–, they are acting from their material presence (Pinney 2006), more than from their texts. Just like the words of the story tellers of Canetti, they are gathering people not because of their meaning, but because they were made special (Botnik & Raja 2011: 47). And that does not mean that they are just texts made useful and beautiful; in other words, signs with clear and attractive texts to be read, offering commodities such



as food, or car parts from a certain shop. In fact, through their elaboration they connect “the maker (and user) to a unique cultural context by employing shared aesthetics in color, pattern, and material” (Botnik & Raja 2011: 47). As Gell (1998: 74) argued, the surface decorations mediate the attachment between persons and things on their social actions. In this case, the hand painted lettering is bound its maker, the letter painters, but also to the people involved with the local shops or workshops (picture 4.2).

It is time now to consider the materiality of these lettering, in order to understand what makes them animated entities that mediate in social interactions. First, there are different kinds of surfaces covered by what I called embellished text: walls made of concrete, adobe, tin, and wood; shop-fascias in PVC, tin, and boards; hanging, projecting and free standing signs, all made on boards, acrylic, tin, or card; and window graphics. Each one of these surfaces implies different formats and textures, and all together might be considered different categories of artifacts that share stylistics graphic attributes.<sup>1</sup> The constituents of this graphic style are related in a hierarchical organization. First of all there are the letterforms -and sometimes numbers-, central in any lettering (after all the generic word *letrero* derives



PICTURE 4.3  
Each letter, a unique one.

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I am not expecting to define what connects this graphic attributes with cultural values. That would be an objective of a different work. (Gell 1998: 156-220)



PICTURE 4.4  
The color-substance covering the surface.

from the word *letras*). There is no unique type, but instead diversity on handmade letters, from script to block in their serif and sans serif form (picture 4.3). Each letter is unique, and this makes the text lively and special; they are the trace of a hand (Ingold 2011: 12; Botnik 2011: 50). It is around them that the second element, the ornaments or vignettes, are displayed in each lettering. They are lines and their variations with different levels of com-



PICTURE 4.5  
Letters appearing from their forms and counter-forms.

plexity: they can be straight, wavy, or pointy; or be shaped in more complex forms, such as asterisks or flowers. These lines are also used to shade or to add bright to the letters, as background decorations or to form the fringes. A third element -not always present-, are the illustrations that are iconic and tend to relate to the text by depicting one of the words. Both vignettes and illustrations are in the lettering interacting with the letters, and all of these elements are shapes formed by relations of colors (picture 4.4). All these elements exist by the color-substance, they are forms that exist because of it (Taussig 2008). It is by the use of it that the sign painters apply their virtuosity to the lettering, animating them. Through the movement of hands and brushes (Ingold 2000; 2011) the coloring matter of the paint covers the surfaces, allowing the emergence of letterforms and vignettes presented in different levels of complexity (picture 4.5). The skillful painters use the layers of color to paint the letterforms, but also to make them appear from their counter-forms. At a certain level complexity produces movement and depth within the letters and in the whole, in a graphic picture based on contrast that attracts with its viscosity (Gell 1998: 31; 86) (picture 4.6).

But as I have said, the city that they wrap is one changing because of development. So this lettering has been moving. And it is about those relocations and transformations of this materiality of language that the second part will discuss.



PICTURE 4.6

A complex lettering: animated with movement and deep.









## CHAPTER 5

### THEY HAVE BEEN CALLING

Around Santiago, the hand painted lettering has caught the attention of many before me. Even if they are threatened by the growing presence of other graphic styles, they can easily be found in the quotidian life of the city, especially concentrated in some areas. Particularly in the world of design, many students and scholars have considered them. The common challenge is to find a ‘national graphic identity’ (Guajardo n/p: 1), and design within it. This agenda can be found in theses, published material and websites produced from the 1990s onwards (Armas 1994; Córdova 2004; Guajardo n/p; Engelmann 2000; Salvo 2006; manosuelta.cl). They are reflexive and creative exercises that aim to design a real project, because as Simón from manosuelta.cl told me, “what is worthy is to do” (Simón, June 2015). And from that point I understood all their products, as artifacts that bound words and images (Tilley 1991: 9) motivated by the hand painted lettering. In them I recognize the cognitive stickiness of the lettering (Gell 1998: 74-86), attracting all of these people to look at them and ask about how they can be part of new designs “that integrate the warm of the local to a global context” (Córdova 2004: 4).

All these projects started from the experience of moving around the city and looking. They are about living in the city, traveling in buses, and going to local shops that are probably named after their owners. It is about the experience of flowing in an intimate space covered by the lettering, a space that wraps around us and simultaneously gives character to the city (Córdova 2004: 10). The German designer Esther Engelmann expressed in her book about the letters that she saw in Santiago, *Safari Tipográfico*, “the city has a simultaneous double character, the three-dimensional landscape, and the panoramic view of diverse adverts and



PICTURE 5.1

The abundance of hand painted lettering in the commercial life of Santiago.

signs (...) it might be said that is a characteristic script over the surface of the city” (Engelmann 2000: 5; picture 5.1).

At the same time they recognize this they explain that it may be because of the “modesty” of the letterings (Córdova 2004: 4) that the people of Santiago seem to not value them enough, and see them as disposable in the context of globalization, new technologies and standardization. So they warn through their projects that designers have “as people the option to keep our own humanity alive” (Engelmann 2000: 54-55). The chance to do it is with the hand painted lettering that are attached to their makers and to the people that interact in the markets, simple (fast) restaurants, or small fruit and vegetable stalls. “Moving around Santiago (...) we can recognize (...) a common graphic impetus (...) that is recognizable to

ordinary people of the city. (...) We find signs, colors, figures, codes that evidence a different way to understand the world. Is the feeling and doing of the popular culture?”. (Córdova 2004: 11) And that is what will be lost.

The lettering are not easy to understand, and when attempts are made to define and classify them as a particular graphic style, the results are somewhat vague. The most common two names are ‘Popular Graphic’ or ‘Vernacular Graphic’ both accompanied sometimes with ‘Chilean’. It is recognized that painters use elements taken from printed material or media, with foreign influences. The letters are based on typefaces, but changed by the hand of the sign painter, sometimes even to create a new one. The same happens with illustrations based on imported cartoons. And that is a key point in the definition: the way in which the lettering are painted has that ‘something’ special, the touch of *picardía* (craftiness) of each person, that is also identified with the Chilean popular culture. It is about solving problems with the knowledge of the man on the spot (Botnik & Raja 2011: 44), and the spot is local. In the Chilean language *picardía* suggests being ingenious and ‘adding flavor’. It is something that captivates us, but hard to define. In Simón’s words it is “like a stroke... cloc!, (he made the sound with his tongue on the palate, along with a fast ‘check’ gesture with his hand), you know? To add to a letter a little tail, to add it some stuff.” (Simón, June 2015)

Along with recognize a continuity of graphic attributes on the lettering indentifying a style, named it and try to identify its cultural specificity (Gell 1998: 155-220), all these people propose a description of the elements of the style. Hence, each one of the documents that I reviewed present -just like mine-, the materials, surfaces and formats, typographic categories findable in the lettering.





PICTURE 5.2

Post grade program on lettering. The picture is a digital lettering within the popular graphic style.

This naming and defining process seems important because, from what I can see, these people using the lettering to resist the replacement of what they shared. For instance, Simón recognizes the phenomenon of the graphic style of the hand painted lettering spreading onto new surfaces and resisting globalization, as one of the peripheries of developing world on all continents. His project is to understand the local style with its particularities. That means to name it, but he rejects “vernacular graphic” as an Anglicism imported from academia. For him “popular graphic” is better because it makes sense with “all” of what popular means (not pop): “popular from the people, (...) from popular roots (...) So, why should we adapt (...) to the Anglicism? (...) Why we don’t name with our own parameters? What I mean, if we all call it popular...” But he warns we must keep looking for a proper name that must come from the people. (Simón, June 2015)

The definition of the graphic style is something in progress. Every year more students add material to the process, stimulated now not just from what they see on the streets, by also from the slides that their teachers project in lectures. All these definitions and classifica-

tions are nowadays part of the curriculum of undergrad and post grade programs. The hand painted lettering are captivating people even in the academic spaces that at the beginning turned their backs on it, from the hand of the same ex-students that were captivated by the lettering in the past.

All these movements are paths of relocation that have one material transformation in common: the reproduction of what was once unique (Armas 1994: 25). Each project contributes to the creation of new spaces of abundance for the lettering. Now copies of the hand painted lettering cover the pages of books in libraries, bookshops and houses. They are

PICTURE 5.3  
Abundance in the pages of Córdova's final project.



PICTURE 5.4  
Abundance in the pages of Engelmann's project, "Safari Tipográfico".



PICTURE 5.5

Abundance in [www.manosuelta.cl](http://www.manosuelta.cl), Simón's project.



"Barrio Independencia"



"Barrio Mapocho"



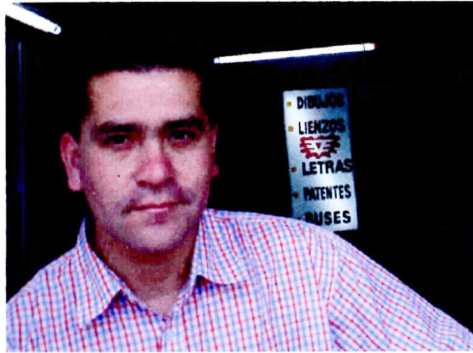
"Barrio Matucana"

also spread on the internet where, just like in the streets, it is accumulated in some spaces, such as [manosuelta.cl](http://manosuelta.cl). These copies are portable and can be multiplied (just imagine all our computers looking at [manosuelta.cl](http://manosuelta.cl)). And even if these are not genuine hand painted lettering or located in the city, all together they are part of the style that is considered authentically local, because it is what we can see every day in the streets.

But this relocation has also acted upon the people that we can find through the lettering: their painters. As we see above, the style has the *picardía*, that "something", because of the strokes, the "touch" of its maker. And these scholars have recognized this, including interviews with sign painters in their texts. As I said somewhere else, they are so attached to their creations that they are called *pintor de letras*; one cannot exist without the other. On these interviews what seems to matter are the techniques use by them, the making process of the sign, but especially the stories of their lives as these make the letterings intimate. Just as the letters objectify localness, the sign painters also embody it. Simón insisted to me that "what matters is the person", because it is with him, with his life that the style exists:



JUAN CADENA



Si uno pone suficiente atención, podrá dar con alguna micro del sector sur de Santiago que tenga la firma de Juan Cadena (37 años), una especie de escudo que se repite una y otra vez en la piel amarillenta de las calles, siempre acompañado de alguna ilustración de dibujos animados o unas letras de fantasía. Desde su alucinante taller ubicado en el paradero 18 de Santa Rosa, Cadena se ha transformado en una marca registrada. Partió como la mayoría, desde muy pequeño dibujando, recortando letras del diario e inventando sus propios alfabetos. Al paso del tiempo se dio cuenta que su talento podía transformarse en un trabajo bien pagado. Su padre, al jubilarse de la

¿Cuántos años lleva en este oficio?  
“Oficialmente hace 15 años”.

¿Cómo se inició en el oficio?

“Partí muy chico. En el colegio. Siempre fui bueno para dibujar, así que de a poco me iban pidiendo que hiciera dibujos para escenarios o diplomas. Cuando salí del colegio empecé a trabajar en mi casa, haciendo algunos adornos para micro o carteles para negocios del barrio. Después trabajé en algunos talleres más grandes, pero me aburrí –el trabajo era mucho y no se ganaba tanto– así que instalé mi propio taller”.

¿Cuál es su especialidad dentro de este rubro?

“La mayor parte de mi trabajo está dirigida a la locomoción colectiva: mis hermanos y primos son



PICTURE 5.6

Juan Cadena, letter painter, in the pages of Córdova's project.

“...the guy dies and that style disappears if no one catches it.” And just like Simon there are others that seem to be challenging the disappearance, or as the presentation of Paula Guajardo ‘s book about Juan Cadena “El Rey del Cartel” says on: “It intends to diffuse and stimulate the visual culture of the popular art and the rescue of the craft of a Chilean craftsman forgotten by progress” (<https://vimeo.com/75174535>).

To finish this chapter, following Steiner (1994) I consider authenticity of artifacts as a value produced in the interaction of people with them. The projects presented here are part of the interaction around the hand painted lettering. They present them as abundantly lo-



PICTURE 5.7  
 Juan Cadena's work, abundant in the pages of "El Rey del Cartel".

cated in the everyday life of Santiago, and hence authentically local. But at the same time, they reproduce on them both the lettering and the abundance, creating new spaces of such authenticity. In my view, this is a discourse of authentic localness in progress.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In this sense, it is important to admit that this dissertation contributes inevitably to it (both as a new reproduction-compilation and as a declaration of abundance).



## CHAPTER 6

### LET US KEEP MAKING

As I showed in the previous chapter, the people attracted to hand painted lettering have claimed that just thinking about a graphic identity is not enough, making is also necessary. They have also recognized in the sign painters the makers par excellence of the *Gráfica Popular*, looking in their lives for an explanation of the *picardía* present in the animated lettering. In what respect to this paper, it is important to analyze first how they have reacted to the fact of seeing their works being “deported to nowhere” (Engelmann 2000: 54-55). Some have disappeared, but many others have kept making by carrying out traditional commissions as they used to, or by creating new opportunities. The last group is most salient outside the specialized world of signs, and the two sign painters that I have mentioned

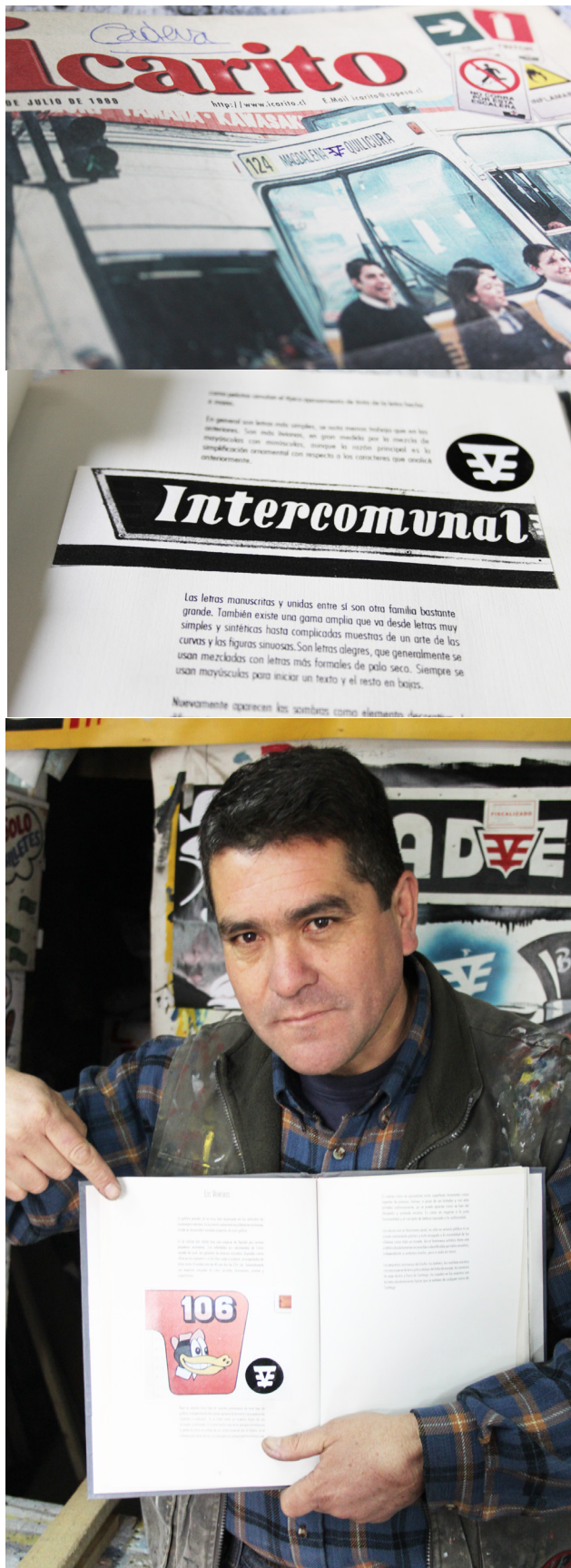
PICTURE 6.1

The walls in Juan Cadena's workshop covered by signs.



PICTURE 6.2

Juan Cadena and traces of his works on “micros amarillos”.



so far belong to it: Juan Cadena and Zenén Vargas. By following the story of Juan Cadena one can observe how the craftsmen have adapted their personas and their oeuvres (Gell 1998: 46) to the new scenario of globalization and standardization.

When I approached his workshop I found a space covered in letters and signs; inside and outside the walls were of this texture (Picture 6.1).

Within this fascinating place Cadena moved making frames for signs that he was going to paint and showing us his portfolios (I went with Simón), while we talked about past and present stories. Like many before, I got into his place looking for them. He drags with him the stories of lettering in the city; from his hands were born the letters and ornaments that covered the buses that moved us around Santiago from 1991. As I



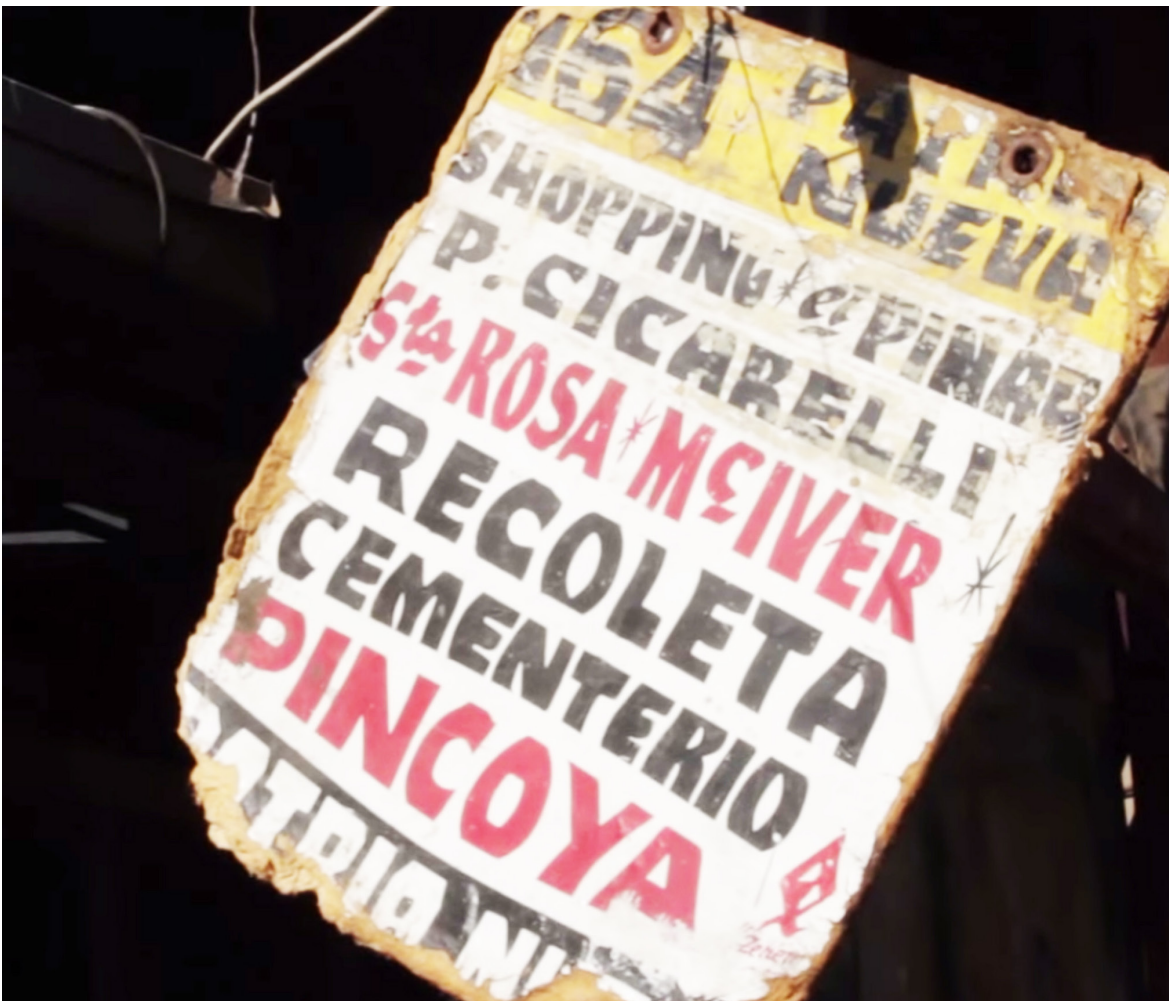


PICTURE 6.3  
"Micros amarillos" and the letters painted on them.

mentioned before, at some point his life intertwined with one of those buses. He and his tag became renowned in the *micros amarillos* world that was the first step in the standardization of the public transport system of Santiago (picture 6.2). With them the different colors of the former buses chosen by their owners were removed from the streets to be replaced by a standardized pantone yellow. But the buses and their drivers resisted this uniformity through the hands of the letters painters who made the signage and covered –along with other objects- the internal and external surfaces of the bus, personalizing and attaching to them (Botnick & Raja 2011; Gell 1998: 74) (picture 6.3) And we, the daily users, bound our lives to these *micros* (Tilley 2006: 62-63)... Until 2005, when the new plan of modernization -*Transantiago*- brought the complete standardization. The color of the buses and their signage was designed by ‘professional designers’ in an office (even if they tried to keep something of the former style) and then it was applied to the buses. The intimacy was lost. And through the reactions crept the feeling that maybe the old system was junk, but it was our junk. From their side, sign painters such as Cadena and Zenén kept making the *letrero de micro amarilla*, no longer for buses but for new customers that want to have a part of the past world of the *micros* in their private lives (picture 6.4).



PICTURE 6.4A  
 "Letreros de micro amarilla". Zenén showing a new one.



PICTURE 6.4B  
 "Letreros de micro amarilla". An old one in Zenén's workshop.





PICTURE 6.4c  
*"Letreros de micro amarilla". Cadena showing a new one.*

And this is where I identify the main articulation of transformation around the letter painters and their style. Transantiago was the most salient case of a generalized process of modernization that implied fewer commissions for the sign painters, but they went out of their medium and innovated. On the one hand, they are accepting interviews from scholars and media, and participating in workshops (picture 6.5). They have been moving from their knowledge on the spot (Botnick & Raja 2011: 44) to discourses of what is valuable of their craft. Cadena recognized himself as skillful; he knows that he and his signs are handy. If you need a sign he can make it fast, well designed and beautiful because of his illustrations and vignettes. But he also recognizes the value of them as handcrafted through his experiential knowledge that begun with what he learnt from elder ones, each one with their own life stories (July 2015); they are not a new invention but instead a cumulative knowledge of how to do. On the other hand, he has kept offering his work to anyone that asks for it, even if that means new costumers with new purposes. For sign painters such as Cadena or Zenén, this meant a different kind of creative freedom to that of a public system such as the





PICTURE 6.5  
The copy of the poster of an international workshop in which Cadena participated, kept in one of his portfolios.

PICTURE 6.6  
Cadena's illustrations looking and talking to us.



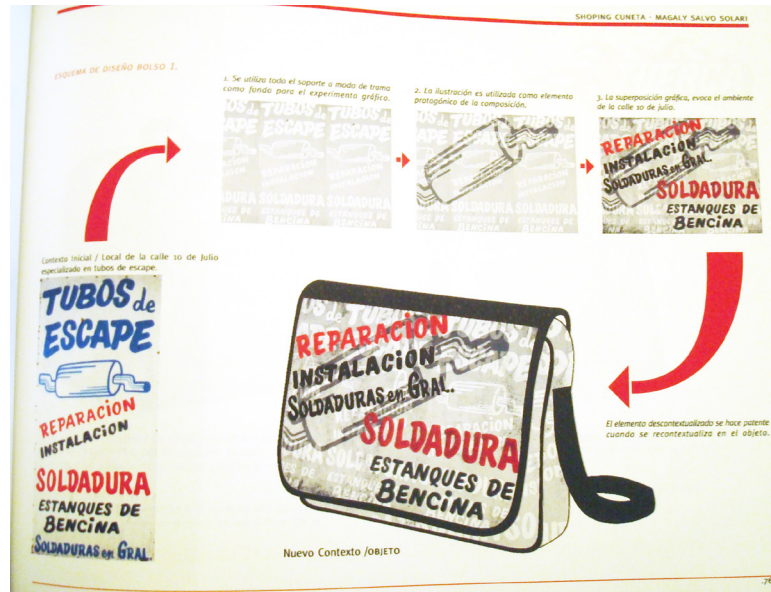
micros amarillas. Compared to the original *letrero de micro* the signs that I observed have more complex designs, making their personal style more recognizable by the use of more color-substance, letterforms, and ornaments or illustrations. There are pictures that look at you and talk to you (picture 6.6) (Mitchell 1996: 80), or the increased use of counter-forms reversing the figure of the letters and ground (Gell 1998: 79), results in more viscous signs, where the letters sometimes are not easily readable and seem to disappear in the internal relations of the sign, attracting us into them. (Picture 6.7)

PICTURE 6.7

A complex lettering by Cadena, to be used as the cover of the book about himself, "El rey del Cartel", by Paula Guajardo.







PICTURE 6.8  
A design proposal for advertising, by Patricia Armas

PICTURE 6.9  
A bag designed by Magaly Salvo.

In a different way of making, the designers started to create within the popular graphic style, with the intention of maintaining its presence in the visual landscape of the city. “We start with this intuition, the idea of recovery these endanger letters” (Tono, July 2015) The



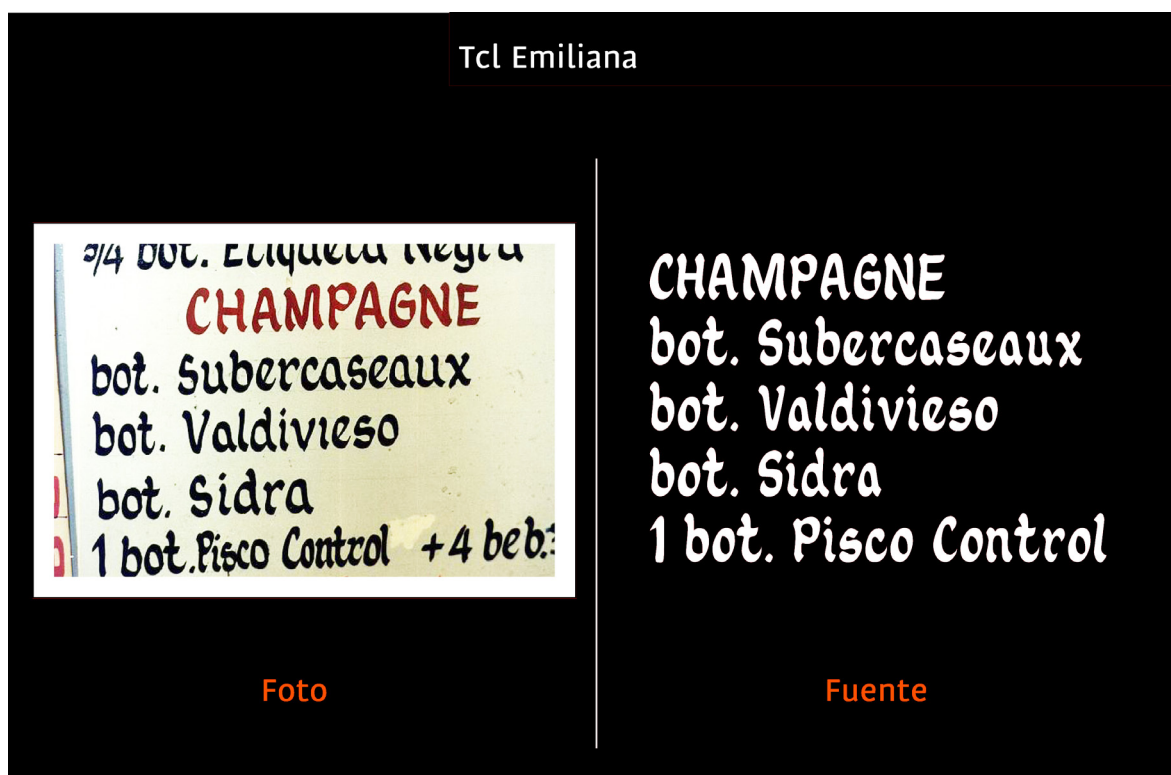
PICTURE 6.10  
Cover of “Modesto Estupendo”, project of Manuel Córdova.



PICTURE 6.11  
“SAGRADO CORAZÓN”, BY TRUFFA+CABEZAS. THE BACKGROUND IS A “LETRERO DE MICRO” PAINTED BY ZENÉN.

solution has been the integration of hand painted lettering as an element of new designs; in other words, to design from them. Already in 1994 a student proposed for her final project in Design called *Gráfica Popular Chilena* to combine hand painted lettering with the texts of advertisements (Armas 1994, picture 6.8). Twelve years later another student proposed to use reproductions of the popular graphic to create patterns and applied them to clothes, bags and shoes (Salvo 2006: picture 6.9). As Córdova explained in his project *Modesto Estupendo* he designed new versions remixing fragments of original materials (Córdova 2004: 32; picture 6.10). This idea of using fragments of the popular graphic was also applied by artists early on, when in 1999 the collective Truffa+Cabezas included the *letrero de micro* that was used on the streets then, painted by Zenén, in their exhibition “*Si vas para Chile*” (“If you go to Chile”) in the *Museo Nacional Bellas Artes*. (picture 6.11)

Among the many projects that follow this path of new design resembling the “originals”, for me the central one is *Tipografías Urbano Populares*, TUP, created by Tono Rojas and Kote Soto as the final project for their undergraduate degrees. The importance of it lies in its inherent capacity of reproduction. TUP were the first digital typefaces based on the popular graphic. As Tono explained to me, the solution for the threat was in the threat itself: the new technologies (July 2015). They move around Santiago looking for letters and pictured them. They made a selection of letterforms and some vignettes, that first, “seemed the more idiosyncratic, and do not look too much as Mecnorma fonts (...) the more recognizable as own, and second, that they have some formal consistency between a sign and other” (Tono, July 2015). Then, they digitalized the pictures, traced and completed the form of each character, and worked on the spacing in software. They designed 8 complete fonts and one set of dingbat (picture 6.12) and spread them into the professional design world



PICTURE 6.12  
The design process of Emiliana, one of the TUP.



on diskettes first, and the internet later. Their project worked perfectly; the application of TUP did not last (picture 6.13). “It is like a virus... It is consolidated those are the letters that are Chilean” (Tono, July 2015). By selecting and isolating minimum key elements of the graphic style (varied letters and vignettes), and transforming them into a new portable artifact, they created a new category of the style -the so called “vernacular typefaces”- that are set of pieces that need to be assembly in the production of new designs (Gell 1998: 167). Now, designers can arrange these basic elements on their digital surfaces without requiring the skills needed to paint letters, and can apply to them the digital colors to create

PICTURE 6.13

One of the first applications of TUP in 2001, during September, month of independence celebration.



a new visual representation or artefact within the style. Part of the viscosity and animation is lost with the replacement of the color-substance and the uniqueness of the original letters in this process fixing in the matrix of the type (Garfield 2011: chapter 8) the fixed-written language to allow reproduction. Even the possible textures of the surface (rough, smooth wavy, irregular) are reduced in the screen; the digital is just smooth. Just like the lost of creative potential in a formalized language (Bloch 1975: 15), the digital typefaces limit those of the lettering. Yet, they resemble the letterforms that inspired them, letterforms that are localized in the landscape of Santiago, in specific places and objects that we can recognize (for instance, the TUP Emiliana reflects with its name its origin: a wine in a menu of a pub in Plaza Ñuñoa). And because of that, they can penetrate the new surfaces animating the lettering, creating new spaces of localness, as we will see in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE LETTERS RELOCATED

So far we have seen how both sign painters and designers have kept making and innovating within the style. Moreover, as I mentioned above, the TUP were successful in their intention and designers started to use them and other vernacular typefaces in their work. Thus, the style that was threatened with the disappearance of the hand painted lettering is now being reproduced in new formats and surfaces. The digital letterforms and ornaments have appeared in the pages of publications, advertising, media, objects, and so on. An eloquent example of how they act from their materiality is *El Poder de la Palabra* ('The Power of Speech', 2009), a critical and ironic documentary about the resistance to the project of development objectified on the standardization of *Transantiago*. It follows the story of the peddlers who were part of the intimacy of *micros amarillos* resisting the exile from the new system. To visually translate the stickiness of their orality, on the still frames the TUP showed up as perfectly suitable in a design that assembled them in the color substance of the worn yellow of the old buses (picture 7.1). After all, both peddlers with their speeches and the TUP's prototypes came from the same world.



PICTURE 7.1  
Still frames of "El poder de la palabra". The peddlers' language visualized.





PLEASE FORGIVE

*THIS*  
INTERRUPTION

a fabulous **PRODUCT**

FOR THE ENTIRE  
COMMUNITY

imperative for  
ACHIEVING

*Our so-desired Modernity*

And as if that  
Wasn't Enough

this is also an

AS A SPECIAL  
OFFER

the **FIRST**  
FEW MONTHS

WILL BE A  
**TRIAL**  
**RUN**

THE ALWAYS  
HANDY

traditional **YELLOW BUS**



**EXCELLENT**

**BUSINESS  
OPPORTUNITY!**

**ALONG WITH THE  
BRAND NEW BUSES**

**You will  
still  
use**

**as you can see**

**You WILL be GETTING**

**PLENTY OF  
ELEGANCE**

Yet, the reproduction of vernacular typefaces in digital designs has another significant edge to be considered. Most of these applications have located them in specific contexts that merged the types inspired by a local style -the one situated on the streets- with words that are articulating a discourse of Chilean-ness. On TV shows (picture 7.2), magazines (picture 7.3), or advertising, “*chileno*”, “*Chile*” or any other word referring to something “typical” of “Chilean-ness” are written with these typefaces. This is strengthened by its use during independence celebrations, especially in September, the “*mes de la patria*”. Furthermore, the same happens with the other way to design within the style that use pictures of hand painted lettering as fragments of a new artifact. At the same time that these designs do not explain their understanding of the popular graphic or in the reasons to design within it (as the projects presented above do), they as applications on media have a massive impact in society. And via the cumulative agency of reiteration their association is setting up the value of the lettering as authentic localness, or even Chilean-ness.

PICTURE 7.2

The cover of one chapter of the TV show “*Qué Comes*”.







PICTURE 7.3  
The TUP Estación on the cover of the magazine "C de Cine".

In parallel, the media have represented the craft and sign painters in the figure of Zenén, making him a sort of pop star of an authentic local craft. In the videos that I watched he was presented as the *pintor de letreros de micros* par excellence, with an entire life dedicated to the craft, and resilient in facing the threatening changes, but with no apprentices



PICTURE 7.4  
An example of a video sequence on Zenén story.







PICTURE 7.5

Embroidery of one of Zenén's ornaments on the clothes of the staff of Emporio La Rosa.

to continue the tradition. This discourse is narrated always following the same visual and discursive structure (picture 7.4). First it locates him in his modest workshop, wrapped in signs; then, while he tells us his story he paints the interviewer's commission. It is the story of how he acquired the skill when he was a child, by observing his father, and how with the experience he developed his own style that, in his words "can be copied, but not equal". Most of the videos then emphasize the shock that was *Transantiago*, to give way to how he reinvented himself to keep offering his works. On these videos and from the words of Zenén we get the sense of the need to value him as the one that embodied a local tradition, with a dose of nostalgia for what seems to disappear; mixed with a doses of marketing over his figure.





PICTURE 7.6  
Sign for Emporio La Rosa painted by Zenén.



Zenén... Why him? I am puzzled, it is always about him. His lettering -just like the vernacular typefaces- have been used on advertising campaigns throughout the country, wrapping six-pack of beers or promoting cable TV offers. Zenén is also distributed through his signs in different *barrios* of the city, especially in the ones that are visited by tourists and not just for Chileans. As I mentioned when we were walking around, he made the signs for *Emporio La Rosa* in *barrio Lastarria* (that is also localized in other neighborhoods) (picture 7.5, 7.6 and 7.8) and for *Galindo* in *barrio Bellavista* (picture 7.7), both restaurants that try to use local aesthetics but in a more fashionable way. The first answer that Gabi, the owner of *La Tienda Nacional*, gave me when I ask her about this was that “it is because he is recognizable (...) he knew how to market himself (...) he is the only one with a known name,

PICTURE 7.7  
Sign for Galindo painted by Zenén.







PICTURE 7.8  
Another sign for Emporio La Rosa painted by Zenén.

you know? And because he signs and leaves his mobile number (...) so people can tell you about him” (Gabi, July 2015). I agreed. But I knew that were others, as Cadena. Later she proceeded, first referring to the hand painted lettering in general, to move to Zenén himself working for big companies advertising campaigns:

“...he designs for each commission and hand paints it, so the result is always different. But that difference is bound to an identity or an ordering principle that it is repeated (...), you know what I mean? (...) otherwise it is diluted. (...) And then when it starts to be repeated here, there, then it remains, then it is retained (...) He is recognizable because you understand his hand style” (Gabi, July 2015)

Again we agreed, and extended her observation to the case of the *letrero de micro*, that is also a repeated form. After a while I could not avoid thinking that just like the original hand painted lettering these new digital categories and the style of Zenén are locally memorable; they remain in the memories of those that live in Chile, have walked around Santiago, watch TV, and read books or magazines.

Furthermore, one last transformation of Zenén’s work is happening at *La Tienda Nacional*. As we saw at the beginning of this text, the signs painted by Zenén are being offered among other mass produced objects, sharing with them the status of commodity (picture 7.9). Gabi explained to me that this exception was made because even if his signs are not serialized “there is a so clearly marked personal element of identity on them” (July 2015). For instance, in his jobs for advertisement you can recognize the ordering principle, but





PICTURE 7.9  
Signs painted by Zenén sold as commodities in La Tienda Nacional.

“the characters are not going to repeat though; what it is repeated is the principle, but not the final form.” (Gabi, July 2015) Thus in her shop Zenén’s signs became design-commodities marked with barcodes. But in order to be in this position the hand painted lettering must stop being personal commissions. Zenén, in his attempt to keep earning money after the end of *micros amarillos*, started to paint signs for anybody. These signs are the part of Zenén’s production that just objectifies his person and not the one of a specific client as occurred in personalized commissions. What you can buy in *La Tienda Nacional* is an “authentic Zenén”, but not a sign made for you. What is lost in terms of personal identification, is gained in terms of a discourse of national identity. We must remind ourselves that we are in a shop that sells “real” Chilean products for Chileans and not souvenirs for



tourists. And, in Gabi's words, Zenén signs are there because they are an ideal "if you are looking for something that is proper Chilean (...) It is so popular culture, it is so Chilean or *santiaguina* identity..." (July 2015). On the signs are painted words of typical Chilean food, drinks, idioms, and so on. And it is because of this that signs come into view as unique ones painted by Zenén and as objects within a traditional local craft, but not personalized anymore, so that they can confidently exhibit the barcode of a commodity.



**FINALLY...**

**THE CRISIS**





## THE CRISIS

We are reaching the end now. As we have seen, the threat that development has imposed over the crafted material culture of Chile has been a turning point in the existence of the graphic style of the hand painted lettering and the people gathered by them. Since the 1990s the transition to democracy -after the 17 years of dictatorship- continued to deepen

PICTURE 8.1

Cadena's signs among litter. Even if covered you can recognize the yellow corner of the second one.



the neoliberal economic system focused on international commerce, along with gradually allowing the recovery of freedom in citizen rights and creative projects. In this context of increasing globalization, even if the lettering started to be replaced by that produced with machines, they reacted by calling for people's attention. As Mitchell would say, what they have been wanting "is to change places with the beholder" (1996: 76). What the hand painted lettering has been doing to face the crisis is to resist their disappearance by interacting with the actors that I presented within an intricate network of social agency expanded over space and time (Gell 1998).

They have been interpellating us with their viscosity from the surfaces of the city that they cover, asking us to help them. Sometimes they are in the position of the most miserable beggar, in the rubbish, but they still having strength to call. That actually happened when walking with Cadena near his workshop, two signs called him from among litter. He picked one up, showed it to us with a sad look on his eyes and left it back there. But those signs also interpellate Simón and myself and we helped them to avoid their destruction (picture 8.1). Their lives were not over, and now with its scar my "*Oferta Helados a \$100*" ('Offer: Ice cream \$100') -a price so cheap that is unimaginable today-, is waiting for me back in Santiago (picture 8.2). Yet as we saw throughout this text, they are not always in a miserable position, but instead in many others such as feeling comfortable grouped in places as *10 de Julio*, or *La Vega*, or standing out proud with their fashionable look helped by Zenén, hung from walls of restaurants, in cabinets in *La Tienda Nacional*, houses, on TV, internet, and so on. In all these situations the lettering were helped by people, who make or (re)use them.





PICTURE 8.2  
The yellow sign rescued on my coffee table.

As a matter of fact, agreeing with Mitchell (1996: 76) I understand the lettering as calling for us to change positions, they want our capacity of action to resist their disappearance and they are mobilizing us to help them, but at the same time we need them to reserve local spaces to being in. A case as the TUP might be interpreted as the one of hand painted lettering asking (as Uncle Sam) for new blood of two students and simultaneously they were desiring overpass the absence of local design. The intentions met and merged; the hand painted lettering are not alone in being mobilized by the changes associated with development. The people gathered by the lettering, including myself, all shared the concern of the local life styles, with all their life stories and material culture, to being replaced by standards that might be anywhere around the world, or that belong to somewhere else. It is not about closing the doors to any innovation or external influence, but it is about not losing everything that is sensed as one's own. If these people accept the complete replacement of the lettering, they will have lost part of themselves, of "our stuff".



PICTURE 8.3

Lives intertwined with a letrero de micro: Tono Rojas (TUP) showing to me his original sign painted by Zenén.



But, why the lettering and not something else? Among all that surrounds us that is locally produced, it seems that the hand painted lettering were bound with the people in a closer way. Many other crafts are being replaced, or they have disappeared already, but the case of the lettering is salient. As we saw, it is not just about maintaining their original forms and locations, but transforming themselves throughout paths that lead them to places as diverse as bags, restaurants, cabinets of shops, houses, and the screens of computers or televisions. What I concluded from my walks around Santiago, my conversations with Cadena, Simón, Tono, Gabi, and the opinions of staff of the places that I visited, and from the other material that I reviewed, is that the key was in their position in the streets, in the places that people move around where they faced us with their materiality. Because of it and by being multiple in the city sharing stylistic attributes, they are animated and create a strong bond with the viewer by cumulative agency (Gell 1998: 61). And that bond was shaped in the urban landscape where the individual life stories are developed. It is not just about an “a” that is unique against the “a” that you just read in Times New Roman, it is about local lives intertwined with the lettering even in an unconscious way (picture 8.3). Thus, even if a digital typeface does not have the intimacy that characterizes the hand painted letterforms, by resembling the original, it still has social agency. Moreover, the lives of the people in Santiago now include the computers and television where typefaces such as TUP have reached, thus the bond is being reproduced.

At this point we are getting to the explanation that I found for this phenomenon of how the hand painted lettering are resisting their disappearance. By their transformations they resist in the changing urban landscape of Santiago. They are seeping in spaces where imported aesthetics and trends are used to design the shops and restaurants, or in which new tech-



**PICTURE 8.4**  
The style wrapping the shop 8 Fortuna: the machine-made version of the "letrero de micro" written on Estación, one of the TUP. The text refers to Bicentennial of Chile's independence.



**PICTURE 8.5**  
The style wrapping my house: my personalized sign, the one that I mentioned in the introduction.

nology is used to create, produce and watch. The lettering now are more portable in their digital versions and small format of signs, and have multiplied covering the walls of some specific spaces of Santiago. And those walls are wrapping the people in their everyday life, reproducing the bond and protecting them from the standardization (n (picture 8.4 and 8.5).



**PICTURE 8.6**  
Do you want to come in? A local workshop in Manuel Montt, Providencia.

They can move in their everyday lives approaching or distancing from those walls from where the lettering wait to captivate them and reinforce the bond that attach both to a lived locality. These people want technology and other changes brought by development but that does not have to mean to reject to all what they are, and the lettering allowed them to move from global spaces to local ones reserved to them. The letterings are mediating the social agency of these people to preserve the specificity of the local and resist the standardization of the global as hand painted ones or as new creations in the style.

To close, in those protected spaces the lettering are being local in a global medium, and are acting from those locus in a way “recognizable” just for the Chileans because of the “proximity” that gave them their local status (Kote, July 2015). It is not that this style means locality, but that the artifacts within it act from the local position that is being considering authentic in a process of value production. (picture 8.6)





## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, during the last 20 years the hand painted lettering in Santiago, Chile, have been resisting the standardization imposed by globalization. I proposed here that they have made it with the strategies of transformation and relocation of their graphic style. Trying to understand this phenomenon, I analyzed these strategies as paths followed by the letters in a network of interactions with people gathered around them. In this study, movement had a role both as a method and as analytical perspective, being in the background of my fieldwork, analysis and writing.

Following the hand painted lettering I moved around Santiago, alert to their presence and absence in different *barrios*. As they were supposed to be almost disappeared, I was surprised by their general highly presence, sometimes subtle, sometimes saturated. The lettering painted on different kinds of signage, on boards, walls or windows, compete in these spaces with other visualities. And all of them are active in the formation of diverse localities in the city, by which you can pass from one to another. On them the lettering cover the surfaces of walls and by doing so wrapped the people that moved among them.

The lettering, because of their materiality have and intimate relationship with those people, and the ones that make them. Here I did not understand these painted letters from a linguistic or semiotic perspective, as I was not looking for the meaning of their verbal or visual representations. Instead, I focused on the materiality of their language -in this case written-, as the way in which the substance of it results on different ways to say things. From there this substance acts upon people. In these lettering conformed by letters, numbers, ornaments and illustrations, these elements are made by the sign painters by adding layers of color-substance on the surfaces, creating shapes from the contrast of

colors and animating the signs. With higher levels of complexity in the internal relation among these elements, the stickiness of the lettering is itself higher. Moreover, as these attributes are multiply in artifacts that cover the surfaces of the urban landscape, they captivate people being part of a distributed agency and a bond is produced among persons and lettering.

Indeed, since these hand painted lettering started to be threatened with their disappearance, their quality of being sticky have implied that they have power to gathered people around them and mobilized them. These interactions have resulted in movement. By the actions of these people the hand painted lettering are being transformed and relocated. First, from their traditional position in the everyday life, they have been considered as something that is one's own, as authentic localness. Trying to find a local graphic identity, these people have valued the lettering by attempts of defining and classifying it (also as a way to face the cognitive stickiness of the lettering). While these people do that, they have been creating new spaces of abundance of these lettering, this time reproduced in new surfaces such as pages of books or websites. Moreover, as the lettering and sign painters are considered inseparable, the painters themselves with their stories are being reproduced in those materials that emphasize the warm and humanity of these local graphic.

In a different path initiated with the critical situation of the lettering, these people have transformed the lettering in their attempts of avoiding their disappearance. Both the letter painters and designers have innovated in ways that have resulted in more portable formats that seep in new contexts produced by development and globalization. On the one hand, some craftsmen have been painting for a new category of customers; they have been adding complexity to their designs and generating more marked personal style. The case of Cadena and Zenén are salient on this. On the other hand, mainly designers have been

creating with original hand painted lettering, with the aim of rescue them from their disappearance among the visual culture of Santiago. What they have done is to use fragments of reproductions of the original, and create new designs with them. Among them, I argued that the most important example are the TUP, because of their impact. They inaugurated the new category of “vernacular digital typefaces”, and have allowed the seeping of the “popular graphic” in the contexts of digital and printed media.

The applications and uses of these innovations have deepened the production of a value of authentic localness attached to the style. Designers applying the vernacular typefaces in graphic designs that tend to use the words *Chile* or *chileno*, or words that refer to traditional aspects of Chilean culture, are being reproduced in different surfaces. Besides, the innovations of the sign painters are also being well received. The case of Zenén is the most salient though. The media, restaurants and shops have chosen him and his work to be incorporated in their stories or designs, even selling his signs as a design-commodity. All these new users or customers have valued him and his job as genuinely local.

Finally... the crisis. This is an ongoing phenomenon; the crisis that faces local with global in a contest for inhabit spaces in Santiago, it is something not resolved yet. The last two decades, but especially during the last one, a new panorama has been emerging. The resistance to disappearance of the hand painted lettering has been possible because of the transformation and relocation developed in the network of interactions among the lettering and the people that they gathered. Both strategies have resulted on the lettering in new materiality and surfaces, and from them to continuing wrapping the people of Santiago reproducing the bound between them and the people. Yet, now this is happening just in some spaces, reserved to the Chileans by the lettering, as local ones opposed to the global medium. There the ones that want it, can get into and moved in a place where instead of

being wrapped with standardized products made with templates, they are wrapped by the local craft (or its digital version).

In closing, for this paper I followed my letters just until the crisis, but they also opened more questions that I could not answer here. They are a future challenge for keep working on. One relevant issue is related with the place that corresponds to nostalgia in this process. In cases as the one of *micros amarillas* and specially the one of their signs sold in new versions now, I could recognize a doses of nostalgic appreciation, as the one of a local world that is fading away, and the desire of keep at least a piece of it. Second, this contest between global and local lettering is a global phenomenon of localities that can be followed in India, Mexico, Colombia, and Ghana, among others. It would be really interesting to develop a comparative analysis to identify the specificities and generalities of it. Also related with different regions, the lettering here presented with its style are also present in the entire central area of Chile, in rural and urban places. Yet, as the social context is not exactly the same, I avoid generalizing. It would be interesting to widen the scope of this research. And lastly, even if the questions have more to deal with the nature of the lettering and not with the phenomenon, in a future might be fruitful to deepen in the analysis of the graphic style in relation with cultural attributes, and to identify if it is a style present in categories of artifacts apart from graphics.



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