

Marking in L.A.:

An Interview with François Chastanet

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Cholo writing is the style of graffiti used by Mexican gangs in Los Angeles. Unlike its bulbous comic counterpart on the East Coast, Cholo has roots in curiously formal calligraphic and black letter traditions. This unique typographic language has been documented in a new book, *Cholo Writing: Latino Gang Graffiti in Los Angeles* (Dokument Press), by François Chastanet, who previously published a photographic survey of graffiti in São Paulo, *Pixação* (disclosure: I contributed the foreword). Chastanet, an architect, graphic designer, typographer and photographer from France, has spent much of his time documenting graffiti and its relationship to architecture. His current analysis illuminates how important these cultural writing (and tagging) forms are to their makers, and how they mark territories much like flags and coats of arms. In this interview Chastanet gives us a condensed lesson in Cholo's history.

Heller: What is Cholo writing?

Chastanet: The term cholo derives from an Aztec word *xolotl* meaning 'dog' that was later turned on its head and used as a symbol of pride by the Mexican-American community in the context of the ethnic power movements of the 1960s, from which emerged the idea of *La Raza* or Chicano nationalism (e.g., Brown Berets in Watsonville). Cholo writing originally constitutes the vernacular handstyle created by the Mexican gangs in Los Angeles as far back as the 1940s: a neglected phenomenon that has a specific place in the history and development of the urban graffiti of the Western world, it is probably the oldest form of the "graffiti of names" in the 20th century, with its own aesthetic, evident long before the explosion in the early 1970s in New York. Cholo writing or *placas* can be seen as cousins of the baroque gothic calligraphies typical of Mexico, as a genuine expression of a border culture between Mexico and the United States. It has had a major influence on the visual expressions of Californian popular culture, including the lowrider, surf, skate and hip-hop movements.

The book *Cholo Writing* explores the genesis of these specific letterforms that paradoxically gave a visual identity to Los Angeles' infinite banal suburbia. For the first time ever a historical series of photographs from the early 1970s in L.A. is presented together with a contemporary collection, which gives a unique insight in the history of Cholo writing from an aesthetic point of view. Howard Gribble, an amateur photographer from the city of Torrance in the south of Los Angeles County, documented Latino gang graffiti from 1970 to 1975 with the simultaneous idea

of “portraying the city.” These black-and-white photographs, frontal visual recordings of various Cholo handletterings, constituted a unique opportunity to try to push forward the calligraphic analysis of Cholo writing, its origins and formal evolution.

Heller: What are the messages in this form of graffiti? Are there any “stars” of gang graffiti, or is it meant to be anonymous?

Chastanet: The gang culture is a truly simultaneous phenomenon of the suburban Californian dream. Latino gangs are a parallel reality of the local urban life, with their own traditions and codes – from oral language, way of dressing, tattoos and hand signs to letterforms. Without ignoring the violence and self-destruction inherent to *la vida loca* (or “the crazy life,” referring to the barrio gang experience), one needs to document the visual strategies of this subculture to survive as a visible entity in a suburban environment. These inscriptions have a totally different function than what we call graffiti nowadays, i.e., tags representing individuals’ nicknames mainly (usually with additional crew names associated with them). These wall-writings, sometimes called the “newspaper of the streets,” are territorial signs whose main function is to define clearly and constantly the geographic limits of a gang’s influence area and encourage gang strength, a graffiti made “by the neighborhood, for the neighborhood.” Writing a group’s name makes it immortal. The image stays while the carnage between gangs continues—name writing has always been closely linked to death and memory. So, in Cholo writing the image of the name of the gang is at the heart of the writing practice. Most of gang members produce graffiti but at different levels: in each gang there are lettering specialists, usually one skilled writer writes for the whole group for large inscriptions, and some guys are genuine lettering experts, both today and in the past.

Heller: There appears to be a lot of references to gothic and inscriptional lettering. Is this studied on the part of the gang members, or naïve? Are there any rules governing Cholo, whether artistic or territorial?

Chastanet: Everything *but* naïve. How we make things, how we represent ourselves, how we display our name in that case: the style tells who we are. Drawing letters is a practice where identity and origin questions are essential. Cholo inscriptions has a specific written aesthetic based on a strong sense of the place and on a monolinear adaptation of historic black letters for street bombing. There are very precise calligraphic codes, constant through time and different generations of gang members, even if continuous evolutions appear. To represent their name with the maximum aura and “officialdom” Chicano writers have chosen since the 1960s (and even probably before) black letters like Engravers Old English or Goudy Text Old Style (mainly in uppercases) appearing in all sorts of official printed ephemera of that time (like school diplomas, birth certificates, etc.) to create the classic Cholo handstyle. Lettering manuals like *Speedball Textbook for Pen & Brush Lettering* by Ross F. George—his work appears in the Speedball Lettering catalogues from the 1930s and ’40s—seem also to be obviously known by some Los Angeles gang writers. In the Mexican community gothic calligraphy consciously communicate tradition, taking the written name to a certain degree of importance, to an almost religious level. What is impressive is to see that this style has a kind of geographic homogeneity through Los Angeles county even if each gang, each territory tries to have its own “corporate” identity through lettering details inside the Cholo script rules.

Heller: The look of Cholo writing is decidedly different from East Coast and European graffiti, in part because it's monochrome rather than chromatic. Why is this?

Chastanet: Los Angeles gang graffiti is much older than what we see as normal or regular graffiti today, which are variants around the New York model of tags (based on the gestural signature aesthetic), throw-ups (quick efficient bubble letters) and pieces (based on comics lettering with highly colored inside surfaces, outlines and background). To the contrary, Cholo writing and *placas* are traditionally black. This is mainly due to the fact that their influence is based on typographic headlines and titles from newspapers for example, mainly black prints. At the same time, their ambition is not decorative but mainly functional, it is clearly a tool for gangs to create a simple, efficient and legible signage system. Nevertheless, nowadays you can see more places written with all sort of colors; white or silver are occasionally used on walls with dark backgrounds for better visibility of course. Their lettering culture is much closer to epigraphy, in a way, no ligatures between signs. Since the beginning of the 1980s a kind of New York style of graffiti—(mainly individual and going all-city, not confined to the neighborhood/turf limits—started to appear in Los Angeles streets, but it has only a very limited influence on gang graffiti.

Heller: You had to go through many gang neighborhoods to document Cholo. Did you have any scuffles?

Chastanet: Not really, but I was close to it several times—I had to run a couple of times. Approximately half of the photographs are shot from the car while driving slowly. Howard Gribble was using the same method back in the 1970s. I was usually shooting photos in the early morning, from 7:00 to 11:00 a.m. (mobsters don't wake up very early), and after 12:00 p.m. it was only possible to do some recognizing of neighborhoods by car and walking, no cameras with me. It was problematic because most of the gang graffiti is removed within 12 hours by the different municipalities of Los Angeles county. Basically, I wanted to work with an SLR camera first, but the street context didn't permit it many times. I had to be as discreet as possible so I used a digital point-and-shoot camera—sometimes taking the picture under my arm and shoulder to hide the camera while walking. In all neighborhoods most of the people believed I was a cop. Rarely it was possible to engage in conversation, but I was not expecting it. I had to jump over fences for some pictures, and also had some problems with LAPD while shooting photos from the banks of different freeways.

Heller: You've documented graffiti in São Paulo, Brazil, and now L.A. What is it that appeals to your eye and sense of aesthetics? Do you have your sights set on another genre of graffiti to document next?

Chastanet: In my work the main idea is to document original graffiti phenomena that created their own visual culture, different from the New York kind of graffiti that became almost a worldwide conformity today, partly because during a long period New York graffiti was the only graffiti visible in traditional media. Tags and pieces from New York were also over-documented in the graffiti fanzines and books world. A book like *Subway Art* by Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper (first published in 1984) had a massive impact worldwide and made the global

emergence of graffiti possible worldwide, spreading mimicry among the youth. Even young Japanese writers don't write with their own characters and choose to follow the existing practices based on the Latin alphabet (only a few are using Japanese signs). The New York myth of the origins is still so strong today that very few people worldwide try to surpass it or to find another way, their own way linked with a specific urban context. And the internet reinforces the recurrent tendency toward sterile mimicry, a lot of "me too" people.

Only few original alternative models exist independently to the now global New York experience/aesthetic—the São Paulo *pixação* scene and Cholo writing in Los Angeles are two pretty rare examples and constitute geographical aesthetical particularities. We can observe the emergence of a genuine "urban efficiency" in (illegal) architectural lettering, the illegal and hand-crafted context bringing new formal solutions. The fact that these letterings are illegal is essential; *pixações* from São Paulo can be seen as an alphabet designed for urban invasion, a beautiful "total coverage" writing system. So both the *pixações* and Cholo letters can be seen as an expression of the consequences of the 21st-century megalopolis conditions on the drawing of letterforms, as an unexpected evolution of the Latin alphabet. São Paulo and Los Angeles Cholo writers were able to create their own original identity through letterforms, this fact being pretty unique in the visual communication of subcultures. As an architect interested in urban planning, and a graphic designer and typographer by academic training, it was hard not to be interested by this.

Heller: Do you link this to typographic or calligraphic history?

Chastanet: Like many people I always have been fascinated by the history and evolution of letterforms, calligraphy, etc. But I had the feeling that calligraphy was a field mainly marked by historic mimicry rarely questioning what is writing today, what is writing without a broad pen (the contrast of "translation," according to Gerrit Noordzij's analysis of the letterform) or without a pointed flexible pen (the contrast of "expansion"), but with tools of the 20th century such as ballpoints (Bic Biro) and felt-tip pens (Pentel's SignPen) producing writing without contrast (without classic thick and thin effect). In a way, calligraphers produce calligraphy, not today's writing or useful models for the masses. Nobody is using a broad pen anymore in its everyday practice, even graffiti writers that were obligated to use broad pen markers because the only really big markers existing on the market—for many years were broad pens—recently created their own tools, giant markers with round tips (mop markers and squeezers). We have to accept that we are now a monolinear writing civilization based on ballpoints and felt-tip pens way of thinking since more than 50 years now, and the consequences of this is too rarely observed in today's type design production (mainly never-ending re-conducting the historical existing type of contrast with only slight variations in proportions, weights and outlines). Nevertheless, quality typefaces like Flora by Gerard Unger—who worked on his own handwriting with a ballpoint for this font—or ABC-Schrift by Hans Eduard Meier constitute interesting projects.

Both São Paulo and Los Angeles offer us a chance to see other and different ideas, changing the structure of the letter itself, even if the people practicing it are not totally conscious of what they are doing. These two examples are not just vernacular phenomena, there is an authority, a real knowledge in the mastering of drawing written signs, imparted year after year through generations (like calligraphy and its transmission through history), a shared knowledge with a relatively long history in the case of Los Angeles. I am not interested in vernacular for vernacular,

I am interested in trying to describe the genesis of innovative shapes, mainly letterforms, urban contexts offering many examples from my point of view. It's a matter of drawing quality, whatever the categorization of a given practice (whether institutionally recognized or not), playing with letter strokes and intelligence of composition with architectural space. Large-scale writing (off the page) is maybe one of the last spaces where handlettering/gestures resist the keyboard ever-growing monopoly.

Heller: What other graffiti or cult letter cultures intrigue you?

Chastanet: China and Japan (*kanji civilizations*) are definitely interesting me. I have seen some interesting examples of inscriptions mixing Japanese and short English acronyms made by the Bosozoku, Japanese motorcycle gangs (pretty strong in the 1970s and 1980s) and also some graffiti poetry and messages traced to Kyoto's different temples by the same anonymous author, inscriptions made in the 19th century apparently. I also have personal type design projects around questions of monolinear writing, changing the usual referent in a font project, i.e., working from today's different handstyles of the Latin alphabet.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. www.hellerbooks.com