

Trial/Error. The way to abstraction in Srger

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Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to carry out an evolutionary analysis of Srger's (Seville, 1983) work in the public space, which has mutated over the years from classical typography within graffiti towards an abstraction that combines its contexts with the artist's own evolution within the studio. All this has given rise to an interesting symbiosis in the form of a dialogue between both work spaces, blurring the between one and the other and enhancing creations that are presented to us as a vestige of an intense creative process.

Keywords

Graffiti, Street Art, Contemporary Art, Abstraction, Srger, Site-specific, Murals.

1. Introduction

When contextualising the figure of Sergio Gómez - also known as Srger (Seville, 1983) - we must mention his early links with the practice of graffiti through the hip-hop movement generated in Sevilla, specifically in the Pino Montano neighbourhood, where he began to take his first steps. His most immediate influences came from his closest environment, where we can cite examples of collectives such as UNEX, which integrated the graffiti crew NSO - including writers like Zoor, Trach, Ricki and Nowet - or the FX crew, which included Mika, Stone and Topo. All of their productions, murals and tags served as powerful graphic references at the time (Srger, personal communication, April 22, 2020).

In the late 1990s, a general boom can be observed in the graffiti scenes of many Spanish cities, among which Sevilla was not an exception. From 1997 onwards, Viapol's wall opened up as a powerful hall of fame near the city centre in an area that was not traditionally linked to graffiti, that also served as a meeting point between different neighbourhoods (Navarro, 2022, 605). In the large surfaces offered by this spot, it was possible to see pieces by leading figures of the Sevillian scene at the time, such as Logan, Bimbo, Ksr 145, Pera, Sequan, Son and Drok, among others. Moreover, as a budding writer, Srger not only came to know this graffiti spot, but also visited

other neighbourhoods' halls of fame, especially those in the Polígono San Pablo, where the pieces of a writer of reference during this time, such as Logan, were displayed. In addition to all of this there was a common practice in the mid-nineties, such as the exchange of information via letter. Specifically, he would correspond with people from areas such as Málaga, Madrid and Barcelona (Srger, personal communication, April 22, 2020), obtaining first-hand information about the scenes in these cities and gaining access to other influences.

Being able to date the beginnings of Srger's mural practice to the summer of 1996, it becomes clear that his first interventions can be circumscribed to a graffiti-based style on tags and pieces, where there would be an important cadence and development of the predominant elements at that time, such as wild style. The construction of the aforementioned pieces can be analysed from an evaluation of the name used and how said name connected with other writers' pieces or characters (Figure 1) in productions made entirely in aerosol.

From a continuous activity within graffiti, Srger would soon overcome the links with groups in his area to form collectives with people from the city who were more involved in the practice. As a result, DEBS crew was formed, with writers such as Ocre, Seleka, Wen, Joe, Picone and Whet, among



Figure 1. Mural by Whet and Srger. Characters by Largo and Slam. Viapol. 1999-2000. Source: personal archive Pablo Navarro

others (Srger, personal communication, April 22, 2020). To coincide at that time with other people who bet on a larger involvement would mean an important learning experience in relation to the development of the aerosol technique and elements such as composition and colour:

“Over time I have come to realise that all that time of painting walls non-stop was very important, a real training. Practically all our time and money were spent on this, we lived and travelled to paint, working as a team with the people we met along the way” (Quintáns, 2020).

The aesthetics of the pieces produced during these years were to evolve, mostly based on the interactions with other writers, although we should locate the writer’s training by the wall, in an almost self-taught manner.

2. Constantly evolving typefaces

As we have already mentioned, in the late 1990s and the

first decade of the 2000s Srger’s productions would evolve from the classic graffiti typographies, transforming his style according to the influences to which he would gain access. At this point, we must highlight the gradual democratization of the internet at the turn of the millenium, which would facilitate access to a higher level of information and would eventually replace the exchange of correspondence (Navarro, 2022, 619). Furthermore, Srger would attend art baccalaureate studies at the Seville School of Art (Hermann, 2022), where he would engage with other people interested in graffiti or design.

The pieces produced in the first years of the millennium still reflect a cadence of classic graffiti styles, although it can be seen how, instead of standing out against the backgrounds of the murals, Srger sought an attempt of mimesis or dialogue with them (Figure 2), advancing what would be a first metamorphosis in his way of conceiving the work on the wall, such as it was approaching an almost flat volume.



Figure 2. Pensamientos de color. Mural by Ome, Seleka, Logan and Srger. Chapina. 2001-02. Source: personal archive Srger.

Around 2002 or 2003, the Sprays Platinum (SPL) group was formed as a result of the integration of the DEBS crew with other writers from the city, such as Nowet and other people who had approached graffiti through meeting a writer like Fafa at the Santa Isabel de Hungría Faculty of Fine Arts. This collective, composed of writers such as Seleka, Fafa, Nowet, Tha, Joe, Lahe178, Wen, Iper, Fish, Carakol, Slam, Yor, Monsterland and Srger himself, among others, was characterised by the variety of tendencies they cultivated, integrating profiles with academic training in Fine Arts, Design or those who had learnt through graffiti and interactions with other writers. Lahe178 recalled the creative impulse it meant to be developing graffiti in SPL: "There were many of us, all with very different styles. A lot of thinking heads that would research and take risks. Many were already studying graphic design, or Fine Arts, or simply researching aesthetics and so on and we would adapt it to the wall" (Navarro, 2022, 276).

The possibility of obtaining information through the Internet provided new graphic influences, where we can mention national crews such as XL, or international ones, such as Viagrafik, or writers such as ECB. But, above all this, we must

mention an exercise in the pursuit of a creative language of his own through training and the search for references outside the world of graffiti, all of this in order to give rise to the implementation of the learned concepts in the productions on the walls:

"At that time in early 2000, I was more interested in reading about art, visiting art spaces and discovering art works by contemporary artists. I was also dedicated to graphic design, and I think that influenced my painting. I started to pay more attention to the walls and what I could offer to those spaces, playing with the architecture for each new project" (Hermann 2022).

The pieces developed at this time would lose their volume almost entirely and would gradually be enriched by the interaction of different execution techniques. The exclusivity of spray paint would be abandoned and elements from graphic design would be brought up; such as simple and primary forms which centred the overall vision. As the pieces lacked depth, the background would begin to acquire an important weight, understanding the total production as a homogeneous whole (Figure 3).

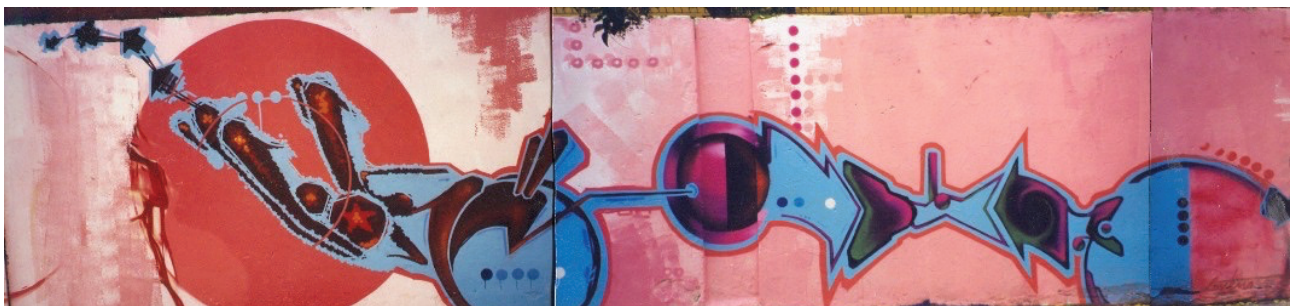


Figure 3. Mural by Srger and Mugre. 2003. Source: personal archive Srger.

In the period up to 2005, approximately, Srger would register many productions with Joe, Lahe 178 or Fafa. It was with the latter that he would create murals in which the figuration, based on his colour sketches, was merged with Srger increasingly more flat approaches, which sought that mimesis or dialogue with the background rather than

standing out from it (Figure 4). Perhaps unconsciously, the writer began to propose a game in which he hid his pieces within the whole. These were years in which learning, both at academic level as well as through the influence of those studying Fine Arts, would drive the stylistic changes at discussion (Navarro, 2022, 655).



Figure 4. Mural by Fafa and Srger. 2004. Source: personal archive Fafa.

As a result of the presence of graffiti writers at the Faculty of Fine Arts for study purposes, a series of group exhibitions, known as 24 hours, were to be held in 2003 and 2005 (Navarro, 2022, 675-679), which would allow a first approach to the medium of exhibition and an exploration of the display of small formats. The epitome of these events would be the holding of an exhibition at the gallery Sala de eStar by Fafa, Seleka, Lahe178 and Srger in February 2004, in which the text of the show underlined the following statement in relation to the development of their own path within the practice of graffiti and their interest in exploring other fields:

“A desire to excel, total dedication and concern for having, and maintaining, your own style are some of the principles of graffiti. This, together with the permanent updating of influences and themes that derive from everyday life, make us a living style that adapts to the times at breakneck speed” (2004).

Also in 2004, together with other graffiti writers from the city - such as Logan, Fafa, Drok, Lahe178, Iper or Joe, among others - Srger participated in the Contemporary Art Fair of Seville, where, in addition to intervening on large surfaces, he was to exhibit some studio works. In these creations one could confirm the advance towards a more minimalist style found in graffiti, since the small works (Figure 5) could be seen as fragments of pieces which, separated from their whole in the manner of puzzles, became small clues that alluded to the developing style.



Figure 5. ST. 2004. Source: personal archive Pablo Navarro



Figures 6 & 7. Wall by Srger, Lahe178, Joe and Wen (6) and Wall by Srger and Lahe178. 2008-09.

Source: personal archive Pablo Navarro

The second half of the first decade of the 2000s was a period of constant evolution in the artist's proposals. On the one hand, he carries out intense work in the streets, where his calligraphic compositions were to evolve towards increasingly simplified elements, in what could be seen as the beginning of the path towards abstraction (Figures 6 and 7). Just as the connection with Fafa was going to be very important during the first half of the 2000s, productions made with other members of SPL crew, such as Lahe178, were also going to be very interesting during these years. On the other hand, as a result of all this work in the public space, his participation in creation contests or urban art festivals would be more constant. Examples of this would be the interventions carried out in Urban Art, both in the Canary Islands and in Seville (both in 2004) or the Poliniza Festival (Valencia, 2007), as well as different contests of young creators, at local, regional and European level; being selected to participate in the 2008 edition of the Biennial of Young Creators of Europe and the Mediterranean, held in Bari.

In parallel to his work, developed around graffiti and its legal and commissioned ramifications, Srger would go deeper into the studio, where he would work in the fields of design, photography and typographic composition. In relation to his subsequent evolution, the artist reflected on how this

development of something such as typography in graffiti would open up a new field of artistic exploration:

"Basically, all of us graffiti writers come from painting typographies. A letter in itself is something very abstract, we did it without any training or type knowledge. The letters were made up of fillers, borders and background; as for me, all this overflowed and I started to create planes of colour and lines to form them. I realised that I didn't want the letters to be visible, to set the rhythm and composition, I needed to work in a whole ensemble. This process was natural and very diffused in time, it grew together with my work in the workshop and my academic training" (Quintáns, 2020).

3. Immersion in abstraction

Despite anticipating an evolution towards an abstract aesthetic in his actions in the public space, either through his attempt to reflect the different dimensions on the same plane (figure 7) or through his gradual simplification of forms, we could not place a total immersion in fully abstract interventions until 2012 (Hermann, 2022), when Srger would begin to move towards a type of outdoor proposal that would begin to show as an extension of his studio work (Srger, personal communication, August 11, 2022). These first attempts (Figures 8 & 9) were to be characterised by simple

geometric forms and a predominant use of primary colours, creating compositions that sought to frame themselves in the environment in which they were made, such as building site walls, abandoned houses or spaces that could bring us closer to the concept of urban voids or non-places. The artist himself alluded to the predominance of these colours as a use of “the primitive as a starting point” (Pascual, 2016), at a time

when his activity in the street would begin to split between the path initiated in graffiti and the first steps of these proposals, where there was an influence of photographic framing when it comes to composition and a notable weight of the existing textures in the chosen medium, which would make up for the absence of chromatic and formal variety (Navarro, 2015).



Figures 8 & 9. Srger. 2012-2013.
Source: personal archive Srger

In the period under review, mainly between 2012 and 2014, Srger would put into practice the symbiosis of his actions in the public space with the aesthetic of another artist, Lolo (figure 10), with whom he would produce a whole series of street interventions that would follow the pattern we have already mentioned. In these works, the colours were even more reduced - red and black mostly - and the forms

proposed by Gómez would come to dialogue with the minimal figurations sketched by Lolo, in an attempt to intervene on urban canvases, since many of them also took place on boarded-up doors or abandoned houses, that would serve as a backdrop for these confrontations between abstraction and figuration.



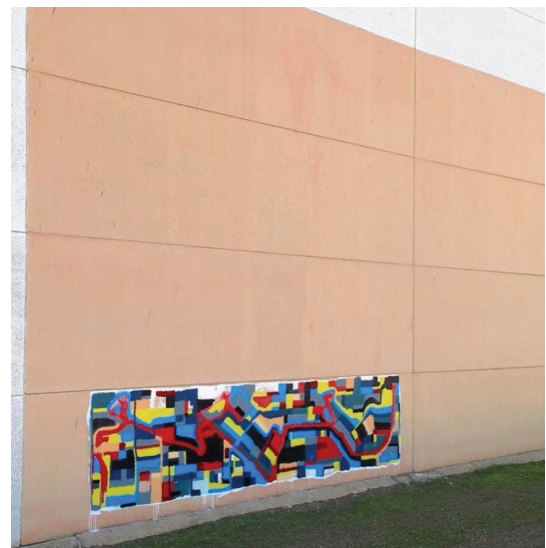
Figure 10. Intervention by Srger and Lolo. 2013-2014

Source: personal archive Pablo Navarro.

From 2015 onwards there is a gradual complexity to be observed in Srger's interventions as a result of this reflection or research on the framing of his artworks in urban space, the mechanics of working within the studio and the development of photography as a tool analogous to this type of actions. He would begin to produce mainly horizontal compositions of a larger format (Figures 11 & 12) that took the abandoned spaces as a diametrically opposite point, while taking galleries at the same height, resulting in a work distanced from everything that remained on the outside (Pascual, 2016). Thus, the location of this type of work was in a direct dialogue with its environment, becoming authentic

landmarks for those who could find them. In general, the contemplation of this type of intervention was carried out by means of graphic documentation gathered by the artist himself:

"When I do murals, architecture is very important, it's where everything comes from. I almost never know where I'm going to paint, it's a challenge to make that adaptation to create something new with my language, a constant exercise that fascinates me. That's why when I start a format I think about 'the during' as well as 'the after', where will it be and what will surround it, in order to create a valid communication" (García, 2021).



Figures 11 & 12. Interventions by Srger. 2015 and 2017.

Source: personal archive Srger.

In the works we have seen so far, the link with certain masters of classical avant-garde abstraction as referents or starting points is a recurrent one. Katia Hermann has generically associated these works with formal references such as Kandinsky, Miró or Klee (Hermann, 2022), although we should qualify the association of the initial proposals in a chromatic, yet not iconographic, wave close to Miró's postulates and his later works with small fields of colour or games of tesserae, with the compositional exercises typical of Paul Klee's notebooks or some of the murals developed by Sol Lewitt.

The parallel activity outside the studio promoted new synergies with other creators, something quite common if we consider the artist's origins in the world of graffiti and the connections developed over the years through it. The collaborations with Rosh (Figure 13), who has been developing a language within abstraction that we could describe as more organic, have been quite interesting, and they would have resulted in works using a fully informalistic language for the first time, since, both on the path towards abstraction as much as in Srger's first proposals, there were always formal ties with figuration.



Figure 13. Composition with Rosh. 2019
Source: personal archive Srger.

Over the last few years, the pathway towards larger works has been enriched by the application of techniques that complemented painting, such as pencils, crayons, chalk or charcoal, which contributed to a more immediate appearance in his creations (Figures 14 & 15). Srger started from geometry and using basic colours to configurate puzzles, in some cases coming to look like large mosaic tesserae, which would then be buried under new creative sketches. A continuous exercise that opens up new passages and work

ideas for the artist who is in a continuous trial and error mode that he considers fundamental to his work (Quintáns, 2020). As a result of this work methodology, and the impulse to confront formats significantly larger than those at the studio, these creations were set as somewhat elaborated elements in which the immediacy in their execution prevails as opposed to the continuous search for spaces for them to be developed, which could be likened to a kind of ritual.



Figures 14 & 15 (next page). Interventions by Srger. 2021 and 2022.
Source: personal archive Srger.



Conclusions

Throughout this article we have tried to show how Srger has followed a creative path from his origins in the world of graffiti, which has led him to unfold his activity in the urban space, thus creating an extension of the work inside the studio in the form of interventions under the language of abstraction, which act in symbiosis with it (Srger, personal communication, August 11, 2022). This bond has been confirmed through the different exhibitions that he has been holding over the last few years¹, where the evolution of these languages has been noticeable in conjunction with the publications made by the artist himself in different social media to verify said connection with his activity outdoors and which constitute the main record of this type of interventions, since they are often situated in spaces far from the accessible urban fabric.

Coming from the desire of mimicking his interventions, within graffiti and using the backgrounds developed in the murals, the artist would go on to create increasingly complex compositions that moved away from figuration and plunged into informalism. Hence, his first steps could be framed as a derivation that started from a suprematist abstraction in terms of the use of simple colours and shapes. This language would eventually be combined with the urge to intervene compulsively on those backgrounds, creating a link or as influence from the tradition of abstract expressionism through action painting; although perhaps in a more mechanical or automatic way, on account that there was the aforementioned link with the daily work in the studio.

To the artist, these compositions share space and some materials with graffiti, but not their function (Srger, personal communication, August 11, 2022). This could refer us to the absence of a name or identifiable form of association with the creator, which has been known as the faith of graffiti since the origins of the movement in the United States (Mailer and Naar, 2009, 8). In contrast to the artist's own vision, other creators have indeed valued this type of intervention as an evolution of the practice of graffiti. A member of the Berlin-based crew Diamonds emphasises:

“It'd be necessary to define the term graffiti writing and clarify its meaning, in order to mark off the boundaries between classical, abstract, and non-writing (whatever that's supposed to be). One root lies in the dissemination of characters in public spaces for marking and I-was-here purposes. One feature lies in the intervention of space its communication. It's always also been about the ruination of understanding - a not-understanding and the transformation in an archeological space whereby the part and parcel dissolution of a rudimentary Wildstyle (Junglestyle) as a feature come across as logical” (Kuhnert ed., 2017, 17).

In relation to this, we could approach the term freeform graffiti, coined by Jacob Kimvall in allusion to some variants made by Scandinavian writers in the first decade of the 2000s (Kimvall 2008, 63). But, considering the working mechanics developed by Srger and some of his approaches within his actions in these spaces, perhaps it would be more illustrative to recall the analysis developed by Rosalind Krauss for the evolution of Cy Twombly's work in relation to the abstract expressionism of artists such as Jackson Pollock:

“The violence that Twombly read in the traces left to mark the path of so many sprays of liquid thrown by Pollock from the end of stick or brush, the violence that he therefore 'completed'-to invoke Harold Bloom's notion of the strong misreading-as graffiti, invested Pollock's traces with a form. For the formal character of the graffiti is that of a violation, the trespass onto a space that is not the graffitist's own, the desecration of a field originally consecrated to another purpose, the effacement of that purpose through the act of dirtying, smearing, scarring, jabbing” (Krauss, 1993, 259).

In the case of Srger, the path would be just the opposite, since he does not seek the aura of transgression that was necessary for Twombly when attacking his works with different techniques in order to give them strength, but rather his creations already possessed it since they were developed outdoors, so we can allude to a violence based on the impulse to intervene through improvisation, trained and

1 Since 2015, the artist has held solo exhibitions in Seville, Cordoba, Barcelona, Madrid and Osaka, has also published a whole series of fanzines showing the work, within the fields of design or photography, outside and inside the studio.

controlled through work in the studio. Therefore, we find in these interventions a meeting point between emotion and exercises carried out in other fields such as photography, which could refer us to the work of artists such as Aaron Siskind².

To the interventions developed in abandoned spaces in a stealthy way, the passage of time or chance itself are added as elements that modify and alter them, also creating an interesting sequence of nuances and evolutions within the creations themselves, in that “after” the action the artist alludes to. Bearing in mind the importance Gómez attaches to the environment or context in which he has been developing his actions, we could almost speak of site-specific interventions. Moreover, having these proposals split from the practice of graffiti, and freed from its weight and unwritten rules, Srger has been developing all these types of actions with greater freedom of movement.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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