

Here Today

Art in museums is carefully preserved and, if necessary, restored in order to be kept for centuries to come. Street art, by contrast, lasts for only a fraction of that time. Ephemerality is in fact one of its defining features; most of the street art ever produced is long gone. Nevertheless, some street art may be around for years. This holds true particularly for murals, although murals fall into a category of their own. Depending on the materials used, the location, the degree of exposure to the elements, possible alterations by fellow artists or passers-by, the level of inconvenience experienced by property owners or, for example, the quick turnaround of municipal cleaners, other (uncommissioned) works of art outdoors may be in existence only for as long as a number of months, weeks, days, or hours. Or even shorter still.

Gone Tomorrow

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A mere five minutes may well be the most dismal record for the shortest lifespan of any street art work. That was literally the amount of time a life-size and hand-drawn paste up depicting AS Roma legend Francesco Totti was up for in a tunnel in Amsterdam, one day in November 2017. Street art crew Kamp Seedorf had hardly glued the paper onto the wall when out of nowhere a blue van appeared, parking on the pavement right next to their piece. Out stepped a hooded man who grabbed a pressure washer and resolutely erased many hours of studio work in a matter of seconds. Never mind the artists stood by watching in disbelief. 'How is that even possible!??', they would later lament on their social media accounts, prompting a great many indignant reactions in a show of support.

With the exception of the phantom outlines of artworks that once occupied a surface, or for that matter, a buffed wall that has inadvertently become a new artwork in its own right, there is normally nothing left to see once a work of street art has been removed. This is different at the intermediate stage where a piece of street art is crumbling or disfigured. Although it is still there, you can no longer enjoy seeing it in its original, intended state. A disintegrating work of art outdoors should still merit our attention, if only because its transience often comes with an aesthetic value of its own. There is beauty in decay.



A screenshot of a Facebook post by ©Kamp Seedorf, November 10, 2017.

In essence, the inevitable and wholly unpredictable process of decay begins as soon as the artist is done putting the finishing touches to their creation. This implies that the photography of unsanctioned art in the streets is basically the documentation of decomposition. A street art work will look (slightly) different each time it is caught on camera. In light of this, Ulrich Blanché (2018: 25) has noted that 'every photograph of a street art work is both the work itself and an individual interpretation of the work'.

While in many places, street art is still deemed vandalism and is therefore removed, illegal street art pieces by popular artists are increasingly marked from on high as being of artistic or cultural value, and measures are taken for them not to be lost¹ – or, exceptionally², to get restored³. However, dealing with street art as if it were heritage in the traditional sense of the word raises a number of issues, as Hansen (2017) and Nomeikaite (2018) have pointed out, amongst others. Although perhaps well-intentioned, installing (acrylic) glass panels⁴ in front of art on a wall as a means of protecting and preserving it, flies in the face of what the movement stands for, notably the right to the city, the right to the surface (Andron, 2019), and thus the right to experience the urban environment.⁵

By comparison, few people will disagree that preservation efforts are ill-intentioned if they are meant solely to result in financial gain. On multiple occasions, Banksy's creations have been stolen from local communities with the express purpose of putting them up for auction.⁶ By appropriating street art in such a way, it is essentially being privatised, commodified, and given elite status. And that is regardless of the fact that traditionally, much street art has been site-specific, which entails that a piece maintains its artistic meaning only so long as it is kept in its original environment. In this sense, moving such works away from where they were installed inevitably

means inflicting harm upon them, which in turn actually makes ex situ preservation a self-defeating procedure.

When it comes to (the preservation of) cultural heritage in relation to street art, it is not about objects from the past with a defined value and significance. Instead, it is about personal and collective experiences in the present – about the emotions generated by works of art as part of their surroundings. As the appearance of unsanctioned artworks are altered by the traces of time, this type of 'living heritage' is subject to continuous change. Put differently, interactions with such works are intangible occurrences which run their natural course, and which can, at best, be preserved as memories.

While documenting street art photographically may certainly help to keep those memories alive, photographs are unlikely to reproduce the emotions that are experienced at a particular moment in situ. As for the photographs in this essay – they primarily serve to put an underexposed side of the movement centre stage, as every single street art piece depicted here is in a state of visible degradation.

Apart from academic articles, not much attention appears to go out to street art's fleeting nature. Nearly all books, websites, and social media pages dedicated to the genre tend to give a distorted picture of what is there to be seen, showing mostly works of art that are fully intact, immediately after their production. Images of artistic expressions in the streets that are flaking off, fading, or are marred in other ways, seem to be considered less fit to print or to be shared online. In short, they are insufficiently Instagrammable.⁷

This essay goes against this trend by highlighting street art that may be losing its fight against evanescence, but that can readily be found in most places in the world and has just as much right to exist as those brand-new paste ups, stickers, stencils, and tiles which – for the time being – are still in their prime.

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Unknown artist. Stavanger, Norway, September 2018. Somehow this wall got pierced with force precisely through the left eye of the dog, at least suggesting this was a deliberate intervention. Regardless of whether or not that was actually so, it made this sticker look significantly more dramatic. Arguably, the only thing that was still missing in that particular state was a Terminator-like little red light right in the middle of that black hole.

Unknown artist. Aachen, Germany, November 2015. This paste up fell apart gracefully from the outside inwards. The main part of the beautiful illustration was still there by the time I stumbled upon it.





Blu. Valencia, Spain, May 2023. Twelve years after the Italian artist had painted this wall (without any scaffolding or cherry picker, just ladders and extendable painting devices), the orange-coloured spray foam coating that can often be found on the side of buildings in Spain, was clearly having the better of the once dominant white paint.



Julien de Casabianca. Paris, France, May 2019. This huge paste up was created in October 2017 as part of de Casabianca's Outings Project, whereby the artist reproduces paintings from museum collections in the streets of various cities around the world. Depicted here is a figure featured in a painting by Louis Béroud that is owned by the Carnavalet Museum. Finding a mural in such poor condition is a bit of a rarity as facades are usually painted over well before works of this magnitude reach this stage. Google Street View shows the work (34 Rue Mathis) being gone almost entirely by August 2022.

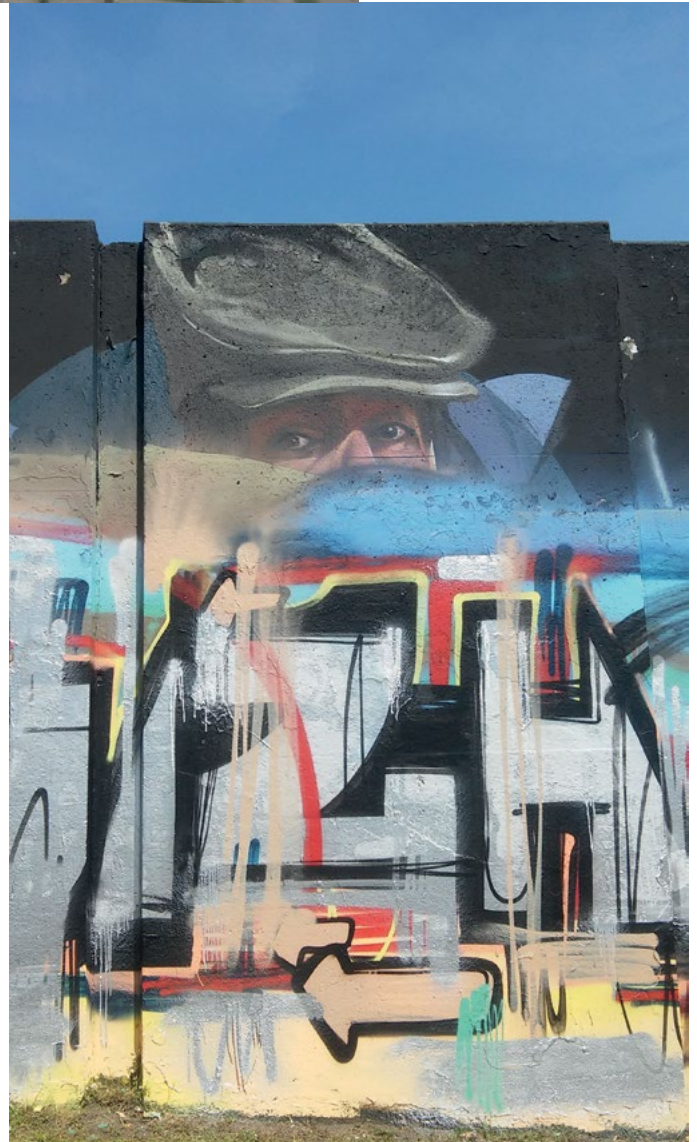
Mr. P. Brussels, Belgium, March 2014. This cartoon-like image of the face of Charles de Gaulle (or what's left of it here) has long been Mr. P's trademark for the simple reason the former French president hailed from the same city as the artist, namely Lille. De Gaulle's face invariably looks the same, it's mostly the colour of the iconic kepi that is different each time it appears in the streets.



Unknown artist (303?). Valencia, Spain, May 2023. The missing piece of plaster had detached itself from the wall rather perfectly in the case of this little stencil artwork.



Unknown artist. Amsterdam, the Netherlands, October 2014. On this very old and brittle panel, the pattern in the wood was resurfacing through the marker pen colours and lines, adding a whole new eerie dimension to this portrait of an (imaginary?) man.



Unknown artist. Eindhoven, the Netherlands, June 2018. The eyes are the most recognisable facial feature. It is the reason why - in case someone's identity must be concealed - censoring the eyes in a person's picture is enough to make them unidentifiable for most people. This graffiti portrait was sprayed over several times almost entirely. Seemingly inadvertently, all that remained apart from the flat cap on the man's head - strikingly enough - was precisely that most telling of areas: that of the eyes. Eyes that kept a close watch on every passer-by for as long as they were still present after taking this photograph.



Nipper John/John XC. Bergen, Norway, July 2014. A corrugated metal surface like this one is not the most suited to hosting a paste up, but that didn't deter the artist from putting up this specimen of fairly large proportions. As it disintegrated, the longer-lasting throw up underneath resurfaced.

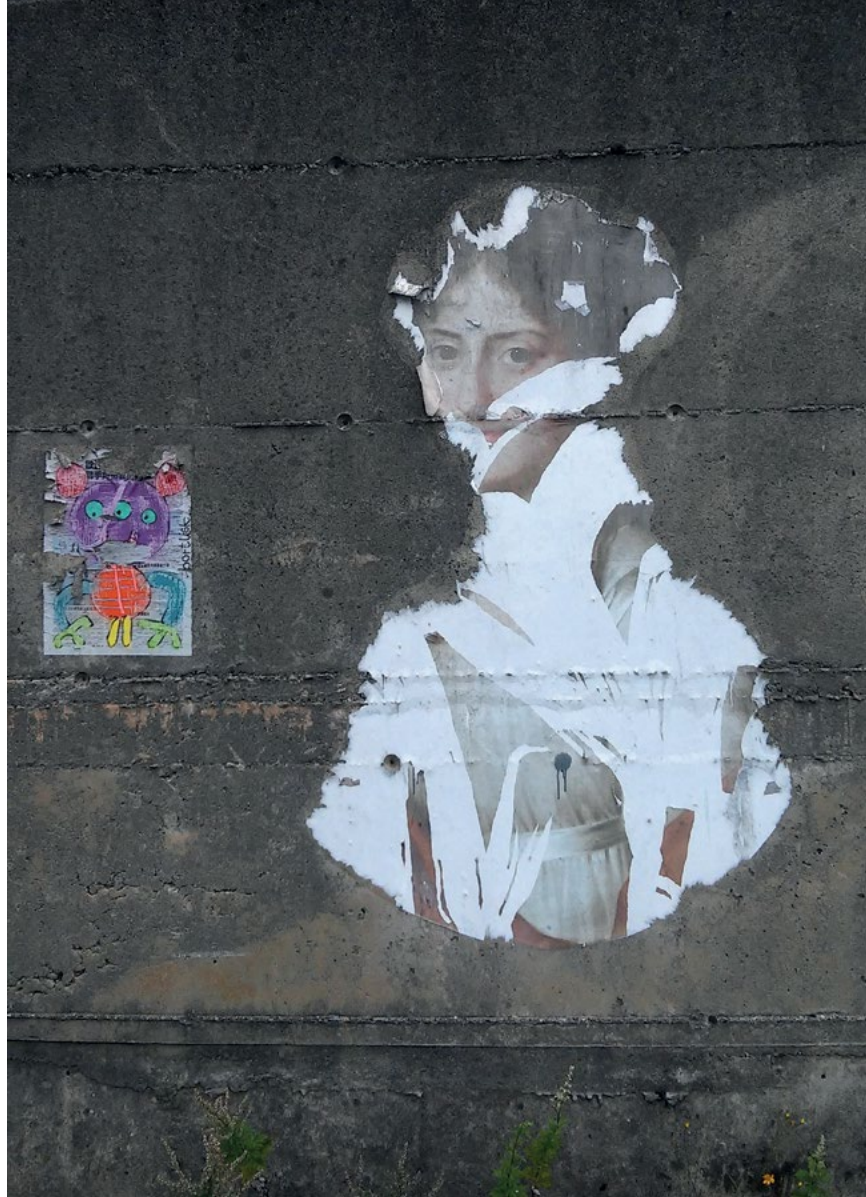
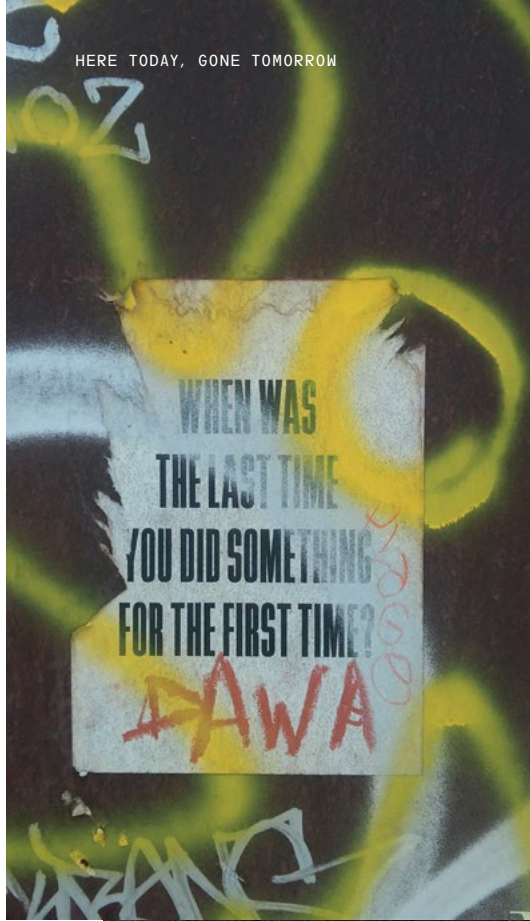


Unknown artist. Utrecht, the Netherlands, July 2018. The face of a woman on a sticker gradually fading away into oblivion as each day passed by.



Unknown artist. Brussels, Belgium, August 2017. An arresting question slowly but surely becoming illegible.

Atomist. Stavanger, Norway, September 2017. A delicate little paste up of an action figure that made me wonder what its face looked like.



Bortusk Leer and Julien de Casabianca. Stavanger, Norway, September 2017. Another portrait liberated from its museum frames as part of the Outings Project, this one created in the context of the 2015 edition of Nuart Festival. The lady originally painted by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (Louvre) didn't face her own disappearance in solitude, as she was accompanied by several cheerful monsters to her left and right (not pictured here).



Various unknown artists. Valencia, Spain, May 2023. A remarkably clear demarcation line cuts several graffiti pieces right through the middle, leaving only the upper half of the wall a spectacle to behold.



SOBR. Berlin, Germany, August 2018. These slightly decaying paste ups show people raving amidst falling confetti. This was part of a project the artist called 'It's time to dance'.

All photographs ©Daniël de Jongh.

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- 1 Most commonly simply by ordering particular street art pieces not to be removed. Or, for example, by applying to such (paint-based) works a protective coating that functions as a consolidating protective barrier against environmental damage caused by weather conditions, cleaning chemicals, and pollutants.
- 2 At the risk of destroying its authenticity, Enrico Bonadio (2019) argues that a decision to preserve a street art work should be made only in exceptional circumstances, particularly where the art is of value to the local community that hosts it. According to him, in the event of preservation it's paramount to take both the wishes of the artists and the interests of property owners into account.
- 3 In 2020, a huge (legal) mural by Keith Haring in Amsterdam was restored. Haring painted the work in 1986, in 1994 it disappeared behind a metal facade. When it was rediscovered in 2018, the work turned out to be in a reasonable condition, but preservation for generations to come was deemed desirable. The Keith Haring Foundation, the municipality of Amsterdam, and project developer Marktkwartier each contributed one third to the total costs of approximately €180,000. The restoration was carried out by the renowned Italian restorers Antonio and Amarilli Rava.
- 4 The use of (acrylic) glass panels in a street art context is certainly a reality, but one that shouldn't be overstated as a widespread issue as it is applicable almost exclusively to works by Banksy. Works by other street artists that are hugely popular around the world rarely get protected in similar fashion, if at all. Prominent other examples include two historic works: a stencil piece by Blek le Rat in Leipzig, Germany (created in 1991, rediscovered in 2012, preserved in 2013), and a large mural by Keith Haring in Pisa, Italy ('Tuttomondo', 1989), whose base was lined in glass panels in 2012 after being completely restored.
- 5 Panels of (acrylic) glass negatively impact the experience of exploring street art works not only by preventing any physical interaction, often they also reduce visibility and the opportunity to take quality photographs as a result of annoying reflections.
- 6 Among other works, this happened in 2013 to a stencil piece by Banksy called 'Slave Labour'. This case of theft, like others before and after it, went hand in hand with inflicting serious damage to the property the piece was sprayed upon, as a portion of the wall was physically removed (Hansen & Flynn, 2015).
- 7 A notable exception here are all sorts of derelict and abandoned structures which are of great (photographic) appeal to urban explorers. Carlo McCormick has recently addressed this 'ruins porn' genre (Nuart Aberdeen, 2024). Coincidentally, urban exploring is a practice that has various commonalities with both the graffiti and street art scene.