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INTANGIBLE

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INTANGIBLE

Editorial
Martyn Reed & Susan Hansen

For our INTANGIBLE issue, we invited contributors to reflect on the theme of heritage, with a particular focus on intangible cultural heritage (ICH). This is a living form of heritage that together we constantly recreate in our present. This represents the dynamic, participatory, co-creative dimension of cultural heritage, and encompasses the cultural practices, representations, knowledge, and skills transmitted intergenerationally inside a (sub) cultural system (UNESCO, 2024).

Intangible cultural heritage incorporates the parts of our shared past that are alive in our present – everyday rituals and practices, cultural expressions, shared memories, stories, and practice-based skills that help to define who we are (Ruggles & Silverman, 2009). This is the kind of heritage that lives in the present, where we often incorporate elements of older traditions and cultural expressions in our contemporary practices. While this concept is rarely applied to graffiti and unsanctioned art on the streets, it is a potentially fruitful avenue for expanding our interdisciplinary field's recent interest in heritage (e.g., Merrill, 2014; Nomeikaite, 2022) beyond physical artworks, images, and artefacts – to ensure that our approach to heritage also encompasses the shared subcultural practices, memories, stories, and rituals that sustain these communities of practice.

For this issue, artist John Fekner gives us a uniquely detailed insight into the production of his work in New York in the late 1970s and 1980s, with reference to a series of rarely shared photographs and archival materials. During this time, he began a relentless stencil crusade targeting urgent social and environmental issues facing the city. Fekner's stencilled messages were site-responsive and appeared in areas desperately in need of repair or demolition. By labelling these decaying structures, he aimed to call attention to the accelerating deterioration of the urban environment by urging officials, agencies, and local communities to act. These illegal interventions were ephemeral and were never intended to last. Indeed, they succeeded when the structural conditions they made visible were remedied. Our conversation with Fekner also explores the synergistic ways in which the politics and energy of his interventions extended to his music, making a multisensory impact on the city.

Bringing ephemeral street-based work and its associated heritage to life within a museum context is challenging. For our INTANGIBLE edition, Ulrich Blanché discusses the critical curatorial strategy behind *ILLEGAL: Street Art and Graffiti 1960–1995*. Unusually for a museum show, Blanché's exhibition unsettles and rewrites our accepted narratives of graffiti and street art history, questioning and complicating the accepted canon. He argues that the US-centric origin story is a construction that we have retrospectively imposed, and that the reality is more complex. ILLEGAL brings to light some otherwise unknown – or hardly known – artists and writers, with a focus on the seldom recognised work of women artists. In doing so, Blanché destabilises our androcentric and heteronormative assumptions about the 'typical' street artist or graffiti writer.

In a further deviation from a standard museum approach, Blanché departs from a focus on singular works of art, stating that:

> I wanted to focus on entire walls and not just separate individual works, to show the ephemerality and decay of street art and graffiti, and the life of the city's surfaces over time – not just the perfection of the work immediately after it was created.

Following Blanché, Daniël de Jongh's evocative visual essay, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* provides a worked example of the documentation of decomposition. Through this image series, he demonstrates the 'beauty in decay' inherent in the very project of photographing unsanctioned art on the streets as it fades, flakes, and otherwise transforms as time passes.

Indeed, a focus on surfaces and living walls over time represents a novel approach to heritage that is not grounded in art historical assumptions that valorise the individual works of recognised artists and seek to preserve these in pristine form. Sabina Andron, Katelyn Kelly, Heather Shirey, and Julia Tulke's contribution to this issue explores the implications of an approach which similarly transfers our focus from individual inscriptions to the ever-changing surfaces of the city. Together, they explore the intellectual, methodological, and creative contributions of Andron's new book *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City*. As Tulke notes during this discussion:

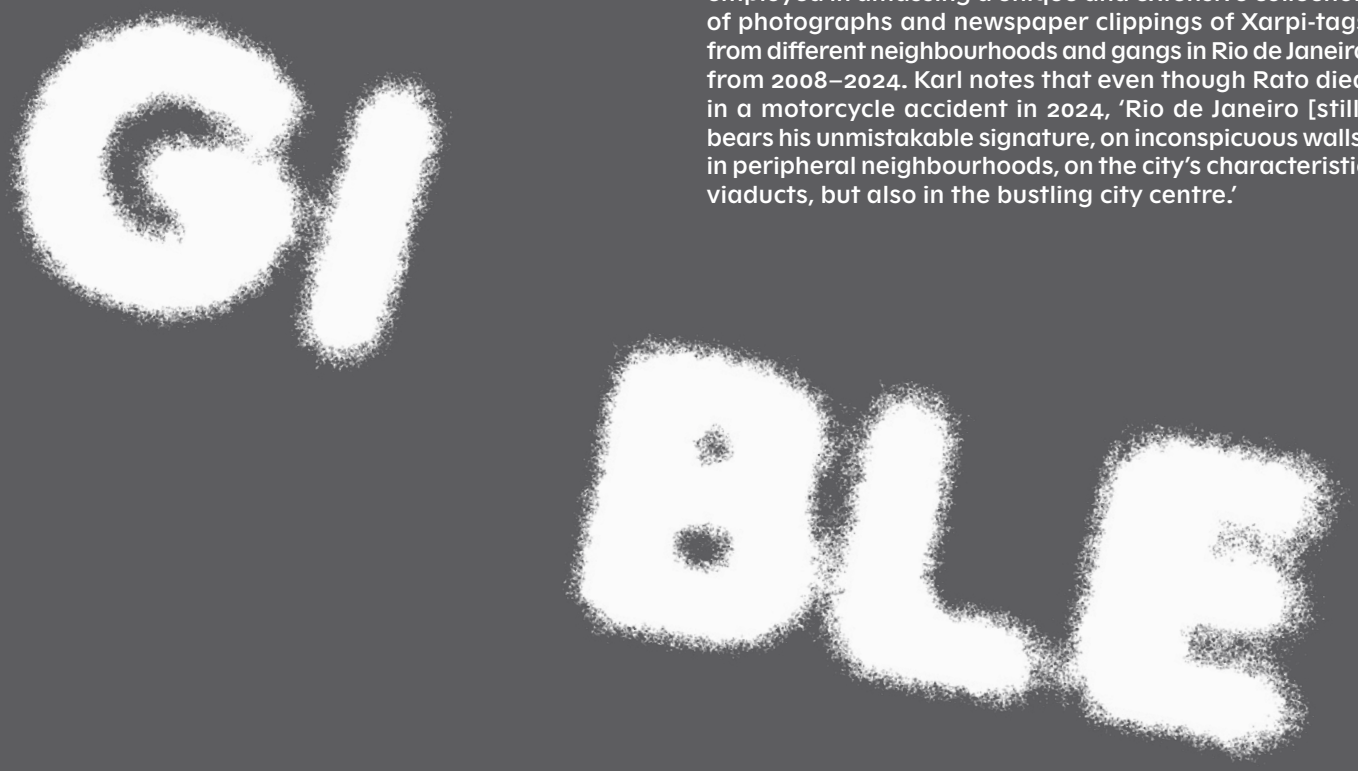
> [Andron's book] prompts us to think about what urban scholarship that activates looks like. I think for... most of us here... this is a matter of longitudinal engagement (Hansen & Flynn, 2015): an attunement over time with urban landscapes in their entire visual intensity, not just individual selected sites, but the whole of it, mediated and captured through incessant walking and photography. This often involves repeat photography, returning to the same site over and over again, and creating archives that are both deeply personal and public.

Building on this critical discussion of forms of urban scholarship that move beyond documentation alone, Andrea Mubi Brighenti's review of Peter Bengtsen's recent book *Tracks and Traces* considers Bengtsen's contribution to the development of reflexive visual methods for researching graffiti and street art. Brighenti notes that visual methods are powerful in that they may be used to gain an insight into social practices that researchers themselves may not be able to directly access, and that gaining entry to and documenting sites where graffiti exists may itself involve a level of trespass and risk. For Brighenti, 'this embodied intimacy with graffiti is valuable to the researcher even in the absence of direct contact with the practitioners' community'.

Whilst many approaches are based on the documentation of work on walls without direct access to the practitioners involved in their creation, others seek to show writers and artists at work. For this issue, Martha Cooper discusses the integral role of photo-documentation in the heritage of graffiti and street art. In this conversation, she reflects on the impact of her early request to accompany writers in New York as they broke into train yards after dark, and notes that this experience gave her an appreciation of the importance of capturing the process and the energy of graffiti writing, which in turn enabled her to more fully appreciate the finished works she was photographing.

Jacob Kimvall (2015) asserts that the role of the documenter is respected and highly valued within graffiti subculture, with the work of early – and still influential – photographers such as Cooper serving as a model for many subsequent documenters of graffiti. Indeed, photo-documentation has long been a primary heritage tool for these ephemeral art forms, not only for scholars and documenters, but also for graffiti writers, who themselves regularly create and share their own archives – a heritage-relevant activity that is itself part of subcultural practice.

For our INTANGIBLE issue, Maëlle Karl provides us with a piece in memory of Anderson 'Rato' Nascimento who was a pixador and founder of the pixação group Legionarios. She explores the archiving methods he employed in amassing a unique and extensive collection of photographs and newspaper clippings of Xarpi-tags from different neighbourhoods and gangs in Rio de Janeiro from 2008–2024. Karl notes that even though Rato died in a motorcycle accident in 2024, 'Rio de Janeiro [still] bears his unmistakable signature, on inconspicuous walls, in peripheral neighbourhoods, on the city's characteristic viaducts, but also in the bustling city centre.'



In his article for issue three of *Nuart Journal*, Tyson Mitman (2019: 37) remarked that 'a dead graffiti writer's tag serves to maintain their presence both visually and ideologically.' Or, as Erik Hannerz writes in this issue, 'They know I write, therefore I exist.' Hannerz's contribution to our current issue explores the central concept of fame. He notes that while graffiti is frequently characterised as a 'game of fame' – where visibility, and the subcultural recognition of your name, is the supreme measure of worth – this concept is seldom explored or problematised. Here, Hannerz critically recasts fame as 'the totemic principle' in subcultural graffiti, with attention to the important work that fame does in 'materialis[ing] collective emotions, ideals, and boundaries that are otherwise ephemeral and intangible.'

Rubí Celia Ramírez Núñez's visual essay draws attention to the role of oral traditions in sustaining the practice of graffiti in Mexico City. She asserts that oral traditions ensure that subcultural knowledge, local styles, and practical techniques are effectively transmitted between generations of writers. Indeed, living heritage is a dynamic form of cultural heritage – heritage which is continuously transformed, interpreted, shaped, and transmitted from generation to generation. This is a participatory and co-creative form of cultural heritage which stresses the role of living generations in engaging with, defining, interpreting, changing, and co-creating the heritage transmitted from past generations.

This co-creative dimension may involve reworking older (sub)culturally valued objects. As De Jongh's article for this issue illustrates, an example of this resides in 'Repainting Subway Art' (RSA). Over a ten-year period, Tripl/Furious, a Dutch graffiti writer, meticulously re-created all 239 individual works featured in Cooper and Chalfant's iconic 'graffiti bible.' He also reenacted every scene from the book and ensured that his own photographs of these works and scenes were as close as possible to the original photographs in *Subway Art*.

But paradoxically, as Jasper van Es (the curator of a travelling show dedicated to RSA) observes, for some graffiti writers, photo-documentation has now come to stand in for physical work:

> It's becoming increasingly common for writers to put a piece on a train, take photos of it, and then immediately destroy the work by painting over it in order to cover their tracks and reduce the chances of getting caught.

Indeed, the relationship between documentation and original work is increasingly complex, especially given the ubiquity of digital forms of documentation and sharing street-based works. Through a series of examples, Mathieu Tremblin's original article explores the ways in which artists' video documentation of their actions in urban space have contributed to the development of what he coins action-documentary practices – or *actumentaries*. He argues that the action-documentary is created in the reciprocal relationship that exists between urban action and its documentation. For Tremblin, this engenders two distinct levels of reception: the first where the urban action operates as a work of art in the real world, and the second where the documentation of the original action is no longer simply at the service of the action but rather becomes an additional – and unpredictable – narrative device in the post-media era.

We conclude our INTANGIBLE issue of *Nuart Journal* with a visual essay that reminds us that our remit exceeds the established genres of style-based graffiti and conventional street art. Here, art historian Isabel Carrasco Castro explores a site in Monchique, Portugal, which features a proliferation of what she terms 'outsider graffiti' – multiple marks apparently inscribed in personal memorial and grief, on the interior and exterior of a former convent. This thoughtful experimental essay considers this graffiti with reference to the history of the site and its inhabitants and develops a reflection that draws on what philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1994) called *topophilia* – the deep and unconscious psychological relations that we develop with spaces. As she writes

> These compulsive gestures – the names of the departed scratched over and over in the cataclysmic confusion of grief – are at once quotidian and domestic. For it is at home that we all *write* our memories by living – existing, being, inhabiting – though usually by furnishing, decorating, and customising them, and not in expecting our words on the walls to be read in the here and now, and in the hereafter or afterlife.

Artist unknown. Stavanger, Norway, 2024. Photograph ©Martyn Reed.

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‘MUSICIANS WERE PAINTING... WATCH THE STREET.’

John Fekner on art and music

This is an edited transcript of a series of conversations between John Fekner and Susan Hansen, Queens, New York, July 8 – September 4, 2024.

In the late 1970s, artist John Fekner began a relentless crusade concerned with urgent social and environmental issues in New York City. The politics and energy of Fekner’s street-based illegal interventions also extended to his music – making a multisensory impact on the city.

Starting in the industrial streets of Queens and the East River bridges, and then in the South Bronx in 1980, Fekner’s stencilled messages appeared in areas that were desperately in need of construction, demolition or reconstruction. By labelling decaying structures and emphasising problems, Fekner’s objective was to call attention to the accelerating deterioration of the city by urging officials, agencies and local communities to take action.

These interventions were ephemeral and were never intended to last. They succeeded when the underlying conditions they made visible were remedied.

John Fekner: Most people think of the *Decay* series as being only about those huge stencils like *Broken Promises* – the South Bronx work. That's the iconic image of the *Decay* stencil, co-opted by the 1980 Republican Presidential Candidate Ronald Reagan in the foreground. I guess that's what people think of first. They're big pieces. Those letters were three feet high!

Ronald Reagan talking to the press on a visit to the Bronx, New York, USA, August 5, 1980. Photograph ©Dave Pickoff, Associated Press/Wide World Photos.

What people may not know is that there were many other *Decay* stencils scattered across the city – at least 50 distinct interventions of different sizes, on walls, bridges and abandoned cars, between 1978–1983.

The lettering on my new Decay print (Bio Editions) is the exact size of the stencils I painted on the Queensboro bridge in 1979. When I did this piece, I had my workspace set up in the living room. My parents couldn't even watch TV. There were piles of Kodak yellow slide boxes, and my stencils, and maybe they were already putting two and two together.

So, my father would go for the newspaper every morning. But this one morning, he came in with the paper and instead of reading it in the kitchen like he usually did, he just put it on my desk. He didn't need to say a word. He just put the paper down.

And that's how he first figured out what I was doing.

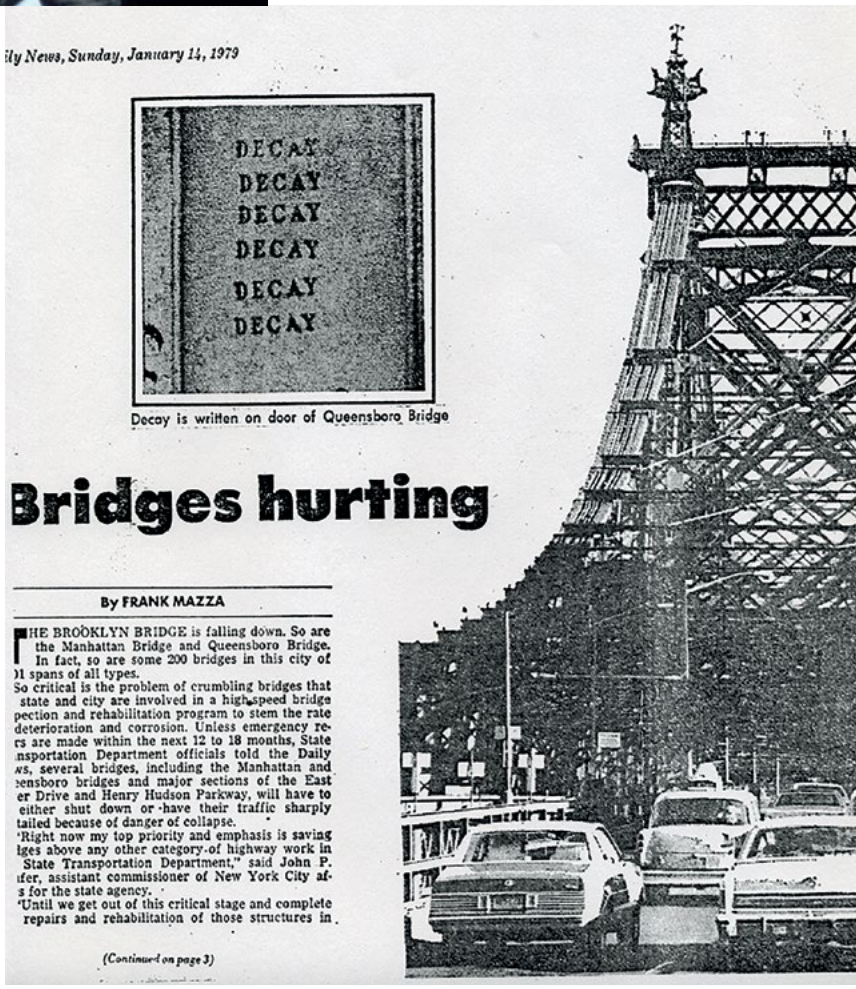
The *Decay* series was about calling attention to the infrastructural decay on NYC bridges. I was paying a lot of attention to my immediate environment and questioning why something was broken and not being repaired. I tried to emphasise the problem that other people seemed to block out of their vision – I aimed to make it more visible. I had started to notice that instead of repairing bridges, the city would first paint over them to cover up the rust and decay, rather than doing the structural work that was desperately needed. On some NYC bridges, parts of the concrete ceiling were falling down onto the roadway. They were crumbling and dangerous.

Because I could paint at high speed, I could repeat the stencils in one location, so you'd see 'Decay' driving onto the bridge, and at the other end of the bridge you'd see 'Decay' again – it wouldn't just be in that one spot. I wanted to spread the word and make people think.

This was a very efficient process for me. My stencils were easily transportable. I spotted or hunted the locations first, and fit the message to the location, so that was all preparatory in terms of the locations that were chosen. But the painting itself was super quick, you know, it was in and out.

The city's graffiti didn't seem surreal to me at all, but the *Decay* stencils always had a sense of being surreal and unexpected interventions. These illegal stencils raised questions for the viewer, because they somehow looked official. For me, awakening this questioning factor was really important. I wanted people to give some thought to this one word and its placement in their everyday experience.

The *Decay* stencils were all done illegally, at night, in my getaway car – I've not told this story before now. So, I would stop the car. I'd jump out, pull up the engine hood to look


ily News, Sunday, January 14, 1979

DECAY
DECAY
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DECAY

Decay is written on door of Queensboro Bridge

Bridges hurting

By FRANK MAZZA

HE BROOKLYN BRIDGE is falling down. So are the Manhattan Bridge and Queensboro Bridge. In fact, so are some 200 bridges in this city of 1 spans of all types.
So critical is the problem of crumbling bridges that state and city are involved in a high-speed bridge pection and rehabilitation program to stem the rate deterioration and corrosion. Unless emergency re- rs are made within the next 12 to 18 months, State nsportation Department officials told the Daily ns, several bridges, including the Manhattan and eensboro bridges and major sections of the East er Drive and Henry Hudson Parkway, will have to either shut down or have their traffic sharply tailed because of danger of collapse.
'Right now my top priority and emphasis is saving ıges above any other category of highway work in State Transportation Department," said John P. ıfer, assistant commissioner of New York City af- s for the state agency.
'Until we get out of this critical stage and complete repairs and rehabilitation of those structures in

(Continued on page 3)

Bridges Hurting by Frank Mazza, staff reporter, *NY Daily News*, January 14. 1979. Photograph ©John Fekner Archives.

like it had broken down. And then I'd do the painting. With the hood up I wouldn't be that noticeable. Sometimes I would stencil the Jersey barriers, the concrete barriers between highway lanes.

I mean, I was nuts. This was in the fast lane. I had my hazard lights on, but I still had to be super quick. I could be so fast because these were smaller stencils that I could paint real fast, and that was the unique thing about this work on highway barriers and bridges.[1]

Obviously, I had a car, I had a crew, rarely did I do something completely by myself. You know, there were always the kids from the park or a few of my other friends. And they were like, 10 to 12 years younger than me. But they kind of looked up to me because I was a handball player. The real New York concrete streetball sports, handball and basketball, you know, one-on-one, singles, doubles and cutthroat. In 1974, before the stencil days, I would play at West 4th Street Courts where all the best amateurs from the five boroughs would come together to compete; Blacks, Whites, Spanish with music blasting in the background.

The politics and energy of my illegal street work extended to my music. During this time, I was also starting to write songs. *Rapicasso* was created from 1983 in various media including painting, music and video. It's a tribute to Picasso. Like his love of utilising different media, i.e., painting, sculpture, ceramics and light drawings, I would use whatever material necessary to create a multimedia work in different forms of artistic expression. Using my LCD stencil plates, *Rapicasso* referenced Picasso's *Three Dancers* and *Three Musicians*, with a focus on three breakdancers spinning on their heads and hands.

The lyrics to *Rapicasso* underline the integral connection between creative work on the street and new forms of musical expression. In 1984, I rapped, 'Musicians were painting … Watch the street, see the modern art/ It's the present and future tied to his heart'.

In 1985, I was invited by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to be part of their Oxbow residency. This was in Saugatuck, Michigan, which is on a lagoon – it's a tranquil and beautiful place for artists. The students from the Art Institute would go there for the summer, which involved artist residencies, talks and lectures, and they would also do their own work. So, I went there for a couple of summers in a row, in 1985 and 1986.

John Fekner. *Rapicasso* 1983. Spray Paint on Industrial Silkscreen 6'×15'. Forgione Estate, Old Westbury, New York, USA. Photograph ©John Fekner.

My songs – like my stencils – started in Jackson Heights, at my parents' apartment. But when I went to Oxbow, I brought my Roland EP-20 electronic keyboard, Synsonics drum machine and cassette recorder, and in the middle of the woods and the cabins, we created what would eventually become *Concrete Concerto*. This song was co-written with Sasha Sumner. There's a video performance of Sasha playing the saxophone in the early stages of what was then called *Sidewalk Shuffle*.

Concrete People was a collaborative work with Dennis Mann that came out in 1986. Writing the lyrics was a year-long project. I stopped doing those kinds of projects because they were so time consuming – you know, you would have to use typewriter paper with white out. I don't know how many pages I used to rework that song. It must have been 50 pages! So, it's almost like a book in itself, because you're constantly moving through variations in the lyrics, just to get it right.

Most of my work was inspired by being involved with late '60s peace movements and listening to protest songs, all those ideas carried in lyrics from people like Phil Ochs and Bob Dylan. From this, I got the whole idea of condensing everything down to one line. Just a single line.The whole idea of conveying something complex and dense into a single phrase, similar to Jenny Holzer. One sentence philosophy. But then I reduced it from a sentence, to two words, and eventually to one word, *Decay*.

Concrete People, 1986. John Fekner & Dennis Mann. Photograph ©John Fekner.

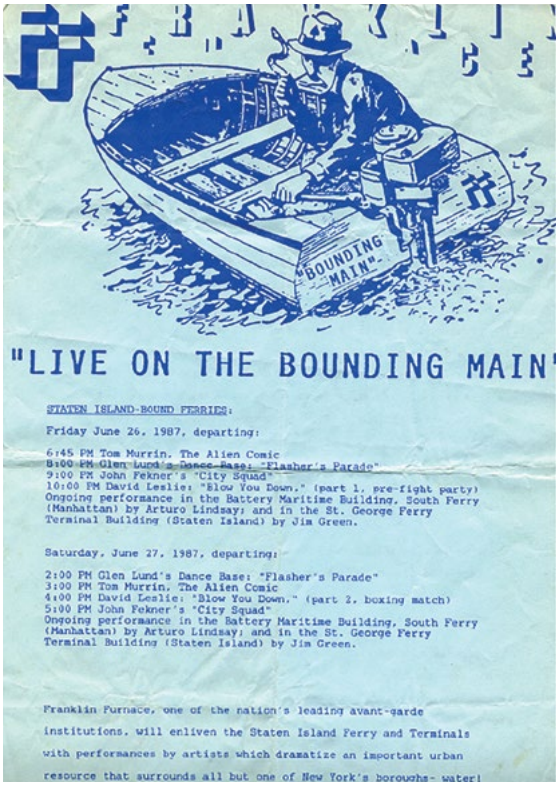
Concrete People also comes out of that instinct, and as a response to what was happening during the '80s, with the media's superficial valorisation of the 'perfect body' as the ultimate goal. Cher was doing fitness TV commercials, Jane Fonda's workout videos were in every home, *Physical* featured Olivia Newton-John in a leotard transforming overweight men into muscular 'hunks', and Arnold Schwarzenegger was everywhere promoting an impossible body standard.

In response to this, I created *Beauty's Only Screen Deep*, which features as a usable stencil bonus print in my new re-release album *Idioblast 1983–2004*. And the stripped-down version of this message is how *Concrete People* came about. The city's surfaces are made of concrete. So, it was about looking at our society's superficial aspects in those terms. The *Concrete People* stencils in public space were part of the project and featured in the music video collaboration with artist Andrew Ruhren.

And The Detroit Wheels. 1985. Saugatuck, Michigan, USA. Photograph ©John Fekner.

During my Oxbow residency, instead of doing my usual one or two word stencils like *Decay, Abandoned or Visual Pollution*, like I would normally use on abandoned vehicles, I painted *And The Detroit Wheels* on this wreck of a van. On a surface level, this was a musical reference to Mitch Ryder's blue collar rock band, but it was also a critical reference to our location. Detroit was the home of General Motors, and Chrysler and Ford, and all the car factories that have since closed. The cars they produced had a planned obsolescence. Back then, all the cars leaked oil. You had to carry around oil cans in the trunk of your car in case you ran low, and we all left dark puddles of oil wherever we parked, polluting the planet.

Although I was releasing records by 1983, there was very rarely a live performance of The John Fekner City Squad. We had fewer than five performances overall. We were all different people from different backgrounds – some were musicians, some were kids, you know, 'non-musicians'. As an extension of Queensites, the group of teenagers from Jackson Heights: Dave Santaniello, Dave Lella, Maria Katsaros, Diana Pavone and Lorraine Lucas and others who assisted me with the outdoor stencil work, joined me to perform. It was kind of a big family. A bit like Joe Cocker and friends, you know, bring everyone, including the dogs, on stage!


"LIVE ON THE BOUNDING MAIN"

STATEN ISLAND-BOUND FERRIES:

Friday June 26, 1987, departing:

6:45 PM Tom Murrin, The Alien Comic
8:00 PM Glen Lund's Dance Base: "Flasher's Parade"
9:00 PM John Fekner's "City Squad"
10:00 PM David Leslie: "Blow You Down," (part 1, pre-fight party)
Ongoing performance in the Battery Maritime Building, South Ferry (Manhattan) by Arturo Lindsay; and in the St. George Ferry Terminal Building (Staten Island) by Jim Green.

Saturday, June 27, 1987, departing:

2:00 PM Glen Lund's Dance Base: "Flasher's Parade"
3:00 PM Tom Murrin, The Alien Comic
4:00 PM David Leslie: "Blow You Down," (part 2, boxing match)
5:00 PM John Fekner's "City Squad"
Ongoing performance in the Battery Maritime Building, South Ferry (Manhattan) by Arturo Lindsay; and in the St. George Ferry Terminal Building (Staten Island) by Jim Green.

Franklin Furnace, one of the nation's leading avant-garde institutions, will enliven the Staten Island Ferry and Terminals with performances by artists which dramatize an important urban resource that surrounds all but one of New York's boroughs- water!

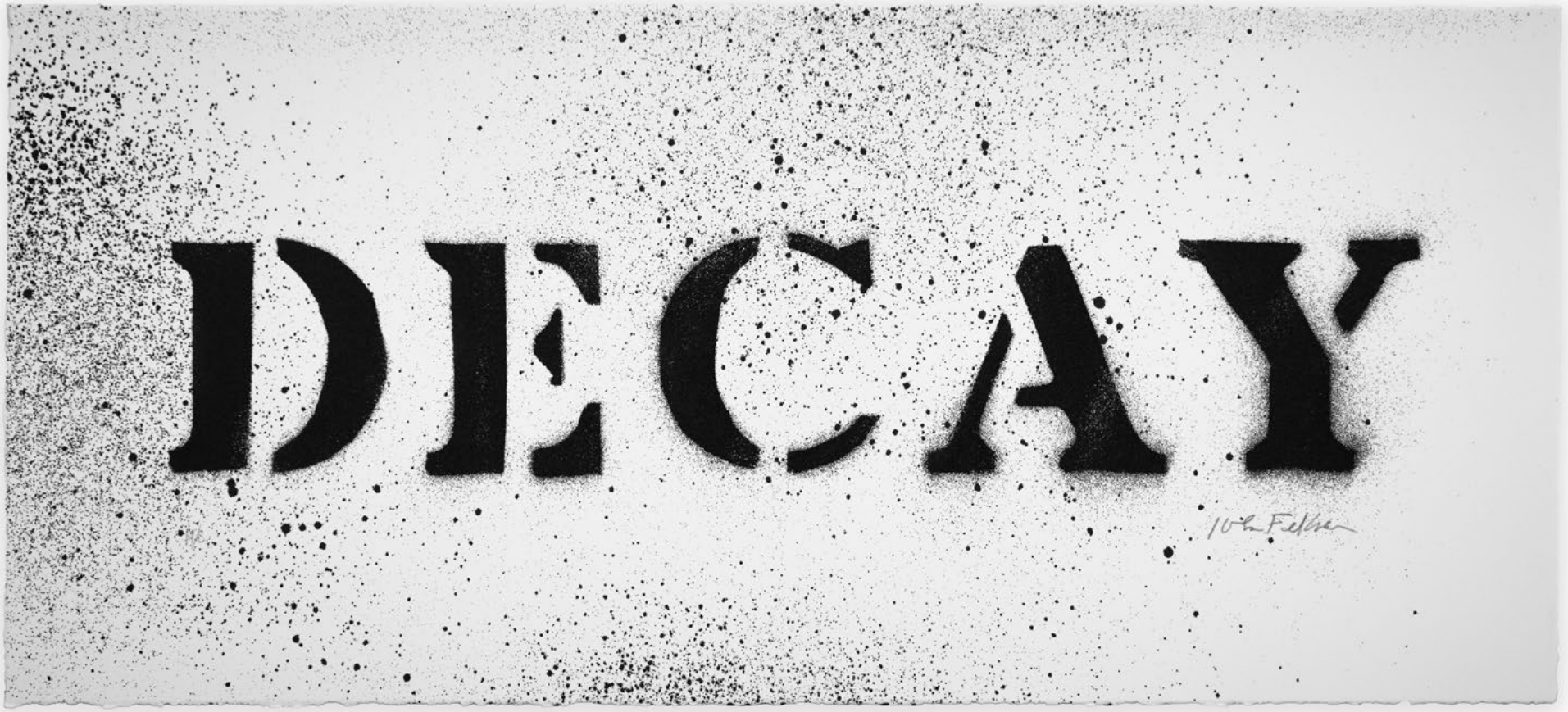
Franklin Furnace Flyer, featuring the John Fekner City Squad. 1987. Photograph ©John Fekner Archives.

The first major place that we played live as the My Ad Is NO Ad Band was back in February 1981 at Martha Wilson's Franklin Furnace space. I was invited to do an installation and instead of just doing an installation, I told her I had been doing some music. So that was the first event with the Queensites kids who had been stencilling with me on the streets. But because some of them couldn't play, we had to fill out the stage to make it look like we were real good – it was a happening![2]

Later, in 1987, we joined a lot of super interesting downtown people to play on the Franklin Furnace ferry on the Hudson, but we did not do many performances overall. There were some other rare other performances in this period that were sound-based. But these were undocumented, so they are now lost to time.

The first ever reissue of The John Fekner City Squad's cult classic, *Idioblast 1983–2004* is now available on vinyl and CD at Sundazed Music: https://sundazed.com/john-fekner-city-squad-the-idioblast-1983-2004-2lp-w-stencil.aspx.

And streaming: https://sundazedmusic.bandcamp.com/album/idioblast-1983-2004.



John Fekner's new *Decay* print is available from Bio Editions: https://bioeditions.com/products/decay-main-edition.

JOHN FEKNER (b. 1950) is a street and multimedia artist who created hundreds of environmental, social, political, and conceptual works consisting of stencilled words, symbols, dates, and icons spray painted outdoors in the United States, Sweden, Canada, England, and Germany. His work is held in numerous museum collections across the US and Europe including the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA; Museum of Modern Art, NYC; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC; and the Malmö Museum and Skissernas Museum in Sweden. His work has also received recognition from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts. https://johnfekner.com/

1 For more, see Fekner's Environmental Stencils 77-79 video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6sSr6njKIU.

2 A video of the 1987 Franklin Ferry event may be found at: https://vimeo.com/21830022.

Tracing the Overlooked Origins of Street Art and Graffiti

In conversation with Ulrich Blanché, curator of ILLEGAL: Street Art and Graffiti 1960–1995

SUSAN HANSEN: With this exhibition in the Saar Historical Museum in Saarbrücken, Germany, it feels like you are consciously unsettling and rewriting our accepted narratives of graffiti and street art history. Why did you adopt such a critical curatorial strategy?

ULRICH BLANCHÉ: On the one hand, I wanted to show there is a canon and obviously I don't want to change that canon completely. But I do want to question it, and I want to complicate it, so we can talk about our shared street art histories, whether in Germany, France, or Poland. We all use the English term 'street art' because there's a kind of dominant narrative, or a history, that rests on the assumption that the Americans invented it, and that Europe was a blank canvas. That the inspiration for 'street art' originally came from the US, as did style writing graffiti. And then you have post-graffiti, but this is based on that same narrative. With this exhibition, I have tried to show that this is actually not true, and that this historical narrative is more like a construction we have imposed afterwards. The exhibition ends in 1995, the year in which Banksy's earliest works appeared in England.

I also tried to show that there are many early examples of graffiti being welcomed with open arms. We knew from Amsterdam that there was a huge punk graffiti scene there. But we had art on the streets in every country. You just have to look for it. And to find this work, you need to use different search terms, not English terms like graffiti, style writing, street art, etc., but other terms that cross genres and borders, like conceptual art or political art.

It turns out that if you use slightly different search terms, you can find artists working very early on in the streets in Poland and Russia, and elsewhere around the world. The exhibition highlights, for instance, the work of Brazilian stencil artist Alex Vallauri. In the early 1980s, his work appeared earlier and had more impact worldwide than Blek le Rat's work. People were inspired by Vallauri not just in New York, but also in Paris and Warsaw. Nobody knew his name. But they knew his work, which sparked stencil scenes all over the world.

So, I wanted to trace those early examples and game changers. The ILLEGAL exhibition shows how art punk stencils by Crass influenced Banksy and Robert del Naja before they had even heard about Blek. There was also an international illegal street sticker campaign by Cavellini in the 1970s – well before OBEY in 1989. We also show LA cholo gang graffiti, Philly graffiti and pichação from Brazil – not just NYC-based style writing. But unfortunately, I just couldn't show everything I wanted to include because of space restrictions and the fact that you can't always get everything you want, in terms of securing permissions.

Catalogues for street art and graffiti exhibitions often have great visuals and maybe one strong essay, but the essays and authors that you have included in the catalogue for ILLEGAL make it more like a serious academic book. How did the essays inform the curation of the show, or were they developed together?

The catalogue and the show were developed together. For me, it was important to produce a bilingual [English and German] catalogue to show a wider audience that there is a history of street art and graffiti in various countries within the 1960–1995 time frame. There were some topics I really wanted to include in the catalogue that are not my specialty, and so these were the ones I outsourced. For example, there is a close connection between graffiti and other forms of artistic expression such as avant-garde art and literature, and also, in particular, popular music.

Many graffiti writers were not just visually creative, but they were also active musically, or they designed album covers. This dynamic interaction between visual art and music is part of the exhibition. As many of us know, the Swedish art historian Jacob Kimvall has an extensive collection of albums which feature graffiti on their covers, yet I'd never come across a text that explores this connection in detail. So, we were keen to include this.

Until I read Kimvall's essay, I didn't know the story about the Tuff City whole car being edited out of later editions of *Subway Art* once the authors discovered it was a 'commercial' piece!
[*Reproduced below*]:
[Given that] that the work was done by two of the most prominent artists, it is at first surprising to learn that the photo was not included in the extended and enlarged 25th anniversary edition of the book. The reason? The authors had found out that the graffiti piece 'Tuff City' was an early example of what would be referred to today as street marketing or guerrilla marketing, and thus found it too commercial to use... Tuff City Records is an independent New-York-based record label which had its first release in the very year 'Tuff City' was painted: a tune entitled 'Beach Boy' by Verticle Lines and featuring Phase 2 himself (Kimvall in Blanché, 2024: 54).

Who else did you invite to contribute an essay to the catalogue?

I really wanted to include an essay on street art and politics so I invited Sven Niemann to write one as he has dealt with this before extensively. But two books were published on this topic last year and I didn't want to reproduce them. I wanted a new essay that would encapsulate what we know about street art and politics. I also wanted to explore some lesser-known precursors, like the New York jazz graffiti artists from the '50s and the French poets who have such a strong connection with both visual art and graffiti.

Another consideration was that this is an exhibition in a museum that is in a region of Germany that borders France, and we wanted it to have some connection to the local area and its history. So, for the big pieces, the life-size works, we tried to show art from international graffiti and street art history. We also included a map tracing how street art and graffiti arrived in the area and showing all of the earliest pieces of illegal art that we could find on local walls, such as stencils. As I'm not an expert on the art from this region, I asked Myriama Idir, who is a French specialist for the Grande Région, to write an essay for the catalogue.

In ILLEGAL, you bring to light some otherwise unknown – or hardly known – artists and writers, with a focus on women artists. In doing so, you destabilise our androcentric and heteronormative assumptions about the typical street artist or graffiti writer. Most official histories assume that the key players in these movements were cis-men.

The show includes lots of artists that clearly played a role at the time they were up. Today, TAKI 183 and writers featured in *Subway Art* are still recognised internationally. So is Cornbread, who's in the show as well, of course. Over time, these artists have continued to speak about their role, and they've written themselves into history. But there are other writers and artists, like Barbara 62 or Vampirella, who also played interesting roles at the time they were active on the streets, but who would not come out publicly again after. They disappeared. Somehow, they didn't feel the urge to step out at a later stage and say 'I was Barbara 62. I was the person who did that'. And so, many early female artists didn't get a voice and haven't become part of our official histories. But in my research for the show, I found out that Barbara 62 and Eva 62 played a much more important role than has been previously acknowledged. Apart from being the first female writers in New York, they played a crucial role in that they were the first writers we know of to move between the tag and the piece. So, it turns out that they did something radically new, which nobody had done before, whether male or female. They were not just the first female artists, but the first artists to do that. In finding examples like this, I tried to contradict the usual narratives.

The virtual tour of ILLEGAL gives a good sense of the layout of the exhibition and it's cool that it's also interactive – it really gives remote viewers an appreciation of how you've used the museum space. You've got some works that look like they are almost life-sized in scale, and you've got some entire walls that look monumental through the use of projection.

There are moving images on the walls of the exhibition, but unfortunately, these did not translate to the 3D tour. We had to freeze the projections because we could not capture moving images using this method and – during the one hour when this guy walked around with his camera to take all the footage for the 3D environment – I had to choose one screenshot for each projection that represented it well. Apart from that, all the posters and prints are visible in the virtual tour, and you get an impression of the scale of the artworks within the space, so that works well.

Your use of space feels deliberately different to the ways in which shows on street art and graffiti tend to conventionally approach museum space. How did you use the museum differently to bring this work to life, and why was this important?

Many so-called street art exhibitions show work on canvas, or other studio-based work by artists who have also done interesting work illegally on the street. But painting a subway train on a canvas, or putting some tags on a canvas, is not the real thing for me. So, I tried to be consistent in not including any non-illegal works in this exhibition.

So, anything that's legal was barred. No studio-based work allowed?

In principle, yes. But of course, there are exceptions. There are a few studio-based artefacts in the exhibition. For example, we show the stencils that were used as tools to do vandalism. These were obviously prepared in advance in the studio, as were the posters that were then pasted in the street, but for this exhibition, focussing on real vandalism was the goal. So, most of the works in the show are illegal.

Alex Vallauri spray painting in the middle of winter in Lower Manhattan, New York, USA, around 1982–1983. Photograph ©Claudia Vallauri (Alex Vallauri inheritance).

Breakdancer Storm poses with a piece by Can 2 on a train in Wiesbaden, Germany, 1988. Photograph ©CANTWO.

Vampirella (Valesca M.) seen spray painting a face in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 1985. Photograph ©Vampirella.

In which other ways is this show different from other museum-based street art exhibitions?

The second thing I hate about most street art exhibitions is that they usually just speak to your mind and not to your body. That means you often have lots of little photos. The trains captured by Henry Chalfant for example – which were like 16 to 24 metres long – are usually shown as hundreds of small-scale photos, which is an overwhelming visual experience for the viewer. I think it's more interesting to look at just a few works, but at a scale that is closer to the length and height they were to the viewer's eye at the time they were created. It is only in this way that we can appreciate – to some extent – the phenomenological effect of a whole car running past you, or a Shadowman by Richard Hambleton leaping onto a wall. So, that was a tactic.

The third thing I dislike is that showing developments over time is often neglected in street art exhibitions. I know you also work with repeat photography – or photographing the same walls over time. But 1960 to 1995 was such an early, historic period for street art. People usually didn't photograph the same wall again and again and again to show progress – not that many people had cameras anyway. So I had to research a lot. And I found photos by different photographers who didn't know about each other, but who took photos of the same walls at different times. I put together a timelapse projection where you can see walls at the first stage, and then a later stage, with new work coming up again and again. I tried to make this kind of dialogue visible.

I had no idea that Brassaï was doing repeat photography of graffiti in Paris way back in the 1930s!

Yes, he was. He came back to certain walls to see how the graffiti looked that he had originally photographed 15 or 20 years earlier. That's the very first example I know of that deals just with graffiti as a subject that's not just somewhere in the background.

The final thing I hate about street art exhibitions is that usually when photos of street works are included, these works are always shown in a state of perfection. A state reached the moment that the can drops. But that's not representative of most works on the street, because they have a development over time, they change and become even more interesting. They are not just this pristine perfect thing.

The coffee table book version of street art we see on Instagram?

Exactly. So, I wanted to focus on entire walls and not just separate individual works, to show the ephemerality and decay of street art and graffiti, and the life of the city's surfaces over time – not just the perfection of the work immediately after it was created.

There are a lot of artists who claim a particular wall, and every time somebody paints over their work, they come back and do a new piece. In the exhibition, we included the Aachener Wandmaler [Aachen Muralists], an artist duo who for over six years painted on the same wall several times. They made their last work in 1983 and it's still there. It's one of only five works in the German speaking countries that are under official state heritage protection. They were created illegally, but are now officially protected. The Aachener Wandmaler were a gay couple and the first queer street artists I know of in Germany – and indeed in the rest of the world. It's not that easy to find early queer street art that's not just activism – gay rights and slogans – but visual art that deals with queer subjects, and this is in the late 1970s.

We've been talking about ILLEGAL mostly as academics with prior knowledge of the field, but what is it that you'd like everyday visitors to take away from their experience of the exhibition?

I think about, what do they know? What does the average person already know about street art and graffiti? And that's usually Banksy, and a bit of what they see in their own streets. Most people who come to this exhibition are from this area: Saarbrücken and the surrounding cities. A ten-minute car ride away, there's a big outdoor exhibition in Völklingen, a UNESCO World Heritage site which has hosted an Urban Art Biennale since 2011. So, I knew that the visitors would probably come to visit both the museum and the Biennale. The Biennale is held at a former industrial site that is now a ruin. The curators invite the usual suspects to paint legal murals there. It's very impressive. But it's just one (legal) side of the coin and I try to show people the other side.

Do you think that German museums are more receptive to a show involving graffiti and street art than museums in other countries?

If we look at the graffiti and street art shows and events hosted recently in German museums, such as this exhibition in Saarbrücken, or Javier Abarca's recent Tag and Unlock events in Munich and Hamburg, it's important to note that these are not art museums, they are historical museums. And that is a big difference. German art museums are still hostile to street art and graffiti, so we still have a problem. The only art museums that show this kind of work are places like Urban Nation in Berlin or the Museum of Urban and Contemporary Art [MUCA] in Munich – but these are run by private collectors or big companies.

In Germany, art museums equivalent to the UK's Tate wouldn't show street art or graffiti, and I think the reason for that is because having to connect to their local community is not a prerequisite for receiving the funding they get, as it is for British museums. And there is an assumption that local communities hate vandalism! But what I like about British museums is that they really engage local communities, and children, and people who are not art specialists, which is often missing in Germany.

In France it is more possible to show graffiti in art museums – like Christian Omodeo's recent exhibition 'Loading: Street Art in the Digital Age' at the Grand Palais Immersif in Paris. I've just had a visit from Susana Gállego Cuesta, the director of the Nancy Museum of Fine Arts who is very much into street art and graffiti. She came to see ILLEGAL with two curators: former graffiti writers Patrice Poch and Nicolas Gzeley. They are working together to take over a current exhibition of French spray paint art. They were very interested in the way in which we used the museum space for the show, with large scale projection and life-sized photography.

So, ILLEGAL may have an influence on the use of museum space in other street art and graffiti museum shows?

Hopefully, or at least they will see that there are some other possibilities beyond the usual options!

Do you have any plans to host the exhibition anywhere else?

Yes, the exhibition could travel. It would be an easy show to travel with, because it's mostly not original works – all of those were destroyed 40 years ago. And even though the show takes up a lot of space in the museum, it's not that expensive to produce because it's mostly projections and printed photographs, as these are the only records we have. Of course, we do have a few original works here and there too, but these could travel also because I have good connections to the collectors.

Without photo-documentation, we couldn't show the history of street art and graffiti?

Yes, without photography all of these works would be lost, and historical exhibitions like ILLEGAL would not be possible.

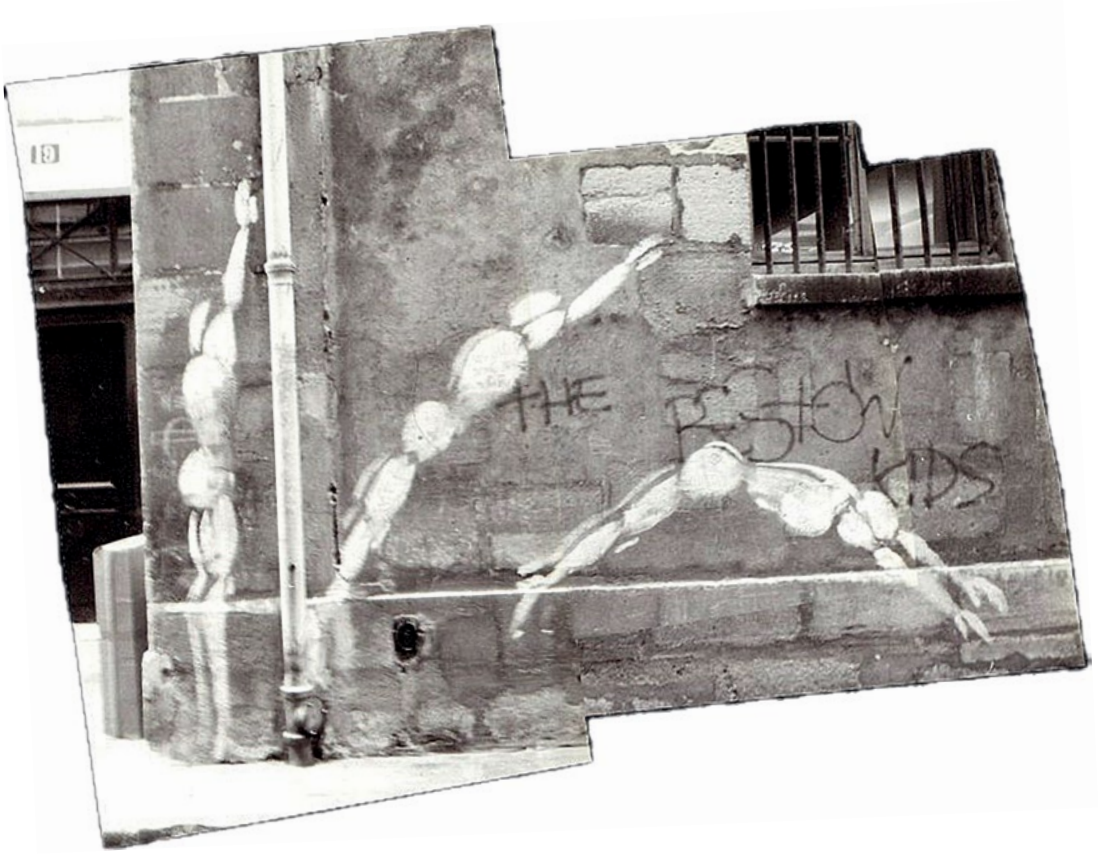
So, perhaps the one thing you might have to do in a different city in another part of the world would be to rework those parts of the exhibition that are place specific?

Exactly. As I said, there is one part of the show that's very much about East French and West German street art and graffiti history. But if ILLEGAL were to travel to a different city, I would replace that wall by constructing a new map showing 'who was the first in this region?' To start locally gives us a different way into the history of street art and graffiti, which is important in correcting the dominant narrative that everything, everywhere, stems from *Wild Style*, *Spray Can Art, and Subway Art*. In local histories you will often find lone wolves working on the streets, who got their inspiration from the strangest places – an advertisement, a film, a record cover, or a music video. Or perhaps they saw someone's photos of their trip to a different city, and they started their own local scene. Street art and graffiti did not start centrally just in Paris and New York to then spread to the rest of the world. In the days before social media, people in different countries were developing their work independently from and in parallel with each other without there being much direct contact.

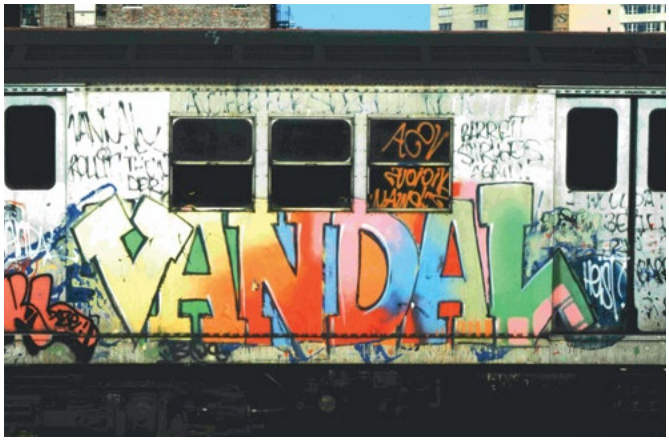
A Shadowman by Richard Hambleton accompanied by a female figure in red by Katrin Kaluza and other interventions by Marcus Krips (Stick figure), Walter Dahn (spray painted viking horns) on a wall in Cologne, Germany, 1984–86. Photograph ©Johannes Stahl.

A graffiti piece featuring characters by Bando (Phillip Lehman) and Blitz (Jean-Baptiste Pontecorvo), Paris, France, 1984. Photograph ©Claude Abron.

A work by Harald Naegeli (the 'Sprayer of Zürich') pictured by the police in Zürich, Switzerland, around 1978–79. Photograph ©Kunsthaus Zürich.



Three men in white painted with a brush by Jérôme Mesnager,
Rue Visconti, Paris, France, 1986.
Photograph ©Christoph Maisenbacher.



Vandal (Barrett Zinn Gross), spray graffiti, New York, USA 1979/80. Photograph ©Martha Cooper.

King Pin (Christian Wolf), graffiti piece, Brühl, Germany, 1983. Photograph ©King Pin.

Alex Vallauri, stencil graffiti, New York, USA, 1982–83. Photograph ©Alex Vallauri inheritance.

ILLEGAL: Street Art and Graffiti 1960–1995, May 18, 2024 – February 23, 2025. Details and 3D Virtual Tour: https://www.historisches-museum.org/illegal-street-art-graffiti-1960-1995
Blanché, U. (2024) *Illegal Street Art Graffiti 1960–1995*. Munich: Hirmer Verlag.

The ILLEGAL exhibition's finissage will feature a conference on Art & Place, co-directed by Ulrich Blanché and Javier Abarca (of Unlock/Tag). This will be held in Saarbrücken in February 2025.

ULRICH BLANCHÉ has been researching and teaching at Heidelberg University, Germany, since 2012, initially as a research associate. Since 2021 he's been a regular private lecturer at Heidelberg University (where he has just completed his research project 'A Street Art History of Stencils'), at the Heidelberg University of Education and at the Heidelberg Centre of Transcultural Studies. In 2021 he finished his postdoctoral dissertation titled *Monkeys in Pictures since 1859*. His dissertation on consumer culture and commerce in Banksy and Damien Hirst was published in German in 2012, and in English in 2016. Blanché has edited the exhibition catalogue *Stencil Stories: History of Stencil Graffiti* (HeiBOOKS, 2022) and co-edited the anthology *Urban Art: Creating the Urban with Art* (Urban Creativity, 2018). In 2024, he curated an exhibition on the history of unsanctioned urban art at the Saar Historical Museum in Saarbrücken, Germany.

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

Daniël de Jongh,
Utrecht, the Netherlands

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 lost[1] – or, exceptionally[2], to get restored[3]. 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 panels[4] 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.

Daniël de Jongh is an investigative journalist, editor, and translator with a long-time interest in graffiti and street art.

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.

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.

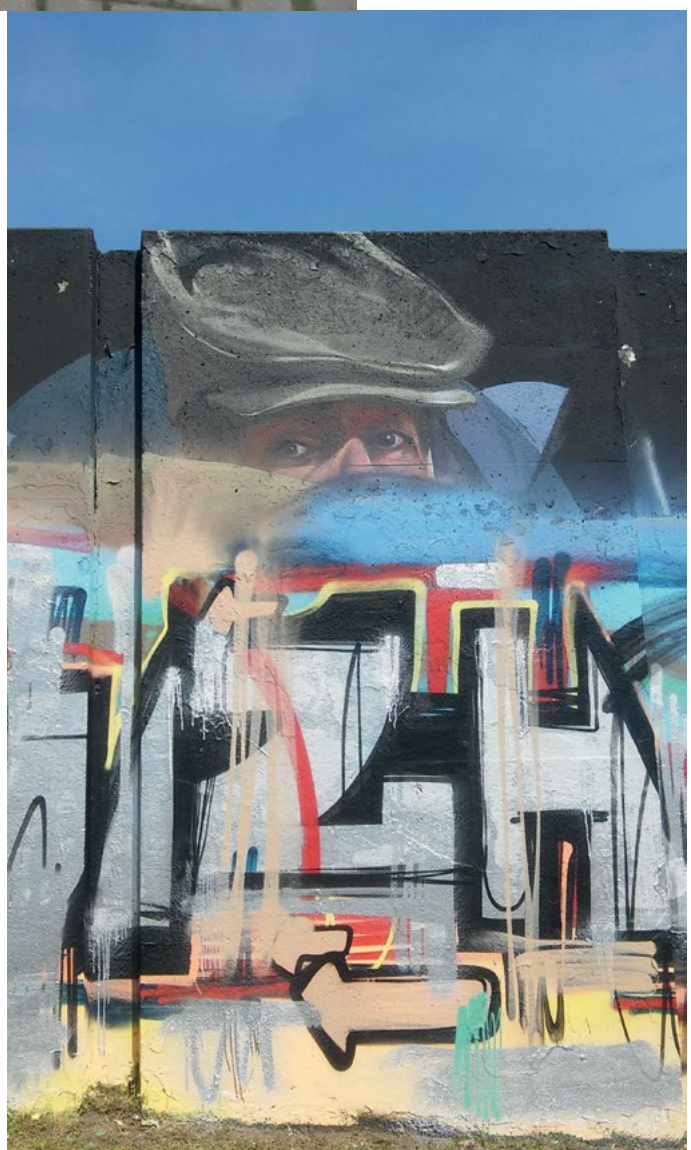
Blu. Valencia, Spain, May 2023. Twelve years after the Italian artist had painted this wall (without any scaffolding or cherry picker, just ladders and extendable painting devices), the orange-coloured spray foam coating that can often be found on the side of buildings in Spain, was clearly having the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

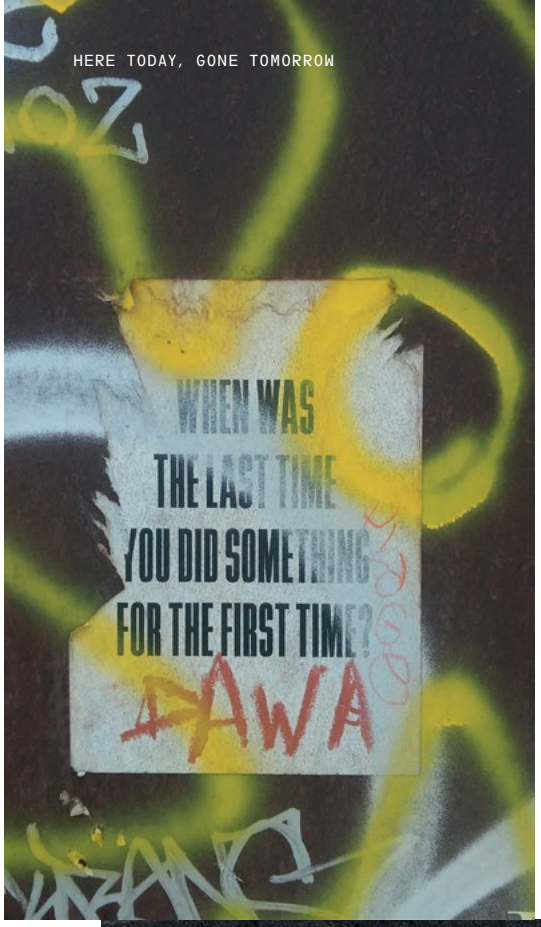
Unknown artist. Amsterdam, the Netherlands, October 2014. On this very old and brittle panel, the pattern in the wood was resurfacing through the marker pen colours and lines, adding a whole new eerie dimension to this portrait of an (imaginary?) man.



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.

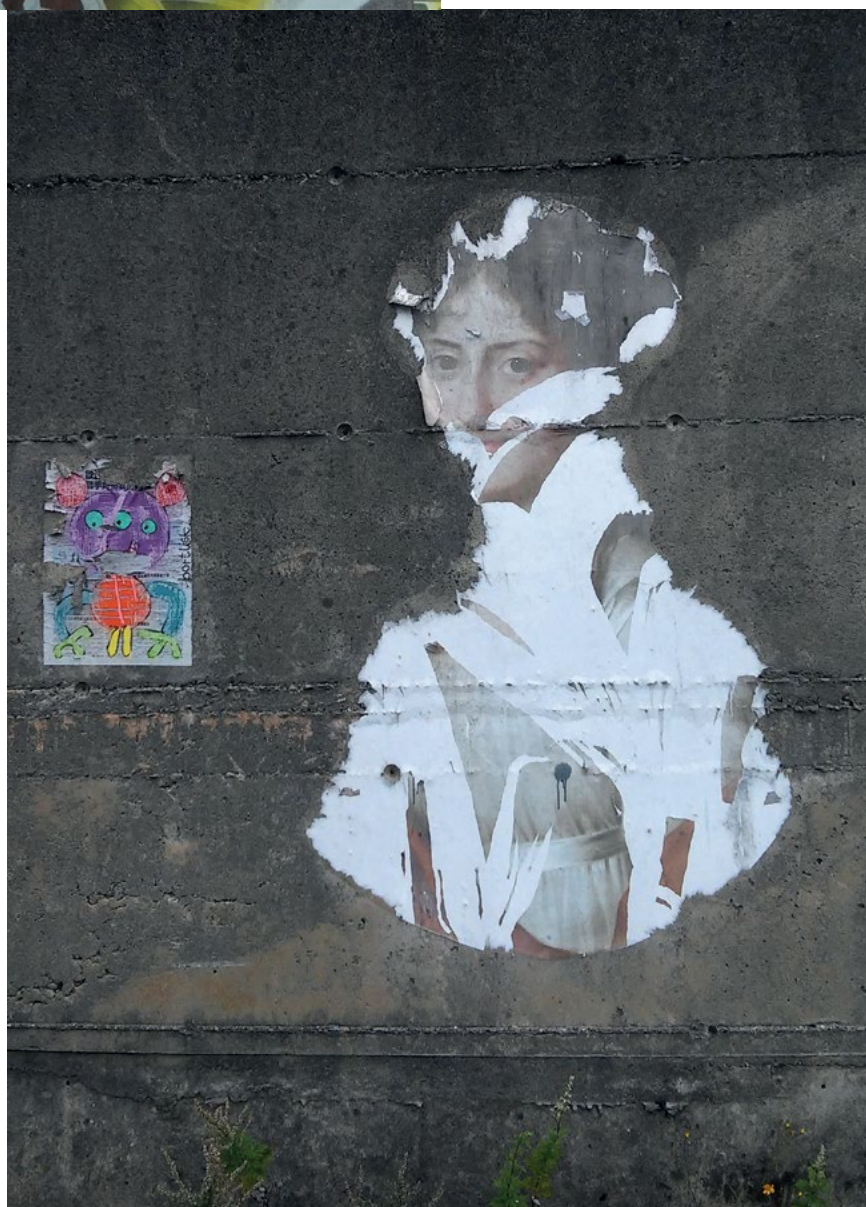
Nipper John/John XC. Bergen, Norway, July 2014. A corrugated metal surface like this one is not the most suited to hosting a paste up, but that didn't deter the artist from putting up this specimen of fairly large proportions. As it disintegrated, the longer-lasting throw up underneath resurfaced.

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.

In the Dutch capital, the graffiti piece on a house that reads 'D.D.T. 666' is the first and only remaining outdoor work by the legendary punk graffiti writer Dr. Rat (Ivar Vičs, May 21, 1960 – June 29, 1981). Sometime after its creation in 1978, it ended up hidden behind a holly bush for decades – the reason it was spared for the most part. When it reappeared in 2021, the Amsterdam municipality thought it was a unique reflection of the social trend of the era in which it was produced, and that it tells a story of the city that transcends discussions about aesthetics. Hence the municipality designated the piece as cultural urban heritage and decided to have it restored in 2022 along with the original surrounding tags by Delta, Curhz, Nuke, and others. The comment 'moet dood' ('must die') that someone else sprayed underneath D.D.T. 666 ('Dirty Dutch Trix 666' – a former punk club in Amsterdam founded by Dr. Rat and others) was also restored by father and daughter Rava, therewith basically recreating all acts of communication on the wall.

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.

BOOK FORUM: URBAN SURFACES

Sabina Andron
University of Melbourne,
Australia

Katelyn Kelly
Black Hills State University
Spearfish, USA

Heather Shirey
University of St. Thomas
Saint Paul, USA

GRAFFITI AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Julia Tulke
Emory University
Atlanta, USA

Introduction

On February 29, 2024, an interdisciplinary group of researchers gathered on a Zoom call to celebrate and activate in conversation Sabina Andron's book *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City*, released with Routledge just weeks prior. Andron and participants Katelyn Kelly, Heather Shirey, and Julia Tulke were joined by a small audience drawn from a nascent network of global street art and graffiti researchers.[1]

We called this encounter a book forum with the explicit intent to move beyond the limitations of the singular book review and towards a more dynamic and relational form of engagement with the intellectual, methodological, and creative contributions of Andron's work to our shared field and individual research. Taking our cues from *Urban Surfaces*, we sought to emulate qualities central to the urban creative practices we study: polyphony, co-creation, reciprocity, and, perhaps more than anything, playfulness. After opening the floor with a brief reflection on the book as a contagious object in and of the city, our conversation oscillated between individual responses and open exchange, moving across and between matters of theory, politics, methodology, pedagogy, and public scholarship.

This model gave us a space to share ideas about and beyond the book in many directions, not simply from reviewer to author and back. We hope to inspire colleagues to engage in similar discussions, as we share an edited transcript of our conversation.

JULIA TULKE: Sabina, to start our conversation, I would like to invite you to share a few words about the book. *Urban Surfaces* is, of course, a scholarly contribution. But it is also an object in and of the city, and during the past month it has travelled with you through several cities – London, Paris, and Milan – activating spaces and conversations along the way. How have these encounters 'thickened' (to use a term that you use in your own discussions of urban surfaces) the book and its lessons for you?

SABINA ANDRON: Many of us in this field are keen walkers, photographers, and our ways of researching space are rarely remote. They involve being present and repeatedly visiting the same places. So, I started taking the book with me every time I went out, to show it the places that inspired it, until my copy here started to crumble a bit (**Figure 1**). I took the book out and into the city, to emphasise the physicality of the object but also to see how it would fit in its place, how it can become an urban object, how it can become an urban sign. What proportions does it have in relation to the city? How can I prop it somewhere? Does it get dirty? Does it get sticky? This has been a very inspiring process, it's a way of 'thickening', but it's also cross-contamination. And I hope that the idea of cross-contamination as something that happens all the time with public signage and with surface matter, comes across well in the book.

The book is dirty, but it keeps its academic integrity. Making space with the book in the city is a form of making meaning, for myself and for others. It's a good exercise for all of us to get out of this bubble a bit and take a more relaxed approach to what academic knowledge can be – to bring our joy and love for what we've signed up to do, and let things seep into the bubble.

JT: Popping the bubble and letting things contaminate in ways that we can't always anticipate and perhaps should not try to – I think that's a perfect segue into our book forum. We will take turns with short responses, all of which take a particular idea, sentence, or image from the book as their point of departure. I will turn things over to Katelyn to get us started.

Figure 1. *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City.* The book is an object in the city. A poster campaign supported by UNCLE in London and Plakkit in Melbourne put the book in its place, 2023–4. Photographs ©Sabina Andron.

KATELYN KELLY: Thank you, Sabina, for this much needed and appreciated spatial political intervention in graffiti scholarship. I am currently working on a genealogy of graffiti in the United States, spanning from Hobo Codes at the turn of the 20th century up to the contemporary socio-political Black Lives Matter Movement. Throughout this work, I've been engaging the concept of *infrapolitics* from James Scott (1985, 1990), which in turn is a growing field in political science and subaltern studies looking at the way folks resist exploitation in everyday life, whether it is intentional resistance or not. This could be something like messing up an order if you're working in a fast food restaurant, it could be dragging your feet, it could be telling tall tales about your supervisor that get everybody prodded and excited, or even the music you listen to, or in our case, graffiti. However, I fear that many romanticise infrapolitical practices, or graffiti and things like it, and possibly flirt with overclaiming the act of agency it provides, and, I think that pulls out some of the radical nature of graffiti. Specifically thinking about the 1970s birth of style writing in urban centres in the United States, it has struck me that the state's response was *to* infrapolitics; which we conceive of as police actively walking around with dogs, being present in subway stations, introducing barbed wire.

And this is where Sabina's work pushed me very fruitfully in the way I think about how graffiti was countered through the conception of order. You sometimes use the terms disciplining and punishment, but it is the concept of order and the way it's being utilised that you focus on throughout the book. You look specifically at the role order plays in making and disciplining various public spaces and surfaces, as well as the individuals who engage with these spaces. This begins with your breakdown of surface semiotics, and how we have been socialised to understand order as white. There is, as you very persuasively show, not only an architectural component to that, but also a racial one, and you point out that these two are interwoven – really highlighting how spaces make us and how we make spaces. On page 29 you state: 'Rather than being relinquished by architectural modernism, surfaces were in fact tailored to actively present ambitions of cleanliness, order, and morality, through a standardised application of design principles and materials.' You continue to outline how cleanliness ends up denoting order throughout society, and is maintained through an 'optical hygiene'. Cleanliness ends up being an excuse for policing, as we see in Martha Cooper's famous photograph of two cops on the train. And we can think about the broken windows theory (Kelling & Wilson, 1982), which isn't encouraging active policing, but more nefariously police informally being in spaces to push for order, which becomes synonymous with a sense of a pure and unmarked surface. It's not just those cops in the subway, but the way the architecture itself – the unfriendly surfaces, as you describe them – end up also being a form of ordering that for me, started to really stand out. It shifted my conception of infrapolitics and my understanding of how unfriendly surfaces or the management of paint supplies were also performing this ordering – not only in the 1970s, but today.

The last thing I want to draw out is how you illustrate that art and aestheticisation end up being components of ordering in their own right. You state: 'A clean and orderly environment was taken to signify a well-controlled space in terms of both ownership of property and ownership of appearance' (77). It's not just about policing and clean environments, but also about the ownership of property and appearance, which you encourage us to think about in relation to claims and/or rights to the city. While related to whitewashing and hygiene, this explains muralism and the highly politicised politics of graffiti that we've seen. You bring all of this together ultimately, to give us a more complete understanding of the way in which order is weaponised by systems of power or individuals, particularly against practices such as graffiti.

Now, we're left with this multi-pronged conception of order and the way it's imbricated in the surfaces around us, and this can be incredibly worrisome. And many of us who find graffiti writing to be a necessary practice, and social spaces for graffiti to be necessary in urban centres, may bemoan this circumstance – we certainly do. However, you clearly show that even when order is weaponised and becomes almost omnipresent, hope is not lost. In this struggle, graffiti is just as omnipresent. This is particularly clear in your study and case breakdown of Leake Street.

I am left with a few questions that I would love to hear your responses to. First, I'm curious about the relationship between aesthetics, politics, and ordering that you lay out throughout your book. In political science at large, you often hear calls for civility in politics – because

Figure 2. Three images from the façade of Hook and Ladder, May 2020, April 2021, and August 2024. Hook and Ladder is directly adjacent to the Third Police Precinct in Minneapolis,Minnesota, the site of intense protests in the summer of 2020. Photographs ©Urban Art Mapping.

as we're engaging in more diverse communities, civility, it is said, is what is needed and helpful to encourage a healthy democratic discourse. But you're putting forth a very different and alternative proposition that I think is potentially much more productive; instead of civility, what is needed to foster a healthy democratic discourse within communities is agonistic politics – or maybe we could also call it a contaminated politics. I agree that politics can be improved by moving towards a more open, agonistic culture. But are aesthetics and politics, particularly around graffiti, necessarily in an antagonistic relationship with one another? And related to that, what are your thoughts around democracy and order? Is there any place for order, or should we not be looking for order in any way?

SA: Thank you, Katelyn for that sharp perspective from political science. This is one of the best things about researching graffiti, that we bring so many disciplines together in the same room!

We obviously can't separate politics and aesthetics. Aesthetics can carry political emancipation, as we know from Rancière (2012) – but I attempted to separate the two because most often, the way that aesthetics is used as an instrument of governance, is to *wash away* politics. The problem is that we use images and a particular aesthetic of public images to depoliticise. And on the flipside of that, in the book I try to pull apart the idea of order, particularly how order becomes soft and atmospheric – the informal presence of police, like you say – so we don't feel it; it's not a hard hammer that comes down on us. But order is also necessary, right? We need it to feel safe. So, we have to engage with it critically, but we can't just dismiss it. It is necessary for democracy.

JT: I love those questions and those responses. I was also moved to think about the question of agency. Katelyn, you spoke of the overdetermination of the political agency of graffiti, which I, as someone thinking about political graffiti and street art, also constantly grapple with. And Sabina, you make such an interesting move in the book by transferring the agency from the individual inscription to the surface, for example in your discussion of the 'inherent anti-whitewashing qualities' (33) of urban surfaces, which gestures at agency as it emanates from the built environment.

HEATHER SHIREY: I have been thinking about the idea of aesthetics as a tool of discipline. I think you summarised that nicely, Katelyn, by addressing murals as a way of imposing order. That resonates with some thoughts I had about the book. In my own response, I'd like to talk about methods and approaches to research, but also about pedagogy, since I'd like to use this book as a tool for teaching. In particular, I was really interested in the idea of interviewing walls as an ethnographic method for understanding the city, which emerged in chapter one, 'Surface Semiotics: A Manual for Knowing Surfaces'. I'm coming at this as an art historian and researcher who studies graffiti and street art. I think about graffiti and street art, as many of us do, as essential forms of communication that are taking place *over time* in the streets – so I'm really interested in how that conversation takes place over time. I have a couple of images to think about, including some images that I've been teaching this week.

We can consider a set of images of the building adjacent to the Third Police Precinct in Minneapolis, which is close to the intersection of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue where George Floyd was murdered in 2020 (**Figure 2**). The Third Precinct was abandoned during the ensuing uprising in May 2020, and the area around it has been the site of constant change through graffiti and street art. It's a perfect example of the idea of murals as a way of imposing order. Early in the uprising, on May 28, anti-policing graffiti covered plywood on the outside of the building, and somebody painted 'pray for you' on top of that. Soon after, in early June, this phrase was painted over with a mural featuring hearts and rainbows, in this way being an 'imposing of order'. Later, the plywood

went through another change when a group called Rogue Citizen painted a new work on top. I'm interested in how the dialogue changes, and also how this dialogue plays out in specific spaces in the city. These ideas from chapter one resonate here: What does the wall see? Who experiences this space? And what does this particular space mean?

I teach a class on a regular basis called 'A History of Street Art'. I'm an art historian, but the approach is not just categorising, describing, and making aesthetic judgments and establishing chronology, although that's part of it. Rather, the goal is to create a path for my students to think about how they can read the city differently, and how they can unpack the conversations that are taking place around them by way of visual material. So this first chapter in particular, but really the whole book, could work well for me as a textbook for the class. One thing that struck me from chapter one was this idea that 'a neutral surface mode does not exist' (45), getting

at the idea that every surface is shaped by tensions, conversations, and competing visions about who owns and controls shared space, and what happens in it. And the remark that 'graffiti and street art are not that interesting, but multiple inscriptions are' (46) really resonated with me because I am not an object- or aesthetic-based art historian. And then Sabina, you write: 'The more guests you welcome to the surface party, the harder it is for graffiti and street art to steal the spotlight. What becomes interesting instead is the mingling, the dynamics, the affinity and dislike between inscriptions, their layering and co-habitation' (46). Here you get at the complexity of the conversations that are taking place, and the tensions within them that are so important. So, I really love thinking about these complex and meaningful conversations, and the idea that graffiti is worthy of our attention for that reason – it just shouldn't be dismissed.

But, specifically, I am interested in talking about the wall interview (48–51). You write about making the choice to not take an ethnographic approach, centred around the perspectives of the people who produce text and images on walls and the people who consume these images, even though that's a common approach in the scholarship. Instead, you're stepping back and giving agency to space and place in a way that is really important. The quote I picked out is this one:

> The ethnography that interested me instead was to interview walls or develop a method of surface analysis which would not afford primacy to human agency and would focus instead on the agency of place, text, and image alongside other components which I gradually developed [...] The strategy was less to imagine a dialogue with non-human subjects and more to try and create a certain disposition of enquiry and attunement with urban surfaces. (48)

Although I am engaged in ethnographic research in my own work, I appreciated this idea of thinking about the complexities of space by interviewing a wall. It was fun and insightful to read the questions you compiled. I was deeply immersed in teaching while reading this chapter, and my students are currently researching murals on Lake Street in Minneapolis, not far from where George Floyd was killed, an area strongly impacted and transformed by the 2020 uprising that followed. I want students to unpack that and think about how to tell those complex stories. This week in class, I asked them what they would ask if they were talking to artists. They came up with things like: How long did it take? How much paint did it take? How much money did it cost? Where did your inspiration come from? Did you work with collaborators? How did you get started as an artist? What is your relationship to this neighbourhood? What does the public think about the piece? It was really lively, everybody was talking, writing notes, and so forth. And then I asked them what they would ask if they could interview the wall. The room went very silent and everybody just looked at me like, what do you mean? It took a minute for everyone to grapple with it. And then somebody raised his hand. He said, okay, we know walls can't speak, we're just asking metaphorically, right? And I said, yeah, just that; what would you ask of the wall? And then it took off. They came up with some of the questions that came up in the book as well: How have you changed over time? What is behind you? What are you concealing? And then things like: What have you seen? What do people think of you? What do you hear? Are you a political statement? And as this developed, I really saw that the questions that they were asking the wall were getting at different things compared to the questions they'd ask the artist. They were getting at things that were more complex, because it just twisted their minds around. And then after that, we started to think, if the wall is not going to be able to answer, how do we address these questions? Because there are answers to these questions. We were puzzling through how we might actually get there. So that's just what I did in class this week with this book. And thank you so much, Sabina, for writing this chapter, because it was really helpful. And if I can put a question back to you, I would love to hear your thoughts on how to use this book in teaching, and whether you yourself have done any such exercises with your classes.

SA: That's such a great story, Heather, thank you for sharing that. It's inevitable that people raise an eyebrow with this wall interview thing. Because of course the wall doesn't speak back to you. But again, it was important for me to imagine this as a direct address, because it is a form of companionship, of *being with the thing*. It's less about looking at a wall through the magni-

fying glass, like the researcher from a distance, but really being right next to it and then seeing and asking: What are you showing me? How am I supposed to pay attention to you? Your story about how students responded differently is really telling. And the wall interview has proven very rewarding to work with, and it's something I imagine growing into a shared online resource to which people can add.

JT: I regularly teach a course on graffiti and street art as well, and I will definitely add this book and the wall interview to my syllabus! And I am, I think like everybody here, very grateful for the sense of playfulness and creativity that Sabina is asking us to find in our practice. Heather, I like what you said about ethnography as a kind of expectation. Because I think that, even though we're a small interdisciplinary field, we all often default to certain methodological conventions. This book does a lot to push these conventions in a way that inspires me to do it more as well.

HS: If my students interview the artist or observer of the wall, what these people have to say obviously becomes the final answer to them. They tend to believe that the artist knows what it's about, that the artist has the final answer. And so it's a powerful idea that the work of graffiti or the mural has a life of its own – the wall does in fact have a life, and there are changes that take place that are beyond the control of the artist, or the vision of the artist. I think it's really important to shift the students' framework and have them ask questions from that perspective.

KK: I've gotten some pushback from folks about giving voice to graffiti instead of the artists, and what you show throughout your book is that – by working with history and interviews, *and* focusing on surfaces – it is a matter of finding a balance between giving voice to both the writers and the writing. Particularly when you looked at Leake Street, you took the ethnography that we're talking about here, and showed how you do that. When I'm talking to students, it's about how they find their voices in research, while giving respect to other voices – about finding these cool, radical, and open questions that they feel safe asking.

JT: I want to begin my response with two images from chapter two: 'Beyond Art and Crime: A Critical History of Graffiti and Street Art'. These images don't have designated numbers, because they're not exactly images, but they occupy an in-between space that is explained in their captions (**Figure 3**). The first begins descriptively, giving us the sense of a rich semiotic landscape, and then telling us that that landscape is essentially overdetermined by a large, figurative mural depicting a woman, and that this mural is deemed to have exceptional artistic value, thus making the photograph irreproducible without the naming and approval of the artist. 'The individual artistic value of one inscription [here trumps] the collective cultural value of many inscriptions.' (91) The second 'non-image' makes this matter even more plain, noting that the images that we are 'deprived of seeing' throughout the book 'are mostly the figurative, 'beautiful' ones', which have 'valued themselves into invisibility' (92) – what an amazingly poetic phrase!

And let me just say here that *Urban Surfaces* is the first book in which I have underlined and annotated captions – quite extensively, actually. I could talk about these non-images and these captions for a long time, but

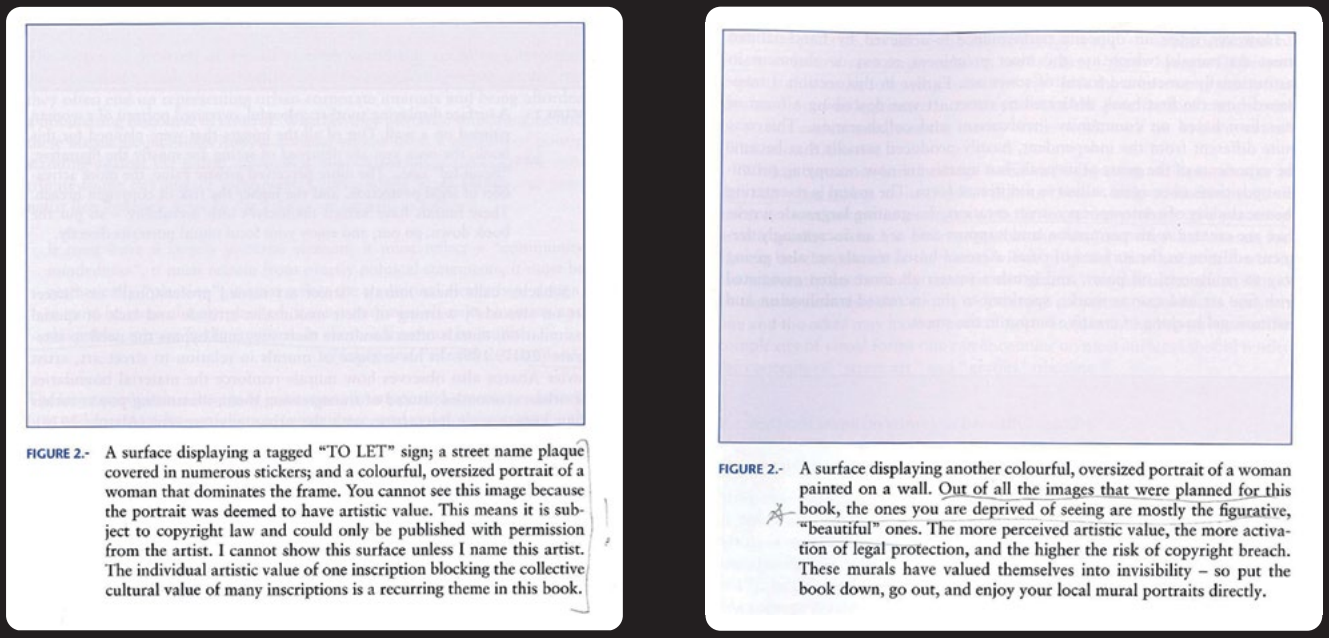

Figure 3. Creating editorial controversy since 2023: empty image frames in Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City have caused delight and confusion. Photograph ©Sabina Andron.

Figure 4. A wall in central Athens, captured in 2018 and 2022, demonstrates the city's transformation from an epicentre of crisis saturated with unruly graffiti and street art towards aspirational post-crisis revitalisation, galvanised by graffiti removal and muralisation. The second image shows a mural by Guido van Helten, commissioned by the Municipality of Athens and the Australian Embassy in Greece. Photographs ©Julia Tulke/Aesthetics of Crisis.

the reason that I wanted to start with them is that they are central to what to me is the main throughline of the book: the interplay of activation and deactivation. And I think these images really invite us to think deeply about how our own scholarly and photographic practices can activate or deactivate, emulate or flatten what we find in the streets.

As visual scholars and practitioners, we all think a lot about images – the ones we take ourselves and the ones we find elsewhere – and about how to embed them in our writing in ways that push back against the idea of images as mere illustration, and that don't replicate the decontexualisation so common in the circulation of photographs of street art and graffiti. And I feel this book really offers an interesting, radical, and creative solution to that, despite being constrained by the codes of scholarly publishing and copyright protections. What Sabina does in this book is to let the images exist in a way where they offer us a parallel and entangled narrative. In a way, you could read the captions as their own chapter, one that gestures simultaneously to and beyond the main text. Many of them are also richly annotated, which pushes back against the idea of the photograph as self-evident and transparent. And this is all nowhere more evident and evocative than in the blank image frames included in the book.

So these images, and *Urban Surfaces* as a whole, prompt us to think about what urban scholarship that activates looks like. I think for Sabina and myself and most others here in the room, this is a matter of longitudinal engagement (Hansen & Flynn 2015): an attunement over time with urban landscapes in their entire visual intensity, not just individual selected sites, but the whole of it, mediated and captured through incessant walking and photography. This often involves repeat photography, returning to the same site over and over again, and creating archives that are both deeply personal and public. For Sabina, as in this instance, I think it is also about rejecting the logics of individual naming and authorship, in favour of collective names (or non-names) and authorship, as a way of conferring meaning and value. I found this most actualised in the book's contrasting of graffiti or wall writing as a 'thoughtful form of grassroots urban engagement', and muralism, or muralisation, which emerges as the apex of what Sabina calls 'streetartness' – the cultural, symbolic value bestowed upon particular aesthetics in and for the contemporary creative city.

From this it follows that, essentially, graffiti activates and muralism deactivates. And this is definitely something that I have witnessed and documented in Athens, my primary site of research over the past decade. This city has seen an intense proliferation of political, self-sanctioned street art and graffiti in response to several crisis situations over the past decade. After the pandemic,

Figure 5. Yehimi Cambrón, 'Monuments: Our Immigrant Mothers'. Mural created in 2019 for Living Walls, the City Speaks in Decatur, GA. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph ©Hector Amador. https://www.yehimicambron.com/monuments-our-immigrant-mothers.


MONUMENTS OUR IMMIGRANT MOTHERS LIVING
@YCAMBRON WALLS
LAURA PATRICIA
CALLE GRANT
2019
N. CANDLER ST
ONE
WAY

the city government turned to whitewashing as well as muralism to signal towards an aspirational post-crisis situation (**Figure 4**). This binary is very explicit in the official discourse: graffiti is crisis, or degeneration, and muralism is post-crisis, or regeneration. We can easily critique this when we look at what plays out in the streets, especially at the level of scale. Graffiti happens at the human scale, it invites engagement and activates in that way, whereas a mural stands at a monumental scale, dominating its site to give us a singular narrative, leaving very little space for engagement. And as Sabina cautions us: 'Any surface sign which does not leave room for annotation, should make us suspicious' (192). If we trace the conversations we've already had, I think we can see that we're all suspicious of murals: murals and order, murals and regeneration, and so forth; and I agree, especially relating to my experience in Athens.

But, since having moved to the US almost a decade ago, I also have a parallel track of experiences related to being involved in a few critical mural projects and festivals. And these experiences have really pushed me to reconsider some truisms about murals, muralism, and muralisation that I want to bring in here as a point for us all to consider together. To reference a recent encounter, I want to share the work of Yehimi Cambrón (**Figure 5, previous page**), an artist and activist based between Chicago and Atlanta, whose work stands in the long tradition of community muralism that's very strong here in the US. She is also somebody who works under the very precarious, liminal legal status of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), which makes participation in illegal writing culture prohibitive, if not impossible. In working with critical mural projects here, I've met a lot of artists that are indigenous, migrant, BIPOC, or who are in some other way more vulnerable to policing, or queer people and women who simply cannot fathom authorising themselves to take up space in the way participants in writing cultures do, and who would have probably never come to create work in the streets if it wasn't for the invitation by a curator (Snow, 2017). So, is this work big? Yes! Is it beautiful? Yes! Is it figurative? Yes! Does it dominate its site? Yes! But do I think it necessarily brings about deactivation because of that? I'm not exactly sure – and I would love to hear what you all think. Because there is a lot to consider in terms of context-specific and site-specific frameworks. This is a work that was created with input from the community, collaboratively, even if it may appear, in the end, as the voice of a singular artist asserting themselves. So, pondering these tensions, and what activation and deactivation can mean in different contexts, and how we can account for that in our scholarship is what I came away with from the book.

SA: You're really offering such a useful, thought provoking framework. I'll start with activation/deactivation, a thread we should follow in future research! When I was on the book tour, I was lucky enough in Italy to have a couple of responses on two different occasions from Andrea Brighenti – many of you might know his work. He made a point that stuck with me that I will try to connect with what you just said, which is that it might be useful for us to start thinking about what's happening on surfaces from an ecological, ecosystem point of view. Thinking about ways to manage, research, and conceive of surfaces so as to make sure that they become more friction-full, warmer, mutually irritative environments, where more things can grow. And I think this is exactly what you say about activation – it's about making more heat, facilitating more bodies to be together and be in tension with each other. And that is not a formal decision. So while friction leads to a *hot* mural like the one you show (**Figure 5**), perhaps there is a limitation to the method of just looking at a wall because the wall won't tell you who the artist is, what their status is, and how the work was composed. Yes, it is a big thing that occupies the wall, and it is only one person's voice, but in fact, if you dig deeper, beyond what you can just learn from that immediate encounter, you actually find out that it is a space that activates the voices of its local environment. So, one lesson here is about limitations. And the other one is that I absolutely love this vocabulary and this framework, and I think it's something that we should think about using more.

And just a small comment about the empty frames, those 'non images': I have been receiving so many messages since the book came out saying there's an error, an omission – because people don't read the caption. I suffered so much when the publisher said I couldn't include those images, but this solution may ultimately spark more interesting debates – if people stop thinking that's a mistake!

JT: I can't believe people wouldn't understand that, because that means they didn't read the captions, it's right in there! And they really made me feel like I need to step up my caption game.

HS: I also need to step up my caption game, I want to have captions that people highlight and underline – and those in the book are really rich, beautiful captions. And what you did Sabina, the erasure, is really important. I also appreciate the framework that you provided, Julia, and I appreciate you thinking about murals, how they might fit in, and how much that depends on the context. And I really love thinking about friction-full walls and irritative surfaces, and the idea of producing heat – how heat is produced with these kinds of images, and where that happens and where it doesn't. I have been studying BLM murals. Sometimes it's just the words 'Black Lives Matter' painted on the street in yellow, which doesn't seem that interesting, but can generate so much friction and so much tension and so much heat, that it is incredibly significant. And sometimes the Black Lives Matter murals painted on the pavement are really beautiful, and yet they don't create a lot of friction and a lot of heat, and they're less interesting. This discussion gave me a framework to think about why that is, why some works do what they do and have the power that they have as a result of that.

KK: I think activation and deactivation also helps us flip our assessment of graffiti writing, not just muralism, which I appreciate. When you were talking about the history and the way that things are activated or deactivated, I thought about when you go to a city and you walk in the streets you can feel the history, and not all murals are doing this violent deactivating, and not all graffiti is doing the super cool activating. It's this weird amalgamation of both that actually becomes really hard to process with your brain trying to toggle back and forth. And so, Sabina, your book really brought that out and I think your activation-deactivation, Julia, helps me hold those two things together.

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Tracks and Traces: Exploring the World of Graffiti Writing through Visual Methods (Bengtsen, 2023)

Andrea Mubi Brighenti
University of Trento, Italy

Graffiti is an exciting transdisciplinary research field that begs for a multiplicity of approaches and methodologies. Aesthetic, legal, criminological, semiotic, and political ecological takes on graffiti – to mention a few – call indeed for as many dedicated research methods. Yet graffiti research methodology does not usually feature prominently in the literature, as confirmed even by a cursory look at recent reference works in the area, such as the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross, or *Graffiti and Street Art. Reading, Writing and Representing the City*, edited by Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi. Within this framework, Peter Bengtsen, himself an established graffiti scholar, has found a gap to fill with his new book *Tracks and Traces*. The aim of his book is precisely to develop visual methods to research urban graffiti and street art. The visual lens here provides both a theoretical prism through which graffiti can be conceptualised as well as a practical tool to attend to graffiti in context.

Social scientists using visual methods are determined to make the most of the visualisable details of social life, in a way that necessarily spans beyond the documentarian and becomes fully reflexive. Such a requirement ramifies into the many lives of images inside and beyond the street, now including those on social media with their intense circulation of shareable pictures, video clips, comments, etc. As Bengtsen shows, visual materials turn out to be inextricably enmeshed with ethical and even legal considerations, attesting to the fact that the public domain is always a sensible terrain, where heated reactions and unintended consequences easily ensue. Another important stance brought forward by the author shares similarities with the anthropology of material culture: in both cases, the visual materials are employed to glean hints of social practices and milieus we do not have direct access to. Not having access to the practice is, notably, not the same as not having access to its sites: in other words, there's a lot in taking pictures of graffiti that resembles painting

A still from the video *Tracing KEGR* (2019) by ©Peter Bengtsen.

graffiti, including trespassing into train yards, climbing walls, and reaching what are sometimes acrobatic spots. This embodied intimacy with graffiti is valuable to the researcher even in the absence of direct contact with the practitioners' community.

The visual therefore has more meanings than those associated with what we might call an 'evidential gaze'. Certainly, the social scientist is bound to remain, at least partly, a practising semiotician, an investigator akin to a detective working on a case to be cracked, as David Frisby beautifully elaborated. Still, the visual materials to be examined also constitute occasions to build connections and rapport in the field, given their capacity to elicit affective reactions and associate people around matters of shared concern. In other words, these pictures are more than just artefacts – or, to put it differently, they seem to possess some sort of agency of their own (as Tom Mitchell suggested, they might *want* something). An additional component that comes into play in the book

is time: the author presents his own experimental 26-minute video, *Tracing KEGR*, illustrating a hunt for tags by the Danish graffiti writer KEGR on the outskirts of Malmö, Sweden. With *Tracing KEGR*, Bengtsen deploys an overlaying technique for enhancing the visibility of tags and their relation to the urban environments where they are emplaced.

It is, however, not only the tag that is the object here, but the search itself, its temporality, and uncertain outcome – gesturing towards a mode of inhabiting the urban environment and possibly also towards the mode that subtended the writer's own action in the first place. A lot of interesting insights also derive from the reactions to the video posted on YouTube, revealing how most viewers expect videos of graffiti to be fast-paced, highly dynamic, entertaining, and over-the-top, even while the actual practice can feel quite different (a graffiti writer is first of all a relentless walker). To continue the topic of the search and its peculiar temporality, the author then produced another experiment, which the book reports in its last chapter: a printed zine based on *Tracing KEGR* (yes, paper zines are still fashionable well into the internet age) has been produced and used by the author to organise several scavenger hunts for copies of the zine conveniently hidden in the city's folds, tipping Instagram followers with apposite clues to the search sites.

In the final few pages, Bengtsen considers the impact new technologies such as drones and artificial intelligence might have in affecting or even disrupting the practice of graffiti, its circulation, and reception: drones give more chances for producing scenic documentation of graffiti in the making, but they also give more surveillance tools to the police and security agencies; and when it comes to AI, it might be used as a creative tool, but it might also disrupt the established hierarchies inside the graffer community, producing endless simulacra of inexistent (and often cheap) graffiti. Neatly produced by the independent press the author himself has launched, *Tracks and Traces* offers, in conclusion, an interesting and valuable resource for continuing the discussion of tags, graffiti, and the urban visual arts more generally.

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In Conversation with Martha Cooper:

Wool – Covilhã Urban Art Festival
Portugal, June 15, 2024.

Martha Cooper, Lara Seixo Rodrigues and Susan Hansen in conversation. Covilhã, Portugal, June 15, 2024.
Photograph ©Wool–Covilhã Urban Art Festival.

The Wool Urban Art Festival has been held annually in Covilhã, Portugal since 2011. The following is an edited transcript of a conversation held at Wool between renowned documentary photographer Martha Cooper and Nuart Journal Editor Susan Hansen.

The Role of Documentary Photography in the Heritage of Graffiti and Street Art

Lara Seixo Rodrigues (Wool Festival Director): Welcome to Wool. Tonight, we are in a special place. This is called the Continent Room because the ceiling features a mural showing all of the continents that were known during the 17th century, when this was painted. So, I think this is the perfect place for us to receive Martha Cooper.

Susan Hansen: Tonight, we've decided to focus on one critical issue in particular, rather than having a more general conversation. This topic is the role of documentary photography in the heritage of graffiti and street art. My colleague Jacob Kimvall – a Swedish art historian who specialises in graffiti – talks about the role of the documentarian in graffiti subculture as being long recognised and respected, as photographic documentation is essential for the evolving life of the subculture. Indeed, Martha's now iconic status is inextricably connected to her being one of the first, and certainly the most prolific and well-known documentarians of graffiti.

So, Martha, while you're obviously a highly technically accomplished photographer and you have produced decades worth of aesthetically strong work, you've also played an ongoing role as an historian and an archivist. Why is this role so important?

Martha Cooper: As necessary as I once was, I think that today, there are many, many documentary photographers, and together, we are important. Every place now has their own documenters. But when I first started taking pictures in the late '70s of graffiti on film, not everyone had access to a camera. Now digital technology has advanced to the point that pretty much anybody can take a really good picture with their phone.

Do you still work with film or have you made the digital switch?

Never. I would never want to work with film again! I don't understand people that think that film somehow is better than digital. Film is very slow. You need a lot of light to get a good picture. I think digital is better, it has its advantages. I mean, there's so many things that I can do by myself now, like the post processing. I never could do colour post processing with film.

But that must mean that you're amassing a lot of photographs, particularly with your digital camera?

I am. Hundreds of thousands. Millions! Well, maybe a million.

A million photographs! What an incredible resource. Do you have any plans for archiving or cataloguing your photographs?

I'm in the process of archiving my photographs now. Which is a big job, but I feel it's a necessary one. I have just sold my entire archive to the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. I have four years to get it all in, and I've started this process already. I'm trying to identify everything and put it in in some kind of order so that future researchers will be able to go to the Library of Congress and search for a name, a date, a place, or a festival and I'm making it so that people can use the pictures – not for advertising, but for editorial purposes. So, artists will be able to go and get pictures of their own work and use them. That's the agreement. So that's my plan for the next couple of years, and that's what it's going to take to prepare my archive for the Library of Congress.

This is very exciting news, but it sounds like a lot of work! Out of curiosity, I did a quick deep dive on the Library of Congress website before our conversation. With the search term 'graffiti', there were only 479 hits for images – and 100 of these were photographs of historical graffiti prior to style writing. So, the addition of your considerable archive represents a significant increase to the available visual documentation of graffiti and street art.

Yes. I should also mention that Henry Chalfant, my coauthor of *Subway Art*, is also working with the Library of Congress. So, both of our collections will be in the same place. I've also started a library at Urban Nation in Berlin. People give me a lot of street art books and I'm giving them all to the library. So, there will be a street art library to archive books on street art and graffiti for people to access.

That's fantastic.

People are calling this the biggest art movement in the history of the world. And it's important that these archives – and I would hope that every country has its own archives – are placed somewhere so that 5000 years from now, people will be able to access them in order to understand the way we're looking at art history now, and at alternative forms of art histories.

Absolutely. This is a major institutional acquisition. Do you know which section of the Library of Congress your archives will be catalogued in?

My section is folklife, because I had done some documentary projects with them in the past that are catalogued in this section.

Do you feel that the positioning of graffiti and street art as belonging in the folklife section of the Library of Congress reflects the fact that these forms of art are still not being taken entirely seriously within major cultural institutions as a critical period in art history?

I don't know whether it's going to make any difference, but I would like to see graffiti and street art be taken a little more seriously by contemporary art museums. That would be my hope for the future. My hope is that museum curators will look at it more closely. But I don't think I have had anything to do with the fact that is not the case now because I've seen and photographed so many wonderful graffiti pieces that are never talked about. And here in Covilhã I don't mean the murals, but just the graffiti pieces around town. They're inventive, colourful, fresh, interesting. And you know, these are kids doing it for each other. They have their own ideas about what they like about art. And I just would like to see that taken a little more seriously by contemporary art museums.

What is the role of documentary photography in achieving this?

I think that photography is really critical to the preservation of street art and graffiti, and I feel like my photographs are probably going to last longer than any of the walls that we see as we walk through the city. Some walls don't even last for a year. Other walls last for five years, but it's unusual to see a wall that lasts for, say, ten years in really good condition. So, how are those walls going to be preserved? From my point of view, the best way to preserve them is in good still photographs, which not just show the wall but also show the context of the neighbourhood the walls were painted in and if possible, the process of painting the wall, which is my specialty. I really like to be able to actually see the artists at work. I mean, anybody can take a picture of a finished wall. But there's only a very limited period of time when the wall is being produced.

It's essential to capture that process. I think this

reflects a vital approach to heritage as it applies to graffiti and street art. This departs from a more traditional approach, which assumes that we should treat work on the street like art in a gallery or museum and put a heritage protection order on the finished work in order to preserve and restore it physically for all time. But the documentation of the life of the work in situ, including its production, as a form of living heritage, feels so important.

Martha, your approach effectively captures finished walls and their social and environmental context, but crucially, you also lean towards capturing process, and thus towards capturing some of the energy and the adrenaline, or the life of producing the work on the wall. That's an energy that some claim is integral to these ephemeral art forms. The example we were talking about earlier is Keith Haring's Crack is Wack wall.

Yes, that's a very good heritage example because since Keith painted the Crack is Wack wall in 1986, it has been preserved and repeatedly repainted. But in the repainting, it loses something. Of course, whoever repainted it was probably a professional artist, but they are not Keith Haring. You know, they paint so carefully, and all the lines become very straight over time, that it loses the freshness and energy of the original.

So, it somehow loses its aura in the attempts to preserve it? Does restoration then paradoxically destroy art on the street?

Yeah, it becomes kind of petrified.

Do you feel that ephemerality is a defining part of this art form? The fact that it might fade over time, or be destroyed, or painted over?

I would agree that ephemerality is the defining part of this art form, and indeed if this were not an ephemeral form of art, I would not be so interested in photographing it. That's what makes it interesting as a subject for photography – the fact that it isn't going to last.

I discovered this morning that if you google Keith Haring murals in New York City, the first photograph that pops up is one of your process shots showing Keith in action painting in the 1980s, which really brings his work to life.

Yes, I think that shot is of him painting the Houston Bowery Wall, which like Crack is Wack was also repainted, but now it's not there anymore. So, there was an attempt to restore it.

I didn't realise that was an ultimately failed physical restoration attempt. I guess now the only real records of that work are through photographs such as yours, and the context they provide.

Audience: Martha, it seems very important you not just photograph pieces on trains or on walls. You also photograph the artist and the context where they are working. What's the importance of context for your work?

Well, the cover of *Subway Art* is Dondi painting in the yard. After I met Dondi, I explained to him that I had seen trains in New York and I'd spent a lot of time standing in vacant lots just waiting for painted trains to go by. But I didn't really understand how those trains could be painted. And I kept asking him to please take me to the yards, which one night he finally did. And really, it was only because these trains are so huge, and because they were parked side by side, that they were able to stand up between them and get to the top of the train. It really was a revelation to me how these trains were painted. In order to paint a whole train [painting every car of a train], the windows were also painted just in case, this was not some random act of vandalism. And so, for me, that's an important part of the story.

First, the graffiti writers make a plan. You have to decide which colours to take because it takes maybe 20 cans of paint. You're sneaking into the yards through a little hole in the fence and you're carrying these bags full of paint and it's really dark. And while you have a sketch, you have to sort of memorise the colours in order to outline the piece. All of that was a mystery to me until I came along. And then the photographs tell the story. So,

Subway Art. 25th-Anniversary edition (2009). ©Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant.

I think that was really important to capture.

It also feels important that you didn't take the artists that were there out of the picture, you kept them in the frame.

Yeah, of course, but only with their permission! It wasn't like I was sneaking around taking photographs. I do think it's important to photograph what you see and what you know. And I always like to see what the artist looks like. So, it's disappointing to me when an artist like Banksy won't let me take a picture of him. You know, I'd like to see what he looks like! I think it's interesting.

Did you think that the media distorted the reality of what those young people you hung out with and photographed were like? You know, they created these images of vandals just trying to destroy things. And you're standing there seeing young kids interested in art. Did that feel frustrating at the time?

Yes. It was frustrating and I always tried to counter that vandal image with images that genuinely showed who they were and what they were doing. I mean, of course there was some real vandalism, but there was a lot more than that.

SH: Did that motivation – to counteract this pernicious 'vandal' discourse – affect the editorial

composition of Subway Art? I've always wondered.

In the first edition of *Subway Art*, we even included a glossary of terms, and we explained graffiti a lot more. But by the time the current edition of the book was published, some decades later, we figured everybody knew those terms, so we didn't explain them so much. *Subway Art* is now more of a photography book than the first book was. The first edition was published in England. We could not get it published in America. We sent it to 20 different US-based publishers, and they all hated graffiti so much. They were like, we have to look at this every day, we hate it and we are not publishing it!

And now it's the most stolen book of all time?

Yeah, when it finally came out, the bookstores locked it in cases.

Audience: How was it like working in New York City in the '70s? The city seems to have been a crazy environment then – how difficult was it to capture this energy?

It felt adventurous, but I had a car, which was my secret weapon. So, I could drive around, and I used to take some of the writers in the car and go to the yard. Yeah, it felt exciting. But the city was bankrupt. And they had a lot worse crime to think about than graffiti. And still do. I mean, if you think of the South Bronx and the Lower East Side, lots of the buildings were destroyed, there were vacant lots everywhere, it was empty. Landlords were burning down their own buildings to claim insurance.

SH: Going back in time, I believe you studied anthropology at college? Do you think that you have an ethnographic eye when you pick up your camera? Is this perhaps why you have such a keen interest in the 'human' process shots and other aspects of the social context?

I was an art major and I did graduate work in anthropology. Yes, I think I'm looking at it from the point of view of an ethnologist. I mean, the thing about the process shots is that after the wall is finished, you really don't even know what kind of paint was used. You don't know whether the artists used a stencil or an edge and sprayed against it, or whether they picked things up from the ground and used those to paint, which I've seen artists do. Those are the kinds of details that you can document and maybe it's not of interest to everybody, but it would be nice to have that process recorded along with the picture of the finished wall.

Audience: I'm a photographer and what I admire most in your work is the humanity you capture. It surprised me listening to you just now, that you studied anthropology, I didn't know! I also think it is amazing that you got your pictures in the Library of Congress. In Lisbon, we put our pictures in the municipal archives.

Oh, it's good to know your pictures are going to the municipal archives. That's wonderful. Every country should have municipal archives for photography.

I see many efforts around the world regarding the conservation and preservation of street art, but these are mostly about protecting material heritage – the walls or the pieces themselves. So, I was wondering what your thoughts are about the immaterial part? The intangible part, or the memories that those walls leave to the community that lives with those walls?

Definitely, it should be part of the documentary process to try to record the memories that are associated with the wall as well as the memories of how the wall was painted. That's important.

Whenever we go to a festival, everyone talks about the impact of the art on the local community, but what about the community of artists, producers, and documenters that festivals bring together worldwide – this community that we engage in together. How do you feel about that community?

The main emphasis is always on the local communities who are embracing the art that the artists are putting up. But you're right, there's another community that is of the artists themselves, and the documenters. It's a wonderful community and we are now travelling from festival to festival, and we meet each other in different places around the world. I think the artists have been given a lot of incredible opportunities, without which the street art wouldn't have happened, and it's made their work very visible. I'm sure every artist has many stories of what their walls have led them to. Who knows what kinds of commissions have grown out of these festivals? And I have stories like that too as I get invited to other festivals because of these connections.

SH: But without photography, and especially in a smaller festival, is the audience for the work limited?

Well, photography allows many more people to see the work. I mean, how many people are actually going to see the mural in person compared to how many people now, especially with Instagram, are going to see a picture of the mural? But the artists themselves are taking very good pictures.

Audience: Has this helped? The fact that everyone has a camera? Or has this devalued the profession of being a professional photographer?

I'm definitely not as necessary as I used to be, but on the other hand it's giving me a lot of visibility. I don't know, I think it's both. What do you think?

I think you're right. I think it's both. But if you're a specialist in the field and you come to an event like this, you attract an audience that really wants to see what you're doing and what you're documenting. That's not the case with somebody just walking down the street, taking a good picture.

Well, you never know who's walking down the street and taking the picture. Anything can happen now with Instagram.

SH: Martha, I believe there's another important collection of yours that has recently been acquired. In closing, could you tell people about this?

I have a collection of images of women photographers called Kodak Girl.com. So, when Kodak first developed cameras, they had an advertising icon, who was a woman – the Kodak girl. But somehow when I was growing up in the late '40s and then the '50s, photography was considered a man's job. I was the only female photographer for *The New York Post*, and their first ever female photographer. That was in 1977, around the time I first started photographing graffiti. So, I have this collection that shows that women have always been photographers. You know, I'm just trying to make early female photographers more visible because there have always been many of us. When I don't have a camera, it feels like something's missing.

Anderson ‘Rato’ Nascimento

Pixador from Rio de Janeiro (1991–2024)

In September 2023, I met Anderson Nascimento, better known among Rio de Janeiro’s pixadores and pixadoras as Rato, which means ‘mouse’. He showed me the city through his eyes, the eyes of a pixador. Soon after, I interviewed him at his home. Rato, who was founder of the pixação group Legionarios, loved to take risks; for writing his name he would climb precariously high above street level, but he would also crawl on the dirty ground on his hands and knees.

Rio de Janeiro bears his unmistakable signature, on inconspicuous walls, in peripheral neighbourhoods, on the city’s characteristic viaducts, but also in the bustling city centre. In a city deeply marked by social inequalities and spatial limitations, pixadores and pixadoras seem to overcome especially the spatial boundaries. Protected by the darkness of the night, they cross the borders of different city areas and leave their conspicuous marks all over the walls of Rio in a style they call Xarpi.

In this interview with Rato, we talk about his childhood memories of being called a camundongo and catching flying fire balloons, and his career as a pixador. We also discuss the tensions between graffiti and pixação, the relationship between art and pixação, as well as the archiving methods that have emerged from within the movement. Rato had amassed a unique collection of photographs and newspaper clippings from 2008 onwards, filling more than eight folders to the brim with Xarpi-tags from different neighbourhoods and gangs (the so-called Siglas).

Anderson ‘Rato’ Nascimento died on April 8, 2024 in Rio de Janeiro in a motorcycle accident. He was 33 years old.

Maëlle Karl
Free University of Berlin, Germany

Karl: Why did you start doing Xarpi?[1]

Rato: My father worked a lot. I lost my mother when I was really young. At school, the boys would hide from their mothers in order to have fun, date girls and paint. They were always painting. And I went along with them. But I was very scared. Very afraid. I'll show you some photos of me riding a mountain bike. Manoeuvring around, I was very audacious. But for these really crazy things like writing and climbing on walls, I was scared to death. One day they created a group here in the neighbourhood – the pixadores from Rio call this group Siglas – but they barred me from joining. They wouldn't let me in, you know? That made me really angry. A week later, I got into an argument with one of them and ended up getting beaten up. The boy who hit me was working out, it seemed. Some time passed and I joined a jujitsu class so I could take him on. And I decided that I was going to be much bigger than all of them together in pixação. I was dead serious. A year later, I beat that guy up and kept on doing pixação. Now, many years later, none of these guys do pixação anymore, but I realised that I couldn't stop doing it.

How do you differentiate between a xarpi[1] that you think is well done, that is beautiful, and one that is ugly?

Firstly, the calligraphy. I think the calligraphy is everything. The xarpi has to be legible and well-crafted. And secondly, it's about the guy's attitude and style: what he's done before and what he's going to do tomorrow. If he started out wanting to attract the wrong kind of attention, or if he wants to do it right.

Can you give an example?

At the time, everyone wanted to have a big name, but not two guys called Bob and Gaspar. They just wanted to do their work quietly. They would go to locations where there was no one else around. In my early days, I used to write a lot at spots where the majority of the other pixadores and pixadoras were writing also. Nowadays, I think that's very wrong, because Rio de Janeiro is very big, there's room for everyone to write at different locations.

And your name? Why did you call yourself Rato?

Because I was quite... well, I'm still small, but I was even smaller then, and very white, and I liked catching large fire balloons in the air.[2] Then they called me a 'camundongo'. When I started to do pixação I said, I'll just shorten that name. I'll just abbreviate it so there are fewer letters.

What is a camundongo?

A camundongo is a small house mouse. So, I changed this to Rato to reduce the number of letters, to match the name.

And this ornament you make on your tag, does it have anything to do with the mouse?

No, but people keep saying that it's the mouse's tail.

Yes, I thought so too.

It's because when everyone starts, they make a very childish ornament to their tag. Mine, over time, just got tighter. Then it ended up like this.

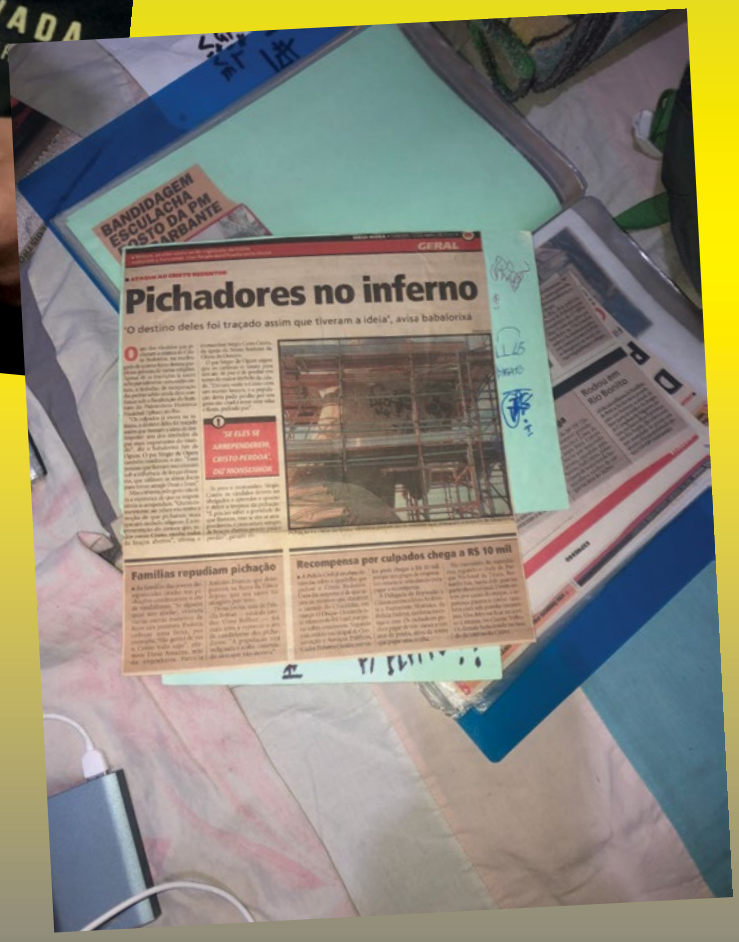
But is it important to have an ornament in your xarpi [pixação signature] or are there some people who don't use one?

It's optional. Now, a lot of pixadores don't have one and I think it's better that way because then your name will fit everywhere. If one day you want to add on an ornament, you can. Gust for example doesn't have one so, if he writes on a smaller spot, there will be room for his name, while mine will be squeezed in because of the ornament – but if he wants to use one too, he can. Over time, people create a symbol in their minds that becomes dependent on the ornament. After a while, you'll have engraved that mark there, not just the letter.

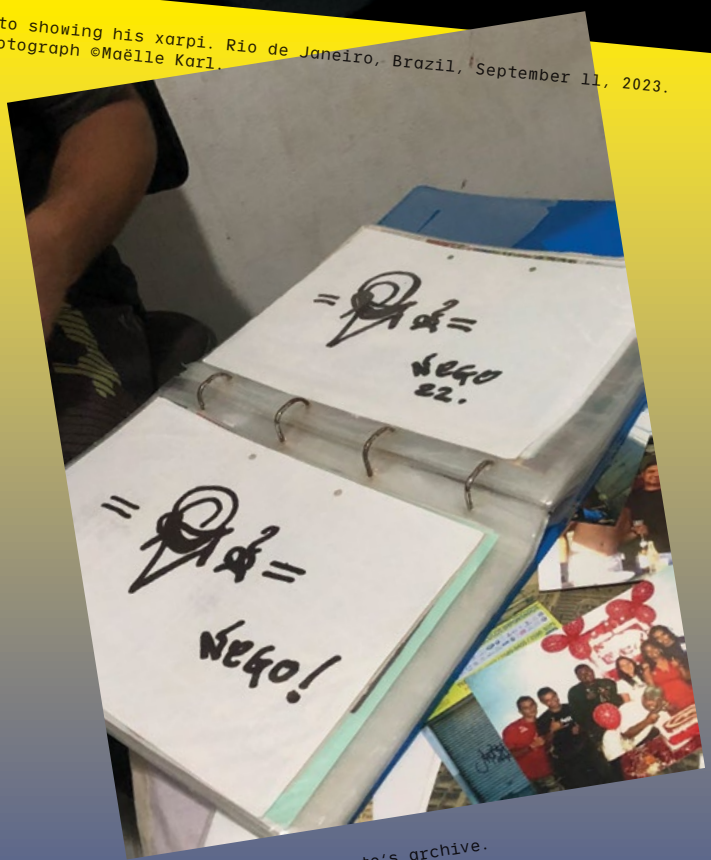
Do the people from the pixação scene know you because of the archiving you do? Do they care?

They think it's important, because you have to be patient, right? Every day you have to look at the newspaper, buy it, cut out the articles, you know?

Rato showing his xarpi. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, September 11, 2023.
Photograph ©Maëlle Karl.

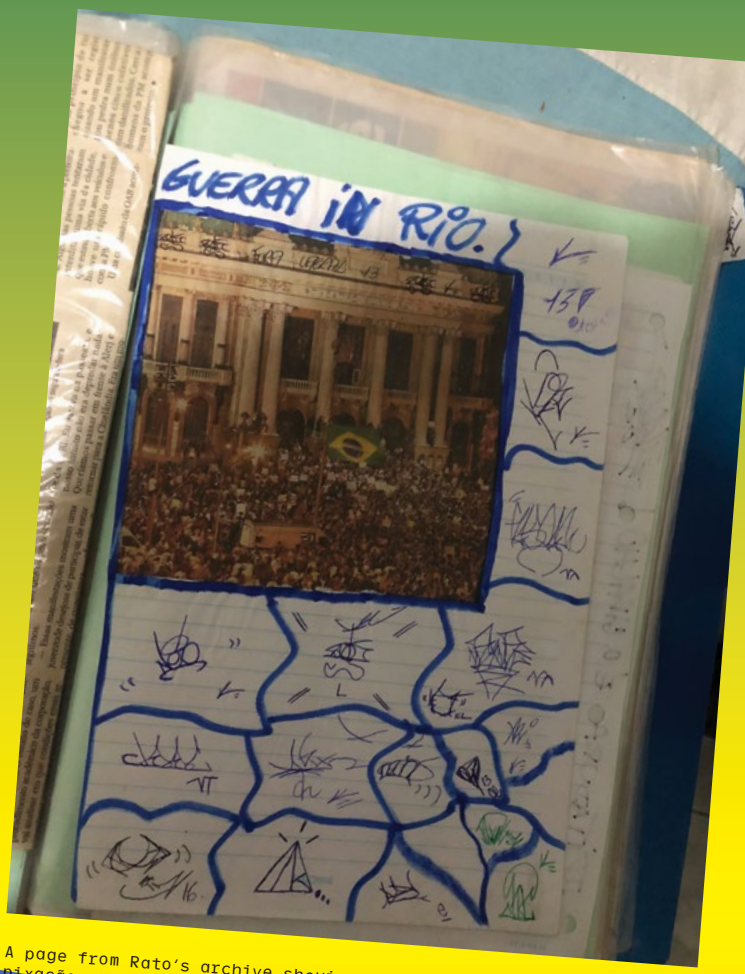


A newspaper article from Rato's archive.
Photograph ©Maëlle Karl.



Xarpi Sketches from Rato's archive.
Photograph ©Maëlle Karl.

Photographs from Rato’s archive. Photograph ©Maëlle Karl.



A page from Rato’s archive showing the connection between pixação and the protest movement. The photograph depicts a 2013 protest against the government (when the governor of Rio de Janeiros was Sergio Cabral). On this page you can see different xarpis and a phrase that says: ‘Fora Cabral’ (Carbal out).

Xarpis on a high bridge. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2023. Photograph ©Maëlle Karl.

A xarpi by Rato on the back of Karl’s t-shirt. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, September 11, 2023. Photographs ©Maëlle Karl.

You have a lot of things in your archive, including 'folhinas', right?

Yes, here I have a folhinha[3], and each folder is a region – Baixada, West Zone, North Zone. Then I organise them by signature, and I keep two sheets of each one. Everyone asks me, why two instead of one? It's because you never know what tomorrow will bring. I've seen a folder like this sell for over two thousand reais.[4] There are groups that know how important these archives are and they offer to pay for this, so you never know what the next day will bring. If one day I needed to sell, I wouldn't just have one sheet, I'd have two of each, you know?

You also go and take the pictures yourself?

Yes. I take pictures of the actions, buildings, and different siglas, pixadores, and pixadoras. But this is my personal collection, which I like to keep. Here's me and Sunk. Me and Kim. And me alone.

What is the difference between graffiti and pixação? In Germany, we don't know the difference. Pixação would be called graffiti too.

No, we're *arteiros*, right? **What's arteiros?**

We screw things up, you know, we get up to a lot of mischief. We like to... how do I put this... challenge the system. Whereas people doing graffiti make art. **And you don't make art?**

No. What we do is rustic art. Very rustic. [laughs]

But why do you think the people in Brazil don't like pixação? Because I mean, they even like graffiti...

Because graffiti is colourful. Graffiti artists do something beautiful. Pixação is only beautiful to us. There are names that even us pixadores find ugly. Mine, for example, I find extremely ugly. Seriously!

Why do you use it then?

Because when I came up with it, I didn't have much creativity. Nowadays I'm more into irreverence. But sometimes I see a xarpi and think, 'holy shit, that's a beautiful letter'. **Don't you think it's difficult to be a pixador?**

It depends on your style. If you like to write on high buildings, there will come a time when it's inevitable that you'll face a risk. It could even be fatal, as it was for some of my friends. **So, you say it's not art, that's fine, but you still have to be creative, don't you?**

Yes, just like the phrases we put next to our xarpis. There have been places where I didn't even want to do pixação, I just went up to them because they would be ideal spots for writing only the phrase. A phrase I use is a saying that goes, 'a rat is a rat in any sewer'.

And do you think there's an affinity between pixadores and those participating in social protests?

Yes, there is. The pixadores wave started with protests. [shows photo]

So, don't you think nowadays it's also a protest? Even if it's not so obvious?

No, nowadays I think it has become more of an addiction. For everyone.

Anderson ‘Rato’ Nascimento and Maëlle Karl. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2023. Photograph ©Maëlle Karl.

Para meu amigo Ratinho. Fique em paz.

1 A Pixação signature/tag in Rio de Janeiro is also called a xarpi.

2 Launching large fire balloons called ‘balão’ is an old tradition from Rio de Janeiro, which has been banned since 1998 due to the high risk of fire, but is still a popular practice, especially in the Zona Norte.

3 Papers pixadores collect, similar to blackbooks in graffiti culture.

4 Around €165, or $180.

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FAME! The Totemic Principle in Subcultural Graffiti

Erik Hannerz

This is an edited transcript of a keynote speech delivered by Dr Erik Hannerz (Lund University, Sweden) at Nuart Aberdeen, Scotland, June 7, 2024.

Figure 1. Erik Hannerz speaking at Nuart Plus. Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum, June 7, 2024. Photograph ©Conor Gault.

For over 40 years the concept of fame – as in subcultural recognition and celebrity – has been the self-evident answer used to explain the driving force behind the hows, wheres, whats, and whys of subcultural graffiti. Still, the concept of fame itself is all too often left unproblematised. In this talk, cultural criminologist Erik Hannerz approaches fame less for what it ***is*** *and more for what fame* ***does****, arguing that fame works to materialise collective emotions, ideals, and boundaries that are otherwise ephemeral and intangible.*

Erik Hannerz: Ever since I started researching graffiti some ten years ago, I have been reluctant to use the concept of fame. Mainly because I am allergic to the unproblematic transferring of a subcultural concept into an analytical one.

What makes perfect sense to subcultural participants often appears as idiosyncratic when approached from a theoretical point of view, for the simple reason that what works within the subcultural does not have to make sense outside of it. Analytical concepts, however, have to do that.

Still, lately I have begun to rethink my use of the concept of fame. Criminologist Jack Katz asks us to investigate what crime does – what does an individual achieve through stealing a bike, dealing drugs, or beating someone up? And Katz does so by stressing the phenomenological aspects of crime and deviance – what and how the crime makes us feel?

So, I started going through the literature on graffiti as well as my own interviews and fieldnotes, focussing less on what fame **is** and more on what fame **does**. What can fame tell us of how subcultural graffiti is experienced and expressed?

In this talk, I will outline a somewhat novel approach to how we can understand the concept of fame, and how such a refined definition can work to capture how graffiti is made sense of as a collective activity. I will point to how fame works to provide a material and physical shape to the otherwise intangible. Drawing from the cultural sociology of Emile Durkheim I will refer to this as a **totemic principle** – that it is through the physical representation of the sacred – the totem – that participants come to experience and express themselves as a group.

I will do so by trying to argue less against the previous research, and by trying to point more to how such a refinement of the concept of fame makes it possible to read into earlier works. The totem provides an existential and affective aspect to subcultural doings and beings, while at the same time distinguishing and maintaining a distance to the outside:

> It is by shouting the same cry, saying the same words, and performing the same action in regard to the same object that they arrive at and experience agreement (Durkheim, 1912 [1995]: 232).

Nevertheless, I will have to start by arguing against the previous research – so much for Mr Nice Guy (that lasted for literally ten seconds!) – because what bothers me is how fame is too often used to simplify subcultural graffiti, suggesting an instrumentality. For example, Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant write in *Subway Art* that fame – as in prestige and admiration – is 'the repeatedly stated goal of graffiti writers'. Graffiti, they argue, is a competition for visibility, and fame is the result of succeeding in this game:

> Getting fame is the repeatedly stated goal of graffiti writers [...] Once a writer is 'up', he finds himself on a treadmill. In order to get fame and rise to the top of a multitude of competitors, he must get up over and over again. He is then rewarded by prestige and admiration – satisfactions he finds hard to part with (Cooper & Chalfant, 1984: 28).

There are numerous examples of graffiti being defined as a game of fame where visibility is the superordinate measure of worth, and the point of graffiti is to get your name up. As such, other aspects such as style, risk-taking, and control are explained as mere means to achieve such visibility. Standing out through style, showing technical skills, hitting hard-to-reach spots, or being the first to hit a particular place, are all thought to simply increase visibility. Other examples of this are the dissemination of your work to a larger audience such as through police reports, mass media, subcultural magazines, or Instagram, which in consequence, move you up in the game for fame.

All this assumes that graffiti is highly individual and highly rational. The communicated reason why graffiti writers would make up names, write them in style in places they are not allowed, risking their health, freedom, and economy is simply to compete for visibility so as to gain fame:

> Fame, respect and status are not naturally evolving by-products of this subculture, they are its sole reason for being, and a writer's sole reason for being here (MacDonald, 2001: 68).

As such, previous research paints itself into a corner, pun intended. Doing graffiti without attempting to become the biggest, most stylish, boldest, or the first becomes rather hard to address without pointing to this as less committed or less meaningful. It's the same with graffiti that is done in less visible, less daring contexts.

This is so, even though there is plenty of research that suggests otherwise. For example, Malin Fransberg shows, in her work on Finnish train writers, how visibility is something potentially negative, and how these train writers exploit the invisibility forced upon them by the buff, so as to pursue secrecy and exclusivity. Similarly, Ronald Kramer has provided a thoughtful critical analysis of legal graffiti.

Fame as capital

Interestingly, previous research attempts to explain the diversity in how and where graffiti is done, through fame. Richard Lachmann, for example, argues that there are two aspects to fame – one that is based on saturation and quantity, and one that is based on style and aesthetic skills – and that the first gives rise to the second. Quantity leads to quality. Nancy MacDonald even talks about this as a graduation, the young beginner pursuing quantity and fame, so as to be able to 'graduate' into a more style-oriented career that is less wild and demanding.

Fame, argues MacDonald, works as a 'highly valued wage' that validates the dedication and sacrifice of writers, allowing them to relax or even to cash in on their fame, for example within the art world. The idea of graffiti as an alternative career is almost as old as graffiti itself. That it constitutes a possibility for young poor writers – often from a minority background – to become artists or designers.

Gregory Snyder writes:

> Graffiti writers who have built a reputation and have avoided (for the most part) arrest find that as they age they have the option of using their talent, knowledge, and fame to transition into an adult career (2009: 44).

The move from tags and quantity to fame, and then from fame to style and galleries, is argued to make this possible.

But – if you allow me to play the devil's advocate – I would argue that the previous research implies that the primary reason for doing graffiti is to be able to stop doing graffiti. That the goal of the game would be to stop playing. To grow up, graduate, and cash in.

To be sure, graffiti writers do at times become renowned artists or graphic designers. We can all name quite a few. But there is more convincing empirical evidence of this being due to competencies acquired through doing graffiti than of this being a matter of a transferral of fame. What makes a writer a great artist is less their subcultural fame and more their aesthetic skills, creativity, flexibility, being able to work under pressure, support from parents and art teachers, class background, etc.

Capital thus risks being mistaken for habitus.

'INSTAFAME'
'CHEAP FAME'
'FAME WHORES'

The definition of fame as a form of capital also suggests that fame is something that can be measured objectively, as it introduces commitment as something in between visibility and fame. Of working hard and paying your dues. As such, fame that is earned without this commitment, as in becoming famous through a single photo or video on Instagram or through appearing in a news article, is addressed within the subcultural as *cheap fame*.

Again, subculturally, this makes sense. But from an analytical point of view, this is trickier. Although there are important studies such as those by MacDonald and Fransberg, that point to the gendered aspects of how commitment is used to include and exclude, and how non-male writers are dismissed on the basis of cheap fame, the term *cheap* nevertheless suggests that there is something that is real fame, and real commitment, and that this is something that can be studied independently from the subcultural.

Still, reading the comments section on any random graffiti post on Instagram is usually enough to realise that even graffiti writers have problems agreeing on what is real fame or true commitment. What is fame for one writer is cheap fame to another.

What about fun?

The problem, I will argue, is that fame is assumed to be a highly individual effort, rather than a collective one. And that this stress on instrumentality and the competitive element takes away the passion and the fun. To be sure, the participants I have interviewed over the years also note that graffiti involves a competition for space, for visibility. But it is a game you play to *play*, not to win. What matters more, they argue, is friendship,

Figure 2. Tags on a door, Milan, Italy, 2019. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.

creativity, fun, thrill, and the collective.

This is in line with other research on subcultural groups who voluntarily pursue risks –- for example Jeffrey Kidder's work on parkour or bike messengers — that stresses how these activities relate to identity work, self-control, and self-confidence, making friends, and seeking thrill, or excitement.

Or why not consider research on sports and arts? My daughter plays handball, and she dreams about making it to the national team and becoming famous. But she would laugh at the remark that the sole reason for playing handball is fame. To her it is about the fun, the passion, and the camaraderie. Why would graffiti be any different?

Previous research on graffiti does at times mention the aspects of fun and passion. Yet when they do so, they keep fun separated from fame — the competition for fame is considered the real and serious aspect, and fun refers to the social aspect.

But we don't need to complicate things. We don't need to come up with a formula of how saturation, style, and commitment relate to fame. We don't need to approach graffiti as different from other subcultural groups. If we let go of the trees, we might be able to see the woods.

And if we ask what fame does, it becomes obvious that its elementary aspect is that of including, affirming, and collectivising. Of making the individual feel part of something.

PLAY!

From a sociological point of view, play is defined as voluntary and self-contained. It only makes sense

within play.It rests on the desire to participate and on the internal rules that specify what should be done, and how and why this is important. From the outside, play is thus seen as largely irrational and unproductive. But play is transformative for the players. It enables them to temporally and spatially escape a prescribed order.

Hide and seek is a perfect example.It can be initiated at any time by someone merely stating it,initiating a way of thinking that we most often do not adhere to – hiding from our friends, and hoping they will fail to find us. Graffiti constitutes an extreme version of hide and seek. It is disembodied play. Graffiti, as noted by MacDonald, hides in the light. Writers know about other writers through their writing, despite never having met. To be recognised as a fellow writer refers to a collectivisation of the individual, being included as part of the play, and as adhering to the rules. This is perfectly illustrated by the graffiti way of greeting someone you don't know: **'Whatchu write?'**

Craig Castleman (1984) offers a brilliant example of this in his story of Stan 153:

> *Tie 174 said to me. 'Listen, let's go up to the Coffee Shop.' I didn't know what it was, but he said, 'Come up with me and I'll introduce you to some people.' I walked in and I saw all these guys all over the place and I said, 'Wow, look at all these people. Who are they?' There was a tough guy with a scar across his face; we called him Zipper Lip. He used to write Pearl 149. He walked up and said, 'Whatchu write?' I said, 'Stan 153.´ So he said 'Stan who?' And I said 'Stan 153.' 'DGA!' He yelled it out across the coffee shop, and everybody immediately focused their attention on me. I was like, 'Who, me? I'm an artist too.' But at that time I wasn't an artist. I was just a little toy, a DGA.*

The last part is telling, having to accept that you are not fully included, a feeling of not truly belonging, of not getting around, a DGA, a little toy.

Stan 153 continues:

> *And it went on for two or three hours, signing books, and then Tie said, 'Come on. it's time to leave.' And I said, 'Where are we going now?' 'To the Concourse.' So I said, 'Concourse?' because I was from Manhattan and didn't know too much about the Bronx. So I went to the Concourse and I went through the great humiliation again of 'What's your name.' 'Oh, I'm Stan 153.' 'Who? DGA!' When a train came in they said, 'Your name on that train?' And I said, 'No, my name ain't on this line.' And they said, 'What line is your name on, the number Z?' And I said, 'No, it's on the 3s.' And they said, 'O.K., we're going to the 3 line. If your name's there, you can hang out. If it isn't, 'bye guy.' So we went to 96th Street and Broadway. It was me, Topcat 126, El Marko, Bug 170, Phase II. I didn't know Phase II then; he was just a guy everybody seemed to idolize. So we're at 96th Street and after a half an hour of waiting, my name came up. 'Is that your name?' It was an ugly piece of gook on the side of the train, but I said, 'That's my name! That's my name!' 'O.K. You can hang out.' When they said that, I said to myself. 'I'm accepted. The Bronx people accept me!'* **(Castleman 1984: 85–86).**

Similar to the earlier quote, what is here being stressed is the affective aspect of belonging. It refers to being seen in its most elementary form: of being validated, validated as having an existence. Stan tells of how he was twice denied inclusion, referred to as a DGA ('Don't get around') as in someone they have never heard of, and thus recognised as partly excluded from the subcultural. It is only through pointing to his name on a train car – one can imagine the relief – that he gains their acceptance. This is a beautiful quote as it captures a move from the unknown, uninitiated, excluded – DGA – to acceptance, with Stan's pride being obvious. They know I write, therefore I exist. We play so as to become part of the play, rather than as a game.

The graffiti writers I have followed would tell similar stories of inclusion, of being out with a senior writer they had never met and the pride they felt when that writer already knew their tag. But they would also tell of the opposite – of being ignored and refused permission to participate.

Feelings such as fun, passion, love, and humiliation are thus an intimate part of fame, not something separate. They are directly tied to the collaborative and existential nature of writing.

Writing both as a noun and a verb is the totemic object of subcultural graffiti

Writing is the physical form through which the subcultural is expressed and experienced as a collective. And as with other sacred objects, such as the emblem of a clan or the flag of a country, it includes, through encompassing – and excludes, through denying – the feeling of belonging. This makes subcultural graffiti different from other forms of graffiti – such as, for example, Michelangelo's graffiti in the cellars of the Medici Chapels in Florence; Rimbaud writing his name on the Temple of Luxor; or Ellen at Lund university who wants to address her presence to everyone (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3. 'Ellen in da hauz'. Lund University, Sweden, 2024. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.

All of these forms of writing are public in the sense that they invite an outsider to participate. We might not know Ellen or care whether she is 'in da hauz' or not, but we can read and understand it. Its message is straightforward. It expresses an already existing identity. Ellen's existence, and even more so Rimbaud's, is not exclusively defined by their writings.

Subcultural graffiti, however, is.

It is performative, in the sense that there is no doer prior to the deed. Tobias Barenthin Lindblad (2008: 12) captures this in saying, 'to be sure graffiti writers create tags, but the tags at the same time create the writers.' Uzi becomes the writer UZI through the writing (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4. UZI tag. Stockholm, Sweden, 2023. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.

The form is the content. The content is the form. Or if you prefer: the medium is the message. Contrary to Ellen in da Hauz or Rimbaud, UZI does not exist without this writing.

A further difference is the attempt of subcultural graffiti to *exclude* a non-initiated outsider. The sanctity of the totem of writing means that belonging is ritualised through rules and prohibitions. Partly through what and how to write – a unique name, written in style, in various forms (tags, pieces, throw ups, etc.) – and partly through how to read the writings. Again, a collectivisation of the individual.

Deciphering tags, throw ups and pieces is somewhat similar to reading black metal logos. It takes an acquired competence of being able to tease out the letters. As Kase 2 notes to the camera in *Style Wars*:

> Sure, I got styles already that's more complex that nobody know about. I mean, super-duty tough work. See, this is just semi-like, what I would call it. But, if I really get into it and start camouflaging it, I don't think you even be able to read it.

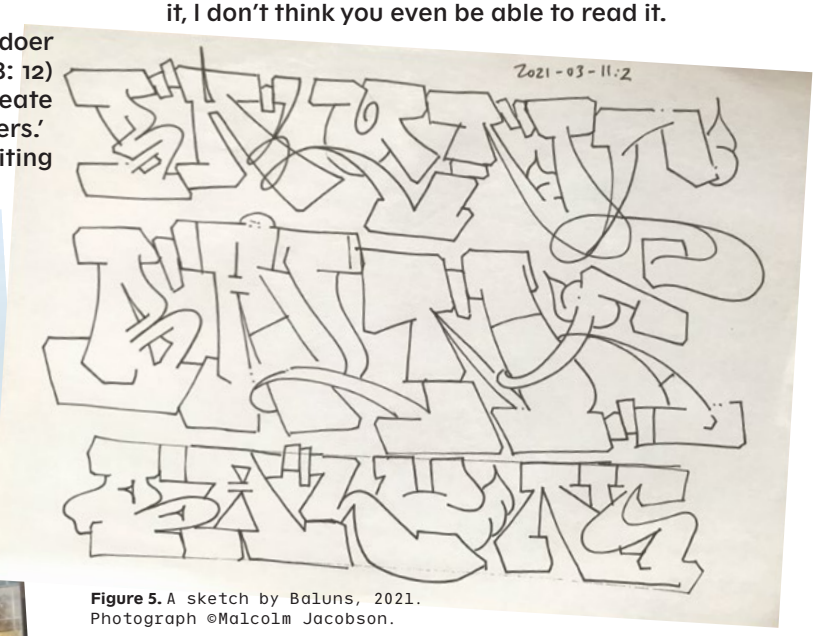

Figure 5. A sketch by Baluns, 2021. Photograph ©Malcolm Jacobson.

Furthermore, to read is to understand. And, similar to belonging, understanding is to be able to piece the parts together into a whole. How different forms of writing U-Z-I become the writer UZI, or – as seen in Figure 5 – how different forms of writing B-A-L-U-N-S become the writer BALUNS. Every single public bathroom in Sweden has the Swedish word for cock written in it: kuk (**Figure 6**).

However, I doubt that anyone would read those scribbles and go: *Wow KUK again. Shit that KUK is really up.*

The point is that to read in graffiti is to connect. And to connect is to include. Of collectivising the individual. Objectifying the subject. As when Stan 153 is asked, 'is that you on that train?'

Figure 6. 'KUK'. Stockholm, Sweden, 2011. Photograph ©Malcolm Jacobson.

Is. That. You. On. That. Train?

Writing graffiti includes as it excludes the outside. They see it, they might be able to read it, yet they can never understand it.

And this goes for all subcultures. I remember the first time I, as a young punk, heard and liked Black Flag. There is separation here in time between hearing and liking. I had listened to Black Flag for months with my friends and I had told them and others how much I loved Black Flag. During this time, I had questioned myself, I had questioned others who claimed to love it too, as well as questioned the band itself. As their music appeared to me as pure noise. But the feeling when I actually understood it, when I wanted to listen to it – that was priceless.

Fame in its most elementary form constitutes the recognition of such a feeling as valid. The feeling of being part of something bigger.

To paraphrase Emil Durkheim:

> It is by ~~shouting~~ [writing] the same ~~cry~~ [forms], ~~saying~~ [reading] the same words, and performing the same action in regard to the same object that they arrive at and experience agreement.

This aptly summarises this first aspect of fame. Its elementary form of drawing and bonding participants together, accomplished through the feelings that writing evokes in participants.

Fame as a totemic principle suggests a transformative and transcendent character through writing – participants lose themselves in the collective. As such, fame is a process, but not in the sense of the previous research's focus on a subcultural and individual development from toy to king.

Rather it is a collective process. Something that is negotiated and validated. As Joe Austin (2002) points out, fame is collective in the sense that it is something that is told, re-told, and mythologised.

Through writing, participants come to belong. Through stories of writing, such belonging is strengthened.

Fame as the iconic

This brings me to my second point: fame as the iconic. Stories are crucial to understanding graffiti: writers sharing their own experiences as well as the extraordinary adventures of others. Who has done what, with whom, who was first? Or who has the worst history of getting caught? As documented by Rae and Akay in their great book *Getting Caught*.

Let's return to the affective aspect of fame as belonging, pride, acceptance, self-worth. Other feelings such as passion, thrill, love, dedication, and creativity associated with the doings of graffiti are harder to grasp. Same with ideals. But stories give a physical form to such feelings. They make it possible to express a fear of getting caught, the thrill of fooling the guards, the beauty of a trackside wall at dawn. But as such, stories also individualise the collective. The subject of such stories come to represent what graffiti is and what graffiti should be.

UZI is not just UZI, in the sense of a recognised part of a whole, to many writers UZI is rather that very whole they feel part of – a subcultural saint – not just recognised but rather renowned. Immortalised through books, interviews, and videos.

If fame as belonging is the inward form of the subcultural, fame as the iconic refers to the outward form. Jeffrey Alexander (2012: 28) refers to this aspect of the totemic principle as iconicity, in the sense of the set apart, that which at the same time represents and singularises:

> Powerful icons combine the generic (they typify) and the unique (they singularize).

Or, as notes Ian Woodward and David Ellison in the same volume: iconic status refers to a condensation of 'the supreme object of a particular class' and an expression of the collective:

> The icon as a 'symbolic condensation', a thing that holds within its material form a cultural, moral meaning [...] pointing to an icon's taken-for-granted status as both the supreme object of a particular class and as concrete expression of a collective representation (Woodward & Ellison, 2012: 157).

Figure 7. A KEGR tag. Lund, Sweden, 2023. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.

Fame as in the iconic singularises so as to make participants feel and express collective ideals.

Let us take Danish graffiti icon KEGR (**Figure 7**), present in almost all my interviews as part of stories:

> *KEGR, who you know I remember from 1995, when he owned the Central Station in Copenhagen, all the way into the station, had tagged all the sides of the platforms, and with fucking beautiful tags. And now, he still owns the Central Station, what an amount of work that is. It such a headstrongness, it's impressive, I mean, many had, I mean he could just withdraw, he has the ways in, he knows all of those who do more gallery stuff, he could easily live on that, but he still hits the streets and I find it so cool that determination, and how you see his tags in fucking weird places, he's been fucking everywhere.*

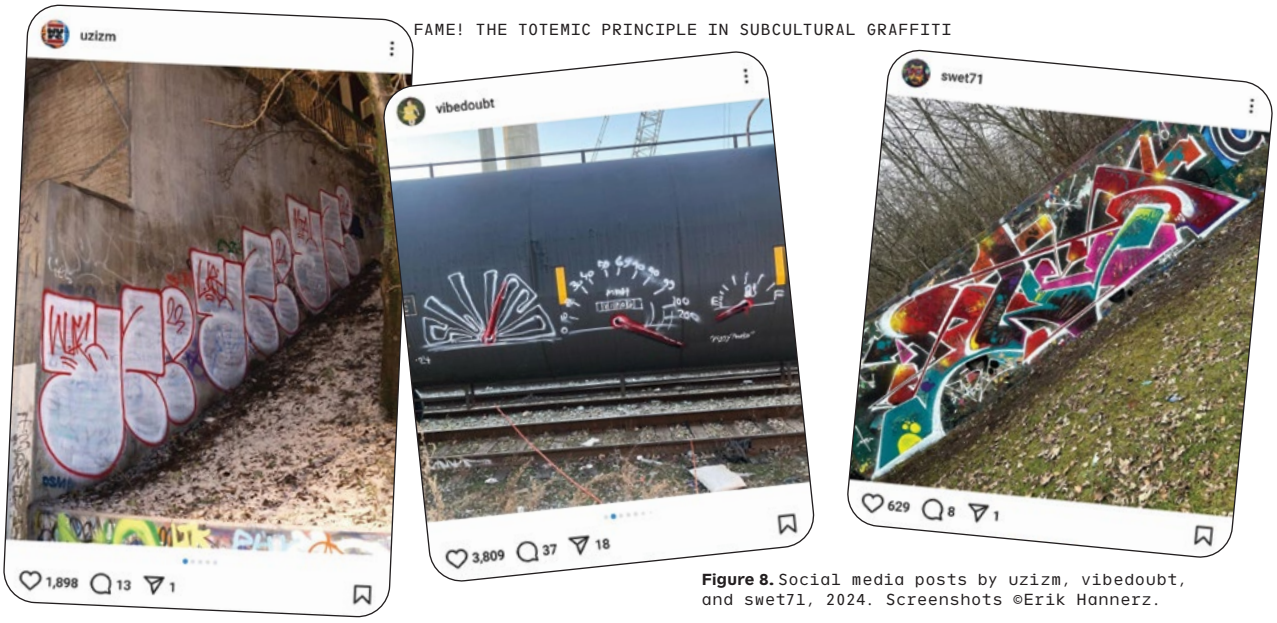

Figure 8. Social media posts by uzizm, vibedoubt, and swet71, 2024. Screenshots ©Erik Hannerz.

KEGR has been renowned within European graffiti since the 1990s for his style, his trains, and as the above quote testifies, for literally saturating the city with his name. To the point that there is a saying in Swedish graffiti that you are never more than 500 metres from a KEGR-tag.

To be sure, we could argue that KEGR is iconic for what he has done – his commitment to the subcultural, his visibility – a well-earned wage that could even be transferred into the art world. This is the assumed meritocratic and individual aspect suggested by the previous research.

Yet, as noted by Jacob Kimvall (2014), masters are built through stories and materialisations. *Subway Art* and *Style Wars* established a canon of masters, all while sending other pioneering writers into oblivion as they were excluded.

KEGR is KEGR not on the basis of what he is or what he has done. KEGR is KEGR because of what he has come to represent. KEGR is KEGR because his writing becomes a means for participants to express subcultural ideals, subcultural feelings, and subcultural boundaries. The quote above says more about the individual interviewed than it does about KEGR.

Through stories, pictures, and videos of the iconic, it is possible to express and experience the subcultural in a shared way. They remind participants of what the subcultural is and what it should be. It is a simple and direct way of expressing what kind of writer you are, but also a convenient way of negotiating awe, fear, or excitement.

That is also why Instagram has become such a stronghold within subcultural graffiti, not just because of its image-based format, but also how it facilitates and makes public a discussion that was previously limited to jams or discussions with your friends (**Figure 8**).

Regardless of whether you admire Sluto's incredible freight pieces, UZI's throw ups or Swet's frantic style, Instagram does not just offer a window, it offers an online shrine – where participants can express themselves together and in so doing extolling and reinforcing both subcultural ideals and their excitement.

Instagram of course also offers the opposite – i.e. a public shithouse – and yet it still refers to subcultural boundary work. Negative representations, as in accusations of the fake, the cheap, the toy or DGA are but just another way of materialising collective ideals.

CONCLUSION

So, to conclude, I am not arguing that graffiti is a religion. The totemic principle should rather be seen as an apt metaphor for how fame becomes a basis for social organisation. A ritualisation of meaning, depth, and collective beings and doings.

To talk about the totemic principle of subcultural graffiti is to describe how participants are drawn together, bound together, and how they come to experience and express themselves as a subculture through writing.

Writing graffiti – that is name-based, style-based, repetitive, and through specific aesthetic forms constitutes the emblem of the group – is the flag of the subcultural, that which marks it off from other forms of crime, and other forms of illegal writing.

Fame, as I have argued, involves an existential joining of individuals into a collective.

Still, this phenomenological aspect rests on a narrative aspect, whereby individual writers come to represent subcultural ideals and feelings – in an outward form of this collective energy.

I have referred to fame as the collectivisation of the individual in the form of recognition and belonging, and as an individualisation of the collective as in the iconic. Still, these constitute two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, I agree with the previous research that fame is essential to subcultural graffiti. But not in the sense of an individual competition for attention, but rather as something through which the subcultural is felt, experienced, and made sense of.

THE PART HERE EVOKES THE WHOLE.

The totemic principle, as notes Durkheim, refers to a tangible representation of the group itself:

> Here, in reality, is what the totem amounts to: It is the tangible form in which that intangible substance is represented in the imagination; diffused through all sorts of disparate beings, that energy alone is the real object of the cult (191).

It is through the principle of fame that subcultural graffiti worships itself.

That is the totemic principle of subcultural graffiti.

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Oral Tradition and Heritage in the Practice of Graffiti and Street Art in Mexico City

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While the now iconic book *Subway Art* inspired many writers internationally during the boom of graffiti in the early 1980s, the shared practice of graffiti writing in situ, in different cities around the world, also influenced many taggers and bombers. In the case of Mexico City, those who had lived for periods in New York and other larger US cities were key social actors in the local scene. The practice was also spread through books, fan magazines, and homemade zines, etc. Although the ways of documenting this cultural movement have shifted over the decades as this type of urban art became established, zines and underground publications still play a significant role in the subculture.

With the advent of the internet and particularly social media, the way of showing one's graffiti to the rest of the world changed, with an ever stronger focus on photographic documentation. Currently, it is possible to learn to tag, bomb, or make large format works from online social networks, rather than through more traditional face to face learning. Although the internet can be isolating, it also has the capacity to conjoin geographically separated networks: from the Mediterranean to the Brazilian favelas, and from Banksy's pieces, globally, to the streets where new African crews paint.

Having conducted 27 interviews with graffiti writers and street artists in Mexico City as part of my research, I have learnt that the practices of these artists – both as individuals and as crews – have changed or evolved over time in response to both endogenous and exogenous factors. Endogenous factors relate to such things as novice writers having to learn from their friends or local contemporaries how to master the techniques of using spray cans, how to make increasingly large pieces in increasingly difficult to reach spots, and how to evade the police. In the absence of 'graffiti schools', these are immersive experiences that are inherited in situ from generation to generation. Exogenous factors, in turn, relate to graffiti's ability to travel and reach other cities, countries, and continents, despite being a structurally sanctioned practice. In the past, it spread via heroic anti-system stories, which stand in an oral tradition and are a key part of graffiti culture.

Graffiti pieces by various writers, Mexico City, Mexico, 2021.
Photograph ©Rubí Celia Ramírez Núñez.

This brief essay is about how the oral tradition in the graffiti and street art movements has been consolidated as a transmitter of subcultural and practical knowledge. Although the practices throughout its history have changed, they are far from a fleeting fashion – on the contrary, they continue to strengthen over time. Oral tradition, by definition, is a way of transmitting knowledge, as it:

> [...] educates new generations through stories, rituals, songs, dances, and paintings, cultural manifestations of great significance. [...] it covers aspects such as the family, the community, the forests, and the streets, that is, the world and the environment that surrounds people. (Silva Rivera, 2017: n.p.).

In Mexico, there are currently many active graffiti writers who first emerged during the second wave of contemporary graffiti in the 1980s. The places they would meet were initially public squares, for example the Tianguis Cultural del Chopo ('El Chopo') flea market in Mexico City, which was attended by young people aged 14 and over who generally hung out with friends from school. Another cultural arena which 'connected' new graffiti writers in Mexico in the '80s and '90s were the rock dance floors. The local transfer of knowledge among participants has been fundamental to give continuity to its tradition, one which, following the NYC style writing tradition, in Mexico City also often involved an important part of hip-hop culture, manifested in dance meetings. For Mexican graffiti writers of this period, it was common to share local styles and practical techniques, such as the mixing of colours from can to can. The graffiti writer 'Humo Sin Fronteras' (Humo Without Borders) was part of the second wave of graffiti in the metropolitan area of Mexico City in the mid-nineties. He reports that he has since directly or indirectly influenced several generations of emergent graffiti writers.

Mexico also has a rich history of muralism that predates the more recent rise of murals as 'street art' in cities all over the world. These older oral traditions, along with contemporary variants, continue to exert an influence locally. Indeed, there is often an emphasis placed on representing older traditions – or intangible cultural heritage – in contemporary murals. My interviewees reported that many projects subsidised with private and/or public resources seek to weave links between street artists and the communities where their murals are made. As artist The Nooks asserted:

> Things happen, and you have to adapt to the contexts, to social movements, to what is happening [...] murals change lives, they change the environment, because you take on all those factors and aspects of that place where you are going to paint and not only of the neighbourhood, but of ethnicity, customs, colours, shapes, things with which the people who live there identify, because if not, I think what you are saying is a bit empty. If not the mural goes unnoticed, you do not unite people, it is very nice when people unite to take care of it, the same people value it, without you having to tell them anything, they simply do it because you are moving something, raising awareness.

Prior to painting the walls, most of the urban art creators in my empirical sample carry out research in the local communities to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the budget assigned to the project. In the transfer of knowledge between the community and the artist there is a strong reciprocity. When street artists interact for prolonged periods of time with a local community, the inhabitants are more likely to appropriate the murals and take care of them. My informants reported that their murals often become points of reference and in some cases, key meeting places for public life.

Leonardo 'Zukher' working on a mural co-produced with Hadestencil, Mexico City, Mexico, 2021. Photograph ©Rubí Celia Ramírez Núñez.


CONAMAT

However, the social dynamics of Mexico City are disparate, since circumstances change from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. There are highly gentrified areas that are part of financial districts or areas of high capital gains; thus, the transfer of knowledge does not occur through the act of creating large-format murals, it only occurs in the periphery. Furthermore, the creation of state-subsidised murals as a way of 'recovering' traditions is, according to critics, prone to becoming a form of visual hegemony. According to Mirzoeff (2011), in cases like this, the right to look as a discursive practice and the freedom to look as an event of individual autonomy, may be disrupted.

Since its origins, graffiti has celebrated transgression, but this circumstance does not exempt it from carrying on the oral tradition of an urban culture that reflects the social, economic, and even political reality of young and older people who inhabit public space. Indeed, to know what is happening culturally in a place, it is very important to look at the rhythms people listen and dance to in public and private spaces, at what they paint in the streets, and what they exhibit in galleries open to new expressions. The knowledge that the graffiti writers and street artists I interviewed have shared with me stems primarily from their shared oral traditions drawn from their experience on the streets. Here, Humo Sin Fronteras reflects on this:

> I lived with a lot of people who liked punk and I liked it because it was the rebelliousness and the rage and this thing of saying something and hitting the system and all those things. It was something that I intended. I mean, no way! So when I know graffiti I say: graffiti is the tool to change something in the street, right? To cause a mess. Something! Whatever!... So, I mean, I adopt it and I say: No way! I'm in charge of this mess.

Oral testimonies have helped me perform a complex analysis of what Geertz (1980) called the informal logic of real life. This essay is an open invitation to research graffiti and street art history by drawing directly from the shared experiences and memories of contemporary social actors immersed in these practices.

A mural by Amauri Esmarq, Mexico City, Mexico, 2021. Photograph ©Rubí Celia Ramírez Núñez.

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Reporting

Subway Art

Daniël de Jongh,
Utrecht, the Netherlands

Little did Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant know in 1984, that the book of photos they so struggled to find a publisher for, was to become a huge and long-lasting success. With well over half a million copies sold worldwide four decades on (and a record many of them stolen from bookshops), *Subway Art* is commonly referred to as the Bible of Graffiti.

2024 marks the fortieth anniversary of *Subway Art* – a publication that not only helped salvage for posterity the imagery of a local graffiti counterculture, portraying happy and fun-loving Black and Latino youths expressing themselves artistically. It also proved influential to the extent that the sort of graffiti pictured – i.e. the visual language of hip hop – soon transcended New York to be duplicated and become dominant in large parts of the (Western) world. The pervasiveness of this form of letter- and name-based graffiti lasts to the present day.

Capturing the painted trains against the backdrop of the city and seizing the imagination of the viewer, Cooper's contribution shaped the way in which train graffiti could best be interpreted and understood. Although Cooper has always regretted being regarded by colleagues as a 'graffiti photographer' rather than simply as a photographer, her status within the graffiti scene is akin to that of a rockstar. Everywhere she travels, she is thanked profoundly by artists who tell her that *Subway Art* had changed their lives.[1]

Subway Art came as the positive answer to a negative press and a tremendous antipathy to what was seen as a plague of graffiti. Along with the film *Style Wars* (1983) which Chalfant co-produced with Tony Silver, *Subway Art* in essence proved to be the saviour of graffiti, paving the way for that form of art to permeate society – from pop culture to advertising – and become the omnipresent phenomenon that everyone is now familiar with. The popularity of *Subway Art* has meant, however, that other, much lesser known forms of graffiti (that originated in other places in other countries) and other graffiti narratives are usually either absent or at best buried in what is often presented as the 'official history' of modern-day graffiti.

'A Reincarnation of the Bible of Graffiti in Slow Motion'

Inadvertently, *Subway Art* seems to have even obscured an interesting chapter in the history of graffiti that transpired in New York itself. One that directly preceded the spray painting adventures captured in Cooper and Chalfant's visual anthropology. In the 1970s, a much darker, 'heavy metal' variant of aerosol art on subway trains incorporated cartoon characters and wasn't focused on name writing. The most prominent graffiti artist of that generation – Caine 1 (Edward Glowaski) – is known for having painted the first whole train in graffiti history ('The Freedom Train', 1976) and for having had significant influence on various writers that succeeded him after his untimely death in 1982 at the age of 24. *Subway Art* features a tiny, tucked-away photo of Caine 1 spray painting a skull with a headdress, but that wasn't the exposure[2] others were lucky enough to get and by and large, his legacy has been condemned to oblivion[3]. The likes of Crash, Daze, Futura, Lady Pink, Lee Quiñones, Seen, and Zephyr, to name but a few of the artists who were truly offered a priceless global platform through *Subway Art*, are more probable to ring a bell among the average graffiti enthusiast.

In light of this, it's worth mentioning that at public events Cooper has often worn a jacket made by Caine 1 in order to keep his memory alive[4], while Chalfant in turn apologised in the 25th anniversary edition of *Subway Art* for the fact that '[…] many pioneering artists who were painting trains before we came along were left out. Marty and I would like to acknowledge all those great artists whom we missed due merely to circumstances of timing and location. We're sorry!'

A boy running on top of a subway train in New York, USA, 1980. Photograph ©Martha Cooper.

Bringing an ephemeral heritage back to life

Given its acclaim, *Subway Art* could be regarded as the epitome of intangible heritage within graffiti culture. The book itself is obviously tangible, but that doesn't apply to the works it depicts, all of which are long gone. One way of exploring this seminal publication from this point of view, is paying heed to a particular graffiti project that is both the ultimate ode to it, as well as the most direct attempt to bring back to life an ephemeral heritage.

Over a ten-year period, a Dutch graffiti artist who goes by the names of both Tripl and Furious meticulously recreated on trains in the Netherlands all 239 individual works featured in *Subway Art*. In addition, he reenacted every scene from the book and made sure his own photographs of these works and scenes were as similar as possible to the original shots by Cooper and Chalfant.

Posing like a spray painting Dondi White jammed between two subway cars? Easy! Dressing up like those two moustachioed cops stood inside a subway car covered in tags? Sure thing. Playing on a wrecked train, hanging upside down from one of its open windows? No problem. Running towards the camera on top of a subway car donned in shorts and a green and white striped T-shirt just like the boy in that illustrious photo from 1980? You bet. Tripl/Furious did that too. Chilling out, sketching in black books, and drinking booze like Dondi is seen doing with his friends was a piece of cake by comparison, except finding precisely the right objects to recreate the blue room they were sitting in, wasn't. That took Tripl/Furious forever and a day, but he succeeded eventually. No one can deny that his devotion to the cause was second to none.

And there is nothing ambiguous about the name Tripl/Furious gave to his mission. 'Repainting Subway Art' (RSA) is an unprecedented endeavour in terms of aspiration, scale, timespan, and attention to detail. Eager to learn all about it, *Nuart Journal* managed to catch up with Tripl/Furious (from here on called only Tripl for ease of reading).

What made him go to such great lengths and how did he actually pull it off? To shed more light on this project (which, remarkably, has had almost no coverage at all in any other media), we also sat down with Jasper van Es, curator of the travelling gallery show dedicated to RSA.

The point of no return

Coming from the skate scene originally, a friend introduced Tripl to the world of graffiti at the start of the noughties. It set him off spotting trains and creating his first tag as a teenager in 2001. 'One year on, I did my first piece on a commuter train, all on my own. It was both a terrific and a terrifying experience', he recounts his baptism of fire. 'I remember how, suddenly, the engine of that train started roaring, and I stood there petrified in the yard. Thankfully, there was nothing amiss, it was just a common thing for that type of train to do every once in a while.'

Ever since, he's been up on trains, initially writing only as Tripl. After a while however – when that name systematically appeared left, right and centre – he started running into trouble and switched to Furious. Several years thereafter, he deemed it safe enough to readopt Tripl, and had two aliases from that point onward.

It was around 2004 that Tripl got acquainted with *Subway Art*, albeit in somewhat peculiar fashion. 'One particular day, a much older graffiti writer I knew had become completely fed up with spray painting after he got robbed while doing so. It seemed a rash decision, but that guy generously gave me all his spray cans and graffiti literature in one fell swoop. That included *Subway Art*, but it took me another decade or so before I really started studying that book', explains Tripl, whose sources of inspiration were first and foremost two magazines he grew up with, i.e. the well-known *Bomber Magazine* and another one called *Fuck Off*.

Studying *Subway Art* is one thing, reproducing it from start to finish is quite another. What made Tripl decide to embark on such a huge and highly ambitious operation? Was it a long-held plan, a bet, or a joke that got out of hand? 'It was the latter', he says. 'For Christmas 2013, along with some friends I decided to do a remake of the Happy Holiday piece by Seen – a whole car. A few months on, I was encouraged in jest to do a variant of the Hand of Doom [originally also by Seen], turning it into the Cock of Doom.'

'Then nothing happened related to *Subway Art* for two years. I did the third remake in 2015, though only as a result of a lack of ideas. I didn't know what to paint when a friend suggested recreating yet another work from the book. Subsequently, people started to challenge me to repaint all the works in it. While it all started off as a joke, things became increasingly serious at the start of 2017, at which point I got my head down and there was no turning back. Overall, it took me ten years to complete the entire undertaking, although I did eighty percent of the remakes between 2017 and 2021.'

Tripl running on top of a subway train in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2020. Photograph ©Tripl/Furious.

This is iiiiiiit!

The remakes were highly similar in terms of image, style, and colour, though rarely identical to the original artworks. Tripl would, for example, routinely replace the names of the original writers with (variants of) one of his own, or with the names of two Amsterdam-based crews he's a part of (ETG and RFA). Which moniker he would use depended mostly on (the length of) the names on the trains in *Subway Art*.

Doing graffiti was commonly called style writing at the time and, fittingly, the difficulty for Tripl – whose 'own alphabet' consists of very solid, readable letters – lay in convincingly copying a plethora of styles. 'I could write my own name in my own style blindfolded, but to do so in another artist's style is really quite different. You don't adopt someone else's way of writing just like that, it takes practising and adjusting skills', he affirms.

In some instances, Tripl granted himself yet more artistic freedom, incorporating all sorts of differences, small and large, a lot of them tongue-in-cheek and sometimes referring to the present. The fact that the images and texts he sprayed on Dutch trains were often a direct response to images and texts on subway trains in New York over 40 years ago, is arguably one of the most intriguing aspects of RSA. Mimicking the past through time and physical space, he truly turned it into a conversation with (graffiti) history.

Noc 167, New York, USA, 1981. Photograph ©Martha Cooper.

Tripl, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2019. Photograph ©Tripl/Furious.

'This is what graffiti art is not the other way around!!!!!', Lee professed on a train in 1979. 'This is iiiiiiit!' replied Tripl in 2018, with a clear reference to that famous clip from *Style Wars* where a group of young writers in a state of elation see their own artistic achievements slowly slide by on a train. One of them can't stop yelling 'This is it!'. In 1980, Lee wondered in an epitaph on a train whether '[...] graffiti will ever last????????'. 'Yes, it will!!!!!!!!', answered Tripl decisively 38 years later with a matching number of exclamation marks.

The text 'Dump Koch' accompanied by the face of then New York mayor Ed Koch who introduced a zero-tolerance policy towards graffiti (Spike Lee, 1982), was swapped for 'Dump Trump' and Trump's face (2018). A whole car by Lady Pink (1980) that paid tribute to 'John Lennon', metamorphosed into a whole car that instead read 'Michael Martin', paying homage to Iz the Wiz (2018 also). One other random example: the bespectacled man wearing a suit who is seen reading a newspaper on the subway through the opening of the soon closing graffitied doors was substituted for a woman in the exact same position, albeit looking at her smartphone – a sign of the times.

No lack of challenges

Overall, RSA required a great deal of organisation, dedication, and discipline. Tripl confides that while the project was a lot of fun, he did at times yearn for it to be over and he considered giving up more than once. He never did, but once he brought the job to an end, a huge burden fell off his shoulders. Although there were no outright setbacks along the way, there certainly wasn't a lack of challenges – not least because RSA was by all means illegal from start to finish and working swiftly was imperative at all times.

At no time during the repainting of *Subway Art* did Tripl get arrested, despite the eternal cat-and-mouse game between graffiti writers and security personnel. The security measures implemented by the Dutch railway operator and railway infrastructure owner have probably become more, and certainly not less stringent throughout the period RSA was ongoing. They were in any case much more thorough and sophisticated than the few that were in place in 1970s and '80s New York. 'Although I have my favourite train yard in Amsterdam which I know like the back of my hand, like all graffiti artists doing trains, circumventing security is very much a part of planning my every next step', he emphasises.

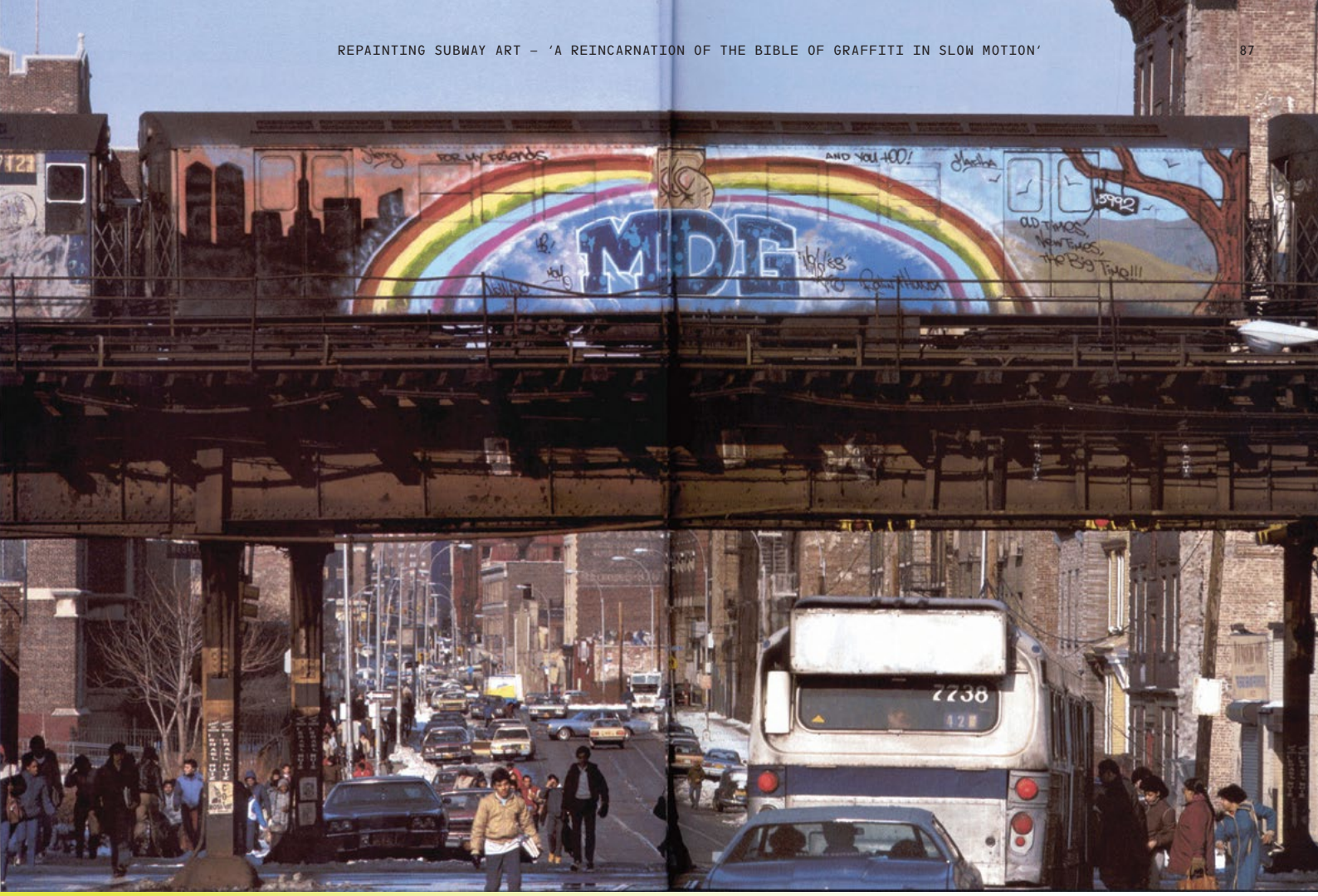
As for the process of painting itself, there was no ironclad strategy and certainly no chronological way of proceeding. In other words, Tripl didn't tackle the artworks from the book page by page. 'I set out repainting the smaller, somewhat easier works first. The big ones were the most difficult – I dreaded doing some of those and tended to save them for last. Initially, the colours of the spray cans I had on hand at any given time made me select the works that still needed doing. At some point, I purposefully started buying spray cans necessary to recreate certain pieces. All in all, I spent thousands of euros on thousands of cans and other materials.'

Preparation at home was paramount, he points out, ranging from selecting the right cans and putting them in the bags in the right order so as not to waste time in the yard looking for them, to making colour sketches of all the works to be used as examples in situ. 'Making a sketch half an hour in advance was the best way for me to get in the groove once I found myself on the spot. One thing I had to keep in mind is that Dutch train carriages are twice the size of a New York subway car, so many remakes had to be much larger too.'

Then again, in the 1970s and '80s there weren't nearly as many different spray can caps available as there are today. So unless writers increased the width of the paint stream by retrofitting the caps and thereby essentially creating their own fat caps avant la lettre (which a lot of them did), it would take a group of artists several more hours to colour a whole car than it would now take Tripl on his own. All the more so as the paint used at the time was far less opaque and pigmented, lacking the quality it has today.

This, however, also implied that a lot of the graffiti works from that early era were rather 'painterly' in nature (what art looks like is in large part dependent on the possibilities offered by the materials at hand). The spray cans and paint that Tripl has at his disposal are of superior quality (and manufactured to be able to create sleek lines), but, ironically, that's precisely what made the production of his copies more difficult. Overall and by comparison, his works probably pop out a bit more.

Tripl/Furious, Overveen, the Netherlands, 2018. Photograph ©Tripl/Furious.



MIDG, New York, USA, 1983. Photograph ©Martha Cooper.

That perfect shot

Tripl made it hard on himself by not only trying to reproduce the works of art, but also by attempting to take photographs of those works that majorly resemble the ones in *Subway Art*. In actual fact, he was never quite done without there being a proper picture taken from a similar angle and in similar settings. Illegal graffiti painter not being the average 9-to-5 job, Tripl usually worked at night, though not always. When he did work in the dark, he had to make sure by daylight that every work was photographed as soon as possible. Particularly so in the case of train carriages completely covered in paint as they're the ones pulled out of service quickest in order to be buffed. This usually meant getting up very early after a night with only very few hours of sleep, or no sleep at all.

There were no guarantees, however, as Tripl could never be certain whether or not his nocturnal efforts had gone to waste. He indeed failed to capture his remakes on camera several times as a result of buffing. One specifically challenging remake required painting two consecutive whole cars originally painted by Duster and Lizzie (pictured in *Subway Art* from a high angle, with the train crossing the Bronx River at Whitlock Avenue). Tripl didn't manage to finish the second car on time, meaning both of them had to be completely redone at a later date as the train was cleaned soon after his first attempt. Frustrating? No doubt, but inevitably part of the game, especially doing everything single-handedly.

'I prefer to work on one particular side of the train to reduce the chance of getting caught', he explains. 'Sometimes, the remakes had to be made on the other side for the sake of being able to take a resemblant photo later on.' But there is only so much you can do in terms of planning ahead. You may well end up in the unfortunate circumstance of being ready and well positioned to take that perfect shot, when – at the supreme moment – you suddenly run out of luck as another train crosses the one with your artwork, blocking it from view. This happened to Tripl on a number of occasions, and armed with a camera, he didn't always get a second chance to redeem himself without resorting back to the spray can first.

As RSA progressed, Tripl began taking the photography more and more seriously, and he regrets having taken many photographs with a relatively poor camera during the first number of years of the project. The fact that he repainted several of his remakes at a later stage merely to be able to take a better picture with a quality camera, attests to his commitment to RSA.

Endorsement from Cooper and Chalfant

When asked, Tripl confirms that RSA represents the snow-capped summit of his graffiti career (which is far from over, he stresses). Countless people will have seen Tripl's remakes, but would have failed to realise that these were part of a larger puzzle that was put together step by step over an extended period of time. Only fellow graffiti writers knew what he was up to. His friends knew from the start, others learnt about it soon enough through social media. His remakes were definitely recognised as such and the photos were shared online. 'Most of the reactions to RSA were positive', Tripl tells, 'except for a few whiners who complained that I was copying other writers' styles, but of course that wasn't at all my goal in and of itself.'

Reassuringly, some of the graffiti writers from the '80s that are still around are supportive of RSA and have his back, like Kel, Quik, Seen, and Skeme (who, on a trip to the Netherlands in 2018, teamed up with Tripl to paint a train). No less important: Cooper and Chalfant also fully endorse the project. 'They love it', says Tripl, who paid a visit to Cooper in New York to discuss RSA with her, while Cooper was briefly involved with the reenactment of her own book when she made a trip through Europe in 2021. 'Some of the photos were taken by Martha herself, including the one where I impersonate Dondi standing on the railway track in front of the doorway of a train, sorting out my spray cans on the train floor. The remake of the portrait of Henry at the end of *Subway Art* is Martha's also.'

Various 'Top-to-bottoms' by Mitch 77, Duro, Iz the Wiz, and Mad, and the remakes thereof by Tripl as shown at the Repainting Subway Art exhibition at MU in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, June 2023. Photograph ©Daniël de Jongh.

Book and exhibition

Tripl would often be asked by fellow-writers when his own version of *Subway Art* would finally come out. 'Publishing *Repainting Subway Art* has been on my mind early on into the project and we're now close to finally realising it as the book will be released at the end of this year', he says.

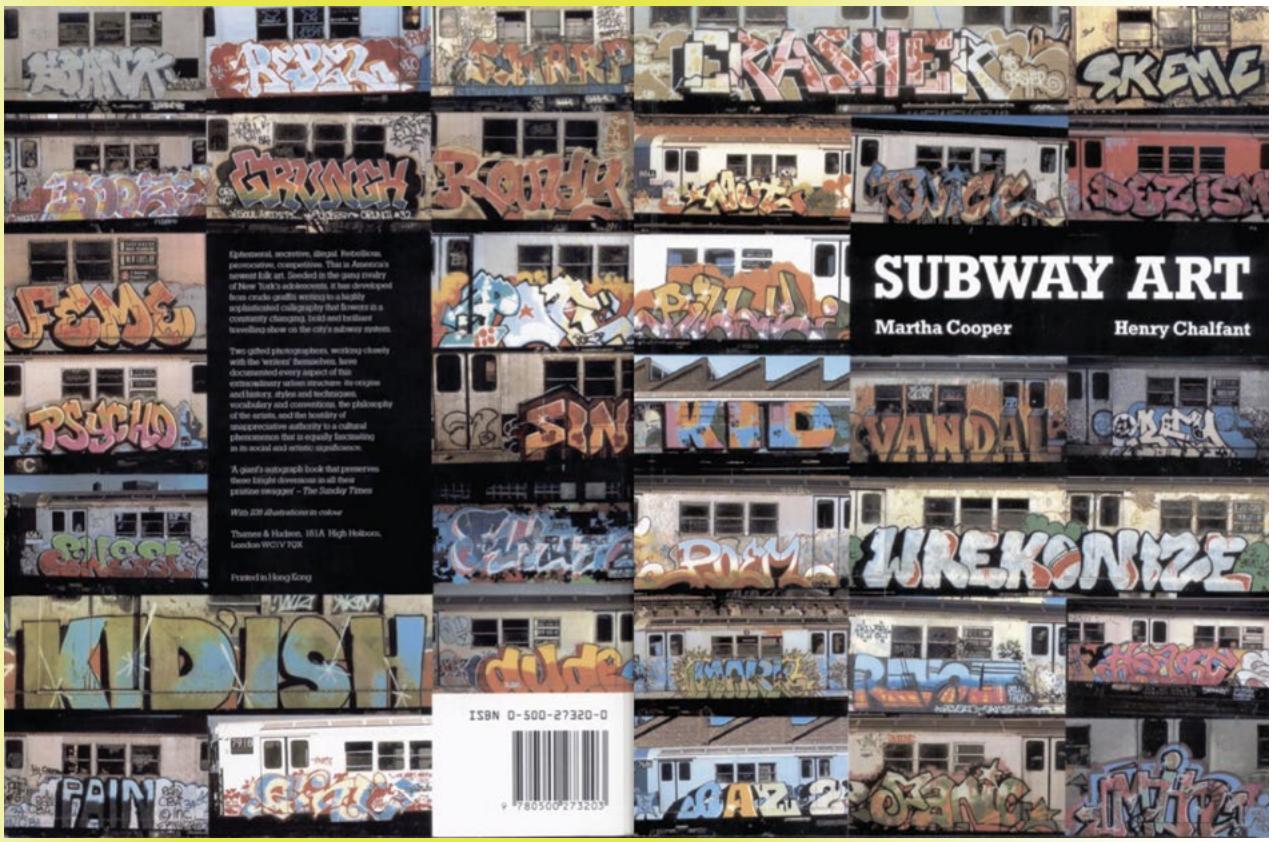
Edward Birzin, who wrote his PhD thesis (*Subway Art(efact)*) on the growth of graffiti from child's play to an original art in 1970s New York – has been tasked by the publisher with writing the introduction to *Repainting Subway Art*, and updating all texts from *Subway Art* that will be featured in it. Considering Birzin's multi-year Subway Art History Project[5], this is no coincidence, as this project is remarkably similar to RSA, and in part happened earlier and concurrently, albeit legally on walls, not illegally on trains. It saw Birzin and some ten friends take the classic graffiti styles and pieces from *Subway Art*, but change the names to names of famous people and thinkers, as well as places, events and phrases from history on a few dozen buildings in New York. Starting out that project with the intention to do every masterpiece from Subway Art and make his own book just like Tripl, Birzin's original plan changed as his reproductions led him to complete a PhD. Either way, in commenting on RSA, Birzin has an abundance of theory and practical experience to draw on.[6]

'*Repainting Subway Art* will contain all the *Subway Art* remakes presented in exactly the same layout, but it will be twice as thick because in addition, it will also feature a lot of behind-the-scenes images, and images of things that ended in failure', Tripl continues. 'I want to offer the book along with a copy of the original, so people can put both copies side by side, just like at the exhibition.'

As far as the exhibition is concerned, Tripl didn't actually want there to be one as long as the book wasn't out, but this is how things panned out nonetheless, courtesy of Jasper van Es, an expert on graffiti and a curator of several graffiti shows. Van Es immediately identified the potential of RSA and curated a show dedicated to it that was held first in Eindhoven in the Netherlands, and then moved on to Leicester in the UK, and Weil am Rhein in Germany.

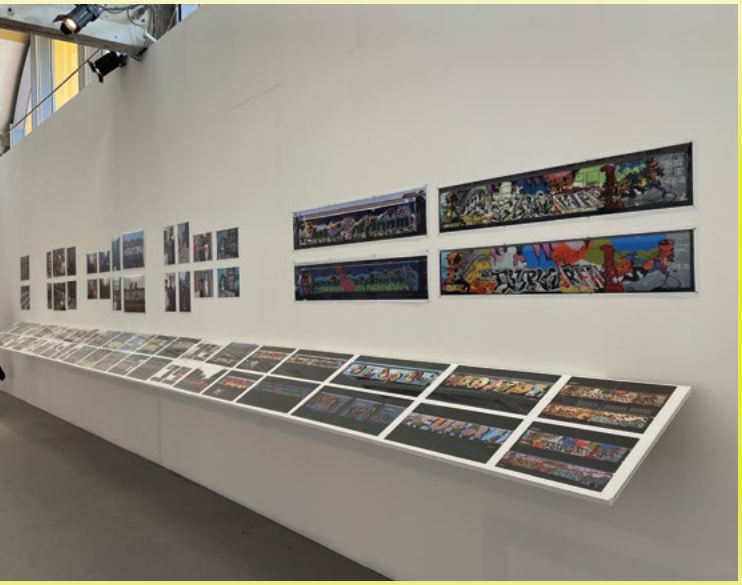
'The exhibition in Weil am Rhein is actually a group show and it also features works by Tripl that are unrelated to RSA', Van Es notes. 'This is important because before you know it, people reduce your artistry to that one project that gets you loads of attention, when in fact you have so much more to offer.' This indeed applies to Tripl, who's done much besides RSA and has had (group) shows before.

'The best thing would be if the RSA exhibition could one day move on to New York', Van Es continues with a smile. Curatorially, he kept things pretty basic, offering visitors to the show the opportunity to compare the remakes with the originals, which – along with some artefacts spread around the exhibition space – are shown in various sizes side by side on walls and panels. The exhibition is in conversation with the book.



The front and back cover of the 1984 edition of *Subway Art*. Photograph ©Thames & Hudson.

The front and back cover of *Repainting Subway Art*. Photograph ©Ruyzdael Publishing.



Repainting Subway Art exhibition at MU in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, June 2023. Photograph ©Jasper van Es.

Van Es points out that he's 'particularly interested in meta-graffiti, whereby pieces themselves are not the work, or at best only half the work. It's about how an ephemeral work ultimately appears on a screen, or is given a new place or function – as an ingredient to a new dish, a new expression. The documentation, adaptation, or new expression is ultimately the real artwork as well as the heritage.'

According to Van Es, realising heritage in the best possible way as an artist calls for a conceptual way of thinking. 'In practice, it's about the innovative, pioneering acts required to create a work, and about being ingenious enough to raise your visibility. In the age of Instagram, this is becoming increasingly important and while certainly not all writers have a full understanding of this, more and more of them do. The likes of Taps and Moses, Utah and Ether, and the 1UP crew are in a league of their own when it comes to this.'

'From this point of view, I think that Repainting Subway Art has been an instructive process to Tripl, who's very context-oriented and has a natural talent 'to look beyond' a piece before it's made. He's always concerned with how his works will be 'consumed', whether along the railway tracks or online.'

Just keep doing it

Through RSA, Tripl regenerated a heritage that exists only in the form of photographs. All of his remakes were short-lived. Indeed, they were often much shorter lived than the original works. 'In light of the ephemeral nature of graffiti and graffiti's relationship to intangible heritage', Van Es comments, 'the project was a reincarnation of *Subway Art* in slow motion. Absolutely no one besides Tripl has experienced quite what *Subway Art* is about in all its facets. You can't get any closer to it than by doing what he's done. Coming that close is certainly not for everyone. Some graffiti crew in Germany could have probably succeeded too, but in order to do this all by yourself in the Netherlands, you have to be really clever. Tripl is well-organised and focused, and uniquely qualified to bring Repainting Subway Art to fruition.'

'As for the best way to preserve heritage, in my view that's simply to keep doing it – in this case, to keep spray painting', Van Es underlines. 'I know someone who plays a 200-year-old cello. That's great, and much better than preserving that instrument inside a display case. Documentation obviously plays a crucial role too, because if it wasn't for the documentation of New York graffiti which in turn led to the publication of *Subway Art*, it would have died out like some other forms of graffiti, and graffiti history would have looked very different as a result.'

Name writing forever?

Zooming out from RSA and taking a broader look at graffiti culture, one could critically contend that – partly as a result of the general fascination with *Subway Art* – graffiti writers tend to look backwards and cling to that dominant letter-based variant of graffiti, rather than look forward. Not that there's necessarily a need for that, but it's remarkable to see that although every writer has their own style and overarching styles vary to some extent from place to place, generally speaking the visual language of graffiti (wild style, if you will) has remained largely the same over the decades. With some notable exceptions (some artists exploring more abstract graffiti styles), graffiti – particularly on trains – has evolved relatively little over time. Against this background, one may wonder whether and to what extent *Subway Art* has been not only a blessing to graffiti, but also an obstacle to it moving forward.

That said, and with *Subway Art* now being around for 40 years, what can we expect from the future of graffiti? Where will we be in 20, 30, or another 40 years' time? 'In terms of imagery, it's about sticking to the rules of the game and staying close to the roots and tradition of the culture. It will remain a practice that revolves around the shape of letters', Van Es claims.

Tripl thinks likewise, and he expects the emphasis will continue to be on name writing. 'There are no indications that we will deviate from that on a large scale. There are artists who do, but they're a minority. I do think there will be less and less graffiti on trains, perhaps that may even disappear altogether as security measures continue to increase. Things are getting ever harder for writers these days and in terms of security, I worry about the role artificial intelligence might play in the near future.'

Speaking of which, Van Es perceives a trend whereby graffiti artists tend to change their strategies rather than their creative output. 'It's becoming increasingly common for writers to put a piece on a train, take photos of it, and then immediately destroy the work by painting over it in order to cover their tracks and reduce the chances of getting caught.'

Thankfully, that never happened to Tripl on any of his Repainting Subway Art excursions and the forthcoming book that stems from it is one to look forward to.

Repainting Subway Art Exhibition
MU, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, June 10 – August 27, 2023
Leicester Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester, UK, February 3 – May 27, 2024
Colab Gallery, Weil am Rhein – Friedlingen, Germany, June 10 – November 2, 2024
(part of a group show called ‘Patience.’)

Repainting Subway Art
Ruyzdael Publishing, Amsterdam
book forthcoming late 2024

ruyzdael-publishing.com
@whentriplgetsfurious @jaspervanes

References

Birzen, E. (2019) Subway Art(efact). PhD thesis. Free University of Berlin. Online: https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/handle/fub188/26288?show=full.

1 Selina Miles’s 2019 documentary film *Martha: A Picture Story* is full of such scenes.

2 *Subway Art* also features the image of a ‘memorial car’ for Caine 1 by MIDG (‘Caine 1 Free for Eternity’).

3 Derived from ‘Caine 1, free for eternity’, a talk given by Dr. Edward Birzin at the Tag Conference in Linz, Austria (May 16–17, 2024). Birzin will dig into Caine 1’s story much deeper in the upcoming *Repainting Subway Art* book, of which he is one of the authors.

4 A point made by Edward Birzin on page 268 of his 2019 PhD thesis *Subway Art(efact)*.

5 See ‘Graffiti of New York’s Past, Revived and Remade’ in *The New York Times*, October 26, 2010. [Online] Accessed July 31, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/27/arts/design/27graffiti.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0.

6 Commenting on RSA for this article, Dr. Birzin even draws a parallel with world literature, as he looks ‘at Tripl like a neo-Leopold Bloom’, the protagonist of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. ‘Tripl took an Odyssey using *Subway Art* as his guiding light.’

THE ACTUMENTARY: FROM DOCUMENTED ACTION TO ACTION-DOCUMEN

Mathieu Tremblin
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Abstract
Through a series of examples, this essay explores the way in which artists' documentation of their actions in urban space has contributed to the development of what I term action-documentary practices – or actumentary. These practices are transformative in that urban intervention becomes a tool for documentary and experimental writing. I argue that action-documentary is formed in the reciprocal relationship that exists between urban action and its capture. This facilitates two levels of reception: the first where the urban action operates as a work of art in the real world, and the second where the documentation of the original action is no longer simply at the service of the action, but ultimately becomes an action in its own right that serves as an autonomous, supplemental narrative device. Through its viewing as action-documentary, the action documented can gain a certain intensity and replicate the effected experience in a different way.

URBAN INTERVENTION IN THE POST-MEDIA ERA

At the turn of the millennium, the democratisation of digital tools and the internet allowed for the development of open source amateur and professional practices and resources driven by the value of the freedom of information. However, this democratic open-access dynamic was undermined in the early 2010s, with the advent of social media and the growing control of online spaces by GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft). In 1989, the philosopher Félix Guattari forecasted this period as a post-media era, arguing for a reversal of 'mass-media power' by the reappropriation of 'machines of information, communication, intelligence, art, and culture'. Many artists working today are consciously part of the reappropriation that characterises this post-media era.

The artistic practices of urban intervention which developed at the beginning of the 2000s benefited from the development of accessible photographic and video-documentation devices and editing tools, and increasingly light, mobile, and fluid methods of dissemination. Until the shift of web culture towards ubiquitous, instantaneous, and proprietary use linked to smartphones and social media platforms, access to street art via documented action catalysed its popularity, since its in situ experience was then complex to post-produce. Beyond the spectacular wave of neo-muralism, the increased popularity of street art was courtesy of the dissemination by artists of photos and videos of their own creative processes on personal websites, blogs, and image-based online platforms.

FROM DOCUMENTED ACTION TO ACTION-DOCUMENTARY

In 2015, Matthias Wermke and Mischa Leinkauf created a series of actions entitled Überwindungsübungen (surmounting exercises, **Figure 1**) in collaboration with Lutz Henke. Having recovered archival footage from 1974–1975 showing East German soldiers simulating the crossing of the Berlin Wall, the artists transpose these exercises to the current environment along the former border that separated East and West Berlin. Most of the Berlin Wall was destroyed in 1989, but by playing with its absence and appealing to the memory of the body, they relocate the concept of an impossible border crossing to the landscape of residential buildings erected where the Iron Curtain once was. With the end of the Cold War and the globalisation of urban planning models, the only frontier now crossed in Berlin is that of the progressive enclosure of public spaces with the gradual domination of private residential neighbourhoods – carried over from the American model of gated communities – which produce a new separation, both social and capitalist.

Figure 1. 'Überwindungsübungen' by Mischa Leinkhauf & Matthias Wermke in collaboration with Lutz Henke, 2015. A poster from the 2018 'Space is the Place' collective exhibition at BNKR, Munich, Germany. Photograph ©Matthias Wermke.

In 2019, American artist Brad Downey, who lives in Berlin, asked French artist Julien Fargetton to take on the role of a street performer for a day (**Figure 2**). Disguised as a mime, Fargetton walks along the demarcation line of the old separation wall, moving his hands flat in the air and pretending to scan its surface for a breach. The pair cross the city centre to the very edge of the line's materialisation on the ground, until it disappears beneath the new buildings — the same buildings climbed by Wermke and Leinkauf.

Figure 2. 'The Ground Walks With Time in a Box', Brad Downey. Berlin, Germany, 2019. Stills from a video ©Brad Downey.

Here, capture is also part of the action, as Downey, camera in hand riveted on the mime, passes as a tourist in the midst of the crowd of tourists who have come to 'see' the old demarcation line, despite the fact that this is now an invisible border.

Together, these artists adopt a performative documentary style, in which history is told through a symbolic rematerialisation that takes place through the body. They address the difficulty of grasping a memory without the indiscriminate presence of artefacts in everyday life, since time, reconstruction, and urban planning through gentrification, district after district, has homogenised the city from west to east.

The archiving and displaying system adopted by the German duo, Matthias Wermke and Mischa Leinkhauf, plays with the archaeology of the media: on the one hand, the original documents are exhibited as a reference and didactic source for their work; on the other, the installation in the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin featuring six carousel projectors in a row which loop the slide images of the artists, trying to cross residential barriers. The deafening noise of the carousels lends a certain gravity to the installation.

In contrast, the video by American artist Downey is in the tradition of performance recordings. It consists of a long video capturing – on either side of the old line drawn by the wall – the same person crossing the space with a slow, confident gesture that lends a certain anachronistic burlesque to the situation.

DOCUMENTING URBAN ACTIONS

In the field of street art, urban actions are often documented on video in a sequence shot in the tradition of 1960s performance filming. The duration of the shot underlines the labour of the body at work transforming the urban landscape. But it also quickly becomes a source of boredom, because it re-enacts the time-lapse of reality by embodying a point of view that replicates that of the static, curious passer-by, observing from a distance of around one and a half metres. There is no certainty over how such documentation is received by a certain audience.

My 'Graffiti Statue' project (**Figure 3**) is a clear example of this, since its documentation, like its production, is based on spectacular expectations which are not met. In a shopping street in the centre of Quimper, France, I'm a street performer enacting a statue, dressed entirely in black, wearing a hoodie, jogging bottoms, and trainers.

Figure 3. 'Graffiti Statue', Mathieu Tremblin. Quimper, France, 2012. Stills from a video ©Mathieu Tremblin.

When someone throws a coin into the metal box at my feet, I come to life for a few seconds and slowly spray paint a few words. After a few coins, I compose the following sentences in succession: 'USUALLY I DO THIS FOR FREE', 'MONEY MADE ME DO IT', 'HURRY UP GUYS I HAVE TO FINISH BEFORE COPS ARRIVE', and then improvisationally 'MONEY MONEY MONEY MUST BE FUNNY'. The wall behind the writer-statue that I enact is covered with a picture rail of the same proportion and colour as the wall, so that an assistant can easily repaint it between two sessions. The action lasts two hours, while its documentation consists of a series of seven real-time videos of the seven slogans being painted. Each video lasts between five and ten minutes, depending on the slogan. The stillness of my frozen 'statue' stance between painting words creates a certain dramaturgy, but quickly wearies those who watch it online where the videos were shared. Graffiti Statue is intended to be read in the first degree as well as the second: as a classic street performance of a statue with no artistic intention, except that it is deceptive because the performer interacts with the audience as little as possible. The games of seduction that usually attract the audience are here reduced to the act of writing itself; the spectacle of the writer who embraces the simulacrum of subversion to curry favour with the art market. In contrast with graffiti, street performance is socially accepted because it is legal and declared as such.

This practice of documentation operates pragmatically and sometimes takes on a performative dimension as the temporary group occupation of public space re-enacts a simulacrum of legitimacy. In February 2012, during the urban creation residency in Quimper in the context of which I created Graffiti Statue, we came together as groups several times, with between six and ten people taking part in each action (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4. Urban interventions as a team, David Renault, Mathieu Tremblin (Les Frères Ripoulain), and Art4Context. Urban creation residency '1 + 1 = 1, 1 + 1 = 2', Quimper, France, 2012. Photographs ©Mathieu Tremblin.

Figure 5. 'Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square', Bruce Nauman, 1968. Still from a ten-minute video ©Bruce Nauman.

At each event, artist and artistic director Éric Le Vergé acted as mediator for the curious, while Didier Thibault took on the role of stage manager, assisted where necessary by Ronan Chenebault and Bénédicte Hummel, two art school trainees. Meanwhile, Erwan Babin and Florian Stéphan, two documentary filmmakers from Torpen Production, assisted by their trainees, set up and moved their professional video recording equipment, taking care to leave areas for passers-by to pass through or stop to observe the filming.

As the philosopher Alain Milon (2004) points out in relation to tagging, the practice of urban art, i.e. bodies in action, creates a spontaneous theatricality that transforms architecture from a setting into a scenic space. This is amplified here by the ostentatious presence of the tripod-mounted camera turned towards the site of the urban intervention and filming in public space, which reinforces the idea of transposing the fourth wall that delimits the stage from the orchestra pit and the rest of the theatre to the location of the lens that frames and documents the action.

Documented action such as this effectively becomes an 'action-documentary' or 'actumentary'. This action-documentary is comparable to the register of the 'mockumentary'. This portmanteau of mock and documentary refers to the practice whereby the director announces that they are going to make their film in a documentary fashion, but stages certain facts in order to weave the narrative thread of the documentary. The mockumentary, which has now moved into the realm of fiction, can be a tool of parody, satire, or social criticism. By virtue of the predominant place it occupies, filming itself, at the time of its production, organises the gesture into a shot rather than a sequence – 'you have to make it for the camera', as artist Akay once put it (Les Frères Ripoulain, 2011). The operator, who was supposed to capture the situation on the sly or in a sequence, stepping back in the tradition of reporter-photographers, instead here intervenes to propose their cut, or stopping or repeating the action, which in turn becomes the film shoot.

VIDEO-PERFORMANCE

This concept of the action-documentary is distinct from video-performance, in which the artist uses the video medium in place of an audience and performs for the camera. The American Bruce Nauman introduced this practice in 1968 when he filmed himself in his studio walking exaggeratedly around a square traced on the floor (**Figure 5**).

Acknowledging that performance is always aimed at an audience (whether informed or not), Nauman took the shortcut of transposing and concentrating the audience's gaze into that of the camera lens – thereby bringing about a transformation in his performative practice. From then on, it was no longer just the framework of his studio that set the limits of his performance space, but also that of the recording device. This principle was later taken up by the feminist art movement of the 1970s to question the condition of women and the multiple roles assigned to them by their gender. The American artist Martha Rosler, for example, produced the performance 'Semiotics of the Kitchen' (**Figure 6**), in which she parodied the figure of the housewife – an archetype popularised by television cookery programmes in the 1960s – by performing non-utilitarian reiterations of mechanical gestures in the very space of domestic alienation.

Video-performance also finds a place in urban art, with a number of solitary, isolated gestures filmed in the hidden camera mode that Vladimír Turner has made his speciality, making a mockery of the romantic figure of the artist. In an untitled performance (**Figure 7**), he enters the field of the immaculate white camera and advances to the centre of the image with a red fire extinguisher in his hand, also wearing a full-body white suit. He lies down on his back in the snow and sprays the red paint into the air, which falls back onto his body. When he stands up again, the silhouette of his body is outlined, and he walks away from the frame.

In 'Sisysfos' (**Figure 8**), Turner moves through a hangar lying on his stomach on a wheeled trolley, using a bar table to pull himself along. The performance seems to last an eternity; he has modified and lengthened the soundtrack to give an impression of disproportionate space.

Figure 6. 'Semiotics of the Kitchen', Martha Rosler, 1975. Still from a video ©Martha Rosler.

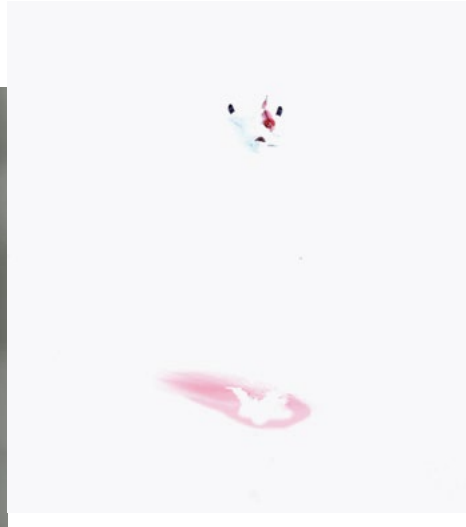

Figure 7. Untitled (Red), Vladimír Turner, 2011. Still from a video ©Vladimír Turner.

THE PERFORMATIVE SITUATION

As illustrated by these examples, the main difference between action-documentary and video-performance is that video-performance ignores the context and time of the situation by creating a single, non-human point of view to which the action is subject.

By contrast, the raison d'être of the action-documentary can be illuminated by the 'performative situation'. A performative situation, as defined by the artist duo Vincent + Feria in conversation with art critic and curator Julia Hountou, is:

> ...a constant back-and-forth between different designations, but generically we can talk about performance. I tend to use the term lecture-performance, or performative situation, which I really like. We had previously developed and experimented with the notion of an 'evolving device'. In performance, the action focuses on the artist, who often becomes an 'actor' in a spectacular space. The situation calls for interaction. We try to use this form in relation to our preoccupations; it allows us to formulate, to present questions and we translate it into this act of presence. We are not in the business of representation.
> (Vincent + Feria, 2010: 35–36)

Understood in the 1960s as the encounter between the situation – as defined by the members of the Situationist International – and the performance, the performative situation aims to escape the 'spectacle' of performance and to introduce a sense of letting go, fluidity, and blurred contours: we no longer know where the performative situation ends and begins. This uncertain state makes it possible to go beyond the separation between artists and spectators, since, as a situation, space-time becomes a form of spontaneous theatricality in which all those present are actors, whether they want to be or not. Any concomitant action by a third party is welcomed and organically linked to what is being played out. This idea of a performative situation is similar to Allan Kaprow's concept of the happening. Happenings are literally about welcoming 'what happens' at any given moment (1959: 4–24). On another level, they are also about intervening artistically in an environment, situation, or space in order to modify its content, while accepting and integrating the hazards that arise – which gives it a new dramaturgy that the artist underlined when he first proposed a definition in the 1950s.

During and at the end of each performative situation, Vincent + Feria produce documents: photographs, videos, and texts. These documents can later give rise to a protean account of the experience, which rearranges this fragmentary, indexical base to shed new light on the situation, with a bias closer to a visual essay than a documentary work. But with so much material accumulating after the experience, they found that they were running out of time for editing and post-production. While the duo conceives and implements performative situations in announced settings (conferences, vernissages, exhibitions, workshops, biennials) that ensure the intelligibility of the artistic context, the action-documentary is instead organised around the creative process of urban work in everyday life. As the documentation has been anticipated as a second reading of the urban action, it is often produced by a third party, which represents an issue in itself, in taking advantage of all of the involuntary performativity that is consubstantial with the situation created by the action itself.

Figure 8. 'Sisyfos', Vladimír Turner, 2011. Stills from a video ©Vladimír Turner.

EXEMPLARS OF THE ACTION-DOCUMENTARY FORM

The action-documentary lies in this reciprocal relationship between an actual urban action and its capture. This allows for two levels of reception: one where the action itself is a work of art in the real world, and the other where the documentation is no longer simply at the service of the action, but becomes an additional narrative tool. The documented action can gain a certain intensity and replicate the effected experience in a different way through its viewing. This is borne out by the following examples of artists who are experimenting with the documentary form and who are, in my view, exemplars of the action-documentary form.

In 'Genius Loci' (**Figure 9**), produced in 2013 as part of an urban creation residency with Station Vastemonde in Saint-Brieuc, we chose to focus on the production of a series of artistic gestures in the city consisting of three constrained strolls along three routes through the Brioche landscape. Each action took place over several days and was repeated several times, so that virtually all of it could be documented in real time. Rail-rafting was the first action and we used a draisine[1] on which a raft was fixed to travel the four kilometres of disused railway line linking the Beaufeuillage business park to the port of Le Légué, crossing various urban areas – industrial, educational, residential, leisure, and agricultural – and skirting the coastline. Our assistant Vincent Tanguy made the journey nine times, documenting it over a two-week period. He also extended the journey through the area, which took just thirty-five minutes each time we used the tracks.

'Easy 2 Sec' is a symbolic transposition of the myth of Sisyphus into a suburban environment. Over the course of a day, I crossed the four kilometres of valley in the heart of Saint-Brieuc – between Les Vallées campsite and the harbour in Le Légué – pushing ahead of me an ovoid structure on a human scale. This sphere was constructed from single-person folding tents, built one inside the other. This action re-enacts, in the field of consumer society, the punishment of Sisyphus, condemned for having dared to defy the gods by eternally rolling a boulder up a hill and rolling it back down again each time before reaching the top. This action, repeated twice, appears as an allegory of the condition of the nomad in the city – whether tourist or homeless.

Figure 9. 'Genius Loci', David Renault and Mathieu Tremblin (Les Frères Ripoulain), Saint-Brieuc, France, 2013. Stills from a video ©Mathieu Tremblin.

Figure 10. 'Funeral', Vladimír Turner. The Ore Mountains, Czech–German border, 2016. Stills from a video ©Vladimí Turner.

Finally, 'Ghost Car' was a nocturnal stroll in which David Renault used a car lighting system to simulate the ghostly presence of a stationary car. Parked in a number of unlikely urban niches or on the side of the road for two evenings, the Ghost Car generated a fleeting and silent ghostly presence, like a disquieting mechanical sentry. Bringing together these three strands, Genius Loci takes a contemplative, melancholy look at Saint-Brieuc, a dormitory town haunted by its industrial and seaport past in decline.

In a similar poetic engagement with the environment, in 2016, Vladimír Turner directed 'Funeral' (**Figure 10**) in which he initiated a symbolic dialogue with an industrial landscape of coal mines, unfolding like a pagan ode to the Anthropocene. In front of the camera, Turner 'partly improvises scenes and invents installations and performances with the allure of post-industrial land art.' He plays not only his own role as an artist, but also that of an allegorical figure caught up in 'a kind of imaginary funeral celebration for the dusty place and for this cursed landscape of the Ore Mountains'. He set out to create an eco-activist film, but it evolved into something much more experimental as the actions and recordings progressed: 'a surreal collage of scenes and ambivalent tableaux vivants inhabited by an affective and critical vision of the way we treat the landscape' (Turner, 2016: n.p.).

Figure 11. 'Melania' (first part), Brad Downey. Melania, Rožno, Slovenia, 2019. Stills from a video ©Brad Downey.

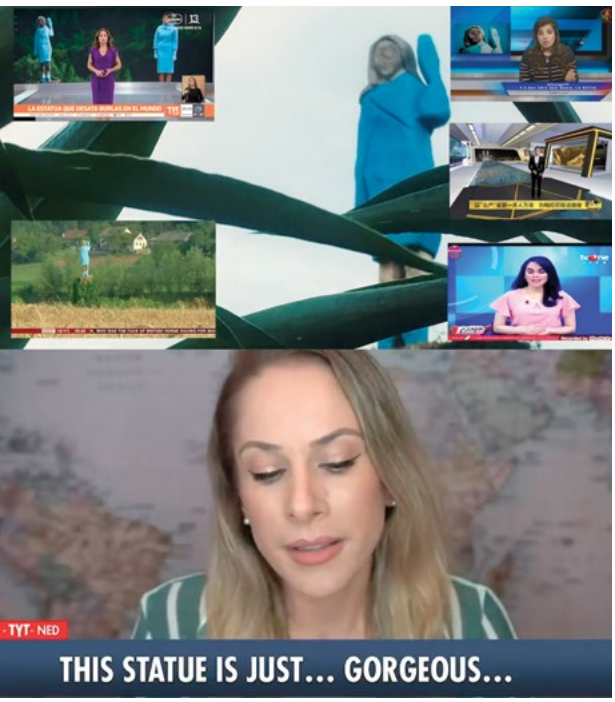

Figure 12. 'Melania' (second part), Brad Downey, 2020. Stills from a video ©Brad Downey.

On a trip to Slovenia in the summer of 2018, American artist Brad Downey discovered that Melania Trump, then first lady of the United States, was born in the small Slovenian village of Rožno. There he met Maxi, a local who claimed he was born on the same day and in the same hospital as her. When Downey returned the following summer, he suggested to Maxi, a folk artist, that he create a one-scale chainsaw sculpture of Melania from a poplar tree on a nearby plot of land that he had bought.

As Downey follows the creative process, the focus shifts from the sculpture to Maxi, becoming a portrait of this singular figure and his relationship to the world. The anecdotal nature of Downey's approach to the sculpture becomes a kind of symbolic conversation with the persona of Melania Trump – with the whole liberticidal imaginary of the policies being pursued by her husband, then US President Donald Trump, in the background. In July 2019, Downey published his documentary online (**Figure 11**). Immediately, the sculptor's clumsiness was mocked in memes. The sculptural portrait, naive and crude, was used by detractors of Trump to mock him.

A second phase of documentation began around the reception and parodic appropriation on the web of Downey's work produced in collaboration with the Slovenian sculptor. Exactly one year after the inauguration of this 'monument' to Melania Trump, the sculpture was set on fire by an anonymous arsonist on July 4, 2020. Given the political context, Downey had prepared a cast of the sculpture in anticipation, and a few months later, he replaced it with a bronze version. At the end of 2020, he made a second part of the documentary (**Figure 12**), this time focusing on the online reception of the statue, mixing videos of YouTubers expounding their conspiracy theories with news channels reporting on the reception of Melania Trump's 'monument' as a new tourist attraction, or even a place of pilgrimage. Here, the narrative has effectively escaped its creator, who is now apparently merely a witness to the most unexpected developments.

Both Downey and Wermke and Leinkauf draw their action towards the documentary – as actumentary – not from the original narrative of the action, but from its reception, which is an integral component of this re-reading of the 'artistic event'.

Similarly, Turner had already deliberately experimented with this principle. Since the mid-2000s, the anonymous Czech guerrilla art collective Ztohoven has been known for its virulent criticism of political corruption and the mass media. On June 17, 2007, its members hacked into the national television channel ČT2 and broadcasted live on the morning news a nuclear explosion in the middle of the Krkonoše mountain landscape. Their proposal, entitled Media Reality, is like an updated version of Orson Welles' 1938 radio hoax 'War of the Worlds'. As with Welles, the aim of their diversion was not to frighten the public – it was obvious to viewers watching that the explosion was fake – but to highlight the media manipulation at work. Their plan worked perfectly, and within a few weeks the artists found themselves at the heart of a colossal police and surveillance operation, being charged with terrorism.

Turner, who was secretly a member of the group at the time, decided to do his final year project on the reception of this action at the film school in Prague where he was studying. In 2008, he produced 'On Media Reality' (**Figure 13**), a documentary film in which he first follows the art collective in action, and consequently shows the response by the media and incredulous onlookers, the detectives in charge of the investigation, the National Gallery presenting Ztohoven with an award, and the terrorism trial. He details a profusion of points of view, using his student hat to be both judge and party to the action.

Figure 13. 'On Media Reality', Vladimír Turner, 2008. Stills from a video ©Vladimír Turner.

CONCLUSION

This essay has considered the ways in which artists' documentation of their urban actions have contributed to the development of what I term action-documentary – or actumentary – practices. As the examples above illustrate, this is transformative in that urban intervention has become a catalytic tool for documentary and experimental work. In contrast to conventional video-performance, in which the artist uses the video in place of an audience and performs for the camera, the action-documentary is formed in the reciprocal relationship between an urban intervention and its capture. This allows for two levels of reception: one where the urban action itself is a work of art that is produced in the real world, and the other where the documentation of the action is no longer simply at the service of the action, but rather becomes an additional – and sometimes unpredictable – narrative device in the post-media era.

1 A human-powered light auxiliary rail vehicle used to transport materials for railway maintenance.

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MATHIEU TREMBLIN (1980) is a French artist-researcher and associate professor in Visual Arts in the School of Architecture of Strasbourg (ENSAS), France. He lives in Strasbourg and works in Europe and beyond. Tremblin is inspired by anonymous, autonomous, and spontaneous practices and expressions in urban space. He uses creative processes and simple, playful actions to question systems of legislation, representation, and symbolisation in the city.

He is also developing a practice-based research linking urban intervention, urbanities, and globalisation. It takes the form of editorial direction, exhibition curation, or collaborative proposals and has resulted in initiatives and projects such as Éditions Carton-pâte, Paper Tigers Collection, Office de la créativité, Post-Posters, Anarcadémisme, the documentary collection of the Amicale du Hibou-Spectateur, Die Gesellschaft der Stadtwanderer.

Tremblin's research focuses on the relationship between the right to the city and artistic urban practices, as well as on sensible diagnosis as a tool for citizen empowerment, processes of co-creation and self-dissemination in relation to social struggles, and the permeability of uses between digital and urban spaces.

MÃE

A Case of Outsider Graffiti

Isabel Carrasco Castro
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MÃO

in Monchique, Portugal

In August 2021, we decided to visit Monchique to get a feeling for the interior of the Algarve region in Portugal. As we parked the car, we spotted an old (**Figures 1–3**) convent on the top of the hill where the town is built on. We decided to climb to the monument before it got hotter. Before our trip, we had read some basic information about the site.

Figure 1. The Nossa Senhora do Desterro Convent in Monchique, Portugal, August 2021.[1]
Figure 2. The convent as seen from Monchique's cemetery.
Figure 3. Streets in the centre of the town that lead to the convent.

Convento de Nossa Senhora do Desterro (Convent of Our Lady of Exile)
Founded in 1631 by Pero da Silva, soon to be Viceroy of India. Manueline style. Franciscan order. Very damaged by the earthquake of Lisbon (1755). Rebuilt and abandoned again. Great views of Monchique from the hill. Worthy to visit. It is on private land but, owners welcome visitors (Unknown, n.d.).

The walk took us through the narrow streets of Monchique. It was a steep uphill climb, but the picturesque white façades made up for it. The last part of the journey was a path surrounded by cork trees. As we got closer to the convent, we started spotting some hand-written signs on the walls.[2] They had been clumsily executed with red paint and a wide brush. They were uppercase and big enough to be seen from a distance. The crude hand style, aligned with the simplicity of the messages, appeared aimed to keep visitors away. The words 'FAMILIA', 'FAMILY', 'DOG', and 'PRIVATE' were often accompanied by sketches of human figures and a dog (**Figures 4–9**).

Figures 4-9. Various images of the convent's exterior displaying the hand-written signs 'FAMILIA', 'FAMILY', 'DOG', and 'PRIVATE' along with sketches of human figures.

Despite these warning signs, we hoped that someone would let us in, and as we approached the door, a man in his fifties invited us to enter. The first rooms evidenced that he was living there despite the lack of electricity and sanitary facilities such as running water. The inhabited area was followed by a series of chambers whose ceilings had fallen apart (**Figure 10**). Some were used as a vegetable garden where hens ran free (**Figure 11**). Others had preserved the original blue and white tiles of the walls (**Figure 12**).

Figure 10. Various images of interior areas in Convento de Nossa Senhora do Desterro.
Figure 11. Area that preserved the wall tiles.
Figure 12. Area devoted to the hens.

The convent had passed to public ownership in the 19th century, when Portugal commandeered Church property. After that, some portions were acquired by different private owners. At some point, several low-income families moved there to live. Since that time, the number of owners multiplied as the private fragments of the convent were divided from heir to heir. Some generations later, the lack of official documents left the current convent's ownership unclear (Varela, 2017). There was no doubt that the convent had been inhabited by different families (up to six at the same time) and that up to the day of our visit, the man we encountered was living there. The proliferation of graffiti discouraging visitors from trespassing in the convent may be seen in the images from a blog entry from 2011 (Brito & Silva, 2011). It is clear that these messages have been there for many years.

In the interior of the convent, more graffiti awaited us. But these works seemed made by a different hand. Most of them consisted of obsessive repetitions of the words 'Jó' *(name of a person (author?) or Job from the Bible)*, 'DIJÓ' (*unclear, perhaps the author's nickname*) and/or 'Mãe' (*mother*) next to images of hearts and crosses.[3] While 'DIJÓ' appeared written in uppercase letters, 'Mãe' was executed with an elegant cursive rounded calligraphy with only the first letter capitalised. This graphic vertical formula was ubiquitous on door lintels and walls, even at heights impossible to reach from the ground level without the help of a long ladder. Another frequent expression was 'Mãe Sagrada' (*sacred mother*), 'Mãe respeitada' (*respected mother*), and 'Da-me a Mão' (*give me your hand*).

Figures 13–18.
13: Jó/Mãe (*Jó/ mother*)
14: (on a blot) and 15: Dijó † heart
16: Mãe (*mother*) † heart
17: Mãe/ Sagrada/ DIJÓ/ Mãe/ seráje [sic. serás]/ respeitada/ hearts/ Mãe (*mother/ sacred/ DIJÓ/ mother you will be respected*)
18: Writing on a blot: Mãe/ Sagrada/ DA-ME/ A MÃO (*mother/ sacred/ give me/ your hand*


DA-ME
A MÃO


DIJO


MÃE
SAGRADA
DIJO
MÃE
SERA VE
RESPEITADA

This graffiti appeared to have been written with graphite, most likely charcoal (**Figures 13–18**). Many messages seemed written over previous ones that had left a blot, suggesting a periodic or recent renewal (**Figures 14, 18**). Another type of message was the number 1631, the year of the foundation of the convent, written with an orange pigment (probably a piece of brick) (**Figures 19–21**).

Figures 19-21.

On the former altar of the convent, there was an improvised shrine composed of dried flowers and a cross on rusty bed bases (**Figure 22**). Around the altar, there is a high concentration of graffiti, both on the walls and on pieces of cardboard. Here the messages accumulate: JÓ, Mãe, DIJÓ, 'MÃE DA-ME A MÃO', 'Mãe Sagrada Sempre Respeitada'. To these, apparently, random juxtaposition of words the term 'DEOS' [sic. Deus] *(God)* was also added, along with images of hands printed and sketched (**Figure 23**). At the centre of the altar are two figures that appear to be a mother and her child, drawn in a childish style (**Figure 24**).

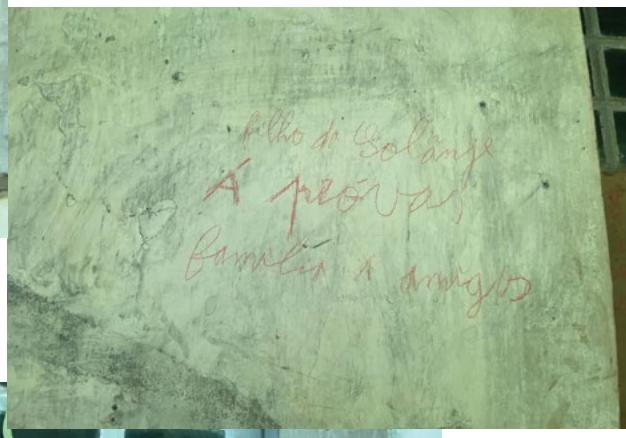
Images taken earlier, in 2019 and 2020, show the shrine in a much more elaborate state, including plenty of fresh flowers, and hoses or wires hanging on both sides of a photograph of a person placed at the centre of the altar. The symmetrical composition around the photograph and the cross give the impression of an actual altarpiece (**Figure 25**). These images also show a sort of still-life arrangement on a camping table covered with a crochet doily with bird feathers hooked on it. On the table there was a switched-on lamp, a glass bottle with flowers and a stone — all creating a true vanitas[4] (**Figure 26**).

Figure 25. Altar in February 2020. Photograph ©TripAdvisor user.
Figure 26. Improvised altar, February, 2020. Photograph ©TripAdvisor user.

Figure 22. View of the altarpiece in 2021.
Figure 23. Details of the altar, 2021.
Figure 24. Central section of the altar, 2021.

Figures 27-29: Various representations of hands.
27: Signboard: 2018/ 2018/ JUDIÇIARIA/ MATOU SOLÃNJE [sic. Solange]/ DERÃ FOGE A/ MONCHIQUE VERDADE 2018/ JUDIÇIARIA/ CERE MATÁR O DIJÓ/ MÃE SAGRADA/AMÁDA/para sempre/ comente/ Monxique [sic. Monchique]/ JUDIÇIARIA/ PORCOS/ASASINOS/ Á PROVAS GORDADAS/ PALÁVRA SÁGRADA. (*2018/ 2018/ criminal police/ killed Solange/ set fire /Monchique truth 2018/ criminal police wants to kill Dijó/ sacred mother/ loved/forever/*[unclear] *Monchique*)
28: Outlines of a left hand.
29: Shield on the convent façade and decoration in the window with the word 'DAME [sic. da-me]' (*give me*) and a hand.

The hanging cardboard signs (**Figure 27**) included more elaborate messages with specific references to an incident that had taken place in Monchique in 2018. One of them is in the future tense, giving the text a kind of visionary tone: '2018/ JUDIÇIARIA [sic. judiciária]/ MATARÀ [sic. matará] A/ MÃE DO/ DIJÓ DEPOIS/ DERÃ FOGE/ A MONCHIQUE/ DIJÓ VIVIADE [sic. vivia]/ A MIASADE [sic. ameaçado]/ DE MORTE/ PELA/ JUDIÇIARIA [judiciária]'[5] (*2018/ criminal police/ will kill/ the mother of/ Dijó after/ setting fire/ to Monchique/ Dijó lived/ under life threat/ by/ criminal police*). The offence against criminal police continues in other graffiti throughout the building: 'JUDIÇIARIA [sic. judiciária] MALDITOS' (*Dammed criminal police*), 'JUDIÇIARIA [judiciária]/ PORCOS ASASINOS' (*criminal police killers pigs*). The other one reads: 'JUDIÇIARIA [judiciária] MALDITOS 2018 FOGUE MÃE' (*criminal police damned 2018 Fire Mother*).



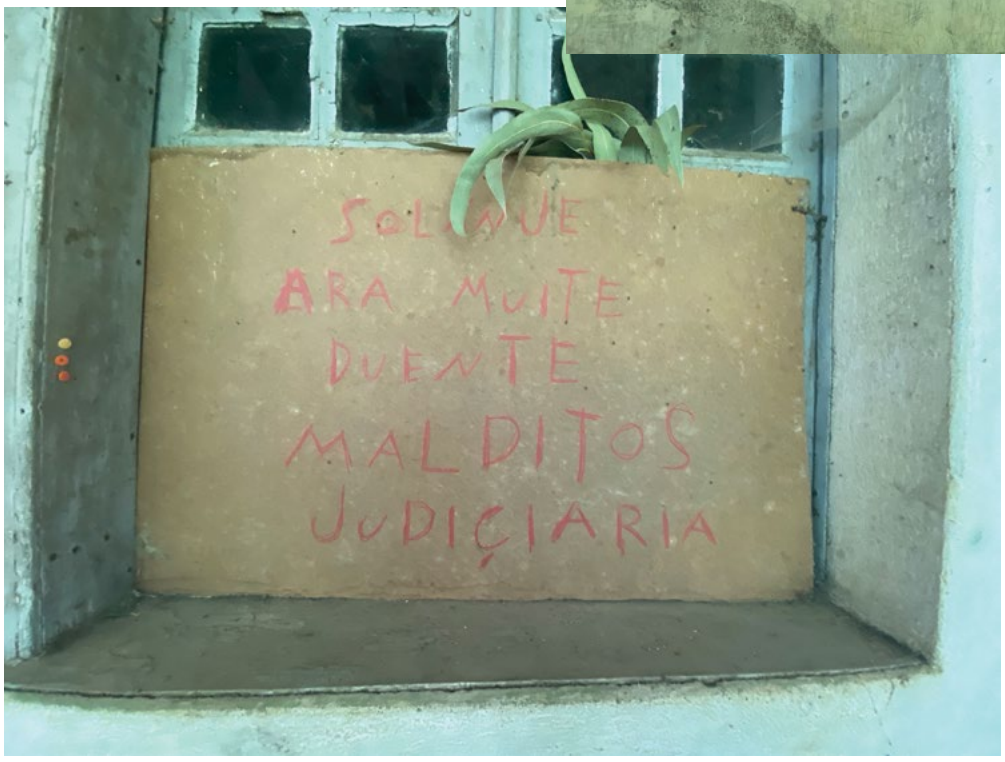


Figure 30. 2018 Judiçiaria [sic. judiciária] porcos asasinos [sic. assassinos] MIRATE 2018 malditos justisa [sic. Justiça] è lixo" (*2018 criminal police killers pigs look at you 2018 damned justice is trash*).
Figure 31. SOLANJE [sic. Solange]/ ARA [sic. era] MUITO/ DUENTE [sic. doente]/ MALDITOS/ JUDIÇIARIA (*Solange/ was very/ sick/ damned/ criminal police*).
Figure 32. Filho da/ Solânje [sic. Solange]/ A [hã] próvas/ familia i amigos (*Son of/ Solange/ there are proofs/ family and friends*)

In another part of the convent, there was a homemade mirror with the sign 'MIRATE' *(look at you)* surrounded by more writing in pink. This text seemed intended to be read while *reflecting* on oneself in the mirror (**Figure 30**). Photographs from previous visitors (TripAdvisor) show that there had been similar mirror-messages in other parts of the convent at earlier times.

When we were leaving, we asked the man who had opened the door to us some questions. He said that he was living in the convent but insisted that he didn't know anything about the writing, that he was not one of the authors of the messages, and that he didn't know who the authors were.

We left the convent and decided to walk around the building on the outside. We observed similar writings and, as we took the path down the hill to return to the town, we spotted a number of small carved stones with hearts, crosses, and the words: JÓ, DÁ *(give)*. It was striking how hard those rocks (granite or similar) seemed to be and how tiny and discreet these reliefs appeared in the middle of the forest (**Figures 33–36**).

Figures 33-36. Carved stones on the path outside the convent.

As we continued down the path, we came across a man in his late forties carrying a guitar, who was going up to the convent. His glasses were broken. Once we reached the town we asked some people about the graffiti in the convent and the people living up there. Everyone refused to speak or said they didn't know anything. Finally, the owner of a local store told us that there was a man with a guitar who trespassed at the convent everyday causing trouble to visitors, addressing the female ones as 'mother' – along with offensive words – and sometimes behaving aggressively. He said that the people in Monchique thought this man was the author behind the graffiti.

TripAdvisor reviews

NOVEMBER 2016 – Go there if you want an aggressive guy cussing and swearing at you

The lady in the tourist office is great, very pleasant indeed and suggests this walk. It is a pleasant walk until you meet a vagrant in the woods. He has a guitar but is not playing it. He is exceedingly aggressive and cusses and swears at you. The aggression could easily turn to violence. I go back to the tourist office so the kind lady in the office can do something about it. Her response is stunning. He has been a problem for some time, the police are aware but can do nothing unless you want to spend time with a formal complaint. Yet she still suggests people go up there! Be warned, protect yourself by not going there.

NOVEMBER 2018 – Terrifying Visit Don't Visit

My boyfriend and I visited the convent or tried to. It was very hard to find and the streets are very tight to drive around, but by far the worst part of our visit was when we eventually found the entrance to the convent, parked up and started to walk up the hill, we were met by a terrifying vagrant with a guitar who swore abuse at us continuously. I felt so scared as though he might get violent at any moment. I would STRONGLY suggest you avoid this place of interest at all costs it is not safe!!!

JUNE 2019 – Dangerous man in cork trees!

Travellers to the convent should beware of a man in a blue shirt, thick black rimmed glasses, late forties with a guitar and bag with coins in it. I assume he is a busker although I never heard him play an instrument. Instead, he swore profanely (in broken English) at my adult daughter and I as we approached the quite isolated convent. This was unprovoked and very intimidating as we were the only people around. On the way back down the same path he responded to my "Bom Dia" with another highly agitated, foul-mouthed tirade. I could see he had been cutting cork bark from a tree with a knife and now my daughter and I were seriously concerned that things could escalate out of control. Fortunately two people came up from the town and the man retreated from the path, back into the trees. I warned the newcomers that this guy was clearly a nutter, and we left pronto. This was a bizarre and unsettling experience in a beautiful and serene part of Monchique. If I could have found a policeman in the town, I would have reported it. Take care up there!

MARCH 2020 – Unpleasant Experience

We walked up to the convent ruins where there were 4 men milling around outside. The place was festooned with plastic flowers, graffiti, and spray painted "private property". It also smelled of urine. It appeared that they were living in the ruins and trying to get money out of tourists. We turned around, went back down the road and encountered a man playing a guitar expecting money. When we did not give him any we were sworn at (he knows some English!). All in all, what should have been a quiet rural experience was quite disconcerting. One might expect to encounter this type of thing in an urban slum but not at such a lovely rural spot. There are many interesting sites around Monchique and until something is done about the people hanging around the convent, I would suggest it be avoided.

AUGUST 2022 – Sad

Very sad end of a very nice hike in Serra de Monchique. This place is abandoned and in really bad conditions. I consider it dangerous to go there. My only recommenda–tion is to the Portuguese authorities to assume their responsibility.

Fire in Monchique, 2018

The fire started on August 3, 2018 in the area of Perna Negra in Monchique and was later described as the largest of the year in Portugal and Europe, having raged for one week. Over 27,000 hectares of land and 74 houses were destroyed, 30 of which were primary residences. (Bruxo, 2020)

Right before the fire, the city hall of Monchique passed a plan long awaited by people and the local authorities. The project involved arriving at a negotiation with the last two brothers who claimed ownership over a part of the convent, providing them with a housing facility and restoring the monument. The restoration plan included a luxury hotel, a space for festivals and exhibitions as well as the recuperation of religious worship (Varela, 2017).

In a news article from August 2018, right after the fire in Monchique, Rosa Ramos interviewed António and Vidaúl, the two brothers who had grown up in the convent and who had saved it from the flames, an enterprise regarded as a miracle in the eyes of the town's population, the authorities, and the media:

> Mas os irmãos ganharam: o fogo queimou tudo, mas não se atreveu a entrar no mosteiro. Mesmo assim, no dia a seguir os jornais e as televisões anunciavam, com pesar, que nada tinha sobrado do Convento de Nossa Senhora do Desterro. As fake news tiveram razão de ser: o lume desceu a encosta com tamanha vontade que não era possível que o monumento tivesse escapado. *(But the brothers won: the fire burnt everything but it didn't dare to enter the monastery. Nevertheless, the day after, newspapers and television programmes announced with regret that nothing was left of the convent. The fake news was justified: the flames went down the hill with such strength that it seemed impossible for the monument to have been saved)* (Ramos, 2018).

The article explained how Vidaúl lived in the convent on his own most of the time, while António spent time between his own house in Monchique, the convent, and in the psychiatric hospital where his mental problems had forced him to stay for a while. He seemed inclined towards magical thinking in relation to the convent: 'É que aqui dentro aconteceram sempre coisas muito misteriosas' *('Mysterious things have always happened here inside')* (Ramos). This is the only article that sheds some light on the meaning of the graffiti: Solange was the name of their mother, who had recently passed away (2018). She used to ask to be taken by the hand to avoid falling. One of António's sons had been named João (Jó?). That was also the name of the last official owner of the convent. António also confessed to the journalist that he was out of his mind and bluntly acknowledged his problems: 'Sou só um pobre diabo que aqui ando, sempre fui. Tenho uma vida de merda [...] A única coisa que eu gostava era que me ajudassem e me levassem a um bom médico de cabeça, que seja especialista' (*'I'm just a poor devil around here. I always have been. I have a shitty life [...] The only thing I wish is to be helped and to be taken to a good doctor to examine my head'*) (Ramos). At the time of this interview, he had started putting signs made of cardboard around the convent. Based on the dates of the images posted on Tripadvisor and in newspapers, and the date of our own trip, we think most of the graffiti analysed was done between 2020 and early 2021, after the death of Solange and the big fire in Monchique (2018), and during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Reflections: A singular space?

The convent could productively be read as a 'singular space' as coined and studied by curator and professor Jo Farb Hernández (2013). These are spaces, generally the home, where owners develop a long-term creative project reflecting a symbolic world that escapes classifications, schools, or periods. Usually referred to as outsider, folk, or environmental art, these interventions tend to affect the whole space and must be approached in their totality.

> The sites [...] are full of personal stories, connections, and experiences, and this fusion of art[6] with life becomes a total synthesis, generally unmatched in any other circumstances. The art environments reveal not only complete commitment to the work and blurring of divisions between art and daily living, but an open reflection of the marker's life and concerns... 'life-specific', not just 'site-specific' (Farb Hernández, 2013: 19).

This type of creative practice is very often rejected or not well understood by the community. In the case of Monchique, the argument was the need to repair the convent to make it safer for tourists and open to everyone:

> Neighbours or passersby, who may be unprepared for the edgy audacity and open accessibility that these publicly available sites proffer, may base their disapproval, at a fundamental level, on a perhaps unconscious conservative sense of property that upholds the idea that certain aspects of life simply need to be kept more private. Also potentially of concern may be that the sites may reveal built, written, or even implied critiques of, or commentaries on, general cultural, ethnic, historical, or political issues, and these judgements may challenge or confront what may have been glossed over to archive superficial civil accord (Farb Hernández, 2013: 21–22).

Reflections: Topoanalysis

In *The Poetics of Space*, philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1994) addresses the deep and unconscious psychological relations that humans develop with spaces – *topophilia*. As adults, we might find shelter and put down roots elsewhere, but it is the childhood home that triggers our deeper emotions and memories, the one that conjures our fears, ghosts, sense of protection and belonging. House, temple, cave as well as mother wound, the convent is a personal place for intimate mourning rituals as well as a sacred place to transcend grief.

Biological or fictional (mother or Virgin – Nossa Senhora) houses and domestic interior spaces are conventionally gendered as feminine – as maternal places that provide protection (*mother, family*) much as hands do (*give me your hand*). As such, as well as being a symbolic extension of our body, we are ever alert to unwanted trespassers and defend these inner spaces from the external forces that threaten it: here, unknown visitors and fire. As Bachelard states:

> In the life of a man [sic], the house thrust aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. (Bachelard, 1994: 6–7).

These compulsive gestures – the names of the departed scratched over and over in the cataclysmic confusion of grief – are at once quotidian and domestic. For it is at home that we all *write* our memories by living – existing, being, inhabiting – though usually by furnishing, decorating, and customising them, and not in expecting our words on the walls to be read in the here and now, and in the hereafter or afterlife.

1 All photographs by ©Isabel Carrasco Castro unless indicated otherwise.

2 This text is not an exhaustive and rigorous empirical study of the graffiti encountered. On the contrary, it is an experimental and subjective visual essay with the intention of sharing my impressions, as a graffiti researcher and lover, during a trip to Monchique.

3 All transcriptions are reproduced as written on the walls leaving incorrect spelling and grammar. Translations from Portuguese by the author. Thanks goes out to Toño Trenado, Pedro Soares and Ana Gariso for their help. Review of the text in English: Allen Hoppes.

4 Historically, vanitas paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries involve 'moody' still life imagery of transitory items, to show the transience of life and the certainty of death.

5 Many words are spelt incorrectly and grammar and syntax don´t follow a logical or normative pattern.

6 In our case, the graffiti can also be approached as a visual creativity process. We take the term 'art' in a broad sense as a visual intervention in the space it aims to modify.

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