

IN TANGIBLE

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 Bengtson's recent book *Tracks and Traces* considers Bengtson'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 recreated 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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