

# Street art and photography: Documentation, representation, interpretation

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In this empirical paper, I propose a 4-point system of classification for street art photography. Street art photography (1) functions as visual inspiration for other street artists. All street art actors take photographs (Derwanz, 2013). Photos can (2) act as documentation of the street work for the artist, but also for fans, researchers, police, home-owners, etc. Street art photography can (3) function as work-in-process documentation, work documentation, documentation of decay and of interaction. In addition, (4) every street art photograph is an interpretation of a work and at the same time a work in its own right.

## Introduction

In this empirical essay based on 12 years of street art research, I specify the different roles photography can play in connection with street art. To produce this paper, I analyzed photos, street art books, and engaged with photographic social media accounts dealing with street art and graffiti. The main aim of this paper is to propose a 4-point system of classification of street art photography. As I will point out, photography (1) can be a visual inspiration for street artists. All street art actors take photographs (Derwanz, 2013). Street artists photograph their works after attaching them in public space. Photos can (2) act as documentation of the street work for the artist, but also for fans, researchers, police, home-owners. Often they also document the creative process or the process of installing the piece. Homeowners and police document the damage by vandalism or secure evidence. Passersby on the street or active street art viewers make spontaneous photos with their phone or a more professional camera. All of the above auteurs, and street art researchers often photograph not only individual works but larger contexts, such as a whole wall full of stickers or tags, often repeatedly over a longer period of time. Street art photography can (3) function as work-in-process documentation, work documentation, documentation of decay and of interaction. In addition, (4) every street art photograph is an interpretation of a work and at the same time a work in its own right. In this paper, I

understand street art as a self-authorized piece on the street that is not style writing graffiti. Graffiti writers write their name as a *tag* or *piece*. This is about style, and about addressing other writers, while street art addresses the general public. I build on these observations to analyse the photographic process, the differences between the photographs of artists / fans / researchers / authorities, and the distribution channels of the resulting images.

## 1 Photography as inspiration – Photos and photo books

Photography can be an inspiration for street artists – and graffiti writers. I start with this argument as street artists – and graffiti writers – often first look at other works, which may be in the form of photographs. Like all art, graffiti and street art refer to earlier works and (as those works may be destroyed within hours) to photographs of street art and graffiti. One of the best-selling art books of all time is a photo book about graffiti in New York – *Subway Art* by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984). The fact that today we can find graffiti and street art almost everywhere around the world may also be traced back to the photographs from this book – as many influential writer pioneers have admitted. Graffiti has also influenced others via moving images, graffiti films, and music videos. Contrary to most

other art, people look at graffiti mostly on-site or as captured in photographs, and rarely in the museum. Hardly a work from photo books like *Subway Art* lived longer than a few hours or weeks. Therefore, graffiti and street art demand photography which, as a means of location- and time-independent documentation, creates the opportunity to inspire others and possibly to reach "eternity." Photos are often presented together with other photos. In relation to a photo book like *Subway Art*, the medium of photography serves to record works. As a collection of photos, the photo book itself, like any (curated) photo collection online, is at the same time an archive and an exhibition space that exists independently of space and time, whereby some aspects of the works' original context are lost.<sup>1</sup>

Graffiti writers often copy style, such as the wild style or the bubble style. However, to copy works from photos is frowned upon in graffiti. In street art, actors also refer to photographs, maybe even more so, or at least more specifically, than in graffiti. Street art is often image-based. However, graffiti writers also use reproductions.

In street art, photos from the collective pictorial memory are often taken as treasure trove and reassembled. Here it is *not* frowned upon to use recognizable photos. On the contrary, herein the creative, artistic spark often ignites exactly at the reputation of the known photo source, which gets a new twist, for instance when Banksy reworks the *Mona Lisa* or *Che Guevara*.

## 2 Photography as documentation

The use of photography for documentation, at least by the artist, is often already taken into consideration in the conception of the street piece. So, documentation may start before the work itself, or as Susan Sontag (1977: 19) stated, "today everything exists to end in a photograph." Since street art is ephemeral, that is to say finite or unlasting, street artists often pay special attention to the fact that important aspects of the work can be clearly seen in the photo afterwards.

In addition to providing inspiration, photography is also a form of documentation. Documentation is always subjective, but often tries to, or pretends to, be objective. "The conflict of interest between objectivity and subjectivity, between demonstration and supposition, is unresolvable." (Sontag, 1977: 106). It is a *festhalten* (summing up/recalling/capturing/recording/taking down/logging) as street art is an ever-changing entity that has an expiration date. A painting can be photographed again and again to a certain extent. However, even here there may be some major differences in photographs of the same work – in colors and sharpness, before and after restoration, before and after war damage, etc. However, unlike sculpture and oil paintings, street art and graffiti are a highly endangered species. As such, it stands on a par with land art considering the degree of ephemerality



Figure 1. Barbara. Bitte nicht zerstören (es gibt keine Zweite) [Please do not destroy (there is no second one)]. March 20, 2016. Photography @ Barbara. Printed with permission of the artist.

of many works. Its material manifestation may only happen in the moment of performance and it may then, likewise, disappear (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> However, it is not quite as ephemeral or fleeting as performance art. Street art often interacts with the environment and changes like the viewer does – the next time one looks at a work on the street, it may have aged significantly.

### a) Process documentation

Further, the manufacturing and process of installation of works on the street may be documented, often by the artist, or by people s/he has entrusted according to their direction – or passersby may photograph the artist at work. This is not primarily about the "completed" work, but at least in most cases the work is already clearly visible (Figure 2). This type of documentation emphasizes the procedural aspect of street art and is also part of its authentication. The performative is inscribed into most works of street art and graffiti (Figure 2). Here the motif is not always in the foreground (Figure 3), but may reside, for example, in the fact that someone has sprayed a simple piece on a high-rise roof. The viewer may ask, how did one get up there? How could the artist work illegally at this dangerous, hard-to-reach-point without being arrested, without falling down? The time aspect of process documentation is usually caught in photo sequences, the location and performative aspect in context shots showing the setting of the street art performance.

The medium of video often emphasizes – even more than photographs – the importance of the action of attaching a work. A video without cuts, showing time and space, is first and foremost an animated serial photo sequence. Here we are close to performance,



Figure 2. Barbara, Bitte nicht zerstören (es gibt keine Zweite) [Please do not destroy (there is no second one)], March 20, 2016. Photography © Barbara. Printed with permission of the artist.

a *context shot* is a photograph where the main motif is smaller, but where more of the overall location becomes visible, including possible location references and allusions, that cannot be seen in close-up of the main work (Figure 3).

The photograph abolishes and emphasizes the transience/ephemerality of the work on the street at the same time. It refers to the liveliness of the piece. As in the case of a photographic portrait of a human,

we see a momentary snapshot. A street art piece can look different the next day, with different daylight; it can barely be visible or 'dead'. Photography shows the state of a work of street art at a certain moment in time and space. Every photograph of a street-art-work is both the work itself and an individual interpretation of the work. This becomes especially clear when comparing photographs authorised by the artist with those of fans. Often, other focuses are set, if a detail is not obvious. In some fan photos of Banksy's IKEA punk for instance (Figure 4), the towers of an IKEA branch in the background are not visible. However, a "different" photograph to that taken by the artist does not always mean a photograph of lesser aesthetic quality.

happening, the unique theatrical, physical moment, which one does not see in the finished work, but its traces are inscribed in the documentation, for instance roof top graffiti or the burning of items (Figure 2).

As street art is often illegal or self-authorized (Blanché, 2016), the photographic documentation of street art processes may emphasize the artist's anonymity to avoid prosecution. The fast, the spontaneous, and the virtuoso – which street art and graffiti celebrates – can be visualized especially well with longer exposed photo shots. By blurring and smearing light, the artist may be shown in a dynamic and anonymous way at the same time (Glaser, 2017).

The photographic documentation of the work's process does not have to occur in the preliminary stage, in the making-of the street art work. It may be of the work itself, or about a particular action, such as the simple showing or burning of an object in front of a street art background (Figure 2). Many street art events were staged specifically for the camera; there is no other "work" except the photo or video showing the process, as in Figure 2.

### b) Work documentation

The artist may also document the finished work in context, with an urban background of a qualitative or quantitative nature, which appears to him/her to be the most suitable for the interpretation of the work. Thus, not until then does the background becomes visible as such. Similar to the long shot or wide shot in a film, this practice is not (just) about details, but about the street art motif in its overall context. If necessary, detailed photographs may follow, showing special aspects, elaborate details, etc. In addition, often following

### c) Documentation of decay and interaction documentation

After the photography involving the documentation of the work, the process of the documentation of decay and/or interaction begins. Each artist's documentation of their work before other entities interact with it is also a documentation of interaction, but one with the found situation. In contrast, the photographic documentation of decay is a reverse process documentation: "what goes up must come down." The documentation of decay, as well as process documentation, meets the serial character of photography half way. The paper tiger of street art learned to walk after painstaking work on the PC with Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, or in the studio. It is then self-authorized and reintroduced into urban public space – and dismissed in freedom. There, wind, weather, sun, other graffiti writers, homeowners and city cleaners chase the piece. Since street art is an almost living artform, it is only a matter of time before it expires. The majority of street art and graffiti has

a limited lifetime, depending on the location and reputation of the artist – sometimes a few hours, sometimes a few years.

Part of the photo documentation of decay is the documentation of interaction after installing the work. Many actors on the street are more likely to communicate with each other and add motifs rather than destroying work directly. Faces get speech bubbles, beards and genitals. Each documentation of decay is a documentation of interaction, at least with nature. Street art is an interaction with the found situation, the background, the street, the site, which changes in public space just as the work changes.

The documentation of decay can be the documentation of a single work or of a more complex interaction. In some cases, entire walls are documented by researchers for years to come with “longitudinal photo-documentation” (Hansen and Flynn, 2015) or “repeat photography” (Andron, 2016). The long-term documentation of street art documents not only a work that changed over time but also the evolution of an entire wall or district. Street art viewers never know before, whether a piece is still there and in what condition they can document it, but many know *where, on* which walls, in which areas the probability is highest, to catch a street-art-work free in the urban wilderness, where to get in front of the lens, where to shoot it.

Every decay has a notion of death, like a *memento mori*. The German and English terminology on photography points to the hunting and killing of animals in a technical manner: *to take a photo, to get it in front of the lens, to shoot photos, a snapshot, freeze-framed* etc. Often the motif changes from a living subject to a passive object – a picture *is taken*. Something formerly living becomes frozen, framed, and hung. A photograph is a demonstration of power over the motif. As each photograph is a framing, subjective interpretation of a street artwork, the next step of almost every framing of street art is a potential commercialization. Street art cannot be possessed, but one can own its picture, look at it again, one can collect, store or sell it. Photography as the documentation of decay “shoots” the street art motif without “killing” it, but draws attention to its “mortality” – not until then is photography necessary because many pieces are so ephemeral that they only exist in the moment of the photo (see Figures 1-2) or in Sontag’s (1977: 10) words: “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.”

#### d) Street art documentation as a series

Photography often has a serial character (Bailly, 1986). Process documentation has a progressive temporal succession, which ends with a ‘for now finished’ work.

In the documentation of decay the ‘for now finished’ work is the starting point for seriality. It does not even have to end with the complete disappearance of the work, or a completely changed location, years later – there is potentially no endpoint. Those street art works that are the most similar to photography, such as stencil, stickers, and paste-up and graffiti tags, tend to seriality – like photography itself. Their respective differences form a serial juxtaposition, because each motif looks different on every other wall, and the background varies, as does the nervousness and artistry of the street artists and their materials.

[T]he series does not really appear as a series (as it would, for instance, if it were exhibited in an art gallery or museum) although each isolated image is determined by the fact that it is part of a series. It might be said that the series is not stocked, but rather dispersed throughout the city like a mark or signature. Consequently, the particular serial effect, which characterizes this pictorial genre, is turned into a game of hunting down the images [...] [of] the series. Signs are repeated at different points of town; this repetition, tracing out a circuit, triggers the perception of a network: various series form a narrative network, and each image is at once a fragment and an echo of it (Bailly, 1986: 8–9).

There can be an order here, if one follows the tag of a graffiti writer within a quarter of a city. What is the individual work of stencil graffiti? Every single documentation photo stands for the work and is at the same time its documentation. Only in a sequence or as compilation in a publication, can these documentation photographs challenge the viewer to view them comparatively – which can be more enlightening than the ‘best’ single shot.

### 3 Street art photography as a work interpretation

Each photo provides one view on a work and excludes others. A photo series (Figure 2) can document the principle way of viewing a work. Taking a photo is like interpreting a piece of music – the work of street art – each time the interpretation is subjective and a little different. The documentary photographs of the artist (See Figures 1 and 2) is arguably their own interpretation – in the conceptual emphasis on the messages implied by the artist, such as references to the place of installation (Figure 3). However, any subsequent interpretation by other photographers are independent interpretations (Figure 4). Artists do not always recognize all possible interpretations of their own work, and not all artists can put everything on record that they may wish to. The interpreter/photographer completes the work for posterity; the viewer does that *in situ* for him/herself.

The interpretation-photograph is like a story someone tells about a street piece from memory. If one has the chance to photograph one and the same work almost unchanged years later, one might perhaps change one’s interpretation, i.e. the framing.

What is the difference between a photograph of a street piece and the art object that it depicts? That depends on what is interpreted, the work – or the photograph. Due to the volatility of street art, this can easily be answered in quantitative terms: the photograph, because the original work often no longer exists. In this case, the work may manifest itself (for others besides the artist) *only* as a photo, such as when a subject is held against a background or burned (Figure 2). Because the street piece often also exists without a photograph and can be manifested through recollection from memory, photography and street art works are not necessarily one and the same thing. However, memory is not static either. It forgets and weaves in imagined details over time. The fixed viewpoint of street art photography contrasts also to experience *in situ*. A video may best catch/preserve the fluent and manifold interpretative options that an individual viewer may have *in situ*, since here the viewers' possible points of view are multiple. In a photograph, you usually only have *one* interpretative viewpoint, and the photograph cannot carry the *genius loci*, i.e. the atmosphere, the smell, the noises, the tactile experience, in the flesh – while street art *in situ* is highly immersive.

#### 4 Artist or documenter?

For the artist, the researcher, the police officer, or the documenter, the individual photograph as such is – as an artistic image – *not* in the foreground.<sup>3</sup> The photograph does not have to be the artwork, it can be the medium of the artwork. Documentation is rarely about the sophisticated technical or artistic skills of a photographer, but image composition, location, context, light, exposure, and time serve the street art motif, often with regard to other, similar, comparable works by the same artist, or to elaborate specific details and interpretations.

For fans and viewers, every kind of photographic street art document can go so far that the focus is no longer on the aforementioned never quite objective documentation of the work, but quite contrarily – the street art or graffiti may itself become the background. In the foreground is then the artistic aspect of the photography, which only as "byproduct" documents street art – as a punch line for instance. Think of a photograph of someone dancing on the street, and in the background there is street art. There are many grayscales between documentation and other possible forms of 'artistic' photographs. Street art may be an equal partner in an artistic photo, or fulfill a subordinate function. However, in the majority of cases, photographs of street art and graffiti photographs still serve as documentations of the work. In selfies involving street-pieces, the documentation of the piece is not in the foreground. The photographer turns into a co-author and co-motif. The work of the selfie photograph is may be proportionately, more-or-less selfie or more-or-less street art documentary, depending on what is emphasized in the individual photograph.

Further, the photography of street-art-objects questions authorship<sup>4</sup> – there are always two creators who can overlap: the photographer and the street artist. The photographer may work for the street artist, or they may be self-employed. They may aim for an objective documentation, or they may seek to incorporate their own handwriting (or visually recognizable style) in their photographs of work on the street. In the 1930s, the Hungarian-French artist Brassai was the first to use graffiti as not only (as has long been common in paintings or photographs of graffiti) an 'authenticity dispenser' in the background. He used his photographs of the illegal scratch graffiti he found in Paris to appropriate these illicit markings as a form of art. We now consider Brassai's photographs as the work-of-art – his personal choice, framing and interpretation of graffiti, and not the graffiti pictured – while in the case of street artists like Banksy it is perhaps the other way around.

Street artists and photographs that interpret their works are also art educators.<sup>5</sup> Street artists utilize/outfit two spaces, the street *and* internet, the analogue and digital. They are faced with a curatorial choice, between very different works (or photographic documents of the same piece) for instance, by focusing on a specific work phase or on a best-of series (Glaser, 2017: 111).

#### 5 Street art and (digital) photo-reproduction/presentation

As street art is ephemeral and illegal, street artists and their interpreters often give special attention to the fact that important aspects of the work on a photograph are clearly visible. One must distinguish between different purposes at different moments in time, often related to the technical possibilities of photographing at a certain point in history. Brassai documented only scratch graffiti and drawings, since color photographs were still rare and expensive and were not often reproduced for these very reasons. If you wanted street art to be seen by many, you had to adapt to the technical possibilities as a photographer at that particular time. Brassai chose only motifs that came into their own in the photograph and



Figure 3. 'Throw-u-TUP crew from Berlin on the Bangkok Ghost Tower', 2011. Photo: <https://www.widewallis.de/artwork/tup/bangkok-ghost-tower/>

looked strong and recognizable. They had to be seen prominently in the photograph – even if at the loss of details in black-and-white and halftone prints screened in a magazine, i.e. either single motives with little background, or the whole context, such as the act of scratching itself, not the small motif, became the subject of the picture.

In the 1970s, New York graffiti writers had to think for themselves about which side they had to paint a train depot, so that the commissioned photographer could photograph the work in all its glory, without shading around on a bridge on the right side. Shout-outs (the little comments beside the main motif) should not be too small to be visible in the resultant photograph.

In the early 1990s, when the internet began to be used, those early reproduction problems seemed to repeat themselves a second time. As web pages took hours to load large files, street art photos had to be small. At best, the main motive should even work as click stimulating a thumbnail pic. This corresponded with the pixel poor early digital cameras. Of Banksy's work therefore remain primarily digitally created photos from the early 2000s that only showed the motif without a large background. The street pieces of this period were often designed for such presentation views. The limits of technology influenced Banksy's early street art motifs and techniques. Already at that time, however, analog photos for print also showed more context and background that we are used to in the digital age today (2018). As early as 1947, Malraux (91) wrote that, "art history became the story of the things you could photograph" – to this, one could add, widely received is the photographable and those details one can perceive in a photograph.

As the majority of street-art-viewers shifted from the street to the internet – which occurred in parallel to faster loading times and better digital cameras and was therefore mutually determined – the form of street art changed as well. In Banksy's case, the goal was no longer to create a motif that could be reproduced on as many backgrounds as a stencil to be seen on the street by as many viewers as possible. Now he published just one work online, but larger and with more colors than before. This work and photograph then had to be perfect. To use

a stencil, a medium of reproduction, became obsolete from a practical point of view. It is reminiscent of the history of the medium and of Banksy's former works, and charges the new, single work with that meaning of the past. Artwork and photograph are mutually conditional here. If you happen to see a street work *in situ*, and the work was designed for viewing on a PC or mobile phone, it often seems disproportionately large, precisely because the artist already factored in the likely viewing size of the photographs, which need to have an impact even when viewed as a relatively small image.

For the third time these early reproduction problems were repeated with the breakthrough of smartphones and Instagram. Much street art is created with its presentation on a future Instagram photo in mind. Does the piece work in a square format? Does it also stand out on a small mobile phone screen? Many websites use the same photographs on their web view as they do on their mobile view. Both want the street piece to appeal. The artist factors this in. However, not only does the future photograph in the header influence the artwork, the comments below the finished photo could also influence the next photograph. Before the rise of the social networks, the acquisition of an artwork was often the only actual personal interaction of a larger audience with the artist. In contrast to the accident on the street, where the viewer only met individual works, street art works in social networks can be quickly classified into an artistic oeuvre, which can trigger an 'addictive' effect, since works in a series may be mutually reinforcing. In the past, this effect could only be achieved by artist retrospectives or work catalogs of later-career artists. Due to the easy and cheap presentation of the digital photograph, recognizability becomes a further retroactive effect of photography on street pieces.

Figure 4. Banksy. Ikea Punk. Fan photo by 303db, taken 28 Sept. 2009. Photo: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/303db/3942039289/>



Street art is an online gift for everyone with PC or a mobile phone access. On the street, you have to be on the spot. The digital reproduction of street art changed the conception of street art, but also the nature of street art as such:

The ability to photograph a street piece that may last for only a few days and bounce it round the world to an audience of millions has dramatically improved its currency. On the other hand, the internet is turning graffiti into an increasingly virtual pastime. It is now possible to achieve notoriety by painting elaborate pieces in secluded locations, without the associated risk of arrest that is usually attached. By posting photographs online you can become a significant graffiti writer from a town where none of your work is actually visible (Banksy, 2006).

In Banksy's quote, one also notices that the term "street art" is already a few years old. "Graffiti" rather describes the technology of application – not the location, like street art or urban art do. Thus, graffiti as a concept is more timeless and accurate in digital times, also because graffiti will not become obsolete by the possibilities of digital photographs because the term graffiti carries criteria that are independent of the peculiarities of photography. Street art, which has long claimed to be non-elitist, and to be seen by all, can fulfill its promise only digitally. When street artists spray in abandoned factories in rural areas, it may look urban or street, but it is not. It is still illegal, not only because it might be violation of property rights, i.e. vandalism, but also trespassing. Many photos under the label "street art" are then arguably actually "rural art" or "provincial art" created in small, not urban, but (post-) industrial areas. Many alleged street pieces are democratic and accessible to all, only in photographic form. Is it punishable to look at photographs that came about through unauthorized, illegal entry? Works like these can be viewed only in two ways: digitally or by breaking into, for example, a vacant factory. Often one can find out photo locations by looking at the geo-data or coordinates attached to digital photographs. Contemporary digital photographs are at the same time treasure maps with traces to the street art motif *in situ*.

### Summary

All street art acteurs take photographs (Derwanz 2013). As street art is ephemeral, inspiration may derive from street art photographs, which are location- and time-independent to a certain extent. Photo documentation may start before the work itself. The artist is often the first to document a work-in-progress. Through documentation of the finished work, the artist fixes it 'for-now'. Every photograph of a street-art-work is both the work itself and an individual interpretation of the work. The photographic interpreter completes the work for posterity; the viewer does so *in situ*. After the documentation of the work, the documentation of decay and/or interaction

occurs. This is a reverse process documentation. Each photograph is a framing, subjective interpretation of a street artwork, which may lead to the potential commercialization of the work. Process documentation is a progressive temporal succession, which ends with a 'for now finished' work. In the documentation of decay the 'for now finished' work is the starting point for seriality – with potentially no end point. Only in a sequence or as a compilation, may documentation photographs provoke the viewer to see the work in a more complex comparative fashion.

The photograph of the street piece and the piece itself do not have to be the same thing, but they often cannot be separated either. The photography of street-art-objects questions authorship; there are always two creators who can overlap, the photographer and street artist. Photographers have had to adapt to the technical possibilities of particular historical periods, be it black and white, or early pixilated photo files, or contemporary social media. Due to the accessibility of the digital photograph, recognizability has come to exert a retroactive effect on the photography of street pieces. The digital reproduction of street art has radically changed not just the reception of street art, but also the material form commonly taken by street art itself. Street art can now fulfill its democratic promise often only digitally, via photographs.

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- 1 Thanks are due to Eva Winter for this noticing.
- 2 Thanks are due to Eva Winter for this noticing.
- 3 Thanks are due to Laura Dermann for this noticing.
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- 5 Thanks are due to Laura Dermann for this noticing.

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