

Conservation of Graffiti: Ethics and Practices

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Abstract

The conservation of contemporary graffiti has been a topic of study scarcely addressed by researchers, practitioners, or the public. Largely, with graffiti being a cultural phenomenon worldwide since the 1970s/80s, the conservation and dissemination of the pieces and murals have always been presented through photographs, in the form of records that allow the collection, admiration and exhibition of what pioneer graffiti writers did, and what later generations have evolved into.

Documentation can maintain the essence of what is seen, but the reality of admiring a piece in the flesh will always go beyond it. Over the years, graffiti writers and followers have tried to maintain certain throw-ups, pieces, and murals *in situ*, for a multitude of reasons and with different results—some better than others. In other cases, and from the other perspective, simple luck has given the public the opportunity to rediscover and appreciate works thought lost (and many times hidden) at the locations where they were first created. In most of the cases of these rediscovered productions, the condition of the works became unstable and slowly faded until disappearing completely. Nevertheless, many graffiti pieces have become valuable parts of the urban environment. This plays an important role in opening possibilities regarding extending their life and appreciation through conservation. The same tools conservators use on public and private works can be adapted and applied to accomplish a better treatment of contemporary graffiti and urban art.

This paper aims to present the opportunities and limits of graffiti conservation, taking into consideration ethical and respectful approaches and the importance of advocating and extending the conservation practice to the support and understanding of Graffiti as a part of the contemporary art repertoire.

Keywords

conservation, contemporary art, ethics, graffiti, preservation, urban art

1. Introduction

Graffiti as a term relates to that part of our nature as humans needing to express ideas (Figueroa-Saavedra, 2014), a collective way to share experiences, views, or thoughts inside the society we live in. It has been present since the beginning of history, and although it has always been visible and accessible to all, it was not until the 1970s that it started to make a point in the world—rising to what is now considered *contemporary graffiti* or graffiti as a movement.

From the first accounts, we have learned the first contemporary written tags appeared on city walls in Philadelphia in the late 1960s (Powers, 1999), and this practice quickly

expanded inside and outside the New York train network. From tagging on trains, throw-ups and pieces, to whole cars but also around the neighbourhoods. This movement was first known simply as *writing* by its practitioners, but later named *graffiti writing*, considering themselves graffiti *writers*¹. Graffiti writing is connected to the traditional form of writing/drawing on the walls (from γράφω—/grá·phō:/ in ancient Greek) and the English term for the same action, which would later be shortened to *graffiti*.

1 - Some practitioners prefer to refer to themselves as 'graffiti artists'. It can also be found the term 'graffitist' to refer to them, although this is usually used by external or mainstream sources (e.g. dictionaries).

This information reached us in written formats from the first sociologists, anthropologists, reporters, and curious people that found interest in what was at that time a new and uncommon practice (Castleman, 1982). However, the most accessible and visual format was the photographic documentation—thankfully recorded by the graffiti writers themselves and those street photographers that saw the potential of these interventions (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984). Photography has helped other graffiti writers—and those later preferring the term *graffiti artists*—to develop their work and extend their imagination in order to build an alternative art movement, now fully embedded in urban society. And for others, such as researchers and professionals that come across the movement or show interest in it, both written and visual documentation has been vital to understanding how it started, how it evolved, and how it has reached current times.

However, there is more to the use of the documentation tools to study and comprehend the movement, as Martha Cooper put it in London at the Chasing Visual Play talk in February 2016: “*I think I am preserving graffiti when I am photographing it*” (Cooper, 2016). Documentation is the key to being able to appreciate, study and value old productions, as well as extending the limits and bringing them to future generations, and currently spreading the information further than the location where the productions were or are made. But is preservation through documentation the only possibility for the conservation of graffiti? Nowadays, and after more than 50 years, graffiti continues, together with street art, to be an unmissable part of contemporary cities. They present themselves as independent, located in the public space, free and open to all, something the public has seen evolve, and in many cases, has started to accept and appreciate to a level that means that not only documentation but also conservation is being raised as a necessity, or at least a debatable idea on how the maintaining of graffiti must be approached.

This paper aims to analyse the aspects that allow conservation mechanisms to be applied in contemporary art, and how those transfer to alternative movements inside the current artistic repertoire, focusing on graffiti. The meth-

odology section will present how contemporary graffiti, and some particular productions, have been preserved, conserved and restored² over the years, and what considerations researchers and specialists should bear in mind when facing future projects or possibilities in graffiti conservation.

2. Conservation of Cultural Heritage

From the perspective of a conservator-restorer, the elements in society that present significant value are considered part of the heritage, which leads to accepting them as objects to be preserved, conserved, restored and displayed. In similar terms, those valued elements are maintained to be appreciated by current and future generations, as they play a key role in spreading ideas of the past and the present to those that might not be able to enjoy the object or the moment when it was created in the first instance. Therefore, conservation will focus on tangible and intangible parts of the heritage, adapting to the needs of each case.

Traditionally, conservation has focused on tangible or physical objects which are iconic parts of societies. These include art, architecture, instruments, and anthropology objects. When the condition of those objects is affected by damage and their significance is altered, conservation and restoration would come into the picture, following principles that would ensure the recuperation of the artwork from a moral approach. The most latent principles are those presented by Cesare Brandi as the three “Rs”: the need to *Respect* the artwork or heritage element, the application of *Reversible* materials, and making any treatment *Recognisable*, so no addition would interfere with the originality or history of the piece (Brandi, 1963).

Intangible heritage is related to immaterial assets such as customs, traditions, music, or any practice or event occurring as a part of society (UNESCO, 2022). In conservation, this is a recent topic of study because, although consid-

2 - The paper will present various terms regarding different aspects of ‘conservation’, including ‘preservation’ and ‘restoration’. For a better understanding of their differences, please refer to *Terminology to characterize the conservation of tangible cultural heritage* ICOM-CC (2008).

ered in the past, its application would have been usually linked to the conservation of a tangible part of the asset within a society (e.g. an archaeological site whose objects show the customs of that particular part of society unveiled). Despite the connection between physical elements and abstract assets, the conservation of intangible heritage can be treated individually and separately from tangible elements, which is effectively done through documentation.

Documentation offers the possibility to record and reproduce, at different levels, any non-physical (and physical³) aspect of modern society and culture, but it also extends to conceptual aspects of art production, opening the door to its relation with the conservation of contemporary art and new media.

3. Conservation of Contemporary Art and Heritage

Contemporary conservation theorists and researchers have started to raise awareness about the limitations of Brandi's theory and consider it insufficient to meet current needs—both in traditional and contemporary art (Santabábara Morera, 2016). Especially in the latter, new ideas and possibilities made those old theories obsolete and unable to cover very important aspects such as heritage works, as well as artwork's—and the artist's—requirements. Therefore, the conservation-restoration field has been opening up to other aspects, focusing on understanding the new forms of art and cultural heritage.

Focusing on the new art, its limitless condition, the synchronicity of the artist's production to preservation interests, and especially, the challenges of a new art form such as Conceptual Art, Time Based Media (TBM), or Eat Art, among others, had changed the way conservators, curators, historians, collectors, art handlers, etc. face an artwork. As new rules apply, those traditional conservation theories fail to cover aspects now imperative to analyse in any conservation approach. New ideas such as conceptuality over materiality, ephemerality, degradation, programmed obsolescence, technical reproducibility, the artist's interview (Beerkens & Abraham, 2012), artist collaborations (Fuentes Duran et al., 2017), contact zones

(Ortiz Miranda & et al., 2022), intention and identity (del Fresno-Guillem et al., 2022) or even, the use of modern and non-conventional materials, raise more challenges in the decision-making process. Taking into consideration all those assets will hopefully lead the specialists to establish correct and respectful procedures for the benefit of an artwork and its survival in the short, mid and long terms.

As previously anticipated, documentation will play a key role in any conservation project. The conservator will depend on it not only to identify the condition of the artwork but also to discover and understand what is physically and abstractly in front of them. Thus, the documentation process will start with the assessment of an artwork and its condition reporting. The physical parts of an artwork (the complete piece or only partial elements of a whole) will commonly be evaluated by identifying its structural and aesthetic condition at that specific moment. Additionally, that idea of discovery will make the contemporary art conservator search for: 1) what was the artist's intention during (and after) the creative process, what were their expectations in the production and for the final object; 2) what are the materials used, and if those should be considered intrinsic to the artwork in its current condition or replaceable when altered; and 3) what life expectancy the artwork have been assigned. In addition to this, the conservator will conduct research identifying similar artworks, the artist's career, and they will even contact the artist's studio or estate to complement the information gathered during the assessment. Paralelally, understanding the value of the location and surroundings is, in many cases, a fundamental part of the artwork (e.g. interactive or public art), as it is necessary to find if there have been issues of any kind (unexpected/expected, harmful/beneficial, unchanging/transformational).

All that information will bring the conservator into planning the next steps in the preservation, conservation and/or restoration of the artwork, considering the condition and issues, the potential changes that treating or leaving a piece untreated would influence its condition, the artist's opinion, the appreciation by external stakeholders (the public) and the care holders opinion (owner, lender).

3 - Technical reproducibility to be considered later in the paper.

4. Conservation of Graffiti

In terms of conservation, graffiti forms part of the current heritage repertory. Also, in terms of conceptuality and the use of artistic and plastic procedures (conventional and unconventional), the movement establishes a close link to what conservators recognise as contemporary art and the need to apply contemporary conservation theories and approaches to it. Therefore, graffiti as a cultural, and in this paper understood as an artistic, movement offers similar issues to other contemporary (art) productions, with the add-on of specific aspects related to the more internal elements of it.

Unfortunately, the conservation of graffiti has been rarely studied when compared with other research disciplines (history, anthropology, geography, law) that benefit from more extensive research on the topic. This has been perhaps because of conflicts between what is traditionally expected of heritage conservation and the graffiti movement's identity. That can be related to its alternative nature, the limitations to access graffiti writers, the usually secluded public and followers, the presumption and concurrent rejection by the general public (who grew up being told that graffiti was just a crime, a pure act of vandalism), as well as a lack of interest by conservators—more pronounced for graffiti and street art than for other parts of the heritage. Both these and other matters interfered and prevented for years the consideration of graffiti as an element to research in conservation. Furthermore, when the topic was raised or suggested, many addressed graffiti as ephemeral, and thus not even supposed to be studied any further⁴. However, as contemporary art has shown, acknowledging something as ephemeral does not mean this should not be 'conserved', as there is more to know about what is actually 'ephemerality'. This reasoning also inducted the idea that conservation should not have been sought after because the complex characteristics presented above would offer limitations for researchers to delve deeper into the topic at hand (e.g. the difficulty in establishing connections with graffiti writers).

4 - Based on the author's first research approaches to conservators and related specialists, and the lack of published research sources prior 2010.

In order to understand the limitations and possibilities of the conservation of graffiti, it is necessary to understand what ephemerality means in this context and how it is understood inside the movement, as well as the thoughts on conserving it, including documenting it, and what has been and is the reality of this topic worldwide.

4.1 Ephemerality and Beyond

Cities change and evolve, and so does graffiti or any other type of expression in public space. On the one hand, there are limited surfaces to work on, so the writers reuse them to continue producing. On the other hand, graffiti productions of any type might be cleaned off by external stakeholders who do not like it or follow regulations regarding the city scenery, but also it can be just because of a loss of interest in the production at its original location (e.g. area reconversion). Therefore, when a graffiti production disappears, this is very often accepted as a part of its nature. The situation is skimmed over in a very light way without considering important points such as whether this was its intended end or just something agreed upon because there is a lack of knowledge about conservation possibilities.

During interviews with graffiti writers (Amor Garcia, 2017), it was found that the ephemerality of graffiti is assumed and accepted in line with the considerations of the space and the practice. Writers are positive towards the fluidity of this matter, as continuous change is considered positive for the practice. However, when asked if they contemplated the durability of their productions during the creative process, the majority of writers interviewed offered affirming opinions regarding this, even stating that, when possible, they use specific materials to allow the productions to last longer. This is, for example, connected to the use of aerosol paint and household paints. The aerosol is a simple tool (and technique) which goes beyond the usability, effects, and preparation of colours in a unique packaging; their cellulose, alkyd and alkyd-acrylic formulations have always been produced to last longer compared to other techniques. Graffiti writers are also familiar with the wide range of emulsion paints with specific finishes and properties (e.g. compatibility in

hard surfaces and environments), which they selectively use depending on their expectations (durability, results). Also, when they were asked if they thought graffiti is ephemeral, the opinions varied, showing the ephemerality overall depends on the artwork, the environment and the possibilities of maintaining the production for longer, or even forever, but many consider the movement as not completely ephemeral. This leads to a two-fold situation between change and maintenance. The continuous practice helps graffiti to be alive, and thus, the movement itself cannot be viewed as ephemeral but in constant change. In return, that change accepts the loss of old productions in the interest of both new graffiti and the evolution of the movement. However, in a movement where style is often the way of standing out, the past will always be present. Graffiti writers continuously check visual records on past generations aiming to get ideas, appreciate the productions, grow and go beyond: collecting fanzines and books, following others on social media, and even having the opportunity to meet (and paint with) 'old-schoolers'. Many graffiti writers remember productions that made them start or carry on writing. Iconic productions that, as found out in the interviews, they would have liked to conserve in situ, to be able to keep enjoying and for others to appreciate later on.

4.2. Conservation Approaches and Ethics

From a tag to a throw-up, to a sticker, a piece, to any mural production in a hall of fame⁵ or in any part of a city, graffiti as a movement continues to have the same idea as the graffiti from earlier civilisations: to express as individuals or as a part of a group, inside of the world. The product of that expression generates an interaction with the public, which adds significance. As a cultural asset in the contemporary world, and a valued element of society (for some or many), the product becomes part of the heritage, and so conservation might be desirable.

When values are given, and there is an interest in conserving the object that has them, conservation mechanisms should be prepared. This will not particularly change depending on the legality or illegality of the work, as conser-

vation will focus on giving a response to an already raised need. In the case of graffiti, this will concentrate on the particularities inherent to the movement and help it in providing solutions that do not interfere with its meaning or the author's intention. The same would be applied to other street artworks and other artistic manifestations beyond a traditional mindset or the art world.

The strategies for the conservation of graffiti go further than a traditional approach based on respect, reversibility and recognition of the conservator's labour. Before establishing conservation approaches for graffiti, it is important to consider the particular aspects that can affect the decision-making for providing conservation procedures. As described above, in contemporary art, conserving anything related to the significance of a piece, including its elements (concept, material, expectations) should be included in the assessment process and condition reporting. Also, specific questions regarding what the artist expects in the short, mid and long terms (ageing), or understanding alterations already present or likely to happen (inherent issues or accidents during the life of the piece), need to be taken into account. In the conservation of graffiti, these also apply, and it is something that any conservator or specialist involved in the conservation of a graffiti production should bear in mind at any time and in any case. In the assessment of a piece, conservators should consider the intentions and ideas that relate to the movement, to the artist, and to the public, as well as the geographical and temporal situation of the production, as well as considering the current condition and appreciation by its surroundings and stakeholders at that stage. Learning about the past of the work and its influences would also be beneficial to prepare an adapted report and conclude with objective reasoning of why the piece should or should not be conserved.

In addition to those new 'conceptual' challenges of this contemporary movement, when proposing a potential remedial treatment (conserving or restoring the piece), it is compulsory to identify the materials and technique used by the artist and whether there is any specific information about their creative process, and how the conservation processes and materials to be used would adapt

5 - Reclaimed spaces by graffiti writers to paint without disruptions and where the pieces are documented by the same practitioners, visitors and connoisseurs.

to the original materials, its conservation and the future of the work. This complements setting up adapted decision-making depending on the considerations already presented and different or new ones that can be found in other cases. Based on all that, it would be necessary to identify potential issues and solutions that might occur due to the treatment, examining alternatives to the proposed plan.

The benefits of conducting prior research before initiating a treatment would be two-fold: firstly, presenting a bespoke project plan considering the characteristics of the artwork to be conserved as well as alternatives and limitations, preventing issues later on; and secondly, following a considerate method prioritising the ethicality of the proposal and being respectful for all parts involved (artist, artwork, public), avoiding repeating mistakes from the past.

4.3. Case Studies

As with any type of art, heritage or collection item, we humans tend to offer value to the object as a way of recognising a connection with them. The same appears to happen with graffiti. Over the years, graffiti and street art productions have been conserved, with a growing interest over the last decade as more regulated and amateur conservation cases appear every year. In some situations,

this is related to a connection with widespread practices in the conservation of works that might enter the art market (e.g. Banksy); in many others, an interest to maintain or refresh a piece for a bit longer (e.g. late writers, iconic productions). These actions come from a multitude of positions, sometimes with more or less effort to maintain the productions in situ, others, with some work done by the same artists whenever it was needed or the opportunity came, using the tools accessible in each case; but in all cases, the conservation intention seems to be there. Certainly, it is common to see that the knowledge about conservation can be limited, which sometimes clashes with potential correct approaches. Nevertheless, thoughtful intentions and consideration of the writer or artist are many times present. The cases shown below try to exemplify the relationship between the significance given by the public, the resources available and the diverse interests in the conservation of graffiti productions and other street works.

As found during the interviews with graffiti writers, it was noted that many graffiti pieces and murals had been iconic for them in their path to becoming better writers or active professionals. This is related to artistic value, as elaborated graffiti murals with complex compositions would frequently stand out and will be appreciated technically by other writers and passers-by. One of the murals



Figure 1. How to Kill a Nazi, 1999 (left) and 2019 (right)

that was often mentioned by graffiti writers from south of Alicante (Spain) was ‘*Cómo matar a un nazi*’ (How to kill a nazi) by graffiti artist pioneer Pepo. Produced in 1990, it lasted for 20 years, ageing without being disrupted by other writers or the community. This happened due to the artistic strength the production presented in the composition at that time with more basic tools than the ones currently available, and the respect for the artist inside and outside the movement for what he accomplished. Unfortunately, the need for structural rehabilitation of the wall and building—a school—completely covered the artwork recently. Despite this, it does not mean it is lost forever, as unveiling the artwork from the overcoating might be possible in the future with the correct methods.

Regarding historical and social closeness, the case of the throw-up chrome by graffiti writer Nekst in Bowery, New York City, proved the community could play an important role in maintaining the person and their work even if their production might be outside what is commonly considered aesthetic or correct. Sean Griffin, aka Nekst, painted the iconic façade of the Germania Bank Building at 190 Bowery in 2007, and it remained there for years, even after the building was bought and restored, removing all the graffiti inside and outside, except from Nekst’s (War-

erker, 2016). Since he died in 2012, the chrome has been repainted by the community in order to maintain alive the memory of the late writer.

Some of the most riveting and recent cases in terms of the conservation of graffiti pieces are the *freshen-ups* or retouching projects done by graffiti writer Ekto One in Romford (England). The active graffiti writer has found a way to restore almost lost and neglected pieces painted by old-school graffiti writers decades ago. In all cases published in his Instagram account, he has not only researched the origin of the pieces, consulted coetaneous writers, and completed the reconstruction/repaint of the pieces himself, but also used educative stencils next to the works indicating part of the history of the pieces and asking to leave the work “*for the future generations so they can be inspired as we once was*” (@ekto.1 [Ekto], 2019). The projects Ekto has completed so far are the case of ‘Evil’ by Talent Tyrant and Wizard in 1986 (Ekto, 2019), and a piece by writer Note, painted in 1991 (Ekto, 2020). The historical, sentimental and social values he gives to the artworks can now be shared with others inside and outside the movement.

Beyond the treatment, reconstruction or repainting of



Figure 2. Nekst's chrome at Bowery in 2019

iconic pieces, there is also the conservation of locations. Places where graffiti has been present for short or long periods without an interest in being regulated. This is commonly visible in the preservation of the graffiti practice in graffiti halls of fame. Some, like the iconic Leake Street and Stockwell in London (UK) or Hosier Lane in Melbourne (Australia) are proof of that, although not the only ones. Holcim Gallery is located in what was an abandoned industrial state in Ontario (Canada). The building was acquired to become a community centre, and part of the rehabilitation and restoration process for the location took into consideration maintaining the graffiti productions done in the space when this was abandoned. The space is no longer used for painting graffiti freely but as a gallery space for arranged exhibitions, where visitors can still see the history and ideas of the use cases the space had over the years.

As previously mentioned, the addition of values and conservation considerations are not only offered to graffiti, but street art has many cases of conserving pieces. The

'Madonna and Child' painted by Blek le Rat in 1991 in Leipzig (Germany), was abandoned for years and rediscovered in 2012, and later conserved thanks to the help provided by many groups of the community, which permitted it to be reinstated as a symbol of group identity for the city. Furthermore, it has been granted 'heritage protection' recently (Julke, 2022). However, cases like this are not the rule. The growing interest in Banksy in the art market has made his works in public space preservable, although the aim of preserving the pieces is moved by an interest in the economic significance of the productions over applying ethical approaches to the conservation aim.

When preserving a graffiti production, street artwork or any form of art or expression in the public space, the location adds a lot of importance and significance to the artwork. It was created in a specific location for a reason. The artist expected it to stay there, and the community expected it to be undisturbed. However, the legal frame around the productions tends to benefit the owner of the location where the object lies, which due to an increasing



Figure 3. Leake St Hall of Fame, London

interest in collecting uncommon contemporary art and heritage, makes it easy to relate to conservation from the monetary side—denying what the intention of the artist or the expectations of the public were. Banksy's stencilled murals are sold and transferred to new locations, depriving the community of their free access afterwards. Unfortunately, this has not been a unique case, as it has happened to other artists. In 2016 in Bologna, some of Blu's mural works appeared detached and displayed inside a museum space for an exhibition. Seemingly the procedures and intentions were not fallacious, but the artist's opinion was not part of the decision-making process, and so, he opposed what was done and decided to delete his remaining murals in the city (Vimercati, 2016).

5. Conclusions

It is clear that graffiti possesses an element of ephemerality that relates to the limited time productions survive. Also, ephemerality is associated with the beauty of evolution, providing more to the current and future generations. However, this is not a strict element of the movement. As documentation has played an important role since the beginning, the—lesser-known—conservation-restoration of productions is something that has been ongoing over the years. This has been done many times by the same writers and artists to commemorate others, or by a collective of interested stakeholders that appreciate what was done and would like to keep it alive.

The paper does not present a unique way of conserving graffiti or street art. Rather it presents a way to see the possibilities and limitations many forms of contemporary art might face if not considered as they should, and tries to fight any intervention, opinion or thought based on a lack of principles or a lack of interest by mainstream society and experts. The paper aims to make a point and raise awareness mainly among conservators and specialists of other disciplines, but also including anyone involved in the conservation of any graffiti or alternative artwork in the public space. Many of the steps proposed here might not be accessible to all as the research proposed could be long and unavailable to some. However, intending to cover as many aspects as possible from a very thoughtful perspective would be more than enough most of the time,

as has been proven in some of the case studies presented.

For conservators and specialists, it is believed there is still a lot to do, to be more prepared in case conservation might be required for a graffiti production and in so, to establish an adequate practical and theoretical approach, following adapted decision-making and using the materials that will allow the artwork to be conserved with respect not only to the artist but also to the public.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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