

ISSUES CONCERNING THE PRESERVATION OF GRAFFITI. DEVELOPING CONSERVATION PRACTICES WORLDWIDE

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Abstract

This conference paper is dedicated to rising issues concerning the preservation of graffiti. The author outlines practical and ethical aspects conservators are dealing with while preserving an industrial canvas. How to treat artworks that are tangible and intangible at once? Graffiti is not just a drawing we see on the murals. It is a form of social movement, an artistic expression of opinion. We can draw similarities with contemporary art, where an idea might be an essence of the artwork and artists do not always think about the longevity of their creations. Artists might use materials and techniques that make conservator's work practically impossible. That is why conservation in its traditional interpretation is an unsuitable solution for graffiti. Various ethical and practical questions have to be answered before conservator and society decide to preserve the art of graffiti.

Keywords: *graffiti, restoration, conservation, preservation, street art.*

American philosopher John Dewey has said that artwork, regardless of how old it is, in fact, and not potentially is an artwork when it resides in an experience of an individual. The material itself is just a reminder of time, an artwork comes to life every time when it is aesthetically experienced [Chiantore 2013: 53]. The statement successfully describes the essence of contemporary art. It is important to mention that the material of an artwork does not always play the main role since sometimes the intangible message is more valuable. To understand the issues concerning the preservation of graffiti, narrow introduction in the field of cultural heritage conservation-restoration has to be provided.

Preservation of the cultural heritage began a long time ago but back then could never be manifested as conservation by the intentions. Cleaning the monuments, filling the lost fragments of building facades and other preservation treatments were

carried out without a professional framework. Artists and craftsmen visually and functionally preserved the tangible heritage which was publicly valued [Conti 2007: 7–8]. At the end of the 18th century, Edward Petro began deliberate cleaning of paintings and began to develop guidelines for the preservation of paintings. Petro was the first who highlighted the need for a school where principles of preservation could be taught. He emphasized the importance of the original material and importance of respecting artist's intentions [Darrow 2000:1–4]. However, despite being one of the first known conservators for paintings, Pietro's ideas for the conservation of cultural heritage did not become the origins of the theories used nowadays. The founder of the first historical conservation theory is an art historian and formalist Alois Riegl. His ideas, even though oriented towards preservation of architecture and cultural monuments, can also be applied to art objects. He emphasized the importance of striking a balance between the historical and the modern approaches, which is still topical in the field of contemporary art preservation nowadays [Schädler-Saub 2010: 1]. Riegl's theory was followed by the theory of an art historian and conservator Cesare Brandi. The theory was published in 1964 and still has a significant role in conservation practices. It provides common principles for the preservation of the tangible cultural heritage and emphasizes the aesthetics of work of art, that is based on the idea of irreplaceability of the original [Schädler-Saub 2010: 1].

The field of deliberate theoretical conservation-restoration of cultural heritage fully flourished in mid-20th century when the first iconic cultural heritage policy documents and institutions began to emerge. These documents provided description of conservator's profession as well as duties conservator had to follow and, most important, the ethics of conservation was developed at that time such as¹:

- creativity in conservation is unacceptable, the conservator is not an artist but a person who helps the artwork to maintain its aesthetic and historical values;
- conservator should not make subjective decisions;
- the material form is the one that expresses historical and aesthetic value;
- it is the patina that provides information about the history and use of the object;
- complete reversibility is a prerequisite in any conservation activity;
- the original form represents the values of artistic work;
- the treatment of conservation must be identifiable. The conservator should not hide the treatment of preservation, but rather make it noticeable [Barassi 2010].

¹ Morea Morera Santabarbara, Carlota. Conservation of Contemporary Art: A Challenge for the Theory of Critic Restoration. Available: <https://ifc.dpz.es/recursos/publicaciones/35/83/20conservation.pdf>

These norms promote the principles and general rules of remedial conservation, restoration and preventive conservation for the tangible cultural heritage and have been followed by conservators and used in practice since then. Although it is important to mention that there is no common methodology in preserving contemporary art. Even though classical theories have been applied in cultural heritage preservation for years every contemporary artwork is unique in its appearance whether it is a complex material or conceptual artwork and they have to be viewed individually. The classical preservation approaches that insist on saving the original material do not always match with an idea of contemporary art. Nevertheless, various suggestions and systems for the preservation of contemporary art were developed more than twenty years ago when the first case studies towards the preservation of modern art began to emerge [Beerens 2015: 12–16]:

- the artist's instructions in the process of preservation of contemporary works of art are irreplaceable. The artist is the one who determines whether the artwork is temporary or permanent;
- the material, idea and the technique used to create the artwork should be taken into consideration;
- preventive conservation should be considered as one of the leading preservation practices;
- preservation procedures for objects that are temporary or designed to disappear must be fully justified;
- before the process of preservation of contemporary art has been started, it is necessary to evaluate the risks and clearly identify involved parties who will do the actual work of preservation and will be entirely responsible for their actions [Chiantore 2013: 52–53].

Problems concerning the preservation of mural paintings have been topical for years. Although classical approaches can be easily applied to historical paintings on murals, it is challenging to apply conservation criteria and methods to graffiti. Even suggestions on contemporary art preservation cannot be fully applied to it, because of graffiti diverse nature, social and legal aspects.

The movement of graffiti began to emerge when the development of paint caused a change in the history of arts. In the mid-20th century artists began to experiment with various polychrome techniques, and replacing classical painting dogmas with contemporary approach, taking over all possible forms of colour expression. Synthetic and industrial paints used in the car industry or spray cans, fluorescent pigments, and polychrome ready-made objects began to appear in the creative work of an artist. These forms of expression became a hallmark of the century. Artists experimented with different types of polychrome forms without paying attention to their quality or manufacturing technology [Temkin 2008: 20]. Within the development of artistic

colours, application of ethical principles for the preservation of these artworks became even more complicated.

Graffiti artists mostly use synthetic paints that have many good properties, for example, they are cheap and dry fast and they have lots of tonal variations [Chiantore 2013: 31], textures as well as they are more sustainable than organic paints, but even that does not help when it comes to environmental impact. Since in most cases the act of graffiti is illegal, the artists do not think about the longevity of their creations. Graffiti is made outdoors where rain, sun, cold, and other weather conditions seriously damage it. More solutions have been suggested in a form of case studies for preserving unprotected artworks such as:

- detaching the object and move it to better conditions;

The case study of Vasarely's wall painting preservation [Brakebusch 2016: 267–268] outlines the issue when art gets moved from its original location to museums. Originally Vasarely's wall painting was made on the wall in a residential complex. Since the building went under reconstruction conservators decided to separate the painting from the wall and move it to the museum. Even though Vasarely's wall painting cannot be assimilated to graffiti the preservation of his artwork can be used as a prototype for preserving graffiti. Both graffiti and Vasarely's wall painting are artistic creations that are site-specific art and created to exist in a certain place. But ethical issues arise when site-specific art is preserved by disconnecting an artwork from its origins. Conservators have to be critical when applying such a method – since some artworks cannot survive without the context of the original site – thereby becoming *homeless art* [Brakebusch 2016: 267–268].

A decision of moving Vasarely's artwork was based mainly on the authority of the artist. In the case of graffiti, it is hard to apply such criteria since most of the artists stay unknown.

- conserving the original by strengthening its structure;

Street art conservation in Athens [Chatzidakis 2016: 17–23] is a successful example of practical conservation of graffiti where conservation professionals together with conservation students are running a project where they preserve the original structures of the street art without separating it from the original site. Initially, it seems like the best solution for preservation of graffiti, but ethical issues such as deciding on what to preserve arise such as: do tags and overdrawing should be considered as a part of the street art movement? How to evaluate what to preserve and what not to preserve? Also, the fact that most of the graffiti in Athens are made on historic sites creates dissonance between historic monuments and contemporary movement, i.e., are they equally valuable? Does graffiti become vandalism when it appears on historic sites or, on the contrary, complements the nature of the sites by reflecting vibrant intangible social movements? If an object is stored in the museum

or owned by other institutions working towards the preservation of art, then it is easier to preserve it because the responsibility of any memory institution is to provide the longevity of their collections. But what happens when artwork does not belong to anyone and is illegal? Graffiti artists may stay unknown and do not share their identity even if their artworks are appreciated and acknowledged by society. In some cases, their art appears on historical buildings or on private property and legally can be interpreted as a form of vandalism.

One of the main arguments for conservators who did conservation work of the graffiti in Athens was that graffiti was one of the tourist attractions in the city beside historic site tours, more and more people were willing to attend graffiti tours of Athens thereby favouring the prosperity of the city, especially during time of economic crisis in the country.

- reconstruction of the artwork;

Reconstruction is a repetition of an artwork based on the original material. Reconstruction can claim the status of an artwork. The method is usually applied to repeat ephemeral artworks, such as installations, media art, most often conceptual works of art. In the context of conservation, the term “reconstruction” is used to refer to the activity performed to re-create art the work that has been lost or the artist anticipates its reconstruction.

The case study of Keith Haring’s wall painting preservation in Melbourne [Dickens 2016: 29–37] is an example of the method where conservators instead of moving the artwork from its original location decide to preserve the artwork by repainting it. Again, various ethical issues arise – by repainting the original we assume that the idea of artwork is more important than its physical appearance. On the other hand, artist’s style, the original paint, and the patina are lost during such a treatment. And most importantly the decision of preserving the mural was highly criticized by the locals. They were not fully informed about planned treatments on the mural. Since Haring’s wall painting was highly appreciated in the local community the protests arose with intentions to stop government’s and conservators’ intentions to preserve the mural. Only after long discussions and compromises both parties – locals and conservators – came to a settlement. The protests showed how important role society can play towards the preservation of graffiti as well as conservators should always communicate clearly and appreciate the opinion of the locals.

- reproduction and migration of an artwork;

Reproduction is an imitation of a work of art, reproduction does not always force to imitate an art object in its original size and not necessarily in the same technique. Reproductions can be replicated in innumerable copies and do not qualify for artwork status. Reproductions are usually seen in museum shops, postcards, art

albums or other forms of souvenirs. The best-known example of reproduction of graffiti is Banksy merchandise. Reproductions of his graffiti are well known and have been used to make souvenirs all over the world.

Migration is a method used in conservation by conveying the idea into comprehensible and accessible form. A method of migrating graffiti was used during the International Research Conference Culture Crossroads 2017 in Riga where photos of Latvian graffiti were projected on the wall of the conference venue.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that graffiti is not only the visual manifestation we see on the murals. It is a social movement, an artistic expression of opinion. It is important to enhance understanding of the context of the mural and environment itself, artist's intentions and if there are more than one graffiti on the mural, then the context of all them together. Not always overpainting and tags can be looked as a vandalism. It can be social interaction, and if they are removed without justification, it can be perceived as censorship [Chatzidakis 2016: 17–23]. Some graffiti artists express themselves visually and the aesthetic result characterizes their intentions. On the other hand, there are artists for whom the material form of graffiti is not as important as the message it represents. In this case reconstruction of an idea as the method of preservation treatment is more suitable, since material often plays only a secondary role. And since the essence of the graffiti is mainly the message it presents it is very complex to preserve it. In order to express their ideas, artists use materials, techniques, and methods that make the conservator's work practically impossible. The society has a major role in preservation of graffiti. Most of the safeguard work has been done thanks to the group of activists that have proved the value and the need of preservation for some exceptional graffiti.¹ But it has to be mentioned that financial aspects can suspend good intentions, where to get financial support for preservation of graffiti if it does not belong to anyone and does not have a status of cultural heritage or is illegal and has to be removed by the owner of the property? Preservation mostly relies on donations, patron funds and crowdfunding, and when object is recognized by the government then only public funding can be applied.² Therefore, it is often not the conservator who preserves street art for future generations, but the society who can do documentation, film, photographs, or with other documentary methods provide longevity [Kyi 2016: 98–103].

All the objects with artistic value cannot be saved and passed to future

¹ The Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles (2012). MCLA Restores "LA Freeway Kids!". Available: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1541595750/mcla-restores-la-freeway-kids/description>

² Vankin, Deborah (2014). Anthony Quinn "Pope of Broadway" mural to get restored. *Los Angeles Times*. Available: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-anthony-quinn-pope-of-broadway-mural-eloy-torrez-20141028-story.html>

generations. Only that what has survived to this day¹ is known, but it is enough to create a history and distinguish the characteristic of art in each era [Chiantore 2013:14]. We can draw similarities with graffiti – not all the mural paintings and drawings can be safeguarded but it is important to preserve the concept and pass it on to the next generations. Still there are no clear methodological practices developed that can be applied to conservation of Graffiti because of the lack of research and practical work done in this field. It will take more time for conservators to create objective conclusions and practices.

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¹ In any form of appearance.

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