
From post-graffiti to contemporary mural art: The evolution of conservation criteria

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Abstract

Works of art in public spaces are part of a type of art adrift because, throughout their existence, they face different attempts of appropriation. From the first instance of sales of graffiti in international fairs like ARCO to their involuntary arrival at auction houses, all of these intermediate actions can be understood as attempts at conservation, since there is a system of assessment in which their ephemeral nature is more questionable than their need for survival. This change of approach also influences the different self-organized artistic approaches that have given way to commissioned works of art, due to the professionalization of artistic activity, which has given rise to a legal change in works of art and, therefore, in the possibilities of their transcendence.

Keywords: Street art, Graffiti, Murals, Conservation, Criteria, Restoration

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is not to speak of the evolution of street art, since, although it does exist, it is not correct to address contemporary muralism as a direct evolution of street art, nor is that the objective of the present study. It is rather to focus on the legal allowances that mark popular works of art developed in public spaces and, above all, on the criteria that permit their chance of survival, which is intimately linked to their ownership and, finally, to their acceptance.

2. Methodology

This paper is part of a study on the evolution of the conservation of popular art in public spaces, which, in principle, have no institutional protection, but have come to be retained, even if it is in precarious ways. The methodology applied is based on the analysis of the criteria required for their conservation. The first experiences, from Keith Haring murals in Pisa and Melbourne, to the repainted graffiti of Nekst in New York, or the restoration of the signature of Muelle in Madrid, are benchmarks of three different types of conservation.

On the one hand, the recovery of works recognized within the world of contemporary art and by the imposing personality of its author. On the other hand, the repainting of works, which, although they can never be considered technically as a restoration in itself, undeniably quickly recovers the lost image, allowing the nearby environment to pay homage to its 'idol' and to ensure its survival as a sentimental approach. Finally, the restoration of a work based on the agreement of all parties legally bound and through a social collective.

3. Criteria for the conservation of popular 20C heritage

To speak of the conservation of some pieces of street art or graffiti does not mean to create a difference to the rest of cultural heritage, since every product of human activity can come to be recognized as cultural or artistic heritage, because they all possess codes and values that time grants them. Therefore, although the works are considered as subcultural or countercultural, they are nevertheless cultural initiatives even though they might have arisen as a reaction to official initiatives. This cultural heritage changes and settles in society through different channels; the use of tattoos serves as an example, as they have gone through an opening up process throughout time.

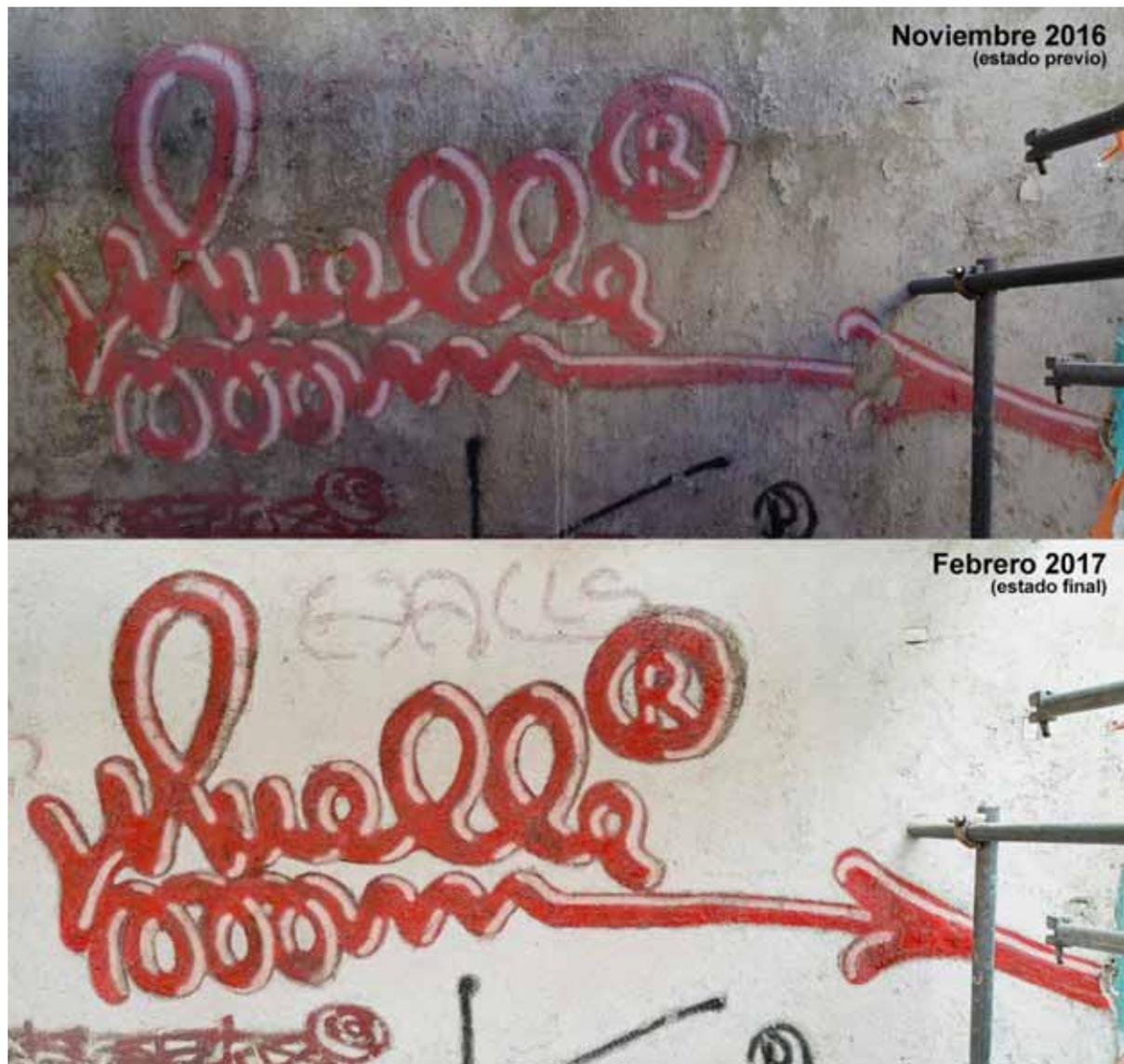


Fig 1. Restoration of the signature of Muelle in Madrid.
Nov. 2016 before and Feb. 2017 after. Photos by ESCRBC

To facilitate the study of criteria for conservation intervention, it is advisable to start from the definition of various urban art forms, without stopping to define graffiti, which focuses on artistic manifestations developed in public spaces. From proposals suggested by various authors, these are chosen:

3.1. Proto Street Art: It takes as reference the first manifestations and first uses of the urban environment as a place for artistic experience (Schacter, 2017);

3.2. Street Art: It focuses on artistic manifestations that give a media leap and move into auction houses and galleries, creating a confusing game between street art and conceptual and contemporary art;

3.3. Contemporary Interventions and contemporary murals: Many of these works are of a gigantic scale, in which artists are recognized as such and the works are commissioned.

The work of the Street Art group of the International Institute for Conservation of Spain has been based in these above-mentioned differences (García Gayo, 2017). It has been decided that for works to be preserved they must be recognized as legal, since in that case, both ownership and intellectual property are recognized. They are either commissioned productions, or, on the contrary, the public interest in the pictorial layer is recognized, regardless of considerations on ownership of the support.

4. Ephemeral art for a century

Ephemeral art has an expiration date, but all materials used in art are ephemeral if special care is not applied to them. That temporary quality is variable and applies, essentially, to works that are abandoned to their fate. In these cases, and as a result of that abandonment, these artistic works are recognized by an environment of people superior to that of their creation, and some of these groups come to represent a huge and heterogeneous collective of people. Therefore, the disappearance of works that come to be recognized as ephemeral should be slowed down. Our goal should be to achieve their material integrity and legibility, at least while the generation that created them is alive. And this is already a difficult task, given the challenges faced due to the weather and outdoor environment constraints these works of art endure.

6. Conservation under pretext and responsibility

In this case, it is not about casual conservation, which is defined by the condition of the wall, nor about the works being unnoticed and converted into invisible objects. It is a conscious conservation in which the most important issue is the reason for their conservation. The objectives can be artistic, economic, curatorial, social or sentimental causes (Muñoz Viñas Teoría, 2004) in which case the responsibility of the previously cited reasons can emphasize this second part of the analysis and can give raise to the possibility of conservation from an institutional perspective that might not exist without any of the previously mentioned points and whose objective is education about its conservation as cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

The parameters on which the conservation of street art and graffiti could be based are petition, sensitivity and intergenerational respect for points of view that have been unintentionally encountered, and that through the conservation of artistic productions, arrive at being considered generational milestones that exceed their natural environment.

References

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