

Street art conservation: The drift of abandonment

Elena García Gayo

Cultural Property Conservator and Restorer, Council of Ciudad Real, Spain

elenagayo@gmail.com

Abstract

There is a need to create a documentation system adapted to facilitate the conservation and restoration of Street Art and Graffiti. Even though they are ephemeral manifestations of art, there have been some signs of the need for preservation mechanisms that would respect their own special features. For selected works we must establish a procedure that enables their preservation with the highest guarantee.

Keywords: Conservation, Restoration, Preservation, Preventative.

Introduction

Street Art, as well as Graffiti, are artistic expressions of the twentieth century – two different visions of the use of the public space with one shared reality: their abandonment in the streets. Both are also defined by the same maxim: think, create, act and forget. This provides them with an ephemeral nature. The main reason for this is that they belong to nobody; moreover, no one is responsible for their continued existence in the long term. However, some of these works not only survive but also become known, and cease to be anonymous, which means a significant change in their recognition, turning them into a consumer good. In fact, artists themselves should take into consideration that their works may ultimately be preserved.

1. Street Art Conservation

It is a fact that some of the most widely known works are already being preserved. One of the most famous examples is Banksy's Rat. Banksy is an artist who has left a great number of works that could be used to analyze and to change these casual drifts of abandoned art. In this specific case, a non-profit organization – Save the Banksy – was created in San Francisco, Utry to avoid the loss of, as well as the economic trade of those works doomed to disappear or to be the subject of speculation (Greif, 2015).

The reasons that lead us to analyze the opportunities we have to preserve street art are based on, in some cases, those works that are being ripped from the walls to be sold

or auctioned; and in other cases, as with a mural by Fairey in Philadelphia, those works that have been restored by the wall's owner – a decision based on personal taste. Moreover, in the case of the graffiti Muelle (Figuroa and Galvez, 2004) in Montera Street, Madrid, for which protection as cultural property was requested, there was already some previous recognition of the artist, given the fact that he has been a point of cultural reference ever since the beginning of graffiti in Spain during the complicated first years of democracy immediately after the dictatorship.

Nevertheless, in the vast majority of cases, street art and graffiti works are preserved by chance. This is the reason that whatever happens to these works can be defined as the drift of abandoned art, for which new and unknown expectations are being raised in a changing society. There is a new challenge in the conservation and restoration field nowadays: on the one hand, there is an ethical consideration which is in altering the ephemeral nature of works done in that they may survive in a hostile environment, and on the other hand, there is the need for further research, and on the part of modern materials applied on walls that are already degraded even before the artistic intervention.

The analysis of the different solutions that have been carried out to date will build formulas that will give to some of the works the opportunity to be subject to interventions in a will make them to retard their aging process. After studying some of the better known cases, this has resulted in the need to

establish a methodology to work with and to implement a respectful strategy adjusted to the specific needs of street art conservation.

2. Identity alteration

When works are intervened with and preserved, they might suffer changes, for their identity may also be altered – the illegal works become recognized, and the ephemeral works become long-lasting. Furthermore, all of these works may end up being digitalized and available on the internet, and their authors may become recognized. This usually happens arbitrarily except for the big murals that are often commissioned works; the murals' identity would not be altered since their recognition has already started as part of the curating system.

In some of the cases though, these changes are abruptly done as when the works are stolen or auctioned, as with Banksy's works, turning them into fetish objects.

3. Restored works

Perhaps the most interesting interventions are the conservation treatments done on three of murals by Haring: one in Pisa, Italy, another one in Melbourne, Australia, and the third one in Barcelona, Spain. These could be used as reference cases since, in less than two years, they have drawn international attention due to their restoration. In the Spanish case, in Barcelona, the work was revived thanks to a tracing completed by MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, before it was completely removed in the 1990s. In the other two cases, mechanical and chemical cleaning was needed, including the final anti-graffiti protection. However, this technique's effectiveness had to be checked, since graffiti has been done over the restored mural.

Placing methacrylate plates is another widespread technique that paradoxically creates the opposite effect – turning it into a watertight compartment for the paint, and favoring the emergence of microorganisms, in what ends up being an irreversible treatment.

The disassembly of the walls or the ripping of the paint layer alone requires the creation of new supports that can make murals into portable works. Let us take the works that have been ripped from the walls in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank as an example. In contrast to the old murals, these were not taken as works attached to the architecture; moreover,

they have been placed in despised architectural spaces.

4. Street Art as Cultural Property: Resources to detect works that should be preserved

Artworks carry values difficult to define [Muñoz Viñas 2004: 41]. They are important for particular groups of people and their value is sometimes intangible. It is not easy to decide which works should be preserved, due to the fact that this is a popular type of art and therefore many of these works are already part of the collective memory, independently of the values that have been traditionally considered important. Some markers should be put in place by which people could request the preservation of the works done in their community. Furthermore, a more complex documentation system than photography alone must be set up – this system should be able to give out information on the conservation status of the walls and the materials. From this point, we could establish a basic methodology designed to assist the preventative conservation of these works. Some of these actions could involve the previous treatments of the walls with a moisture protection; using an ultraviolet protective finish action; a simple correction of water falling due to runoff; or selecting the eadecades according to how protected they are from the sunlight. As commissioned murals are becoming more and more common as part of street art tourism, a control system for aging speed and loss of color must be created.

A preventative conservation program and a system for technical and complete documentation would facilitate the development and dissemination of this evidence base – not only of the reasons for the survival of the works but also of what connects them to their environment; reasons that go beyond chance.

References

- Figueroa, F. and Gálvez, F. (2014) *Firmas, muros y botes*. Madrid: Autoedición.
- Muñoz Viñas, S. (2004) *Teoría contemporánea de la restauración*. Ed. Madrid: Síntesis.
- Greif, B. (2015) *Save the Banksy*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/savethebanksy> [Accessed: 21/11/2015].

Acknowledgments

Translated by Mariola Rey

This article had changes made in the copy editing process.