# Notes on the Archive: About Street Art, QR Codes and Digital Archiving Practices

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**Abstract**
My paper focuses on one specific case study, a QR code project by Berlin based artist Sweza: Graffyard. This, in turn, constitutes the starting point of my further reflection on digital archiving practices, with special attention to the concept of location and placement. My approach implies the questioning of both time and space as well as Graffyard's archive architecture. As will be shown, Graffyard not only functions as a hybrid, "real-virtual archive", as the artist himself states (Sweza, 2012), but exposes its inherent logics and processes. In that way, it both alludes to the topic of ephemerality – street art is generally known for – and addresses broader questions regarding digital archives, the availability of data, digital art history, the production of memory and the consolidation of a street art canon. Graffyard elaborates on these topics in a playful-experimental way and makes them reflexive in the medium of art. My paper emphasizes that it is more and more important to also reflect on what is missing in our digital archives and what kind of 'connecting practices' are involved. This, inevitably, demands taking into account the investigation of data monopolies, platform politics, algorithms and net critique in general.

**Keywords:**
Street Art, QR Codes, Digital Archiving Practices, Net Critique, Digital Art History

## 1. 'Getting Up': About Street Art and Zombies

Berlin based artist Sweza uses QR codes to preserve graffiti or street art for posterity by photographing it before it got removed. After the pieces have been cleaned off by the local authorities or building owners he places a QR code in the exact location which resolves to an image of the original (fig. 1, 2).[1] "In that way a mobile phone with a QR code reader can be used to travel back in time"[2]. Sweza states: "By scanning these codes individual graffiti or street art pieces got reanimated and 'get up' as zombies. That is why you can also call them 'graffiti-zombies'." (Sweza, 2012: 52 sec ff. [transl. KG]) And this, at least on the first sight, might be obvious – because if you read in the QR code with your smartphone, respectively your QR code reader, the image of the disappeared graffiti appears on the screen of your mobile smartphone device. This means that it has been digitally reanimated.

## 2. The Archive

In the following, nevertheless, I want to elaborate a little bit more on the discourse of the archive. Discussing this topic, one of the main challenges or problems will be that the archive not only points to both an institution and a concept – which means it both addresses a specific place and a method (Ebeling and Günzel, 2009: 10), – but rather that it alludes to a complex, overflowing and therefore almost unmanageable phenomenon. While historians use the archive for historiography, others, in return, question its generative effects (Ernst, 2009). Cultural scientists, like Aleida Assmann (2006, 2009) for instance, question the archive as the place of our cultural or collective memory – an idea which can be linked with Boris Groys understanding of the archive as a "machine for the production of memory" (Groys, 2009: 140-141 [transl. KG]). Groys states that on the one hand, the archive is associated with the idea of completion. This means that it should collect and represent everything that is outside of the archive. On the other hand, "archive things" (ibid.), as Groys names them, generally *do* have a different destiny than all the profane things outside of the archive. 'Archive things' are considered valuable and worth keeping in a safe place whereas the mortality of the profane things outside of the archive is generally accepted. Therefore, a fundamental difference between the things inside and outside of the archive has to be highlighted – a difference in regard to value, destiny, ephemerality, destruction, and death (ibid.: 141).
In the same way archives (pretend to) endeavor for objectivity, in the same way they are ideologically (pre)structured. They decide what is visible and preserved in a culture, and what is not, and therefore decide what remains hidden from both present and future societies. "Archives precede historiography, which is their effect", Ebeling and Günzel (2009: 14 [transl. KG]) claim in the introduction of the "Archiveology". This shows that the archive, as a mediator between the visible and the invisible, the included and the excluded, the remembered (or memorable) and the forgotten has become a central category within cultural studies. Its ongoing dissolution and metaphorical extension to different ways of collecting, storing, saving and remembering – nevertheless, or precisely because of that – asks for further differentiations (Ernst, 2009: 184). Since the emergence of new media technologies and digital archiving practices, this demand has gained in impact, relevance and complexity. Today, the archive should no longer be considered as the place of historical storage, but, following Wolfgang Ernst (2009: 186), of availability, accessibility and actualization.

## 3. 'Lighting up the Dark'

However, at this point let me come back to *Graffyard*. I'm questioning: What happens in this mobile smartphone box – it is *truly* possible to travel back in time, as Sweza states on his website: "In that way a mobile phone with a QR code reader can be used to travel back in time"[3]. In addition, what happens to street art – is it 'ghosting around' –, and if so, where? And moreover, will it finally 'get up' as a virtual zombie? So let us open the black box to the graveyard of graffiti.

Ephemerality is an issue within the street art scene, Sweza states (2012: 35 sec ff.). For him it is interesting to see the process of 'decomposition', when pieces take on different shapes and, in the end, disappear forever (ibid.). Sweza plays with this fact by "superimposing this 'real-virtual archive'" (ibid. [transl. KG]). Given that both the form and the content of his archive have 'real-virtual' reference points, it is not only constituted, but permanently processed on the intersection between 'the physical' and the 'digital'. Within this constellation the two opposite layers are interconnected with each other by means of a QR code which synchronizes the process of disappearing and 'getting up' – respectively 'rising up from the dead' – of aforementioned street art and graffiti pieces. The QR code, consequently, presents itself as a mediator within a network of complex sociotechnical relationships that interconnects both layers in a significant

way: it separates by linking and links by separating. Sweza's QR codes, consequently, must be understood as pictorial signs that do not only include, but also refer to their own backside. This shows that Sweza's *Graffyard* renounces any determined 'either-or', a characteristic that brings us back to the metaphor of the temporary street art zombie which can also be located in an undetermined space-time, somewhere 'in between', on the intersection of life and death.

It is interesting to note here that *Graffyard* not only reflects on the topic of ephemerality, but rather depends on it as well. Thus, not only the found street art and graffiti pieces are ephemeral, their 'graveyard' is ephemeral as well. The intermediate stage between life and death, passing away and getting up, destruction and (temporary) revitalization is not only artistically addressed, but also inscribed into the project. The functionality of the hybrid, time-spatial interplay of *Graffyard* is decisively dependent on the life span of the QR codes. The pasted codes, on the long run, do not guarantee a long-term remembrance or survival of the street art and graffiti pieces, rather they contribute to a sudden, selective, unexpected and zombie-like appearance of their digital copies. *Graffyard*, consequently, must be understood as a self-reflexive project, which does not confront the fast moving time outside of the archive with a certain 'place of protection' or 'stability' (Stäheli, 2002). It rather refers to its own archiving logic and exhibits its inherent processes.

In sum, *Graffyard* is an archive, attached to, or even augmenting urban space, that is both locative, situational and self-reflexive and offers limited access to its own archival documents. It is produced and permanently re-actualized in the process of its reanimation. Consequently, we might possibly understand *Graffyard* as some kind of hybrid memory black box that is characterized by qualities of situativeness, selectiveness, temporality, subjectivity and incompleteness.

**4. The Logic of the Archive**

This, in return, makes clear that *Graffyard* must be dependent on preliminary research and preparation. Even though Sweza, apparently seems to somehow undermine the 'traditional' understanding of (urban art) aesthetics – by mainly adding tags to his archive instead of decorative street art and graffiti pieces – he, nevertheless, is not able to lever out the logic of the archive. Thus, every single 'import', 'add' or 'upload' marks a difference, which separates documents worth archiving from documents not worth archiving. Individual tags as well as street art and graffiti pieces are always privileged in comparison to others that have no access to the archive. This amply demonstrates that every archive contains a border which separates the internal from the external, the archive from the non-archive, the closed from the open, the included from the excluded, and in the end, the preserved from the non-preserved (Fohrmann, 2002: 20-21). "No archive without outside," Derrida states (ibid., with reference to Derrida [transl. KG]). Sweza's selection, whether conscious or not, must therefore always be understood as a first interpretation that determines which works will be remembered and which ones will not. This shows that the archive, as the place to remember, is closely linked to the logic of exclusion, ignorance and oblivion.

So let me finally close with a series of questions. Given the fact that ephemerality determines Sweza's project in a significant way and, on the long run, contributes to cut the recently outlined interplay between 'the physical' and 'the digital' I am asking: Does Sweza, in the end, offer the possibility of a final oblivion? Alternatively, what happens to the said graffiti and street art pieces once the digital lid of the archive is snap shut? Will they be offered a last resting place, and thus, confront death; or are they condemned to an eternal life inside a non-accessible, digital web space whose gates will be closed forever? (see also Warnke, 2002: 270).

### 5. The Internet as an Archive and (Art Historical) Storage Medium

This question, on the one hand, leads to the questioning of the internet as a digital archive and art historical storage medium, on the other hand, the addressing of associated potentials and impositions. As will be shown, the outlined discourse draws attention to the conditions in which cultural heritage and knowledge is made accessible. Given the fact that culture is the result of its storage media, then cultural memory turns out to be the effect of an archive whose basic operations constantly change with new media innovations (Ernst, 2009: 178). Nevertheless, the idea of the internet as storage medium fosters some misunderstandings, because archive material is not only stored but also published (Ebeling and Günzel, 2009, with reference to Assmann, 2009).

However, it can be assumed that Sweza never intended to create an archive in the proper sense of the word. Rather, he exposes its inherent logics, processes and dynamics and provides a meta comment on digital archiving practices in general. By not selecting pieces that go hand in hand with the common taste or criteria of the art system, he adds another level of reflection and unveils the fictional qualities of the archive. By revaluating tags, which are otherwise underestimated, marginalized, displaced and unwanted, he reveals the selectivity of the archive and its inherent ambiguity. In this way, his project complies with other works of contemporary art. In her article *Anarchy in the Archive* (2009) Monika Rieger points to a similar perspective. She states that the majority of artists do not associate the archive with a safe storage room and the possibility of an identical reconstruction of the past. Rather, they focus on its framework and do not spend too much time on analyzing its content. (ibid.: 266) Sweza's project follows this genealogy. With his work, the dynamic conception of the archive becomes evident, addressing the dialectic between remembering and forgetting. This idea can be associated with the increasingly important question – or problematic – of digital archiving and storage practices in general. Sweza addresses these topics in a playful and experimental way, making them reflexive in the medium of art. Following Aleida Assmann it could be stated that art unveils that culture does not remember anymore (Rieger, 2009, with reference to Assmann, 1999: 371); or, in other words, that the storage capacity of our cultural archives has exceeded the amount that can be retranslated into our human memory (Rieger, 2009, with reference to Assmann, 2006: 94 ff.). At the same time, she indicates that the selection criteria of our cultural memory have become unclear (ibid.). This fact, in particular, can be observed in the context of street art festivals. Here, it is especially worth questioning *if* and *in what ways* our cultural memory and related media practices of documenting, archiving and storing have already contributed to establish – and permanently reprocess – some kind of international street art canon (Glaser, 2015).

### 6. 'Doing the Archive' and the Changing Accessibility of Cultural Heritage, Goods and Knowledge

Within this context, further questions can be raised. One might possibly think of Google's *Street Art Project,*[4] which was founded in 2014 and meant to archive street art worldwide. Apart from all the advantages of an easily accessible, digital archive in high-resolution, it remains to be questioned what this kind of archive furthermore entails. In his study on digital archiving, Jeff Rothenburg states: "Digital documents last forever – or 5 years, whichever comes first" (Warnke, 2002: 276, with reference to Rothenburg, 1999). Moreover, he adds: "There is – at present, no way to guarantee the preservation of digital information" (ibid., with reference to Rothenburg 1999). At the same time, Martin Warnke indicates that digital archives only endure as long as they are permanently in use (ibid.: 280). This means that data, in regular intervals, have to be stored to new media and converted into new formats, in order to impede death (ibid.: 276). Due to the fact that internet packages are fitted with a mechanism of self-destruction (ibid.: 272), the internet has proved to be inappropriate as an archive, Warnke states (ibid.). What is not on the servers anymore

is not accessible; the well-known *error 404* occurs (ibid.). French artist MTO was one of the first artists who explicitly addressed this topic,[5] while at the same time criticizing Google's practices of surveillance and censorship, which are also associated with their archive project.

If one assumes that technical standards and software technologies will further improve, the archive, eventually, will not only be addressable as a 3-, but as a n-dimensional space (Ernst, 2009: 200). This would offer new search options and organizing tools (ibid.). For instance, one could easily be able to search melodies with melodies, images with images, etc. (ibid.). *Google Photos*[6] is one example, which points into this direction. Here, photos are algorithmically sorted and categorized. Google, most likely, uses this as a playground to improve its own face and object recognition software (Hernandez, 2015). This makes evident that, in the context of digital archiving practices, it is increasingly important to also question the supposedly 'free' infrastructures on which our digital archives are based, considering especially the fact that they are offered by multinational companies like Google. Berlin based curator Lutz Henke supports this idea by also voicing some concerns regarding the Google *Street Art Project*. He questions what kind of algorithms are working in the background and if they, sooner or later, will tell us what kind of images generate the highest advertising impact, and in the end, most of the money (Henke, 2015). The questions of who owns and controls images and what for, as well as who establishes and handles data monopolies, is, at present, one of the greatest sociopolitical challenges, Henke states (ibid.).

**7. Conclusion**

As my paper has shown, in the future it will be extremely important to also reflect on what is missing in our digital archives (Ernst, 2002: 29) and what kind of 'connecting practices' are involved. On the one hand, this implies the questioning of archive architectures and their inherent processes and mechanisms of selection, which separate documents worth archiving from documents not worth archiving (Fohrmann, 2002: 21-22; Stäheli, 2002: 74) and, in the end, favor the consolidation of a street art canon. On the other hand, this implies the questioning of associated practices, which are often based on commercial interests.

Against this background, it seems to be crucially important to no longer understand the internet as a simple tool or storage medium, but as an inseparable part of our political, economic, social and cultural life (Lovink, 2012: 94). Multinational companies like Google – much like the internet in general – do not offer a free infrastructure. Rather, the whole cultural, political, economic and educational landscape is strongly influenced by its networking structures, its algorithms and mechanisms of coordination (ibid.: 199). Debates about spatial appropriation, advertising, institutionalization, domestication, censorship, privacy as well as the questioning of hierarchies – which in the context of today's street art are still tied to the framework of the physical city – have to be transferred to the nets (Glaser, 2015). The current but decisive challenge will be to critically question familiar conventions, mechanisms of control and exclusion within existing – most possibly centralized – network infrastructures. The nets and its central nodes are places of decision making, which inevitably display the current infrastructures of power (Glaser, 2015; Lovink, 2012; Lovink and Rasch, 2013). Consequently, we are no longer in charge to simply 'reclaim the city', but to 'reclaim the internet' (Glaser, 2015).


Fig. 1 - website picture from 2014, website relaunch in 2016; photo: © Sweza.


Fig. 2 - website picture from 2014, website relaunch in 2016; photo: © Sweza.

**Endnotes**

1 - See www.sweza.com/graffyard (accessed 30.07.2013, website relaunch in 2016).
2 - www.sweza.com/graffyard (accessed 30.07.2013, website relaunch in 2016).
3 - www.sweza.com/graffyard (accessed 30.07.2013, website relaunch in 2016).
4 - www.streetart.withgoogle.com/de as well as www.google.com/culturalinstitute/project-/street-art (accessed 22.04.2015).
5 - The documentation of the mural is accessible online at www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10152768696761723.1073741871.195423476722&type=1 (accessed 22.04.2015); for further information see also Levy (2015).
6 - www.google.com/photos/about/ (accessed 08.12.2016).

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