

When documenting doesn't cut it: Opportunities and alternatives to intangible conservation

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Abstract

Conservation of urban art is a subject in vogue in contemporary academic research. It may seem like a new topic of discussion – a new field of understanding – but the preservation of the ideas and forms of urban art practices has certainly been present since the very beginnings of graffiti and street art. Although generally practices related to urban art are considered ephemeral, when an artwork, style or general practice acquires value, conservation is the only way to prolong its idea – its life. The proceedings to allow that statement could be twofold: The first one is using intangible conservation mechanisms as simple as keeping the idea by photographic and video records; promoting spaces for the practices; documentation of styles, forms, ideas, states; developing new researches, and so on. The second, main topic of discussion in this paper, is the application of more intricate mechanisms when wider objectives are presented because of the significant importance of the artwork for the public, based on trying to keep the materiality of the artwork in addition to maintaining its idea. In these cases, tangible conservation mechanisms should be applied. This paper questions the limits of intangible conservation and the possibilities that tangible conservation could offer in the physical and conceptual preservation of the alternative contemporary art practices that involve urban art. Nevertheless, it is not forgotten that the application of conservation-restoration mechanisms could be questioned, so additionally to the alternatives that tangible conservation offers, the criteria used for its general application will be reviewed.

Keywords: Urban Art, Contemporary Art, Intangible Conservation, Tangible Conservation, Conservation, Restoration

1. Introduction

Ephemerality has been introduced to cultural and art tradition as an intricate concept that makes historians, curators, philosophers and especially, art restorers, become creative in the way that artworks and expressions with a transient life are presented to future generations.

In the range of ephemeral situations presented nowadays, we find ourselves looking at two groups: the movements and traditions that involve an action or practice, and the objects that those actions produce, or objects which are created to disappear. In regards to actions, their singularity in being part of the society in a particular moment of history makes it necessary to keep it the same for as long as possible, being

the action itself transferable to the future generations. This is what we understand as 'intangible conservation'. However, given the consequences of those actions for the object, the preservation of memory could be more intriguing. The object – artwork – could be preserved or not; if preserved, it could be treated either as a consequence/remnant of the action, or as an independent object related to the action but with its own character. In any case, conservation can be intangible, based on the registration and tracking of the different states of the piece (conceptual and material) and the documentation of the action which surrounded it, but also, 'tangible' because the work may be treated both as a remnant or as an independent object, which resides in the materiality in with it was created.

This paper focuses on the 'intangible' or 'tangible' conservation of the remains of contemporary art expressions like graffiti and street art. Discarding both technical reproducibility and creation of replicas (as new artworks) from this research, documentation resources have been the main and most used tool to accomplish the transference of forms of contemporary art such as short-lived artworks, performances and happenings, or cultural traditions and remarkable historic events for societies (intangible cultural heritage), among others. As a result, documentation is the primary and best adapted approach to perform intangible conservation. Nevertheless, what happens with those artworks created separately from the (art) tradition? Should we try to conserve urban art? How should we do it if those alternative practices have the idea of ephemerality linked to them? With regards to those questions, the main purpose of this paper is to analyze the current situation of graffiti and street art in relation to material conservation inside and outside the public space, and the possibilities that this approach has delivered to the field until now.

In order to accomplish this purpose, the research presented here has a focus on the limits that intangible conservation offers to these alternative manifestations of art, presenting case studies where material conservation has been applied. In addition, from the revision of those cases, the most significant aspects that facilitate conservation are identified, including alternatives based on respectful and correct conservation criteria.

2. Conservation of urban art

From our perspective as conservators, we aim to treat any object that could receive heritage value as any other historic, cultural or artistic object traditionally understood and officially registered as heritage. If we transfer the concept of preservation of intangible and tangible heritage to contemporary experiences, we find that alternative artistic movements, such as graffiti and street art, can be deemed worthy of being presented as an interest on their own under those same principles.

Intangible conservation is always a possibility to maintain and disseminate the idea of something valuable, as it does well with the different stages a work or action could present. Despite that, it is the researcher's aim to go further into this matter: the value added to an artwork makes it, as we have

seen, not only accessible to intangible conservation, but also to the tangible. If the object is relevant enough to be registered, the preservation of the physical aspect of the artwork in a particular stage of its life may be possible too.

On the other hand, there are limitations in the application of tangible conservation depending on the kind of object/idea we work with. The limits that we could find in the material conservation of graffiti and street art are related to the artwork concept – created by the writer/artist – or the movement which surrounds it. So, when an artwork has received consideration as a valuable object by the public, which asks for its physical preservation, it is our duty as restorers to understand the objective established by its author and the historic and creative procedures linked to the environment in which the artwork was created. After that, we should evaluate whether a conservative-restorative intervention could benefit or damage the meaning of the artwork, the intention of the author and/or the availability of the work to the public.

2.1. Intangible versus tangible conservation

Before developing the subject of the analysis of tangible conservation case studies, it is important to understand the ways that intangible conservation has, without a specific purpose, operated in urban art practices. Since graffiti writers themselves – and professional photographers as Martha Cooper or Henry Chalfant (2006) – tried to keep records of the best pieces (including promotional videos launched by spray can brands) the visual reproduction of the image has been the way authors and public used to be in the loop with the latest artworks, as well as with those lost recently or a long time ago.

It is commonly known that in the beginnings of graffiti, information was reduced to a few spectators outside (and inside) the movement, but thanks to, firstly the publication of fanzines, films, printed books, and last but not least, the Internet, any information old and new has spread worldwide. All these resources are the ways that current generations come across the beginnings and development of graffiti and street art; and so, the way all visual information is conserved. Consequently, photography galleries on the internet have become the best way for artists and public to share and delight in new artworks in the public space.

The internet has considerably increased the number of people that have access to this invaluable historical record, and at the same time, keeps that information preserved for longer. As Stephen Powers (2014:n.p.) wrote once about the demolition of some of his murals in Baltimore “see them TOGETHER now or see them FOREVER online.” In this manner, the internet is the biggest and most accessible gallery of artworks ever created. Furthermore, the written information linked to the images and thematic blogs is also useful. These complement basic information regarding the artwork and, in many cases, either add interesting facts or relate to specific topics, depending on the website, blog or community which organizes the space. This is how intangible conservation works nowadays.

By the same token, there are new proposals from both academic institutions and organizations that try to present new methodologies for acknowledging urban art practices, and for preservation possibilities. Consequently, research studies on graffiti and street art have been brought to the table much more often during the last few years. Academic environments find graffiti and street art a very rich topic of research from different perspectives – geography, philosophy, art, history, anthropology, or conservation. The multiplicity of fields increases the quantity and quality of the information that the public from diverse backgrounds can access; it also helps in the understanding of those alternative art practices and defines its situation within society and the art world.

The objective of the new researches that academic/specialist environments produce is to organize the information found and develop better work-models, closely related to intangible conservation. However, the same is being applied to other possibilities and the outreach is not only reduced to textual and visual information. Far from what may be thought, art conservation and restoration processes have already been applied to graffiti and street art, from Banksy’s detached walls and Perspex® protected stencils around the world, through repainted pieces like that of Does Loveletters in Abshoven, and right up to the conservation interventions done by the St.a.co collective in the streets of Athens and the recently full-restoration intervention of Muelle’s piece in Madrid. These are just a small sample of the many examples of artworks in which intangible conservation has been considered insufficient, nor even, in many cases, proposed.

Bearing in mind that the current situation allows for both intangible and tangible conservation of urban art, it is now the time to start asking ourselves what are the limits of each approach.

Intangible conservation only works in terms of the documentation of the idea of what the work was and the concept the artist wanted to spread, so it is complicated to maintain the real image of the artwork, and when lost, it will always be under an interpretation of those in charge of transferring the idea. In contrast, tangible conservation can preserve the real image – its materiality – which may give sense to the artwork. Despite this, its application can also contradict the concept or idea in which the artwork was created. That would bring us back to the intangible conservation, whose application would, in very few cases, contradict the artwork concept.

For that reason, if we want to apply tangible conservation to prevent the materiality loss of a graffiti or street artwork, in addition to the values added to it, we should analyze the extent to which the conservation would command the understanding of the artwork, conflict with the art concept, or show an ambivalence towards the artist’s will, before ever determining a plan of intervention.

3. Tangible conservation of graffiti and street art

As we have seen, tangible conservation is currently happening. The value that urban art practices have taken, following public interest in them, has allowed for furthering the idea of delighting in alternative art forms. This new approach has gone from possessing them, to keeping them in the public space for longer than intended, with an extra concern for safety.

The interest in this and the lack of knowledge on how to proceed, have produced in the conservation-restoration research the need to broaden the limits that restoration theories offer, adapting the procedures used in conservation of contemporary art to these alternative forms. In this path of adaptation, new topics of discussion have been presented in academic environments: from theoretical aspects, such as if we should conserve graffiti (Orsini, 2012), through practical and focused projects in particular cities (Chatzidakis, 2016:18-19), to evaluation of the composition of the materials used in those practices, in general (Germinario et al., 2016) or in specific cases (Rava et al., 2015:194).

Other projects have been proposed outside academia as specific solutions for particular artworks. Interest in these new forms of conservation has mostly come from private companies related to the commercial art market such as The Sincura Group (2017), public platforms like Por la declaración de Muelle como BIC (García Gayo, 2010), or the owners of the buildings where the artworks are located.

As far as the conservation process is concerned, there is a wide range of possibilities for the preservation of urban artworks. For the consideration of the nature of the materials used and the environment in which those artworks are located, there are two paths that allow for conservation: ex-situ and in-situ interventions. From a neutral perspective, in the following research, the most significant mechanisms of tangible conservation to date are presented.

3.1. Ex-situ interventions

Ex-situ interventions start their action in the emplacement of the artwork, from where it is transferred to a lab where it goes through an in-depth restoration, and eventually ends up in a new location. The processes followed to accomplish that are mainly based in emergency systems of preservation used to avoid an imminent loss of the artwork because of a highly dangerous situation or difficulties presented in the environment (Hekman, 2010:9-55), like the so-called detachment, a transfer system used on wall-paintings and mosaics to separate them from the location in which they were created, taking them to a safer one. The majority of artworks where transfer systems have been applied in urban art are wall-paintings and the restoration processes used have been detachment by stacco a massello, stacco or strappo. Below, three cases of study where the three detachment techniques have been used are presented.

The first study presented relates to work produced by the artist known as Banksy. The fame and value of the artworks of this anonymous and controversial street artist has produced an interest for possession. In order to prevent the loss of his stencils on mural support, the wall-paintings are detached, transported and sold after an in-depth restoration using mainly the detachment by stacco a massello or stacco. Some of the artworks end up being available in galleries or itinerant exhibitions, others are now part of private collections as had already happened with his canvas or prints. The detachments have been done mostly by the

art and concierge services company The Sincura Group (2014), but there are other cases set by private owners, as with a mural in Beddington, Sutton (Gregory, 2009; Channel 4, 2011).

The second case study is the one developed as a part of the exhibition Street Art – Banksy & Co. L'arte allo stato urbano in Bologna. This exhibition was presented as an instrument to understand the ways cities communicate differently from the establishment (Roversi-Monaco and Sibani, 2015:7), as Bologna is one of the Italian cities with more long-lived tradition in urban art practices (Ciancabilla, 2015:9). All the artworks displayed tried to show an itinerary from the first contemporary graffiti expressions to the current street art, presenting works fit to be seen – as canvases or black-books – by international artists; and detached wall-paintings, from well-known Bolognese street artists. Those mural pieces were collected by stacco and strappo techniques from the streets of Bologna, restored especially for the exhibition, and are now part of the collection of the museum.

The third case is a lesser-known action of partial detachments made by strappo of some murals from Poliniza festival in 2010. As you may know, Poliniza festival is a street art event celebrated in the Polytechnic University of Valencia since 2006. The walls of some buildings in Campus de Vera, Valencia, are redecorated every year with international street artists and graffiti writers' artworks. At the beginning of 2011, as the 9th edition of the festival was approaching, two murals from the previous edition were selected for the conservation of some fragments before the wall-paintings were painted over. The detachments in this occasion were made by strappo technique only, its preservation being a complement of the documentation gathered of that edition.

Wall-paintings are not the only type of artworks transported from their original location to a new one. Sculptures, canvases, mosaics and ready-mades left in the streets are some of the objects that provoke a desire for possession from some people. Banksy is also an example of this, but there are many others like Space Invader. Space Invader (2017) highlighted the uselessness of stealing or buying the pieces he left in the streets as anyone can do similar mosaics by themselves. Although this is not specifically an example of a conservation mechanism, the idea of keeping the artwork somewhere away from degradation is apparent behind the will for possession.

3.2. In-situ interventions

In contrast to the cases presented on ex-situ interventions, there are also the in-situ interventions, a great number of which are focused on the conservation of paintings on mural supports, which are divided in two different groups.

The first to be presented are in-situ interventions when the main purpose is the maintenance of the artwork, meaning only conservation mechanisms have been applied. These processes would try to keep the artwork safe from external damage and in its best condition as long as possible in its original location.

The mechanisms used for such interventions are physical barriers like the well-known Perspex® (acrylic glass) or other chemical kind of barriers such as varnishes. In very few cases those murals kept in the public space have experienced other restoration processes as in many cases it can be complicated to find specialists or funds to carry out the restoration. The use of physical barriers is a common practice in British cities as London, Brighton, Torquay or Folkestone, but it has also been seen in other European cities – it was used after the restoration of the Madonna of Blek le Rat's Madonna in Leipzig, which will be explained in detail later. Regarding the chemical barriers, varnishes have been traditionally used for the protection of conventional wall-paintings. Even though, ordinarily it is not the purpose of the artist to protect his/her artwork and varnishes have been hardly used in contemporary productions, its application to urban murals seems to be an option for many owners, and sometimes, for artists. For that reason, in order to protect commissioned murals, synthetic varnishes – acrylic mainly – are the most used together with anti-graffiti coats. The combination of both would protect the surface of the painting against light damage and tagging.

In a second stage, there are in-situ actions to keep the artwork safe but also try to recover a lost aesthetic aspect lost. In these cases, conservation and restoration processes like cleaning, consolidation or reintegration, have been applied in two different ways: punctual interventions for singular problems presented or altogether full interventions related to the whole piece.

In regards to punctual restoration interventions, it is necessary to highlight the work done by the collective Street Art

Conservators (St.a.co) since 2012 in Athens (Staco, 2013). It is generally agreed that Athens is one of the cities most open to street art, so the work done by this collective responds to the same idea of public spaces. Although the interventions of this collective developed in the Technological Institute of Athens are based on the consolidation of posters and flaked painting, light cleaning and monitoring their interventions, in both public murals and street artworks (Chatzidakis, 2016), their contribution prolongs, for a short period of time, the life of some artworks left in that city. A similar study of materials on the difficulties of conservation was focused on a wall-painting by street artist Nunca in Vitry-sur-Seine. This research evaluates different aspects of the restoration mechanisms available to use on the mural, including the as removal of tags and the consolidation and reintegration of paint, both practically and theoretically (Matthey-Demoulin, 2014).

Other singular interventions could involve the reintegration of murals by the same artists that created them, like the one done by graffiti writers Does Loveletters and Nash in an abandoned church converted in a restaurant in Abshoven (Does, 2014) or some the murals by Kiz in Alicante. This kind of intervention can also be performed by collectives and by the public, as it is the case of Nekst in New York (Chin, 2016); or by the owners of the buildings, as with some of Banksy's stencils after being tagged or altered.

Moreover, there are cases where full-restoration interventions have been applied, since the artwork's appearance had suffered an important degradation due to different agents. Public organizations like the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles are trying to conserve the tradition of public murals and the aspect of the wall-paintings made for important artists and collaborators in Los Angeles (MCLA, 2015); similarly, the Keith Haring Foundation protects Haring's legacy around the world (2017). Last but not least, the interest of the general public has helped bring to the attention of the authorities the need for the restoration of popular pieces such as the stencil of Blek le Rat in Leipzig, which was funded by a private company after the a public request for help (LVZ, 2013), and the recently finished restoration of Muelle's piece in Madrid, as a part of a community proposal followed by the restoration by the Escuela Superior de Conservación y Restauración de Bienes Culturales of Madrid (Garcia Gayo, 2017; Colao, 2017).

4. Criteria

This article has tried to highlight the reality of how the addition of, or rise of in, cultural or artistic value to objects is what brings them up to be considered for any type of conservation. The values that are linked to urban manifestations are, perhaps, similar to those presented by Aloïs Rielg at the beginning of 20th Century (Reilg, 1996). However contemporary researchers as Michael von der Goltz (2010), Alice Nogueira Alves (2014) and Isabelle Brajer (2010; 2015), have reviewed Reilg's work and propose some changes in the conception of those values applied either to the conservation of contemporary art or to alternative urban practices, which would need to be considered. Nevertheless, the most common values used in the cases exposed are: historical, artistic, social and economic.

It is undeniable that economic value has played an important role in the consideration of preservation of many of the cases exposed (generally those related to Banksy), and the application of this particular value can cause a conflict between what is the priority in the application of mechanisms to the artwork or what is the best for the owner; though it does not mean that other values were not applied at the same time – if a piece of created pieceion is not considered as recipient ofto hold artistic value, can it be called an artwork?

To prevent the application of incorrect – or untruthful – criteria in the conservation of urban art practices we aim to follow contemporary theories of restoration as well as the new deontological principle of ethics coming out like the one proposed recently by the Urban Art Working team of the Spanish Group of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (GE-IIC) (2016).

5. Conclusions

We have seen that any new form of art or self-expression which appears freely in the current society has an incredible support behind it, as the public and many researchers nowadays are willing to be part of it. One of the theories in which some ideas are followed here – and as seen in many cases in the public space – is that an object is considered art when the communication between author and receptor is accomplished thanks to the (art)work, and the second analyzes it (Hernandez-Belver and Martin-Prada, 1998:46). This could help not only in the consideration of the artwork itself by a wider public, but also in its future preservation.

It is clear that some of the mechanisms for tangible conservation presented in the cases of studies above are neither perfect nor ideally adequate; also, the criteria followed could be respectful towards the artist or the public – and may be beneficial for only a minority of people. For all these reasons, we determine that it is our duty as restorers, historians, artists, philosophers or specialists in the subject, to develop our own criteria and opinions on what could be the best strategies for the conservation of urban art for future generations, trying to understand one another's opinions and ideas, and being open-minded of with regard to what we have got now and what will be coming.

As a final conclusion, I can say that – intangible or tangible – conservation is possible for urban art, and it does not differ from other forms of contemporary art. Despite this, urban art practices have special characteristics that need to be considered prior to any intervention in order to determine a modus operandi for the preservation either of the idea or the materiality of the work. This could be accomplished by understanding past problems, analyzing current situations, and keeping in contact with all those actors that were, are, or will be part of the story of urban art.

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