The wall is dead, short live graffiti and street art! Graffiti, street art and the Berlin Wall´s heritage

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Abstract
This article addresses some of the challenges faced by heritagization related to graffiti and street art, namely the changes in context and temporality that this process entails. In order to discuss these issues, I will frame the Berlin Wall as a paradigmatic case that presents a trajectory in time: I will follow the transition of the Wall from a deadly frontier to an obsolete structure and, finally, to a historic monument. I will argue that graffiti and street art are context-specific, and deeply affected by the symbolism and/or functions of the surface on which they are inscribed. Moreover, I will recognize graffiti and street art as practices situated in between tangible and intangible heritage. Particularly with the Berlin Wall, and in regard to the preservation of memory and heritage, I will suggest that graffiti and street art do not always enter the institutional circuit, especially when illegal and anonymous.

Keywords: Heritage, Berlin Wall, Graffiti, Street Art, Temporality, Context

1. Introduction

While graffiti is historically associated with vandalism and urban decay and street art has been rewarded with more acceptance both from public opinion and the art world, both practices frequently overlap and can be defined as mainly unsanctioned visual interventions in public spaces. Furthermore, graffiti and street art practices are normally considered urban, ephemeral, and context-dependent practices. In an effort to define street art, Nicholas Alden Riggle has argued that an "artwork is street art if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning" (Riggle, 2010: 246). Although Riggle´s definition is debatable since it relies exclusively on the characteristics of the artworks, neglecting their social construction and place within the art world (Bengtsen, 2013), it rightly alludes to the importance of the urban site for street art (and graffiti). In fact, it has been suggested that transposing such objects from the street to the gallery or the museum necessarily implies a loss, or, at least, a shift, in their meaning and relevance (Riggle, 2010; Bengtsen, 2016).

Since memorialization and heritagization generally imply a form of institutionalization, the recognition of the role of the context and urban dependency for graffiti and street art are crucial when discussing such issues. Indeed, the preservation of the memory of a given community is normally ensured by the institutions entrusted with this task. In this sense, graffiti and street art, when faced with issues of memory and heritage, may integrate an institutionalized circuit that affects its meaning and temporality, in similar ways as its transposition to the gallery or the museum.

Moreover, issues of heritage related with these practices are complex, and, for this reason, graffiti and street art can simultaneously be considered tangible and intangible heritage. As Lachlan MacDowall suggests, "in its ephemerality, graffiti falls somewhere between tangible culture (heritage sites) and intangible culture (traditional music, chanting, performances or rituals and festivals)" (MacDowall, 2006: 474). In truth, while the tangibility aspect relies foremost on the objects that are created, graffiti and street art also involve practices, representations and expressions of a given community, that represent a more intangible character (Merrill, 2015).

In what follows, the Berlin Wall is discussed as a paradigmatic case in which graffiti and street art prove to be context-specific, deeply affected by the shifts in meaning of the structure, with special regard to the challenges of memorialization of past traumas. Despite changes in value throughout the Wall´s trajectory in time, graffiti and street art, especially when illegal and anonymous, still resist heritagization, arguably due to its intangible and transient aspect, as well as its marginal status.

2. Cultural Heritage and the Berlin Wall Trajectory

2.1. The Berlin Wall – an example of cultural heritage´s dark side?

Even though cultural heritage is often associated with the achievements of a given community, the relation with the past can sometimes be traumatic and challenging. In such cases, the preservation of memory is a way of coping with past traumas. The Berlin Wall is a singular yet outstanding example for such cultural heritage as it embodies negative values derived from a problematic and conflicted past. The purpose of preserving the remains of the Wall from oblivion is to prevent similar events from reoccurring in the future, besides paying tribute to the victims.

During its life as a frontier, the Wall proved to be a lethal structure: until November 1989, besides the drastic and traumatic separation of families and friends from East and West Germany, at least 139 fatalities were reported at the Wall (Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer, n.d.). This number excludes others occurring at different sites, not to mention the mental disorders that a few segments of the population suffered from – these disorders were known as the "wall sickness". It is thus understandable that the preservation of such a negative icon was not immediately advocated for after its fall. In what follows, a brief history of the structure will be delineated, in order to articulate the role of graffiti and street art on the Berlin Wall.

2.2. Brief History of the Berlin Wall as a Deadly Frontier

Following the scission between East and West Germany, which reflected the tension between former allies since the end of the Second World War, the city of Berlin was divided into two parts, East and West. In 1961, during the night, the government of East Germany, mainly to prevent a massive migration of its population toward the West, closed the frontier with a barbed wire fence. This was the first stage or generation of the structure that would later be called the Berlin Wall – or the "wall of shame"1 by the city population (Ladd, 1998). Soon the border was improved with bricks, and another fence was constructed in parallel to the first in 1962, leaving an empty space in between. This infamous "death strip" was filled with raked sand, anti-vehicle trenches, watchtowers, and similar objects, systems and operations of surveillance (Laemmermann, 2012). In 1965, a third generation of concrete structure replaced the former generations and from 1975 onward, the fourth generation emerged – an even more sophisticated version of blocks measuring 3.6 meters high and 1.2 meters wide, lined with a smooth pipe (ibidem).

The Berlin Wall was a complex set of structures. As it measured more than 150 kilometers, separating the two halves of the city and the rest of the East German territory from the West, it is understandable that modifications and improvements were slow to be made, and that older sections of the Wall coexisted with newer versions. In addition to this, the Berlin Wall was not only one wall, but in reality two walls, both in East Germany territory, one facing West (outer wall), and the other East (inner wall), with a "no man´s land" in between. Therefore, the Wall was a heterogeneous and ever shifting set of structures, which also included operations and activities of surveillance:

> The security system was in its essence less a Wall than a controlled sequence of empty, visible spaces. More than that, "The Wall" signified a set of activities searches, patrols, observation, and identification checks at the crossing points that protected the border (Ladd, 1998: 18).

Unlike most borders that are constructed in the name of safety, keeping people from coming in, the main function of the Berlin Wall was to prevent the population from the East to migrate and/or escape the regime. Attempts to cross the border became increasingly difficult and lethal. In this context, it can be said that the Wall was a dangerous structure for anyone who tried to cross it.

2.3. The Wall´s Trajectory and Graffiti and Street Art

As Andrea Mubi Brighenti suggests, walls are built with strategic purposes related to governmentality and territory that can be countered with tactical uses, such as graffiti

and street art (Brighenti, 2010). Even a dangerous structure like the Berlin Wall was subjected to such tactics and its surface became the object of visual interventions. Indeed, and despite all patrolling, transgression of the surface was possible on the outer wall, accessible from West Berlin. It can be said that graffiti and street art actions were fairly tolerated on the side facing West. Despite rumors of people disappearing at the Wall, only one arrest related to visual interventions was ever recorded (Kimvall, 2014). As property of East Germany, the East German authorities alone had the legitimacy to arrest and prosecute offenders on that border and, according to Jacob Kimvall, the police cared "less about people writing on the Wall, and more about the content of the writing" (ibidem, 2014: 92).

Although the famous and globally known landscape of graffiti and street art on the Berlin Wall, which served as a huge canvas, dates from the last generation of the Wall, that is, from 1975 onward, political writings were seen as early as a few weeks after the Wall´s construction. Indeed, according to Ralph Gründer, after the drowning of a refugee in the Spree river, not far from the western shore, and the shooting of another soon after the construction of the Wall, slogans such as "IN TYRANNOS", "IHR KZ MÖRDER" or "DIE MAUER MUß WEG"2 were painted in the west side of the frontier. These words accused the authorities and demanded the dismantlement of the Wall. During the first generations, most visual interventions consisted in political claims. Two reasons may explain the lack of more diversified actions. Firstly, the first three generations of the Berlin Wall consisted of various and different materials, uneven and porous, which hindered the use of paint, in contrast to the last generation of the Wall, which was smooth and white. Secondly, the emergence of the fourth generation coincides in time with the popularity and dissemination of graffiti as a practice throughout the world.

The golden era for graffiti and street art on the Berlin Wall was inaugurated by Jonathan Borofski's artwork titled Running Man (1982), within the scope of an exhibition called "Zeitgeist", promoted by the museum Martin-Gropius-Bau (Gründer, 2007; Henke, 2011). Keith Haring, Christophe Bouchet, and Thierry Noir were among the many artists who acted on the Wall, among graffiti writers, locals or tourists yearning for a piece of the action.

According to Lutz Henke, authorities regarded graffiti and street art as less dangerous than anti-communist slogans. Nevertheless, the activity was still illegal and, therefore, risky, which is why Thierry Noir developed his Fast Form Manifest ("Two ideas, three colors, and the image is done", my translation3), in order to paint fast and efficiently. This attests to how the conditions for approaching the surface determined the (art)works on the Wall (Gründer, 2007). While some of the population considered the works of graffiti and street art on the Wall empty of meaning, Thierry Noir argued the contrary: "Everything you do on the wall is immediately political. Even if you just piss on the wall, it is a political act" (Noir, n.d: n.p). For the artists, the political function and symbolism of the structure imbued the visual interventions with a special meaning.

Although the authorities tried to whitewash the Wall to erase visual interventions, it became a common practice to intervene in the west side of the Wall. In the late 1980s the outer wall was completely covered in ink and paint. Most of the interventions consisted of scribbles, scrawls, and meaningless symbols (Gründer, 2007). In its last generation, not all of the actions on the Wall had an explicit political and resistance content; in truth, most were merely transgressive. In addition, the structure had integrated part of West Berlin´s touristic circuit.

Until 1989, while the west side presented a palimpsest explosion of colors and drawings, the east side maintained a virgin aspect, due to the repression of the authorities. According to Kenneth Bush, the absence of graffiti is as significant as its presence: "graffiti may be interpreted as a measure of the level of resistance to a particular political dispensation. Conversely, the absence of graffiti may be interpreted as an inability, or unwillingness, to resist the dominant political dispensation" (Bush, 2013: 169-170). In the case of East Berlin, it is more plausible that the absence of visual interventions on the Wall would relate to an inability to resist due to repression, as it was forbidden to get near the Wall, or even to take pictures of the border in East Berlin.

Everything shifted suddenly with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of both Germany and Berlin. Indeed, what is called the "fall" of the Wall is, in fact, the drastic change of the meaning of the structure, which shifted from being a dangerous frontier between two territories to

an obsolete structure. The "murderous aura" of the Wall, to borrow an expression from Brian Ladd, abruptly disappeared and became inoffensive and harmless (Ladd, 1998). Whilst the Berlin Wall "fell" in 1989, the actual dismantlement of the structure took approximately two years to be completed. This event inaugurated a creative period of transition in the city.

As the meaning of the Wall shifted, the practices of graffiti and street art also changed drastically. A generalized euphoria was observed during the transition, in which the population actively participated in coloring the previously blank and inaccessible inner wall. What was once an illegal and clandestine practice became an act of freedom, especially on the east side of the Wall, as argued by Tim Creswell:

> Graffiti, in this case [on the east side of the wall after its fall], represents desired disorder – disorder in a context that we are used to thinking of as overly authoritarian and orderly. In this context graffiti is associated with freedom and democracy – the Westernization of Eastern Europe and, inevitably, the end of Communism (Cresswell, 1996: 45-46).

Alongside the authorities' actions, the civil population also took part in the removal of the structure with hammers and other tools. Fragments of concrete were kept, sold, and even sent abroad as if a piece of the Wall could stand as an amulet. The remains of what had been a dangerous structure became valuable. According to Brian Ladd:

> Pieces of the Wall did indeed have a special aura: they were treated as holy relics that bespoke our deliverance from the Cold War. For that brief moment, the Wall was in demand precisely because it was disappearing. […] These magical properties translated into its market value. The Wall, symbol of epic confrontation between capitalism and communism, became a capitalist commodity (Ladd, 1998: 8).

Graffiti and street art were actively included in this circuit of commoditization. Sections of the Wall that exhibited graffiti and street art works dating from before the fall were commercially more valuable during the transition period. Some were sold at exorbitant amounts, namely a section with artworks from Thierry Noir and Kiddy Citny that escaped the fury of dismantlement and was auctioned with authenticity certificates. Moreover, fragments, however small, that presented traces of paint, were considered genuine remains of the Wall, the outcome of years of graffiti and street art practices. Even some postcards carried little pieces of the Wall. It is interesting to note that the practice of selling these "souvenirs" is still in force today, as observed by Alison Young: "The Berlin Wall can even be purchased, in small containers, at the Museum of Checkpoint Charlie" (Young, 2014: 79).

Although segments of the Wall are exhibited in countries all around the world, little of the former frontier survived in the city of Berlin after the transition period between 1989 and 1991. Only very few sections remain to this day where the Wall once stood. Examples include a segment next to the museum Topography of Terror or a long section in Mühlenstraße known as the East Side Gallery. In addition to the remnants throughout the city, a section was reconstituted in Bernauer Straße to serve as a memorial site. The lack of surviving segments of the Wall in Berlin can be explained by the need that the population felt to erase one of the most visible symbols of painful events: "It was as if the complete and permanent demolition of the Wall (either psychological or political) could guarantee history´s irreversibility"4 (Senat von Berlin, 2006: 6, my translation). Indeed, following the dissolution of East Germany and the subsequent reunification of East and West, the obsolete structure of the Wall, seen as a hateful symbol of separation, death, and repression, was to be removed as soon as possible.

However, in spite of the widespread opinion that in order to cope with the past the Wall had to disappear, a civil and institutional movement (namely the German Historical Museum) in favor of the preservation of the structure was organized immediately after the fall. Without the effort of the preservationists, nothing would have remained of the Berlin Wall. Even a segment painted by Keith Haring, at the time recently deceased, did not survive the collective removal of the Wall (Ladd, 1998). Since then, the city of Berlin has approved policies and strategies addressing memory issues and recognizing that the legacy of the past should not be forgotten.

Fig 1. View to the Wall´s Section Bernauer Straße, picture taken in March 2015.

3. Institutions of Remembrance and Heritage vs. Graffiti and Street art: a problematic relation?

3.1. Heritage as an institutional circuit

For the purposes of this article, it is noteworthy to ask ourselves what place graffiti and street art currently occupy within the institutions and practices of remembrance regarding the Berlin Wall? How are graffiti and street art works generally (un)represented within the institutional circuit of the Berlin Wall heritage?

As stated above, little remains of the approximately 150 kilometers long structure in the city of Berlin. The authorities or the euphoric population either destroyed most of the Wall, or it was cut up, sold and shipped away. An example of the latter is the aforementioned segment by Thierry Noir and Kiddy Citny hosted in Manhattan.

According to Anna Saunders, the city of Berlin has maintained several locations for heritage, recognizing that claims "to unique authenticity or centrality prove unhelpful, for […] it is clear that no single monument can ever represent the complex history and legacy of the Berlin Wall" (Saunders, 2009: 18). One of the main sites of the Wall´s heritage is the Berlin Wall Memorial in Bernauer Straße. It is the only place where it is possible to see a segment of the Wall with all its original components: inner and outer walls, death strip with a watchtower, light systems, etc (Senate Department for Urban Development and the Environment, n.d.). In contrast to other preserved sections, the Wall in Bernauer Straße has been restored to the previous condition it was in before the fall, and it therefore does not present any traces of destruction. Moreover, the surface is clean on both sides, and thus the presence of graffiti and street art are non-existent (Fig.1).

Thus, while in Bernauer Straße visitors can observe an "authentic" segment of the Wall before its fall (although it was, in fact recreated), "original" segments still exist in a few sites throughout the city. For instance, it is still possible to see a few original segments and their unsanctioned visual interventions with a typical palimpsest quality in the streets of Berlin, namely in Potsdamer Platz (FIG 2), and indoors in the German Historical Museum. The section next to the museum Topography of Terror presents a surface pecked by the population during the transition period. These segments could arguably be seen as more "authentic", in the sense that they have not been restored and still exhibit the scars and colors of the population´s activities before and immediately after the fall. In other words, the section in Bernauer Straße, as an example of the structure of the Wall as a system, presents historic accuracy despite having been recreated. In contrast, the segments near Potsdamer Platz or the Topography of Terror stand as pieces of the original Wall that attest to the activity of graffiti and street art before and after the fall, in addition to its attempted removal by the population after the reunification of Germany.

Therefore, it would seem that the concept of "authenticity" in the context of heritage would depend on what period of the trajectory of the Wall the institutions of remembrance and memorialization aim to represent, and with which purposes. Despite the importance given to the colors, drawings, scribbles, and artworks before and during the two-year transition after the fall, such practices have nowadays nearly disappeared, even in the surviving segments.
In the document approved in 2006 delineating public strategies for protecting, preserving and highlighting the Wall´s remains, paying tribute to the victims, and securing economic issues ("Gesamtkonzept zur Erinnerung an die Berliner Mauer: Dokumentation, Information und Gedenken") there are no mentions of the legacy of graffiti and street art on the Wall other than the East Side Gallery – which does not entirely represent these practices, as we shall see in the next section of this article (Senat Von Berlin, 2006).

Furthermore, during a visit to the Berlin Wall Memorial in Bernauer Straße in 2015, I noticed that mentions of graffiti and street art are practically non-existent. Graffiti and street art are arguably only celebrated as heritage at the East Side Gallery, despite their crucial role for protesting against the Wall during its existence as a border, as well as their brief glamorous status during the transition period of 1989-1991.

3.2. Intangibility, illegality, and transience

The larger portion of the Wall that remains on its original site is situated in Mühlenstraße. This section, measuring more than one kilometer, was, in fact, an inner wall, that is, a side of the Wall facing East, which means it kept a blank surface until 1989. Only after the fall did that segment of the Wall become accessible to the population. Therefore, none of the artworks on the East Side Gallery are representative of the period before the fall.

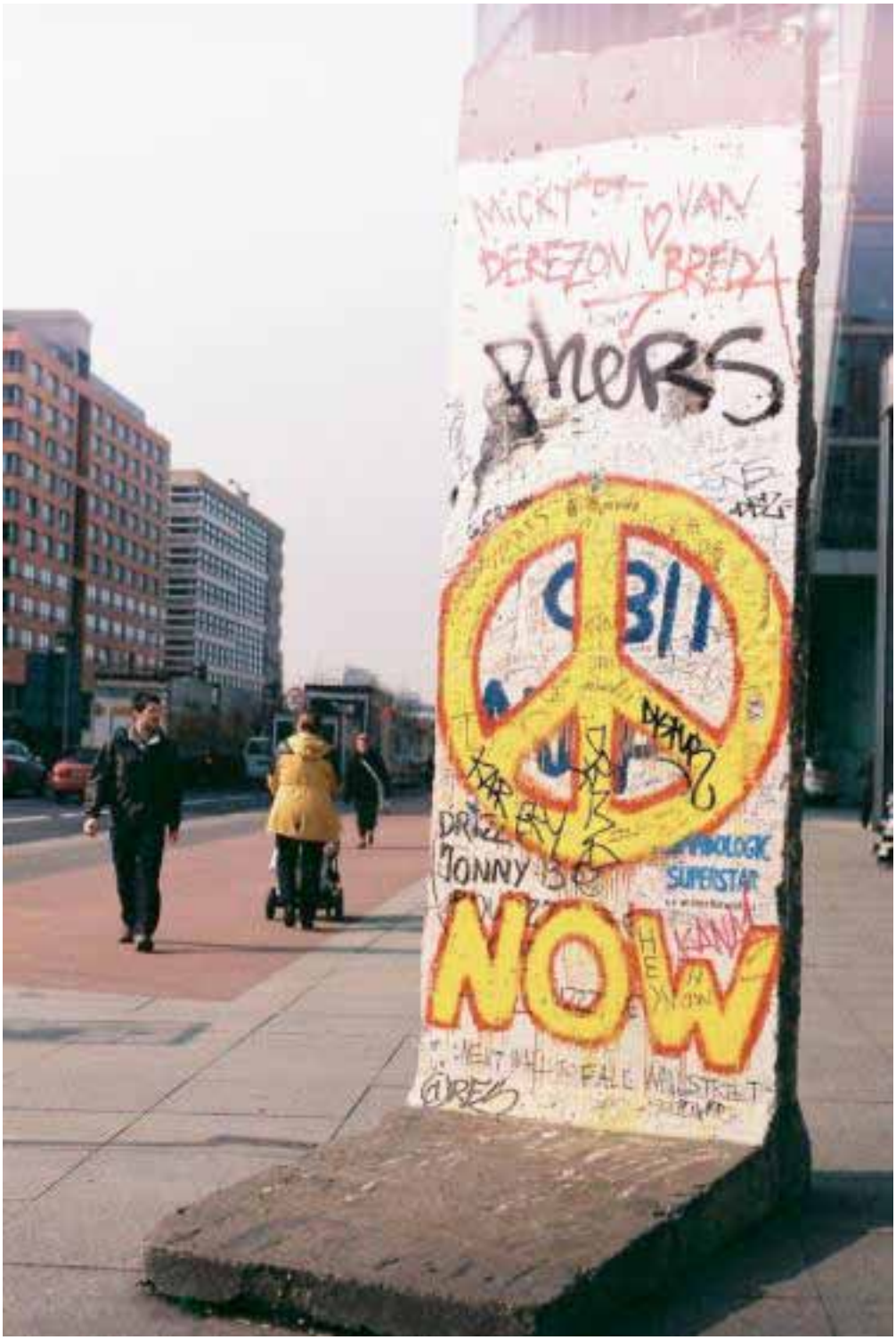

Fig 2. Original segment of the Berlin Wall in Potsdamer Platz, picture taken in March 2015.

In 1990, 118 artists gathered to paint on the surface in what is today known as the East Side Gallery. As an outdoor gallery, the artworks of this section of the Wall belong clearly more to the category of "mural", since all of the works exhibited in the East Side Gallery are sanctioned and legally painted. The interventions are characteristically large and authored by commissioned artists. Although a celebration of the reunification of Germany and the end of the Cold War, the East Side Gallery could not be farther from representing the activities, illegal and unsanctioned, that were practiced on the surface of the Wall before its fall. Moreover, in contrast to uncommissioned practices, there is arguably nothing disordered and disobedient in sanctioned murals in general. Indeed, according to the official document "Gesamtkonzept zur Erinnerung an die Berliner Mauer" from 2006, the East Side Gallery more appropriately represents the spirit of euphoria after the fall than the horror and suffering of the Wall. Two questions may then follow: what remains of the practices of protest on the Wall surface before its fall within the institutional circuit of remembrance? And what remains of the unsanctioned practices during the transition period from 1989-1991, since all works exhibited in the open-air gallery of Mühlenstraße are legal and commissioned? While the East Side Gallery surfaces preserve an important slice of the history of Berlin, playing a crucial role as tangible heritage, it would seem that only sanctioned practices of graffiti and street art were guaranteed a place in the institutional circuit of collective memory. Unsanctioned, illegal, and anonymous practices were, however, the majority of the production on the Wall surface before its fall and during the transition period. These practices are practically unrepresented within the heritagization of the Berlin Wall in the city to this day.

In 1993, the Gallery was considered as a heritage site that had to be preserved. As such, overwriting the artworks has been considered a forbidden practice, as shown in the sign below: "It is forbidden to deface or damage the Wall. Offenders will be prosecuted" (FIG. 3). Clandestine practices still occur on the margins of the murals, however. Where once the illegality to act on the Wall surface was due to an authoritative regime, it is nowadays derived from a noble need to preserve the memory and, most likely, to maintain its touristic marketability.

In addition to the institutional character of the East Side Gallery, the temporality of the artworks is very different than those produced illegally in the streets. As part of a cultural heritage, one could argue that the temporality of the murals on the East Side Gallery was artificially suspended. Already in 1995, the artworks in Mühlenstraße were starting to disappear and were since the object of restoration. In contrast to the practices of graffiti and street art on the Wall before its "historic status", the murals in the East Side Gallery are there to last. While the former presented a character of "here-ness" that depended on transience, artworks of the East Side Gallery are expected to endure. Thus, the integration of volatile practices such as graffiti and street art in institutional circuits, such as of cultural heritage, alters its temporality and illegal status. However, it can be argued that it is precisely these features that mark graffiti and street art as relevant:

> The feeling that an unsanctioned expression is not really supposed to be there and the knowledge that it could potentially be gone tomorrow may lead to a sense of privilege (or annoyance) from having come upon it before it disappears: it puts into focus the urgency of the here-and-now existence of the individual in a particular space, and it makes it necessary to take a stand in relation to the work we are confronted with (Bengtsen, 2013: 76).

This discussion echoes Samuel Merrill´s argument that one can prioritize "graffiti subculture´s tangible material culture, namely its tags, throw-ups, and pieces, but their consequential conservation could be detrimental to the authenticity of the intangible ephemeral traditions that gave rise to them" (Merrill, 2015: 381). While Merrill makes a clear distinction between subcultural graffiti and street art, the claim may be relevant to the assemblage of practices that were once prolific on the Berlin wall. It would seem that urgency, critique, and ephemerality now belong to any other wall in Berlin. As suggested by Alison Young, the "Wall may be a civic gallery, a tourist attraction and a collection of painted fragments sold in small plastic boxes, but walls all over Berlin continue to speak of creativity, memorialisation and protest" (Young, 2014: 79). Indeed, writing and drawing as a practice, that is, as the expression of a community that has once been strong and relevant on the Berlin Wall must now be relocated to other surfaces.

Fig 3. Close-up of the East Side Gallery, picture taken in March 2015.

If, as claimed by Brian Ladd: "[r]emoved from a politically liminal space and a sense of transitory creation, the Wall became a mere ghost of its former self" (Ladd, 1998: 36), what remains of graffiti and street art practices on its surface froze in time, gaining the relevancy of heritage, but also losing something of itself.

Nevertheless, as the events that culminated in 1989 become more distant in time, the preservation of the past may become more fleeting to hold. In 2013, for instance, a civil movement gathered against the removal of segments of the East Side Gallery planned for the construction of luxury apartment complex, attesting the city´s gentrification (The Guardian, 2013). Unfortunately, protests were not able to prevent the action, putting the future of the open-air gallery at risk. With time, the challenge of not forgetting may become more acute than ever.

4. Conclusions

While heritage concerns have shifted "from ancient monuments to living cultures" (Jokilehto apud Merrill, 2015: 381) or, in other words, from the tangible to the intangible, a few practices – such as graffiti and street art – remain categories. This may be one of the reasons why the process of heritagization is particularly challenging in regard to graffiti and street art. Moreover, these practices are particularly sensitive to context changes. As argued with the Berlin Wall case, the impact, role, and importance of graffiti and street art depend on the changes in meaning, value or symbolism of the structure on which they are inscribed.

As practices, graffiti and street art on the Berlin Wall before and immediately after its fall consisted in an act of freedom that ranged from resistance and disobedience, to mere transgression. The role of graffiti and street art, however, has become ambivalent after the remains of the Wall were granted the status of monument. Regarding graffiti and street art, heritagization may, on the one hand, produce a change in context, being itself part of an institutionalized circuit; on the other hand, a shift in temporality from transient to permanent contradicts the nature of these practices.

In the case of the Berlin Wall, most of its graffiti and street art were dismissed from the institutional circuit of remembrance, especially unsanctioned, anonymous and illegal works.

Notes

1. "Schandmauer" in German.
2. The first is a reference to tyranny; the second means "you murderers" and "KZ" stands for "concentration camp"; the third can be translated as "The Wall must fall".
3. In German: "Zwei Ideen, drei Farben, fertig ist das Bild".
4. In the original: "Es schien so, als ob nur der permanente und vollständige Mauerabbruch (psychologisch und politisch) die Unumkehrbarkeit des historischen Prozesses garantieren konnte".

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