Longitudinal photo-documentation: Recording living walls

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Abstract

This working paper advocates a methodological approach to the study of street art and graffiti that is based on the documentation of single sites over time. Longitudinal photo-documentation is a form of data collection that allows street art and graffiti to be examined as visual dialogue. By capturing everyday forms of public mark making alongside both more recognizably 'artistic' images, and more visually 'offensive' tags, we aim to attend to graffiti and street art's existence within a field of social interaction. We describe a relevant analytic tool drawn from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis – the next turn proof procedure – which may be adapted in order to study street art and graffiti as a form of asynchronous, yet sequential, communication. This form of analysis departs from existent forms of analysis in that it is not concerned with the semiotics or iconography of decontextualized individual photographs of street art or graffiti. We present a worked analytic example to demonstrate the utility of longitudinal photo-documentation in making visible the dialogue amongst artists, writers and community members, and we employ the principles of the next turn proof procedure to illustrate the ways in which each party shows their understanding of the prior work on the wall via their own contribution to the 'conversation.'

Keywords: Longitudinal Photo-documentation, Visual Dialogue, Ethnomethodology.

1. Introduction

The burgeoning literature on street art and graffiti is replete with photo-documentation. From the early works of Brassai in Paris in the 1930s, Siskund in Chicago in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the highly influential photographs of Martha Cooper in New York in the 1970s and 1980s, to the contemporary work of Lee Bofkin (2014) and Rafael Schacter (2013), photography has long been key to capturing and studying these ephemeral public art forms. Without photographic records, graffiti and street art are unlikely to have achieved such an international scale and influence. Graffiti writers, street artists, and the many followers and fans of independent public art also engage in prolific online photo-documentation, sharing and cataloguing images through Instagram, Twitter and other forms of social media. Indeed, many works of street art may now only be viewed as photographs uploaded to social media and online forums, as they are commonly subject to removal by authorities or being written over by others and thus may have only a very brief tangible existence in the material world. Often collections of these images are organized according to the artist or writer producing them; geographic location; content or topic; medium and method (e.g., stencils, paste-ups, stickers) artistic style; or historical period (e.g., 1970s New York; 1980s Paris; 2000s London). It follows that many scholarly examinations of these contemporary forms of independent public art appear primarily based on the individual image as object, often abstracted from local context, with an isolated photograph standing as the illustration of a particular work.

It is far less common for scholars to take a temporal and geographic site-based, rather than an object-based, approach to graffiti and street art (though see McAuliffe's (2014) study of legal walls in Sydney, Australia; Andron's (2014) study of Leake Street in Shoreditch, London; and Curtis' (2014) North American website Graffiti Archaeology for rare exceptions). Whilst these existing site-based photographic studies offer invaluable insights into the transformation of city walls over time, they tend to focus on aesthetically palatable work in areas where street art and graffiti are legal or at least condoned. This focus again reflects the hierarchy of aesthetic worth evident in the contemporary literature, in that street art appears more often documented and examined critically than is graffiti (Young, 2014). Further, the negative curation practices of local authorities mean that other everyday mate-

rial interactions with street art and graffiti (including tagging and other 'amateur' forms of textual engagement and mark making) are often removed in order to protect and preserve the integrity of the work it comments upon or supplements. These less aesthetically pleasing forms of mark making are arguably also worthy of documentation and scholarly attention. Indeed, to do so offers an alternative to the currently dominant object-centered approach to street art and graffiti.

2. Methodological approach:
Longitudinal photo-documentation

This working paper advocates a methodological approach to the study of street art and graffiti that is based on the detailed longitudinal photo-documentation of single sites, as images appear and disappear over time. We propose a dialogic and democratic analytic approach to the resultant series of images – with everyday forms of public mark making considered alongside more recognizably 'artistic' images, as a means of attending to graffiti and street art's existence as part of 'living walls', rather than as isolated images abstracted from their temporal and spatial social context. As MacDowall (2014: 36) has recently argued, street art should not be considered as the singular product of individual artists, but rather, as:

the cumulative effect of a range practices over time… the result of collective authorship… a 'cultural scene' or 'cultural ecosystem'… an unstable and permanently unfinished object, subject to both material decay and erasure and to semantic refashioning as the artworks and urban fabric change.

Longitudinal photo-documentation represents a complementary approach to MacDowall's (2014) novel application of the notion of stigmergy to street art. Stigmergy is a model originally derived from the study of the collectively organized activities of social insects that seeks to explain how they accomplish coordinated behavior (Grassé, 1959). However, rather than grounding the analysis of street art in terms of stimulus and response sequences, as such a biological model would suggest, an ethnomethodological approach to analysis, based on a temporally unfolding series of images, would arguably allow for a greater purchase on the intersubjective and interactive process of understanding and meaning-making inherent in street art approached as a form of visual dialogue.

The logic of this local approach to documentation and analysis is holographic. Sacks (1995) asserted that cultures will demonstrate 'order at all points', and thus that even relatively small fragments of a culture may display the order inherent in the whole:

This view… understands order not to be present only at aggregate levels… but to be present in detail on a case by case, environment by environment basis. A culture is not then to be found by aggregating all of its venues; it is substantially present in each of its venues (Schegloff, 1995: xlvi).

Thus, the fine-grained analysis of the marks appearing on just one wall over a period of time, may in turn – like the fragment of the hologram that projects the whole – show us something important about how street art and graffiti, as a part of our everyday culture on a broader scale, may operate. Here, then, we seek to examine street art as a complex form of in-situ communication and resist an approach that would analyze street art as an 'object' thus neglecting the lifeworld of the works in context.

The next turn proof procedure is an analytic resource drawn from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. This technique offers a democratic route to analysis that is grounded in the display of understanding evident in parties' turns at speaking:

While understandings of others' turns (at talk) are displayed to co-participants, they… afford a proof criterion (and a search procedure) for the analysis of what a turn's talk is occupied with… The display of those understandings in the talk of subsequent turns affords… a proof procedure for [the] analysis of prior turns – resources intrinsic to the data themselves. (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974: 729)

Although ordinarily restricted to the analysis of verbal communication, the next turn proof procedure may be adapted to be applied to street art and graffiti as a form of asynchronous, yet sequential, visual communication. This represents a novel stance towards analysis that is not located solely in the semiotics or iconography of individual images, but which may also take account of the visual dialogue amongst a series of artists, writers and community members, with each

contributor showing their understanding of the prior work on the wall – whether still physically existent, or since erased or written over – via their own contribution to the 'conversation.' This is also a fruitful way of approaching the site-specificity of many works, which respond to aspects of the environment – thereby showing the stance of the artist/writer in their material interaction with that particular space.

Despite the fact that the next turn proof procedure is seldom utilized as a tool for analysis it represents a valuable analytic resource, as it is intrinsic to visual dialogue itself. Furthermore, it also likely reflects the quotidian experience of the viewers who encounter, understand, and may even contribute to, the ongoing conversations on city walls on a daily basis, as part of their passage through their neighborhood. However, due to the ephemerality of these forms of mark making, and the limitations of the currently popular forms of photo-documentation that decontextualize images from their spatio-temporal context, the interactive and dialogic character of street art and graffiti is not often captured in a form that would facilitate this route to analysis. In order to record this data as a form of sequential social interaction, or visual dialogue, the regular photo-documentation of single sites, over a sustained period of time, is necessary.

3. Analytic example

The following analytic example is drawn from our ongoing longitudinal photo-documentation of a wall in North London (Hansen and Flynn, 2015). We have been photographing this particular wall for a period of 36 months. The wall, located on Whymark Avenue in North London, was originally the site of Banksy's Slave Labour (2012) that was removed without notice from the wall for private auction in February, 2013, much to the dismay of the local community. Many of the subsequent works on the wall, especially in the period immediately following the removal of Slave Labour, provide visual and verbal commentary on this act of 'theft.' Figure 1, below, shows a stenciled work that appeared in April 2013, two months after Bansky's work was removed.

This stenciled work presents the viewer with a puzzle: it is a representation of "a Banksy" in that it draws on design aspects conventionally associated with Banksy's own (early) work (the monochromatic panda stencil; the wearable signboard). Further, is apparently signed by Banksy (see the characteristic tag – albeit long out of use by Banksy himself – below the panda). Yet the work claims that it is not a Banksy. These contrasting claims together work to highlight the potential repercussions of attributions of authorship (or worth) to the survival of work in situ, a topical local concern given the recent 'theft' of Banksy's own work for auction in Miami. The author of this stenciled piece thus displays their understanding of, and stance towards, the fate of the prior work on the wall.

Daily longitudinal photo-documentation of the wall allowed us to capture the additions subsequently made to this work by members of the public. Following the next turn proof procedure, we can approach these additions as contributions that show these authors' understandings of the prior works on the wall. The morning after the panda stencil appeared, a passerby scribbled "Take me to America" in a speech bubble above the panda's head (see Frame 2 of Figure 1). This projected speech has particular resonance in the relatively socio-economically deprived context of the neighborhood where the work is located: few local residents would have the means to travel to America. This contribution thus marks Slave Labour's transatlantic journey to an auction house in America as in some sense enviable, but perhaps also out of

Figure 1. Whymark Avenue, London. April 2013. Photographs © Susan Hansen and Danny Flynn.

reach – as the faux Banksy panda stencil, like the average resident, is unlikely to be offered such an 'opportunity.'

In the third frame of Figure 1, we can see a series of further marks made on or around the original stencil. These include a single question mark above the panda's head, perhaps marking uncertainty as to its identity; a tiny starred halo between the panda's ears, mocking its status as a work to be revered; and the block-lettered, "FREE ART NOW!" along the panda's right arm, adopting the format of a political slogan to refer to the wrongfully 'captured' Banksy, and perhaps also to the unethical commodification of street art gifted for 'free' to the community.

Figure 2. Whymark Avenue, London. May 2014 – April 2015. Photographs © Susan Hansen and Danny Flynn.

In May 2014, a very large text based piece, by Mobstr, appeared on the wall (see Frame 1 of Figure 2). This covered the entire stretch of wall with block lettering that animated the imagined public reaction to the work. The text arrests the viewer with the exclamation, 'DARLING LOOK, IT'S A BANKSY!' However, this is followed by the dismissive retort, 'DON'T BE SILLY MY DEAR, THAT'S JUST SOME VANDALISM', to which the first speaker concedes, 'OH RIGHT. YES, OF COURSE.' This work thus provides critical commentary on everyday evaluations of the status, or worth, of street art. Like the prior works on the wall, it offers a critique of the objectification and commodification of street art; however, unlike prior works, it notes a sharp division between 'A BANKSY' worth exclaiming over and looking at, and 'SOME VANDALISM' not worthy of viewers' attention. The author of this work displays his understanding of, and stance towards, the prior work on the wall, by adopting the perspective of the imagined passersby, who turn out to be not looking at the art at all, but are rather focused on the task of categorizing it as 'A BANSKY' or as 'VANDALISM', in order to determine whether it is worth looking at.

This large piece remained untouched until September 2014, when some of the letters were selectively painted over. The modified dialogue (see Frame 2 of Figure 2) now read, "DO BE ILL" rather than "DON'T BE SILLY." The author of this amendment displays their stance towards 'the message' of Mobstr's work by translating the mocking middle class admonishment, "DON'T BE SILLY" into the working class urban slang, "DO BE ILL" – thus inverting the aesthetic/moral judgment satirically animated by the original piece.i This new appropriation enjoins the inner city viewer to "BE ILL" – or to engage with/in street art as a sublime and creative aesthetic activity, thereby disrupting the dismissive practices of looking exposed by Mobstr's original piece.

The final frame of Figure 2 shows an amendment made to the work in April 2015, when the letters that had been erased the previous September were replaced, restoring the original message of the work. However, in contrast to Mobstr's precisely rendered original lettering, these new letters were crudely painted with visible brushstrokes, giving the impression of an amateur, or everyday, author. In 'restoring' the text, this contributor to the 'conversation' demonstrates the value placed on the original work of 'art', by rejecting the illicit erasure accomplished by the prior author.

Figure 3, below shows, in summary, the most recent additions to the wall, in August 2015.

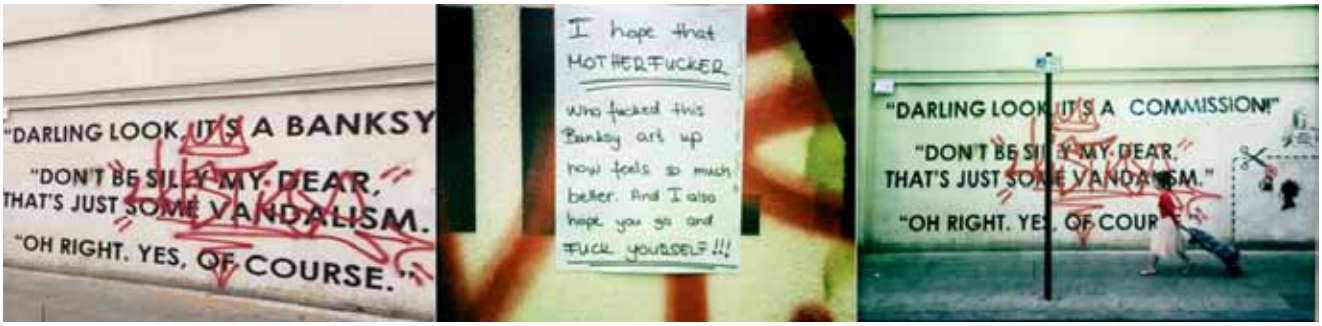

Figure 3. Whymark Avenue, London. August 2015. Photographs © Veronica Bailey.

A large red spray-painted tag – centered on the section of Mobstr's text that dismisses work not worth looking at as "VANDALISM" appeared in early August 2015 (see Frame 1 of Figure 3) and was swiftly followed, the next morning, by a note taped directly on top of this 'graffiti' (see Frame 2 of Figure 3). The note (reminiscent of notes left on the windscreens of badly parked cars) employed obscene words to strongly chastise the author responsible for "f*cking this Banksy art up." However it was signed formally (if anonymously): "Sincerely, someone who likes Banksy." This very large traditionally rendered calligraphic tag was sprayed directly over Mobstr's piece, in a clear breach of the insiders' etiquette that prohibits capping, or writing over the work of others. Indeed, the writer of the note responds to this amendment to the wall as an act of destructive aggression, but only insofar as the tag writer has apparently willfully ruined the valuable piece of "Bansky art" it has defaced.

Later that same week, Mobstr's original text was again changed (see Frame 3 of Figure 3). The words "A BANKSY" were replaced with "A COMMISSION" so that the work now read, "LOOK DARLING, IT'S A COMMISSION!" This alteration operates as a correction for the author of the note, who has mistakenly attributed authorship of Mobstr's piece to Banksy. It is also perhaps a veiled insult to Mobstr, in that it is effectively an accusation that he has placed this large work on the wall with some form of permission from the authorities. This amendment also provides wider critical commentary on the increasingly popular practice of commissioning street art murals – as the only work on the street that everyday viewers consider aesthetically palatable, or "worth looking at." This addition to the wall thus also paradoxically affirms Mobstr's own commentary on the hierarchy of worth inherent in viewers' practices of looking. This final author therefore demonstrates their understanding of several 'prior turns' at communication on the wall, as their visual/textual response appears to address not just the immediately prior author (the writer of the note of protest), but also Mobstr, as the author of the original work that they have now altered, and the wider community – or the viewers of the work addressed by this now collaboratively authored text-based piece.

4. Conclusion

Longitudinal photo-documentation is a form of data collection that allows for street art and graffiti to be examined as a form of visual dialogue. We have argued that the next turn proof procedure (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974) may be adapted in order to study street art and graffiti as a form of asynchronous, yet sequential, communication. This stance towards analysis diverges from existent forms of analysis in that it does not rely on the semiotics of decontextualized individual images. Rather, as our brief worked example shows, longitudinal photo-documentation allows us to make visible, for subsequent analysis, the dialogue amongst artists, writers and community members, with each party showing their understanding of the prior work on the wall via their own contribution to the 'conversation.'

Following Sacks' (1995) ethnomethodological focus on the small scale, the mundane, and the obvious we have cho-

sen to restrict our focus here to the idiographic, the local, and the particular in documenting the works that appeared on, and were then erased from, a particular London city wall over a period of time (see Hansen and Flynn, 2015). In geographical terms, it is true that this represents a very small sample indeed. Given that street art is a global phenomenon, how then might such a circumscribed local focus be justified? We would argue that a global focus risks obscuring local practice. As MacDowall (2014: 37) notes, any particular piece of "unauthorized [art] creates the conditions for its own interactivity, 'authorizing' further unauthorized use" and thus often provoking a series of works in situ. We seek to capture the dialogue and social interaction integral to these ephemeral works.

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