Chapter 5
Drips Gallery:
A Community-Driven Graffiti Library and Archive

Alexandra Lederman
Drips Gallery, USA

Farah Jindani
Drips Gallery, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibilities of using digital technologies in an archival setting. The hypothesis examined and investigated was: street art can be preserved and archived through archival websites and mobile applications. In order to explore this problem a community driven digital archive, Drips Gallery, was created. Drips Gallery is a new archive consisting of graffiti photograph collections and is available through a website and mobile app. The database, website, and mobile app was created, coded, and programmed specifically for the archival and community needs of Drips Gallery. Drips Gallery allows the community to drive the archive and changes the role of the archivist from record keeper to facilitator. By creating an archival mobile app and website, new and immediate ways of capturing and preserving culture as it is being created and consumed is now possible.

INTRODUCTION

Designedly displayed yet outlawed and elusive, graffiti is more complex than scrawled drawings and painted letters on city buildings and streets. It is a representation of a neighborhood; a voice of its inhabitants speaking to the public, to each other, and to themselves. Graffiti is a worldwide subculture. It is political activism. It is art. Although the concept of graffiti dates back as far as Ancient Egypt, the art movement developed its roots and notoriety in 1970s New York City. Strategically glazed over subway cars were canvasses that travelled from the neighborhoods throughout the city. As city officials labored over the whitewashing of vandalism, advertisers adopted the style to sell clothes and music. The art form

became popular and trendy. Since then, graffiti has evolved into a more accepted and often commissioned form of art. Walls around the city have been adopted for intricate murals, paintings are sold in galleries, books and documentaries on the subject are available, and all in homage to street sign scribbles. It's clear that from the birth of the movement to its current place in culture, graffiti has tremendous archival value. There are countless reasons why graffiti should be preserved including its role in art history and New York City, the socioeconomic connotations, the political stance, the effect on consumer culture, the controversy, and the acceptance. Of course, this is no easy task for archivists as graffiti is a transient street art. For the most part, graffiti is fleeting, constantly changing. Graffiti artists take risk with their art, exposing it to the world without knowing how many people will see it and how long it will survive. Thus, this radical type of art requires an unconventional, proactive archival approach. The best way for archivists to document graffiti would be to apply the technology that matches the mobile nature of this movement as well as rely on participation from the community.

Problem

Graffiti has tremendous archival value as an art form, a culture, and a political movement. However, there are many factors contributing to the reluctance in acquiring and maintaining these records. Similar to the internet; born digital material and social media, vital cultural material, are consumed as rapidly as it is being created occurring simultaneously across multiple platforms. With the rise of mobile technology, rapid creation and consumption becomes instantaneous creation and consumption; a stream of consciousness culture. A similar temperament is inherent within graffiti culture, except that it is also being destroyed at the same rate it is being created and consumed. The destruction of graffiti art stands against unpredictable forces including weather, property owners, and government sanitation. There is also the considerable issue of illegality; while graffiti art has become widely popular it is still often seen as vandalism. Artists, the primary sources, are hesitant to document their work and risk exposing their identities, which is paradoxical to their displays of activism which are meant for the public; a picture-taking, status-posting, auto-archiving, constantly mobile public.

The current state of the graffiti archive is a large gap of missed moments due to its original stigma of vagrant misdemeanors dirtying city streets, as well as its elusiveness and transient nature. Today, graffiti is being embraced by the art world, by communities proud to see displays of their roots on public walls, and by those who identify with the movements' politics. The archival gap is will be more apparent as the lack of documentation becomes more obvious. As previously stated, there are several challenges that face archivists in acquiring and preserving graffiti art. The greatest of which is its swift and simultaneous rate of creation, consumption, and destruction. Due to these challenges, a proactive approach will be necessary in the capture and documentation of this art form. The similarities between the nature of graffiti and the instantaneous use of mobile technology in today's culture suggest that a merger of the two could successfully result in a digital archive of graffiti guided by the community for which it is intended.

The purposes of this project were as follows:

- Capture and preserve graffiti by creating a digital archive, Drips Gallery, accessible via website and mobile application formats
- Encourage community contribution and usage by allowing users (creators and consumers) to create, edit, and share collections within the archive

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