

Street Art Photography: Archiving Urban Narratives and Memory

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Abstract

Cities are geographically and socially defined by their informal and sometimes undesired street art. Despite their ephemeral nature, vernacular street graphics never disappear entirely; their remnants are visible in textured traces on street walls, urban furniture, and street photography. The alternative nature of these visual expressions becomes the spoken truths of artists and residents who use their urban environment as their canvases. Photographs of vernacular street graphics aim to bring to light underground art, commissioned work, and DIY advertisements that define a city's visual landscape. They examine themes such as the passage of time and its impact on artworks, wall surfaces, and textures, the role of vernacular typography, and the viewers' gaze on these artworks. When photographs record street art, they archive and make them available to viewers across different contexts. If public art's inherent quality is to make the artworks accessible to more people by bridging the gap between creator and viewer, photographs of such works thaw urban memories. Street art photographs comment on those alternative artistic expressions and their temporality, which stems from being at the mercy of human and environmental elements. Through their pluralistic accounts, street artists hope to contribute to the visual memory of the city as a form of legacy. Their work, as recorded in photographs, shows that memory cannot be homogenous and isn't faithful to a particular truth. Street graphics are, therefore, the visual expressions of individual memories and become part of a larger vernacular narrative frozen in time through photographs.

Keywords: street art, memory, photography, documentation, digital archiving

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Introduction

Street art is arguably the most democratic art form, with its “free” urban canvases and easily accessible audiences. But it’s also incredibly ephemeral, while some pieces last for years, others disappear within months, days, or even hours. Despite its ephemeral side, street art has been photographed, documented and archived for decades. Its memory expands with every snapshot taken and social media story created. Street art photography captures the ephemeral nature of alternative artistic expressions, works that are often created and then erased by human and environmental forces. Street artists strive to add their perspective to the walls, contributing to the city’s visual legacy. As documented in photographs, their work reveals that memory is not uniform, nor tied to a single truth. These street graphics become visual expressions of personal memory, woven into a broader vernacular narrative, momentarily preserved through the lens of the camera and the scrolls of social media platforms.

The City as Canvas

Defining Graffiti and Urban Street Art

Street art and graffiti have deep historical roots that can be traced back to ancient rock carvings and cave paintings. Despite conflicting opinions about the first wall markings, there is a consensus that leaving a trace is a fundamentally human impulse (Young, 2013). Some of these traces can be found today in the Black Desert in Jordan, also known as *Harra*, a vast, lava-covered landscape shaped by ancient volcanic activity. The dark desert stones are covered with a thin layer of ashes which, when scratched, reveal a light grey surface underneath. Over the centuries, Nabataeans, Romans, and Bedouin nomads all left their marks here, carving inscriptions into the rock. Often personal and emotionally charged, these writings capture moments of daily life, memories, humour, and even lighthearted teasing. Together, they offer a window into the beliefs, emotions, and everyday experiences of desert communities from over two millennia ago (Macdonald, 2018) (Figure 1). In Elizabethan England, tourists and soldiers left inscriptions on walls to mark their passage (Young, 2013). Modern documentation traces the first widespread appearance of graffiti to American cities such as Chicago and New York. These practices evolved globally, becoming codified within subcultures and amplified through media, with New York and Chicago remaining central to their development and dissemination (Young, 2013). American photographer Martha Cooper was among the first to thoroughly document and disseminate images of graffiti and its subculture in the 1970s and 1980s (Hansen & Flynn, 2015).

Anthropologist Rafael Schacter describes graffiti as a monument that “imposes itself by its intrinsic aesthetic or decorative qualities” (Debray, 1999, p. 31). For Schacter, graffiti’s unique temporal, site-specific, and, most importantly, interruptive and marginal qualities make it a distinctive, ephemeral monument (Schacter, 2024). He argues that graffiti is not just a visual decoration, but a form of alternative public monument embedded in the urban landscape through its materiality. This alternative monument asserts the public’s right to shape, claim, and speak within the city, resisting privatisation, surveillance, and commodification (Schacter, 2024) (Figure 2). However, Schacter and other scholars stress that graffiti’s marginality does not make it illicit (Schacter, 2024). Scholar Tony Chackal questions whether street art in all its forms – graffiti, stencils, posters, sculpture, yarn bombing, and more – is inherently illegal, or whether this perception of illegality arises from a historical legacy that frames it as essential to the development of street art (Chackal, 2016). He argues that, art spaces being inaccessible and elitist, artists turn to the streets using city

surfaces as their canvas (Chackal, 2016). Illegality, therefore, becomes the byproduct of socio-economic inequalities. Illegality also provides a political dimension born from street art's antithesis to the mainstream art world (Chackal, 2016). Graffiti's urban marginality, public accessibility, and illegality make it a risky endeavour, elements that together shape its inherently political nature. This is why, when private owners or city authorities grant permission for street art, it raises questions about the authenticity of the work. Whether legal, illegal, or illicit, street art shares two fundamental characteristics: first, the artist must accept its ephemeral nature, subject to removal, destruction, being painted over, or appropriated by others. Second, there is a commitment to anonymity, with most street artists operating under pseudonyms (Chackal, 2016). However, the rise of online exposure has led many street artists to gain public recognition, challenging the tradition of anonymity.

So, is art a crime? Or is the city being redefined as “an image curated and marketed as one commodity among a host of competing commodities across the world?” (Schacter, 2024, p. 138). It is both and none at the same time. Street art is more than inscription; it is about communication, engagement, urban language, and spatial practice. It is about inscribing oneself into the urban fabric and becoming part of the city. It reflects cultural production, public discourse, and the politics of surfaces (Andron et al., n.d.).

Figure 1

Safaitic Inscriptions on Basalt Rocks. 1st Century BCE To 4th Century CE. Jordan Desert or Al Harr'a., Rawan Al Adwan, 30 January 2019



Source. worldhistory.org

Figure 2

Escif Untitled, 2021, Beirut, Lebanon



Source. www.archisearch.gr

Defining Graffiti and Urban Street Art

The study's framework explores the temporality and impact of street art from multiple perspectives. The case studies are analysed based on several key factors: whether the work is commissioned or guerrilla-style; its legal status (legal or illegal); the intended message (social, political, or purely aesthetic); the visibility of its location; its temporality (ephemeral or lastime); how it is received (contested or preserved); and its mode of documentation (archived in digital repositories, shared on social media, or examined in scholarly work). Together, these elements help categorise the contexts in which street artworks exist and illustrate how their memory is preserved, or frozen in time, through visual documentation.

Ephemerality and Trace**Street Art Is Ephemeral, but It Never Fully Disappears**

“What you see today may look different tomorrow, or be gone altogether” (Martis et al., 2024, p. 65). Graffiti, though fleeting and often illegal, embodies a powerful, time-based form of artistic and social expression. Its transient nature is subject to weather, overpainting, or removal, but does not diminish its value. Instead, this impermanence is intrinsic to the identity and aesthetic of graffiti. Decay, erosion, and transformation are accepted, even celebrated, within the subculture, adding to the work's meaning and presence. Street art conveys a message through form and leaves a lasting impression on the surface. The time-based artworks, which rely on the fragility of paint that solidifies and fuses with the surface, are prone to various forms of natural and human-induced degradation (Schacter, 2024). Indeed, paint can peel, crack, fade, expand, or wrinkle. Paint decomposes and inherently modifies the derma of the surface, exhibiting its variations and imperfections (Andron et al., n.d.). Those accumulated paint layers, although once ephemeral, become self-preserved testimonies and experiences (Andron et al., n.d.) (Figure 3). If street art's deterioration is

perceived as architectural decay, it is, in fact, a revival, and an addition to the city fabric and its visual memory (DeSilvey, 2017). Decomposition and disappearance are integral to the artistic process and deeply ingrained in the culture of street art. The lack of space in sought-after areas encouraged fellow artists to paint over each other's works (Boxe, personal communication, March 2025). Whether out of internal competition, spite, or territorial marking, artwork defacement proves that "[images are] never sacrosanct, [are] always subject to the vagaries of a world in process" (Schacter, 2024, pp. 102–103). For street artist Boxe, to survive, one must paint relentlessly. He describes the urban visual scene as the law of the jungle, where street artists carry and spread the medium of a culture to ensure its survival. Boxe argues that it is not about a single piece but about the body of work and the journey it represents; the composition matters. Boxe has painted over 2500 pieces around the world, using his day job to fund his travels (Boxe, personal communication, March 2025) (Figure 4). In some extreme cases artists remove their own like in the case of Blu who in 2016 destroyed decades of his work in the city of Bologna, in Italy. Blu was protesting against the exhibition *Street Art: Banksy & Co: L'Arte allo Stato Urbano*, which commodified and institutionalised street art after years of criminalising it (Vimercati, 2016).

Figure 3

Old Advertisement in Beirut



Photograph by author, Lebanon, 2024

Figure 4

Boxe (2024)



Street Art Leaves Behind Textured Traces

In a recent improvised advertisement for a pressure-washing product, Squicky Clean Dave, a van owner and YouTube content creator, demonstrates his ability to remove graffiti in a single attempt. At the end of the nine-minute video, the surface initially appears clean. However, upon closer inspection, he concedes that remnants of paint remain between the brick joints. He also acknowledges that complete removal isn't achievable in one pass and that certain paint colours pose greater challenges than others (Squeaky Clean Dave, 2024). Squicky Clean Dave's video proves that Street art, although ephemeral, is resilient and persistent.

In her book *Urban Surfaces*, Sabina Andron makes an extensive list of materials used in street art, assessing each in terms of its removability. Aerosol and brush-applied paints, as well as lipstick and wax crayons, are difficult to remove. However, paste-ups, water-based felt-tip pens, and pencils are easily erased (Andron, 2023). However, even when covered or removed, paste-up remnants remain over the years, filling layers of papers on urban walls (Figure 5). Those seemingly ephemeral artworks become urban modern archaeological artefacts buried under layers of paint and paper. For Andron, those traces are symbolic witnesses of attempted removals by local authorities, fellow artists, or weathered away (Andron et al., n.d.). She argues that surfaces are "like derma on living creatures" defined by texture, colour, imperfections and depth (Andron et al., n.d.). Surfaces represent the passage of time and events and are, therefore, in no way neutral architectural agents. They convey messages that range from consumerist to anarchist claims. Surfaces are also a tool of control that local authorities use to exclude, gentrify and commodify. On the other hand, "unauthorised inscriptions" become a form of silent protest where various voices "demonstrate all kinds of urban manners" (Andron et al., n.d.).

Figure 5
Carving Beirut Walls



Photography by Author, 2023

Traces Become Urban Fossils That Record Social Expression and Urban Heritage

Street art, in all its diverse forms, whether sanctioned or commissioned, captures moments that become part of our urban collective memory. However, not all street artworks are created

equal. For Peter Bengtsen, the increasing number of organised and curated walls becomes a phenomenon he describes as the fossilisation of urban public spaces (Bengtsen, 2020). He argues that fossilisation is in direct contradiction with the ephemeral nature of street art as it pushes away any form of spontaneous expression. He believes that organised and commissioned street art, although becoming part of the visual urban fabric, can negatively affect the social and political impact of spontaneous street artworks (Bengtsen, 2020). However, as noted earlier, city walls often serve as canvases layered with artworks accumulated over the years, allowing new pieces to find their way back onto those same curated surfaces, becoming their own kind of urban fossils. For Rafael Schacter, when graffiti is viewed through the lens of a monument, it becomes a form of expression that challenges power structures and questions whose voices are included in and excluded from public space (Schacter, 2024). Whether they're generous gifts from artists to the city or politically motivated initiatives, street artworks remain intrinsically democratic (Young, 2013). Street art is a deeply embedded visual conversation between artists, viewers and the city. It is an intangible urban heritage that witnesses, records, and craves to be seen and heard. It invites interpretation and engagement but does not try to change what people believe (Schacter, 2024). Even when covered or defaced, inscriptions are resilient forms of expression that will find ways to reemerge in urban spaces, often in hidden or unexpected places (Andron et al., n.d.). In recent years, street art has gained recognition as cultural heritage by organisations such as UNESCO and various local authorities, particularly when viewed through a “performative” approach that emphasises everyday interactions and embraces multiple perspectives (Nomeikaite, 2020).

Photography as a Tool of Preservation

Archiving Street Art Through Photography

Photographs and documentation of street art help preserve these fleeting works, making them accessible beyond their original context. Whether through tourists snapping photos, viewers capturing artwork, or scholars conducting longitudinal photography, photography has the most significant impact on our reception of street art in an archaeological context (Hale, 2022). If, as historian Pierre Nora once wrote, modern memory “takes roots in [...] images and objects”, it relies entirely on the “visibility of the image”. In that sense, Street art photography becomes a time capsule that protects artworks from decay. For Rafael Schacter, memory without visibility becomes “irreversible disappearance”; “Out of sight (or out of site), out of mind” (Schacter, 2024). The archaeological use of photography to document graffiti is well established (Cooper & Chalfant 1984), though capturing graffiti from the recent and contemporary past remains relatively uncommon (McFadyen & Hicks, 2020). However, clichéd tourist photographs also play a role in shaping perceptions of heritage (McFadyen & Hicks, 2020). They turn photographs of ephemeral artworks into a material site even after their disappearance (McFadyen & Hicks, 2020). Graffiti is now seen as valuable heritage rather than damage, and everyday photos of the built environment, often considered as worthless snapshots, should also be taken more seriously.

Daily photo-documentation of walls captures public additions to the artwork, revealing how people engage with and interpret it (Hansen & Flynn, 2015). Longitudinal photo-documentation enables the study of street art and graffiti as a visual dialogue, capturing asynchronous yet sequential exchanges. Unlike analyses focused on isolated images, this approach reveals how artists and community members respond to and interpret each other's contributions over time (Hansen & Flynn, 2015). Longitudinal photography focuses less on

the artist and their style, and more on the evolution of the surface over time. This form of repeat photography is for Susan Hansen, a way to highlight social interactions through visual urban expressions (MacDowall, 2016) (Figure 6).

Street art visual documentation that uses photography raises new questions about documentation: who captures the image, who curates and shares it, and how these choices can shape places and create value for communities (McFadyen & Hicks, 2020). Graffiti's connection with photography encourages us to rethink the boundaries between physical sites and their archives, as well as between material and visual elements in archaeology. photography becomes a process where engagement and dialogue with communities reshape the past. As inscriptions can transform the historic built environment, taking a photograph deepens our understanding of the relationship between archaeology and photography (McFadyen & Hicks, 2020).

Figure 6

Beirut Revolution Walls, Longitudinal Photography



Taken between October and December 2019. Photographs by the author.

Photography and Social Media as Tools for Cultural Preservation and Urban Visual Storytelling

Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok were designed to host current, original photographic content. Particularly Instagram, which acts as a digital collaborative photo

album. Instagram's design creates a sense of constant present, with its home feed organising images by the moment they are posted. Instagram's temporalities and persona archives help shape memory (MacDowall, 2016). In the graffiti culture, platforms like Instagram have allowed writers and viewers to upload and share content that was once only available in personal photo albums. With the rise of Instagram, private and secret image-keeping has given way to a culture of constant sharing, where visuals circulate openly and collaboratively as part of a broader digital landscape (MacDowall, 2016). Today, street artists are highly active on social media, sharing their artworks and creative processes, which has made the once-valued secrecy of the practice increasingly uncommon. This yearning for online exposure stems from the idea that the ephemeral nature of street art still has significant cultural value (Martis et al., 2024). Self-documentation has therefore become a tradition within the street art culture using both analogue sketching methods and online photo documentation. Mid-00s platforms like Flickr and Fotolog have been replaced by Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. A diverse range of contributors exists online; they range from artists showcasing their creations, to collectives curating digital graffiti archives, to fans capturing and posting street art they encounter (Martis et al., 2024). "The online world has become an extension of the street" (Martis et al., 2024). The digital landscape extends the core drive of graffiti, being seen, by offering endless new spaces for exposure beyond the physical walls of the city. Through photography, social media gives street art a second life, turning temporary urban expressions into lasting digital artefacts and preserving fleeting moments as part of a new, accessible visual heritage. For curator Christian Omodeo, street art follows the codes of social media, and in doing so, becomes a key channel for contemporary activism and collective expression (C. Omodeo, personal communication, April 2025). This new form of street art amplifies the voices of its authors. It becomes an even stronger tool for advocacy and sustainability, reaching broader audiences and freezing messages in a "continuous now" (MacDowall, 2016).

Street Art as a Bottom-Up Archive of Socio-Political Climates

As daily life is increasingly witnessed through the lens of smartphones, digital platforms become repositories that archive ephemeral street art and safeguard its memory. Their action reinforces street art's democratic bottom-up approach. Graffiti writers, street artists, and fans of independent public art actively contribute to a growing online archive by documenting, sharing, and categorising street art through platforms like Instagram, X, and others (Hansen & Flynn, 2015). Many works now exist solely as digital photographs, having been removed by authorities or painted over by others shortly after their creation. Archaeologists Alex Hale and Annie Leigh Campbell have even turned to Instagram to follow the changes of a wall over time (MacDowall, 2016). This form of preservation and archiving of street art also takes the shape of museum conservation, as museum-like practices and values are brought into the streets, turning the city into an open-air gallery (Schacter, 2024). These methods promote street art tours that boost tourism and encourage both offline and online sharing of the artworks. Graffiti is an art form that needs to be seen, and its legacy can be critical. However, the risk is that museums, galleries, local institutions, and political bodies reappropriate bottom-up practices. Once street art becomes commodified, it can lose its original purpose: being a spontaneous act of dissent, reclaiming of urban space, and giving voice to the marginalised. Although street art's motivation for conservation and archival is real, its conservation methods differ from those of the cultural heritage sector (Martis et al., 2024). Although there's room for mutual learning between the two worlds, the graffiti community's interest in preservation doesn't necessarily make it compatible with traditional heritage structures. As one New York-based graffiti artist says, "This is our community; this is our

nation, our contribution to the world. It's our job to preserve it, ensure it and nurture it, not someone else's" (Martis et al., 2024). Archiving and preserving street art through photography offers a more democratic and accessible approach to cultural preservation. Like street art itself, photography is a widely accessible medium. Anyone with a smartphone can capture and share artworks with hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people. Street art photography is inherently inclusive, often valuing the work regardless of the artist's fame or status. If street art is about giving a voice to the voiceless, then digital photography and social media exponentially amplify that voice, extending its reach far beyond the walls on which it was created.

Conclusion

Despite street art's ephemeral nature, it is not doomed to disappear. Remnants of artworks linger in the textures of city walls, the memories of viewers and increasingly in digital online archives. The urge to leave a mark remains a deeply human impulse, from the ancient inscriptions of the Black Desert to modern Instagram posts. These marks, whether legal or not, form a living archive continuously shaped by the surfaces they inhabit and the communities that engage with them. Digital photography helps extend the life of street art through documentation and widespread sharing, turning artworks into urban visual records. In a world where museums and institutions are increasingly looking to street art as a form of cultural heritage, photography offers an alternative, grassroots model of preservation. It resists exclusivity and curatorial gatekeeping, inviting anyone with a camera or a smartphone to participate. Social media platforms act as public archives, enabling new forms of collective memory-making.

Through its aesthetic style, street art value can interrupt, question and inscribe new voices into the public space. The photographic interpretation of artworks not only preserves but also expands their reach. Together, the wall and the lens tell stories that challenge, remember, and reimagine the city.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I used ChatGPT to enhance my writing in some sections.

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