Writing on the Wall

The Graffiti Archaeology Project challenges the definition of archaeology.

by Samir S. Patel

Modern graffiti has its roots in 1970s African-American hip-hop culture, in which graffiti "tags," the term for the heavily stylized signatures and symbols that compose a lot of graffiti, were a form of vandalism and protest, a declaration of personal and cultural identity, and a way to reclaim neglected spaces. Now practiced as much by white skate-punks as by black youth, some graffiti has achieved remarkable beauty and skill—even making it into art galleries—while remaining vandalism in most places.

Curtis started by just taking photographs, but in 2002, while rifling through his collection, he noticed he had visited one obscure site six times, and that it was different every time. To look at this evolution more formally, he took all his images of one site on a certain day, corrected them for color and perspective, and merged them to create wide, expansive murals. In comparing murals of the same site taken at different times, he saw surprising juxtapositions and interactions of styles, motifs, and subjects through both space and time. So Curtis and a friend, Eric Rodenbeck, who designs interactive graphics, started working on an interface that would make these comparisons more accessible. On the website they created, each mural is a layer—a particular wall on a particular day—that can be laid one over another and flipped through like the pages of a book, creating a kind of digital stratigraphy. In addition to his own regular photographic excursions, Curtis uses pictures from friends, fellow enthusiasts, and the Internet. When the photo-sharing site Flickr was created in 2004, Curtis created a group for "graffiti archaeology," which at press time included around 3,000 members and over 15,000 photographs. His project currently records 25 walls at 12 sites, with more than 300 layers. Curtis also has 10 times more material than he has time to process, including...
The evolution of a sprawling graffiti wall: A site in San Francisco called 25th North, painted in the summer of 2003, includes Mesoamerican motifs—a remix of the present and the archaeological past.
walls from cities, such as Hamburg, Germany, and Valencia, Spain, that he’s never visited.

“I absolutely do not think of what I do as traditional archaeology. It was the closest word I could find that felt like it described what I was doing,” says Curtis, who feels sheepish when the site gets attention from archaeologists, a few of whom have commented on it. “I certainly wished I could have picked a word that was shorter and easier to spell.” But by adopting the name, he invited viewers to see the project in the context of the academic discipline and inadvertently highlighted some of the questions floating around about how to treat modern artifacts, and how archaeology might evolve in a connected, digital, participatory world.

After reviewing the site, Matt Ratto, a scholar at the Royal Netherlands Academy who studies information technology and archaeology, said, “I enjoyed it but I did wonder a little bit about what kinds of research questions could really be addressed.” The website does not include commentary, analysis, or context about locations and artists, outside of Curtis’s blog, which discusses general goings-on in the graffiti world.

“There’s a necessary veil of secrecy around some of these locations,” says Curtis, who doesn’t specify where many of his sites are for fear that authorities might come and paint over, or “buff” them. “I can definitely see that being frustrating from an archaeological perspective,” he adds (even though archaeologists often keep locations secret as well to prevent looting and, ironically, graffiti). The Graffiti Archaeology Project lacks rigor in its acquisition of data and subsequent analysis or discussion, which is enough to label it a novelty, easily dismissed as fun but misleading. But the site has something else, what some call an archaeological sensibility.

“I think there is something deeply archaeological about the modern world,” says Michael Shanks, an archaeologist and director of the Metamedia Lab at Stanford University.

“Archaeology is as much a way of thinking about the world as it is a discipline. It’s about the stuff that accrues around you that makes you who you are. It’s a way of feeling about ourselves and the past. This is one reason why people adore archaeology, because it’s more than an academic subject.”

The archaeological sensibility that Shanks and others describe casts the human world as a place where people interact with and accumulate material culture, from trash piles, to items on a knick-knack shelf, to paintings on a wall. Archaeology is all around us, constantly created in that brief moment between the past and the future, and is forever changing as it recedes into the past.

“Cassidy [Curtis], I would say, has a wonderful archaeological sensibility in recognizing the accreted nature of these ensembles,” says Christopher Witmore, a landscape archaeologist at Brown University who works on classical Mediterranean sites and has a strong interest in new media. “As an archaeologist, I really appreciate this and I hope others do too.”

As an expression of an archaeological way of looking at the world, perhaps Curtis’s collection doesn’t need analysis at all. “I think it would detract from the site to put some sort of academic theorizing in there,” says Sven Ouzman, a rock art specialist at the University of Pretoria in South Africa who used to live in San Francisco and admire the graffiti there.

The site stands on its own visually, and as a site for exploration and participation, but in relegating it to a kind of memory-machine art, there is a risk of overlooking what it teaches about graffiti culture and how archaeology of the contemporary past engages communities and cultures. “More and more practitioners are seeing the past-present divide is not something that’s absolutely critical to the definition of what archaeology is,” says Witmore. “Many are beginning to understand archaeology more as a wider sensibility about how humans live with their material environments.”

The walls captured in the Graffiti Archaeology Project are illustrative of the habits, ideals, and interaction of the culture of graffiti artists, who call themselves “writers.” As Curtis explains it, the culture has a word, “heart,” that captures its core values, a combination of skill, dedication, bravado, and territoriality. Website visitors can see battles between writers
Belmont Tunnel in Los Angeles goes back further than any other location on Curtis’s website. The first image was taken by a railroad enthusiast in 1949. The tunnel, which was sometimes used as a television and movie set in the 1980s, was sealed in 2002 or 2003.

who cover each other’s work; the social dynamics between skilled writers and “toys,” as inexperienced writers are known; and how the humor and anti-authority spirit of graffiti plays out in a public space. Although none of these interactions are explained, the murals provide an intimate look into a world few know anything about.

“For me, those kinds of minutia, those kinds of intimacies, those details, to have them persist, transported elsewhere, and for other people to engage them, I find incredibly interesting,” says Witmore. Curtis would welcome a layer of explanation, narrative, and audio, but there’s his pesky day job animating talking squirrels.

Curtis also explains that through his observations, he has found that a graffiti wall has a predictable life cycle. Blank walls rarely attract the large, beautiful, gestural tags—an 8-color, 10-foot, wild-style piece, for example—that are the blockbusters of the graffiti world. There is fear that the municipality will remove such pieces right away. So instead, the skilled writers wait for a wall to accumulate a messy, lichen-like collection of smaller, less sophisticated tags. If those works persist, good writers know their work has a chance of both lasting and being seen, and it will attract other impressionistic pieces nearby. But this golden age for a site is often short-lived. “A spot can die a slow death or it can die a fast death,” says Curtis. The slow death comes when a wall is covered again in small, ugly tags—death by a thousand cuts. The fast death comes from the municipal authorities, who “buff” or paint walls gray—death by bunker buster. “I look at these patchy gray walls and I think, is this really better?” says Curtis. The arc he describes is not unlike the rise and fall of an ancient city or culture, only compressed into a matter of months or years. “Graffiti is such a fast-changing world that five years ago really is ancient history on one of these walls,” he adds.

But this “ancient history” surely doesn’t compare to truly old things—after all, there are enough big questions in the ancient past for archaeologists to study without turning an academic eye to every byproduct of popular culture perhaps better left to art scholars and contemporary anthropologists. “To imagine we’re going to be channeling resources into graffiti archaeology rather than hominid evolution is a bit silly. That’s not going to happen and it shouldn’t happen,” says Shanks. “However, I think archaeology can only benefit from an awareness that we are all archaeologists now. We’re all highly sensitized to the material remains of our past all around us, whether they’re deep history or whether they’re contemporary history.”

The process of making the website, as Curtis describes it, shows how a new, open archaeology can lead to unexpected connections and discoveries. “We document things for certain reasons, but they become important for different reasons,” he says. For example, railroad enthusiasts provided him with some of his oldest images, which show the defunct Belmont Tunnel in Los Angeles in the 1950s, before it attracted graffiti. Suddenly the computer animator was interacting with people twice his age who took pictures with boxy old Brownies instead of digital SLRs. As Curtis creates a layered mural for Psycho City, he has found images of DJs there in the 1980s. The pictures, saved for one purpose, provided him with the older layers he needs to root his observations in the contemporary history of a place.

Social software that allows people to share lifetimes of memories and photos of places and things heralds a new kind of digital archaeology—data mining with the care and approach of an archaeologist. This idea can expose new avenues of research into our archaeological nature that might not have been imaginable in the old days of 1992. The flood of information, the attention to detail, and the ability to store, search, and organize this information in novel ways is perhaps a new frontier for the archaeological sensibility. The next step is getting more attic-bound shoeboxes scanned and into the digital ether.

“It’s great for Curtis to know that there are archaeologists out there who would kind of validate what he’s doing and would take a keen interest in it,” says Timothy Webmoor, an archaeologist at Stanford who studies both Teotihuacán in Mexico and new media. “It’s not going to be traditionally archaeological, but damn if it’s not fascinating.”

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