

# International Symposium on the Conservation of Monuments in the Mediterranean Basin

(2024)

Proceedings of the 11th MONUBASIN (2024)



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doi: [10.12681/monubasin.8331](https://doi.org/10.12681/monubasin.8331)

### To cite this article:

Chatzidakis, M., & Stefanis, A. (2024). Tears in the Rain. Street Art Conservation in a City that is Constantly Changing. *International Symposium on the Conservation of Monuments in the Mediterranean Basin*, 257–262. <https://doi.org/10.12681/monubasin.8331>

# Tears in the Rain. Street Art Conservation in a City that is Constantly Changing

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**Abstract.** Street art has become a worldwide phenomenon over the past few decades, especially in major cities, serving as a form of urban activism that reflects the current socio-political landscape. These ephemeral artworks are vulnerable to deterioration due to outdoor exposure and human intervention.

The conservation of street art is a growing field that has gained the attention of international organizations, academics, and professionals. Since 2009, the Department of Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art at the University of West Attica has been at the forefront of exploring the ethics, documentation, and research related to street art conservation. The department has been actively involved through lessons, educational programs, and voluntary efforts.

The alteration, extensive deterioration, and potential loss of street art create a different value and interpretive context. The deterioration and losses can enhance or even extend the meaning of the artwork. Deterioration becomes an integral element in the dynamic interpretation and understanding of the artworks, transforming the role of conservation from merely decelerating deterioration to actively interpreting it.

The conservation of street art has brought forth profound questions and challenges that prompt a reconsideration of the broader perspective and ethics of conservation. To this end, documentation and educational initiatives serve as proactive measures in the preservation of street art as a contemporary city's patina and living heritage.

**Keywords:** Street Art, Conservation, Graffiti, Public Murals, Urban Art.

## 1 Introduction: The Dynamic Landscape of Street Art

Street art, public murals, and graffiti are vibrant forms of visual expression flourishing in the urban environment worldwide.

Over the past few decades, street art has evolved into a global phenomenon, particularly prevalent in major cities, serving as a form of urban activism that reflects the current socio-political landscape.

Street art is characterized by the creative use of public space, its ephemeral nature, the intention to communicate with the public, and the utilization of various techniques and substrates. Unlike traditional art forms, street art encompasses a wide range of techniques—from stencils and posters to installations and performances—emphasizing its ephemeral nature and its close interaction with the public.

Art in public space has always been at the heart of movements for social justice and social change [1]. In Greece, street art has emerged as a powerful form of protest during the socioeconomic crisis, providing a voice for the marginalized and serving as a mirror of social struggles.

Public murals are large-scale paintings on urban surfaces that often reflect the local community's history and political activism, serving as a powerful communication tool. They have a long history dating back to prehistoric cave paintings and extending to iconic movements like Mexican muralism and contemporary political and community murals in places such as the USA, Ireland, Palestine, Greece, and elsewhere. They have played key roles not only as aesthetic contributions to public spaces but also as tools for social activism and collective memory.

Graffiti is an unauthorized visual expression using inscriptions and characters through scratching, writing, or spraying on urban surfaces. Its origins range from ancient wall scratches to the graffiti culture of the 1970s in the USA, evolving into an iconic form of underground expression that reflects subversive narratives and countercultural dialogues. Despite its unsanctioned nature, graffiti challenges conventional boundaries of art and public space, making it an integral part of contemporary visual culture.

Street art and graffiti have garnered attention from a range of academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, geography, criminology, art history, conservation, and linguistics, each offering a distinct perspective on these forms of expression [2].

These artworks face significant challenges due to exposure to uncontrolled outdoor conditions and human interventions such as overpainting and tagging, making them ephemeral and susceptible to complex and extensive deterioration [3,4,5,6,7].

From a conservation standpoint, street art provides a valuable opportunity for scientific investigation into the identification of materials, mechanisms of deterioration, and conservation treatments. Most importantly, it presents a challenging ethical framework that has sparked ongoing discussions for the preservation of artworks that might vanish before the discussion can reach a resolution.

## **2 Fading Surfaces: The Ephemeral Life of Street Art in the Urban Environment**

The pathology of street art presents examples of the behavior of complex systems rarely observed in other kinds of artworks. These unique characteristics do not have been previously studied. Thus, they need a novel approach, focusing on the phenomena that either trigger or retard deterioration mechanisms -a field that is still in progress.

The environment in which street art exists is very different from the controlled and stable environment of a museum. For example, a public mural in Athens receives direct sunlight for 269 days (about nine months) a year, with some exposure reaching over 40,000 Lux, including high quantities of UV radiation. Additionally, the mural endures rain for about 102 days annually, with huge variations in humidity and temperature [8]. These harsh conditions lead to the rapid degradation of materials, resulting in deterioration that is rarely seen in other types of paintings. Consequently, these works often vanish before preservation decisions can be made, significantly reducing their lifespan (Fig. 1).

The alteration, extensive deterioration, and potential loss of these artworks create a unique value and interpretive context (Fig. 2). Street artists may intentionally incorporate deterioration into their works or highlight it subsequently.

Deterioration and loss can connect or even extend the artwork's meaning. In all cases, deterioration becomes an integral critical element in the dynamic interpretation and understanding of the artworks, shifting the role of conservation from merely decelerating deterioration to actively interpreting it.

The use of already corroded metal substrates, such as old doors, is quite widespread in street art. The water-based glue of the paste-ups obviously activates corrosion mechanisms and consequently results in aesthetic alterations of the surface of the artwork. The rust stains of a paste-up on a corroded metal door are incorporated as a part of the artwork that adds a dramatic effect to the painting as, in the case of artworks by Dimitris Taxis and Wild Drawing.

Especially during the crisis period, the deteriorated support adds importance and extends the meaning of the artwork.

An example that illustrates this hypothesis is Wild Drawing's "5 Euro" (2014), at Exarchia, where the collapsing support of the artwork, the anxious face, and the symbol of the euro, falls apart long with the decomposed render of the substrate.

In this case, the ongoing material loss of the support creates a lively continuity of the artwork which although it is gradually destroyed, it strengthens its meaning very with a dramatic way.

All the above are proving that the deterioration can have a devastating effect and, on the other hand, can add value to the artwork.

The rate of decay and the potential for ultimate loss are crucial for estimating the state of preservation of an artwork. Gradual deterioration is generally accepted until it reaches the critical threshold of potential loss and transformation to something new.

For street art, the most significant aspect is the loss of connection with its environment and the loss of its meaning, while physical degradation is an ongoing process usually accepted by artists. Street art is

time-based contemporary art because of its inherent ephemeral nature, openness for interventions, and interaction with the constantly changing city's environment. The degradation might add value and extend meaning with criticism and skepticism in dealing with the crisis, as demonstrated by Wild Drawing's (WD) artwork at Exarcheia (fig. 3).

Visibility and invisibility in public spaces during a crisis raise ethical and political issues [9] that shape the framework for documentation and preservation decisions. Street art often arises from communities in distress, reflecting their struggles and resilience. As such, the conservation of street art preserves not only the physical artwork, but also the socio-political context it represents.



**Fig. 1.** The impact of extreme, uncontrolled outdoor environmental conditions and human interventions, leading to the rapid deterioration of street art.



**Fig. 2.** Deterioration of street art.



**Fig. 3.** Since decay and ephemerality are intrinsic elements of the time-based artwork what do we want to preserve? Mural by Wild Drawing (WD), 2014.



**Fig. 4.** The artwork as an ongoing process: creation, additions, extensions, overpainting, whitewashing. Plaka, Athens, 2009-2024.



**Fig. 5.** Interventions in the urban space: from creation to overpainting,



**Fig. 6.** WD's mural adapted to the building concerning its historical and social value and intervention by city authorities.

### 3 Conservation in a Changing Landscape

The conservation of street art is a relatively new and growing field that has garnered increasing interest from international organizations, academics, and professionals [10, 7, 11].

From a conservation viewpoint, we start by considering that street art characterizes the face of the contemporary city that we ought to -at least- document. Conservation interventions are rarely and occasionally carried out on artworks with social, scientific, and educational - apart from artistic - value [7].

The study of urban surfaces as a palimpsest uses losses and gaps to detect and interpret layers and signs (Fig. 4). Archives, photographs, and stories are used to synthesize narratives composed of evidence and hypotheses. As Orbaşlı (2017) [12] mentions, “conservation is a way of interpreting through material remains informed by the meanings and values of the present.” However, in-depth documentation does not mean a neutral perspective. Conservation has proven with the plethora of publications in the field that it does not stand on the grey side of the street. We preserve legally protected heritage while accepting that the contemporary face of the city -like it or not- belongs to the heritage of today.

Since 2009, the Department of Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art (C.A.W.A.) of the University of West Attica (UNI.W.A.) has been at the forefront of exploring the ethics, documentation, and research related to street art conservation. The department has been actively involved through lessons, educational programs, and the voluntary efforts of Street Art Conservators (St.A.Co.), a team of students and academics dedicated to the documentation and rescue conservation of street art [7].

During this period, a large amount of documentation material, experience from in situ interventions, theses, and surveys of students and the public emerged, reflecting the experience of monitoring artworks from creation to destruction.

At the same time, in an age where the most consistent archive of information is social media, part of the documentation of art projects the public counter-reaction arises from this data, proving the public's interest and enthusiasm.

This was evident with WD's mural "Knowledge Speaks, Wisdom Listens", and Stelios Faitakis' mural on the history of the olive tree on Pireos Street, where the public strongly reacted to tagging interventions and supported the cleaning of murals and the extension of their existence through conservation/restoration treatment. The public's call for preservation shows how certain artworks become part of the city's cultural heritage. In both of these cases, the conservation/restoration effort symbolized not only the technical challenge of tagging removal but also the ethical issues of how to maintain the integrity of a piece that exists within the changing, living fabric of the city.

By documenting these interventions, we gather knowledge that contributes to the evolving practice of street art conservation, where the ephemeral and the permanent must find a harmonious coexistence.

More effective in the rapid disappearance of street art is the special authority's service that offers its contribution to the appearance of the city (Fig. 5,6).

The appearance of a city looks intricately linked to the way of life it represents. A city with flawless surfaces may not necessarily be ideal, as imperfections and losses create opportunities for communication and intimacy. The city is our common social ground and small losses and gaps are the starting points for questions and research that -in a way- allow something new to emerge and flourish.

Connerton [13] noticed that "Today it is we who observe the birth and death of objects; whereas, in all previous civilizations, it was the object and the monument that survived the generations." The familiarization with consumable products being substituted by others has influenced art for decades. The end of the artwork as a physical entity is not the end of the artwork... As Lucio Fontana said in 1947, "Art is eternal, but it cannot be immortal. ... It will remain eternal as gesture, but it will die as material (...)."

In today's world, the artwork as a consumable product and the graffiti as an alternate advertising message on the walls prepare for the acceptance of the end of the artwork. Since "Conservation is the process of managing change" [14], managing these alterations through documentation, research, and mild rescue interventions is the only feasible way. Understanding and accepting the inevitability of loss as a natural part of the life cycle of artworks, buildings, monuments, and cities can lead to creative solutions. These solutions can help prolong the lifespan of artworks and also aid in planning conservation strategies through documentation, education, and raising awareness. Given the transient nature of street art, traditional conservation often proves impractical for its protection. Thus, Conservation plays a crucial role in educating the public about appreciating and accepting the natural decay intrinsic to these artworks.

#### **4 Conclusion: Street Art is Dead. Long Live Street Art**

By understanding street art as a time-based ongoing process [15] in extreme environments, we can better manage its changes [14] and set a preservation strategy based on documentation, research, and educational activities. The practice of conservation cannot effectively reduce and forever the degradation process. The choice of more drastic interventions, such as detachment and transfer, affects its intrinsic characteristics and invalidates its nature and values. The transition from interventive conservation to a documentation for preservation strategy, keeping the instances/moments of its existence that were significant for the community or -even- of those that we happened to be there, is the real-life of conservation. This can help us set achievable and inspiring goals. Conservation in the streets is an influential performance. It also sets goals that extend to scientific and educational benefits that, in turn, broaden the significance of the artworks.

Documentation and monitoring are useful processes for conservation students who are thrilled to participate in these projects. Difficult outdoor conditions, complicated conservation case studies, and communication with the public make student engagement a very interesting experience that adds educational value to artworks. Additionally, the research on deteriorated surfaces is challenging and precious for conservation and adds scientific value.

Thus, the end of an artwork on the city's wall is an unwelcome but expected event that often signals the beginning of a new piece of art. By embracing the ephemeral nature of street art, we recognize its role as a dynamic and evolving component of urban culture, ensuring that its legacy endures even as its physical form fades. Documentation and educational initiatives serve as proactive measures to engage the public and mobilize experts in the preservation of street art as a contemporary city's patina and living heritage. Street art is not formally under protection in a defined institutional framework but can be

protected on a case-by-case basis and in ways that most often do not involve interventions on the physical object but rather their thorough documentation, public awareness, and educational programs.

In conclusion, the conservation of street art poses unique challenges and opportunities. While the physical preservation of these works may be limited by their inherent ephemerality, their documentation and the stories they tell can continue to inspire. Street art, as a living heritage, not only reflects the ever-changing socio-political landscape but also invites ongoing dialogue about the values and narratives we choose to preserve in our urban environments. Embracing this oxymoron allows us to appreciate its social value and its enduring impact on the cultural fabric of our cities.

Despite the colored surfaces being lost, much like "tears in the rain," to use the poetic phrase from Ridley Scott's film "Blade Runner" in its dystopian urban landscape, the memory of the space and the values associated with it persist as long as people recognize the urban space as common ground for social life and change.

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