Graffiti Some Times: Archaeology, Artefacts and Archives

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Abstract
This keynote address for the goINDIGO 2022 symposium aims to act as an introduction to the exciting complexities that graffiti can present to archaeologists and others who are interested and choose to research this subject. The paper considers graffiti through three lenses: as a subject for archaeological investigation, as artefacts from time past, time now and time as unfolding surfaces; and it asks how should we develop our archival practices in the wake of digital profusion challenges and the 6th extinction event, in the contemporary archaeological timeframe?

Keywords
archaeology; archives; artefacts; graffiti; between practice and collaboration

1. Graffiti and archaeology

I am making a big assumption, but indulge me for a moment, that at some point graffiti emerged as a suitable subject to most of us and we realised that this unknown, potentially unruly, or even feral phenomena could open up new research possibilities—including those beyond the academy. I use the term feral in this context to remind us that graffiti is not something to be tamed by research, but with the view that it can enable new conceptualisations of approaches and practices, with people and places, that archaeology and archaeologists have rarely explored. Things get interesting when we consider that not only is graffiti a way of life for writers, but also how our involvement in this domain can affect it. We are not the first to tread here, this feral landscape comprises a much deeper timespan, from cave paintings and rock art to expressions within contemporary culture, ranging from language and music to performance and graffiti (Ross, 2021). So, we should recognise and acknowledge those who have trodden this path before us and walk in their footsteps into this feral territory.

Recently published edited volumes, amongst others, have brought together multiple disciplines from around the globe (e.g., Lovata & Olton, 2015; Ross, 2016) and have done much to demonstrate the breadth and history of graffiti and its role in past and contemporary cultures. These contributions provide multidisciplinary research that extends for nearly 100 years, with early exponents such as Brassai photographing graffiti in Paris between the 1930s and 1960s (Brassaï, 1960). Of course, this does not mark an origin point for graffiti; historical and archaeological studies have demonstrated the long durée of graffiti since prehistory to present (Frederick, 2009; Hale, Forthcoming; Oliver & Neal, 2010). However, within many of these studies it is the people who are an absent presence that cannot be directly engaged with. Whereas within contemporary graffiti studies, writers are very much present. When engaging with graffiti today, we should be attentive to the central agency of the writers and similarly our effects within research practices when engaged in this work. As Herbert

Khol explained in 1969, 'The more I attended to that particular wall, the more I felt like a voyeur spying on the lives of children who were strangers to me,' (Kohl & Hinton, 1969). I too am guilty of something similar, when I photographed the changing graffiti on a wall, every week over the course of a year, in Edinburgh, Scotland (Hale, 2018).

Early research into contemporary graffiti, such as that by Nancy Macdonald (2001) have adopted anthropological, immersive, practice-based work and set standards in good practice, that fully recognise the practitioner's role. These earlier approaches have enabled more recent researchers to consider expanding archaeological approaches, archival practices, heritage conceptualisations and fruitful collaborations. For example, work by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, Jeff Ferrell, Ursula Fredrick, Laima Nomiekaite, Susan Hansen, Martyn Reed, Samuel Merrill and many more, some of whom were able to attend the goINDIGO 2022 symposium, have raised the bar in terms of how contemporary practices can inform interdisciplinary, collaborative projects that broaden academic accessibility and create learning opportunities beyond the walls of our

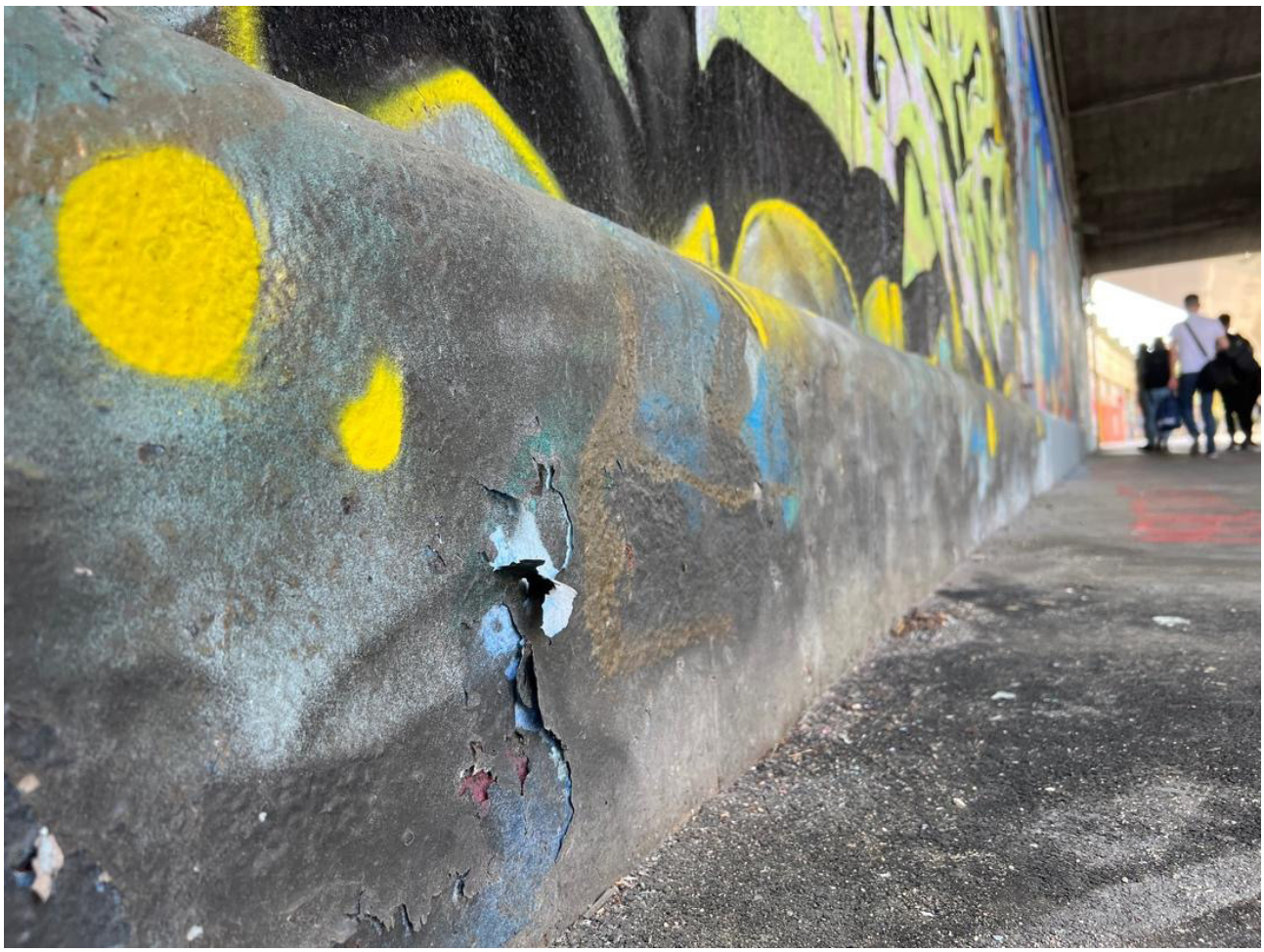

Figure 1. Walking along the Donaukanal, Vienna, whilst experiencing the micro to macro scales of the graffitiscape.

organisations.

On top of this, I would personally like to thank graffiti writers for their hard work, ongoing endeavours and artistic abilities, because they create an unruly subject that has opened our eyes and ears to worlds beyond our working lives. Their craft, that is the subject of this symposium, appears to be the world's largest (unofficial) art movement and one which doesn't appear to be diminishing. It is this feral, subversive, pleasurable expression of writing, that enables projects like INDIGO, to not only document and archive this living craft, but it also opens up debates around urban spaces, enables us to consider the precarity of the commons and public realm, and why modes of research need adapting, in order to become public, creative and collaborative. I'd like to focus on a few archaeological approaches that have been undertaken with graffiti as the subject, which will perhaps expand our conceptualisations of our roles within the graffiti world, if we choose to follow some of these paths (Figure 1).

2. Graffiti, time and artefacts

It is incredibly powerful to think that a lifestyle, like graffiti writing, can affect change; remember the recent seismic political disruptions across the Mediterranean since 2013, that we are still experiencing (see Naeem (2013) for a summary).

I feel honoured to stand up in front of people and say that I am an archaeologist. But what does it mean to be archaeological in today's world? Like many friends and colleagues, I began as a Prehistorian; proud to create data from primary sources, combine them with secondary material, analyse datasets and then interpret it to present stories of past lives, from thousands of years ago. Nowadays, I'm not so sure as to how I can speak about past lives. Today, I recognise that everyone is archaeological in one practice or another; that being archaeological has become a way of being, seeing and engaging with our weird wide world (Holtorf, 2016). I consider archaeology to be a practice linked with citizenship, that seeks to uncover worlds, through a broad range of approaches and as Doug Bailey urges us, to disrupt our perceived views, to unsettle our comfortable positions, risk new practices and reflect on our actions (Bailey, 2017). New practices can take us beyond the past tropes of treasure hunting that filled museums with artefacts and into the realms of entanglements between material culture, people and more than humans. These collaborations and their impacts should be carefully considered, co-created and co-produced, to enable others to positively participate. Sometimes, this can be confusing and unsettling, but we are not alone and feeling supported is an important aspect in all our lives today. For an excellent example see Rachael Kiddey's research on working with people experiencing homelessness (Kiddey, 2017). Rachael's politically-oriented work demonstrates the importance of recognising agency across a range of people and places, and how archaeology can provide an enabling framework to engage with complex contemporary issues.

Clearly with changing social, political and ethical shifts within our lifetimes we are recognising that recasting our archaeological approaches are increasingly necessary (Haeckel, 2021; Hicks, 2020). One such approach is the concept of time in archaeology. If we follow Karan Barad's research on quantum physics and time, we can consider that time is neither linear nor unrepeatable but comprises rhythms and multiplicity (Barad, 2007). Time for archaeologists is often used as a hook on which we hang much of our work, but one which we often get snagged on for a variety of reasons. We strive to define the extent of a phenomena through dating, typologies, seriation and stratigraphic positioning, all of which are linked to time, but as Gavin Lucas discusses in his recently updated book 'Making Time', artefacts are time, rather than existing 'in time' (Lucas, 2021). For example, the artefacts of graffiti are intertwined through time by past actions of writers and the present dissemination and reception of images of graffiti, which can occur at multiple times both synchronously and asynchronously, via social media and the internet. This multiple time dimension can take the form of a passer-by walking along the Donaukanal and looking at the graffiti, and at the same time somebody swiping on their Instagram feed and seeing images of the same pieces. The latter can also take place on multiple occasions and repeatedly. Add to this the possibility of the writer looking back over their black books and remember-

Figure 2. Throwie on a door in Edinburgh. (©Alex Hale).

ing when they came up with the letterforms, defined their colour scheme, planned the spot to hit and then created the piece, and we are confronted with artefacts that comprise multiple times in multiple places, which can be both digital and in-place.

Another example of time(s) enclosed within the visual artefacts of contemporary graffiti is the inclusion of dates. In Figure 2, we see a throwie accompanied by the number '14'. As an archaeologist my assumption would be that the 14 represents an origin date of 2014. But if that is the case, what does the date represent? Is it the date when Youts, the

writer, hit the spot? Or does it represent a significant moment in their life, which involved something that they wanted to commemorate? Or is it part of their crew number? The archaeological mind can be distracted by the temptation to fall back on a known date and assume that it is an origin point. However, it would be better to consider the date with the other components of the throwie and recognise that they are components of the performative materiality, which encompasses intent, action, materials, time and archive, that forms to create a dynamic, unfolding assemblage.

Today we are overburdened with metadata, which helps improve our archival actions and the INDIGO project is unique in its aims to set new standards in this arena. Before I come on to archives, I'd like to consider some specific approaches to graffiti artefacts, from the spray cans to the artworks themselves and photographic representations of the works. The creativity is for all to see on walls around the world, the spray cans and the walls are artefacts associated with the artworks, but it is perhaps photography that has had some of the most significant impact on our reception to both graffiti and archaeology. Some of the most recent thinking around this has been published by Lesley McFadyen and Dan Hicks in their book, 'Archaeology and Photography' (2020). Specifically, the agency of contemporary photography within archaeological practices that can enable us to go beyond the ocular-centric, representational tropes of 19th century and present new directions (see Hale and Anderson (2020), with specific reference to photographing graffiti). With the development of digital recording, photography has become a crucial tool in not only geo-spatially positioning artefacts, but seeing beyond the visual spectrum, that can lead us into places beyond the eye can see. We heard much more about this during the symposium and some of which is published in this volume.

But these exciting advances in research tools and methods could, if not carefully considered sustain the space between researcher and researched. For a specific discussion around some of these issues in a community heritage context see the work on the ACCORD project (Jones et al., 2018) and for one specific Scottish example of a potential approach, see Hale (2017). Without community engagement and participation this can lead to uncomfortable, voyeuristic positions for a researcher, which we should strive to avoid for ethical, moral and social reasons. I suppose, when it comes to graffiti writing, an alternative approach is to become immersed in the culture: to become a participant in the artefact assemblage, perhaps even by practicing our handstyles (see Graffiti Grannies: http://artnote.eu/graffiti-grannies-come-to-aberdeen-for-the-nuart-festival)? Within this form of participatory research we can begin to experience and explore this culture by learning with writers (Fransberg, 2020; Macdonald, 2001; NuArt journal, https://nuartjournal.com). The following section considers immersive graffiti territories as unfolding archives.

3. Graffiti archives

Just as the Parisian arcades inspired Walther Benjamin to explore the physical remains of the city and at the same time use the architecture to critique his contemporary world (Benjamin & Tiedeman, 2002), we can be encouraged to explore our worlds through the artistic interventions we find on the streets, scratched in tree bark, laid out in fields and carved on hillsides, and use them to critique our world. The locations of graffiti, these places of performance are critical in our understanding of why people engage with space and make it a place (Nomeikaite, 2020). Across time, people leaving marks on the landscape have left behind artefacts for us to engage and explore. Within these artefacts are temporal rhythms and spatial performances, so as we walked along the Donaukanal (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjEBPMYn3ac) on our graffiti tour during the symposium, we observed the colours, shapes, styles, letters and image forms, juxtaposed with the water of the canal, the sunshine and the changing canvases that the writers have adopted.

The positions of the pieces, throwies, tags, street art and paste-ups converse with each other, with us and their surroundings (Figure 3). These are not static artworks hanging in a void and waiting for us to give them layers of meaning through our academic practices. These are performed texts that were not written for us, they are beyond our control and part of a wilder-ness that we can explore. But these artefacts should not be hidden in archives, their very presence is the archive.

Figure 3. A small section of the graffiti on the Donaukanal (©Alex Hale).

If we are lucky, we sometimes encounter some of the other effects of these archival presences, such as caps and cans (Figure 4). These artefacts are indicators that enable writers to assemble their own timescales. Between painting and buffing there may be what we call days, weeks or even months, but within painting time these events can form quite different rhythms. Between creating a sketch in a black book, planning where to place the work, hitting the spot and the piece being buffed, is not a 9–5 job, the practices create their own cadences. Perhaps we should consider 'graffiti time' as a scale that we have previously not recognised or measured? It is projects such as INDIGO that aim to research not only the colours, forms and positions of the artefacts, but also to document and surface these new cadences within graffiti.

Graffiti is always at the point of becoming, gathering layers of paint because of writers 'biting' or over-writing, and this can appear to disrupt the order of the wallscape where it is placed. But aggregating information and collecting objects with a view to placing them into archives, is one of our keenest human instincts. Rather than thinking about graffiti as a phenomenon to be archived into a museum full of artefacts, we should consider it as an ongoing archival practice, as an act of archiving through doing, what Henck Slager and more recently Gina Wall and myself have referred to as 'pa-

Figure 4. Discarded cap, found behind a bridge support, by the Donaukanal (©Alex Hale).

ra-archiving' (Slager, 2015; Wall & Hale, 2020). In this way the writing not only forms an archive but it provides assemblages of materials to be reused and re-purposed into new ways, that are yet to be surfaced and emerge.

Lachlan MacDowall has discussed how archiving has become a world-wide lifestyle, especially within our online lives that are predicated on algorithms, designed to create personal archives, without our consent, by way of giving away our data (MacDowall, 2019). But para-archiving, whilst acknowledging and critiquing the power systems that exist in archival practices, based on Derrida's 1995 essay, 'Archive Fever: a Freudian impression', aims to expand the creative opportunities that assemblages present (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995). So, consider the possibility that graffiti presents us with an archive that is constantly in a

state of becoming assembled, but which is feral, unwieldy and something not to be tamed. Within this para-archive are artefacts that are continuing to be in a state of becoming that contain multiple contradictions and opportunities.

4. Future graffitiscapes

So, to finish this ramble through graffiti, I wanted to quickly remark on our era of data profusion and at the same time the climate emergency. There is a tension here that should make us ask difficult questions of our actions; for example, does the ongoing amassing of data enable people to live more sensitive, compassionate, and caring lives? And at the same time, we know that museum stores are bursting with artefacts, and archives are actively considering de-accessioning aspects of their collections. Add to this, the ongoing drive to mass digitisation, which is demanding vast quantities of electrical power, in some cases generated from finite resources. We should all be thinking about these tensions and how we address them on a range of scales. Emerging from this are interesting possibilities that we are only just beginning to consider, and it is interdisciplinary symposia such as this, that provide opportunities to dive deeper into this aspect of (graffiti) research and being. Within our subject area, graffiti artists, such as Bordalo II, are making their art using recycled materials and everyday remains, and addressing some of these issues by being, 'focused on questioning the materialistic and greedy society of which he is (also) part. The excessive production and consumption of stuff, which results in the continuous production of "garbage" and consequently in the destruction of the Planet, are the central themes of his production' (Bordalo, 2022).

So, I will finish by posing two questions, challenges if you like for us as global citizens, graffiti archaeologists and archivists:

- How do we ensure that graffiti writers share in the pleasure of research, just as we share the pleasure of their creativity and art?
- How do we conceptualise and develop complementary archival practices that address current global environmental, social and moral issues?

In addressing these and other questions we should be sure to always act collaboratively, sensitively and with others in mind. Luckily for us graffiti writers create art that asks many questions, not only of themselves, their craft, but also of how we want to engage with art, performance and transgression. This can lead us towards conversations about curated social media feeds, blogs, vlogs and podcasts; to symposia, workshops, graffiti jams, bombing nights and beautifully crafted books (Acker, 2013), amongst an amazingly diverse assemblage of graffiti archives. So, I wish everyone a most enjoyable symposium proceedings and here's to many more collaborative, unfolding graffiti journeys through archaeology, artefacts and expanding archival practices!

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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