Abstract

Graffiti as Virtual Heterotopia: Reimagining the Place of Graffiti Production in Heritage Studies

This paper draws from doctoral research centred on how illicit graffiti reshapes and transforms place. To date, research into graffiti has largely been divided into two camps taking up either an art or crime focus (conferred by Chmielewska 2009; Cresswell 1996; Halsey & Young 2006). I support Ella Chmielewska’s (2009) argument that the ‘place’ of graffiti production provides a material and discursive space where the dichotomy between artwork and crime, which undermines the socio-cultural consequence of graffiti’s transgression, can be effectively resolved. Crucially, this reframing has the capacity to intervene in, destabilise and shift the perception of illicit graffiti as damage to cultural heritage.

The interdisciplinary framework outlined here expands on Michael Shanks’s (1997, 2007) theorisations, which explore the connections between photography, archaeology and the archive as situated modalities that intervene in the detritus of past material practices in the here and now. It rests on the premise that photography, archaeology and the archive are reflexive mediations which can breathe new life into the re-articulation of socially constructed artefacts and poetisation of place. In this framework the researcher becomes an active participant in the reproduction and dissemination of the counter visual rhetoric embedded in graffiti’s material trace. Readings from the researchers own empirical encounters in the encoded territories of graffiti production in Sydney’s inner suburbs will be considered.

This paper goes onto consider the creation of the Sydney Graffiti Archive as a dynamic mechanism to infiltrate and transgress normative conceptions of place, cultural narratives and assumptions about what constitutes cultural research, as well as digital heritage. It evaluates the place of the archive as a heuristic device and heterotopic entity – a space of otherness that operates in non-hegemonic conditions and encourages new ways of seeing graffiti in that it reshapes present relations to the past through user engagement. The Sydney Graffiti Archive, as a living repository for the photographs analysed in this research, further re-emphasises the value of the recontextualisation of graffiti, as monuments to the past and sites of knowledge in their own right. To its end, this research supports the call for a more inclusive notion of heritage that incorporates the dynamic, fleeting and unofficial expressions of the vernacular in the contemporary past, and one which encourages personal categories of significance (Foster 2003; MacDowall 2006; Symonds 2004).


Samantha Edwards-Vandenhoek
Lecturer // Acting Head of Program (Design)
PhD Candidate (under examination)
University of Western Sydney
School of Humanities & Communication Arts
s.edwards@uws.edu.au
References


