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Art Crimes: Building a Digital Museum

Susan Farrell

OR many years I have been fascinated by graffiti art. I began taking pictures of paintings and tags in 1990. I wanted to find out everything I could about this mysterious writing. During summer break from grad school (1994), I made a Web gallery, called Art Crimes,

F to show my collection of 150 photos from Atlanta and Prague (Czech Republic). I called for contributions of similar photos from around the world. I hoped that other photographers would put their graffiti photos online to help create a worldwide archive of graffiti images organized by city. What began as a handful of photographs from two cities has grown into more than 3000 images from some 160 cities around the world, and hundreds of other graffiti sites have since invaded the Internet.

I announced the opening of Art Crimes in the newsgroup (comp.infosystems.www) where it was then considered polite to inform others when a new site was launched. There were almost no art projects online then, since it had just become practical to put images on Web pages. Immediately, the few graffiti artists online contacted me.

The "writers," as they call themselves, had been hanging out on Usenet in alt.graffiti. They'd been talking about making a Web site for their photo collections. It was difficult to code and decode binary files in newsgroups and they wanted to exchange photos very badly. They were excited but suspicious of my motivations at first.

Several photographers also contacted me immediately, offering to share their photos. The first was Brett Webb, a computer science student from Los Angeles who had photos from Fresno and LA. We hit it off right away and decided to share the project and build the site together. We worked closely every day, even though we'd never met, and in fact lived 3000 miles apart. The possibilities for this kind of distance collaboration were intoxicating, and we were extremely excited about the positive response we were getting from the viewing public and the graffiti community. Then I met Ionone BTS in Atlanta, and he generously allowed me to scan his photos from Vancouver, Amsterdam and Munich.

I quickly realized that if I was working full time and taking two classes in grad school, I really didn't have time for a massive Web hobby site. I was so engrossed in learning about graffiti that I would almost rather have given up work or school. About that time, *Newsweek* did an article about Art Crimes in their "Cyberscope" column. My email exploded with demands for information and more digital photos.

Since my master's degree (Information design and Technology) required a large multimedia final project, I presented the site to my adviser, Dr. Kenneth Knoespel, and presented a good case for it to be accepted as my long-term thesis project. To my great relief, he became almost as excited as I was about the potential scope of such an archive and the appropriateness of doing it on the Web as a collaborative project with another college student.

The project was accepted, and during the next year I wrote a paper about the tradeoffs and

possibilities of digital museums (http://www.lcc.gatech.edu/gallery/artcrimes/museums.html), and another on the navigation, presentation, and interface design for Art Crimes. Meanwhile Brett and I added new photos almost every week and attempted to design the site to scale up with maximum accessibility and utility.

Brett and I were adopted by Paul, our incredibly patient sysadmin, who offered to host our first mirror site and arranged for our own domain, graffiti.org. From time to time, other servers host copies of our site, for easier access in other countries, and to guard against censorship. Soon we had two copies of the site in the US, then at one time or another, one in Scotland, Australia, Italy, and now Poland. We're looking for another one now.

Art Crimes is one of the largest collaborative art projects. We couldn't have built a site this large without Georgia Tech, Paul, and other generous system administrators. Their technical help was priceless. Without the enthusistic cooperation of the writers and the technology of the Internet, we would not be able to show work from all over the globe and allow it to be viewed worldwide. We are extremely grateful to have such an opportunity.

Graffiti writers have supported our efforts because Art Crimes offers its information free to everyone and it gives the artists great exposure. Many writers are also photo collectors, and they see the need for preservation as their pictures fade. Many great photo collections have been seized and destroyed by police during the last 25 years, so the need for a new archive strategy is very clear. It is difficult and expensive to publish graffiti books and magazines, so the Web became the obvious place to answer the demand for graffiti media and information.

Graffiti writers tend to be entrepreneurial, and they do a lot of zines and other documentary projects. They've taken that energy and publishing fervor to the Web now. You can see the incredible explosion of online graffiti by browsing the comprehensive list of sites maintained by Art Crimes: <http://www.graffiti.org/index/other.html>.

New sites are coming up every day now as more writers get Internet access and learn how to make pages. Many graffiti writers got online and learned computer skills because they found out about Art Crimes and the other Internet graffiti sites and they didn't want to miss the train. Some have designed beautiful high-tech sites, demonstrating their style in a new medium. Some now design Web sites for a living.

Graffiti publications and artist's businesses have profited from the online graffiti sites through increased publicity and international business networking. Now when someone wants to have a painting event, it is possible to invite the whole world to come. Many of the graffiti events of the last few years have enjoyed a large and sometimes international attendance because of the increased awareness of upcoming shows. Graffiti gallery shows

are enjoying more traffic too, and there seems to be a renewed interest in portable graffiti-style artwork and mural installations. If someone wants a famous graffiti artist to do a commissioned work, it is now usually possible to contact the artist eventually, even if both parties live in different countries.

"Graffiti art is a performance with invisible actors," declared Katherine Albers, a long-suffering colleague of mine from Georgia Tech. Graffiti used to appear on the walls and trains, shouting in an incomprehensible language, with no one around to explain it. The artists would sometimes return to a public painting and hope to overhear comments from viewers. The Internet allows for the first time a real dialogue to take place between some of the writers and their audience. In an effort to be understood or just heard, many are writing texts explaining their views and motivations.

Information about graffiti used to be a closely guarded secret teaching. Passed from master to apprentice, the skills are very hard to acquire, and impossible to fake. Outsiders were easily identified and excluded. The history of the 25-year-old urban artform is largely an oral tradition, conveyed in a jargon that is all but opaque to outsiders. When I discovered that there is so much more to graffiti than meets the eye, that there is an international subculture totally dedicated to graffiti writing, I was very concerned about exposing the artists too much to the public. Brett and I began Art Crimes as a photo gallery with no explanations offered, in sensitivity to the secretive nature of the artists.

Then a graffiti writer (Cesar Rene Arce, 18) was shot to death in 1995 in Los Angeles by a vigilante, and the news and talk shows made the killer into an instant hero. He was touted as the citizen's answer to violent gang self-help, and the dead teenager was demonized for vandalizing public property. A bridge abutment's smooth gray surface had become more valuable than a young kid's life. We decided then to help educate the public. Graffiti lore had been a somewhat open secret since the birth of the zines and the publication of several books some 10 or 15 years before, so we felt that the time had come to fight media with media.

Despite what the news may have reported, graffiti crews are not gangs, at least not in the Crips vs. Bloods sense. Any three people who dress alike and loiter together are a "gang" by US legal standards, but the primarily peaceful and creative graffiti artists are in many ways the antithesis of drive-by civil unrest and turf disputes.

Sure, some guys talk big and paint a lot of guns, but this is swaggering machismo, not mortal danger talking. The violent imagery is also a reflection of the world we live in, painted by people who want us to think. Unlike many gangs, graffiti crews are often multiracial and sometimes multinational as well. A writer is judged by his or her originality, artistic skill, bravery, quantity, and years of effort -- not on appearance or ethnicity. At dawn, only the painting counts.

Although graffiti is done by almost every kind of person imaginable, all but one or two percent of graffiti writers are male. Many "fine" artists dabble a bit on the side, but most writing is done by kids 11-17. A small number of those who stick with graffiti after adolescence rise to worldwide fame for their style innovation, so a lot of emphasis is placed on being in it for the long haul and pushing oneself for better style and technique. Some of the older writers are entering their 40s now, so there are several generations teaching younger kids how to develop their own unique styles.

Graffiti originated on the walls and trains of New York and Philadelphia in the early 1970s, as young people tried to make their own names stand out over all the others. They wanted to become famous and to show where they'd been. Those simple first efforts evolved into the elaborate lettering and complex forms of today's "style writing" which has now spread to most countries around the world.

Each aspiring writer must invent a unique name and get it noticed by everyone else. These signatures, often done with markers, are usually referred to as "tags." After a respectable amount of time and energy has been spent perfecting the signature, many writers move on to spraypaint and develop their own lettering and painting styles. Originality and mastery are the main artistic goals.

Graffiti writing is often very competitive, and some disputes over names and who-wrote-over-whom inevitably arise. The competition for good wall space is intense in many places. Sometimes these controversies are settled with a skill (painting) battle or a brawl, but they usually end peacefully over time. The process of such competitions is described as "uplifting one's enemy through battle," because generally both writers push themselves to exceed their previous skill level in order to best the other. All onlookers are rewarded with the battle pieces, which are often spectacular efforts.

For many young graffiti writers, the crew is their family of choice, perhaps the only family they have. Graffiti is much more than art. It is a way of life and a commitment of effort, honor, respect, and solidarity. It is a survival strategy in a harsh and deadly environment. It is unregulated self-expression in an increasingly commercial society and an exuberant declaration of existence in an otherwise anonymous world. Graffiti is the streets talking to the buildings.

Graffiti Battle Crown

Tijuana, Mexico Oct 12 - 20, 1996

Graffiti artists from both sides of the border united in a friendly competition for the crown. Artists and crews painted on permanent walls throughout Tijuana, Mexico. The Department of Culture in Tijuana helped organize the event and arrange for the wallspace. The project was very much a success, and we hope to see more cities in Mexico open their walls to public art as a result. The artists were furnished with paint and housing, but they painted all the murals free of charge.

This event was organized thanks to Man One & Fuska and Maria Isabel Juárez, Dept. of Culture, Tijuana

Man One's character
from the flyer

Click any small picture for a closer view. Some larger views are also available under the "bigger" links.

"Style" in science fiction style
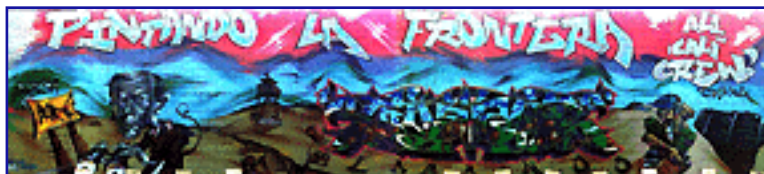by Neonski (San Francisco)
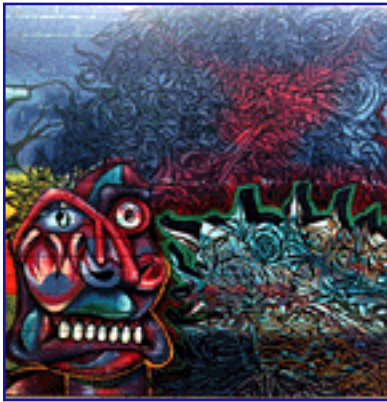

"Stet" by Phresh (Oakland)

"Wildstyle" by Crayone.TWS (San Francisco)

Asylm.SH (LA)

"Somos Hermanos (our brothers)" and character by Swank.SH (LA)

"Sacred" closeup

"Sacred" by Sacred.COI (LA) freestyle and character

"Vial" by Vyal.COI (LA)
[black line is missing image, not part of painting]

"Man" by Manone.COI (LA)

Sar.HTK (San Mateo)

See it bigger - 90k
Quake TFL, (San Francisco)

Pashe.TFL (character and "Masacr") (San Jose)

Zane & Persue (character) (San Diego)

Ses (Tucson)

See it bigger - 111k - by Nuke.UTI (LA)

Streets Talking Back:

Read Man One's account of the event. Read Crayone's report of the event. **Add your thoughts and reactions!** Write to us; be sure to indicate whether your comments **are** or **are not** meant for publication.

You may wish to paste the banner at right into your site as a pointer to this one:

Copy and paste the code below to do so.

If you have access to a printer that does 11" X 17" color printing, you may wish to download the Commemorative Poster **[D]** for this joint exhibition. Print at 72 dpi for full coverage.

<A HREF= "http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~aad/culturework/culturework.html"> <IMG SRC="http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~aad/culturework/tj/tjbanner.gif" ALT = "Image: photo of large painting by Nuke.UTI (LA), on cinder block wall. Dark reds and blues. Left to right: abstract nude female figure, moon in sky above, street lamps, lone figure walking beneath street lamps, figure of small person [boy?] with hands in pockets and facial expression of hopelessness, bearded face, red and blue calligraphy "NUKE" on flaming red background, skull facing right, UFO near two figures, figure of man with sombrero and mustache, cartoon of creature with body of rat and head of man, with bird [crow?] in mouth. Letters UTI at upper right." Copy: Graffiti Battle Crown | http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~aad/culturework/culturework.html | Tijuana Mexico | See this Now!" X-SAS-UseImageWidth X-SAS-UseImageHeight BORDER=0 ALIGN=middle></A>

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Susan Farrell, the curator and webmaster of **Art Crimes**, began the online project in 1994 as an offshoot

of her hobby as a graffiti photographer in Atlanta, Georgia. Farrell was then a master's student in Georgia Tech's Information Design and Technology program and a Research Faculty member at the Georgia Tech Research Institute. An artist herself, Susan was captivated by aerosol art and wanted to find out all about the work and the elusive graffiti artists behind it.

Back Issues:

- May, 1997. Volume 1, No. 1: A Tool for Analysis of Web Sites' Accessibility to Users with Disabilities. Douglas Blandy, Ph.D.

- July, 1997. Volume 1, No. 2: The Arts Management Employment Interview. Deborah Snider.

- November, 1997. Volume 1, No. 3: The Invisible Careers for Latinos: Public History and Museum Studies. Miguel Juarez

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CultureWorkis an electronic publication of the University of Oregon Institute for Community Arts Studies. Its mission is to provide timely workplace-oriented information on culture, the arts, education, and community.

CultureWork seeks submissions of concise (500-1500 words) critiques and advisories on community arts and the preparation of community arts workers. Graphics that express the spirit of community arts are welcome, to be published with attribution. Manuscripts should be sent in plain text format, via email, or on either Macintosh or Intel high-density 3.5 inch floppies. Send submissions to Maria Finison at mfinison@darkwing.uoregon.edu or via snailmail: care of Arts & Administration Program, School of Architecture and Allied Arts, University of Oregon, Eugene Oregon 97403. If accepted for publication, authors may be asked to make revisions.

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Editor: Richard Bear.

Editorial Assistant: Vanessa Ward.
Advisor: Dr. Douglas Blandy.

Curator for this issue: Susan Farrell.
Consultant for this issue: Travis Davison.
Comments to: mfinison@darkwing.uoregon.edu