

The Skin of the City: Graffiti and Patina

La piel de la ciudad: Graffiti y pátina

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Resumen

El estudio de los grafitis provoca opiniones muy polarizadas y plantea problemas delicados y espinosos acerca de la conservación del patrimonio. Este campo complejo e interdisciplinar exige nuevas orientaciones de investigación y nuevas metodologías capaces de proporcionar las herramientas para abordar los grafitis de forma ética y sostenible. Con este fin, un concepto muy arraigado en la teoría y la práctica de la restauración —la pátina— puede resultar fructífero para cuestionar la percepción actual de la “piel” de las arquitecturas y los objetos como símbolo de suciedad y decadencia y verla, en cambio, como una valiosa estratificación histórica. Desde el punto de vista de las ciencias naturales, los muros son más que un depósito de cultura y memoria; dado que son los espacios verticales más comunes en los entornos urbanos, ofrecen un gran potencial para mejorar la microecología y la biodiversidad de nuestras ciudades. Sugiero en el presente estudio que la pátina funciona como un concepto puente que conecta los dos mundos que cohabitan en los muros urbanos, el de la naturaleza y el de la cultura, colapsando la distinción binaria entre pátina natural y artificial, agentes humanos y no humanos.

Palabras clave

Graffiti, pátina, arte urbano, ecología urbana.

Abstract

The study of graffiti polarizes opinions and raises sensitive and thorny problems of heritage conservation. This complex interdisciplinary field calls for new directions of research and new methodologies able to provide the tools to approach graffiti in an ethical and sustainable way. To this end, a long-established concept in restoration theory and practice —patina— can prove fruitful in challenging the current perception of architectures and objects’ ‘skin’ as a symbol of dirt and decay and seeing it instead as a valuable historical layering. From the point of view of natural science, walls are more than a repository of culture and memory. As the most common vertical spaces in urban environments, they offer great potential for improving the micro-ecology and biodiversity of our cities. I here suggest that patina functions as

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The Kunsthistorisches Institut of the Universität zu Köln (Abteilung Architekturgeschichte) is planning a research project addressing contemporary graffiti from a multidisciplinary perspective. The project proposes an integrated approach combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies, theory and fieldwork, micro and macro scales, natural sciences (conservation science, biology, urban ecology) and humanities (history, archaeology, art history, sociology, ethnography, environmental humanities). Aesthetic, ecological, and sociological issues complement the conservation aspects, and the investigation of historical contexts and case studies from the past helps to frame the subject and provide references and comparisons. Participants include scholars, (graffiti) artists, conservation authorities, and citizens, who engage in a fruitful dialogue on the topics of the project.

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a bridging concept that connects the two worlds cohabiting on urban walls, that of nature and that of culture, collapsing the binary distinction between natural and artificial patina, human and non-human agents.

Key words

Graffiti, Patina, Urban Art, Urban Ecology.

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Graffiti

From prehistoric cave drawings through remains from the pre-modern period to the street art of today, the practice of graffiti has a vivid and uninterrupted global history. As a relatively young and inherently interdisciplinary field of research, graffiti is finally gaining traction as an area of serious academic study. In recent decades, interest in graffiti in its many forms and in its historical, political, and sociological dimensions has grown exponentially, as has the specialized literature on the subject. Disciplines as diverse as art history, archaeology, history, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, epigraphy, as well as the art market and art criticism have all found the sedimentation of signs on walls and the counterculture of graffiti to be an immense source of study, interpretation, and exhibition. Even though (city) walls have always been the site of expression and communication, today, street art along with graffiti is everywhere. Despite attempts to distinguish the illegal practice of graffiti from institutionalized street art, there is no clear differentiation between the two.¹ Many other questions also remain unanswered and many problems unsolved, especially in the field of conservation: *Is graffiti art or politics? Is it free expression or vandalism? Is it an archive or a crime – or an archive of crimes?*²

Graffiti is controversial. It is seen by many as an urban problem in cities around the world.³ Whereas the historical instances of graffiti

¹ In his study on the transformation of graffiti and street art in London between 2005 and 2017, Rafael Schacter argues that *while in 2005 street art was quite clearly a post-graffiti practice, a form whose practitioners were grounded in the ethical and conceptual prerequisites of graffiti, (...) by 2015 street art had metamorphosed into something radically other, into a clearly capitalised, institutionalized 'Street Art', a form set in diametric opposition to its progenitor.* According to him, the terminological distinction between graffiti and street art is not fluid anymore. Instead, there is a clear separation between the two terms. SCHACTER, R., "From Pollution to Purity: The Transformation of Graffiti and Street Art in London (2005-17)", in Tilley, C. (ed.), *London's Urban Landscape. Another Way of Telling*, London, UCL Press, 2019, pp. 403-425, espec. p. 411.

² SAMMOND, N. and CREADICK, A., "The Writing on the Wall: Learning and Teaching Graffiti", *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, 24, 1-2, 2014, pp. 138-154, espec. p. 138.

³ In an article devoted to the effects of anti-graffiti coating reads: *The protection against graffiti has become a serious problem in most cities. Unfortunately such form of vandalism does not save the cultural*

have generally been recognized as valuable sources of information and documentation,⁴ contemporary graffiti remains largely ignored, criminalized, and equated with vandalism and urban decay. Unless it is a work by a famous artist, it is usually considered uninteresting, is removed and its author sanctioned, sentenced, or even killed.⁵ Even though the conservation of urban art is an established area of academic research,⁶ there is still no agreement on the conceptualization of graffiti as heritage and especially on conservation policies. There are those who want to erase it, those who want to protect it, and those who want to detach it from its environment as an object to exhibit or commercialize.

Similarly, there is no consensus regarding the value of graffiti, even within the same city, as evidenced by inconsistent attitudes. The ambivalent, even contradictory positions taken towards work by artists such as Klaus Paier (whose graffiti is removed or neglected in Cologne and preserved in Aachen) [fig. 1], and Harald Naegeli (who was awarded an art prize and prosecuted for the same graffiti created in Zurich in 2020) [fig. 2], are telling examples in this regard.⁷ Paradoxically, *while anti-graffiti*



Fig. 1. Klaus Paier, mural, *Liebespaar*, Aachen, 1980. Photo: Regina Weinkauf.

heritage (GOIDANICH, S. *et al.*, "Effects of Wax-based Anti-graffiti on Copper Patina Composition and Dissolution During Four Years of Outdoor Urban Exposure", *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 11, 3, 2010, pp. 288-296, Abstract).

⁴ On historical graffiti as sources, see for example: LOHMANN, P. (ed.), *Historische Graffiti als Quellen. Methoden und Perspektiven eines jungen Forschungsbereichs*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2018; and FIUME, G., "Soundless Screams. Graffiti and Drawings in the Prisons of the Holy Office in Palermo", Franz Steiner Verlag, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 21, 3, 2017, pp. 188-215.

⁵ An article published on *The Guardian* in 2018 reports on the killing of two graffiti artists in São Paulo. PHILLIPS, D., "São Paulo: Taggers Killed for Their Art Show Dangers of City's Graffiti Culture", *The Guardian* (1 August 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/01/brazil-graffiti-artist-sao-paulo>, (last access: 21 February 2024).

⁶ An issue of the *Street Art & Urban Creativity Journal* is devoted to contemporary challenges in the conservation of graffiti and street art (*Intangible Heritage, SAUC*, 3, 1, 2017).

⁷ Klaus Paier was a German graffiti artist known as 'Aachener Wandmaler'. On the initiative of the former Mayor of Aachen, Kurt Malangré, the famous graffiti *Liebespaar* was placed under

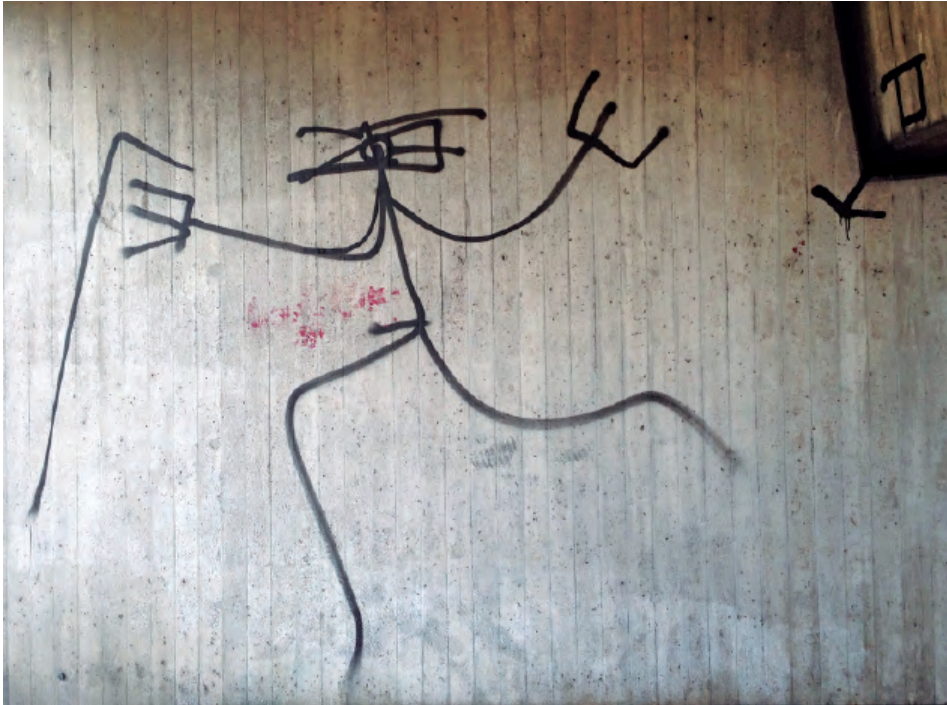


Fig. 2. Harald Naegeli, graffiti, Parkplatz Neusser Straße, Düsseldorf, 2017. Photo: Julia2812.

policy and campaigns struggle to clean city walls, institutions fight to ‘preserve’ street artworks.⁸

The study and preservation of graffiti has much to gain from strengthening its methodological bases. New approaches can help frame the

monument protection in 2011. See: SILBERER, E., “Klaus Paiers Graffiti in Aachen unter Denkmalschutz. Illegal, aber Kunst”, *NRW-Kultur*, 3 May 2011, https://www.nw.de/nachrichten/kultur/kultur/4438966_Klaus-Paiers-Graffiti-in-Aachen-unter-Denkmalerschutz.html, (last access: 21 February 2024). On Paier, see: KRÜCKEN, M., “Wer war Klaus Paier? Eine Annäherung an der Aachener Wandmaler”, *Denkmalpflege im Rheinland*, 28, 2011, pp. 40-41; and DUBNER, A. (ed.), *Die Wandbilder von Klaus Paier in Aachen und Köln*, Aachen, Druck Sieprath GmbH, 2023. Harald Naegeli is a Swiss artist known as the ‘Sprayer of Zurich’. Naegeli’s work was controversial: intellectuals and artists recognized the artistic value of his graffiti, but the Swiss authorities condemned it as illegal defacement of property. In 1983 he was arrested and spent six months in prison. Today he is a recognized and valued artist, to whose work the Museum Schnütgen in Cologne has dedicated an exhibition in 2022 (WOELK, M. (ed.), *Harald Naegeli in Köln. Sprayer und Zeichner*, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2022). On the prize received for the graffiti series realized during the Covid-19 lockdown, see: BÜHLER, U., “Einst geschmäht, nun gepriesen: der Sprayer von Zürich nimmt den Kunstpreis der Stadt entgegen – und deren hochhoffiziellen Dank für seine ‘Geschenke’”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 26 September 2020, <https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/der-sprayer-von-zuerich-wird-mit-dem-kunstpreis-geehrt-ld.1578349>, (last access: 21 February 2024).

⁸ GATTI, G., “Toxiccape: An Epistemological Approach to Graffiti through American Narrative Cinema”, *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*, 8, 1, 2017, pp. 23-36, espec. p. 24.

questions and provide guidelines, priorities and a set of criteria to deal with graffiti beyond the contraposition art/vandalism.⁹ This article contributes to bridging the gap between heritage studies and conservation practice by addressing what Tim Winter calls *the uneasy relationship that currently exists between social science and humanities-based approaches to heritage and the professional conservation sector oriented by a scientific materialism*.¹⁰ To this end, I seek to link the *sociology of the wall*¹¹ with conservation science by looking at the walls themselves through an interdisciplinary lens that is at once humanistic and scientific. My hope is that a shift in understanding of the deep entanglements of natural and artificial layers on wall surfaces will open a more productive dialogue with the conservation sector and provide a different critical perspective on the graffiti discourse. An interdisciplinary approach is much needed, not only to address graffiti, but also to face other complex challenges of our contemporary urban environments.

From a purely quantitative point of view, are the thousands of square meters of graffiti in our cities a ‘toxicscape’¹² – or rather a valuable cultural patrimony? [fig. 3]. Should we consider graffiti a heritage to be preserved or should we remove it as something that damages the buildings and the image of our cities? Obviously, the answer depends on the interests and values attached to it. So far, heritage institutions and conservation authorities have been mostly concerned with methods of removal and prevention, i. e., with erasure techniques or ways to protect monuments, such as anti-graffiti coatings. Graffiti can also disappear on its own, in keeping with the ephemeral nature of this art. In a few cases, it is actively preserved and even restored.¹³ Over time, this social practice has undergone different and controversial developments, gradually becoming recognized as street art. Although forms of occupation and

⁹ COLOMBINI, A., “The Duality of Graffiti: Is it Vandalism or Art?”, *CeROArt*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ceroart.5745>, (last access: 21 February 2024).

¹⁰ WINTER, T., “Clarifying the Critical in Critical Heritage Studies”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 19 (6), 2013, pp. 532-545, espec. p. 532.

¹¹ BOZORGIAN, A. and VAHDATI, M., “Sociology of the Wall. Rereading Iran’s Contemporary Political History through Murals”, in CO3 Cologne (ed.), *The City is Us - Tehran/Cologne*, Bönen, Druckerei Kettler, 2022, pp. 7-9.

¹² On graffiti as epistemological objects and the concept of ‘toxicscape’ as ideological use of graffiti aesthetics in visual communication, see G. Gatti (footnote 8).

¹³ Spanish graffiti artist Muelle, who died in 1995 at age 29, became popular for the tags he spread on the walls of Madrid. In 2016, the students of the Escuela Superior de Conservación y Restauración de Bienes Culturales de Madrid carried out the restoration of a tag by Muelle located in Calle Montera as part of the training in the specialty of protection and conservation of contemporary mural painting: *Conservando MUELLE*, <https://conservandomuelle.wordpress.com/>, (last access: 21 February 2024). The graffiti sprayed by Harald Naegeli without permission on the portal of the former Caecilienkirche in Cologne was also ‘legitimized’ by a restoration (see STAHL, J., “The Questions from the Walls and the Answers to Them”, in *The City is Us...*, *op. cit.*, 11, p. 6, footnote 11).



Fig. 3. Hannover, graffiti, Ihme-Zentrum, 2021. Photo: RaBoe.



Fig. 4. Munich, MUCA - Museum of Urban and Contemporary Art, 2017. Photo: Rufus46.

claiming of public space through graffiti still exist, we are now witnessing various processes of domestication and musealization through commissions, festivals, and exhibitions [fig. 4].

Recent studies, following different disciplinary approaches,¹⁴ are increasingly interested in the role that these traces play in the historical, social and political production of space, whereby graffiti can transform an abstract space (or non-place) into an anthropological place, by introducing relationships, meanings, and histories.¹⁵ Graffiti are living matter that ignore or challenge architectural, spatial, and power structures, proposing an alternative (dis)order¹⁶ – often with a political intent. With reference to the protests that broke out in Istanbul in 2013, Christiane Gruber speaks of the Gezi movement's graffiti as *highly visible agents for resistant place-making*, sustaining a multitude of dissenting individuals.¹⁷ Graffiti permeates *landscapes of contestation*¹⁸ in different times and places, from the Arab Spring to the feminist movement in Spain¹⁹ and Mexico.²⁰ The debate around the conservation of the Column of Independence in Mexico City, contested from a feminist angle, has revolved around the possibilities for layers (of graffiti) to be added and preserved in the urban landscape as the evidence of shifts in collective memory.²¹

A practice always threatened with erasure, graffiti challenges authority, social order, and forms of control. In its subversive and illegal nature, it embodies civil disobedience and political protest, escaping power structures and proposing alternative meanings. It is the testimony of lost voices, the self-determination of minorities and subalternities, offering a counter-hegemonic narrative in the urban landscape. It questions difficult heritage, interacts with architecture and monuments, and can transform

¹⁴ In their analysis of the graffiti left by the punk group Sex Pistols in their London flat, Paul Graves-Brown and John Schofield explored and recorded these signs using the methodology of the archaeology of the contemporary past. According to them, *the fact that the graffiti could be considered rude, offensive and uncomfortable merely enhances their status and significance* (GRAVES-BROWN, P. and SCHOFIELD, J., "The Filth and the Fury: 6 Denmark Street (London) and the Sex Pistols", *Antiquity*, 85, 330, 2011, pp. 1385-1401, espec. p. 1385).

¹⁵ See FALÉTRA, M., *Graffiti. Poetiche della rivolta*, Milan, Postmedia Books, 2015.

¹⁶ SCHACTER, R., *Ornament and Order. Graffiti, Street Art and the Parergon*, Burlington, Routledge, 2014. See also: DAL LAGO, A. and GIORDANO, S., *Graffiti. Arte e ordine pubblico*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2016.

¹⁷ GRUBER, C., "Gezi Graffiti: Shout-Outs to Resistance and Rebellion in Contemporary Turkey", in Ragazzoli, C., Harmanşah, Ö., Salvador, C. and Frood, E. (eds.), *Scribbling through History. Graffiti, Places and People from Antiquity to Modernity*, London/New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, pp. 83-94, espec. p. 84.

¹⁸ *Idem*.

¹⁹ BIEL IBÁÑEZ, P., "Public Space and Urban Art in Spain. Walls in Conflict and the Feminist Movement", in Cianciolo Cosentino, G. et al., *Graffiti Art in Prison*, forthcoming 2024.

²⁰ BUENTELLO GARCÍA, M.ª E. D. and QUINN RICE, J., "Gender Debates on the Stage of the Urban Memorial: Glitter, Graffiti, and Bronze", *Landscape Research*, 48, 5, 2023, pp. 647-661.

²¹ *Idem*.

them in counter-monuments.²² Finally, this (sub)cultural heritage of our contemporary society represents a right to speak, a non-negotiable freedom against authoritarianism.

Patina

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard compared graffiti-making to tattooing, identifying the city with the body. Without tattooing, he argues, the body is naked and expressionless. Similarly, by tattooing walls graffiti artists *free them from architecture and turn them once again into living, social matter*.²³ Graffiti show to posterity how people interacted with their living environment. It is a trace, a testimony, a historical incrustation, a ‘protective skin’ saving the city from gentrification and capitalistic exploitation (or contributing to it through marketing actions). The first question I consider in this article is whether graffiti can be thought of in terms of the patina that John Ruskin once praised as essential to the meaning of architecture. The second is, if so, what this comparison entails. Conservation authorities include both —graffiti and patina— within the list of deterioration factors of buildings, however in two different categories: ‘biological patina’ and ‘vandalic graffiti’.²⁴ But can they really be separated? Considering the layer that covers the wall surfaces as the result of environmental influences and social practices, we can overcome the distinction between natural and artificial and propose an analogy or even correspondence between graffiti and patina, both emanations of the past and a repository of memory and nature.

Ruskin believed that patina was evidence of an object’s history, or the way it had interacted with its environment over time. For him, the beauty of patina lay in its ability to reveal traces of the past and to testify to the life and material individuality of a building. He was particularly interested in the patina of architectural structures, which unveiled the natural, social, and cultural forces that had shaped them over the centuries [figs. 5-6]:

²² In recent decades, counter-monuments have emerged as a new critical practice challenging traditional notions of monumentality and collective memory. Graffiti are often adopted as strategies to contest existing monuments and the values they represent. They provoke critical reflection, stimulate dialogue, and confront uncomfortable past.

²³ BAUDRILLARD, J., *Kool Killer or the Insurrection of Signs*, ed. by Les partisans du moindre effort, 2005 (1993), p. 36, <https://lpdme.org/projects/jeanbaudrillard/koolkiller.pdf>, (last access: 21 February 2024).

²⁴ MATTEUZZI, E., “Il degrado delle superfici di architettura secondo la norma UNI 11182. Riconoscere e classificare le forme di degrado dei materiali lapidei naturali e artificiali”, *Teknoring*, 7, June 2022, <https://www.teknoring.com/guide/guide-architettura/il-degrado-delle-superfici-di-architettura-secondo-la-norma-uni-11182/>, (last access: 21 February 2024).



Fig. 5. John Ruskin, study of the marble inlaying on the front of the Casa Loredan, Venice, watercolor, 1845. Photo: Wikipedia.



Fig. 6. John Ruskin, decoration by disks on the front of Palazzo Badoari, Venice (from: *The Stones of Venice, vol. 1, The Foundations*, Londres, 1906, pl. 8).

It is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture; and it is not until a building has assumed this character, till it has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, till its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the shadows of death, that its existence, more lasting as it is than that of the natural objects of the world around it, can be gifted with even so much as these possess, of language and of life.²⁵

In his environmental thinking, his sense of the relationship between patina and human experience, and his interest in ecological holism and conservation issues, Ruskin offered a radically modern approach to the study of patina and to the understanding of heritage.²⁶

Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, too, focused his attention on the superficial patina and traces of age on artifacts and buildings. In *Der moderne Denkmalkultus* (1903), regarded as a manifesto of modern conser-

²⁵ RUSKIN, J., *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1849, p. 155.

²⁶ Ruskin is regarded as a pivotal figure in ecological thinking. On Ruskin's early environmental approach, see for example FROST, M., "Reading Nature: John Ruskin, Environment, and the Ecological Impulse", in Mazzeno, L. W. and Morrison, R. D. (eds.), *Victorian Writers and the Environment. Ecocritical Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2016, pp. 13-18.

vation theory, he argued that cultural heritage possesses —among other values— what he called age-value (*Alterswert*), visible in the signs of aging (imperfections, incompleteness, tendency to dissolution) produced by *nature working over time*.²⁷ The *disintegrating effects of nature forces*, part of the cycle of growth and decay of organisms, Riegl assigns equal status to *the creative rule of man*.²⁸ Since then, age-value and signs of decay (including patina) have been considered constitutive elements of cultural heritage.

In 1963, under the heading ‘restoration’ in the *Enciclopedia Universale dell’Arte*, Cesare Brandi’s thoughts on patina were codified in the slogan: ‘No to the removal of patina.’ Brandi argued that the preservation of patina, the layer that matter acquires over time, *is not only desirable, but peremptorily required*.²⁹ Carlota Santabárbara observes that *patina is attributed immaterial values, beyond the physical traces that time imprints on the works. These physical changes in the material imply an intangible dimension of historicity, science and emotional values*.³⁰ Today, patina is still critically valued as a form of visuality and authenticity. Since it has long been a key concept in restoration theory and practice, I suggest that it can be productively deployed as a methodological tool for evaluating graffiti.³¹

First, the concept of patina must be extended from the object (archaeological, artistic, architectural) to the context (the city, the urban environment).³² Secondly, the binary distinction between natural and artificial patina, human and non-human agents must be collapsed. In fact, they are not separable: pollution, the black patina of dust and dirt, is natural, but it also has a human cause, as the research and exhibition project by Jorge Otero-Pailos (*The Ethics of Dust*, 2016) demonstrated

²⁷ RIEGL, A., “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and its Origin”, translated by Karin Bruckner with Karen Williams, in Stanley Price, N. *et al.* (eds.), *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, Los Angeles, Los Angeles Getty Conservation Institute, 1996, pp. 69-83, espec. p. 73.

²⁸ *Idem*.

²⁹ BRANDI, C., “Restauro”, in *Enciclopedia Universale dell’Arte*, vol. XI, Venice/Rome, Istituto Collaborazione Culturale, 1963, pp. 322-332 (in *Conversaciones... con Cesare Brandi y Giulio Carlo Argan*, 7, June 2019, pp. 12-29, espec. p. 24). See also BRANDI, C., *Restoration Theory and Practice*, ed. by Giuseppe Basile, digital edition 2015 (2013).

³⁰ SANTABÁRBARA MORERA, C., “Cesare Brandi and Contemporary Art: Theory, Aesthetic and Restoration. A Tempestuous Dialectic”, in *Conversaciones... con Cesare Brandi y Giulio Carlo Argan*, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-266, espec. p. 263.

³¹ On the concept of patina, see: MOSTAFAVI, M. and LEATHERBARROW, D., *On Weathering. The Life of Buildings in Time*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1993; BRACHERT, T., *Patina. Von Nutzen und Nachteil der Restaurierung*, Munich, Callwey, 1995; KOLLER, M., “Patina, Alterswert und Schmutz. Ein historischer Exkurs und Begriffsdefinitionen”, *Restauro*, 119, 2013, pp. 23-26 and GLANZER, I. and MATYSSEK, A., *Patina. Spuren der Vergangenheit in der Kunst der Gegenwart*, Munich, Edition Metzler, 2023.

³² MENDES ZANCHETTI, S. *et al.*, “The Patina of the City”, *City & Time*, 2, 2006, pp. 11-22. In this paper the authors propose a reflection on patina in urban conservation and revitalization, understanding patina as the effect left by the passage of time on the external surfaces of urban elements and on social practices.



Fig. 7. Jorge Otero-Pailos, *The Ethics of Dust*, photomontage (from: EBERSBERGER, D. and ZYMAN, D., *Jorge Otero-Pailos, The Ethics of Dust*, Cologne, 2009, p. 69).

[fig. 7].³³ Adam Phillips suggests that the powerful installation by Otero-Pailos —preserving and displaying the patina of the Doge’s Palace in Venice— foregrounds the moral and aesthetic status of stains, which are integral to our histories.³⁴ Rafael Schachter’s definition of graffiti as ‘pollution’ makes also clear the entanglement of graffiti, patina, natural and human actions on walls and other surfaces as well as its perception and societal acceptance (or rejection).³⁵

Similarly, man-made graffiti mix with natural traces of decay, moss, lichen, and vegetation, in a unique palimpsest of organic and inorganic remains. Observing walls, we notice that graffiti colonizes empty surfaces

³³ OTERO-PAILOS, J., *The Ethics of Dust: Doge’s Palace*, Venice, 2009, exhibition in the Corderie dell’Arsenale, 53rd Venice Art Biennale 2009; and EBERSBERGER, E. and ZYMAN, D. (eds.), *Jorge Otero-Pailos, The Ethics of Dust*, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2009.

³⁴ PHILLIPS, A., “Sustaining Stains”, in Ebersberger, E., Zyman, D. (eds.), *Jorge Otero-Pailos...*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

³⁵ SCHACHTER, R., “From Pollution to Purity...”, *op. cit.* (footnote 1).



Fig. 8. Venice, wall with graffiti, 2023.
Photo: Gabriella Cianciolo Cosentino.

just as nature takes over abandoned places. Like plants and mushrooms in nature, tags and murals proliferate and spread in our cities, escaping control and censorship. Borrowing Johannes Stahl's metaphor, we can say that the walls not only reflect the *political microclimate* of a city,³⁶ but also its *natural microclimate*, and between the political and the natural there is not a dichotomy but an inseparable relationship. In short, I suggest that the graffiti studies be pushed towards scientific disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches, such as that of urban ecology, which considers the inseparable blend of human culture and natural forces [figs. 8-10].

Beginning in the 1930s and culminating in the publication of a book of photographs in the 1960s, in the series *Graffiti* the Hungarian photographer Brassai depicted close-ups of signs carved and painted on walls in Paris. Blurring the distinction between painted graffiti and accidental, abstract marks, Brassai used powerful visual juxtapositions to create a dialogue between graffiti and the cracks and signs of deterioration that occur naturally over time [fig. 11]. An inextricable network of signs gives life to images, symbols, and languages, which Brassai entitles *Propositions of the Wall (Die Wand als Anregerin)*.³⁷ For him the wall was a liminal space, a shadowy zone with uncertain boundaries where the 'propositions' of nature and man's 'dispositions' meet halfway.³⁸ This landmark publication shows that from the earliest steps in the study and record of graffiti, the patina is present as a microcosm of natural and human forces, mechanical and chemical actions *attacking the soft, grainy plaster*: rain, frost, smoke, mold, lichen, layers of paint, children's scribbles, letters, and brushstrokes.³⁹

³⁶ STAHL, J., "The Questions from the Walls...", *op. cit.*, p. 5 (footnote 13).

³⁷ BRASSAI, *Graffiti. Zwei Gespräche mit Picasso*, Stuttgart, Belsler Verlag, 1960, pp. 15-18.

³⁸ DICKINSON, J., "The Writings on the Wall: An Abc of Historical and Contemporary Graffiti", in Sarmiento, C. (ed.), *Popular and Visual Culture: Design, Circulation and Consumption*, Cambridge, Ricardo Campos, 2014, pp. 39-58, espec. p. 44.

³⁹ *Alle Elemente wirken ein und fallen den weichen, körnigen Verputz an. Die Fröste zeren, die Hitzen dehnen ihn, die Feuchtigkeit bläht ihn auf. Wind, Rauch, Gase, Regen fräsen ihn mit Ruß und Staub. Die Farbe fängt*



Fig. 9. Cologne, wall with graffiti, 2023. Photo: Gabriella Cianciolo Cosentino.



*Fig. 10. Tehran, wall with graffiti, 2012. Photo: Keywan Karimi
(from: The City is Us - Tehran/Cologne, exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 2022, pp. 8-9).*



Fig. 11a/b. Paris, wall with graffiti (from: Brassä, Zwei Gespräche mit Picasso, Stuttgart, 1960, pp. 74-75).



*Fig. 12. William Kentridge, Triumphs and Laments, mural, Rome, 2016.
Photo: Kentridge Studio, <https://www.kentridge.studio/projects/triumphs-and-laments/>.*

Many forms of graffiti use patina, vegetation, and decay as a medium, such as William Kentridge's monumental frieze in Rome (*Triumphs and Laments*, 2016), realized along the Tiber River through the subtraction of patina [fig. 12], the large-scale portraits by Portuguese street artist Vihls [fig. 13], which are scratched and carved on surfaces, or the so-called 'moss graffiti', made by growing moss on walls [fig. 14]. In short, graffiti and patina are an inextricable unit of human-imposed signs and natural-temporal decay on the surfaces of buildings and on the city's walls and corners. Of course, graffiti, unlike patina, reflects subjectivity and intentionality, but paradoxically this does not make it more valuable than a 'natural' patina.⁴⁰

What are the implications of this graffiti-patina parallel for the heritage discourse? Patina is an important concept in both the sciences and the humanities. In the natural sciences, patina refers to the layer that develops on the surface of various materials over time as a result of exposure to environmental factors or chemical reactions. This layer can provide important insights into environmental processes and can be a valuable source of biodiversity in its own right. In the social sciences, patina is understood as the accumulation of experience and cultural influences over time that reflects political situations and social structures and provides a lens through which to explore historical narratives and cultural dynamics.

From the point of view of the natural science, the walls are more than a repository of culture and memory. As the most common vertical spaces in urban environments, they offer great potential for improving the micro-ecology and biodiversity of our cities.⁴¹ Concrete, brick and stone walls are habitats for spontaneous flora and a valuable complement to small-scale urban greening.⁴² In their *informal, precarious, and transitory*⁴³

an abzublättern, frühere Farbschichten schimmern durch. Wasserrinnale siedeln Schimmel, Flechten, Wachstum an. (...) Es bedarf nur noch, um das ‚Bild‘ zu vollenden, der zufälligen Kerben, des Kindergkritzels, wuchtiger Pinselhebe, Buchstabengeschmiere und hängengebliebene Plakatfetzen. Dieses verschwenderische Hin und Her, Aktion und Reaktion, mechanische und chemische, unterwirft die Wand einer Reihe von Zustandsänderungen, die an die der Erdkruste erinnern, die sie während Jahrzehntausenden erlitten hat: Basaltausbrüchen, Faltungen, Auswaschungen und Anschwemmungen. Wenn auch Gebild der Menschenhand, kann doch die Mauer ihren tellurischen Bezug nie verleugnen (BRASSAI, Graffiti..., op. cit., pp. 17-18, footnote 37).

⁴⁰ There are studies of anti-graffiti systems that protect the patina of surfaces with cultural or historical relevance. In other words, the value of patina has been recognized for at least a century, while graffiti struggles to find acceptance and recognition (GOIDANICH, S. *et al.*, "Effects of Wax-based...", *op. cit.*, footnote 3).

⁴¹ FRANCIS, R. A., "Wall Ecology: A Frontier for Urban Biodiversity and Ecological Engineering", *Progress in Physical Geography*, 35, 1, 2010, pp. 43-63.

⁴² Recent studies provide evidence of the high value of urban greenery from an urban ecosystem perspective, including for sustainability and climate adaptation (BOEHNKE, D. *et al.*, "Mapping Urban Green and its Ecosystem Services at Microscale. A Methodological Approach for Climate", *Sustainability*, 14, July 2022, pp. 1-26).

⁴³ CHEN, C. *et al.*, "Walls Offer Potential to Improve Urban Biodiversity", *Scientific Reports*, 10 (1), 2020, p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-66527-3>, (last access: 21 February 2024).



Fig. 13. Vhils, Alcântara (Lisbon), mural, 2015. Photo: Bosc d'Anjou.



Fig. 14. Łódź (Poland), Forest Trails of Nature, moss graffiti, 2015. Photo: Zorro2212.

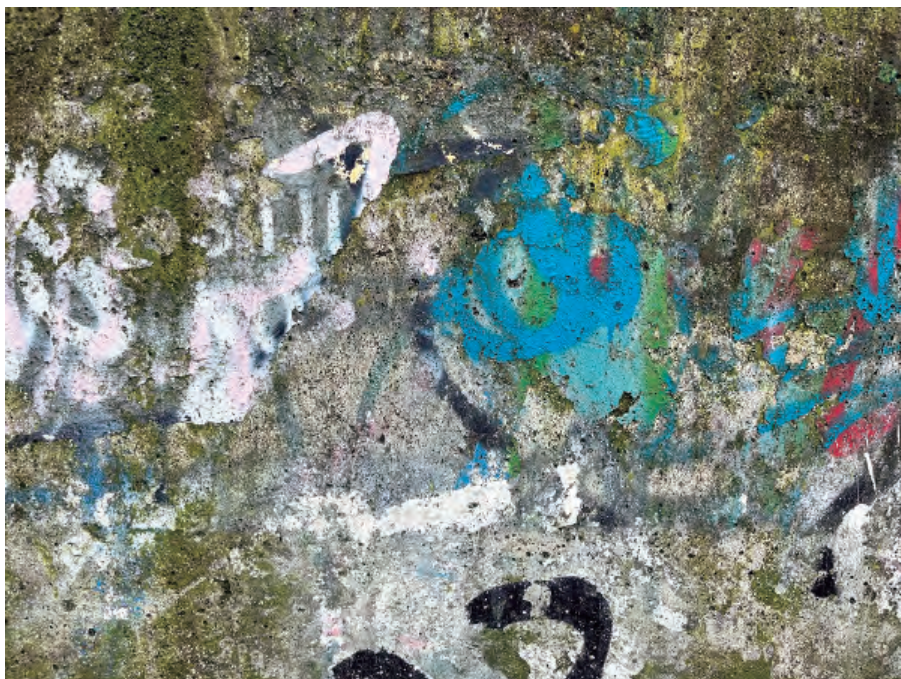


Fig. 15a/b. Cologne, wall with graffiti, 2023. Photo: Gabriella Cianciolo Cosentino.



Fig. 16. Cologne, wall with graffiti, 2023.
Photo: Gabriella Cianciolo Cosentino.

character, they are a form of wall colonization similar to graffiti. Like these *silently growing species*, graffiti serves as a vibrant expression of urban diversity. Considering these vertical surfaces as the intersection of the activities of different agents, both human and non-human—a patina of age, a palimpsest of letters and colors, a labyrinth of accidental signs, a microcosm of organisms and vegetation [figs. 15-16]— can contribute to the ongoing discourse on the need for a new urban ecology and to a more inclusive, socially diverse interpretation of heritage. *The task we face is not how to eliminate these plants, but rather how to manage them to increase their ecological, social, and aesthetic values.*⁴⁴

The same logic can be applied to graffiti; patina functions as the concept that connects the two worlds cohabiting on urban walls, that of nature and that of culture.

⁴⁴ DEL TREDICI, P., “Spontaneous Urban Vegetation: Reflections of Change in a Globalized World”, *Nature and Culture*, 5, 3, 2010, pp. 299-315, espec. p. 311.