

ABSTRACT

The Permanent Impermanence Project: What Role Can Museums Play in Street Art and Graffiti?

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Street art and graffiti in the public conscience is a topic that is often left out of academic journals. The need to find a way to preserve this art form is the key concept at the heart of this project. While online documentation plays a significant role in this process, I am primarily interested in the possible role of the museum in the preservation process. Even though I am advocating museum involvement in the world of street art and graffiti, I am in no way suggesting that the process is as simple as taking the work off of the streets and putting it into a “sterile, disinfected gallery or a restrictive museum.” The context of this art form is as important as the actual content. That being said, museum professionals have certain skills and backgrounds that can help the street art and graffiti community grow and further connect with the culture and environment around them. To do this though will require a rethinking of what it means to be a museum.

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THE PERMANENT IMPERMANENCE PROJECT:
WHAT ROLE CAN MUSEUMS PLAY IN STREET ART AND GRAFFITI?

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Thank you to all of the individuals who took time out of their
busy schedules to talk with me. Without your help this wouldn't have been possible.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This entire project was started because of a single article in a 2013 publication of *Art Education*. It was a short, three-page piece, but it completely changed the way that I looked at an entire art form. Written by Los Angeles street artist Morley, the article discussed the way that he just wanted to bring some element of joy and comradery to the daily grind of the people in the community. As he put it, “My work may not change the world, but if it helps someone summon the strength to face just one more day, maybe that’s worth the gallon of paint it takes the city to cover it up. I’d like to think so.”¹ Morley’s comments made me realize that not all of these “vandals” fit into the gang or juvenile delinquent profile. Some of them really understood their surroundings and wanted to further interact with the people around them. This sense of community was an aspect of the article that particularly resonated with me. Having a more intimate view of the museum and gallery world of art, I understood their dissatisfaction with the disconnect between the public and these institutions. Morley himself said it best: “This was art by and for the people. It didn’t have to be crafted in a studio by an artist deemed professional by the hallowed white walls of a sterile, disinfected gallery or a restrictive museum keeping you 6 feet from the work at all times; it could come from anyone with something to say and the balls to say it.”²

¹ Morley, “I Put That There,” *Art Education*, 2013, 31–33.

² Ibid.



Figure 1: Morley

The need to find a way to preserve this art form is at the heart of this project. Librarian Michael DeNotto describes a need for the curation of the images of the works and provides a number of online platforms to do this.³ I am suggesting that we have to take this concept and push it one step further. The distribution and collection of images online is an important element, but there needs to be some level of involvement on the streets as well. While online documentation plays a significant role in this process, I am primarily interested in the possible role of the museum in the preservation process. Even though I am advocating museum involvement in the world of street art and graffiti, I am in no way suggesting that the process is as simple as taking the work off the streets and putting it into a “sterile, disinfected gallery or a restrictive museum.” The context of this art form is as important as the actual content. That being said, museum professionals

³ Michael DeNotto, “Street Art and Graffiti,” *College & Research Libraries News* 75, no. 4 (April 2014): 208–11.

have certain skills and backgrounds that can help the street art and graffiti community grow and further connect with the culture and environment around them. To do this though will require a rethinking of what it means to be a museum.

To be clear, this thesis is not about the differences between street art and graffiti or whether these forms of expression should be considered art. Other scholars have tackled these issues. For the purposes of this article, I will refer to the individuals who create street art and graffiti as artists. This project is also not about the history of street art and graffiti, although it is important to have a basic understanding of the art form. As I got into the project, I quickly began to realize that the world of street art and graffiti is a much more complicated than I originally anticipated, but this is the spirit out of which the project grew.

In the next generation, I believe that we will continue to see a shift in the popularity of this genre and public interest in it. As the founding generation of this art form grow older and shift to other pursuits, it will be up to the next generation to decide how they want to approach the streets as well as a growingly interested audience. Art, especially public art, has great power to change community environment and make people take notice of what's going on in the world around them. This is why it is important to document this artistic public response to our cultural environment before it is gone forever.

I used a variety of research methods to better understand the preservation needs of street art and graffiti. I began with traditional academic research, but I found that the most useful sources were online. Very few traditional academic sources dealt with the

artists themselves or the practicality of what the outdoor nature meant for their work. I found the general Internet, news sources and resources that had been created by the artists themselves to be more informative because these articles and websites tend to have a more current perspective of what is actually going on in the streets. This course of research led me to narrow my focus specifically on Houston, Texas. In an attempt to gain further insight into the current situation of the city as well as what the artists themselves want, I decided to conduct artist interviews.

CHAPTER TWO

The Artists and Their Work

I began the interview process by creating a basic website, *The Permanent Impermanence Project*, that I could show prospective interview candidates so they could better understand what the project was all about and to begin the process of documenting the street art and graffiti of Houston.⁴ This entailed a great deal of text writing, website formatting, and most time-consuming of all, picture taking. I spent several days driving and walking around Houston attempting to take in as much of the existing street art that I could. While I am sure that I missed a lot of it, I eventually collected enough pictures from the main spots that I felt comfortable taking the next step forward. It was also at this time that I decided to also document the areas where graffiti had been covered up with grey paint. It wasn't until I was focused on what was on the walls that I realized how prevalent and generally unattractive these "buffed" areas were.

The next step was to compile a list of artists that I wanted to contact. While this does not sound difficult, it became very overwhelming very quickly. I began by going through all of the pictures I had taken and using as many names as I could identify from them. I then watched *Stick 'Em Up*, a documentary focused primarily on wheat paste art in Houston, and used it as another source of names.⁵⁶ From there I scoured the Internet,

⁴ <http://thepiphouston.wix.com/home>

⁵ Alex Luster, *Stick Em Up!*, 2011.

trying to find as many contacts as I could for these artists. Some were easier to find than others, but I ultimately became more involved in their work in the process. These steps also led me down various paths that led me to discover other artists. It was fascinating to see a web beginning to appear as I clicked through this virtual rabbit hole. I recognized at this point that I was not just dealing with individual artists, but a community. I ultimately received about 10 responses in total, or about 50% of the individuals that I contacted.



Figure 2: Example of Wheat Paste Art That is Weathered

In an attempt to make this process as convenient as possible, both for the artists and myself, I gave them the option of completing the interview by phone, email, or in person. While the in-person interview was preferred, various location and time constraints prevented this from always happening. The in-person interviews were scheduled in various locations throughout Houston in either coffee shops, in artists'

⁶ Wheat paste is another form of graffiti in which the artist preprints a poster, possibly in multiple sections depending on the size, and uses a form of glue to adhere the image to a wall. For more information about this form of graffiti and some of its unique challenges, refer to this short segment done by Shepard Fairey, one of the most well-known wheat paste artists to date: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJfeAvP8xTo>. For more information about Fairey himself visit his website: <http://www.obeygiant.com/>.

studios, or on the location of one of their pieces. I decided to present the interview consent form to these artists in person instead of sending them ahead of time. At the request of many of the artists, I also contacted them the day before to remind them of our appointments.

As I was completing the interviews, I realized there are certain benefits to each type of contact. While email and phone interviews are more convenient because they can be conducted from anywhere, there are certain benefits from sitting in front of someone and asking the questions personally. Not only is there a different level of trust, but I could also better follow the flow of conversation in person and adapt the questions to better fit the artist I was talking to. While some artists were fine with very short question and answer format, others were much more talkative and felt compelled to elaborate on their own. This often led to discussions of valuable topics that my original set of questions did not cover.

If I have learned anything from interviewing artists for this project it would be that the age old saying “don’t judge a book by its cover” is true. Just because an individual may look a certain way or they are associated with street art or graffiti does not mean that they are a bad person. While I did not come into the project with any particular notions about these artists as people, I was overwhelmed by how kind and gracious everyone was with me. I truly appreciate how much time all of these people took to talk with me.

Before I continue on with the analysis of the interviews, I feel it is important to clarify what kind of work it is that these artists do. Many of the artists that I talked to no longer actively paint in the streets in an illegal capacity, but instead have opened up

companies so that people can pay them to commission a piece.⁷ This is part of the shift that I discussed previously in which the founding generation of artists has gotten older and they sought to gain something from their art other than jail time. While I was able to talk to a few people who still paint illegal walls, this group is much more difficult to get in touch with. These people are much less forthcoming with their contact information in the public sphere and are very reluctant to talk to anyone outside of their community about their work. Even though I wish that I would have had a chance to talk to these artists, I appreciate their desire to keep their privacy.

Despite the fact that each artist I talked to has their own fascinating background story, there are a number of trends that I noticed. The first is that they all got into art at a young age.⁸ Whether they had a teacher that particularly inspired them, or they had just always been doodling, almost every artist had caught the art bug by high school. That being said, that did not always translate into further schooling in the arts, although some did go back later and take some classes.⁹

⁷ leetheonelee, interview by Hannah Quinn, In Person, February 28, 2015; Sloke, interview by Hannah Quinn, In Person, February 13, 2015; David Flores, Skeeze181, In Person, February 7, 2015.

⁸ Brittany Bandy, clear_1, interview by Hannah Quinn, Email, February 24, 2015; leetheonelee, interview.

⁹ Nicky Davis, interview by Hannah Quinn, Email, February 12, 2015.



Figure 3: Nicky Davis

Each artist also has their own way of choosing the subject matter for their work. While some artists, like Daniel Anguilu, include quotes that carry a certain level of social commentary, the majority of artists appear to focus on more aesthetic qualities. The artists that I talked to seemed much more focused on bringing beauty and color into their environment instead of a heavy political message. While this does not necessarily hold true for all artists in the area, as portrayed by the *Stick Em Up* documentary, this was the trend that I found amongst the artists that I interviewed.



Figure 4: Daniel Anguilu

There were also a variety of styles in how they approached an individual piece. While some artists such as Ack! prefer to go into a work with just a vague idea and let the wall and environment speak to them, others, such as Leetheonelee, are much more methodical in their approach.¹⁰ No matter the approach, there was a consistent concern about corresponding and gelling with the environment in an organic way.

When I posed the question “Do you have any work that you are particularly proud of and why?/ Is there any piece that you feel embodies your work?” I expected to get specific stories about certain pieces. Instead I found that many of them had not really thought about this question. Many of them were particularly self-deprecating and said that they did not have a favorite because as soon as they were done they saw things that they wanted to fix.¹¹ Others approached the question in a different way and discussed work that they had done with different programs. Skeeze181, for example, paused for a moment and responded that he was most proud of his work using art to help kids in the prison system.¹² Another interesting response was from Sloke in which he discussed the shows that he had organized to promote the art form in Texas, including Pieced Together, Balcony’s Burner Bash, and Emerge.¹³

The next section of questions dealt with interactions with police and authorities. I rather enjoyed these questions because they often led to amusing stories of grand games

¹⁰ ACK!, interview by Hannah Quinn, In Person, February 7, 2015; leetheonelee, interview.

¹¹ leetheonelee, interview.

¹² Flores, Skeeze181.

¹³ Sloke, interview.

of hide-and-seek or interesting bargains being made.¹⁴ Almost all of the artists broke the mold of the typical anarchist or antiestablishment stereotype associated with graffiti in particular. While they all had some element of a rebellious streak, none of them harbored any negative or oppressive feelings toward the police or authorities themselves. The general phrase that came up time and time again was that they were “just doing their jobs.”

The thing about their interactions with authorities that I found most interesting though was the way in which these pressures led many of the artists to make a more “traditional” career out of their art and open mural companies. The common theme was a question of what they were getting out of the art other than a criminal record.¹⁵ While they still had this creative urge within them, as they got older they realized that they could actually make a living off of their art.

Along the more “traditional” view of displaying art, most of the artists that I interviewed also had displayed in a museum or art gallery. A common show that united many of them was the 2013 exhibit *Call It Street Art, Call It Fine Art, Call It What You Know* at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art.¹⁶ While few of the artists described showing in a museum to be “selling out,” they did feel that it was no longer graffiti or street art in the traditional sense. They discussed a distinct difference in the cleanliness of the environment as well as the audience that was attracted to such exhibitions. Even though

¹⁴ ACK!, interview; 2:12, interview by Hannah Quinn, Email, February 2, 2015.

¹⁵ Sloke, interview; Flores, Skeeze181.

¹⁶ Anat Ronen, interview by Hannah Quinn, In Person, February 7, 2015; Flores, Skeeze181; Daniel Anguilo, Weah, interview by Hannah Quinn, In Person, February 8, 2015; ACK!, interview; Angel Quesada, Artkungfu, interview by Hannah Quinn, Phone, February 4, 2015.

it can be nice to have an air-conditioned environment to view such work up close, removing it from the streets corrupts one of the basic elements of the art form.¹⁷

These questions unexpectedly led to an interesting discussion of museum labels. Overall, labels became a sticky subject with each of the artists. There was a general dislike of labels as a whole and yet it seemed like you could not get away from them. Be it graffiti vs street art vs gallery work or whether or not they are artists, each person had a distinct perspective. Some artists such as Daniel Anguilu And ACK! described a distinct difference between graffiti and street art, both in stylistic terms as well as cultural ties.¹⁸ Other interviewees, such as Leetheonelee, still continue to reject the title of artist despite obtaining large commissions and showing in a variety of exhibitions.¹⁹



Figure 5: Ack!

¹⁷ ACK!, interview.

¹⁸ Anguilu, Weah; ACK!, interview.

¹⁹ leetheonelee, interview.

Even though they may not recognize their work as an art form, there is still a compulsion for documentation and an appreciation of the aesthetics. Whether or not their goal was fame or simply a desire that someone know more about their work, the artists that participate in these types of projects help to validate the need for better documentation of this art form. Other than the news, there are a number of other sources about street art and graffiti that tend to be artist or sometimes even fan driven. The most common form of this is websites.²⁰ This makes sense considering that there is no room for these individuals within the academic community and their desire to spread news about their work quickly. While some people have created their own websites, many artists use existing social media platforms to spread news about their work and to create their own catalogue. Twitter and Instagram are especially popular platforms for this kind of work. Another fan/ artist driven form of documentation is books. These have become increasingly popular of late and mainly contain high quality pictures of work from a singular artist or the majority of pieces in a particular location.²¹ Other than a basic introduction that is sometimes included at the beginning of the book, very little text is used. Even though they function more as coffee table books than scholarly documentations, they are insightful because they are often produced by the artists themselves and it is interesting to see what pieces they include, what information is

²⁰ “[Http://globalstreetart.com/](http://globalstreetart.com/),” n.d.; “[Http://www.artcrimes.com/](http://www.artcrimes.com/),” n.d.; “<http://www.at149st.com/>,” n.d.

²¹ Christian Hundertmark, *Art of Rebellion: The World of Street Art* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2005); Christian Hundertmark, *Art of Rebellion 2: The World of Urban Art Activism (No. 2)* (Publilkat, 2006); Cedar Lewisohn and Henry Chalfant, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* (Abrams, 2008); Rafael Schacter, *The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti* (Yale University Press, 2013); Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (Random House UK, 2007).

included with each piece, and how the pieces are photographed. Similarly, documentaries were some of the most useful resources that I was able to find in that they offered a window into a community that is generally very difficult to enter. The documentaries *Beautiful Losers* and *Stick Em Up* were both particularly useful because they provided artist interviews and explored their motivations as well as clearly documenting their artistic process.²²

I have also personally observed that some artists have even begun including hashtags within their pieces so that street viewers can find them online.²³ In other words, they want some level of recognition for the work they have done. This relates to an interesting area of discussion of the ownership of the images or at times, the very piece itself. While she ultimately decides that it would not work, Cathay Smith attempted to argue that graffiti and street artists could claim rights to their own works “under U.S. Intellectual Property Law and Intellectual Property's ‘Negative Space’ Theory.”²⁴ Despite this, she describes the way that the street art community itself has come up with ways of protecting its work over the years. While mainly focusing on work in Canada, Julia

²² Aaron Rose and Joshua Leonard, *Beautiful Losers* (Sidetrack Films, 2008); Luster, *Stick Em Up!*.

²³ Bandy, clear_1; leetheonelee, interview.

²⁴ Cathay Smith, “Street Art: An Analysis Under U.S. Intellectual Property Law and Intellectual Property’s ‘Negative Space’ Theory,” *Journal of Art, Technology & Intellectual Property Law* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 259–93.

Johnson also tackles the idea of ownership in the way that certain pieces by high-profile artists such as Banksy have been literally cut out of walls and sold at auction.²⁵

My research had shown that there are two basic views of street art and graffiti that are prevalent in the media and news. There is the more common perspective of the city official, generally viewing this art as an act of vandalism, and that of the art appreciator who is attempting to explain the value of this form of expression. Coverage of this topic in the news tends to be very reactionary, responding to a new piece or an increase in new pieces, often times ones that have been specifically commissioned.²⁶ A common topic that is brought up in articles against street art and graffiti is the broken window theory.²⁷ This concept states that if a window is broken and nothing is done about it, then the community perceives the police and government officials as lacking authority to take care of them. The longer that this goes on, the greater the perceived lack of authority. As I expound later, this does not have to be the case if the community and artists come together to better understand one another.

²⁵ Julia de Laurentiis Johnson, "Taking It Public," *Maclean's* 126, no. 40 (October 14, 2013): 60–63.

²⁶ Lauren Talarico, "Gorilla Murals Create Buzz About Upcoming Houston Zoo Exhibit," *KHOU*, February 5, 2005, <http://www.khou.com/story/entertainment/2015/02/05/gorilla-murals-create-buzz-about-upcoming-houston-zoo-exhibit/22951615/>; Pooja Lodhia, "Face of God Stares Down in Midtown Mural, Holding Spray Paint," *abc13 Eyewitness News*, June 5, 2014, <http://abc13.com/hobbies/face-of-god-stares-down-in-midtown/95668/>.

²⁷ "Graffiti Abatement Program Cleans Up Neighborhoods," *Click2Houston*, March 7, 2013, <http://www.click2houston.com/news/Graffiti-abatement-program-cleans-up-neighborhoods/19225800>; "Wiping Out Graffiti in Houston," *The City of Houston*, n.d.

There was an experiment done in late 2014 in a large Mid-Atlantic city focusing on the police perspective of street art and graffiti as opposed to that of the artists. This was particularly interesting because this is a side that is often overlooked and can be difficult to find any information about first hand. Their major finding was that race can play a role in whether or not an officer will stop to question someone working on a piece and ultimately they often feel like “I’ve Got Better Things to Worry About.”²⁸ A similar opinion came up in the film *Vigilante Vigilante: The Battle for Expression* in which two men follow around different individuals that have become so outspoken against street art and graffiti that they have taken it upon themselves to either remove or cover it up.²⁹ What is most fascinating is that the police take no action against them even though the “vigilantes” are using spray paint to cover these works up. The documentary made it seem like the police didn’t stop these self-professed vigilantes because they viewed their actions as a public service, but instead because it was easier to simply not deal with them. The authorities did eventually have to reprimand one man in particular when he continuously painted over pieces that the city had commissioned. It was interesting to see how his perception of spray paint art as a public blight fueled him to act against the wishes of the city he was trying to help.

²⁸ Jeffrey Ross and Benjamin Wright, “‘I’ve Got Better Things to Worry About’: Police Perceptions of Graffiti and Street Art in a Large Mid-Atlantic City,” *Police Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (June 2014): 176–200.

²⁹ Max Good, *Vigilante Vigilante: The Battle for Expression* (Open Ranch Productions, 2011).



Figure 6: Sloke

Despite sending emails requesting interviews to a handful of city departments, I ultimately only heard back from one individual, Patricia Harrington, the Assistant Director of the City of Houston Department of Neighborhoods and the Director of the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office.³⁰ Being a city official, she responded to my questions in the way that I expected of her. In general, the feeling was that they have very little against the art itself; they merely have a problem with the location. The most interesting aspect of this interview though came about in a roundabout way. One of the questions that I asked dealt with any efforts the city has made to reach out to the public or artists about this art form. Not surprisingly, there were limited programs dealing with the art form directly. That being said, she did discuss a lecture program that she conducts periodically about how to distinguish between gang graffiti and tagging. What she described was a misunderstanding of the distinction between the two in the public mind. Interestingly, one of the common audiences for these talks is insurance companies. She also talked about the way that the public as well as some police officers will often send her pictures of graffiti from around the city and ask if it is gang related. There appears to

³⁰ Patricia Harrington, interview by Hannah Quinn, Phone, February 6, 2015.

be an intense, fearful connection in the public perception between any marks made with a spray can and gang activity.³¹ This is simply not the reality of the situation. As the City of Houston website explains, gang graffiti accounts for less than 10% of all graffiti in the city.³² While the lectures put on by the Department of Neighborhoods are a step in the right direction, they are just a drop in a much larger bucket. If any further progress is to be made in the public sphere, this misconception must be addressed.

Another perspective that is common amongst the articles that appear to support street art is this as an act of social change. As mentioned previously, these articles are especially prevalent in coverage of pieces in other countries in which street art is viewed as a way for a people to reach out and express their own dissatisfaction with something within their community.

The impermanent nature of street art and graffiti is one of the great underlying principles of this project. Oksana Zaporozhets tackles that very issue in her article “The Permanence of Ephemeral: Tsoi Wall 23 Years After,” but in a fresh way. In this piece she describes the way that the Tsoi Wall has become a major cultural element within the surrounding community. Even though the work is ultimately ephemeral, she argues that these images have become part of the identity of the city. She then goes on to describe how this wall has been maintained over so many years as well as the greater implication that this wall has for Soviet identity.³³ This emphasis on the implications of what street

³¹ Bandy, clear_1; leetheonelee, interview.

³² “Wiping Out Graffiti in Houston.”

³³ Oksana Zaporozhets, Ekaterina Riise, and Alexandra Kolesnik, “The Permanence of Ephemeral: Tsoi Wall 23 Years After,” *Coactivity/ Santalka* 22, no. 1 (2014): 38–52.

art and graffiti can do for a city is seen time and time again in countries throughout the world. While there has not necessarily been an extensive amount of scholarship about it, although there is some, it is often a hot topic in the news. For example the wall around Qalqiliya in Israel which Banksy covered or the graffiti that popped up around Brazil during the 2014 World Cup.³⁴

During my time driving around Houston to meet up with various artists, I personally viewed the way that these works can play a role in a community even if they are not politically charged. As I sat staring at these graffiti covered facades I was amazed by how many people from the community came out to take pictures of the works or have their picture made with it. My personal favorites were a little boy who excitedly jumped out of a car to have his dad take a picture of him in front of an Ironman piece and a young singer who was having promotional pictures taken in front of more traditional graffiti style work. It was obvious that these people consistently passed by these pieces and that the work had made a difference in their lives.

³⁴ Jonathan Jones, "Brazil's Anit-World Cup Street Art- In Pictures," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2014; Nigel Parry, "Well-Known UK Graffiti Artist Banksy Hacks the Wall," *The Electronic Intifada*, September 2, 2005, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/well-known-uk-graffiti-artist-banksy-hacks-wall/5733>.



Figure 7: leetheonelee

A study was conducted on the way that the environment influences the way that audiences view a work of art. Researchers found that people formed aesthetic judgments of graffiti art and modern art based on its location, in a museum or on the streets, as well as their existing preferences. They found that both of these factors highly influence the viewing experience, although the work being in a museum does not always have a positive effect.³⁵ This is particularly important for this project because it provides evidence that taking street art and graffiti off the streets and putting it in a museum may not be the best course of action in the long run, even though it is appealing. The viewer simply interacts with the work on a completely different level when there is no authority

³⁵ Andreas Garts and Helmut Leder, “The White Cube of the Museum Versus the Gray Cube of the Street: The Role of Context in Aesthetic Evaluations,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity & the Arts* 8, no. 3 (August 2014): 311–20.

watching them and they are in control of their viewing experience. Often times it takes multiple passings of a piece for it to really register in a person's environment and therefore becomes almost a daily ritual activity. Even though it would be simpler to just move street art and graffiti from the streets to an institution, this corrupts one of the basic tenants of the art form.

The interviews also highlighted an interesting relationship that the artists had with the impermanence of their work. As the name of this project suggests, this is one of the key concerns of my research. Surprisingly though, this did not seem to be of much concern to anyone else. The fact that their work, be it commissioned or done illegally, would eventually be worn away by the elements or removed by the building owners did not appear to bother any of the artists. It ultimately was just an element of the medium that they chose to accept.³⁶ There seemed to be a general feeling that once they were finished with a piece, it no longer belonged to them and the public would do with it what they wanted. That being said, this does not mean that they do not have any connection to their work. While some of the artists did not seem to be caught up in the documentation of their work, others were very detailed in collecting information and images of their pieces.³⁷ This inconsistency in documentation highlights the need for a diligent team to fill this gap.

³⁶ Bandy, clear_1; 2:12, interview; Sloke, interview.

³⁷ Davis, interview; leetheonelee, interview.

CHAPTER THREE

Recommendations

This is where my recommendations of different actions that can be taken to help preserve and promote street art and graffiti come into play. These suggestions will likely require more specific study of specific community issues such as city ordinances or funding.

My first suggestion, that I attempted to put into practice with *The Permanent Impermanence Project*, is the creation of a website or an app that can be used by the public to track new works as well as view old pieces that no longer exist.³⁸ This desire to track both existing and past works was one of the key principles of the site, but was also one of the more difficult things to put into practice. I tried to create a website that was also mobile friendly so that people could use it when they were out looking for pieces. Ultimately I would like to create a system that would also alert people when information that is of interest to them is added. Another element of the website that I had originally envisioned was an interactive map. While I had initially begun creating one for the pieces that I had personally documented, I began to run into some concerns. My primary issue was that I did not want my project to “burn” various locations. What I mean by this is that I did not want to create a resource that the authorities could use to track popular locations and therefore make them unusable in the future. Maps are also difficult because things are always changing so quickly, especially considering how much flux the city of

³⁸ <http://thepiphouston.wix.com/home>

Houston is currently going through. I, being a single individual, am simply not physically capable of doing this level of documentation alone.

I am not the only one who came up with this idea. The manufacturers of the energy drink Redbull recently launched a collaborative project with Google Maps that allows users to use Google Street View to locate pieces that they are aware of and tag them on a global map.³⁹ As the website states, “Tag your favorite spot, share it with friends, and help build the world’s largest art collection.” They are very well on their way with almost 7,500 locations added so far. I love the concept behind the project and the ability to view street art from around the world and I applaud them in their collection of additional information outside of the location. When a user submits a location, they are prompted to provide an artist, the type of art it is (graffiti, stencil, painting, or paste up), as well as any additional information. While I do not know what the overall mission of the website is, I do have one primary concern. If a user would like to use the site to actively find the works on their own, it would be ideal to have a way for other users to mark when a piece has been removed so that they are not led on a wild goose chase. I would suggest some sort of color coding feature so that the pins can be turned to a different color once they have been removed. I am curious to see if this project will continue to have public support and grow further.

The link to the Red Bull Street Art View page, along with a variety of other resources, has been added to the website in an attempt to help dispel the stigma around the aerosol art form. My hope is that by educating themselves as well as by seeing how

³⁹ <http://streetartview.com/>

beautiful and artistic it can be, more people will see this art form as an asset to their city instead of a blight.

Even though these online resources are a fantastic tool in the documentation of this work and the education of the community, I found through the process of creating the website that it still is not enough. As soon as I had finished taking the pictures and posted them online, it was almost immediately out of date. The photos became a documentation of the past instead of a way to portray the present. This is the greatest challenge of such a dynamic art form. In our current age it is hard to think that the Internet is not fast enough to keep up with something, but in this case it is still too static. I ultimately realized that I was trying to take the format of a museum and apply it to something that is much more fluid than what I was used to dealing with. In order to better serve the needs of this growing art form, the museum world has to find a way to adapt to this breakneck pace.



Figure 8: Building in Houston

This leads into the second and more ambitious suggestion of how to deal with the impermanence of street art and graffiti. While I came into this project ready to advocate for more museums to open their doors to street art and graffiti artists, I have actually changed my mind. Even though showing in museums and galleries can be great exposure for artists and may open up a different audience to the art form, at the end of the day, what is shown is no longer graffiti. That is not to say that museums should not show this kind of work, just that they should be aware of how their institution changes the context of the work.

One of the main issues that I have run into with the creation of the website and attempting to create a digital collection, much like the Red Bull Street Art View is doing, is that these projects can never reach the status of a museum. With the explosion of digital exhibitions over the past few years, the American Alliance of Museums has clearly excluded digital collections in their basic definition of a museum by including that museums must “own or utilize *tangible* objects, care for them, and exhibit them to the public on some regular schedule”.⁴⁰ While this definition overlooks the time, effort, and resources that it takes to curate online images as well as the fact reproduction rights are separate from owning an object, this is the framework that has been established. While it may not seem important at first for such projects to gain the label of a museum, there is a certain level of authority that comes with the title of an accredited museum. Not only does it lend credence to the work that you are trying to preserve, but it also opens you up to a variety of funding options that can be very beneficial.

⁴⁰ “National Lending Service,” *National Gallery of Art*, 2015, <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/national-lending-service.html>.

This is why I suggest playing within the rules of the American Alliance of Museums, but not creating a traditional four-walled institution. Instead, I would like to create a non-profit organization and then approach local business owners and purchase/rent any blank wall space that they have on their building exterior, similar to the concept of buying air rights above a building. One resource that is particularly visible in Houston would be the number of vacant properties that are slated for demolition. I would then open up this wall space for any artist to come and create. While this may fuel a free-for-all at first, I believe that it would settle out over time because the street art and graffiti community already has a form of self-curation in place existing outside of any institution.

The key to this concept being successful is limited interference in the content or structure of the artistic response. There are obvious propriety standards, such as no derogatory language or imagery toward any race, that should be set in place, but beyond that, let the artists respond to the space as they see fit. There should be no red tape or application process, simply a blank wall open to anyone who thinks they have enough talent to tackle it.⁴¹ This is vital to the project because artists need to feel like they are not being controlled. If they feel like there is an “institutional” influence, it is very likely that they will avoid the walls even though they are free, protected spaces. This may be difficult to convince business owners of at first, but hopefully working together we could come to an agreement.

⁴¹ Davis, interview; Anguilo, Weah; ACK!, interview.

There would also be a process of renewal built into the project. Depending on the public reaction and the quality of the work done as determined by the board of the non-profit organization, the walls would periodically be cleaned and the process would start again fresh. This would only take place after extensive documentation and notification of the public. While it could be argued that cleaning the walls does not meet the AAM requirement of caring for the objects, I would suggest that it does in that it keeps with the spirit of the work itself. As I have discussed previously, the artists themselves do not expect their work to last forever and accept the impermanence as part of the art form. There is also always room for adaptation as well. If there is a piece in particular that is part of an otherwise not noteworthy wall, then you could clean around the piece and look into further preservation techniques or bringing in the artist to maintain it. Also, if an artist approached the organization about a large-scale project for a particular wall that they control, then they could possibly set it aside for that artist instead of opening it to the public.

In order to communicate what walls are open for painting under the non-profit as well as documentation of the work that has been done, a website should be created. This is where the combination of both an online and physical presence becomes so important. Having an easily accessible list of which walls are now paintable is important not only for communication with artists, but police officials and anti-gang departments as well. Part of the goal of this kind of project is to help bring these artists out from the shadows of the night and into the open so that the public can appreciate their work. It in no way helps to reshape the public's associations with the spray paint medium if they see the police are constantly stopping the artists while they work.

In order to further facilitate the public understanding and awareness of this art form as well as providing an outlet for overzealous novices, I also suggest creating a “graffiti park.” In other words, one of the walls could be set aside for the general public to come and try their hand at using a spray can. There could be cheap paint rentals for people who just want the thrill of writing their name without having to go buy a bunch of different spray paint themselves that they would never use again. This would hopefully divert this kind of attention from the other walls which are more geared toward more elaborate endeavors. This is somewhat the concept at Austin’s Graffiti Park at Castle Hill. While I appreciate that the “project was developed to provide muralists, graffiti artists and community groups the opportunity to display large scale art pieces driven by inspirational, positive and educational messaging,” I just don’t know if that continues to come across.⁴² It has somewhat become an un-curated mess in which many beautiful pieces have been scrawled through by overzealous kids. There is no element of respect for the work of the more experienced artists. This is why I’m suggesting a separation of where these two spheres would create. That being said, there would be no set rules that experienced artists couldn’t paint in the novice space or vice versa, this is simply an attempt to channel the energies of the two groups into more productive avenues.

The beauty behind this concept is that even though it was created with Houston in mind, it could easily be adapted for any city with an interest in facilitating public art. Depending on the growth of the project, you could also develop additional programming to help different at risk groups, such as the way that the Mural Arts Program in

⁴² hopecampaign, “Hope Outdoor Gallery,” *Hope Campaign*, March 3, 2013, <http://hopecampaign.org/hopeprojects/hope-outdoor-gallery/>.

Philadelphia creates the Restorative Justice Program which emphasizes “re-entry, reclamation of civic spaces, and the use of art to give voice to people who have consistently felt disconnected from society.”⁴³ While there would be challenges, I believe that bringing art out from behind the walls of the grand institutional museum and out into the streets can help to create a more vibrant, interesting community. As I have seen with my own eyes, if you paint it, the community will be respond.

I believe that if we put this project concept into practice, we could file to become an accredited museum based on the definition of the American Alliance of Museums because the organization would own “objects,” actively take care of them, and provide programing for the public. This is a radical shift from the traditional museum mantra of “collect, preserve, and interpret,” but if museums want to further benefit their communities and engage the public, they must get out of their own institutional box.

⁴³ “Restorative Justice,” *City of Philadelphia City Arts Program*, 2015, <http://muralarts.org/programs/restorative-justice>.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Based on the interviews that I conducted as well as my general observations, the museum world is not effectively supporting an entire art form. Because of the perception of these institutions as "higher class," they have positioned themselves in a place that prevents them from promoting a "lower" art form. Even the steps that some museums take to preserve this work inadvertently subverts the essence of the style and turns it into "something else." To keep this art on the streets as well as bring in museum principles to support it will take a drastic reimagining of what an institution can look like. While graffiti and street art could be left to run its own world, it would be a missed opportunity to utilize the current increase of the medium in the public conscience. If spaces are provided, hopefully artists will rise to the challenge and continue to push what can be accomplished with spray paint in a more public forum. I think that Morley was right. If these efforts make even one person's day just a little bit better, then maybe it's worth the effort to not cover it up.

APPENDICES

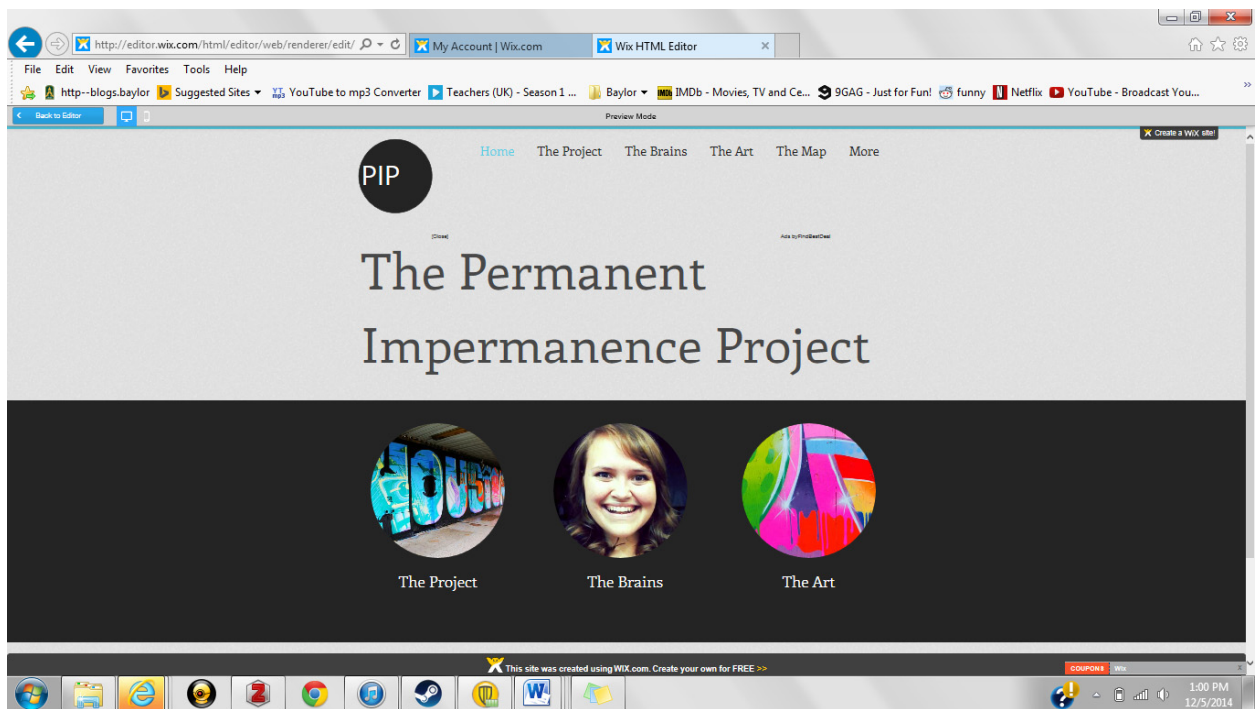
APPENDIX A

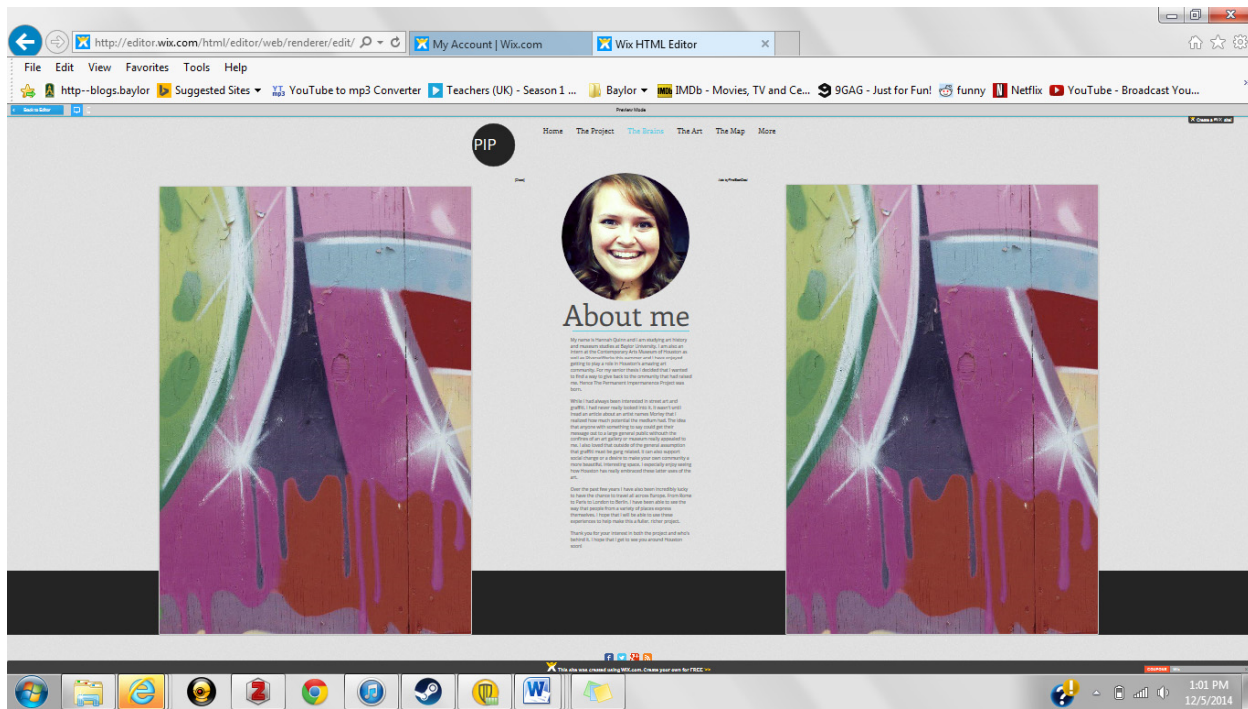
Website Screenshots

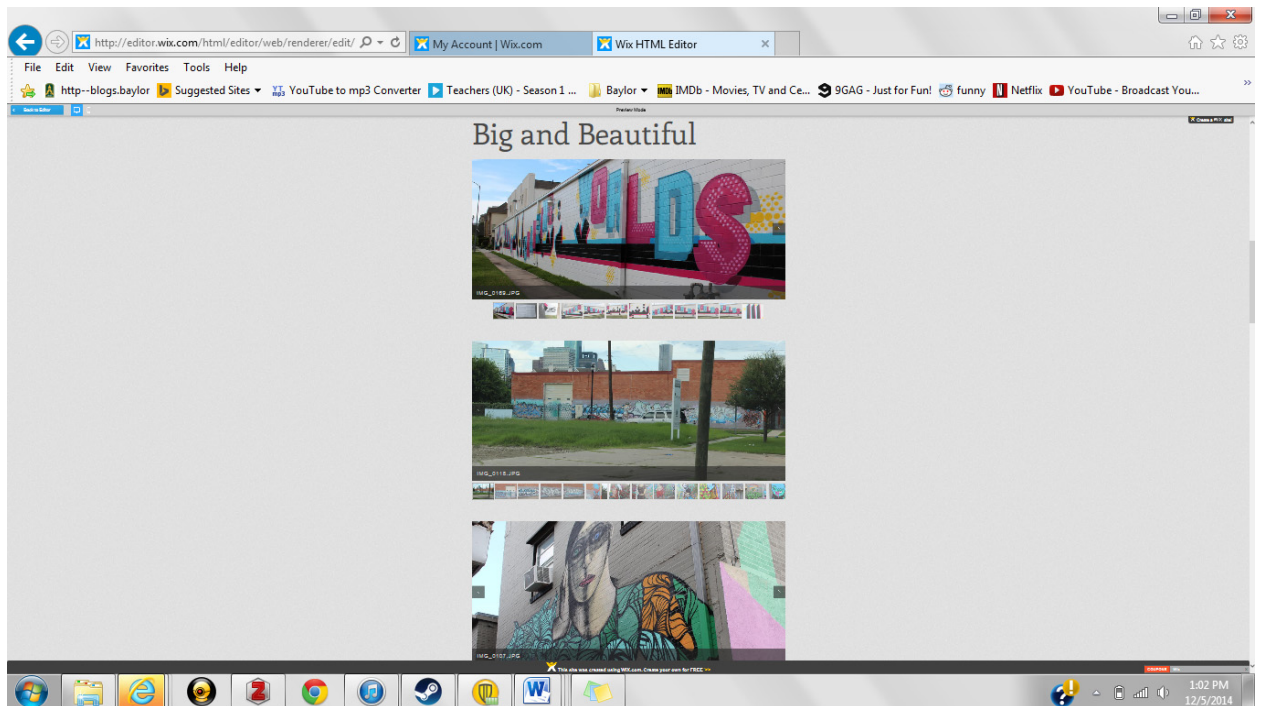
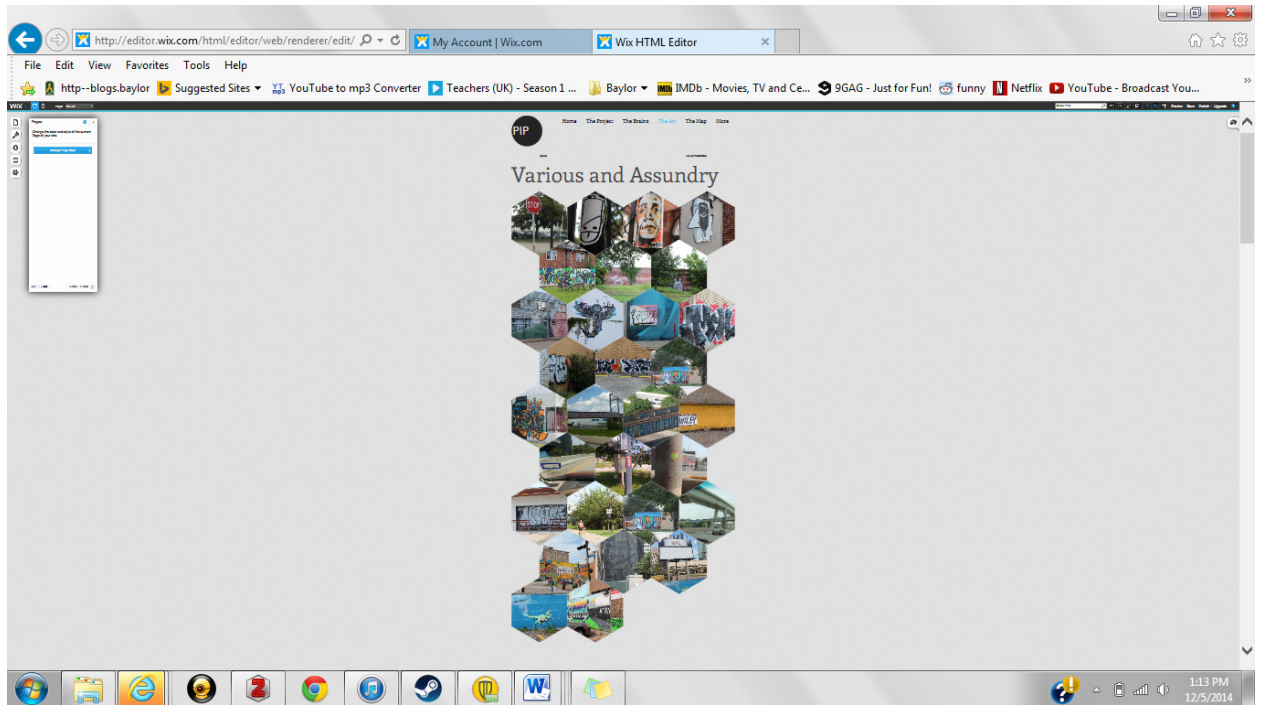
Please note that these are zoomed out screen shots of the website and therefore it has skewed the formatting a bit. To view it on your own please visit:

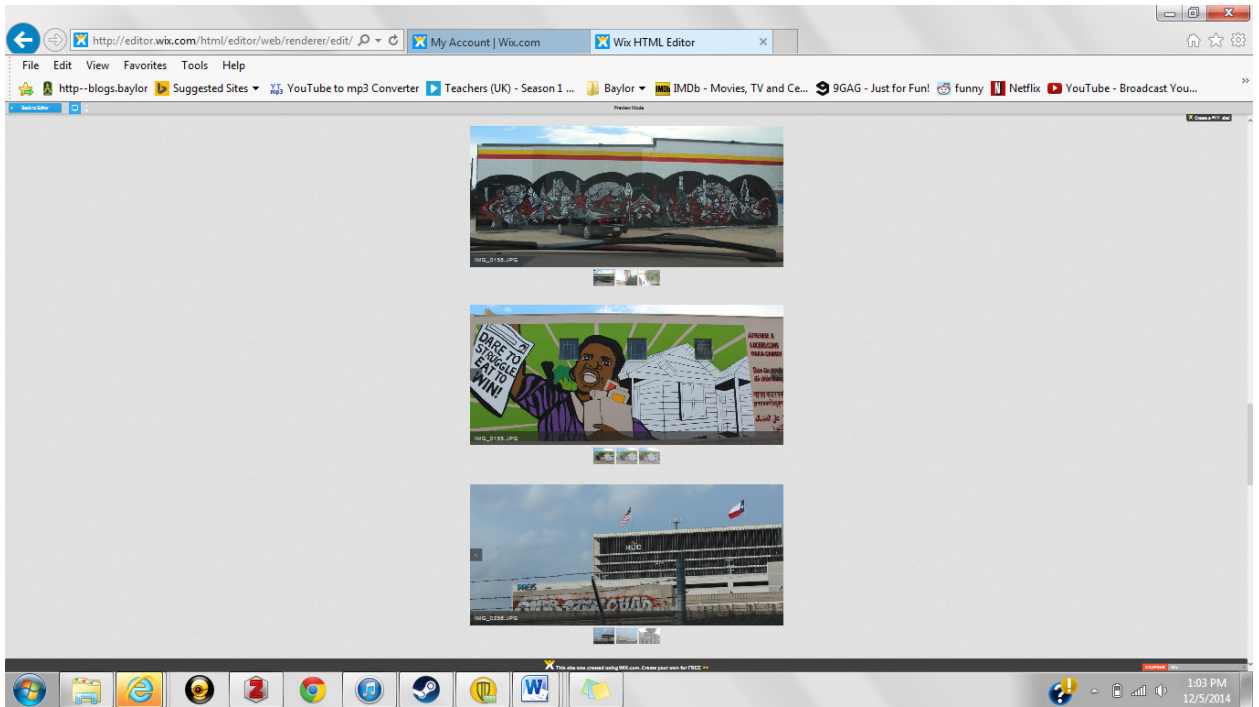
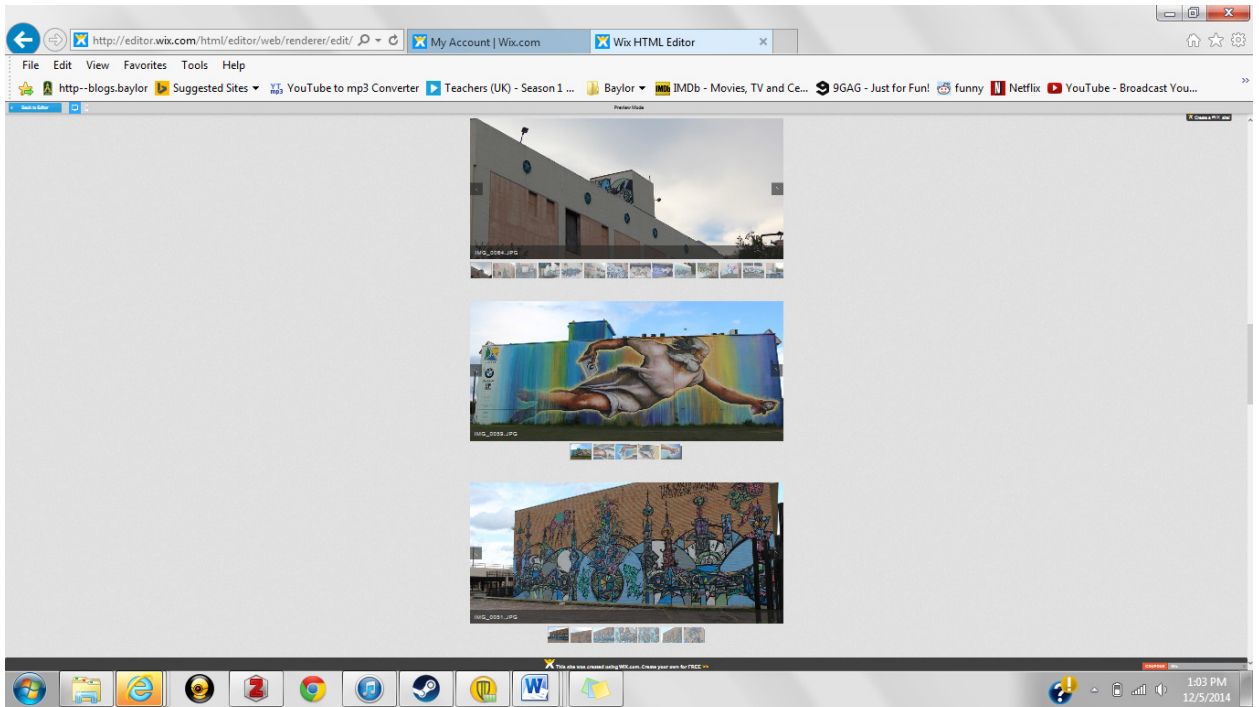
www.thepiphouston.wix.com/home.

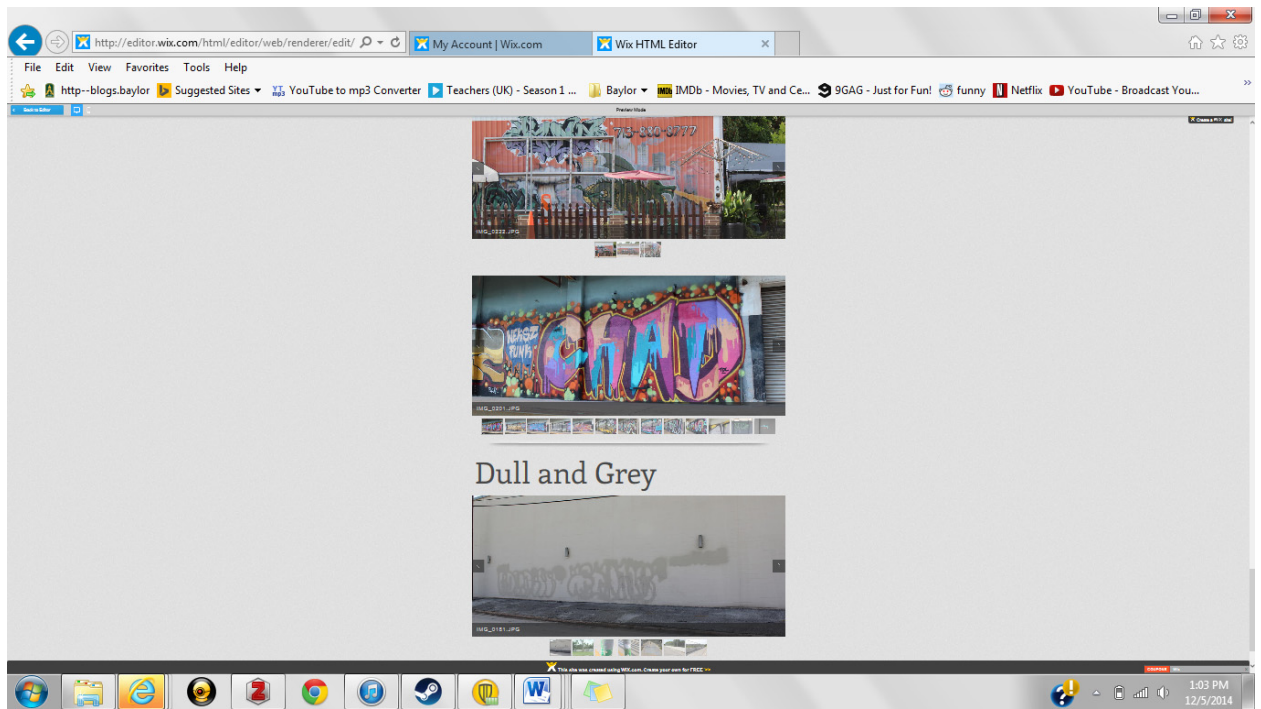
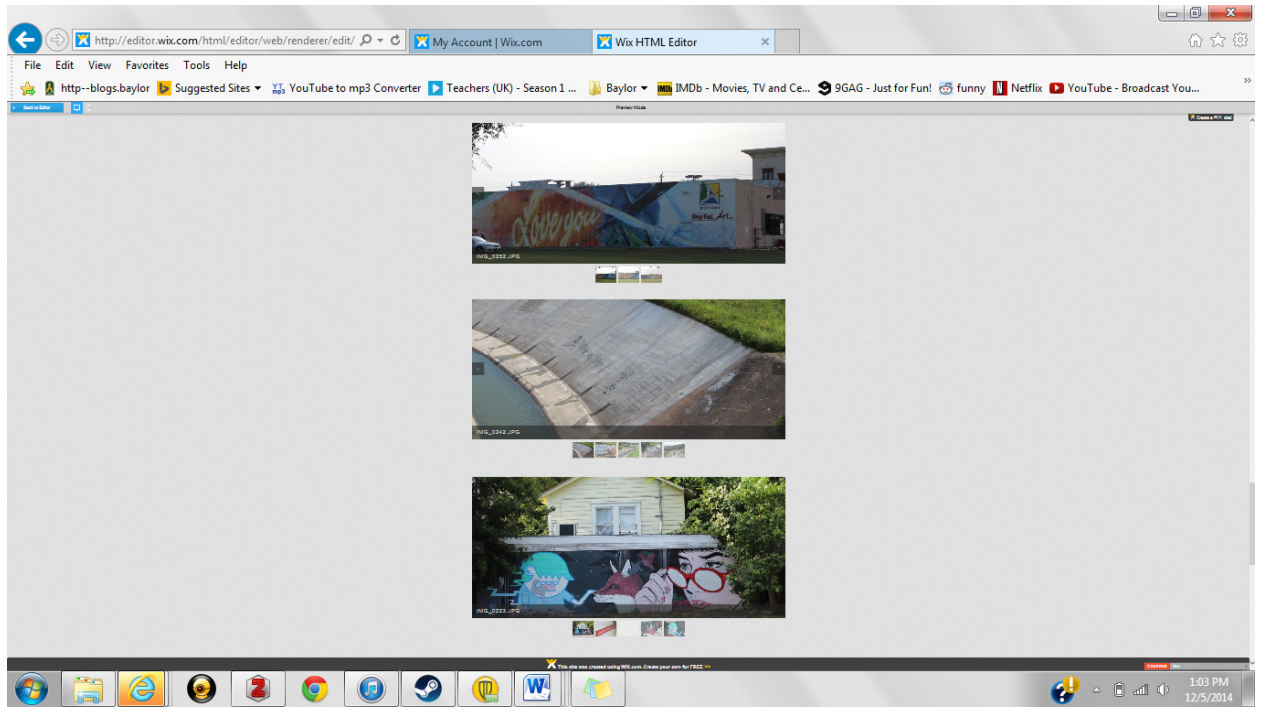
This website is also visible in a mobile format so that you can view it on the go.

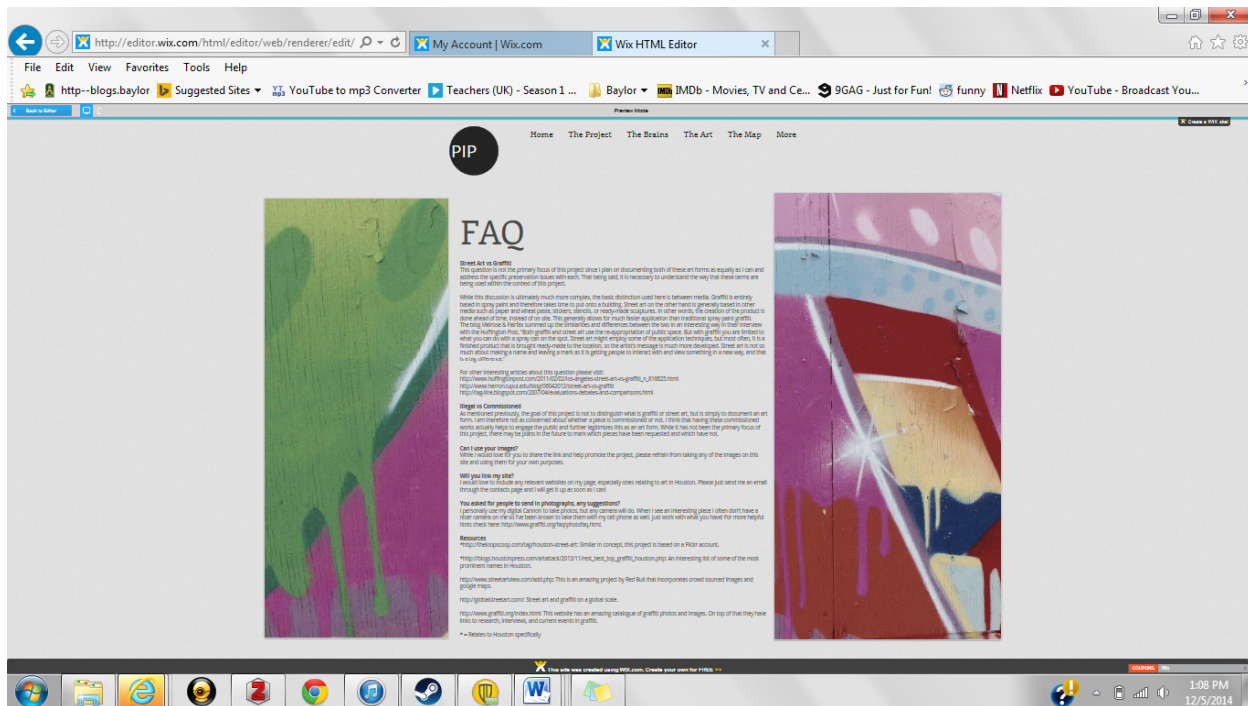


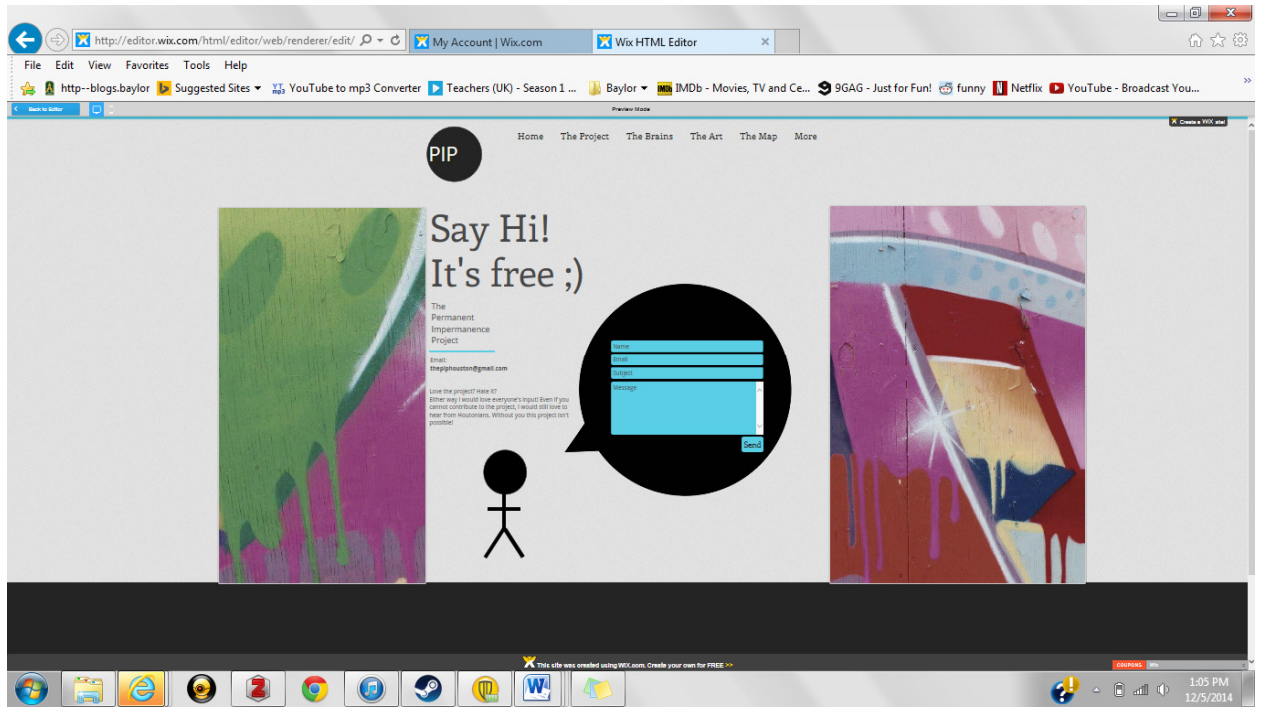












APPENDIX B

Website Glossary

Street Art and Graffiti- See here.

Black Book/ Piece Book- The journal that an artist keeps his/her designs in. Even though graffiti art looks like it is done very quickly, it has often been planned out with numerous drawings.

Bomb- To prolifically put pieces in a location

Buff- To remove a piece

Crew- Sometimes artists will work together and form a group of people they can trust. They will often work together to create larger works. This can also be dangerous because if one of them gets caught then the authorities may charge everyone within the crew (because they don't know for sure which one of them did it individually).

Etch- To scratch or carve out a surface

Gallery- This is when a building has been allowed to collect graffiti and street art over time, thus creating a sort of gallery.

Ghost- After a piece has been removed and you can still see the vague outline

Going-Over- This is when one artist covers up the work of another artist.

Heaven Spots- This is a high spot (such as an overpass) that is ideal for putting a piece because they are generally left alone. Accomplishing such a piece generally increases the reputation of the artist that completes it. This name is two-fold though because even though this is a "heavenly" spot, many artists have died attempting to reach such a location and are thus "sent to heaven."

Lock On- This is a readymade sculpture that has been locked on to a public object using a chain and a lock. Bikes are commonly used for this purpose.

Piece- A work by an artist. Short for masterpiece.

Paste-Up- Any kind of drawing on paper that is then attached to a wall using wheat paste

Run- How long a piece has been around. Ex: that piece had a run of about a month.

Slash- To mark through the work of another artist. Generally viewed as an act of disrespect

Sticker- This is when an artist either creates their own or modifies an adhesive sticker and places it in a public space.

Tagging- The artists signature. This is usually done quickly and with a single color

Throw-up- A piece that has been done quickly, Often not very detailed

Wheat Paste- The kind of glue that is used to adhere pre-printed paper to a wall

Yarn Bombing- To knit or crotchet around a public object, especially trees, light poles, and fire hydrants.

These glossary terms were selected specifically to supplement this project because I felt like they were the ones that I would use most often. For more complete glossaries please check out these other resources:

<http://www.at149st.com/glossary.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_graffiti

*Please note that a number of these glossaries include terms about train or subway graffiti, which this project is expressly not focusing on.

APPENDIX C

Website FAQ Page

Street Art vs Graffiti

This question is not the primary focus of this project since I plan on documenting both of these art forms as equally as I can and address the specific preservation issues with each. That being said, it is necessary to understand the way that these terms are being used within the context of this project.

While this discussion is ultimately much more complex, the basic distinction used here is between media. Graffiti is entirely based in spray paint and therefore takes time to put onto a building. Street art on the other hand is generally based in other media such as paper and wheat paste, stickers, stencils, or ready-made sculptures. In other words, the creation of the product is done ahead of time, instead of on site. This generally allows for much faster application than traditional spray paint graffiti.

The blog Melrose & Fairfax summed up the similarities and differences between the two in an interesting way in their interview with the Huffington Post, “Both graffiti and street art use the re-appropriation of public space. But with graffiti you are limited to what you can do with a spray can on the spot. Street art might employ some of the application techniques, but most often, it is a finished product that is brought ready-made to the location, so the artist’s message is much more developed. Street art is not so much about making a name and leaving a mark as it is getting people to interact with and view something in a new way, and that is a big difference.”

For other interesting articles about this question please visit:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/02/los-angeles-street-art-vs-graffiti_n_816625.html

<http://www.herron.iupui.edu/blog/06042012/street-art-vs-graffiti>

<http://tag-line.blogspot.com/2007/04/evaluations-debates-and-comparisons.html>

Illegal vs Commissioned

As mentioned previously, the goal of this project is not to distinguish what is graffiti or street art, but is simply to document an art form. I am therefore not as concerned about whether a piece is commissioned or not. I think that having these commissioned works actually helps to engage the public and further legitimizes this as an art form. While it has not been the primary focus of this project, there may be plans in the future to mark which pieces have been requested and which have not.

Can I use your images?

While I would love for you to share the link and help promote the project, please refrain from taking any of the images on this site and using them for your own purposes.

Will you link my site?

I would love to include any relevant websites on my page, especially ones relating to art in Houston. Please just send me an email through the contacts page and I will get it up as soon as I can!

You asked for people to send in photographs, any suggestions?

I personally use my digital Cannon to take photos, but any camera will do. When I see an interesting piece I often don't have a nicer camera on me so I've been known to take them with my cell phone as well. Just work with what you have! For more helpful hints check here: <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/photofaq.html>

Resources

*<http://theloopscoop.com/tag/houston-street-art>: Similar in concept, this project is based on a Flickr account.

*http://blogs.houstonpress.com/artattack/2013/11/rest_best_top_graffiti_houston.php: An interesting list of some of the most prominent names in Houston.

<http://www.streetartview.com/add.php>: This is an amazing project by Red Bull that incorporates crowd sourced images and google maps.

<http://globalstreetart.com/>: Street art and graffiti on a global scale.

<http://www.graffiti.org/index.html>: This website has an amazing catalogue of graffiti photos and images. On top of that they have links to research, interviews, and current events in graffiti.

* = Relates to Houston specifically

APPENDIX D

Artist Interview Questions

- Briefly describe your artistic process (sketches, tests, etc.).
- Do you have any training in the arts?
- How did you get started and at what age?
- How do you choose your subject matter? (For example, is it politically charged, social commentary, or for the aesthetic value?)
- Do you have any piece that you are particularly proud of and why?
- Do you create in the same area in which you live or do you seek distance?
 - If you live in Houston, which neighborhood/ ward do you live in?
- Have you ever encountered any problems with the authorities and if so, please briefly describe the experience?
- Do you have negative/ oppressive feelings toward police/ city officials in their response to your work or general graffiti in the area?
- Do you consider yourself an artist? Vandal? Activist?
- Who is your intended/ target audience? (Ex: Yourself, public, officials, other artists)
- Have you ever shown work in a museum or gallery and if so what was your experience?
 - If not, would you like to?/ What holds you back?
 - What could these institutions do to entice you to show in their spaces?
- Do you feel like showing in a gallery equates to “selling out”?
- Are you ever commissioned by businesses to create work on their property and if so, what is your experience typically like?
- How do you view the impermanence of your work?/ Is the fact that that your work will eventually be removed or worn down by weather intrinsic to the process or is it a side effect?
- Do you keep records of you work? Pictures? Dates? Locations?
- Would you like some sort of record of graffiti in your area and if so, how would you envision it working?
- Do you feel that Houston is a street art friendly city?
- If you have created work outside of Houston, what was your experience in these other locations and how did it compare to Houston?
- Are you aware of any attempts from the city to reach out to street artists in any way?
- Are there any actions that you would like to see from the city?
- Do you view projects such as these to educate the public about this art form to be beneficial or a hindrance to your work?
- Is there anything that you wish people better understood about you work?

- Would you be interested in including any social media (Facebook, twitter, Instagram) on the website (<http://thepiphouston.wix.com/home>)?/ Would you be interested in continuing to help grow and improve this project?
- Do you have any additional comments?

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