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Describing an Outsider Art Movement from Within: The AAT and Graffiti Art

Abstract

Knowledge organization is the study of the order, whether natural or imposed, of knowledge. As researchers in this field of science have increasingly acknowledged the importance of different epistemologies, or ways of knowing, that merit not only acceptance but investigation, I have chosen to examine how a particular artistic community describes their processes and products via historical discourse found in graffiti zines from the mid-1980s to 1990s in comparison with the overarching art community discourse as evidenced by a popular controlled vocabulary. The focus of this research project is to examine the sufficiency of vocabulary contained within the Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) for use in representing concepts from the graffiti art movement.

Introduction

Graffiti art has been studied from a number of perspectives, citing the movement into criminal justice, sociology, history, and art (Ferrell, 1993; Lachmann, 1988; Forster et al., 2012; Masilamani, 2008). The works themselves have value to researchers from all of these areas of study and as a global art movement and ever-expanding online archive of artistic output, it behooves library and information science to be aware of the processes in place to collect, organize, and access these uncoordinated collections. As precursor to a larger examination by the author, this domain analytic study will advance discussions on the epistemological construction of an art community and the organic knowledge organization revealed in the social construction of terminology by its members as evidenced in the selected graffiti zines.

Major historical art movements are represented with descriptive terminology available in large structured vocabularies such as the Getty Research Institute’s Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT). Participants in newer, smaller, or outsider art movements may not find terminology in such readily available vocabularies to represent concepts, contexts, and methods commonly used by their community of practice.

Sometimes referred to as graffiti art, the movement began in the late 1960s in Philadelphia and New York with the proliferation of graffiti tagger names in concentrated areas of these cities and quickly spread and evolved into larger, more detailed and artistic renderings on city walls, subways, and the ubiquitous train cars (Austin, 2001; Castleman, 1982). As the movement spread across the country, several graffiti magazines, or zines, began to appear. These were originally photocopied sheets of photos of graffiti art compiled by graffiti artists themselves, sometimes with artist or crew names and general locations of works contained therein. Some of the popular zines became more like modern magazines, printing in color and accepting subscriptions from around the country and even overseas. As the Internet developed,
most of these zines moved online and there is now a burgeoning number of websites, blogs, and social media feeds such as those on Flickr and Instagram that feature works by the graffiti art community. Due to the ephemeral nature of graffiti, photography is the most currently reliable, albeit not perfect, means to preserve a record of these works (Waclawek, 2011).

**The AAT**

The AAT is a structured vocabulary “that can be used to improve access to information about art, architecture, and material culture” (About the AAT, 2015). The resource began in the late 1970s as art libraries and art journals were looking for ways to index and describe their collections in the face of new computer cataloging technologies. The AAT has been developed by submissions from numerous sources and thus is a collaborative project, evolving and continuously expanding.

Its scope includes terminology needed to catalog and retrieve information about the visual arts and architecture; it is constructed using national and international standards for thesaurus construction; it was initially a hierarchy inspired by the tree structures of MeSH (Medical Subject Headings Thesaurus); it is based on terminology that is current, warranted for use by authoritative literary sources, and validated by use in the scholarly art and architectural history community; and it is compiled and edited in response to the needs of the user community. … The AAT is a hierarchical database; its trees branch from a root called Top of the AAT hierarchies (Subject_ID: 300000000). There may be multiple broader contexts, making AAT polyhierarchical (About the AAT 2015).

This study follows in the tradition of a postmodern conception of knowledge organization (Mai, 1999) and is built upon domain analytic methods as introduced by Hjørland and Albrechtsen (1995) and Hjorland (2002), and expanded upon by Smiraglia (2015) and Smiraglia and Lee (2012), among others. While studies combining KO and graffiti art are rare, Gottlieb (2008) used a modified Delphi questionnaire method with 11 graffiti experts to develop a classification of graffiti art styles for use by image catalogers. Her research resulted in 14 style categories, 14 facets for each style, and additional foci for each facet. Ørom (2003) examined knowledge organization systems in the domain of art studies and suggested that newer art historical paradigms, which often cross traditional domains, might be well served by the polyhierarchical structure of the AAT (2003). Due to this structure, the AAT can be expanded for new paradigms, methods, and styles more easily than monohierarchical systems. With this optimism in mind, and because of its popularity and ease of use, the AAT was chosen for this comparative examination.

**Methods**

I examine terminology relating to the graffiti art movement through textual analysis of a series of three graffiti zines, International Graffiti Times, Can Control, and Flashbacks. These three zines were chosen from a number that were available to me through the generosity of Dr. Joe Austin at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee. After discussing my research proposal with him, he offered me, from within his large
graffiti zine collection, a sampling of titles that are best known, respected, and long-lived. From within this group of about a dozen titles, I chose three of which he has the most complete runs. These zines contain numerous photographs of graffiti art, sometimes with additional information about the individual photos, as well as essays, reviews, and interviews with graffiti artists. Text from the zines was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document so that it could be more easily manipulated. This transcription process resulted in a document 124,443 words in length.

Graffiti art descriptive terminology related to processes, products, and style was extracted manually and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. From there terms were normalized to account for varied spellings, misspellings, casual variants, and pluralization. Terminological preference was given to noun forms over verbs and adjectives. For example, the term piece was most often used as a noun, sometimes in gerund form (piecing), but it was also used as a verb (to piece) or as a past participle (pieced). Examples of normalization can be seen in Table 1, the first line representing the normalized term used for each group of variant terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>end to end</th>
<th>top to bottom</th>
<th>throw-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E to E</td>
<td>T to B</td>
<td>throw up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-E</td>
<td>t-b</td>
<td>throw ups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>end 2 end</td>
<td>top 2 bottom</td>
<td>throwups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E2E</td>
<td>T2B</td>
<td>thro-ups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ends to end</td>
<td>top-to-bottoms</td>
<td>throw-ups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-to-E</td>
<td>T-to-B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once a typology of the most commonly appearing terms from the zines was developed, comparison was made between the terms and the available terminologies that might be used to represent them from within the AAT.

Results

After normalization a list of terms resulted that could be sorted according to frequency. This can be seen in Table 2, below. The most commonly occurring term, unsurprisingly, is graffiti. This term appeared four times more often than the second most commonly occurring term, piece. Words that occurred at least ten times or more were kept for comparison with terms from the AAT.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>term</th>
<th>frequency</th>
<th>term</th>
<th>frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>graffiti</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>piecing</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piece</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>wildstyle</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bomb</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>burner</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>throw-up</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>graffiti art</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To better understand how well search results for these terms in the AAT correspond to the actual meanings of the zine terms, summary definitions for the zine terms are provided in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whole car</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aerosol</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>character</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spray paint</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mural</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>top to bottom</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: Graffiti zine terms defined

**Graffiti:** “Typically refers to words, figures, and images that have been written, drawn and/or painted on, and/or etched into or on surfaces where the owner of the property has NOT given permission” (Ross, 2016, 476).

**Piece:** “(short for ‘masterpieces’) Large, colorful, elaborate, detailed, and stylistically intricate rendering of letters and images. Pieces require a greater amount of time and expertise to create than ‘throw-ups’ and ‘tags’. (Usually deserving of more respect from other graffiti artists/writers)” (Ross, 2016, 477).

**Bombing:** “The prolific writing of one’s tag [chosen name]. Bombing usually involves saturating a given area with a large number of one’s ‘tags’ and/or ‘throw-ups’. Often regarded as an important avenue for achieving recognition among other graffiti writers” (Ross, 2016, 475).

**Throw-up:** “(also known as throwies) … Produced with spray paint, throwies spell out a graffiti writer’s name in bubble-style letters. These letters are usually produced and filled in quickly with a single color, and then outlined with a second color of paint. Throwies may also be done with a single can of paint, in which case the graffiti writer will produce a quick series of letters. In the more recent history of graffiti, throwies have increasingly come to be recognized as a distinct and valuable part of a graffiti writer’s repertoire, often leading to the production of multi-colored throw-ups. Unlike masterpieces, throw-ups allow graffiti writers to cover more surface area relatively quickly” (Ross, 2016, 478).

**Whole car:** A large piece that covers an entire train car. This references the size of the piece and is related to ‘end to ends’, ‘top to bottoms’, and ‘window-downs’. (Snyder, 2009)

**Aerosol:** Aerosol can refer to spray paint (see below) or it can be used instead of the word graffiti, as in an aerosol artist or an aerosol artwork. While a writer or artist may refer to a piece as aerosol art instead of graffiti art, graffiti art remains illegal, while aerosol art could be carried out legally on a canvas or other legal surface.

**Character:** “A term used to describe pictorial elements of graffiti works, especially renditions of creatures or personas. Characters are often used in conjunction with elaborate pieces of a graffiti writer’s name/tag, and often incorporate gestures that draw the viewer’s attention to the name” (Ross, 2016, 475).

**Spray paint:** Paint in a can that is applied using internal pressure and aerosol spray caps of varying sizes to change how it behaves when leaving the can.

**Mural:** “Large paintings on walls, sides of buildings etc. where the artist/s have been given express permission by the owner, and/or has been commissioned to do the piece (e.g. the work of Diego Rivera). Often depicting historical and/or religious events, themes, individuals, etc.” (Ross, 2016, 477).

**Top to bottom:** A top to bottom (T-B, T2B, T-to-B) is a piece that covers a train car from top to bottom. (Snyder, 2009)

**Piecing:** Piecing refers to the making of pieces, or “masterpieces.” See the definition for piece above.

**Wildstyle:** “Energetic pieces of graffiti with interlocking, highly stylized and often cryptic lettering” (Ross, 2016, 479).

**Burner:** “A graffiti piece that is regarded as high quality. To ‘burn’ is to outdo the work of others” (Ross,
Graffiti art: “Graffiti art is a face-to-face, social practice with clear aesthetic intentions and unlike traditional graffiti, the semantic content of graffiti art is secondary to its visual aspirations. The identity of the individual (name and/or signature) is a crucial component of both, but graffiti art developed and is practiced collectively within skilled, locally organized subcultures” (Austin, 2010, 35).

End to end: An end to end (E-E, E2E, E-to-E) is a piece covering a train car from one end to the other. (Snyder, 2009)

Black book: “Writers carry sketchbooks that they call blackbooks which they use to practice outlines and to get autographs from other writers” (Snyder, 2016, 211n3).

Insides: The insides of subway trains. Graffiti artists can paint insides or outsides. There are many different ways to describe outsides, but insides are not commonly places to bomb or to piece, but rather to simply tag, which is to quickly write one’s stylized name, usually in black marker. Graffiti writers speak of doing insides or outsides as a type of work.

Subway art: Another way of referring to graffiti art that was typically practiced on the subway cars in New York City in the late 1960s to 1980s.

Aerosol art: Graffiti is sometimes referred to as aerosol art, but this term was not common in the zines until issue 10 of IGT, when the editor explicitly stated disdain for the term graffiti and began to use aerosol art instead almost exclusively in all issues going forward (IGT 10, 1988). The term was used in IGT as aerosol art, aerosol archives, and aerosol artists. Interestingly, the title IGT formerly stood for International Graffiti Times, but by issue 8 the G in the acronym appears to have changed from graffiti to “Get Hip”.

Production: These are larger and more involved pieces that involve several artists (often from the same crew) to work together. They are done on legal walls, where permission has been granted or the work commissioned. They require a larger amount of time, supplies, and people, all of which are prohibitive without permission. (Snyder, 2009)

Using these definitions, meaningful comparisons can be made between them and matching or related terms from the AAT. Results from this comparison are presented in Table 4. The original zine term is given first, then the term match from the AAT, as well as the name of the facet and the hierarchy under which the AAT term is found. Results that are shaded are those that provided a match or related term, but that were either not sufficient to describe the zine term or were completely different in meaning. NR indicates that although a result was found in the AAT, it was not related to the zine term meaning. A dash indicates that no result was found for the zine term in the AAT.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zine terms</th>
<th>AAT</th>
<th>facet</th>
<th>hierarchy name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>graffiti</td>
<td>graffiti</td>
<td>objects</td>
<td>visual and verbal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graffiti artists</td>
<td>agents</td>
<td>people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subway graffiti</td>
<td>object</td>
<td>visual and verbal communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piece</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bomb/bombing</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>throw-up</td>
<td>throw up</td>
<td>activities</td>
<td>processes and techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[book binding action]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whole car</td>
<td>railroad cars (subdivides into freight cars, passenger cars)</td>
<td>objects</td>
<td>furnishings and equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerosol</td>
<td>aerosol</td>
<td>materials</td>
<td>materials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Results of zine term search in the AAT
This comparison resulted in three term matches: graffiti, mural, and black book. While graffiti artists were found in the AAT, graffiti itself was not referred to as graffiti art. Subway art is not found in the AAT, but subway graffiti is, as a sub-category of graffiti. The term aerosol is found in the zines and in the AAT, though the meaning is different. In the AAT aerosol is a material only, not a way to describe graffiti or graffiti art as it is in the zines.

It is really no surprise to find mural in the AAT as this is a recognized art term in common usage, associated with specific artists such as Diego Riviera, for example. What is notable is the inclusion in the AAT of the graffiti artist’s black book, something that is basically a sketchbook but specifically so named by graffiti artists for their purposes.

**Limitations**

Graffiti zines were chosen for use as data in this research because of their place in the early history of the graffiti art movement. As a written record by and for graffiti artists, they document the language used by those creating graffiti art themselves, such language not being accessible by looking at the artworks or photographs of the artworks. While the knowledge contained in the zines is rich, it must be noted that it is from a specific era of the movement’s development. The zines used in this study were from the 1980s and 1990s, but the art movement has continued to grow and develop. Further study is needed to examine the evolution of terminology to the present.

Knowing how graffiti artists talk about and describe their artworks and artistic practices is important to inform how systems for the organization of art and cultural objects make representations of the artworks available for further study and appreciation, yet it is not the only input upon which such systems can, and probably should, be created. This is a highly contested issue, that of who gets to decide how a
movement is described – those within it, those studying it, those in power, or a combination of all of these and more. This study has examined only one small part of this puzzle in demonstrating the lack of inclusion of one relatively recent artistic subculture’s vocabulary within the AAT.

Summary
The results of this study show that, other than a few very general concepts, the terminology of the graffiti art community is not well represented by what is available in the AAT. The AAT is well suited to represent mainstream and traditional historical art movements, but does not include most terminology that is used by the graffiti art community to describe their own work. Reasons for this gap in AAT terminology may be due to the relatively young age of the graffiti art movement, to the well documented rejection of mainstream institutional art ideology by graffiti art community members, or a combination of both. Without further study it is not easy to say what users of graffiti art collections need from them, but by looking at what facets of information are offered by the zines, a picture of community needs develops based on these facets.

There is a need to be aware of newer movements in not only art, but other various aspects of a constantly evolving society. Especially considering how quickly artistic, political, and social movements now spread across virtual space and thus the world, continuing research of knowledge specialists must consider not only these issues and how to meet the demands of varied users to access knowledge of all types, but also to develop ways to change and/or expand subject vocabularies in faster and more flexible ways to meet these needs. The graffiti art movement is an important example of a subdomain of art that can be shown to warrant further research into the epistemological dimensions of KO.

References


Ex-graffiti artist Marcus Barnes found himself arrested for "encouraging" crime when he produced a magazine about train graffiti. Many participants operate with a level of professionalism outsiders would find hard to believe. Some transport and high-level security operators describe their practices as a threat on a par with the "hostile reconnaissance" that happens before a terrorist act, but while the end result "graffiti" can be seen as a pain in the backside for the authorities, arguably a blight on communal areas, the perpetrators, consciously or unconsciously, question long-accepted norms about how our cities and spaces should be used. Graffiti-related media had become abundant since Style Wars and Subway Art.