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Kelsey Perreault

Western University, kperrea2@uwo.ca

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Hidden Histories and Collections: Discovering the Underbelly Project

Kelsey Perreault

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Below the bustling streets of New York City is a collection of artwork unlike any other. Hidden in an abandoned subway station is the work of one hundred and three street artists from around the world. It is widely known as The Underbelly Project and it took over eighteen months to complete. The location is a closely guarded secret and the exhibition itself closed on the very same night it opened. The unique nature of this project opens up our understanding of the museums' purpose and function within society. The Underbelly Project seemingly rejects every norm of the traditional museum experience. However, the ritualistic quality of the Underbelly Project undeniably links it to fundamental principles of museums such as the ritual, the archive, and notions of collecting.

The practice of writing on walls is not new; in fact it is a universal condition that goes back thousands of years. "It is done everywhere from third-world villages to affluent cities. People were scratching their names in plaster a century ago, as a visit to many old tourist sites will confirm ... Graffiti adorned 18th-century Parisian lavatories, medieval Norwegian churches and the walls of Pompeii, which was buried under ash in 79AD."¹ Over the course of eighteen months beginning in 2009, curators and New York street artists, PAC and Workhorse brought in artists individually and in small groups to leave their mark on the walls of a subway station (fig. 1) that had been left dormant for close to a hundred years. Artist Jeff Soto even remarked that "it was impossible not to draw comparisons with the prehistoric cave painters of Lascaux, working by firelight in similar conditions. There is something undoubtedly primal about painting in the dark. The tunnel was respected always, and we treated it like a shrine."² This reference to Lascaux cave paintings is particularly interesting because of debates over whether the caves should only be accessible to scientists, for the sake of preservation or whether these sites should be open to the public. The Underbelly Project remains inaccessible but much of the

romanticization surrounding it comes from the idea that one day people will find it and be in awe of its vast collection, in the same way that people were fascinated by the Lascaux caves. The ritual act of painting and drawing on walls underground comes from the desire to leave behind a legacy, a mark, or even a story for future generations to uncover.

A ritual is defined as a formal ceremony or a series of acts always performed in the same way each time.³ It is based on this principle that Carol Duncan forms her analysis of the art museum as a ritual in her book “Civilizing Rituals”. She argues that museum visitors are guided through the museum space in a ritualized way that is controlled by signs, signals, norms and expectations.⁴ The Underbelly Project defies the controlled nature of the museum space by placing the art in a location that is separate from the institution of the museum. Institutional art theory proposes that “the existence of the work as ‘art’ is due to its being appointed to the status as a ‘candidate for aesthetic appreciation’ by agents who are situated inside the ‘art world’.”⁵ This particular project is in direct opposition to the institutional art theory as the artists appoint the unconventional space of the subway station as gallery and proclaim the graffiti as art even though it exists outside of the ‘institutional art world’. The curation of the Underbelly Project allows for greater involvement of the actual artists in determining how the space is used and what type of art they want to create.

In this sense, they escape the rigid guidelines that often guide museum curators while creating exhibitions that are inherently ritualistic, as Duncan outlines. However, the exhibition itself is perhaps even more controlled than a museum exhibition because of the ways in which viewers have very restricted access to view the space. The Underbelly Project was documented by photograph and video which are the only ways that the public can access the artworks. The inaccessibility of the space in many ways adds to the romantic aura surrounding the project.

Lister, one of the participating artists from Australia said that “[t]he main difference between painting in the subpublic, as opposed to the public, is the feeling that you may never see your work again. But this is also the attraction- the idea that someone else, sneaky and adventurous, will receive your work with a different type of intensity than if they saw it where everyone else can. My subpublic works are special gifts for those willing to risk something for nothing.”⁶ The artists that participated in the project were trespassing to reach the site. For those daring enough to go searching for The Underbelly Project, they risk criminal charges as well as their own personal safety.

The photographs taken from the Underbelly Project were compiled into a book called *We Own the Night* (fig.2). The production of this book ensures that people know that this project really exists somewhere underground in NYC, while the knowledge that they may never find its location adds to its mystery. The secretiveness of this project is due to the illegality of its production but it also safeguards the works of art. Typically graffiti in a city like New York is ephemeral and is covered over, removed, or vandalized quite quickly. In this sense, the subway station is a kind of archive that protects the works of art. This is the first time such a large group of graffiti works has been collected so there is a need to preserve the space. The book acts as both a photographic archive for the works and an image based gallery for the public to view the art. The artworks themselves will deteriorate over time due to the damp climate underground so these images capture them at their time of production. These photographs give a sense of the space but will never fully do it justice. As Walter Benjamin once wrote, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”⁷ It is impossible for viewers to ever fully appreciate these graffiti works because they will never have a chance to see them in reality.

Moreover, Sonja Neef stated in 2007 that “[i]f a graffiti museum exists, it does so on the Internet. The Internet is full of graffiti webpages used by sprayers and their sympathizers as showcases, allowing them to put their work on display under the protection of anonymity offered by the web.”⁸ The Underbelly Project was produced three years later and is the first true graffiti museum of its kind. Graffiti entered the commercial gallery scene in recent years but these works are not curated in the same way that the Underbelly Project was. Graffiti in many ways has never belonged inside a conventional gallery or museum; it has always belonged to the streets and underground. The Underbelly Project is a museum that fits more with the spirit of graffiti itself. Placing graffiti within the confines of a museum is the equivalent of placing Indigenous art within museums. This displacement strips these artworks and objects of their original value and they cease to function in the way they were intended. As Baudrillard suggested, “any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized or it can be possessed.”⁹ When we merely possess or collect objects or artworks we strip them of their function. If one purpose of graffiti is social intervention then this function is stripped away when it is placed inside a gallery or underground.

Furthermore, The Underbelly Project disrupts preconceived ideas about the purpose of museums, galleries, and archives. The issues surrounding art institutions that this project brings up fall under the category of institutional critique that was born in the 1960’s when the practices of art production and presentation were highly scrutinised and re-negotiated. “By propagating the dematerialisation of the art object and exploring alternative media, sites and publics to stage works, conceptual art, land art, performance art or fluxus in their respective ways addressed and expanded conventions of how art is produced and presented.”¹⁰ The Underbelly Project offers an alternative mode of display for graffiti that is both outside the commercial gallery and away from

the street. Clearly, the interrogation of art institutions has continued into the twenty-first century which has led to some very positive changes. “Louis B. Casagrande, President/CEO of the Children’s Museum of Boston, observed, ‘museums have transformed themselves from mainly predictable, preachy, white-walled, academic institutions into more engaging, educational and entrepreneurial organizations, committed to building audiences as well as collections’.”¹¹ These changes are due in large part to interventions like The Underbelly Project that challenge conventional museums and force them to start thinking in new ways. Although, some museums have become very progressive there is still a need for artists, critics, and the public to continue institutional critique.

Undoubtedly, the museum world continues to change as does the museum itself. Collecting started in small cabinets of curiosities and grew to progressively larger collections spanning entire rooms and houses. These collections began as private and privileged but have grown to become massive, public institutions. These collections are bits and pieces of our cultural histories. Some tell stories and some are complete mysteries. Workhorse, one of The Underbelly Project curators tells a fascinating story of the first time he saw the abandoned subway station that came to be the site of the project. He said that, “[a]fter slipping around, through, over, and up into areas we shouldn’t be in, I suddenly found myself standing in a massive temple of New York history... as I stood there it was hard not to think about the history of the space. How was this place here? Why was it here? How long had it been there? How many other people had seen this? This place was the exact place that I never knew I was looking for.”¹² All of the graffiti artists spoke of the space as if it were a church and a truly sacred place. History is most often thought of in association with books, objects, and museums but here was this dirty subway station that the graffiti artists worshipped as a historical marvel. Upon discovery of this

abandoned space that holds an unknown and mysterious history, these street artists claimed it as their own and left their own mark and history before abandoning it again.

Evidently, The Underbelly Project is a unique underground graffiti museum that simultaneously takes up and rejects traditional museum practices. The location and inaccessibility of the site is unconventional. However, this large collection of graffiti works clearly engages with ideas of collection, archiving, and preservation. The abandoned subway station was treated like a temple which is similar to the way museums are often thought of as ritual spaces. Many people thought of The Underbelly Project as a critique of traditional art institutions. Yet, upon close investigation the project follows many of the same principles that guide museums and curators. The Underbelly Project really expands the boundaries of what constitutes as a museum. It also challenges the idea that all art and cultural objects belong in a traditional museum. Some art, like graffiti needs to have its own kind of museum that better reflects its spirit and values. Hanging graffiti in a commercial gallery or museum contradicts everything that graffiti represents. The Underbelly Project is the perfect museum and collection for graffiti because it was curated by graffiti artists. These two artists looked at this dirty, empty space and had a vision of a monumental collection of street art hidden below the street. Shortly after the New York project was completed, they set to work on another project under the streets of Paris. Are these underground projects the future of graffiti museums? Only time will tell.

¹ “The Writing on the Wall; Graffiti.” 2004. *The Economist* 373, (8406): 94.

² Workhorse, PAC , Jiae Kim, John Lee, and Emeht Agency. *We own the night: The art of the underbelly project 2012*: New york mar 2009-aug 2010. New York: Rizzoli.

³ “Ritual” Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ritual>.

⁴ Carol Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” Chapter 1 in *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.7-21.

⁵ Sven-Olov Wallenstein. “Institutional Desires” *Arts and its Institutions: current conflicts, critique, and collaborations*. 2006. London: Black Dog Publishing p.120

⁶ Workhorse, PAC , Jiae Kim, John Lee, and Emeht Agency. *We own the night: The art of the underbelly project 2012*: New york mar 2009-aug 2010. New York: Rizzoli.

⁷ Harry Zohn. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Walter Benjamin. January 1, 1936. Accessed April 3, 2015. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

⁸ Sonja Neef, "Killing Kool, The Graffiti Museum." *Art History* 2007: 30, (3): 418-431.

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London 1994): p.8

¹⁰ Jan Verwoert "This is Not an Exhibition" *Arts and its Institutions: current conflicts, critique, and collaborations*. 2006. London: Black Dog Publishing p.133

¹¹ Des Griffin. "Advancing museums." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 2008: 23, (1): 43-61.

¹² Workhorse, PAC , Jiae Kim, John Lee, and Emeht Agency. *We own the night: The art of the underbelly project* 2012: New york mar 2009-aug 2010. New York: Rizzoli.

Image Appendix



Fig.1 Subway Station location for the Underbelly Project. Photo by: Emile Souris (2010)
<http://popupcity.net/new-yorks-underbelly/>

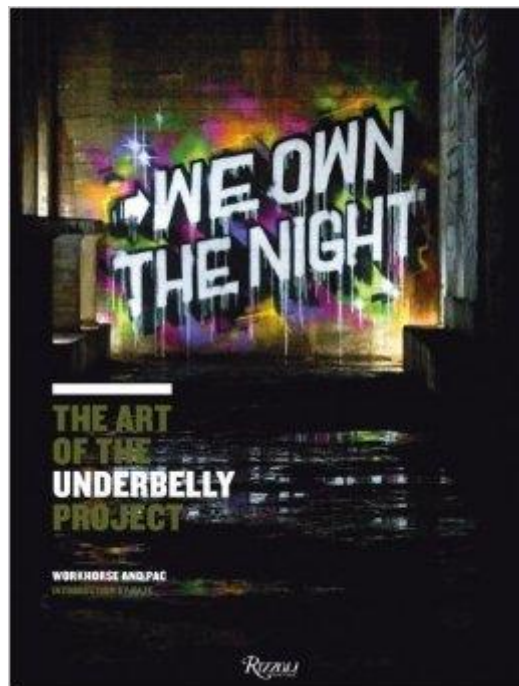


Fig. 2 We Own The Night: The Art of the Underbelly Project, book cover 2012

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