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Warrant Revealed and an Institutional Response: The AAT and Graffiti Art

Introduction

Knowledge organization concerns itself with the process of documenting the products of various domains of scientific and cultural research and expression. Disciplines with the longest history of intellectual inquiry often have the most granular systems in popular use to describe their respective processes and products of endeavor, such as the hard sciences, age old religions, mathematics, and philosophy. Yet the world is a place of continuous exploration, discovery, and development. Newer disciplines such as gender and sexuality studies, nanotechnology, and social media studies have shorter histories and have undergone challenges as terminologies adapt from older, parent disciplines to provide descriptive support for related, yet new concepts. One such discipline is that of street art.

Street art, and the related term graffiti art, are situated within the broader narrative of fine arts in general, though there are many ways in which street art and graffiti art differ from other fine arts, in terms of traditional views of style, materials, and siting, but also in terms of legality and ethics, institutional recognition and support, preservation, and documentation. Unlike artworks in a museum or art gallery, graffiti art and street art exist outside these institutional boundaries, and therefore also largely outside the realm of concomitant efforts to preserve and document them in the standardized and detailed ways we are familiar with in the professional realm of libraries, archives, and museums (Cowick 2015, Dallas 2015).

This does not mean the works are not being documented. On the contrary, the internet swells with sites devoted to photographs of the ephemeral works (Wacławek 2011). The rich sources of documentation contained on a number of these websites provide a treasure trove of terminology relating to the organization of graffiti art and street, vocabulary originating with those who create the works themselves and the community that documents, organizes, shares, and discusses it at great length.

Grounded in a post-modern approach (Mai 1999) and in the need for more and deeper domain analysis to inform knowledge organization systems (KOS) (Smiraglia 2015, Hjørland 2017), I will examine specific terminologies that correspond to the needs of the graffiti art and street art community, supplying evidential support from an examination of over 240 graffiti and street art websites. The research herein culminates in an example of adaptation and change in response to the needs of the community within the Getty Research Institute's Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT).

Methods

In 2016 I examined graffiti process and product terminology as evidenced in a series of three graffiti zines (Graf). Terminology was extracted from a total of 38 issues of the zines, produced between 1984 and 2000. After normalization for spelling variations and parts of

speech, a list of twenty terms relating to graffiti art practices and products was revealed and used for comparison with the AAT (see Table 1). This comparison showed a match between graffiti art terms and the AAT only three times out of twenty, or a rather low match rate of 15% (see Table 3). At this time, it was reported that the AAT, while built upon the premises of user needs and warrant, was not responsive to the needs nor warrant of the graffiti art community (see Graf 2016 for details of this original study).

Table 1: Frequency of terms appearing in the zines (Graf 2016)

graffiti	741	piecing	25
piece	185	wildstyle	23
bomb/bombing	86	burner	17
throw-up	41	graffiti art	16
whole car	38	end to end	15
character	35	insides	14
spray paint	35	subway art	13
mural	30	aerosol art	11
top to bottom	29	production	11

To provide a more in-depth and up to date analysis of current graffiti and street art terminology, further research was carried out on 241 websites that share photographs of graffiti and street art. These sites were found by looking at all 709 individual websites linked from the Art Crimes website (www.graffiti.org), and removing all the dead links, moved links, and no longer active websites. One part of this research specifically examined types of art style terminology used on the websites to describe and organize works featured. This resulted in a list of 31 terms that were used by at least two websites as categories into which works were placed (see Table 2). Each term is given with a count of how many times it was used, on how many sites it was used, and on what percentage of sites it was used. The count is higher at times than the number of sites using the term because it may have been used more than once on an individual site, such as a sub-category to more than one category. For example, a website may use the term sketches to organize works that are considered sketches, but also to further divide parent categories of graffiti, murals, or pieces. Terms that are in italics are those that are found in the list of 20 zine terms, either exact matches or conceptually alike ("end to end" in the zines is the same concept as "TrainEtoEs" on the websites, for example).

Table 2: Terminology focusing on types of artworks over a total of 241 websites
Initial Results

Type Facets	Count	Sites	% of Sites
Sketches	74	56	23.2
Graffiti	75	50	20.7
Other	184	43	18.3
CommercialDesign	63	43	17.8
StreetArt	38	35	14.5
Murals	39	32	13.3
Tags	22	17	7.1
3D	18	16	6.6
Characters	59	15	6.2
Pieces	37	15	6.2
Stencils	20	13	5.4
Bombs	13	12	5.0
Throwups	16	12	5.0
Letters	19	10	4.1
Productions	12	10	4.1
Stickers	14	10	4.1
Digital	8	8	3.3
TrainWholecars	13	8	3.3
Action	6	6	2.5
Posters	9	5	2.1
SprayPaint	4	4	1.7
Wheatpaste	4	4	1.7
Political	3	3	1.2
Projections	3	3	1.2
TrainEtoEs	5	3	1.2
Collaborations	3	3	1.2
TrainPanels	3	3	1.2
Silvers	2	2	0.8
TrainTtoBs	2	2	0.8
Wildstyle	3	2	0.8
Handstyle	2	2	0.8

While 12 of the 20 zine terms are found in the much more extensive list of website terms, this gap is understandable for at least two reasons. First, the websites represent the art form as documented not only from the same time periods as the zines, but continuing into the present, nearly two decades after the time period in which the most recent zines were created and distributed. The ways in which graffiti and street are expressed, documented, and shared have expanded and been refined over time. Second, while the zines and the websites were both examined for terminology, the entire text of the zines was used while only the text that described facets for organizing photographs of the works was used from the websites. In other words, the terminology taken from the websites was only that used as categories for the organization of types of works. The zines captured the words of artists talking about their works and how they created them.

This research examining current websites is useful to illustrate the continuing usage of terminologies present in the 2016 zine research, which in turn reflected usage from the mid-1980s to 2000, and to demonstrate still further granularity in descriptive practice used by those curating sometimes very large collections of graffiti art and street art images. It is seen that the terminology in the zines is still used today, demonstrating a concretization of graffiti art and street art vocabulary and further supporting the authoritative warrant for such terminology in a controlled vocabulary designed to represent artistic process and product, such as the AAT.

Updated Results

In late 2018, the list of twenty graffiti art terms from the 2016 study was again compared with the AAT, now with much different results. Table 3 shows results from the comparison in 2016, and Table 4 shows the same comparison made two years later, in 2018. Terms that are in yellow are an exact match between the zines and the AAT. Terms in blue were those that did not have a match in the AAT. The table shows non-matching terms as either having no search result in the AAT, having some kind of a match in language, but not related (NR) in concept, or having an exact match in language, but again not in concept.

In 2018 there was a match between 14 of the same 20 terms, or a match rate of 70% (see Table 4). This represents a great improvement in the variety of terminology now available in the AAT to describe the processes and products of this historically marginalized arts community. It also demonstrates the validation of the stated goals of the AAT's developers to allow for the inclusion of terminology that is warranted by authoritative sources such as the members of the art community in question as evidenced by their literary output in the form of the zines, and further supported by the demonstrated usage by graffiti and street art photography collection curators online.

Table 3: Terminology comparison between the zines and the AAT in 2016, showing only three matching terms out of 20 (graffiti, mural, and blackbook).

Zine terms	AAT	Zine terms	AAT
graffiti	graffiti	top to bottom	--
	graffiti artists	piecing	piecing [quilting]
	subway graffiti	wildstyle	--
piece	NR	burner	--
bomb/bombing	NR	graffiti art	--
throw-up	throw up [book binding action]	end to end	--
whole car	railroad cars (subdivides into freight cars, passenger cars)	black book	black books (graffiti)
aerosol	aerosol	insides	interior
character	NR	subway art	subway cars
spray paint	--	aerosol art	--
mural	mural painting (image-making)	production	working drawings
	mural paintings (visual works)		

Table 4: Terminology comparison between the zines and the AAT in 2018, showing 14 matching terms out of the same 20.

Zine terms	AAT	Zine terms	AAT
graffiti	graffiti, graffiti art	top to bottom	top-to-bottoms
	graffiti artists	piecing	piecing
	subway graffiti	wildstyle	Wildstyle
piece	pieces	burner	burners (graffiti)
bomb/bombing	bomb, bombs, bombing, bombed (graffiti)	graffiti art	graffiti art
throw-up	throw-ups (graffiti works)	end to end	end to ends
whole car	whole cars	black book	black books (graffiti)
aerosol	aerosol	insides	interior
character	NR	subway art	subway cars
spray paint	--	aerosol art	--
mural	mural painting (image-making)	production	Productions (graffiti art)
	mural paintings (visual works)		

While there are no indications in the AAT itself under the recently added entries as to when they were added, there are references for warrant in several of the entries to very popular and often cited sources such as Austin (2001), Gottlieb (2008), Bengsten (2014), and Ross (2016), all of which were also cited in the original comparative study by Graf (2016). According to the AAT website, the thesaurus is updated every two weeks (Contribute to the Getty Vocabularies 2017).

Conclusion

The results of these explorations into graffiti art and street art terminology, and the subsequent reaction by the AAT to include a larger percentage of terms over time is evidence of a knowledge organization system that has responded to the need for terminological representation as warranted by those closest to the art themselves: the creators, curators, and other graffiti and street art supporters who photograph the works, describe them, and organize them to preserve a record of their ephemeral presence among us. This artistic community has not been historically well served by systems used in the traditional art world for documentation, preservation, description, nor organization. The recent updates to the AAT regarding graffiti art are encouraging.

Further research is currently being conducted by the author to reveal still more granular descriptive terminology that can be useful for the description of graffiti art and street art. This research focuses on the aforementioned websites and on interviews with the curators of the websites themselves to understand why specific vocabulary and facets for organization are used. Such understanding can lead to better documentation methods, ways of organizing, accessing, and using collections of photographs of graffiti art and street art from around the world. Further domain analytic studies of various marginalized communities may have positive bearing on systems for knowledge organization, as has been shown here in the case of responsive change in the AAT.

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