The STEAM Journal

Volume 1
Issue 2 *The Quantified Self*

Article 17

February 2014

The Art / Crime Archive: An Anti-Boredom Space

Paul Kaplan
San Diego State Unversity

Brian Goeltzenleuchter

Dan Salmonson

STEAM is a bi-annual journal published by the Claremont Colleges Library | ISSN 2327-2074 | http://scholarship.claremont.edu/steam

The Art / Crime Archive: An Anti-Boredom Space

Abstract

This paper reports on an ongoing web-based project devoted to the study of deviant art and creative crime called the Art / Crime Archive: www.artcrimearchive.org. The Art / Crime Archive (ACA) is a collaborative laboratory, teaching center, and web-based platform devoted to the study of this space. The ACA is organized by an artist, a criminologist, and a computer engineer. The working process of the ACA involves locating, archiving, and discussing visual, audio, and text artifacts that support this shadow space. The work product is a dynamic archive which can be configured for a multiplicity of contexts—art exhibitions, academic presentations, community awareness panels, etc. The ACA's objective is to foment a dynamic, dialectical, and innovative discussion of deviant art and creative crime.

Keywords

art, crime, street art, boredom, post-modernism

The Art / Crime Archive: An Anti-Boredom Space

Paul Kaplan, Brian Goeltzenleuchter, and Dan Salmonson[1]

This paper reports on an ongoing web-based project devoted to the study of deviant art and creative crime called the Art / Crime Archive: www.artcrimearchive.org.

Modifying the famous idea of 'postmodern malaise,'[2] cultural criminologist Jeff Ferrel (2004) observes that modernity is 'boring' because it objectifies us with its typologies, organizations, laws, bureaucracies, and categories—its boxes. Of course, all of modernity's boxes possess a certain 'house of cards'[3] aspect that most of us don't perceive directly but vaguely intuit, which is what theorists such as Bauman (1992) believe cause the malaise. Sometimes, the bored malaise caused by modernity translates into action, from the tiniest 'microresistance' of tagging a wall to the extreme of killing people with mail bombs. In a sense, Jean-Michel Basquiat[4] and Ted Kaczynski[5] were both reacting to boredom.[6]

Meanwhile, branches of thought and discourse about art and crime run parallel. An important school in contemporary art theory argues that 'the post-modern flux' means that art should be 'relational:' "open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure" (Bishop, 2004, p. 52). Moreover, because a truly democratic society requires *conflict*, art should cause *unease, discomfort, and tension* (Bishop, 2004, p. 66). Like crime, art should be transgressive, disruptive, or deviant, but also relationally seductive and pleasurable. Similarly, since the emergence of cultural criminology with Katz's (1988) *Seductions of Crime*, a school of scholars of deviance, crime, and culture have articulated how crime is interactive (relational), improvised, emotional, and related to conflict. Like art, crime can be frightening and dangerous, but also commodified, consumed, and exploited.[7]

An important distinction is that art's dangers are usually celebrated while crime's are condemned. Sometimes these contexts overlap or drift between categories. 'Coke rap,' for example, illuminates the shadow space where art and crime live together. Is the Wu Tang Clan a crime syndicate or one of the greatest rap groups in history? Is graffiti synonymous with urban blight and vandalism? Or is it "street art" worthy of museum exhibitions and elite private art collections?[8]

---

[1] Paul Kaplan is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at San Diego State University; Brian Goeltzenleuchter is a conceptual artist based in San Diego; Dan Salmonson is an artist and computer engineer based in San Diego.

[2] The postmodern malaise is well summarized in the various works of Zygmunt Bauman (e.g., Bauman, 1992).

[3] The idiom of the house-of-cards expresses the idea that seemingly solid structures—including social structures—are actually precarious and susceptible to falling apart; we do not refer to the TV show of the same name.

[4] Basquiat was a Neo-expressionist painter active in the East Village/New York City art scene throughout the 1980s. His activities as a graffiti artist—under the moniker SAMO—predated and arguably catalyzed his meteoric rise as an international art celebrity. He died of a heroin overdose at the age of 27 in 1988.

[5] Kaczynski, also known as 'the Unabomber,' plead guilty in 1998 to three mail-bombing murders (and several non-fatal mail-bomb assaults), and is currently serving a life-without-the possibility-of-parole sentence in federal prison (Glaberson, 1998). He became well known at the time of his capture because of his radically anti-modernity views.

[6] For a comprehensive discussion, see Jeff Ferrell's "Boredom, Crime, and Criminology" (2004).

[7] See this website for cultural criminology for a list of general texts discussing this position: http://blogs.kent.ac.uk/culturalcriminology/

[8] The past decade has seen a number of museum exhibitions dedicated to "urban" or "street" art: *Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture* at Orange County Museum of Art, 2005; *Viva la Revolucion: A Dialogue with the Urban Landscape* at San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010; *Art in the Streets* at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011 are but three that garnered critical, popular, and economic accolades. Commercial galleries devoted entirely to street art have opened to

The Art / Crime Archive (ACA) is a collaborative laboratory, teaching center, and web-based platform devoted to the study of this space. The ACA is organized by an artist, a criminologist, and a computer engineer. The working process of the ACA involves locating, archiving, and discussing visual, audio, and text artifacts that support this shadow space. The work product is a dynamic archive that can be configured for a multiplicity of contexts—art exhibitions, academic presentations, community awareness panels, etc. The ACA's objective is to foment a dynamic, dialectical, and innovative discussion of deviant art and creative crime.

Users and Discourses

We pilot tested the ACA by incorporating it into the curriculum of an honors seminar at San Diego State University in Spring of 2013, which generated a number of fascinating conversations between students and other ACA participants about artworks posted to the web-page. An especially interesting example of these is about a Japanese art collective called Chim↑Pom, whose work controversially involves altering public artworks. ACA participant Nat Andreini posted a video and his own essay about the work of Chim↑Pom concluding with some fundamental questions about the role of subversive art:

> The Japanese government's relatively slow and opaque response to the nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant has resulted in a growing mistrust of the government in Japanese society.
>
> The Tokyo-based art collective, Chim↑Pom, was one of the first groups to initiate art projects to raise awareness about the realities of nuclear power and radiation in Japan through their performances and installations. Utilizing one of Tokyo's busiest neighborhoods, Shibuya, as the staging ground for many of their interventions, Chim↑Pom targets candid public audiences with sometimes outlandish and humorous projects . . .
>
> If anyone would like to comment on the above, I would be especially interested in the discourse about how art projects that are interventionist and subversive in nature, are sometimes associated with illegal activities. The work of Chim↑Pom and many others ride a fine line between our notions of legal and illegal, but when are these actions considered OK in society? Must they be educative (2013)?

The resulting conversation evolved into a debate about the value(s) of public art, when it is (or not) 'okay' to alter it, and the concept of 'mendalism,' which entails 'mending' public art (rather than vandalizing it):

> *huddlestona*_Artwork that infringes upon or changes someone else's art is a crime . . . the artists from Chim Pom make their artwork an addendum to someone else's artwork already displayed in the metro. Regardless of their

---

satisfy market demands, while the most successful street artists – such Barry McGee, Ed Templeton, and Shepard Fairey – have transcended the classification by signing with "blue chip" contemporary art galleries.

[9] The participant is referring to the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's exhibition *Viva la Revolucion: A Dialogue with the Urban Landscape.*

feelings about the meanings of the original artwork and how they would like to improve or add on to it, or to use it to compliment their own artwork, doing so is vandalism and indeed theft of the original artist's oeuvre. Unless the original artist was consulted or a collaborator, the new artwork is a criminal assault on the original artwork.

pkaplan To huddlestona: but see the post on 'Mendalism' on this web page. That artist makes a different case.

nat.andreini To huddlestona & pkaplan: Thank you . . . Chim Pom's addition to the original "Myth of Tomorrow" could also be regarded as a 'silent collaboration', where sticking to the main theme of the original merely updates the work to contemporary standards. The fact that it was created in actual physical space, versus the Internet or some other virtual environment, challenges us to consider notions of authorship and privacy. I think your comment is very astute, but would also ask you to consider less conventional reasoning. This kind of thing happens on the Internet and in advertising all of the time. Why is Chim Pom's version not OK?

artasauthority I think "Mendalism" is clever at best. If it weren't for the Papal blessing of MCASD[9] (and the exhibit that spawned these murals) along with those building owners who allowed their walls to be "tagged," these works would have likely suffered a fate much worse. "Mending" them so to speak neither improves, recovers, restores or even enhances the original I believe. In the spirit of most graffiti, it was a one shot deal not meant to be cherished or even safeguarded. This is why Chim Pom's interventions seem different to me. If we accept for a moment that all artwork is not static or "finished" as it appears to our senses, and that it is only a reflection of a particular moment in time or the artist's psyche, emotions or what have you, then you could possibly accept that perhaps the artwork hasn't attained the goal(s) the artist intended it to achieve. In other words, the artwork is not Gospel and is open to many interpretations and interventions by others. Not because the artist is incapable but because maybe the artist couldn't see the finished product. If you allow for this "flux" or "silent collaboration" perhaps then you end up with an artwork that is truly unique.

pkaplan The appeal of Mendalism for me is linguistic and substantive. I like the sound of the word and I like what it does semiotically to invert 'vandalism.' I also like the idea of altering public artworks for precisely the reasons artsauthority lists. The particular instance of adding tears to the mural in San Diego may be have been merely clever, but the idea is something more than that.

brian Some of the above commentary intersects with notions of public art - where it begins and ends, and most importantly, its relation to issues of permanence. One might ask: What's the shelf-life of an artwork? Within the conventions of so-called 'studio arts' if an artwork has outlived its public it can go into the archives of a museum of collector (and reappear, possibly, when a new use-value is determined). But in the public domain, the art work persists,

> often embarrassingly so, long after the public for which it was made morphs into that inevitable 'something else'. Given the ever changing identity of the public, this OUGHT to be a real conundrum for public artists and community advocates alike; what does one do with a public artwork that has outlived it public? Is it really an affront to a public artist to concede that his work is no longer relevant and needs to be replaced? And if not, what does one do with the outdated public artwork? In an age of neoliberal environmentalism this would certainly be a pressing question. Until such a time comes that the field of public art can address those issues at a policy level we should anticipate - and somewhat optimistically, I might add - artists taking matters into their own hands.

This conversation is worth quoting at length because it demonstrates how through its participatory archive the ACA enhances knowledge of archival material while promoting user engagement.[10] The cited debate was started by a Columbia University graduate student (nat.andreini) who was researching artists' roles in regions affected by disaster and conflict. Along with his initial commentary he submitted a digital artifact to the ACA: a video documentary of Chim↑Pom's recent cultural interventions. When he added the item to the collection, Andreini tagged his artifact with meta data (his tags included "Japan, intervention, art, performance, 3/11, Chim Pom, conflict, disaster, social movement"). This allowed another participant (pkaplan) to make the comparison to the Mendalism artifact as a means of challenging a previous participant's (huddlestona) contention that any art that infringes on an existing artwork is a crime.

By instigating a discussion on the ethics of subversive art in relation to the activities of Chim↑Pom, Andreini demonstrated the basic function of the ACA's online platform: to foster an active form of crowdsourcing that promotes user engagement that augments the archive. This form of crowdsourcing is predicated on meaningful and self-aware contributions,[11] which typically fall into one of two categories: Meta data (usually transcriptions or geotags) or specialized knowledge about archival material. The resulting discussion led to an increased understanding of both the Chim↑Pom and the Mendalism archival materials. For example, one participant (artasauthority) augmented the understanding of the Mendalism materials by adding specialized information about the sanctioned status of graffiti in question. This information led the last participant (brian) to summarize the state of public art and question its relevance in light of current public policy.

This is but one example of conversations currently taking place at the ACA. Since its launch in 2012, there have been 243 articles published by 139 users. Without any formal press release or advertising, 2,921 unique visitors from 89 countries have viewed the ACA, spending an average of 2.5 minutes per visit.

[10] Our definition of a "participatory archive" is indebted to Kate Theimer's recent keynote lecture on the subject (see Theimer, 2012).

[11] This stands in relation to passive forms of crowdsourcing such as the data aggregation compiled by Amazon.com, for example.

Harm

We are aware that this project could be interpreted as insensitive to the harms caused by crime. We do not wish to minimize the pain, suffering, and loss caused in victims by the behaviors of some persons deemed criminal. Rather, an important part of the ACA is to illuminate the relevance of culture to criminal behavior in order to better understand processes of criminalization, labeling, and selective law enforcement. Many examples of these processes can be cited, but note for example the proliferation in American culture of crime-related reality TV shows, such as *Lockup*, *Gangland*, and *To Catch a Predator* (just for example).[12] In an important sense, cultural artifacts like these tell us 'what crime is' and 'who criminals are' more than any penal code: according to them, crime is interpersonal violence committed by tough inmates, tattooed gang-bangers, or creepy perverts. 'Crime,' is not (for example) catastrophic financial mismanagement, corporate-caused environmental destruction, nor the marketing of alcohol and tobacco to children—all behaviors that are far more harmful to the society than any violent individual or gang. A simple thought experiment can help illustrate this point: write the word 'criminal' on a piece of paper and then close your eyes and imagine a criminal. The figure you see is a culturally produced character, a version of which is shared by everyone in the society, including government actors.

Looking at this process from the opposite end: the reported violent and property crimes recorded by the FBI that represent the official crime rate[13] are: murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson (FBI, 2014). All of these acts are committed by individuals against individuals. The US crime rate simply does not include reference to corruption, stock manipulation, or Ponzi schemes, let alone legal but harmful acts like those listed in the previous paragraph.

We believe that studying cultural artifacts related to crime—such as reality crime TV shows—can usefully complicate their meanings. Critically interrogating shows such as *To Catch a Predator* can help us see primary goals (to display sexually titillating and emotionally intense scenes in order to produce corporate profits by selling advertising) that underlie their purported goals (to educate the public about the dangers of internet predators).[14] This kind of critical engagement shows how 'crime' turns out to be more complex than the simplistic narrative of 'a bad man hurting an innocent person because he wants to.'

The discussion of Chim↑Pom and 'mendalism' discussed above illustrates this point in a straightforward way (albeit one covering a lighter topic than violent crime). Altering public art can be both illegal (Chim↑Pom) and legal ('mendalism')—discussing them together demonstrates the arbitrariness of crime, criminality, and law enforcement. Few would think that the Chim↑Pom activists or Nicholas Nicholas (the 'mendalist') are 'criminals'—and most people would probably frown on criminal charges being brought against either. Yet, as shown in a different posting on the ACA,[15] the government can and does charge such persons with serious crimes.[16]

---

[12] Several of these are discussed on the ACA.
[13] Known as 'the index crimes.'
[14] See LaChance and Kaplan (unpublished) for more on this.
[15] http://www.artcrimearchive.org/article?id=101001
[16] A San Diego activist who made critical images in water soluble chalk on the sidewalk in front of Bank of America branches faced 13 misdemeanor charges; he was ultimately acquitted by a jury (Perry, 2013).

Conclusion

Historically, archives epitomize the modern. By collecting, assessing, organizing and preserving, an archive literally and figuratively 'boxes' its subject. The Art/Crime Archive transforms the traditional notion of 'archiving' by using digital media to make it interactive and dynamic. Drawing on postmodern (digital) archival science, the ACA is a participatory archive; it decenters curation, democratizes the role of the user, and recontextualizes the archive process.[17] By facilitating collaboration, the ACA assumes the role of a collective memory: it becomes a collective instantiation of a global community's opinion about the in-flux limits of cultural transgression.

[17] Postmodern archival science is thoroughly addressed in the writing of Terry Cook (e.g., Cook, 2000).

References

Andreini, N. (2013, September 23). Chim↑Pom [electronic discussion board post]. Retrieved from http://www.artcrimearchive.org/article?id=49001

Bauman, Z. (1992). *Intimations of Postmodernity.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Bishop, C. (2004). Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. *October Magazine.* 110(Fall 2004), 51-79.

Cook, T (2000). Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts. *Archival Science*, 1(1), 3-24.

FBI (2014, January 7). Crime in the United States 2012 [web page]. Retrieved from http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2012/crime-in-the-u.s.-2012/violent-crime/violent-crime

Ferrell, J. (2004). Boredom, Crime, and Criminology. *Theoretical Criminology.* 8(3), 287–302.

Glaberson, W (1998). The Unabomber Case: The Overview; Kaczynski Avoids a Death Sentence with Guilty Plea. *New York Times.* Retrieved January 6, 2014 from http://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/23/us/unabomber-case-overview-kaczynski-avoids-death-sentence-with-guilty-plea.html

Katz, J (1988). *Seductions Of Crime: Moral And Sensual Attractions In Doing Evil.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

LaChance, D. and Kaplan, P. (unpublished manuscript). "The Good Shrank Not From The Wicked": The Pursuit of Sex Offenders on Primetime Television. Manuscript available from Paul Kaplan.

Perry, T (2013). San Diego Jury finds Protester not Guilty in Chalk-vandalism Case. *Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved January 7, 2014 from http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-chalk-verdict-20130701,0,1617754.story#axzz2plQObzsu

Theimer, K (2012). "Participatory Archives: Something Old, Something New," MAC Keynote, April 19, 2012