

Making Use of Pre-Existing Street Art Object Metadata

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In Graffiti and Street Art Studies, we are currently facing a paradoxical situation: vast amounts of publications relevant to our field – some of them academic, most of them not; from journal papers to coffee-table books – are continuously being published, but even the scholarly-oriented among them typically provide only sparse data about individual graffiti pieces and street art objects. More often than not, pictures of individual works only serve as illustrations of wider issues, themes or movements. It is rare to find complete metadata records containing information about the artist, the precise location, measurements, and the date of completion. Ideally, any textual content of a street art object would also be fully transcribed. If made available in digital form, a collection of such rich data records would yield answers to many a research question.

Efforts are being made by individual projects and researchers to gather and provide comprehensive, granular, structured, and accessible metadata, and to establish corresponding standards and guidelines. However, it would be unreasonable to assume that such efforts are going to add up to an amount of data necessary for ‘big data’-style analyses in the foreseeable future. While it is important that those efforts be continued, I propose a different, complementary approach that aims to ‘quickly and dirtily’ gather ‘messy’ data. The idea is to make use of work that has already been carried out instead of trying to describe the same works in better ways time and again. This requires us to learn how to deal with incomplete data from vastly different sources – in short, to employ methods that can be described by the terms ‘data wrangling’ and/or ‘data reconciliation’, concepts from the field of Data Science that have become popular in recent years.

Effectively, such an approach lowers the threshold for data sources to become useful for street art researchers. Anything can become a valuable resource, even amateur websites (including abandoned ones) and print publications regarding local and obscure street art. In this presentation, I will demonstrate how to extract object metadata from street art websites and feed it into a database. I will also outline a software pipeline to extract data from digitized print books and feed it into the same database. The end result will be a messy but massive treasure trove of street art object data. Querying it, e. g. for artist names, places, or themes, will reveal connections between diverse datasets.