The Art/Crime Archive: A Place for Reactions to Boredom

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The Art Crime Archive (ACA) is a collaborative laboratory, teaching center, and web-based platform devoted to the study of the shadow space where art and crime overlap. The ACA, housed in SDSU's Institute for Public and Urban Affairs (IPUA), is organized by an artist (Brian Goeltzenleuchter), a criminologist (Paul Kaplan), and computer engineer (Dan Salmonsen). The Archive's method involves locating, archiving, and studying visual, audio, and text artifacts that illuminate the cultural similarities between transgressive art and criminal behaviors. Put another way, The ACA investigates 'criminal art' and 'creative crime.' The work product is a dynamic archive which can be configured and re-configured for a multiplicity of contexts—art exhibitions, academic presentations, community awareness panels, etc. Ultimately, the Archive aims to foment a dialectical interpretation of art and crime.

The ACA invites submissions of 'criminal art' and/or 'creative crime' to its web-based platform: artcrimearchive.org.[1] Users can easily upload art/crime images, video, text, and sound to the website. Users can then comment on their own and other submissions, and also rate submissions on scales of 'artistry' and/or 'criminality.' Submissions can be nominated for permanent inclusion in the ACA by registered users; these submissions can then be evaluated by ACA Fellows (explained below) or Directors.

These data enable a range of analytic and socio-aesthetic outcomes, such as:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles focused on 'case studies' of particular art/crime artifacts submitted to the ACA
- Peer-reviewed journal articles addressing this post-structural, new media archive as a dynamic agent (as opposed to a passive object)
- Peer-reviewed journal articles about categories of artifacts (e.g., comparing ACA user ratings of graffiti to tattoos—analyzing perceptions of 'criminality' or 'artistry')
- Peer-reviewed journal articles based on the use of cutting edge image visualization software to explore patterns in archived images
- Books co-authored by the Directors and/or Fellows (e.g., an edited volume focusing on projects developed by Fellows using ACA data)
- Critical engagements with more explicitly policy oriented artifacts in the ACA (e.g., a panel discussion of the creativity of 'gang monikers' listed in gang injunction documents, to include a scholar of gangs, a gang member, and a poet)
- Exhibitions curated from archival documents (e.g., "Criminal Art & Creative Crime: Cultural Perceptions of Transgression" is a curatorial project currently in development by Goeltzenleuchter)

Fellows

A key feature of the ACA is its community of Fellows. Fellows are appointed by the Directors and come from a diversity of backgrounds, including professional academics, artists, students, justice system professionals, activists, and reformed criminals. A key role for Fellows will be to evaluate nominated uploads to the web platform for inclusion in the Archive. Ultimately, we envision Fellows as both data

[1] The web platform will be engineered so that only registered users can upload. In order to register, users will be required to electronically agree to terms of use to include a provision prohibiting uploads of evidence of prosecutable criminal behavior. Users will also be required provide identifying information, including the IP address of the submitting computer.

providers and data analysts; all Fellows have access to all Archive materials, metadata, and analytics for their own scholarly, creative, or other relevant works.

Theoretical Significance

Some post-structural theorists argue that Modernity is 'boring' because it objectifies human subjects with typologies, organizations, laws, bureaucracies, and categories—its 'boxes.' At the same time, we are perpetually invited from one box to the other—tricked into thinking we are having a subjective moment, usually through the act of consuming. Arguably, all of modernity's boxes possess a certain 'house of cards' aspect that most of us don't perceive directly but vaguely intuit. Hence the idea of 'postmodern malaise.'[2] Sometimes the malaise 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 and Ted Kazcynski were both reacting to boredom.[3]

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).[4] Similarly, since (at least) the emergence of cultural criminology with Katz's (1988) transformative *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.[5][6]

An important distinction is that art's dangers are usually celebrated while crime's dangers are condemned; this is because we conflate crime that harms with crime that offends, but does not harm. 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? The ACA investigates these and other responses to boredom.

At first glance, the Art/Crime Archive might seem to represent the epitome of the modern. By collecting, assessing, organizing and preserving, an archive literally and figuratively 'boxes' its subject. This project, however, transforms the traditional understanding of 'archiving' by using digital media to make it interactive and dynamic. In the first place, each individual engagement with the Archive can be unique because of the dynamic nature of the web platform, which allows individual users to uniquely configure their experience in the way material is captured, retrieved, assembled and shared. Secondly, the integration of dynamic media platforms 'democratizes' the archive, offering access to a far greater audience using the vernacular of social media. In this way the ACA is designed to remember the past while anticipating public opinion on the future. Ideally, the ACA assumes the role of a collective memory:

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

[3] Jeff Ferrell summarizes this view beautifully in "Boredom, Crime, and Criminology" (2004).

[4] Aside from the many examples from the formal world of 'art,' see the episode of Bravo TV's *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist* in which two female artists were celebrated by judges for desecrating another female artist's mural with stickers and graffiti depicting penises.

[5] Turn on your television and tune into any of the many 'crimesploitation' shows for examples (e.g., *Gangland*, *Lockup*, *To Catch a Predator*, etc.).

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

it becomes a collective instantiation of a community's opinion about the in-flux limits of cultural transgression (or antagonism).

Note on 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 our project is to illuminate the relevance of culture to criminal behavior in order to better understand processes of criminalization, labeling, and selective law enforcement. Ultimately, we believe that this illuminative process will lead to deeper understandings of 'causes' of crime, which can in turn inform policy decisions aimed at decreasing harm. We hasten to add that lots of things not called crime are more harmful to individuals and communities than almost any particular violent crime, or even large scale patterns of violent crime (e.g., the use of tobacco, environmental disasters, risky financial schemes). This archive can help study why certain relatively un-harmful acts are deemed criminal while some extremely harmful acts are not.

Note on Invisible Resistance

We know that some artists and criminals do their work explicitly to destabilize America's boring western liberal democratic consumerist world of blah. An old acquaintance the Archive's was a mid-level seller of methamphetamine in the late 1990s in San Francisco. This person framed his work as *explicitly* subversive, and purposely invisible—not-to-be exposed. This drug dealer wanted his work to be invisible not primarily because of risk of arrest but because he wanted to do be deeply *underground* as a way of resisting what he perceived to be America's boring, conformist, consumerist society. We reflect on this position with some difficulty as we develop this project. We do not want to illuminate or expose cultural practices that inherently require invisibility. At the same time, we find these practices profoundly interesting. For now, we can't resolve this issue and simply propose to keep it in the conversation.

References

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