

## **Daniel Kernan**

### **People & Place report**

#### **MY AIM(S)**

My aims during this project were to catalogue the graffiti and other ephemeral objects in the old tunnel in Holyrood park. In doing this I was aiming to also uncover the true scale of contrast between the different styles of artist, as well as to potentially uncover any interactions between artists that was visibly painted on the walls.

The tunnel under Holyrood park is a good place for this brief because it serves as something of a petri dish for certain types of behaviour, because it's quiet at night but well lit it's a choice target for graffiti and street art. It also serves as an odd kind of measure of time, we see processes that take a long time to occur, (like stalactites and mould forming) as well as faster changes such as layers of graffiti appearing and being covered over again. If the tunnel was a clock, the hour hand could be stalactite formation, graffiti could be the minute hand, and objects of litter would be the second hand.

The people who paint the tunnel or perhaps others (probably both) also drink and litter. The tunnel serves as a good indicator of what people do unobserved and plays host to a variety of ways people choose to express themselves, as well as some interesting conflicts between contributors to the tunnel walls. There are three main types of vandals at work here, (although there is always some overlap) graffiti writers, street artists, and jokers. I'll explain how these categories are different and give a brief description of each before writing specifically about how they're represented and interact in Holyrood.

#### **WHY I CHOSE THE METHOD(S)**

I chose photography as my main method for documenting the tunnel firstly because of it's high fidelity in representing the work of the graffiti artists exhibiting.

The second reason for using photographs was that it would allow me to create a contact sheet-like collage of the images. This is important because the layout of graffiti in the tunnel is nearly totally random, with a collage I can re-order the images in a way that groups similar works and themes together, giving a much clearer structure to the piece and hopefully making the goings on in the tunnel much more legible than they otherwise would be.

#### **WHAT I DID**

My initial task was simply to go and take as many photos of the tunnel as possible, giving myself a large amount of subject material to then sift through and try to categorise at home.

#### **HOW I DID IT**

I went to the tunnel and used the camera on my phone (as it was the only one I had at the time) to photograph nearly the entirety of the tunnel walls and ground. I chose any features that I thought might be of interest and photographed them. After photographing I began to arrange all the photos into an order that grouped all the images into groups of a similar kind.

#### **FINDINGS**

I was able to break down the kinds of graffiti in the tunnel into three rough styles, street art, graffiti writing (or 'tagging'), and jokes.

Graffiti writers are those who choose a moniker for themselves and usually do their best to plaster the city with it, the name chosen is often called a "tag" (the term has largely fallen from grace though for entering the mainstream). This style of vandalism could be seen as personal branding, someone saying "Here I am, I exist, and this is how I want to be seen". Conflicts can easily flare up between graffiti writers due to a perceived slight or disrespect because the work is so tightly bound to the ego of the writer, we can see this in Holyrood park tunnel.

Street artists are a broader category, their work ranges from detailed murals and characters to abstract shapes and patterns. Where the graffiti writer is making a project about themselves, street artists seem more likely to be trying to make a statement about the politics or society, that is if their pieces are decipherable and not entirely abstract or expressionistic.

Jokers are surely the least committed to their artwork, but nevertheless often provide a welcome respite to the aesthetic violence of graffiti writers and whatever visual onslaught street artists produce. They are often not tied to any moniker and this utter anonymity gives them free reign to express themselves without fear of backlash for being offensive or just stupid.

In observation it's quite easy to see where these categories overlap, graffiti writers may include a character or place their pieces on elaborate mural-like backgrounds, street artists often sign their works with an assumed name, and either is likely to leave a cheeky message beside their work.

The most notable interaction between graffiti writers in the tunnel is the apparent feud between "Evil" and "The Gabba Crew", "Evil" and "Dias" (which in this location are one sided attacks coming from Evil) and also some malice directed towards Evil from an unknown saboteur with the classically crude male genitalia painted over his piece. Evil has clearly noted beside one of his or her (although graffiti writers are nearly always young men both in my experience and in representation through social media, books, and documentaries) pieces "death to all gabber snitches", a sentiment echoed once more in the tunnel, albeit from an unidentifiable source. Evil is also one of the artists who crosses the boundaries between the three categories I listed above by having a recurring character that they identify themselves with, a sharp angular face with pointed teeth poised in a menacing grin. This they use both in their own pieces and to make an attack on one of Dias' pieces.

The street artists in the tunnel vary from interesting colourful and textural murals, overtly political slogans, and one or two fairly contrived pieces or symbols. There are some attempts at complex and colourful patterns and also some wild, abstract pieces that seem to be the artists first attempt at using spray paint. Often these inexperienced looking murals are the most enigmatic because it seems even the artist doesn't know what to do and ends up letting their subconscious mind take control, moderated only by the users lack of skill and the inherent visual qualities of the paint.

There is a good mix of different styles of characters painted in the tunnel, ranging from Godzilla to (intendedly) intimidating dark figures, to crudely or cartoonishly painted knights and legionnaires/centurions. One style in particular (which I'm going to assume is from the same artist) has an interesting look of being an attempt at realism limited by technical skill, portraying Roman soldiers fighting or otherwise interacting with winged humanoid creatures. These pieces stuck out to me because their dramatic nature, portraying very specific supernatural struggles gives the impression that one individual piece is just a small glimpse into the imagined world of the artist and reminds me of the work of outsider artist Henry Darger. This gave the pieces an especially intriguing quality for me.

It's pieces like these that make the more generic bits of street art pale in comparison, you can see a lot of hippy peace symbols lining the walls of the tunnel and there's also someone's reinterpretation of the cover of Rage Against the Machine's album "The Battle of Los Angeles" which takes up quite a lot of space.

Jokers in the tunnel often may well be the same people painting other things there but it's often impossible to tell, sometimes the apparent lack of familiarity with a spray paint can make it seem like at least some of the jokers aren't graffiti writers or street artists. There is also a split in styles between the jokes that are totally original and the ones that make reference to another piece of graffiti. For instance, one of the featured jokes here says "This halloween mother nature is gonnae sit on your face", totally original, unrelated to anything else in the tunnel, and with the crude irreverence that shines through in anonymous graffiti jokes. For an example of a joke aimed at another piece of graffiti, we have one saying "sneeze the weans of production" in response to graffiti saying "seize the means of production". This brings up an interesting point, the more

sincere a political statement, the more likely it is to be ridiculed because there's a greater contrast between the aspirational message of the first statement, and the irreverence with which it's treated by the joker.

Although the jokers aren't usually very talented artistically, and more often than not the jokes are in (what most would surely consider) poor taste, it is still refreshing to have some comic relief on the walls and also it adds another element to the already rich tapestry of graffiti in the tunnel walls.

## **REFLECTION ON HOW IT COULD BE IMPROVED**

Although the result was overall quite successful there are a number of ways the research methods could be improved.

The tunnel would be a great opportunity for a 3d photogrammetric scan. Making a 3d model of the space would allow for a digital recreation of the tunnel with annotations and relevant information displayed right beside the piece, an immersive 3d infographic.

Augmented reality would also have been a great way to annotate the graffiti in the tunnel, the only thing stopping me from carrying out either of these ideas is the amount of work, time, and computer power required is simply unachievable for me.