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Keywords Street art; museums; exhibition; open-air museum; Amsterdam

Abstract Noteworthy museums in Europe and North America have organized international exhibitions that appropriated street art to display within a gallery space. This paper argues that the restrictive framework of the ‘white cube’ museum space is incompatible for the display of street art. As the museum redefines its role in our society and carefully crafts appropriate narratives around cultural objects, it must also rethink its presentation of artworks like street art. All cultures deserve to have their story told in their way, and their objects authentically displayed – including street art culture. Taken from a larger research project, this article considers the conceptual relationship between street art and the museum, and physical display of the artwork. Rather than forcing the art to conform to the museum, the strategies of the Street Art Museum of Amsterdam are highlighted to provide opportunities for the museum to reconsider its role in the presentation of street art.

About the Author Caitlin Wunderlich completed her Master of Science in Museum Studies at the University of Glasgow and Bachelor of Art in Art History from the University of Michigan. She has worked in exhibition project management at the Brooklyn Museum and the Detroit Institute of Arts, and collections management at the Cranbrook Art Museum. Caitlin's research interests encompass street and graffiti art, and the future of museums.

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Introduction Exhibitions of street art and graffiti have taken place in galleries and artist-run spaces since the 1970’s, but these art forms have traditionally been excluded from prestigious art museums. While an intrinsic link exists between street art and graffiti, the continual evolution of the street art movement means that there is no consistent or all-encompassing definition of street art. Traditionally the street artist relinquishes control of the art object to the city and to the public once a work is installed in a publicly accessible space; its location invites other artistic expressions, and the work will eventually disappear either by natural elements or public intervention. The public space is necessary for analyzing and understanding the context of the work and complicates the display of these artworks in terms of the traditional museum model.

Street art is largely ephemeral art that is usually cheap to make, free to experience, and owned and overseen by no one (or, rather, everyone). Museums often contain art that is extremely expensive (to make and own), costly to experience, and overseen by an elite few...what is in the museum is supposedly sufficiently different from what is outside it—it is more powerful, full of complex meaning, more beautiful, challenging, and rewarding than the everyday.
This perceived incompatibility based on ephemerality, accessibility, and value will be some of the themes traced through the course of this article. However, this theory of incompatibility is rooted only in what scholars have witnessed thus far from museum exhibitions and the traditional role of these institutions. This article will highlight challenges to traditional museum display by exploring the first international museum of street art founded in 2010, the Street Art Museum Amsterdam (SAMA), Netherlands, and will propose solutions that could be used by future organizations to authentically exhibit street art.

Street art exhibitions
Over the past decade, the relationship between art museums and street art has begun to change through international exhibitions, programs, and commissioned projects. In 2008, the Tate Modern in London organized Street Art, which brought six international artists to create murals on the exterior of the museum. The international press, art critics, and scholars applauded the Tate for representing the art that its public wanted to see in its museums. Marc Schiller, co-founder of the street art website Wooster Collective, was asked to give a presentation during the run of the exhibition. For Schiller, the format of the exterior mural exhibition, without any work physically inside the walls of the museum, created a hierarchy between museum quality artwork and artwork that was just not good enough yet. Schiller also commented later that the exterior exhibition was “more about marketing...than about doing a survey of the movement.”

In 2011, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), Los Angeles, organized Art in the Streets, one of the first major museum exhibitions of street art in America, and incorporated work both inside and outside the museum. The exhibition featured paintings, photographs, and three-dimensional objects within the museum gallery, and a series of exterior murals commissioned nearby. However, art critics and members of the MoCA board criticized the exhibition for focusing too much on attracting large visitor numbers at the cost of the exhibition content. Additionally, following the museum’s decision to whitewash a commissioned controversial mural by a famous international street artist, critics began to question the role of the museum today and whether its job is to maintain the status quo or create change. Schiller, immediately reacted to the whitewashing:

We want, and expect, museums to defend our free speech. We want, and expect, museums to provide a home for provocative thought. We want, and expect, museums to provoke and inspire debate. What we should not want is for museums to be so constrained and commercial that they add very little to the public debate.

New museology or new museum theory states that museums should transform from “a site of worship and awe to one of discourse and critical reflection.” For museums, this means they need to critically reflect on the audiences they represent, the needs of those groups, the diversity of their museum collections, and the topics they present at the museum. In order for a museum to remain relevant to their community and audiences, they need to create something new and meaningful, whether that is through research, interpretation, participation, or in the case of Art in the Streets, presenting new art and new social movements. Schiller had expected MoCA to allow and encourage debate regarding a controversial mural.
Art in the Streets sparked another debate, this time from the local and national press arguing that MoCA was sanctioning and glorifying vandalism. Several media outlets including the New York Times reported that the exhibition was responsible for an increase in graffiti and vandalism in downtown Los Angeles. As a non-profit or government supported institution, this association could be harmful to the reputation and financial support of a museum. However, museums are expected to represent culture, every layer of it.

**Street Art Museum Amsterdam**

These street art exhibitions indicated that street art is an international movement worthy of museum attention, but perhaps museums first need to critically understand the artform and determine the most authentic way to display it. Anna Stolyarova, founder of the Street Art Museum Amsterdam (SAMA), explained, “I think when a museum drags a wall into the ‘white cube’ they don’t understand it.” Installing street art inside a traditional gallery space removes social, political, and economic context, and changes the nature of the artwork. Taking the work from the public to the private space also alters the visitor experience and removes public dialogue around the artwork.

Outside of the city center, SAMA commissions street artworks throughout the Nieuw-West region of Amsterdam. SAMA provides artists with pre-approved spaces from either the government or community associations. The neighborhood is a mix of smaller businesses and shops, apartment buildings, parks, and gardens. In terms of accessibility, walking or riding a bike is the most efficient way to experience the artworks, because many are featured on private buildings or in residential neighborhoods away from main roads. Stolyarova estimates that there have been more than 200 artworks completed, some no longer exist. By exhibiting in public space, all artworks face the threat of destruction by other individuals or by natural elements, making the artwork truly ephemeral. For instance, an artwork in a prime location may only last a day, while others tucked away from main roads may survive for years.

As previously stated, a fundamental link exists between street art and graffiti; scholars have reached a consensus that the street art movement, as it is understood today, emerged from the subcultural practice of illegal graffiti writing emerging from Philadelphia and New York in the 1960-70s. As the predecessor to street art, graffiti is a rebellious, counter-cultural movement used to mark territory in the form of a tag or stylized signature; it is fundamentally competitive and anti-institutional, and is an international movement. Although scholars have argued that the street art movement developed from graffiti culture, not all street artists follow a linear path from graffiti to street art. Some artists choose to only do legally commissioned artworks in the city. In Amsterdam, commissioned murals are scattered amongst illegal graffiti writing and street artworks. As a visitor, it is often hard to distinguish between a legal or illegal artwork. In some instances, graffiti and street art can be found on the same wall, working together as one larger artwork (figure 1).
Figure 1. Graffiti and street artwork working together to create a larger mural. See notes for full story between Juice, graffiti writer, and Suso, street artist. Amsterdam, all photos by author, July 2016 unless otherwise noted.

Figure 2. Venn Diagram explaining the connection between street art and graffiti. J. Daichendt, 2012.
The complexity of the street art movement can be partially explained by the diagram above (figure 2). However, street art draws from many other artistic styles in addition to graffiti. Stolyarova explained that it should actually include one more circle, to the right of street art, to illustrate the connection to muralism. “I so wanted to draw a comparison between muralism and contemporary graffiti art,” said Stolyarova, because some artists prep the surface with latex paint, come prepared with a concept, and create a masterpiece. A museum could include street art and graffiti as movements within contemporary art, although, there also needs to be space for a distinct movement to exist within art history. Stolyarova explained that it was street art that brought her to other historical artworks:

If there was no Stink Fish, there would be no Fra Angelico. If there was no Stink Fish, I would never go to Caravaggio. If there was no Kenor, I would never look to Kandinsky—never would express interest at all. They brought me back to study. I wouldn’t know who Diego Rivera is. If there was no Btoy, there would not be Frida. (figure 3.)

Figure 3. Mural by Kenor.

Links to other art forms are a starting point for museums and support the argument that street art and graffiti are worthy of being in a museum. There is an opportunity for museums to bridge the gap, to reach new audiences, and to inspire. Yet, scholarship within the museum needs to also focus on the unique characteristics of street art and graffiti. Part of the challenge rests with some institutions:

It’s democratic and it’s social art, but unfortunately many museums today, due to ignorance about the entire movement just do a graffiti workshop and say, ‘we have already done graffiti.’ They do a street art tour in the center and say, ‘we have already done it. We have already had one graffiti lecture; we don’t need to connect to this form of art anymore.’ That’s the ignorance of a big institution.

SAMA has worked with traditional fine artists, muralists, graffiti artists, and street artists. The majority of their artists tend to be international street artists because Stolyarova has found that many local artists either do not want to work in the Nieuw West region of the city, or they do not approach the project with the same level of respect and passion as visiting artists. Stolyarova explained that she envisions herself “as a curator representing the interest of
people around me, knowing them after years of interviews and complaints.” Stolyarova acknowledged the difficulty she faces in determining which artists are authentic street artists, and which are “posers” trying to become famous. As a non-profit organization, SAMA operates with a strict budget, receiving funding from the city, and other organizations; therefore, Stolyarova feels a duty to fully research each potential artist, and relies on leads from other artists. Representing an international art movement, a museum such as SAMA, faces challenges and potential criticism. Much like any other museum, accurate representation is challenging because it can come off as a “colonized space,” where some artists are clearly left out of the fold.

Street art does not connotate a necessary medium or mode of operation; meaning that many types of art (mosaic, latex paint, spray paint, marker, sticker, paper, etc.) can be street art. Stolyarova explained that artists—fine, street, or graffiti—often incorporate the same materials and methods for murals commissioned for SAMA. The use of spray paint or latex paint, for instance, were both used by artists who came from a formal art background or a graffiti background. Similarly, stencils or free hand painting were also used by both types of artists; the preference of one over another depends on the effect desired and preference of the artist. The amount of time required to create an artwork also varies largely from artist to artist, the conditions they are working in, and whether or not the work is commissioned. (figure 4).

Artworks vary in scale; some murals encompass an entire side of a building while other artworks are displayed on smaller utility boxes or similar public fixtures. Imagery varies from abstract patterns, cartoon figures, to characters that allude to geographical or social elements in the neighborhood. One artist, Btoy, installed a series of portraits of women, often depicting ethnicities that were represented in the neighborhood (figure 5). The public artworks by SAMA are contextually more relevant to the areas they are displayed in, and are more socially and...
economically accessible than the artworks that are displayed inside a museum. Artworks that are displayed in more prominent locations are viewed more frequently by a larger number of people, and for some, the artworks become part of a daily encounter.

Describing one of SAMA’s early murals, Stolyarova had a wall within a government housing block and began to photograph notices posted on doors, and discarded items on the street. These photographs, in conjunction with officials policing the area in yellow jackets, reinforced the message that this area was unsafe. Stolyarova sent all of this material to the artist, Alaniz, and he created Safety (figure 6). Stolyarova explained, “The moral of this artwork is that in the moment of danger, it is not the ones with the biggest teeth or the biggest guns who are the heroes, it is the ones that help those in distress.” At the bottom of the mural, the artist featured names of individuals from the neighborhood who donated a few euros each so the team could finish the piece. The mural is now a source of pride for those who donated and for those who live nearby. Additionally, in 2015, SAMA was named runner-up for a local safety award as their projects, tours, and events have provided an element of community safety that was not accomplished by cameras or police officers.  

SAMA received positive responses from the community, expressed through neighbors bringing food to the artists, children playing in the streets while the artists worked, and several people coming to thank the artists for brightening up their neighborhoods. This exchange is unique to producing art on the streets. Communities are typically not an active part of the creation of artworks featured inside a gallery or museum.
The official museum collection
According to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, published by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), both graffiti and street art would be included as “performing arts,” “social practices,” or “craftsmanship.” The convention calls for the safeguarding of all such heritage through actions including “identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, [and] enhancement...” UNESCO’s identification of the value of intangible heritage is a step forward for both graffiti and street art, and supports the argument that these art forms are worthy of museum inclusion. Stolyarova explained, however, that there is no way to really regulate street art or graffiti. In an attempt to establish guidelines for SAMA, Stolyarova has begun working with the local heritage academy to build a collections plan and heritage framework that acknowledges the unique characteristics of street art. Among the topics this framework addresses, ethical, social, and artistic criteria such as authenticity, copyright, and originality are included. There are, however, still more questions for Stolyarova and the SAMA team to address.

Initially, SAMA pre-approved many of the images before the artists began painting, as some locations had certain requirements or sensitivities. Stolyarova explained that artists still retain a high level of artistic control over the execution of their work; it is usually the concept that...
Some of the murals are located on social housing structures so Stolyarova and her team of volunteers undergo a long process to approve potential artworks with both the city and residents in the space. This approval process is necessary for SAMA because they have been working against the stigma of graffiti writing in Amsterdam. To demonstrate that the projects were going to be artistic murals, especially when the organization first began, SAMA worked with formally trained fine artists, as well as street and graffiti artists, using traditional painting media along with spray paint.

It could be argued that this approval process is a form of censorship by the museum. Upon reflection of the interview with Stolyarova, it appears the organization gaining initial acceptance as an active agent within the community and from the city was more important than the charge of censorship. This acceptance was won through dialogue and an approval process. Now, Stolyarova has more freedom as a curator to mount more ambitious projects. Further, by including the community and by inviting them to meet and watch the artists work, the community feels ownership and pride over the finished murals. (figure 7.)

SAMA straddles both the legal and illegal realms in terms of art production. The commissioned legal artworks are part of their formal collection, but Stolyarova has also accompanied artists as they create additional artworks (figure 8). Stolyarova does not...
condemn the illegal artworks done by artists. These uncommissioned and illegal works could be considered part of an “unofficial” collection. For Stolyarova, she understands that claiming public space in a way that the government labels illegal is an inherent part of the street art and graffiti movement, and to some is seen as the most authentic expression. To deny that aspect, or to chastise artists for creating these illegal works would only represent one side of the broader movement. Coinciding with Stolyarova’s actions, Merrill wrote, “heritage practitioners will need to acknowledge that the values of graffiti subcultures must be respected even if they rely on the subversion of established legal and social codes.”

The ethical dilemma related to legality is two-sided: upholding the true spirit of an art movement and/or upholding a system imposed by the government. A further practical complication, of course, is funding and government support for the organization. Museums such as SAMA must skillfully navigate this relationship.

**Interpretation and education**

The location of the street art within the urban environment means that it is ultimately free for viewers to experience. Accessibility, therefore, is a physical concern of finding and getting to the artwork, rather than one of financial or social status, often experienced in museums or galleries. This free experience poses challenges for organizations and the type of services they are able to provide to their audiences. Site evaluation revealed that interpretative and educational material exists in alternative formats for SAMA rather than what one expects to find in a museum or gallery setting. Labels, for instance, were only present for some of SAMA’s murals, and many of those had either fallen off or been destroyed by the weather. These traditional elements of a museum were not a priority for SAMA as street art is an autonomous art form in which the public is invited to connect individually, without someone else dictating what one is supposed to learn. For those that do want to know more, SAMA provides tours for a fee of 15 euros. These walking tours can be broken into slots of 1 to 4 hours, and are designed to move people organically through the neighborhood.

**Conservation**

SAMA has noticed that their murals have become important to the communities and have become part of the community’s identity, so the topic of conservation has continued to arise from both the community and the city. At this point, SAMA only intervenes with an artwork if it has been subject to an offensive tag (figure 9). Stolyarova explained that SAMA must judge whether the tag detracts from the original mural or if the tag can remain. A further concern is whether or not it is possible to cover up the tag without interfering with the artwork (figure 10).
In terms of museums, which are founded on the premise of protecting and conserving artworks, street art poses a challenge to that traditional role. Stolyarova is currently working through the question of conservation in the collection framework that SAMA is creating. Stolyarova believes that, as an ephemeral artwork, street art should be allowed to decay and change within its natural environment. She is thus investigating alternative forms of preservation. Similarly, within the emerging field of street art studies, a divide remains as to whether or not to preserve or to restore street artworks. Some scholars argue that it is an “ethical consideration in altering the ephemeral nature of works.” There is also the question of who determines and when an artwork is at its most authentic state. Other scholars argue that the heritage sector needs to reevaluate its understanding of ephemerality in relationship to this type of art, and “tolerate greater levels of loss.” An authentic street artwork is created to experience now, in this place and in this political and social climate, until the “public” determines that it is no longer relevant. It is unclear who has the authority to remove a street artwork; however, it seems more acceptable that the artwork be destroyed rather than artificially preserved.

**Documentation: the role of digital display**

The role of digital documentation is a potential solution to preserve and virtually display street art. In addition to their presence on social media, SAMA has partnered with Google to document its collection as a part of the larger Google Street Art Project, which launched in 2014. SAMA’s Google page features many images organized into virtual exhibitions by year, including artist name and title of the piece. These exhibitions also feature detail shots of the artworks, brief interpretive text, and several videos, but images do not provide the exact location of the murals. SAMA will continue to document the murals it commissions, and plans to produce a formal database of its collection in the future.

The digital display of artwork presents new opportunities for the display of street art. Viewers are able to see works that would otherwise be inaccessible to them, and in instances like SAMA’s Google page, viewers can learn more information about the artist and search for other international artworks by the same artist. Moreover, individuals also have the opportunity to
build their own virtual collections, providing yet another form of engagement. However, digital websites need to add relevant information in order for these images to be properly documented and usable for future users. As has been emphasized, for street art, scale and site are vital to the interpretation of the artwork. The online experience is mediated first by the organization capturing the photograph, and then through the presentation of the digital display, limiting the impact and perhaps artistic intention of the piece. It could be argued that digital display is similar to traditional museums that bring street art into the gallery because both remove the work from a complete wall or neighborhood, severing it from its context.

![Figure 10. Mural with a tag that SAMA will not cover up as it could impact the original artwork.](image)

**Going forward: considerations for the museum**

In the past, street art museum exhibitions demonstrated a tension between street art and the traditional art museum both conceptually and in terms of its physical display. To some scholars, this suggested that the two were fundamentally incompatible. However, it is the legacy of the traditional museum as an elite institution and the reliance on conventional display strategies that is incompatible with street art. Rather than forcing the art to conform to the gallery, SAMA displayed works within the urban environment, which preserves the artist’s intention, scale, context, and the work’s authenticity as part of the broader street art and graffiti movement. The location of the street artworks increases accessibility when compared to the financial and social barriers felt by some in museums and galleries.

Visitors, both local and international, seeking street art have the freedom to design their own experience or elect to take a tour. The use of tours, rather than other traditional educational tools, is a potential strategy for future organizations. The public location allows for an aspect of fluidity, serendipity, and self-determination unlike visitors setting aside time to go inside a museum. Conserving street art and digital documentation will continue to be a topic for discussion in the future. Scholars have begun to propose a methodology for documenting street art relying on the use of effective metadata and search functions, which would benefit...
artists, students, and scholars. While the digital realm provides increased accessibility, it also hampers an aspect of the artistic experience.

Museums, especially encyclopedic or contemporary art collections, are limited in their representation of contemporary art and culture if they do not represent street art and graffiti culture. Yet to a certain extent, street artists need the traditional art museum to remain as it is in order for their art to create the desired effect. Street art, created in opposition to the elite art institution, could potentially lose part of its appeal, impact, or relevance if museums change and begin to fully accommodate it. “There is logic to the mutual dependency, since if not for museums the work would lack bearing and by assimilating the work...museums demonstrate their open-mindedness and resilience.”

More complex questions and topics rise to the surface: How should a museum decide which artists represent and contribute to the street art movement? As Stolyarova explained, artists today could be popular because they are buying online traffic. When commissioning new artworks within a public location, how should the museum balance artistic voice and vision with its duty to visitors, neighborhood, and board of trustees?

Street art provides an opportunity to question the prevailing museum model and to define a new museological space in which ephemeral artworks from street art cultures are presented in an open-air environment. In the future, this can take the form of new museums, as SAMA has displayed. Or another solution, perhaps more practical and effective, is for an existing museum to partner with organizations that exhibit street art. It is more beneficial to work together than to compete for a limited audience. SAMA has demonstrated more authentic ways to display street art, cultivated artist relationships, and relationships with their neighborhood. These qualities would benefit museums looking to display street art. Conversely, museums could assist independent street art organizations due to having a broader network of funding, specialized staff, and more resources. Unless existing institutions are willing to critically engage with and authentically display street art, their exhibitions will continue to be viewed as museum marketing or in the words of Stolyarova, “a lot of noise but very little substance.” (2016). Through a partnership, the museum will adapt to the art rather than forcing the art to conform to the “white cube” gallery.

List of figures

Figure 1. Graffiti and street artwork working together to create a larger mural. See notes for full story between Juice, graffiti writer, and Suso, street artist. Amsterdam, all photos by author, July 2016 unless otherwise noted.

Figure 2. Venn Diagram explaining the connection between street art and graffiti. J. Daichendt, 2012.

Figure 3. Mural by Kenor.

Figure 4. Comparison between artists, materials, technique, and time.

Figure 5. Two artworks by Btoy.
Figure 6. Safety, Alaniz.

Figure 7. Mural by Stinkfish.

Figure 8. Unofficial/illegal artwork.

Figure 9. Mural with an offensive tag that will be covered up.

Figure 10. Mural with a tag that SAMA will not cover up as it could impact the original artwork.

Notes
3 Ibid. 249.
7 Ibid.


In the interview, Stolyarova explained, “Juice is the big name in Amsterdam. If you go over Juice, tomorrow anything you do will be destroyed...Juice is about 46 years old and still bombing today. When it comes to lettering and writing, it is incredible. The government wants me to take on this wall, but I have a problem, there is Juice at the bottom. If you go to 99% of the artists, they will not take the wall. They will just say, ‘sorry, find me another one...there is a legacy, there are rules, and I don’t want to be involved in destroying another piece because...
he will go over me.’ ...if anybody can break it, it’s Suso. A kid can not break it; you need an expert. You need somebody that works with the colors, with the letters, and knows how to integrate it.” (2016)

During a conversation with an artist called Stink Fish about her desire to link street art with muralism, Stink Fish exclaimed, “Please don’t!” The artist didn’t want to be compared to a muralist because, in his opinion, a real mural artist spends hours on a composition, studies light, shape, and materials, whereas he works very fast, works with spray paint, does not name his works, and isn’t trying to become famous. Stolyarova, A. (2016, June, July). [Personal interview and email.]

Stolyarova provided an anecdote to explain some of the requests she receives from artists looking for commissions: “I painted a pair of wings in New York and Taylor Swift took a picture in the middle as if she were a butterfly. I will be coming to Europe, starting with Switzerland where I will be doing product endorsement and I believe that Amsterdam deserves a pair of wings, too. My manager [sister] will be communicating with you from now on with regards to a possible deal and a commission.’ I got curious...so I am writing back saying, ‘That’s fine, here is a picture of a wall, can you give me a rough estimate of what you would need?’” Stolyarova received a two-page document highlighting the artist’s demands for accommodation and payment. At the bottom of the second page, the artist finally mentioned the materials: 200 markers that cost about 10 euros each. Stolyarova, continued, the artist “didn’t ask to give a close up of the surface. And how old is the brick? Markers do not work on the brick—the brick will eat the filter in two strokes. That’s why the can was invented, traditional materials would not work on the bricks.” Stolyarova, A. (2016, June, July). [Personal interview and email.]


43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
49 Stolyarova, 2016; Donadio, 2014 June 10.
50 Stolyarova, A. (2016, June, July). [Personal interview and email.]
54 Ibid.

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**Additional street art and graffiti resources**

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