

Contextualizing graffiti and street art in suitable museum settings

Street Art Today's upcoming museum in Amsterdam

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Abstract

Overall, this essay examines the suitable settings for contextualizing graffiti and street art indoors, by introducing the upcoming museum for graffiti and street art in Amsterdam, an initiative of Street Art Today. Firstly, an overview of the project's story, including its idealizer, location and collection is provided. Secondly, the contributions of the museum to the art form are presented. In particular, through its ambition to become a knowledge hub of graffiti and street art, the institution produces, gathers and analyses data, thus reinforcing the legitimization of these visual expressions. Finally, this article examines the expectations related to the museum's role and its future visitors.

Key words: graffiti, street art, museum, legitimization, institutionalization, Amsterdam

1. The start of the dream

It all started in 2015 when the founder of IJ-Hallen - the flea market located at NDSM-Wharf in Amsterdam - asked art director Peter Ernst Coolen to produce some large-scale canvases to hang inside the shipyard warehouse where the market used to take place. The 24 meters high and 118 meters long walls distinguish the space, previously used to assemble some of the largest ships in the world. Consequently, although gigantic, those first artworks looked like postcards in comparison to the building.

For this reason, Coolen engaged in producing even larger 'large-scale canvases' - resulting in 3,5x2,5m; 4,85x3,5m and 9x5m canvases - to fill this 7.000m² space. After a few dozen paintings, he finally realized that they were creating what could easily be called a 'museum collection'. That was the defining point when the former warehouse turned from the flea market shelter to the home of the largest upcoming graffiti and street art museum in the world.

1.1. The dreamer

Peter Ernst Coolen discovered graffiti at the age of thirteen. He felt at home in this intersection of self-expression and freedom, which allowed him to color outside the lines. Always creative, he became an advertising art director, while remaining highly engaged with street art. Coolen produced several campaigns with graffiti artists, organized international street art projects and festivals, and started a street art gallery in 2013.

In 2014, he founded Street Art Today and in 2015 the agency produced the first edition of the annual Kings Spray Street Art Festival at the NDSM wharf in Amsterdam. It was then that the founder of the flea market became interested in using street art paintings to decorate the hall. In 2016, when the idea of the museum was materialized, Peter became director and curator of the institution. Around this period, he realized he needed some extra hands to make the dream come true. The 'one-man team' grew and now stands at 10 members with diverse areas of expertise and backgrounds.



Figure 1: Hall of fame on outside walls of Street Art Today's museum Author: Marco Buddingh

1.2. The location

The location's elements of the museum contributes to the unique character of the institution while giving it right to exist. It is based in Amsterdam, one of the first punk graffiti and street art locations in Europe. More specifically, it is situated in the NDSM area, a lively neighborhood that exhales creativity and freedom. Further, the museum is housed in a former shipyard warehouse - an industrial building with raw energy, thus very connected to the streets.

1.2.1. Amsterdam: Europe's former graffiti and street art capital

The first illegal texts in a public space in Amsterdam appeared in the 1960's (Again, 2019). A few years later, in the 1970's, the first traces of what could be called graffiti emerged, when punk bands felt the urge to write their names on walls (Pone, 2008).

Almost simultaneously, street art started to take shape as some artists – such as Hugo Kaagman with his stencils – developed their style into a more imagery concept (Boerdam, 2006). Today, the Dutch city is considered one of the first in the old continent to embrace these forms of expression (Randal, 2010). Traditional graffiti formed by pieces, on the other hand, started later in 1984, heavily influenced by the New York scene (Again, 2019).

During this period, illegal/self-authorized art on walls was constantly flourishing around the city, turning Amsterdam into Europe's graffiti and street art capital (van Loon, 2014). This was partly a result of the creation of the United Street Artists collective and the rise of the punk movement, enabled by the municipality's liberal regulations at the time (Randal, 2010).

Since then, the Netherlands has cultivated a true street art culture, hosting a great variety of graffiti and street art

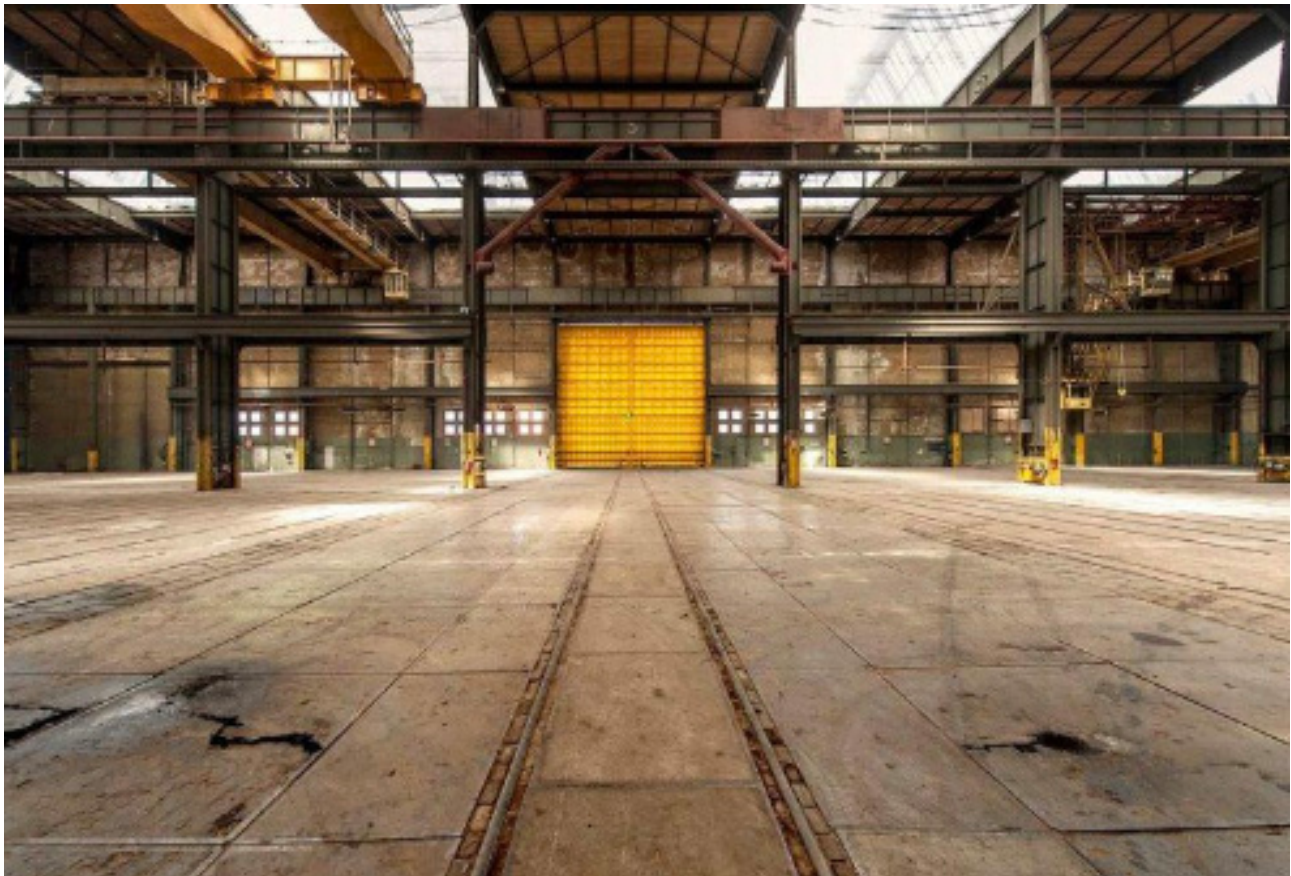


Figure 2: The empty interior of the former welding hangar Author: Biesterbos

works created by local and international artists (Boerdam, 2006). For this reason, Street Art Today's museum – official name to be announced – aims to document and transmit the history of the local development through specific theme exhibitions and events.

1.2.2. NDSM

Located on the banks of the IJ River in the north of Amsterdam, the NDSM was once Europe's largest and leading shipyard (de Klerk, 2019). Today, it's a creative district, which hosts many festivals and gathers thousands of people throughout the year. Further, for more than ten years, the NDSM has been a hotspot for graffiti and street art because this spontaneous area tolerates these visual expressions.

The outside walls of the former welding hangar, also known as the NDSM chapel, accommodate most of the

graffiti pieces in the area, attracting writers and artists daily. It is a true Hall of Fame, where anybody is welcome to paint. Although not fully legal, the self-authorized practice is tolerated by the municipality on this building. In a way, all the colorful spray art contributed to justifying the existence of a graffiti and street art museum on the inside. Nowadays, as a platform for creative experimentation, it can be considered part of the democratic and ever-changing outdoor collection of the museum.

1.2.3. Monumental welding hangar

The former welding hangar was built in 1952 as part of the Netherlands Dock and Shipbuilding Company (from Dutch Nederlandsche Dok and Scheepsbouw Maatschappij - NDSM) complex. Back then, massive ship parts were welded together in this industrial hall (Rijksmonumenten, 2014).

Since 2007, the building has been regarded as a national heritage for its cultural-historical and architectural-historical value. The former is due to its impressive production power as one of the most important shipbuilding yards in the Netherlands. The latter corresponds to its unique silhouette and appealing industrial interior design (Rijksmonumenten, 2014). These rough characteristics contribute to the building being appropriated to house graffiti and street art.

In 2016, the municipality of Amsterdam concluded that the building's roof needed to be completely renewed for safety reasons. After that, a major complex renovation took place and lasted for around two years. Due to the monumental character, the new structure had to be exactly like the original one. Such detailed and bureaucratic

processes highly affected the logistics of the museum and ended up postponing its opening.

1.3. The collection

Organically formed, the museum's collection now totals more than 240 objects – including paintings, sculptures and installations. Moreover, new artworks are constantly being produced, giving it an ever-growing character.

Peter Coolen's curatorial criteria is based on quality artworks that provide a fair representation of the variety found in the streets in terms of styles, techniques, motifs, contents and locations. Whether an upcoming talent or a renowned figure, all these artists must be or have been active in the street scene.



Figure 3: Painting by Dan Kitchener for the museum's collection Author: Peter Ernst Coolen

Regarding the creative process, the invited artists have complete freedom to develop what they choose. Consequently, the team gives them support to turn their ideas into reality, inspired by the statement of the acclaimed curator Hans Ulrich Obrist (2014) that our role is to enable artists to realize their unrealized projects.

Moreover, a particularity of this collection is that most of the works are created in situ - the museum's building. This way, artists have a similar feeling to the streets, as they conceive their works in the same location where later the viewer will be in touch with it.

2. The added value of bringing the art form inside

Although graffiti and street art emerged on the streets as illegal and underground practices, since the late 1970's they can be found as legal art works in museums, art galleries and art fairs (Cascardo, 2012, Irvine, 2012; Shapiro & Heinich, 2013). The presence of these expressions in the institutionalized art world provides a different context while contributing to their value as legitimate art forms (Baumann, 2006).

2.1. How is it possible to build a museum for graffiti and street art?

The placement of graffiti and street art in art institutions is often polemic, particularly due to the shift in its former anti-institutional discourse (Irvine, 2012). Yet, these art forms belong to the streets, often drawing inspiration from them. Also, because the streets are not a blank canvas, the final meaning of the work is a sum of the elements that were already there before (Abarca, 2016).

Due to all the shifts involved, it's not possible to bring a work created by a graffiti or street artist inside with the exact same meaning and value as it has in its original habitat. However, at Street Art Today's upcoming museum, several aspects remain connected to the art form's true roots. On top of that, as a museum, it adds to its several values by, for instance, providing in-depth information.

Moreover, our museum distinguishes itself from other street art-related institutions. The main differences can be summarized by the following attributes: Street, Institution

and Experience. Firstly, the museum's team is comprised of individuals that have been active in the context of graffiti and street art for several years, ensuring it remains deeply rooted within the scene. Secondly, the institution thoroughly produces, collects and shares information on the art form, contributing to a pioneer database that is simultaneously broad and in-depth. Finally, the unique attributes of the monumental building and its exciting creative and free industrial surroundings, amplified by ever-changing artworks on show, make the experience similar to a lively street scene.

2.1.1. Embracing the terminologies issue

So how shall we name the artworks created by graffiti and street artists in/for art institutions? There are a variety of terms coined with the intention of solving this issue; such as urban contemporary art (Macmillian, 2007), street wave art (Artmosphere, 2019) and new contemporary art (Martinique, 2017). However, there is a lack of consensus for unifier definitions, which echoes the discussions involving a sharp meaning for street art. As art historian and sociologist Peter Bengtson (2014) pointed, "the term street art cannot be defined conclusively since what it encompasses is constantly being negotiated."

Polarities with the use of definitions around street art are likely to continue. The most appropriate way to overcome this situation is by acknowledging and embracing it as part of the art form (Hoppe, 2016). In other words, as illustrated by professor Edwige Fusaro (2019) "If spilling over and trespassing are in the genes of graffiti and street art, so are the borders and frames: graffiti and street art need them to be able to violate them". Therefore, our museum intends to provide its visitors with a multitude of definitions, while leaving them free to embody or overcome them.

2.1.2. Quoting the streets

As street art and graffiti works are changeable once leaving the city walls, at Street Art Today's museum we intend to present a 'quote of the streets'. Along these lines, the collection should represent the broadness found in the world's street environment, as much as possible. By bringing all this variety together with their stories

under the same roof, limitless narratives emerge. These outcomes reveal patterns related to foundations of the art form, which contribute to highlight its role in the cultural heritage and art history framework.

Besides being a representation for the works found in the streets - in terms of styles, techniques, motifs, contents, locations and artist's career stage - our collection maintains another key attribute that reflects the former identity of graffiti and street art: freedom. Similar to when they create illegally in the public space, artists are completely free in their creative process at the museum. Visitors will also be able to experience this feeling as they will have the opportunity to freely co-create meanings of the artworks in unfixed routing.

Certainly, along the path to institutionalization some relevant aspects are lost. The artworks are not created illegally, which may completely change the creative process of some artists. There is less time pressure and adrenaline. Also, their hands go beyond the human scale, as there are more tools available, such as scaffolds. Another aspect is that the artworks can be displaced from one location to the other, something that is not possible - at least not as easily - on brick walls. So, to complement the indoor collection, Street Art Today's museum, fortunately, also provides its outside walls as a spontaneous canvas.

2.2. Legitimation and museal function

Several scholars demonstrated that the idea of what constitutes art does not rely only on the aspects of the artwork itself, but also on the boundaries of acceptable art determined by the art world (Danto, 1964; Goodman, 1977; Dickie, 1969; Bourdieu, 1993; Baumann, 2007; Becker, 2008 [1982]). Therefore, Street Art Today contributes to the legitimation of street art and graffiti by building a museum exclusively dedicated to it. Our goal, through all our activities is to support the cultural, artistic, historical and educational value of this art form.

Our efforts in this direction follow the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition that "a museum is an institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches,

communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment." (ICOM, 2017).

Considering that, in the longer-term, Street Art Today's museum aims to become a member of this Council, as well as the Museum Association in the national sphere (from Dutch Museum Vereniging). Below some of our key museal functions are further explained.

2.2.1. Preservation

Evidently, by placing street art inside, we contribute to its conservation for a longer period than if it would be on the city walls. However, as a museum, our role goes beyond that. In this context, the uniqueness and monumental character of our building present challenges in climate control of the environment. Also, spray-paint on a PVC canvas - the surface on which the artworks are created - is a singular combination of relatively recent materials. Therefore, there is a lack of literature in this specific segment.

Due to the pioneering role related to our collection's materials and the building characteristics - it wasn't built intending to be a museum - we have to figure out our solutions, just like the 'do it yourself' mentality of graffiti and street art. To achieve that, we collaborate with scientists and various experts from the University of Amsterdam and the National Body of Cultural Heritage (from Dutch Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed). Consultations and several laboratory tests characterize this long-term collaboration. This data has immense value, according to some conservators, as it can shed light on the challenges of artists and art professionals who may adopt similar choices of materials.

2.2.2. Research and education

To fulfill our museum role and raise the profile of graffiti and street art, our team is regularly working on an in-depth database about our collection and the art form in the broader sense. Extensive data is gathered from different sources (i.e. original interviews and available literature) and areas of expertise (i.e. Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, Art History). Later the material is analyzed,



Figure 4: Adhesion test on samples of painted canvases Author: Pieter Keune

interpreted and combined with the existing database. We see this as a key contribution to building a museum to graffiti and street art: providing context that is rarely available on the streets.

Moreover, the museum currently collaborates with several students and researchers from institutions such as the University of Amsterdam, Erasmus University Rotterdam, University of Jaén and Birmingham University. In the long term, our goal is to expand academic collaborations (from independent researches to journals) to facilitate and gather knowledge production. Unhesitatingly, our ambition is to become the world's leading knowledge hub in graffiti and street art.

The finalized information should be easily accessible to anybody interested – from street art lovers to professionals. By highlighting multiple perspectives, we will support them with tools to uncover this young art form. Finally, just like graffiti and street art DNA, we want our visitors to be free and in charge of their own interpretations.

As part of our educational program, several activities are planned to assure the transfer of knowledge. Besides insightful exhibitions and guided tours, the program will feature regular discussions, such as symposiums and round tables with experts to encourage insights' exchange.

For those interested in more practical work, we will have workshops for individuals of different ages and with different expectations. Furthermore, artists in residence and live paintings will add to the lively atmosphere of this unique institution.

3. Expectations

The museum's grand opening is expected to take place in 2020. Until then, our team is working to provide visitors the opportunity to fully experience the most popular contemporary art form. For now, we share a few forethoughts related to the overall museum's role and the audience's characteristics, which reinforce that it is not only possible but indeed positive to institutionalize graffiti and street art in suitable settings.

3.1. Balance between streets and guidelines

The heart of our institution is the street; we are deeply inspired by its spontaneity, volatility and unpredictability. Thus, we fully embrace people that are creatively active in the scene. Our outside walls – characterized by its distinguished Hall of Fame – provide space to keep the art form alive, while bringing the street community closer together.

Our collection is greatly representative of the art form found in the public space through different means. Additionally, as a museum, we fulfill several functions – adapted to our reality – that contribute both to the acknowledgment and appreciation of graffiti and street art.

We believe that this blend is going to fill the gap between the streets and institutional guidelines, helping to lead the art form to a further stage. The balance is achievable because the art form can keep its street roots, especially in a rough environment like ours. At the same time, graffiti and street art gain legitimation value, something we can reinforce due to our role as a museum.

3.2. Ever-expanding knowledge hub

Since the collection will continue to grow, so will our collection database. Whenever a new artwork is produced, more information will be gathered and analyzed. Moreover, as mentioned previously, our research network should expand in the upcoming years, resulting in an unforeseen graffiti and street art knowledge hub. Altogether, this data will not only allow researchers to deepen their studies, but also allow our broader audience to frame the art they see on the streets.

3.3. Broad and diverse audience

Due to the art form's accessible character, more people can understand it, relate to it and feel attracted by it (McAuliffe, 2012; Anika, 2013). In our museum, we aim to maintain those attributes, not only through the artworks, but also in the manner we communicate with visitors. For these reasons, we expect a broad audience which includes individuals who are not traditional museumgoers. Conclusively, the expected museum's role towards its



Figure 5: Light painting by Eoin O'Conner in the museum Author: Eoin O'Conner

upcoming audience can be greatly summarized in the words of director and curator Peter Coolen (2017): “I think we will have a broad, world-wide audience, and we want to show them the diversity and the true beauty of the art form; what is there in the streets that they might normally overlook and not take time to understand... A lot of people are into it, but many more still say 'street art, graffiti, it's all the same. It's the illegal stuff kids do at night'. But I see a world of beauty within street art and that's what I want to bring out and show people.”

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