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Can There Be Street Art in Museums?

Andrea L. Baldini

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1. Introduction

On 18 March, 2016, the controversial exhibition *Street Art: Banksy & Co.* launched at Palazzo Pepoli in Bologna. Even before the vernissage, it made international headlines due to street artist Blu's outraged reaction to the unauthorized inclusion of some of his works (fig. 1). At the artist's request, local youth collectives destroyed scores of his murals throughout the city, a form of radical protest against the exhibition's organizers (Vimercati 2016). This shocking gesture prompted many to ask about an issue that has become increasingly urgent: *Can there be street art in museums?*



Fig. 1. View of *Street Art: Banksy & Co.*, Palazzo Pepoli, Bologna, 2016. Courtesy of Luca Ciancabilla.

In philosophical discussions, the prevailing response is a resounding 'no'. Many philosophers and theorists are radical pessimists: they believe that street art's rebellious spirit, site-specificity, and ephemerality are incompatible with the official nature of art and cultural institutions. For many of them, the act of exhibiting street art in a museum renders it a soulless simulacrum, commodified and inauthentic (Riggle 2010; Bengtsen 2015; Blanché 2015). Even more moderate pessimist theorists who tolerate exceptions typically confine them to unauthorized guerrilla operations that maintain a hostile relationship with the institution (Bacharach 2015). The prevailing intellectual consensus posits that officially exhibiting street art in museums is inherently contradictory.

However, the practice of street art suggests otherwise. Despite these theoretical difficulties, street art exhibitions, both authorized and unauthorized by participating artists, are becoming increasingly popular around the world. This generates a significant tension: why does the philosophical literature stay so pessimistic in the face of a much more fluid artworld? This tension is not merely academic; as highlighted by recent open letters from the graffiti community (Urbaner 2025), there is a pressing

concern: while street art *is* being institutionally exhibited, curators frequently lack knowledge of the movement's essential values, which are routinely overlooked.

This paper challenges the widely held philosophical assumption that pessimism (either radical or moderate) is the most suitable approach to the understanding of street art in museums. In contrast, my goal here is to defend as a viable position—and perhaps the best candidate—what I call *moderate optimism*. It contends that not just guerrilla interventions in museums, but also official and sanctioned exhibitions, can effectively showcase authentic street art, with the following caveat: the need to employ specific curatorial strategies aimed at preserving the practice's subversive nature and constitutive relationship to public space. This disclaimer sets my approach apart from naïve optimism, as defended, for example, by Bicknell (2022), who challenges the notion that street art is inherently subversive.

Moderate optimism is preferable not only for its theoretical rigour but also—and primarily—for its practical and ethical necessity. In a rapidly changing artworld, the existing alternatives offer little guidance. Paradoxically, both pessimism and naïve optimism yield the same normative outcome: a submission to the status quo. While the pessimist surrenders by refusing any critical engagement with institutional

frameworks—effectively abandoning the field to unchecked corporate co-optation—the naïve optimist gives up by dismissing street art's critical stance from the beginning.

Following the tradition of pragmatist aesthetics, I argue that theory's role is not merely to map static concepts or draw demarcation boundaries, but to 'critically assess the different directions' of a practice and, through such criticism, 'promote the conception and pursuit of better ones' (Shusterman 2000: 60). In this sense, moderate optimism serves as a responsible framework for a movement currently caught between an uncritical acceptance of musealization and an unviable rejection of reality. My overarching purpose here is to highlight trajectories for maintaining street art's critical stance when dealing with the institution.

Sections 2 and 3 address respectively two key objections to exhibiting street art in museums: the violation of artists' intentions and the loss of subversiveness. While acknowledging their relevance, I argue that neither is ultimately convincing. Section 4 responds to the site-specificity objection, suggesting that street art can retain its spatial identity even when displayed in institutional settings. In section 5, after introducing more explicitly moderate optimism, I discuss what I call new-media exhibitions, that is, those based on photographs, videos, and similar media, as strong candidates for

experiencing street art authentically in museums. Building on this, section 6 argues that such exhibitions reflect stable appreciative conventions rooted in the practice's history.

2. The artist's intention argument

Unsurprisingly, the artist's intention argument centres on the intentions of street artists concerning the inclusion of their work in official museum or gallery exhibitions. This line of reasoning underpins some of the most prominent critiques of unauthorized displays of street art—particularly cases where works are removed from the street without the artist's consent, such as Blu's murals controversially featured in *Street Art: Banksy & Co.* mentioned above. In response to an article on the Italian street artist's act of self-erasure, user beckly aptly noted: 'De-installing a work from its location without consulting the artist is disrespectful and contravenes the artist's intention' (Dunne 2016). The point is clear: works of street art should not be appropriated for institutional exhibitions without the explicit approval of their creators.

A possible reply to the artist's intention argument draws attention to what we might call the 'fuck-you attitude' often attributed to street artists themselves, who generally disregard conventional norms of property and institutional authority. Street artists frequently operate without permission, intervening in public and private spaces in ways

that challenge ownership and control. As Italian writer Paolins put it in an interview with Brighenti (2010: 322): 'I paint the wall but the house is still workin', right? [M]aybe it's just slightly different, aesthetically speaking. I understand you get angry about that, but after all I don't give a damn. Fuck off, I too want my slice of fun in all this shit. I found it like this, too bad for you.' This unapologetic stance suggests a form of cultural anarchism or irreverent opportunism that some might view as undermining any strong claim to moral authority over how the work is subsequently treated.

From this perspective, one might argue against pessimists that artists who disregard property rights and institutional procedures when creating their work cannot reasonably demand institutional deference to their intentions afterwards. If the act of placing art in public without consent is framed as a radical or liberatory gesture, then the appropriation of that art by others, curators included, could be viewed as an extension of the same irreverent logic. In short, if street artists claim their 'slice of fun' by using others' property, curators might feel equally justified in claiming their own by repurposing that work within a new context. This reply highlights a potential ethical asymmetry or hypocrisy embedded in the artist's intention argument.

While it is conceivable to defend rogue curatorial techniques based on street art's irreverent spirit, some may argue that this line of reasoning requires too much indulgence in its 'fuck-you' logic. There is also a less ethically complicated and considerably more direct response to this argument. One could simply affirm that exhibitions of street art should only feature pieces whose authors have consented to their display. This approach would allow curators to ethically align with street artists' choices while respecting their creative agency. Considering this, we might stipulate that authentic institutional exhibitions of street art (if they exist at all) must be guided by the principle of honouring the will of those whose work constitutes their very foundation.

Aside from the ethical problem of consent, a more substantial philosophical objection pertains to what Levinson (1992) refers to as *categorial intentions*. These involve 'the maker's conception of what he has produced and what it is for, on a rather basic level' (232). From this perspective, although an artist may lack complete control over the semantic meaning of their work, they hold a particular authority to establish the category in which an artwork should be appreciated. Bacharach (2015: 489) supports categorial intentionalism in street art and claims that if an artist identifies their work as street art, categorizing it as public art or museum art is incorrect.

Here we have an interesting—perhaps limiting—case in which categorial intentions may not be infallible. In effect, an institutional setting may fail to allow for a work to be taken as an instance of street art, regardless of the artist's desires. In this respect, it is critical to analyse what the constitutive features of street art might be—and whether they might survive the museum—as I begin to do in the next section.

3. The subversiveness argument

In discussing categorial intentions, I bring forward a need for a further discussion of street art's constitutive features. A dominant trend in scholarship views this art kind as essentially subversive (Bacharach 2015; Baldini 2016; Chackal 2016; Baldini 2022). Building on this pillar, radical pessimists develop what I call the subversiveness argument: the claim that institutionalization is a process that necessarily deprives the practice of this stance—or fatally dilutes it. That is, placing a work of street art inside a museum or gallery would strip it of its rebellious charge, jeopardizing its identity *qua* street art. As a result, authentic street art cannot exist in official contexts such as museums or galleries because it loses its essential subversiveness when displayed there (Bengtsen 2015: 226; Blanché 2015: 38).

The subversiveness argument does point to something significant. In many cases, self-proclaimed street art and graffiti exhibitions are soulless simulacra of the real thing: mere empty cans co-opting street art styles for commercial consumption. In this way, they tarnish street art's anti-commercial and subversive nature. Danto (1985) predicted this trend while reviewing an early exhibition of graffiti writers' gallery works. Invoking Chalfant's classic documentary *Style Wars*, he describes the 'most dispiriting sequence' as one in which, caged in the white cube, 'these young knights of the spray can [are] lionized by crass esthetes' (Danto 1985: 24). Institutionalization certainly puts street art at risk.

To assess such risk, we must first characterize subversiveness. If physical location outside the institution were a necessary condition, the radical pessimist would be correct: institutional occupancy would inherently dissolve a work's dissident charge. However, Bacharach (2015) refutes this by defining subversiveness through *aconsensuality*—the requirement that a work be 'made on property without the consent of the property's owner' (486). Crucially, aconsensuality is a normative rather than a merely spatial or legal concept. It concerns the work's ability to contest the status quo—specifically, the social conventions and regulations governing behaviour in and uses of public space.

In the modern metropolis, in effect, spontaneous creative expression on urban surfaces is often deemed unacceptable. By freely producing interesting forms, street artists 'defy the role of [those] social conventions and norms' (Bacharach 2015: 493). Their works act, then, as a transformative force that redefines the function of space by existing precisely where it is not permitted.

Building on this, Bacharach defends what I term *moderate pessimism*: the view that, while generally genuine street art cannot exist within museums, some exceptions occur. These include examples such as Banksy's *Banksus Militus Ratus* and *Early Man Goes to Market*, which the artist surreptitiously installed on the walls of major institutions. Because these works were placed without permission**,** for Bacharach (2015: 494), they 'qualify as bona fide works of street art in a museum by virtue of [challenging] current museum practices.' Subversiveness is maintained here by aconsensually appropriating institutional space rather than avoiding it.

To fully vindicate and appreciate the moderate pessimist's viewpoint, one must first deal with a fundamental objection: the claim that museums and galleries are not truly public spaces. Clarifying their nature is also a key step toward better understanding

their relationship with street art. If this art kind is identified by its rejection of social norms regulating uses and functions of public spaces, moving it to indoor, gated, or fee-based institutional venues may appear to deprive it of its vital settings. However, Bacharach is justified in treating the museum as a public space. This point can be supported by distinguishing between outdoor and public spaces.

Although numerous public spaces are situated outside (such as piazzas, streets, and parks), the two categories are not interchangeable. A crop field in a secluded rural region is undeniably an outdoor space; nonetheless, it is not public in a meaningful sense, because it does not facilitate communal engagement. In contrast, a town hall, albeit being indoors, quintessentially epitomizes a public space since it provides a platform for people—including strangers—to gather and interact with one another.

Accessibility is central to public space, but universal and unrestricted access is an ideal rather than a necessary condition. In real-world scenarios, publicness is a matter of degree: a piazza may be restricted for a performance, or a public park may require a maintenance fee, without forfeiting their public status. While most galleries and museums are indoors, they function as public spaces by facilitating social interaction and discourse—prompting us to re-evaluate our cultural standards and societal

customs. Though an exclusive gallery limited to a billionaire's inner circle would fail this test, most public institutions operate as essential communal spaces. In this functional sense, 'museums are actually quite public spaces' (Knight 2008: 73).

At this point, I'd like to press moderate pessimism even further by asking whether a loss of subversiveness, that is, its capacity to challenge social norms about uses of public spaces, is a necessary result of street art's institutionalization or merely a possible risk. Numerous practices of resistance retain their dissident charge despite—or even because of—their institutional status. Consider *Gay Pride Parades*: the fact that these are now sanctioned demonstrations rather than unauthorized gatherings does not inherently strip them of their political subversiveness; in many contexts, their official recognition is an important aspect of their political significance (Brickell 2000; Joseph 2010). Similarly, the collective *RTMark* utilizes the legal status of corporations to advance its anti-commercial agenda (Allen 2003). If these practices can weaponize institutional consent, could the same be true for street art?

The key question then becomes: When can an *institutional public* exhibition retain the subversiveness of street art? Call this the subversive-exhibition question. I am qualifying the variety of exhibition being discussed for two reasons. First, as Bacharach

(2015) highlights, street artists often exhibit their works in anti-institutional 'shows, like the *Underbelly Project* or [Banksy's] 2013 exhibition *Better Out Than* In' (491). However, here, I am primarily interested in exhibitions as organized by institutions intended in Harré's (1979) sense, which includes—among others—schools, police departments, museums, and cultural foundations. Second, I wish to address solely public exhibitions: those taking place in public spaces as functionally defined above.

I opt to address the subversive-exhibition question by identifying cases where institutional endorsement enables, rather than diminishes, a work's normative challenge. The aforementioned contentious *Street Art: Banksy & Co.* is one example, where curators specifically aimed to maintain the art's rebellious spirit within an institutional framework (THE GRIFTERS 2016). In interviews (Smargiassi 2016) and our private conversations, Omodeo claimed that the museum had actually restored the subversiveness of Blu's murals. Though some dismiss it as a mere rationalization, his view is that those pieces had become urban decorations that had lost their critical edge. By repositioning them within an alien institutional site, the exhibition reactivated the art's capacity for normative defiance.

While the Bologna case illustrates subversiveness arising from institutional appropriation, the 2009 exhibition *Banksy vs. Bristol Museum* provides a model for subversive exhibitions through institutional collaboration. This was not a mere display of artefacts, but a 'hostile takeover' (Johnson 2025). Here, in effect, the museum allowed Banksy to freely install his works across the whole institutional space without limitations or institutional supervision. According to Johnson (2025), the exhibition maintained its subversiveness in three ways: it blurred the lines of cultural legitimacy by placing street art in an esteemed public institution; it challenged curatorial norms by integrating works directly into the permanent collection rather than a separate gallery; and it subverted institutional control by allowing the artist to maintain creative authority over the museum on his own terms.

A final illustrative example is *Range Ta Chambre* (2016), a one-day exhibition in Rome curated by Stefano Antonelli, showcasing works by the French artist Seth. This case illustrates a third strategy—a friction-based model—where the artist extends institutional partnership beyond the confines of formal agreements. The project developed as the inaugural instance of the 'Artist Resistance Residency,' a partnership between Antonelli's 999contemporary and the Roma Theatre Foundation.

Antonelli (2016: 73) articulated and reaffirmed in our conversation that his overarching objective for this project was to devise a method for showcasing street art within an institutional framework, specifically the India Theatre, while preserving the practice's critical essence. When brainstorming ideas for the exhibition, Seth went all in, convincing the curator to relocate the show from the theatre's assigned spaces to the abandoned sections of the same building, the Mira Lanza Factory. For two months, while the Foundation assumed he was working to exhibit in the theatre's facilities, Seth painted murals on this dilapidated section (fig. 2).

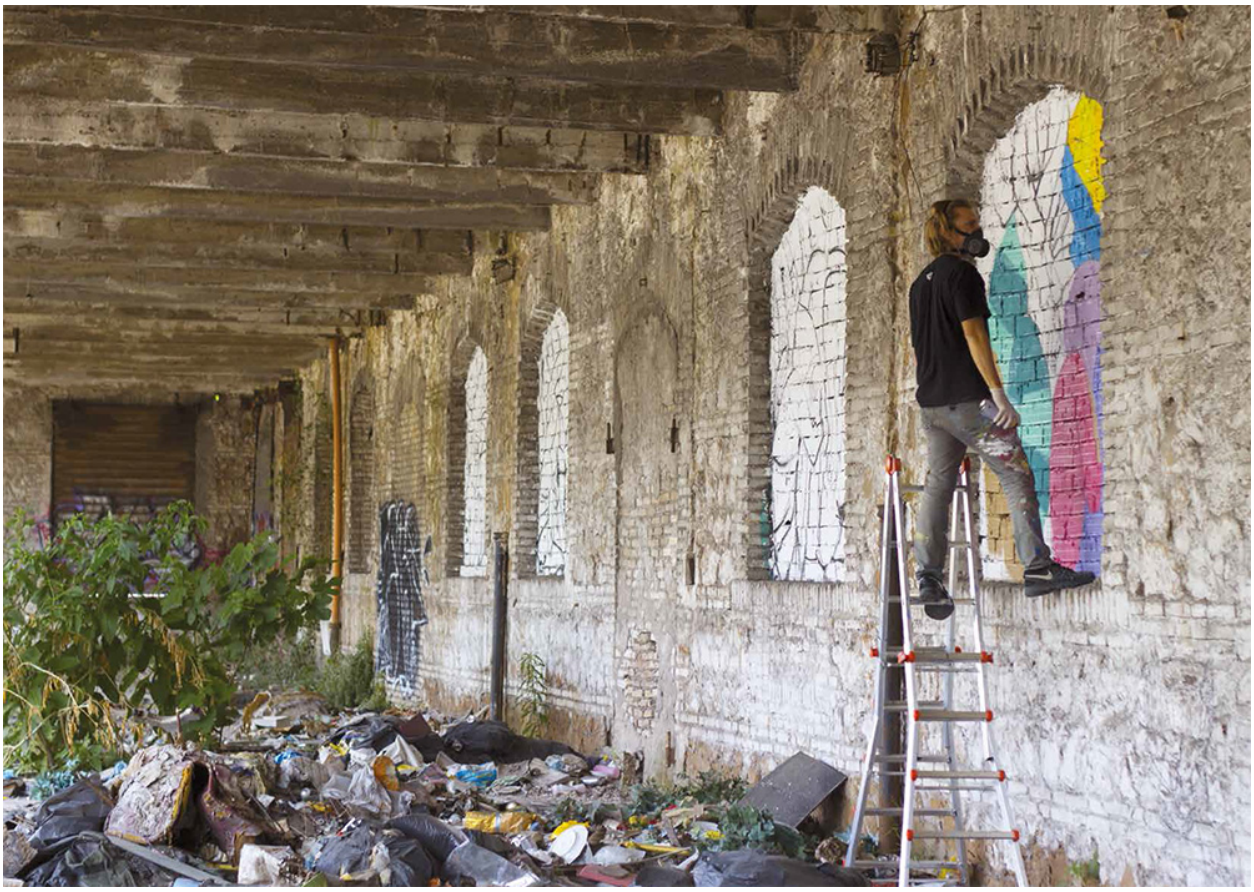


Fig. 2. Seth working on *Range Ta Chambre*. Courtesy of Stefano Antonelli.

The normative tension triggered by Seth's unconventional move might be seen as a mature, friction-based institutional relationship. A key piece of evidence supports my point of view: even though approaching the site for the inauguration required an act of 'civic disobedience,' as the exhibition's official banner stated, institutional authorization was never rescinded. Despite the natural tension that Antonelli confirmed, the Foundation's director, Antonio Calbi, along with the entire management team, retained full accreditation in the officially published catalogue. Had there been an actual institutional recusal, Calbi could have sought police involvement to ban Seth or suspend the inauguration; by refraining, he implicitly granted a tacit, if *obtorto collo*, endorsement. This is exactly what we might expect when street art enters the institution on its own terms: a form of 'hierarchical jiu-jitsu' in which the artist uses the institution's resources to question its own practices.

Functionally, the venue, which is usually uncanny and liminal, converted into a public space for the duration of the exhibition. It served in effect as a stimulant for communal interaction and dialogue by requiring people to navigate a place that was both a temple of art (with its impromptu galleries) and a zone of marginalization. *Range Ta Chambre*

then well highlights how a public exhibition may be both sanctioned and subversive, using the institution's resources to release a critical force.

The preceding cases provide a topology of subversive exhibitions, demonstrating empirically that institutionalization can enable continued contestation rather than being a certain 'death' for street art. While some may prefer one strategy over another (appropriative, collaborative, or friction-based), my purpose is to demonstrate that various alternatives exist. After addressing the site-specificity objection, I will discuss further possibilities.

4. Exhibitions and site-specificity

Aside from issues of subversiveness and artist's intention, a pessimist might object to the possibility of authentic street art in museums by arguing that examples of this art are essentially site-specific (Riggle 2010: 246; Bengtsen 2013; Blanché 2015: 36). This concept is notoriously complex, and it has frequently—and not without controversy—been used in highly metaphorical senses (Gaiger 2009). In this context, I define site-specificity as a property of artworks whose installation sites are integral to their identity. In other words, a site-specific artwork is one whose meaning is essentially influenced by its connection to the original context of creation. The removal of a site-

specific work from its intended site results in its destruction as that specific work (Serra 1989). To put it more formally, moving a work of street art w_1 from its original context of creation O_1, i.e., the street, to a museum or gallery M_1 would destroy it insofar as it would sever the constitutive relationship between w_1 and O_1. As a result, just like Blanché (2015) suggests, w_1 would cease to exist as street art and transform into w_2, which is a work in a different kind, that is, urban art. Call this the site-specificity argument.

The objection, I believe, is not insurmountable. However, as with the subversiveness one, the site-specificity argument captures something important, namely the spatial dimension of street art: responding to it will help me clarify some important aspects of street art in general in relationship to the possibility of institutional public exhibitions.

There are a number of approaches to dealing with the site-specificity argument. One, for instance, could argue that street art is function-specific rather than site-specific. This would make the entire argument unsound. In effect, one of the essential features distinguishing a work of street art as such—functionalists could point out—is not its mere connection with its location. From their perspective, a work's ability to transform

its installation site into a contested space in which dominant social norms are turned upside down is what distinguishes it *qua* street art.

Consider works of street art realized on movable objects such as a train car or the side of a truck. Banksy's *SWAT Van* and *Turbo Zone Truck (Laugh Now But One Day We'll Be In Charge)*, a train painted by MOSES & TAPS™ (fig. 3) as well as any subway graffiti, fall into this category. They have no essential connection to a specific unique location. They are intentionally designed to be moved around—something that would destroy a site-specific work. However, they seem still capable of challenging the nature of the spaces to and through which they travel, including perhaps a gallery or a museum. And for functionalists that is why those works could still count as street art.



Fig. 3. MOSES & TAPS™ (2016). Courtesy of artists.

More broadly, the point made here is that the meaning of street art is determined not primarily by its physical location, but rather by its ability to perform a specific transformative function in a space (Baldini 2016: 190). According to this form of functionalism, what matters for street art's identity is that it retains its functional efficacy rather than its original spatial placement.

One could object that in cases like a painted van or train car, the 'site' is not the railyard or the street, but the vehicle itself: these examples do not support the functionalist. To this, I have two responses. First, let us agree with the critic, who then accidentally gives to the moderate optimist a perfect answer for institutionalizing site-specific street art: simply drive the van or train car inside the museum! If the 'site' is the vehicle, the change in geographic location does not affect the work's site-specificity.

Second, one could argue that the objection is based on a reductive understanding of the term 'site.' If it is only the physical support or substrate (the metal of a van or the panel of a train car), then all art becomes site-specific by definition, as each oil painting is painted on a specific canvas. This looks to be a *reductio ad absurdum*, as a site seems to be a thicker concept pointing at unique social, legal, and cultural dimensions. I leave it to the reader to determine which road to take, but in either case, it seems that we have found an answer.

But, in my opinion, there are more interesting responses to the site-specificity argument that do not take the functionalist route and deny the site-specificity of street art. One could agree with the idea that removing a work of street art from its original location of installation and displaying it in a gallery or museum jeopardizes its street art identity.

In this sense, including Blu's pieces in *Banksy & Co*. has destroyed them as street art. However, this leaves open the door for the existence of authentic works of street art that have been explicitly designed for a museum context. For the moderate optimist, these include not only Banksy's unauthorized museum pieces, but also his works in the Bristol exhibition and Seth's murals and installations from *Range Ta Chambre*.

A critic might remain unsatisfied, dismissing these cases as inauthentic because they fail to 'use the street' as an artistic resource, as discussed in Riggle (2010). Since the street is without doubt *different* from the museum, then any work that uses the latter instead of the former, as in Banksy's and Seth's cases listed above, cannot qualify as genuine street art. However, Riggle's own analysis of Blu's *Muto* (2008) suggests a way around this objection.

Muto is an award-winning stop-motion animation consisting of hundreds of murals created in urban areas. Crucially, this work is not appreciated on the street but rather through a screen. Riggle (2010: 244–5) characterizes it as street art because it uses street elements as artistic resources—buildings, sidewalks, and pipelines all contribute to its meaning. In effect, if the film were discovered to be CGI rather than genuine paint on urban surfaces, its artistic significance would considerably change. Thus, for Riggle, a

piece of street art can be site-specific by making meaningful use of the street without necessarily being displayed there.

This analysis of *Muto* appears to provide a definitive response to the Rigglean radical pessimist. In effect, if *Muto* is genuine street art when seen on a smartphone in a bedroom, it should be the same when appreciated on an LCD screen in the *Tate Modern*. In both cases, the street is used as a significant artistic resource. When considering institutional public exhibition of street art, museum shows comprising works developed for screens while making meaningful use of the street would meet Riggle's *sui generis* understanding of site-specificity. If I am not mistaken, Riggle is actually a moderate optimist, contrary to popular opinion, and his view can be reconciled with mine in non-obvious and yet robust ways.

As they retreat into an increasingly narrow corner, radical pessimists may envision a final comeback by reclassifying *Muto* as video art instead of street art: Blu's work incorporates street art, but is not a work of street art *per se* (Chackal 2016: 361). Riggle (2010: 256n5) anticipates this move, stating that any such complaint must be balanced against the 'vast consensus among practitioners and enthusiasts' who view Blu's work as street art of the highest calibre. Riggle (2010: 256n5) interestingly also adds that even

if we reject this particular case, 'without an argument to the contrary,' we must consider the possibility of street art that is not physically in the street. In the following section, after introducing moderate optimism more explicitly, I explore how curators deploy new media—specifically photography and video—to activate this possibility and bring genuine street art into museums.

5. Moderate optimism and new-media exhibitions

So far, I have questioned the philosophical supremacy of radical and moderate pessimism, arguing that the arguments for these views are far from irresistible. By expanding on Bacharach's museal exceptions and including Riggle's perspective, I have started to build the case for moderate optimism: a perspective that is open *with some caveats* to the institutionalization of street art and the prospect of what I call (subversive) institutional public exhibition.

This position is not merely theoretical; it is based on the nuances of real-life interactions between street artists and institutions, such as Omodeo's fraught mediation with Blu, Banksy's cooperation with the Bristol Museum, and Seth's frictional dealing with 999contemporary and the Roma Theatre Foundation. Moderate optimism in this sense refuses to reduce institutionalization to a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, it

encompasses a topology of varied interactions—appropriative, cooperative, friction-based, and perhaps others—between artists and institutions. Furthermore, it also recognizes the complex relationship that street art has with public space, even when viewed as the street, while opening the door—in line with Riggle's analysis of *Muto*—to street art's digital reach.

But allowing street art in museums does not mean there will not be complications. Moderate optimism, unlike Bicknell's (2022) naïve optimism, acknowledges an underlying tension. Bicknell (2022: 289–91), notably, strongly disagrees with the idea that street art is inherently subversive by pointing out that many well-known artists often take part in artworld events and exhibitions. Yet, to refute the subversive nature of street art requires a robust argument that she fails to provide. Moreover, the fact that street artists display in galleries lacks inherent philosophical significance: not all creations by a street artist qualify as street art, just as not all writings by a poet qualify as poetry.

Moderate optimism thus insists that if institutional exhibitions are to exist, they must be capable of preserving the art kind's nature and original ethos. Institutional relationships are never inert; as I have acknowledged, they possess the power to destroy street art as

a practice. For a work to survive the white cube, it must therefore maintain its constitutive features, most notably its dissident charge and its relationship with public space—or the street.

Now, let us expand on this last point by picking up where we left off in the previous section, when I challenged the site-specificity argument: I cited an interesting and yet largely overlooked point made by Riggle in his seminal article on street art, namely that even if we reject *Muto* as an example of street art, we must consider the possibility of street art that is not physically in the street. For Riggle, this variety of street art could accommodate the practice's sui generis site-specificity, that is, its artistic use of the street.

To further explore such an invitation, I now transfer my attention to the curatorial strategy of the new-media exhibition. This strategy uses photographic and video reproduction to bring street art inside museums without compromising its original nature. A paradigmatic example is Pietro Rivasi's *1984: Evolution and Regeneration of Graffiti* (2016), held at the Galleria Civica in Modena (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Pietro Rivasi viewing *Blackbook* at 1984. Photo courtesy of Fra32.

This project followed his co-curation of the Bookshow of *Bridges of Graffiti*, a collateral event of the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. With *1984*, Rivasi—a former writer long embedded in the most radical factions of the movement—created an exhibition that comprised 'installations of photos and videos truthfully representing the neuralgic centre of the practice, hence of the pieces created without authorization' (Rivasi 2017: 13), such as Fra32's *Blackbook* (fig. 5)—an installation of 942 photographs of unauthorized train graffiti—and Sauli Sirviö's video *Never Going Home*.



Fig. 5. Fra32, *Blackbook* (2016). Courtesy of the artist and Paolo Terzi.

Rivasi's strategy—and more generally that of new-media exhibitions—rests on the following principle: that photographic or video documentation of street art 'can be considered in all respects the work of art itself' (Rivasi 2017: 14). This provides a straightforward answer to the question of how street art may exist without being physically present in the street. In these reproductions, works still make artistic use of the street. Additionally, they preserve the subversive nature of the practice as parts of unauthorized acts.

For its ability to do justice to the practice's constitutive elements, scholars and practitioners alike have identified the new-media exhibition as a prominent candidate—if not 'the most sensible and least compromised' (Reed 2018)—for institutional public exhibitions of street art (Bonadio 2019: 37–8). Even Fra32, a hardcore purist of the old-school graffiti scene, told me in our conversations that this was the first time an institutional exhibition of graffiti felt authentic. The Galleria Civica's inclusion of four unauthorized works as pictures in its permanent collection arguably adds to the validity of this model (Rivasi 2017: 14).

While acknowledging the crucial role of new media in advancing street art, some commentators convey doubts about the artistic legitimacy of these exhibitions (Bengtsen 2015; Alves 2017; Garcia 2017). These critics present a more fundamental objection: unlike *Muto*, which employs street art as a foundational element to produce a work in another category, namely video art, these pictures and videos are perceived only as evidence remnants. From this perspective, a new-media exhibition of street art is considered a *documentary* rather than an *artistic* one. While these exhibitions can provide a useful historical record, they cannot present authentic street art: replicas lack

(some) aesthetic and non-aesthetic aspects of the original, which can only be perceived in the street.

One way to deal with the objection is to just bite the bullet: maybe this is the best we can do with institutional exhibitions. We can draw a parallel to prehistoric art like that found in Lascaux: where the original is too fragile to be seen, so audiences are given very detailed copies. Street art perhaps has a similar kind of ontological vulnerability. Its identity is so tightly linked to subversion and the street that any physical move would destroy its nature. Like their prehistoric counterparts, contemporary new-media exhibitions may serve as informational proxies—precise and respectful representations of street art. The brutal truth may be that the museum functions solely as a legitimate archive, whilst the authentic experience is restricted to the street.

As tempting as this option may sound, I wish to avoid it: this retreat effectively fails to explain why a purist like Fra32 would regard a new-media exhibition as authentic. His claim is not an isolated incident; it aligns with the attitudes of other radical artists in the scene—such as Zelle Asphaltkultur, MOSES & TAPS™, and Utah & Ether—all of whom were featured in *1984*. Any Manichean solution ignores the evolving complexity of institutional relationships and the deliberate strategies of these figures. They are not

opportunistic actors seeking a payday, but hardcore practitioners who oppose commercialization and choose to confront the institution on their own terms.

By drawing a comparison with other ephemeral and locationally difficult art forms, such as performance art and land art, Rivasi offers a significant tip for overcoming this obstacle. Through photographic and video representation, both art kinds were able to successfully enter markets and institutional contexts. As Rivasi (2017: 14) argues: 'photographic documentation, combined with the official recognition of the "original" as a work of art, can be an alternative to any work carried out without authorization […] regardless of the place where it was made and the duration of the work itself.'

To make Rivasi's point philosophically more explicit, consider Davies' (2011: 214–5) analysis of Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969). In this work, Acconci chose individuals at random on the street and followed them until they entered a private location. While his intended audience could not directly watch what he did, he chronicled the procedure with brief notes and a series of (staged) photographs. Davies contends that, while the performance is an integral part of the work, this can only be imaginatively reconstructed through documentation. The use of photography in such a documentary role 'is understood by the receiver as indicating that visible features of the actual

performance not preserved on film are not important for the appreciation of the work' (Davies 2011: 214). In this sense, the photographs isolate those specific features that are relevant for appreciation and interpretation.

The notion that, in this instance, photos act as *perfect surrogates* (Hopkins 2015; Ravasio 2018) due to their functional transparency is one way to cash out what Davies is claiming. Even though it is questionable whether a reproduction can ever offer a real appreciative experience for traditional painting (Savedoff 1993), the perceptual and ontological gaps that give rise to such scepticism are avoided here. In *Following Piece*, just like in many cases of performance art, the artist's manifest intentions via artworld conventions stipulate that the photographic record and other forms of documentation are the principal medium for the work. Because the observer understands the act's performative constraints, the photograph serves as a transparent window that allows direct access to the work's salient features.

Rivasi recognizes a phenomenon that is remarkably similar in the context of street art. As a result of the specific performative constraints under which a piece is executed (Young 2014: 121; Chackal 2016: 366; Baldini 2021), which often involve speed, illegality, and physical inaccessibility, street artists generally assign photographs and videos the

same function that Acconci gave them in *Following Piece*. In these cases, the documentation functions as a perfect surrogate for the original act, ontologically serving as the primary vehicle for interpretation and appreciation. Like in Acconci's case, the artistic category is not determined by the medium (video or photography). The surrogate transparently maintains the salient features of the unauthorized act, including its artistic use of the street, ensuring that the work remains street art.

In the following section, I further expand on this point, delving into the history and nature of street art to uncover the specific conventions that guide its existence as a documental practice like performance art and land art.

6. Appreciative conventions and street art's tension with the law

The following sociological and historical analysis illustrates that the use of documentation as a perfect surrogate is grounded in the teleonormative structure of street art—the internal, goal-oriented norms that govern how the practice functions. This history shows that the move toward new-media exhibitions is grounded on the attitudes of core practitioners like Fra32, rather than outside curators. The ontological dependence on photographic and video representation is not a recent institutional

invention; it is a long-standing internal convention now exploited to facilitate the transfer into the museum.

Brassaï's work is one of the earliest testimonies showing this close association. From the 1930s until the 1950s, the Hungarian-born photographer chronicled the spontaneous drawings that appeared on the walls of Paris. As MacDowall (2019: 36–8) points out, Brassaï (2002: 8) famously told Picasso: 'More than any other form of artistic endeavour, graffiti is dependent on photography.' Brassaï's remarks indicate that the ontological role of photography was a spontaneous necessity that was dictated by the nature of the practice—arguably its ephemerality, scale/accessibility, and performative nature.

As a result of the ephemerality of 1980s New York graffiti, which was boosted by 'the Buff,' the MTA's chemical cleaning procedure, the photograph was transformed into a 'necessary adjunct to the work itself' (Austin 2001: 251). The destruction of works became so commonplace that writers began to tolerate it, as long as they first obtained the 'flick,' which is a photograph of their effort. Fontaine (2018) compares these recordings to the *imago* of antiquity, a wax mask preserving the features of the deceased. Significantly, as law enforcement cracked down on the actual 'benches' where

writers convened to appreciate and evaluate works in person, the photograph emerged as the focal point of the evaluative and appreciative process (Austin 2001: 133).

These conventions have since migrated into street art more generally (Bonadio 2019: 37–8). Empirical studies demonstrate that most street art is currently appreciated and interpreted through video or photographic representations disseminated via social media (Hannerz 2016; MacDowall 2019; Baird 2022). Today's audiences interact primarily via digital apps with these specimens, accepting them as perfect surrogates for the work in the street.

As evidence, consider how critical discourse regards street art that survives solely through photography: it is not considered lost. For example, though no original version of Banksy's *Girl with Balloon* remains in public space, it is not discussed as a missing Caravaggio. Even though most viewers have only seen pictures of the piece, they think they can appreciate and assess it: in 2017, they voted it the UK's favourite piece of art (Kennedy 2017). This is not an outsider's mistake, but an intuitive acceptance of the perfect surrogate convention: the public perceives the snapshot as transparent.

Certain tactics employed by street artists further underscore photographs' role as perfect surrogates, intentionally rendering them the sole source of appreciation (MacDowall 2019: 42): in effect, some produce 'self-destructive' works that are specifically intended for a photograph before being whitewashed by the creators. Others like RONE have been granted access to abandoned sites on the condition that they get rid of physical works before releasing photographs. This is intended to discourage the public from entering dangerous sites.

Allow me to clarify the parallel with Acconci's *Following Piece*—and performance art in general: in both instances, the viewer recognizes that only what is documented is pertinent to the work's appreciation and evaluation. While Acconci's restriction is intentional, the limitations in street art typically arise from dominant societal norms—often legal frameworks—that constitutively influence both its creation and accessibility (Baldini 2018). The result, however, is similar: photos (and videos) become the point of access to the work.

The scale and accessibility of street art also contribute to the establishment of the convention that photographic documentation is a perfect surrogate. As is frequently the case with land art, several street artworks—such as large-scale installations on highway

walls or those concealed within transit tunnels—are physically inaccessible or visible only momentarily from specific, difficult-to-reach viewpoints. Examples such as Zelle Asphaltkultur's train-length works (fig. 6), MOMO's *Manhattan Tag*, and the subterranean *Underbelly Project* show that without photography or video, these works would be experientially inaccessible for most people. As a result of these practical constraints, the appreciative practice has evolved to embrace documentation as a suitable, and even exclusive, object of aesthetic engagement.



Fig. 6. Zelle Asphaltkultur, *Detonation Boulevard #64* (2016). Courtesy of the artist.

Finally, a last reason grounding conventions of new-media appreciation depends on the performative dimension of street art. Although it is unnecessary to accept that street art is fundamentally a performance (Baldini 2021), scholars widely agree that the practice incorporates constitutive performative elements (Young 2014: 121; Chackal 2016: 366). These include not just the act of creating work in public—often under duress, in dangerous settings, or at night—but also the risky processes of accessing production sites, which usually involve trespassing.

In this regard, street art mirrors the performing arts in its emphasis on the act of creation. Unlike traditional performances, which are frequently presented for an audience, the performative instances of street art are generally concealed from public observation. Photographs and, especially, videos are important for documenting these acts. Moving images are particularly well suited to conveying the kinetic, temporal, and embodied aspects of street art production—hence their highly regarded status among practitioners. For instance, Sirviö's video installation *Never Going Home* exemplifies the role of this technology: the viewer not only sees the final result but witnesses the graffiti writers' actions as they unfold (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Sauli Sirviö, *Never Going Home* (2012). Courtesy of the artist.

The claim that street art conventions allow for perfect surrogates does not make the physical work irrelevant: Its material existence is a causal prerequisite for the surrogate's existence and serves as a source of aesthetic engagement when encountered. Moreover, it is essential to underscore that not all street art can be documented, since several artists create pieces deliberately designed to be unphotographable (MacDowall 2019: 41–2). My argument is qualified: photographic and video recordings can *sometimes* serve as perfect surrogates, allowing for authentic institutional exhibitions of street art in such situations.

However, a critic could object that many pictures of street art provide no information regarding the work's placement or subversive nature. We appear to face a double bind. On the one hand, if street artworks are truly site-specific and subversive, photographs do not appear to adequately capture their constitutive features: they are not perfect surrogates. On the other hand, if photographs convey all such features, street art is *not* site-specific or subversive in the first place.

I believe that the critic is here pointing at the limitations of *some* photographs rather than the medium itself. The 'instagrammification' of street art, which turns a piece into a picture-perfect, decontextualized canvas, is, I believe, a failure of documentation rather than proof that perfect surrogates do not exist. Perhaps such a trend has created a new genre—digital urban art—but it has not shown that images are, in principle, incapable of meeting the task: there are simply suitable and unsuitable instances of documentation.

This concern has already been addressed in the practice: Brassaï recognized the limitations of the isolated shot. After 1950, he began supplementing his photographs with notes (MacDowall 2019: 36–8)—similarly to what Acconci did with *Following Piece*.

To ensure a '"good photograph" of subway graffiti' (Fontaine 2018: 16; my translation), writers such as Gues (SDK) adhere to strict guidelines. These include shooting a frontal view of the piece, documenting the train model, and even utilizing photomontage to compensate for perspective distortion. And when Banksy shares his works on social media, he always includes information about the installation site.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this objection is the need to examine and investigate the necessary characteristics of a perfect surrogate in street art. What features allow an inexperienced eye to imaginatively reconstruct the work's location and its production process? How much information should be recorded and shared with the audience? Another reason for engaging with the institution is, in effect, to consider the optimal methods for adapting and eventually enriching photographs and videos for a general audience, enabling outsiders to appreciate the practice's constitutive features and ethos.

7. Conclusion

Can there be street art in museums? In this paper, I have defended a form of moderate optimism that cautiously answers yes. It is true that, more often than not, works of street art confined within four white walls can feel like wild beasts domesticated behind

the bars of a fancy cage—there for the viewers' amusement. Yet sometimes, street art enters the museum on its own terms, preserving both its *sui generis* connection with public space and the rebellious charge that defines its most compelling examples. Exploring the possibilities of authentic street art in museums can help inform cultural policy and museum practices as they navigate the fraught transition of this art form, from marginal subculture to mainstream phenomenon. Street art may be popular now, but it does not have to be a sell-out.

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