



## Wallism

*"Art is an evolutionary act. The shape of art and its role in society is constantly changing. At no point is art static. There are no rules."*  
-Raymond Salvatore Harmon

What is it that's so captivating about great street art? Is it the scale? The often bright and bombastic color display? Maybe it's the shock of seeing something out of place, illegally slashed on private property and wall space. Perhaps it's all of these things and more. One thing that is certainly true though is this: the world of fine art has finally accepted this art form whole-heartedly into its galleries and museums. One of the problems though is how to display it in a way that maintains the art form's integrity. How can you possibly show something that was meant to be temporary, illegal and anonymous? How much is lost in the process? A tiger in a zoo is no doubt an amazing thing to see but it would never compare to glimpsing one in the wild. Let's propose a word for how galleries and exhibitors tackle this problem then: *wallism*.

One of the things street art has always had a chokehold on is its claim to the underground. There's a certain element of danger and anonymity involved that makes a piece of street art something more than just the sum of its parts. You can't help but wonder about the late night hour it might have been made and by whom. You may imagine gangs, drugs and alcohol involved (although these elements have been largely cut from the equation, relegated to Hollywood cliché and marketing meme). Almost all of these things that give graffiti its edge seem to vanish in a gallery setting. This may be the reason it has taken so long and had such a turbulent journey into art world acquiescence.

On the heels of enormous popular media attention for Banksy's Dismaland (not to mention the extravagant scale and budget of it), it's easy for most to suppose that street art and graffiti have always been accepted by the art world and society at large. Even one of the most successful companies on the planet, Google, has begun preserving images of the world's street art by launching an online gallery<sup>1</sup>. Consider though that it was only in 2008 that Tate Modern held the first major public museum display of street art in London<sup>2</sup>. It's almost unthinkable that such a progressive and modern urban setting would have waited so long to do this but it's a testament to how far the art form has come in such a short amount of time. Shortly after Tate's show the floodgates seemingly opened to the genre as the Fundación Caixa Galicia in La Coruña, Spain a similar exhibition titled "Postgraffiti, Geometry, and Abstraction," featuring artists working in "street art". The Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego also followed suit with a six-month show titled "Viva La Revolución: A Dialogue with the Urban Landscape," showing a wide range of street and graffiti artists<sup>3</sup>.

Street art has of course had previous dalliances with the fine art and gallery world. From 1979 to 1984 New York galleries began to host and champion the art form as a rebellious experiment in the wake of modernism's (then) booming popularity. While it did enjoy some limited success it was eventually uprooted and in some ways banished from the fine art world as critics staunchly deemed it too far astray from the historical precedents and lineage of art<sup>4</sup>.

One of the biggest (and most predictable) arguments against the *gallerization* of street art is that these artists are selling out and letting their work be commercialized for profit and so on. It's hard to take this criticism seriously considering that the same arguments have been made against almost any art form in any medium that has made the transition from experimentation to pop-culturally embraced. Surprisingly though, this criticism has come largely from the street art community itself. Choque Cultural Gallery, for example, fell victim to a more rash group of critics as a Brazilian Pixacao crew broke into the space to deface the artwork in 2006<sup>5</sup>. Street artists protesting the sudden exploitation (real or imagined) or their art form have mostly gone about their rebellion in more subtle ways however. The Underbelly Project has sprung up in recent years (although there is some dispute over whether or not it actually exists) as a roaming pop-up street art exhibition in an unplanned, unsanctioned location announced only to those in the community<sup>6</sup>. This movement and others like it aim to take back the genre and buck the current trend towards what many see as selling out.

*"If you had a degree, you did 'street art' as opposed to graffiti"* -John Fekner

One of the unanticipated effects of street art's early gallery exposure was recognition by advertising and marketing executives. While those in the art world were busy arguing about the merits of graffiti's work, these businessmen were succinctly in agreement about its marketing potential. Companies like Nike were quick to associate themselves with this "street culture" which would eventually entwine itself with the then budding hip-hop movement. Suddenly there was a new framework and machinery in place to communicate branding and corporate image to the youth culture, every advertisers dream come true.

While corporate America was trying to use graffiti to in order to turn a profit and connect with the youth market, some artists were reconsidering the medium altogether. Two names that often come up in discussions of this time period are (rightfully) Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. These pioneers were shunning the vandal label while embracing the aesthetic appeal of it, ultimately finding a new middle ground that was both respectably edgy and respected by the fine art establishment<sup>7</sup>. As one prominent art critic wrote, Basquiat somehow "fused a street aesthetic of spray paint and chalked-out skelley games with a spliced and stripped down version of the modernist vocabulary. During the year 1981 he made the transition from a profusely talented and promising artist working on the street to a world-class painter, poised to become one of the most influential artists of his time."



*"I wanted to be a star, not a gallery mascot" -Jean-Michel Basquiat*

*"People were more interested in the phenomena than the art itself. This, combined with the growing interest in collecting art as an investment and the resultant boom in the art market, made it a difficult time for a young artist to remain sincere without becoming cynical." -Keith Haring*

One of the reasons *street art as fine art* may be a concept that is here to stay: the internet. For one, the quickness and broad reaching ability to communicate an image or idea has led to graffiti having a more permanent place in the world. Secondly, the way most people see street art now is the exact same way in which they see fine art: in a digital photographic image. Why *wouldn't* someone acknowledge graffiti as something that belongs next to a Picasso when nowadays it so often is. They are both presented in a library of online images side by side, their merits and similarities appearing incredibly close to one another. It may be no small coincidence then that the rise of street art's fine art credibility has so closely mirrored the expansion of the internet and social media. These street artists are now getting just as much exposure as fine artists (if not more) and so of course it will be these works which drive the public interest and lead to massive crowds at exhibitions and art fairs.

One of the problems that arise when these large groups converge on a "street art" gallery exhibition is the method of display. As this text previously mentioned, how do you display something in a gallery that is inherently beautiful and exciting precisely because *it is not* inside a confined space? The aforementioned Tate Modern gallery went about solving this problem by giving the artists free reign to do as they pleased with the outside of the building. Artists made large sprawling works on the old brick and covered steel windows<sup>8</sup>. This *carte blanche* allowance for the artist is a popular method but begs an even more difficult question: how do you sell the work? Unfortunately in cases like this you can't. If the artists don't make something that can be physically taken home by a buyer then it simply won't be purchased. This has led to most galleries searching for creative middle grounds where the artists can present the work in an off the cuff way, yet still in a manner that lends itself to mobility. As the Hong Kong gallery scene has seen a wave of street art themed shows, many galleries have taken to using walls that can be detached/moved after the show<sup>9</sup>.

So many facets of graffiti's whimsical nature make it difficult to properly discuss. The same issues arise again and again whether they be in academic papers, gallery press releases or even casual discussion. Problems such as how to classify street art and graffiti, what (if any) are the differences and how open to interpretation are those differences and similarities? Graffiti has always had a temporal tinge to it as it is often erased or painted over before it can be fully examined and appreciated. Frequent anonymity on the part of the artists make it almost impossible to ascertain the real meanings and motivations behind most works.

In moving from the street walls to the gallery there's no doubt that most of the original appeal has been lost. Graffiti's traditional grounding in a vandal-spirited subculture doesn't mesh at all with this newly found high-class (and rather wealthy) audience...or does it? For a subculture whose main goal is ostensibly to buck the system and turn things upside down they sure have managed to do that in the art world, what could be more of a success than that? It may seem strange to step back and think that in many ways our society has chosen to celebrate one of the most boisterous critics of that very society, but then maybe that's the draw of it all. Street artists, in the truest and most traditional sense of the word, have found a way to give everyone the biggest and most visible middle finger they could, one we'll all enjoy until the next trend arrives.

**Dates:** From March 17<sup>th</sup> to June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Vernissage:** Friday 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2017, from 3 to 8 pm

**Curation:** Ryan Nimmo

**Art Direction:** Thomas Charvériat

**Research:** Jackson Hugh

**Artistic Research:** Jin Yun 金云, Song Jinxuan 宋董萱, Tang Dashi 汤大师 & He Dashi 贺大师

**Coordination:** Yeung Sin Ching 杨倩菁, Andrés Gál

**Venue:** island6 ShGarden, 50 Moganshan Road, building #7, G/F (#109), Shanghai

**Artist:** island6 art collective (Liu Dao 六岛)

**Link:** [http://island6.org/Wallism\\_info.html](http://island6.org/Wallism_info.html)

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/11/google-street-art-project-graffiti>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/street-art>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.artnews.com/2011/01/01/beyond-graffiti/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.academia.edu/5053571/Definitions\\_and\\_Transitions\\_Graffiti\\_and\\_Street\\_Art\\_in\\_New\\_York\\_City\\_A\\_peripheral\\_and\\_mainstream\\_presence\\_since\\_the\\_1980s](http://www.academia.edu/5053571/Definitions_and_Transitions_Graffiti_and_Street_Art_in_New_York_City_A_peripheral_and_mainstream_presence_since_the_1980s)

<sup>5</sup> <http://slamxhype.com/2008/10/sao-paulos-choque-cultural-gallery-struck-by-vandals/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fatcap.com/article/underneath-the-underbelly.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/graffiti-art-streets-to-galleries/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/street-art>

<sup>9</sup> <http://artradarjournal.com/2015/08/31/the-rise-of-hong-kong-street-art/>