

Freeland's *Art Theory*

Chapter 4 – “Money, markets, museums”

Chapter overview

- Chapter 4 examines the role of art institutions, especially the art **market** and art **museums**.
- Art has been traditionally used to display power and wealth. In Europe, this is evident from the patronage of artists by royal courts or the Church, and later by the bourgeoisie.
- Modern museums have primarily an educational function. However, art's role as a marker of wealth and **social status** hasn't disappeared, as can be seen from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.
- Another interesting question concerning museums is whether some artworks should not be displayed in them. We shall examine the case of **street art**.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Salvator mundi* (c. 1500)
Sold in 2017 for USD 450.3 million

Taste: innate or acquired?

- In his book *Distinction: a Cultural Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) challenges Kant's account of taste.
- Unlike Kant, Bourdieu does not believe in a universal taste, a sense of the beautiful valid for anyone at any time. Taste is acquired through education, and it signals our belonging to a specific social class.
- Bourdieu's account challenges the view that taste is ahistorical, and simultaneously promotes the idea that taste is relevant from the sociopolitical point of view.



Komar & Melamid, *America's Most Wanted* (1994)

What art belongs in a museum?

- In contemporary society, museums are the institutions that more than any other perform the function of displaying and preserving art.
- However, new genres of art challenge this function, in that it does not seem possible or advisable for a museum to include them in their collection.
- **Land art** is an obvious example. Large outdoor pieces cannot be displaced, partly also because their meaning often depends on their location.



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (1970)

What art belongs in a museum?

- **Street art** is a more interesting case. It involves subversive and at times openly illegal behavior – for example, leaving graffiti on a public building.
- Because of this, there may be a pressure for museums to reject street art as inappropriate to their collections.
- However, the artistic innovation, creativity, and quality of street artworks have drawn the attention of art critics and curators. In recent years, some exhibitions have attempted to present street art in a museum environment.
- In the rest of this lecture, shall discuss reasons in favor and against exhibiting street art in a museum.

Street art: its origins

- People have always expressed themselves by leaving marks of various sorts in public spaces. However, the phenomenon now called 'street art' is normally taken to originate in New York and Philadelphia, starting from the 1960s.



Street artists Bil Rock, Min, and Kel, New York, 1983

Street art as a reaction to Modernism

- Nicholas Riggle (2010) considers street art to be a reaction to Modernist formalist aesthetics, and its consequent separation of art and life.
- According to Riggle, while Pop Art reacts to Modernism by turning everyday objects and experiences into art, street art reacts by creating art in public spaces.
- Unlike some Pop Art, and similarly to Modernist art, Street art maintains an interest for the artwork's formal features. However, it rejects the Modernist separation of art and life by occupying public spaces, and by deriving its meaning and value from such a location.

MODERNIST
AESTHETICS
Formalist
Non-relational

POP ART

“The transfiguration of
the commonplace”

STREET ART

“The transfiguration of
the commonplaces”



Street art and subversiveness

- While the exact boundaries of street art are debated, art critics and philosophers of art normally agree that street art often has subversive aims. It challenges the way people perceive and use public spaces.
- The subversiveness of street art makes it hard to find a place for it in art museums. Museums are often publicly funded, and it seems inappropriate for a public institution to fund art that challenges the use of public spaces, and at times does so illegally.
- Street artists may also be unhappy with the idea that their works could end up in a museum, as this may deprive their works of their challenging and subversive character.

(often) ILLEGAL

(typically) LEGAL

SUBVERSIVE

QUESTIONABLE

ACCEPTABLE

ENCOURAGED



Class discussion

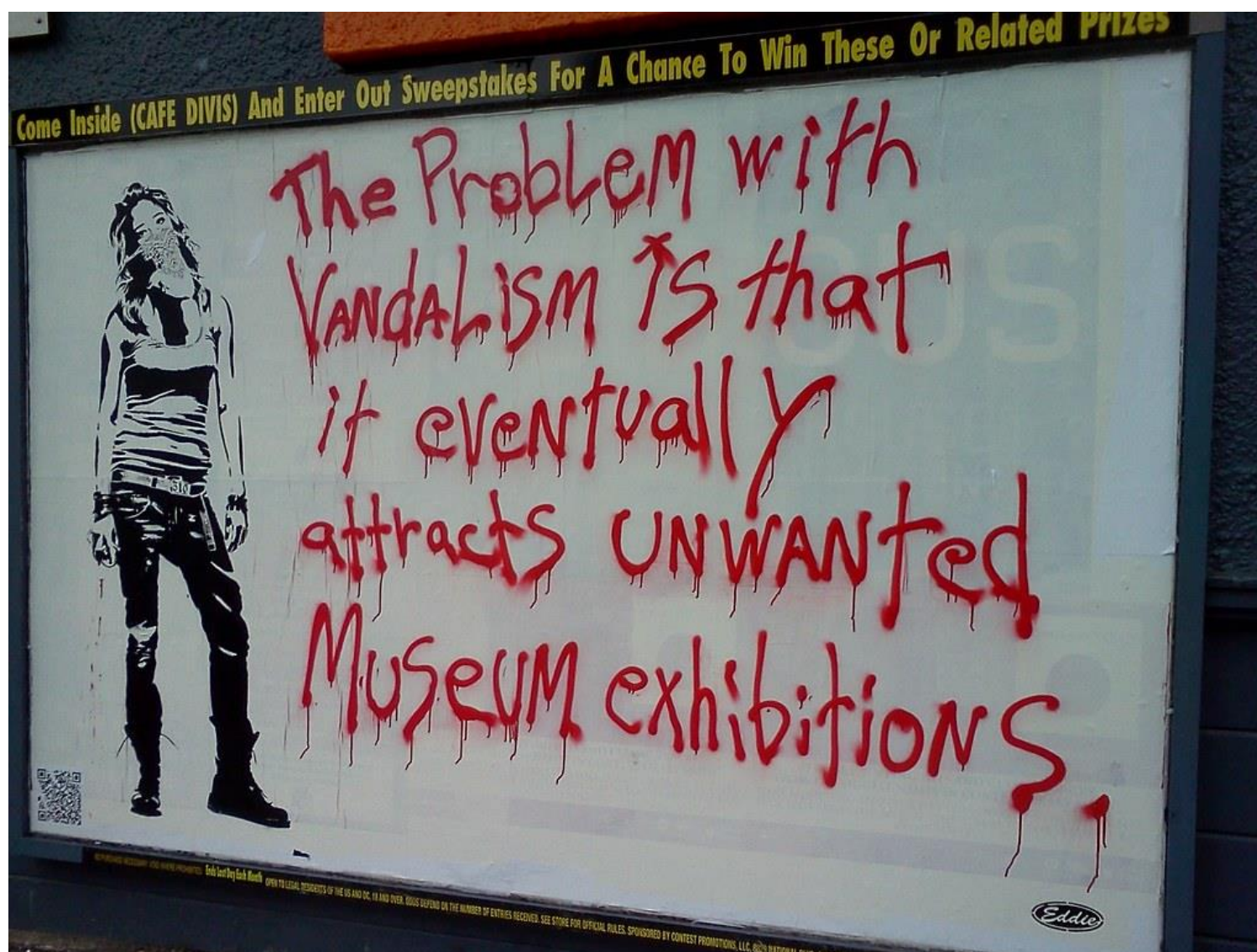
- Should museums display works of street art? If so, what would the best way to exhibit such works?

Some things you might want to consider:

- 1) Some works of street art are in places that are difficult to access (physically and/or legally).
- 2) If street art is more widely appreciated today, this is also because famous museum have devoted exhibitions to it.
- 3) Some works of street art derive (part of) their meaning from their location.
- 4) Street artists have often cooperated with museums, and some have shifted to a more traditional career path.
- 5) Museums depend for their funding on public or private institutions, as well as on the generosity of wealthy donors.

A mural by the Italian street artist BLU was removed from the exterior walls of the MOCA (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles), which had commissioned the work as part of its exhibition *Art in the Streets* (2011). The removal was likely due to the sensitive anti-war topic chosen by BLU.





Eddie Colla, *The Problem with Vandalism is that it Eventually Attracts Unwanted Museum Exhibitions* (2011)

- Peter Bengtsen (2015) has argued that any attempt to exhibit street art in a museum is bound to fail, as it is incompatible with the **unsanctioned** (不被批准) nature of street art.
- According to Bengtsen, once street art enters the museum, it is impossible for it to maintain the spontaneous, transgressive character that is essential to it.

“Colla’s artwork turns on its head the argument that a museum exhibition such as *Art in the Streets* leads to a surge in unwanted graffiti and street art. The artwork instead makes the point that practitioners of art in the street may themselves not be pleased with the institutional attention.”

(Bengtsen 2015, 228)

- Philosopher Andrea Baldini (Nanjing University) is also critical of the attempt to display works of street art in museums.
- He observes that, while some street artists have chosen to pursue a more “commercial” career, few of those who have done so have continued to produced interesting works.

“Even as the art world pats itself on the back for its overdue inclusion and recognition of urban art, its tendency toward institutionalization is eroding the value of both street art and graffiti, while simultaneously undermining their subversive and anti-commercial reputations. When shown in a museum, graffiti becomes mere simulacra: empty vessels deprived of their true meaning.”

(<https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1003698/on-exhibit-street-art-without-heart>)

- However, Baldini also argues that museums may successfully show works of street art by exhibiting **photographs** and **videos** that document this practice.
- The street art community often only appreciates these artworks in photograph, as their location is hard to access, and works are often quickly removed.
- Appreciation through photographs is thus central to the **appreciative practice** that characterizes street art. Photographs are not a surrogate for original street artworks (contrast this with oil painting).
- Rather than attempting to eliminate the boundary between street art and “mainstream” art, museums should therefore document street art, while at the same time respecting its spontaneous nature.