

STRAAT ARTS

Museum for street art and graffiti

Lannoo

“If street art and graffiti have taught us anything over the past 50 years, it’s that it is useless to wonder in which direction these phenomena are going. All the same, one can follow them blindly and be certain that it is the right direction.”

/ Christian Omodeo

1. The Bright Future of Street Art and Graffiti

Christian Omodeo

*Christian Omodeo is an art historian and critic. He holds a Ph.D. in Art History from La Sorbonne and began his career in the 2000s, significantly contributing to the organization of Rome's first mural festival, the Outdoor Festival, in 2010. Omodeo is the founder of Le Grand Jeu, initially established in 2015 as a curatorial company that later evolved into a specialized bookstore focused on street culture. From December 2023 to July 2024, Omodeo curated a show *LOADING* at grand palais immersive that delves into the role of technologies in the global evolution of urban art. He continues curating as well as running Le Grand Jeu to this day.*

When STRAAT opened in 2020, in a world still grappling with the pandemic crisis, it was introduced as a museum dedicated to street art and graffiti, designed to engage with artists and showcase the history of urban art. Now, four years later, the need for a second catalog to include new additions to its collection and artworks missed in the first book provides a valuable opportunity to look back at what's been achieved and think about future goals.

The latest catalog tells STRAAT's recent history through its collection, explained in themed chapters inspired by the museum's layout. Steven P. Harrington from Brooklyn Street Art looks at those paintings that "honor inclusivity and celebrate many identities, documenting and preserving the essence of street art's evolution in real time." Sophie Curtis dives into various topics such as contemporary murals, abstract graffiti inspired by lettering, eco-themed art, and STRAAT's installations. Charlotte Pyatt highlights the social and political activism of artists who "promote a dynamic call to action well suited to the urgent terrain in which we find ourselves," like Shepard Fairey, whose vision is captured in an interview by Alex Pope from the 2023 "Printed Matters: Raise the Level" exhibition at STRAAT.

In just over three years, STRAAT has evolved from a newcomer to a central hub for the global street art and graffiti scene. This growth prompts reflection on the museum's future, especially as street art shifts from underground to mainstream. Which artists should STRAAT spotlight? And how should it connect with the new generation of artists, like Judith de Leeuw (Netherlands, 1994) and Kayla Mahaffey (USA, 1994), who often view traditional countercultural aesthetics that have defined the DNA of these phenomena with skepticism? These are important questions as

STRAAT continues to define its place in the ever-changing landscape of street art and graffiti.

From the underground to mainstream culture

The history of street art and graffiti is often presented as following a familiar narrative: urban art is portrayed as an offshoot of hip-hop culture, which emerged in New York between the late 1960s and early 1980s, encompassing elements like breaking, DJing, and rap. However, we now know that various forms of graffiti and street art existed in many Western and non-Western cities even before the 1900s. It was in New York, though, that these art forms gained significant visibility and media attention, leading to their rapid spread first in the Western world and now globally.

The link made in the 1980s between street art, graffiti, and hip-hop has shaped the way these art forms are analyzed, often limiting a true understanding of them. For instance, the impact of the Internet, smartphones, and social media on street art since the 1990s is rarely discussed, unlike the well-known effects of MP3s and streaming on the music industry. Additionally, the voices of women and minorities, whether ethnic, religious, or sexual, have been largely overlooked. This situation has led to a lack of thorough evaluation of street art and graffiti's transition from underground movements to mainstream recognition. Most critiques come from those — often men, often over 30, often white — who are worried about losing the authenticity of the art form's origins. While artists like Banksy, Shepard Fairey, Os Gêmeos, KAWS, or Invader are celebrated, there is a concern that urban art has lost its soul, becoming a kitschy, low-cost, and late version of Pop Art. Over the past decade, in fact, “the idea that ‘street art’ has now exhausted (if not betrayed) its true aesthetic and ideological foundations” (Vittorio Parisi) has found fertile ground among the followers of this milieu, as has the conviction that its large-scale rollout, made

possible by festivals and city-funded projects, is ultimately harmful. Opinions are divided, in short, between those who consider that “appreciating street art is a call to action” while murals “are a call to obedience, to passive consumption” (Javier Abarca) or those, on the other hand, who regret noting that “what had been ten years of innovation, evolution and maturation [between approximately the years 1998 and 2008] began to transform into repetition, imitation and simulation” (Rafael Schacter).

Interestingly, these views echo the satirical portrayal in Banksy's 2010 documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. The scene where Mr. Brainwash, in a wheelchair with a leg cast, is urged by an assistant to splash paint on canvases to meet the demand for his 2008 Los Angeles exhibit *Life is Beautiful*



Kayla Mahaffey (USA, 1994)
Nectar (2022)
Acrylic and spray paint on polyester
3.5 x 4.85 meters



Judith de Leeuw (The Netherlands, 1994)
Renovate (2022)
Spray paint on polyester
9 x 5 meters

captures the absurdity of mass-producing art for profit, instead of paintings in the streets for free. While some believe Mr. Brainwash is a Banksy prank, it raises the question: Is the decline of street art and graffiti's golden age solely due to their current recognition? Quincy Jones famously said, "God walks out of the room when you think about money," but why should success be the only measure for judging the countless artists risking their safety to create street art worldwide?

The death of authenticity

Ever since antiquity and the ancient myth of Oedipus, it's been seen as normal for each new generation to rebel and assert their own worldview. This idea is so deeply rooted that, in the 1960s, we coined terms like countercultures and subcultures to describe movements that, like

street art and graffiti, challenged hegemonic cultures from the ground up. For decades, we've viewed the world through this mainstream vs. underground lens. However, as Andy Bennett notes, "such a perspective is increasingly less effective in a world characterized by fragmentation and cultural pluralism." In today's hyperconnected societies, the rebellious young idealist who wants "to give peace a chance," as John Lennon used to sing, is giving way to the whistleblower and activists fighting for specific causes like ecology, girl power, and privacy rights, following the route traced by Edward Snowden, Pussy Riot, Julian Assange, Greta Thunberg, and Aaron Swartz, just to name a few.

This shift can be puzzling for those who witnessed or contributed to the rise of street art and graffiti,

but it's a natural progression for younger generations like music critic Julie Ackermann, who was born in 1994 just like artists Kayla Mahaffey and Judith de Leeuw. They have grown up in a world where "human experience is exploited as raw material according to a parasitic economic logic" (Shoshana Zuboff) synonymous with Silicon Valley. Ackermann reflects: "I've never been able to grasp anything 'authentically.' In 1994, the year I was born, everything — absolutely everything — had already been transformed, commodified, and wrapped in a shiny plastic coating: ideas, objects, even people. This Disneyland colonized by pretense is my natural environment: it's inside me, it runs through me. 'Some girls are just born with glitter in their veins,' as Paris Hilton puts it."

From this perspective, the way younger generations casually mix and remix the aesthetics — rebellious and otherwise — of the past takes on new meaning. Their tendency to combine and distort elements without regard for their original context is itself a form of rebellion. What might seem like superficiality to some is actually a statement in a world where focusing solely on the present turns the past and "culture into more of a resource than a legacy" (David Chaney). In short, it's time to recognize that what looks like a betrayal of countercultural roots is, in fact, a new way of rebelling, shaped by the hyperconnected, commodified world these younger generations have inherited.

Give mainstream a chance

People often see museums as archives, preserving the art of the past, because that's why they were originally created in the 1700s and 1800s. Museums are viewed like encyclopedias, not as dynamic entities reflecting the present. Yet, the people who run these institutions share the same contemporary concerns, expectations, and dreams as their visitors. STRAAT, like other older

museums, is building a collection to tell the future story of street art and graffiti. Browsing through its first two catalogs reveals the decisions made by its founders and current curators to showcase the pioneers alongside the ones that grew up reading *No Logo* by Naomi Klein in the early 2000s and the new generation transforming the scene today. The goal is to ensure these art forms continue to resonate with future audiences.

However, STRAAT's mission goes beyond just creating a historical collection, because its team clearly knows that the history of street art and graffiti is still being written on walls worldwide and that STRAAT's role is to recognize and support the ongoing evolution of these art forms. The museum aims to educate younger audiences about the origins and history of street art and graffiti, highlighting the struggles of artists who have challenged dominant values. It also helps current artists promote inclusive lifestyles that respect all political, religious, sexual, and ethnic identities within a single overwhelming mainstream. Additionally, STRAAT carefully selects the most deserving artists from the vast community of street art and graffiti creators, because, as Louise Brooks, a Hollywood star of the 1920s, said, artists create "an epic subjective composition in which they present the world from their own point of view. The question, however, is whether they have a point of view."

STRAAT is not just a time capsule for street art and graffiti; it's a living, breathing institution that tells multiple stories of these art forms, now and in the future. It's challenging to predict the future and uncertain to look ahead, but if street art and graffiti have taught us anything over the past 50 years, it's that it is useless to wonder in which direction these phenomena are going. All the same, one can follow them blindly and be certain that it is the right direction.





TAQUEN

Born in Madrid, **Taquen** was surrounded by the historic Spanish traditions of movement and music. His early studies in Fine Art at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid provided a formal foundation, while his graffiti roots, dating back to the age of 13, continued to influence his evolving style. Throughout his artistic development, Taquen honed his focus on exploring the dynamic connections between individuals and their surroundings. The tranquility conveyed in his work reflects Taquen's broader perspective on nature, a theme he consistently explores in his preferred painting environments. Seeking inspiration in the serene and quiet places he encounters during his travels, Taquen encourages viewers to reflect on the significance of peace and tranquility embedded in his art.

In his contribution to STRAAT, titled *Movement as a Language*, Taquen captures the essence of a dancer, Aina, who moves instinctively, seamlessly blending her art form with the natural environment. His artistic evolution has centered on the integration of nature, movement, and migration, culminating in a unique portrayal of these interconnected themes through dance. Aina was initially photographed by a friend of Taquen, and her portrayal introduces another layer to the multifaceted creation. The artist translates the dancer's serene movements into the artwork using gentle tones, a technique reminiscent of his larger wall murals. Delicate lines gracefully traverse the dancer's body, mirroring the dance around her distinctive features. The juxtaposition of the artwork's scale with the tender subject matter enhances the commanding yet graceful positioning.

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Taquen (Spain, 1992)

Movement as a Language (2020)

Acrylics on polyester

7 x 5 meters







NILS WESTERGARD

A stencil artist and filmmaker, **Nils Westergard** grew up in an artistic household. His grandfather was a successful painter in his own right, and Nils began painting theater sets in his early school days. He actively creates stencils to this day, as the base for freehand political and portrait images. He works both on the streets and in galleries, creating works that sit between fearsome and powerful. A key development for Nils has been his stencil work of cyclists around Amsterdam. This project has been highly documented by Nils, showing each step of the intricate process. He photographs unique characters, slowly creating multiple layers to draw out each detail.

Nils's eye-catching piece for STRAAT utilizes the scale of his canvas to the full extent; his oversized portrait takes up two-thirds of the entire piece. Nils creates a double meaning by adding some fragility by making the subject's hair slightly damp. This softens her powerful stare. "While there isn't an ounce of fear in her, the power of her gaze and the scale of the piece belittles the viewer and allows her to dominate," he explains. The butterfly in the lower left corner of the painting is a signature that Westergard began adding early on in his career, initially having included it in one of his high-school pieces.

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Nils Westergard (USA, 1992)

Meredith (Stare) (2016)

Spray and latex paint with stencils on polyester

9 x 5 meters







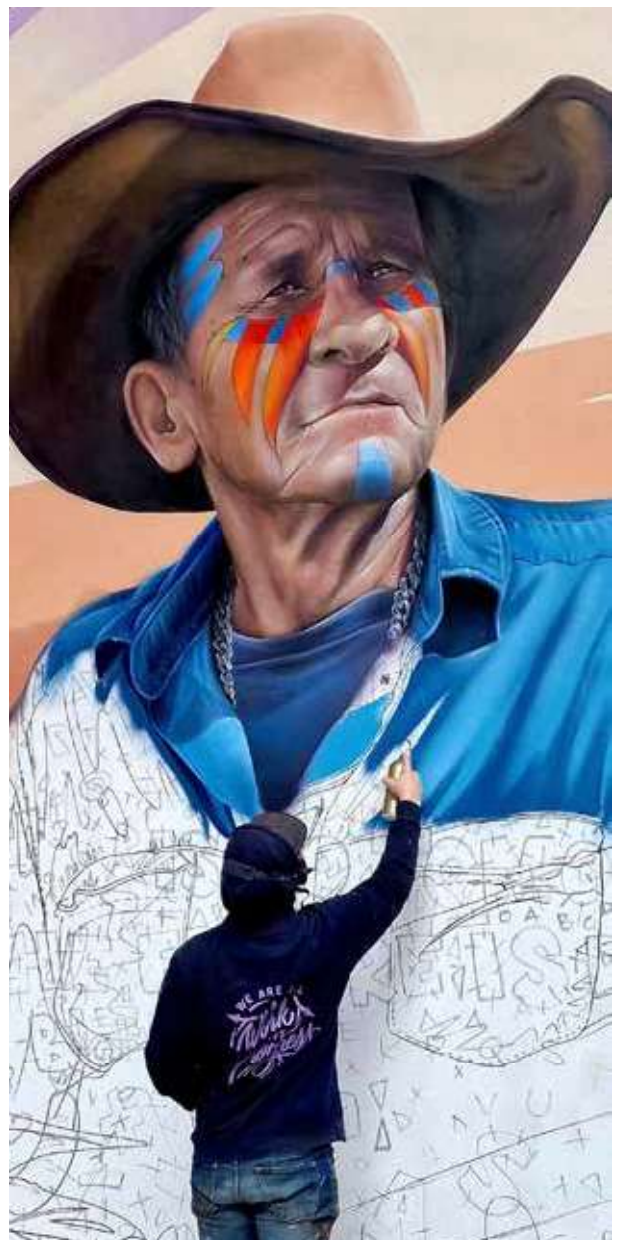
TYMON DE LAAT

Tymon de Laat is a muralist and visual artist who lives and works in Rotterdam. Originally from Delft, he pursued studies in advertising at the Willem de Kooning Academy, where he discovered a passion for artistic freedom. Transitioning to full-time artistry, he shed his alias Me Like Painting in favor of his birth name and has since dedicated himself to painting under this title.

Tymon's artistic journey has led him to the intersection of surrealism and realism, resulting in hyperrealistic and imposing artworks. He gravitates toward portraying individuals with whom he shares close bonds, infusing his pieces with personal connections. Drawing from the vibrant atmosphere of Rotterdam and his deep affinity for Latin America, Tymon adorns concrete walls with lively hues and heightened dramatic elements.

In exploring the cultural landscape further, Tymon's work shares thematic resonance with Latin American artists such as Uno Nueve and Gleo. While Uno Nueve delves into the shared heritage of his Latin American ancestors, Gleo's art is enriched by intricate depictions of Latin American masks, echoing de Laat's cultural influences and personal connections. Tymon's murals are characterized by their lifelike quality, fostering a strong connection between the artist and subject, evident to the observer.

In his piece for STRAAT titled *Las Ultimas Hojas*, he immortalizes a Cuban tobacco farmer from Viñales, whom he photographed during his travels. He wanted to create a painting that pushed his technical abilities, knowing that the museum creates a space where visitors can look at paintings for a long time. Tymon therefore pushed his skills to ensure what he left behind showed off his technical abilities to the fullest.



Tymon de Laat
(The Netherlands, 1979)
Las Ultimas Hojas (2022)
Spray paint on polyester
4.85 x 3.5 meters



STUDIO GIFTIG

Niels van Swaemen and Kaspar van Leek worked independently for many years before setting up **Studio Giftig** together in 2012. The Dutch duo has a huge amount of combined experience, and their name, Giftig, comes from the original location where they stored their spray paint. Within this place lay a basement called the “toxic” room, owing to its assortment of various materials and chemicals. In Dutch, *giftig* translates to “toxic,” thus lending their collective name both a literal and symbolic significance derived from their early creative environment. From the beginning, their pieces focused on hyperrealism, surrealism and realism. Their inspiration came from photographs they had taken.

For STRAAT, Studio Giftig combined music with art. They painted with the famed Dutch singer Eva Simons as their muse and musical inspiration. This work of art is currently the largest painting within STRAAT at 15 meters high. These dimensions highlight the scale of STRAAT, embracing the dramatic high ceilings of the space. It also encapsulates the grandeur and magical nature of the singer’s stage persona. Eva Simons is famed for working with musicians such as Afrojack and Will.i.am, and sings about her own rebirth after the birth of her child. There was a grand opening for this impressive painting at STRAAT, with Eva Simons singing while a black cloth fell to the floor to reveal the artwork behind her.



Studio Giftig (The Netherlands 1981/1983)
Close to You (2022)
Spray paint on polyester
15 x 7 meters