

**STRAAT**

Quote from the Streets

Lannoo

“Visit  
the museum  
of graffiti.  
It will soon  
close”

/ France, 1968.

# Foreword



We live in a time where the #metoo movement calls for rethinking the place of women in history, where a growing debate asks for a new reading of the colonial past and where many wonder about the role that museums should play in society. However, defining what a museum should be is a hard task in a world where many question what these institutions have been in the recent past.

Who would have imagined that museums would start selling off the artwork they have preserved for so long? How can we protect heritage when many start to consider Unesco's policies as a lever for gentrification because they "prize historical authenticity in the form of buildings but not in the form of the culture of the people who have made their neighborhood what it is?"<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, a debate has risen between different ways of looking at these issues. There are those who still look at André Malraux, the French minister of culture after the second world war, and his imaginary museum - "the only place in the world that escapes death" - as the only way of thinking about museums. To them, the model of a universal museum remains a dogma beyond debate. It's up to reality to adapt to an ideal framework, not the other way around. Recently, those fighting for more space for women and minorities in museum programs and collections have gained more attention. Their goal is clear: to force institutions to align themselves with the challenges of our times, even if it means removing from their boards rich and powerful donors associated with racism, misogyny or elitism. The time for compromises has ended and they feel their role is to ring the alarm. Then, there are those who normally work on the margins of the institutional framework, graffiti writers and street artists included, who dream of bringing to museums the participatory, experimental and pluralistic practices that made their art so much

appreciated in the streets and on the internet. In their eyes, there is no clear distinction between indoor and outdoor, between the street and the museum, between vandalism and authorized commissions. What they mostly care about is giving the silent majority so often excluded the opportunity to discover what museums can offer. Their agenda isn't new. Banksy and Inkie already proposed this in 1998 at the Glastonbury Festival: *"It's better not to rely too much on silent majorities... for silence is a fragile thing... one loud noise and it's gone"*.

This soundcheck may have taken longer than expected, but initiatives like STRAAT, with its innovative exhibition and catalogue, prove that the party has truly started.

Like Urban Nation in Berlin, the MIMA in Brussels and the Museum of Graffiti in Miami, STRAAT is indeed one of the first museums in the world to be entirely dedicated to graffiti and street art. The almost exclusive interest of these institutions for a specific urban genre should not, however, be seen as a quest for self-identity. It's exactly the opposite. These projects focus on the recognition of specific practices while supporting artists hitherto underrepresented in museum programs. In fact, one of their main goals is to highlight the inclusive conception of culture that street art and graffiti champion. Between their walls, these cultures are given the space to challenge institutional codes through exhibitions like *Quote from the streets* at STRAAT (2020), which itself follows in the footsteps of *Street Art* at Tate Modern in London (2008), *Born in the Streets* at the Fondation Cartier in Paris (2009), *Art in the Streets* at MOCA in Los Angeles (2011) or *Graffiti. New York meets The Dam* at the Amsterdam Museum (2016). However, unlike most of these projects, STRAAT is also heir to a Dutch passion for graffiti and street art, which dates back to the 1980s and is quite unique in Europe. Let's not forget that the first museum exhibition ever

organized around graffiti culture was held at the Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1983. Similarly, *Coming from the Subway: New York Graffiti Art* at the Groninger Museum in 1992 is still one of the most relevant shows on New York graffiti culture ever held. And remember the work of art dealers like Yaki Kornblit, who first showed Blade, Rammellzee, Futura, Crash and many others in Europe, and the overflowing passion of collectors like Henk Pijnenburg. It's no coincidence that Keith Haring visited The Netherlands before becoming the famous artist we know today.

Or that younger artists like Os Gemeos and Barry McGee followed his path here in the 2000s, thanks to the support of the Museum De Domijnen in Sittard.

We should also underline the importance of the Dutch national scene in the graffiti and street art world over the last decades. Yet, STRAAT's mission is to support the entire international graffiti and street art scene, not just the Dutch. It also catalogues the wider scene, not only a few big names. At STRAAT the kings and queens are recognized for their contribution to these cultures, but the focus is to invite a wide audience to discover and understand the DNA of street art and graffiti through an in-depth and unique contextualization as perfectly captured in *Quote from the streets*, the exhibition reproduced in this catalogue. Finding the space to allow for such ambition wasn't easy, but here too, STRAAT bet big. The museum is not located in a classic building in the city center or inside a new building designed by a world-renowned architect or one of the country's many talented designers.

On the contrary, STRAAT is situated in a former warehouse on the NDSM wharf, the centerpiece of a vast urban rejuvenation project that fosters a dialog between street art, graffiti and industrial heritage in a way that recalls what the Urban Art Biennale initiated in 2011 at the World Heritage site

of Germany's Völklingen ironworks. STRAAT's warehouse spaces offer many advantages, beginning with allowing artists to freely determine the size of their interventions. The result is that the young museum's collection already brings together many artworks whose monumentality competes with Picasso's *Guernica*. Going big, inside as outside, can be viewed as the easiest way to carry graffiti and street art from the street to the museum without questioning what this change really implicates. Inviting artists to work on such large scale isn't just a strategy for STRAAT to distance itself from the 'white cube' model. Size is simply the result of the museum's desire to offer its artists the widest possible freedom and support them in shaping the projects they care about most.

To more easily understand this issue of inside/outside, it helps to look at it from a different perspective. Music makers know that playing live outdoors and recording music in a studio are two separate ways of sharing music with their audiences. However, no one will question musicians for playing live from a studio, because we know that while the sound might change, the music we feel doesn't. Musicians adapt themselves to their surroundings in the same way street artists and graffiti writers take over spaces most suitable to their needs. It's up to us to focus on the very nature of their interventions, without letting our judgment rely exclusively on the place where we view the artwork. As the number of museums dedicated solely to street art and graffiti grows, perhaps so too will the inside/outside debate, or at least the misunderstandings around them. But let us not belittle this shift hidden behind the contemporary passion for these cultures. Throughout the 20th century, we have tended to distinguish art made for galleries and museums from public art made in the city. On one hand, we considered art for inside spaces as

"the product of an individual and autonomous act of expression, and its appreciation [was], likewise, a private act of contemplation". On the other hand, public art was meant to be "a public phenomenon [that] must entail the artist's self-negation and deference to a collective community"<sup>2</sup>. Because we are used to seeing graffiti and street art in the streets and not in museums, we instinctively compare them to public art. But as STRAAT's *Quote from the streets* tells us, it is so much more rewarding to instead focus on how these practices are attempting to challenge the standards of modernist art and aesthetic theory made for galleries and museums by moving indoors that "deference to a collective community"<sup>3</sup> distinctive of art made in public spaces.

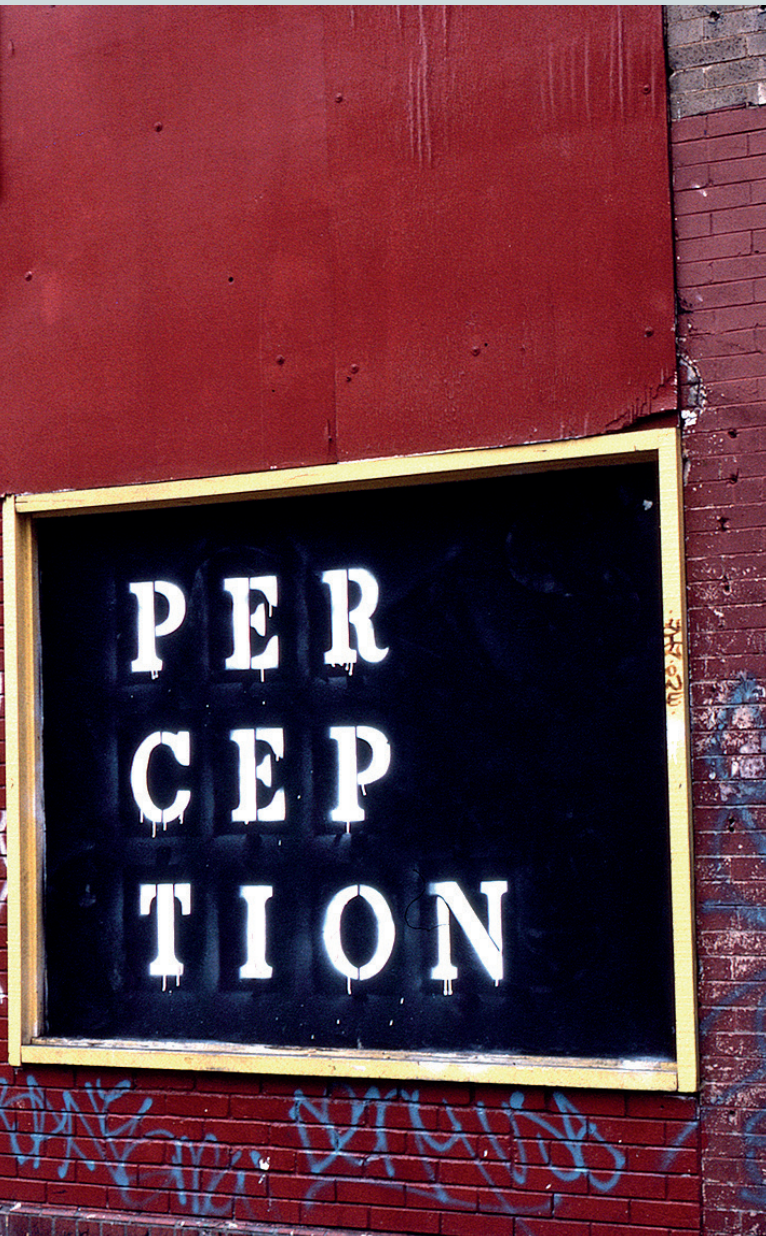
This is why, today, museums like STRAAT have a fundamental role to play. They are not intended as places where street art and graffiti are squeezed into pre-existing molds, but as spaces that invite exploration and where new ways of experiencing art are introduced. Graffiti and street art museums may be the very tools needed to combat the loss of appeal of community ties that the French sociologist Émile Durkheim first pointed out around 1900. They can be the antibodies that heal the body of our society, proving their worth inside as they have already done outside. "Visit the museum of graffiti. It will soon close"<sup>4</sup>: This was the message written on the door of a museum of graffiti created by protesters at the University of Lyon in France in 1968, a few days before their dispersal by police. This message alone clearly shows that the history of projects like STRAAT are anything but simple. Luckily, we are no longer in a rush. As Banksy and Inkie pointed out, the party has started and what people now expect is a cacophony of noise.

**Christian Omodeo**



Fashion Moda  
Gallery in 1981

# Is street art inside still street art?



Although graffiti and street art emerged as illegal and underground expressions on the streets, it didn't take very long for the traditional art world to absorb them into their galleries and museums. But is street art actually street art when it appears on canvas? Isn't street art by its very nature meant to slowly fade away into the urban landscape? Isn't the rebellious spirit, so essential to this art form, lost once it ventures down the institutionalization path?

These questions remain as relevant today as they were back in the 1970s and 1980s when art institutes began collecting and promoting graffiti and street art. What does the institutionalization of street art mean for street art? And what are the consequences for the artists themselves? We tackle these questions with *Quote from the streets*, the opening exhibition at STRAAT. That exhibition and its artworks have been reproduced in part here, STRAAT Museum's very first catalogue and comprehensive look at our unique collection.

Before diving in, we briefly explore the history of this monumental shift from brick walls to white cubes and the various points of view that helped define it. Ultimately, we invite you to join one of the most pressing debates taking place on street art today: Is street art exhibited inside still street art?

## INSTITUTIONAL ABSORPTION

While graffiti and street art date back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, it didn't take long for these artforms to be assimilated into the institutionalized art world. This thanks to the efforts of a few forward-thinking artists, art dealers and collectors. The first gallery exhibition of graffiti took place in September 1973 at the Razor Gallery in SoHo, New York and featured the collective United Graffiti Artists, whose original members include Hugo Martinez, PHASE 2, Mike 171 and SJK 171. Over the following five years, the underground scene developed in its own cocoon. In October 1980, Fashion Moda, in the South Bronx, organized one of the earliest and most influential exhibitions showing graffiti and street art side by side. The show included works by Basquiat, Futura 2000 and Kenny Scharf, among others.

The first gallery to showcase graffiti art in Europe was Galleria La Medusa in Rome. The exhibition took place in December 1979 after Italian art dealer Claudio Bruni bought 'graffiti per square foot' from graffiti veteran Lee Quiñones and hip-hop icon Fab 5 Freddy. In the same year, the founding of ANUS Gallery by Amsterdam pioneers Hugo Kaagman and Diana Ozon marked the birth of the first punk graffiti gallery in the Dutch capital. Three years later, in late 1982, artworks by graffiti writers like Seen, Blade, Futura 2000 and Dondi were exhibited at Yaki Kornblit Gallery. As the first exhibition in Amsterdam featuring American graffiti, the show was a milestone. The introduction of American aesthetics convinced many Dutch artists to start practicing 'New York stylewriting'.

So where did this institutional interest in graffiti and street art come from? Many say it resulted from the evolution of the artforms themselves. Artists continued to refine their work and experiment across painting, sculpture, music, fashion and film.<sup>2</sup>

As art institutions came to appreciate and value this new aesthetic from the street, renowned museums and experienced art buyers began opening up their collections more and more to these urban expressions.

While the institutionalization of graffiti and street art in the 1970s and early 1980s was limited to a few 'art visionaries', today it is common to find artworks by (former) graffiti and street artists being sold for tens of millions in auction houses across the globe. The movement has undeniably moved from the periphery to a more central position in the art world. Yet even as they are assimilated into the art world, graffiti and street artists retain a greater independence from the cultural authorities than other artists. Graffiti and street art's Do-It-Yourself (DIY) mentality, combined with internet and social media exposure, enable the artists to promote and sell their work without the need for gallerists, buyers and other traditional artworld middlemen.<sup>3</sup>





## POLEMICAL SHIFT

From the very beginning, the presence of graffiti and street art in art institutions has been surrounded by heated debate. Many (still) feel that an art form born illegally in public space and rooted in promoting nonviolent civil disobedience loses much of its relevance when institutionalized.<sup>4</sup> Inside, the artworks are no longer illegal and thereby lacks the time pressure and adrenaline required to freely create on the streets. The differences brought by this shift go even further. When painting for an institution, artists have access to a greater set of tools, such as ladders and scaffolding, than they would on the street. This allows them to transcend the 'human scale' – literally, how high a hand can reach – that limits them outdoors. Moreover, in a gallery or museum, street art becomes an isolated work of art, no longer part of the sum total of an urban setting and any work that precedes or surrounds it.<sup>5</sup> Finally, a canvas can be moved from one location to another, unlike a brick or canvas wall.

Considering all these changes, it is little surprise that many artists and experts believe street art can only ever exist in the urban scenarios where its political and interventionist power to foster discussion is greatest. In their minds, street art's value is derived almost exclusively from its social power on the streets. Museums, galleries and biennials are mere interferences, disrupting not only the messages but also the creative freedom in how graffiti and street art are made.<sup>6</sup>

There is, of course, another side to this argument, one that states there is no difference between outdoor and indoor street art. This thought is based on the idea that, whether viewed in the context of the street, studio, gallery, museum or internet, the street always remains street art's main source of inspiration. In other words, dialoguing with the city is *the* defining feature of street art no matter where it is created or displayed. According to this school of thought, city walls are simply laboratories for experimentation; what is discovered on the streets is introduced into the studio and vice versa.<sup>7</sup> Even on canvas, street art still speaks to a wide audience and retains its underlying rebelliousness. The content also remains the same and its form barely changes. Street art transcends any single surface or location. Any street artist who is (or ever was) active on the streets is still a street artist, even when making works on canvas.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, as this debate rages, a middle ground has emerged. Some scholars, biennales and institutions, even those devoted to street art, are filing graffiti and street art under contemporary art or adopting entirely new terminology like 'urban contemporary art', 'new contemporary art', 'intermural art' and 'street wave art'.<sup>9 10 11</sup>



Dan Kitchener  
Brick Lane, London

## QUOTING THE STREETS

These vast differences of opinion on what does and doesn't define graffiti and street art are likely to continue for some time yet. Not least of all because these art forms are evolving on a daily basis in the work of countless artists around the globe. It is unrealistic that we will ever unanimously agree on any single definition.

At STRAAT, we actually believe this debate should be embraced as part of the beauty of the art form. Or, as professor Edwige Fusaro notes, "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".<sup>12</sup>

With so many changes involved, it is impossible for any work by graffiti or street artists to completely retain its original meaning and value inside as it has outside. Which is not to say that it cannot remain connected to its original roots. At STRAAT, our once-derelict industrial structure seems almost purpose-made to house a graffiti and street art museum. The sheer size and enormous height of the museum also doesn't much alter the scale of the work as it would otherwise appear on the streets. Nevertheless, the question remains: are even the slightest deviations from the street enough to contextualized graffiti and street art inside?

To better understand how a habitat alters works by graffiti and street artists, we dove into our own collection. With nearly 250 artworks created specifically for STRAAT – ranging from paintings and sculptures to site-specific installations – the collection lends itself nicely to such an investigation. As part of our research, we spoke extensively with the artists themselves. Using the artists' own words, we were able to find specific patterns that reveal much about the movement's



roots. We discovered, for example, that working indoors has little impact on the artists' inspirations; with or without a roof over their head their inspirations are the same. Similarly, artistic styles, mastered with years of practice and dedication, hardly change when switching up surfaces (i.e. brick vs canvas). Working indoors also doesn't have much influence on the concepts that drive their works; after all, graffiti and street artists have always been moved by an intrinsic motivation that doesn't recognize boundaries or borders.

Based on these findings, we have categorized the STRAAT collection into five key narratives shared by graffiti and street artists worldwide: *Aesthetic*, *Personal*, *Grounded*, *Empathic* and *Conscious*.



With *Aesthetic*, we explore street art's pursuit of perfect shapes. With *Personal*, we view street art as a reflection of the artist's universe. With *Grounded*, we reveal the connection between street art and its environment. With *Empathic* we zoom in on how street art communicates with its audience. And *Conscious* demonstrates street art's power to raise awareness for social and environmental causes. Together, these five narratives give shape to the opening exhibition *Quote from the streets*, which features 153 artworks by 140 artists from 32 countries.

Opened in October 2020, the exhibition is laid out like a city with its own streets, squares and

intersections, inviting street art lovers to lose themselves in the artworks and explore their deeper meanings by unveiling the stories that would otherwise remain untold on the streets. This catalogue aspires to reflect the same spirit and energy of this ambitious show. We hope that the many inspiring artworks and revealing insights you'll find on these pages will encourage you to contribute to the ongoing debate: Is street art inside still street art? Does street art, once removed from its context, invite a different interpretation than it does on the streets? And do artworld labels even have any use for a global art movement that has always taken great pride in defying artworld labels? This publication lets you be the judge.

# NDSM

## OUR HOME SINCE 2015

STRAAT would not have been possible on Museumplein, the museum square in Amsterdam that houses institutions like the Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksmuseum. STRAAT was instead founded inside the former engineering workshop of what was once Europe's largest shipyard: The Netherlands Dock and Shipbuilding Company (NDSM).

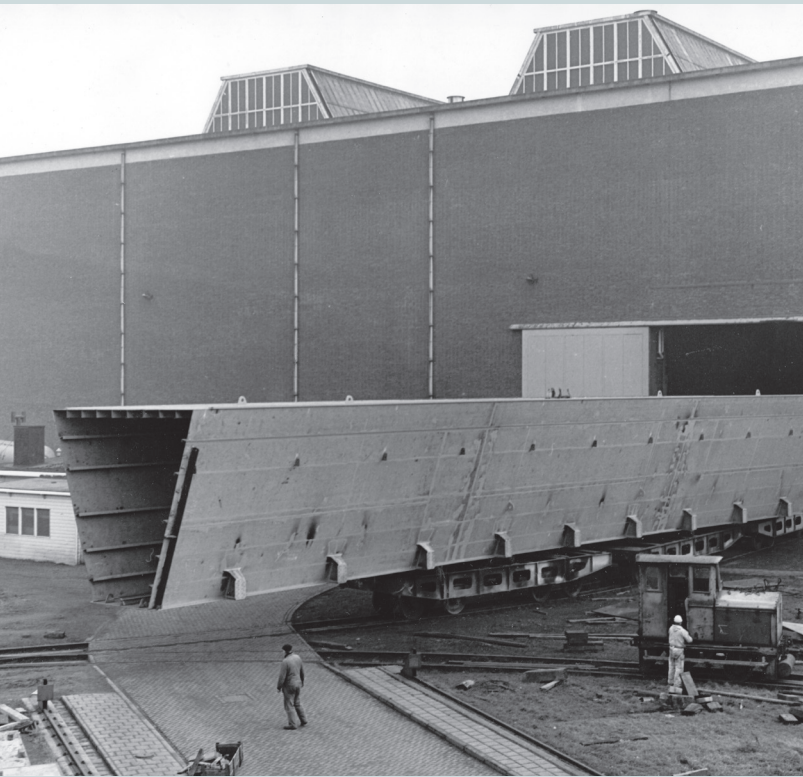
NDSM has always been a place of makers. Ships are still repaired in the area, but NDSM is now also home to designers, artists and craftspeople. Inspired by this local community, we set out in 2015 to create a museum that is self-made, self-funded and independent. Our identity has been forged by what NDSM is and used to be.

The NDSM terrain occupies a unique place in Amsterdam. It is one of the few areas where the authentic soul of the city – rooted in freedom, tolerance and creativity – is still pulsating. The museum actively shares and promotes these values. The streets in and around NDSM are covered with graffiti and independent street art that are continually changing. Long before STRAAT was founded as a museum, its walls already functioned as a true Hall of Fame, a place where anybody is welcome to paint. In a similar vein, the works in our ever-expanding collection are firmly anchored in and inspired by the creative dynamism that surrounds us.



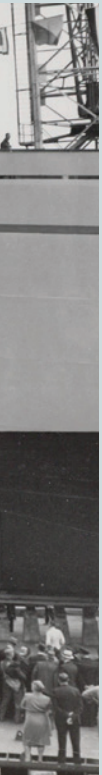


'Hall of Fame' on outside walls of STRAAT Museum



Ships being built inside STRAAT Museum's warehouse

The NDSM when it was one of the most modern shipyards in the world



## FROM SHIPYARD TO ARTIST ENCLAVE

The Netherlands Dock and Shipbuilding Company was created in 1946 through the merger of NSM and NDM, founded in 1894 and 1920, respectively. In the post-war years, the shipyard evolved into one of the most modern in the world and employed over 9,000 people in Amsterdam Noord (Amsterdam North). Over the next 30 years the company produced dozens of tankers, transport and lifting vessels, cargo ships, dredgers, torpedo boats and other cutting-edge ship models.

The tide began to turn in the 1960s, but it wasn't until the 1970s – fueled by Asian competition and an oil crisis – that ship construction plummeted for good. When NDSM closed indefinitely in 1978 the social consequences for the area were enormous, not least of all because many workers and their families received housing and social assistance from the shipbuilding company. NDSM officially went bankrupt in 1984. The economic crisis of the 1980s meant that few people were interested in investing in the wharf. For years the terrain was left largely abandoned.

In the 1990s, Amsterdam received European funding to clean up the derelict and polluted terrain in an attempt to attract businesses to the area. In 1999, one of the wharf's empty halls first housed the IJ-Hallen, Europe's largest flea market. Film studios, music producers, theater makers and stage builders also moved into NDSM's vacant spaces.

As Amsterdam rapidly gentrified in the early 2000s and centrally-located squats shut down, a greater number of artists and creative types started settling in. In 2007, they joined forces under the name Kinetisch Noord (Kinetic North) and established their studios inside the NDSM's enormous hall and slipways. The artists' colony became known as Kunststad (Art City).

One by one, the terrain's industrial buildings were renovated and adapted to new purposes. In 2005, for example, the Kersten building, which once housed the shipbuilder's assembly hall, offices and cafeteria, was turned into the hip restaurant IJ-Kantine. In 2006, MTV moved into the former carpentry shop. In 2015, the iconic Hensen Crane 13 was turned into a Faralda's luxury hotel. And of course in 2020, the International Street Art Museum STRAAT opened in the NDSM's engineering workshop.

## THE PLACE TO BE

Today, NDSM has transformed into one of Europe's most dynamic city districts. It's an urban hotspot where young professionals aspire to live, work and play. At the same time, the area never stopped being the city's largest marina. Past and present coexist at NDSM, where innovative companies operate next to iconic industrial structures.

The most prominent halls, warehouses, hangars, cranes and slipways gained national monument status in 2007 and can still be admired in all their glory. They now form the perfect backdrop for music festivals, performances, artists' studios, creative businesses, alternative bars and – of course – a great deal of graffiti and street art.

As for the future, some locals are concerned about gentrification and the consequential loss of the area's distinctive frayed-edge character. We believe that, however hip and residential, the NDSM terrain will remain an authentic artistic district thanks to STRAAT and the many cultural organizations that now call this former shipyard home.





“My work doesn’t have any message. I like to paint contemplative things, for viewers to enjoy a bit of calm in a world where they are surrounded by messages everywhere, more or less relevant, mainly boring. We need some silence sometimes.”

/ Bims

# 1. Aesthetic

## 1.1 Graffiti's legacy

Daan Rietbergen

Eoin

Mr. June

L'outsider

Bims

Nase

## 1.2 Figurative portraits

Intro

FinDac

Kevin Ledo

In the urban environment, aesthetic expressions come in many styles and shapes – ranging from abstract patterns to figurative portraits. Similar to many 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde art movements, some contemporary artworks exist independently of any kind of message. Unburdened by context or meaning, colors, shapes and forms acquire a dignity of their own. The motivations and methods of the artists who focus on aesthetics may differ, but they are united in their pursuit of perfect forms.

## 1:1 GRAFFITI'S LEGACY

The pursuit of perfect forms in graffiti have pushed some artists towards ever-greater abstractions. What began with the writing of names has evolved purely into the exploration of colors, shapes, textures and layers. This evolution is often referred to as 'post-graffiti'.

By painting abstractly, post-graffiti artists (re)found the freedom lost after years of following the rigid rules of graffiti. They journeyed down their own unbeaten paths, experimenting with new styles and different mediums that captured their individual graffiti personas. They pushed the boundaries of graffiti art and took it in previously unimaginable directions. And they did it without losing touch with graffiti's core 'brutal' essence, as noted by French writer L'Outsider.

“For me, my work on canvas is not ‘graffiti’. Of course, it’s inspired by my background, but it is also something that you can see in a museum now. It’s abstract art, or geometric art. The medium [graffiti] is very brutal, but on canvas I feel I’m finding the finest scents with a brutal medium.”

/ L'Outsider





When letters lose their primary function of readability, the experience becomes exclusively aesthetic. Cut loose from the alphabet, letters acquire a freedom and pureness of their own, as in the work of Dutch typography artist Daan Rietbergen.

“I paint typographic characters. Most of the time it’s only one character instead of one word (something most graffiti writers, including myself, used to do). When I paint one letter it becomes much more abstract and acquires less meaning in a way. With a word you communicate something, but I want to focus more on the shape and the character itself.”

/ Daan Rietbergen

The *Aesthetical* section of the exhibition *Quote from the streets*