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Admirers Call It Art, but the Police Call It a Problem



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Jeffrey Deitch, the director of the museum, said the exhibition was designed to present graffiti in a historical and critical context.

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By ADAM NAGOURNEY
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LOS ANGELES — Walk into the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) here and urban graffiti — scrawled on walls, buses, a subway car and behind glass — is being celebrated by this city's art lovers in a hugely popular show. Walk a block away and the same sort of scrawling could get you thrown in jail.

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An exhibition of street art that opened last week has been responsible, the authorities say, for a new wave of graffiti on buildings, lampposts and mailboxes in downtown Los Angeles, forcing a fresh crackdown on an activity that the police thought they had brought under control. And it has put them in the awkward position of trying to arrest people for doing something that is being celebrated by the city's cultural establishment.

On another level, the exhibition, "[Art in the Streets](#)," has fueled a 40-year dispute about the nature of graffiti and

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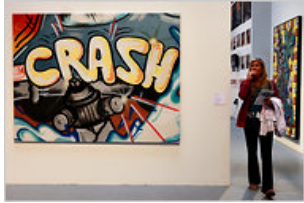
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Monica Almeida/The New York Times

The increase in graffiti in the city has brought a fresh crackdown on an activity that the police thought they had brought under control. [More Photos](#) »

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In many ways, the battle in Los Angeles reflects a recurring debate in cities around the world: Is graffiti a legitimate form of art? [More Photos](#) »

the appropriateness of a mainstream arts institution, like the [Geffen Contemporary](#) wing of MOCA, conveying legitimacy on an activity that some people see as nothing short of vandalism.

“It sounds like every nitwit around is down there trying to take advantage of these admirers of graffiti,” said [William J. Bratton](#), who served as police chief in Los Angeles and commissioner in New York and in both places made eradicating street graffiti a top priority.

Mr. Bratton said he was not going to call on the museum to shut the show down — but he would never visit it. “What was expected to occur has occurred in the surrounding areas,” he said.

A French tagger known as [Space Invader](#) was detained and released by the authorities after climbing down a building near the museum this week. The police now believe he was responsible for a tag later found there and are trying to find him again.

Jack Richter, a senior lead officer with the Los Angeles Police Department, said that was one of a number of graffiti episodes in the neighborhood of Little Tokyo that he argued had been, at the least, encouraged by “Art in the

Streets.” He vowed to prosecute anyone caught defacing public space, even those whose work might have made it to the big leagues of the Geffen.

“They will go to jail, sir,” he said. “This not a ticket. I will put them in jail myself.”

[Jeffrey Deitch](#), the director of MOCA, said that reports of tagging linked to the show were exaggerated, and that the museum was ready to send a crew of workers to paint over any graffiti found in the neighborhood.

“It’s actually very minimal,” said Mr. Deitch, and paying too much attention to it was only going “to encourage vandalism where the exhibition discourages it by emphasizing the positive direction that young people can take to channel their talents.”

The exhibition, a year in the making, fills 40,586 square feet and is the most ambitious of its type, museum officials said. As such, it suggests a final validation of graffiti as an art form.

Forty years ago, [Taki 183](#), a graffiti writer in New York, became a symbol of urban life run amok as his distinctive tag turned up on subway cars, bridges, schoolyards and walls across the five boroughs. Taki’s tag is on prominent display here, and the artist himself turned up for the opening. The exhibition includes a sweep of street artists, including [Keith Haring](#), [Shepard Fairey](#), [Chaz Bojórquez](#), [Henry Chalfant](#) and [Banksy](#).

The show itself appears to be a huge success. On Thursday morning, a line snaked up the sidewalk waiting for the doors to open at 11. By noon, the huge expanse was filled with people examining the galleries in an atmosphere of intense interest.

“I was skeptical before I came, but I think graffiti like this is art,” said Eric Watson, 42, a filmmaker. “Look at the way kids here are engaging in it.”

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Cynthia Miltenberger, 39, an arts educator, scoffed at the notion that this had anything to do with what was going on outside — or in fact, that there was anything wrong with graffiti. “It’s a way of encouraging people to express themselves,” she said.

Niels Kantor, an art dealer with a gallery on Melrose Avenue, said: “People have to realize that art has to start somewhere. Cavemen drew on walls.”

In many ways, the battle in Los Angeles reflects what has been a recurring argument in cities around the world: Is graffiti a legitimate form of art? Should society be trying to quash it or validate it with exhibits like this? Indeed, the conflicting sentiments could be found right inside the museum the other day, where graffiti over sinks in the men’s room had been painted over.

Mr. Deitch said the exhibition was designed to present graffiti in a historical and critical context, showing the chronology of the development of street art and the connections between various artists. “I want people to look at this and understand this is an important contribution to contemporary art,” he said.

Officer Richter said he had been over to look at the exhibit a few times.

“I think graffiti is so yesterday,” he said.

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