

Institutionalizing Protest Art

A meeting point between street art and institution

Marieke van de Plasse

Study No. 4566130

Abstract:

‘Thoughtful and challenging dialogs are vital for sustaining meaningful relationships within the artworld and between the artworld and other segments of society.’¹ In the South of Rotterdam there is a disconnection between this artworld and the way of life in the neighbourhood. The design of the new museum will try to attempt to reduce the gap between different segments of society in the area. Therefor the relation between the program of the museum and the impact on the community is important, trying to provoke debates among the diverse population. This is important because museums in the future should no longer be a representative of the established power but should adapt to the changing political, environmental and economic environment, creating a platform for the audience. This can be achieved by addressing political issues and including protest art in the program of the future museum. The research question is: In what way are we able to connect the vernacular culture of Tarwewijk with the institutional culture of Rotterdam by institutionalizing protest art?

Protest art is art that is created with the ambition to convey a message. These works are used during protests, like posters or banners, or are used to convey the message through art. The works provoke thoughts and opinions among society, which result in discussions and exchanges among the audience. Generating these debates by exhibiting protest art is central to the protection of freedom of expression by no longer suppressing the contradicting voice in the museum world. When in the future the culture of arts is accessible for everyone, creating a stage for opinion and debate, and at the same time mediating between different groups of society the social and cultural mission of the museum is accomplished.

To achieve this goal, the museum will become a meeting point between institution and street art. To do so, the program of the museum picks up on the existing street art which is representative for the city of Rotterdam and the neighbourhood of Tarwewijk. In order to make an inclusive and accessible museum, it is necessary to interweave the program of the museum with the way of life in the neighbourhood. Therefor the museum will show the transition from protest art in the streets to protest art on display. The art collection of the museum will consist of protest art made by non-professionals (protest participants) and artworks made by artists who translate the subjects of protest into artworks like artist Ai Weiwei.

It is of interest to primarily dive into the definition of protest art addressing the history, the art and some protest artists as examples. Apart from that, research will be done on how protest art can be facilitated in an institution, exploring the possibilities of positioning the

art in a different context. After gathering this information, the strategy of the new museum typology as a collusion of institution and street art will be explored to find out how to design an inclusive and accessible public building.

Keywords: Protest Art, Street Art, institution, debate, society

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the museum as an institution has increasingly become a site for protest. In 2018, organization and campaign PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) founded by photographer Nan Goldin, approached different targets in their protest against the addictive OxyCotin.² This painkiller played a big role in the opioid crisis and is closely linked to the Sackler family who owes its wealth to this drug. At the same time, this family is well-known in museums, research institutions and universities around the world for its generous donations. PAIN protested in different museums to put pressure on these connections between the institutions and the Sackler name. In those museums, creative flyers with powerful slogans covered the floors, while the protesters staged a 'die-in' on top of them. And with result.³

This protest versus institution would in a lot of cases not be necessary if the institution would on a closer level connect with its audience. The history of the museum as an institution relied on patronage of the powerful and the rich and therefore the dissenting voice or the protest have been suppressed which makes art not always as accessible to everyone as it should be. In the South of Rotterdam there is also this disconnection between the artworld and the way of life in the neighbourhood or the possible audience. By designing a new museum for the neighbourhood, it is important to create a platform for people to connect with the artworld in an accessible way while at the same time giving room for the audience to react on the art as well as on ongoing political issues. This should be done by bringing institution and audience closer together. This is important because museums nowadays and in the future should no longer be a representative of the established power but should adapt to the changing political, environmental and economic environment.

To find a meeting point between audience and institution, the new museum will include vernacular culture in the museum that connects to the neighbourhood and the city. This vernacular culture will be covered by the street art of the city of Rotterdam which contributes on a large scale to the appearance of the city but also of the neighbourhood, the South of Rotterdam, as artistic area of the city. The form of street art the museum will house is protest art. While street art nowadays mostly appears for the aesthetics, its origins began as a protesting voice.⁴ The museum will show the transition of protest art, starting with street art to the movement of protest art nowadays. The research question is: *In what way are we able to connect the vernacular culture of Tarwewijk with the institutional culture of Rotterdam by institutionalizing protest art?* By means of literature research and analysis, an answer is formulated to this question.

This research will demonstrate the importance of reshaping the multi-layered relationship between protest art, institution and audience. The approach of a new designed museum typology as a mediator between institution and visitors and between different segments of society, shows how a museum can function as a generator to re-wire art with the city.

The paper begins with an introductory chapter addressing the topic of protest art. Subsequently, a second sub question will be addressed: *Is protest art institutionalizable?* Exploring the possibilities of positioning art in a whole different context. The third chapter will go deeper into the curating element and the strategy of a new museum typology. Furthermore the research will explore how to connect the architectural design with the program of the building and the future role of the museum. In the conclusion, the research results will be summarized and an answer to the research question will be formulated.

2. The definition of Protest Art

Although it is difficult to establish the beginning of the artistic expression of protest art, the church was the first target of protest in Europe history. We can also state that protest art has been around since there has been authority. The invention of the printing press around 1436 made it possible to duplicate letters and pamphlets. But the visual form of protest art only truly arose in the early 20th century.⁵ Dada and cubism emerged around this time. Both movements were a reaction on existing art practices. *Guernica* (1937) by Picasso, a cubist painting about the Spanish Civil War, is one of the most powerful starting pieces of protest art while talking about the fine arts.⁶ Contemporary protest art really took off around the 1960s and 1970s where the Vietnam War can be seen as the crossed threshold for protest all over the world.⁷ From here on, protests and the appurtenant art expressions took shape and the invention of modern internet made sharing information about gatherings, ideas or art effortless.⁸

So protest art is art that is created with the ambition to convey a message and is in this way actually a method of communication. Protest art covers street art like graffiti, signs, banners and posters but also fine arts have conquered a place within this movement.⁹ This means that the art that will be on display in the new museum, will be made by artists as well as (anonymous) non-artists, which gives actually everyone the change to become part of the collection with their artwork or protest poster. Also since the making of Protest art needs few financial resources.

World famous street artist Banksy, is a great example of protest artist performing with less requirements. He is famous for its politically, incisive and clever street art pieces and shows the unlimited range of a protest artwork in the streets.¹⁰ Another example of a modern day protest artist, but within another art scene, is Ai Weiwei, famous for its comments on social and cultural changes and other political subjects. One of his memorable pieces is *Study of Perspectives*, a series of photographs of his middle finger in front of various monumental buildings around the world. He also made a lot of sculptures with which he wanted to draw attention for certain political subjects. Probably his most powerful installation piece was *Sunflower Seeds*, a critique on mass-manufacturing which he expressed with 100 million porcelain sculptures of sunflower seeds.¹¹



Mural by Banksy.¹



Ai in Tate Modern with 'Sunflower Seeds' (2010).²

To give room to protest art, you need a quite free environment with a certain level of tolerance which can be found in democratic countries like The Netherlands.¹² In these countries the subject of protest has potential since people have an encouraged freedom of speech. In this degree, the way protest art is perceived depends on the culture in which it

operates. By documenting protest subjects in the museum, moments are captured for future generations. It also gives people a time and place to get informed about the (ongoing) political issues in the country and have a moment of reflection on what is going on in the world. This adds to the educational role of a museum by educating about politics but also about people reacting to problem pieces and the corresponding influence in past, present and future. Because, as Nina Simone stated in her documentary about her live as activist 'How can you be an artist and not reflect the times'? ¹³

In addition to the fact that the Netherlands has a suitable political status to house a controversial art movement like Protest art, the museum also fits its context in terms of time. At the end of the 1940s, the Second World War was over and the Netherlands started with the reconstruction of the country. This reconstruction was more or less finished around 1960 and prosperity increased. In the meantime, a new generation was born. The majority of this generation formed an opinion against the conservative way of life while challenging the established order of society. This generation, born between 1940 and 1955 was called the protest generation. ¹⁴ In subsequent decades, different protest organizations came up and protesting became a new concept. The 70s can be described as the peak of progressive protests movements in this century, with protests about emancipation, environment and democratization. ¹⁵ Around 1990, this period of social unrest came to an end, partly because of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. During this period, having and expressing ideals was not as appreciated as before. Around 2010, people went out on the streets again in several cities which caused street demonstrations to receive a new impulse worldwide. The amount of demonstrations started rising again in the Netherlands as well. Where there were 1500 registered demonstrations in the Netherlands in the year of 2015, ¹⁶ this amount doubled to 3000 in 2019. ¹⁷

3. Protest Art in its original context

This chapter will explore the original context of protest art.

Stated in the introduction, the aim of the new museum is to connect on a closer level with accessible art and therefore with the audience. Low culture will be included in the program of the museum. This low culture label being a cultural perspective which doesn't signify the quality or importance of the art. The difference between high and low culture is rather a division created by people and institutions.¹⁸

As argued in the chapter before, protest art is actually a form of street art but has grown to an art movement with high end art displayed in institutions. The two ends of culture actually already come together within this art movement. On the one hand we have the low culture, also the vernacular culture. The street side of protest art is a vernacular form of culture due to the informal and voluntary presence and the contribution to the local cultural appearance of the city of Rotterdam and the neighbourhood of Tarwewijk.¹⁹ When you walk around in the city of Rotterdam, graffiti tags, murals and sculptures are not to be missed.

When these street artworks have an activist aim by conveying a message through the art, they have the appearance to belong to protest art. But protest art consists of even more temporary art expressions in the streets. During a demonstration people design posters, banners or other creative works to show their opinion or arguments about a certain subject. These works made to inform and persuade people, are also protest artworks. Afterwards they will be left behind on the paving, with no signature of the artist or they will be glued on some boards along the demonstration route. But if such a poster is picked up from the ground and a little later is placed inside the walls of a museum, why is it suddenly treated as a painting?

In its original context, the artworld in the street has no limitations or restrictions, considering that the art is for everyone to see without the art being curated to select only the well-suited artworks within a certain appearance which is the case in a museum.²⁰ People voluntarily make whatever they please with in a lot of the cases not even the intention to be seen as an artist but just the aim to reach people and convey a message through their work. The whole status of an artwork changes when moving a piece from the streets onto the white walls of the contemporary museum. But can we really experience the art when we can only imagine its original context?

Another important element of street art nowadays is that everyone can be an artist. Literally everyone is able to make a graffiti piece or a protest sign. Artists as well as non-professionals can become part of the protest art movement. Anonymously or recognized. The art is 'for everyone to see and anyone to make'.²¹ Art in the street reaches a broad audience and there is no such hierarchy on the street as there is in certain institutions. This also has to do with the temporary part of street art. Art on the street stays until it gets tidied up, when it decays or when someone else places his or her work on top of another's. And this unpredictable temporarily also shows a certain charm of street art of which 'its loss is understood as part of the movement's transient nature.'²²

4. Institutionalizing Protest Art

How to institutionalize protest art? That is the question this chapter will try to answer, exploring the possibilities of positioning low culture art in a different context.

In order to understand the juxtaposition of vernacular culture and the institution, it is necessary to find out the consequences of detaching art from the exact context which formed the artwork and place the object into a designed art space.

As mentioned before, the new museum will house the fine arts of protest art but to not forget where protest art came from, also the protest art in its street form will be facilitated. This range of artworks have different needs to be on display in a museum without losing its strengths and it is important to found out the best way for an institution to adapt to this needs to achieve the goal of bringing the divergent cultural worlds together.

Next to including a different artform in the program, the role of a museum nowadays and the attitude towards the audience should also change. Because to diversify the content also means to diversify the audience.²³ Art historian Margriet Schavemaker working at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam: “By radically opening up to these critical and ‘other’ voices, the museum can shake off its identity as a neutral white cube speaking with a single, authoritative voice. Instead, the museum becomes a production house in which a myriad of voices can interact”.²⁴

While using the institution as decor for the artworks, there will be, in a very elitist way, a commission deciding which artworks shall end up in the museum and which will not make it.²⁵ And in the same way, by choosing certain works over other works, the institution actually decides on who is recognized as an artist. Therefor the curating role of the museum will be the most important one in order to accomplish an accessible museum for the desired audience. The goal is for the art and the museum as well to reflect different political and artistic positions and in order to do so, these positions should be regulated by the artist themselves rather than the institution. Creating a so called ‘curator-as-artist and the artist-as-curator model’, a model which is also used in the exhibition Agitprop at OFF-Biennále Budapest where Protest Art was included in the program of the Biennale.²⁶ Levelling with the artists in such a way makes the museum already less of a high end institution.

In a way protest art is already temporary since the subjects of discussion change over time. But it is also temporary in the street art characteristics. This temporality of Protest art should be included in the museum as well. Impermanence is a defining element of the protest art in the street,²⁷ therefor we should not just preserve the pieces in a museum but different scales of temporality must have a leading role in the exhibitions. This can be done in such a way that the street art principles are imitated in the museum in the way that an artwork is gone when someone else paints or paste something on top. In this way the audience becomes the artists and the museum achieves a for the citizen and by the citizen concept which again covers the desire of the audience connecting with the museum.



Exhibition Estampadores de Conciencia,
Madrid.³

Another way to do so is to hold open calls for artworks, drawings or posters about a certain subject where creative people are given the chance to show their talent. An example of such an exhibition is *Estampadores de Conciencia* (*Conscience Stamps*) in Central de Diseño in Madrid. This exhibition is the result of an open call for political poster using just a pencil. A method which is well-associated with posters and banners in protest.²⁸

The last step that needs to be taken is of course creating a well-suited context for the art. If we think about modern art on display, the white cube is indispensable. The focus here is too much about creating monumental spaces and not so much about what works best for the art.²⁹ In the new museum the design will concentrate on the art instead of the architecture with the aim to create the perfect conditions for putting the art on display. To do so, the atmosphere of the original context of protest art will be leading in the interior design of the building. The indoor – outdoor relation will be important but also the implementation of street elements, creating an accessible building rather than a monumental temple. Because just like Bishop writes in her book *Radical Museology*, in the art and museum world, we are now in a period of anticipation.³⁰

5. Conclusion

By investing in a close connection between audience and museum, an accessible and inclusive environment can be created to let every single person enjoy art. The museum will challenge boundaries between artist, curator and critic to reshape the institutional sites of power and to design a new museum typology that fits in the context of time. In order to make an inclusive and accessible museum, it is necessary to interweave the program of the museum with the way of life in the neighbourhood. The museum picks up on the existing street art which is representative for the city of Rotterdam and the neighbourhood of Tarwewijk. The museum will show the transition from protest art in the streets to protest art on display.

The museum will reflect different actual political positions which will be regulated by the artists themselves following a curator-as-artist and the artist-as-curator model to really get a grip on for whom the art is and by whom the art is. The museum will be designed from the inside out to design for the art and the exhibition rather than the appearance of the building. Therefor the museum will attempt to get a grip on the impermanence of protest art and the other characteristics of the art not by simply preserve the street art but by making a suitable context for the artworks. In this way street art pieces as well as paintings, sculptures and even performance art all get a decor which is best for the strength of the artwork.

Diversifying the content and diversifying the audience of the museum goes hand in hand. The result of the art on display will be human dialogue in the sense that the audience will absorb the artworks and their messages but the final exchanges will be reached by dialogues which follow from the observations. By creating a stage for opinion and debate, thoughts and opinions among society will be provoked which result in discussions and exchanges among the audience and between audience and the new museum.

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