

Cultural Daily

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Keeping the Streets Safe From Art

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, April 20th, 2011

MOCA's opening of *Art in the Streets* on Friday night, its well-curated show about street art, was jam-packed. The self-consciously hip, micro-skirted and designer eyeglass-framed listened to hip-hop outdoors, then crammed inside with other arts aficionados and many of the artists themselves to anoint street art with museum legitimacy.

This is the first major street art museum show, and MOCA's to be commended for it. If I can take its director, Jeffrey Deitch, [to task](#) for whitewashing Blu's mural, I can applaud him now.



The show renews your understanding that ambivalence is the price we pay for creative expression in our society.

The street art on display is, at its very essence, illegal. It comes from an outlaw spirit and is painted with an outsider's spray-can. Any of this work would be painted over in our City's streets. It is legit in a museum, but sends you to jail outside.

Literally sends you to jail. Earlier this month, the City forced a [Valley Village resident](#) to remove a mural she'd commissioned on her private property.

Meanwhile, MOCA covered the outside wall where Blu's work had been with a strange and poorly-executed Americana mural by New York street artist Lee Quinones. Whereas Blu's mural made a statement against the human and financial cost of our wars, it is hard to know what Quinones is getting at, other than a gesture of multi-cultural patriotism that feels as empty as Disneyland's Main Street after the theme park closes.



Back at the *Art in the Streets* opening, it was impossible not to note that the surrounding buildings have been tagged in protest by street artists who didn't get in or who object to some of MOCA's prior approaches. An artists' protest-performance accompanied the opening; video [here](#).

Gang tags blight neighborhoods and foster criminal activity. I'm glad they're illegal. But where does tagging stop and art begin?

I would happily tolerate murals I don't like – on aesthetic or political grounds – as long as I knew I could support an artist who would paint something different elsewhere. I think our City would be

much more beautiful and vibrant if there were murals everywhere. I'm uncomfortable that we have laws making private property owners erase art from their walls, even as we have more super-graphics, and digital billboards, and city buses rolling through our streets wrapped in images for the latest tent-pole movie.

I don't think laws can define what art is, and I don't want our legislators trying to write them. Maybe the best thing MOCA's show does is make me feel my own ambivalence, and focus on our society's collective inability to define just what art is.

The work in *Art in the Streets* is legal only because you have to pay to see it, and I admit that if I woke up tomorrow and found some rogue artist had sprayed my garage with the same work, I'd paint over it myself.

Yes, I'm ambivalent. Guess I live in LA.

Images: An opening night visitor prays with Banksy; an artist signs an autograph for a fan; Lee Quinones mural outside MOCA.

The show has been well and intelligently reviewed by [Sharon Mizota](#) in the LA Times and by [Edward Goldman](#) on ArtTalk.

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