

TAKEOVER – Street Art & Skateboarding: Turning the Museum into an Urban Playground

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Abstract

In the summer of 2019, the ‘old’ Wien Museum opened its doors one last time. The galleries had been emptied for a substantial renovation and expansion project, affording unprecedented opportunities for interaction. Located right in the city centre, more than 2000 m² were turned into a playground for street art and skateboarding.

The museum invited prominent local protagonists, affording everyone the opportunity to discover the scenes in entirely new ways. The building was split into two zones: on the ground floor, it was DIY and skateboarding; the first floor was a ‘Hall of Fame’ featuring main figures of Vienna’s street art scene. More than 80 artists took possession of the museum’s walls. Old exhibition furniture was turned into a skate park using concrete. There was much to discover and much to do—from break-dancing to workshops on various painting styles.

Street art and skateboarding still polarise, even though they have the status of pop cultural phenomena with a growing number of exhibitions. Yet the question remains: how can these outdoor practices be brought into a museum without losing their original spirit?

This case study gives an insight into the making of a collaborative project that became an overwhelming success: How the museum became a meeting spot for street artists, skateboarders and visitors of all ages; the difficulties we faced and the support we got, and especially how we made the first exhibition of Viennese street art.

Keywords

community project; exhibition; outreach; participation; skateboarding; street art

1. Introduction

Wien Museum is a general-purpose metropolitan museum with a wide range of collections and exhibitions—from the history of the city to art, fashion, and modern culture. It has 22 sites throughout the city. When we learned that the main building on Karlsplatz would close for renovation and expansion, we wanted to make use of the empty space before the construction work began. Why not do something with street art and skateboarding—two subcultures that are appropriate for unused areas and challenge our understanding of participation in public space? In 2016 and 2017, several local street artists were invited to paint the large wall in the central atrium of the museum, thematically linked to our exhibitions. This laid a foundation for what

became one of the greatest adventures in the history of Wien Museum: “Takeover – Street Art & Skateboarding”. From the 5th of July to the 1st of September 2019, the former historical museum of Vienna was turned into an urban playground (Figure 1).

Since I had suggested the idea and initiated the previous activities, I was asked to curate the project. At a later point, Karina Karadensky joined our small team as curator and producer. We wanted to create something quite different from a normal exhibition, more like a festival with various activities, open for collaborations and a space where everybody would feel welcome. Following the idea of the ‘open museum’ with one main goal: it should be fun!



Figure 1. Opening Night 04/07/2019 “Takeover – Street Art & Skateboarding” at Wien Museum. Mural by Fraú Isa and Nychos, members of The Weird-crew, photo: Kramar/kollektiv fischka.

2. Reference Project

If you want to convince a museum director, who also has to stand up for your idea, it is always good to refer to someone who has done it before. Especially if you want to paint the whole building and do something quite unconventional for a museum.

2.1. BundeskunstHALL OF FAME. Graffiti- & Street-Art-Festival at Bundeskunsthalle 2015

Bundeskunsthalle Bonn reused street-like architecture that was left over from the previous fashion exhibition for a graffiti and street art festival. One part created an atmosphere mimicking a ‘normal’ surrounding where prominent local artists like MOSES & TAPS painted directly on the walls. The other part presented exhibition-like sketches, photographs and other artworks telling the history of the local scene. This was combined with an intense event program. Lucky for us, a book was published that document-

ed all of the activities (Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2016).

2.2. Street Art at Wien Museum

In the summer of 2016, Skirl, Ruin and Perk_up became the first street artists to paint at the museum. They decided to split the 27m-long wall in the atrium into three parts to show their interpretation of the Viennese amusement park ‘Prater’. This was connected to the exhibition “Meet Me at the Prater! Viennese Pleasures since 1766” (Storch, 2016).

A year later, the same wall in the atrium was again devoted to street art inspired by “Vienna Calling. A History of Pop Music”. This time the paintings evolved during several jam sessions, among others with Chinagirl Tile, Deadbeat Hero and PEKS.

3. How to Bring the Streets into the Museum? (Concept)

Of course, we dreamed about beautiful murals, but at the same time, we wanted to show the ambiguity of a subcultural scene which has its roots in vandalism. How can interventions like stickers, tags and other forms of writing be included? How could we bring outdoor practices into an institutional setting without losing their original spirit? Is it possible to invite graffiti into a museum? These thoughts lead to an idea: What if the exhibition was not completed at the opening, but left open spaces to slowly evolve? A takeover, so that people who would not so easily trust an institution could also join. And also allow visitors to contribute. We had several discussions concerning the title. Which term should we use—graffiti, street art or urban arts? Graffiti being the most common expression, but for the reasons above seemed not fitting. Urban arts sounded too broad. We settled for the popular 'street art' as a term that people could relate to.

With less than a year of preparation time and a limited budget, several decisions were made for pragmatic reasons.

While we could make full use of the whole building, the interventions had to be temporary, and everything was to be destroyed afterwards.

The building was split into two zones: the first floor was a "Hall of Fame" featuring 40 protagonists of Vienna's street art scene. Painted from top to bottom, but otherwise exhibition-like with labels introducing the artists.

The ground floor was an interactive space for Do-It-Yourself (DIY), events, workshops and skateboarding. The collective Spoff Parks turned old exhibition furniture into a skate park using concrete. Not only for decoration but free to use by our visitors. Everybody was invited to contribute and fill the walls with their artwork. The space evolved and changed from week to week. Outdoors, a stand-alone wall provided a legal spraying zone in cooperation with Wiener Wand, the Viennese municipal institution for legal walls. Three Murals on the façade of the museum showcased different crews.



Figure 2. Skirl adapting his lines to the 1950ies design of Oswald Haerdtl, photo: Rafael Bittermann/SAE.

3.1. Which Space to Use?

The museum not being a museum anymore since it had closed for visitors on the 3rd of February 2019, there was one thing we had plenty of: space. All the walls were empty, looking as sexy as empty buildings do when pictures were hanging in the same spot for years and years. Nothing like a white cube. Street art can adapt to any surface, so in a building, about to undergo refurbishment, the space grew even bigger. The floor, glass windows, elevator—almost everything became an option (Figures 2 and 3).

3.2. Cultural Heritage and Monument Protection

The museum was built in the 1950s. It opened in 1959, designed by the Austrian architect Oswald Haerdtl. As one of the few cultural buildings from the post-war era in Vienna, it has protected cultural heritage status and is under monument protection. Even though many parts of the house were to be completely renewed, some elements—like the entrance and the foyer—were especially sensitive. Covering them seemed a strange signal at the starting point of an interactive zone: “You can paint everywhere, but not here!” Instead, an installation with old storage boxes functioned as an information board and seating area. A museum guard



Figure 3. Video Oner lets a deer loose in the atrium, photo: Christoph

was placed for customer service at the information desk. To our relief, this proved sufficient.

The staircase was going to be covered with wood for the construction work later on. We chose to move this forward and thus gained additional painting space.

Much to our surprise spraying the façade was less complicated than expected. The stone cladding on the outside of the building was already in poor condition and no longer original. For several years, a fence had protected pedestrians from the danger of falling slabs.

4. Outreach

In the beginning, we were anxious about whether we could convince artists of our idea. Many had bad experiences with other institutions, galleries or fellow artists in the past. We established the museum as a neutral space, not tolerating

any beef, and they set aside any quarrels they had amongst each other. They were surprised to hear that we did not want to hang canvases or other studio works but wanted them to interact with the building itself. Soon they realised that this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance with a lot of freedom for their ideas. All of the artists showed a lot of respect and contributed particularly fine pieces, reflecting the museum's surroundings and playing with the institutional versus the rebellious character of street art. Their commitment to the project was the key to the success.

4.1. Hall of Fame

The focus on Vienna turned out to be a real asset. We could meet everyone, show them the space and make plans together. Looking for artists that were (still) active in the streets of the city. We started by asking around and talking



Figure 4. MALR's STYLES ÖRTCHEN before the opening night of "Takeover – Street Art & Skateboarding", photo: Christoph Schlessmann.

to artists we had previously worked with and questioning them: whom would you invite? As our list got longer, big names like Frau Isa and Nychos confirmed. Soon we heard: “With this line-up, it’s an honour to be part in Takeover.”

We also wanted to include graffiti writers that did not have shiny Instagram accounts. With help from one of the participating artists, we made acquaintance with MALR, a quiet guy who only paints abandoned houses and is friends with everyone in the scene. Whenever somebody thinks they discovered a new spot, usually one person has already been there: MALR. The invitation to the museum came as a surprise to him. He was thrilled and uncomfortable at the same time—much too clean. When we explained that he could choose any spot he liked, he asked: “Is somebody doing the toilet?” That’s how the secret highlight of Takeover began (Fig 4).

The toilets on the 1st floor had been out-of-order for some time. They became “MALR’S STYLES ÖRTCHEN” (referring to ‘stilles Örtchen’ a slang word for toilet) with his writing and empty cans in the lavatory bowls to signal their dysfunction. He added lots of little details, like a dead plant that had been left behind in our former offices. He even put up his own sign “Das betaggen der Toiletten ist ausnahmslos erwünscht!” (Tagging the toilets is explicitly welcome!) making fun of the museum-sign “Wir ersuchen Sie die Toiletten so zu hinterlassen, wie sie diese gerne vorfinden würden” (please leave the toilets as you would like to find them). Everybody was invited to contribute and so they did. All the artists sponsored MALR’s installation with the empty cans from their set-up and added their tags. As many more did during their visit. Little messages popped up on the walls and were sometimes commented on, and stick-



Figure 5. MALR’s STYLES ÖRTCHEN at the end of “Takeover – Street Art & Skateboarding“, photo: Christoph Schlessmann.

ers appeared. In short: day after day, they looked more like toilets in a club with decades of patina. Nothing you would ever expect in a museum (Fig 5).

The basic rule in allocating spaces was that artists had to make use of things as they were. For those who needed a clean wall, we found fitting spaces. Those who wanted to interfere with leftovers from previous exhibitions were encouraged to do so. Bombing or Paste-ups with old museum posters? Welcome, Friend, Knarf and Lym Moreno! Calligraffiti emerging from a pillar to the wall? Yes, please, Moiz! Who wants to make use of an old cabinet? Thank you, Tabby. Can a chunk missing from a column be given a facelift with a vagina sculpture? Sure, Kollektiv Kimäre. Do you like the smooth surface of the plastic floor? Enjoy, Kryot! (Fig 6) Junek used a former projection space as a frame for her writing that also had an AR animation. Others fooled

around with single letters from old exhibition labels and created funny new messages.

Paul BUSK wanted to break through a wall to create a huge stencil. He then used a fire extinguisher—cautiously filled with black paint to spray his name through the wall-cum-stencil onto the wall behind (https://youtu.be/Jgz_Ava_UT0). Something that he could never do in the streets because it takes too much time. Even in the museum setting, this was a tricky task and took much longer than any of us expected. We had a stand-alone double-wooden wall that fitted his plan. It had been unchanged for at least ten years, so nobody knew what was inside. Carefully Busk started to cut out his name. After a week, the stencil was ready for action. The result was impressive and honoured the prominent spot it occupied on the first big wall that visitors encountered upon entering the “Hall of Fame”. It had been a



Figure 6. 3-dimensional Stencil by Paul BUSK, floor by Kryot and writing by Skero, photo: Christoph Schlessmann.

much coveted spot (Fig 6). The large wall in the atrium also attracted a lot of interest. Size does matter in graffiti and street art. When they heard it was reserved for Nychos, they nodded with respect.

Nychos, probably the most well-known Austrian street artist, now living in L.A., was in town for a short time during our set-up and was able to fit a few days into his otherwise tight schedule. Watching him paint was fascinating. It looked like dancing with a can. Without a sketch, just an idea in his head, he sprayed layer upon layer and created a group of swimming crocodiles in the translucent, dissecting style he is famous for. (Fig 7) On the façade, he dissected one of Frau Isa's beautiful female characters—a thing he had longed to do for some time. The mural later became our key visual and cover for the book "Takeover. Vienna Street Art Now" (Fig

1).

With documentation being important to the genre, we invited photographers who had been working with the local scene for years to be involved. The urban explorer-collective, Die 78er, presented photographs of different underground tunnels and entrance doors. Only those familiar with the locations would know which two matched. Since urban exploring is about entering hidden places, Die 78er used a hidden spot behind the exhibition walls to display a set of urbexing-tools. Only those daring enough to crawl there could see it (Fig 8).

Another one was Spraycity, the web platform for all kinds of graffiti, especially train writing, hosted by the art historian Stefan Wogrin (see also the Spraycity contribution in



Figure 7. Nychos painting in Wien Museum, photo: Rafael Bittermann/SAE.



Figure 8. Ripoff Crew “United in Struggle” and a set of urbexing-tools hidden by Die 78er. In the back the long list of Viennese sprayers by Phekt, photo: Christoph Schlessmann.

this volume). He created a huge poster featuring pictures of all writers in alphabetical order. PHEKT had the same approach, wanting to bring in everyone, spraying a long list of names as a shout-out to those who had left their name on the streets of Vienna. By chance, both walls were situated next to each other.

Only female creators were scarce. Despite extensive research, at some point, we had to accept that we would be unable to avoid a gender imbalance. We were happy to have 30% female artists, which is more than can be seen in the streets of Vienna. Käthe Löffelmann, Mariella Lehner and Linda Steiner had only started as Ripoff Crew a year before. ‘United in struggle’ in Wien Museum they enjoyed their breakthrough that summer, visually communicating female empowerment ever since (Fig 8).

The Hall of Fame featured the artists Abend, Paul Busk, Cane, Chinagirl Tile, Deadbeat Hero, Flör, Frau Isa, Emanuel Jesse, Friend, Golif, Wolfgang Hartl, Olivier Hölzl, Junek, KLITCLIQUE, Knarf, Kollektiv Kimäre, Kryot, MALR, Thomas Mock, moiz, Monsterzeit, Lym Moreno, NDZW, Nychos, Peks, Perk_up, Phekt, Ripoff Crew, Ruin, Seco, Shue, Skero, Skirl, Speaker-23, Tabby, Video Oner and the photographers die 78er, Herbalizer, Spraycity and Vienna Murals.

4.2. The Secret Society of Supervillain Artists (SSOSVA)

With the focus on Vienna, there seemed to be no real reason to invite international artists. Yet travelling and leaving marks in other cities is an essential part of the street art game. I knew that Chinagirl Tile, a ceramic street artist, was a member of the SSOSVA. She supported our crazy adventure and made a call to her fellow members to send us paste-ups, posters or other small works as a tribute to



Figure 9. Secret Society of Supervillain Artists – SSOSVA, photo: Kramar/kollektiv fischka.

“Takeover”. More than 60 supervillain artists including their big boss, Silent Bill, followed her invitation and sent in pieces. Overwhelmed by the volume we received, we decided to present them in a separate area (Fig 9).

5. Transformation

When we started with the set-up six weeks before the opening, packing the museum objects that had been on display before was still in progress. Boxes were waiting for transportation, and conservators were anxious that nothing would harm them. Careful logistics ensured parallel work. The last two weeks, everybody else had moved out and we could tackle the more tricky things.

5.1. No Cans Allowed

Spraying almost killed the whole project. The empty building on the brink of renovation was still a museum building.

We could not open the windows (the high risk of pests and unwanted humidity is avoided in museums for conservation reasons), and the desolate ventilation system was from the 1950s. This had not been a problem in the previous projects as the atrium had a separate ventilation system and windows in the glass ceiling that could be opened. The danger was not so much the toxic substances in the paint, but the highly inflammable gas that is necessary to push it out of the can. We needed extra fire prevention, ventilators, and security. A carefully structured plan avoided more than two people spraying at the same time. Several artists switched to brushes, for others—like Golif or Skirl—it was their normal technique anyway.

5.2. Jam-Sessions

For safety reasons, we had to move the jam sessions in the DIY area to closure days. Spraying workshops had to take

place outside. For all other painting activities, we established a strict no-can-policy.

The jam sessions had different hosts from the scene reach out to other artists, focussing on female artists (Chinagirl Tile/Hands-of-the-wall) and graffiti (Cane and Speaker-23). The first session took place a few days before the opening. Even though the entire ground floor was considered an open space, we did not want it to be entirely empty. Also painting the skate park would become difficult once the exhibition started. Word had already gone around that we were preparing something big and several artists had contacted us, wanting to join. We didn't ask for clear names. We just set a date, provided the paint and those who showed up were given a spot. Soon the walls looked more street-like.

Many artists were astonished that we welcomed their contribution, given that usually only 'neat' street art gets displayed in museums (Fig 10).

5.3. Work in Progress

The rough charm of the DIY area also appealed to our Hall-of-Fame artists. Some of them left tags or small pieces—like Tabby, who makes subversive stencils with pop-cultural icons or politicians (Fig 11). Paul BUSK had the habit of adding his name on each visit. Stickers, throw-ups, tags and even a tiny sgraffito—it became a funny game. In the end, we got 'busked' 28 times.

Week by week the walls became more colourful. Visitors returned with markers and pens to leave their messages,



Figure 10. Skatepark by Spoff Parks with pieces by Drawvolution, Slayer, Jakob der Bruder, Kiwi, Fati and Lumen (from left to right), photo: Christoph Schlessmann.



Figure 11. Tabby charging the DIY-Area, photo: Christoph Schlessmann.



Figure 12. Wiener Wand in front of Wien Museum. Karus dedicated his piece to Franz Kratzer, the founder of “Wiener Wand” who had passed away in August 2019, photo: Stefan Wogrin/Spraycity.

groups of students met for painting sessions and the flow of artists seemed endless. Instagram served as the main communication tool. Not only for documentation and sharing souvenir pictures, but for people contacting us about creative possibilities. The usual dialogue: “Hi, I want to do a piece at the museum. Do you have a spot for me?”—“Sure. What do you want to do? Can you do it without cans?”

We soon ran out of clear spots and overpainted some walls for new interactions. Most people enjoyed the atmosphere and respected our Do’s and Don’ts, which included a non-tolerance policy for racist, anti-Semitic, or sexist content. There were fewer offensive marks than expected. Still, we had to erase several—mostly sexist comments—especially on the feminist artworks.

The ‘Wiener Wand’ outside changed almost daily, sometimes even twice a day when nighttime activists had gone to work (Fig 12).

6. Collaborations and Events

Many parts of Takeover were only possible thanks to collaborations. Particularly in the event programme: the open-air cinema Film Kaleidoskop created a programme dedicated to street art. The Wien Museum had always served as a location for Popfest Wien. This time it became the festival centre. The museum was also the festival centre for Calle Libre, which invited the Spanish collective Reskate Studio to do a mural outside. Music Res. Radio set up a DJ-Line in the former café, run by dasWERK, a club deeply connected with the scene. The shop space was covered in turn by Jan Arnold Gallery, Leap Art Prints and Oxymoron Gallery.

The FM4-radio station broadcasted live from the museum for the album release of Skero, a well-known Austrian hip-hop artist and member of the first generation of graffiti writers, in front of his wall. Shue, who has a long experience as a breakdancer, organised a breakdance battle. Speak-

er-23, who has a strong affiliation with techno, persuaded us to host a rave. He was so happy that he made his wall a huge flyer advertising the line-up. A video of the “Tek Over”-party can still be watched on YouTube (https://youtu.be/FbkhjLi_pWs). For the finissage, Dead Beat Hero organised an ‘Artslam!’ – a great art battle with live drawing sessions, artist booths, DJs, and drinks.

7. Conclusion

From the museum’s point of view, the regular museum service ended on the 3rd of February 2019. “Takeover” was not considered a normal exhibition. Everything had to be thought of anew: guards, cleaning, guided tours, cafeteria and shop. An advantage this gave us was more flexibility with different opening hours fitting to our event programme, Thursday to Sunday from 2 pm to 10 pm, and free admission.

From the artists’ point of view, it was the—long overdue—first museum exhibition about Viennese street art. Intrigued by the temporary character, they fully supported our adventure.

From the visitor’s point of view, it was the chance to visit their beloved city museum once again before it closed for several years. They enjoyed the multiverse of street art and skateboarding and the many possibilities for participation. People lined up, waiting for the doors to open. Teenagers and young adults dragged their parents to the museum. Usually, it was the other way around. The museum became a meeting spot for visitors of all ages. Senior citizens, our usual audience, were also celebrating “Takeover”. Many visited us several times. We heard: “Thank you. Now I recognise the artists of the murals I see on my walks in the city” and “You should keep the museum this way” and “When will you do this again?”.

With more than 55,000 visitors and 123 events in 36 days, the exhibition was a huge success, ranking among the top 10 in the Wien Museum statistics. As a follow-up project, the construction fence became a canvas for street art during the summer of 2021 and 2022. Street Art continues to play a part in our museum work.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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