

The Unforbidden City: 'Street Art, Street Life'

The Bronx Museum captures the urban vibe—just don't look for any graffiti art

By **Ben Davis** Wednesday, Oct 1 2008



BintaZarah Studios

NYC, Nigeria: Fatimah Tuggar's *Coverfield*, 2008

Details

'Street Art, Street Life'

The Bronx Museum of Art
1040 Grand Concourse, the Bronx
Through January 25

"Street Art, Street Life" is the [Bronx Museum's](#) slick, slightly stilted, but ultimately lovable show focusing on art "from the 1950s to Now" that's infused with the messy energy of the city. The 40 artists in the show represent a grab bag in terms of style and sensibility. Yet at the exhibit's core is a buried theme of artists grappling with urban blight. With the economy once again circling the toilet, this could not feel more timely.

Organized chronologically, the show opens with Beat photographer [Robert Frank's](#) melancholy photos of lost souls in mid-'50s America—always a punch to the gut—and concludes, more or less, with [Nigerian](#) artist [Fatimah Tuggar's](#) photo

montages, which insert signage from New York streets into dusty scenes in her African nation. Along the way, there's [Yoko Ono's](#) upsetting 1968 film *Rape*, in which a [London](#) film crew stalks a seemingly unsuspecting young woman, ultimately invading her apartment in its quest to keep her in the frame; Paris-based artist [Sophie Calle's](#) 1985 *The Shadow*, a sort of conceptual self-portrait displaying documents and photos from a detective hired to follow the artist; and a suite of 2005 photos by Sze Tsung Leong depicting the transformed cityscapes of the new China, rendered with a dreamlike barrenness.

The beating heart of the show, however, is New York. Fully half of the artworks come from the Big Apple, and these provide the exhibition's most vivid, oddball moments, like the documents

recalling [Tehching Hsieh](#)'s gonzo, near-forgotten 1981-82 art project to live on the street for a full year. [Amy Arbus](#)'s photo portraits play up the theatrical styles of characters in the '80s downtown scene. And a blurry '90s film from [David Hammons](#) captures the artist literally kicking a bucket down a deserted street, repetitively—a customarily deadpan bit of existential satire for the artist.

Particularly for a New York-centric show, however, it's notable that "Street Art, Street Life" features little actual "street art." The show offers exactly zero works by graffiti artists. There's not even a [Keith Haring](#) (Basquiat appears, but only in cameo form, his street tags photographed in solemn black-and-white by [Peter Moore](#)). There are likewise no music posters, a medium into which so much earnest countercultural zeal has been poured, from the hippies of '60s San Francisco to the hipsters of '90s Providence. There are performance artists, but no street performers.

Despite curatorial patter about opening the museum to "the street," what guest curator [Lydia Yee](#) has really done is cut a crisp slice out of the museum-approved canon of art. In this, there seems to be some thesis about presenting not just mere urban creativity, but showing how the more cerebral tradition of visual art reacts off street culture—but the idea is only half-developed. If one project in "Street Art, Street Life" shows the potential of knitting these two threads together, it's [David Wojnarowicz](#)'s series of bleak masked self-portraits from the late '70s, which draw on the sense of alienation the artist absorbed firsthand as a onetime street hustler. Against the background of an empty [Coney Island](#) or [Times Square](#), the black-and-white pictures show Wojnarowicz with the paper likeness of French poet [Arthur Rimbaud](#)'s face covering his own features. Bruisingly melancholy (all the more so when you know that the artist died of AIDS) and touchingly awkward, the images capture the sense of feeling permanently out of place.

Today, a generation of art students has been raised on promises of instant celebrity and the idea that shit-falling-apart is just a really cool style. Especially right now, it's worth the trip to the [Bronx](#) to remember how artists survive when things really do fall apart.