

# La Morsure des Termites

## Ethics of Unearthing Termites

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Artistic production, economic value, and institutional prestige have long been interconnected, from Renaissance commissioning and patronage of artists by the church and the aristocracy to the modern art market and its many stakeholders. Many people measure artistic success in terms of commercial viability and institutional prominence, but many artists challenge these assumptions by eschewing traditional venues and artistic practices. Institutions are catching up and beginning to showcase these artists, raising questions about the neutralizing potential of becoming mainstream. A contemporary example of this is *La morsure des termites* (“The gnawing of the termites”), an exhibition featuring more than fifty international artists who occupy spaces outside of institutional and commercial boundaries. The exhibit was curated by Hugo Vitrani and hosted by downtown Paris’ contemporary art museum Palais de Tokyo from October 2023 to January 2024.<sup>1</sup> *La morsure des termites* explores concepts relevant to our experiences of public space that provoke reflections about the relationship between art institutions and transgressive art. The exhibit simultaneously uplifts and validates street art within the art historical canon, and potentially negates its transgressive power as an extra-institutional practice. This essay will provide background on Palais de Tokyo and its relationship to street art, the execution and effect of the exhibition, and its position within larger discourses.

Palais de Tokyo occupies an unadorned gray concrete building that conceals an excitingly raw interior. Designed for the 1937 Paris World’s Fair, the building was later split between two different modern art museums. The east wing has been home to the Musée d’art modern de la Ville de Paris since its construction, and the west wing has changed hands several times, becoming the

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1 Palais de Tokyo, *Edito: Saison Divers* (Paris: Palais de Tokyo, October 19, 2023).

Palais de Tokyo in 1999. It has no permanent collection; instead it hosts a series of temporary shows year-round. Renovations in 2012 rediscovered extensive subterranean spaces from the building's original construction, which made the Palais ideal for its current focus on urban, underground art.<sup>2</sup> Since its renovation, Palais de Tokyo has been dedicated to honoring urban art with a program directed by Hugo Vitrani, called the Lasco Project. Embodying a "modern cave of Lascaux" in the Parisian subterranean, sixty international street artists have staged interventions across over a kilometer of Palais de Tokyo's "interstitial spaces." Vitrani conceives of this undertaking as both a confrontation with and an infiltration of the museum's brutal architecture.<sup>3</sup>

*La morsure des termites* is an extension of this Lasco project, showcasing the kinds of artists involved in these subterranean interventions, the titular "termites." The term originated in a 1962 essay by film critic Manny Farber, who contrasts these termite artists with "white elephant" artists, who are more conventional and institutionally acclaimed. Vitrani describes termite art as gnawing its way into its environment and power structures, occupying a parasitic niche in the ecology of creation, neither expected nor wanted, but necessary.<sup>4</sup> The artists shown range from highly recognized to entirely unknown and "express themselves in languages and practices that are more difficult to grasp and manipulate."<sup>5</sup>

The purchase-only exhibition catalog is a rich collection of scholarly texts analyzing the politics of public space, the link between writing and identity, and the dichotomy of disorder and maintenance, thus providing a rich theoretical context for the exhibited works and emphasizing the historicity of graffiti through the Lasco-Lascaux connection. In his introductory essay, Vitrani connects modern spray-paint signatures to cave-painting hand-prints, both of which serve as markers of their creators, and highlights their shared subterranean locations within caves and subways, noting, "The underground spirit of graffiti has been enlivening the miracle of art for 40,000 years."<sup>6</sup> Another essay by Nicholas de Monchaux, Head of Architecture at MIT, traces the history of aerosols and links spray-paint to the blow-spray pigment used in the caves of Lascaux.<sup>7</sup> This connection "corrupts" not only contemporary art history but the conception of

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2 "The site and its history," *Palais de Tokyo*, <https://palaisdetokyo.com/en/the-site-and-its-history/>.

3 "Lasco Project #1," *Palais de Tokyo*, <https://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exposition/lasco-project-1/>.

4 Hugo Vitrani, "Il morso delle termiti," in "La morsure des termites/The gnawing of the termites," ed. Hugo Vitrani and Camille Mansour, *The Magazine of the Palais de Tokyo* 35 (Paris: Mazarine, 2023), 14.

5 Palais de Tokyo, *Edito*.

6 Vitrani, "Il morso delle termiti," 12.

7 Nicholas de Monchaux, "Aerosol," in "La morsure des termites/The gnawing of the termites," *The Magazine of the Palais de Tokyo* 35, ed. Hugo Vitrani and Camille Mansour (Paris: Mazarine, 2023), 86.

art prehistory.

Located in the first basement level of the museum, the massive room that housed *La morsure des termites* felt half-finished, like some abandoned building, an excellent match for the kind of underground graffiti it displayed—evoking precisely the kinds of places where the displayed art occurs more organically. A speaker installation by Samuel Bosseur played low, droning music that intermixed with the hushed shuffling of visitors and the muted clamor of an exhibition under construction in the next room. The works were housed within a massive, labyrinthian structure of raw wooden planks, constructed by architect Olivier Goethals, meant to embody a space like an “invisible city;” layered thickly with meaningful signs and never fully discoverable.<sup>8</sup> The structure left large gaps through which glimpses of other spaces in the exhibition could be seen; occasional black spray-paint tags were scrawled directly across the wood, dripping onto the floor. There were few barriers between visitor and art, with almost no railings or marked lines on the floor. This unbarred display methodology and meandering architecture made visitors aware of their occupation in a space which felt forbidden and the body’s relationship to the artworks, which past museum experience teaches distance from.

At the same time this architectural structure emphasized the physical location of much street art, it foregrounded graffiti’s place within official structures. This surfaces formally within the works as part of larger conversations about the connection between writing and authoritative meaning. Vitrani makes a point of mentioning how early street artists rejected the term graffiti and labeled themselves “writers.”<sup>9</sup> Exhibited artist RAMMELLZEE deconstructs language and obscures meaning through ornamented gothic lettering, modeled after that of medieval manuscripts, questioning the authority of traditional alphabet, in his work *Ikonoklast Panzerism*.<sup>10</sup> More broadly, the early graffiti wild style, with its characteristic cryptic lettering, also subverts meaning through illegible aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> The rejection of meaning in writing, especially in gothic letterforms, which connote the authority of religion through their use in medieval manuscripts and their modern use in such things as newspaper headings (take the logos of the Los Angeles or New York Times), both question the authoritative nature of the alphabet and confer its official, legitimate nature onto the graffiti writers who use it.

This relationship between authority and graffiti extends beyond its formal elements to its material presence. Street art is defined by ideas of

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8 “La morsure des termites,” *The Magazine of the Palais de Tokyo* 35, ed. Hugo Vitrani and Camille Mansour (Paris: Mazarine, 2023), 14.

9 Vitrani, “Il morso delle termiti,” 8.

10 Vitrani, “Il morso delle termiti,” 8.

11 Jeffrey Deitch, “Art in the Streets,” in *Art in the Streets*, ed. Jeffrey Deitch, Roger Gastman, and Aaron Rose (Skira Rizzoli, 2011), 12.

disorder and the abject expressed in physical space and in opposition to ideas of maintenance. David L. Johnson's exhibited collection of illegally removed anti-homeless architecture, titled *Loiter*, makes clear the authoritative material hostility of public spaces.<sup>12</sup> Homelessness and graffiti share a commonality: abjection. In an essay on abjection and the female body, Christine Ross stresses the use of abjection in identity-making as the "other" against which the subject is created, and as the revolting which is policed. She conceives of the female body as "a materialization of a norm" and "the performance of an ideal construct."<sup>13</sup> Through this lens, a city functions much like the female body, beholden to norms and the ideal construction of society, where disorder is seen as symptomatic of criminal immorality. Tala Madani's *Shit Mom Animation 1*, included in the exhibition, makes this bridge between the female body and the city visible. Her animated form, smearing excrement across the surfaces it touches, embodies the idea of bodily abjection, vandalizing the places we occupy with our filth.<sup>14</sup> Her bodily excretions are akin to those of the city's graffiti. Graffiti, as a sign of disorder in the body of the city, qualifies as abject.

This abjection is often legally diagnosed: various works in the exhibit engage with criminological theories about the body and the city. The "broken window theory," first articulated by George Kelling and James Wilson in 1982, regards visible signs of disorder as a cause of criminality, arguing that the neglect of public spaces encourages transgressive behavior. The theory was used to justify the erasure of graffiti; rather than fixing underlying issues, the city polices aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> This maintenance is the response to the abjection of the city. As sociologists Jerome Denis and David Pontille discuss, maintenance (defined as the invisible upkeep of things) is a power relation, adhering to specific definitions of the default ideal state of things and the undesirable visual disruption of markers of disorder.<sup>16</sup> They conclude that maintenance is a tool, which manifests in unsustainable, problematic, or even harmful ways.<sup>17</sup> Ari Marcopoulos' exhibited photograph *Buff 1, Paris* (2007) of a Palais de Tokyo employee removing graffiti from a window demonstrates the "negative budget" for graffiti, revealing maintenance as erasure of what has largely been a public method of expression and identity construction (and the venue's own complicity).<sup>18</sup> Even the work of

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12 Wall text, *La morsure des termites*.

13 Christine Ross, "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (1997), 149, 154.

14 Wall text, *La morsure des Termites*.

15 Ingrid Luquet-Gad and Hito Steyerl, "The City of Broken Windows," in "La morsure des termites/The gnawing of the termites," *The Magazine of the Palais de Tokyo* 35, ed. Hugo Vitrani and Camille Mansour (Paris: Mazarine, 2023), 36.

16 Jerome Denis and David Pontille, "The Care of Things," in "La morsure des termites/The gnawing of the termites," *The Magazine of the Palais de Tokyo* 35, ed. Hugo Vitrani and Camille Mansour (Paris: Mazarine, 2023), 63-64.

17 Denis and Pontille, "The Care," 66.

18 "La morsure des termites," 52.

famous street artists has often been destroyed as part of property maintenance.<sup>19</sup> Johnson's *Loiter* and Marcopoulos' photograph, in conversation with the graffiti populating the exhibition, contrast the removal of harmless unsanctioned street art as a symptom of public disorder with official methods of making the streets actively hostile to their inhabitants. This strategy is ultimately political, aligning poorer and communities of color with the undesirable traits against which the city ideal is constructed.

*La morsure des Termites'* central concept is the subversion of these official powers by underground artists, but its very existence commodifies street art. Although only selectively, graffiti has increasingly been adopted by institutions and brought into commercial gallery spaces, which forces street artists to continually modify their practices.<sup>20</sup> SKKI discusses how he abandons his artistic practices the moment they become potentially profitable;<sup>21</sup> FUTURA 2000 did not attain art market prominence and did not want to, but his inclusion in the exhibition works against that desire;<sup>22</sup> the graffiti artist REVS refused to be part of the exhibition, "rejecting all collaborations with the sites that institutionalize or market artistic practices."<sup>23</sup>

Institutional dynamics concerning what art is promoted in prestigious sites like Palais de Tokyo are intertwined with commercial profit motives; institutional prominence goes hand in hand with commercialism. This paradox raises the question of the ethics of a major art museum displaying these ideas of institutional rejection and exclusion and commodifying them so blatantly. Palais de Tokyo undoubtedly profited off of the exhibition; in addition to ticket sales, the museum sold one hundred limited-edition T-shirts printed with Marcopoulos' *Buff I, Paris*, a collaboration with streetwear brand Études.<sup>24</sup> Further T-shirts printed with other works were produced in collaboration with another streetwear brand, Highsnobiety.<sup>25</sup> The commercial move of making limited-edition pieces using

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19 Banksy, "Banging My Head Against a Brick Wall," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 431.

20 Deitch, "Art in the Streets," 11; Diedrich Diedrichsen, "Street Art as a Threshold Phenomenon," in *Art in the Streets*, ed. Jeffrey Deitch, Roger Gastman, Aaron Rose (Skira Rizzoli, 2011), 285-288.

21 Simon Johannin, "SKKI is the Limit," in "La morsure des termites/The gnawing of the termites," *The Magazine of the Palais de Tokyo* 35, ed. Hugo Vitran and Camille Mansour (Paris: Mazarine, 2023), 45.

22 Matsumura, "Public and Street Art."

23 Wall text, *La morsure des termites*.

24 Robyn Pullen, "Palais de Tokyo Pairs up with Etudes for New Paris Graffiti Exhibition," *Culted* (blog), October 17, 2023, <https://culted.com/etudes-and-palais-de-tokyos-new-exhibition-is-taking-termites-to-paris/>.

25 Chris Erik Thomas, "Graffiti's Countercultural Power Is Being Celebrated At Palais de Tokyo," *Highsnobiety*, August 2, 2023, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/palais-de-tokyo-graffiti-exhibition-il-morso-delle-termiti/>.

art that often avoided commerciality feels incongruous, but selling merchandise presumably supports the exhibiting artists directly. Further, Palais de Tokyo's support of underground artists through the Lasco Project and *La morsure des termites*' questioning the devaluation of street art provide recognition of a culturally valuable artistic practice and critique the systems of power that designate it as undesirable.

*La morsure des termites*' art was interesting in its own right, the sheer bodily experience of the space was impactful, and the curatorial choices were bold, immersive, and aligned well with its thematic basis. Its conceptual basis was the strongest component, making a case for the historicity of graffiti as artistic expression, and connecting street art to contemporary discussions of authority, institutional critique, commercialism, and the politics of public spaces. Yet though the exhibition was intellectually engaging and gives unconventional artists a platform, one has to wonder whether a mainstream art institution can exhibit a typically marginal art form without compromising it. The official legitimization of these practices is generally at odds with its impact as a transgressive act, to say nothing of the ethical implications of profiting off those art forms, given these artists' characteristic resistance to institutionalization and commodification. The exhibition set the stage for further conversation about what effect unearthing termite art and exposing it to the institutional spotlight might have, both on art history (as the exhibition statedly aims to do) and on the art itself. Ultimately, the exhibition demonstrates that underground art has always surfaced in some form or another, surviving without the involvement of institutions, as well as the role of institutional recognition in recognizing street art as valuable, and worthy of remembrance, in its preservation.