

PRESS RELEASE

September 20, 2022

WONDERWALLS

Art & Toys

30 September 2022 – 05 February 2023

Pop meets street art. In the exhibition *WONDERWALLS. Art & Toys*, more than 2,000 works of photography and graphic design as well as graffiti, sculptures and designer toys by international artists and designers such as Banksy, Shepard Fairey, Swoon and JR merge into a colorful Gesamtkunstwerk of pop culture.

Street art originally stemmed from protest cultures, civil disobedience and countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the United States, young graffiti artists first sprayed their names or simple tags on houses and underground trains. This later evolved into increasingly sophisticated images that covered entire building walls. The whole city became a gallery, a place where social issues could be expressed and debated.

Informed by a critique of society and consumerism, these works are as relevant today as they were at the time of their creation. As a group, they illustrate the creative, playful and political potential of urban art. Encompassing graffiti, stencils, stickers and mosaics, as well as performances, different forms of guerilla communication and designer toys, this exhibition features works by Banksy, Javier Calleja, Shepard Fairey, Daniel & Geo Fuchs, Futura, Mark Gonzales, Herakut, JR, KAWS, Conny Maier, Stefan Marx, Prune Nourry, Hoker One, OsGemeos, Ricky Powell, Stefan Strumbel and Swoon.

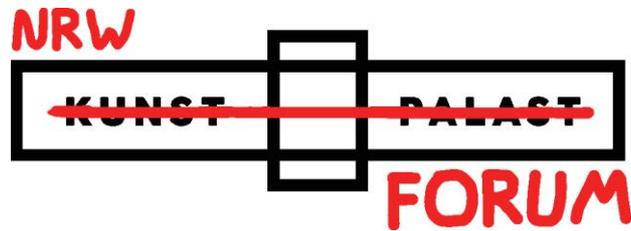
WONDERWALLS starts with the emergence of street art in the Bronx, New York, showing documentary street photography taken between the 1970s and 1990s by the likes of Ricky Powel, Martha Cooper and Futura, and the first stencils and pastings by Banksy and Swoon. Banksy is the pseudonym of a British artist, activist and film director whose identity is unknown. His works are political and social commentaries that can be seen on streets, walls and bridges around the world. Known for his dark humour and distinctive stencilling technique, he is considered a vocal critic of capitalism and the art

PRESSEKONTAKT
Irit Bahle
Pressesprecherin
T +49 (0)211-566 42 743
irit.bahle@kunstpalast.de

NRW-FORUM DÜSSELDORF
Ehrenhof 2
40479 Düsseldorf
www.nrw-forum.de

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1/4



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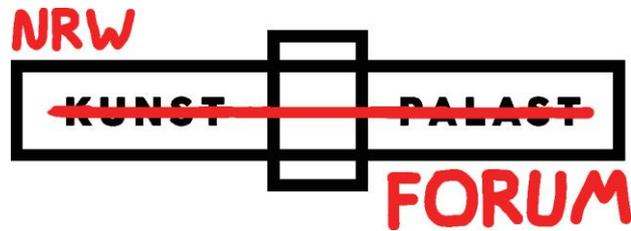
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market. Since the late 1990s, the American artist Swoon has been crafting life-sized, intricately designed figures using recycled newspapers. In an unusual approach to street art, she spends a long time preparing these figures in her studio. Her works are large-format, illustrative portraits that she pastes on industrial and abandoned buildings, bridges and water towers. The nature of her work is predominantly collaborative and she is strongly committed to social issues and environmental preservation.

Street art pioneers took great risks and remained largely anonymous because of their illegal actions. In spite of it, some have achieved great notoriety – including the French artist JR, who has also kept his true identity a secret. He displays his works as large-format posters on house fronts, staircases and walls. Often displaying extreme close-ups of human faces, his works draw attention to social and political issues, as in the series featured in the exhibition *Portrait d'une Generation* (2004), which deals with youth crime in the banlieues, or *Face 2 Face* (2007), a series of close-ups of clergymen from Israel and Palestine.

Artist and designer Shepard Fairey, who started by drawing on T-shirts and skateboards, became famous around the world when he designed the “Hope” campaign poster for former US President Barack Obama. Featuring more than 250 editions, this exhibition presents a large selection of prints by the American artist. Fairey is also known for his streetwear brand *Obey*, which is critical of capitalism.

The popularity of street art has grown to such an extent that many artists are now represented internationally by major galleries and millions are paid at art auctions for works by Banksy or KAWS, to name but a few. Brian Donnelly, better known as KAWS, has enjoyed success with paintings and sculptures as well as designer toys. In the 1990s, he made a name for himself as a graffiti artist by painting over and ironically reinterpreting advertising posters in public spaces with his own motifs. The “Companion” character with crossed eyes, which he invented and frequently deployed in this context, provided the inspiration for many of his designer toy editions, to which this exhibition dedicates a special room. Designer toys are artistic fantasy figures or adaptations of well-known commercial characters. They are often produced in



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limited editions, which emphasises their serial nature and attracts the interest of collectors. KAWS' distinctive design can not only be found in his sculpture editions, but also in the Be@rbrick figurines by Japanese manufacturer Medicom. This exhibition includes one of the most extensive collections of cubist bears, which were designed by many international artists.

Many of the artists chosen for this exhibition come from skateboard and graffiti scenes. They grew up with characters like Bart Simpson and Luke Skywalker – which is why this exhibition is also a chance to reconnect with pop culture icons from the 80s and 90s. While Daniel & Geo Fuchs' photographs feature close-ups of super-heroes like Batman, Javier Calleja's manga character *Astroboy (No more Heroes)* is inspired by the *Kawaii* (Japanese for adorable, sweet or cute) aesthetics. In many Japanese toys, the New York street culture of hip-hop, breakdancing and graffiti becomes merged with Japan's manga culture, creating a unique market and visual cosmos. Designer Toys are hybrid beings: Halfway between a child's toy and a collector's item, they derive from the logic of play and mass production while also being influenced by street art's focus on protest and countercultures.

All the works exhibited belong to the collection of Düsseldorf entrepreneur Selim Varol, who has been collecting for over 30 years and, with more than 10,000 works, has probably amassed one of the most extensive collections of urban art and designer toys in Europe.

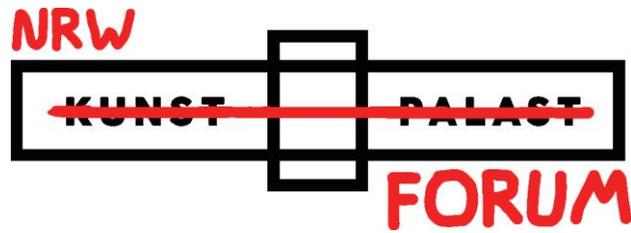
WONDERWALLS is curated by Alain Bieber, artistic director of the NRW-Forum Düsseldorf.

PRESSEKONTAKT
Irit Bahle
Pressesprecherin
T +49 (0)211-566 42 743
Irit.bahle@kunstpalast.de

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3/4



PRESS RELEASE

September 20, 2022

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog published by Kettler in September 2022, 156 pages, with texts by Alain Bieber, Nils Müller, Jacqui Palumbo, Aaron Rose, Eva Varol, Lydia Yee and numerous illustrations.

Press images: <https://www.nrw-forum.de/en/press/wonderwalls>

Press Preview: Thursday, September 29, 2022, 11 a.m.

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PRESSEKONTAKT
Irit Bahle
Pressesprecherin
T +49 (0)211-566 42 743
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4/4