Urban creativity between metropolitan and museum space.

Erica Mone,
contemporary art historian and conservator.

Abstract

For some people if it is not illegal then it is not Street Art, but is that really the case or are other factors at play? Today there is a lot of discussion about Street Art, however is it talked about properly and in the correct way? How much does myth condition and influence our interpretations of this language? We talk about an art form seen as a voice of protest, of the people, of the marginalized, of those whom society relegates to the slums. An expression apt to convey messages as immediate as they are strong in order to reach everyone, without social or hierarchical differentiation. It is not an elitist art; on the contrary, it is the art of the people. For the first time, we are talking about an artistic language that truly enacts a process of "cultural democratization". Often placed in open contrast to every inherent form of the social, cultural, artistic, and political system. Simplicity and immediacy have gone on to form solid foundations on which this movement still stands today. Like any self-respecting artistic innovation and avant-garde, this phenomenon is also in danger of being sucked, voluntarily or involuntarily, into the system that was initially so criticized. After all, even the well-known gallerist Steve Lazarides said, "Nothing in the history of art has remained underground forever. Evolving is part of a normal process of growth". In this way, street art is commodified within a vicious circle made up of economies of unreachable value, implicated in the well-known gallery-exhibition-market mechanism, a context of which it was initially proposed not to be a part. Currently we are witnessing an increasing number of initiatives promoted by institutions and local authorities that feature precisely street art as a means of redeveloping dangerous or degraded areas. It frequently happens to see new "street art" exhibitions inaugurated at museums and galleries. A sort of recognition of its intrinsic value manifested through the misuse of words like "institutionalization" and "legitimization". For many it would seem a paradox: an art born against institutions now operates alongside them. However, how much can this phenomenon of institutionalization be considered negative for urban creativity and actually paradoxical? Artists are well aware of their own work while art-experts in the field admit how much the so-called "Institutionalization of Street Art" is nothing more than a natural development that came about spontaneously and that the real problems are actually quite different.

The paradoxes of a culture

"The street, at least originally, is not just one of the possible places of artistic expression, it is rather its constituent element and ends up reacting on it, shaping its substance"[1]. Although streets are "non-places", apparently no-one's territory, they actually reflect the essence of those who live on them and walk along them every day. A place of no-one and yet of everyone. A space that should not be politically correct. Space is a social product and everything that is transformed or produced within it is the result of relationships between groups of individuals. History evolves over time, repeating some of its characters, with slight modifications: from walls covered in hieroglyphics to 16th-century frescoes, to contemporary walls still covered in symbols. Centuries pass but some things never disappear, at most they end up evolving into something different. Graffiti did not originate with the intention of decorating urban walls, just as ancient frescoes did not have a solely decorative and aesthetic function. This contemporary language criticises the decadence of modern rationalist and impersonal cities.

The result of the urban creativity we witness today would be quite difficult to understand without taking into account

1 - Original text "La strada, almeno in origine, non è soltanto uno dei luoghi possibili di rappresentazione dell'espressione artistica, ne è piuttosto elemento costitutivo e finisce con il reagire su essa, plasmandone la sostanza". E. Cristallini, P. Mania, R. Petrilli, "Arte sui muri della città", Round Robin Editrice, Roma 2017, p. 34

some of the protagonists of the underground scene in the US metropolis between the 1960s and 1970s. I speak of the young man who grew up in Brewerytown, in the Philadelphia suburbs, known to his relatives as Darryl McCray[2] but known to the Street Art world as Cornbread. A black boy who, like many of his peers, finds himself in a dangerous environment due to crime. A situation that ensnares even the youngest in a vicious circle. From 1965, when he was locked up in a juvenile prison, the world began to know his tag, his pseudonym, namely Cornbread. After the prison walls, the entire city was branded with this identifying mark. McCray was well aware of what he was doing, so much notoriety, over the years, led him to consider himself the first real writer in history[3]. How true these claims are, it is rather difficult to establish except by surveying every single tag that appeared through the complicity of the night. However, other names soon emerged on the scene. From Philadelphia many writers moved, in an attempt to seek their fortune, to New York, among them Top Cat who began to popularise his style.

"Bronx style is bubble letterts, and Brooklyn style is script with lots of flourishes and arrows. It's a style all by itself. Broadway style, these long slim letters, was brought here from Philadelphia by a guy named Top Cat. Queens style is very difficult, very hard to read"[4].

Many young people draw inspiration from these new signs, first and foremost a boy from Washington Heights, Taki 183. A name that is lost in legend. However, this young man of Greek descent, Demetrius, is regarded as the initiator of graffiti writing, although earlier cases are well known. What earned Taki this effigy was media attention. Important in this respect was the New York Times article entitled "Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals" from 1971. No spray can for the young man, but a simple marker; this was the medium through which Taki bombarded walls of subways and blighted neighbourhoods.

"His TAKI 183 appears in subway stations and inside subway cars all over the city, on walls along Broadway, at Kennedy International Airport, in New Jersey, Connecticut, upstate New York and other places"[5].

An invasion that cost the New York City Council a lot of money, yet the writer was aware that he was not breaking any strict rules "I work, I pay taxes too and it doesn't harm anybody', Taki said in an interview, when told of the cost of removing the graffiti"[6].

Again, however, a new name emerges. Taki in fact states that he was not the first in New York, his inspiration came from Julio 204 "I took the form from JULIO 204, but he was doing it for a couple of years then and he was busted and stopped. He's the King. I just did it everywhere I went. I still do, though not as much"[7].

All these young writers take their steps within slum neighbourhoods, the fringes of a wider context such as the 1970s New York City area steeped in lawlessness, warring gangs, economic recession due to the oil crisis and rising prices, with individuals forgotten by state power and left to their own devices. It was here that the subculture and movement known as Hip Hop took shape: a reaction to the negative effects of post-industrial decline, to an ever-changing economy towards a post-Fordist order and increasingly focused on the accumulation of objects. Individuals experience city life with increasing difficulty, so a large part of the white middle class has moved to the suburbs. This migration shifted demographics and segregated small communities, worsening conditions in neighbourhoods populated by such minorities as African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Caribbean immigrants. Police controls could not handle all the rampant corruption (the only occasions when some control was attempted was through the violence the police used against those who broke the rules, which was far from really helpful). Thus, abandoned buildings, car parks as well as unsupervised parks became the stage for large neighbourhood parties, events that laid the foundations for everything associated with the early Hip Hop culture:

2 - R. Gastman, "Wall Writers: Graffiti in its Innocence", Gingko Pr. Ink. 2016.

3 - V. Russ, "Off the wall: Cornbread and other erly graffiti artists speak", in: The Philadelphia Inquirer, 2016.

4 - N. Mailer, "The Faith of Graffiti", Esquire, May 1974, p. 79.

5 - The New York Times, "Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals, July 21, 1971, p. 37.

6 - *bidem.*

7 - *Ibidem.*

rapping, break dancing, writing were the main means of expression of this new subculture[8]. A big role was played by Fred Brathwaite (known as Fab 5 Freddy) as the one who combined all the elements of the Hip Hop trend, helping to lay the foundations for the change from a subculture to full-fledged pop culture. Raised in Brooklyn by black parents, Fred Brathwaite participated in subcultures while being familiar with the codes and contexts of the dominant culture; a boy who grew up and belonged to marginal parts of the city but was always in touch with the "white capitalist culture" of the centre. This allowed him to act as a bridge between the ghetto and the media that created the link[9]. Fab 5 Freddy states that he developed his theory on the impression he had about the elements of this urban culture that seemed to be one big thing

"I wanted to show that a culture can only be complete if it combines music, dance and visual arts. I thought there were elements around that could be put together and made to look like one thing, and that a film would help"[10].

The film Fab 5 Freddy is talking about is Wild Style, directed in collaboration with Charlie Ahearn and which, together with Style Wars by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, represented a kind of pop culture manifesto. Released both in 1983, they provide a visual documentation from the point of view of the artists themselves, of all those young people considered vandals at the time. In Wild Style, the actors actually play themselves; they are also artists, such as Lee Quinones (Fab 5 Freddy's great friend with whom he founded the Fabulous 5, in the film he plays the mysterious writer Zoro), Sandra 'Lady Pink' Fabara (in the film she plays the role of the artist Rose), the rapper Busy Bee, Fab 5 Freddy himself (as Phade). In general, the protagonists are writers always with spray cans in hand, breakdancers for whom every single bit is ideal for their acrobatics, and rappers, whose rhymes are the real stars of the jams. Some rather relevant elements are evident in this very film. Among the speeches made by Lady Pink one is particularly meaningful "you know we do a lot of work, shutters, signs, we are trying to make a mark, to do something for the community. We're trying to get a job out of it, we're trying to do something that can sustain us"[11].

This making of a mark was viewed negatively for many years by New York administrations, especially under Edward Koch because of theories formulated in earlier years and implanted in the social substratum such as the disorder theory coined by Wilson and Kelling under the admirable metaphor of the neighbourhood with "broken windows"[12]. Koch recruited numerous celebrities to implement anti-graffiti propaganda. All those close to the Koch council wave the slogan "leave a mark in society, not on society"[13]. However, disorder does not always equal anarchy and vandalism. We should ask ourselves how much vandalism is a tag on a wall. The narrow-mindedness that some people possess does not allow for the understanding of what is seen as unprovoked defacement. However, is the problem really that piece with giant, colourful letters, that provocative, satirical stencil, or is it rather the peeling walls on which these works and the underground tunnels with their cracked billboards are made? As Augé put it, "we all share a small space that we treat badly"[14].

Returning to the protagonists of the 1980s pop scene, Fab 5 Freddy's resourcefulness leads his friend, in reality as well as in the docufilm, to meet gallery owners and collectors in New York, for whom he agrees to create works on canvas. This is the 1980s and what is shown in the film is not so far removed from reality. In fact, the "The Fabulous Five" after achieving great success in the United States, landed with their pieces also in Europe, specifically the first place that

8 - S. McCollum, "Hip Hop: a culture of vision and voice" in: "The Kennedy Center", October 30, 2019.

9 - Fab 5 Freddy papers, Sc MG 961, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.

10 - S. Armstrong, "Street Art", Art essentials, Italian edition "24 ore cultura", Milano, 2022, p. 97.

11 - C. Ahearn "Wild Style", movie 1983.

12 - G. L. Kelling, J. Q. Wilson "Broken Windows. The police and neighborhood safety", The Atlentic, March 1982.

13 - H. Chalfant, T. Silver, "Style Wars" TV Movie documentary, Public Art Films, New York, 1983

14 - Italian Edition M. Augé "Nonluoghi", Elèuthera, 2018, p. 10

would host their exhibition was the art gallery "La Medusa" in Rome in 1979[15]. Small independent galleries represented a springboard for all these unconventional and anti-academic artists. In New York, for example, Patty Astor's FUN Gallery, which hosted the likes of Futura 2000, Lee Quinones, Haring, Basquiat, Kenny Scharf. Graffiti is a long-standing phenomenon, something instinctive if one thinks of Roland Barthes' words that "walls, you know, attract writing"[16]. This is why "they can be considered the purest expression of those social strata that, due to their condition, have no chance either of leaving an imprint or of being recorded in the annals of history"[17]. This is just the beginning of that post-colonial time when "the other", the different, the marginalised and the subaltern finally take the floor so that they no longer remain silent. Even before this international exhibition on European soil, however, graffiti writing had already landed in official exhibition circles. I am talking about what was organised in 1972 by the young student Hugo Martinez in downtown New York with the collaboration of the United Graffiti Artistis[18], considered to be the first graffiti exhibition. The young New York student had taken on a very important mission from a sociological and artistic point of view: to track down the city's best graffiti writers and unite them as members of this large collective that aimed to inspire all these writers from street walls to canvases. Martinez himself tells of his research "I started in Washington Heits, approaching the local gang, the Young Galaxies. I new they would be able to provide the necessary first contact"[19]. His journey has yielded numerous research "From the masters I learned the secrets of graffiti: the moral codes, esthetic criteria, technology, nomenclature, history, legend and ritual"[20]. UGA was therefore born in October "with the immediate purpose of organizing the best writers of Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn and offering them the opportunity to redirect their work to legitimate surfaces"[21]. So already in the 1970s, a way was being sought to give legitimacy to this language. As stated by Peter Schjeldahl "some people predicted that as graffiti writers began working on canvas, away from the perilous environs of subway railyards, the vigor of their art would diminish. It hasn't"[22]. After all, even Lady Pink in Wild Style had stated that there would be no end to the pieces made on underground walls.

At this point, the fateful questions such as "From the street to the museum, but what is street art if there is no street?" or "Street art: from the street to the museum. Right or wrong?" find historical precedents that can help to deduce possible answers. However, the question is as controversial as ever. The simple idea of creating a work on the surface of a wall in the street starts out with the intention of being an egalitarian product in the sense that it lends itself to the free observation of all without paying the cost of a ticket for free enjoyment. Indeed, it is precisely this strong ideological basis that provokes criticism and scepticism when exhibitions are organised in museums or gallery shows and auction sales of these works. Within this "institutional" venue, where spaces are closed and "domesticated", some feel that the gestural and ethical purity risks being compromised by losing its subversive charge. However, the introduction of the 'rebel sign' within official spaces could challenge the visual and now fossilised hierarchies typical of these places. Today, from a strictly curatorial point of view, one no longer only has to deal with the phantom White Cube, a white, aseptic box that transforms everything stored inside into

15 - C. B. Sakraischik, A. B. Traverso "The Fabulous Five. Calligraffiti di Frederick Brathwaite e Lee George Quinones", Galleria La Medusa, Roma 1979, p. 1.

16 - Italian Edition of R. Barthes, "Variazioni sulla scrittura", Einaudi, Torino, 1999, p. 64.

17 - C. B. Sakraischik, A. B. Traverso "The Fabulous Five. Calligraffiti di Frederick Brathwaite e Lee George Quinones", Galleria La Medusa, Roma 1979, p. 1.

18 - M. Ricolfi, "Banksy. L'arte come rivoluzione", Luni Editrice, Milano, 2021.

19 - United Graffiti Artists 1975, Artists Space, New York City, Sempteber 9-27, 1975 in: https://artistsspace.org/media/pages/exhibitions/united-graffiti-artist/4026758671 1639688455/fullcatalog_1975_unitedgraffitiartists.pdf

20 - *Ibidem.*

21 - *Ibidem*.

22 - *Ibidem*.

art. The white cube devours the object, the four white walls of the room are like a machine that transforms everything that enters it into art. So even a chair placed in the middle of that room could be art? Ironic as it may seem, just think of the artist and performer Arman who introduced his famous Accumulations into the white ground of contemporary galleries. After all, as stated by Bryan O'Doherty "The wall became the locus of contending ideologies, and every new development had to come equipped with an attitude toward it. Once the wall became an aesthetic force, it modified anything shown on it. The wall, the context of the art, had become rich in a content it subtly donated to the art"[23]. This *a priori* significance is also conferred by another important element that is increasingly replacing the White Cube - the museum work. The exhibition space is a reality that can be malleable and moulded to one's liking, in this way architectural works are supplanting classic museum buildings. The museum is increasingly becoming a work in itself created by the great names in architecture. Cases in point are the MAXXI in Rome designed by Zaha Hadid or the Guggenheim in Bilbao by Frank Gehry. Regardless of the works inside, the museum in itself is already considered Art. In this case, any work placed within it would acquire the legitimacy derived from the authority of the context. An example of this was the 2011 exhibition at MOCA in Los Angeles entitled "Art in the streets" curated by the then director Jeffrey Deitch. The exhibition was held in the most modern wing of the museum, the Geffen Contemporary, which gave even more legitimacy to an act such as writing that was considered more of a vandalism. The location was a former warehouse used to house police cars in the historic Little Tokyo district of Los Angeles. In 1983, the well-known architect Frank Gehry was called in to renovate this area of the museum. So the Art in the Streets exhibition was not simply placed in the Warehouse but directly in the most important wing of the entire building. It is now 2011 and all the famous exhibitions that have hosted works of urban creativity, especially the much-criticised graffiti, should by now have institutionalised and legitimised this artistic language in the eyes of the public and critics, yet this was not the case.

After all, Dick Hebdige has already analysed the meaning inherent in the style of each subculture. These break our expectations in the form of challenges to a pre-established order. It is therefore not surprising that the emergence of a subculture is always followed by conflicting attitudes dominated by a kind of collective hysteria that clouds a realistic view of the phenomenon "such hysteria is typically ambivalent: it oscillates between fear and fascination, between offence and amusement"[24]. It is worth pointing out how certain subcultural types such as punks, mods or hippies "through their clothes, activities, pastimes and lifestyles" may project a cultural response or solution to the problems posed for them by the material and social conditions and experiences of their class[25]. They were, however, straw fires that one still hears about in reference to a past time that will not return. Quite different is the situation involving pop culture: a sub-culture that has become a culture in its own right, as no one would have expected; according to Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, "there is a community of artists and enthusiasts that crosses all borders and, thanks to the internet and the ease of transfer for anyone, graffiti has become an international youth culture"[26]. Today, the situation has not changed so much. This is because it turns out to be a culture with blurred boundaries that does not lend itself to labelling or easy definitions. This is why anyone who has to deal with such a cultural reality has to be as rigid as possible.

Returning to the issue of MOCA in Los Angeles, the difficulty in accepting this new art form is again documented by an article in the New York Times "Admirers call it Art, but the Police call it a Problem". According to Chief of Police William J. Bratton "What was expected to occur has occurred in the surrounding areas,'he said. A French tagger known as Space Invader was detained and released by the authorities after climbing down a building near the museum this week. The

23 - Brian O'Doherty, "Inside the white cube. The ideology of the Gallery Space", The Lapis Press, San Francisco, United States of America, 1986, p. 29.

24 - Italian Edition of D. Hebdige, "Sottocultа. Il significato dello stile", Meltemi, p. 3.

25 - Italian Edition of P. Magaudda, "Ridiscutere le sottocultures. Resistenza simbolica, postmodernismo e disuguaglianze sociali", p. 304.

26 - M. Cooper, H. Chalfant "Subway Art", Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1984, p. 7.

police now believe he was responsible for a tag later found there and are trying to find him again"[27]. Yet why is Space Invader's intervention to be considered vandalism while his works are exhibited in galleries and museums? Eric Watson, filmmaker present at the exhibition and interviewed by the New York Times admits "I was skeptical before I came, but I think graffiti like this is art. Look at the way kids here are engaging in it". The testimonies of appreciation do not end there, a Los Angeles gallery owner in fact states "people have to realize that art has to start somewhere. Cavemen drew on walls"[28]. Self-fuelled myths and unfounded stereotypes have grown over time, which is why perhaps, although it may be taken for granted, it seems necessary to dwell on terminological issues.

Defining "Street Art" as that type of figurative art created and exhibited precisely in the street is now something that seems limiting and about as generic as one can get. Street art keeps adding more and more nuances to its palette and this makes its unambiguous definition complicated. When talking about Street Art one runs the risk of referring to everything and nothing; do we want to talk about graffiti, stencils or perhaps murals? One has to be clear about the distinctions of the genre and try to distance oneself as much as possible from any labelling. As the Italian artist Ozmo put it, "I understand that labels are useful to (almost) everyone, but I consider them like antibiotics: when they create tolerance, in the long run they destroy the organism they were meant to protect"[29].

When we speak of graffiti writing, we refer to a broad production that goes from tags to throw-ups to pieces; the latter evolved over the years to become more and more abstract, adding small figures between the letters, the so-called puppets, small characters derived from comic strips and cartoons that come very close to the figurativeness typical of later production. Within the classic term 'street art' one can include works created using stencils and posters. Finally, we have the so-called New Muralism, derived from the muralism of the first two decades of the 20th century, which has been undergoing a general revival in recent years. Currently, people are opting to use the word 'urban creativity' which, although not perfect, seems the best to encompass all the elements of this underground language: graffiti writing, street art (referring to stencils or posters) and murals. When we talk about urban creativity, we refer to all those products of creativity that originated in the street and underground places or that draw inspiration from these contexts. Terminology is useful in the academic sphere, and to the historian, when analysing a particular current from an analytical point of view. The usefulness of a precise term is useful to all players in the art system, certainly not to the artist himself. The use of terms such as Street Art, street art or urban art to refer to the same trend seems functional to the discussion, but one must use this term with awareness.

So all those paradoxes, arising from the risks of institutionalising and legitimising an art form that is difficult to control, may in fact only be apparent. Is it nonsense that 'Street Art' now collaborates with the same institutions it used to attack or criticise? For a moment, one forgets that works commissioned by state institutions are actually, for the most part, Murals and not stencils or pieces and tags, which are much more difficult to control and towards which there is still much prejudice. Muralism has always been the result of commissions and collaborations with institutional bodies: just think of the Mexican muralism of Ribera, Orozco and Siqueiros who were already active in the first two decades of the 20th century at the height of the Mexican Revolution. Also in Italy during the twenty-year fascist period, numerous murals were commissioned inside public buildings thanks to the work of one of the most important Italian painters of the time, Mario Sironi, who signed the Manifesto of Mural Painting in 1933. Separating these artistic products from the strictly political context, the representation that these works gave of the social and cultural spirit of the time seems relevant, allowing individuals to identify with and be immediately involved in them without necessarily

27 - Adam Nagourney "Admirers call it art, but the Police call it a Problem", The New York Times, april 22, 2011.

28 - *Ibidem*.

29 - E. Mone "Urban creativity between metropolitan and museum space: an artistic, social and institutional question" Ca' Foscari University, 2023, p. 133.

having a historical-artistic knowledge base. If today we see so-called 'street artists' collaborating in the realisation of a public project, we should actually not be surprised because there is nothing new or contradictory in this. The issue is quite different when it comes to graffiti still seen as clutter to be cleaned up and removed from alienating city walls, certainly clutter that has arisen not because of these artists. In the 1980s, even though the New York City Council had only partly succeeded in cleaning up city surfaces, it cannot be said that the battle against "anarchist graffiti" had been definitively won; as graffiti writer Mare 139 put it, "we may have lost the trains, but we have conquered the world"[30]. Of course, understanding a piece of lettering is quite different from understanding the meaning behind a stencil or mural. In Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant's documentary, this very factor is highlighted through the words of the young writer Skeme. According to the latter, when it comes to "bombing" a surface, for the writer it means to see one's name on that train he takes every day, to realise that "I was there", these graphic representations are for the writers themselves and not for others "those who don't write have nothing to do with it"[31]. For many of these young people, the old New York underground system is just a pile of old stones and steel like "a chasm" opened up under the city. A place that everyone walks through without paying too much attention to it, so why should writing on these old stones covered in mouldy concrete bother the public so much? After all, even today it is easy to walk down the streets and see tags and pieces decorating the walls. It is a creative language that is so independent that it can adapt to any medium and context. This is because it turns out to be an art that sees spaces for what they really are "spaces can be real or imaginary, they can tell and explain stories, spaces can be interrupted and transformed through artistic and literary practices, spaces can be appropriated"[32]. Art criticism has often relied on the element of interpretation of works in order to be able to read the visual message by going beyond the surface and grasping unspoken values and words. In the contemporary art system, there is an endless amount of critical volumes that claim to explain works by contemporary artists by identifying their precedents in the past, legitimising the value of creation and having to track down meaning at all costs without worrying about falling into strange historical strains. Certainly, this method is functional for academic study, but what if many of these works actually do not have real meaning? What if modern-day artists do not want to see their names compared to the greats of the past? Many contemporary artists are inspired by the great masters of the past, but are focused on a unique production and personal language. Despite the evolutions and changes in the contemporary art system, we are still bound to the idea that a work must convey a message. The question of art for art's sake is now unacceptable, subsumed by the conviction that all works must necessarily conceal a profound meaning to be linked back to the official historical tradition. To be sure, the idea of a product as an end in itself is alienating, since history has shown that art was a means of conveying messages, yet the moment of creation is instinctual, it is a gesture that projects an idea otherwise closed in the artist's mind to the outside world. To give an example, surely Pollock, while sketching his canvases on the floor, was acting driven by his own personal impulses, perhaps not thinking of all the historical precedents that led to abstract expressionism. These are constructions that are added later and often not by the artists themselves. The quintessential example of posters designed without an expressive intent can be found with Shepard Fairey. Around 1989, small black and white stickers with the half-length bust of the wrestler André Roussimoff with the phrase "Andre the Giant has a Posse" began to appear all over the United States. A randomly chosen image of a popular icon became an example of how easy it is to create and spread a brand from nothing. The then young student Fairey had created an essential logo without referring to anything in particular, yet the public response was enthusiastic. An enigmatic and for that very reason interesting figure, when questioned it said nothing, perhaps precisely because it was created to say nothing.

Tags and writer's pieces, similarly, were also not accepted because they were considered incomprehensible and meaningless. As Tom Wolfe said, "To look at a painting without

30 - M. Cooper, H. Chalfant "Subway Art", Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1984, p. 124.

31 - H. Chalfant, T. Silver, "Style Wars" TV Movie documentary, Public Art Films, New York, 1983.

32 - Italian Edition of b. hooks, "Elogio del margine" in: "Elogio del margine. Razza, sesso e mercato culturale", Feltrinelli, Milano 1998, p, 72.

a convincing theory is to be deprived of something fundamental. In short, let's face it, today, without a supporting theory, I cannot see a painting. Not to see is to believe, but to believe is to see, for Modern Art has become completely literary: paintings and works exist only to illustrate the text"[33].

Even now, it is difficult to fully understand a simple tag on a wall and the idea of cleaning up surfaces is still felt by many to be a necessity, but one has to realise that probably without graffiti writing, street art and the new muralism would not have got where they are now, who knows if they would have emerged as strongly on the world art scene.

Does street art run the risk of betraying its origins and being decontextualised when placed in museums and galleries? Here again, specific cases must be considered. As illustrated above, the first exhibitions of graffiti writing took place between the 1970s and 1980s. The works exhibited, however, were created specifically for display, so the medium was no longer the peeling wall of an external building as much as a canvas (although the lettering style remained the same). A different case is when works are illegally torn from the walls and places where they were made in order to be sold or moved within galleries without the consent of the artist. It often happens that works of an important artist are taken off the street to be sold to collectors or exhibition organisations who charge a ticket fee to allow the viewing of works that actually belonged on public land. Perhaps the best known example dates back to 2016. This date is quite significant. We are in Italy, specifically in Bologna, where the exhibition "Street Art. Banksy e Co. L'arte allo stato urbano" curated by Luca Ciancabilla and Christian Omodeo, publicised as the first major retrospective dedicated to the history of street art. A project that was intended to focus attention on the issues of the preservation, conservation and musealisation of these urban works161. Rather ironic as an intent in the light of the earthquake it stirred up even before it was inaugurated. A critical storm not entirely unfounded. Under the fictitious illusion that public land is suitable terrain for individual initiatives, works made by urban creatives specifically for urban land were ripped up or 'detached'. In the case of Blu, this rightly triggered annoyance on the part of the artist who proceeded to delete his works rather than see them decontextualised from their place of birth and, more importantly, avoid paying a ticket to see them. The artist is no stranger to this kind of initiative, a similar event also happened in Berlin (where a house for sale saw its market value rise as a result of the artist's intervention). This does seem rather wrong and only in this case can one really speak of decontextualisation. Walls and streets are like boundaries or arteries that delineate a social rather than a spatial topography. Museum walls are more spatial than social frameworks. The outer wall, housing a piece rather than a stencil, had a meaning even before the work was made. A half-destroyed, peeling, exposed-brick wall in the Bronx has a history even before the arrival of a writer. Just as the wall of the Gaza Strip possessed a sad history before the arrival of Banksy and many other artists, so does the infamous Berlin Wall. Whether political boundaries or simply walls of a business or park, every wall, every element of urban space tells a story and has experienced events and situations that make it meaningful in itself. The same cannot be said for the newly plastered walls of contemporary museums, for which it is the works arranged above that give meaning to the space.

The entry of this language into official circuits could help subvert the hierarchies that characterize them. Again, however, one must consider the other side of the coin. Graffiti developed at a time of great economic crisis, in the midst of a capitalist-bourgeois society devoted to consumerism. The idea that to see a piece one only had to sit on a bench and wait for a train to pass by or stroll through the streets made it an art outside the sick mechanisms of the market. Its entry at galleries and museums risks making it easy prey for the market, as has happened in numerous circumstances after all. One really has to believe that resonating in the background of this scenario is the Marxian thought that "works of art, which represent the highest point of spiritual production, will meet with favor in bourgeois society only if they are considered capable of directly generating material wealth"[34]. Has so-called street art therefore found

33 - Tom Wolfe, "Come ottenere il successo in arte", Umberto Allemandi & C, Torino, 1987, p.8.

34 - Italian Edition of Donald Thompson, "Lo squalo da 12 milioni di dollari. La bizzarra e sorprendete economia dell'arte contemporanea", Mondadori, 2017, p. 26.

favour with bourgeois society? Nothing is simple, neither is art, nor is the world around it. As pointed out earlier, artists have always combined their 'illegal' work with official exhibition work. They are artists and the history of art has always shown how necessary it was to sell their work. The urban creative cannot be unambiguously defined; the artist working in the 'illegal' underground space has in parallel carried out production in the official art context. It is not only now that the artist collaborates with institutions or sells his or her work on the market, despite having made a piece on a station wall the night before. This underground world has always rested on paradoxes and myths often exaggerated by others. However, on closer inspection, there is not so much that is paradoxical. The artists who took their first steps in the Bronx in the 1980s wanted the voice of the 'slums' to be heard, they were angry at the system, but they were also young people who did not disdain a little fame, which was fine if they could make some money from their work. All this does not mean betraying one's origins. Displaying one's pieces in galleries does not mean selling oneself to the corrupt system of the art market, especially if those works have been created in one's own style, with one's own language on media specifically developed for that place; unauthorised rip-offs are quite another matter. We often talk about Banksy and how his being against the market actually only makes him even more marketable. Beyond his intentions, no one knows if this is actually what he wants or not, however objectionable or faux-controversial it may be, one issue remains unchanged: there is nothing wrong with putting one's work on the market, there is no betrayal in collaborating with institutions on commission. From the moment the importance and uniqueness of the creative product was achieved and the word 'art' was associated with this product, a market was generated in parallel. Some artists found their fortune in it, others unfortunately were only appreciated and valued long after their death. If there are still doubts about the definition of what art is, how can one claim to fully understand every nuance of the phenomena that constitute it?

Institutionalisation, this much-criticised word alongside street art, has actually always existed, but only now has it been decided to shine a beam of light on it, with the only consequence of further lengthening the shadows it already naturally possessed. Murals have always been commissioned and wanted in urban space or inside public buildings, so once again nothing new.

Conclusion

The reality of this phenomenon is that however commercial and 'tokenistic' it may be, it persists in being only partially commodifiable, due to its ability to combine transgressive cultural activities, legitimate art and commercial design while continuing to cross the boundaries of these fields, never settling in any of them. Advertising design practices have taken shape and inspiration from the underground world, not the other way around, legitimate figurative art has always been employed in the world of urban creativity but this has not turned it into an 'academic' phenomenon. Add to this the fact that spaces and places are the result of a dynamic process produced by the intersection of individual and group activities, in this light art reformulates its own way of being, acting, feeling, saying, uniting in a common sense. Once again, however, we speak of an art that lives within the limits of common sense, sometimes respecting it, sometimes criticising it. In a society that tends to normalise everything and no longer looks at the world with curiosity and wonder, graffiti writing, muralism, street art and urban design represent a tool as rhetorical as it is practical to awaken the now numb senses of citizens, always trying to keep that interest alive to prevent them from falling into normalisation: probably good or bad, the important thing is that they are talked about. One is never indifferent to a work of urban creativity, be it intentional and commissioned, or improvised and independent. Pier Paolo Pasolini said in an interview that when an author is altruistic and passionate, he always represents a living protest; the moment he opens his mouth he challenges something to conformism or officialdom. The voice of those who create on the ground is a way of giving agency back to the citizen who is too often not called upon. The world of Art is not easy, indeed it is so much articulated between official and unofficial, between market and system, between museums and galleries, between elitism and egalitarianism. A misleading artificiality that often disorients by making one forget the core: art was born with the intention of showing, revealing and conveying messages. Because 'street art' is an artistic and social phenomenon, it is not an individual work, the artist lives in his time and the work he produces is genera-

ted in his time. This time is that of all of us and that is why a work of this kind begins to live when we discover it for the first time, when the spray can or paintbrush is laid down and the work lends itself to active contemplation, then the public is called in because art is not only understood through words but also and above all through visual language.

Bibliography

- C. Ahearn, Wild Style, First Run Features, Rhino Entertainment, 23 novembre 1983, Stati Uniti.
- S. Andron, Selling streetness as experience: the role of street art tours in branding the creative city, The Sociological Review 1-22, SAGE, 2018.
- S. Armstrong, Street Art, Art essentials, 24 ore cultura, Milano 2022.
- Marc Augé, Non luoghi, Elèuthera, 2009.
- H. Chalfant, T. Silver, Style Wars, United States of America, 1983.
- Fab 5 Freddy papers, Sc MG 961, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.
- Banksy, Wall and Piece, The Random House Group Limited, London, 2005.
- R. Barthes, Variazioni sulla scrittura, Einaudi, Torino, 1999.
- E. W. Burgess, The Growth of the city. An introduction to a Research project, in: "The city", The University of Chicago Press, 1925.
- A. Carastathis & M. Tsilimpounidi, Against the wall, City. Analysis of Urban
- Change, Theory, Action. Routledge Taylor&Francis Group, July 2021.
- M. Cooper, H. Chalfant, Subway Art, Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2015.
- R. Gastman, Wall Writers: Graffiti in its Innocence, Gingko Pr. Ink. 2016
- S. Hall, T. Jefferson, Rituali di resistenza. Teds, Mods, Skinheads e Rastafariani. Subculture giovanili nella Gran Bretagna del dopoguerra, Novalogos, 2017.
- S. Hall, Il soggetto e la differenza, Meltemi, Roma 2006.
- D. Hebdige, Sottocultura. Il significato dello stile, Meltemi, 2017.
- b. hooks, Elogio del margine, in: "Elogio del margine. Razza, sesso e mercato culturale", Feltrinelli, Milano 1998.
- G. L. Kelling, J. Q. Wilson, Broken Windows. The police and neighborhood safety, The Atlentic, March 1982.
- N. Mailer, The Faith of Graffiti, Esquire, May 1974.
- P. Magaudda, Ridiscutere le sottoculture. Resistenza simbolica, postmodernismo e disuguaglianze sociali, Studi Culturali, 2009.
- B. O'Doherty, Inside the White Cube. The ideology of the Gallery Space, The Lapis Press, San Francisco, 1986.
- M. Ricolfi, Banksy. L'arte come rivoluzione, Luni Editrice, Milano 2021.
- V. Ross, Off the wall: Cornbread and other erly graffiti artists speak, The Inquirer, 2016.
- C. B. Sakraischik, A. B. Traverso, The Fabulous Five. Calligraffiti di Frederick Brathwaite e Lee George Quinones, Galleria La Medusa, Roma 1979.
- D. Thompson, Lo squalo da 12 milioni di dollari. La bizzarra e sorprendente economia dell'arte contemporanea, Mondadori, 2017.
- Tom Wolfe, Come ottenere il successo in arte, Umberto Allemandi & C. Torino, 1987.

.