

Streetness & Inopinatum: the “sense of the street” and the “unexpected impertinence”. For a binary code in street art.

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It was December 2003, exactly 16 years ago. That morning, a few of us were at the Circumvesuviana train station in San Giorgio a Cremano, the town the famous Neapolitan actor Massimo Troisi was born in, waiting for something to happen. Kaf and Cyop were amongst the graffiti writers that had been called to paint the walls of that infrastructure, on the side of the unelectrified railway track. We had been told that the local entity managing railway transports had a mind of entrusting its stations to graffiti writers from them to paint them on, since the managers had had enough of the graphic vandalism burdening them. And we went there, spurred by curiosity. In the beginning, we questioned the communications and PR experts of the entity that managed the regional railway transports, as we believed that they did not provide truthful information on the matter. It was usual at the time, and it is usual even nowadays, but the nuisance was more heartfelt, almost as a pretext. Other people arrived, while Kaf and Cyop, besides painting, applied items, wood and plastics on the painted characters and their parts. Then a single coach, i.e. one third of a normal train, entered the station: journalists, cameramen, an important regional councilperson, all together with other directors, got off it. Those were the guest everybody was waiting for at the station. Indeed –and that was our first consideration – there was a special “cargo” of politicians swarming to see the young graffiti writers working on the walls of the stations of the Circumvesuviana rail. The main elements for a good press release were all there, as we all know; the trend was about to be positively turned around, from vandalism on walls to beautiful graffiti. However, everybody was still, quivering as if they were waiting for someone in turn, and we still could not understand all of it. A sort of suspension seemed to be underway. And then – not from a coach on the track, but from the stair of the overpass above – as if it were to give the signal for a small, yet huge revolution, below came Achille Bonito Oliva, also known

as ABO, one of the leading art critics overall. And all this was happening as the revolution was reaching the suburbs as well, and the subway stations in Naples were being turned into a museum circuit, a “mandatory open air museum”.

That project was titled Circumwriting (Circumvesuviana + graffiti writing) and implemented, for the very first time in Italy, a system of relationships that was neither approximate or casual, involving transport networks and graffiti in both stations and coaches. The art critical remarks were by ABO himself as he believed, between the usual perception and the risky new future of graffiti writing in the city, that the new form of art was to be connected with the urban transport system between the center and the suburbs of the city, as if it was one with the citizens as a whole, enhancing the mandatory show and the unexpected impertinence (the *inopinatum*), one might say, of this phenomenon. As it is widely known, the effect of the merging between stations and museums and of the enchantment involving users and spectators have a social function, as it can bring works of art to public transport places, making the most of the main features of the postmodern era, focusing, amongst other things, their offer on city users. And city users, those who move on foot or use the public transport do indeed see and recognize the different signs of urban creativity, graffiti writing e street art most of all, whose size and scope are subject to significant scrutiny and work nowadays, in the attempt to site up its range and main definitions before that. To summarize, on one hand, graffiti writing remained on the path, even if it has come a long way and, on the other, it swerved on the path of street art, which received new branches from the wider public, city-focused art in turn. On such a thick network, for what concerns us, two cornerstones, themselves useful in understanding the pathways of artistic stimuli and the relevant critical remarks are the Circumvesuviana event and another



Fig.1 - 2003 Ante Circumwriting



Fig.2 - 2004 Circumwriting catalogue

event organized following the project work on the matter carried out by the LUISS University in Rome, called Tracks, held in 2014, with artistic direction by ABO, whose outcome wanted to be a reflection on urban creativity in terms of artistic mobility.

Therefore, our journey moved from Circumwriting to Tracks, holding the suggestion of urban railways from Naples to Rome providing the advantage of a unique viewpoint on the whole of the changing dynamics of Italy in the field during the last sixteen years. It may be interesting and educational to take a look from the bridge whose main pillars are two remarks by ABO, one provided in December 2003 "*writing all around, all around writing*" (evocative slogan of the Circumwriting project) and the other, offered in December 2014, involving "*the signs and paths of street art*" (subtitle of the LUISS research project). This said, the spur to start a journey becomes strong; this journey should be an exercise in remembering and summarizing, since the whole of the path followed by graffiti writing, street art and their unique circumstances, being by no means linear in their interdependent flowing and fading, should be examined and understood right now, as if stopping its mechanisms and focusing our gaze on its cross-cutting nodes, ways and multilevel system, like a railway networks having innumerable tracks and switches.

A single hoard of experience is therefore possible, provided one is able to understand the significant growth this phenomenon has experienced, from before then until now. It is however interesting to see how seeds for reflection abound, especially in the form of food for thought arising from critical reflection on art, while looking for suitable parameters and paradigms, to be found in the heart of wonders, both ancient and recent, something that happens every time this phenomenon succeeds in confirming and recognizing itself as – *streetness* (the sense of the street) – even as it evolves.

Considering the most important moments and cornerstones of the Circumwriting event, some of them are worth noting in our opinion. For example, labo, a graffiti writer, performed a white throw-up and it appeared poor, even disrespecting, as a gesture at the moment. Then he went on installing a mannequin, which then went on to become the simulacrum of a graffiti writer, his clothes, hoods on his eyes and spray in his hand, including the gesture of spraying on a wall. Not far from there, Etnik, another graffiti writer – who, in that waiting room, with other artists had, perhaps, the very first exhibition of his life as an artist – trapped,

within the lightsaber of a Darth Vader Puppet, one of the neon tubes of the station quay. Meanwhile, in the underpass of the Trecase station, Cyop was drawing in an amazing way, especially using brushes and paint rollers; the exasperated dripping of the paint vibrated as every train moved to and from the station, giving the work of art its final shape. Therefore, within the nooks and crannies of the event, the manifestation of subjects being almost a prerequisite of the object of the work, including both direct and indirect interaction between the art and its surrounding universe, both by material inclusion and immaterial impression. In all three of these cases, as it has been stated and read for decades, the painted text experienced a highly attractive dialogue with its context, offering a glimpse of strong alternative wishes, beyond graffiti writing and achieving street art, thanks to the courage shown by some artists.

At the bottom of the artistic catalog for the Circumwriting event, a series of works by Aldo Cinque was inserted. Mr. Cinque is a photographer and he was an employee of the Circumvesuviana at the time, with a passion for those spray-painted details being his aesthetic delight and the bane of his company at the same time. At the first glance, his artistic production seemed to be beyond the main artistic sense of the project; however the artistic value of his steps until the wall in order to better photograph and frame not the whole works of street art, but rather a part thereof, something not so easy, given the multicolored triumph of those works of art, was so that it completed the actions by graffiti writers, as the latter would, slowly but surely have made a step back from their works, turning the outcome of their action into something poetic, sublimating it. Here, we intend to pinpoint the moment of awareness of a phenomenon that, once it is sufficiently known and evident, can be examined, becoming the center of discussion. Several artists and scholars offered the contents of their head and of their writing on the phenomenon. However, the only kind of certified action is endogenous in nature, spurred by environmental dialogue and pressures. If the works of art of any given painter, photographer, sculptor or video artist makes a reference to the phenomenon (ranging from graffiti writing to street art), it is interesting; should such a reference be made by a protagonist of this phenomenon (be him or her a graffiti writer or a street artist) this is something very important, as it promotes reflection by the phenomenon on itself, as only an expert could spur, remaining recognizable even as they evolve.

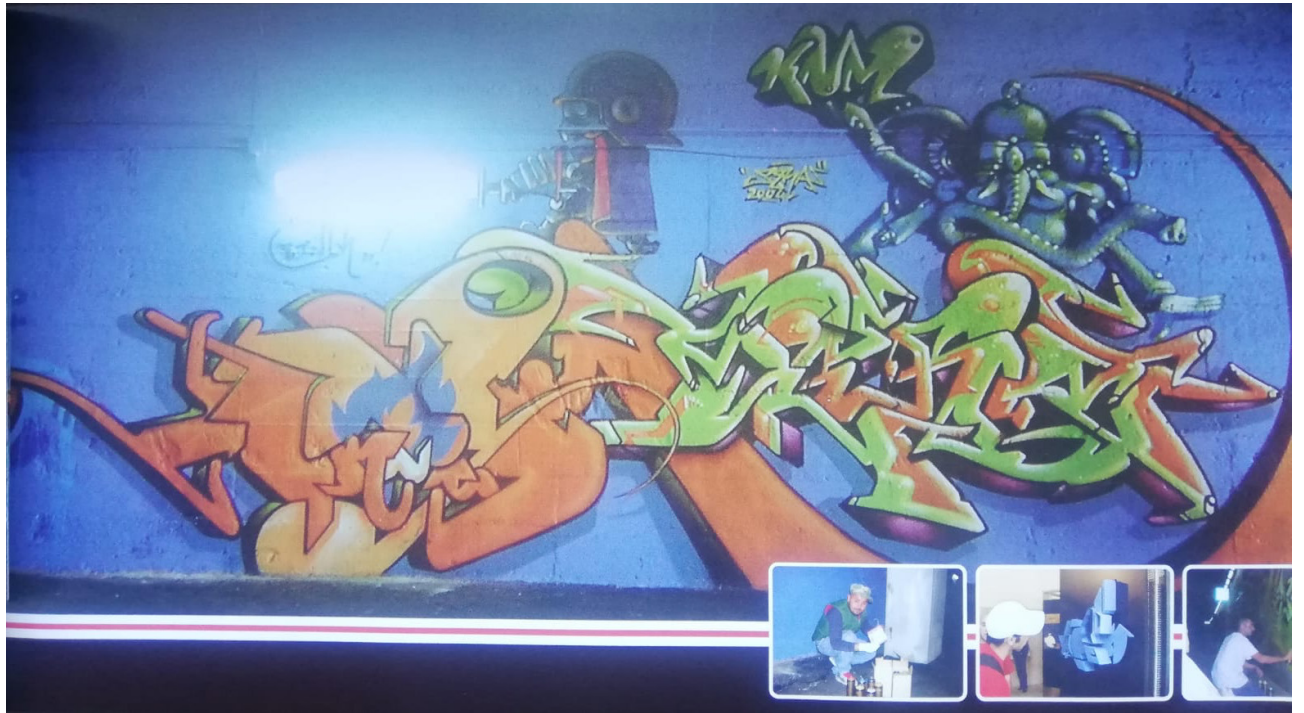


Fig.3 - 2004 Circumwriting Etnik artwork



Fig.4 - 2004 Circumwriting, press conference with Achille Bonito Oliva



Fig.5 - 2005 KAF artwork inside Quarantotto Graffiti Writers Bookmarks expo

In 2005, only a year after the Circumwriting event was held, a former officer of the Circumvesuviana, Mr. Franco Cusati, being the director of one of the most important and history-rich contemporary art galleries in Neapolitan area, invited us to nominate and select some graffiti writers, within the wider framework of his "Segnalibri d'Artista" (*Artists' Bookmarks*) collection, in order to create a specific collection, since his curiosity was piqued concerning the creative relationships the graffiti writers having been chosen might have created when confronted with unusual dimensions, supports and instruments. In the end, two works of art for 24 graffiti writers each, amongst which Airone, Bean One, Kayone, Rae Martini, Stand, Verbo, JB Rock, Diamond, Wany, Cyop, Kaf – that is to say a sizeable part of the future of Italian street art – together with works by Barisani, Tatafiore, Castellano and Paladino were created. Some of these artists created reduced-size graffiti, while others, using the same 10x40 surface, actually took a step back in order to observe themselves and their art better, as it is the case with every kind of research. For example, the graffiti writer named Kaf, proposed a photograph, taken from top to bottom, of a railway track and its sleepers; on them he put, still dirty with paint, a pair of working gloves, creating something apparently very dissimilar from the usual work of a writer. As requested, his work had a title, and the title was "Dopolavoro ferroviario" (*After-work railway free-time group*, but also the time after an illegal artwork by graffiti writer in a train yard). It was indeed a step back, taken in order to jump forward in a surprisingly agile manner, as if the artist was endowed with telescopic sight.

The most evident and shared difference between graffiti writing e street art, lies, as it is widely known, between the expression of visual contents and in the use of technical instruments, while the scenario is almost the same. It is always the city, with its streets, surfaces and things; by the same token, the reason why artists decide to start the revolution, drawing the signs and starting the creative process of art may range from the confirmation of their identity, to ethics and aesthetics. Once such a (widely known, indeed) juxtaposition is implemented, it's the crossroads that generate those issues connected, for example, to the sense of those works of art not being in cities but rather (and even) feature mobile forms or those issues connected with those works of art being produced in cities after having been authorized, therefore being predictable.

Today, the derailment is only apparent in nature and is by no means a cause for concern. Rather, the courage of those artists having been able to take a step backwards ushered in a new, enticing

and finally free, viewpoint on a huge system of interconnections, switches, parallel routes, frequencies and metrics, spurring new tracks and journeys in turn. This said, it would be useful to make the new roving art critics aware of the existence of a new phenomenon that, firmly intending to take notes connected to new journeys rather than projecting old documents by art critics on difference scenarios, wishes to lose itself in the railway maze of its new lines. These roving art critics should also be told that the aforementioned phenomenon, remaining the same even as it evolves, should keep being based on the following two cornerstones: those works of art and not being performed or created on city elements should express *streetness*, that is to say a certain streetwise and street sense (be it textual, iconic, technical or any other kind); on the other hand, those works of art being performed or created in cities should express *inopinatum*, that is to say unexpected impertinence (in its place, area, impact, community or other). Indeed, it is through a similar critical watershed that the current reflection on what urban creativity is today should be shaped. Otherwise, there is a concrete risk of talking about other things, or first of all of seeing other things. This applies both to the nuances of the phenomenon as a whole and to the more articulated situation street art is currently in. Nowadays, street art works as a hub, juxtaposing a significant number of trend lines. In order to become aware of it, it is enough to examine who and what makes use of them, as well as why. Probably, and it is now like it was then, the most important and suggestive instruction comes to us from a railway system. Indeed, in any given railway network, notes intersect a series of lines able to converge, interconnect or be parallel to each other. Whenever such lines meet, switches are activated, reconfiguring the network as a whole. By the same token, the notes themselves may concern only goods or things, or passengers and travelers. The latter may then become mandatory spectators or roving art critics. Finally, these nodes may be open to the public, spurring new experience or being a part of the internal traffic alone, as if they still kept a secret, a code intended only for the city. In 2017, we intended to propose the experience of the bookmarks again, even if within a framework featuring street art more than graffiti writing. This was enacted because, as it has been explained elsewhere in this document, if during the first exhibition the interest was completely focused on stimulating the discovery of new elements when shifting from creation to poetry in graffiti making, the second of such experiments featured a study on the sedimentation, segmentation and differences in style within street art today. Abstractism, realism, figurative style,



Fig.6 - 2005 Quarantotto Graffiti Writers Bookmarks expo

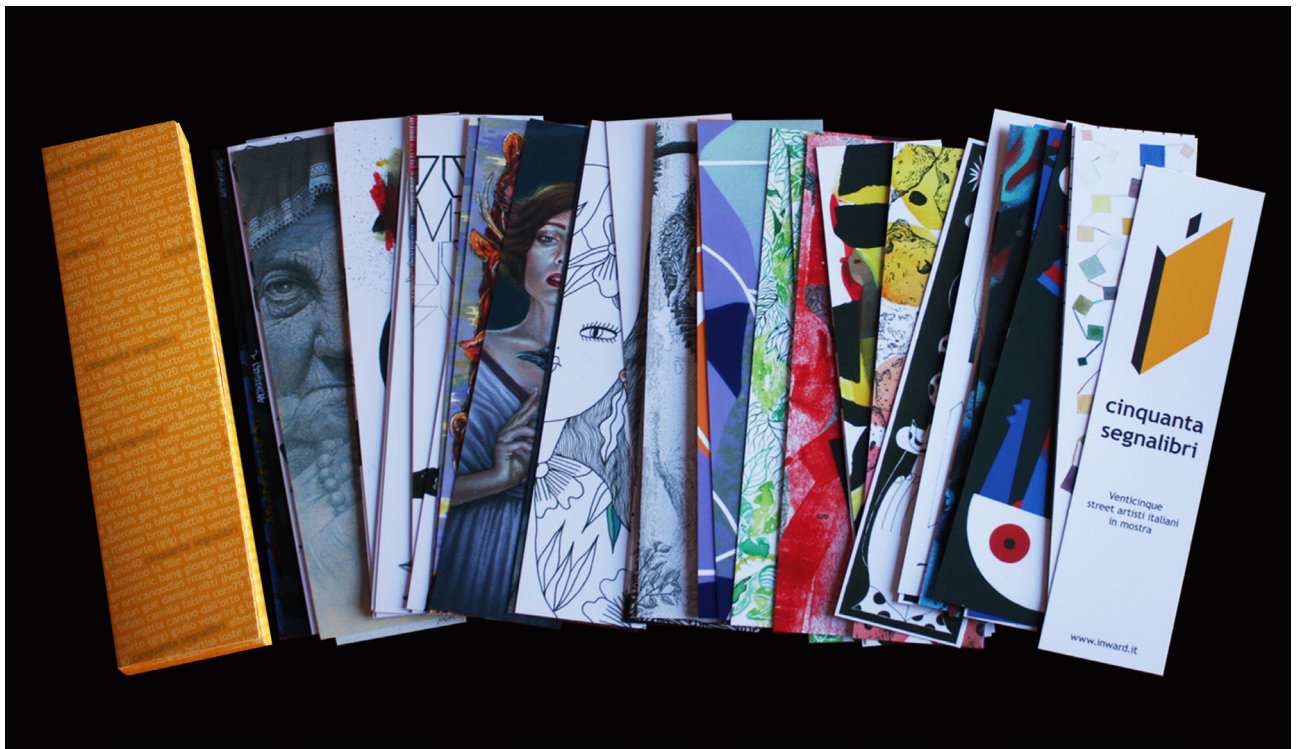


Fig.7 - 2016 Cinquanta Street Artists Bookmarks expo

illustration, geometrism, chromatism and other such variants all fuel the reflection this phenomenon carries out on itself, as it was the case with the “Cinquanta Segnalibri” (*Fifty Bookmarks*) exhibition, featuring works by twenty-five of the best street artists in Italy: Alberonero, Bifido, Camilla Falsini, Corn79, Daniele Nitti Hope, Flycat, Geometric Bang, Giorgio Bartocci, Giulio Vesprini, G-loois, Gola Hundun, Gue, Ironmould, Kerotoo, La Fille Bertha, Lose, Luigi Gig Loquarto, Matteo Brogi, Mattia Campo Dall’Orto, Mr. Fijodor, Orticanoodles, Rmogr18120, Rosk, Xel and Zeus40.

Examining the artworks we have gathered, we nurtured our strong belief that, within the framework of a wider growth and maturation of this phenomenon, street art is evolving its stylistic elements, techniques, tools and the object itself of its activity. There is indeed a risk that the most prominent features of such an art form could be watered down and become debased, should an urban artist paint a portrait any other good painter would be able to achieve, but on the street. Once, in Moscow, during a specific conference on these matters, I had an opportunity to examine some works of art by local street artists who were able to integrate within their urban culture some elements wholly referring to suprematism; on the other hand, I also saw a catalog featuring one of those big Russian women shopping in a flea market selling also small works by street artists on wood. Those works of art were surely to be hanged on house walls and were low-cost. All of this had a hand in turning some of my thoughts around, especially concerning what remains of street art outside of cities, on mobile elements, while it is integrated with story-rich artistic formulas, sometimes authorized by institutions and other times fiercely fought by them, and so on. The reflection I was carrying out focused on *streetness*, that is to say, that street sense making possible the achievement of works of art by street artists not being street art works and on the *inopinatum*, that is to say that impact force street art productions still have going for them, even when they are created together with the areas, communities, even the local government entities they act in. The works of art requested and gathered in “Cinquanta Segnalibri” provided answers to these questions as well, offering a much-needed overall viewpoint on Italian street artists and their wishes, while keeping and transferring those features making them unique in their studio works. We believe that an overall expansion in the production of Italian street artists is underway, almost in as many directions as the authors themselves. This belies a decidedly strong degree of personalization, making the most of typical elements of street art, juxtaposed with the personal development and growth experience of any single artist

As it was the case with the “Quarantotto Segnalibri” exhibition, the example of the “Dopolavoro ferroviario” work of art by Kaf was a light, signal and a vision in perspective, of something to come, by the same token, in “Cinquanta Segnalibri” one may very well say that some works of art seem to hold within themselves the memory of their coming, and therefore, almost a homesickness for lost signs. Besides everything else, the artistic proposal by Flycat fully confirms tools and effects, the drippings and the drops, the over-spraying; on the other hand, the alphabets by Zeus40 are complementary and are provided outside every rhetoric of repetitions as essential tools for graffiti writers; such a continuous elaboration of a code seems to have involved Xel as well: this artist seems to draw the small houses in a comics-like style, while actually providing soft lines being very akin to classical graffiti. All of this may very well remind us of the principles of urban writings and metropolitan languages, up to everything else having shaped over time that “street sense” that can also be found in every iteration and evolution of this phenomenon besides simple spraying, drawn letters and other aesthetic features.

A good proof of that are not only the other works of art in “Cinquanta Segnalibri”, considering the small quantity examined, but also the residents themselves of the most recent gathering of Italian street artists, organized with the Treccani Institute and bearing the self-explanatory title of “UrbanRoom”, in order to provide a first layer of narration between works of art and about works of art, between painting and sculptures themselves able to be the most accurate possible mirror of the production of Italian street artists and, therefore, of the relevant street art that can be seen in cities. Therefore, the opportunity of a room, of a closed, private space, where not the well-known testimonies of an exotic phenomenon, but rather the autonomous and self-sufficient production was stored, was an opportunity to provide a common narration to their audience, featuring a sensitive and encompassing familiar air, while explaining the phenomenon through signs, stories and, most of all, specific features belonging to the authors.

This gathering of works of art put together, through a plurality of times and spaces, styles and techniques, ranging from studies on graphemes to photorealistic painting, from placid shapes to coarse materials, from graphic minimalism to iconoclastic assemblages. Indeed, within the small space of a room constantly updating itself, the overall artistic dimension can find its identity, something that can be found in every work of art within such an exhibition. Neve, Corn79, Fabio Petani, Giulio Vesprini, La

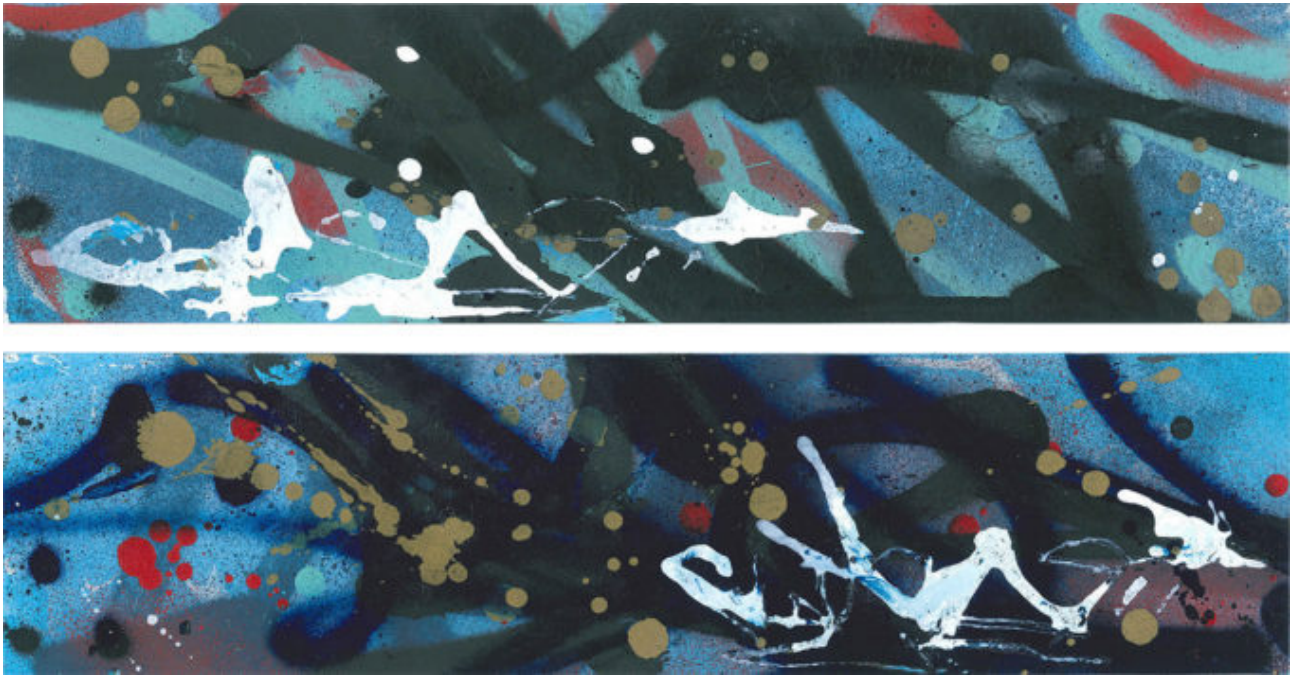


Fig.8 - 2016 FLYCAT artwork inside Cinquanta Street Artists Bookmarks expo

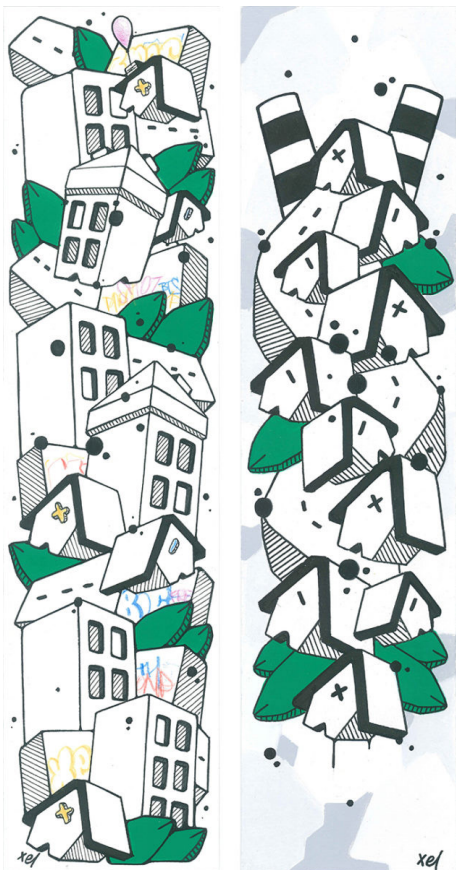


Fig.9 - 2016 XEL artwork inside Cinquanta Street Artists Bookmarks expo



Fig.10 - 2016 ZEUS40 artwork inside Cinquanta Street Artists Bookmarks expo

Fille Bertha, Flycat, Dado, Zeus40 and labo are all different and meaningful artists within the scenario of Italian street art, considering both its history and its current situation.

This exhibition started with traditional painting, in an open contrast with the anti-classical standpoint of street arts. It started with a tragedy, with begging, given the apparent contradiction between these two worlds, while synthesizing the aesthetic confrontation on the new muralism the cities have many examples of. Within the “Le supplici” (*The Begging Women*) by street artist Neve, a formula by the author intends to make everyday activity something mythical. Besides this silent, deaf, cold, stands “Oxidation And Etching On Iron” by Corn79, an actual metal plate scarred by chemical agents, featuring the characteristic elements of the old handmade geometrical rays and currently appearing on scores of building surfaces. The Piedmontese selection ends with artist Fabio Petani and his work titled “Anilina & Taraxacum Officinalis”, whereas his typical way of drawing giant flowers and plants, including the relevant chemical or experience-based elements, on the surfaces of high-rise buildings has the shape of a dandelion quelling queasiness as all herbariums know, in an explosion of colors. From the figurative, drawings-heavy style, one shifts to the graphic minimalism espoused by Giulio Vesprini, a real designer of urban landscapes, giving structure to structures, within the tryptic of signs and colors of its work called “Struttura 33, 34, 39” (*Structure 33, 34, 39*); here, it is as if the essential elements took their place in a constantly new and surprisingly simple way. They are amazing whenever they are painted in cities. La Fille Bertha seduced us all towards her world of female shapes, small princesses and illustrated dolls, providing her fantastic characters from sheets to prints, from gadgets to clothes; whenever they are painted within cities they come down from space likely and can transfer to them whiteness and disbelief, like in “Suspended”. The essential and quiet are markedly different from the matter clashing within the allergic sculptures by Flycat, a longtime Italian member of the scene having been a pupil of the early American milieu. Under the expert guidance of master Rammellzee, he produced “Letter Racer Y1”, a beautiful plastic example of iconoclastic panzerism. Another defense of graphemes, and of identity-building letters, can be found in certain kind of idolatry venerating their segments, curves and counter shapes, as it is the case with the perpetual evolution of graffiti writing, both on paper and on sketchbooks, as well as in cities, on trains, obsessively. Dado studies, teaches and perfectly shapes all this in his work of art called “La Sfera” (*The Sphere*). Writing may very well remain a cornerstone, from

graffiti writing to street art, and the circle may be completed by those who seamlessly paint by writing and write by painting, as it is the case with Zeus40, someone who has no fear of the infinite alphabetical, and more recently, textual research on message being carried out, as in his “Have no fear of perfection, you will never reach it”. It is indeed “Untitled”, but maybe it needs no introduction, the closing of the circle the street artist labo tributed to Keith Haring, an engaging greeting where subject and object coincide, within an aesthetic sublimation preventing the loss of sense, even when we are in a closed room and surrounded by urban experiences.

We believe that, within these mobile works of art, as well as in other similar works, *streetness* can be found; that is to say, a specific essence, connected with the unique path the single street artist chose to walk on, from his or her place in the universe of urban creativity, to be intended in a wide sense, towards a wider production capacity, bringing on a distinct teaching, considering the overall art and craftsmanship as well. The single authors, whose art is widespread as if it were a sort of common school, should indeed leave a mark, in its dimension as a worldly moment, and artistic phenomenon and an instance of cultural legacy, cross pollinating in a fruitful and not fragmented way other human, aesthetic, social and cultural dimensions, themselves able to significantly strengthen all the cornerstones of a wildly varied artistic current, now approaching its 50th year of age.



Fig.11 - 2019 artworks by DADO, ZEUS40 and IABO inside UrbanRoom expo



Fig.12 - 2019 artworks by VESPRINI, FLYCAT and LA FILLE BERTHA inside UrbanRoom expo