

Street Art is dead. Again and again.

Brief State of the (Urban) Art

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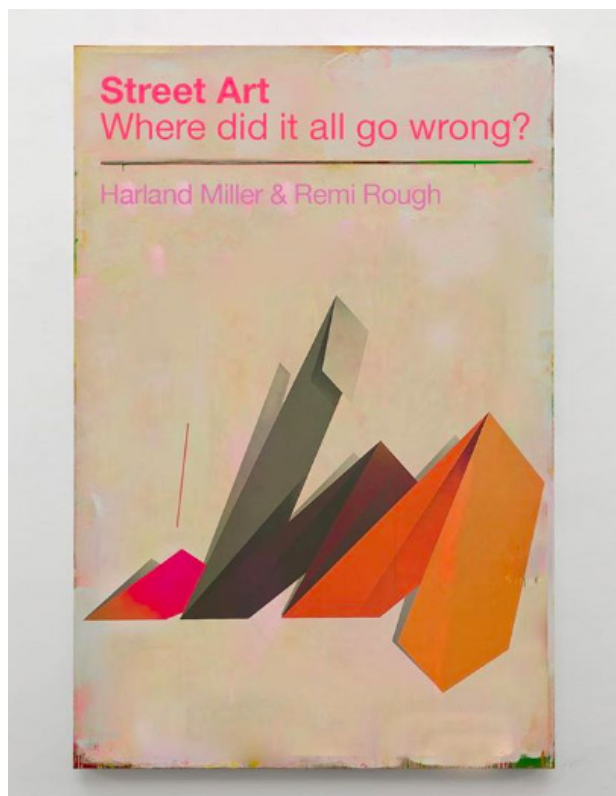


R.U.S.Co | Bologna 2016. Urban Recovery of Common Spaces: jam at the ex Zincaturificio Bolognese of Via Stalingrado in response to the exhibition '**Street Art - Banksy & Co. L'arte allo stato urbano**'. (photo credit: *M.Filippi*)

What do we mean today, in 2019,
by the label '**Street Art**'?

Is there really anything that still associate Mexican murals, New York tags and Brazilian pichação with festivals, exhibitions, fairs and millionaire auctions? What links the political and media performances of **Banksy** to the silent and detailed decorations of **Nespoon**, the enormous and spectacular installations of **Kaws** to the tiny and ephemeral characters of **Slinkachu**, or even the powerful vandalistic actions of **Brad Downey** to the shining live paintings of **Natalia Rak**?

'**Street Art is dead. Long live Street Art**', this was the title that the architect Giovanni Caffio, with a subtle polemic vein, gave to one of his books in 2012.



'**Street Art: where did it all go wrong?**' - Mockup by **Remi Rough** which simulates a collaboration with the English artist and writer **Harland Miller**, known for the series of paintings that reinterpret the covers of the classic paperbacks by the English publishing house **Penguin Books**. (photo courtesy of the author)

In recent years many scholars and experts have discussed the origins of the concept and the definition of Street Art, without getting to a shared and univocal version. Being an indefinite and complex phenomenon, but above all in the middle of its evolution, it appears objectively difficult to fix a date and agree on places of origin. It is certain, however, that the term appeared in literature as early as the mid-80s, when a young **Allan Schwartzman** published one of the first books on the subject entitled 'Street Art'. The book, absolutely pioneering, collecting the work of writers and artists from New York of the late 70s and early 80s in the expressive container of **urban creativity**, joins both the world of Graffiti Writing and that of Street Art. In the last chapter Sir Schwartzman already highlights the complex relationship between Street Art and Star System, citing artists and writers of the caliber of Keith Haring, Jean Michel Basquiat, Lee and Futura.

From this moment on, the official story of Street Art starts to be associated with that of Hip Hop, as well as cyclically claimed also by the followers of the Punk scene. But as **AAaron Rose** asserts in the pages of '**Beautiful Losers**', the truth is perhaps in the middle. It would be more correct in fact to speak in a generic way of a wider '**Street Culture**' made, not only of music, but also of fashion, skate, tattoo and much more. It is no coincidence that, a few years later, **Marco Tomassini**, symbolically responding to the work of Aaron Rose with the essay '**Beautiful Winners**', tries to highlight the origins of the phenomenon, between Punk and Hip Hop, and its growing and controversial relationship with the art market and institutions.

terror161
Follower: 5,198

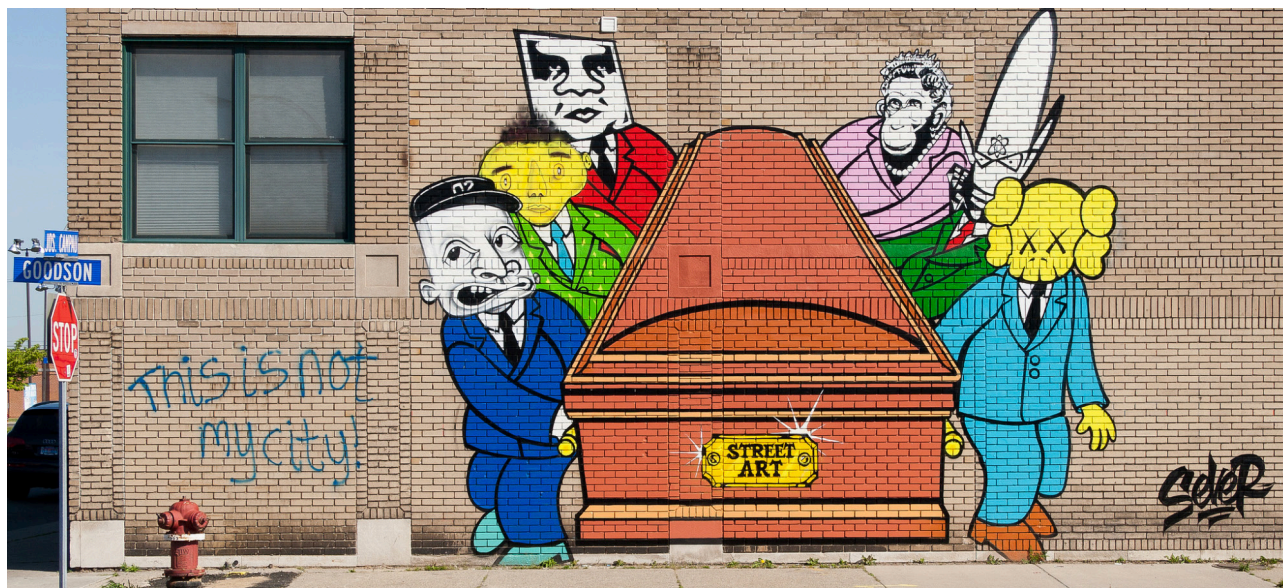
Visualizza il profilo



'Graffiti is not Hip-Hop': Rime MSK. Taking advantage of this statement, the American graffiti writer **Terror161**, active in New York in the 70s and 80s, maintains with many others, that graffiti is not to be understood as one of the '5 arts of Hip Hop' (MCing, DJing, Writing-graffiti, B-boying and Beatboxing) but that this interpretation is on the contrary partial and mainly created by the media for speculative purposes. (photo credit: Terror161 - Instagram Account).

If **The Crass** already sang 'Punk is dead' in 1978, we must wait until 2006 to have the specular 'Hip-hop is dead' through the rhymes of the American rapper **NAS**. The reasons of these extreme words, despite the temporal delta that separates them, appear very similar in consideration of the fact that over the time they have become mainstream and have progressively abandoned the values of their original reference. These genuine socio-cultural roots are considered in fact more traditional, pure and conventional, compared with the today's massified phenomenon, followed by a too vast, generic and distant audience.

The same fate then befell, more or less systematically, all the forms of art that experienced a rapid growth. Nothing strange, therefore, if for decades now, the same has happened to the world of Graffiti Writing and Street Art, historically and viscerally connected to the above-mentioned counter-cultural musical genres. They are, basically, the same motivations that, in 2012, pushed the street artist from Los Angeles **Sever** to paint on a Detroit wall a large coffin with 'Street Art' written on it, carried by its most popular exponents.



'The death of Street Art': **Sever**, 'This is not my city', Detroit Beautification Project, 2012. Carrying the coffin, with "Street Art" written on it, are, from the left, the iconic characters of Barry McGee, Os Gemeos, Shepard Fairey (Obey), Banksy, Futura and Kaws.

When a phenomenon born on the street becomes mainstream it is usually accompanied by a constant growth of variations, distortions, betrayals and aberrations compared with the original aspiration.

The first concepts to be affected, in the field of Street Art, were those of **'spontaneity and freedom'**, often associated with **'ephemeral and unauthorized'** actions: a Street Art considered 'free' and 'rebellious', distant from public or private commissions and from the blackmail of visibility.

But as it often happens, the business, always considered the greatest threat to all forms of **underground creativity**, came then to undermine the foundations of the phenomenon. This thesis is founded in the belief, probably simplistic and radical, that money may vary or even upset the spirit and the aspirations appreciated by the faithful and the nostalgic. The invisible hand of the market, inevitably arriving where the interest of the large public resides

and turning values into profit, soon transforms the self-production of street clothing into high fashion collection and the aggressive throw-ups into simple graphic patterns for mass production of consumer items.

Are we really living the era of that **'artistic capitalism'** mentioned by **Gilles Lipovetsky** in his **'The aestheticization of the world'**?

In this process the historicization of the subject by scholars and experts plays a decisive role: if in 1974 **Norman Mailer** and **Jon Naar** published **'The Faith of Graffiti'** in America, giving for the first time expressive and artistic dignity to the tags - the signatures of teenagers considered by the American public opinion of the time only works of mere graphic vandalism and urban decay -, it is in the last decade that there has been a real boom of thematic exhibitions and sector publications, from the **Tate Modern** to the **PAC** of Milan, passing through the **Nuart Festival** and the **Urban Art Fair** in Paris.



In 2018 the Swedish artist **André**, known in the international independent public art scene since the end of the 80s thanks to his personal character **Mr.A**, signed a whole clothing line for **Mango**, giving the Spanish clothing brand the commercial reproduction of his own alter ego.(photo credit: Mango, Punto FA, S.I., official social campaign).

The artistic upgrade of Street Art has led in the last two decades to an escalation of **street art thefts**, such as the striking examples of Banksy's works by now described in more than one documentary. Some other artists, such as the Italian **Biancoshock**, have even provocatively decided to offer online **free tool kits and tutorials on how to steal works of art in the street**. In Naples since 2005 the controversial photographer **Augusto De Luca** has been appropriating numerous works of ephemeral street art pieces with the declared purpose of preserving their integrity threatened by vandalism and atmospheric agents. In the same time between Denver and Catania, passing through Dordrecht and Rotterdam, **Daniele Pario Perra** offers **workshops for the removal and preservation of graffiti** [see *anarchetiquette*], symbols and signs, with the purpose of protection and private collecting.

Some have also requested substantial compensation for the unauthorized use of the image of illegal works in the commercials of multinational corporations [see **Revoc Vs H&M**], and others, more recently, have established, on the contrary, real schools for the management of thematic events, with lessons on the history of graffiti, modules on security of artistic sites [see **Oculus by Inward**]; there are those who have experimented '3D virtual painting', through live performances in galleries with immersive viewers [see **Street Levels Gallery** in Florence] and those who have animated huge murals with spectacular video mapping works [see **Rebecca Smith with Urban Projections**]. Finally, there are still those who, like **MAUA**, have proposed the hybridization with Augmented Reality technology, creating post-production experiences (in the sense described by **Nicolas Bourriaud**) that digitally revisit the methods of the 'Appropriation Art'.



In 2018 the Spanish artist **Escif**, invited to exhibit at the Palais de Tokyo, decided to set up an artistic incursion by creating his own augmented reality app called **Graffiti Yoga** which associated virtual contents to some graphic symbols, apparently meaningless, represented in paint on the walls of the exhibition space. Escif then carried out a further virtual vandalism by adding secret contents called **Tokemon Go** that overlapped the works on display signed by the other authors. (photo courtesy of the author)

All this has happened approximately in the last fifteen years, a period in which Street Art has experienced an unprecedented media echo and the economic interest has grown exponentially, bringing with it also **dangerous side effects** such as the gentrification and the privatization of public works. Exactly as for football, even for Street Art, we talk today about excessive economic evaluations and doped markets, but both in terms of prices and in terms of more commercial literature, **the scenario remains almost monopolized by the figure of Banksy**. It is no coincidence that the last major exhibitions in Italy, both in institutional and private locations, have been dedicated to his figure or have at least used his name in the title. Last, in chronological order, is the exhibition “A Visual Protest. The art of Banksy”. It was not authorized by the author and comprised over a hundred of his works including paintings, prints, photographs, videos, covers and stickers. Also on the occasion of this exhibition there was no lack of controversy from artists and enthusiasts, so **Mr. Savethewall**, a former sui generis company manager converted to urban art, decided to stage an artistic performance called ‘**Street Art is Dead**’, illegally pasting-up posters above the promotional

ones of the exhibition and revisiting Caravaggio’s “David with the head of Goliath” in a Pop key. This last signal shows once again that time is now ripe to start a trans-disciplinary, theoretical and methodological reflection on the subject of Street Art and to try to give an order to the large amount of values, effects and works produced in the last 40 years of activities.

In this regard it is interesting to note that even the italian **Treccani Encyclopedia** has felt obliged to explicit its own definition of ‘Street Art’ by proposing a section specifically referring to the “issues about the concept” in which it states:

“The global success reached by Banksy, in which the media recognize the totem of a new cult-art, catalyzes the process of promotional and commercial exploitation of the expression ‘street art’, today weaker and weaker in its indisputable meanings but very strong in the elements that relate it to a successful brand. This dynamic is provoking the effect of a progressive rejection of the term by artists and other operators gravitating around the field, who defend their independence and distance from speculative manoeuvres.”



In 2016 Palazzo Pepoli, in Bologna, hosted the controversial exhibition ‘**Street Art exhibition - Banksy & Co. L’arte allo stato urbano**’, curated by Luca Ciancabilla, Christian Omodeo and Sean Corcoran. The decision to remove and exhibit some of **Blu**’s works without his explicit consent, led the artist to create a performance during which, helped by friends and supporters, he deleted, covering them with gray paint, all the works he had previously made in the city. Emblematic was considered the choice not to cover the words “**Fuck Street Art**” appeared polemically a few months earlier on one of his murals. (photo courtesy of Michele Lapini)

With the intent to clarify terminology issues concerning the form, but above all the content, in 2018 **Rafael Schacter** (English anthropologist known as curator of the iconic and pioneering 'Street Art' exhibition at the Tate Modern in London in 2008, and author of "The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti" in 2013) writes '**Street to Studio**', a publication in which he reviews the work of 40 exemplary international artists, who, starting from a research mainly centred on the street, have landed over the years at a work more oriented and designed to be exhibited within the walls of the classic containers of art. In doing so, unsatisfied about the label 'Street Art', by now unable to describe the new nuances of the phenomenon, become too broad and nebulous, Schacter coins a new term: **Intermural Art** - literally 'art between walls' – a definition that in his opinion could hold together Graffiti Writing, Street Art, and Contemporary Art.

After all in the field of Graffiti Writing several terms have been coined to describe the most advanced components of the phenomenon such as the '**Graffuturism**' or the '**G-word**' label created by Swedish researcher Jacob Kimball in 2014 to satisfy those among the graffiti writers who do not even recognize the label 'Graffiti'.

But if the concept of **Post-Graffitiism** has been completely accepted in the last years and absorbed among the experts, can we say the same for the Street Art?

After the concept of **Neo-Muralism** borrowed from the Mexicans and appeared over the time in the wake of the gigantic pictorial works mostly authorized and made in the metropolises all over the world, will the term **Post-Street Art** be recognized and accepted in the next years?

Already in 2016 **Martyn Reed** used this label as the title of the exhibition he curated for the **Nuart Festival** in Stavanger, Norway.

Will Street Art close its doors - as **Angelo Milano** decided to do bravely some years ago, with the **Fame Festival** in Grottaglie, to safeguard its original values - or will it go on readapting to its own time, accepting case by case opportunities and risks?

To POSTERS the arduous sentence!