From 'either/or' to 'both/and': Some thoughts on graffiti and street art conservation, curatorial practices and the handling of cultural heritage

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Abstract

The institutionalization of street art and graffiti has been discussed a thousand times. My article takes the next step and asks: Are we not simply in charge of reevaluating the 'interventions' happening outdoors, be they commissioned or not, and integrating them into (fine art) shows, exhibitions and museum collections – with no attempt to plexiglass? The long-term perspective might be an equal treatment of commissioned and uncommissioned artworks, as well as the appreciation and self-confident exposition of their direct and unambiguous linkage. This article includes interviews with Pietro Rivasi (Italy) and Robert Kaltenhäuser (Germany) and refers to the 'BLU controversy' in Bologna, Italy. The text was written with regard to an exhibition that took place in Herne, Germany, where I contributed as a curatorial and scientific assistant.

Keywords:

Street Art and Graffiti Conservation, Urban Art Expositions, Urban Art Museums, Curatorial Practices, Cultural Heritage

Essay / Working Paper

Research is directed by trends. Some years ago, in the early 2000s, the academic street art world – still a very young discipline, if at all – began to think about graffiti and street art in a more elaborate and differentiated way. In the beginning, the academic world discussed graffiti and street art's similarities with other art forms, their unique characteristics and tried to find (general) definitions – or let's say *one* general definition – which, in principle, was doomed to failure. By around 2015, the academic world focused on the challenges surrounding street and urban art festivals, the creative city and gentrification processes. Today, a new 'trend topic' can be observed: graffiti and street art conservation, curatorial practices[1] and the handling of cultural heritage – although, and I want to highlight that, these issues rightly take an important position on today's academic as well as cultural, art historical, and political agenda.[2] In this paper I want to address these topics from an academic point of view of, as this is my background. At the same time, I want to keep in mind my new position as a curatorial assistant. Thus, rather than giving a condensed framework of answers, I try to address some questions that came up recently while working

on an exhibition that took place in Herne, Germany, in May 2017.[3] My aim is to open up a debate and invite, encourage and inspire people to join the discussion.

One of the most illustrative examples to introduce this topic is the controversy that surrounded the exhibition "Street Art – Banksy & Co. The Urban State of Art" in Bologna, Italy, where artworks by Italian artist BLU were taken down by the exhibition organizers without the artist's permission – using a novel technique[4] – and put on view in the museum (Kordic, 2016). As a direct and (un)ambiguous answer, BLU removed all his remaining artworks from the walls of Bologna. The action was said to be an artistic protest against the organizer's decisions and larger political controversies in Bologna in general (Kordic, 2016, quoting Omodeo). However that may be, this is not the main point here. Rather, I propose to refrain from the individual case and focus on more general questions – such as: How can we (re)present and expose graffiti and street art in an institutional framework or art space, if at all? And, in the long run: "What could be the role of a museum in the next future of urban art?" (Kordic, 2016, quoting Omodeo)

As I already indicated, these questions are not new.[5] However, what is new is the context and most likely the socio-cultural, -political and art historical urgency to reflect on these questions. When brought into museums and galleries on canvas, street art and graffiti 'pieces' are accused of losing their spontaneity, freshness, possible site-specificity, material characteristics and aesthetics. This is one of the most popular and frequent accusations that street art and graffiti artworks are faced with. Therefore, curators and gallerists – by no means all of them – began to include photos and videos in their expositions (to somehow reveal the performative aspects of these practices), as well as sketches, notes, installations, sculptures and interviews. These kinds of works serve as documentary proofs and as (in)dependent artifacts, often with own artistic aspirations and qualities. Accordingly, we are faced with curatorial practices that have already been applied much earlier – let us just think of land art, public art or performance art. Historical precursors do exist. My colleague and curatorial partner Robert Kaltenhäuser used to say: "You just have to look at land art, a better example hardly exists. If you think of Robert Smithson, for example, did they put 'Spiral Jetty' into a museum? No they didn't! But they used photography and video for documentation" (see also Bengtsen, 2014; Kimvall, 2016; Kwon, 2004; 1997). There is no doubt that photos and videos do not fully substitute or replace the original intervention, but they are somehow part of its 'afterlife' and contribute to its 'survival'.[6] If this is the case, and I'm convinced that it is, we should finally take the next step.

We all know that graffiti, originally, is an art form that is based on illegal interventions. While hosting an exhibition, it is not unusual for artists to also interact with the local streets. They leave their tags and pieces in the city while at the same time meeting the requirements of a fine art exhibition. In view of this, I therefore propose: *Why not simply invert the 'BLU case' in Bologna, somehow?* Instead of putting illegally painted artworks into museums, without the artist's final agreement, we could simply reevaluate the 'incidents' happening outdoors, be they commissioned or not. The long-term perspective might be an equal treatment of commissioned and uncommissioned artworks, as well as the appreciation and self-confident exposition of their direct and unambiguous linkage. Pietro Rivasi, curator of the exhibition "1984. Evolution and Regeneration of Writing" in Modena supports this fact: "When hosting a show, we as

curators and art critics cope with the task of explaining that the most valuable part of the artworks done by 'urban artists' remain the ones done 'unofficially' in the streets. So if an institution wants to have this kind of art in a show, they must deal with the fact that it belongs to the streets."[7] That's one of the reasons why Rivasi[8] decided to include some of the illegal interventions that happened in Modena (during the '1984' show) in the exhibition catalogue: a Fra32 piece in an underground train station and the "SI" intervention[9] by Zelle Asphaltkultur [fig. 1]. "These two pieces, together with the Olivier Kosta-Thefaine 'Jardin', are in the 4th booklet of the catalogue that is about 'site specific interventions'", Rivasi states, "one legal, two illegal; but with the same importance in the show."

This pioneering example shows that we are definitely in need of more dialogic and entangled thinking. Artworks, be they commissioned or not, should be recognized as an integral part of the artist's production, his or her artistic self-conception and the art form's discursive framework. Therefore, we are obliged to foster some kind of 'educational work' on behalf of these issues. People need to be (made) aware that "what they can see on the streets, and usually conceive as vandalism, actually can be art", Rivasi adds. In the long run, this approach may not only lead to a general revaluation of 'unauthorized art production outdoors', but to their inclusion into (fine art) shows, exhibitions and museum collections – with no attempt to plexiglass them in situ. At this point, my argumentative setting comes full circle with the 'Bologna show' – and I quote: "If you do it [an exhibition or show, KG] properly, you should not only show the art, but the dissent that this art form essentially carries within its nature." (Kordic, 2016, quoting Omodeo)

Although conservation is neither easy nor inexpensive – and a lot of people might argue that graffiti or street art should not be conserved, but exposed to its own dynamics on the street (crossing, buffing and disappearing included) – some actors have already began to adopt a more long-term approach: Looking at Stockholm, Sweden, great effort was put into an attempt to protect an iconic mural called "Fascinante" which was painted in 1989 by Circle and Weird (Abarca, 2016). The initiative, headed by Tobias Barenthin and Jakob Kimvall, was successful: The mural was declared as cultural heritage (ibid.). In Madrid a graffiti piece (of Muelle) even got restored professionally, in a quite elaborate

and complex way, with the support of the government (Colao, 2017). And, on April 4, 2017, Pietro Rivasi received the municipality's official confirmation of the acquisition of the "SI" painting by Zelle Asphaltkultur: "Together with all the photo installation we used in the show, it will become part of the permanent collection of the city's contemporary art museum, the 'Galleria Civica'. Nevertheless, the 'SI' painting will be left in place, without protection, respecting that it was painted knowing that it was ephemeral and site-specific. The idea is to have an illegal painting recognized officially and acquired in a public collection", Rivasi explains.

You are invited to join the discussion.

Fig. 1: Zelle Asphaltkultur, Ex-Fonderie Riunite, Modena 2016. Uncommisioned wall painting.

Notes

1. It must be highlighted that these topics, generally speaking, are not new; see for example Bengtsen (2014), Derwanz (2013) and Kimvall (2016).

2. "[…] [M]useums will soon include urban art in the collections. However, at the moment, there has not been a real analysis of how that should be done", Christian Omodeo emphasizes in his interview with Widewalls (2016). See also The Grifters Journal (2016a).

3. See Martens (2017): http://inherne.net/ungenehmigte-malerei-im-alten-wartesaal/.

4. The technique, originally invented in Bologna in the 18th century for restauration purposes (churches, frescos, etc.), allows to detach a painting from a wall and paste its skin on canvas (The Grifters Journal, 2016b).

5. See footnote 1.

6. Kimvall uses the term 'chronicling' to relate to the variety of photographic practices that surround an artwork. His aim is to emphasize that it is an active practice, not merely a documentary one (Kimvall, 2016).

7. A similar approach was applied in a street art exhibition that took place in Cologne, Germany: http://strassengold. org/konzept.htm. There, artists were explicitly invited to also interact with the local streets while being on display in the show – and they did. In return, there were no exclusion criteria regarding the exhibition. The only precondition was that they are active on the streets, on a regular basis.

8. In accordance with the artists.

9. "During fascism, in Italy there were some 'public propaganda interventions' that looked like 'street art'. The 'SI' is taken from a Mussolini 'propaganda work', rendering an (in)direct commentary on rightwing dictatorship", Rivasi explains. And Kaltenhäuser adds: "But it also works without the specific historical meaning, the bold 'yes' could be interpreted as an unconditional support of something."

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The conversation with Pietro Rivasi took place at the end of February 2017, on Facebook. It was a group conversation together with Robert Kaltenhäuser, with whom I also talked independently, while working on our exhibition project.

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