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Street Art and the New Status of the Visual Arts

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Abstract. This paper explores the «nature» of street art, highlighting its innovative features, the new socio-political status, and the differences between this emerging art form and dominant trends in contemporary visual art. This examination builds on the premise that artistic phenomena can only be considered from a critical perspective that situates questioning within a historical and specific gaze. Therefore, my aim is not to place this art movement within categorial boundaries, identifying the necessary and eternally true characteristics of street art, but to identify the motives and tendencies that constitute it as a movement that runs against the dominant orientations in contemporary art. Building on this comparative analysis, the *construens* part of this paper explores the salient features of street art more thoroughly and more extensively, through an examination of the works of certain street artists.

Keywords. Street art; Visual Arts; Walter Benjamin; Image.

This work aims to develop a reflection on street art, building on a question posed by Walter Benjamin in the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, where the philosopher claims that Dadaist art manifests, through its own expressive means, that which can be satisfied only by adopting the technical tools of filmmaking:

It has always been one of the primary tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come. The history of every art form has critical periods in which the particular form strains after effects which can be easily achieved only with a changed technical standard – that is to say, in a new art form. The excesses and crudities of art which thus result, particularly in periods of so-called decadence, actually emerge from the core of its richest historical energies. In recent years, Dadaism has amused itself with such barbarisms. Only now is its impulse recognizable: Dadaism attempted to produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today seeks in film. (Benjamin [1936]: 38-39)

The analyses developed by Benjamin in this essay on the “destiny” of painting¹ seem to trace a final phase of its history, where

¹ Consider the passage where Benjamin (*ibid*: 35) compares the painter to the

traditional arts give way to new poetic forms based on mechanical reproduction, filmmaking and photography. Echoing Benjamin, we can speak of the «past character of the traditional visual arts» – paraphrasing Hegel’s well-known phrase from his *Aesthetic Lessons* on art in general –: the progressive loss of value of such poetic forms, which goes hand in hand with the increasing separation of art from the world of life.

Nevertheless – as Hegel himself claims – paintings and sculptures are still being produced, such that, paradoxically, in response to the crisis announced by Dadaist art, there has been a proliferation of new pseudo-avant-garde movements in art: neo-Dadaism, Informal art, Action painting, Abstract expressionism, Body art, etc.. The birth of these movements is always accompanied by the announcement of a rupture with tradition – a decadent rite that is often celebrated «within the Museum ordered space» or in the institutional circuits of the art world:

The transformation of contemporary art is getting way too easy. A new trend is born and the next day it is already time to rush to its funeral; just enough time to fulfil such a sad duty, and immediately after we are informed that a new one will arise tomorrow. The expectation, as short as it may be, is worthily filled with the small chores of the moment: choice of a name for the new-born, determination of its favourable or unfavourable astral influences, the putting on alert of godparents and godmothers as well as with all due caution, all of those who will become inconsolable fans. (Urbani [1963]: 27, trans. by author).

Starting from Benjamin’s reflections and from the concerns manifested almost fifty years later by the art historian and conservator Giovanni Urbani about the destiny of the traditional visual arts, it seems urgent, in the present, to ask ourselves the following question: is it possible to find a way out of this? Is it possible to locate a terrain

enchanter. It is important to remark that the word «destiny» stands merely for «historical development», with no commitment towards a teleological conception of history, as may be found in Hegel.

of the visual arts whose products are able to arise and grow, to re-open the closed circuits of the art world, whose laws seem to be dominated solely by the logic of the exploitation of art itself? Given the development of visual productions in our time, may we hope that the last word on its destiny, and on its «sense of the past», has yet to be spoken? We can raise these questions without in any way intending to rescue the alleged purity of art from the mechanisms of market exploitation. Rather, they can be raised in the hopes of identifying and focusing on an artistic phenomenon the origin, existence and function of which are not primarily or uniquely legitimated and determined by the laws of the cultural industry – an artistic phenomenon that has the function of redefining and extending the boundaries of the art world, helping to bring its plural nature to the surface², and that constantly pushes the limits of this world through a movement of authentic transformation, the impulses of which lie in the irreducible otherness of the historical, social, political and natural world.

1. STREET ART AND THE REDISCOVERY OF THE MATERIAL DIMENSION OF ARTWORK

In the last decades of the twentieth century, a new constellation of visual productions came to light. This artistic movement was «defined more by real-time practice than by any sense of unified theory, movement, or message. Many artists associated with the “urban art movement” don’t consider themselves “street” or “graffiti” artists, but as artists who consider the city their necessary working environment» (Irvine [2012]: 235).

Defining «street art» by listing univocal and evident features is difficult because, in general, artistic phenomena defy unitary paradigms: absolute definitions are inadequate to express their complex nature. Like all contingent phenomena, they respond to what Aristotle defines as the law of what is «for the most part», «*epi to polu*» or

² We should start talking of «worlds of the art» instead of the «world of art».

«*anagkaion ex hypotheseos*», namely the tendency of «contingent phenomena» to be actualized in a certain way, a tendency that cannot be assimilated with «absolute necessity», conforming instead to the principle of «probability»³. Starting from this assumption of the contingent nature of art, I will try, in the following pages, to capture the salient aspects of street art. Above all, I will attempt to highlight those characteristics that constitute street art as a moment of radical breakdown, of discontinuity with respect to the orientations of what is called «contemporary art». To develop this argument, it will be necessary to start from the assumption that by «contemporary art» I do not mean a set of heterogeneous artistic tendencies that are linked merely chronologically, but rather a set of *tendencies* defined within a certain paradigm.

Street art has rapidly taken on global importance, incorporating the forms, styles and contents of heterogeneous aesthetic movements. Beginning as a form of protest art, it arose spontaneously from the urban fabric in an attempt to give meaning and *utterability* to social phenomena of alienation generated by the reality of life in big cities. Within urban reality, it has secured the materials with which to create its cultural and expressive project⁴. Its images often take shape in abandoned parts of cities, in crumbling structures, in architectural skeletons, and at times in places that are ignored and hidden from view. Locations in which the city reveals an image of urban development oriented by an economic logic and the law of the exploitation of territory, in which healthy cultural and life is not envisaged. Street art seems generated by these artefacts, which manifest themselves as inert material products or the waste of human technology and capitalist development, reshaping them and giving them new value within a cultural, political and communicative project:

³ See *Metaphysics* XI, 8, 1065a 4: «for all science is of that which is always or for the most part, but the accidental is in neither of these classes».

⁴ Riggle (2010: 243-245). affirms that street art is an art form that has developed in antithesis to the art world, a form of «post-museum art», at 246.

For contemporary visual culture, street art is a major connecting node for multiple disciplinary and institutional domains that seldom intersect with this heightened state of visibility. The clash of intersecting forces that surround street art exposes often suppressed questions about regimes of visibility and public space, the constitutive locations and spaces of art, the role of communities of practice and cultural institutions, competing arguments about the nature of art and its relation to a public, and the generative logic of appropriation and remix culture (just to name a few). Street artists exemplify the contest for visibility described by Jacques Rancière in his analysis of the «distribution of the perceptible», the social-political regimes of visibility: the regulation of visibility in public spaces and the regime of art, which policies the boundaries of art and artists' legitimacy. (Irvine [2012]: 236)⁵

The new phenomena of urban art burst like a moment of rupture from the trend, dominant in contemporary art, of self-determination on the basis of theoretical apparatuses and conceptual interpretations. They do so by leading production activities back to their privileged connections with the sphere of sensitivity and perception, redefining the forms of urban space in the direction of an explicit «socio-political value of visibility». A new status of aesthetic experience takes shape compared to the prevailing orientation of contemporary production, even though street art takes its images, styles, forms and techniques from postmodern culture in its entirety. The contiguity, from a stylistic point of view, of many street works with some contemporary art movement is evident. A noteworthy example is the affinity with Pop art; an affinity that is also evidenced by the biography of certain artists, such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who started as writers and street artists and soon joined the Factory. Artistic phenomena, like all social phenomena, are complex, pluriform, interconnected and contaminated in its

⁵ The redefinition of the visibility of urban spaces in socio-political terms is also highlighted by Bacharach (2015: 481). Bacharach identifies two characteristics that distinguish street art from the two forms of art that border it, i.e., public art and graffiti.

own origin. Identifying moments of rupture does not mean denying that there is also continuity and similarity between these phenomena⁶. However, one of the essential difference between street art and the other tendencies of visual art is the fact that it takes and combines all stylish elements of postmodern culture to use them as materials to be moulded and reinserted into the multifaceted, complex, stratified canvas of metropolitan.

Compared to the contemporary art paradigm, street art marks a break that consists in the rediscovery and rehabilitation of the artwork's material dimension (which goes hand in hand with its «post-museum» dimension). In an essay entitled *From Modernity to Contemporary: The Work of Art Beyond the Object*, Giuseppe Di Giacomo seeks to identify, beyond a chronological characterization, a founding paradigm of contemporary art, locating it precisely in the cancellation of the object produced by the artist:

Let's think of four emblematic moments that announce the advent of contemporary art: the urinal submitted by Duchamp in 1917, De Kooning's drawing, erased by Rauschenberg in 1953, the sheet of paper slashed by Murakami in 1955, and the void exhibited by Klein in 1958. All four exemplify the four major genres of contemporary art: Ready-made, Conceptual art, Performance and Installation. What they have in common, and, by the way, what is particularly unintelligible to those who adhere to the modern paradigm, is the fact that the work of art is no longer in the object proposed by the artist. That's because there is no longer an object other than the simple container (a sheet of paper, the walls of a gallery) and because the object has no more value or existence (one example is the «urinal», which, although it was lost, was never prevented from becoming an icon of contemporary art). The common point of these multiple ways of extending the work beyond the object is the narration that goes with their creation, without which nothing would remain, which is to say that contemporary art has essentially become an art of «story-telling» and that the object is

nothing more than a pretext for setting in motion the work of art. As a consequence, far from being reduced to its object material limits, the artwork is likely to become available to all sorts of interpretations, and it is this reality that needs to be expressed in order to enter the paradigm of contemporary art. All this pulls our attention to what inscribes the artistic work in acts that are not only means but that coincide with the realization of the «artwork»: a process that moves from the object to the act, where the dematerialization of the artwork to something informal takes place, its conceptualization inside the idea, its turning into the ephemeral matter of performance. (Di Giacomo [2014]: 3, trans. by author)

Such extreme freedom in art making, which emancipates itself from the «material limits of the object [and] is susceptible of enriching itself with all interpretations» - supported by contemporary art theorists - is defined by Urbani as the «slavery of freedom»: an obsessive and self-referential attempt to free the art making from previous forms, which leads to the extreme outcome of denying the existence of the artwork. The artist's freedom is translated, in a complementary way, into a presumed freedom of infinite interpretations that actually needs «instructions for use» - as Di Giacomo underscores - without which the intelligibility of the artwork would not be accessible, or, better, would not exist. Performances, Installations, Conceptual art, Happenings: they all reveal their ephemeral character, and the truth of the art passes from the object to the action, to the *making* that brings it into being. The truth of the artwork lies in the narration of the action that leads to its being. This narration allows for its diffusion, its reproduction and the perpetuation of its expositive value. However, this results not in the de-subjectivation of the work - as Di Giacomo claims - but rather in its total dependence on the attitude and the story that the artist makes of it, which often translates into a creation of the situation and the context in which the work itself was recreated, from time to time, in conformity with personal needs and, above all, with the needs of the market. Artworks that, in the words of Di Giacomo, *donate to thought* the infinite liberty

⁶ On the ties between street art and the artistic movements of the twentieth century, see Irvine (2012: 248).

of its interpretations are in reality transformed into pseudo forms of work that generate profit⁷ but have no utility whatsoever. The work of art is transported, reassembled and recreated from time to time in different venues, the only element that guarantees its continuity is the persistence of a subject's will, which belongs to the institutional apparatus of art (the artist, the gallery owner or the critic, who are capable of selling and giving visibility to the event wherever it is recreated). The existence of the artwork is secured by laws established by the same world, where the price of the artwork increases through procedures similar to those «operations inaugurated by hedge funds in the banking or fiduciary field» (Clair [2013]: 52, trans. by author). Clair then goes on to mention the market value of some works by artists such as Koons and Hirst; more interestingly, he remarks how the paradigm of the creative genius has been carried into the present days, and even strengthened: «just like God offers his body to mankind, the artist offers his waste, the slag of his own body under the heading of “artwork”, so that it may be revered as relics. Thus body humours, purulent drainage, sweat, sperm, blood, hair, nails, urine, and finally excrements, will be set up as objects of worship for the new believers, the connoisseurs of contemporary art». In order to exemplify this tendency, Clair questionably conflates Duchamp, Dali and Schwitters with Gina Pane, Louise Bourgeois, Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Win Delvoite, Piero Manzoni: «the list is endless».

Yet the former, and especially «the Dadaists turned the artwork into a missile. It jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile [*taktisch*] quality» (Benjamin [1936]: 39); with the latter, on the other hand, art seems to have fired that bullet at itself, or perhaps it has been playing with toy guns, outliving the repeated staging of purportedly unsettling or desecrating gestures, of clashes and shocks that paradoxically reproduce in an empty, deca-

dent, and self-referential repetition, set within the framework of a mechanism of cultural industry that Adorno characterized as the industry of mass entertainment: the bleeding body in Gina Pane's performances, the body exposed provocatively by Şükran Moral, and the famous Balkan Baroque by Marina Abramovic. And still: Nitsch's Dionysian orgies, Louise Bourgeois' psychoanalytic sculptures, all seem to be counterexamples to what has been said concerning the immaterial character of contemporary art⁸. The focus on the material character of the work has become a trait that defines certain currents of contemporary art, such as the Informal Materic art and New Materialism. Regarding her art, Kath Fries observes that «the New Materialism discourse sees one of its tasks as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality». Yet the trunks, the «living materials» that create trees, flowers, branches, with which Kath Fries is «interconnected», generate works that, when inserted into the space of the museum, provide us with an intellectualistic view of nature, a mummified nature, which the aseptic and uncontaminated spaces of galleries and museums seem to place on a “mythical” dimension in which our sensations are also canalized.

It is once again Jean Clair (2001) who provides us with a compelling reading of such phenomena, drawing from Agamben and centered on the distinction between *bios* and *zoe*. Elaborating on his analysis, we might say that body and flesh are employed in these performances in order to produce a sort of *aesthetization of bare life*: the human

⁷ On the relationship between artistic activity, market production and work as it has been determined in the United States since the 1950s and 1960s, see Steinberg (1972).

⁸ Lyppard (1973) introduced the concept of the «dematerialization of art» in the field of art history studies, circumscribing it to Conceptual art. This concept is understood in the context of this work in a broader and, in philosophical terms, deeper sense. A meaning that invests the status of the production of images in the post-modernity age. This is a much-debated topic: in this context, it seems appropriate to refer to Virilio (1989), who speaks of an «aesthetics of disappearance» and who claims that contemporary art has contributed to bending this phenomenon to the needs of the cultural industry. See Baudrillard (1981), who highlights the pervasiveness of image simulacra, in which it is always the dimension of contingency and otherness of the “real” that tends to disappear.

body, open to the outer world and to the *communitas*, is degraded to mere flesh, secluded within the bounds of an individuals' biological survival. The welding of art and market ultimately brings forth the image of bodies as waste, as suppurating, bleeding masses, bodies that call for the paying viewer's attention but emit no "words". Thus displayed and displaced in an aesthetic space, flesh is increasingly regulated by the laws of consumption aesthetics.

Productions of this sort certainly relinquish the traditional concept of artwork, as Emilio Garroni has pointed out in *Relazione interna, relazione esterna e combinazione delle arti* (Internal relation, external relation, and combination between arts), where he identified precisely this feature as the one that best characterizes contemporary art, without any privileged reference to specific works: such artifacts may well be said to exhibit «a sheer abandon, in the name of a manifold and heterogeneous agency which fades into random agency or into every day's heteroclitic reality» (Garroni [2003]: 239-240, trans. by author). Thus, the aesthetic space harbours a radical version of the traditional cleavage between appearance and essence, twisted in the shape of a radical dualism, whereby a multifarious, inarticulate, erratic physical world bursts into the sphere of art as unrefined material, which can only be processed into an image by virtue of meanings that transcend it. Such meanings "position" the image into the traditional and "imperishable" space of a museum, and/or within the media circuit, where they are soon swallowed up in a game of acquiescence and «theatrical showcase of contingent reality». Garroni concludes his essay as follows: «What we claim is not the rights of "art" – for we do not know for sure what art is, and in what form it is going to survive, if at all, and whether we should even wish that it survive – but merely the right to resist the inevitable dissipation and outright nonsense of daily contingencies, let alone their near-sacralization: the right, as far as possible, to understand such contingencies, to govern, rearrange, and *bestow a meaning* on them»⁹.

⁹ It must be stressed that Garroni does not share the unconditional rejection of contemporary art professed by Clair.

The *eidos* of the artefact is thus defined through a perfect correspondence between the «creative principle» and the laws that govern the world and the art industry, an *eidos* that is embodied in exemplary elements such as the caption¹⁰, the story of the artist's experiences and the nature and implementation of his or her creative process. Without the repetition of these subjectivist instances, which recreate the figure of the genius (in this case, produced by the art market), the work of art would disappear into the silence of its own senselessness. Therefore, the work is designed to muster its potential admirers, who actively take part in the life of the work in the role of consumers, recreating it, from time to time, within the various exhibition spaces. The alleged, radical freedom of artistic production, which produces a corresponding freedom of infinite interpretations, is translated into the strict conceptual constraint of the «illustrative leaflet» or the «instructions for use» provided by the artist; indications without which the work would produce only generic interpretations of the nature of art, valid for any other similar work.

With street art, artistic production marks a clear discontinuity with the status of contemporary art (as defined thus far), re-establishing the priority of the produced object. In this respect, continuity with the definition of *poiesis* that Aristotle provides in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI, 2, 1139b 1-3 and V, 4, 1140, 4-12), through the distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, is re-established. In this work, Aristotle affirms the «autotelical» character of action that is an end in itself, an aim in an absolute sense. The produced object is distinguished from the production process; once created, it possesses a proper autonomy in relation to the process of making and to the maker himself. This Aristotelian definition of *poiesis* has characterized the experience of art

¹⁰ «Caption» is the name of Alberto Garutti's retrospective at the PAC in Milan (2012). The title of the exhibition takes its name from one of the works specifically designed for the PAC: stacks of hundreds of colored sheets on which the artist has printed the captions of his works.

for centuries, even if in the ancient Greek context it did not imply a separation between art and the ethical-practical domain. These two spheres of human experience, while having a different essence, were at the same time constitutively connected. As previously noted, in contemporary art what becomes fundamental is the act of producing, the activity that leads to the coming to be of the work (in terms of Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes, constitutes its «efficient cause»): this replaces the work itself as the artistic object. With street art, we are witnessing a phenomenon that arises on the basis of a political-social condition that implies a limitation of the role of creator¹¹. The figure of the street artist takes shape when he manages to discover an origin that grounds his art in the architectural fabric of the metropolis and in the various phenomena of marginality and social hardship that the cities themselves create – cities that reveal their double face. On the one hand, there are city centres, which flaunt forms of economic prosperity through the way in which their spaces are inhabited, crossed, cared for, adorned, and pervaded by images that respond to a «taste» that is increasingly made uniform with the logic of profit. The law of economic exploitation has caused a rapid decrease in the wealth and plurality of social components that characterized them up to a few decades ago, resulting in the migration of less-well-off social groups to the outskirts. On the other hand, there are the suburbs, which reveal the dark, chaotic, shapeless and violent aspects of capitalist urban development. These take shape in architectural conglomerates that contribute to the creation of lifestyles characterized by isolation, solitude, and alienation – spaces designed for the survival of biological life, in which the forms of the urban landscape inure the sensibility of those who live there to segregation and detachment from social, political and cultural life. The dominance of the law of territory exploitation also pro-

duces a vast amount of garbage and architectural waste, especially in the suburbs, which becomes something of a landfill of capitalist urbanism with its buildings, industrial structures, and entire sections of decaying cities (in Italy, this process of abandonment and neglect has also unfortunately affected historical centres, strewn with abandoned buildings, churches, and historic gardens). It is from this dark matter and this potential nucleus, continually removed and pushed to the limits of our ability to give meaning to our inhabitation of urban spaces and our social and collective life, that street art was spontaneously generated – on a radically heterogeneous terrain with respect to the institutional circuits of art. It succeeded in re-establishing a constitutive correlation between aesthetic experience and the world of life, re-characterizing both in an ethical and political sense.

As we have seen, these new forms of production have among their basic characteristics the fact that the moment of the production of the work does not emerge as its primary factor. In the past, and frequently today, street artists paint on every artificial surface possible, breaking the law and trying to avoid the police. Their works often appear unexpectedly under our gaze or arise in the light of day as if from nowhere. The condition of possibility of the work itself and its semantic legitimacy become completely independent from the artist's explanation. Their origin presupposes as a condition the fact that the work alone speaks to its spectator because the artist cannot *promote* it or offer viewers a connected interpretation or attached «instructions for use». Text sometimes appears in street works as a title or a form of performative language, but it belongs to a composition in which the narrative dimension has a symbolic, iconic value – in which the synthesis and the sensitive form, not the conceptual narration, remains dominant¹².

Reconstituted as an original bond with the multifaceted and inexhaustible network of rela-

¹¹ Tomaso Montanari (2016) dedicated a meaningful article to Banksy (*Who is Banksy? The kind art of anonymity*), in which he debates the theme of the cult of personality in the art world.

¹² The idea that aesthetics is not able to access the essence of art is at the foundation of the thought of Danto (1981). The importance of aesthetic aspects in the works of street art is emphasized by Riggle (2010).

tionships that makes up the world of the artwork, street art productions live an «autonomous life» with respect to the production process that brought them into being and with respect to the activity of the maker. They live in that diffused and «distracted» reception¹³, which unconsciously and pervasively redefines the forms of our visual perception of urban spaces. Street art redefines them by giving them meaning, regenerating our relationship with the city, opening up symbolic and communicative glimpses in spaces where we usually experience the solitude and deprivation of the community and political dimension. The aesthetic experience that invades the urban fabric through street works produces a break with the usual and ordinary. However, this *non-contemplative* reception of works does not imply their dissolution into the indistinct and chaotic fabric of everyday images. By defining themselves through aesthetic values, in a completely different direction from a formalistic idea of art, they become distinguishable and *distant* from what appears usual and ordinary. At the same time, however, it is precisely this distance that allows these images to redefine and renew our experience and perception of the city.

It is true that the phenomenon of street art is progressively entering the traditional circuits of the art world. The works of street artists have entered museums and galleries, and the artists themselves have become protagonists of festivals. An emblematic example of this trend is undoubtedly the exhibition *Art in the Streets*, which was held at the MoCA in Los Angeles in 2011 and then subsequently at the Brooklyn Museum. This event brought together a hundred artists, exposing the history of graffiti and of street art from the 1970s up to today.

However, street Art has «entered» the institutional circuits of the art world, infusing it with new values, radically redefining its boundaries,

¹³ The well-known Benjaminian theorization of the «reception in distraction» that characterizes the reception of art in our age, but which «finds in the cinema the most effective instrument on which to practice» (Benjamin [1936]: 39-40), is appropriate for defining how we engage as spectators of street works.

and making it a reality intrinsically linked to the complexity and conflicts of civil society. This does not trivially mean that the artwork is inserted into a historical-social context, but rather that, giving meaning to what appears chaotic, formless and meaningless, it can redefine and deeply regenerate our experience, thus contributing to redesigning the essential traits and boundaries of our world. To see the world differently is to transform it: in this way, art expresses not only utopian values but also ethical and political ones. It is true that the utopian values of street art are sometimes expressed in naïve, controversial, unelaborated forms. The «iconographies of the marginal» (Branzaglia [2004]: 276) have flowed into it, sometimes taking the form of protest slogans, immediate expressions, lacking the interpretative skills, of social unease. But this is the physiological implication of its peculiar innovative and civil value, of its will to redefine the forms of the visible and the sensible not in the direction of a subjective experience (private and internal, which belongs to the sphere of inner life), but in the direction of refiguring the horizon of common, dialogic and intersubjective sense.

As noted above, street art operates in light of, provides a countermovement for, the dominant trend that characterizes contemporary culture, oriented towards the dematerialization of images:

Street art provides an intuitive break from the accelerated «aesthetics of disappearance», in Paul Virilio's terms, a signal-hack in a mass-mediated environment where what we see in the regime of screen visibility is always the absence of material objects. The placement of works is often a call to place, marking locations with awareness, over against the proliferating urban «non-places» of anonymous transit and commerce – the mall, the airport, Starbucks, big box stores – as described by Marc Augé. Street art is driven by the aesthetics of material reappearance. (Irvine [2012]: 239-240)

Street art reveals the postmodern aspects of the loss of aura, of the *hic et nunc* of the work of art. The character of a specific experience through production, linked to a place and time, is over-

come when it originates in interdependence with network and television culture: it is inserted in an expositive and reproducibility logic that pertains constitutively to its techniques (stencils and posters are exemplary in this regard). However, and at the same time, productions of street art are inextricably linked to the body of the city, to its material structures, to its contents, to its messages and the visual codes that it produces. Street works seem to be born spontaneously from the tumult of the symbolic universe of the city and from the inert materials that it uses and discards. Testimony and criticism of alienation, massification, serialization and the reification mechanisms of urban society, street art do not respond, as the traditional visual arts of the twentieth century did, through the creation of a separate, autonomous dimension (a dynamic that remains even when there is a tendency toward indistinctness between creative production and serial products); rather they respond via creativity with a political and community vocation.

2. STREET ART BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM AND THE MANIFESTATION OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Given the characterization of street work as a production that always arises in the material and specific context of the multiform, fluid, complex and chaotic fabric of the city, what kind of universality does it entail? What conditions lie at the foundation of its complex capacity to produce new forms by adhering to that indiscernible network of sense in which different cultures consist and, at the same time, to expand in a world in which globalization tends to uniformity and the annulment of the diversification of symbolic mechanisms? How is the ability to conjugate the universal and the individual, the contingency and the necessity, actualized in the works of street art?

As noted above, in these new forms of production, the aspect of diffused and distracted reception becomes dominant. This kind of reception is, according to Benjamin, an essential aspect of this

profitable process of the development of aesthetic experience, which consists in «politicizing art»¹⁴. The phenomenon of «reception in distraction» has been actualized in the works of street artists in the fabric of the suburbs, thus producing a profound mutation of techniques and, more generally, of the status of the traditional visual arts. Street works are made in a chaotic material context, aimed at an audience that lives and/or commutes primarily in the suburbs and in places of passage: overpasses, underpasses, building facades, crumbling structures, poles, pylons, garbage containers, street signs, fences, subways corridors. These spaces require that the images painted on their contaminated surfaces, observed by passers-by in a distracted manner, are designed according to techniques that make immediate communication possible. The attention of the spectator is captured by adopting techniques that are similar in certain respects to those adopted in advertising posters. However, these constructive procedures are adopted to unmask the underlying logic and to overturn political assumptions from within. For these reasons, street art has privileged and has rediscovered figurative forms, in contrast to the majority of contemporary art movements. It is true that some street artists have made non-figurative formal choices, but their works, not included in the museum circuits (in which a conceptual, contemplative and reflective reception of the work can be expressed), arise in the urban context as a mere formal exercise, a work of design.

On the other hand, it is also true that the figurativeness of street works often takes on a cartoonish style, since the techniques, imposed by

¹⁴ Benjamin counterpoises the phenomenon of the «aestheticizing of politics» on the one hand with «politicizing art» on the other, seeing in the first a tendency to make technological reproducibility an instrument in supporting, legitimizing and increasing the power of the dominant classes, and in the latter he sees a means that can contribute to the emancipation of the subordinate classes, a means of exerting criticism of the perpetuation of power: «Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art». (Benjamin [1936]: 42)

the material conditions in which the work is produced, tend to simplify forms. This is a limit that sometimes leads to naive and unelaborate images; at other times, however, it borrows an expressive and dreamlike power from comic books. The latter is the case with the French artist Seth – with his child-like visionary images – whose works are painted on the walls of the Rome metro¹⁵.

I have already highlighted the global and international character of urban art, combined with its ability to take root in specific situations and in the material conditions in which images are produced. The universality of contemporary art language is based, in analogy to the formal languages of science, on a progressive dematerialization of the artwork, until it seems to cancel itself in the void of mere self-reflexivity and to remove any contamination from the sphere of *praxis* and from the sensible dimension.

The «action» and «event» character of contemporary artwork, which is located in the contingency of its being recreated in different times and spaces, is in reality only a simulacrum of becoming and mutation, because its actualization is determined mostly from the pervasive and reifying laws of the globalized art market. Its relationship with the public is a receptive dislocation that condenses the work, channelling it towards a paying spectator. The visibility, the tactility, and the spatial-temporal dislocation of the work are not meant to construct a «different imaginary» compared to that which is aligned and standardized by an aesthetic of consumption, and indeed these seem to contribute to the perpetuation of commodity fetishism.

The example of the French street artist Seth shows us how street art has inserted itself into the globalization phenomenon, conjugating it with the ability to interpret the identity forms of cultures



Rome (Fig. 1)

and of places, which redefines visibility and on which, at the same time, his images are inscribed.

Seth's children explicitly thematize the original dimension from which philosophy and art are born: the attitude of amazement and wonder – the *thaumaston* to which Aristotle, in the first book of his *Metaphysics*, traces the birth of philosophy and which, in *De Partibus Animalium*, he describes as a cognitive feeling that grounds *mimesis poetike* – that dimension in which the essential questions are continually proposed, removed from the sphere of daily existence, which concerns our being in the world. Thus the child is able to discover and free the many forms of nature, its birds and its colours, within the cement landscape: colourless, bleak, the non-place of the corridors of the Rome subway, which incorporates those who pass through it, people on the horizon of an alienating *techne* which creates a radical rift between the human world and the natural world.

Seth, like most street artists, is a wandering artist, a traveller who explores places through a gaze aimed at giving visibility and sense to what remains hidden from our perception. Even where the urban landscape has become a place of ruins, evidence of the degradation, the violence, and devastation of the capitalistic development of the city, a spectacle that meets us with chilling silence, even here, through art, emerges the ability and willingness to communicate, the stubbornness of

¹⁵ In 2014, the association 999Contemporary and Atac carried out a project in the subway, in particular in the corridors of the Piazza di Spagna station. The walls of these corridors became the background for 14 works, occupying a total of 400 square meters of surface. Several famous French and Italian street artists took part in the project, free of charge.



Shanghai (Fig. 2)

not wanting to succumb to that dark and chaotic evil which resists all attempts at interpretation. The indistinct and widespread groan of down-trodden children, which cannot take the form of speech, finds on a patch of wall, which stands among the rubble, a medium and place on which to become language through art.

The image assumes the capability to interpret and discovering the peculiarity of forms - or of what appears as shapeless and chaotic - that different cultures have produced, adhering to the material context, to radically different sensible situations, to revealing and reinventing infinite worlds through art.

The imagination of the children as a way «to escape» from dominant reality isn't a manner to seek refuge into a dream-like dimension, but a way to oppose the violence of the capitalist development of cities that destroys the old



Shanghai (Fig. 3)

neighborhoods where traditional forms of life still survive.

Shanghai: the children and the pervasive, implacable violence of capitalist development of the city. The children and the violence of the segregation and the war: Seth at the Aida Refugee Camp, Bethlehem, Palestine. The girl gives/owns the key to the border wall.

The wall of a building in the refugee camp of Aida. Gazing over Palestine, the child kneels next to a door that opens to the roof of a building. The image is situated in a border area between the devastation produced by man and the sphere of freedom, which opens up to the sky and which, according to mythical tales, is symbolized through



Bethlehem (Fig. 4)



Bethlehem (Fig. 5)

the flight. This flight directs our gaze towards the ideal and the possible, towards the utopia that provides us with the image of another story. Are these pigeon-travellers messengers of peace or of war?

These works by Seth tell us that the essence of art is disseminated far from the institutional places¹⁶, far from the hyper-sponsored architectures of contemporary art museums, with their aseptic spaces and uncontaminated by the richness, plurality, and multiformity of «reality», which seems to come only in the form of celebrating the reification of world. These works tell us that we find the essence of art far from the closed places where, in a reiterated way, the self-referential rite of its narcissistic incommunicability is celebrated; we find it in *praise of a restlessness* of which Chatwin was the narrator.

If changing the world means imagining it differently, then street art takes this leap into the imaginary, distancing and suspending itself, effecting a rupture with the habitual, with the real experienced as the omnipotence of the existent, with the reified world perceived as a totality of manipulatable entities, with reality as a system built by simulacrum images. But the jump into the imaginary is, at the same time and paradoxically, a movement of distancing and belonging, a creative and reflective act, which does not produce a

¹⁶ Nevertheless, Seth is an artist who exhibited his works in a museum (e.g., the exhibition *Like Child's Play*, at MoCA of Shanghai, 2017).

dualism between image and reality but creates a heuristic force capable of continually extending the boundaries of our world, freeing resources of meaning from within, discovering unexpressed potentialities in it. It is in this capacity to invent, to create worlds by interpreting and taking root in situations and social, political, urban, geographical and environmental contexts, that street art reveals both its utopian and its realistic aspects. And it is in this attitude of continually referring to otherness that its ability to open itself to dialogue is based: that language modality that intertwines the singular and the universal, without ever reducing the one to the other.

3. THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT TAKES SHAPE IN THE IMAGES OF STREET ART

In the previous section, I referred to works located in the urban reality of Rome. This is because my primary aim is not to engage in debate on the most important street artists but rather to show how this form of art is connected to the material world of the city. Rome, in this sense, can be seen as a specific but exemplary case of the way in which this connection has now developed. Over the past years, many of its suburban neighbourhoods have become the centre of the street art world¹⁷. I have chosen to start with Rome's urban reality, however, in part because this setting poses in an exemplary way a question that, from the Renaissance onward, but especially from the modernist avant-garde until today, has become salient to both the production of and reflection on art, namely the problem of dialogue between the art of the past and that of the present, the relation-

¹⁷ For example, the project *Big City Life* was realized in the Tor Marancia neighbourhood (2014), the project *SanBa* was set in San Basilio (2014), and *M.U.R.o* was realized in the neighbourhoods around Casilina Street (2010). The project *Big City Life* was selected as an entry in the International Architecture Exhibition of Venezia. *Artribune* recently described Rome as the European capital of street art.

ship that exists between tradition and contemporaneity – starting from the modernist avant-garde, has become problematic and difficult.

The Roman routes of street art offer works that are particularly significant from this point of view. Here I am referring to the productions of Borondo, a Spanish street artist, whose works often reproduce images from classical mythology, for example, the myth of androgynous (taken from Plato's *Symposium*), the myth of Narcissus, or the Pietas. This revival of tradition is achieved not only on the level of content but also on the level of form and style. The human figure, which is the constant subject of Borondo's images, is composed according to a revival and transfiguration of the classical canons, recalling a figurative tradition in clear discontinuity with contemporary production. Incorporated into his art is criticism of the trend, characteristic of our age, of removing history and of sacrificing the forms of our past in the name of a fictitious conception of progress and the improvement of our cities and living conditions.

Borondo's training was carried out in connection with the activity of his father, who was a restorer; in this way, Borondo has brought the images of his memory to the spaces of the city. This memory is marked by classical paintings, by the harmony of proportions and lines, and by drapery. Using contour lines, at times incisions or scratches on glass, Borondo defines bodies that combine the expressionistic drama of colour spots with classical figurative harmony:

In his works, initially, he used to trace outline lines as if they were real preparatory sketches, but now the lines have been replaced with scratches which «frame» the stain obtained with the paint and laid with the roller. The discovery of the roller is a further step that has allowed him greater speed, uniformity and compactness. It has become his brush, and his works appear airier, the lines more expanded and aimed to cover large portions of space¹⁸.

¹⁸ Sabina de Gregori, from the exhibition Catalog Isterofimia, Borondo (trans. by author).



Rome (Fig. 6)

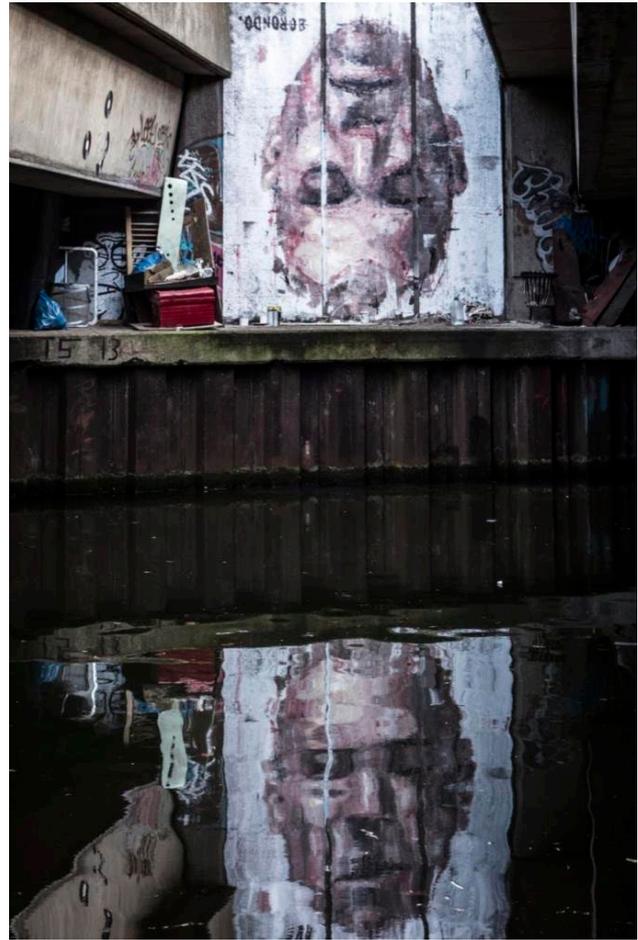
The images created by Borondo undermine the unitary composition of forms through a process that is realized, primarily, by the fusion between the pictures and the peeling, irregular, discontinuous architectural surfaces on which the works are made. This «dissolution» of forms is accomplished, moreover, through the mode of distracted reception, often fragmented and disturbed by obstacles, people, and machines placed between the observer and the image. The result is a work in which the forms of the past authentically become our contemporaries in a dialectical conflict that is a dynamic of distance and presence, the familiarity and extraneousness of the past. The images of the past thus live in our everyday life outside a museological and conservative conception, that tends to mummification and objectivation of our tradition.

The result is that images of mythical stories, forgotten or unheard of by most passers-by, appears before our eyes. The picture of the Platonic myth of the androgyne appears on the façade of a building, home to the Italian gay association Arcigay.

The artwork was produced on an irregular, peeling surface made discontinuous by electric wires and by a door located between the unity/duality of the figure: elements that are constitutive of, not extrinsic to, its truth. It is also «contaminated» by writing, incorporated into the vision of advertising posters, a railing, and

cars parked outside the entrance of the building. The deconstruction of the formal and compositional tradition becomes constitutive of the truth of the work, both at the time of its production and at the moment in which it is returned to the world of the spectator, in the locations of its reception. But Borondo's work, with its reference to classical images, in both style and content, does not renounce its task of «synthesiz[ing] the heterogeneous»¹⁹, the act of composing that identifies and gives form, gives sense and meaning, to our experience. The image of street art traces a form that constitutively reopens and exposes itself to the complexity of the world with which the artwork merges, redefining its boundaries of sense.

From Rome to London: the myth of Narcissus. Because the work is produced on a section of wall between two large bridges, the observer is able to see the image in the mirroring water that reflects it. This work is exemplary of an image's ability to insert itself and interconnect with the surrounding architectural structures, which is typical of all street work. The painted face is inverted on the wall, appearing upside down on the surface, but the reflected image, when observed from across the river, returns the image of Narcissus to a «natural» orientation. In this way, we perceive that the representation that is closer to «human reality» is precisely the reflected image, which takes on blurred and evanescent outlines. The theme of the double and of the mirror goes together with the narrative of human pathological degeneration when the dimension of the *Other* is nullified. This theme transmits to us what is constitutive of human existence, and of the otherness that marks it essentially, rendering the boundaries of its identity fluid and evanescent. This Narcissus has his eyes closed to the world, but the inability to look «outside» at the same time implies the impossibility of recognizing and understanding oneself. Borondo's work allows us to participate in a truth about the human condition and the way in which



London (Fig. 7)

we stand in the world: the definition of our existence, indeed, is marked by radical otherness and contingency.

4. THE SOUL AND INORGANIC FORMS

Let us return to the underground of the Piazza di Spagna. Just before the branch of the road that leads to Villa Borghese, a few meters from the dreamlike figure of a child who releases colours of nature, we find the uncanny images created by Eron, certainly one of the most interesting street artists on the international scene. The artwork is part of his project *Soul of the Wall*: in this case, the work represents peeling and rusty signs bearing the inscription «for sale». A halo of rust drips down the walls below, revealing fuzzy

¹⁹ In order to define the *mythos*, Paul Ricoeur ([1983]: 110) borrows this expression «*synthèse de l'hétérogène*» from Aristotle.

and ghostly human faces. These are images of the souls of those who have crossed these corridors, with their burden of suffering, of love, with the weight of everyday worries, and of those who have stopped in these places seeking refuge or a place to die. The rust, executed by Eron's spray paint cans, causes the invisible traces of memory to appear; traces which do not manifest themselves in our daily, direct perceptions of things. On the walls appear images of ghosts, mysterious, impenetrable presences that evoke an unfathomable and abysmal dimension. The nuanced technique, masterfully realized with spray paint, creates images that seem to be spontaneously generated by the walls. These pictures are a testimony to the erased identity of the space, which bears the traces of those who have inhabited and walked through it, erased by the conditions and the rhythms of reifying life - in which man has also been put on sale, himself now a commodity - all of which create silent victims, sacrificed to the laws of capitalist exploitation.

Still in Rome, on the occasion of a conference on graffiti and street art held on 9 April 2016, Eron created a work on the wreck of a boat found in a shipyard in Rimini and transported for the occasion to the courtyard of Palazzo Mattei, home of the Treccani Institute. With the same technique used to create the pictures in the Rome subway, Eron created the work *Soul of the Sea* live, on the side of this wreck. The work depicts the faces of women and refugee children who emerge like ghosts, evanescent creatures against the rusty hull, a memory of the soul of our seas, a testimony to the losers and the victims of a story that may never be written²⁰.

These images of ghosts (*phantasmata*) seem to refer not only to the soul of places, of things, of people and of history, characterized by strong ethical and political values, but to conditions of possibility of artistic production.

Through Eron's images, reality transpires, filters through walls and surfaces, as a revelation



Rome (Fig. 8)



Rome (Fig. 9)

²⁰ The phenomenon of migration is one of the most represented themes in street art; see Al-Mousawi (2016).



Rome (Fig. 10)

of what is not commonly seen, something hidden from our habitual experience, something not evident or certain but ambiguous and disorienting; a trace that art has an ethical and political duty to represent and that the spectator has a responsibility to interpret. Paradoxically, the artwork's characteristic trait seems to be the manifestation of the unrepresentable, explicitly proposing, in its language, a fracture, a hiatus, the sign of a difference that always recurs and whose meaning can never be saturated by a definitive and exhaustive interpretation. This inexhaustible reference to otherness is characterized in the works of Eron by a strong ethical value. In the *Soul of the Sea* cycle, the horror of the deaths at sea refers, on the one hand, to the astonished suffering that cannot be put into words yet that, paradoxically, calls on us to fulfil the duty of «testimony» (Montani [2004]: 19). For this reason, the reflective aspects of these productions, which refer to the essence of art, emerge only in interdependence with the dominant ethical-practical implications and heteronomous character of the images.

CONCLUSION

In his 1936 essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger wrote about the Hegelian claim regarding the character of the past of art – the claim that «the last word is not yet said» – waiting for the advent of a new way of being medi-

ated by the poetic word. In the same way, we can affirm by mirroring and answering, after so many decades, Benjamin's thoughts on painting and the painter as expressed in his essay *The Work of Art in the Era of its Technical Reproducibility*, where he observes that painting no longer has the character of the past thanks to the birth of street art. This new constellation of visual phenomena has been able to gather and to give a certain form (one that is extremely heterogeneous, complex, and dynamic) to the emergence of a whole mass of aesthetic and symbolic manifestations, which contribute to creating the articulated, complex and chaotic fabric of our city. The identities of our cities and our historical centres are constantly changing, especially as a result of globalization and migration. One of the fundamental tasks assigned to art, and which street art has made its own, is to challenge itself with the problem of interculturality and «aesthetic contamination» (Contini [2009]). Artistic experience is able to extend the horizons of sense – as they emerge from the work – to radically redefine the way we look at the world and to regenerate our experience, the power to see reality and history in terms of their unexpressed potentialities: today, all this is historically determined as a need to confront the intercultural nature of art. This area of human experience can indeed constitute a valuable instrument for expanding, deepening and transforming our understanding of cultural boundaries; understanding through which may emerge an individual and cultural identity that is plural, «contaminated» and dispersed. Art thus becomes an experience in which the challenge of encountering the otherness and unfamiliarity that constitutes us as human beings becomes a task that we consciously assume and a responsibility that involves us daily. This assumption of our human condition leaves us bewildered, strangers in the world, beings whose definition is marked by an endless search, a process that never finds a definitive goal, because it is continuously handed over to the sphere of otherness in its many forms: another thing, another man, another language, another place to which we are always «hostage» and in which man has always been «hosted» and «welcomed». We inhabit a lan-

guage and a culture that is entrusted to us by the other and which we donate to the other; thus our identity and our culture become a sort of phantom that we build through «waiting without horizon of a language that is able only to make itself wait». (Derrida [1996]: 94)

The visual arts, in their contemporaneity, have responded to this challenge through a form of «colonial violence» that attempts to universalize the abstract and empty language of contemporary art, which is meant to enter the global market and to be enclosed in the circuits of art hypermarkets²¹. The nomadic culture of street artists (a culture of boundaries and difference) responds to this derive, building its proper universality on radical, historically and spatially determined, alterity, a radical alterity that makes us feel like strangers to ourselves and our world, at the same time perennially in dialogue and familiar with every possible «other», with whom we share our vulnerability and our constitutive contingency.

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²¹ Huang Yong Ping, one of the most famous artists of the contemporary scene, has introjected into his art the themes of globalization and cultural differences. His work *The History of Chinese Painting and The History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987-1993), that marks the starting point of his career, reveals its meaning in the long and explicative title already. The theme of the relationship between cultures remains a constant of this artist (also for biographical reasons: 1989 immigrated to France). In the last Maxxi exhibition dedicated to him, Huang Yong Ping shows his work *Travel Guide for 2000-2046, La Charte du Monde* (2000-2001). This work represents the earth as having been cut and peeled like a fruit and skewered by copper needles, each with a label indicating the chronology of future disasters. The Prophecies are inspired by the book *The Future Century* by Li Yu (1993) and highlights future threats such as earthquakes and droughts, wars and conflict.

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