Introduction. Street Art: Iconoclasm and institutionalization

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On the night of May 12, 2016 the street artist Blu, armed with a roller and some grey paint, set out to paint over all the works he had done in the city of Bologna. In this intent, the following day also, he was helped by activists from the community centers, his own collaborators and ordinary citizens united in an informal community that upheld his cause. Many others gathered either to celebrate this rite of destruction or to complain in disbelief, but in any case, to watch as it happened. Attention centered particularly on #OccupyMordor, a large mural that dominated the XM24 (an occupied social community center in the Bolognina district) which had previously been a focus when citizens mobilized to protect it from new building projects that envisaged the destruction of the building (July 2013).

The artist's statement appeared in a post sent to the Wu Ming Foundation blog and explained that the event was a response to the exhibition *Street Art - Banksy & Co.: Art in the Urban Form*, set up by Fabio Roversi Monaco and Genus Bononiae with the support of the Carisbo foundation. The exhibition opened on March 18 and also displayed some works by Blu, including three that had been removed from the location where the artist had created them to protect them from destruction and to preserve them as objects of artistic and cultural heritage. It was immediately apparent that Blu's act was political as well as artistic. Blu had already acted similarly in Berlin. On the night of December 11, 2014, facing the relentless gentrification of the city, Blu had erased two of his most famous works, "Brothers" and "Chain" that had occupied two huge walls on Cuvrystraße since 2008, had become symbols of the Kreutzberg district and were recognized by residents and tourists as well.

Street art is a form of discourse in the urban space; a form of clandestine art, that is both ephemeral and illegal. The life cycle of such art obeys the rules of the street and is subject to the weather, the city's cleaning policies, and to anyone who may choose to paint over or remove a work. This is not the first time street art has been radically at odds with the processes of institutionalization and preservation of works by institutions. Yet Blu's act has created an unprecedented uproar and sparked an international debate not only about the artistic but also the social value of street art, questioning its relationship to

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the space where it is created, and to the communities it affects. The event has divided public opinion into two camps; even the community of street artists has been split in its reaction to the act, to the extent that some have harshly criticized Blu for wrongly "re-appropriating" works that had been given to the community. A counter-exhibition was organized by the Associazione Serendippo that ran at the same time and thus appeared closely related to this theme (see: www.bolognastreetart.it/r-u-s-c-o-via-stalingrado-bologna-street-art/).

Social sciences have shown great interest in street art and graffiti-writing since the phenomenon first appeared, triggering analysis and considerations from philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists. As early as 1973, Jean Baudrillard's interpretation recognized the outbreak of an insurrection of signs ("*Kool Killer ou l'insurrection par les signes*"), while the reflections of Michel De Certeau and his research team in *L'invention du quotidien. Arts de faire* (1980) focused on the sociopolitical dimension of a phenomenon previously considered as an individualistic and egocentric action.

In Italy, reflection on street art began in the 1980s when the Bologna University School of DAMS -Drama, Art and Music Studies- became a reference point for the study and criticism of the phenomenon, in the wake of Francesca Alinovi's research, that led to the organization of the exhibition *Border Art. New York Graffiti* in 1984, which brought a talented collective of New York artists and graffiti writers to Italy for the first time.

In recent years, Italian semiotics has approached street art from a reflection on urban space and the resemantization practices that run through it. Some examples are issue 8 of *Carte Semiotiche* (2005) devoted to "The semiotics of space" edited by Paolo Bertetti, the volume *Senso e metropoli. Per una semiotica post urbana* edited by Gianfranco Marrone and Isabella Pezzini (2006), the collection *Palermo. Ipotesi di semiotica urbana* published in 2010 and the special issue of the journal Lexia, *Writing the city. Graffitismo, immaginario urbano e street art* (No. 12, 2013) edited by Roberto Mastroianni. In 2015, Marcello Faletra's book *Graffiti. Poetiche della rivolta* came out, in which the author commented on Blu's act, calling it "one of the most meaningful images of the disappearance of contemporary art" that symbolically opposed the fetishism of the image.

Blu's destruction of his work in May 2016 again placed Bologna at the center of international attention, making not only the academic world reflect on street art. The subject has in fact become a topic of collective interest, involving directly private citizens, institutions and movements in Italy. A lot could be said about what has happened this year and what is happening these days in that corner of Bolognina, a "difficult" area, on the border between futuristic urban reclamation projects and immigrant communities- and only those immigrants who have been resident for a considerable time are completely integrated into the urban fabric. In the middle of all this, there is a space, a former fruit and vegetable market, which was occupied many years ago, was "saved" by miracle and is now again in danger of being knocked down. The occupied social community center in this area, XM24, was given notice to quit some months ago,

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but is still there, although we do not know for how much longer. There is also a wall, the material support for #OccupyMordor by Blu, that covered at least another two previous works by Blu, which then became a mousy grey wall covered by scrawls and at the moment of writing hosts (but we do not know for how much longer) a new mural painted by XM crew.

This narrative of an evolving situation is a prerequisite and a necessary update that forms the framework for issue 18 of *Ocula* that we are presenting here. A year ago, we asked experts in the fields of semiotics, philosophy, sociology and art history to use a single case to reflect on the themes of *musealization, transmission and preservation* of street art inasmuch as it is a resemanticization of space that is intended to be born, live and (in many if not all cases) die in the street. The authors have investigated the many contradictions of this phenomenon: illegality and institutional recognition, anonymity and authorship, ephemerality and conservation, trying to respond to our questions: Who does street art belong to? How is it expected to evolve? Can street art and graffiti writing be preserved? And how? What is the relationship between street art and new media?

The first two essays that we present, by Michele Martini and Francesco Mazzucchelli, take a close–in-depth look at the *affaire Blu* in relation to the street art exhibition promoted by Genus Bononiae.

In the essay *Tragedia di un artista di strada. La pratica della cancellazione da eutanasia artistica ad articidio (Tragedy of a street artist. The practice of erasure from artistic euthanasia to articide),* Martini provides a detailed analysis of #OccupyMordor to trace the author's universe of values and to understand better the author's reaction to an unauthorized musealization attempt. In a conflictual relationship with the city authorities and in a dialogue-based relationship with the urban setting, Blu seems to incarnate many contradictions of street art, which led him to a radical decision: deleting all the works that he had previously donated to the city (or which the city had already commissioned from him), in a sort of artistic euthanasia, an "articide" that in Martini's interpretation takes on aspects of tragedy, a "classic" tragedy that is reminiscent of the act of Medea, who killed her own children not in order to make Jason change his mind but in order to confirm a unilateral severance and a non-functional negation. Blu's act is in this sense an iconoclastic act but with specific features that Martini defines as "an emancipation from a betrayed relationship", a unilateral breaking off of the dialogue and conflict with the city of Bologna.

Mazzucchelli's essay entitled *Street(icono)clashes. Blu vs. Genus Bononiae: un caso di iconoclastia urbana (Street(icon)clashes. Blu vs. Genus Bononiae: a case of urban iconoclasm)* is also dedicated to the Blu case. This analysis of #OccupyMordor compares two forms of urban space, two divergent images of the city that become manifest in the museum narrative and in the narrative "of the street". The musealization of certain works in the exhibition curated by Christian Omodeo and Luca Ciancabilla for Genus Bononiae is in reality only one, albeit significant, aspect of the multifaceted conflict regarding street art. This is an aesthetic conflict, a conflict of values, a political con-

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flict that involves restive citizens, street artists who do not intend to give up their freedom to use the spaces and walls of the city for their works, an often contradictory City Hall that sponsors some forms of street art whereas it determinedly hinders others. In fact, an exhibition of street art in a museum setting is bound to unleash yet another conflict about the value and actual ownership of works "donated" by artists to the community. As Omodeo also emphasizes in an interview with Silvia Viti that we have published in this issue of *Ocula*, the curators of the exhibition have always been conscious of moving on very slippery ground, but *making the "traces" of street art an inheritance to be passed onto future generations"* overrode all other considerations.

This monographic issue of *Ocula* does not just analyze the *affaire Blu*, but also contains accounts of street art in Italy and in Europe that illustrate that it is a rich, composite and continually evolving panorama.

Mario Panico, in *Esplosioni di icone. Street Art e iconoclastia performativa sui monumenti socialisti dell'Europa orientale (Explosions of icons. Street Art and performative iconoclasm on the socialist monuments of Eastern Europe)* investigates the actions of street art and recoloring on the monuments of the Communist dictatorship that "survived" demolition after the fall of the regime. The Soviet tank in Prague, the monument to the Red Army in Sofia and the monument to Lenin in Luhans'k (Ukraine) are the three examples that Panico analyzes in depth. This is because instead of being destroyed and consigned to oblivion like others, these monuments became spaces for protest and were resemanticized through a process of monument reshaping. Panico talks of "performative iconoclasm" because in these cases the monument is reinvested with meanings that have a powerful media echo, so much so as to transform the monument into an object of consumption that is branded and contextualized differently.

Marco Mondino takes us to Paris. In *Collezioni visive negli spazi urbani: i luoghi della street art a Parigi (Visual collections in urban spaces: the sites of street art in Paris)*, he works on two districts (the thirteenth and twentieth *arrondissements*), which were particularly important in terms of their diversity for the works of street art that are on the border between unauthorized actions and institutional instruments for visually redefining urban areas. The comparison between the two quarters clearly shows the characteristics of the language of visual urban culture, the display strategies and the sensory effects achieved. On the one hand there is the institutional regulation accompanies exhibitions and projects to promote the district, and on the other hand there is the "open-air museum", that is transitory, always evolving and destined to disappear.

The contrast between regulated street art and non-commissioned street art seems to have been resolved in another French city, Lyons, where the process of "open-air" musealization of street art is interpreted by Julien Thiburce as a true driver of urban dialogue. In *Paye ton musée! Street art et (re)médiation culturelle en milieu urbain* (*Pay your museum! Street art and cultural (re) mediation in urban space*), Thiburce interprets the musealization of street art as an element that promotes the dialogue between the languages of the

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city (architecture, town planning, signage, etc.) and enables citizens to regain possession of their urban space.

To finish, we go back to Italy and two recent experiments with on-line storage and interactive mapping of street art as an attempt to restore to the collective memory certain works that will be lost over time because they have been deleted or because of urban reclamation projects.

Cristina Greco's essay, *La traccia in fieri. Mappare l'arte urbana, documentare l'assenza tra archivi web e locative media* (*Embryonic lines. Mapping urban art, documenting the absence via Web archives and locative media)* concentrates on Rome. The contribution offers a reflection on the relationship between urban art, maps and digital archives, starting with some exceptional cases, i.e. the project of mapping Street Art in Rome, M.U.Ro. (Rome Museum of Urban Art) and the case of the Google Street Art Project. Characterized by a plurality of forms, supports, styles, types of intervention and implementation methods, urban art is certainly a complex phenomenon that is capable of cooperating with the process of self-defining cultural identity and revaluing outskirts and accordingly enables means of expression to be given shape that help the visitor to have a different, constantly changing and participatory experience. And this is possible through a combined approach to the territory that is characterized by a multimedia reading, where different systems of expression and modes of communication are based on the use of digital technologies and locative media: from geolocation apps to unconventional experiential mapping projects, from social networks to programming collective actions.

Lastly, Damiano Razzoli, in *Sulla digitalizzazione della street art. Linee guida per un'analisi del museo virtuale Reggiane Urban Gallery* (*Digitalization of street art. Guidelines for an analysis of the Reggiane Urban Gallery virtual museum)* tells us about his experience digitalizing the street art put on display at Ex-Officine Reggiane, an enormous abandoned industrial space that Reggio Emilia has gradually renovated to provide services for the public. The uses of virtual reality and of an interface that can be surfed are proposed here as solutions for conserving street art, because many exhibits are bound to be lost through the demolition of the wall supports. Razzoli's analysis proposes some guidelines for digitalizing street art, emphasizes the importance of locative media and reflects on four concepts (device, locativity, topographic database, and interface) that are essential for the mediated experience of moving through an urban setting.

In this issue of *Ocula* we wanted to create a space for scientific reflection in which to examine street art as a political even more than an artistic process, at a fundamental moment of its evolution: a moment in which it reached maturity and a metareflective turning point at which various view points are considered. The value of street art has been recognized, so we now need to start again from the contradictions that defined the phenomenon at the outset in order to evaluate the possible paths to follow to ensure conservation that respects the founding values that make street art unique in the field of contemporary art.

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Looking at this phenomenon semiotically has enabled us to treat different practices as a single *corpus* that were generated by the impetus of a nascent need, which was often contradictory – to elevate street art to an artistic and cultural inheritance. This is a movement that ranges from experimenting in techniques for preserving artistic interventions that need to be preserved as cultural records to making these records works of art *tout court*, that are thus legitimized and sometimes obliged to migrate from the street to the museum, as in the case of the Bologna exhibition. This ferment has generated a response that is the same and opposite, which recognizes Blu's deletions as their maximum expression of dissent. It is our *casus belli*, a conflict that was fought in the street with rollers, removals and flows of paint, and which gave rise to a debate of international dimensions. The underlying cause is a fundamental role reversal: whilst the street artist deletes his work to prevent its being conserved to emphasize its ephemeral value, the institutions take to the streets to claim the work as part of our common heritage. This reversal of values is consistent with the very nature of street art, which is historically controversial and oxymoronic; a record born of an individual's illicit appropriation has the power to become a political statement, a monument from below that is the manifestation of a collective way of feeling.

Theodor Adorno (*Minima Moralia*, 1951) has asserted that any work of art is a failed murder attempt. This maxim is especially true of street art in general and of the *affaire Blu* in particular. Besides, any text is also a counter-text as Paolo Fabbri affirms in *La svolta semiotica* (1988, p. 41: *The semiotic Turning Point*) and cannot be examined in interactional terms starting with its tactical dimension and the conflicts found there. A consideration of street art and on its turning point, which on these pages becomes a chance to conclude by reaffirming the value of semiotics of art: it is not only an effective methodology for detailed analysis of the individual artistic text but a discipline that is able to examine an artistic phenomenon in all its sociopolitical complexity.

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