

Urban Art: new markets for culture

The new contemporary art scenario is evolving very fast and is bringing some deep changes into the entire system. The last twenty years have seen the evolution and rise of some new genres as Street art (born directly from the late 70's NY graffiti movement), POP Surrealism and what is generally defined as Urban Art.

What kind of art are we talking about? That's easy. Even if we cannot recognize it by its name, we are exposed to this art everyday, even if unconsciously. The red and blue worldwide famous poster for the Obama presidential campaign made by Obey the Giant, the guru of modern poster art, is an example. The C'mons puppets, main characters of few years ago Opel Corsa advertising campaign are the commercial side of artist Boris Hoppek's tissue sculpture (or "toys"), exhibited in the galleries of all over Europe and sold as artworks (at artwork price). The stunning Michael Jackson "Dangerous" album cover was created by the artist Mark Ryden in 1991.

We are familiar with this art since it enters different aspect of our everyday life but it is still hard for common people (and most European and Italian art institutions) to look at it as ART or separate it from advertising, design, nice (or sometimes awkward) decoration.

The cradle of this new art impulses is of course in the United States, where art critics begun to recognize and celebrate it as the new sign and future path of contemporary art more than a decade ago. All over United States museums and public institutions propose exhibitions and shows of Urban Art aside the Masters from the past. A Shepard Fairey (Obey) retrospective is touring around the Country: it has been hosted by the Institute of Contemporary Art of Boston, The Warhol Museum in Pittsburg and presently it is being exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati.

The english street artist Banksy was invited by his hometown Bristol Museum to fill the rooms with its crazy and surrealist installations, paintings, stencils and animatronic animals. In spite of the four-hours queue needed to get an entrance ticket, the exhibition was attended by 300,000 visitors while organizers had expected only about 100,000 to come through the door. This produced a massive impact on the city economy, starting from the generous donations to the museum skyrocketing beyond £45,000 – nearly four times the annual amount – to the need to hire 30 new workers in the museum only to manage the crowd.

Why is this new weird art coming from streets and graphics studios becoming so important?

First, there is a shared feeling that it will be "the next big thing". Art market saw the big potential of these new creative waves years ago, and viewed them as a profitable investment for art sellers, since the last Mark Ryden was sold at Miami Scope Art Fair for 900.000\$. Urban art is quickly attaining a status similar to the "conventional" contemporary art for market dimensions, prices and collectors.

Second, as the Banksy example shows, this art can exert a great impact upon societies and communities, activating a strong impulse towards development through regeneration, economic growth and welfare.

Even if institutions still look at them with suspicion ("it's only a fashion, it's just comic and cartoon design"), these new genres are able to move huge crowd of people, and must be considered as one of the most powerful media of the present time. They use the right tools to easily speak to people, without any need of special explanations as was the rule with the previous art currents.

The language used by the artist is shared by the audience because both of them have a common set of images and references from where they take inspiration. Internet, cartoons, underground comics, punk and rock music, videogames, politics and everyday life can be easily spotted in the work of this generation born at the end of the 70's and grown up during the quick rise to the power of television, advertising and

web. That's the reason why this art can generate connections, sense of inclusion, involving the audience into the creative process, fostering the use of creativity and develop a critical sense towards our society. The message is immediately understood and shared, the audience can appreciate it at the moment. Most of these artists started their artistic career in the street or in graphic studios, not all of them have studied art. To paste and sticker the town with their message, to re-mix advertising billboards in their personal way, to invade town walls with invented characters has been the main activity of these guys before they have been noticed by the formal Art System. Still once McLuhan is right: also in pop art the media is the message.

Art galleries and art dealers begun to work, sell and promote this kind of art more than 20 years ago. A carpet of small expositive spaces was opened and many american towns had their new underground live scene. The first Street Art and Pop Surrealism exhibitions were organised and soon also the "official" market started to pay attention to this rising scene. In few years, most of the open-minded and creative galleries had to close but jusy a few of them became the nowadays "killer sector" of the field.

The previous contemporary art market system was identified by a network of gallerists, private dealers, experts, collectors, sunk connections, hidden contracts and secret sales. This allowed old-fashioned art galleries to survive and most of all to build empires due to this over-structured market with few rules. The present and future scenarios are totally different, also due to the internet. All the artists we are talking about belong to the computer and internet generation. They all grew up playing the first videogames in late 80s, using the first e-mails, testing the first web social networks more than 7 years ago. This implies that they all use internet as the main channel to show their art, recognising the web as the easiest and most effective media to make self-promotion. The net allowed young emerging artist to show their work to gallerists, experts, art manager and dealers, but most of all to a wide and heterogeneous audience of potential fans and collectors.

Each artist has a personal website with picture galleries to show its artworks, artistic cv or most important exhibitions and art projects list and a direct contact (generally a personal e-mail). In this way each artist gives to any potential purchasers all the information to contact him and negotiate an artwork sale. The system allows also potential collectors who don't know work and value of the artist to get knowledge about these fundamental elements, most of all if the collector see art purchase as an economic investment. Suggestions from experts or gallerists are no more essential. Agents and steps from regular purchase process can be easily jumped over.

The web is the biggest 24hrs open and more competitive art gallery of the world! Artists use websites to give a deep vision concerning style and work and at the same time use web social networks and blogs to promote themselves all over the web. Social networks allow to create nets of creatives-galleries-collectors, linking all the different agents of the field. This generates sense of inclusion, the idea to belong to this specific Urban Art world, to be active part of it. Social networks have the great power to "spread the voice" like no other media.

On web social network everyone receive both what are called pull and push information. The former are all the information that we receive because we required them: for example all the tweets from a person we decided to follow on Twitter. The latter are all the information that we receive even if we don't require them: spam, for example. Thinking about Facebook, we can consider push information most of the notifications that we receive on our home page: a friend of a friend commented his pics and so on. This mechanism could have a huge effect on art promotion: people normally not interested in art can be reached by un-required information that maybe could attract their curiosity. Most of all if the information comes from a friend or a member of their web net of relations.

The idea of self-promotion and self-management has its roots in the punk philosophy of "Do It Yourself". The DIY ideal is common to the punk scene, especially in terms of music recording and distribution, concerts promotion, zines, posters and flyers in opposition to the Majors management of music artists. Get some friends, get a garage for setting up your tracks and be the manager of yourself: in this way the

Ramones, Green Day, No Fx, Dead Kennedys, Black Flag and most of 70's and 80's punk rock groups were born. Many of the artists played with their punk band when they were teenagers and once they went to art schools quitting music for art the philosophy was the same: DIY.

Self-management is another very important aspect introduced by the emerging art genres: new artists rarely require being supported by agents managing their careers. They do everything on their own, building up their own "brand", contacting galleries and collectors, selecting the best choices for their artistic growth. Sometimes they have a team to help both with the artistic and commercial productive processes as most of them create merchandise (as t-shirt or limited edition silkscreens) at the side of paintings, following pure POP Art style. Sometimes they are "One Man Band" co-operating with external agents only for what concerns specific projects and merchandise production processes. All these elements transform the new contemporary art market in a sector with no rules. The traditional mechanism artist>agent>gallery>collector is totally obsolete and not at all up-to-date.

The price-making process is going out of control: artist's coefficient calculation is rarely adopted and often prices follow no rules. We assist to incredible and with no justification prices' increase of some artists, like Mr. Mark Ryden who sold his last masterpieces at Miami Art Fair for 900,000 \$. Less than 10 years ago one of his paintings costed around 3000 euros. But prices' "crazy race" is even more evident in auctions. Christie, Sotheby and De Pury, the three main auction houses, since some years ago show interest in this art including it in its catalogue and auctions. Artists like Banksy or Obey frequently appear now among lots with always higher and higher prices (Banksy at Christie last February has been evaluated for £ 100,000-150,000) even if most of times the final price doesn't reach the auction house's evaluation.

But Christie and Sotheby are maybe attracted by the new art collectors that have built solid collections of Street Art and Pop Surrealism, investing thousand of dollars. Many of these new buyers are Hollywood stars. As I showed before, due to the internet collectors are not forced to purchase artworks from a gallery: they can directly contact the artist from his website, his Facebook, his Myspace. In such a way the collector tries to pay less for an artwork, avoiding gallery commission surplus on the final price. What will happen later depends only by the artist's ethic. He could decide to sell the artwork for a lower price than common gallery price for the same work, or offer it for the same amount of money of the gallery as the final price reflect the artwork value, not a sum of commission costs. Or he could simply ask the collector to contact the gallery. The general vision that emerges from this field is that this market has no structure and rules, but a carpet of sunk and hidden agreements and negotiations.

On the other hand, Urban Art generated brand new markets that didn't exist before. The Art Toys movement, for example, is a specific branch of Urban Art where artists create a vinyl sculpture reproducing one of their artwork's characters. Joe Ledbetter, Gary Baseman and Kaws are among the most representative protagonists of the genre, welcomed and celebrated by Museums and galleries. Art Toys, in spite of their aspect of "children puppets" must be considered a sort of 3D original painting. This brand new market was introduced a few years ago, providing offer and attracting the newly born demand. Now collectors and fans make of the Art Toys field one of the most active and wide art market sections, where prices can reach the same level of paintings and artworks.

But in such a framework what remains of the function of art galleries? When we think about contemporary art galleries the first image is probably a white and silent space with few people or nobody inside and a grumpy girl at the desk reception. It is not a coincidence if one of the most famous London based galleries is called The White Cube and the famous Gagosian Galleries in America and Europe make no exception. Everything is necessary to give an élite's atmosphere, to give the impression and the message that inside there is something for few selected people, not for everybody.

The emerging currents share an opposite philosophy, since they want to address a wide and varied spectrum of people. That's the reason able to push most of worldwide famous artists to follow with their work in the street: give the possibility to everybody to see and appreciate art and culture. According to this new vision, the new galleries' function can't be no longer to sell artworks and make a good promotion of

them, it must be something different. It's to invest resources in view of long term benefits, to prepare strategic plans for supporting and promoting artists, to build a strong reputation to their artists and most of all to involve their community and educate it to enjoy and appreciate art projects, fostering social and cultural inclusion and participation.

In such a respect a good example is the Deitch Project in New York that will close its door after 15 years next May. Deitch Projects is known for producing ambitious projects by contemporary artists. Since its opening with a performance by Vanessa Beecroft in January 1996, the gallery has produced over 250 projects and public events by artists from all over the world. They produce exhibitions and books and act as the exclusive representatives of the Keith Haring's Estate.

Deitch Projects is also known for embracing the new convergence of art, music, performance, film and design. Each year at Art Basel Miami Beach the gallery presents a performance by a band that has emerged from the art community. Performers have included The Gossip, Madonna and the filmmaker Michel Gondry. Each September Deitch Projects presents an Art Parade on West Broadway in SoHo involving 1,000 participants.

Some of the gallery's most memorable projects have been Street Market (2000), an installation by Barry McGee, Steve Powers and Todd James that recreated an apocalyptic version of an urban street, and the project with Swoon that included the construction of seven boats in the form of floating sculptures that sailed down the Hudson River from upstate New York and docked in front of the artist's exhibition in the gallery's expansive new riverfront space in Long Island City. Deitch has always fostered the idea that there's no difference between art, pop culture, life, fun and high production. The final aim is to support and finance artists' projects, even if they are not remunerative in the short run.

Many of these efforts are now being re-paid for: Mr. Jeffrey Deitch has been nominated the next director of Los Angeles MOCA, Museum of Contemporary Art that always suffered from competition with New York and San Francisco Art Museums. Current Moca's financial situation is quite negative, due to enormous expenses and debts. The appointment of a private dealer and one of the most astonishing art businessman could fix the Art Center's financial problems. J. Deitch as new director is a turning point: it blows away the old idea that museum directors and curators must come from the academic world.

The emerging needs of art institutions push the boards to hire a new kind of agent, somebody able to amalgamate art and business, financial management and high quality curatorial standard. Somebody able to exploit the economic potentials of art centres without undersell them. Of course, a lot of people disagree with this decision, but this is where we are moving towards. This will be the new trend, because we will face soon a desperate lack of funds and resources to art and culture. Fortunately, even in dark financial times, Street Art and Urban Art do not need anything else that a new city wall where there can be pasted on.



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