

Paint before the police come!

Since street art went mainstream, art institutions have addressed the issue of conservation and display of murals, stencils and wheat pastes in galleries and museums.

Having the graffiti art being rooted in the 70's New York art scene, much of the contemporary discourse over the institutionalization of such rebellious art movement is often conducted by museums directors, art journalists, curators and artists in such a thorough way that we rarely experience in Italy.

Street art is challenging the world of art, its set of rules and its commercial system as few art movements in the past.

In the framework of the Moca's exhibition "Art in the streets" held in 2011, the news on the street artist Blu's whitewashed mural – depicting a row of coffins covered by dollar bills in front of a War II memorial – by the museum itself which commissioned the work, has raised a storm of protests and reactions, from local veterans and activists to renowned street artists.

The clue of what is really at stake is given by the Moca director Jeffrey Deitch email to Blu, whose contents the street artist has disclosed later and in which Deitch admits he would have preferred a piece that "invites people to the museum".

Despite being considered a truly advocate of street art, his request could be deemed as misplaced, not only because Blu was not "the artist best suited for this task", as remarked by the street art himself.

Indeed, the attempt in USA but also in Europe with the Munich's Stroke Art Fair to set up a commercial art system which involves art curators, art dealers, galleries and artists highlights how confusing is to place a street artist in the shoes of a public artist despite this being desired by both the counterparts: the art institutions on the one hand and, for the first time, much of contemporary street art movement on the other.

Yet, It is not just a case that the art curator, editor in-chief and co-founder of the art magazine Hyperallergic, Hrag Vertanian, have branded the exhibits set up at the high-profile New York gallery Deitch Projects as "sanitized", "luxurious" and "expensive" and so did many artists and activists in several guerrilla actions after Blu's mural removal. The protest group La Raw, for instance, handed out provocative pink condoms labeled with Moca director Jeffrey Deitch's name which reads: "Don't be Blu – Deitch – Practice Safe Art".

Nevertheless, Vertanian himself expresses a positive judgement of the Banksy exhibition that was in display in Art Miami and in its sister fair "Banksy out of CONTEXT" in 2012, in which entire walls painted by the famous English street artist were taken away and placed inside the gallery.

Although he recognizes that the walls "are more akin to relics of the Berlin Wall that were salvaged for display around the world", he underlines what is the main mission of art institutions: to protect artworks from vandalism and pollution, to provide museumgoers of another context, historical for instance, letting them appreciate street art they would never have the chance to see for real.

Yet, ironically enough, the “Banksy out of CONTEXT” exhibit turned out to be a “Banksy into a fictional museum context” art show and to reduce a whole rebellious art movement in a collection of objects.

The journalist reported visitors had appreciated the exhibition apart from a small writing over the “Stop and Search” Banksy mural reading “This doesn’t belong here” but what is missing in his analysis is to what extent the whole art system and its chain of art institutions – from art festivals to galleries and museums – may consider their mission accomplished.

To provide museumgoers with the historical context of an art movement, which wishes in most of the cases to be caduceus, to protect the artifacts from vandalism and to display the artworks to a new demographic, is still all this the unique prerogative of a contemporary art institution?

Is not street art ephemeral as much as the media buzz in which we are immersed and against which It tries to make a short but intense interference?

A distinction among public art, fine art and street art is needed. How and to what extent museums and galleries will be able to replicate the un-predictableness and the stroke – in a different meaning from the Munich Stroke Art Fair – and the flashes of the street art is yet to arrive.

Meanwhile, let’s paint before the police come!



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