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MURAL PAINTING AND THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE VERSUS GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

Today a phenomenon produced by globalisation has appeared, which is transforming some urban territories into a global art gallery! Some cities, in their fierce competition for greater visibility in the field of territorial marketing, are rushing to create the umpteenth Festival of Street Art, in the same way as others have already gone for “the buzz”, courting the large international brands to implant them in their city centres (photo 11). It is now the same for global cultural competition. With the crisis and constrained budgets, contemporary art cannot ensure media visibility of cultural policies of cities because it has become inaccessible in terms of costs.

This is the time of Street Art. These artists and their worldwide reputation on the net allow the city and its festival immediate and inexpensive media presence. In turn, these young artists use the city as a marketing medium: they profit from this visibility, with gallery owners seeking new opportunities as they no longer have access to the extravagant prices of contemporary art (photo 36). Graffiti, meanwhile, has a subversive function derived from its origins. Graffiti artists have always invaded public space in an illegal way to affirm the existence of underground culture. This expression still exists despite numerous attempts by the art market to institutionalise this practice. The new generation that once dabbled in graffiti quickly migrated to Street Art, which had the advantage of financial reward. A case in point is Banksy whose work has boosted the arrival of art dealers in the commercial development of Street Art. This practice is far from the cultural and social activism of the first graffiti artists... Nothing too bad in the “grand art market carnival” so denounced by Banksy... Nothing serious, if not the fundamental question that nobody is asking: do these operations of Street Art produce sustainable development for cities? So, take time in this “fifteen minutes of fame” (considering the time of the city) to look more closely at this urban phenomenon, by first eliminating the aesthetic questions about the works from the debate that should be left to art critics and other leading figures in

the art market. Is the street a simple space for market activity? Or rather a highly political place where the concept of living, of citizen use, of territorial context, of shared public space, of identity and memory is fundamental? Initially, to validate these operations, the word “festival” is often attached to the word Street Art to demonstrate the ephemeral nature of these works. Indeed, during the festival (an average of 3 to 5 days), jet-lagged artists are expected to create new and hitherto unseen works on raw surfaces that have not been properly prepared. In the end, even if it is interesting from the price/quality perspective (a Street Art artist receives between 3,000 and 5,000 Euros to paint a wall in 3–7 days), the technical quality of the works is poor and they degrade very quickly. And it is at this point that the question of sustainability of the piece emerges... but it is too late! The citizen questions this ambiguity: a monumental exhibition that cannot be dismantled has been purchased and, after but a few months, just degrades his/her immediate and intimate environment. After all, when we look closely at the cities of London, Lisbon, Vitry, Aubervilliers, Lodz, Turin, São Paulo... and most recently Paris, with its White Nights Street Art, we can observe the production of distressing uniformity: the same works, the same artists find themselves plastered in a monumental way in all these cities, resulting in a strange feeling of loss of identity and of specific urban stories. There is still time to rethink this tsunami of Street Art that is sweeping across the world... This is not to criticise anyone, particularly the artists who only do what we allow them to do; the intention is simply to **reintroduce the debate on the fundamental and essential concept of the relation of the citizen to his/her city**. Both the content of the works, in their relation to the spirit of the place, and the sustainability of the works themselves, raise important questions. If we lift the lid on this debate, we can see what the other failed or successful experiences in the history of the mural are: “The Wall is the skin of Inhabitants” (photo 37).

The spirit of the place is not a marketable commodity, but the receptacle of uses and daily social and cultural practices, for residents as well as visitors to the territory. Public space too is not a single environment to be consumed in the way we consume other commodities. Neither is it a virtual space like in some science fiction films which people cross without seeing. It is a fantasy to believe that public space does not belong to anyone and therefore to everyone. This trend of gentrification denies any local or marginal nature of the identity of the territory. On the contrary, it must be said loud and clear today that the details, the singular social practices and local cultural identities are the basis of the real experience of the use of public space. This spirit of the place that must be found is the driving force of the collective good life. Because when the mural becomes the mirror of invisible solidarities or negated identities, it becomes a totem for the greatest

pride of the residents. The mural as it is practised by Cité Création aims to “make visible” the levels of collective memories that have built up in the human history of the area. Thus, the resident/viewer becomes an actor of his or her living space: he or she can share, chat with visitors and tourists to create a mediation, which is a tolerance and openness factor. The Tony Garnier Urban Museum in Lyon, a collective adventure led by locals, artists, politicians, media and visitors, showed that the spirit of the place could be the basis of extraordinary cultural success (photo 38). This experience became reality in 1989 and since then has become a reference in the field of urban development. 25 murals co-created with the inhabitants, around works designed by the architect Tony Garnier (1869–1948), produced an urban open-air museum, which now receives over 30,000 visitors a year (photos 39–41).

Beyond revaluing the social housing district of Lyon, it helped revitalise economically the whole territory. The most important, however, was the residents’ participation in the project and the appropriation of a shared history with Lyon’s population. This population could identify with the open-air museum that over time has become a unique cultural asset. The meeting between the spirit of the place (the buildings on which the frescoes are placed were built by Tony Garnier himself) and artists allowed these works to exist today as new Lyon and French heritage. Nowhere else does or will exist the Tony Garnier Urban Museum because the uniqueness of this work comes from the meeting of the place (the district is now called the Cité Tony Garnier) and the unique history of the inhabitants of this working-class district of Lyon in the 90s. It took ten years of consultation and struggle for this crazy little idea – that participative democracy could be a competent and recognised phenomenon – to get off the ground. Today the necessity to produce more and more of the city leads the municipalities to favour short-term investments, leading to quantity over quality. Just take, for example, the damage done to those cities which hosted the Summer or the Winter Olympic Games or the World Football Cup and that have to manage, once the “Carnival” has left, those excessive and unusable incumbents. Sustainable development must be the basis of any research, creation or production of the city in order to ensure the durability of the works produced and to avoid waste. If aesthetics is part of this approach, it becomes a formidable vector, not only for beauty but especially for the social and cultural development of cities (photos 42–44).