

# Public Icons on the Fringe of a Metropolis

## Street art in a district with strong migration flows

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### Abstract:

A suburb north of Milan, bounded by road axes that hinder the communication with the surroundings, has gradually become the first accommodation place for an immigrant population triggering the exodus of the younger part of the long-time local residents. Social malaise and economic marginalization have built a stigma that some young urban artists, in collaboration with a responsive public body, have tried to fight, recovering the spirit of the historical beginnings of street art.

Keywords: Street art, Social marginalization, Immigration, Suburbs

### Art from the city

Since the end of the sixties, under the various names of *Aerosol art*, *Subway art*, *Hip hop*, the first examples of spontaneous figurative representations, nowadays catalogued as Street art or Graffiti, came out on the walls of American cities in the wake of the youth protest movement<sup>1</sup> and the affirmation of the civil rights<sup>2</sup>. The historical moment<sup>3</sup> was crucial to build the background of a phenomenon that was, in some ways, unexpected and perhaps unconceivable if not in parallel with the race riots<sup>4</sup>, the progress of protest movements<sup>5</sup> and the first signs of economic

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<sup>1</sup> DRAPER H. (1965). *Berkeley: The New Student Revolt*. New York: Grove Press.

<sup>2</sup> CLARENCE T. ed. (2011). *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*. New York: Fordham University Press.

<sup>3</sup> ISSERMAN M, KAZIN M. (1999). *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> ABU-LUGHOD J. L. (2007). *Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> POLLETTA, F. (2006). *It Was Like A Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

crisis<sup>6</sup> after decades of growth but the spatial issue is no less interesting. Graffiti were expressions of re-appropriation of derelict sites of the metropolis by young people from disadvantaged social classes and ethnic groups (Puerto Ricans, African-Americans and Italian-Americans) who perceived themselves excluded from wealth. They wanted to mark their own territory and, at the same time, get out of anonymity, at first even only through their simple signatures or initials (*tags*) on subway cars.

After this early stage a real artistic movement started, on one side to invade the globe, on the other to make a qualitative leap by the end of the 1970s, abandoning walls, pavements and means of transport to land in art galleries. This transformation happened through an hybridization of the icons of comics, sports and jazz with the stimuli of the official art history: an evidence of that was the phenomenon Keith Haring<sup>7</sup>, a successful American brand in the world. It is therefore a paradox that in the decade when New York, the cradle of graffiti art, fell into a deep urban crisis<sup>8</sup>, reflected in the consolidation of ghettos<sup>9</sup>, and pushed the white middle class into suburbs in search of a better quality of life<sup>10</sup> (the so-called «White Flight») the city gradually gave to the world a new art movement. In other words, New York exported a way to urban icons with endless variations that, right from the beginning, could be made by anyone and for everyone's enjoyment. To quote Hanna Arendt an art that, as a public affair, «...can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity»<sup>11</sup>.

## From the new world to the old continent

The issue of a public art without propagandistic, political, pedagogical or encomiastic purposes (street art, graffiti art, urban art, murals) has therefore assumed a considerable importance in the urban landscape of almost every cities of the western world. It is clear, according to what has been said up until now, that every nation, but almost every city, has offered different opportunities for various personalities to have alternative spaces for their

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<sup>6</sup> MIECZKOWSKI Y. (2005). *The Great Recession of the 1970s*. In *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s*. University Press of Kentucky.

<sup>7</sup> KOLOSSA A. (2005) *Keith Haring: una vita dedicata all'arte: 1958-1990*. Köln: Taschen. P. 7.

<sup>8</sup> CANNATO V. J. (2001). *The ungovernable city: John Lindsay and his struggle to save New York*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>9</sup> THABIT W (2003). *How East New York Became a Ghetto*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>10</sup> ALBA R. D., DENTON N. A., LEUNG S. J., LOGAN J.R. (1996). *Neighborhood Change under Conditions of Mass Immigration: The New York City Region, 1970--1990*. In *The International Migration Review*. Vol. 29, N. 3/1995. Pp. 625-656

<sup>11</sup> ARENDT H. (1988). *Vita Activa. La condizione umana* (tr. FINZI S.). Milano: Bompiani. P. 79.

projects. New York allowed Keith Haring to exhibit for a month on the *Spectacolor Billboard* at Times Square in 1982 and Jean-Michel Basquiat to take part in the same place at the *1980 Times Square Show* within the famous *Colab* (Collaborative Projects). But as a global phenomenon street art has crossed the ocean and spread all over the old continent. Berlin, for example, offers perhaps the biggest open-air public art gallery in the world on the east side of the old dividing wall (the East Side Gallery), more than one kilometre long and with hundreds of graffiti. Paris shows up a wide list of famous personalities such as Anna Bocho, Da Cruz, Psy, Mark 93 and can boast the wall on Rue D'Aubervilliers of about 500 meters, along the depots of the railway station of La Chapelle, with the works by Kashnik and Combo. There are many other examples not only from large metropolises but in small cities too. Dublin, not a megacity, is anyway another Mecca for urban artists: in this city pubs, typical meeting places, often host the most interesting murals. Just on a pub the famous artist Bordalo II shaped one of his «Trash Animals», a red squirrel made of waste to raise awareness about environmental issues. But perhaps the most significant examples of an art that plays a social role can be found in Madrid where the centre «La Neomudejar»<sup>12</sup> hosts a space for antagonistic art. Here we can also find the base of the interesting group of Boamistura<sup>13</sup>, a crew now famous throughout the world for its anamorphic interventions with the declared purpose to build connections between communities.

In this panorama, Italy offers urban artworks worthy of being taken into consideration too. In addition to being affected by Banksy, the well-known global media phenomenon (with the provocative «Virgin with the gun» in Piazza Girolomini in Naples), many examples could be reported in cities like Rome, Milan, Bologna. Perhaps the most outstanding case-study to be mentioned here is Blue, the famous Bolognese artist who, among his many works, took part in Campobasso in an extremely complex and long-time urban renewal project: the «*Drew Line*», started in 2011 as a collaborative work with residents, implemented through the involvement of volunteers and creative workshops with a broad shared perspective.

## The metropolis and its suburbs

Milan, in all of this, had a first phase of rejection due to a conservative political position that called for city cleaning and in some cases invoked sanctions and imprisonment<sup>14</sup> of writers.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.laneomudejar.com/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.boamistura.com/#/home>

<sup>14</sup> DE RICCARDIS S. (2007). *De Corato: "Carcere per i writer"*. Milano: La Repubblica. 24 agosto 2007. Available at <https://milano.repubblica.it/dettaglio/de-corato:-carcere-per-i-writer/1356855>.

But now the city shows more open policies with the arrangement of certain spaces for street art<sup>15</sup>. As is to be expected, most of the walls are close to the elevated railway ring which forms a sort of modern technological bastion that encloses the city. Beyond this threshold the suburbs of the first and second post-war period extend their residential fabric. However, there is another more recent physical barrier shaped by the large road axes with their traffic flows formed by the system of tangenziali (circumferential highways) and the urban motorway tracts. Beyond them the infinite Lombard megalopolis spreads from the Alps to the Po river. Alongside such artificial borders a lot of small municipalities can be found on the fringe belt where the morphology of the territory sometimes creates conditions of heavy segregation.

This is the case of the Crocetta district, in the town of Cinisello Balsamo. Here a residential fabric, intensely built to accommodate the immigrant population in the post-war period during the economic boom, is bounded by the Turin-Venice motorway and the state highway 36 (SS36). A small district, with few trade services, not much green space and almost no personal services (if we exclude compulsory education) must have recourse to the surrounding area for its own needs by crossing with difficulty the large transport infrastructures. Only recently the covering of the motorway has been started to be built on one kilometre tract and it will probably change the present situation of isolation (Fig.1) but until the completion of this structure the historical physical segregation implies a heavy conditioned life for all Crocetta dwellers.



Fig.1. Covering of the A4 motorway

A special morphological condition is also the cause of a distinctive demographic situation. Over the course of time, a succession of ethnic groups with various origins in search of a provisional residence after their first arrival in Italy overlapped with Italian citizens, most often

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.comune.milano.it/wps/portal/ist/it/news/primopiano/archivio\\_dal\\_2012/lavori\\_pubblici/muri\\_liberi\\_mappa](http://www.comune.milano.it/wps/portal/ist/it/news/primopiano/archivio_dal_2012/lavori_pubblici/muri_liberi_mappa)

middle-class homeowners. Immigrants are, on the contrary, extremely poor and without great educational background but with rather cohesive families (as usual among newcomers). Overall, there is no dominant ethnic group: most of people have South American, Maghreb and Sinhalese origin. It is necessary to report that the existing housing stock is privately owned so the public body has no say over maintenance and rent which is left to a private negotiation. This has two immediate effects. First of all the owners have no great interest in service and conservation of their buildings and only want to draw from them the greatest possible profit. Secondly the tenants show a very fast turnover since, as soon as the economic conditions allow it, they leave their first home for a better dwelling solution, preferably outside the district. The outcome is so clear: the need for a simple temporary place of residence is related to a low social status that cannot be quickly changed by better economic conditions and when that happens it triggers mostly a relocation. The fast turnover consequently implies also a rapid replacement of the ethnic groups according to ever-changing parameters.

In any case, foreign people have few professional skills and, at least initially, no linguistic competence. In such conditions the effects of social segregation in the neighbourhood are added together. Interaction with historical residents is indeed episodic and often marked by distrust if not open hostility. Behaviours coming from unfavourable social condition and low cultural levels of immigrants are inevitably perceived by Italians as an invasion of their own space and as a clear degradation of the place. Above all new generations and couples with children, who wish a different environment to raise them, follow, to a lesser extent, the above mentioned American paradigm of the «White Flight», at that time due just to the school desegregation.

The «Crocetta» district is so actually now labelled, even beyond its real conditions of marginality, as a space of carelessness, crime, drug peddling and insecurity according to a social stigma that takes on a spatial meaning too.

Just in order to fight fragmentation and conflict of the social fabric as well as the distorted perception that comes with them, the local public actors and the voluntary sector have worked with great commitment. In the neighbourhood there are actually significant resources that must be carefully considered not to give back a totally negative image. The aforementioned education system, with kindergarten, primary, secondary school and, recently, a new Montessori section (which attracts parents and students even from outside the area) is the most engaged at territorial level in the community involvement. It has so managed projects such as the «school without a backpack» (the possibility to reduce the number of books that the students have to

bring into the classroom) and the «school in the hospital» in collaboration with the nearby Bassini hospital. The family planning centre also plays a strategic role to contact and inform, above all the immigrant female population (often mistrustful) about the need for regular and in-depth check-ups for the health of mothers and children. The church of S: Pietro Martire plans activities with its parish youth club. The civic centre of Via Friuli, housed in a disused school, gathers Italian residents, often quite aged people, and serves as a public place of meeting for all the area. In different ways the neighbourhood can therefore show forms of solidarity and collaboration that are not visible outside but try to meet a real social malaise that is clearly perceived by the messages on the walls of the streets (Fig. 2.3.4.) showing all the problems of people living in a marginal place.



Fig. 2.3.4. Signs of discomfort and resistance in the streets of the neighbourhood

It is important to remember that significant projects have also been supported by the municipal administration to trigger a generative welfare process through, for example, the «Casa Arcipelago», a block of flats in Via Milazzo managed by «Anffas» (National Association of Families of People with Intellectual and / or Relational Disabilities), that offers residential accommodation to help people with slight disabilities undertake transitional paths to independent living outside the family. Another important project is the help-desk for indebted families that try to put into practice the law on «over-indebtedness» of 2012<sup>16</sup>. In this context, the experience of street artists has taken place for a short but powerful stay in the district.

<sup>16</sup> LEGGE 27 gennaio 2012 n. 3 (in Gazz. Uff., 30 gennaio 2012, n. 24).

In collaboration with the Department of Cultural Policies of Cinisello Balsamo, as a moment of the «Muri Liberi» (free walls) project, it was possible to organize the «Crocetta Art Project - C.A.P. 20092» which planned the involvement of different graffitists coming from the world of urban art. Here we must mention Question Mark, in charge of the art direction and the call for authors as well as the informal group of young local writers gathered in the «AAA Aerosol Art Area», a crew of urban artists, some students of the several academies of fine arts in Milan.

Since 2013 they have started a dialogue with the municipality of Cinisello Balsamo for the liberalization of some walls to be dedicated to the art of graffiti writing. Throughout the project, the youth centre «Icaro», the main meeting point for young people in Crocetta was their gathering place and the venue. The «C.A.P. 20092» offered therefore an opportunity for many important international artists to work for a mural regeneration on the neglected surfaces of the area with the aim to highlight the importance of the place itself: among them Andrea Casciu, Crisa, Dado, Luca Font, Ring, Joys, Rosk and Loste, Skan, Verbo, Yama 11 (Fig. 5-10).

The transformation of the place goes just through the creative expression of graffiti. To use the words of Ship1 «If I make graffiti they generates in me a feeling of belonging to the place where I make them. I take care of it». The «care» comes mainly from the challenge with the real situation in the place: the Icaro centre, for example, today shows itself with a rainbow of colours, created by the street artist Joys: The same special attention was paid to the primary school of via Sardegna whose walls have been painted during a free street art course that involved young people from other towns nearby. From this point of view, overcoming the borders can only be another contribution to overcome segregation and mistrust as well. The interesting achievement, if we consider the particular condition of this quarter, was the success, even if only for a short time, in attracting people who otherwise would never have set foot here.

In this sense the nomadic character of street artists can break down the boundaries: they create bridges not only among places but among people too. So to quote again the words of Ship1 «Making graffiti forces you to face the others» and that is just one of the original main implicit motivations of street art: being together.

Involving people and building communities are perhaps the most significant results of this kind of projects. In our cities where distrust is fed by separation, public art can erode that feeling of fear that Zygmunt Baumann saw as a distinctive feature in post-modern era<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> BAUMAN Z. (2003) *City of fears, city of hopes*. London: Goldsmith's College.



Graffiti gallery in Viale Abruzzi in Crocetta district:



Fig. 5. Street artist: Verbo



Fig. 6. Street artist: Ring



Fig. 7. Street artists: Rosk& Loste



Fig. 8. Street artist: Ship1



Fig. 9. Artists: Graff Lab. Graffiti workshop headed by SHIP1 on the school of via Sardegna



Fig. 10. Street artist: Andrea Casciu



Few people know that until a few years ago Cinisello Balsamo was ranked as the poorest municipality in northern Milan suburbs<sup>18</sup> and within the city borders Crocetta still stands in the lowest position. The praiseworthy efforts in the area by health workers, civic centre volunteers, educators and teachers are aimed precisely to avoid the isolation of newcomers and the abandonment of the area by historical residents. The collaboration between the past municipal administration and the young street artists can so be considered the social and symbolic counterpart of a commitment to reverse a trend consolidated over the years.

### An art of relationship

The recent experiments managed by other Italian municipal administrations do nothing but acknowledge the creative potential of street art that succeeds even in an era of technological progress. The key point is indeed the special relationship with citizens as, for example, in the case of the MAUA<sup>19</sup> project in which works created on city buildings after a participatory discussion with the inhabitants are animated with virtual contents through augmented reality.

In the same way it can be said that the experience of Crocetta once again witnesses how street art is still viable and has a positive social function in a period of ethnic tension and crisis like the current one: it can erode barriers and make connections. In this regard, although the Italian context cannot be put into comparison to the United States, it is not out of place to quote in conclusion the «*Peace Wall*»<sup>20</sup> of Philadelphia, perhaps one of the most interesting and effective experiments of street art coming from overseas as it sums up in a certain sense the deep meaning of the way to make urban art.

In a Philadelphia district shaken by racial tensions and criminality the artists Jane Golden and Peter Pagast have agreed with the residents on a symbolic theme to represent the brotherhood among the different ethnic groups: the citizens' converging hands. From a photograph they first simulated the proposed final outcome through a projection on the wall of a building to have their approval. Then they painted it reproducing the original shot in an wonderful work of art with the power to gather a community that now feels the neighbourhood as its own.

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<sup>18</sup> Editorial staff (2014). *Comuni del Nordmilano: Cusano il più "ricco", Cinisello il più "proletario"*. In Nordmilano24.it. 17.04.2015. Available at: <http://www.nordmilano24.it/2015/04/17/comuni-piu-ricchi-nordmilano/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.streetartfactory.eu/maua/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.muralarts.org/artworks/peace-wall/>

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