Speculating on (the) *urban* (of) art: (un)siting street art in the age of neoliberal urbanisation

O *urbano* na arte (urbana): (des)localizar a *street art* em uma época de urbanização neoliberal

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Abstract

This paper addresses the current co-optation of street art into an uncritical aesthetic supplement to the process of neoliberal urbanisation, by focusing on its unresolved relation with its own site. This is done in three steps. First, via a perambulating immersion into the complexity of a specific site. Second, via a critical engagement with the form and politics of contemporary street art. Third, via a strategic speculation on the relation between the notions of art, urban and site. Street art's current impasse, I argue, paradoxically depends on its incapacity to become properly *urban*. A *urban-specific* street art, I contend, is not a decorative veneer nor an enchanting disruption to dramatic processes of urbanisation: it is a force-field in which these processes are made visible, experienceable, and thus called into question. The 'Olympic' works of JR and Kobra in Rio de Janeiro, and the iconoclastic performance by Blu in Berlin, are used to illustrate and complement the argument.

Keywords: street art; institutional critique; urbanisation; Porto Maravilha.

Resumo

O artigo aborda, em três etapas, os processos atuais de cooptação da *street art* e sua transformação em complemento estético e acrítico ao processo de urbanização neoliberal, focando na sua relação, não resolvida, da arte com o seu próprio sítio. Primeiro, através de uma perambulação imersiva na complexidade dum sítio específico. Segundo, através do engajamento crítico com a forma e a política da *street art* contemporânea. Terceiro, através duma especulação estratégica sobre a relação entre as noções de arte, de urbano e de sítio. O impasse atual da *street art*, argumenta-se, depende paradoxalmente de sua incapacidade de se tornar plenamente *urbana*. Uma *street art* com *especificidade urbana* não é uma superfície decorativa nem uma interrupção encantadora dos processos dramáticos de urbanização: ela é um campo de forças que torna esses processos visíveis, experimentáveis e, portanto, questionáveis. As obras "olímpicas" de JR e Kobra no Rio de Janeiro e a performance iconoclasta de Blu em Berlim são usadas para ilustrar e complementar o argumento.

Palavras-chave: *street art*; crítica institucional; urbanização; Porto Maravilha.

Introduction[1]

This paper addresses the current impasse of street art, and its ongoing reduction to an uncritical aesthetic supplement to the process of neoliberal urbanisation, by focusing on its unresolved relation with the complex ontology of its own site: in other words, on street art's current inability to overcome its static relation with the city and thus become properly *urban*. The argument is constructed in three parts. The first is a perambulating immersion within the aesthetic and structural reconstruction of the Porto Maravilha waterfront in Rio de Janeiro, in the context of the 2016 Olympic Games. While an in-depth analysis would require an effort of its own, this section intends to provide a snapshot of this remarkable waterfront regeneration project, tracking some of its intersecting rhetorics, histories, erasures and aesthetics, as well as the ambivalent role street art plays in the process. An extended appendix closes this section and grounds it theoretically via a reflection on the relation between capitalist urbanisation, urban experience, and public art. This sets the stage for the second part, that addresses street art conceptually and critically. The main argument here is that street art, and its current impasse, are best understood by getting rid of the unproductive dichotomies that often frame the discussion (legal/illegal, institutional/independent, art/vandalism, etc.), as well as by deprioritising the paramount role usually played in this discussion by the *intentionality* of the author, the aesthetic *look* of the artwork, or the *content* it expresses. Instead, I contend, it is the *formal* relation that street art entertains with the socio-material constitution of the urban that is to be highlighted. Accordingly, said impasse is better understood as not simply the result of the usual 'recuperation' of a radical aesthetic practice by the commodifying logic of the capital, but as the consequence of street art's incapacity to address the relational, power-structured and normative complexity of its site in the age of neoliberal urbanisation. This argument is developed via a critical engagement with a short text by Rafael Schacter, as seen through the lenses of Institutional Critique. That being said, the third part speculates on the possibility for street art to overcome this impasse, by questioning its oft-simplistic conflation

with activism and politics, as well as the unproductive opposition in which it is often split, between a consensual and assimilative approach to the urban, and an agonistic and conflictual one. A truly *urban-specific* street art, I contend, is neither a decorative veneer nor an enchanting disruption to dramatic processes of urbanisation: it is rather a field in which these processes are made visible, experienceable, and thus called into question. The 'Olympic' works of JR and Kobra, and the famous iconoclastic performance by Blu in Berlin, are used to illustrate and complement the argument.

1

1.1

In 2011 the French street artist JR was given the TED Prize: one million dollars, annually awarded to a 'leader with a creative, bold wish to spark global change' (TED, [s.d.]). One of his most famous projects, WOMEN ARE HEROES, takes place between 2008 and 2009 in the Morro da Providência, a historic favela of Rio de Janeiro (see JR, [s.d.]). It consists of gigantic images of faces and eyes of local women, pasted on the walls of the favela's houses. Born as a graffiti artist, JR narrates he became a *photograffeur* (his term, literally: 'photo-graffiti artist') once he realised this technique was 'much more powerful' than the egocentric style of tagging: it permitted 'giving people a voice' (Cadwalladr, 2015). 'In some ways, art can change the world', JR claimed at the TED prize acceptance speech: 'art can change the way we see the world' (TED, 2011). INSIDE OUT, his 'global art project', brings this idea around the world. During the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympics INSIDE OUT was part of the first artists-in-residence programme in the Games' history (see Artists..., [2016]). It took place in the *Boulevard Olímpico* [Olympic Boulevard], the 'biggest live site in the history of the Games', as the website claimed (Rio..., 2016). Interviewed by a journalist in front of his work JR expressed his delight to be working again so close to the Morro da Providência, which sits only a little more than one kilometre away.[2]

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2   As observed by the author, Rio de Janeiro, 7 August, 2016

Figure 1. Rio de Janeiro, August 2016 (photo by the author).

1.2

At the far end of the boulevard lies a giant mural by Eduardo Kobra, a street artist from São Paulo. Titled *Etnias*, it represents five continents through five indigenous faces. As the artist explains, *Etnias* is meant:

> to show that everyone is united [...] we artists cannot be silent and close our eyes to the issues that are going on around us and I believe that, by using public space and talking openly about these issues, we can really create awareness. (Stewart; Perpétua, 2016, my translation).

Kobra sees his commitment as consistent with the Olympic mission 'to reinforce the significance of keeping harmony between nations' (Mural..., 2016, my translation). The mural measures 15 metres of height, 170 of length, and at the time was recognised by the Guinness World Records 2016 as the largest spray

paint mural by a team in the world.[3] The surrounding area was once the seat of the city harbour. Since the 50s it has been neglected and dilapidated, as a giant viaduct, the *Perimetral*, cut it through by separating the land from the sea and creating an abandoned and dangerous *terrain vague* among decaying warehouses. Kobra knew this 'degraded area' and found 'sensational to have the chance to revitalise it through his own work' (Eduardo..., 2016, my translation). This is also the word of choice in the official rhetoric around *Porto Maravilha*: self-defined as 'one of the greatest projects of revitalisation in Brazil', *Porto Maravilha* began in 2009 with the stated objective to recover the 'economic, touristic and housing potential of an area that extends for more than five millions sq/m', and which includes both the Morro da Providência and the *Boulevard Olímpico* (Junkes, 2017, my translation).

Figure 2. Rio de Janeiro, August 2016 (photo by the author).

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3   Kobra and his team outdid themselves in 2018, realising a mural of more than double the size of Etnias, in the headquarters of the chocolate company Cacau Show, based in São Paulo, Brazil. See Stephenson (2018).

1.3

As Diniz (2014) notes, the notion of 'revitalisation' has lately substituted that of 'renovation' in urban planning rhetorics, since it communicates more effectively the intention to *reanimate* an area by unleashing its dormant potentials, rather than simply demolish-and-reconstruct it. While often the latter is nonetheless the case, this rhetoric puts the accent on the role played by intangible processes of valorisation, and especially relies on cultural industries and 'creative city' politics (below). What often remains unsaid is the fact that the 'degradation' (which often pairs with the 'stigmatisation' of the prior residents) that dialectically justifies the need for revitalisation is never a natural fact, but the result of the prior abandonment of the site by the institutions themselves: an abandonment that indirectly produced the conditions for the subsequent privatisation of public soil that accompanies such endeavours (Caselli; Ferreri, 2013; Ribas, 2014). *Porto Maravilha* is no exception. The biggest Public-Private Partnership (PPP) of Brazil, the project is structured on CEPACs (Certificates of Potential Additional Construction). These represent the potential of construction of a given area, that is, the potential for its economical valorisation, and are sold in the stock market. CEPACs, in other words, provide the 'rent gap' (Smith, 1996; see below) of a given area with a direct, if fluctuating, financialisation. By buying these *de facto* virtual territories, and thus betting on their valorisation, private companies are given exceptional rights of construction vis-à-vis the existent urban zoning laws. In exchange, they must take care of public services in the area, which are in this way privatised (Belisário, 2016). The dramatic modifications carried out by construction works between 2009 and 2014 are evident, and during the Olympics, along the Boulevard, many posters proudly show the before-and-after aesthetic of the place. Barely existent are the references to a more remote past.

1.4

In 2011, during the construction works, something unexpected occurred. Amulets, bracelets and other objects of African origin, together with many human bones, began to surface. It is thought that in this area between 700,000 and one million slaves entered Brazil: about 1/10 of the whole slave trade of the

Americas. They mostly passed through the *Cais do Valongo*, a pier specifically built for slave trade and buried under the ground almost two centuries ago, when the 1831 *Lei Feijó* formally forbade slave-trade, which continued slightly more south, illegally, until the official abolition of slavery in 1888. In 2011, the construction works encountered the remains of the *Cais do Valongo*. In July 2017, the site was enlisted in the World Heritage List of Unesco, which defines it as 'the most important physical trace of the arrival of African slaves on the American continent' (Unesco, 2017). This enormously significant finding did not seem to be met by the same enthusiasm at the time of its unearthing. When the Games began, in August 2016, *Porto Maravilha*'s two iconic attractions – the Museum of Art of Rio (MAR) and Santiago Calatrava's *Museu de Amanhâ* (Museum of Tomorrow) – were open to welcome the public. By that time, the thousands of precious objects found among the *Cais do Valongo*'s foundations were still sealed in plastic bags, unreachable, and invisible (Daflon, 2016). Since its foundation, Rio de Janeiro has sought to bury, physically and symbolically, its uncomfortable past of colonisation, slavery and violence, in the attempt to build a glossy image of a world-class destination: *a cidade de amanhã*, that is, the city of tomorrow (Dias, 2008; Jordão, 2015). In *The Futuristic and Speculative Circuit of Disrespect for African Heritage, Urban Oblivion and Rotting of Society*, an artistic urban intervention in the Porto area aimed at denouncing this intentional erasure of the past, Laura Burocco and Pedro Victor Brandão showed the remarkable discrepancy between the underfunded invisibility of the future Unesco-enlisted site and the shiny presence of the two expensive museums.[4] In 19th century the slaves arriving from Africa were amassed, bargained and sold in *Rua Valongo*. Walking along that street (today: *Rua Camerino*) during the Olympics I could not find anything explaining the dramatic role this place played in the past, when it was perhaps the biggest slave-market of the Americas. The posters proudly showing the site before and after the 'revitalisation' works, instead, abound (fig. 3). The street ends at the *Boulevard Olímpico*, where during the Olympics was one of the music stages: *o Palco Amanhã*, the Tomorrow Stage.

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4   Information about the project is available at https://circuitofuturistico.tumblr.com/.

Figure 3. Rio de Janeiro, August 2016 (photo by the author).

1.5

Not far away, in the Morro da Providência, an iconic cable car was installed as part of the Porto Maravilha project. The construction, initially meant to demolish 832 houses, 1/3 of the whole community (a number reduced to about 100 thanks to the physical, media and legal resistance of the locals), had very high costs and, so far, a dramatically intermittent functioning (Ferreira, 2017). While, a functioning cable car would have been useful at least for a part of the community, this was hardly a priority, given the enduring lack of basic sanitary services, health, education, and kindergartens in the area. Its aesthetic function is, in fact, unquestionable: the cable car permits visitors to enjoy a proximity flight over the favela without having to negotiate its 'dangerous' alleyways (Johnson, 2014; Sanchez et al., 2016). Each car was proudly decorated with drawings from a local school's pupils, asked to imagine and draw an answer to the question: 'what is the Harbour Region you would like?' (see Porto Maravilha, 2015). A question nobody asked the inhabitants, systematically excluded from a project that has been notable for the lack of transparency and democratic standards (Gaffney, 2016). As shown in the 8-year long ethnographic exploration carried out by Caterine Reginensi and Nicolas Bautès (2013, p. 11) in the Morro, regardless of its real or perceived usefulness and value, the inhabitants were well aware of – and uncomfortable with – the fact of the cable

car being the result of an urban vision imposed from above, a decision taken without involving them in any significant discussion. Here, in support of those threatened of demolitions, in 2011 JR realised an instalment of INSIDE OUT, informed by the statement: *We don't want our houses to be destroyed* (see Inside..., 2011). The artist apparently saw no contradictions in beautifying the Olympic Boulevard five years later. The blue building pictured below (fig. 4), where an assistant of JR is pasting a poster, was the *Casarão Azul*, one among the various formerly occupied buildings in the area, whose residents (about one thousand) have been evicted between 2009 and 2011 (Burocco; Brandão, 2017). Nine years later these buildings are still empty, waiting for their value to rise. At the time of writing, the cable cars remain still. Their functioning has been interrupted for lack of funding in December 2016, and has not been reinitiated since then. Its stations are frequently occupied, and dilapidated (see Calado, 2018).

Figure 4. Rio de Janeiro, August 2016 (photo by the author).

By the end of 19th century, early urban thinkers had already begun to perceive the novel spatio-temporal logic introduced by urban capitalism in the form of a complex dialectics between abstract, increasingly global structures and forces, and the concrete experience of urban everyday life. In his 1903's seminal text, Georg Simmel (2002, p. 14) describes the 'money economy' of globalising capitalism as a force that 'hollows out the core of things' reducing everything to a comparable and measurable quantity, a reflection Henri Lefebvre (1991) would subsequently provide with a more markedly spatio-temporal nuance, by exposing the systematic fragmentation, homogeneisation, and hierarchisation of the urban engendered by the capital's production of 'abstract space' and 'linear rhythm'. Accordingly, capitalist urbanisation unfolds as a dynamics of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, as local contexts are deterritorialised from their contingent relations and simultaneously reterritorialised into a global non-place, a disembedded networks of circulation and flows of which each single city, each single urban space, is a node (cf. Deleuze; Guattari, 2008; Soja, 1996). No longer captured by the static equivalence with a given physical environment (i.e. the city), the urban will thus have to be understood as a dynamic process (i.e. urbanisation), one that today takes an increasingly planetary dimension (Brenner; Schmid, 2013).

Capitalism may be said to function as a machine for the extraction of value that constantly prolongs, bends and empties places by force-adapting them to its own rhythms and diagrams. Under such a process, the old anthropological understanding of place, based on 'the relation between locale and meaning, internal to the boundaries of physical contiguity', no longer holds (Osborne, 2001, p. 188). Yet, the resulting proliferation of non-places is not to be superficially found in transitory sites such as airports, stations or shopping malls, as Marc Augé (1992) famously proposed. In fact, what Augé failed to grasp is 'the constitutive role of non-sites in all sites' of capitalist modernity (Osborne, 2013, p. 144): under the spatial logic of global capitalism non-places proliferate *within* the very composition of each place, as the nonlocal increasingly insists on and reformulates the local, remarkably complexifying the ontology of any given site. As a result, contemporary urban places are invisibly prolonged towards hypothetical futures, stretched by invisible vectors of financial and economical 'speculations' (literally: conjectures on potential investments) that depend on global flows of capital's circulation, accumulation and exchange. These

speculations are the 'expression of a geopolitical economic system that may or may not exist in the future', an abstracted topology of capital desire that invisibly shapes our cities to come (Lewin, 2015, p. 192).

The consequent mismatch between the local and phenomenological experience of a place and the global and abstract forces that prolong and shape it was insightfully indicated by Fredric Jameson (2007) as a typical condition of modernity. Whether in pre-modern societies these two dimensions may be said to occupy the same spatio-temporal 'world', since the surfacing of imperialism a disjunction would widen between the phenomenological perception of everyday life and the abstract connections, processes and flows that structure and organise it (Jameson, 2007), a process that today is dramatically intensified and complexified by the global infrastructure of computation, financial speculation and digital mediation that shapes the reality in which we live at a speed and a scale that are vastly unexperienceable (Bratton, 2016; Srnicek, 2015). Sites, however, do not simply disappear. The concrete does not dissolve into the abstract. As Neil Brenner (2013, p. 95) helpfully summarises, following Lefebvre, the urban is better understood a

> 'concrete abstraction' in which the contradictory socio-spatial relations of capitalism (commodification, capital circulation, capital accumulation, and associated forms of political regulation/contestation) are at once territorialized (embedded within concrete contexts and thus fragmented) and generalized (extended across place, territory, and scale and thus universalized).

A simultaneous territorialisation and deterritorialisation that is always problematic, turbulent and sketchy. The abstract rhythms and diagrams of the capital are always actualised in the contingency of a given locale: they must unavoidably take place in the turbulent singularity of everyday life, which always resists being fully translated into them (Tsing-Lowenhaupt, 2012). The local, Peter Sloterdijk (2013, p. 257) reminds, is not a particular opposed to a universal but a singular *uncompressible* that 'can neither be reduced true to scale nor expanded beyond a certain degree'. This complexity requires a bifocal lens to be observed, pointed to the planetary process of urbanisation and the socio-spatial configurations it presupposes, and at the same time to the socio-spatial relations *in* and *through* which this form is concretely actualised

onto the urban space (cf. Cunningham, 2005). It is through this perspective that the centrality assumed by experience in contemporary urban politics appears more evident.

If on the one hand urbanisation occurs at a degree of speed, scale and abstraction that systematically escape sensible experience, experience itself simultaneously becomes *the* fundamental battleground of aesthetic capitalism and its experience economy (Böhme, 2017). This is all too evident to anyone living in contemporary cities, where urban branding has grown into a key urban development strategy, enrolling discourses and policies of planning, security, marketing and law in the production of safe, commodified and entertaining urban spaces, and functioning as a sort of lubricant that both propels and expedites this process of value extraction by mediating between the abstract and the concrete, the planetary and the local (Pavoni, 2018). Since the new millennium this process has been most closely associated with a single name: Richard Florida. Florida (2002) notoriously set the stage for a model of urban 'creative economy' that would spread among cities worldwide. In a nutshell, his suggestion, indirectly plugging and expanding on the as much notorious Broken Windows doctrine,[5] assumes that urban decay could be challenged via the production of intangible cultural and symbolic capital, courtesy of an ever-increasing 'creative class'. Few years before Neal Smith (1996, p. 67) had precisely shown how the differential (social, cultural, lifestyle) value prompted by such a process tends to generate a 'rent gap' between the 'immaterial' and the 'ground' value of each urban site, that is, between 'the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use'. This means that, lacking adequate counterbalances, the production of such cultural and symbolic capital is likely to kick-start place-valorisation processes and thus widening the related rent gaps, up to the threshold beyond which they begin cascading into gentrification. Jason Moore (2015) explains that capitalism constantly relies on searching for, appropriating, and reproducing 'cheap nature' (food, labour-power, energy and raw materials) in order

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5   The Broken Windows theory was introduced in 1982 by James Wilson and George Kelling (1982), famously tested by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in New York City, and then enthusiastically imported in Europe and beyond. It is an environmental deterministic perspective which assumes that an aesthetic of disorder and uncivil behaviour in the urban space (such as 'broken windows', uncollected garbage, or graffiti) will be conducive to more crime.

to keep the circulation of capital (value-in-motion) alive and productive: to do so, capitalism constantly redefines and expands its 'commodity frontiers', i.e. the boundaries of acceptability and thus 'appropriability' of a given practice. Accordingly, he continues, systemic moments of reconfiguration occur when 'the interlocking agencies of capital, science, and empire – blunt categories, yes – succeed in releasing new sources of free or low-cost human and extra-human natures for capital' (Moore, 2015, p. 53). In this sense, what David Harvey (2001) has termed the 'collective production of culture' (in other words, the cultural commons) has in the last decades become yet another frontier of capitalistic reproduction and exploitation by intersecting the marketing field of experience economy, whose application extended well beyond the private and the commercial sector, to become a key feature of urban politics, planning and branding.

Unsurprisingly, public art has gradually begun to play an important role in the process of place-valorisation triggered by aesthetic capitalism (e.g. Berry-Slater; Iles, 2009; Bridge, 2006; Deutsche, 1996; Pinder, 2008). Following Brighenti (2015, p. 165), we may understand the interaction of public art with a given site as corresponding to an eventful 'precipitation' of the site's dense complexity, one that is potentially able to produce 'new valorisation trajectories and circuits' which 'are not simply projected onto pre-existing space but, in turn, topologically shape it' (see also Poole, 2015). Valorisation in this sense should be understood as not merely an economical process, but rather 'a *systemic* phenomenon' (Moore, 2015, p. 54-55, emphasis in the original) in which 'the sheer economic side of value (buildings' prices and land revenue) actually precipitates and condenses a number of scattered, convergent or divergent, social forces', whose effects on the socio-material constitution of the urban cannot be simply accounted for via the reductive category of 'gentrification' (Brighenti, 2010a, p. 159). The key question here, of course, is how these trajectories may avoid being co-opted as the ancillary aesthetics of capitalist urbanisation. How the eventful quality of art, that is, may avoid becoming yet another tool at the hand of what Doreen Jacob (2013, p. 3) terms *eventification*, that is, the 'process in which urban space, itself, is represented as a spectacle and transformed into an aesthetised place of consumption'.

All too often these questions are addressed via unproductive dichotomies (e.g. institutional vs. independent; commodified vs. non-commercial;

subversive vs. conformist; social vs. artistic; etc.) that polarise the reflection and propose a simple and simplistic solution: if it is to avoid capitalist co-optation, public art is to become more social, more political, and more activist. This suggestion, while to some extent commendable, is ultimately counterproductive, unless complemented by a critical discussion able to address the aesthetics of public art *qua* art, and the relation it entertains with the aesthetics of urban experience under capitalism (cf. Bishop, 2012; Foster, 1995; Kester, 1995). If today 'the forms of aesthetic experience are mediated by the geographies and rhythms of historical capitalism' (Toscano; Kinkle, 2015), then it is crucial not to ignore, or take for granted, the question of the *formal* relation between public art and the aesthetics and ontology of its (urban) site. This is indeed *the* key political-aesthetic question, in order to develop a 'new political grammar' able to foster 'a political re-composition of the cultural commons and artistic agency' against the 'creative destruction' of contemporary urban capitalism (Pasquinelli, 2014, p. 171-172). The rest of this text will seek to unpack and mobilise the complexity of the last two paragraph by focusing on the field of street art.

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2.1

Modern graffiti emerge in the 70s, together with hip-hop music and break-dance, out of the underground culture of deprived US East Coast inner cities. Born as by definition excessive to the social, legal, and aesthetic normativity of the urban, it was immediately perceived as an assault to urban morality and décor, thus attracting social stigmatisation and legal persecution. 'Classic' signature graffiti, or *tagging*, is mostly concerned with the act of marking a presence and a territory with a self-referential claim (the tag), the meaning of which is often fully resolved within an internal language that for the most part remains obscure to the outsiders. Literally incorporating a transgression to the aesthetic regime of the contemporary city, and especially to its normative utopia of order, safety and cleanliness, it is no surprise that graffiti was singled-out among the key symptoms of urban decay by the notorious Broken Windows theory. Today, the intensity of these 'graffiti wars' (Iveson, 2010)

has somewhat waned.[6] As the aesthetic of contemporary capitalism gradually attuned to the 'gritty', 'edgy' and subversive allure of counter-cultural spaces, styles and practices, graffiti was increasingly acknowledged as a valuable expression of urban culture – one, moreover, emblematic of an increasingly marketable lifestyle (Böhme, 2017; Moses, 2013). Most important, however, has been the surfacing of street art, or post-graffiti as it is sometimes defined (Waclawek, 2011), that radically altered the socio-cultural, legal and economic status of this practice.

Emerged at the intersection between graffiti subculture and art market, most notably fostered by the New York experience of the likes of Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat, street art guided graffiti towards social acceptability, artistic legitimation, legal institutionalisation, and gradual commodification. Although street art is far from being a monolithic phenomenon, and many are its individual, geographical and historical specificities, these all share common features which allow to refer to street art as a consistent *genre* of public art with significant differences from previous graffiti (cf. Schacter, 2016). With respect to the latter, street art develops technical and stylistics differences, adding new techniques (e.g. stencil, posters, installations etc.) to the traditional spray can, and gradually moving from the cryptic language of tagging to the pictorial image. This 'shift from the typographic to the iconographic' (Manco, 2004, p. 16), together with a greater attention to the political content of the message, provided street art with 'a more universal, democratic aesthetic' (Dickens, 2010, p. 77), one whose relation with the art world and market is increasingly comfortable.

To be sure, this evolution has been, and it is, far from linear or smooth, and while on the one hand street art ferried graffiti towards social acceptation and aesthetic legitimation as public art proper (as per Shapiro and Heinich's [2012] notion of 'artification'), traditional graffiti remained in place, at times also morphing in more explicitly illegal, spectacular and excessive practices (e.g. 'emergency brake graffiti'). In fact, the advent of street art inserted within the wider field of urban art a new threshold of acceptability, rendering the traditional

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6   It is far from being over though, as for instance the recent grey-painting of the walls of a graffiti mecca such as São Paulo demonstrates, courtesy of the new mayor João Doria's *Cidade Linda* (Beautiful City) project. See for instance Sims (2017).

distinction between public art and vandalism or crime far more unstable. Outright (social) stigmatisation and (criminal) persecution began to leave room for a tentative and yet effective differentiation between vandalism and art, one often coinciding with the separation between tagging and street art.[7] In a sense, we may see this as an instance of the above-mentioned redefinition of the 'commodity frontiers', i.e. the boundaries within which a given art practice can become exploitable within the circuit of capital valorisation. This interpretation may be only partially accepted, however.

Osborne (2013, p. 133) argues that 'contemporary visual art is an urban phenomenon, in both its historical and cultural form, in a sense that transcends locality to the extent to which the metropolis transcends the city'. This is obviously all the more true in the case of street art, a *constitutively* urban phenomenon which, as result of artistic legitimation, digital mediatisation and widespread commodification, has increasingly transcended the site of its taking place in at least two overlapping senses. First, street artists and their artworks have overcome the 'limits' of their physical location by joining the space of circulation, accumulation and exchange of the art world, as testified by the global success of street art exhibitions, outdoor galleries and festivals around the world. Second, street art has been detached from the socio-historical specificity of its site by means of being increasingly reframed as a 'portable' tool that both private and public institutions may employ in order to decorate, promote, revitalise and brand the urban, as the example provided in the first section eloquently shows. It is therefore by looking at the complex relation between street art and the spatial and aesthetic logic of contemporary capitalism – and thus the role of the latter in reshaping the relation between graffiti and its own site – that significant insights may be gained. This endeavour goes against the widespread tendency, both within and outside of the graffiti community, to lament the ongoing 'co-optation' of street art on the account of the betrayal street artists would have perpetrated against the independent, non-commercial, illegal and transgressive 'spirit' of graffiti, thus 'selling out' this very spirit

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7   This is instructively shown in the 2013 documentary *Cidade Cinza* (Grey City), directed by Guilherme Valiengo and Marcelo Mesquita, where a municipal officer, tasked with deciding upon the erasure of graffiti from the city walls, selectively chooses to erase the tags, while keeping 'iconographic' street art in place.

to the market (CDH, 2013; Guémy, 2013; Schacter, 2015). Yes, the advent of street art undeniably rendered graffiti more palatable to the common taste and the adaptive context of the 'creative city', to some extent succumbing to the 'recuperation of radical aesthetics' that is peculiar of contemporary capitalism (cf. Boltanski; Chiapello, 2007; Campos, 2013). Yet, I stress, although it is undeniable that many artists exploited the situation by aggressively valorising their work in the market, it is not so much artists' intentionality or moral integrity that we should look at to understand this phenomenon, but rather it is the *formal* relation between street art and the urban environment, and the related processes of place valorisation. Borrowing Simon Sheikh's (2009, p. 32) observation, a critical investigation of street art and its complex institutionalisation should not be

> primarily about the intentionalities and identities of subjects, but rather about the politics and inscriptions of institutions (and, thus, about how subjects are always already threaded through specific and specifiable institutional spaces).

2.2

According to Ronald Kramer (2010) street art does not betray the transgressive 'spirit' of graffiti, but rather shifts such transgression away from its formal relation (or, outright conflict) with the legal and aesthetic normativity of the urban, towards the socio-political message conveyed by the work itself. In the face of an increasingly legalised, institutionalised and commissioned practice, the argument goes, transgression requires be translated, and reclaimed, as a freedom of expression and control over the creative process: from the context to the content, that is. While in his classic work Dick Hebdige (1979) argued that subcultures' critical potential tends to dissolve once they are absorbed within the realm of commercial exchange, according to Kramer (2010, p. 248) this strategy is a cunning way the artists found to continue performing also in a changed socio-economical and aesthetic context, while reaping advantages 'towards the graffiti writers and/or graffiti writing culture' in the process. While this objection may have some value against the moralistic overtones of the 'selling out' argument, it fails to grasp that the key issue at stake here is the way in which the relation between the graffiti and the site (its physical, social and

normative surface) is rearticulated as result of this process. In the words of Ella Chmielewska (2009, p. 44),

> graffiti is site specific even if its placement may seem arbitrary [...] By *taking place*, it designates its context marking a spatial entity with the temporal dimensions of a personal trace. By taking place, it also makes itself public.

Graffiti is an articulation of a gesture and a trace enacted by the materiality of being-there and thus by the fact of entering in-between *(inter-venire)* a dense urban complexity (see Riggle, 2010). A tag in this sense is an act of marking as well as *making* a territory – a site in itself, and a fundamentally *public* one (Brighenti, 2010a, p. 329). Brighenti (2010a, p. 328) emphasises this aspect by following Isaac Joseph's definition: 'a public space is not a plane of organisation *[plan d'organisation]* of identities in an environment, but a plane of consistence *[plan de consistance]* where identities are problematised and situations become constantly redefinable'. The public, in other words, is not a static domain opposed to the private, but a conflictual, asymmetric and power-structured terrain in which urban politics are constantly (re)produced, asserted and contested (see also Brighenti, 2010b). Therefore, rather that simply 'a subcultural practice among others, or as a personal search for the thrill', graffiti may be better understood 'as a radical interrogation of public territories, a questioning of the social relationships that define the public domain' (Brighenti, 2010a, p. 329). To be at stake with graffiti, as with any instance of public art, is nothing less than the very the production of public space, and thus its relation with the spatial and aesthetic *conditions* of possibility of the public itself: in other words, 'the definition of the nature and the limits of public space qua public' (Brighenti, 2010a, p. 328; see also Sholette, 2012). It is in this light that we may better appreciate the role played by the advent of street art and its prioritisation of the aesthetic (visual) 'look' and the socio-political 'message' of the artwork, over the eventful contingency of its gesture and its relational inscription within a given urban site. For this reason in what follows, rather than trying to evaluate graffiti and street art according to worn-out dichotomies (art/crime, street/gallery, un/commissioned work, etc.), I will focus on the role played by street art vis-à-vis the fundamentally public and indeed *urban* dimension of graffiti themselves.

2.3

In the light of what has been written so far, it may be useful to briefly engage with Rafael Schacter's recent reflections on the 'end' of street art *qua* artistic period.[8] Schacter (2016) defines as 'street art period' the decade between 1998 and 2008. This is obviously a heuristic periodisation that may be conditionally accepted for the sake of his argument. What is peculiar and consistent in the works belonging to this period, Schacter observes, are not only the technical and stylistic peculiarities we already mentioned, but also a *formal* difference with respect to the relation between art and the urban surroundings. Differently from previous graffiti, street artists, he writes,

> can all be argued to have been attempting to work in dialogue with rather than in opposition to surrounding architectural forms [...] being intentionally attentive rather than purposefully disruptive to the context which they inhabited [...] utilizing media such as stencils or posters, producing forms such as sculptures or installations, methods that transformed the viewership of the practice from an *ex*clusive to a more *in*clusive public.

Today the 'street art period' is over, the argument goes, due to the combined action of market, media and municipal authorities. The entry of street art within the art market led to its commodification and the betrayal of its ephemeral, singular (site-specific) and public nature, as artworks are increasingly 'produced, exhibited, and sold inside' as well as, we may add, musealised in outdoor galleries, street art reserves in which artists may enjoy a right to write which they often lack in the rest of the city. The digital mediatisation of street art led it to be 'identified with big, colourful, exterior wall paintings', marginalising less visible and less spectacular practices while championing grand-scale muralism – what better example than Kobra's Guinness World of Record's mural? Finally, its municipalisation led street art to be increasingly 'produced at the behest of urban planners and publics servants rather than critics and curators', that is, as a tool within the 'Creative City model of city planning', a state

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8   Unless stated, all the quotes in the following sections are from Schacter (2016).

of affairs that 'has turned art into a project of branding (of place, of lifestyle) [and] turned artistic value into financial rather than cultural or societal gain'. What results from this tripartite process is an art that is no longer recognisable as street art and should rather be termed Creative City Art (CCA), Schacter polemically suggests. CCA, according to him, is an art that

> fails to assimilate with its surroundings, rather coming to directly dominate it. Much of it is institutional, not independent, sacrificing autonomy yet feigning subversion. Much of it is strategic, existing for reasons of gain rather than art. Much of it fails to act consensually and rather embraces the fatuity of sentimentality or "cool."

I believe Schacter's argument has a point. Granted, this text may be criticised from different angles, and primarily for the reliance on rather simplistic oppositions such as 'institution' and 'autonomy', 'artistic' and 'strategic', 'consensual' and 'cool'... As already argued, this binary approach is problematic since it fails to grasp the question at stake (i.e. the relation between street art and urban space and its role in the production of the 'public'), and implicitly postulates the previous existence of an 'authentic' street art, now irremediably tainted by its compromise with (market, media, and municipal) institutions. While Schacter (2014) has elsewhere provided a more detailed account of the difference between what he terms *consensual* and *agonistic* approach to graffiti and street art, I believe its application in this short text is better appreciated as a provocation, and as such it calls upon us to follow the thoughts it provokes, rather than seeking to dissect its inconsistencies. This is what is done in the next section, by focusing on Schacter's key point about the formal difference between street art and CCA, from the perspective of Institutional Critique (IC).

2.4

The term IC refers to an artistic approach or, more precisely, a critical complement to site-specific art, which emerged in the 60s in opposition to the sacred site of art (i.e. the museum or art gallery) and its assumption as a neutral and innocent – that is, normatively flat and power-free – 'white cube' of artistic and spectatorial freedom (cf. O'Doherty, 1999; for an anthology of IC see Alberro

and Stimson, 2009). Site-specific art puts the emphasis on the relation between the artwork and its site, prompting artistic practice to experiment with public space by addressing its socio-material complexity, differently from the modernist paradigm and its reduction of public space to a pedestal for the art-monument (see Kwon, 2004; Traquino, 2010). As Gerald Raunig (2009) notes, since its inception IC oscillated between the critique of the (art) 'institution' and the risk to succumb to the escapist fantasy of a non-institutional purity: that is, the belief in a space 'outside' in which the artist could experiment with a creative freedom that would be untainted by institutional structures and logics. Translating the white cube outside of the museum is a problematic and dangerous strategy, however, one that moreover does not take into account the fact that its presupposition is nothing but the dialectical counter-point – and thus the corroboration – of the institutional logic itself (Fraser, 2005). In fact, this is exactly the conceptual (and political) impasse in which most of street art rhetorics fall, as exemplified by the commonplace that presents the city as a *playground* for the artist's unbridled creative freedom.[9] Needless to say, today the urban is first and foremost a playground for the process of neoliberal urbanisation and its violent, unequal, and exclusionary logics: this is something street artists all too often ignore, ending up being 'played' by the process itself. Likewise, it is again a blatant misunderstanding of institutional dialectics which is secretly at work in the value-laden distinctions between 'institutionalised' and 'independent' artists; or in the emphasis on the creative 'independence' the artist must retain vis-à-vis the commissioning institution. This is all too evident in Kobra's candid solution to the question of how to 'continue doing art without art becoming commercial': simply, he suggests, 'when a company or anyone else wish to support my work, they cannot interfere in the creations' (Eduardo..., 2016, my translation). The respect of creative freedom, in other words, is presented as the guarantee of moral integrity vis-à-vis compromise with the market. Such anachronistic defence of authorial independence not only ignores the complexity of socio-economical processes of institutionalisation, but also the significance of the artwork's site over its content. When JR proudly affirms 'I don't use any brand or corporate sponsors. So I have no responsibility to anyone but

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9   'It's like taking the city as a playground', as JR himself put it (Neto, 2016).

myself and the subjects' (TED, 2011); is he not blatantly disavowing the role his artwork may play in *branding* the urban spaces in which they appear?

Art historians usually distinguish between two periods of IC. While the so-called 'first wave' (in the 60s) sought to find a '*distance from* the institution', the second (in the 80s) began to address 'the inevitable *involvement in* the institution' (Raunig, 2009, p. 9, emphasis in the original), and thus to dismantle non-institutional illusions of artistic self-sufficiency by inserting a deeper self-questioning on the processes of subjectification and institutionalisation that occur through and beyond the art space proper (cf. Fraser, 2005). This meant recasting the site of art 'as an institutional frame in social, economic, and political terms' – a frame that, in fact, was to become the very content and the material of the artwork (Kwon, 2004, p. 19). It is such a critical update to be still missing from the field of street art which in this sense, rather than being assumed as a finished artistic period, could perhaps more promisingly be understood as an artistic period that is still waiting the advent of its *critical* phase. Street art has always been entangled with urban (normative, aesthetic, artistic and socio-economical) structures and thus with their various institutional logics, *regardless* of its actual enrolment in private or public 'institutions'. It is by unpacking this original entanglement, and thus developing its own 'institutional critique', therefore, that street may begin to address its current impasse.

2.5

In her critical account of modern public art in the US, Miwon Kwon (2004, p. 60-72) schematically distinguishes three main paradigms: art-in-public-places, in which the site is understood as a mere pedestal for the artwork; art-as-public-places, in which art is meant to be formally integrated with the environment, converging with the practice and strategies, of design, architecture and planning; art-in-the-public-interest, in which art is meant to engage with social and political issues, by fostering the participation of the community in the process. The last two paradigms, which inform the majority of cultural institutions worldwide, directly challenge the modernist approach by prompting an ideology of assimilation and integration according to which public art is meant to adapt to – or to 'act consensually with' (Schacter, 2014) – both

architectonic and social surroundings. Public art, in other words, is understood as a tool to improve the city, to deal with the malaise of urban life by ameliorating and beautifying urban space, and by empowering urban communities (cf. Bishop, 2012).

Many authors have warned against the risk for this tendency (exemplified in such definitions as 'new genre public art', 'community art', 'participatory art', etc.), by uncritically enrolling public art into urban planning and social policies, to end up being co-opted in processes of urban regeneration and, all too often, outright gentrification. Of course, the argument is rather more complex that this simple sentence may suggest, and the reader may find it spelled out in different, but equally compellingly ways, in various places (e.g. Bishop, 2012; Berry-Slater; Iles, 2009; Deutsche, 1996; Foster, 1995; Groys, 2010; Kwon, 2004; Zukin, 1982). While addressing these works is beyond the scope of this text, I want to emphasise an aspect they all converge in singling out as problematic, namely: the promotion of an 'assimilative' and 'integrationist' approach for public art. This approach, they argue, is premised on a reductionism of the site, which is implicitly postulated as an innocent, neutral and malleable power-free matter which responsible artistic practice may manipulate towards the common good. With all due differences, it is exactly such a socially inclusive and architectonically integrated aesthetics that Schacter assigns to street art in opposition to CCA.

According to his argument, as we saw, while street art attempts 'to work in dialogue with rather than in opposition to surrounding architectural forms', being 'intentionally attentive rather than purposefully disruptive to the context', CCA 'fails to assimilate with its surroundings, rather coming to directly dominate it'. On a closer look, however, there appears to be no such a *formal* difference between CCA and street art. On the one hand, CCA is perfectly integrated with its surroundings, that is, with the spatial aesthetics and structural process of neoliberal urbanisation. On the other hand, this occurs in continuity (albeit in a somehow intensified form) with respect to the tendency towards physical and social assimilation that originally characterised street art. In other words, once we refrain from challenging street art's institutionalisation – which is self-evident – but rather focus on the specific form it has taken in the city, we begin to see that the problem here, one that street art and so-called CCA share, is their reductionist incapacity to deal with the complex ontology of their own site.

Today, in the age of its massive commodification, mediatisation and municipalisation, street art tends to be accepted and legitimated only insofar as integrated within its aesthetic and socio-cultural urban context: an integration that, by making it increasingly indistinguishable from other practices of urban planning and design, makes it increasingly difficult for it to be disentangled from cultural strategies of regeneration and city-branding. In this context, moreover, the emphasis on the artwork's socio-political message prompts a further, 'rhetorical' dematerialisation of the site, rehashing an (even more naïve) version of what Grant Kester (1995) famously termed 'aesthetic evangelism': namely, the implicit belief 'that the real differences and disparities that exist between themselves [the artists] and a given community can be transcended by a well meaning rhetoric of aesthetic "empowerment"' – a pose that Kobra and JR' idealistic quotes reported above well exemplify. The emphasis on the beautifying quality of the artwork and its socio-political message eventually performs a phenomenological and social reductionism of the site, to the extent that any attempt to assimilate and integrate the artwork to the site itself eventually ends up disembedding the artworks from the relations and structures that constitute the site in the first place (cf. Mackay, 2015). To put it otherwise: the incapacity to address the relational, power-structured and normative complexity of the site causes street art to be indeed assimilated, albeit merely as an uncritical prosthesis, as Matthew Poole (2015, p. 89) puts it, an 'appendag[e] of the already existing ideological vectors [...] of the given site'.

3

3.1

Andrea Phillips (2015, p. 83, emphasis in the original) argues that 'the role of art – which is always *public* – is [...] to give over to forms of thought and practice that challenge and resist the financialisation of civil space [...] it is about changing not the form of art, but the structure of its relation to social-political context'. A truly critical art, in this sense, is not necessarily an art that is explicitly 'involved' in socio-political issues. This misunderstanding, that

accompanies much of contemporary discussions on 'artivism', recommends the merging of art and activism without questioning the ideological separation that this 'merging proposition' presupposes in the first place (cf. Groys, 2014). In the words of IC's pioneer Daniel Buren (1973, p. 38), 'art whatever it may be is exclusively political. What is called for is the analysis of formal and cultural limits (and not one or the other) within which art exists and struggles'. This analysis should not lead to simply remove these limits and dissolve art into social practice or political activism. While art can never be outside of the social, it cannot be dissolved within the social either. Quite literally, there is no *solution* of art into life, *pace* the numerous supporters of the *art is life* dogma, whose corollary – *everyone is creative* – is the slogan of neoliberal cultural departments around the world. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) argued that, if any political potential were to be ascribed to art, it would belong to its capacity to exceed the socio-empirical state of affair. On the escort of Theodor Adorno's famous formula, Osborne (2001, p. 192, emphasis in the original) similarly argues that art always occurs by 'transfiguring the social character of the space it occupies', to the extent that the equation art = life is constitutively untenable, since 'art cannot live, *qua* art, within the everyday *as* everyday. Rather, *qua* art, it necessarily interrupts the everyday, from within, on the basis of the fact that it is always *both* autonomous *and* "social fact"'. Jacques Rancière (2006) precisely captures the intersection between politics and aesthetics that is at stake in this discussion, by arguing that art is political not owing to its intention, content, or capacity to represent 'social structures, conflicts or identities', but rather

> It is political by virtue of the very distance that it takes with regard to those functions. It is political as it frames a specific space-time sensorium, as it redefines on this stage the power of speech or the coordinates of perception

A public art that be able to address the critical and political ontology of its own site, therefore, must be able to visibilise and engage with its structural and ideological vectors, rather than uncritically complementing them. Instead of being mobilised to restore 'the lost meaning of a common world by repairing the fissures in the social bond', such an art would become a tool for dissecting and problematising the ontology of these very fissures (Alliez, 2010, p. 88): not

an instrument to provide solutions to already defined problems, but one able to challenge and point to the redefinition of these very problems in the first place.

Reflecting on his most (in)famous piece, *The Tilted Arch*, Richard Serra (1994, p. 203) reclaimed the necessity for art 'to work in opposition to the constrains of the context, so that the work cannot be read as an affirmation of question-able ideologies and political power'. As Kwon (2004, p. 74, emphasis in the original) observes commenting on this passage, 'it is only working *against* the given site... that art can resist co-optation'. To be sure, such 'working against' should not be fetishised into the self-satisfied thrill of transgression *per se*, or reductively framed through the category of illegality (e.g. Bacharach, 2015). Capitalism 'tolerates all transgressions, provided they remain soft' and superficial (Tiqqun, 2010, p. 170), and this depoliticising effect goes together with the ongoing municipalisation of street art, as official bodies are keener in funding works that express creativity, social value, place-making capacity and socio-political engagement, over those that appear as excessively subversive, incompatible and problematic (Bishop, 2012). Likewise, 'working against' should not simply be understood as the 'situational' capacity of a street artwork to generate spontaneous encounters and a perceptual reconfiguration of the site in which they take place (e.g. Young, 2013a; Schacter, 2014; Andrzejewski, 2017). Such a capacity, if merely affirmed, would be hardly distinguishable from the logic of capitalist *eventification* and its constant attempt to 'animate' the city by producing ever-novel atmospheres of pervasive entertainment and frenetic festival rhythms whose effervescence is however kept at a low, consensual and politically uncontroversial intensity (Pavoni, 2018). How are we to distinguish between the enchanting moment of disruption that Alison Young (2013b) ascribes to street art and the enchantment of capitalist aesthetics?

An answer may be found within this very ambivalence. Street art must engage with the 'structure of its relation to social-political context' (Phillips, 2015, p. 83), while at the same time reflecting on the aesthetic form of this very relation (cf. Fraser, 2005), and thus on 'the 'conditions that traditionally govern the reception of aesthetic objects' (Rebentisch, 2012, p. 255-256) in the urban context. Addressing, in other words, the *conditions* of possibility street art itself, their unavoidable entanglement with the dominant aesthetic regime of the contemporary city, and thus the centrality assumed by sensorial and phenomenological experience within such a regime (cf. Salemy, 2015; Malik; Cox; Jaskey, 2015).

As 'half a century of consumer society has produced an insatiable appetite for aestheticisation' (Berry-Slater; Iles, 2009), the need for art to extricate itself from the experience economy of capitalism appears paramount. It is in this sense that we may interpret Sven Lütticken's (2012) suggestion for art to 'move away from finished form to the matrix of form, to the conditions that produce' it: the *real* conditions of possibility of art's own site, and thus its entanglement with the conditions of possibility of the urban itself. Paraphrasing Claire Bishop (2012, p. 274; cf. Guattari, 1995), street art 'needs to be successful within both art and the social field, but ideally also testing and revising the criteria we apply to both domains'. At the very least, this may require for street art to try and extricate itself from the unproductive opposition between, on the one hand, a consensual and assimilative approach to its urban surrounding and, on the other, a merely agonistic and conflictual one. In fact, these may be seen as two equally external positions vis-à-vis the urban, whose ontological composition they equally take for granted, only then to either try and adapt to – or disrupt – it. Instead, a truly *urban* street art would have to assume its always-already urbanised and urbanising quality, renouncing to be a mere tool for *enchanting* a grey city so as to become a way to disenchant the city, by turning itself into a force-field in which the aesthetic regimes and politico-economical processes that shape the urban – and thus the very role street art plays with respect to them – are made visible, experienceable, and in this way put under discussion.

3.2

> The painter does not paint on an empty canvas, and neither does the writer write on a blank page; but the page or canvas is already so covered with preexisting, preestablished cliches that it is first necessary to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision. When Fontana slashes the colored canvas with a razor, he does not tear the color in doing this. On the contrary, he makes us see the area of plain, uniform color, of pure color, through the slit. (Deleuze; Guattari, 1994, p. 204).

In December 2014 the inhabitants of Kreutzberg, Berlin, assisted to a curious scene. Two very famous, giants murals painted in the neighbourhood about seven years before by Blu, a famous Italian street artist from Senigallia, were

being covered, that is, erased with black paint.[10] This was no routine 'wall clean-ing' performed by over-zealot authorities. It was an action carried out by Blu's collaborators, with his consent. Three months before the squatters living in the building where the murals were had been evicted, victims of Kreutzberg's rampant process of gentrification. Urban revitalisation rhymes with art's 'zombification', Blu's collaborator Lutz Henke argues, turning 'Berlin into a museal city of veneers', in which 'the "art scene" [is] preserved as an amusement park for those who can afford the rising rents' (Henke, 2014). In this context, the aesthetic and socio-political message of street art goes to increase the appeal and edginess of a place, playing an important role in the economic valorisa-tion of urban space, and therefore in the direct or indirect expulsion of local communities which usually follows such a process (Berry-Slater; Iles, 2009). As Blu wrote on its website on the aftermath of the erasure: 'After witnessing the changes happening in the surrounding area during the last years we felt it was time to erase both walls' (Blu Blog, 2014).[11]

As Lucio Fontana with canvases, and Gordon Matta-Clark with buildings, Blu used black paint as a way to let the background (its conditions of possi-bility) emerge. Of course, his gesture was reactive and to some extent naïve in its luddite ardour. Yet, it was also a paradoxical way to reclaim the excessive quality of street art by erasing its means of expression, i.e. the pictorial image. Brighenti (2015, p. 165) observes that researchers should not so much individu-ate who gains and who loses in the graffiti game, but rather explore the topol-ogy of valorisation that this practice intersects, and 'draw the maps of the new valorisation trajectories and circuits as they are not simply projected onto pre-existing space but, in turn, topologically shape it'. Perhaps street artists themselves should begin drawing such maps, no longer merely working *on* the wall, but *through* them.[12] Nick Srnicek (2012, p. 10-11) observes that today's task for aesthetic practice is to 'try and grasp these accelerating lines that compose

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10 The two works were painted in collaboration with JR (who pasted the eyes of the first murals, which were then re-painted by Blu once the posters disappeared because of the rain), Lutz and Artitude.

11 In Bologna Blu recently painted in grey all his works, in response to the municipality that, without his consent, physically removed one of his works from the wall and carried it into a gallery, to forcefully enrol it for an street art; see Pavoni (2016).

12 It is in this direction that Schacter's (2016) notion of 'intermural art' is promising.

the world, and to turn them into an intelligible, tractable plane of consistency'. Instead of turning its own site into an exhibition space, street art may thus operate as a device to map and exploit the ruptures that punctuate this very plane of consistency, that is, not a decorative supplement to dramatic processes of urbanisation, but a field in which these processes become visible, and thus questionable (cf. Brissac, 2006). As Henke (2015, p. 294) writes:

> Public art inevitably is subject to valorisation with all its pros and cons. And even more important becomes the awareness and retention of responsibility for these valorised creations, e.g. by transforming them into tools to reveal certain processes.

How is this to be done, it remains an open question. According to Jameson (2004, p. 46), utopian thinking has not to do with the positive capacity to envisage a better future, but is rather a suffocating and negative force that, by reaching the limits of imagination, and thus 'demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future — our imprisonment in a non-utopian present', propels it further. It is *through* the failure of imagination that 'the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined' becomes visible, a necessary premise to break it open (Jameson, 2004, p. 46). Perhaps this is what the black wall of Kreutzberg enigmatically communicates: the current failure of street art's imagination vis-à-vis its seemingly unstoppable co-optation into the logic of neoliberal urbanisation and, therefore, the necessity for street art to break out from this contradiction by embarking into a novel uncertain direction, perhaps a radically different one, whereby coming to term with its *urban-specificity*.

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