Chapter 6

Vandalizing the Commons

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Erasure

On the morning of 12 March 2016, in the streets of Bologna, people woke to find that several famous street artworks had suddenly disappeared overnight, covered by generous coats of grey paint. A few people were still working on it, using paint-rollers with long extension poles, thoroughly applying layer after layer of paint over one of Bologna's most famous murals, *Occupy Mordor*, which had been made by the Italian street artist Blu. The atmosphere was convivial, a musical band playing, while a small crowd of journalists and passers-by gazed with curiosity. The sight of people erasing graffiti from Bologna's walls, as in any city, was certainly not unusual, especially at a time in which the whole country was obsessed with the aesthetic-moral category of urban *decorum* (Tulumello and Bertoni 2019). Removing 'signs' of degradation from the streets had become a moral duty of the responsible citizen. In Milan the year before, more than a thousand volunteers had cleaned the streets of graffiti as part of the *Beautiful Milan* initiative, but also erasing, while carried away with cleaning zeal, a mural by street artists Pau and Linda that had been authorized by the municipality itself (Liso 2015). Likewise in Bologna, the 'NO TAG project' has involved since 2013 a team of volunteers with the purpose of removing 'tags, graffiti and other acts of graphic vandalism' from the city's walls.[1] The previous December, the mayor Virgilio Merola had enthusiastically endorsed the NO TAG project, coherent with the long-standing battle that the city is waging against graffiti, with the consequent criminalization of many writers, whose arrests are usually trumpeted on the front pages of the local conservative newspaper.[2] And yet something in this scene was out of place. These people were clearly not working for the municipality. Their look, their movements and attires were much closer to those who usually *write* on walls than to those who *clean*

them. In fact, these people were for the most part activists belonging to two local social centres, Crash and XM24.

At the time of its appearance in 2013, *Occupy Mordor* was acclaimed as a street art masterpiece. Truly beautiful, and powerful, it depicted in the style of a Tolkien's epic a fateful battle between the forces of urban speculation – the political and economic powers running the city – and a variegated population of activists, farmers, cyclists: city-dwellers. The mural perfectly captured the gentrifying zeitgeist, and was positioned in the most appropriate site to do so: a wall of XM24, a social centre constantly under threat of eviction and demolition. *Occupy Mordor* 'is an "artistic barricade" in the defence of a social space threatened by the *gentrification* of the surrounding Bolognina district. [In this place] the City Council intends to build a roundabout, flattening the social centre' (wu ming 2013, my translation). Thus wrote the *wu ming* collective at the time. Six years on, the situation has not changed much. XM24, which has occupied the space of a former food market since 2002, still remains on the brink of eviction – at the time of writing, all the more so.[3]

There were also municipal police officers looking at the scene, puzzled. Usually they are the ones ordering people to erase writings from the walls. What should they do? They asked some questions. They left. They came back: 'This wall is Council property, and they want to know what is going on', they uttered. 'We're eliminating urban decay', one of the painters rebutted. 'Did you ask the permission to the artist?', the agents continued, making a half-hearted attempt to stop the action, only to refrain,[4] as there were too many people around. 'What should I fine them for? I don't even know what kind of crime this is…', one agent is said to have exclaimed. They had no clue.[5]

Destruction

A notorious photographic sequence from 1995 shows Ai Weiwei impassively letting a Han dynasty urn fall from his hands and smash on the ground.[6] Weiwei had regularly bought the urn, together with others that he then painted in different colours and with advertising slogans. One of them would become the protagonist of another photographic triptych, realized in 2012 by Swiss artist Manuel Salvisberg, and performed by his fellow countryman, art collector and former ambassador in China, Uli Sigg, who is shown dropping and smashing on the ground the Weiwei's *Coca-Cola Urn*, in Weiwei-esque pose. Could he do it? In the byzantine world of copyright, the notion of 'moral right' is a particularly idiosyncratic one. It inserts an animistic dimension in the juridical jargon, in so far as it is supposed to

embody 'a belief that an artist in the process of creation injects his spirit into the work, and that the artist's personality as well as the integrity of the work should therefore be protected and preserved'.[7] Although it had been a regular purchase from the Chinese artist, did Salvisberg respect Weiwei's moral right vis-à-vis the *Coca-Cola Urn*? Asked about this matter, he swiftly responded: 'Did Ai Weiwei ask the masters who created the vessels he uses in his work many years ago?' (in Yap 2012).

Two years later, in 2014, the Dominican artist Maximo Carminero bought a regular ticket for a Weiwei exhibition at the Pérez Art Museum in Miami. Once inside, he took one of the painted ancient urns on display, and calmly smashed it on the ground. Confusingly, he painted this gesture as a political act against the museum for allegedly paying little attention to local artists, and compared it with Weiwei's most famous act: was he not the first to smash urns which were 'patrimony of humanity'? Weiwei did not see much sense in Caminero's gesture (Madigan 2014). The Dominican got an 18-month probation, a fine, and a good deal of notoriety from the event.

'Short of witnessing grievous bodily harm, few things are as astonishing as seeing the casual, physical destruction of what one holds sacred', writes Teju Cole (2012). While all three gestures ended up with a similar outcome, the striking effect they produce on the viewer is unavoidably filtered by the context in which they occur, and the normative framework through which they are seen. Searching among the dusty debris of the three urns one may find that some relations are more resilient than others: some have been shattered, while some are still perfectly in place even after the physical destruction. Property is made of a more resistant material than terracotta. This is why Caminero's gesture appears so shocking: what is held sacred here is not an ancient urn but the right to property, both in its private and collective sense (as cultural heritage). This is the sacredness these gestures differently affect. This is the magical operator able to turn vandalism into art, and vice versa. The crux of the matter was expressed clearly in the words of curator Kerry Brougher: 'Ai Weiwei, I believe, has owned in one way or other the things that he has destroyed [in his art]. [Caminero] was destroying someone else's property. That strikes me as a form of vandalism and not a form of art' (in Steinhauer 2014)

Preservation

According to the theory of loss aversion coined by Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, averting a loss is always a strong preference for individuals vis-à-vis acquiring gains of the same value. Loss aversion, as Cornelius

Holtorf (2015) suggests, appears to indeed be the case in current attitudes to heritage, where 'the remains of the past seems to exist only to be preserved' (Fairclough 2009: 158). This 'obsession with physical conservation' (ibid.) is perfectly consistent with the words of Abbé Henri Grégoire ([1794] 1977), to whom we owe the modern notion of vandalism, coined in 1794 to criticize the destruction of cultural patrimony that followed the French Revolution: 'Barbarians and slaves hate science and destroy monuments of art. Free men love and conserve them'.

In his classic 1933 report, Raphael Lemkin proposed to outlaw 'acts of vandalism', namely those acts that have to do with the destruction of 'works of cultural or artistic heritage'. These acts, akin to those of 'barbarity' (acts of extermination, for which he would later coin the notion of *genocide*), express 'the *asocial* and *destructive* spirit of the author' (Lemkin 1933). In the 1956 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the concept was updated to refer to 'any act of vandalism directed against cultural property'. Subsequently, the definition would gradually widen from the question of heritage to encompass that of criminal activity *tout court*, eventually coming to signify 'an intentional or malicious act to destroy, damage or deface the property of another, whether cultural or not' (Merrill 2011: 62). Today, vandalism defines an act that targets the physical materialization of the (private or collective) right to property, and more generally, any act that may be said to threaten a normative constellation formed by culture, property, physical integrity, or preservation.

However, asks Holtorf, 'is the value of cultural heritage really inherent in a given object so that it might be damaged with the object'? (Holtorf 2015: 4). In a brilliant short text, Tim Ingold (2010) takes aim at this preservationist tendency by challenging its underlying ontological assumption about the hylomorphic origin of beings: what if, by shifting paradigm, we understand ontology as a continuum in which formations, beings, emerge and persist as crystallizations that do not originate at a precise moment in time, but rather contribute, by happening, to constitute time itself? Following this position may imply shifting away from 'the current emphasis on the material fossilisation of heritage as "product", towards a focus on heritage as "process"' (Jones 2006: 120–21), and a necessary recalibration of the contemporary tendency to musealize everything existing. After all, how do we define the essential properties of a given site, if not by singling out, arbitrarily, a given point in time (Morris 1877)? We also find the same oscillation between product – or, more precisely, 'resource' – and process in the current debate over a fundamental concept in which the notion of heritage is included – namely, the commons.

Commons

Since the seminal work of Garrett Hardin (1968), and through influential theorizations such as that by Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (1990), the notion of commons has often been framed as a static and depletable resource that is to be protected, enclosed and safeguarded so as to be *preserved* against its unilateral appropriation, abuse and destruction. This interpretation has been applied not only to so-called 'subtractive' resources (that is, resources reduced by use, e.g. water), but also, implicitly, to 'nonsubtractive' ones (not reduced by use, e.g. knowledge). In both cases, in fact, the commons has been still understood 'substantially' – that is, as a given 'product' that to some extent remains external to those who produced it, use it and enjoy it – and thus from the panoply of interactions and practices that emerge around it (cf. Hess and Ostrom 2007). The question is further complicated moving to the urban context. As Christian Borch and Martin Kornberger ask, can we really assume, as this reasoning implies, that an urban street be a subtractive resource – in other words, something that is affected negatively by use? Are not urban streets 'reduced' when suffering an absence of interaction and relations – that is, when not 'used' and lived? In this case, evidently 'the act of consuming does not detract but rather increases value' (Borch and Kornberger 2015: 6).

A wave of radical thinking around the commons has convincingly integrated its sedentary picture as an external 'resource' with a more complex, dynamic and processual one. In their well-known study, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri define the commons as 'not only the earth we share but also the languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships, and so forth' (Hardt and Negri 2009: 139). The urban commons (from now UC), in this sense, would be the coming together of human and non-human bodies, ideas, knowledge, images and practices, that constitute a city. An immanent, socio-material and transformative relation that cannot be reduced to a given object, space or domain (for example, knowledge), and cannot be clearly distinguished between material and immaterial. Albeit David Harvey somewhat struggles to accept the latter point,[8] he is spot on when defining the commons as not 'something that existed once upon a time that has since been lost, but something that is, like the urban commons, continuously being produced': a *commoning*, that is (Harvey 2012: 77; Linebaugh 2008). Not simply 'something' that is shared, the UC would be an emergent process through which 'sharing' itself assumes an ontological quality, to the extent that 'the commons is not just something that is shared by pre-existing commoners; rather the commoners may be constituted in the creation of production of a commons' (Borch and Kornberger 2015: 8–9; Stavrides 2016: 7).

Providing an 'urban' dimension to the commons is not only convenient to the present text; it also emphasizes its relational, spatial and affective dimension, as a sort of urban atmosphere, as again Borch and Kornberger (2015) propose. This notion is particularly valuable, well beyond its metaphoric sense. Take the specific vibe of a neighbourhood, and frame it as an atmosphere emerging out of the relationality and density of its built environment, sociocultural histories, legal rules, daily interactions, aesthetic designs, and local and global imaginaries. Its atmosphere is this 'coming together of people, buildings, technologies and various forms of non-human life in particular geographical settings' (Conradson and Latham 2007: 238). This concept makes explicit how UC is a 'common space' that is co-produced at the intersection between structures, representations and experience (cf. Sloterdijk 2004). In this way, it avoids the immateriality of certain theorizations of cultural commons, emphasizing instead both the ontological materiality of tangible and intangible bodies, relations and practices that produce a city, as well as the phenomenological and thus aesthetic (e.g. sensorial) immersion in and through which its inhabitants experience and live the urban every day. While there is no room here to explore the promising ways in which this notion has been dealt with in the last decade (see Adey et al. 2013; Bille, Bjerregaard and Flohr Sørensen 2015; see Pavoni 2018: ch. 2), suffice to highlight its value in focusing on the emergent (contingent) and stratified (historical) configurations of affects, senses, bodies and spaces that constitute the UC and, at the same time, to the way they are acted upon, reproduced and retuned for political, economic or securitarian purposes (e.g. Anderson 2009; Thibaud 2011; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2016). One may indeed argue that the key aesthetic-political urban question is that of how to organize –materially, emotionally and symbolically – our common (physical, affective, cultural) spaces of co-existence, and thus, our UC (cf. Sloterdijk 2013).

This is particularly evident vis-à-vis the contemporary rise of 'creative city' policies, today grown into a hegemonic 'meta-policy' shaping urbanization dynamics worldwide (Peck 2012), as urban branding has become an all-encompassing urban development strategy in which discourses and policies of planning, security, marketing and law converge, producing safe, commodified and entertaining urban atmospheres (Pavoni 2018). In this context, the UC may be decomposed into creativity index parameters (Florida 2002) that fuel unequal processes of financial valorization, commodification, gentrification and so on (Smith 1996). While exploring these processes is not the task of the present text, it is important to stress that any such explorations should not assume the UC as a somewhat pristine, homogeneous and pacific set of relations, which would only be subsequently acted upon by the forces of

market, security and control. The urban being-together is always normatively tuned in one way or another (cf. Pavoni 2011), and there is no pure, ideal, or intrinsically 'just' UC waiting to be 'liberated' from the manipulation of power. Paraphrasing Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2015: 3), the UC is not a 'culturally-relative flat ontology but a tilted, power-structured surface', always asymmetric, conflictual and political.

Against the tendency to idealize it as such, therefore, we should stress that the UC is 'not just about *opposing* power and capitalism' since 'all sorts of power and politics go into how commons are produced' (Borch and Kornberger 2015: 16). We should be wary, for instance, of the implicit depoliticization of the commons, which subtends the call for increasing participation, sharing and collectivization. Not only because this is the very language on which neoliberalism thrives, but also because, as Jodi Dean remarks, the commons are internally antagonistic, divisive, heterogeneous and conflictual (Dean 2012). Taking aim at one of the main representatives of this tendency, i.e. the free culture movement championed by the likes of Lawrence Lessig and Yochai Benkler, Matteo Pasquinelli (2014: 171) explains that 'the commons of culture are not an independent domain of pure freedom, cooperation and autonomy, but they are constantly subjected to the force field of capitalism'. This is strategically significant: if the UC is always a conflictual, asymmetrical and power-structured surface, with no pre-existing 'pure' commons to be somehow recovered, then the political question will not be that of 'liberating' a given and static resource from the grasp of power, but rather that of reorienting an always power-structured process into more desirable configurations – the difference, that is, between a passive and reactive politics of preservation, protection and enclosure, and an active politics of reconfiguration, production and becoming.

It may be useful, in this sense, to mention Jacques Rancière and his understanding of politics as having to do with the 'distribution of the sensible'; that is, 'the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it' (Rancière 2004: 12). Politics, in other words, has to do with the normative organization of a common: the way in which it is experienced, sensed and reproduced according to a spatially and historically situated aesthetic regime, given a consensually accepted 'common sense'. In a radically opposite sense to that of Jurgen Habermas, therefore, *political* would be the act of rupturing this common sense, reverting the existent distribution of the sensible by letting appear something, someone, some instance, that cannot be contained within the existent configuration. What Rancière (cf. 2010) refers to as *dissensus*, in our terms, would be an aesthetic praxis that, by challenging

the given configuration of power relations, asymmetries and structures that normatively *tunes* the UC, will make it visible and thus amenable to action, reconfiguration and transformation. Not a reduction or destruction, this vandalization of the UC would entail the reframing of coordinates of perception, experience and engagement, and would thus, in this way, be an active and productive *re-commoning*.

Vandalism

According to Godofredo Nobre, vandalism removes the profane patina of banality (its apparent 'inconspicuousness', as Robert Musil once wrote) from a monument or a building by showing its deep sacredness, 'the *real* power of the building and the truth of architecture. One vandalizes because it's worth it, because the building represents something' (Nobre 2010). As he continues: 'Vandalism is an attack against the profane (against the building that pretends to be profane) showing that it is deeply sacred, bringing to the fore the totemic monument that lurks behind the mundane routine of everyday life' (ibid.).

This is, to be sure, not in the sense of unfolding some kind of hidden reality that lies beyond the building, but rather in order to break the spell that the building – or a given heritage site for that matter – with its sheer materiality, embodies. One is reminded of George Bataille's words: 'Actually, it is evident that monuments inspire social wisdom and arouse a veritable awe. The storming of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of affairs: it is difficult to explain such a crowd movement, except by taking into account the animosity of a people against those monuments, who are their real masters' (Bataille 1929).

Vandalism makes explicit the sacredness of property (either individual or common, as in the 'patrimony of humanity' definition) by challenging both its *immunity* and (physical) *integrity*, as well as, as we saw, by embodying its original, anarchic and 'dirty' act of appropriation. In their seminal article introducing the Broken Windows theory, James Wilson and George Kelling wrote that 'vandalism can occur anywhere, once communal barriers – the sense of mutual regard and the obligations of civility – are lowered by actions that seem to signal that "no one cares"' (Wilson and Kelling 1982). 'Caring for the common', they seem to imply, requires maintaining protective barriers so as to keep the vandals outside. Graffiti, they famously observed, is understood as a vandalistic practice that, by lowering such barriers, exposes the common to the risk of depletion.

Surfacing in the dilapidated landscape of the late 1970s US East Coast, modern graffiti did indeed incarnate a transgression vis-à-vis the quintessential

moral and aesthetic barriers of 'civilization': order, beauty and cleanliness (Freud [1930] 2002).[9] From the beginning, their trajectory violently inter-sected that of social control measures inspired by the Broken Windows theory, most enthusiastically employed to address 'quality of life' crime by New York City police commissioner William Bratton and mayor Rudolph Giuliani in the 1990s. The 'moral panic' narratives of the time defined graffiti as a visual sign of decay and an incentive to criminal activity – a symptom as well as a scapegoat of the ongoing crisis. New York's mayor Ed Koch famously coined the slogan: 'Make your mark in society, not on society' – to which it was all too easy to answer 'no', because as writer Iz the Wiz summarized, 'When you're poor that's all you got' (in Huertas 2015: 10). In fact, it would be more correct to say that graffiti artists were making their mark both *in* and *on* society. Graffiti emerged because of social and environmental decay, plus the lowering of controls released possibilities for this form of visual appropriation. More profoundly, graffiti expressed the systematic crisis of the 'civilized' world.[10] It provided a dissensus to the aesthetic and moral status quo, reframing the existent landscape of physical and social ruination not simply by opposing the given order, but rather by letting the multiple and incompatible realities lying beneath to reveal it 'in crisis' (cf. Austin 2001).[11] Not simply a disruption to the UC, graffiti were a form of commoning in themselves, constitutive of a site of *critique* (in its etymological sense, i.e. as a rupture), aesthetically experienced and expressed against quintessential barriers of the hegemonic aesthetic regime: the physical border (the wall as the fundamental protection), the legal border (private property) and the moral border (decorum).

Arguing for the need to reconcile vandalism with its original link to cultural property, Sam Merrill has proposed to recognize its 'potential cultural significance' by focusing on 'one particular form of vandalism, graffiti' (Merrill 2011: 63). Looking at graffiti through this lens, from the perspective of heritage studies and archaeology, Merrill makes a point for reclaiming a value for them as constitutive of the heritage site itself. In this sense, graffiti at heritage sites may be understood as not simply a vandalistic defacing, damaging or destroying of the site's essence, but as an eventful layer added to its very history – or, as Ingold would have it, to its *pastness*; thus, a recognition that buildings, individuals and sites neither originate from nor finish at a given time in history, but rather carry 'on along temporal trajectories that continue in the present' (Ingold 2010: 164). Graffiti in this sense are 'one of a site's many layers of history', an addition that may 'represent heritage on their artistic merit and also due to the academic and cultural significance they embody as mirrors of contemporary society' (Merrill 2011: 63). These approaches, Merrill eventually suggests, 'may encourage the actual

preservation of examples of vandalism', pointing towards a paradoxical notion of 'heritage vandalism' (ibid.).

It is certainly useful to reflect on the cultural value of practices that are too hastily categorized as defacement, soiling or destruction. More recently there have been attempts to specifically refer to graffiti and street art as a form of urban cultural commons which reinforces local knowledge, identity and struggles, and adds to the visual and informational palimpsests of the urban (McCullough 2013; cf. MacInnis 2016). What if, taking this reasoning to its conclusion, we were to recognize vandalism as significant in itself? In so far as inserting an event within the processual flow of a given object, situation, or set of relations – that is, in so far as prompting a potential change of state, and thus a novel crystallization of the given socio-material constellation and distribution of the sensible – vandalism could accordingly be recognized as a process of commoning, but not, however, in the sense of adding another layer to a given site, which would thus require to be passively preserved. More profoundly, because they prompt the reconfiguration of the site itself, translating this observation to the field of graffiti would mean understanding their political value independently from their aesthetic quality or ideological content: not as some form of beautification or context added to a given site, but rather because, by embodying its vandalization, they open the possibility for its re-commoning.

Let us rephrase this point. Graffiti does not add to the commons. More profoundly, graffiti always constitutes an act of appropriation and a problematization of the commons, one that is performed by means of soiling. In *Malfeasance: Appropriation through Pollution?* (2010) Michel Serres has suggested that property, before being a precise legal construct, is a natural act, exemplified in the animal act of marking space with bodily fluids. As Danilo Mandic (2017: 515) explains, 'the common become one's own by the act of soiling', a unilateral, abusive and violent act – the dirty birth of law. The essentially vandalistic quality of graffiti may be said to rest on the way they challenge property by means of rehashing property's institutive act: graffiti affirm and embody a unilateral possibility of appropriation, which, although surreptitiously legitimizing the reality of property, at the same time incorporates a constitutive excess to its legal apparatus. The hypothesis here is that their political value lies in their capacity to unpack the complexity of a given site exactly by means of breaking the spell that its physical materiality exerts – a spell that ultimately the conservation paradigm, repurposed in today's heritage graffiti sites, seemingly reproduces. Rather than the adding of a layer of meaningful (or meaningless) decoration to a given heritage or, more generally, to an urban site, this value would rest on graffiti's capacity

to problematize the particular socio-material relations that hold that site together, and thus prompting their reconfiguration.[12]

Countless pages have been written on the evolution (or involution) of graffiti, with the surfacing of street art or post-graffiti, and the gradual, remarkable change of their relationship with the social, legal and moral normativity of worldwide cities. There are many accounts that trace this history, more or less polemically, and this is certainly not the place to rehash it one more time (see e.g. Ross 2016). Whatever the position one holds, it is safe to say that the previous oppositional relation with the civilizing pillars of the urban normative landscape has been in many cases (though by no means all) reversed, as graffiti have followed the path of other subcultures by gradually becoming consistent and coherent with the spatial aesthetic of contemporary urban capitalism, while slowly but steadily moving towards mainstream acceptance. This was most crucially an effect of the advent of street art, which, besides the multifaceted and complex stylistic consider-ations (see, for instance, the Introduction to this volume), brought about a prioritization of the aesthetic (visual) 'look' and the sociopolitical 'message' of the artwork, over the eventful contingency of its gesture and its relational inscription within a given urban site (Kramer 2010; Pavoni 2019). As a consequence, street art has been increasingly accepted and legitimated as far as is compatible with the aesthetic and sociocultural parameters of the contemporary urban visual regime, with the result of making it increasingly indistinguishable from other practices of urban planning and design, in the context of wider cultural and creative strategies of regeneration and city-branding (cf. Schacter 2016). Today, street art is variously recognized as a way to valorize and increase the common good, to the point that we assist in its gradual entrance into the realm of common heritage, and thus to the beginning of practices of musealization, institutionalization, preservation, and legal protection.

While it is all too easy to romanticize their 'illegal' status, or to provide it with a moral superiority to 'legal' forms of street art, it is worth stressing that graffiti's illegality, at least initially, did undeniably play a key role in releasing their 'political' potential. Paraphrasing Andrew Russeth, simply by means of placing 'artists or viewers at risk, opening them both to the possibility of physical or emotional harm, or at the very least, the power of the state,' graffiti 'la[y] bare systems of power in ways that other art cannot, rendering them painfully visible' (Russeth 2016). Yet, to equate graffiti's 'vandalistic' potential with their illegal, unauthorized or informal dimension would be a correlational fallacy. There is something more to graffiti than their (aes-thetic) form, (ideological) content, or (legal) status: something that has to do

with the way they intersect and problematize the normative structure of the urban, and thus the composition of the UC itself. Andrea Mubi Brighenti argues that 'the two conventional, opposing views that interpret writing alternatively as art or as deviance fail to identify the real stake in the practice of writing. Such stake is not "art or crime". The stake is, on the contrary, the definition of the nature and the limits of public space qua public' (Brighenti 2010: 328–29). As with any form of urban artistic intervention, what is at stake is the production of the public, the testing of its spatial and aesthetic conditions of possibility, and thus the politics of urban commoning itself. The hypothesis here is that it is the capacity to vandalize the normative integrity of (urban) structures to be the critical core of graffiti, besides, and beyond, their (certainly neither uninfluential nor redundant) *beautifying* capacity to decorate a grey city, their *meaningful* capacity to communicate a given sociopolitical message, or their *transgressing* capacity to shock and awe. There is, in other words, something more at stake with graffiti vis-à-vis their political potential, and this is not to do with their enchanting power (cf. Young 2013), but with their capacity to disenchant urban life by breaking the spell of its invisible normativity, and the socio-material relations, forces and structures that hold it together. It is in this sense that we may locate their political potential. Paraphrasing Rancière, therefore, graffiti is

> not political owing to the messages and feelings that it carries on the state of social and political issues. It is not political owing to the way it represents social structures, conflicts or identities. 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, shifts the places of the actor and the spectator, etc. Because politics is not the exercise of power or the struggle for power. Politics is first of all the configuration of a space as political, the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects posed as 'common' and subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate these objects and argue about them. (Rancière 2006)

Removal

In the months preceding the scene narrated at the beginning of this text, a few of the graffiti had already disappeared from the walls of Bologna – and not only because of the municipal cleaning zeal. Some of them had surreptitiously been surgically removed for another purpose. They were to populate *Street Art. Banksy & Co. – L'Arte allo Stato Urbano* [the Art at the Urban

State], an exhibition organized by Genus Bononiae, a cultural entity financed by the city's most powerful bank foundation, Carisbo. The exhibition was to open on 18 March 2016. Some of the works removed from the street belonged to Blu himself, who had been contacted by the organizers prior to the removal, to which he did not give his consent – in fact, he had not replied at all. Assuming that a contact, even if unanswered, was sufficient to proceed to the removal, the exhibition organizers duly carried it out. As the curators Luca Ciancabilla, Christian Omodeo and Sean Corcoran explained, the purpose of this removal was to 'salvage the works from demolition and preserve them from the injuries of time' (in wu ming 2016a). 'Preservation' and 'musealization': this is what the exhibition intended to reflect upon, questioning the relation between street art, urban space, and time.[13]

To many, the removal of graffiti from the street and their translation into a museum space where they could be contemplated upon the payment of a rather hefty fee (13 euros) sounded preposterous. Some complained that the exhibition had no right to take these works. This argument's legal basis was shaky, however. Does not doing street art entail that the artist cannot pretend to maintain control over the artwork and its social life? Was not the drawing of (most of) those graffiti illicit in the first place? Can one speak of legal protection for something that has been realized illegally? Surely controversial, the questions posed by the organizers were not easy to challenge from a legal point of view, and showed the contradictions one may encounter when attempting to challenge the removal of graffiti by upholding a proprietary paradigm.[14] If, as suggested above, graffiti's *critical* essence is encapsulated in their aesthetic, moral and legal excessiveness to the urban articulation of property and preservation, then it follows that mobilizing the latter to protect the former is an effort fraught with contradictions – contradictions that were bound to explode, in fact, as the same argument was used against Blu after the artist reacted by erasing all of his works (more than twenty) from the walls of Bologna.[15]

The city's mayor swiftly lamented that, as a result of this gesture, the city would wake up 'poorer, with less art and fewer spaces of liberty' (in *Bologna Today*, 2016, my translation). A rather brave statement, taking into account the criminalizing stance of the city council against writers, and its penchant for evicting 'spaces of liberty' such as social centres and other occupations around town. Political hypocrisy aside, it is worth reflecting on the assumptions that fed this reasoning. As explicitly put in a piece that appeared on *Wired*: 'Who is Blu to decide whether or not other publics deserve to enjoy his works?' (Cosimi 2016, my translation). The art journal *Artribune* echoed the mayor, arguing that Bologna had been culturally impoverished by the gesture, which moreover provided the supporters of street art's musealization

with a strong argument in their favour. Blu had committed an 'ideological own goal', the argument went, in failing to understanding the 'public' quality of his artwork: by deciding unilaterally over its fate, he had acted according to the same logic that fed the removals performed by the exhibition organizers (Giacomelli 2016, my translation). One could hear the World Heritage Convention resonating here: the 'deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world'. The president of the district where the most famous piece, *Occupy Mordor*, appeared, offered the most comprehensive framing of this argument:

> I understand the political intervention against those whose purpose is turning everything into a commodity, but Blu has been completely disinterested as regards the fact that his works have become a collective good. I am astonished; now the usual idiotic writing will appear in place of that artwork … it took years to make people understand that such artworks may valorize a neighbourhood like Bolognina. Today it is the same author who, by turning his back on Roversi Monaco, also turns his back on all those citizens who have learned to love that place. (in Miele 2016, my translation)

One could hardly find a most exemplificative case of the reduction of UC to a physical and depletable resource: objectively and tangibly defined (in this case, a specific artwork); its value supposedly resides on the possibility of its being 'seen' and 'enjoyed'; and consequently, it is to be *physically* preserved, no matter what, against both the 'injuries of time' and possible vandalistic acts that may impoverish the cultural commons of the city. The same argument could be moved against both the exhibition and Blu, both allegedly guilty of having unilaterally appropriated and thus *subtracted* from public enjoyment a common good. The exhibition curators would certainly agree, only contending that their action did increase the longevity of the artwork, albeit in decontextualized form.

Equally unconvincing was the argument of those who noted that graffiti has from its origins been an ephemeral practice, bound to deterioration, erasure and disappearance. This somewhat romantic point overlooks the possibility that art forms evolve and change and, moreover, that the purpose of the exhibition was to reflect and question this very assumption in the first place – what Omodeo himself termed an 'ideology of memory', that is, the 'necessity of ephemerality at all costs' (Viti and Omodeo 2017: 156, my translation). Incidentally, the systematic use of ephemerality as a rhetorical device to justify and support neoliberal policies of regeneration would caution against its uncritical endorsement (e.g. Ferreri 2015). Another

argument, with a similarly conservative nuance, stressed the site-specific quality of graffiti, it being a practice that cannot be severed from its own context. Many contemporary instances of street art musealization question this statement, Omodeo argued, adding that the context is not always or necessarily essential to the artwork (Viti and Omodeo 2017: 156). Decades after the advent of Institutional Critique, this argument does not sound as preposterous as many critics claimed.[16] While it is evident that the relation between graffiti and its own site is crucial, the meaning of this affirmation greatly depends on the definition of site on which it rests. The risk, otherwise, is that the debate remains at the superficial level of discussing whether an object–site relation could and should be severed or not, without actually addressing the nature of said relation, and, most importantly, its changing form in the context of contemporary capitalist urbanization.[17]

Ultimately, the debate that accompanied this controversy for the most part took the form of a sterile set of skirmishes among different opinions around temporality, context, preservation and artistic value. Beneath the superficial differences, in fact, there remained a consistent if implicit agreement around a set of taken-for-granted assumptions: that a street artwork coincides with a physical painting on a given surface, the removal of which equals the disappearance of the street artwork itself; that the 'site' of a street artwork is a physical location, be this a street, a square, or a gallery; that the reason a street artwork exists is the aesthetic experience of spectators; and that its aesthetic value is dependent on a consensual aesthetic agreement – which would accordingly differentiate a piece by Blu from worthless 'idiotic writings', for instance. What was taken for granted, in other words, was a constellation of art, experience and preservation, linked to a static and objectified definition of UC. The corollary was that, provided a graffiti is consensually recognized as a street artwork, this becomes part of the UC and it must be physically preserved against deterioration or defacement. As a famous Italian political columnist emphatically stated, while Blu may have been informed by good intentions, his gesture went *against* the people, as the only ones to suffer as a result will be the neighbourhoods affected (Serra 2016). It is exactly this 'being against', I would instead suggest, that is Blu's gesture's most interesting aspect. A 'being against' that should be understood with respect to the just mentioned 'constellation' and, more generally, vis-à-vis the way in which the UC tends to be perverted and parasitically exploited in the context of contemporary creative city politics and aesthetic capitalism. As stated by the wu ming collective (one of the few lucid voices in that debate), perhaps one should consider whether what is at stake in the whole affair – and in the question of UC at large – is the aesthetic beautification of the city, or the political conflict that lies beneath (wu ming 2016b).

Fight-Specific Art

Reflecting on his most (in)famous piece, *The Tilted Arc*, Richard Serra 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 questionable ideologies and political power' (Serra 1994: 203). Commenting on this passage, Milton Kwon writes that 'it is only [in] working *against* the given site … that art can resist co-optation' (Kwon 2004: 74). In the case of graffiti, while this *working against* has certainly characterized its early surfacing, as noted above, the subsequent evolution has gradually defused this subversive potential by absorbing it into the all-ingesting realm of urban branding. This, to be sure, occurred as much to legal and authorized as to illegal and unauthorized graffiti. Contrary to those who imply an equivalence between subversive potential and their illegal/unauthorized forms (e.g. McCormick et al. 2010; Bacharach 2015), it is easy to show the extent to which, for instance, an illegal graffiti may provide a transgressive and edgy vibe to a neighbourhood, which in turn may be recuperated into branding strategies and trigger processes of gentrification. The quest for purity is fraught with contradictions, even more so in the contemporary urban context.

From Henri Lefebvre to David Harvey, and from Ed Soja to Neil Brenner, countless are the urban scholars and critical geographers who have analysed the extent to which, in the contemporary age, urban sites are increasingly stretched, prolonged, multiplied and emptied out, most significantly as a result of the global process of neoliberal urbanization and its related outcomes – gentrification, commodification, touristification, and so on. As argued above, the aesthetics of the urban space have been profoundly reshaped by this process, as cultural industries, creative city politics and urban branding have become central in urban politics. 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 this context then, it is naive at best, and complicit at worst, to understand such a *working against* as a voluntaristic matter of transgressing a given law or moral code. The political potential of aesthetic dissensus will have to be assessed far more carefully, looking at its contingent and contextual outcome vis-à-vis the given, spatially and historically situated distribution of the sensible, in and through which the UC is configured.

Suhail Malik, in an essay provocatively titled 'Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art' (Malik 2015), lamented the priority that contemporary art assigns to the sensorial and phenomenological experience, as if this should be the only condition and horizon of art. Contrary to that, he proposes a

realist art, from which experience and interpretation would be expunged – in other words, an art that would be indifferent to aesthetic experience: an art of rational knowledge, which would not need to be experienced, but only known. While unpacking this suggestion here would lead us astray, it is worth pondering on the background from which it emerges. If 'half a century of consumer society has produced an insatiable appetite for aestheti-cisation' (Berry-Slater and Iles 2009), the need for art to extricate itself from the experience economy of aesthetic capitalism (cf. Böhme 2017) appears paramount. For graffiti and street art, or any other form of public art for that matter, to conserve a political potential means to counter their ongoing entanglement within the very aesthetics of contemporary capitalism, and thus their surreptitious co-optation as tools fostering the ongoing commodi-fication of urban space. Doing so, I suggested, may require rescuing its van-dalizing quality – not necessarily in the illegal sense but, more profoundly, against the constellation of art, experience and preservation, which remains dominant in the current urban aesthetic regime, and is responsible for the ongoing objectification and exploitation of the UC.

In his speculation on the 'specificity of sitedness', Matthew Poole argues that that artworks that are 'brought in', or 'fabricated for', or 'performed within', or 'enacted upon' already given sites – that is, artworks that are premised on some sort of 'suitability', even in oppositional terms, to a give site – are bound to become 'merely functional … appendages of the already existing ideological vectors' (Poole 2015: 89). Addressing a site, in this sense, means more than engaging with its empirical dimension: it entails dealing with its conditions of possibility, by moving 'away from finished form to the matrix of form, to the conditions that produce it' (Lütticken 2012). Facing an increasingly planetary process of urbanization, having to work 'with measures we can no longer handle' (Nelson Brissac, quoted in Yúdice 2005), it may be time for street art to radically rethink its relation with the complexity of its urban site. As Andrea Phillips suggests more generally vis-à-vis contemporary art, it may be time to focus on 'changing not the form of art, but the structure of its relation to social-political context' (Phillips 2015: 83) – that is, shifting from a concern for a finished form, such as a given mural, and to focus on the *real* conditions of possibility of something like graffiti and, more profoundly, the conditions of possibility for the very surfacing of the UC.

From this perspective, Blu's gesture assumes another quality, one that can hardly be captured by merely focusing on the grey surface it left behind. Instead, it requires turning the attention to the detonating effect it had vis-à-vis the complex web of socio-political and economic relations that is reshaping the city of Bologna, in the age of its massive gentrification, com-modification and securitization (see Della Puppa, this volume). Traversing

and exceeding the debate over the preservation or musealization of a given street artwork, this collective and participatory artistic performance did plug into the conflict that has fermented in the last decades in the city, *working against* the neutralizing role that street art is all too often made to play in this context. This was no decorative supplement to dramatic processes of urbanization, but rather the 'beauty of a collective action in defence of a common good', as wu ming put it (in wu ming 2016a, my translation), with this 'good' not being understood as a static piece of street art to be preserved, but the collective and *commoning* force of the sociopolitical conflict that revolved around it. The *site* of this erasure was not the wall of a social centre, but rather the fight around its occupation, defence and eviction – and, more generally, the fight around the ongoing commodification of Bologna's UC.

In an insightful reflection on the relation between monumentalization and dissent, Lize Mogel (2002) asks whether it is possible to monumentalize something without rendering it innocuous – that is, how to materialize dissent in a work of public art. This collective erasure provides a possible response, in the form of a piece of veritable fight-specific art (Esche et al. 2013), a piece in which the vandalistic potential of street art is actualized, and legally so, by challenging the dominant parameters of heritage and property, aesthetic and social legitimation, as well as the current failure of street art vis-à-vis its ongoing co-optation within the logic of neoliberal urbanization, therefore gesturing towards a novel, uncertain direction to break out from this contradiction.

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Notes

1. https://notagbo.wordpress.com/info/.
2. For instance, the writer AliCé had been fined 800 euros for defacing a wall just a month before this scene took place (Fatto Quotidiano 2016).
3. After months of tension, the XM24 was eventually evicted at the beginning of August 2019.

4. Retrieved 10 August 2019 from https://www.radiocittadelcapo.it/archives/blu-cancella-murales-bologna-171310/ (my translation).

5. Three activists from Crash were subsequently charged with 'defacing and trespassing', an accusation that usually pertains to writers, not to erasers (reported in *Corriere di Bologna*, 13 March 2016).

6. The sequence *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) comprises three gelatine silver prints.

7. *Carter v. Helmsley-Spear*, Inc.., 71 F.3d 77 (2nd Cir. 1995).

8. See, for instance, Hardt, Negri and Harvey 2009.

9. While this is only one of modern graffiti's multiple 'origins', it has surely been the most influential, culturally and stylistically, at the global level.

10. This was similar to what hip hop was doing, at the same time, in the same place. When it appeared, hip hop embodied a critical fracture to the aesthetic and moral common sense. At the same time, however, as put by one of its most prominent early protagonists, RUN-DMC's Darryl McDaniels, while it looked 'different to the civilized world … to everybody uncivilized it was the familiar thing, and that's why it worked', in *Hip Hop Evolution*, HBO (season 1, episode 3), 18 September 2016.

11. I am here paraphrasing a passage by Hal Foster who, reflecting on the relation between art and transgression, argues that this is a matter of 'rethink[ing] transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde posited somehow outside the symbolic order, but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde inside the order', with the goal of not simply breaking with the order 'but to reveal it in crisis' (Foster 2015: 17).

12. This is something Jean Baudrillard ([1976] 2016: 82) brilliantly intuited, when arguing that graffiti 'free them [the walls] from architecture, and turn them once again into living, social matter'.

13. From the exhibition website, at https://genusbononiae.it/mostre/street-art-bansky-co-larte-allo-urbano/

14. For instance, Marcilio Franca (2016) argues that law could provide protection to the integrity of the artwork. This seems to him the most practical solution, since graffiti *deserve* legal protection in so far as they are works of art. While appreciating this effort, one may wonder whether it risks producing undesired effects, such as implying that licit graffiti are only those that have been 'authorized'. More recently, the verdict on the 5Pointz building in New York provides a crucial addition to the debate. 5pointz was a world-famous street art playground for decades. When in 2013 the owner decided to demolish it, erasing the graffiti overnight, protests ensued. In February 2018, twenty-one street artists won a $6.75 million lawsuit against the developer, on account that their work, although painted on a building that did not belong to them, was eligible for protection under VARA, the Visual Art Rights Act (see Meiselman 2018)

15. This is not the first time he did so. In 2014 Blu had already performed a similar gesture, albeit in a smaller scale, erasing a mural from an occupied building in Kreutzberg, Berlin, after the squatters living there had been evicted, and his mural had appeared on the advertising video of a real estate company (see Pavoni 2019).

16. The notion of Institutional Critique refers to an artistic approach or, more precisely, a critical complement to site-specific art, that emerged in the 1960s 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 (for an anthology of IC, see Alberro and Stimson 2009).

17. Scarce are the reflections on the relation between graffiti and site that take into account the ontological modification that the site undergoes in the current epoch – a subject that instead is variously addressed with reference to contemporary art (e.g. Kwon 2004; Osborne 2013; Mackay 2015).

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