

'Bad' Street Art: The Artistic Practice of Res Publica Temporanea and Collettivo FX in Catania, Sicily

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Abstract

This article deals with the artistic practice of the Italian street art collectives Res Publica Temporanea and Collettivo FX in Catania, Sicily, which has so far been neglected by academic research. The results of this study are the outcome of a field trip in April 2023 by invitation of the artists. The article recaps their work in different areas, each of which marks problematic developments in the city of Catania (San Berillo, Librino, Palestra Lupo).

The case study is embedded in the discourse of critical research that considers street art in general aesthetically and ideologically exhausted. Accordingly, in this article, I use the term 'bad' in an ambiguous way pointing to its implications in processes of gentrification and commercialization. At the same time the results show a form of street art that appears also formally as 'bad' as the collectives use poor materials and an often rough style in contested areas of Catania. The selection of these neighborhoods in combination with social activism developed in consultation with the residents echoes the very roots of street art in the 1960s, the context in which the term first appeared. Therefore, I would like to present their practice as a medium that differs clearly from contemporary forms of legal muralism and as a critical practice to the neoliberal urban space.

Keywords

Street art; gentrification; Res Publica Temporanea; Collettivo FX; community-based art; Catania; Sicily

1. Introduction

This article presents material from a field trip to Catania, Sicily, where I was invited in April 2023 by the artist collectives Res Publica Temporanea and Collettivo FX. It goes without saying that I therefore have a strong bias because I'm highly enthusiastic about both the city and the artistic practice of the collectives. Nevertheless, I have tried to embed the results within the discourse of critical research. From this perspective, street art is—since several years now—considered aesthetically and ideologically exhausted (Parisi 2016); no longer a call to action, but only passive consumption (Abarca 2015) or repetition, imitation, and simulation (Schacter 2014).¹ In these judgements we find a combination of aesthetic and ethical categories, reflecting its manifestation both in the art world and as

political activism in the public sphere. Accordingly, for the here presented practice I use the term 'bad' street art with a double meaning: firstly, as an ethical category, because of its undeniable implications in processes of gentrification and commercialization, and secondly, as an aesthetic term, regarding a form of street art executed by the collectives with poor materials and a rough style. The following case study clearly shows both sides, but its nevertheless understood as activism. The collectives emphasize that they do not 'only' street art but want also convey political resistance. Considering the very roots of street art in the 1960s I would like to present their practice as a medium that can still or again be seen as a critical practice to the neoliberal urban space.

1-I owe this concise survey to Christian Omodeo, with whom I worked on a joint text.

2. Catania

Catania is an ancient port city on the east coast of Sicily, famous for its proximity to Mount Etna. For a long time, it had little independent tourism, but this seems to be changing now. In the past, it was mainly the starting point for excursions to the volcano and, through the airport, the arrival point for travelers on their way to other destinations such as Syracuse in the south or Taormina in the north. The social and economic situation of Sicily in general is not an easy one due to the influence of the Mafia, there called Cosa Nostra, which is primarily engaged in protection rackets, illegal drug and arm trafficking, and more recently in the real estate market. In addition, there is a historic North-South divide in Italy in terms of economic strength

and structural development, mirroring the relationship between the global North and South within Europe itself. All the problems associated with this, such as unemployment, poverty, and corruption, are exacerbated by the dramatic migration situation in the Mediterranean Sea, to which Sicily is exposed due to its geographical proximity to North Africa. At the same time, Palermo, the capital of Sicily, seems to be the main recipient of EU funds for revitalization and restructuring. Culturally, too, it has always been able to attract more resources, not least through the Manifesta art biennial in 2018. This interdisciplinary exhibition intervenes on the crisis-ridden edges of Europe with urban development options directly on the spot. This was the case in Palermo as well, even though its outcomes were criticized

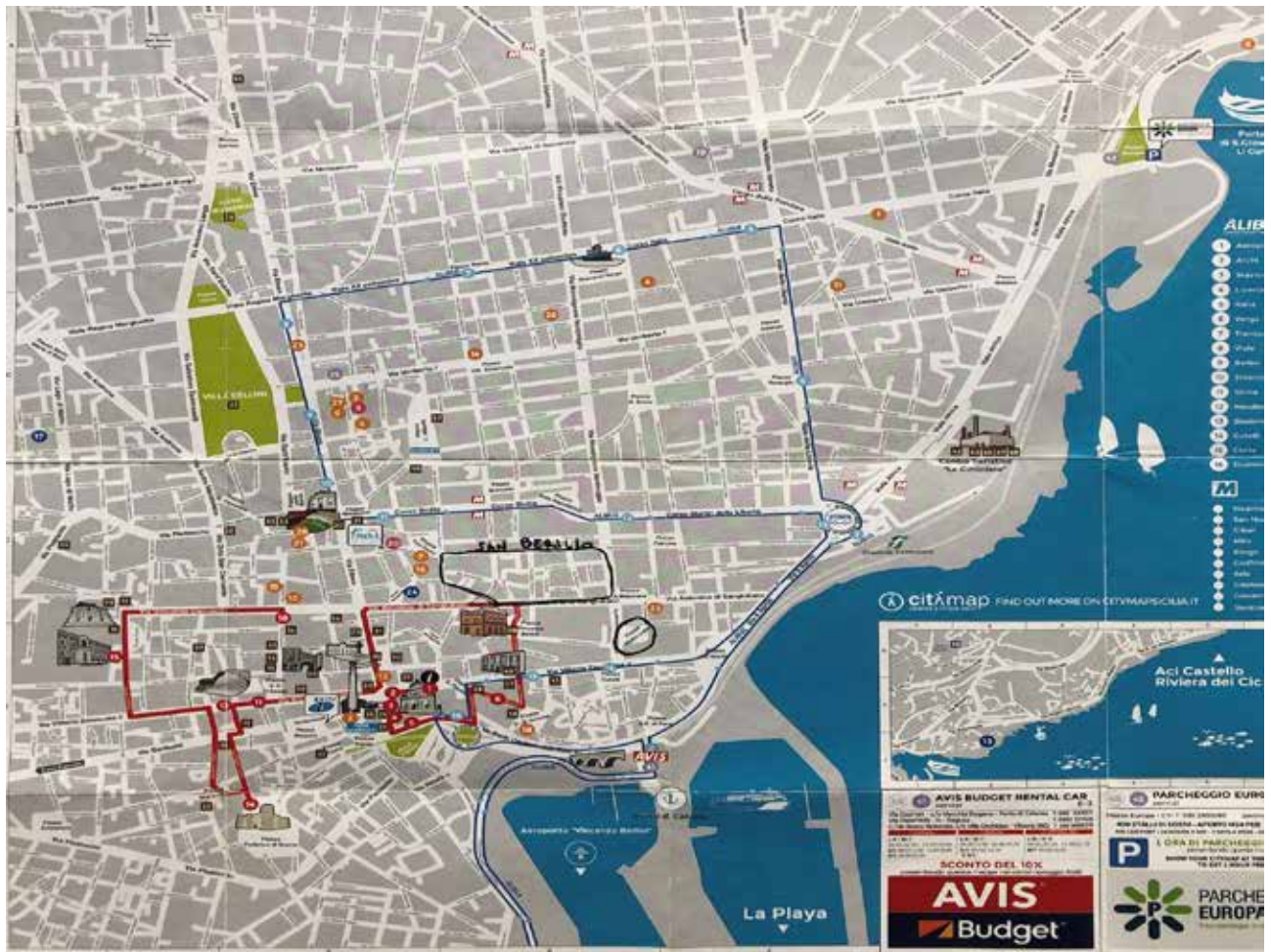


Figure 1. City map of Catania, with the position of San Berillo and the squatted Palestra Lupu (by Luca Prete)

as disappointing (La Rosa 2020). In any case, the efforts of the city of Catania to gentrify and attract more tourism are clearly noticeable, as the city center is extremely well maintained and made safe for the vacation industry. More and more international visitors are attracted by the still affordable prices for accommodation, good food and nice bars, as well as the historical sights. However, not everywhere to the same extent as in the district of San Berillo, which is always in the headlines and receives a lot of media attention (Giambalvo 2016). And this is exactly where the street art collective Res Publica Temporanea has been active since 2011, later starting the collaboration with Collettivo FX in 2015. On the map, it is evident that most of the historical sights are grouped in the historic center, which includes the San Berillo area (Figure 1). All the excitement stems from the fact that a part of this former working-class neighborhood, so near to all the attractive places, is a lawless space in a state of ruin (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ruins in San Berillo (photo by the author)

2.1. San Berillo

The houses of San Berillo are decaying, with no electricity, running water, or sewage. Yet people live here: On the one hand, young migrants, some of whom are selling drugs; on the other hand, sex workers, mostly from Columbia or from the transgender/queer community. For my documentation, I did not photograph people directly. Access to this area was facilitated for me by accompanying the collectives, who have made many friends there since their project. Historically, we have a situation that is very familiar in the field of street art and graffiti research: An old neighborhood offers cheap housing—in this case, free or squatted housing—as well as open spaces for urban art and culture, which in turn favors processes of gentrification (Tunali 2021). The municipal government has repeatedly been asked to remove the ‘eyesore’ because of the precarious situation. At loose intervals, police forces undertake so-called ‘blitz actions’ to carry out checks and arrests. This has repeatedly resulted in the use of violence, sometimes specifically against transgender persons, and press coverage afterwards. So far, the neighborhood has not been demolished. However, the entrances to the houses have been walled up many times to prevent illegal use, but they are opened again and again. At the same time, these closed doorways and windows provide the surfaces for painting, as a reminder that there was once life behind them, as well as to draw attention to the residents’ situation and reevaluate the district.

After being active there since 2011 Res Publica Temporanea developed its project of painted doors and windows in 2015 in close consultation and communication with the residents and joined by Collettivo FX. Since they work illegally, and the outcomes are of course ephemeral, their practice can be considered ‘real’ street art according to the most common definitions of the term (Bengtson 2014; Blanché 2016). Some of it has survived and is particularly attractive because of its contrast with the ruined masonry (Figures 3 and 4). Characters and saints are painted and executed in a variety of styles and materials without great expenses. Their shapes are particularly suitable for the upright rectangular format. In addition, one can trace both the format as well as some of the iconographies back to the Italian tradition of sacred images in public spaces, and by doing so valorize the dilapidated territory. But, according to the collectives, there were also tensions with



Figure 3. Luvi, *Madonna*, San Berillo
(photo by the author)



Figure 4. collettivo fx, *San Berillo*, San Berillo
(photo by the author)



Figure 5. Luprete, *Geisha*, San Berillo
(photo by the author)



Figure 6. Unknown, *Hope*, San Berillo
(photo by the author)

and between the inhabitants of this part of San Berillo during the realization: The tag under the dedicatory tondo to the patron saint San Berillo suggests a dispute between sex workers (Figure 4); the slightly deformed face of the geisha originates from an iconoclasm because her skin appeared too white to a resident (Figure 5). The adaptation of the famous portrait by Shepard Fairy, on the other hand, marks the border to the male part of the neighborhood, the territory of the young migrants, where it is not certain if there are other images, and even this photo I could only take due to the mediation of the accompanying artists (Figure 6).

The intervention of the street art collectives thus had, as so often, a spatial effect: The careful placing of pieces within a confined area creates a visual network that can be discovered by walking (Hoppe 2020, 205-211). This spatial practice is enhanced through the site-specific qualities of every single image due to their formal interrelation with the architectonic environment. Both categories were further enriched by activist interventions, which additionally marked the territory as a social structure. In summer 2017 Res Publica Temporanea were approached by the migrants, who, not having ease in finding running water, had difficulties in ensuring their personal hygiene. As a first response, the collective built a shower, again with poor materials as they used recycled wood from the streets, removed the next day by the police with reference to issues of decency in urban space. After the destruction of the first cabin, the collective thought of a removable solution with a camp shower. But this was removed soon after as well (Figure 7). Moreover, in the same year, the *San Berillo Calcio Junior* team was born, a soccer team for children, growing up in an area completely lacking services and opportunities (Figure 8). Res Publica Temporanea supported the team through the purchase of technical equipment, following the training and establishing cooperations with other supporters. In 2018 the team counted 25 children from 4 continents between 5 and 15 years old. This project took an abrupt halt in 2020 because of the pandemic; but some of the children who participated in the sports project today play in Catanese teams. In this respect, the activities of the collective can be seen as a critical practice, as the addressees and the San Berillo neighborhood are unwanted. Both the street art and the practical support remind the urban public of a failed city

and migration policy. They point to a situation that would rather be preferred to silence.



Figure 7. Res Publica Temporanea, shower cabin, 2017 (photo by rpt)

What happened next seems to have been taken from a manual on gentrification: The street art in San Berillo first attracted the guided tours that were already operating there, showing one of the oldest parts in town and the sex workers as exotic 'sights'. Then an entrepreneur developed part of the area with bars and restaurants into the *Art and Fun District*, already marked on Google Maps (Figure 9). Do-it-yourself street signs lead tourists from the southern main street directly into a fully commercialized zone with



Figure 8. San Berillo Calcio Junior team, 2017 (photo by Poki)

bars and restaurants, while the sex workers and migrants continue their lives right behind the next wall. There was also an attempt to separate the two areas by a barrier, which for Luprete, a member of Res Publica Temporanea, brought back bad memories of an almost physical confrontation. In fact, in the old town of Catania, there are these very narrow squares that offer an attractive living-room atmosphere, which is being discovered by more and more tourists and therefore gladly accepted and enhanced by the local municipality. The price of this, as is well known, is the displacement and marginalization of socially weaker or unwanted groups.

And the process continues: In April 2023, further expansion was carried out by construction workers (from Eastern Europe), and the upgrading was intended to lead, of course, to real estate development and speculation.

Overall, the project was a stress test for the collective: they had great success with it, to the point of international media coverage; at the same time, they feel responsible for bringing the attention to a sensitive urban space. As Luprete stated in a conversation, “What remains of the project are the many good contacts with the residents of the neighborhood.” Besides the great efforts invested in this area, the collective is dedicated to other undertakings as well. Valeria, for example, opened the artistic project space *Vastasa*, while she and others are at the same time participating in LUPo (Laboratorio Urbano Popolare), a squatted cultural center downtown, not far from San Berillo. Furthermore, Res Publica Temporanea is involved in the district of Librino, a social housing project on the outskirts of the city.



Figure 9. Catania, San Berillo 'Art and Fun District' (photo by the author)

2.2. Librino

Librino is a settlement near the airport located completely outside the city with poor access to public transportation. This area has a bad reputation too, associated with social decline and crime. However, from the perspective of the history of urban planning in Europe, we find again a familiar motif: the relocation of the working class from old buildings in the inner city to modern housing constructions, which has often led to marginalization and ghettoization, especially in Western Europe. The neighborhood, though, was designed with the best intentions, as it was supposed to represent a modern Catania. Its design and development were entrusted to the famous architect Kenzo Tange in the 1960s. However, for several reasons, the project was never completed to its full extent (Gianino 2007).

There, the collective works on several projects as well: the squatted sports center San Teodoro, urban gardening projects, and murals on high-rises. The sports center, which never officially opened due to construction defects, has since attracted sponsors to renovate the turf and professionalize services for the Briganti rugby team. Inside and outside, street artists are constantly intervening to beautify the area that allows for a very free artistic practice (Figures 10 and 11). The site can be characterized as a modern ruin, so typical for Italy and Sicily in particular, since unauthorized buildings or botched constructions are a recurring manifestation, a type which Parisi has, in a recent article, targeted as a specific destination for Italian street art (Parisi 2023). The center itself is threatened by the neglect of the authorities and by attacks attributed



Figure 10. Catania, Librino, Briganti rugby team clubhouse inside with an intervention by Mozone (photo by the author)



Figure 11. Catania, Librino, Briganti rugby team clubhouse outside with mural by Collettivo FX (photo by the author)

to the Mafia (Tondo 2022). It seems that they are always trying to destroy it, not only to gain territory, but also to detach young people from it to recruit them. Against these forces stands the volunteer work, who has been able to create a children's and youth library, offering afternoon care in addition to the sport venue. Furthermore, the collective started urban gardening projects to directly involve the inhabitants of Librino with their environment. Unfortunately, most of the plants were destroyed by the municipal lawn and garden maintenance.

Before, the collective had begun to communicate with the residents through smaller interventions (Figure 12). At first, they reacted very skeptically, asking mainly about funding since they felt overlooked and did not want public money to be wasted on art. The—in my view—very accessible themes, such as love or the representation of animals, which were realized freely and without commission after 2015, facilitated the exchange with the inhabitants and led to more visibility for this neglected neighborhood in the press. This preliminary work also made possible the large-scale intervention of Blu (Figure 13)

Again, without official permission, but in consultation with the residents of the high-rise, Blu executed a large-scale mural in 2016 (Figure 13). In this sense, it is an illegal mural that he painted without funding and only through the support of the collective. He therefore used paints with inferior quality that have since faded considerably. The motif of Mount Etna establishes a rather general, site-specific reference. What most convinced the inhabitants was his commitment. Without official support, he worked in a very disciplined manner every day from morning to night for three weeks. It was this dedication to his work, that someone would put so much effort into this settlement with a bad reputation, that inspired the inhabitants and has given this form of art and artists a deep trust within the community.

Parallel to these endeavors, official interventions under the lead of the local artist and patron Antonio Presti and his foundation have been carried out as well. One is the decoration of highway bridges with ceramic tiles as part of a large-scale participatory project involving the schools of Librino called *Porta della bellezza* (Gate of Beauty, 2009) and *Porta delle farfalle* (Gate of Butterflies),



Figure 12. Catania, Librino, *L'amore regge la famiglia*, Collettivo FX, 2015 (photo by rpt)



Figure 13. Catania, Librino, *Mount Etna Exploding*, Blu, 2016 (photo by the author)

the last one inaugurated during my stay in April 2023 (Figure 14). This monumental project was accompanied by large press coverage and a rather paternalistic discourse. The schoolteachers had to choose the children that were allowed to participate, mostly girls. These girls from the first campaign should now be themselves mothers of a new generation working with the 'master,' in sum to educate the whole community, implicitly healing it from the disease of the Mafia that is not overtly addressed. "The little girls who participated in the making of the Gate of Beauty are the mothers of today, and the mothers who had shared this process 15 years ago in the Gate of Beauty today have become grandmothers. This is the great political victory with a capital P for the entire neighborhood. In Librino, a

contemporary nonplace, today there is a work of art that has epic value" (Presti/Barbetta 2023; translation by the author).

Also, under the direction of Antoni Presti, the photo gallery *Il Canto delle creature*, named after the writings of St. Francis of Assisi, was created in 2019. The photographic series with portraits of the residents is also intended to reinforce the sense of community (Figure 15). The wish of the curator-patron Presti that Librino would become a mandatory stop for all tourist buses and public transportation going to the airport did not happen in the end. Reminiscent of JR's photographic works, but realized in color, it unfolds an ambiguous aesthetic, especially in Italy, where it is common to post obituaries on the street.



Figure 14. Catania, Librino, *Porta delle farfalle*, Fondazione Antonio Presti – Fiumara D'Arte, 2023 (photo by rpt)



Figure 15. Catania, Librino, *Il Canto delle creature*, Fondazione Antonio Presti – Fiumara D'Arte, 2019 (photo by rpt)

In any case, the collective was not invited to participate in these large-scale and fully financed campaigns that we can describe as street art-inspired public art. Through the participation of the inhabitants, these projects encompass site-specific qualities and open a space for communication, but under the lead of an artist functioning as curator, teacher, and patron. In comparison, the street artists asked the residents directly for permission, or in the case of Poki, a member of Res Publica Temporanea, born and raised in Librino, a citizen himself acted, thus creating a self-authorized public sphere.

2.3. LUPo (Laboratorio urbano popolare)

The third place in Catania where the collectives work, meet, and exchange is the squatted cultural center LUPo, again a modern ruin. The building was originally constructed as a central bus station, which explains its wide overhanging roof, but it never went into operation in this capacity. Instead, it was used as a sports hall for a while, and then left to decay afterwards. The self-organized center offers a variety of cultural activities such as film screenings, exhibitions, lectures, and concerts. Besides offering alternative forms of culture and entertainment, their events often address critical issues about the possibilities of political influence and agency. The walls are at the disposal of street artists and are constantly being redesigned on a large scale. Again, we find a collective that creates public space in an alternative way offering art, culture, participation and debate. This is particularly important for young people, especially in Sicily, where they often feel powerless or forced to emigrate because of their lack of opportunities: "The lack of hope for building a richer and more fulfilling future," as the young filmmaker Carla Costanza describes it in the presentation of her documentary movie, *Transumanze*, screened at LUPo in early September 2023 (Costanza 2023). For years, the site has been threatened with eviction for various reasons, the latest being a proposal by the municipality to build a parking lot. During my stay, this was the occasion for Collettivo FX, this time in collaboration with Jens Besser, to take a critical look at the situation. Their murals comment on the predominance of car traffic and the reluctance of the municipality, but also of many residents, to abandon the car as a means of urban mobility or to offer alternatives (Figures 16 and 17).



Figure 16. Catania, Palestra Lupo, Collettivo FX, *We Drown in a Sea of Cars*, 2023 (photo by the author)

3. Street Art and the iconography of famous men and women

During my stay in April 2023, another intervention happened in San Berillo. The collectives are now friends with the sex worker Magnolia, who welcomed the idea of a new pictorial intervention. They agreed to paint in the alley where she works, right behind the 'Art and Fun District.' The themes were developed together and then executed by Res Publica Temporanea and Collettivo FX. At Magnolia's request, a gallery of famous Colombian men and women was executed: the *India Catalina*, as well as portraits of the 1990 national soccer team, whom she probably knew personally (Figure 18). India Catalina is worshipped like a saint in Colombia and at this point in Catania serves as a positive identification with a female goddess-like image. Historically, she is a similarly ambivalent figure as Pocahontas in North America. She served the Spanish conquistadores as a translator and a mediator for the



Figure 17. Catania, Palestra Lupo, Jens Besser, *San Pedaleone*, 2023 (photo by the author)

indigenous population, and as such was also a victim of colonization and the power imbalance it created. But this side of the iconography can also be interpreted in a site-specific way because it represents what happens in this alley: exploitation through male dominance as well as displacement and marginalization.

For its part, the iconography of famous men and women has a long tradition. It dates back to antiquity and is closely linked to the premodern model of historiography, which was essentially structured by the juxtaposition of biographies. This form was then applied to both the painting of saints as well as the secular iconography of historical figures. The various assemblages were used to represent republican heroes or aristocratic bloodlines,

embodying different kinds of virtues. In sum, they always envisioned ideal societies (Hoppe 2014). In my opinion, this can be observed in a similar but simplified way in the first mural campaigns of the 1960s, when marginalized groups put famous historical figures from their respective communities on the walls to gain visibility and the right to their own history and identity.

Among the earliest examples are the murals at the UFW Center in Del Ray, California, and of course the even more famous *Wall of Respect* in Chicago (Figure 19). The murals were both collaborations between activists, designers, and painters. The works consisted of various portraits of figures from African American history or, in California, from Mexican revolutionary movements. In both cases, the selection of the 'famous men and women'



Figure 18. Catania, San Berillo, Res Publica Temporanea and Collettivo FX, *India Catalina*, and Colombian soccer player, 2023 (photo by the author)

was the result of a discussion process. The executions of the works took place in close collaboration with the residents of the community, where changes were always possible. In the case of the Chicago wall, it is known, for example, that there was a debate about whether to include Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, who were considered respectively too moderate or too radical for the movement (Alkalimat/Crawford/Zorach 2017). In addition, the images transformed the buildings into places for political meetings, artistic performances, or tourism. The walls were the first emerging collective murals in the United States that helped discriminated groups gain visibility and express their political goals of equality. This was achieved through the ability to create their own public space, as well as the

representation of a distinct history with which residents could identify.

Afterwards, in the mid-1970s, these phenomena were summarized in various publications under the term street art: first by Horst Schmidt-Brümmer in 1974, and shortly thereafter by Robert Sommer in 1975. The German-language publication accompanied the *Street Art: Public Mural Painting in the USA* exhibition in Berlin, which presented mural painting as a medium of revolution and resistance (Schmidt-Brümmer 1974). This is also true of Robert Sommer's text, in which he defines street art as a form that is created and exhibited exclusively in public space and therefore cannot be sold, thus circumventing



Figure 19. Visual Arts Workshop, Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), *Wall of Respect*, 1967-1971, Chicago (Photo: Darryl Cowherd; Alkalimat/Crawford/Zorach 2017, p. 259)

the logic of the market (Sommer 1975). The fact that it is exposed to the elements and vandalism gives it, according to the author, an ephemeral and fluid quality. The places most affected by this first wave of street art were, poor or blighted neighborhoods, bohemian areas adjacent to college campuses, and otherwise outlying residential and middle-class districts. Thus, street art is presented as a way of activism tightly rooted in the urban realm, connected with an anti-hierarchical work practice and a democratic demand for self-determination by the residents.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, I would argue that all the characteristic elements of this early street art, such as ephemerality, participation, communication, anti-capitalist strategies, and the reclaiming of history and space, apply as well to the artistic practice of the collectives working in Catania.

Especially the most recent intervention in San Berillo conveys a similar 'bad' style that will not necessarily arouse the attention of street art tours or the art market. The chosen iconography of famous men and women echoes the model of community-based art as well. The location marks a clear contrast to the 'Art and Fun District,' where migrants and sex workers are not allowed to enter. In that narrow alley, however, the art is developed with and for them as a sign of contestation and a demand for participation. These kinds of situations, not only in Italy, usually are solved by either banishing these groups to the outskirts of the city, where they can no longer be seen, or by deporting them altogether and for good. The interventions therefore convey a critical practice because they question how and by whom the public space can be used.

This argumentation joins recent trends in research that conceive art again as a committed part of urban activism

(Tunali 2021). The widespread criticism of street art being only a trigger for gentrification undervalues its agency and that of the artists creating it. Following the theoretical paths of Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe, Tijen Tunali has made a strong plea to take especially unsanctioned forms of art seriously, not only as a means of reclaiming space, but also in the interests of a contentious public sphere. They offer creative possibilities to reinvent the urban realm and represent the demand to decide how and by whom it should be used. This is not to deny that street art has fostered processes of gentrification, was and is still used to control 'difficult' neighborhoods or to increase the market value of a city within the global competition. But especially the latter phenomenon applies mostly to contemporary muralism, with its often hyper-realistic images without any site-specific content or political agenda. These productions clearly exhibit the highest standards of craftsmanship (and give artists a living) as well as an aesthetic appeal, but they certainly do not contest urban space and stimulate discussion. In analogy to Jean-Christophe Amman's criticism of public art as 'drop sculptures' in the 1980s, one could speak of 'drop murals' serving the purposes of decoration and social consensus. Basically, contemporary cities remain at the mercy of the neoliberal agenda, and this is true of society in general. But it seems that a 'bad' street art still allows for the possibility of reaction and influence, precisely because—according to my thesis—it does not adapt to an aesthetic norm. With poor materials and a 'bad' style, it clearly sets itself apart from the shiny high-end productions and helps to make urban social conflicts visible and keep them in the discussion.

Conflict of interest and ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects' anonymity and consent to publish.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Res Publica Temporanea and friends for their generous hospitality in Catania and Collettivo FX for inviting me to join him and Jens Besser on this great trip. As always, the proofreading was done by Mark Miskovic,

for whose diligence I am always very grateful.

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