

About Street Art

Contemporary *street art* is often discussed in media as a phenomenon undistinguished from *graffiti*. This oversimplification is rather misleading. Already in the 1980s, in connection to the mainstream success of the graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, concerns were raised about the need for a new category: *post-graffiti*. Typically, for the terms with such a prefix, there is a consensus that *post-graffiti* in principle differs from graffiti, but there is no consensus concerning the definition of the new category itself. With some generalizations, however, it can be said that traditional graffiti is subcultural - as expressed best by its text compositions, tags and pieces that are so complex and cryptic that they remain undecipherable for outsiders; post-graffiti, on the other hand, is open to the widest audience: it uses clear words and widely familiar iconic imagery. Therefore, social attitude towards post-graffiti is also much more favourable, despite the fact that the law still sees it as a crime, an act of vandalism against the public property. To illustrate this ambiguity, one could recall the recent NY tour by the superstar street artist Banksy¹, when the local newspapers culture and leisure sections encouraged their readers to hurry up and visit this and that street corner "because the city's municipal officials have to clean the wall by tomorrow."

In context of the above-mentioned meaningful contradiction, I would suggest the concept of *social banditry* to describe contemporary street art (*aka* post-graffiti).

The concept comes from the British historian Eric Hobsbawm and, in short, stands for a person who is both an outlaw and a popular hero. Hobsbawm focused on the early-modern folk heroes, such as Robin Hood, but he also assumed that the social bandit is a universal archetype that could emerge in any society during any era, provided that the circumstances are right. Surely, even then not every offender could earn such status. In order for a criminal to become a folk hero, a bandit to become the social bandit, one needs to meet a series of requirements. Based on Hobsbawm, anthropologist Graham Seal listed the 12 necessary conditions. I will next discuss the most crucial ones.

¹ Reference to the Banksy Tour in NY, October 2013. See for example: <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2013/10/interactive-map-banksy-tour-of-nyc.html>

First, the social bandit comes from the community which has suffered injustice and loss of its traditional land property through the hands of the ruling authorities.

In the 1990s, something like this happened in the western metropolises. It was when the contemporary city furniture was invented: bus stops with advertising spaces, garbage bins and street lamps with advertising spaces, etc. For the municipal power, the new symbiosis with the private capital was seen as generally beneficial, yet the consequent advertisement-onslaught in city space triggered a strong protest from the local communities as it was perceived as a deprivation of the public property. It didn't help that municipal powers, in order to commodify the public space, at first had to restrict its usage – non-commercial, unofficial, community- or individual-initiated adverts were prohibited or taxed; the fight against graffiti and other unauthorised forms of urban self-expression was greatly intensified. In the early 1990s, the popular resistance to the increasing privatization of public space found its new form in movements like *Reclaim the Streets* in the United Kingdom and *Critical Mass* in the United States. In this context, illegal street art also acquired a wider social meaningfulness: it became a part of the struggle for the public space between the central government and the local communities. Just as a social bandit fights against foreign occupiers and for the traditional freedom of one's community, street art began to symbolize the commoner's freedom of expression.

Further. The social bandit is fair-minded. He only attacks malicious authorities, he protects the weak, protects women and protects children.

If we look at the messages delivered by contemporary street art, then one could rarely find such radicalism that is characteristic to subcultures. On the contrary, contemporary street art predominantly expresses socially normative, humanist values, tolerance, an ethical and responsible worldview. Critical and ironic messages are targeted against greedy corporations and warmongering governments, against stereotyping and exploitation. At the same time, they express almost sentimental empathy towards the small aspirations of the common everyday life. A typical street artist seems and feels like a person you would like to be your neighbour.

More. A social bandit must possess some magic abilities. In particular, a supernatural ability to remain elusive: an ability to become invisible and an ability to act at the speed of lightning. Banksy certainly has the ability to become invisible. Despite the fact that he is a superstar artist who, among other things, regularly steps up at art galleries, and who has been repeatedly unmasked, photographed and identified by the journalists - despite all that, Banksy remains an anonymous, faceless, phantom-like figure. One could cynically argue, that this is because both his sincere fans and pragmatic art market are unwilling to dismantle the myth - but this doesn't make it less miraculous.

As for supernatural speed, Blek le Rat, the (alleged) inventor of *stencil-graffiti*, as well as Banksy, who has mastered that technique, they together and separately have recalled incidents in their early career, where they were "almost caught by the police" while spray-painting. The conclusion was, that there has to be some better, quicker way to make a mural. And there was. You just put a stencil on the wall, flush it with colour, and ready it is. After that you vanish into the night, leaving behind a belated, frustrated police officer. Wonderful.

And finally. As with all heroes, it is crucial to meet their tragic end. One has to perish in the right way, following the good practice. At first, the social bandit should become betrayed by someone close. Then there comes the execution - Graham Seal names the bullet, the sword, the axe or the rope as most recommended options.

As the emergence of *post-graffiti* is generally placed in the 1990s, there certainly is still some time left with this last point. No need to rush with the body count yet. However, when following the current developments, the growing institutional recognition of street art - which is especially evident in the example of Banksy, Shepard Fairey etc - one can suppose that the street artists and social bandits are likely to split here. The fate of the street artist will not be the axe death. The fate of the street artist will be a museum and new professional challenges.