

Christian Omodeo (PhD) is an art historian, art critic, book collector and director of Paris-based bookshop Le Grand Jeu. Christian was one of the curators of *Street Art Banksy & Co. The urban state of mind* at the Museum of Palazzo Pepoli in Bologna, Italy. Blu's dramatic response to the inclusion of an excised street-based piece in the show (erasing his work from the streets of Bologna) sparked an international debate on the ethics of removing work from the streets for display in museum space. To some extent, this controversy overshadowed the rest of the show, which remains one of the biggest retrospectives ever dedicated to graffiti and street art, featuring over 300 artworks, photos, videos and documents. More recently, Christian revisited the Blu story in his film *The Man Who Stole Banksy*, as part of a critique of the ways in which museums have co-opted street art. Nuart Journal recently sat down with Omodeo for an interview.

CHRISTIAN OMODEO: VANDAL CURATOR?

Christian, you suggested that we should talk about 'vandal curators' in this interview. We're curious to hear your thoughts on this...

Christian Omodeo: It's something I've been thinking about a lot lately. The French graffiti writer Nasty belongs to the AEC crew (*Artistes en cavale* / Artists running from the law). I think art historians and curators should also find new ways of working with institutions so they don't get captured and absorbed by the system.

There are curators like Martyn Reed, David Demougeot or Monica Campana, who work primarily in public space and who critically engage with cultural institutions. Some of their curatorial decisions have been radical and have set the bar for new ways we can work in public space. But these approaches do not always translate to closed exhibition space. We need to design new rules for bringing urban art into museum space.

What does it mean to be a 'vandal curator'?

For me, being a vandal is not just about rule breaking. It's about changing the rules of museum policies. If you consider that street art is a game changer phenomenon, you cannot use old algorithms. You have to find new rules for working with museums.

You've suggested that 'institutions search for curators who do not curate in a vandal way.' How does your own approach diverge from what institutions want?

There are two kinds of street art exhibitions: shows featuring artists coming from the streets who are considered *assimilable* by the art system, and whose work is then mixed with other contemporary artists; and exhibitions that put together dozens of artists with a street background

in a kind of maelstrom show. The last type of project is often highly appreciated by a mainstream audience. But let's be serious, there is no curation in such projects, it's just about organisation.

Standard shows like these just do not interest me. I've said no to some exhibition projects that would have made sense in terms of my career and my profile, but are we sure that this is what the street scene needs right now?

We need to think about the direction all this is taking, the rules we want to play by – and the future role of museums in urban art.

So, we need to bring in some of street art's sub-cultural rules about what is, and is not, acceptable practice?

We need to educate the art institutions about our rules and not just play by their rules. Banksy & Co in Bologna was a turning point. That experience showed that we must attempt to have total control and that we cannot accept or endure compromises.

You recently revisited the Banksy & Co vs. Blu controversy in *The Man Who Stole Banksy*.

Actually, the Bologna exhibition in 2016 has been, in my own experience, a spin-off of the movie I was working on since 2012, during which I stumbled upon the restorers who had just peeled off the Blu walls. They were attempting to save them from destruction and trying to offer them to the city. At that time, I was going deep into a post-colonial lecture on Banksy's intervention in Palestine and this gave me a totally different perspective. What I saw in Bologna was the birth of a powerful narrative of street art that was arising from nowhere, without a real debate. I felt that the situation was perfect for discussing not only the narrative

Christian Omodeo, Evan Pricco and Carlo McCormick discussing Banksy & Co. at Nuart Plus, Stavanger, 2016. Photograph ©Kristina Borhes



Cuoghi & Corsello, Spaccare Tutto (Destroy Everything). Stencil and spray paint on wall, Bologna, 2016. Photograph ©Le Grand Jeu



behind a single show, but the whole idea of what an urban art museum should be. Most people have focused on Blu's self-destruction of his walls, thinking of the whole game as a fight between ephemeral art and preservation. Only a few have understood that the exhibition was also proposing to destroy the 'critical' approaches towards street art of the past, before starting to build new ones. That was the point behind such rooms as Cuoghi & Corsello's 'Destroy Everything', which was stencilled between tags and stickers peeled off by Arek, a Parisian writer, and the peeled wall-paper tagged by many writers from Bologna. As much as writers destroy cities with their tags, my idea was to vandalize art history, to cover it with tags and throw-ups. Many people have been shocked by this, but what should I do? I was like 'Hey guys, seriously, do you want me to put on a tie to talk about vandalism?'

Is there a lesson for the ways we should work with museums here?

Yes. There are two key points:

1

We have to find new ways of bringing street art into exhibition spaces.

2

There is a real demand from audiences to be educated about street art.

Mainstream audiences do not have the historical knowledge that subcultural audiences do. They know maybe Shepard Fairey, Banksy or Futura. They don't know all the artists we are familiar with – but they want to know more. They want to understand the new language that we are speaking.

Do not forget that street art museum shows are not just important for artists and for cultural insiders. They are also important for everyday audiences. It is fundamental that we create educational spaces that are audience-oriented, and not only about the egos of the artists and curators.

Do street art shows have the capacity to bring in new audiences? To engage people who would not usually go to a museum?

Of course. This is the power of street art in the museum. People who do not come to see contemporary art will come to a street art show. They will learn more about the story and the scene, but museums can also be used as a tool to teach people new ways of looking at their cities and to consider the role of art in their everyday lives.

So, the aim is to make the museum as democratic as the wall?

Museums need people to have specialist knowledge to understand what is on show. This discourages ordinary people from coming to museums. By being pop, street art reaches out to people, like a popular movie or pop music. This doesn't mean that it is less intelligent than contemporary art. It's just using a different register.

When we discuss the history of music, or the history of cinema, mainstream and popular works are always central (e.g. Star Wars). But this does not yet seem to be the case for visual art. It is the world's most popular artform, but yet, where do you find it mentioned? In the lifestyle section or maybe the cultural or human interest section – not the art section.

Why is this?

It's also our own fault. Most of the big street art museum shows have been a celebration of the freedom of the scene. But this is very much a surface mode of exhibition. We select the top 40 or 50 artists, put their work on the walls – sometimes there is a video or some photographs – but none of this seems very considered. Then we have a big party, and the artists, curators and collectors have fun. It's difficult to remain engaged with this.

They're like a music festival – fun, friends, beer – but it's mostly surface. I do not think that I'm the only one seeing something much more powerful in the work of the artists that I know, follow and admire. What are we waiting to focus on this?

But is there a problem with shows being fun? Could this mode of celebration not be a revolutionary act? Does art have to be quiet and serious?

Fun is fundamental, but it's also the most serious topic on earth. Think about Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* or Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*. Who says that fun cannot be smart? Street Art museum shows should not just be fun celebrations for insiders. We cannot be fun, but exclusive.

Beyond artworks, what role should photography, videos and other forms of documentation take in museum shows? Are these forms of documentation forms of art (as Pietro Rivasi and Andrea Baldini argued in the last issue of *Nuart Journal*)?

The role of documentation as art – as suggested by Pietro and Andrea – works very well for them as they deal essentially with graffiti writers. In that case, it is entirely appropriate to include photographs and videos of writers' work – as art – in museums. However, for a street artist, this approach would not be appropriate – as it would exclude that artist's studio-based practice and would focus only on the documentation of their work on the street. It would probably also be received as disrespectful, as if any attempt of translating the core of their streetness into an artwork would fail. Instead of this, I prefer to look at the entire production, to consider which parts are valuable and which are not, and to include a selection in any exhibition.

The ways that museums display urban art has been dismissed by critics like Nick Riggle as being 'inauthentic' – and as falling short of capturing the 'streetness' of street art.

I have a problem with the notion of street art as something 'pure' and 'authentic', especially when it comes from someone who is not an artist. It's like saying to a musician: I liked your live show very much, but you cannot go into a studio and make a record, because it would be 'inauthentic.' Also, I see street art as something far from pure – it's a wonderful community of bastards that often do exactly the opposite of what you are expecting. Am I wrong?

What's next for you? Will you be putting all this into practice soon?

In 2018, I had the bad idea of opening a bookstore devoted to street cultures. Helping people to find good books is simply another way of curating. It's like educating people without having to be the one talking under the spotlight. The next big step is the opening of a new bigger bookstore in the centre of Paris in May 2019. This will be a space where the walls that now exist between subcultures – like street art, graffiti, and skateboarding – will come down. I have many ideas for future exhibitions. Just be patient.