

Streetartists

A young man sits on the pavement. Playing an instrument. A bit further on another is completing a sketch in chalk. On the opposite side of the square, two girls are performing a short ballet piece. In front of a large department-store a Latin-American ensemble in native dress. Jugglers, people performing mime, magicians ... In fine weather and on holidays they crowd the streets and squares, when it is raining they go down to the subways and the underground stations, at night they are silent.

They are artists. Street artists.

The first tourists from socialist countries often looked on them as a special sort of beggars, which proved to them that, in the harsh conditions of capitalism, everybody had to work, even those who idly begged. The better-informed accept street artists as unpaid entertainers to whom one should occasionally give the odd coin. The suburban mentality sees in them a potential nest of debauchery and all manner of misbehaviour, but benevolent supporters and unrealised talents create an entire mythology concerning these anonymous eminencies by which, at least to some extent and between the lines, glorify their own unrecognised 'genius'. The easiest way to put it would be that all of these labels are applicable. Street artists differ no less in their performance skills than do the other known and recognised artists. The difference, however, is not just one of quality but of motivation. The first, probably most usual motive for street performance rests on the knowledge that it is a well-tried method of earning some money. In this sense, the socialist tourists were not far from the truth: the cities are full of worn-out musicians and young students from the conservatories, as well as all sorts of 'artists from necessity', for whom their instrument serves as a clumsy camouflage of their true situation, as also a proof of their pride that refuses unearned and humiliating charity. Passers-by and idle strollers never stop for the sake of these latter. Far more attractive are the young beginners, for whom the street offers an opportunity for the public testing of their talent. Still greater attention is given to those enthusiasts who perform some small folk spectacle, which is the performers' contribution to the conservation of the

tradition to which they belong and for the spectator a mixture of the exotic and the bizarre. These first skilfully exploit this, often expanding their 'activity', offering various talismans, souvenirs and even their own cassettes to the assembled crowd. A crowd will gather also around those professional entertainers who have gone out onto the street because, at that moment, they lack a regular engagement. Their trade-mark is their skill as entertainers. Such professionals may sometimes be joined by some real star of show-business. Woody Allen played and Mario Lanza sang on the street. This apparent eccentricity on the part of the *vedette* is partly an expression of his nostalgia for direct, spontaneous contact, without the repressive mediation of the manager, just as it could also be proof of a democratic attitude forbidden to him. The final meaning of such a star's performance is a contempt for the official: Woody Allen is no longer anonymous, even in a crowd, and so his democracy is false, for, even here, he is a star who evokes immense attention, indeed, a defiant star who resists the rules of those who have made him a star. So the *vedette*, in this way too, demonstrates his independence, individuality and greatness. Finally, there are not a few of those whom a pure artistic motive has led to be street artists, irrespective of whether it be a matter of beginners for whom this is an opportunity for a first public performance, or whether it be a case of mature performers who are testing the possibility of realising a spontaneous street happening. An odd obligatory exhibitionist rounds off this picture of street performance.

Hope is what all street artists have in common. Nor is it of great importance whether their hopes are for small gains or great glory; what matters is their decision to persist in their life's challenge, what matters is the will that does not allow them to surrender to the comfort of idle nihilism, what matters is their desire to come face to face with existence. Any creative activity proves that the man has not abdicated.

A second common quality is of an external nature. All street artists ensure their often essential earnings by the proffered hat. Their income is not assured beforehand, but must always be earned anew, so that in this sense they are truly free artists, who, over and over again, struggle for their existence. The street artists still more resemble their predecessors in entertainment - the travelling

actors. Common to both is the expectation of a monetary award for their efforts. Both regularly vary the venue of their performance. Common to both is that they are both addressing a haphazard, indiscriminating public whom they must please. In so far as they please it, the public will graciously reward their effort, although, in this gracious scattering of small change, there is also ever a shade of contempt and superiority which the well-off man often feels towards the poor artist. (One should perhaps remember that the casting of metal coinage at the performers, which even Pirandello experienced, was a sign of belittlement and contempt, far worse than any whistling or other sign of scorn.) To please! this becomes the imperative for street artists. In a drastic way, they confirm the fact that all art 'lives' by the whim of public taste, though, more than other artists, they are forced to resort to tricks of seduction and methods of flattery. Hence they try, in their performances, to avoid ad-libbing. Well-organised groups of street artists have a clearly defined programme, consisting of a combination of catching and well-tryed acts. In any case, they are generally not in a position to improvise, as do the lead musicians in a jazz session, but repeat what has for them long since become routine. Their art is closer to mechanical repetition than to creativity, closer to mass production than to artistic creation. On this level street artists are not true artists. They are entertainers.

This is how the public experiences them. With time, it grows accustomed to them as a part of the town decor, as an ornament to the ambience and free entertainment which dispels monotony and creates the illusion of good living, as the entertainment wing of the urban atmosphere. But connoisseurs and specialists know how to distinguish even true talents among street artists. Not only have many future celebrities had their first 'auditions' on busy streets, but, at times, have even skilfully adapted their performances to the given ambience, which has resulted in a particular conceptual gesture. The completion of the act of performance and its haphazardly selected location lends both the work and the place an unexpected quality: in the passages of an underground railway, a sonata affirms its indestructible value, spiritualising the depressing space of the *metro*. This 'ambiental' possibility of art was brought to its extreme consequences by those theatrical groups which, counting on directness, spontaneity and surprise, without any warning or explanation, began their performances on some square or in some park. Art is possible always and

everywhere - that utopian slogan is the motive force of such attempts. Possessing courage, a high degree of self-confidence and concentration, these uninstitutionalised companies had to be prepared for every form of improvisation. Improvisation was customary already in the *comedia dell' arte*. Pushkin in one of his stories mentions an actor who was able to weave an entire monologue at a word, cast at random, from among the assembled public, the American theatre Combine adopted this as its usual practice. In such attempts even failings are turned to advantage, from Paganini's performance on one string to Hamlet in jeans. Inventiveness in strained circumstances has been known to aid and direct the occasional witty conceptual decision.

Improvisation, naturally, may be considered a proof of the highest art. As resistance to every pattern and accepted dictum in general, improvisation opposes every rule and 'prescribed' necessity, expressing, through its own spontaneity - which is a game in which a new order is discovered - the ever-present trend of art towards freedom. So, improvisation is not a matter of a momentary reaction of the performer, for spontaneity ever wells up from the depths of being, but nor is it a question of entirely inner motivation, for it expresses also the attitude of the creator to every artistic and even social canon. Hence it is possible to say, albeit with some caution, that in the performances of individual street artists there exists a dose of rebellion and open defiance towards any form of institutionalisation and its representatives. Defenceless, left to themselves and the whims of the passers-by, the street artists confirm drastically that all freedom is uncertain. And what need is there for a safe refuge? What is discovered in the game may be lost in the game. Fearless before the eternal, discovering the sense of the ephemeral and unrepeatable, the true streets artists do not serve vanity, but the work itself. Their acceptance of authorial anonymity and the disappearance of their own work is the acceptance of the immanent sense of life itself. The song will not be taped, the actor will be forgotten, the sketch will be washed away by the first rain, yet by this very creation for one single moment the potential value of every possible moment is confirmed: in the game human glorifies freedom, in freedom life, in life the free player - human. Street artists are only an occasional and only a pale echo of this possibility, but, in the world in which we live, even a slim hope means a great deal.

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