

MILAN, ITALY: TACTIC VS STRATEGY IN THE RELATION BETWEEN ART, ARCHITECTURE AND IMAGE IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

It is a well-known fact that in the Anglo-Saxon world, ever since the 60s, relations have been forged between contemporary art and the urban space under the now historical banner of Public Art. Institutional departments have been appointed the task of evaluating and providing funds for artists' projects, private companies provide sponsorship, and university courses have been devised as sites for technical development. In Italy, meanwhile, a comparable network is virtually nonexistent. Here, contemporary visual culture meets with active resistance from our institutions, and the imbalance of interests in favor of the country's historical-artistic patrimony has helped consolidate the image of Italy as a country committed to the full-on preservation of its tradition.

I shall be underlining the contradiction heightened by such shortcomings whereby we are faced with a city that boasts spectacular interventions ripe for exportation and conceived to convey contents with optimum visual impact alongside works by artists who address the selfsame urban context from quite a different angle. I will begin by pointing out some of the most cogent works in the city, visual interventions supported by the institutions and major companies, before running through a selection of works instigated by artists themselves, all in the context of Milan. The comparison will be couched in terms of a consideration which French anthropologist Michel de Certeau illustrates in his essay *The Practice of Everyday Life*, an analysis of everyday behavior.

De Certeau, who focuses on the 'producers' of signs, the holders of power (institutions, companies) versus the 'others' (the objective targeted by the former), singles out two antithetical movements: on the one hand, those (the 'producers') who have the opportunity to elaborate a *strategy* which will augment their sphere of influence, and those (the 'others') who carve out the possibility for communication and expression in any available chink within the strategy. Such behavior, weaker but less structured and therefore with a heightened potential for surprise, is classified by de Certeau as *tactic*.

The tactical vs. strategic dichotomy would appear to be quite literally personified by a city like Milan.

More so than any other city in Italy, Milan bears all the pervasive hallmarks of the transition from the 70s to the 80s. Milan boasts the country's highest concentration of the culture industry. Here, we find the headquarters of the great fashion designers who, in relatively few years, have changed the way we in the western world dress. The city has undergone a sort of economic neo-boom thanks to businesses in the private television, publishing and communications sectors. Consequently, Milan has undergone a thorough restyling which has brushed away any traces of a painful recent past of fifteen years of political wrangling coming in the wake of the so-called 'lead years'.

One symbol of the city is the circus tent situated near a motorway junction, entrusted in the late 80s to designer Nicola Trussardi as a venue for concerts and other events. The Palatrussardi sign occupied the top of the tent for

years (having recently been replaced with its new name Palavobis), and would go on to become something of a symbol of the city, not unlike the 'Hollywood' lettering in the hills overlooking Los Angeles as featured in the paintings of Ed Ruscha (1).

We are looking at signs which go beyond the point of no return. It is no coincidence that by whatever means of transport you arrive in Milan, be it train or airplane, you are greeted by huge-scale hoardings featuring posters for Armani, the designer being unparalleled in his ability to leave his mark on the city by means of a series of enormous photographic images in elegant black and white. Were the city asked to present its documents, these photographs would be as close as it could get to an identity card.

Milan is a city of fashion, a showcase aimed at a public made up of consumers from all over the world. Again, it is no coincidence that we have been regaled with *The Needle, the Thread, the Knot*, a recent installation situated in the square in front of the train station at the start of the journey for the international airport. Now this enormous sculpture by Claes Oldenburg, a needle, thread, and a knot, dominates the square. The piece explicitly addresses Milan as the 'hard-working city of fashion' yet its arrival in the city was neither preceded nor followed by debate of any form on the relation between monuments, the collective they are aimed at or the intentions of the artist. Yet these are all issues which, elsewhere, would have been the cause of debate, touching the very hearts of the citizens who are involved to take up a position. In Milan, such feedback was conspicuous by its absence. Thus, the city now hosts a piece of work by an artist of capital importance in the history of art but one who also promotes a pacified imagery that is altogether out of touch with the urgency of the present day. Oldenburg's statue is, first and foremost, an attempt to introduce a dash of color into an otherwise cement-gray city. It is decidedly strategic in accordance with the definition stated earlier: the State, the city council, and leading private companies are all able, through their involvement with the sculpture, to project the desired image of themselves, while any expression of the people who live in or pass through Milan is muted. Dusseldorf has its tube of toothpaste, Frankfurt a sculpture in the shape of a necktie, Barcelona a box of matches, and now Milan has finally secured its own high profile in the ludic circuit of contemporary art, a step towards the disneyfication of the city rather than any cogent attempt to reflect on the community or on the contemporary valences of the public space.

Other revamps in different parts of the city over recent years suggest *strategy*: I am thinking, for example, of the reworking of the square in front of Stazione Centrale, once an area complete with benches and gardens frequented by the usual human detritus, mainly junkies and hangers-on engaged in some unlawful pursuit or other, today an empty concrete expanse. The visibility of the area means that any of the activities for which it was previously infamous are out of the question, and while the logic behind its transformation is aimed at ensuring the security of the citizens, it actually meets the need to have an area of the city kept under control by the forces of law and order with an intervention which calls to mind Haussman.

Elsewhere, Piazza Vetra, another 'free' zone of the city, a green area in the historical center of Milan which would over the years become a meeting point for young people and, perhaps inevitably given the very dynamics of a metropolis, an area overrun with hash dealers, is now fenced off, locked up at night and illuminated by day at the request of the city council spurred on by angry residents. As a result, one of the few places in the city open to spontaneous meetings, which also happens to be one of its most beautiful areas, is intruded upon by the illumination. Thus, even in those cases where strategic disorder is afoot from people eschewing the rules in disorderly fashion, the city council responds by establishing order, a policy aimed not at solving the problem but simply to shifting it to some other shady setting. And the surface of the city suffers as a result.

One factor which might help explain interventions in the city of the type described above is the lack, on the part of the institutions, of any reference point. The stronger the private gallery scene in a city, the weaker the institutional counterpart: in Italy contact with contemporary art comes principally from the private circuit. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that there is no such thing as an institution dedicated to art works in public spaces. Instances of public art are, with very few exceptions, sporadic episodes forced through by individual artists.

In context, then, they take on an the valences of 'tactical' gestures as described by de Certeau.

The works we shall be looking at can therefore be considered indirect responses to the dearth of art in the urban space in Milan, significant suggestions aimed at constructing interpersonal relations to fly in the face of the 'strategy' alluded to earlier, real incursions which make strengths of precariousness, the transitoriness, and fragility. Given all the circumstances, any appeal to the institutions for assistance would represent a limit (to action) and a loss of contact (with the reality of the people who tread the territory in question every day). Paradoxically, one finds oneself hoping the situation can be allowed to continue -- perhaps with a bit of funding -- so that artists may continue to operate in the chinks of the system rather than at its service.

Marco Vaglieri works with video and photography, his imagery the result of a research into our relation with the Other. The scale is prevalently one to one. In (*Operations Required for the Accelerated Circulation of Oxygen*), the artist visited the various squares in the city over a period of months where he would set up a curious village composed of cardboard houses, a small stove for making tea and some stools. Anyone who wanted could take a seat, have a chat, if just to take part in a situation. The artist chooses not to abandon his own lived experience but to take it around with him, offering this part of himself to the outside. By doing so, he interrupts the circuit of functionality by offering a setting at which to pause and meet others in a transitory and unauthorized occupation of a public space. In another piece, (*Embraces*), Vaglieri asks the people he meets if he can hug them. The video comments on the climate of human relations: the shyness, the reluctance to

entrust ourselves to physical contact with a stranger and, in some cases, the rediscovery of warmth when the offer is accepted.

Enzo Umbaca too considers the metropolis a theater of relations and a territory ripe for exploration. Since the early 1990s this artist has been producing videos and photographs which record situations featuring himself as protagonist or instigator. Recently, dressed to fit the part, the artist took to the Milan subway where he was videoed asking people, in the usual sin-song voice adopted by those who do this full time, whether they had the time to consult a website. By camouflaging himself as someone directing a sort of theater of survival, he short circuits roles and brings two forms of marginality (including linguistic) into superimposition.

Still with Enzo Umbaca, the artist has produced a series of drawings and a video under the title (*Windows to Wash*) which feature him asking (the prevalently north African) immigrants waiting on street corners to wash windscreens to draw freely on soot-blackened panes of glass. Once again, the artist is addressing the way in which we carry out mechanical gestures, discarding the rules of production to produce a sign (a drawing) of identity.

Patrick Tuttofuoco brings us a sort of performance piece which he carried out on one of the busiest pedestrianized streets in the city center. Saturday afternoons see this street inundated not only by residents but by tourists and youngsters from the suburbs. The artist runs on a hamster wheel, the energy produced threatening to implode unless it is channeled into producing of something else. In the final analysis, it produces a sort of unexpected mirroring for those who happen to be in the area to witness such a curious spectacle. Tuttofuoco also sets up an installation, not coincidentally in the vast empty square in front of Central Station mentioned earlier, a track in the shape of a figure eight plotted out by people the artist had called to participate. The artist runs various laps of the track partly composed of a wooden runway, the construction of which is the first part of the video (*Eight*) on a scooter which has also been constructed with the help of others. The result is a collective project. Tuttofuoco succeeds in actively re-appropriating the public space in an intentionally transitory way. Interventions such as this and the ones mentioned above are the result of direct contact and function in such a way that the audience itself is the active subject, an integral part of the action. However circumscribed, the result is the production of an experience. Nothing could be further from the proposal of an ideal model.

Emanuela De Cecco

Translated from Italian by Christopher Martin