

## **Walk the Line project in Genoa: combining Graffiti-Writing traditions and Street Art innovations**

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### **Abstract**

The *Walk the Line* Street Art project, organized in the north-western Italian city of Genoa, starting from summer 2016 has brought a new face to the skyway of the city, mostly hated by both residents and tourists but strictly necessary for the city's fluid control of the traffic flow. Working on the surface of the pillars of the skyway, the artists called by the curators have been participating in a project that not only wants to embellish an infrastructural element of the city, but also wants to start a dialogue and create a link between different neighborhoods, creating a sort of open-space gallery. Furthermore, the different backgrounds of the artists who have taken part in the project raise a reflection about the dialogue between Graffiti-Writing traditions that still live today and Street Art innovations in the field of public art issues. The essay has the purpose of analyzing this kind of Street Art project, evaluating its artistic and social impact on the city, comparing it to the traditions developed by the protagonists of the Writing scene in Genoa and in northern Italy during the 1990s and the 2000s and introducing various questions about terminology.

**Keywords:** Genoa, Street Art, Graffiti-Writing, Terminology, Festivals.

### **Introduction**

The *Walk the Line* Street Art project, that has been developed by "Page Public Art Genoa" and "Trasherz Music & Art" organizations, has the aim to paint one hundred pillars of the skyway that links the western and the eastern zones of the Italian city of Genoa. Until now, most of the pillars between the central neighborhoods of Molo and Prè have been painted. The representations realized by the artists are mainly linked to the themes of limit, sea, sky and the connection between them: indeed, the skyway follows the natural arch that defines the geographical shape of the city and it is an important element that characterizes the landscape and the skyline of the city center (images 1 and 2). The skyway, in Italian "sopraelevata", has always been both hated and loved by the Genoese people and without any doubt hated by the tourists too, who consider it a disturbing element to the appreciation of the harbor's landscape. The *Walk the Line* project has, as one of its objectives, that of redefining the aesthetic and emotional impact of the skyway,

re-evaluating an infrastructural element that, at this time, has become part of the story of the city. Indeed, built between 1964 and 1965, the "sopraelevata" is, by now, a symbol of the economic growth that occurred in Italy during the 1960s.

### **1. Story of the project**

The associations involved in the project wanted to make an open-space art gallery that follows the line traced by the skyway, transforming the pillars from disturbing elements into objects of interest. Officially started in summer 2016, the project was born from an idea partly already realized during the summer of 2012. At that time, the Genoa municipality asked the D406 gallery of Modena to choose four street artists to paint four pillars in the neighborhood of Molo, in an area of the city habitually frequented by tourists.<sup>1</sup> The

1 - Siviero V., La sopraelevata, il mostro della "superba", si veste di street-art, June 20, 2012, <https://www.espoarte.net/arte/la-sopraelevata-il-mostro-della-%E2%80%9Csuperba%E2%80%9D-si-veste-di-street-art/>

selected artists were the Italians Ericailcane, 108 and Dem, and the Colombian Bastardilla. Besides the unquestionable importance and the aesthetic impact of the single works, the whole initiative could be defined as a mere embellishment operation coming from the public administration, in a sort of inverted process of the relationships between street artists and municipalities.

The *Walk the Line* project, on the contrary, can be defined as an initiative started from the citizens, that wanted to keep on realizing the project started in 2012, extending the painted pillars to the neighborhoods of Prè, Dinegro and Sampierdarena. Until now, 18 pillars have been painted, mostly between the areas of Molo and Prè.

## 2. Aims

Besides the aesthetic importance of the artworks realized and the re-evaluation of the infrastructural elements of the skyway, the project has also the aim of linking two different zones of the city center. Indeed, as the Molo is, without any doubt, the most touristic zone of the city, with a high level of integration between local people and immigrants, the area of Prè is instead considered a sort of ghetto, where only immigrants live and where the public administration cannot stop drug dealing and prostitution.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, *Walk the Line* is one of the numerous initiatives that has the objective of creating a link between this neighborhood and the very center of the city and realizing a true integration in the area of Prè. *Walk the Line* can also be considered the very first Street Art project in the city of Genoa, that had never hosted such a wide and complex initiative based on urban art like that before. In this sense, Genoa is reaching the inspirations and the instances coming from all over Italy, where a great number of Street Art festivals and projects have been realized since about 2010.

## 3. Street Art innovations

The *Walk the Line* project has mixed two different urban art approaches: what is commonly defined as Street Art and what is called Graffiti-Writing, introducing methodological issues and questions at the center of critical debate of the

last years (Bengtson 2017, Blanché 2015, Dal Lago and Giordano 2016, Tomassini 2012.). Indeed, both street artists and graffiti-writers have taken part in the project: the first ones realized works of representation ascribable to the definition "Street Art", the second ones mixed their personal way of studying the letters with elements of representation, or, on the contrary, developing an abstract research. In the first case, we can put, for instance, the works by Ruben Carrasco (image 3), La Fille Bertha (image 4); Combo (image 5) and Seacreative (image 6). The works like those by Carrasco, Combo and Seacreative are directly linked to the theme of the sea and the identity of the city, strictly connected with its harbor. On the other side, the representations like those of La Fille Bertha and Caterina Piccardo are based on a feminist inspiration and are linked to the element of the air: the first one with a woman that seems to start flying over the skyway and the second one with a female figure that holds up the architectural structure (image 7). The richness and the complexity of these representations are typically linked to a legal situation, in which the artists can easily work with the daylight and with tools like ladders and cranes, and in which they do not only use spray cans but also brushes and rollers. All these elements are valid also for the graffiti writers involved in the project, but it is important to point out that their contribution to *Walk the Line*'s artistic development is mainly connected with another kind of urban art, that has its roots in the Graffiti-Writing culture which arrived in Europe in the 1980s and grew in Italy starting from the last years of that decade (Caputo 2009, Tomassini 2012).

## 4. Graffiti-Writing traditions

Even if realized in a legal context and with tools typically used in authorized contexts, the works done by graffiti writers for the *Walk the Line* project conserve a strong background of the Writing culture elements. Indeed, the pillars painted, for example, by Blef (image 8), Joys (image 9) and Dado (image 10) are three cases of works in which the lettering can be considered as the main purpose of the artistic action. These three artists can be included in the list of writers that have contributed to define the history of Graffiti-Writing in Italy, each of them, in particular, getting up<sup>3</sup>

2 - Viani B., «Via Prè non è un ghetto». E l'imam visita il presepe, December 29, 2017, [http://www.ilsecoloxix.it/p/genova/2017/12/29/ASMEHn9L-ghetto\\_presepe\\_visita.shtml](http://www.ilsecoloxix.it/p/genova/2017/12/29/ASMEHn9L-ghetto_presepe_visita.shtml)

3 - In reference to the title of the research realized by Castleman C., 1982. Getting Up. Subway Graffiti in New York, MIT Press, Cambridge

and influencing the cities where they were living during the 1990s and the 2000s: Blef in Genoa and the entire Italy for the wildstyle, Joys in Padua and the whole Veneto region for an abstract research, Dado in Bologna for the 3D style. The work of these artists for the *Walk the Line* project could be divided in two schematic parts: those that contain elements of representation and those that, through the lettering, arrive at a completely abstract result. The pillars by Blef and Shen2 (image11) belong to the first group, as in their works the representational part looks in dialogue but strictly separated from the lettering research. In the same group, we find the pillar by Dado, in which, contrary to the previous two, the lettering leads to a new form of representation. To the second group, belong the works by Joys and Orion (image 12), that came to a complete abstract result, but in which the letters are in some ways still recognizable.

## 5. Terminology questions

Nowadays, all these graffiti writers are recognized artists who work all over the world, but they continue to preserve and develop the traditions and the inspirations they took from Writing culture. How can we define these works? Is it possible to talk about “pieces” and use the word “Writing”, or is it better to put them in the great box of the artistic expressions we call “Street Art”? These kinds of terminology questions are not very easy to solve, but, first of all, we can draw a clear distinction from what is realized in a legal context to an illegal one. Furthermore, we can propose a distinction from what we should put under the term “Street Art” to what we can ascribe to the Writing traditions.

Once certified that all of the artworks done in the context of the *Walk the Line* project are realized in a legal situation, it is clearly not possible to put all these artistic expressions under the generic term “Street Art”. The distinction between “Street Art innovations” and “Graffiti-Writing traditions” proposed in the paragraphs before is one, but not the only, of the terminologies that could be adopted talking about these kinds of urban art phenomena. Even if realized in a legal situation, indeed, the pillars painted by the graffiti-writers carry a high amount of elements coming from the Graffiti-Writing culture that it is not possible to reduce in the single term of “Street Art”. Talking about the artworks by graffiti-writers like Blef, Joys or Dado it is not possible, as a matter of fact, to overlook their past as members of that culture, their membership to crews, their origins as artists based in the illegal contexts.

All these elements are important facts that allow us to assume consciousness of the ways in which the Graffiti-Writing culture has transformed itself during the last decades. While the masters of the 1990s and the 2000s has developed their own way of being artists, converting their passion into a full-time job, the Graffiti-Writing culture still lives today, thanks to the teachings they gave to the newcomers.

## Conclusions

At the conclusion of this essay, it can be stated that the *Walk the Line* project in Genoa can be included in the list of Street Art initiatives and festivals that have taken place in the whole territory of Italy and Europe in the last two decades, progressively leaving a trace on the surface of the cities where these kinds of events are organized. At the same time, analyzing the artworks realized on the pillars by the various artists, it can be declared that, in this project, both street artists and graffiti writers’ works can easily stay together in the same context and create a dialogue between each other and the surrounding urbanistic elements. In the end, the participation of graffiti writers such as Blef, Dado and Joys in this kind of project introduces complex questions about terminology and how this culture has been transformed through the years. Therefore, the article has the aim of proposing a distinction system that clearly defines what should be called “Street Art” and what can be defined as “Writing”, always specifying the cases in which the works are realized in an illegal context or in a legal one. By doing this, it is important not to reduce and to simplify in an extreme way the complexity of these kinds of artistic expressions.

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## Images





