# Pragmatic heterotopias
## The redefinition of urban spaces through street art: the case of Grottaglie

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Street art phenomenon is part of the magmatic forces that shape contemporary urban spaces. Usually fought as vandalism is at once appreciated as artistic expression capable of triggering positive dynamics. Starting from the guiding metaphor of heterotopia coined by Michel Faucault – places open on other places, spaces of connection and inclusion – this paper principal aim is to illustrate and analyze the forms of collective use of environment and the informal actions through which citizens are reclaiming space through the concrete example of the city of Grottaglie, Puglia, home of the Fame Festival, one of the most important event in the street art world. The interventions analyzed allow us to understand how street art, through individual actions and apparently *weak* systems of transformation, may innovatively act on the overall image of the city.

**Keywords:** street-art, heterotopia, city

## 1. Introduction

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## 2. Street art: re-imaging the city

Street art is now considered in all respects an artistic genre that comes from the confluence of many experiences[1] and has, as its own characteristic, the ability to incorporate and metabolize the most different instances, from the erudite citations of abstract art to styles coming from the street, from expressions of the local political struggles to global advertisements. It is an artistic practice, son of postmodern society, the concrete and tangible result of the culture that Henry Jenkins calls "convergence" (Jenkins, 2007). This is not a school or a trend, or originates from a theoretical manifesto, but is developed through practice in a constant state of becoming. As a movement, now spread all over the world, it owes much of its strength to the ability of acting in local contexts while turning, at the same time, to a global audience. As with other forms of contemporary expression, it uses all possible media – photography, video, especially the Internet – not only to appeal to an audience of enthusiasts around the globe, but also to document, in an almost extreme way, each work. A requirement mainly linked to the transience and impermanence inherent the intrinsic quality of such works. The language of street art, unlike what happens for graffiti writing, is not autonomous or deliberately cryptic for the uninitiated, but in common with this practice uses artistic raids and real guerrilla actions, which require an organization similar to that of gangs. The artists involved in this movement often refuse labels (in fact, very often they also refuse to be called artists too) and if there is a bond that unites them, is the field of work and exploration: the city.

Since the '90s, the street art phenomenon began to gain more and more space and it has been proposed as a clarification of the illness but also of the hidden dreams of its diverse community of people. In this way, it is able to project on the walls of the city the aspirations hidden in the urban subconscious, a new self-managed layer in addition to those governed by the institutions, like the rash of a psychosomatic illness. Rebecca Solnit (2005) has shown clearly how in the city layers of coexisting consciousness spontaneously arise, some of them clear and awake, some others slumbering and unconscious. They are abandoned spaces, those left to decay and degraded, where unexpectedly practices of street art appear, which bring to light the dark side of the city. What unites such diverse projects is the importance of the city as a place of inspiration and incubation. Whether it is a symbiotic and empathic, or otherwise, confrontational and subversive relationship, artists are never separated from the context of urban life. Their works can be gratuitous gestures that return beauty to degraded areas or alteration of billboards fighting against the overwhelming iconographic power of advertising industry, but the scope of these action remains the city. A mural that materialises on the wall of a road reveals the importance of the material framework and makes it possible to re-imagine and re-invent the city.

## 3. The FAME Festival

FAME is a festival where international artists are invited in Grottaglie, a small town of southern Italy near Taranto, to put their art in reaction with the local reality then letting the outcome of that encounter leave traces on the walls and in the streets. It was born in 2008 and had five editions, but it was anticipated by an experiment, dating from the year before the first edition. Regarding that experience, the creator and curator Angelo Milano says, "along with some artists that I invited to work on the silk-screen prints in my lab, we started to do a few things around Grottaglie. At that time I realized that these people, from all over the world, fell in love with this place, they peculiarities and potentialities that the natives did not know"[2] (Caffio, 2012, p. 82). Thus was born the idea of deepening the experiment and see what kind of effects could have on the city. The idea is simple and, from its first edition, has not changed: every year from late April to late September, from ten to twenty artists arrive in Grottaglie, where they spend an artist residency hosted by Angelo and his family. During this stay every artist is invited to use the city as a

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[1] On the cultural origins of street art and its relationship with the previous art movements see Lewinsohn C. (2008), *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*, Tate Publishing, London.

[2] This publication, after a brief recognition of the different perspectives on street art movement, presents detailed descriptions, with original drawings, maps and photographs, of all the works realized in Grottaglie during the last five editions of FAME Festival.

medium for their work, in most cases with appropriate institutional permissions, in other cases not. The artists are given the opportunity to collaborate with local artisans specialized in ceramic production and to use the space and equipment of Studio Cromie[3] for screen printing. In this way, through direct interaction between international contemporary art and traditional crafts of Grottaglie, works of art, produced in a limited edition, are exhibited and offered for sale as part of a group exhibition that at each edition closes the festival in September.
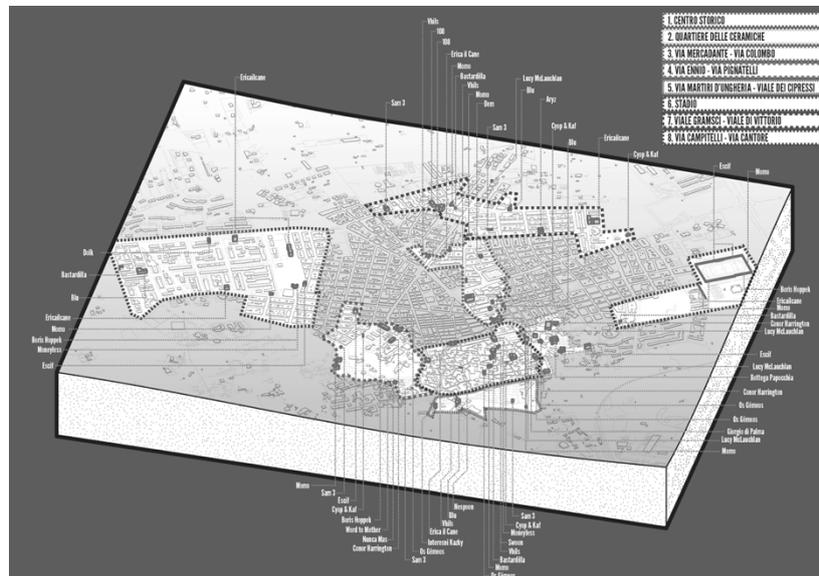


Figure 1. *Synthetic diagram of interventions in the city of Grottaglie in the past five editions of FAME Festival. The division of the territory into eight areas is intended to facilitate the visit of the works grouping them by proximity and linking them to their specific urban context.*

The festival, with all the interventions available for free in the public space, does not generate any kind of direct income. The economic aspect is committed to the craft production that supports the festival. The sale of ceramics, limited edition prints and other unique pieces that takes place online through Studio Cromie and at the final show, is the sole financial source of the event and economic compensation for the artists. Alongside the public and free works, the production of marketable art objects allows the festival to waive any sponsor and any institutional support only living by self-financing. This system preserves the independence and the opportunity to address critical issues in the works that often highlight problems and deficiencies arising from local administration decisions. The choice of locations and the design of the projects and works, are the result of an intense dialogue between artists and the organizer Angelo Milano who seeks to address the various projects on a local scale considering the specificities of the urban and social reality where they will act.

The works come from the observation of the spaces and architectures in that specific place, with the objective to fill town with ouvres that might really function and dialogue before becoming global, thanks to the Internet, even if the dialogue can be confrontational and the aim explicitly provocative. Although they are always forms of interaction with the urban and public environment, the works of each of these artists are unique expressions, resulting from attitudes and poetics individual choices. So far, more than thirty artists intervened over the city, providing an overall quite heterogeneous framework, which makes the idea of the multitude of trends that have been developing on the walls of towns and suburbs around the world over the last ten years. In addition to Blue, Ericailcane, 108, Lucy McLauchlan and JR, have come and gone, over the various editions, names like Akay, Barry McGee, Boris Hoppek, Escif, Momo,

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[3] See http://www.studiocromie.org

Nunca, Bastardilla, Os Gemeos, Sam3, Swoon, Conor Harrington, Vhils and many other, more or less, emerging artists.



Figure 2. *Vhils, Via Partigiani Caduti, 2011. Photo courtesy of P. Marino.*

## 4. Pragmatic heterotopias

Each piece of street art is a form of spatialized thought and much of the work comes from the selection of the place in which to operate. The idea of artistic intervention as a strategy of spatial resistance is connected to the act of union and fusion of the idea with the place. Each project represents a form of resistance against the use of urban space as a tool for spatial control, which delimits and defines areas. Each project must be considered as an example of spatialized thought, a conceptual turn which generates new understandings of the geographies of resistance and utopia.

Angelo Milano starts on the assumption that Grottaglie is his home and he is perfectly aware of the changes that are facing the city, but also of how the site can be used as a tool to oppose or denounce the speculative logic of power. Angelo chooses the places in which to work considering the kind of forces they stand for and the categories that led to the their birth and definition: abandoned spaces, blind spots of urban planning. They are spaces lacking of intentional design, sometimes resulting from residual or historical layers of interrupted constructions. The inaccessibility, the closure outward, the marginalization and displacement from urban functions are key factors for their inclusion in the festival. These places are victims of conflicting vetoes from different powers and regimes, those of the state, the municipalities, the private, the advertising economy that saturates every attractive surface. These places become part of the festival because their level of abandonment is likely to take them out of the common interest. As spaces defined and delimited by multiple systems of power, cultural rules and spatial planning logics, their ontological status, highlighted just by artistic interventions, can be considered heterotopic.

The term "heterotopia" was established in 1967 when it was used for the first time by Michel Foucault at a conference entitled *Espace Des Autres* ('Of other Spaces'). Although the term sounds rather obscure, Foucault explains that a heterotopia is a place outside all of territories, although it may be possible to recognize it in a precise point of the reality. "There are also, probably in every culture, – Foucault affirms – in every civilization, real places, places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society, which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and

inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias" (Foucault, 1967). In many ways, the actions of FAME fit this description because they are perceptually and physically outside the established rules of local urbanism and, therefore, become pragmatic, tangible and, in other words, geographical expressions of the relations among the forms of power. They live in already marginal spaces in which a deviant behaviour – such as, for example, the artistic intervention on the wall – can produce oppositional phenomena within the space managed by the authority.



Figure 3. *Nunca Mas, Via Sant'Elia, 2010. Photo courtesy of P. Marino.*

Moreover, in the conference, Foucault introduces the concept that these places can be of two types: heterotopias of crisis and of deviation. While the first ones focus on sites linked to specific times of human crisis – youth, fertility, aging – the second are dedicated to individuals who possess behaviours that deviate from the standard rule. In the case of Grottaglie, street art interventions are located in those parts of the city in which policies are weaker or vacant. Blind walls of buildings (*Fig. 4*), for example, are nothing more than spaces that deviate from the rule that every domestic surface should be pierced by openings to illuminate and ventilate an interior space. Closed walls are infertile surfaces because lacking the life that takes place behind. They are unnecessary scenes because without any commercial and residential use.

Small cohorts in the historical centre, so small that they can not accommodate moments of conviviality, the makeshift open spaces to accommodate parking lots, abandoned houses, technical cabins, niches and openings in structures: all spaces born by the deviance from urban design and any previous use. Places out from the common interest as unserviceable or no longer useful. The interventions of FAME are in areas that are both open and secluded. Blind alleys and walls are the most common of this type of space: open to all, but rarely used. Fences, gates and shutters (*Fig 5*), the tops of buildings (*Fig. 6*) these spaces may not be public spaces in the official sense, but certainly have a big impact on the public visibility regime. Sometimes difficult to reach but always easy to see.

This feature is, not surprisingly, in line with another of the heterotopic criteria described by Foucault: "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable." (Foucault, *Ibidem*).

In the context of economic relations, graffiti adopt those spaces that have little or no value for their sizes and shapes, places forgotten because linked to objects or insignificant architecture. As heterotopias and places that reflect, in the negative, hegemonic power, the works of FAME are places that deviate from normalized use and create a new perception of public space within the city. With their unusual dimensions and their inaccessibility and lack of commercial value (they are not for sale and everyone have access to)

opposed to a high aesthetic and artistic value, they function as heterotopias – places antithetical to other sites. Through their transformation and the subsequent public recognition, they experienced the transition from neglected to significant space.
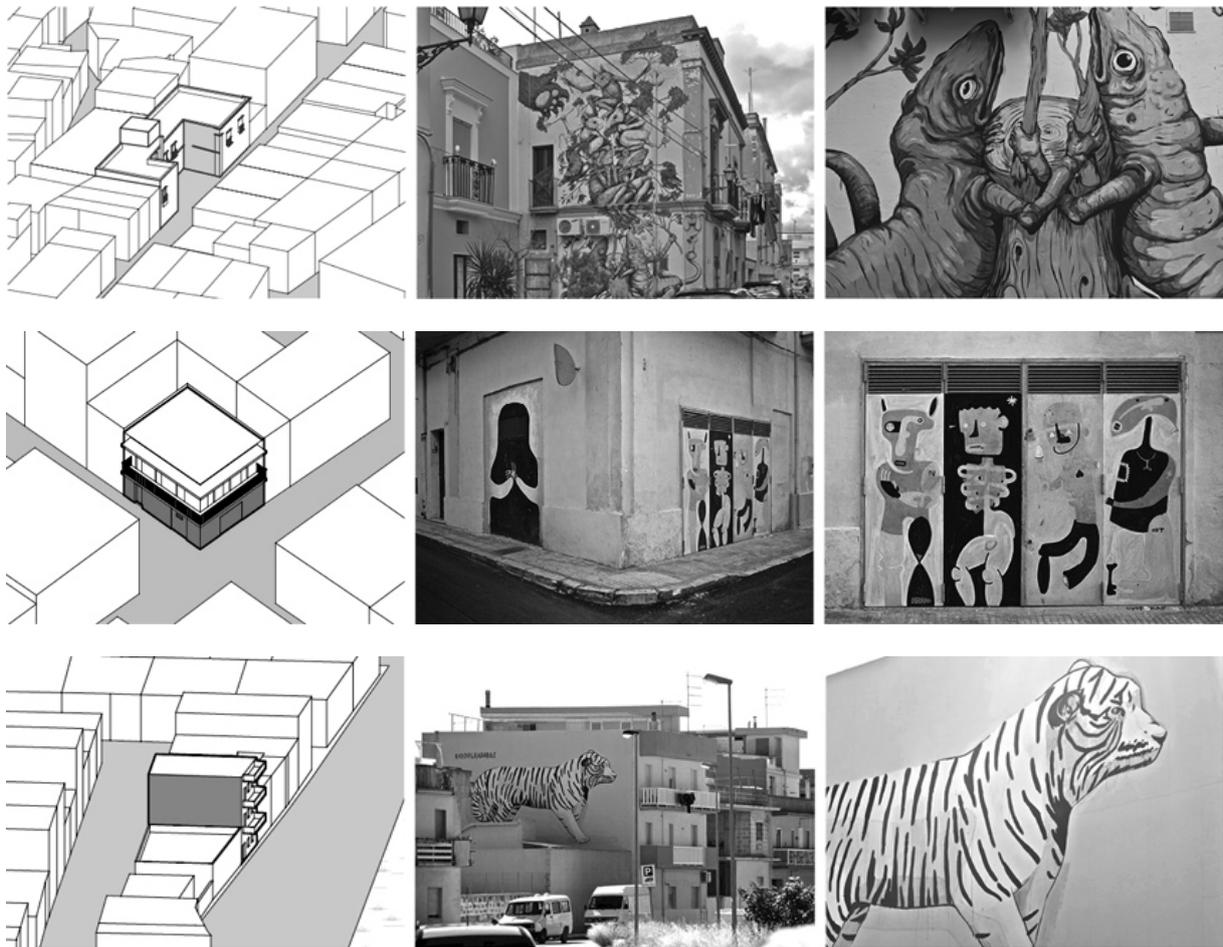


Figure 4. *Ericailcane, Via Sonnino, 2011. Figure 5: Cyop & Kaf, Via Pacinotti angolo via Mercadante, 2010. Figure 6: Escif, Via Cantore, 2011. Axonometric views of interventions, photos courtesy of P. Marino.*

The decision to intervene on the body of the city with street art is therefore never accidental but a powerful combination of three factors that have fuelled the curator choices: the first one is the interest in graffiti writing, a kind of megaphone for those who have no voice as young and underground rebels; the second is the anarchic and provocative attitude inherited from the Italian punk-rock and hard-core music scene[4] and, finally, an intuition that the places without identities in the urban landscape have the strong potential to subvert a present hopeless condition because of negligence or voluntary indifference. The recovery process has resulted in an artistic ontological shift of the places, from hidden spaces to destinations of international tourism. The FAME project has succeeded, therefore, in reaffirming the close connection between place and identity, as well as in demonstrating how the graffiti art, in its infinite shapes and forms, can act as a form of re-integration and upgrading of degraded spaces into the shared urban life, as instinctive and pragmatic action that puts into play again the value of the sites and allows them to be "new and alive."

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[4] Angelo Milano, in fact, collaborates with the post-hardcore/screamo musical band La Quiete.

Finally, let's refer to another of the features that characterize the idea of heterotopia according to Foucault: "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." [9] The murals that appear either on small facades of the old town and on the big ones in the blocks of the periphery (Fig. 7 and 8) open impossible rips towards hidden dimensions. Like theater sets, they show to urban viewers strange places that slowly begin to coexist with the lives of the inhabitants.



Figures 7. and 8. *Momo, Via Carducci, 2011; Ericailcane, Via Mattarella, 2012. Photos courtesy of P. Marino*



Figure 9. *Boris Hoppek, Via Maratoneti, 2010. Photo courtesy of P. Marino*

It is no coincidence, in fact, that the works integrated themselves into the local geography becoming part of that oral and informal toponymy, typical of small towns, able to guide you from one place to another without ever using names of streets and squares, but only reference points. But, it is not just the individual works, with the strength of their pictorial illusion to show new possibilities of meanings and hidden potential. It is the entire FAME Festival that brings a new city out of the folds of the existing one. If one of the characteristics related to heterotopia is to create an illusory space that reflects the illusion of its real counterpart, the Festival with its colourful murals complaint the fictitious, stereotypical and touristic image of a city that, like many others in the South, is in a deep economic, environmental and cultural crisis. In Grottaglie the FAME Festival has built a geography that brings locals and tourists to explore the streets with a new focus. Observed under a different perspective from that hegemonic, the city can show its hidden beauty, bring back its forgotten history and imagine new alternative futures.

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