

Art Vandals



by Enrico Maria Davoli

The issue of vandals and vandalism, in its many forms, is always topical. The phenomenon is inseparable from the processes of privatization, alienation, restructuring, and gentrification which, in contemporary societies, see a significant percentage of people identifying with marginal and/or illegal groups and lifestyles. The “glue” that holds these groups together is a series of rituals which, insofar as they break the law, become symbols of freedom, irrepressibility, and opposition to the established order. The rituals we are concerned with here are a small fraction of the total and are not particularly violent, but they have great visibility and impact on public opinion. We are talking about acts of vandalism by those who deface images and artefacts: buildings, furniture, signs, vehicles, works of art, decorative and embellishment elements in general.

Let’s say right away that those who, armed with spray cans, awls, or other tools, carry out these acts, have no mitigating circumstances. Think of those who deface train carriages, preventing passengers from looking out of windows that are completely obscured. There may also be a hidden meaning here of raising awareness and protest, but what is certain is that blinding is a pedagogically ominous method, typical of a mentality that, like terrorism, loves to “re-educate” at any cost. But consider even more uncivilized behavior, such as those who litter and dump debris wherever they happen to be, out of laziness, contempt, or to avoid paying disposal fees. Or those who make tax evasion their daily mission. In short, the gray area that includes illegal graffiti writers is very broad and varied.

But unlike other behaviors, which are understandable only to those who justify illegality and share its methods, in some cases graphic vandalism offers food for thought even to those who are strangers to it. Anyone who frequents a street, square, or neighborhood will have noticed that, for seemingly incomprehensible reasons, certain elements of art and decoration remain untouched by vandalism. This cannot be explained by stricter surveillance or special protective barriers, all of which can be overcome if one really wants to. Evidently, the appropriateness with which these elements fit into the urban (and human) context pays off, and their presence is perceived as a structural fact, like trees or pedestrian crossings. It goes without saying that when this happens, there is also an underlying communication strategy, consisting of persuasion and dissuasion. But above all, there is an artist who is aware of what it means to deal with decoration. That is, knowing that when addressing a community, one must appeal only to conventions that everyone can agree on: non-invasiveness, discretion, osmosis with the environment, no personal ostentation. Coincidentally, this is the exact opposite of the vandalism of graffiti writers.

Turning a private icon into a public icon is neither easy nor quick. Or perhaps it is impossible. Just think, to cite two recent cases, of the grotesque puppets by Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gaetano Pesce, installed in recent years in Piazza Municipio in Naples. Sacrificing the few, unwritten rules mentioned earlier to the myth of the brilliant artist, King Midas who turns everything he touches into gold, is a mistake that leads to many others. The temptation to vandalize may be one such mistake. Those who deface things that lack meaning and legitimacy undoubtedly feel frustration, anger, ignorance, and sometimes even mental distress. But they also have the capacity for indignation, the desire to express an ethical judgment, however distorted by the final act. Those who wield the power of words and opinions should have the courage to recognize this.

Homepage: Giacomo Balla, Bankruptcy (detail), 1902, oil on canvas, 116 x 160 cm, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea.