

Wall and Peace
By Ana Tajder

You might recognize that sticker with a little black and white maggot frowning from the back of many street signs in Vienna. At the first sight, its cartoonish form might fool you – because actually this is one very angry maggot.

Or that beautiful bird with spread wings, stuck on a crumbling old wall. Behind the Piaristenkirche, the bird is carrying a rosary made of tiny pieces of mirror in its beak. Touched by sunlight, the rosary shines like a precious piece of jewelry in stark contrast to the decaying wall a reminder of the oft-forgotten wealth of the Catholic Church.

This is Street Art.

Not to be confused with graffiti, Street Art combines graffiti, stencil art, sticker and poster art, video projection, art intervention, guerrilla art and installations. But the biggest, and most crucial, difference from graffiti lies in Street Art's strong critical message and its dissociation from vandalism.

A current exhibition of Street Art is mounted, ironically enough, directly behind the Old Stock Exchange, in the gutted, future office space of Sabotage Film Studios, where it will stay up until renovation starts, June 19. This makes sense; contrary to mainstream art reach for immortality, Street Art consciously plays with its very short life span. Which in a way seems a pity, as the quality of presented work is remarkable.

On two floors, twenty Austrian Street Artists show not only creativity, but also wit and a critical perspective. It is the unspoiled energy, the courage to be different and have an opinion that gives those pieces their unique strength. Some are amazingly skilled – you might be surprised. But hey, they don't give a damn about what you think. They do not do it to be loved, or even to be bought and owned.

It is the street that gives this art form its strong anti-establishment character. In today's privately owned world, it is the street that offers this art the possibility to be free-for all. In the world obsessed with ownership, this art is not to be owned - it belongs to everyone who just dares to open their eyes. Today, when the art world is becoming just another field for trade and art dealers, but also many artists, are in for the big bucks, Street Art is letting you know that not everybody – and everything - is for sale.

To avoid the possibility of becoming a saleable object, but also to keep the freedom to shock and criticize the establishment, Street Artists consciously cherish their anonymity. Still, the system again proved its ability to annex even its loudest enemies. Banksy is Britain's most famous Street Artist whose establishment-critical work is selling for up to €600,000 to celebrities such as Brangelina and Christina Aguilera.

One of his most touching works shows the naked girl from the well-known Vietnam war photo running away from napalm – and Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald holding her by hands, all smiles as if posing for an ad. Despite his well-known name, Banksy has managed to stay anonymous, opening up the question of how much his anonymity may have added to his fame. Running away from the establishment can sometimes become an effective marketing tool, and even a VIP ticket directly into the heart of the very same oh-so-hated establishment. But judging from the posts on his web site, he is not happy about it.

The artists presented on the Viennese show do not earn money with their art, let alone €200,000. But even Vienna is not free of speculators. Sissi Farassat devoted a whole issue of Sioseh art magazine to the exhibition. Sioseh means Thirty Three in Farsi – announcing that only 33 issues of the magazine will be published. Each example of Sioseh # 32 called “Addictive” is a valuable unique piece – a collection of miniature cards, each designed and handcrafted by one of the exhibited artists. It was on sale at the exhibition opening for €20. Now that it is sold out, hundreds of Euros are being offered for a copy. No one is safe from commercialism.

Commercialism and freedom are always mentioned when discussing the vandalism issue. Exhibition organizer Hutan Vahdani was not sympathetic:

“Look around you. The streets are full of billboards. You cannot take a pee in a public toilet or a ride on a metro without being forced to stare at some advertising poster,” he protested. “These images are ugly. They massively devastate our cities. But is anyone asking us?”

Norbert Siegl agreed. Founder of the world’s only Institute for Graffiti Research, based in Vienna, he is currently organizing the next Graffiti Conference here.

“The big question is whom does the public space belong to? To the public, I guess.”

But two wrongs don’t make a right, so what do those who are responsible for the “right” kind of Street Art say?

“Graffiti is art; it is also critique and rebellion. Like most art forms, sometimes it has to use inconvenient ways to dispute with the society. By providing legal walls, this art form will be supported and a dialogue between the artists and the public further developed” says Vienna’s Mayor Michael Häuptl.,”We believe that tolerance is a better way”

His tolerant policy seems to work – compared to other major cities, Vienna is relatively free of vandalism.

And still – today, I passed by two freshly renovated statues of cherubs behind Hofburg. One had a bikini and some words drawn on its body. The black lines on the shiny white surface were so intimidating; they felt like a cut on my own skin.

This is vandalism, and it is from unnecessary acts, even childish, acts like this that the image of Street Art suffers. And I wonder: Just how cool would it be if the street artists used their creativity to criticize pure maliciousness such as this?

Street Art

Sabotage Film Studio

Börsegasse 7, 1010 Vienna

Open until 19 June 2008, Thu-Fr 16.00 - 19.00

For other times: 0664/3903689

Featured Artists: A1one, Busk, DBS, Deep Inc., DNM, Die Made, El Lasso, Franke, Holy Sin, Keramik, Knochenmann, Kryot, Muecke, Nychos, Robert Huttinger, Serge Wottafak, Skero, Smurf, Stereotyp, Tony Hell and guests: Dave Huettner, GRL Vienna, Michael Ornauer.

Organized by Butterflies & Bunnyrabbits, Sabotage Films, Inoperable Vienna, The Message Magazine, Sabotage Project Artist in Residence