

LIKE A SCREEN DOOR ON A SUBMARINE



SMASH 137

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A couple of years ago, the Basel Police finally reeled in the biggest fish in the world of illegal Swiss Art. Smash137 had been sold out by another writer, and was charged with several counts of vandalism. This in itself is not that interesting. It happens all the time. More interesting was that the city of Basel had commissioned him to paint a wall, and when he came back a few nights later to paint the other side of the wall without the same invitation, this is the wall that saw him take a fall. The judge compared Smash137 with Picasso, saying that it didn't matter who had painted it. The work was illegal and Smash137 was about to have a lot of new debt to deal with.

I met Smash137 at Art Basel in 2007 while working on the first clip for Modart TV. We got in the car with a guy called Ruedi and drove across the city. When we hit the Graffiti Wall of Fame, we pulled to the side and crossed the highway on foot. What set this wall apart from others I've seen across Europe is that it was pretty much a one man show. In Basel, one guy seemed to be grabbing all the fame. Smash137, Smash137, Smash137, Smash137; over and over and over and over and over again. I wasn't that interested in these works as art, but more intrigued by the evidence of passion or obsession. Was this love? Was it addiction? Or was it just about fame? I would learn that all had their role to play and would agree with Smash137 a year or so later when he wrote that Graffiti is not art, it's Graffiti. Art comes into the discussion when we look at the role Graffiti can play in a person's life.

Still, if we see this work in a gallery, if we put it on a wall and slap a price tag to this product of passion, we have to discuss it as art, and in the last few years (not unlike what happened in the 80's) there has been a lot of talk about what it means to take something intended for the great outdoors and placing in within the walls of the infamous white cube.

I get so bored of these discussions about the transition of Graffiti or Street Art from the street to the gallery, the gist of which I find to be: its hot, how do we sell it? What does that have to do with this guy hiding in the shadows night after night after night to write his name?

Inside a gallery, you have an artist presenting a body of work. This work might be Graffiti related or influenced by Street Art, but both of those practices are about public space and this places certain demands on both their production and the public's perception of them. Once you go inside, you have an artist working in a gallery. Period. This



artist might have a background in graphic design, fashion, photography, Graffiti, or whatever. Really, WHATEVER. Maybe they went to an academy or art school. Perhaps they are autodidactic. Whatever. We're interested in what they share with us as a precursor to who they are right?

Regardless of what attracts you as a viewer, for the artist, when you copy what you do outside (the thing you love to do) and put it inside (on a canvas instead of a wall for example), this seems to me like instead of using the creativity that earned you attention on the street, you begin to sell the authenticity attached to what you did when you were on it. You attract attention by expressing love. What do you do with her attention once you have it? It occurs to me that an artist can enter the production conditions and constants (opening hours, public, etc) and use your creativity to put on something special, or you can leverage your street cred (authenticity) and see if people care (often they do). This is somehow similar to an artist doing a brand collaboration. Does a company engage an artist to piggy back on their name, or to employ them to use the creativity and talent that drew attention to their name in the first place?

Is this an important distinction? The difference between selling creativity and authenticity? It is to me. Both artists and observers will tell you that this transition from in to out, or to professionalize, is always complicated. It isn't just the question of authenticity, for many observers, once something gets locked indoors, it's stripped of its energy and virility. It becomes impotent and pretty, another decorative offering. One of the very few projects I've seen that pulled off boxing Graffiti into a gallery was the one Smash137 was working on about a year after we'd first met.

One night when Smash137 was having fun with Graffiti by the train tracks, he found a roll of red and white striped netting on the ground (these nets are used by workers to protect the construction site from passing trains). He grabbed the roll, hid it and came back the next day with a car to collect it. With a generous paint sponsor behind him, there was no longer a need to wrack cans. Smash137 started wracking nets.

Once he had roll of the stuff, he stretched and framed it like a mesh canvas. Then the frame was mounted on a wall where he'd spray out a piece

before removing the frame. You could see his work on the wall, waiting to be crossed out, buffed, weathered away and left to the same range of possible fates as any other piece he does outdoors, but the frame could be taken to a gallery and eventually the home of an admirer.

Later that year when Modart had a booth at the Scope Art Fair during Art Basel Miami the fair director generously offered us a bit of unsold wall, we jumped on the chance to put up one of these pieces from Smash137 with photographs and the address where the actual piece was located. You could buy what was on the wall, or visit what was actually on the wall. It was a sort of paradox, a work that was at once available for everybody and for sale to anybody who wanted to own a piece of his renegade style.

Honest, organic and innovative, it struck me as a move, which did not compromise, but did successfully transport the spirit that Smash137 works in from the streets straight to the art fair.

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