

Badiucao and Gianluca Costantini

Line of Duty

In the responsibility of drawing, the two artists, far apart geographically but very close in vocation, modality and interests, when questioning themselves had only one answer, to use the line as a political and social tool.

They both share a geographically alter space, Twitter, where they met and began interacting several years ago. Twitter, now in danger of being colonized by Elon Musk's mono corporation and thus losing its virtuous freedom of expression, is par excellence the virtual site of online activism. Not Instagram, which flatters the visual ego and acts as a glittering showcase of fashionable shopping, not Facebook you understand, which is friendly and gregarious place, not other spaces that for the moment have other customs and habits. The twittering of few but clear words is what those who have to organize or support rioting squares from Hong Kong to Gezi Park, from Yangon the old capital of Myanmar to Cairo use, that is the place. And they are there.

With lead times that must stand in the changing times, they make art that challenges the glittering world of the market: it is no coincidence that the Chinese government tried to stop Badiucao's exhibition in Brescia in 2021 by writing to the mayor and then in Prague to the museum director. For the Italian Costantini, this world's methods of censorship are less obvious; what is used is the one that costs the least in terms of side effects, namely the silence of the archives of that culture, the hegemon, which decides what is and what is not exposable. Although the Erdoğan regime, after the failed coup, issued a terrorism ruling against him, just to be on the safe side. Both forms of silencing have acted heavily on their material presence in the market world, as if what happens in the network was not already long ago a reality happening in a "real" and militant geographical space. The walls and railroad cars of the 1980s have moved into this bit space, they are the new street artists, only a certain world does not want to see them because their assumption, namely that art is a political and militant space, is fine as long as it remains a poetic perspective of the artist, and not a tool that activists actually take to the streets and use as a tool for protest and pressure. As Nick Cohen has written, "True censorship removes choice. It menaces and issues command that few can ignore"¹, true censorship works without our knowledge.

They come from profoundly different backgrounds and histories: Costantini from typically artistic studies, Badiucao trained as a lawyer. Anagraphically, they are from different generations, yet theirs is a common grammar, and although they met in person only a year ago, they share a common syntax and praxis.

Drawing as a form of protection particularly for those who have no voice: hence the drawings in Costantini's *The Day of Knowledge*, a narrative sequence about the Beslan school massacre; a theme taken up again in *Robb Elementary School* in which portraits of the children killed on May 24, 2022 are placed in a classic shooting gallery grid. Stylistically, the Beslan series is related to the *Other Caucasus Mythologies* series that investigates the imagery of Chechen terrorism and the mythological tradition of this country, but the intent is the same, to stop in lines that are live, never rehashed and corrected, the life that flows and that is not told and represented, creating a new closet of imagery to draw on. The lines are those of faces, which can also constitute a dense lattice of control as appears in the video *Constellation* on the theme of biometric control:

¹ Extract by Cohen, Nick, *You Can't Read this Book. Censorship in an Age of Freedom*, London, Harper and Collins, 2012.

in this case, the faces whose unique constellations are displayed as in facial recognition, are those of poets, artists, activists who make a difference and who with their bodies testify to the essential need for freedom of expression.

Freedom of expression is also central to the work of Badiuca, an alias created by the Chinese naturalized Australian artist to protect his identity in the early phase of his artwork, when he wore a mask. Discovered however by Chinese police, he decided to keep the nickname that disturbed the touchy authorities in his home country anyway.

Even in his case, the immediate style is the outcome of political insight and direct involvement in the issues addressed. The viral quality, the vitality that characterizes them is an epidemic aspect that not even the repressive force of the powerful CCP empire can combat.

Its adherence to the present that happens from the Fall 2022 riots to the Hong Kong protests, to the physical and cultural repression of the Uighur minority, is always connected to the urgency of redefining the historical trauma of the People's Republic of China, a state devoted to state secrecy and the removal of history, of even remote historical heritage, because it is dedicated to constructing a hypothetical future whose coordinates are increasingly foggy and opaque, close to a hysterical and collective mass consumerism, without any democracy even formal.

Empathy is the heart of democracy: if we often forget this, giving excessive weight to other ritual aspects, these two artists have set themselves as an aesthetic responsibility to remind us of this in every action they daily share.