THE QUESTION
IS WHICH
IS TO BE MASTER

Francesco Finizio's sculpture *Silver Surfers* (2005) consists of a little pile of skateboard decks partially burned in a campfire. That piece always reminds me of the anachronistic, nay, archaic character of a skateboard deck: seven thin layers of maple cross laminated together.

Following the advice of his wood-worker father, Willie Winkel, a young Canadian skater, conceives the first seven-ply maple skateboard deck in 1976. This new process quickly replaces decks made out of oak, various kinds of plastic, fiberglass, aluminum and other compounds. Since then, things haven't changed at all. A handful of diehard fanatics of innovation have provided us with a few minor discoveries, most of which only go on to prove the contrary: that nothing is better than maple.

In one of the essays featured in his famous collection, *Mythologies,* from the mid-1950s, Roland Barthes laments the disappearance of wooden toys, which have been replaced by figurative metal and plastic toys (from little cars to dolls, not to mention tea sets and

revolvers of every kind). Although significantly discredited by the invention of Lego, Barthes' analysis remains germane and could easily be used to describe the relationship a skater has with the forms that surround him or her. The toys that Barthes disparages "always mean something, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life."[1] According to Barthes, these toys prepare the child to immediately accept the adult world with its values, from war to housekeeping. But what Barthes reproaches them for above all is how they socialize a child as owner-user and never as creator: "Faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child [...] does not invent the world, he uses it: There are prepared for him actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy. He is turned into a little stay-at-home householder who does not even have to invent the mainsprings of adult causality; they are supplied to him ready-made: he has only to help himself, he is never allowed to discover anything from start to finish."[2] Building blocks, and later, Lego (in their most abstract version) implicate the child in a demiurgical activity, in which the meaning, use of, and overall aggregate form of these elements is determined by the child alone.

The objects and spaces from our everyday life are no less subject to this schema; they are conceived for a specific use, determining our gestures and our movements. Like laws, urbanism and its codes are from the outset an attempt to organize the city in hopes of addressing a genuine problem: How can we live together on healthy and equal terms? Nevertheless, architecture and urbanism both often seem to be repressive (however slight that repression might be) with regards to freedom. The notion of commercial space tends more and more to systematically replace public space. In an architecture conceived not for the citizen, but for the consumer, skaters ask the question: What do we do with our cities? As Iain Borden remarks in his book *Skateboarding, Space and the City*, everyday urban objects are functional and highly programmed.[3] They are all vectors of a message. They speak an

1   Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Trans., Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pg 53
2   *Ibid.* pg 54

3   Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001). See notably the two chapters "Urban Composition" and "Performing the City."

authoritarian, unilateral language, which conditions us and with which it is impossible to communicate. The activity of the skaters tends to spontaneously suspend the implicit power in each building, space, object or piece of urban furniture; skaters reduce the city to its essence, a game-like collection of materials put into form. By disengaging it from its intended use and depriving architecture of its meaning, skateboarding becomes a way to appropriate the city, or, to use Barthes' vocabulary, becomes a way to exist as a "creator" rather than as a simple "user."

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty says to Alice:
    "When *I* use a word, [...] it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
    "The question [responds Alice] is whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
    "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."[4]

Skaters invent new uses for certain patches of the urban fabric of cities. In the spirit of Humpty Dumpty, non-English speakers (around the world) often choose to use the words like curb, ledge or handrail as opposed to their counterparts in their own languages. But these words are more than simple English, they designate new objects, a parallel reality where the reasons to be a curb or handrail are something else entirely. Through action, skaters modify the meaning as well as the history of the spaces they appropriate. These words crystallize this modification: a handrail is only a handrail as it used by a skater.

In his remarkable essay *The Poetics of Security*,[5] Ocean Howell maintains that skaters rectify the commercial logic of certain spaces, and thus become producers of public spaces. In my opinion, skateboarding, which very effectively asks the question of how to redefine public space, does not as effectively answer it. Skaters are not producers of public spaces in the sense that they open up spaces to other practices. More often than not, skaters end up annexing a space rather than sharing it. What is more, it is

4 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), Chapter 6 "Humpty Dumpty"

5 Ocean Howell, "The Poetics of Security: Skateboarding, Urban Design, and the New Public Space," *Urban Action Journal*, 2001

not so much skaters who can't bear others, but others who often find the fact of being around skateboarding rather difficult and invasive (which is quite legitimate). Skateboarding offers individual, rather than collective, solutions; it is not a civic-minded activity. It is through a sense of play, and thrill-seeking (and all the egotism that inevitably entails) that skaters short-circuit the pre-established use of certain spaces.

In 1978, Jacques Carroux perspicaciously remarked: "Based on what we have seen, the success of skateboarding underlines, at the same that it seeks to remedy, the difficulty of practicing sports in our cities, especially the large ones."[6] While the game or sports are a traditionally separate activity, circumscribed in a particular space and time (Caillois), such protocols do not apply to skateboarding—it imposes itself upon certain spaces shared with pedestrians who are not doing it, and this is one of the main reasons it is often criticized. The architectural degradation caused by skateboarding in certain spaces is undeniable. And yet, skateboarding should not be perceived as a form of vandalism. It is an activity in which enjoyment is more important than any kind of cultural or individual affirmation, and aesthetics are more important than any sense of aggression; the noise, traces and damage caused by skateboarding have never been its motives but rather its simple consequences.

On the model of surfing, it was the large, coastal cities that engendered skateboarding. Today, cities generally consider skateboarding to be a malady that afflicts architecture.[7] The issue of skateboarding must, in my opinion, continue to formulate itself in rather contradictory terms: how can this practice be legally integrated into the heart of the city, without giving up its savage and untamed side? In other words, retain its spirit of dissent?

One thing is certain, the vandalism of skaters is as tangential and indirect as their critique of public space. I do not see why the formula applied to viewing art since Duchamp should not be applied to everyday life: skateboarding is above all that which the observer makes of it.

6   Jacques Carroux, "Le Skate Sauvage," *Esprit* magazine, October 1978

7   On this point, please refer again to Ocean Howell's text.