

Ted Talk - Veronica De Angelis

All's well that ends well. Time flies. Haste makes waste. Better safe than sorry! The grass is always greener. All that glitters isn't gold...

These are only a few examples of common cliches that make their way in to the chatter of millions of people, all the time.

To open this talk by saying that we are in the middle of a 6th mass destruction, that which could also prove to be the final and definitive one, would turn it in to another talk entirely. So I won't say that...even though I just did.

The thing is that we are living in a time of contradictions and we don't always do that which we truly want to do. Sometimes we need someone, or something, to give us a wake-up call.

Here's how it happened for me: one morning I opened my eyes to a gorgeous sunrise. While the sun was coming up, it illuminated the immense art installations in front of me at Burning Man. This is the legendary festival held in the middle of the Nevada desert, which has turned in to somewhat of a social experiment, a collective dream. This is a place where thousands of people join forces to create these enormous works of art.

During that week I realized that the power of one person truly can make a difference, and that each one of us can bring about change.

My work takes me often to the USA, and that's exactly where I got to witness first-hand the rebirth of troubled neighborhoods through the regenerative power of street art. Miami's Wynwood Art District is a perfect example. To think that, up until just the year 2000, this was primarily an industrial area full of warehouses and not exactly a safe place to hang out. Right about then the Primary Flight Association decided to create an open air museum among those very blocks, and invited street artists from the world over to adorn the warehouse walls with their work.

Today Wynwood is considered the most expansive street art museum in the world.

I am a dreamer, and America has fully stolen my heart. Without saying a word she has shown me that anything is possible. So, I asked myself: why not bring this same dream to life in Italy, in my own home country?

Now that I think about it, I already had the canvas ready. Here it is.

My great-grandfather built this building, and it passed on to me after losing my father.

The man who taught me to love the ocean and to climb mountains. The same man who taught me to follow my dreams and that to reach them takes perseverance and determination. Because dreams left on a shelf tend to crumble to dust and come back to haunt us as regrets.

The more I thought about it the more I realized that the walls of that very building were truly the perfect blank canvas, and that they had the potential to broadcast a message close to my heart.

But on my own, I hadn't the slightest idea how to make this happen.

One day my yoga teacher mentioned that the Hindu religion maintains that the Universe is perfect, that there is balance in all things, that when we have a desire and we put our energies towards it, the Universe will give us a hand. It actually answers.

So one summer I stumbled on to a video which talked about a line of magic wall paints, able to "eat" smog and purify the air of up to 88.8% of the surrounding atmospheric pollution.

That same summer I met the woman who would become my Vice President. A woman able to toggle between being pragmatic and a dreamer, she is a brilliant project manager. And here it was: the Universe giving me that hand.

A few days later I traveled to NYC and met, again by "chance", Federico Massa—aka Lena Cruz, an artist known for his dedication to environmental issues. He was the missing link.

I told him about my project. Federico accepted the challenge and met up with me in Rome to take a look at the building. Just a few days later he presented me with a sketch of his proposal.

And this is how I came to launch my non-profit "Yourban2030". I was drawn to the idea of using the universal language of art to move people to reflect on the importance and urgency of proaction in the name of climate change. The ways to accomplish this are truly countless. And so it was that, upon that wall, which was once my great-grandfather's, in only 21 days Hunting Pollution came to life—a piece which I believe to be the perfect synergy of art and technology.

VIDEO

We succeeded in the creation of Europe's largest "green mural", worthy of a Guinness Record: 1000 square meters of art. The surface area of Hunting Pollution is able to neutralize the equivalent of 80 cars' daily emissions. That is analogous to the impact of planting 30 forest-high trees. This is all thanks to the paint which we chose for this project: water-based, all-natural, anti-bacterial and anti-smog. This paint reacts to the air much in the same way chlorophyll's photosynthesis does: upon contact with light it creates a photosynthetic reaction during which the pollutants present in the surrounding air, those of automotive traffic in particular, are transformed in to benign salts which then adhere to the wall.

The impact of Hunting Pollution's message is an invitation for all to reflect on the subject of contamination, and on Man's own actions which are destroying the environment.

The subject of the piece is a tricolored heron, an endangered species, as he attempts to forage for prey in a polluted sea. He stands atop an oil barrel, which has become a part of his habitat, while black drops rain down upon him in stark contrast to white ones. The heron is unaware that the food he is catching is poisoned and potentially deadly for him.

Not unlike when we humans ignore danger while doing the things that are most natural for us. Like breathing, for example.

90% of the world's population currently breathes drastically polluted air. Air pollution affects 9 out of 10 people on our planet, and is responsible for 7 million deaths annually, that's 1 mortality every 5 seconds. In Italy alone, out of a population barely topping 60 million, there are 38 million vehicles in circulation and 90,000 deaths annually attributable to atmospheric pollution.

And yet we continue to cut down our forests. Do you know how many trees we would have to plant in order to make a dent in the quantity of CO₂? About 10 million square kilometers-worth, that's about the surface area of Canada.

The Native Americans believe that we inherit the Earth from our fathers, and only have it on loan from our children. Although I am not yet a mother, there is one question I can't get out of my mind: what will we say to our children? That it wasn't up to us to fix? That it was too big a problem for us to address? Or will we teach them that we must always have hope and dreams, and that it takes concrete action to bring those dreams and that hope to life?

A few days ago I received an email I would like to share with you all:

Dearest Veronica,

My name is Tommaso. I am a student from the town of Terni and I am 14 years-old. I saw on TV what you have done in Rome. Well, I'm writing to offer you my building, in this terribly polluted city. We live among steel plants and incinerators...God knows what we are breathing here. In fact, I was born with asthma and there are some days when, on the morning walk to school, you literally can not breathe outside. What's more, our town has just cut down an entire street's trees. I understand that your paint can actually change the air. My building is in the middle of a major city traffic thoroughfare, and I would love for you, or whomever else works with you, to paint it. This would be a way to let the adults in charge of this community know that we young people do have brains, that we want a better outlook for our future, and that as long as we are here on Earth we need to take care of it. I hope to hear back from you. Thanks, Tommaso.

So here is my newest challenge: my new dream is to give life to projects such as this one.

I can visualize people willing to donate their buildings' facades to the cause, artists willing to paint upon them, and a crowd-funding campaign powerful enough to get everyone involved in whatever capacity they are able to participate. A way to give everyone the sense of being a part of the change, the metamorphosis, so that those walls and those works of art truly belong to all. Imagine a collective cry made up of colors, of a thought, of a union.

Imagine a world where we can gaze upon a wall and say: "that is ours, this is our home."

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So I know that to tie up this talk by saying "the future is in our hands" would be just another cliché, one of countless. But I'm going to do just that. Because it's the truth.