

PRIDE-OF-PLACE: THE SKATEROOM

Art is a strange paradox in and of itself - souls poured out on canvas, fixed in place under the white lights of galleries for all eternity. Well, what about art on a skateboard? Commonly known as the "hanger", this is the world's most destroyable canvas put pride-of-place, never to realise its true purpose, be eventually focused and thrown at a tree. We have them, of course, hangers. Our badges of honour, and some of the best (and cheapest) art around. Well, Charles-Antoine Bodson's project - The Skateroom - has taken the concept to its logical conclusion, reproducing some of the world's most high-priced artwork on skateboards. If you've heard of The Skateroom, it won't be because of their skate-team or from seeing these boards in your local's quiver. Warhol's tomato-soup deck go for 200€ and, like many of The Skateroom's editions, target the art-community rather than skaters. And while it may seem perverse at first to see McCartney's sketches on 7-ply, when you think that The Skateroom has in the last 5 years managed to raise over \$500K+ for social skate-projects like Skateistan, Make Life Skate Life and Concrete Jungle, it actually makes you feel pretty proud of what these little popsicle canvases can achieve.

INTERVIEW BY OISIN TAMMAS
PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SKATEROOM

Where'd you come from, Charles-Antoine?

Well, I am absolutely not a pro-skater, though I skated a bit when I was a kid. I'm in business; finance early on in my career, then I was one of the founders of an entrepreneurial project called Weekendes, for gifting experiences and adventures. After that I began to jump into art, opening a gallery in Brussels. I'd collected a few decks from artists since I'd skated as a kid, but I hadn't looked at them for years. Then I met Oliver Percovich...

...from Skateistan! So many stories seem to start with him.

Exactly. This was eight years ago at a fair in Paris. I was displaying some of the gallery's collection. His discourse hit me deeply. He was looking for some funding for their second project in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I decided to sell a part of the collection at our gallery to help him - I think it was about 50k in the end.

50K! The project must have really touched you.

Yeah, at the opening in Phnom Penh also. Watching how the kids interacted with him at the skatepark. That was when I decided that there was no sense working in the gallery, I wanted to continue to support Skateistan.

Somewhere inside your younger self was drawn back to skateboarding.

Yeah, I realised how much I could raise by selling the collection of decks I'd amassed, donating at least 20% of the sales to Skateistan. I liked, rather than being directly involved with the project, facilitating Oliver to do what he did so well. He's one of the best in the world, I was just glad to be useful.

So you had one foot in. What made you throw your all into this and start The Skateroom?

The rule of social-entrepreneurship says: do good while doing business. But of course the collection would soon stop doing business at all since we would run out of boards. I had to jump from just selling, to being a producer of these decks - always with the idea of donating part of our sales to social projects within skateboarding around the world.

Was it tough to convince your current partners and bring in new artists to produce these boards?

Artists were very willing. Our retailers were another story, it took much more time. But by producing art-editions with the willing artists, we could impact the retailers - that's how it went.

Who were the first artists you approached?

Good question! In order to have one, I had to approach ten. It was difficult. I think the first one was ROA, the Belgian street-artist. At that time, I was working with him on a show at my gallery in Brussels. It was a hectic partnership juggling both sides.



They say artists are temperamental but it seems you speak their language.

Oh yes! Artists are watching carefully which project they collaborate with, especially the projects linked to social causes. At the beginning, we had very little track-record to share, it was then more difficult to convince them than today. What stays a reality, is that we have to deal with their agenda. We are not, of course, their highest priority.

How about skaters' language? When you decided to produce the decks did you want to attract the skaters as well as the art-collectors?

Those decks are sold at a higher cost precisely because we want to have this social impact. Also because those decks are art editions of big names artists, we have to consider their market, even if we are usually much more affordable than the rest of their editions - and we like that!

Right, skaters know about Skateistan. Art-collectors may not. But the real money is with the latter.

Yes, selling direct to the art community, galleries, concept-stores, it works best like that.

Has the skate community understood?

I am sure many people don't understand our exercise yet, but that's completely normal. From the beginning I decided that all the money we had, we would donate to social projects. That didn't leave much for marketing towards skateboarding specifically. It's been an immense sacrifice to work like that, and there will be people who love what we do, people who don't know what we do, people who take issue with what we do - I guess that's the game... We know why we're here and that's all that matters. The real challenge for us today is to explain more clearly what, why, how, and generally give thanks to those who facilitate the work.



Skaters have been hanging decks forever, putting a board pride-of-place is a tradition in our culture. But even within skateboarding, it's sometimes funny to see something which was made to be destroyed be given this protected status.

It's funny, as is the whole industry around art. But what we've realised by becoming social-entrepreneurs is that by doing good things you feel good, so having that board on your wall represent the project you supported makes it about more than just art. The idea is to bring a new way of consuming to the community who buy our editions, one which does its bit to take care of people all over the planet. We are proud every time we reach a new skate project, whether it be Skateistan, Concrete Jungle, The NYC Aids Memorial, Make Life Skate Life, or anything else. By having this on your wall, you've had an impact on them - and it makes sense of your consumption. It's shameful today to have ten pairs of shoes, but if one of the shoe brands ran a social campaign then we could justify the trajectory of consumerism more easily.

Do you feel guilty yourself?

Yes! I feel guilty that I can consume just because I live in the right place in the world to consume and the other side of the planet can't. I want to at least help others through my buying process. Voila.

Skateboarding can sometimes be blinkered and reject things which don't seem homegrown; but to see somebody like you who is, by your own admission, not a skateboarder, benefit global skate communities - it goes to show how much we can all learn from this charity movement.

It's true that it can be individualistic, but it's a great opportunity to socialise - especially when you're young. That's why I skated as a kid, that's why Oliver uses skateboarding now to empower children all over the world.

These projects show skateboarding as more community-driven than we ever imagined.

Exactly. And we want to do more...

Like what?

We'd like to fund the building of 100+ skateparks and skate projects around the world by 2024. Why not? All these young people all over the planet, want skateparks for their communities. Skateistan has the expertise to help manage this based on the programme they've been running for ten years now. We have many collaborations we can set up to support that. It's difficult for them to find the money, we're there to help. That's it.

100+ skateparks though! Is this really going to happen?

I'll tell you what I can say: we are going to launch a massive project with Skateistan, major brands and organisations such as the Olympics in the coming months to engage our community into long lasting positive impact.

What are the Olympics saying?

They're saying: spread skateboarding around the world! It's clear skateboarding will remain part of the Olympics after Tokyo, Paris, LA, and they're saying that we must reach as many places as we can otherwise the USA, Japan and Brazil will have all the medals. Spread skating!

Tony Hawk's Foundation is doing similar work in the US. Having somebody in Europe to offer that kind of support is crucial.

He's doing brilliant things, taking care of the US with a very clear vision of how and why. Our partnership with Skateistan can in a way be compared to the model of Tony Hawk's Foundation except that thanks to the incredible work of Skateistan, we are adding the education component which is essential in our model. This is why we'd like to be this actor for the rest of the world. And I like the idea that it's the people, through their buying process, that make this happen...with the support of the artists, the museums, et cetera.

You must have a pretty long list of places to build skateparks then...

Oh, of course! I hope we'll have the luck to work with many more to come, especially in collaboration with our bigger upcoming project. But it is not only about building skateparks but also how social skate projects can scale up and empower children and communities the world over.

You're going to need a long list of artists too then!

I'll be honest with you, there are countless artists we want to work with - but only those who understand what we do, love the model and want to be on the ground to help the project - those who shout about it - are who we end up making it happen with. Ai Weiwei, he truly feels it, and while he's difficult to reach sometimes, his passion is fantastic. We've got a great agenda coming with more street-artists, more galleries, it will be an interesting year for us.

What kind of challenges do you face with the estates of, say, Andy Warhol or Basquiat?

It's difficult for two reasons: firstly, because we have to pay a huge amount of money upfront; and secondly, because the foundations that mediate their estates can be more complicated than independent or living artists. But we are handling it and are delighted that they get our model.

But I imagine you get the most exposure through these?

We get great exposure, but the artists we're working with live have some of the greatest ideas. For example, Jenny Holzer recently did an aluminium deck with truisms engraved. Now she wants to do a marble deck. Something like this we can sell for 10,000€ - and with that comes not a donation of just 20%, but 30%! That's 2,100€ per deck. That can completely change the scope of some social projects. We know skate-artists are doing skate-art way better than we ever could - that's why we use artists from outside of skateboarding which attract up-market collectors, because that's how we can make a difference.