

# Street CRY

GRAFFITI  
IN PARIS  
1985-86

WRITTEN  
BY ANDY HADEL

PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY ARI SHERMAN,  
MICHEL FAIN SILBER  
& ANDY HADEL



# Legend

## Technique



**Spray paint:** This technique must be done quickly because the paint is liquidy. Allows for subtle changes in transparency, building up layers



**Brush:** The traditional painter's medium works well on the myriad textures of city walls, allowing for a dry brush or wet brush look depending on application. Texture can be built up when applied in thick layers. Greater viscosity allows for slower execution



**Marking pen:** This technique is best suited for quick action. Due to small size and relatively slow ink flow, this technique is the least durable of most graffiti



**Stencil (pochoir):** Since this is pre-produced in the graffitist's studio, art made in this manner can be extremely detailed, leaving a very worked look. Sprayed on or painted



**Scraping/gouging:** Probably the most traditional all graffiti techniques, and is extremely durable. Typically hard to see since no color is involved

## Message



Equatable to painting or drawing, perhaps lacking recognizable content



Political intention to the message, typically used to denigrate or oppose or support people or causes

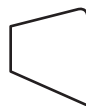


Message is poetic in nature. Often obscure and precious and meant for a specific coterie



Overall goal akin to a marketing call to action or to communicate an idea

## Location



Any wall, window, attached to any regularly fixed structure



Construction wall or zone



Bridge, tunnel or underpass



In or near the Paris Metro



Statue or monument

Graffiti to a graffitist is many things at once: it is a desire to speak out, to lighten the spirit, to create art, and to decorate a space. Whether or not the graffitist is aware of these reasons, the act of painting graffiti on a wall is, after all, a public act. For the artist, the graffitist and the stencilist, producing graffiti must therefore stem from a desire of exhibiting a certain truth whose reality resonates so much within that it must burst forth in a move toward the outside world.

The above incentives account for the state of mind requisite for making graffiti. The graffiti itself, however, cannot

be defined so easily. For the most part, the negative connotations are a result of underlying attitudes that only rarely creep into the forefront of our conscious thought.

Indeed, graffitists are poorly understood because they work in the margins of society, lending an inward and arcane perception to their product. In Paris, there are nevertheless astonishing examples of the artistic talent and the social commitment made by artists who have chosen to work their magic in the open light of the street. What they have done is, if anything, to cast doubt on the standard definitions and connotations of graffiti.

In any case, the aim of this book is not so much to define graffiti as it is to highlight just how much the graffitist esteems his society, and to show how his work confirms that the city street is not merely a place of passage and transition, but also a place of enchantment where the poetry of life and art freely intermingle.



OUI  
C'EST  
POSSIBLE





# Dreams first impressions of graffiti

...Somewhere, in some imaginary encyclopaedia I dreamed of finding them. I figured that all ascertainable knowledge was to be found in such books. So I searched through card catalogues in the libraries of UCLA. I was wrong. Few people had ever considered graffiti from an artistic perspective. There were many archeological and sociological compendiums that made reference to it; they echoed great truths about prehistoric cultural development or postindustrialnuclear society. But with only few benignly academic exceptions had a work focused on graffiti as a possible sibling or even cousin of the beaux arts. These foetal ideas about graffiti represent the first step of my research. At this point, my query wasn't yet limited to the modern era. In fact, I was quite stuck in an historical wonderlust that the study of classical texts induces. If anything, it was going to be the graffiti of ancient Greece.

Still, it was a bit premature. That is, I had no research travel grant nor even a supportive professor willing to oversee the assignment. Hell, I was 18 and it was just an idea that I daydreamed about...

## Venice

...Time goes by. Something like eight years. I spent that time living on and off in Venice. It was a place where you nodded hello to your neighbor walking on the boardwalk. Unlike the rest of town, there weren't the sounds of honking or engines gunned neurotically, just the dull snap of sandy rollerskate bearings. I even liked the disheveled beggars and assorted

lunatics. They supplied much local spice. But sometimes I tired Venice's seamy side and would escape to the other world east of Lincoln Boulevard.

You can say that the campus of the University of California was part of that other world, even if the BA. in French was absolutely useless to the world outside its metered gates. When it was all over and done, I knew I needed a change. So I applied to graduate schools and looked for funding sources.



A year later I moved to Paris in order to do research on a masters thesis on Parisian graffiti. In the beginning, I was tapping into information from the best literary authorities on the subject. Nevertheless, the flow of usable







# Paris school in the city of light

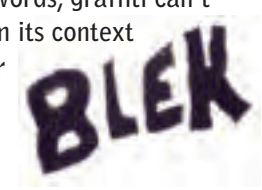
information was coming in droplets that often reflected the advanced age of the sources. Much to my dismay, I learned that even the major libraries at the University of Paris didn't have a category for graffiti, and that the books which did contain references were sorely outdated. I decided that this method of research had a major flaw so I transferred my study place to the damp, gray streets and, under their tutelage, I became quite familiar with a handful of Parisian graffiti artists.

One of the first things I learned about graffiti was gleaned from these field investigations. Namely that, even with the many technical innovations of this century, it is tempting to point out just how little the tools of a graffiti artist have evolved. Certainly, one of the main reasons for this lack of evolution is to be found in the very nature of graffiti. In order to thwart any possible intervention by the authorities, the typical tools of a graffiti artist are that which can be "found" near the site chosen for a graffiti piece, rocks, plaster chips and wood sticks being prime examples. For the modern graffiti artist intent on his project, the transformation of ordinary tools has become commonplace. Aerosol spray cans, thick marking pens and steel gouging tools serve to this end. Older inventions like the paint brush and the stencil kit continue to be used by many a graffiti artist also. New types of paints and varnishes that adapt themselves to different climatic and architectural demands are yet another example of these borrowed tools.

Photography can be considered another tool of great importance to the graffiti artist and researcher alike. Since the variety and the abundance of graffiti has become

so great, it is necessary to make use of this medium as a means of fixing graffiti's ephemeral state. Also, since graffiti doesn't last long, and the good pieces only reach a limited audience, it is difficult to disprove the many myths of urban blight that its detractors claim so adamantly.

For the artist, photographing a graffiti piece is also a way of reassuring himself that there is at least one observer of the work. There is, however, a catch: art objects in a museum are often photographed much to their benefit. This action frames them with a back, front and side reference point, which in turn makes for an optimal viewing experience. On the other hand, graffiti offers nothing even vaguely resembling this. A photographic document can certainly be made of one, but that would inevitably mean to overlook the real context from which it is born and constantly takes part. To look at a wall is the real experience; in so doing you feel the rain falling on your shoulders and you hear the dog barking next door. There is no climate control or security guards to optimize your observation. You are on your own. In other words, graffiti can't simply be lifted from its context in order to be better understood; it is inextricably bound to it.







# Risks <sup>Penalties, civil</sup> and otherwise

Making graffiti is, of course, illegal and legal penalties constitute the most obvious type of risk run by the graffitist. It just doesn't pay for the state to make a martyr out of a graffitist. In France, the first time offender sustains a misdemeanor charge and pays a negligible fine. If caught a second time, incarceration for up to six months is possible. (Although nobody has ever been imprisoned for painting graffiti, there have been several people jailed as a result of their graffiti making activities during the course of a demonstration or march.) The city of Paris cleans its walls and edifices with a service created in the mid 80's called O.L.G.A. (Organization de lutte contre le graffiti et l'affichage sauvage). Besides their janitorial functions, O.L.G.A. agents are authorized to give out tickets to unwary graffitists caught in the act.

The two laws listed below belonging to the Penal Code give evidence of France's resolve to deter the graffitists. There are others, but they only slightly differ in which administrative jurisdictions they apply.

In general, the severity of a sentence is determined according to three criteria: first, the financial damage caused by the graffiti and its creation; second, the relative civic importance of the damaged site; and third, the nature of the crime and whether or not it was committed in conjunction with another crime, such as breaking and entering.

Article 257 (1980): whomever will have intentionally destroyed, demolished, mutilated or degraded a monument, statue, or other object deemed to be of

public utility or decoration, which has been erected by or with the approval of municipal or state authority, will be punished by an imprisonment of from one month to two years and by a fine of from 500 to 30,000 francs.

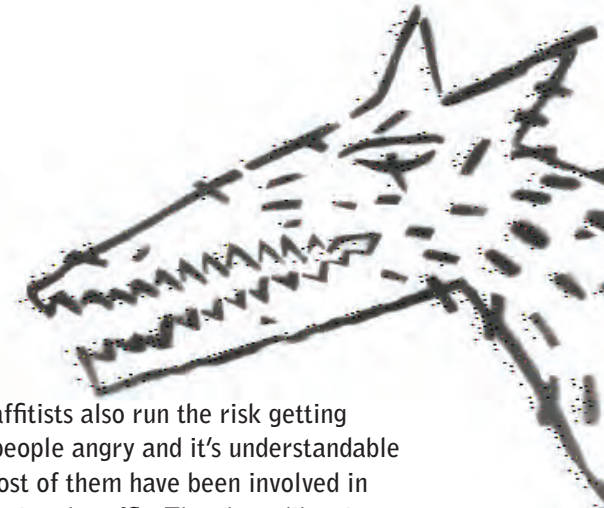
Article 434 (1981): whomever will have voluntarily destroyed or degraded a commercial or real property belonging to someone else will be punished, except if the damage is considered to be minor, by an imprisonment of from three months to two years and by a fine of from 2,500 to 50,000 francs, or by only one of the above. If the damage or destruction has been committed in conjunction with the crime of illegal entry, the imprisonment will be from one to four years and the fine from 500 to 100,000 francs.

One irony to these penalties rears its head: if graffiti can be considered as such, would it be surprising to find that the same judicial apparatus assigned to defend against the graffiti is equally interested in its artistic and social value? And so much so that it collects also!

Article 290 of the Penal Code: the court will call for the seizure and the destruction of objects used in conjunction with the crime; it will be empowered, nevertheless, to order that a part or all of them to be remitted to a state collection or deposit if the artistic character of the work justifies its preservation.

This contradiction doesn't in any way help a graffitist if he is caught either. He might have created the Mona Lisa of





this century, but its beauty, although it could very well add luster to the state art collection, will not commute his sentence or reduce his fine in the least. One conclusion to all this might be that graffiti itself enjoys a certain impunity from the letter of the law after satisfying two conditions: first, that it be distanced from its original and sinful liason with crime and, secondly, that this new status puts it on the same level as other conventional artwork. By viewing graffiti in this new light, the state has effectively legitimized the illegitimate.

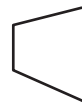
The physical risks associated graffiti making are varied, and above all linked with each graffitist's way of operating. In Paris, there are graffitists who have chosen to work in the network of tunnels through which the Metro (subway) makes its daily travels. One graffitist in particular, Costa, works during the after-hours of the Metro for the most part, but even at these early morning times, he risks getting run down by an out-of-service train being sent to the other end of the city. There are also the high-voltage rails and cables that he must inevitably cross over to get to a good spot. The smallest movement on his part puts him in danger since there are many blind spots where iron gates and low-laying panels are poorly illuminated. Costa finds merit in taking these risks, but he questions the logic of those judging him: "eccentricity and insanity are terms that vaguely describe a range of human behavior." Each graffiti work and its location create a brand new set of physical variables that modify the graffitist's possible risk. To learn more just look at a graffiti and imagine how it was made.

Graffitists also run the risk getting other people angry and it's understandable that most of them have been involved in an occasional scuffle. They have likewise had interesting reactions to potential problems. Namely, a renewed desire to work in groups where, reassured by the presence of their friends, they can work in relative security. Moreover, the group members notice that the artistic inspiration so necessary to the work seems to be enhanced by the collective energy brought together at such sessions. In this way, they talk about a certain feeling of serenity while working together. For those who work alone, it is the contrary that stimulates their labor. That is, they consciously look for the anxiety caused by the endeavor and find that the urgency its inspiration all the more worthwhile to the ultimate graffiti painting.

#### The Mazet

The winter of 1985 was cold. It snowed about once a week for two months making the streets a permanent green slush bowl. Long walks, formerly the bread and butter of my discovery process, were out of the question. Finally too, I couldn't find anymore good information in the libraries. I was at an impasse and realized that much of my research was inappropriate to what I wanted to find out. By chance, I stumbled on a lead that enabled me to bridge the gap between the dry research I was compiling and what my intuition was suggesting.

With the temperatures hovering just above freezing, my studette (because it was smaller than a studio and just a wee





# Le Pont Neuf a chance encounter

bit larger than a garret) took on a certain polar aspect. The window frames swelled with frozen moisture. Opening them to let the room air was very difficult, as the room's temperature would shift from that of a Turkish bath and an Eskimo patio. There was no middle ground on which I could even comfortably shiver. I couldn't tolerate the ebb and flow of humidity followed by frigidity except in the case when I was nestled snugly under a ton of blankets. And since I couldn't stay in bed all day, I had no recourse but to start spending more time in the local bar, right next to the heater.

Everyone in Paris has a bar or pub to go to. That is not to say that it is his favorite, just that it's the most convenient. Well, the Mazet was convenient. It was three flights down and four or five groggy steps to the coffee salvation found there. I would usually begin my days there watching the world wake up around me. I would likewise finish my evenings there sipping a Stella Artois, the French/dutch equivalent of Bud.

There were a lot of musicians hanging around all the time. I hardly ever spoke to them so much had living in Venice made me weary of local artists, con and otherwise. So, until the unrelenting cold spell worked its charm on me in late

**QUAND ON VOUS VOIT  
ON VOUS AIME.  
QUAND ON VOUS AIME  
EST-CE QU'ON VOUS  
VOIT ?**

winter, even the swing jazz billowing up to my student didn't succeed in drawing me down.

One night, after dining with some friends, I was walking back across the Pont Neuf when I caught a glimpse of a graffitist with his hands in the proverbial till. I was drunk from dinner and my gait lumbering. I guess the particular disgracefulness of my approach led him to believe I was one of the CRS (Companie routiere pour la securite: a sort of deputized posse drafted from the ranks of police academy washouts. In other words, the worst hulking, gaulist clods that the mass demonstrations of 1968 had ever conjured. And when there was no civil strife with which to muck about, they let these French Rambos loose on informal patrols.). Before you could say Jacques Chirac the guy was off and running into the foggy night. Still, I felt privileged as this was the closest I had come to the real crux of my thesis. It wasn't dead and drying up on some book shelf nor was it a hieroglyphic scrawl left on a gray building. It was alive, and scared as hell running away from me as if I was the heat. I stepped forward to have a look. It read, "Quand on vous voit, on vous aime. Quand on vous aime est-ce qu'on vous voit?" (if to see you is to love you, then by loving you can you be seen?). It was signed by Raba. It was poetic to be sure, that is, the repetition of the verbs "aimer" and "voir" in this poem/question made for an attractive hook, as in a musical chorus. I was also interested in the state of mind its word play suggested. However, the most noteworthy aspect of this piece was that I had seen it all over town. This Raba person







# LE MAIRE

was definitely on a spree and I wondered what importance this poem had in the scheme of things.

Tuffs of fog started to blow in off the river, the alcohol was wearing off and it was getting colder so I continued walking back home. Near the mouth of my street I could hear the jazz a block away careening off the rows of buildings. Getting closer, I could see that the musicians had stationed themselves on the street outside the Mazet and were playing to a sizable crowd. Danny, the older black man fronting the band, kept the people well entertained with his maudlin charm and husky baritone. Mark, the guitarist, and Miss Thang, the singer, worked them well also. The crowd seemed anesthetized to the elements by their performance. They were jovial, clapping out of time as only the French do so well and bottling up the traffic trying to get by. When a car had stopped in order to listen, the ones behind it began to honk their horns. A squad of CRS descended on the scene, first waving on the traffic and then focusing on its cause. The music stopped abruptly. The musicians stood unperturbed, almost stoic. They then packed up their gear and walked back into the warmth of the Mazet without once looking back at the goon squad. The crowd called for an encore, but they were quickly dismissed by the CRS. I followed the musicians into the bar, found my usual spot at the counter and ordered a nightcap. The band members sauntered to a corner, retuned their instruments and quipped a while with their friends about having to play in the metro when it rained.

When they finally did play it was strains of Django for a solid hour. They played in the smoke filled room without ever missing a beat, even when sipping a beer offered by the house.

Things were going smoothly when someone yelled "les flics" (the police). The music died with a jerk as the lights, which had been dimmed for a ballad, were raised to their normal setting. A police van cruised slowly by the bar and then down the street. The owner, convinced that his liquor-only license was no longer in jeopardy, gave the high sign and the band jumped full throttle into "Sweet Georgia Brown." Toasts to the bar's escape from justice were being made as the set ended. Prized instruments were eased back into their cases and the band took well deserved swigs from tepid steins.

I took myself back upstairs while thinking about the relative impunity with which the musicians played compared to the aggravated flight of the graffitist. There was a nagging doubt that left me wondering why each street band that I saw seemed to either attract or repel the police as if it was all just a function of personalities and odds, and not one of the law being applied equitably. What I didn't realize was that it was generally the CRS, and not the police, that made musicians and graffitists run. I learned that music played in the street is technically illegal, but only worth pursuing if a citizen complaint is made. This subtlety passed right over the head of most CRS officers who, in their quasi-police, quasi-military guise, could easily sidestep common





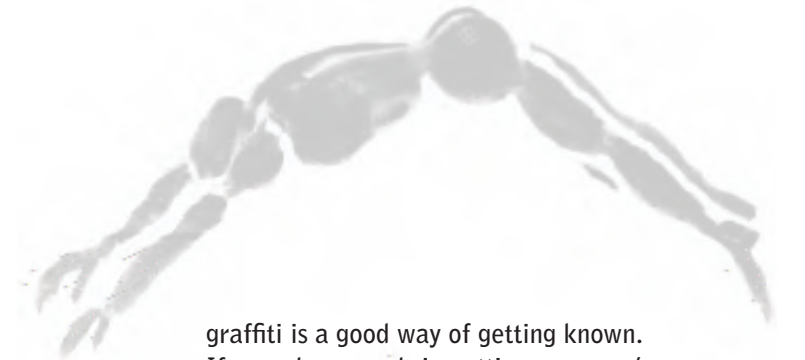


police practices as being so many cumbersome rules. This fact combined with their unusually low professional aptitude explains why they had earned their universal disrespect.

Obviously, graffiti artists too had personalities and, therefore, different ways of working. Since I couldn't interview all of them, I settled on a system of identification based on their approach to graffiti making and the style with which they did it. Three groupings emerged: the self-promoter, the social critic and the performance artist. There is no attempt to rate a given graffiti artist; I have used them only to describe which particular motivation drove certain pieces or individuals.

The strategy of self-promotion is the most easily distinguishable of all the groups. These works usually display the artist's name in large formats that are only a point of departure from which flowing graphic treatments ensue. This strategy is very effective. Only a glance at the careers of Speedy Graffiti and Claude Costa will confirm this statement. For instance, the story is told about how Speedy Graffiti obtained work from a Parisian advertising agency after spraying the wall next to it with graffiti, his name and his telephone number. Self-promotion has, for them, become a decisive factor in provoking the attention of galleries, museums, advertising agencies, and, of course, thousands of passersby on their daily travels.

For the artists lacking connections to the traditional outlets of the art market,



graffiti is a good way of getting known. If a work succeeds in getting someone's attention, the artist can certainly congratulate himself. Costa: "to put out a graffiti is to have people profit from it." Anything beyond that, is cream on top. Often, galleries put pressure on an artist to repeat a successful work at the expense of a more valid and perhaps less lucrative exploration. Or the contrary, as in the case of an artist who changes so often to meet market demands that he never gets a chance to develop his own inner voice and style. For the artist who wants to communicate or create at all cost, these outlets may be nothing more than stumbling blocks. In turning to graffiti, the artist gets rid of the middleman and markets himself directly to the street.

The second group of graffiti artists also finds impetus in the concept of direct communication. However, they are different from the first group in that their primary concern is with the reactions that their works provoke. These artists are committed to social reform and they see themselves as the mouthpiece of a society that confronts major issues with silence and indifference. Their cries usually focus on the corruption of the state and its ambiguous policies in connection with the needs of the people. The society's laws and ultimately its walls are targeted for both their symbolic and tangible relation to the state.

By choosing such a canvas, the artist openly plays with the sense of his transgression. First, he announces his position with his graffiti. Secondly, by





breaking the law in making graffiti, he shows himself to be radically defiant of the very structure that supports the injustice as he sees it. His offering is therefore a twoedged blade that publicly invites new thinking to passersby and which finds its greatest force in its provocation.

The last group of graffitiists proposes an "art form" to be savoured in a live setting. The city streets where they work are conceived of as a place of adventure with people and things. These artists make it a point to get out there in order to seize the wind of opinion generated by the streams of people during their daily course. Finding stagnation from within the controlled studio environment, they have opted for the street and are so confident of their moral right that they go head to head with potential obstacles and paint in plain day. While painting, they feel like actors on stage, and take all the more pleasure in listening to the praise, the criticism and the interrogations made by onlookers.

This transfer of energy to the street recalls to mind the more spectacular aspects of a theatrical performance. Like a stage show, the often enormous painting which result evoke the particular circumstances that make each performance unique. It isn't unusual that some onlookers might grab a brush and do their own graffiti. Or perhaps the authorities might try to stop them, and in so doing begin to repaint the wall. As with a stage production, the sense that nothing could bring back the experience lingers... it lies in memory only and couldn't possibly be committed to a permanent

form of reproduction. For that matter, the graffitiists aren't concerned whether or not their work lasts five minutes or five hundred years just as long as some of their observers can partake in the frenzy of the performance. It is the intoxication of the performance itself that motivates them.

Some groups like V.L.P. (Viva Painting) and X-Moulinex tend to choose their work space as a function of the people that frequent an area. Their work fills up the quarter in and around the Pompidou Center where tens of thousands of people walk by every day. X-Moulinex, indifferent to questions of propriety, has taken to painting in pedestrian crossings. Luckily, this method hasn't incurred any official wrath and, curiously enough, the authorities have let them paint in total peace.

Painting on construction site fences or on crosswalks sounds like a death wish for an artist interested in keeping his work in fresh condition. This fact doesn't bother them. What does, conversely, is when a collector might indelicately steal the work from the street where it was made. The graffiti is an offering to the entire community and whether it becomes downgraded, erased or totally covered by other graffiti is not the point. These artists see dignity in the natural course of things.

There is a sub-grouping to this performance category which features the works of Jerome Mesnager, Gerard Zlotykamien and Richard Herrington. These pieces are not made in a performance setting. However, it is the way they "interact" in such a forceful



# impressions of hoodlums and heiresses

## § Impropropriety

manner that leads me to include them with live performance pieces. Their graffiti recalls the sometimes forbidding aspect of the city streets. It is, perhaps, a subject that many don't want to address: these images, troubling and pensive as they are, lay hidden in blind corners waiting for fate to make their presence felt. They bring to mind the little thought of and never desired dangers that are unswervingly attendant in life. In this case, it is indeed the shock value for which the artists are searching. They want to upset our society's false sense of security with images of raw emotions that conjure fear and, ultimately, force us to envision other possibilities.

All in all, these three groupings can get mixed up. There are no pat distinctions to be drawn: the graffitists don't trouble themselves to conform to any sociologic convention and therefore you would be hard pressed to categorize them with any certainty. In other words, what I have just presented as a strict definition is nothing more than a model from which we can make further deductions.

§

I don't know why the subject of impropriety has always been so interesting to me. Maybe it's because social values have no constant either historically or geographically, and that they become all the more diluted, overlaid and obscured as modern technology brings the world's communities closer together. Maybe it's because I grew up with a strict secular background and am apt to spout out with pop culture references my about

distrust of the Occidental conception of god. Maybe it has something to do with knowing people who have expended great amounts of energy and time in accomplishing deeds (and misdeeds, as some say) that weren't considered to be worthwhile or desirable to the society at large. It's hard to say if this incertitude makes me a good representative of my culture or not. In any case, I look around and I can see that we are swimming in uncertain waters: to call on heroes and supermen as moral leaders isn't realistic because they inevitably fall victim to their own frailty; to lionize modern gospel personalities evoking salvation through attitude improvement is ludicrous as well. It's as if you have to knock heads with the CRS to get an inkling of your own moral limits.

There are days when a graffitied wall makes me think of a sorcerer's wand. I see the sign, "Post no bills," and I remark that these three words of prohibition are themselves provocative and seem to invite speculation. If the making of graffiti is a flagrant transgression of the law, is it then right to suspect that anyone who has ever scribbled out a message or design on a wall is guilty of debasing the moral structure of the society?

A wall painted with graffiti effectively calls to mind many questions about individual freedom in society. The question of a graffitist's culpability towards his peers is valid. Still, would society's laws fail to see a distinction between the graffitist, he who works towards a self-defined yet universally applicable goal, and a common criminal, he who works toward



a totally selfish goal?

The distinction we make about private and public property lends itself to this sort of discussion. What is a wall if not the embodiment the social mores? It is the concrete manner by which an individual shelters himself from physical as well as societal elements. Hence the rhetorical question: Is it not then a slap on the face of this system to mask or soil these walls? There are obviously some poor examples of graffiti that portray selfish behaviour. On the other hand, there are some that reveal truths beyond reproach.

I DON'T SEE MYSELF AS A HOODLUM. BUT AS SOON AS YOU BREAK A LAW OF A WELL STRUCTURED SOCIETY, YOU RUN THE RISK OF BEING CONSIDERED MARGINAL, AND THEREFORE A HOODLUM. (Claude Costa)

The appearance of some graffiti reminds us of those frightening elements on the outside. To label them as cowardice and juvenile is one way of assuaging the fears brought on by graffiti's provocation and by the violent images that it inspires. Because of these associations, graffitists have been considered lunatics and the areas bearing their diabolical creations considered to be places of lunacy, instability and horror.

This redoubtable analysis of graffiti's ability to cause fear isn't far from what had already happened during the 1968 student riots in Paris. Frustrated, coerced and suppressed by a college administration indifferent to their demands, the students launched a dialogue with federal union

workers and together they turned their wrath outward to the rest of the country. Their strikes and rallies eventually paralyzed the nation's workings and shattered national confidence. Because of blacklisting, information blackouts and retaliatory dismissals, the role of graffiti during this time was of premiere importance. The government's quasi-totalitarian measures deprived dispersed Parisian groups of effective information networks. Graffiti came to be viewed as synonymous with revolution because it served as a potent and yet invulnerable political tool that could unite and inform the masses as well as post messages of discontent to the adversary.

The tens of thousands of acerbic messages and paintings throughout the city were the supposed signposts to a new political era and the harbingers of doom for France's Fourth Republic. The Parisians' civil disobedience brought on the fall of the De Gaulle government precipitating a reversal in French politics whose mandates are still strongly felt today and whose "lunatic fringe" represents some of France's most respected contemporary politicians.



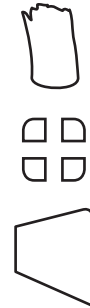


Could the profusion of graffiti or lack of it be one of the indices of a nation's political health? Based on France's example, the impropriety of graffiti seems to have nothing to do with a blatant disregard of property. Instead, it does link itself to a desire to disseminate truth, be it nice or not, to those who have an interest to know. Taken in this sense, there seems to be a connection between graffiti and humanity's instinctual rejection of injustice and inequality. When Costa says, "to provoke a reaction, I want to make them think," this also means that a society of mute citizens will never make good of anything, even if they believe they do justice to the expectations of civility.

#### Contacts

I was in the Mazet one cold winter morning warming up with a shot of brandy and reading a novel called "The Demolition" by Pierre Marcell, which is probably the only novel written about a graffiti artist and his work.

The dusty construction site of what was formerly a metal foundry is the scene of this novel. The foundry becomes a symbol of modern society when its Belle Epoque boilers, rooms and fixtures have outlived their usefulness. Bulldozers will soon come and raze the building to the ground. Left in the wake of the demolition are the crushed and ravaged foundry objects which will be eventually sold as scrap metal. So here too is the destiny of a love affair which lets itself become annihilated in the sadness of he who was left behind and for



whom the foundry's demolition draws a tragic parallel.

IT'S NOT A PRISON, BUT IT COULD BE WITH THE BARRED WINDOWS. IT'S GIGANTIC, SO TALL THAT THE HORIZON BECOMES SQUASHED.....

Moved by the sense of the demolition, the author decides to make a tribute to his love and to give the site a purpose. After having made his first graffiti there, he announces that the wall has been baptised.

Time passes and the author, still gripped by anguish, relates how little the graffiti is helping him. He finds a quote from the poet Lichtenburg that expresses his feelings, "a bladeless knife that lacks a handle," and he goes to spray it on the wall. Still finding no resolution with his graffiti, he grows so weary of this failure that he decided he must give up conscious control to the storms blowing in his fantasy.

Everyone at one time or another has taken a closer look at the heart pierced by the arrow carved on a tree or scratched on a rock. What is it about this type of graffiti that captures our attention? Perhaps, it is the graphic realism by which this pictogram portrays both the attraction and

the obsession that love engenders. This kind of graffiti recalls some of the more primitive aspects of the love relationship. For example, the instinct of marking a sexual territory for oneself, or the symbolic bond of fidelity made between lovers. This sign of our sexual past is obviously alive and well as the heart and arrow prove so eloquently. In this way, it has the seemingly magic capacity to be a stark reminder of both the goodness and the badness welling up from our own sexuality.

Brassai comments that "graffiti presents itself like a violent cutting edge that evokes all the subversive energy of the atom." In *The Demolition*, author Marcell makes use of this energy by sublimating the meaning of the heart and arrow. The reader knows that the hero

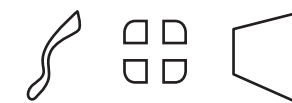
hopes for his ex-girlfriend's happiness even if he has trouble accepting it apart from the context of their relationship. Instead of drawing hearts, the hero writes poetry. But his intent is clear. By intellectualizing animal frustration, Marcell's adventure becomes a vehicle demonstrating both the most noble and the most primitive of aspirations.

Apparently, the woman to my right had been reading along over my shoulder because, when I finished a chapter, she sighed and added a reflection about the book. It turned out that she knew a graffiti artist who might be willing to talk. I was very pleased because this break would pull me out from under my theoretical avalanche and get me circulating in the real world where strangeness and ambiguity are more easily accepted.

#### §

It was a balmy November evening when I made my way to Claude Costa's apartment. He lived in the 10th arrondissement where the rows of decrepit Belle Epoque buildings offered no clue as to what I would encounter there. The only thing different about the quarter was the immensity of the Place de la Republique whose large boulevards spoke outwards into the smaller and more familiar avenues of the Parisian cityscape.

I had just read the national polls and had learned that a full 10% of France would support Jean-Marie Le Pen in his bid for the Prime Minister's seat. As a foreigner, it gave me an uncomfortable







# Le Pen

## magrebins and graffitists

feeling to think that France's borders might be closed by this xenophobe. One of his brainchilds had been a battering billboard campaign calling on the citizenry to reproduce more infants. Not that it was such a bad idea in itself since the French birthrate had been at an all time low. It was just that the method of this campaign was to use blond-haired, blue-eyed infants as it photographic fodder and, as of late, Paris was being besieged by these smiling gallic faces twenty feet tall.

National recession, high unemployment and a traditional mistrust of colonial immigrants had led in part to this state of affairs. France was now, as America and Germany had been before it, undergoing a conservative backlash that was polarizing the country. The past in the Middle East and North Africa was still fresh in their minds...the scenario was connected to Algerian émigrés and all the "magrebains" (literally Moroccans, but really meaning anyone of north African descent) who, by seeking opportunity in France, got swept like dust under her carpets. And in the process of their resettlement they had gone from being 1st to 2nd class citizens.

It wasn't really a bad deal: get conquered by "enlightened" explorers of centuries past, have their descendants start huge commercial ventures which artificially prop up a few lucky local leaders, be sucked dry of mineral and other natural resources needed for the new commonwealth, have these new industries (for now we've reached the Industrial Revolution) develop symbiotic dependencies with the host country,

destroy the nation's formerly agrarian self-sufficiency, create staggering trade deficits while throwing one countryman who benefits from this situation against one who doesn't. Along the way, unexpected problems rear their head up.

Colonial politicians, who for so long had exercised their right of sovereignty over the colony, are now feeling the sting of their hypocrisy; the rhetoric they threw like table scraps to defend their exploitation is getting assimilated by the populace. From the sons and daughters of the locally created nouveau riche comes a generation of western educated, ideologically impassioned political upstarts who foment rebellion against the colonial government by espousing non-capitalistic doctrine. Dissent in the home country forces the government to an unwanted decision. But their lukewarm response to the problem lays the seeds for a struggle. Time passes, a revolutionary faction takes control of the local radio station. Shots ring out. A coup d'état is attempted and the country sees its factories, which had once been purring to an efficiency expert's delight, destroyed in partisan guerrilla attacks. With a colony wallowing in strife, international relations strained, and public opinion calling for reforms, the home government finally takes a stand.

In what is then hailed as a boldly magnanimous gesture by the home state, the colony, is given its freedom. To diffuse accusations of having pawned off a political liability, the colonizer attempts to save face: it allows embattled immigrants to repatriate inside its own borders. But





## Costa an interview with a graffitist

the nice gesture is not without letbacks. First, this act brings the 1st and the 3rd world into a headon collision. The newcomers have never heard of indoor plumbing, central heating and, least of all, equal rights for women. They happily accept the worst housing and jobs that they are offered. Secondly, their great number, traditionally needed for the labor intensive agricultural work at home, becomes a burden in the capital intensive economy of the urban jungle. Moreover, for as much as this policy's supporters claim to have improved their lot, real integration into the economy, equal education, job pay and security and birth control alludes them in an equal proportion to the antipathy that their skin color inspires. When their quarters swarm and overflow into others, the official reaction is to buildup the police force in those outlying areas where the protection of the innocent locals is paramount. And yes, if they are lucky or smart enough to make it to a state funded clinic, they are offered the ultimate method of contraception: sterilization.

So now France has a population crisis, not that there aren't enough blue collar workers to fill its factories, only that there aren't enough white collar, true blue Frenchman to manage them.

§

One of those clever billboards greeted me as I came up from the metro. It showed an adorable infant's face quoted to say, "Do I look like a metaphysical problem?" The billboard was perched

above a tiny cafe in which several Arabs bantered and drank beer...they didn't notice me as I walked by.

Costa's studio was filled with works in varying states, paint jars, brushes and various personal artifacts all laying scattered about. It was clear that I would be dealing with a painter, that I could handle. But a graffitist? My illusions about his state of mind had been thrown off when his father, a stooped and graying man, eased open the door, bade me to enter, brought me to a seat in front of a cluttered table and set a mug of tea down for me, and all of his actions, administered by a series of hand signals and staccato sighs. So his father was mute, but a graffitist?

This was my first interview and I had assembled a questionnaire for the occasion. I don't know why, but when Costa entered the room, I immediately abandoned the idea of using it. Costa was dark haired with dark, penetrating eyes. I could tell by his manner that he didn't care about this interview. I started by talking to him about painting in the hopes of getting him to open up. I went on like this for 15 minutes. At least I had succeeded in getting his attention. He could tell by my schpiel that I wasn't really a journalist, but someone who was simply involved in their research. He thanked his father for having let me in and dismissed him. The old man left the room mumbling.

It was his turn to speak and he knew it. I hadn't been asking questions, just giving impressions so his discourse started slowly. He let go a few, "painting, oh la





la's" and eventually broke into a description of his work and his motives for doing it. The act of talking made him relax a bit more.

At this point I mentioned the word graffiti and his whole demeanor changed instantly. Sitting on the edge of his seat, hands gesticulating like his father's before him, he gave vent to his feelings in a flurry of excited statements.

He explained that if one of his paintings ever made it to a museum, he would consider it an honor. On the other hand, if anyone ever turned a profit on his graffiti, it would be the cause of much anger.

Costa believed his graffiti to be like a window to the mind. He considered thought, especially creative thought, to be sorely lacking in the mechanistic world we live in. People needed help with putting their mind in this special mode. To him, graffiti was a way of unfastening the constraints on thinking. The product of the unfastening, whether a positive thought or not, was irrelevant.

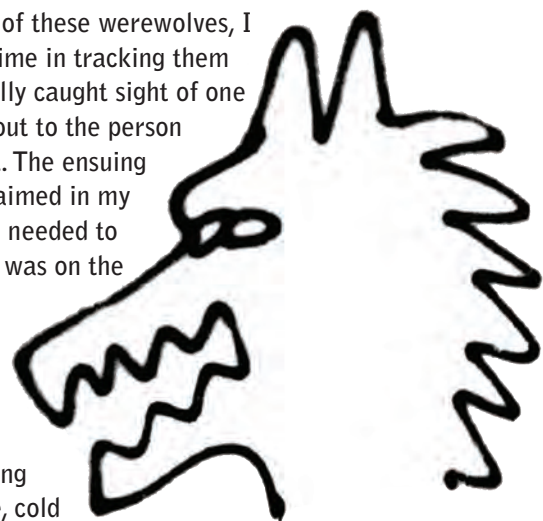
Costa's work was quite interesting and he went out of his way to present it in adventurous ways. He was one of the first Parisian graffitist to paint over existing advertisements in the metro with bright colors and fanciful designs. To my mind, his most important graffiti work was the series of werewolves he



the metro tunnels Chatelet. This embodies best the of graffiti because its curious subject matter and placement. Riding on the metro is a lot like zipping yourself up in a cocoon, so much are people resistant to interaction. Blank stares are the big payoff that greet inquisitive eyes. So Costa's idea is actually a playful one in the way it deals with the intensely vacuous metro experience.

Upon learning of these werewolves, I didn't waste any time in tracking them down. When I finally caught sight of one I tried to point it out to the person seated to my right. The ensuing accusatory smirk aimed in my direction was all I needed to realize why Costa was on the right track.

The werewolf, wolf's bane, the full moon, fog bound valleys, a distant howl echoing through still space, cold air, glassy eyes in a bush not far off, the rattle of twigs in the underbrush. Lon Chaney? Hollywood? Well, even Hollywood knew what could scare a person out his wits. Wits? Oh yes, now we're getting closer. After all, when it comes to myths and fantasies, could there be any better reincarnation than the one that marries the best qualities of man, namely his reason and memory with the basest attributes of animals, namely, the



instinctual fulfillment of all cravings. How much more appropriate could it be than to imprison this reasoning man inside an instinctual animal's rebellious carcass? And then this unruly specimen has the audacity to threaten every tenant that urbane society depends on to maintain its status quo. Being frightened doesn't fit into the scenario because it might provoke thought. So why not put a werewolf in the metro?

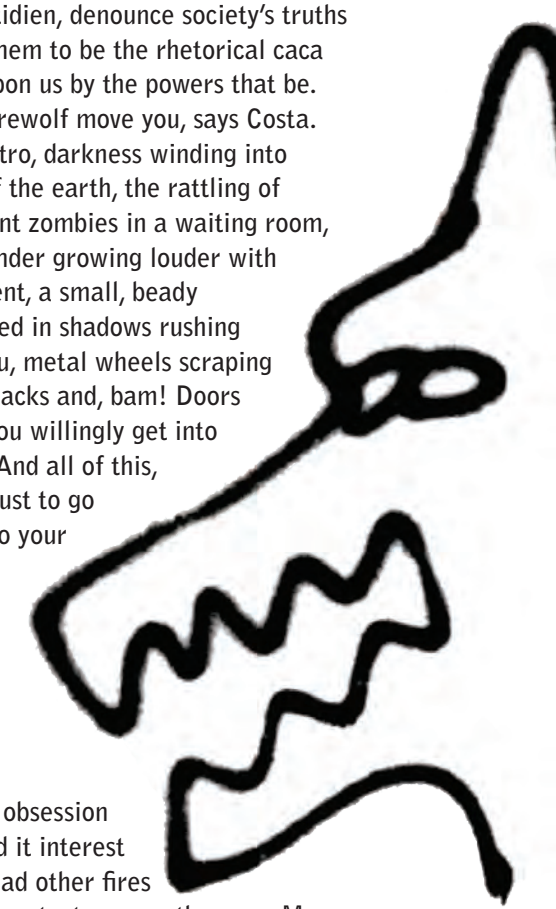
Costa's plan is to make people reexamine their world. According to him, people go through life as if it was one long metro ride, never letting their intellectual defenses down, never looking beyond the officially stated meaning of things and events. It's an activity that seems antithetical to the smooth running of society. Some say that a society of thinkers would be tantamount to anarchy by its very nature. Costa believes that those vapid glances in the subway cars are really the moral cement of a stable world. So

if you know how to think and you see the werewolf inside the tunnel careening by every 15 metres until it takes on the look of an animated cartoon, you can then start to appreciate how much displeasure it stirs up. It seeks to frighten you, to pummel your psychic defenses with burlesquely indignant images which, by their intrusion on the quotidien, denounce society's truths and show them to be the rhetorical caca shoveled upon us by the powers that be. Let the werewolf move you, says Costa.

The metro, darkness winding into the belly of the earth, the rattling of wind, patient zombies in a waiting room, distant thunder growing louder with each moment, a small, beady light couched in shadows rushing towards you, metal wheels scraping on metal tracks and, bam! Doors open and you willingly get into this beast. And all of this, you think, just to go for a visit to your Aunty Em.

§

Riding the metro could have become an obsession so much did it interest me. But I had other fires to put out, or start, as was the case. My descents into the Mazet were growing more frequent ever since I started making acquaintances there. I started playing music there as well and it was this last







**ROCK'N'TONIC**  
**MARIE ROUFFET**

# Street musicians, ware-wolves and the office **Busking**

fact that accounts for most of the time I spent apart from my academic pursuits.

A busker is a British term that refers to a street musician. The other buskers and I earned money by playing squares and cafe terraces. By definition, buskers never form lasting alliances and our group, in tacit compliance with this unspoken rule, never even managed to come up with a name for itself. It didn't really matter either since we were able to scratch out a living as unidentified flying objects on the streets in Paris.

A hint of the end of winter shone its warming light for a few days. People quickly took advantage of this climatic respite and hustled outside. Cafe doors, so long closed to the winter cold, were opened all the way. The terraces, our bread and butter, were filled up with people anxious to vicariously tap into a busker's verve. The right crowd at the right time could yield a two or three day hiatus. The wrong crowd at the wrong time would snooker out the CRS, themselves, annoyed that we weren't some obscure terrorist group bent on wreaking havoc and mayhem. Usually, however, our money came in drips big enough to keep us speeding on double espressos until the wee hours of the morning. But that was okay because in this quarter, unlike many others in Paris, people stayed out very late. By being able to play here, and not having to displace ourselves, we didn't have to worry about missing the last metro, a feat which earned you a stay under a cement awning along with the other street artists.

Due to a habitual contempt for schedules and organization, a busker

spends probably one tenth of his working time actually making music. There's the once every hour bus to be missed, the two hour martiniless lunch at the university restaurant to eat, the espresso to drink at the Mazet (also known as the office) afterwards, and lastly, the spliff to be smoked while waiting for the stragglers to arrive. Under good conditions, a rendezvous slated for 12 p.m. usually meant we wouldn't start playing until 3 p.m. All this down time also meant that there was a lot of politicking going on at the office. It was unavoidable, but it was also a great time to learn new tunes from other buskers.

Blek

I continued to interview more graffitiists. Through the Costa connection, I landed one with Xavier Blek, clearly the most ubiquitous of all the Parisian graffitiists. He made his reputation for his stencils that depicted all manner of people indigenous to a particular quarter. For instance, in the Marais, where the largest contingent of Jews is located in Paris, he sprayed a stencil showing an old Hasidic man walking, or in the Latin Quarter, where all the chic left-bankers gather, he sprayed one showing a woman kneeling down, crying passionately, and so on.

By profession, Blek was a master engraver working in the printing trade. By preference, he would go out at night with his accomplice Gerard and spray stencils. Like Costa, he was interested in getting people to notice their surroundings in a new light. Unlike Costa, he didn't seek to shock them into a metaphysical state





of frenzy. Blek's people were normal, everyday beings caught in a moment of anguish. As such, they radiated pathos and frailty. One could have been your grandfather whose warm insistence calmed a childish fear. Another could have been your lover whose beseeching led you to reconciliation. Each one evoked not so much a particular emotion so much as a general condition of struggle. Blek's people recalled the turmoil that comes from feeling.

Blek's graffiti was literally sprayed all over the city. The profusion of his work revealed an attitude and an energy level that was undeniably vigorous. With each piece inevitably came his highly recognizable signature.

Again, I noticed this tendency toward militancy in the graffiti artists' work. It was as if the act of producing an illicit artwork had forged a new facet onto their personality. They became more like graffiti with each new escapade. They had taken chances, sometimes calculated, sometimes not, and succeeded in putting up their own images in the city. In a sense, they were like grizzled veterans who had put aside mitigating circumstance and thought. They had a clear vision of their purpose and they were all the more exacting for it.

#### Value

In spite of all the obstacles, the graffiti artists were relentless in plying their trade around the city. Their tenacity led me to wonder about the graffiti itself and the significance it held for them. In making this analysis, I have used painting

as a means of comparison to graffiti, but sculpture or lithography, for example, would have been equally appropriate.

First and foremost of all our preconceptions about art is the value that is assigned to it. The intrinsic value accorded to graffiti is quite different from that of painting despite their many shared qualities. To begin with, the very nature of the canvas seems to preclude analogies. For Alin Avila, "the canvas is a symbolic significant space." It receives a value because it is an entity unto itself. Its value increases even more when it is considered as an entity which belongs to someone. The artist, in an effort to preserve his work, will either keep it himself or will sell or give it to someone else. Its status as a possession doesn't change in the least so long as it continues to be possessed. [Note: the destruction of a known work of art is a crime punishable by law in most countries.]

On the other hand, the graffiti artist doesn't visibly stake his work except for the moment that he is doing it. He then leaves it and, therefore, its intrinsic value radically evolves (or degrades as the case may be) since nobody in particular takes an active possession of it. (Pablo Picasso once made



some graffiti on a wall in Paris that was subsequently lifted from its original site and sold on the black market to a private collector. Unfortunately, Picasso's incontestable notoriety spawns an equally perplexing

dilemma for someone trying to analyze the value of his graffiti compared to his other legitimate artwork. Is this piece valuable because it is part of Picasso's personal legacy, such as letters, interviews or photographs that we do have of his? Or is it valuable in its own right as an artwork bearing his signature? There is no clear distinction to be made. The fact is that this graffiti piece is probably insured by Lloyds of London along with the other valued objets d'art created by his hand.) This lack of belonging is probably one



of the main reasons that graffiti isn't considered in the same light as traditional and possessed art. Since graffiti has no intrinsic value to the society, it also is wont for a legal sense. These two reasons coupled with its typically negative cultural associations tend to invalidate any sincere attempt to compare it, even academically, to a conventional work of art.

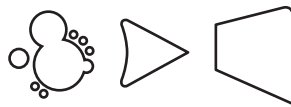
#### The Greenpeace Affair

The French have always maintained a high level of national pride. Nevertheless, dissension flared in both liberal and conservative strongholds across the country over the Greenpeace Affair in 1985.

The trouble centered around the covert operation orchestrated by the French government to sink the Rainbow Warrior, a Greenpeace vessel which had been at dock in Auckland, New Zealand awaiting to embark upon a three-month protest cruise of French battleships laden with nuclear warheads in the South Pacific. When the Rainbow Warrior was sunk one Greenpeace member was killed.

The resulting cover-up by the government was likened to Watergate in the French press because it involved the indictment of two French navy officers on charges of murder and arson. It also pointed a suspicious finger at their commanders up to and including the Minister of the Navy. Pressed to respond to these charges, the French authorities stonewalled information until it was unearthed that François Mitterand himself





had given the go-ahead for the operation.

The populace was not upset per se by the decision to uphold the right of a French nuclear presence in the South Pacific. What bothered them was the attempt to cover up the truth after a certain amount of criticism had arisen in its wake. The French were insulted by what seemed to them to be a cowardly manner to handle the urgent affairs of state. Although two cabinet officials associated with the sabotage had to resign over the affair, the hawks prevailed and coverage of the affair decreased to a trickle of editorials in the "Liberation" demanding the president's resignation for his obvious act of "mauvaise foi." Nevertheless, the damage had been done in what was then a very caustic election season; faith in Mitterrand's Socialist party could not be restored and this event, along with others, helped to drastically change their political fortunes.

The Greenpeace Affair and the changing political tide didn't exactly give cause to flatter the usually bloated French national ego. They seemed then all too well prepared to greet the foibles of other countries, among them the US, being a prime target.

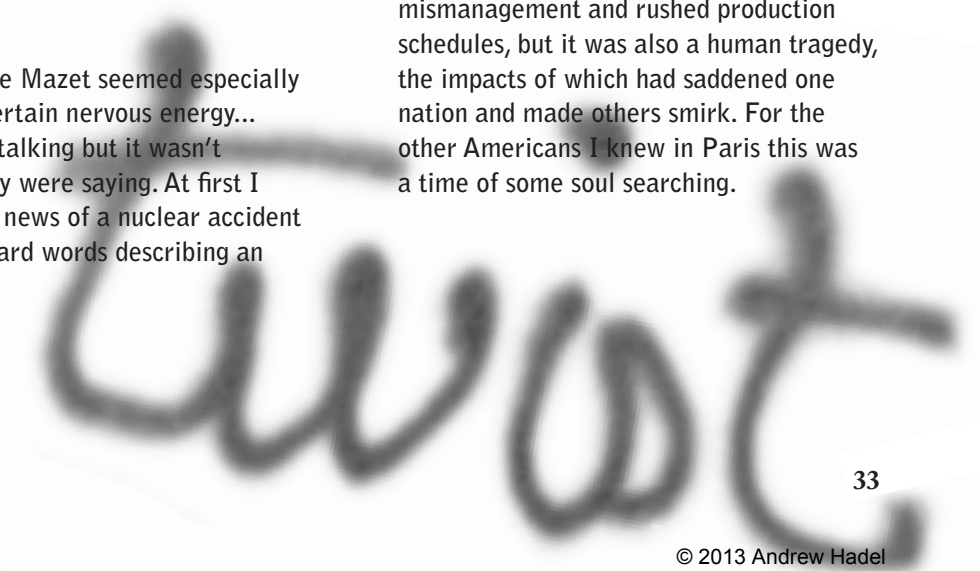
#### Challenger

One day, the Mazet seemed especially filled with a certain nervous energy... everyone was talking but it wasn't clear what they were saying. At first I thought it was news of a nuclear accident when I overheard words describing an

explosion. Then I noticed the indifference in their voices and I figured the event had been neither of a military nature nor had it directly concerned France. I soon heard that the American space shuttle Challenger had blown itself and its crew up during take-off and that the whole thing had been watched on a live broadcast by tens of millions of Americans. I was shocked and dismayed by the news but I grew even more so as I saw how the French were dealing with the news themselves.

For the most part, I observed scornful reactions from them and the other Europeans as well. Even though most Parisians don't like to admit, they are tightly attuned to events taking place in America. It's a love-hate relationship with little ambivalence or gray area. Some cry out against Hiroshima, some against the historic effects of the Marshall Plan. Still others berate the American performance in Vietnam, or divisive American corporate practices abroad.

They snickered at what they called an American blunder. The pleasure they took at this tragedy was very apparent and I found myself in the unusual position of defending America ideologically. To me, this might have been a blunder due to mismanagement and rushed production schedules, but it was also a human tragedy, the impacts of which had saddened one nation and made others smirk. For the other Americans I knew in Paris this was a time of some soul searching.







# Reflexivity

## the artistic process

The big question for me has always been the relationship between a serious graffiti work and a painting. In both cases, there is obviously an artist who is at the creative helm. If we take into account the immediate differences in the two media, is it possible to make deductions about the mental processes going on during the creation of the two pieces? Well, according to French author Christophe Genin, it is. In an article entitled, "The Phenomenology of Reflexivity" from the revue *Tribus* (Jan. 1986), he explains some of these events. In this case note the many affinities and resemblances between graffiti and painting.

Like the painter or poet, the graffitist is in search of the inner visions that his life inspires. What he seeks to achieve is seemingly enigmatic: the materialization of the ephemeral. To this end, he must take account of time's flow in life. He must sort through his memory of things and make a selection from which a temporal mark (a graffiti) will be the result. By producing such a mark of himself, the graffitist creates a mirror image that captures the sentiment of the present time and the remembrance of it when he examines the graffiti in the future. In this way, the piece becomes a tool by which to remark on the changes in his own personality. What is actually happening in this process is a reflexive means to momentarily halt the course of time. It is an affirmation of what Brassai called "man's exotic autonomy as a paradox in nature."

With painting as with graffiti, this is an act of hovering just above the natural order of things. The work that is born of this reflection hastens the perception

of this other self that, for most people, remains locked up and dusty in their photo albums.

Mesnager

I remember seeing it the very first time I had stayed in Paris on a cobbled wall across the street from the ancient roman arenas of Lutecia. It had struck me as both macabre and joyous. It was a solitary figure painted in a few light brush strokes of white paint. This graffiti was like a photographic negative in that the wall was the black negative space and the white was the positive space. The figure carried in its hand a sword and was frozen in the act of thrusting it forward. The movement was articulated with a dancer's finesse: the shoulders remained straight with the torso, the left leg was slightly bent at the knees as the bulk of the weight, and thus the power, was riding on the right leg straining forward. It must have been done with as many strokes as there are members of the body, but this in no way hinted at a simplistic or primitive style. It was accurate and expressive to the point of jumping out from its two-dimensional backdrop on the wall.

Standing in front of these works always filled me with a reverence for humanity. The figures seemed to celebrate the nobler aspects of our physical being because of their minute attention to the movement and coordination of the body's musculature. Had I seen more ancient reminders of them in the spry Minoan athletes who triumphantly jumped over rushing bulls? I couldn't say for sure.







They were, in their white paint treatment, much more somber and pensive than their Cretin counterparts. On the other hand, their exaggerated movements betrayed an inward striving that suggested a form of moral purification through physical exertion.

This had been my first encounter with one of Jerome Mesnager's white phantoms. One year later, when I again returned to Paris I made a point of working up a Mesnager dossier. As it turned out, I never got a chance to meet with him personally. Nevertheless, of the many works that I saw and photographed, and from the remarks I heard from his friends, an enigma involving his work became disturbingly clear. Nearly all of his graffiti was painted on old stone edifices and not on modern structures.

I wondered about this for a long time because, the more I met with graffitiists, the more I was impressed by their sense of moral imperatives in daily living. Almost all of them did express reticence about painting over old and antique surfaces. They thought that old stones possessed a certain dignity that shouldn't be tampered with. My problem was that I essentially agreed with their attitude while at the same time my enjoyment of Mesnager's work went unaltered by his transgression of this rule.

I've come up with several hypotheses to explain away the enigma, but the fact remains that I don't really know for sure since I never met with him face to face. Perhaps the best justification of his work is the longevity they have known in some

highly traveled Parisian locations.

There was another aspect of Mesnager's work that was equally perplexing. It had to do with placement of his graffiti. In contrast to Costa's fleeting werewolves in the Chatelet metro tunnels, Mesnager's white phantoms lay obscured in the darkness of the catacombs beneath Paris. Virtually no one would ever see them unless they consciously set out to find them and painstakingly wandered through miles of cavernous tunnels.

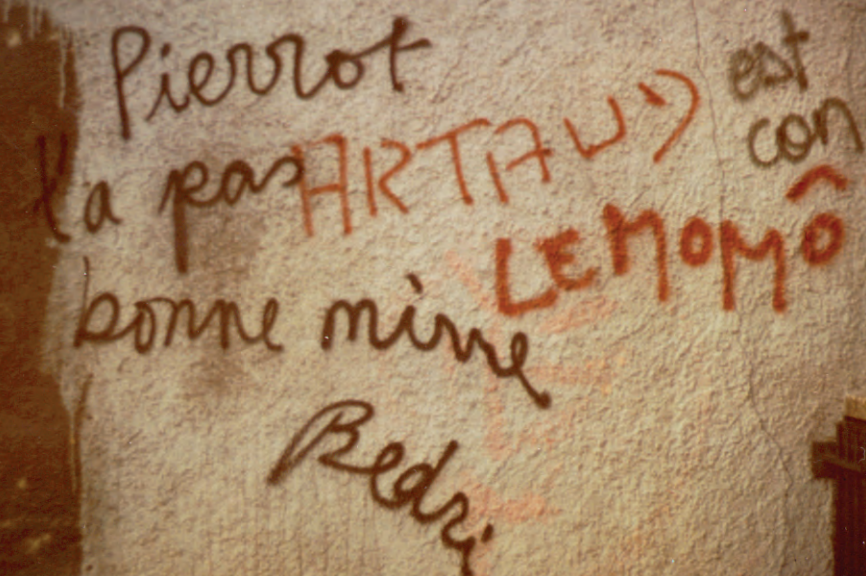
Down below, you can see the layers of building foundations. There is a whole history of architecture to be found there going back to Roman times. Mysterious scratch marks abound. Rounding a dimly lit corner, I finally found a series of his white phantoms. In the catacombs' swamplike humidity the paint glistened and evoked the appearance of a sacred place. It made me feel like an archeologist who had just stumbled upon an ancient burial ground. I couldn't just snoop around indignantly. I was drawn into the graffiti's enchantment. It seems appropriate to me now, in retrospect, that my camera flash didn't work on this outing.

To me, the white phantoms represented a kind of artist's prayer to his god. Since no one would ever see them, they would never be lauded publicly; they would remain memorable only to their creator and for this reason they were a form of mystic communion that wouldn't be widely appreciated anyways. Insofar as their otherworldliness goes, they were leaps and bounds removed from any typical graffiti or art, in which direction, it's difficult





Comments and echos are part and parcel of the graffiti's world. Like published authors subjected to critique, these vituperative pronouncements exist for all whether or not they are deserved or libelous.



to say. Nevertheless, these conundrums were fascinating and didn't seem to threaten my impressions of other more accessible graffiti.

### Baykam

Another painter/graffitist that I interviewed was a Californian of Turkish descent who had come to Paris to oversee an exhibition of his works at the Galerie Templon.

Bedry Baykam had developed some extraordinary views about graffiti when he was growing up in Turkey. Student revolts of the late 60's and early 70's had emblazoned the power of graffiti on his mind just as it had done on the walls of Istanbul. As an artist in New York, and more recently in the San Francisco bay area, he had consciously set out to terrorize the sanctity of his own paintings with graffiti slogans and wordplays. As internationally acclaimed artists go, he was quite young. And at 28, he still retained the youthful vigor that is a major part of the graffiti's arsenal. He told me of his many forays into the Berkeley night in order to spray drawings and cryptic poems about social inequality.

There was a lot of power evidenced by the brush strokes in his paintings. This power also evoked a very pointed urgency. One of his paintings in particular, Wanda Meets the Turk, portrays an obviously western female painted against a maelstrom of abstract forms. The title "Wanda..." was scrawled across the bottom half of the canvas. Indeed, its inclusion played a major role in its design.

Baykam talked at great length. I was impressed by his attitudes and his work, but I wanted to see some of the graffiti he said he had made in Paris. Following his indications, a friend and I were walking through the 5th arrondissement when we came across the same familiar scribble that he had used in his paintings: his graffiti was composed of his paintings' titles, strange wordplays were always accompanied by his signature in big black letters.

One of Baykam's main themes was the conflict between his Turkish background and his American/western European acclimation. I might not have realized this were it not for the fact that he sprayed the "Wanda" title in the alley adjacent to my apartment. The alley where it was found can be more aptly described as a 17th century covered market that bisects the boulevard St. Germain and the smaller Rue St. André des Arts. The Cour de Rohan is cobbled and quaint. It also used to be the fabled site of Danton's revolutionary presses back before 1789. The building managed to survive the 18th century version of the terror, and had been doing quite well up through that of Winter 1985. Unfortunately, it fell victim to a fire and then repeated assaults by vandals. By the end of 1985 it was in poor shape with scorched wood sidings, debris and glass scattered about the empty interior. Parked beside the building was the likewise







# The Wall of Ages

## The ephemeral, art and Desnos

charred carcass of an abandoned Renault. Someone had painted "make love not war" on the hood and even this pithy dictum was peeling off with all the other corrosion. For no apparent reason, the car was left there next to the burned out building and together, like a disheveled master and the equally abused lap dog poised solemnly at his feet, they had withstood the winter snows, the spring termites and the tourist's coke cans.

By placing his graffiti just opposite the old press building, Baykam was adroitly killing two birds with one stone. The clash of cultures theme suggested by Wanda Meets the Turk underscored the French government's hypocrisy vis a vis its third world emigrés. This graffiti, though very personal, was equally applicable to the uncertain plight of these Arabs, Turks, Africans and Vietnamese who had made a new home for themselves in France. The famous credo, liberté, fraternité, égalité, which had once been refreshing wet ink for tabloids bent on civil progress, was now laying yellowed and crumpled up on the floor of the Renault.

Baykam's second bird was his message to me. I was delighted by his communiqué because this was yet another vibrant reminder that my thesis could never be the sole fruit of a library's contemplation. It had also to come from the street where it belonged in the first place.

Even in the best conditions, it is a foregone conclusion that the material composition of all things breaks down and eventually returns to its most basic elements. There is no getting around it.

As for art, there has always been

an attempt by curators and the like to suppress this process. The presence of the world's great museums is proof of this desire to concentrate the remnants of our culture's history into a neatly designated whole and, hence, to stabilize our conception of it. If the preservation of a conventional work of art suggests that its value knows no historical limits, than graffiti certainly means the contrary; when it fades into oblivion on a street wall, the only lesson to be learned is that of our own dashed wish for immortality. In this sense, graffiti pays homage to the emotions that can only be found in the moment at hand.

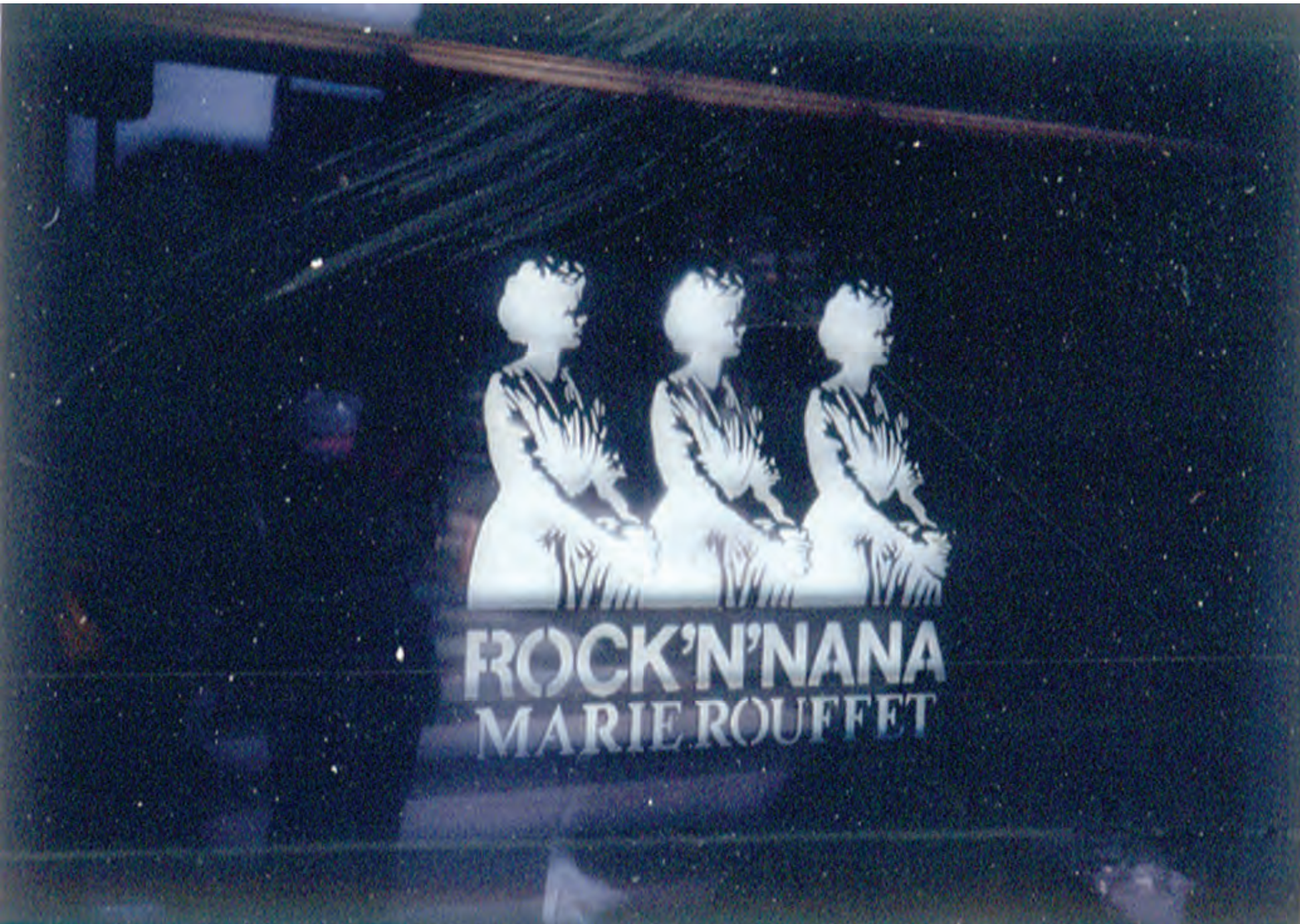
YOU ARE, ALL OF YOU, A FORM OF THE PRESENT AND A CREATION OF OUR IMAGINATION.  
(Robert Desnos)

Perhaps, it is the ephemeral quality of graffiti that incites people and poets to talk about it the way they do. By looking at the life of a graffiti, the slow dissipation of our own bodies becomes apparent, and, likewise, that of our own selves. For many people, this can mean nothing but an ill-omen of death, and is understandably shunned or made the object of scorn as a result.

It can also set off an investigation of the past where the person that we once were lays shrouded by prejudice. Going beyond an apology for his immortality, man has tried to justify his own short passage on earth with many noble *raison d'être*. For example, we console ourselves with grand and honorable generalities that run through the culture. We invent luxurious mythologies peopled with archtyped emotions that render every human action







crystalline and predictable. This is not, of course, a vain pursuit. Indeed, much great art was born of these ponderings.

On the other hand, it is the modern arts that have so eloquently shown that these truths in and of themselves do nothing for our elemental anguish. Desnos' suggestion cries out against this denial of mortality. Instead of placating oneself with dry generalizations, he insists on the validity of actions and feelings which occur in the present. In other words, nostalgic emotions represent nothing more than delusions of grandeur. If Desnos' suggestion could be likened to a recipe, there would be three ingredients: one part that admits to the particular in ourselves; another part that is aware of the phantoms which haunt reality; and the last part that can freely tap into this personal luxury.

ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS TO SCRATCH THE SURFACE TO SEE THE DESIGN OR THE MAXIM OF OUR BYGONE TIMES. (Desnos)

Moreover, Desnos believed that a genuine self-realization could come about through the demands of the artistic process. The relief of the anguish caused by mortality and the unknown was for Desnos and the surrealists a quintessential feature of their investigations. For them, it was precisely the ephemeral quality of graffiti, its surprise birth and eventual destruction, that beckoned for an appreciation of the present and a refusal of the chains of bygone times with its worries.

### Roots

One of the first comments that anyone will offer about graffiti is that, as an artform, it is a quite simplified bird. This assessment is actually far off the mark. For instance, I have seen many pieces, which, though they had seemed extremely primitive in nature, had obviously been worked and reworked over a period of time.

What this above remark was describing, however, was none other than the graffitiists' preoccupation with rarefied images and forms. If you go to a museum of contemporary art you'll hear similar comments. 500 years of classically realistic art still hangs over the heads of this century's artists. The simplification of a subject matter's form is, for them, a very real consideration.

At the turn of the century, freestyle painting as we know it today was still undiscovered. Nevertheless, major changes in the conception of the artistic process were in the offing. As form became simplified, so too did structure become diminished. No longer did the traditional nomenclature of painting hold credence. Perspective gave way to two-dimensionalism; light and shadow were lost to pure color play. By the time that Picasso unveiled his *Les Femmes d'Alger* in 1907, the art establishment hadn't yet caught up to his modern vision of a world made up of archetectonic units. Still, this was just the beginning. Picasso's vision was, in fact, imbued with a specific methodology that did eventually become





available to the rest of the pack.

The real missing link between a modern art movement and our old friend graffiti would have to wait yet another 15-odd years till the cataclysm of the First World War. Only then could the chaotic tumult that a wall saturated with graffiti inspires be compared to its contemporary social environment.

The art movement that grew out of this chaos was Surrealism. Setting aside a strict methodology, the surrealists based their art on all non-intellectual processes. Poetry inspired by automatic writing, painting and film give echo of the world thrown in moral disarray that was Europe after 1914. Their retreat from the repugnant reality of war led them to conjure phantasms, daydreams

and opiate-laced reveries. The field of exploration would be the human conscious from which, they said, the act of creating a work of art was more real and more productive than any other human endeavor.

The surrealists were perhaps the first admirers of graffiti. The urgency of the act of making graffiti was of a singular importance to them. Moreover, in graffiti they saw such a tight correspondence with automatic writing that they published entire canvases filled with the scrawls and scribbles of artists fascinated by this new artistic approach.

At once incredulous and revolted by the malaise in Europe during the First World War, the surrealists fought against the old institutions that they believed to be at the heart of the problems. Around this time, the first meetings of the Dadaists were

also taking place in Zurich. Expatriated artists from the four corners of Europe turned the city's cafes into a hotbed of social discussion. Their meetings often turned into outrageous demonstrations where the outlandish and the shocking seemed to be the order of the day. Their goal was to shake up the staid neutrality of Zurich with a plan of action that caused many scandals.

In the United States, the moral atmosphere wasn't as fragile as it was in Europe. Nevertheless, New York galleries were experiencing an American reaction to the war that was just as vitriolic as the European version. New York proved to be a dominant force in the latter artistic outspreading. "We marveled at the first things that he [Marcel Duchamp] unveiled under the name of Ready-Mades, everyday objects promoted to new artistic status due to the sole fact that the artist had chosen them." (Michel Samouillet)

The Ready-Made that attracted the most attention was also the work of Duchamp. In 1917, he sent a typical porcelain urinal to the exhibition at the Grand Central Gallery under a pseudonym. The offering wasn't accepted but it precipitated an uproar throughout New York and elsewhere. He used the urinal as a pretext to cast doubt not only on the notion of art but also on the role of the artist in that creation.

Like the dadaists and their "Ready-Mades," the surrealists were intrigued by the queer finds (like graffiti) that daily life presented in abundance. However, they went farther than Dada because of





their use of these objects. The surrealists proposed a liberation from the Superego, as enumerated by Freud, and a welcome to the findings of the Id which, for them, was considered the point of origin of all artistic activity. These finds, and likewise the creation of one could open up the way toward such investigation. They believed that art couldn't be justified without using the unconscious as its springboard.

The pictorial aspects of this heritage have left a lasting influence on the modern arts. Like the surrealists, contemporary artists haven't ignored the validity of the marriage of text and image in their works. A German painter living in Paris, Peter Klasen, is a good example. His canvases examine normal objects seen telescopically.

Klasen's minute attention of things (walls, spaces and architecture)

highlights signs, posters and even graffiti that are attributes of the same area.

It is a seemingly non-subjective point of view reconstructed by chance that designates a new sense of meaning to the objects pictured. Thus, to look at a painting of Klasen's is to be struck by an overwhelming range of information: the significance of the objects themselves and the meaning elicited by their arrangement together. For certain artists, this kind of mixture has become a sine quo non in the work: "Image and text are conceived of together, they couldn't exist any other way because they're complementary." (Baykam) Obviously, the graffiti seen today takes full if not unconscious advantage of this liberty. Conversely, the appearance of graffiti without text is hardly new.

For the last twenty years many artists have perfected what Deny Riout calls



picturo-graffiti. These are the brush or spray paintings reminiscent of traditional painting on canvas and stretcher bars. According to Alin Avila, the first of these artists was Gerard Zlotykamien whose works date from 1963.

Zlotykamien's approach is a result of his desire to denounce the unnecessary loss of life caused by the world wars of this century. The gross simplification of bodies in his graffiti marks his discord with the society's warlike nature. The flat, neutered quality of the bodies set against a wall arouses our sympathy as they silently cry of their suffering. Even though he never signs his work he has inspired the wrath of many a municipal court, so recognizable is his style. His goal is to cross at any cost people's threshold of indifference to aggression and war.

Another example of picturo-graffiti manifested itself in 1982, when a group of artists calling themselves "Zig-Zag in the Savannah" moved into an abandoned slaughterhouse in the Parisian suburb of La Villette. Once inside, they transformed the giant space into an embroiled artistic scene. They performed spontaneously in time to the old tools and traces left there long before.

They were seeking to reappropriate the space with images, sculptures and music (among them were dancers and musicians) for which the underlying theme

was, according to participant Joel Brisse, to "force the imagination into action." Deliberately working without an audience, they nevertheless took their license from the notion that it was necessary to show how ordinary objects and places could be transformed into genuinely poetic experiences. Eventually, they did attract media attention when the police forced them to leave the slaughterhouse. However, the building's owner relented in the face of public criticism and let them finish their work.

It is tempting to say that graffiti today is indeed the direct heir of the preceding surrealist aspirations and its latter incarnations in modern art. To begin with, the generation of artists subsequent to them enjoys an unreined pictorial freedom utterly devoid of moralistic imperatives. This influence is so keenly felt that older conventional painting styles have given way to canvases that betray any



classical sense of form or structure. It is commonplace for a canvas to have paint running, mixing, pouring over, spurting up, cracking open, puffing up, etc. In fact,



# New York Graffiti

## Tagging, gangs and American art

this chaos has so well permeated our conception of modern art that a subject executed in a realistic fashion often invites comments of decided confusion. Finally, the notion of graffiti as a valid methodology is gaining adherents at an unprecedented rate. The graffitist's hat that some painters wear can be their chief claim to fame both financially and critically.

§

I was getting a lot of information that I didn't know exactly how to judge. Struggling with this loss of objectivity, I decided on another path of research in order to somehow calibrate all the impressions I was having. Since many graffitists were making comparisons of their work to that of New York, I started to investigate this area by way of books and by recollecting the walks I had taken

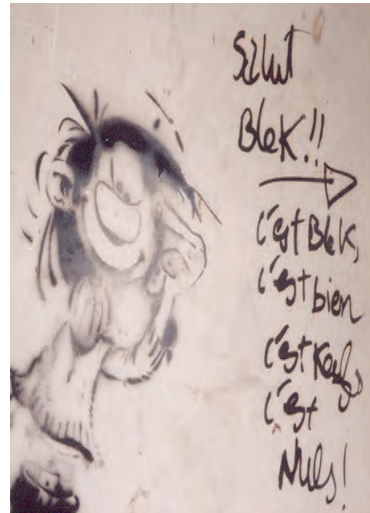


previously in New York city on a stopover between Vermont and Paris.

As I walked down the stairs into the subway station near the Village I remember feeling like I was entering a dream: it was night and there were a couple drunks milling about; the train had pulled in and it was glowing with colors intensified by the strong lights thrown from the station beacons. The light show was centered on one huge name sprayed onto the side of the car.

The colors were all primary and doubly accentuated by their thick black out lining. The word's execution was skilled as there was hardly a trace of drip lines, just the big, flat expanses of background color overlaid with expert touches of juxtaposed tone. I looked over to the other cars and discovered that they too had been likewise sprayed, but that each one had been made by an obviously different artist. Then the doors closed and the train lumbered off in a high pitched tumult leaving a view of the heavily graffitied wall on the other side of the tracks. There too were to be found names, but they were much smaller and totally monochromatic.

In the book, *Getting Up*, author Craig Castleman's sociologic study describes adolescent groups of New Yorkers who, during the 1970's, were making so much graffiti on the side walls of subway cars that the city of New York felt compelled to prohibit the sale of aerosol spray paints to minors. Castleman indicates that theirs wasn't necessarily an artistic movement. It had been from the outset an effort to paint one's name in as many places as possible without any apparent concern for

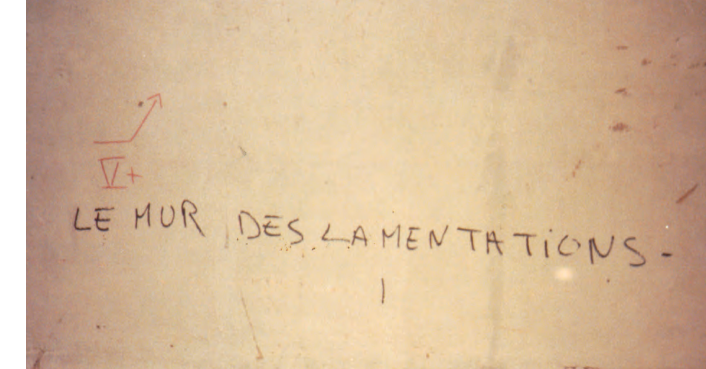


the quality of its execution. This practice's initial nonchalance gave birth to numerous variations of calligraphic styles and ultimately to a phase during which the once revered name (tag) had become only an excuse for masterly executed paintings covering the sides of subway cars.

It is very difficult to measure the influence that the New York graffitists had on their Parisian counterparts. For the most part, the Parisian art world was aware of events occurring across the Atlantic. Nevertheless, there seems to be very little if any correlation between the two movements, except in terms of the materials that were common to both of them.

There has been an increase in New York style graffiti (tags) in Paris. I am convinced that this is nothing more than the proof that New York graffitists had transplanted themselves to Paris. Only the future will tell if this and other styles will come into favor with Parisian graffitists.

Another aspect of the New York phenomenon is that the graffitists formed gangs to which they would give a name. A gang member's loyalty was a function of the violent tradition in New York ghettos. The graffitists would often have recourse to their gang for aid during a name writing spree in unfriendly territory. The



many tag invasions inspired sometimes violent reprisals between competing gangs. In only a few cases, graffiti or "writing" gangs would use their art work as a creative outlet of the pent-up frustration that these groups felt in the first place. Their battles were fought with spray cans and marking pens and judged by outsiders. Unfortunately, these attempts to pacify rival gangs also met with sometimes tragic results that rendered the city officials of New York incapable of helping the gangs break through their vicious circle of violence.

It is important to note that a gang member's average age was sixteen years, and, since minors enjoy relative impunity from laws designed to punish adults, they weren't motivated to discontinue their activities until the age of eighteen, when they could be duly tried by a court as an adult. For this reason, a

majority of writing gang members also retire around this age. To my knowledge, there has never been a group of Parisian graffitists organized with the same intent as New York gangs. That is, out of the fear of a violent reprisal for having stepped over a territory. It is true that the groups are not always in agreeance on matters of styles, messages, etc, but they have never fought over this either. And, for the most part, they have nothing but the highest esteem for the work of another graffitist, regardless of his group's associations.

Like the rest of New York, or America for that matter, the ghetto graffiti was anchored in a kind of visual overkill which left little room for pure aesthetic



# Media and Graffiti in France

appreciation. I was interested by the lettering styles, the bold use of color and finally, the names themselves. It seemed that function superseded form in this graffiti, so much was each name like a billboard calling out for your attention. You spent some time thinking about the name, the person behind it and his condition in this world. But in the end, what did you have? Relevant personal information about the artist in order to better evaluate the work, or relevant descriptive information from the work in order to understand the artist? It wasn't very clear. After all, isn't it true that so much of America's appreciation of art revolves around the myriad details concerning the life style of the artist as a marketable personality in society. We go to great lengths to know which Manhattan nightclub he frequents, with whom he dances when he is there, if he has stayed in the same little studio for the last twenty years or if he's treated himself to a chateau in the south of France where he throws huge gala events in honor of his elite peers.

The fact that the work of an artist seems to have been relegated to a position of secondary importance is not merely

a semantic oversight. It is more closely bound to the subtle transformation of our conception of modern art. The art that was once considered valuable in its own right has now become a part of a vaster sociological context for which the artist's identity is his life blood.

For the gangs of graffitist/warriors, so bitterly disenfranchised in the seamless urban ghetto, so incessantly browbeat into psychic submission by the barrage of modern medias, a glimpse at an article in People Magazine describing one of these gala events might have been all they needed to start their own blitz. So they invent a name that echoes a medieval-like yearning for chivalry and status, steal an aerosol can from the local hardware store (fore the code of graffiti ethics insisted on this practice), go out and brave the rival gang's sacred territory and leave a mark of their temerity to be seen by all passersby. It was an identity proclamation stating in no uncertain terms that the maker had transcended ordinary urban blight and, aided and abetted by a dash of good ol' twentieth century publicity hype, had crawled up into the womb of self-knowledge.

American artists seemed to be dealing in images of identity too, much like the New York graffiti artists. It was as if their art was only intended to advance their media persona, and not any personal artistic exploration. Art had nothing to do with media blitzes, yet in America, the fine line between art trend setting and media wizardry was fairly indistinct.

The making of graffiti has always been a traditional activity with its first documented traces dating from the







earliest civilizations. Of course, particular cultural signs and symbols pervade each country's graffiti, but, for the most part, the aspirations and grievances which graffiti echoes are similar in a greater human context. France is no different and its graffiti owes some of its peculiarities to a few uniquely French characteristics.

France in this century has experienced such a rapid evolution in the means of communications that almost every aspect of the culture has metamorphosed, including the perception of graffiti. The technical revolution intervenes in such a way that no one can escape from its influence: daily affairs are accounted for, classified and verified at a speed unimagined by even the most immediate ancestors. The medias as we know them can be considered as the prodigal children of this same revolution. Within the last 50 years they have outgrown their first set of clothes and now everyone in France has been more or less conditioned by their advantages as well as their disadvantages. Compared to America, France was relatively tardy in establishing its own media industry. This is true for several reasons, the most important of which being the devastating economic effect of the two World Wars and the sluggish recovery they precipitated. With the concentration of capital and high technology as a requisite for a start up of such an industry, France found itself lacking due to its war wounds.

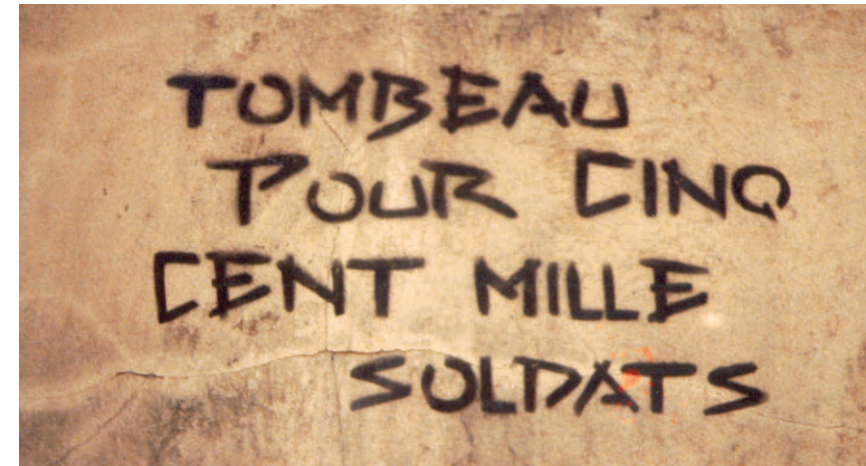
Another perhaps arguable factor might

be the rigid control held on the fledgling industry by the state, its chief backer and benefactor. Until the mid 1980's, there were less than a handful of television stations. Soon thereafter, an attempt at decentralization paved the way for more pioneering efforts and innovation. Nevertheless, with the exception of radio, which enjoys a full range of programming,



the country witnessed a reign of mass media conglomerates developing in the last twenty years between 1965 and 1986 having access to the financial and technical means to manipulate the nation's television viewing habits.

The commercial monopolies arising out of the media revolution were not without their drawbacks. For instance, one of them was to curtail the a normal user's input on his desired programming. The new trends in programming



sacrificed local services and news in favor of increasingly generalized and watered-down interests.

It wasn't surprising to see France welcoming the decentralization of these monopolies. Likewise, there was an appreciable gain in popularity of non-commercial format radio and television stations. Many people nurtured from this decentralizing movement became aware of their role as a passive consumer in the French media universe. They in turn heartily welcomed the new and smaller media companies who seemed better suited to respond to their more particularized needs.

The weariness of the large producers of media was equally felt in the area of



publishing. Self-publications of small editions therefore became the normal companion of the larger companies on book store shelves. Since the smaller publishers could never wield the same capital as the larger ones to finance their edition costs, they started experimenting with new printing procedures and graphic styles echoing their modest conditions. The smaller publications often made outright fun of the larger ones, which they could never truly imitate, by creating images and texts just as grotesque as their means permitted.

Art too is a form of media, and the critics haven't spared its stomping grounds, the public museums, either. Immense institutions like the George Pompidou Center in Paris attract equally immense crowds that would like to absorb their dose of culture in one single place and at one single time. These institutions rightfully take upon themselves the task of presenting as much culture as their government subsidies can procure. The criticism of these institutions is that they have lost touch with the social impetus of the art they are supposed to protect and that they have become puppets to bureaucrats' planning at the state level. The critic's argument is that this careful planning is meaningless if it doesn't serve the art that is being created at the moment.

Arising from the same tendencies, the question comes to mind of exactly the obligation that these institutions have towards the art they are entrusted to preserve. "There is something inside of



us that resists the notion that art which is locked up, hung up and protected by security is a lively artform." (Genevieve Breerette) Even without addressing ourselves to the question of the inherent competition in the world of professional art, it is nevertheless necessary to give a thought to the people for whom art is intended. The work which catches our eye requires that we get as much as we can from its inspiration and that we try to enter into its privileged realm of creativity in spite of the gap between our observation of it and its moment of creation.

This theatre of emotion beckons for our regard. And so it goes for graffiti. It is there, not locked up, hung up nor protected by security. It is arrogant in the sense that it reminds us of life with all of its colors and textures. Its background is the real world where the collective life of people is managed. The appearance of graffiti in the street seems to be a reaction to the modern media mechanism and its inherently restrictive nature. The artist, heeding only the demands of his artform, isn't necessarily inclined to adopt modern media techniques. And so in order to spread his gospel he has turned to public wall that, when turned into artwork, expresses a little recognized thirst for personal communication that is far beyond the control of the institutionalized state.

#### Bombs Away in Paris

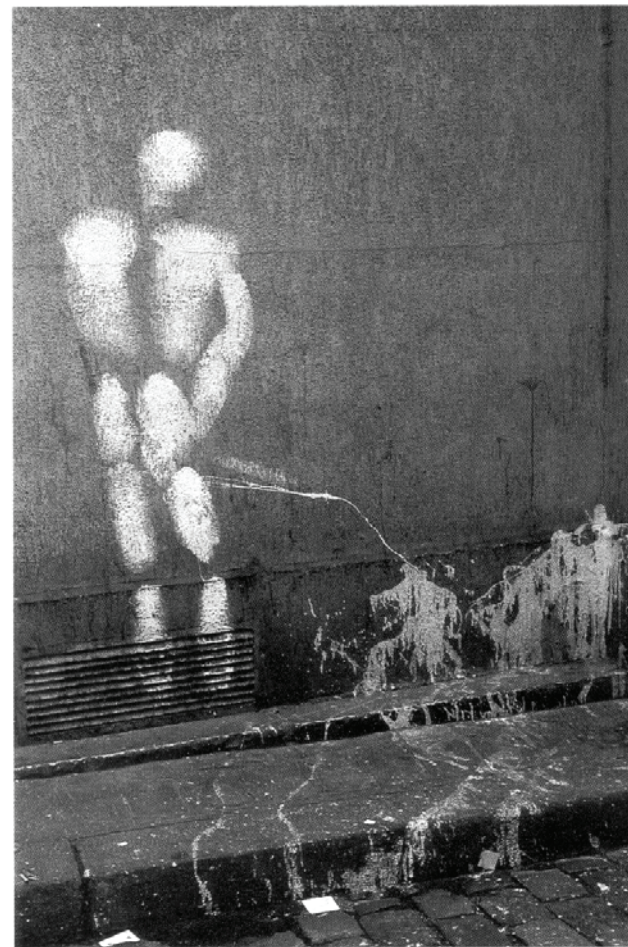
In the warmth of the Parisian Spring things were jumping, and smashing, and breaking. The winter storms had

finally passed and it seemed like the warmer temperatures had brought every known and unknown terrorist out from his closet.

The crisis arose out of the French government's decision to prosecute a handful of PLO terrorist sought in conjunction with the gangland-type killing of a highly placed French business executive.

Soon thereafter, letters and phone calls came in demanding the immediate release of the alleged murderers or else. The government held firm and then the attacks started.

In what was a series of bloody assaults, two in particular hit a critical nerve point: the first was the bombing of the shopping center Le Forum des Halles where one person was killed and another sixty people were wounded. The Les Halles mall was a

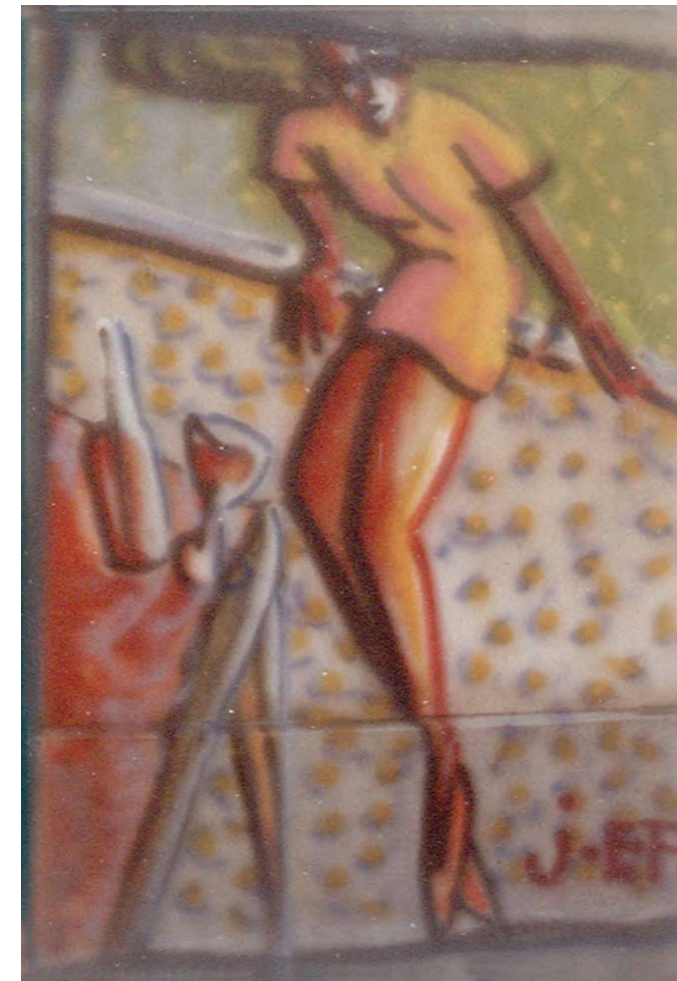


prime target because it is located directly above the largest transit artery in Paris. Virtually every citizen who doesn't have a car or a motorcycle passes through its electronic guichets on his daily commute to and from work. The second bombing was less strategic than the Les Halles attack, but its effects were similarly traumatic. The book store Gilbert Jeune was located in the Place St. Michel and it had been a Parisian landmark for decades. Although no one was killed and the number of those wounded was far less than Les Halles, the building was completely sacked, and consequently the management icily announced that the store would not be reopened due to prohibitive reconstruction costs.

The city shuddered with each new announcement of violence. It wasn't a time of war, yet we all had the feeling that going outside entailed an unknown risk. Of course life went on as usual, the two World Wars that had trampled across the flat plain from Germany guaranteed a stoic resignation in this period of trouble. Nevertheless, there was always an undercurrent of paranoia attached to even the most simple conversations. If you could avoid it, you didn't go to Les Halles even if it and the quarter surrounding it were home for any and every form of personal necessity.

The spree of violence was also adding fuel to the Le Pen contention that the nation's woes would cease by closing the borders to all Magrebains. In response, groups of Arab students demonstrated at the university in an effort to both prove

their loyalty to France and to protest the random searches carried out by the police. Other groups of Arab students demonstrated also, but their protest was one of solidarity with the tenants of Islam and the Arabic world. There threatened to be some clash between these groups every couple of days. Tensions were running high. In short, this wasn't a good time to be a person of color in France. Police were stationed outside of every important site





# art criticism and societal neurosis

## § Avila



in Paris. They were likewise given carte blanche to stop and hassle anyone who looked suspicious.

I remember one day in the Mazet when two usually sleeping French prejudices suddenly woke up screaming. I was sitting with my Israeli friend Ares when the barman Patrick came over to get our order. He took mine and walked immediately away into the steamy recesses behind the bar counter. It was obvious that he had purposely ignored Ares' order so I yelled over to Daniel, the owner, to get my friend a drink. He snickered back that no Arabs would be served today. When I informed him that Ares was an Israeli he shot back coldly, "they're all the same, aren't they!?"

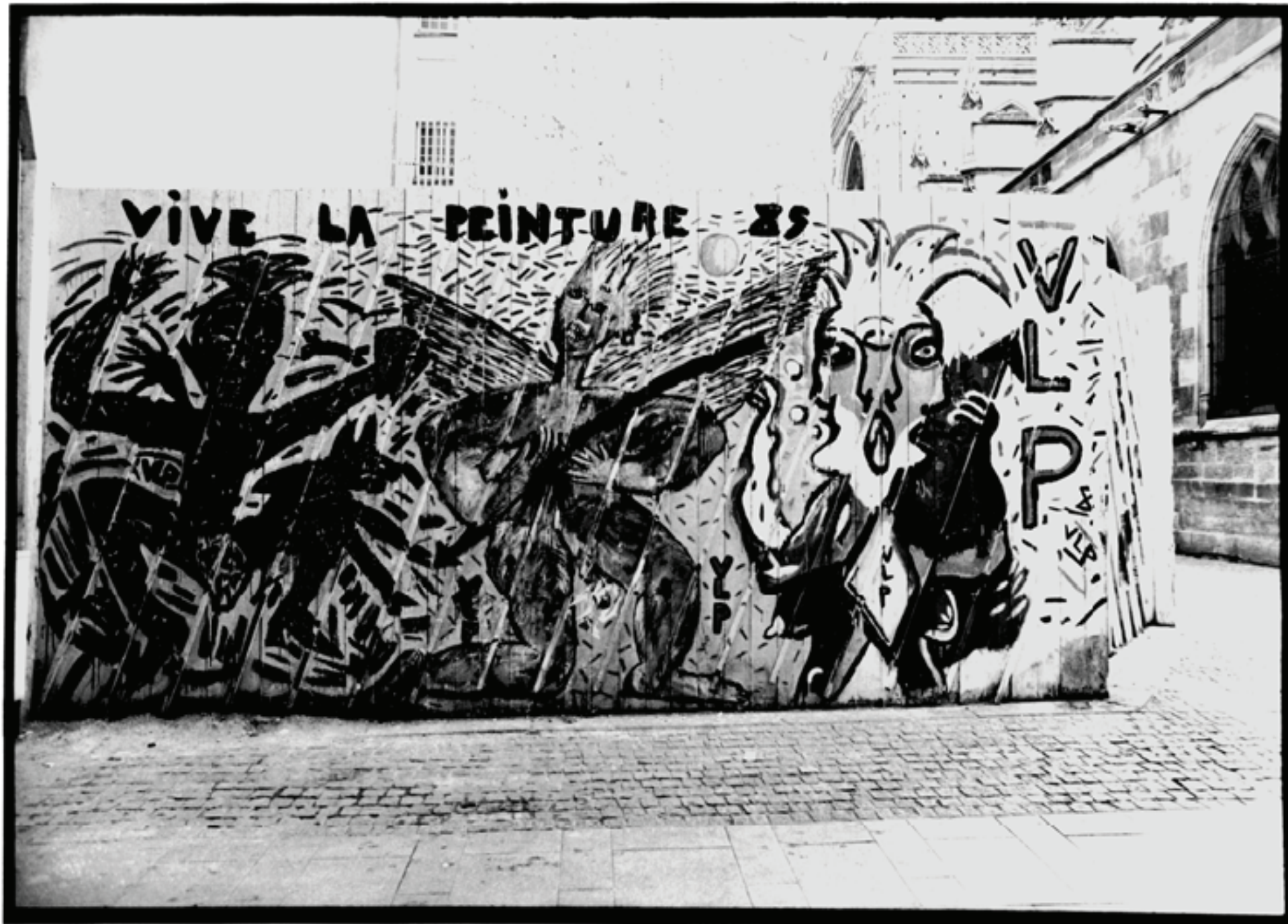
Throughout the terrorist debacle, there was one unexpected, pleasant side affect. Previously, buskers had always to be on the look out the for police who would invariably break up their show thus depriving them of their living. The band members and I had long since developed a third eye in order to detect oncoming police. Now, with a vast majority of the police force being deployed to safeguard possible bomb targets, the streets became an unchecked haven for roving musicians. Even if they did see us playing, they would just walk on by without giving so much as a glance in our direction. After all, we weren't stockpiling molotov cocktails in the guitar cases, and they knew it. Besides, we were providing a much needed public service in that, at least for a moment, the audience could bury its frustrations in the beat of an up-tempo song.

With playing in the street having become so easy, other buskers and I started aiming our sights on the summer cornucopia far and away the most lucrative and enjoyable time to busk in Europe. Some of them were already leaving as the competition from incoming buskers was turning the streets into a musical breadbasket.

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I was heading up the banks of the Canal St. Martin for what was going to be my last interview. I was to meet with Alin Avila, a well-known French art critic and lecturer. I guess I had arrived a little early and I asked a man who was tinkering an artist's studio on the bottom floor for the directions to Avila's apartment. It turned out to be Avila and he seemed a bit put off by my early arrival. We exchanged formal greetings and he lead me up the stairs to his place.

Most Parisians will drink coffee at the drop of a hat. With their coffee they consume a mountain of sugar that would make most Americans gag. I had never really gotten used to the sugar, but I was definitely addicted to my morning espresso, so when Avila offered me what was to be my third cup of the morning, I wasn't sure what the consequences might be. I finished it rather quickly and within 15 minutes of getting there, I was so wired that you couldn't have scraped me off the ceiling with a spatula. My agitated state luckily corresponded with Avila's high strung personality. Things warmed







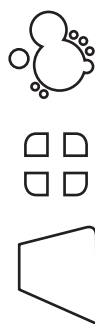
up between us at this point. The critic was responding to my questions with a puppy's energy and a scholar's measured brilliance.

Avila's overriding credo in life was that we must use our information as if it were a tangible tool. To him, relevant ideas were the distilled essence of actions that could be beneficial both on a personal and on a social plane. This sort of critical thinking tends to coexist well with academic institutions whose charters are based upon researching new things. We both agreed that society is conditioned to accept rebellious behaviour from its younger members because they, themselves, are engaged in the act of learning. It's okay if there is a demonstration on a university campus, but God forgive us if normal people became involved. After college, radicalism is supposed to be replaced with the sense of realism that increased responsibility brings. Avila wondered why this tendency toward rebelliousness is lost

to most responsible adults. People were always nipping controversial ideas in the bud because they wished to conform to a hypersensitive conception of social graces.

He too was enamored of Parisian graffiti and he spoke admiringly of the artists who made it. He was impressed by their willingness to embrace an issue and take a personal stand in its enunciation. And it didn't come to him as a surprise that the level of graffiti art work was often comparable in scope and importance to that which was being turned out by traditional artists.

We discussed a recent exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou that had featured the advertising, literary and commercial images of the printed word in media. In the middle of the exhibit was a wall of graffiti that had been lifted from a construction site in Paris. Everything about it looked authentic: the jagged nails protruding from the wood, the rain stains that had dripped down and dried, the chipping paint, etc. Out of all the technically engendered images there, however, the one that was supposed to have had the least treatment was actually the that looked the most staged. Perhaps it was because all the other images were so clean and manicured that the rude graffiti stuck out like a sore thumb. It looked so rustic, in fact, that I had a lot of trouble believing that the curators of the show hadn't tried to enhance it in



some way. I'm sure their intentions were honest enough--this was indeed one of the multitudinous ways to portray a word or words. There was something about it that seemed very ingenuine and pretentious.

I recounted a story to Avila. The friend with whom I had gone to the museum that day felt the same way as I did about the exhibition. Together, we decided to put on one for ourselves. We went to the main lobby, took off our shoes and arranged them in a pile. He took out a sketch pad and started drawing the still life. I marched around it a couple of times coming in close and then walking away, all the while studying it intently.

Pretty soon, we had a small crowd looking at our show with us. I listened to approval of it in three languages. A museum aid walked over. His initial curiosity turned into frustration when he was unable to answer an onlooker's question about it. When he couldn't find an identification marker he became suspicious and abruptly walked away. A moment later he came back accompanied by an older man who, by his deadpan look, must have been a higherup. The older man had a look, scratched his head slowly, pulled out a much used catalog and scanned it. When he too couldn't figure out what the exhibit was, much less its origin, he let out a sigh. At this point my friend and I couldn't contain our giggling any longer. Laughing like fools, we walked our stocking feet over to the exhibit, sat down, grabbed the shoes and started putting them on. A woman in the crowd let out a whimper and in her worst Slavic gave me

what I'm sure was a humiliating tongue lashing. With each rise in pitch of the woman's voice, my friend and I laughed even more hysterically. The older man grew very angry and called security on his walkie-talkie. The rude boys rushed over and made us stand up. Some people there were laughing too by now and this caused a chagrin of silence on the higherup. His inability to speak coupled with the onlooker's less than serious reactions made them feel more foolish than us. We shrugged our shoulders, apologized profusely and edged back into the crowd. There no crime they could pin on us, order had indeed prevailed in the lobby, and we







hadn't broken or stolen anything. They didn't try to stop us, so we left.

My little story had appealed to Avila. He commented how unfortunate it was that society demanded all things cultural to be served up on a silver platter, and that, if a piece was going to be communicative, how it had to have at least the trappings of validity in order to attract any attention at all. He acknowledged that an artistic/poetic experience has no real relation to its museum backdrop. The art, poetry, dance and music made in the streets was theoretically real too; art could exist anywhere.

So why did graffiti seem so out of place in the museum? We were calling some graffiti art. Did that mean also that graffiti art specifically didn't exist apart from its street context? Avila answered that there was no physical way to present something that already has a presentation. It was like seeing an Egyptian tomb on formica, as in the Louvre. A painting has a frame, a statue has the space around it. Graffiti has a wall which bears no resemblance to these two aforementioned concoctions. It can't ever look prepared without sacrificing a large portion of its meaning to the preparation. In other words, some graffiti could be art, but no art esconced inside a museum could be graffiti.

I surmised that the crowd laughed at our shoe exhibition for the same reason. Before its trapping were so unceremoniously stripped away, they regarded it with the same respect as say, a Rembrandt. When the presentation was made illegitimate, their discomfort at their

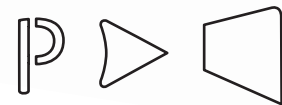
apparent folly manifested itself in laughter. The Slavic woman's reaction was exactly the same save for the way she expressed her sense of betrayal.

Next we talked about modern art's preoccupation with itself. To Avila, this kind of behaviour exhibited nothing less than the societal neurosis born of the fear of nuclear annihilation. With the fragility of life balancing on the diplomacy of elite heads of state, corporation, and other assorted megalomaniacs, confidence in mankind's longevity had been cut to the quick: since life seemed now like a precarious joyride on the back of such a beast, qualities long appreciated such as the universality of reason and justice had likewise lost their backing. In response, artists were exploring the immediately personal side of existence which needed no great excuses. No longer was it a requisite that the work reach out and touch you, the audience. No, it was now your turn to invest a meaning upon it. If you all agreed on a certain aspect of it, so much the better. If not, too bad.

Graffiti statements, owing to their very real connection with contemporary art currents, were indeed giving vent to this new view of the world. However, they were still rooted in a struggle that, by its nature, could never be as technically rarefied as the art made in the privacy of studio. It had to hit home and it had to be provocative if it was going to be worth the artist's risk to do it in the first place. Therefore, the graffitied wall in the museum looked like a caged lion next to the other pussycat images. It was



QUAND ON VOUS VOIT  
ON VOUS AIME.  
QUAND ON VOUS AIME  
ON VOUS VOIT-ON ?



## § Raba impressions of graffiti echoes

ferocious and alive because it didn't deal in stock imagery or diluted opinion that deigned to share itself with privileged museum patrons.

§

I floated back out into the cold air after the Avila interview still agitated by the dose of coffee surging through my body. Instead of taking the metro, I decided to take a slow stroll and visit some of my two-dimensional buddies.

I came across a Blek piece that I had seen many times before. Today, this familiar image bore a new inscription just to the side of it. It read, "That's great Blek! Keep up the good work, Marc." Directly underneath was Blek's response: "Thanks a lot Marc, I will, Blek." This little dialogue between them made me realize the vital role that subsequent graffiti plays for the graffitist.

Most of the time, graffitic responses to a provocative work recalled only the dynamics of anger. The graffiti echoes were usually of no great import save for the fact that, taken as a whole, they established a dramatic backdrop for the good graffiti paintings. Sometimes, however, there were echoes that complemented the original pieces, an event which turned the street into veritable grapevines.

Perhaps I'd been too lackadaisical in my reading of these echoes. Surely they

offered proof that not everyone completely ignored the street's cry. It was also clear that some graffitist didn't just paint and run, as it were.

Another such dialogue was being seen all over the streets of Paris that again involved Xavier Blek. There, next to many of Blek's works, the question "Raba est un amour?" (Is Raba your love?) would inevitably appear. It seems natural to me now that this gargantuan effort to interrogate Blek could have only been the result of a very specific kind of passion, but I couldn't be certain.

As it turned out, I learned that Raba was indeed Blek's girlfriend with whom he had been quarreling. Apparently, Raba wasn't satisfied with the way Blek was getting around to making up with her. So in response to his passive wooing, she was prepared to fight tooth and nail to get him back. Like a flurry of verdure after a spring shower, her graffiti sprung up next to his where ever it occurred and other places as well. This one piece, and the other one mentioned earlier, constituted her labor of love, which to me, was as good a rite of passage as any other for a graffitist in France.

### Elections

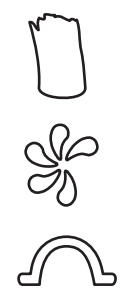
Spring finally did come to Paris and the streets again grew crowded with strolling people. The news of violence and the winter damp of weeks before were still present in our thoughts, but were now slowly receding back into the Seine's high waters. The warmth generated by





# §Élections

## mitterand, chirac and le pen



the lengthening days made all these past tribulations seem a bit unreal.

One event that could have had a sobering affect on Paris was the rapidly advancing date of the national elections. Billboards with large maniacally shining teeth appeared out of nowhere. Inquiries into on the candidates' sometimes dubious past were being featured in all the newspapers. Vans playing amplified music and rallying speeches were echoing through the tight streets. Pre-election patriotism was running high and it was being paraded all over town, on the television and on the radio.

The cafe chatter, usually the place for benign gripes against international issues and soccer scores was now becoming the scintillating forum of an enraged national debate. Even the drunk mumbling to himself in the corner was expostulating the latest high tech rhetoric. Everybody was an expert. Everybody had his finger on the national pulse. With so many winners in the game, who could lose?



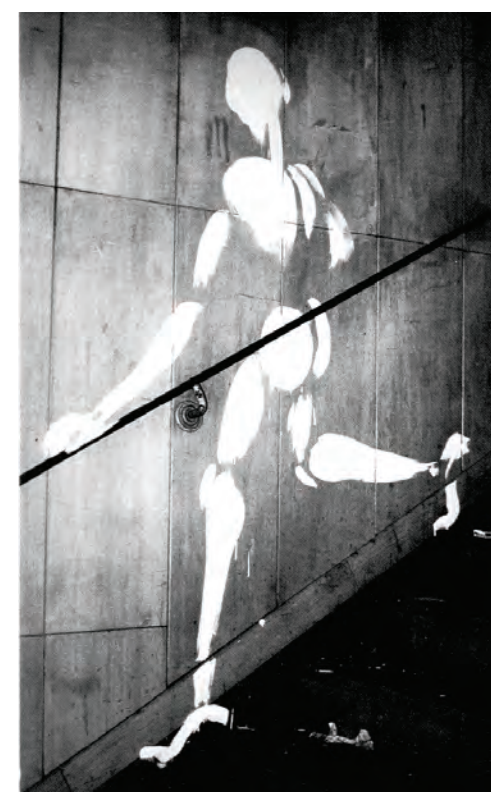
### The National Front

Unfortunately, all was not so rosy for Parisian walls. At the climax of the election season, politically tainted graffiti was in full bloom. There were the typical affirmations of the races' major contestants, and their parties.

The candidate for Prime Minister, Jacques Chirac and the conservatives he represented were heatedly pushing for cooperation with the Mitterand presidency. A liberal president and a conservative prime minister seemed like a marriage made in hell, but Chirac's promise to merge their two ideologically opposed parties was the only way to placate the socialists and the communists. In the end, the conservative tide washed Chirac onto the winning shore. Now, it was his chance to wrestle with France's troubles.

The big surprise of the election was the way the FN (National Front) had attracted so many supporters. The FN's great success lay in the fact that they had mobilized a full 10% of the nation's voters not from the outlying rural population, which the extreme right usually calls home, but from city dwellers spilling out of every possible socio-economic category. After a 28 year absence from the scene, the FN was on the march towards a new French political repartition that differed from the traditional "band of four" (the Communist party, the Socialist party, the Union of French democrats, and the Reunion for the Republic) view.

One reason for the rise in popularity of the FN was that they never showed the same extremist visage as traditional reactionaries. They were not ferociously







# oh shit, here comes the crs Getting Busted

white French parents.

The threat of his xenophobia could be felt everywhere. Many likened his party's leanings to the fascist attempt at racial purity. When a supporter would spray Le Pen's name on a wall in confirmation of his victory, a dissenter would add the letters i and s (which is translatable) or spray an equal sign followed by the word nazi. In the election's aftermath, emotions were high enough to inspire anxious meetings between FN supporters, drunken with electoral pleasure, and people who contested his means of arriving at fiscal

anticapitalist. They did not call into question the role of big government, nor did they take democracy to task. Quite to the contrary, Le Pen took great pains to defer to French respectability.

When 35 Le Pen deputies took oath in the Parliament a month later in April, they could safely trace their loyalties not so much to the party, but to the person of Le Pen. He was the FN and his keen blend of facile answers coupled with his shrewd manipulation of the media helped set the tone of the party at all occasions. His specialty was to simplify and distort intricately detailed social questions. Playing on the fears and insecurities of a France wracked by economic problems, he chose for his scapegoat those not born to

equilibrium.

At this point, France was still groggy from the huge Mitterand-Chirac wedding party thrown at the election's close. The question on everyone's mind was how they would deal with the vows they had made to each other. The morning after also brought speculation on Chirac's mandate proven power trip and if he was going to end up as a mere spokesman for the now conservative majority in Parliament or if he was going to use his influence as a legitimate leverage in dealing with the issues that confronted both conservatives and liberals alike.

As April and May were rolling by, I was finishing up my research paper on Parisian graffiti. Around the middle of May, I shipped it off to a typist and took a deep breath of relief. About the same time I started playing more or less full time in the streets with two friends. One of them was from California like myself, and the other was a New Yorker. Our trio played in all the regular outdoor spots, and did some club gigs as well.

One night we were rehearsing a few tunes on the office terrace. It was a slow night and we didn't figure that many people would be out and about. After a few songs we pulled in a large, raucous crowd that backed up car traffic all the way down the street. Out of nowhere came a paddy wagon full of CRS. Since the bombings, the street pickings had been so good we didn't think much of their presence. But things had changed; they were motioning for us to stop, so we had no choice but to do so. However, on the last beat of the song my partner leaped



off a table with guitar raised above his head and jackknifed to the ground. The crowd roared for more, but the CRS was right there. We sat down at our table; the crowd kept beckoning for an encore. The goon squad was getting furious. When the people wouldn't clear the area, and the car horns down the street filled the space, the CRS had enough.

They arrested us and put us in the paddy wagon. It took us ten minutes to get through the packed-in crowd because they just wouldn't give way. Ten CRS officers had to escort the wagon while waving batons at the people unwilling to budge. We were brought to the station where they tried to intimidate us with threats of deportation. But we were small potatoes and they knew it. In the end, we were given court summons that even they didn't expect us to keep. They let us go after an hour: there were more important things and they knew it. So we walked out and burned our tickets.

Some things had really been changed by our arrest.

For instance, the Mazet's owner was so fearful of losing his business license that he put a temporary hold on the playing of music there. And us, well, we were officially kicked out.





# a story of blek and gerard

# Blek meets the FN



It felt like the humidity at the end of spring was not quietly soaking back up under everyone's collars as expected. Instead, it was overflowing into billowing rivulets of antagonism. The change in government seemed to precipitate many struggles in daily life. Political one-upmanship was the order of the day: each party was constantly trying to get the most out of anything considered favorable to public opinion or the least out of anything unfavorable. There were beady eyes glowing behind cloaks, and daggers drawn, and everyone acted so cordially. Chirac, now secure in his new position, ordered an immense crackdown on terrorism. How he would do it was anyone's guess. In any case, the state's presence in the streets had increased dramatically.

A few days after our arrest my friend and I were sitting in another cafe griping about being declared persona non grata at the Mazet when a friend came in and told me he had some important news. It seems that a night or two earlier, our friends Blek and Gerard had been out painting their graffiti in the Montmartre district. They were working on a very dark street when, across the street, a group of FN supporters slowly gathered. The two graffitiists were aware of the group of men, but thought nothing of it since they were working on a temporary wall of a construction site. They continued painting.

Blek and Gerard couldn't have known that the group had entrusted itself with the clean-up of all Le Pen and FN posters which had been graffitied over by liberal political slogans. Since the graffitiist

were in close proximity to these posters, the group assumed that they had caught their culprits red-handed. The two were putting the final touches on the piece when they realized that a semi-circle of men brandishing boards were closing in on them. There was no place to run and the men's steely faces betrayed no desire for banter. They were badly beaten and completely liberated of all their tools along with the unmistakable threat that they would be as good as dead if they returned to the quarter.

They picked themselves up from the wet pavement and brushed off the dust. They decided to call it quits for the evening. It had been one hell of a night and besides, Gerard knew that his young son's baby-sitter would be anxious to get home herself. They parted company in the metro: Gerard went home to his son and Blek went home to Raba; each of them knowing that, at the habitual time and place a week later, they would again go into the cold night air to paint graffiti.



# Epilogue

I left Paris in early June in order to go busking in the south of France. Summer was in full swing. The street was a boisterous batch of farmers, craftsmen, tourists, strollers and musicians. Graffiti too, was being made even if it didn't parade around by day.

For those that opposed this natural course, it must have been a tough time since the graffitists hadn't disappeared, been frightened off or gone for a lucrative gallery deal. The imprint had been made. Eyes and ears had soaked up the information and maybe even some converts had been won over.

Some would start doing it themselves out of the idealistic notion of responsibility for others' welfare or happiness. And they would be perfectly right to do so. But it goes deeper still. It taps into our primal desire to cry out for our own mirth or sorrow and to cry out so loud that others might equally cry or laugh with us. The only crime is that the cry isn't solitary. In this sense, it was selfish. Those emotions were imposed on others, and it was done in a place where the light of every law of civility gleams at its zenith, the street.



# Appendix

The etymology of the word graffiti goes back to the ancient Greek world where *graphein* used to signify to write, to design and to paint. It goes the same for the Latin version *graphium*. In Italian, there are the derivatives *grafio* (a writing nib or a point to trace letters in wax), and *sgraffito* (a mural process made popular during the Renaissance). In French, the derivative verbs are *griffer* (to claw), *griffonner* (to scrawl) and *gribouiller* (to scribble), and their associated noun derivatives.

In English, we use the word graffiti in its Italian version, as well as the verb to graft, to grate (from the French *gratter*) *graphite* (the metallic element) and finally, the ubiquitous words *graph* and *graphic*.

Certain French academicians have attempted to francify the word graffiti by dropping off the last *i*, adding on another *t* and an *e*, which renders *graffitte*, and, according to standard French word practice, a feminine gender, which in turn artificially defies the masculine assignation of the original Italian. Their efforts, although accepted at the academic

level, have been totally ignored by the rest of the country, including the French press. For the non-academic majority, the simple addition of *s* renders the word in its plural form. Likewise possible in French (but not in English) is *graffiter*, or the verb to make graffiti.

