

## Skysthelimit les peintres de l'extrême note d'INTENTION PREFACE

I have been involved with graffiti for a good 20 years, going from being a writer, to a spectator and finally a commentator of this ever evolving movement. Our behaviours and habits mutated from the original first few tags we took (with Chok, Thom, Katre in St Denis and on the south bank, and, with Again, Saler, Acet and Reamz, in the North, later becoming the CLM Crew) to big mural festivals at Les Grands Voisins in Paris 14.

Twenty years down the line, it still is enjoyable to have this obsession and this passion, built up from adrenaline rushes and alternative lifestyles. The starting point for Sky's The limit was a phone call from Katre, a fellow STS crew member (Suce Ton Sexe) and his invite to discover his graffiti-collage shenanigans.

I had missed his display at TOUR13, and I couldn't bypass this new project of his. I ended up filming his abseiling performance on the side of the external façade of the building, finding myself precariously assisting him, hands-on with the camera. I began this adventure on the rooftops of Paris, at the mercy of the elements and with the unpredictability of the project itself. And this was with an immense pleasure for my eyes and lenses that I undertook this exciting new journey under the skies with many a great artist as well as a few envious observers.

Making an independent movie without a producer, nor a distribution channels, is indeed a handicap that can be turned into a major advantage.

For one, I have all the time and freedom necessary to transcribe this ever-growing hybrid urban phenomenon, at the crossroad between graffiti, street art, and "muralism", depicting it as a modern colourful remedy to the impersonal greyishness of the city and the lack of dialogue one finds in it. People stop for a minute, have a look, and exchange accordingly. Imagination starts kicking, as there is no intermediary between the passer-by and the creation itself.

If anything, the subject provides me with a unique and commanding viewpoint on the capital city, its suburbs and horizons. The artists are French and international, and I meet them in gallery openings, graffiti jams, or at their workshops. Painting, like music, is universal and resonates differently within each of us, depending on the mood of the day, and the colour of the sky.

These are the vibes I try to convey in this series. Besides the main documentary, you will also find two short 26 minutes films about Jace's mural in Pantin and Inti's one in Mulhouse, as well as a web series focused on my Chinatown adventures with Pantonio. His mural - the tallest in Europe - was the hardest and most challenging to shoot.

The first salvo of pixels lasts 7 mns and covers Astro's first wall in Vitry sur seine. The long version is 128 minutes long, for thousands of hours of rushes. Beyond the social interaction created by the encounter of the artists and the passerby, several social and political issues are embedded in the subject. Ever since Mexican "muralism", the relationship between artists and politicians has always been passionate, interested and conflictual in nature. Jesus Gonzalez Aguilar, the Mexican artist and historian,

explains this to us, in the heart of Mexico, with the Polyforum of David Siqueiros as a backdrop.

It seems fundamental to me to anchor this new school of graffiti-inspired artists, in the Latin American roots of public art. Some of the acting protagonists can also be extracted from a more traditional painting background, through art schools and stencils... and a variety of paths can lead to painting in the streets.

The style of the documentary is raw and direct; I am shooting outdoors and without a safety net, without sets, far away from classic Tv productions, where everything is written, calculated and predictable. My filming is reactive and intuitive, as I am taking risks to shoot uninterrupted rushes, with the hope to capture that magical moment. Several time-lapses have been included in the movie in order to illustrate the time it actually takes to finish such undertakings. The visuals are as important as the messages, and a certain balance is sought after whilst editing the film. I am very close to many of the artists featured, and do feel the responsibility to retranscribe their work and their passion, within this young and enthusiastic movement that is the Neo-Muralism, without any shortcuts or detours.

## **SYNOPSIS - Introduction**

Artists of the extreme, Neo-muralism in Paris

Murals, or cave or rock art, are as old as mankind itself. From prehistory and antiquity, to the Italian renaissance and up to today, humans have always painted walls, either by devotion, passion or by necessity. Neo-Muralism -as we will call it- consists in enlightening the city by painting facades and frontages, often giving vertigo to the most daring observers. This revolutionary mural art form is only pursued outdoors, in plain sight, and is the product of American and Mexican "Muralism" of the 70s. Today, it mixes with graffiti and classical traditional art from art schools, and is often produced by ambitious artists from a working class background, who benefit from the respect and complicity of the locals. As a completely unique branch of the art world, this geo-poetic movement remains largely underrated and underrepresented, often suffering from scorn from the cultural elites. There isn't a single way to define this art form, it doesn't belong to a specific school, and isn't restricted to a particular audience, it is often a simple decoration, but can also be a protest, or a statement. Without judging the result, one can differentiate between some artists who create an image based on a drawing or a sketch, and illustrators who reproduce a certain type of iconography on the facades. If the selection of locations and artists is left to curators and local public servants, the sustainability of the work itself often relies on the local population.

## **Publicity or the first invaders**

What have the walls been telling us in the last 50 years?

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, publicities were hand painted on facades to advertise for brands such as Picon, Bebe Cadum, Dubonnet or Suze. Letter artists – essentially painters – were recruited and trained to deliver commissioned work for clients. In these days, painting precise letters on a massive scale was regarded as a challenge and a performance. And even if the motive might have been to put a meal on the table, the feeling of accomplishment must have been great. This savoir-faire that disappeared in the 60s in France – and only visible today through some faded left overs on some buildings – made space for a far more invasive and "in-your-face" type of advertising in the public space. It targets drivers on old country roads and at main intersections, and frontages were quickly replaced by unappealing and debilitating billboards. The golden era of massive façade paintings died out after the 1950s in Europe.

After the Second World War, muralists started to embrace the technique of the trompe-l'oeuil (optical illusion) to enhance the architecture. Thanks to the invention of acrylic paint in the 50's in Mexico, the technique and quality of pigment became more sustainable.

Chemists from Mexico's National polytechnic institute, in collaboration with Mexican Mural masters, developed it while covering the walls of Mexico's University. But the paint itself is not the only thing that is changing: the face of the city is also transforming. Paris slums in the southern suburbs such as the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement are being knocked down, in favour of the first few new housing skyscrapers of the French capital. In agreement with the Athens Charter and with Le Corbusier's vision, the State is pushing developers to build upwards in order to free ground space and ensure more light for the units. From an initial development project of 55 tower blocks, about 30 were built between 1969 and 1977. In doing so, and without any implicit knowledge, urban planners and politicians made an amazing delayed contribution to artists craving gargantuan art productions. Those new formats are regarded as a challenge, bringing fame to the artist while boosting the somewhat dilapidated image of housing projects around Paris. Those big blocks are often considered by the population as gigantic eyesores in the urban landscape, and massive murals often become the cheap option for local government, when upgrades and refurbishment become unavoidable.

### **The first generation of artists**

Big painted advertising murals are becoming very scarce in greater Paris, renovations, conversions; demolitions are slowly but surely erasing them from the urban landscape. A new generation of ambitious artists is now taking over, operating on the unevenly smooth vertical surfaces of the buildings. Since the 80's and until this day, contemporary artists in the likes of Fabio Rieti, Philippe Rebuffet, Jérôme Mesnager, Robert Combas or Hervé Di Rosa have been painting their creations on the frontages of popular neighbourhoods, in Châtelet, Ménilmontant or Gaieté. Two schools of muralists are emerging; the "trompeurs" using the technique of the trompe-l'oeuil (a school founded by Henri Cadiou in 1955) and the others, with far

less constraints and more freedom of action. The latter group often create their works themselves and paints them directly or employ traditional building contractors and painters. Some, like Fabio Rieti are between the two; they deliver lyrical and pictorial recitals for the eyes in the manner of urban conductors.

### **The succession, the genesis of the movie**

In 2014, I started following a new wave of French and international artists with a graffiti background; Inti, Seth Globepainter, Katre, Jace, Borondo, C215, Kouka, Stew, Pantónio, or Astro, all equally motivated in taking over those derelict spaces to rejuvenate the city. Most of them had been writing for over 20 years on horizontal formats, and were suddenly undertaking this vertical elevation, often with some degree of apprehension. On the first day of the shoot, I had an appointment at la Tour13, a housing estate made available by La Sabliere, a major corporate landlord for social housing in Ile-De-France. A smorgasbord of international artists had moved in and was slowly converting the units in workshops and temporary exhibitions, while some inhabitants were still living in the building; and on the outside, the façade was also being used as an external surface to exhibit work. A few months before the opening, and in order to promote this unique and incredibly successful space, Mehdi Ben Cheikh painted a giant orange fluoro drip on the side of the tower. At that stage no one could foresee, that this old block from the 50s was just about to host an incredibly successful international exhibition. Before the first public opening, I filmed Katre on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, working on an interior display. Taking advantage of a security breach, I took my video camera around for my own personal pleasure and discovery. The following day, I called my homie Gerz to invite him to paint one of the pieces of this colourful concrete puzzle. A month later, before the programmed and equally anticipated destruction, the pieces painted by Katre and Stew on opposite facades on nearby buildings seemed to echo Ludo's collage and Rapto's pixadore. Katre delivered his monumental collage in trompe-l'oeuil, with his legendary K across the dilapidated building. Meanwhile, El Seed was going over the drip with a calligraphic fresco, while Stew produced a massive Samurai Jizzo, 5 storeys tall.

### **The housing environment**

Economic stress in France has led to many old buildings becoming unsafe, derelict and abandoned and / or with very poor sanitary conditions. Illegal occupation and squats became more frequent after 1990, and the DAL went to the media with the forceful opening of spaces in the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, rue Rene Coty, rue Didot or rue du Dragon. In the 20<sup>th</sup>, urban planning projects left little hope for the locals. In popular districts of Paris, squatters, migrants, street performers and artists often have to fight to preserve the cultural life of their neighbourhoods. People like MissTic, Mesnager, Nemo and Mosko have become the spearheads of this protest by taking over the walls in the aforementioned areas. In the same time, graffiti artists have also invaded no man's lands and vacant lots around Paris, by collectively

painting those unique spaces where time stands still. This fight illustrates the difficulty to identify and find places for popular expression and spaces to practice public art, without the urgency and stress of painting in the street. And more often than not, as soon as prominent new spaces and facades become available, there is a plethora of artists ready to occupy them and to transform them regardless of any pecuniary interest. Auto-appropriation is a feature common to independent rap music and to the graffiti movement. In the early days, people use to steal the paint as well as the support space (walls, trains etc...), in the same manner, Neo-Muralists tend to finance their expenses with sponsoring and partnerships while seeking some form of authorisation. Graffiti writing is a collective practice opening the doors to the art world to the greater number, without any guarantee of success or outcomes. Pushed by the ever-increasing media exposure of street art, public housing are slowly opening up to it, often encouraged by local town halls and associations. At the end of the day, the local population has the final word: a mural tends to be far more successful if an appropriate democratic consultation was made prior to the start of the project and it is generally far better accepted when local associations are involved.

### **An alternative to traditional institutions**

The art market has been closed to street artists for a very long time. And this might have been a good thing as far as it pushed this group to practice and grow in the street and outside the traditional channels, where the constraints and scrutiny are much greater. In the early 2000s, only a handful of galleries were supportive of the graffiti world (Chappe, Magda Danysz, Addict, Anne Vignal or the Ligne 13). In 2004, the Galerie Itinerance opened its doors in the 13<sup>th</sup> district, and from 2008 onwards, started to exhibit established artists (or on the rise): YZ, Jana & JS, Btoy, M-City, C215, Inti Castro, Borondo ou Bomk. All of them have also been invited to spray the elevated line 6 of the Metro, arousing the curiosity of commuters, and at the expense of the RATP (Paris subway system).

Since then, other galleries have caught up with this revolution, often without the prerequisite knowledge and understanding required, and it is not so rare to see openings crammed packed with people for a product of very limited interest, anything goes!

But Neo-Muralism is far more surprising than a gallery opening; it is open 24/7 and reaches all audiences... and nothing prevents you to have a drink and a toast while admiring the artwork if you feel like it!

### **The emergence of new promotional tools:**

The advent of the web: creating website and uploading information on any given theme becomes possible. As early as 2000, a few specialised urban art websites

appear, essentially sharing platforms such as Fotolog, Pintrst, Flickr, not to mention Facebook.

Uninterrupted live news and updates on neo-muralism are available via the Internet; whilst artists all over the world are increasingly travelling, responding to each other's invites and taking part in national festivals or around causes such as "Education Is Not A Crime" (Human Rights in Iran). Other specialised websites such as Street Art Anarchy (thank you Andrew for your support), Street Art News, or Widewalls have daily updates on new productions by Pantone, Nevercrew, Aryz and many others.

The democratization of access to photography also plays a major role: Smartphone with advanced quality cameras are common these days, and a new generation of paparazzi is ready to disseminate these images onto social media platforms and networks, which in turns contribute to further fuel the ever increasing volume of work. Magazines and blogs are created (as well as jealousies!) in a pictorial avalanche. But the Street Art Tsunami also generates imposters and opportunists; and so be it, history is as unforgiving as an over-caffeinated Parisian on his scooter.

### **Public art being born again**

Public opinion on graffiti is slowly evolving from outrage to tolerance to admiration and support. Consequently, in some cities, local government is changing its approach. Social and public Housing commission are increasingly supportive of initiatives allowing the horizontal walls of the projects to become creative spaces. But tackling the side façade, i.e. embracing the vertical dimension, is a different story altogether. The process is lengthy, as the green light from architects is often required, leading up to delays, and more often than not certain reluctance. A good old power trip...

Urban art association can be very persuasive with local representatives and town halls, but the implicit approval from local people is equally important. If the quality of the work is appreciated, its long term survival is guaranteed, and new social interactions might be created between the different audiences involved. Unfortunately, there are far too few Mayors (local government) like Jerome Coumet, who get actively engaged and supportive of this form of public art. Being the youngest Mayor in France, he supports and encourages the renewal and embellishment of his suburb (13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement), and his age might not be anecdotal in this equation.

His collaboration with artists from the Itinerance or Mathgoth galleries also contributed to the development and establishment of an open air exhibition centre. And on the line 6, world renown artists such as Obey himself, have left their marks,

in particular with a tribute - "Fraternite" - to the Paris attacks on November the 13 2015.

Vitry Sur Seine -the red enclave- is the best example of a city giving carte blanche to street art, without any second thought, bringing colour to the darkness of the city. Brok explains; "in the early 90s, we were a small group to paint pieces in the Industrial zone Les Ardoines, wedged in between the river (La Seine), and the tracks. It is an industrial no man's land, with abandoned factories and derelict storage facilities, where Stiby, the 3HC Crew, Babs and many others started painting.... Until 2000, Vitry was a city for Rap music, hip hop, and graffiti, but certainly not for street art".

In less than 10 years, a genuine artistic and disorganised journey took place in plain sight, with some of the best actors from the local and international scenes bringing colour to the otherwise grey and impersonal soviet-inspired architecture. Pain and suffering are often good catalysts for talent. Some of the most famous artists who painted Vitry are Brok, Bebar, Amour (Darco), Artis, Meushay, Takt, Dash, Baps, Avatar, Makio, Tacos, Stew, C215 or Jamer ; and many international artists came too : Borondo (Spain), Pixel Pancho (Italy), Alice Pasquini (Italy), HNRX(Holland), Jorgue Rodriguez-Gerada (USA), Roa (Belgium), Nychos (Austria), MadC (Germany), Claudio Ethos or Nunca (Brazil).

## **How are those murals created?**

### **Funding**

There is little way to generalise, as far as each production is differently financed. From the individual initiative of local artists transforming the walls of their local housing commission to galleries and local government teaming up to promote artists and international festivals, privately or publicly funded, the movement is extremely heterogeneous. As opposed to big productions in the 90s where each artist was receiving payment, many of the initiatives visible today are self-funded by artists willing to offer their creativity for free. Here lies a major difference between those concerned by the challenge and the fame, and traditional commissions designed and produced solely for the private sector.

### **The method**

Since 2004, artists in the likes of Jorgue Rodriguez-Gerada have painted facades using all possible means available. They use subterfuges and tricks, extended ladder and elongated rollers, as well as scaffolding, obstructing a global vision of the work; finally, they learn how to drive the several types of "nacelles". After having the

chance to park Inti's aerial lifting platform once, I have to confess that driving around in this peaceful tank is thrilling. The machine amplifies considerably man's limited means of action; but could the same be said of the modes and techniques of intervention in themselves?

There is a plethora of paints and techniques used; from Gerada's charcoal, or Arvz roller, to Katre and his collages, Stew with cans and stencils or even Vhils using a jackhammer, the combinations are endless. The sheer size of those creations requires fast and accurate new methods to reproduce the sketch on such a scale. Long rollers are essential, in order to quickly cover huge areas, allowing artists to paint 30 to 40 meters tall buildings within a couple of days.

The time required to produce the work is also greatly dependant on how much it might cost to rent the aerial bucket truck lift (between 300 and 500 euros a day). Contrary to Mexican muralism organised around teams of artists and ground workers associated in the production, neo-muralism is a display of individual strength - even if a tandem might be necessary at times- if only to take a step back and visualise the work in its entirety. On the odd occasion, some artists receive the help of a few helpers, in extreme cases; they sometimes even replace them for a while.

### **Technical limitations**

Outdoor painting highly depends on weather conditions, and Paris is not LA as far as sunlight and temperatures are concerned. Paradoxically, winter is the best season to enjoy murals, trees being stripped bare of their leaves providing an unobstructed vision of the work. On the downside, high winds and storm can make it difficult to paint at that time of the year.

These commissioned walls being official and legal, their realisation needs to abide by standards of safety and regulations, all the more so since some of them are being painted some 70 meters above ground. In practice, those safety precautions are rarely being followed. Aerial bucket trucks or Bima, bring the artist high up along vertical rails, up to the urban canopies offering a unique panorama, high above the monotone sonorities of the city.

The neo muralists paint, eat, listen to music and sleep on those makeshift workshops with zero gravity.

What is the impact of neo-muralism in Paris?

### **An alternative to over-aggressive marketing**

In parallel to this new wave of giant paintings Paris is also experiencing a new form of marketing invasion; brands like Apple or Dior are justifying their share of facades by financing their renovations. Negotiations around those public spaces are made without consultation of the local population. Sad sods! They will eventually buy an Iphone that won't work a year later thanks to inbuilt obsolescence. But let's get back to business; since 2007, the Code du Patrimoine, (classified buildings), allows publicity on the protective tarps covering scaffoldings during renovations. This is a gold mine for advertisers who regularly treat themselves to prominent museums such as Orsay, the Louvre or the Palais de Justice to get maximum exposure. According to the decree in place, the benefits generated by the sale of such prime advertising space are only meant to fund further repairs, while the surface covered can never exceed 50 percent of the total area in question. JC Decaux, who facilitates such undertakings, specifies in its brochures destined to advertisers, that the monthly price to pay varies between 290 and 390K for such key spots; while artists struggle getting 2000 euros for the same work in Paris. It is interesting to note that in the States, big companies like Gucci are starting to get artists to actually paint their campaigns, providing extra work for a few lucky beneficiaries. For the better!

### An architectural transformation

This type of urban artwork is both complicit and solidary to the architecture. It is an extension of the architecture, as well sometimes as a mean to hide it. The hands of the artists bring new perspectives, opening up to a new spatial dimension in which it is easy to drown for the observer. The specificities of neo-muralism lies within its implementation, far from the classical ties with power or governance: it boosts popular neighbourhoods and sanitized city centres, and rejuvenates countryside towns. This universal movement also reaches a population generally less receptive to art, and often reluctant to visit museums or exhibitions. And even if local government often takes credit while updating neglected neighbourhoods, the freedom and fame gained by the artists is very valuable.

Of course the location and the inherent environment of the artwork remain strategic at all time. Its positioning in relation to the sun influences the visual impression and the communication around it.

One can measure the success of a mural by the impact it has on the building, and its ability to transform the block and by extension, the neighbourhood. These artworks are far better suited at embellishing the city than any of the advertising campaigns, and in doing so, tend to shake static urbanism. They provide bearings and identity to suburbia and should appeal to politicians as much as cycling lanes do.

Will cultural services learn to spend their art budgets appropriately?

They are so incompetent in organising outdoor initiatives that they often end up giving allocated budgets back, when artists extracted from the civil society would have managed them very well. Along the same lines, graffiti writers are often

dispossessed of projects they created themselves by shameless politicians keen on taking credit for it. They are pursuing their pyramidal ambitions and careers at the expense of ground workers who have spent years establishing themselves as artists and have done the hard yards in the street since day one. This should not make us forget about the hundreds of local cultural representatives and proactive individuals who have been fighting for years for public art.

The artistic expression on the walls needs to be nurtured, valorised, respected and financially supported within our consumerist societies. As a newbie in the greater field of public art, neo-muralism, boosted by the sheer determinations and hard work of its actors, is actively fighting social isolation by creating tangible social connexions. Paris 13, Vitry Sur Seine, Grenoble, Sete, Mulhouse or Bayonne, are great examples of urban spaces opening up to large murals. Tattooed all over and covered in paintings, the skin of those cities received the colourful blessings of an international wave of artists, and the greatest majority of people are enjoying it.

## **Conclusion**

Out of reach, timeless and free of the constraints of mainstream cultural movements, Neo-Muralism is beneficial to all: locals, fans, curators, artists. The exposure that the mural has is particularly prominent during the execution of the work. The interest often fades quickly once the elevated platform has disappeared, and general public is less receptive after the performance. They tend to be replaced by fans and paparazzi, ready to immortalise the final product. Given the technical constraints, alternative or illegal productions are fairly rare compared to official and organised artwork. One should mention Bonom however, a Belgium writer specialised in roof tops who paints giant spines, monsters and nudes in his home country.

One could also mention the social contestation movement illustrated by the Brazilian Pixadores, risking their lives for a tag by free climbing facades, or even the Berlin based BK – 1UP writer's crew, abseiling buildings at night in order to paint their vertical alphabets. Is graffiti tempted by going over those monumental productions? It is unlikely, put aside personal retribution by a publicist. This spectacular and tantalising movement never stops shaking walls and retinas alike. All monetary considerations aside, let's love and protect walls and artists in order to valorise the talent.

May the paint be, may the paint heal, may the paint heal...

A big thank you to all....

Jerome Thomas