The Godfather of Stencil: Interview with Blek le Rat

In 1981 stencils by **Blek le Rat** began to appear all over the streets of **Paris.** Today, this french artist is preparing three exhibitions of his stencils in San Francisco, London and Paris. With his enthusiasm intact, his words inspire us in this exclusive interview, where he speaks about his career, about the transition from street artist to gallery artist, and...about his visit to **Buenos Aires**.

By **Laurent Jacobi**, from France. laurent.jacobi@gmail.com
Photos: Blek le Rat

How did you begin?

I studied Beaux Arts and Architecture in Paris. Around the time of my graduation, in the 80's, I was working with teens in abandoned tenement buildings in so-called "free" spaces. One day I watched the kids painting graffiti in our cabin. It was a great idea. A real trigger. We said to each other, my friend Gerard and I - "we're going to do the exact same thing around the walls of Paris"... So we bought bodywork paint for vehicles and we went to the neighborhood 14. I painted graffiti inspired by the American styles. It wasn't that bad if I remember correctly.

Had you seen anything like this before?

Yes, of course. In 1971, during a trip to New York, I was amazed by the drawings in the subway. In the 80's I was still thinking about them, something was developing in my thoughts. If I go back even further in time, I had a visit to Italy when I was young, and I'd seen traces of fascist stencils there. Despite the theme, I thought they were really beautiful stencils. Of course I was also greatly influenced by the political paintings in French Algeria and from May of '68.

Graffiti is everywhere: In Roma, Pompey and the Parthenon. It's a type of art that has always existed, a social phenomenon that lets personal expression become collective. You can express anything with it, your love, your hate…

Your career began with the French left coming to power...

Yes, but that's not to say that I felt any sort of support... I did a huge tour around France in a 4L and that gave me considerable notoriety in the press. Also, in 1983 an article was published in Télérama. During the 80's and 90's graffiti exploded. It was absolutely everywhere. A real steamroller of images. There was not one millimeter of wall left unpainted, there were tags on every surface.

What has influenced your work?

On a conceptual level, we are really an extension of Pop Art. The work of English artist David Hockney affected me greatly. In 1972 or 1973 I saw one of his exhibits and I was totally fascinated by his colorful crayon drawings. In *A Bigger Splash,* a movie that I saw 5 or 6 times, I saw him paint a life-sized character on the walls of an apartment in London. I thought it was magnificent. Richard Ambleton as well. In 1983 he painted characters 2 meters tall in Paris: beautiful shadows. At this point I had been making little rats and I decided to experiment with stencils at a larger scale.

What can you tell us about your techniques?

I've worked with stencils from the very beginning. If you don't include political graffiti, I am the first to have used them for a work of art. There are no accidents with stencils. Image created this way are clean and beautiful. You prepare it in your studio and then you can reproduce it indefinitely. I'm not good enough to paint freehand. Stencil is a technique well suited to the streets because it's fast. You don't have to deal with the worry of the police catching you.

Has the idea of risk played a role in your work?

Absolutely not. At the beginning of the 80's the police wouldn't say anything at all. They asked me only if it was something political. I'd say "it's art", and that was it. The problems really began with tags. In the beginning police usually thought they were sectarian... The repression came later, when they realized that they were just individuals writing their names. That was also when I began to have problems with the police. They attacked me in New York and I ended up in a criminal court in Paris...

It was never very pleasant working in the streets. I'm paranoid and anxious. Even today when I paint with permission, I'm always a little bit nervous.

Do you ever go back to see how what you've painted has turned out?

Systematically. I take photos, I talk with people in the neighborhood and I watch their reactions without letting on that I'm the author of the piece. It's the best part of graffiti: a moment of true happiness.

What do you want the spectator of your works to experience?

Pleasure, more than anything. I'm not interested in aggravating people. My images are clear and visible for all. I want people to love me, not hate me.

How is graffiti considered nowadays?

In France, a graffiti artist continues to be considered a vandal. There have always been a few galleries that support the art, but they are somewhat marginalised. In England, the US or Australia, the support of the media, politics and the art market is much stronger. I'm much better known internationally than I am in my own country.

What interests you about graffiti these days?

After whole periods of stencils, tags and graffiti, we are now entering into a phase of intervention in urban space. For example, I really like Space Invader, Jerome Mesnager, Costa or Zeus with his billboard interventions. In France the current scene is unfortunately quite poor. We're lacking in imagination and creativity. We're slow and it takes us time to assimilate new movements. You really have to go to London, Australia or China in order to find things that are truly different and innovative. I am a big fan of an American artist who does molded sculptures around cities with scotch tape. There's also an English artist who does tiny characters and puts them in different situations throughout public spaces.

Are you conscious of having made an important impact on graffiti?

Yes. From the start I saw a lot of people who were interested in my stencils. This interest lessened until Banksy came on the scene and brought this artistic technique back into style.

I've received a lot of emails, almost 40 or 50 a week, where people ask me about my technique or they ask me for advice about creativity. This brings me a lot of joy and I always try to be friendly. At 60 years old I'm like a grandfather. In fact, they call me the Godfather of stencil...

What do you know about Argentina?

In 2006 I was contacted for a documentary and I spend 10 days in Buenos Aires. I arrived in December and I stayed with an older middle class woman, who passed away shortly after. The architecture there is very European. I felt like I had travelled back in time. It was like visiting my youth in Europe. I painted a bunch of abandoned ships in La Boca. I also did some work in a dumping ground between two apartment buildings, inhabited by a couple and some dogs. They had accumulated thousands of things from the trash in a pile and I added a person on the top of it. I also stuck up posters in Palermo. More than anything, I had a lot of problems...

What kind of problems?

In Palermo a woman got upset and took down all of my posters. Then one Sunday morning a complaint was filed by the people of the neighborhood and the police came and arrested me. They brought me to a police station, took my passport and interrogated me. They didn't believe that I didn't speak Spanish and I spent an entire day in jail.

What did you notice about graffiti in Buenos Aires?

It's a lot more political, with very specific messages. It's the same in Mexico City, where I also did a giant Victor Hugo on a house that belonged to a bunch of Trotskyites.

Is there an element of political discourse to your work?

In the case of Victor Hugo, of course. But I don't create political messages for the left or right. I once made a David with a Kalashnikov, which got me into some trouble. All I was saying was "I don't want the war between Israel and Palestine"; if not the right of the Palestinians to have a separate state and to come and go freely and, on the other hand, the right of Israel to live in peace.

What are you working on now?

It's been 30 years of le Rat. I'm working on 3 exhibits for 2011-12, which will take place in San Francisco, London and Paris. I'm preparing the pieces now. They will be a mixture of old and new characters.

Do you think that le Rat has evolved?

No, it's always been the same. Only I've gotten much older... I'm 60 years old now. My story is over. I hope to stop creating one day because I'm a little weary. Marcel Duchamp ended his career to play chess until the end of his life. It's just a question of money. Artists don't get retirement plans or pensions...

How do you work now?

I ask permission and obtain authorization before investing in a wall. I work with galleries in Los Angeles and San Francisco, who organize commissions of my works for individuals, institutions or brands. Now I create images for the places that are available. I also continue to work "illegally" but no longer in Paris. I don't like that city.

Do you have any advice for someone just starting?

I have an 18 year old son, and I always tell him: "don't be an artist, it's really difficult". The life of an artist is not made of love, creativity and fresh water. You have to know certain recipes. You have to understand how the art market works. You also have to be able to speak to the public, to flatter them, and you have to give them things they can understand. Art is a real business, and it's complicated, with rules and laws, ways of exhibiting and of placing value on someone's work in order to establish its market value. I wasn't aware of all that when I began.

When you were starting out, did you imagine that you might ever make a living from your art?

Honestly, no. I was very aware that it was a new form of art, and a different type of expression. We didn't know how it was going to develop, but we did realize that we were developing something truly innovative. I never that I would live off of this, and that I would be known in the US or in London thanks to Banksy... I merely saw the breaking point: painting in your own studio and exhibiting in a gallery was not the future. It was a transition. Art became public, it was no longer reserved for an elite audience. There was a true democratization. In fact, there's really no contradiction between a work on exhibit in a gallery and another done free in the street.

How do you handle the fact that street art is ephemeral?

It's ephemeral and yet the mark it leaves behind is important. There's nothing left from the 80s. For example, all of Keith Haring's graffiti has disappeared and they are no longer tangible. At the beginning I didn't create works on canvas and I didn't even take pictures of my stencils. I never imagined that what I do would someday be considered a work of art. It's sad because an

entire part of my life has been lost and it's nice to have a memory of where we've been. Yes, I've kept some of the stencils. The only way to work is on a medium like canvas, or pieces of wood. I started to photograph my works when I noticed the consistency of what I was doing. For 20 years I've left works in the houses of collectors and there they are maintained.

When did you start to realize that you were creating works of art?

It's terrible to say, but I realized when people started to offer me money. My work had always had a different value for me. When I sold a piece in Christie's or in Sotheby's for 40,000 dollars, something happened, the dynamic changed. Especially for those who don't consider graffiti as a form of art.

It's sad, but everything has a price. At the beginning, I had my own discourse: I wanted to be outside the system, to trick the art market. In fact, it's impossible. You never leave the system, you can't escape it if you want to live. At 60 years old, I no long want to trick anyone. I'm not creating a revolution. I came to understand that I wasn't going to change the world. However, I continue to work for free in the streets. I give access to images the people aren't used to seeing in museums. It's the art at the corner of the street. It's the gift I give to the world.

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