

WS – GRAFFITI PAINT AND PROTEST – ep1 (EUROPE) – 26'29" version

BILLBOARD ep 1 59" / 29"

Graffiti.

For some people, the urge to get their message across, on a wall, with a spray can, is just too strong to resist.

Even if that means risking their life, their freedom.

OPTIONAL CLIPS 30"

BLEK: When I'm working illegally, I'm very paranoid. I don't take any pleasure. It's a fight inside of me, I push me to do it. I'm afraid to be caught by the police, or to be beaten by some guy in the street who don't like graffiti art.

NINA: Some people actually died, trying to do their tags. The police, if they see someone tagging, they shoot first and ask questions later.

Why do street artists go to such lengths? And, what do they actually achieve? I'm Steve Urquhart. Join me for part one of GRAFFITI: PAINT AND PROTEST – here on the BBC World Service, after the News.

0'00"

SURIANI: I really like Sundays. Sunday's a very good day because all the shops are closed. So there's less people on the street, and people who are on the street, they're not stressed, they're just walking around. So, Sunday mornings and afternoons, for me it's the best time. Because at night you have to be very quiet, and you can be suspected if someone sees someone, everyone's afraid of everyone! – there's like a tension – so, Sunday's more chilled.

MUSIC: Etienne De Crecy – Soldissimo
FX: Spray paint

SURIANI: Sometimes people will yell at you, from a window, when you're painting or pasting – they say they're calling the cops, but I just stop doing what I'm doing and come back later.

1'00"

From the BBC World Service – this is GRAFFITI, PAINT AND PROTEST.

NINA: It is actually really addictive. You get all this adrenalin rush when you're out on the streets and you're doing something that you know is illegal, but it's your way of expressing yourself. Once you start tagging, it's really hard to stop!

ROC: You know, the walls are there, and they should speak.

BLEK: You write something in the street...

VEGAN: I wanted to share things, put messages...

BLEK: ...and thousands of people will see the message. This message will have an impact on people.

ROC: Graffiti can be a political tool.

PAULO: When I'm upset with politicians, I will not punch them in the face, because I'm going to the jail! So my vengeance is painting a wall.

(PROTEST FX)

JOAO: We have message against the dictatorship, against the brutality of the police, we have message against corruption... there's a lot of commentary going on.

BLEK: If you have something to say to the people, please say it – write it in the street!

PAULO: Graffiti, street artists, we will not change the world – but it can change people's minds, and people can change the world.

2'32"

I'm Steve Urquhart. Two years ago, for the BBC World Service, I went to New York to meet some of the city's graffiti pioneers... people who, in the 1970s, were painting their names all over subway trains. They told me how they did it for fun... they weren't protesting, they were just being creative with spray cans. "Artistic vandalism", as one put it.

And yet, the story of modern graffiti goes so much further than "artistic vandalism". Where are the political points, the social statements?

Well... they're everywhere. They're not always obvious... they're not necessarily what you think they're going to be... and neither are the people behind them.

3'20"

(MUSIC UP FOR 12")

In this series we'll meet some of those people in Brazil – where the Olympics are about to begin, against a backdrop of political and economic chaos.

But we'll start in Europe – in the outskirts of Paris, at the home and studio of an artist who's been painting the walls of the French capital, for decades.

3'53"

BLEK: So this is all my stencils. About 20 years of different stencils here...

(They're all just piled up! Would you know where to find...?)

Yes, absolutely! In this big mess, I know where exactly – no, really! – I know exactly where my stencils are.

(MUSIC UP)

BLEK: My real name is Xavier Prou, and my artist name is Blek Le Rat. In the early days I was a kind of rebel, 30 years old. I'm not a rebel any more, I'm too old now, but I was a rebel in 1981. So I was a rebel, against the police of course, against the government, and I took the name of Blek Le Rat, because I was painting rats in the streets of Paris at that time.

Paris is full of rats – like every city in the world – more rats in Paris than people living in Paris. So I wanted to say to the people, oh you live in a beautiful city, but don't forget that in the basement it's full of rats, and er... it's a society completely... (it's a society full of problems as well, that generally you don't see unless you're looking for them)... absolutely.

MUSIC: Cocteau Twins – Shallow Then Halo

5'20"

Xavier was born in Paris... he went to art school, where he quickly became politically engaged... but he only really found his sense of purpose when he discovered stencil graffiti.

BLEK: For me it was a kind of therapy, because at that time I was very alone. I didn't see many people. I was very... I had a lack of identity inside the city. I didn't know who I was, exactly... I was looking for an identity. And for me, to go outside and to put my name, to paint an image on the street, to write my name – even if it was not my real name – it was very important for me, very important.

(Why? Why was it therapy? How did it make you feel when you'd done it?)

Because to live in the city is very difficult. I remember not to talk to anyone, for, I used to take the subway and feel completely isolated in the middle of people. It was terrible. I was not happy at all. So, to go outside and work in the street, it was a kind of reaction to this feeling of isolation...

(So, to paint on the wall, did that make you feel more connected to the city? Did you WANT to feel more connected to – to the people? And how does it make you feel more connected to the people?)

Because, to put an image in the streets, and come back the day after, to watch people looking – if people was watching on my things, on the wall – and it was very important for me. And...

(And, seeing them reacting and interacting with your work, that's the acceptance that you craved?)

Oh I was so happy! I was so happy. I felt like living, like a real human being.

(So it made you want to do more?)

Yeah. Of course. It was a kind of drugs.

(How much more? How often?)

Every night.

7'30"

MUSIC UP – spray paint fx

Blek Le Rat doesn't just paint rats.

BLEK: (+ stencil fx) This one, it's a soldier carrying a child, in his hand. In 2003, I made a big campaign against the war in Iraq. I put many stencils in Paris, posters in Paris, against the

Iraq War. It was part of the propaganda. It's a kind of propaganda we make. Stencil is a very good tool for propaganda, because you make one stencil, and you can reproduce it a hundred times. The more times you repeat it, you're more... the impact is important. Absolutely. And it's important to have an impact, very important to have an impact on people... yeah.

MUSIC: Flume – Innocence

8'46"

He's had a huge impact on people – not least, the British artist Banksy. Blek Le Rat has become known as the “father of stencil graffiti”.

Much of his work highlights social problems – homelessness, for example – although he has a surprising confession about this...

BLEK: I was involved in social problem, but this social problem, because I was always afraid, all my life, to be derelict. Even when I was a kid I remember, my grandfather told me, oh you'll be homeless when you grow up. And I always kept this in my mind. So it comes more from my fear to be homeless than to be a political message.

MUSIC UP

BLEK: I have to say that I don't – when I'm working illegally, I'm very paranoid. I don't take any pleasure. Some artists take pleasure to paint in the streets, it's a challenge for them to do it. For me, no, I never took pleasure. Always when I do it it's a fight inside of me, I push me to do it. I'm afraid to be caught by the police, or to be beaten by some guy in the street who don't like graffiti art.

(MUSIC UP)

10'15"

In the middle of Paris, I meet another man who spends his days dodging the police... AND trying to avoid being beaten up.

SURIANI: I'm Suriani, and for the past three years I've been doing portraits of drag queens on the streets.

SURIANI: 2013 was the year where we were trying to implement the law of equal rights to homosexual couples. That's when we saw millions of people in France going to the streets and manifesting AGAINST the laws. So it was pretty much of a surprise, not only to French people but to the whole world to see this kind of reaction in France. So that was the starting point for me to talk about queer subjects and gender issues in my work. I said, that's what I

can do as an individual. Because street art is my domain, it's what I've been doing, it's what I know how to do.

MUSIC: Floating Points – For Marmish

11'22"

This one, for example, is called the Grace Towers... what's very interesting about this guy is that he'll wear a lot of make up, and he has this long beard as well, so yeah it's pretty fascinating... (FADES)

Suriani has been a street artist for 15 years. But these dazzling, larger-than-life-sized portraits of contemporary drag queens are his most overtly “political” pieces to date.

SURIANI: I love doing it, and I really see it as a way of standing out for what I believe – freedom of expression, gender, fluidity and all that. The reaction I've had from the LGBT community is that they feel represented in a field that they hadn't been before – which is Street Art – so it's a way of getting visibility to the community.

(It's saying, “I am here – you need to know that I'm here...”)

Yeah – and we're not only hidden inside the clubs and bars. The famous “we're here, we're queer”! (laughs)

12'26"

Usually, if you see political graffiti in France, it's about terrorism, capitalism, corruption, migration... but this series of portraits is unlike any street art I've ever seen. The message is bold, vibrant, flamboyant.

Suriani leads me around some of his favourite sites, where he pastes up these massive images with cheap, home-made glue.

Doing it this way – rather than painting a wall from scratch – is quicker, and it's safer.

13'00"

SURIANI: Most of my gay friends in Paris have suffered violence in the streets, so for me, it is kind of a risk to do it in the streets, cos we never know where we're gonna walk through, but I think this risk is part of the work. Like, the visibility of the work is also MY visibility being in the streets doing it! I don't know if that's clear?

(Yes, that is – you’ve got the risk of doing the street art, and then you’ve got the risk of what the subject is as well...)

Yes. But I think, the reasons why I’m doing this are more important than this risk. And the fear – when you start doing it, you forget the fear, you just do it.

(MUSIC UP)

13’54”

From the BBC World Service, this is GRAFFITI, PAINT AND PROTEST.

**And, from Paris, on to Barcelona: a city where you’re never far away from...
a bunny, wearing a mask.**

VEGAN: This is a bunny... I don’t know, it’s just a warrior! You can see the face, it’s like, huh! I’m gonna do it! (laughs) That’s mainly what is... to be a warrior, you have to change something, in politics, or human or animal rights, you do have to fight a lot.

**The image of a masked “rabbit warrior” appears on walls throughout
Barcelona. The street artist behind the rabbit calls herself “Vegan Bunnies”.**

VEGAN: Why I started with graffiti is because, I’m playing this game of vandalism, I’m playing this game of illegal – and I’m not a company that’s paying to put out advertisement. So when you do this kind of stuff, and you try to get into people, a message, I wanted them to think about veganism, and stop using animals, stop consuming them... that pushed me a lot to go to the streets. To start putting bunnies with masks, like give it a lot of power!

15’14”

**“Vegan Bunnies” is almost a thousand kilometres away from Suriani, and
Blek Le Rat. Yet, the three artists have a lot in common. Their work’s
anarchic, and it’s deeply personal. SHE is perhaps at her most passionate
when she talks about big companies, and billboard publicity – LEGAL
messages on the streets.**

15’35”

VEGAN: As I girl – I want to say this, because it’s really important for me as a girl to say it – um, I’ve been a really insecure girl. (laughs) Which is hard for me to say. I was always, and I am always, feeling insecure. Sometimes I go on the street, and all this publicity – and you don’t know it, but it gets in your head. Like, they want to sell you all these things, they want

you to buy all these creams, all this stuff – they want you to believe in all these things. And we’re the ones that give them the power. And as a girl with all these insecurities, I can tell you that all these things I have in my head gives them the power. And, I want to take this opportunity to say to girls: like, please don’t let anyone ever make you feel that you’re less... because it’s just so... to let girls die from anorexia and bulimia... they create this competitiveness between girls, like – oh, she’s better than me – and we don’t support each other. We don’t support each other, and we are jealous of skinnier, younger, healthier... and I know a lot of girls feel like this, because I’ve talked to them, and they don’t talk about this... so I’m being really honest. And, don’t let this society corrupt your mind, your heart, your body. Respect yourself and do it harder. Because I don’t want people to go through the monsters I go through. And it’s a constant fight – I can’t say I’m over them, because I’m not over them. But I think if you help people to realise that, you are also helping yourself. (laughs) You know? So, yeah.

MUSIC: El Gremio – Dark

17’37”

“Vegan Bunnies” has made it her mission to shout about what she describes as the “invasion of publicity” in Barcelona... and she’s not the only one.

XAVI: My name is Xavi, I’m one of the ones involved in the OpenWalls project. OpenWalls is a project that wants to give legal spaces, open spaces for people to freely paint in the public space of Barcelona. Because now, you can only put your messages up in the public space if you pay for a billboard. Every other way, it’s prohibited – or it’s messages like traffic lights, or street signs, or advertisement. You cannot have anything else in the street. So, where’s the people’s voice? Where’s the communication? We’re more and more in front of screens, and at home, so, what happens in the street when you walk, when you commute to your work? I don’t know, there should be some of these spaces available for people to say whatever they want to say.

18’50”

XAVI: There was, a movement – people doing interesting things – they created a movement. And now, the only thing you can feel is control. (MOTORBIKE FX) The reputation of Barcelona, it was good, until the ban we suffered in 2005 – and after that the whole thing changed. We got the whole city buffed by the anti-graffiti brigades. People being fined and people moving to the outskirts and to other cities to paint. So, it had a good reputation for graffiti, it was known worldwide, but after that it died. It died – and we’re trying to raise something from the ashes.

19’46”

***Xavi Ballaz [“CHAVV-i BAHl-azz”) wants to “reclaim” some of Barcelona’s walls, legitimately.**

Others are less concerned about what's legal, and what isn't.

ROC BLACKBLOCK IN SPANISH

20'02"

This is Roc Blackblock. He paints massive murals that take up entire walls, intended to highlight social movements – one was on the side of a building occupied by squatters, with the slogan “Popular Power”, which became the image associated with the squatters’ fight to remain in the building... a fight they won.

ROC BLACKBLOCK IN SPANISH

His words are translated.

20'26"

ROC: I don't use if it's legal or not as a criteria for doing it. I create messages to denounce these situations that should be legal, because I want to give them a response.

STEVE: Why is it ok to be critical on the city's walls – to actually write on the city, your criticism – how can you justify that?

ROC: I mean, I never consider if I have the right, or I don't have the right. I'm a muralist, I work on murals, I do graffiti, I come from the social movement, and for me the important thing is not the justification.

MUSIC: El Gremio – Dark

21'25"

JAVIER: I'm not sure about the legitimacy of many things! (laughs)

***Javier Abarca [HAVV-ee-ay] is an artist from Madrid.**

JAVIER: There's things I don't understand. There is paint on the wall, and then there's another layer of paint on the wall – which are technically or physically the same, but culturally very different. I don't know why that should be so important. And then, there is the wall to begin with. What's the wall doing there? It's not part of nature, you know! And then again, compare the presence of a wall and the presence of paint. And the permanence, I don't know... there's a lot of questions about one, but no questions about the other.

(LOUD CAR FX FADES)

ROC BLACKBLOCK IN SPANISH

22'23"

ROC: You know, the walls are there, and they should speak. A wall that is a grey wall can become something with content, a communication space, a place to dialogue with other people, and I don't consider that to be a problem, on the contrary, I think it's something really good. Graffiti can be a political tool. It can be used to express political views, and to me it's very important and fantastic that a young kid goes out to the street with a spray can and just makes his mark, becoming identified with that space, becoming identified with that place, and making that place his own place. I think it's really healthy for people to create, I think a healthy society would be one where everybody could intervene in the street, and paint, and modify it, just as a way of communicating and creating a dialogue. I think that would be intellectually really healthy.

ROC BLACKBLOCK IN SPANISH

But is it ALWAYS “intellectually healthy”?

Back in Paris, Blek Le Rat isn't so sure.

23'33"

Sometimes it can also be very bad message – like the Nazi, they used graffiti on the Jewish stores – so, it can be a very bad message. I can understand why it's illegal... it can be terrible. Graffiti can be a dangerous thing.

STEVE: And therefore SHOULD graffiti be illegal? Do you think it's RIGHT that it's illegal?

BLEK: It always change. Sometimes I think it's a pity that it's illegal, sometimes I think it's normal, because it can be used in a very bad manner. And sometimes I said, why people don't have the right to express themselves in the streets? Why not? If you have something to say to the people, please say it to the people – write it in the streets. It's difficult, very difficult. Even at 65 years old, I don't have any logical answer to that question!

MUSIC: Etienne de Crecy – Prix Choc

24'47"

In France, and in Spain, graffiti seems to have become much less tolerated, even just in the last few years. Street artists talk about harsher penalties,

pieces getting scrubbed off walls in a matter of hours, a real tightening of the laws.

In Brazil, the laws are much more complex. A lot of traditional “street art” is now legal – not just tolerated, but celebrated – even if it carries a message of protest. But the Brazilian style of graffiti tagging known as “pixo” is definitely NOT ok...

CLARISSA: Usually, when the security of the place, or police, find someone making, doing a pixo – they take their spray can, and paint all the body of the guy. PSSSHHHH! They start to paint him – it’s humiliating.

NINA: Some people actually died, trying to do their tags. The police, if they see someone tagging, they shoot first and ask questions later.

So who ARE the taggers, the pixadores? And why do they do it? We’ll meet them in São Paulo and Rio, in part two – next week.

MUSIC up... SPRAY PAINT AND PROTEST FX

GRAFFITI: PAINT AND PROTEST is presented and produced by me, Steve Urquhart. It’s a Falling Tree production for the BBC World Service.

26’30”

(ALTERNATIVE BIT FOR SHORT VERSION)

“Vegan Bunnies” is at least thirty years younger than Blek Le Rat, and almost a thousand kilometres away. Yet, the two artists have a lot in common. Their work’s anarchic, it’s deeply personal, and sometimes it’s angry. SHE is perhaps at her most passionate when she talks about big companies, and billboard publicity – LEGAL messages on the streets.