



TOM WAITS AND RUNNING MAN, PARIS 1984

## WHEN POETRY DEVOURS THE WALLS

CAROL KINO

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE not to be fascinated by Blek le Rat's work? First, there is the curious aesthetic quality of his images, which manage to be clearly delineated and ethereal at once. Then there are his characters—the Russian soldiers, the mother and child, the faun, the sleeping beggar, the sheep—each of which seems to incarnate some aspect of the public subconscious.

As of this year, Blek has spent thirty years using his figures to tap into the zeitgeist, from the rats he sent running through the streets of Paris to the American soldier he stenciled in protest on the Berlin Wall right after the Iraq war began.

Although each piece typically has a short lifespan, it often serves as the opening volley in a larger exchange. Blek told me recently that this became clear to him in 1983, right after he stenciled his second life-sized figure, an "Old Irish Man," near the Jardin des Plantes and someone else quickly drew a pipe in his mouth. It was then, he said, that "I started to realize that you can have contact with people that you never met in the city, and that you never will meet. It's a kind of conversation."

I saw the evidence of this conversation for myself last week, when I went out looking for Blek's work in New York's Chelsea gallery district. Three years ago, just before the 2008 election that gave us President Obama, Blek had plastered a wall there with the image of a black male athlete who appears to be running out of the wall toward the viewer. He warned me that it might be hard to find. "This street art is really ephemeral," he said. "It stays only for a few weeks, or a few days, or even a few hours." He turned out to be right.

Although I located the place fairly easily, aided by photographs, including one from Google maps, virtually no trace of the athlete remained. The wall had been scraped, painted, plastered with posters—and then painted, scraped, plastered over and scraped again. Looking very closely, down amid the layers, I could see a tiny scrap of peeling paper that might have once been part of the man's head. Yet around the place where he'd once stood, an ebullient garden of graffiti and wall paintings now bloomed.



ANDY WARHOL, PARIS, 1984



RUNNING MAN, PARIS 1984



OLD COUPLE, MEAUX, 1984

Since I first saw Blek's work, I haven't been able to stop thinking about its relationship to 20th-century art history, starting with its obvious link to political propaganda. When Blek stenciled his first rat on his first wall near Montparnasse, he was inspired not only by the graffiti he had seen on his 1971 trip to New York, but by a childhood memory of a holiday in Padua with his parents. While there, he had seen a portrait of Mussolini stenciled on a wall, "a vestige of the Second World War," he said.

Because stencils are efficient and portable and can convey a world of meaning using only a few graphic lines, they have often been used for urban propaganda. In 1919, Vladimir Mayakovsky and other artists created stenciled posters for the Russian Telegraph Agency, which effectively broadcasted political, economic and military news in pictures to the proletariat. And witness accounts suggest that the ubiquitous stencils of Mussolini gave Italians the sense that Il Duce was everywhere, eavesdropping on their conversations.

Blek's stencils have often functioned in the same way, by searing an image into public awareness. In 2005, by putting up hundreds of images of the kidnapped French journalist Florence Aubenas around Paris—an act that received much media attention—he helped to keep pressure on the government to secure her release from Iraq. And by plastering images of beggars around the city, he has made it just a little harder for passersby to ignore the real thing.

The other aspect of Blek's work that fascinates me—especially his oeuvre over the last two decades when he began using stenciled posters—is its curious and poetic relationship to Nouveau Réalisme, the French movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s that prefigured pop art. Its adherents sought to bring the real world into the gallery, often quite literally. Yves Klein used people as paintbrushes; Arman filled rooms

and vitrines with trash. And then there were the affichistes, starting with Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé, who in 1949 began cutting down torn and layered posters from the streets of Paris and affixing them to canvas, which were displayed in galleries as artworks.

Without knowing it at first, the affichistes had reinvented the Surrealists' use of *décollage*, a term coined in 1934 by the poet Léo Malet, who one day happened across the image of a woman bleeding from her eye in the street only to realize that it had been produced by layers of vandalized posters. He viewed *décollage* as a way for art to be liberated from the studio, and foresaw a time when such works would "appear on the walls of the big cities—a limitless area for poetic creation."

As the art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has pointed out, Malet's utopian notion was derailed by the Second World War, which covered the walls of Europe with fascist directives and propaganda. After the war, when consumer culture reemerged, these were replaced by another sort of propaganda: advertising. That's where the affichistes came in—except that they returned the work to studios and galleries.

So when Blek, some decades later, was suddenly moved to take his paint and stencils to the street, he was in some sense fulfilling Malet's original vision. The movement he set in motion brought more artists onto the streets of Paris to join in the conversation, and has inspired countless followers, including Banksy and Shepard Fairey. As Malet once predicted, "Poetry will devour the walls."

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OLD IRISH MAN, BERLIN, 2006



GRISE ROMANCE, PARIS, 1984