

*Julien Mallard, a 41-year-old artist-activist who goes by the street name Seth, completes a mural in the 13th arrondissement.*



# BARBARIANS

HOW OVERPROTECTIVE PARIS BECAME THE CENTER OF STREET ART



# AT THE PORTE

BY SUSAN HACK PHOTOGRAPHS BY AZIM HAIDARYAN

# ONE MORNING LAST FALL,

American graffiti artist Cope2 (real name: Fernando Carlo) walked up the Rue Oberkampf in Paris to a bare wall abutting the century-old Café Charbon. A bald, thickset man dressed in a black T-shirt, jeans and work boots, he contemplated the surface while a crew of helpers tested a ladder for weight and unpacked bags of spray paint. Donning a protective mask, the 45-year-old practitioner of New York's so-called Wildstyle shook the day's first aerosol can and confidently began a billboard-sized composition consisting of the word *Cope* rendered repeatedly in blue and green balloon letters outlined in black.

"I started tagging at 11, and all I wanted was to be king of the New York subway," Carlo said during a break from creating the mural for Le M.U.R., an association

that invites prominent street artists to work in public without risk of arrest. *Tagging* is graffiti slang for writing one's alias in a stylish, distinctive manner, and Carlo was recalling an era when restless youths, who were considered vandals by the public and who didn't yet regard themselves as artists, elevated territorial marking into a complex aesthetic. Embraced by fashion figures, gallery owners, rappers and tourists, the Wildstyle subculture leapt across the pond to Europe and helped propel art stars such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring and fashion designer Stephen Sprouse.

French laws against the degradation of private and public property are so strict that it's illegal to put up a poster for a lost dog in Paris, let alone wield a can of spray paint, without prior permission from

landlords or city officials. Le M.U.R.—which stands for Modulable, Urbain, Réactif and spells out the French word for *wall*—works with the mayor of the 10th *arrondissement* to bring an underground art form into the daylight.

Today, street art is seemingly everywhere, fueled by major retrospectives at London's Tate Modern and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art; social media; dedicated auctions; and young artists looking to be the next Banksy—the pseudonymous British superstar who since 2002 has conquered the art world, from galleries and museums in London, New York and Paris to the private collection of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. A one-time tagger, Banksy now employs animatronic puppets, bumper cars and even entire film crews for witty and increasingly conceptual installations.

As early as the 1960s and 1970s, Paris artists elevated the form beyond mere graffiti, inspiring Banksy and American Shepard Fairey, among others, to travel here to paint, stencil and wheat paste walls, subway cars and other public targets. However, a police battalion devoted to investigating graffiti "rings," a 2000 lawsuit by the French national railway against 56 of the city's most prolific taggers and a 1994 law amended to establish jail terms of 10 years and fines as high as 150,000 euros (\$203,000) for defacing official monuments sent artists underground and to other metropolises.

Much of the city's street art from the 1990s fell prey to a multimillion-dollar cleanup in the early aughts that coincided with the government's failed 2012 Olympic bid. But a decade later, artists have matured, official attitudes are changing, and the capital has lately re-emerged as a street-art mecca, boasting a stunning architectural backdrop and a growing population of appreciative *citoyens*. I visited in October—not to frequent the Louvre but to witness the huge variety of giant murals and smaller works in a multitude of media

*Mehdi Ben Cheikh, whose Galerie Itinerrance deals solely in work by street artists, including this piece by Barcelona-based BTOY*



PREVIOUS IMAGES: STYLIST: SOHEI YOSHIBA; SET DESIGN: CAROLE GREGORIS; THIS PAGE FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JEF AÉROSOL; COURTESY OF EL SEED; DEMIAN SMITH; FATCAP; NICK WALKER; DEMIAN SMITH; NICK WALKER; DEMIAN SMITH (2); STREETARTPARIS.ORG; THEO DAVID; DEMIAN SMITH

blooming legally and illegally across the City of Light.

“Why do the French love street artists? Perhaps because we are still a little bit revolutionary,” says Nicolas Lasserre, director of the Espace Pierre Cardin cultural center and himself a major collector, with pieces by Banksy, Fairey, Haring and such Parisian luminaries as Jef Aérosol, Speedy Graphito and Rero. “Sure, many people consider 15-year-olds who tag the bus, the metro and monuments as vandals. But there are *graffeurs* who become real artists, and I appreciate the way they appropriate the street, create work outside cold gallery spaces and show the world in a different way, with insolence and a free spirit.” Lasserre says he gets annoyed by crude tags that routinely appear on his own residential building’s front door but nonetheless considers them as “avant art, like a fetus before the baby.”

In 2013, street-art purists decried the removal for auction of the Banksy mural *Slave Labor*—depicting a boy sewing a Union Jack—as an act of cultural vandalism surpassing Lord Elgin’s appropriation of Parthenon statuary. Stenciled on the wall of a North London discount store in the dead of night, the piece was legally excised by the property owners, Robert Alan Davis and Leslie Steven Gilbert of Wood Green Investments. Auctioned in London last July, the winning bid exceeded \$1.1 million.

Yet while most artists prefer works created for the street to remain there, many, including Banksy, see no contradiction in making a living applying signature styles and techniques to canvas and other media suitable for gallery sales. The market is particularly active in Paris, where the number of galleries representing street artists—often labeled urban contemporary artists—has grown since the early 1990s to more than 60, or about 10 percent of the total, according to Lasserre. The roster includes such high-end establishments as Galerie Perrotin, Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont and Galerie du jour (owned by fashion designer Agnès B.), along with



Left to right, from top: Paris street art from Jef Aérosol, eL Seed, Ethos, Ezp and Djalouz, Nick Walker, Seth, Walker, Fred Le Chevalier, Aérosol, Artiste Ouvrier, C215 and Stinkfish

**‘I HAVE  
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street-art specialist Franck Le Feuvre, who through his namesake gallery has introduced artists such as JonOne and Aléx-one Dizac to an affluent clientele in the 8th *arrondissement*. In 2006, Paris auction house Artcurial was the first in the world to hold a sale dedicated solely to street art; in 2013, a dozen such events took place at Artcurial and other venues.

On the Rue Oberkampf, I witnessed Parisians’ embrace of street art as Carlo posed for Instagram photos and genially allowed a spray paint-wielding acolyte to fill in some of the 0.6-meter-tall (2-foot-tall) letters. In what has become a typical trade-off, the street artist was donating his time and talent to residents of the 10th *arrondissement* while preparing—and promoting—a solo show at the Galerie Mathgoth across the Seine in the 13th.

Carlo may not have matched the \$1.87 million auction record of *Keep It Spotless*, Banksy’s 2008 collaboration on canvas with Damien Hirst, but since giving up his construction worker job in 1999, Carlo has traveled the world, been the

subject of books, appeared as a character in video games, designed clothing and accessories for Adidas, had his graffiti tag appear in the DreamWorks Animation movie *Shrek the Third* and painted live at the most recent Art Basel Miami Beach show. In October, the panel of a New York subway sign he once graffitied was auctioned at Drouot in Paris for €5,500.

Unlike the scene in London, where street art and street-art galleries are concentrated in the East End and Shoreditch, the Paris scene is geographically dispersed. The most-interesting work tends to be located in an arc stretching from the Canal de l'Ourcq through Ménilmontant, Belleville and Oberkampf, along the Canal Saint-Martin and over the Seine into the 13th. Riders on the elevated sections of the No. 2 and No. 6 metro lines have a clear view of art-covered rooftops.

For an overview, I arranged a walk around the neighborhoods of Oberkampf and Belleville with Demian Smith, a lanky 30-something Brit and former freelance journalist who relocated from London in 2012 to found Underground Paris, one of the city's first street-art tour companies. "Banksy has been a massive tourist draw in London, but all the CCTV cameras make it difficult for younger artists to develop," Smith said. "The energy of street art comes from the rush of adrenaline from breaking rules, and artists have to pass through this stage to get better. Paris artists still have that spirit of resistance and fraternity, which helps keep the city ripe for street-art culture."

We set off on a three-hour walk from Carlo's freshly painted wall, which would be replaced a few weeks later by the work of a subsequent Le M.U.R. invitee. In the meantime, it would be vulnerable to weather, vandalism, creative layering by other artists and even theft. In 2010, police, notified by an angry school principal, erased *Le Corancon*, a provocative mural depicting ladies wearing veils and *abayas* kicking up their heels, a mere 90 minutes after British artist Nick Walker painted it next to a 10th *arrondissement lycée* in response to the French ban on Islamic head





*A mural by Paris-based duo Jana and JS on Rue Jeanne d'Arc in the 13th arrondissement*

scarves. In another infamous case, a 2012 stencil by Vhils, a 26-year-old star from Lisbon, was peeled off its wheat-pasted underlayer in the dead of night. Judging by auction results for Vhils's smaller pieces, the stolen work may have been worth as much as €300,000, Smith estimates.

Our tour had the serendipitous nature of an African safari, with Smith a meticulous tracker of graffitied walls, rooftops and delivery trucks. Smith pointed out a portrait by Melbourne artist Vexta ("I heard she was in Paris but just noticed this a few days ago," he told me) and, on a 19th-century rooftop, a winged, lemon-yellow feline by local artist Monsieur Chat.

Off the Rue Dénoyez, a graffiti-covered pedestrian thoroughfare, I was startled by a sophisticated mural depicting a skeletal crow perched upon a boat shaped like a baleen whale being pulled into the sky by a balloon shaped like a human heart. The anatomical detail, fine black-and-white brushwork and outlandish imagination of Puerto Rican artist Alexis Diaz suggested Albrecht Dürer on acid.

The French love to say that graffiti originated with human handprints in the caves of Lascaux, but art historians agree that post-graffiti street art within Paris emerged in the vast ruins of Les Halles, the central produce market torn down in 1971 to make way for a subway station and a modern shopping mall. In the eviscerated space, artist Gérard Zlotykamien spray painted silhouettes of prone bodies in an evocation of the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. Around the same time, Ernest Pignon-Ernest wheat pasted silk-screened portraits of Arthur Rimbaud in Paris locales the poet had frequented. In the early 1980s, Blek le Rat, whose influence Banksy has publicly acknowledged, began pasting life-size stencils of rats and other creatures in iconic Paris settings.

Saying goodbye to Smith, I took the metro over the Seine to the Place d'Italie to meet Jérôme Coumet, the 47-year-old mayor of the 13th, a little-touristed district that's emerging as the city's newest

## THE MAYOR OF THE 13TH HAS COMMISSIONED GIANT MURALS ON MULTISTORY BUILDINGS, TURNING HIS LITTLE-TOURISTED DISTRICT INTO THE CITY'S NEWEST INCUBATOR OF STREET ART.

incubator of street art. Although it has plenty of historic buildings, such as the 17th-century Gobelins tapestry factory, the neighborhood is dominated by drab 1960s and 1970s housing projects for the disadvantaged, including immigrants from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. To encourage art outside museums and improve the quality of life for residents, Coumet has been commissioning French and international street-art stars to execute giant murals on multistory buildings, along with many smaller, eye-level works.

A Socialist Party member, Coumet leans on landlords and schools to make exterior walls available, on scaffolding companies to help with logistics and on artists to pay their own travel expenses and work gratis. So that the art is democratic, his office distributes three proposed compositions from each artist in the mailboxes of residents, who vote to determine the final outcome. The size of the murals means they take days to complete, offering inhabitants, pedestrians and school kids the opportunity to encounter famous artists at work. Instead of police summonses and hefty fines, artists receive spontaneous gifts of cake and orange juice.

The city of Paris employs three private companies to remove graffiti considered offensive or aesthetically displeasing, estimated at 200,000 square meters

(2.2 million square feet) annually. But since the first authorized mural went up in 2010, there have actually been fewer cases of juvenile or disrespectful tagging in the 13th, Coumet said. "I hope our street-art program sends a message to taggers that they can do more and cultivate their own artistic instincts," he said. "The cleaners themselves are developing an eye for what is interesting and what is mere vandalism."

The mayor gave me directions to one of the latest additions, a mural by Julien Malland, who goes by the moniker Seth. The 41-year-old artist-activist spent three years traveling the globe painting in remote communities, producing books and even a television series based on his efforts. On a five-story wall facing a park through which a small stream bubbled, Seth's piece depicted a girl floating dreamily on an upturned umbrella.

Taking advantage of the 13th's online public art map and the city's bike-share program, I toured 16 large murals in the evolving open-air museum. A 13-story beige, black and red image of a veiled woman by Fairey stared hopefully skyward above a sushi restaurant in view of the No. 6 metro line. Commuters could also catch a glimpse of a giant black-and-blue cat by the prolific C215 (aka Christian Guémy), whose hometown of Vitry-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, has become the equivalent of Claude Monet's Giverny for street-art fans and practitioners.

I was in the capital during the 30-day life span of Tour Paris 13, a condemned, 10-story housing project on the Left Bank covered inside and out by 100 street artists from countries around the world, including Brazil, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Access was free, but city building code restrictions meant that only 49 people could enter at a time—ideal, uncrowded viewing conditions for those willing to wait for up to eight hours in a line that stretched around an entire city block.

Tour 13 was the brainchild of frequent Coumet collaborator Mehdi Ben Cheikh, a 39-year-old French-Tunisian who moved to the 13th to take a job as a public

school art instructor. Fascinated by street art's global appeal, Ben Cheikh founded Itinerrance, a gallery dedicated solely to the movement, in 2004.

Wandering around the building, I felt like Alice in Wonderland. Crows chased panicked rabbits over the ceilings of an apartment taken over by two-man collective La Pandilla. French artist Nemi Uhu had created a Medusa whose strangely illuminated eyes turned out to be holes that captured the light reflected off an orange mural in an adjacent room. The sheer variety of media and uncensored work was astonishing, covering stairwells and nearly every available surface: ceilings, floors and, yes, even the kitchen sinks.

After my visit, I caught up with Ben

Cheikh in the courtyard. "I'm persuaded that street art is the most important art movement of the 21st century," he said while waiting for the French minister of culture to arrive. "In Asia, Africa, the Arab world and the West, young people yearn to be individuals with the liberty to create and change their environment, and they make art that is not in a gallery where only a few can see or afford it."

The Tour 13 artists paid their own travel expenses and agreed to keep the project secret while they prepared. They also accepted that their work would be destroyed when the building was demolished. Apart from a book and documentary film project intended to preserve a visual record, Ben Cheikh refused all requests to monetize the undertaking, including offers from

collectors wanting to buy parts of the installations and from apparel companies, such as Nike Inc., that sought to use Tour 13 as an advertising backdrop.

The project cost less than €10,000—a €5,000 grant from Coumet's office and a personal check from Ben Cheikh covering the rest. The limited time frame and strictly noncommercial aspect of Tour 13, Ben Cheikh was convinced, would create buzz and channel demand back into Itinerrance and other galleries, where the participating artists could, if they chose, place work created for sale. "I have a feeling for what it must have been like in the galleries of New York in the 1960s, when Warhols were arriving on the scene," Ben Cheikh said.

The distance *(continued on page 104)*

*Tour Paris 13, a condemned, 10-story housing project covered inside and out by 100 street artists from around the world*





## Barbarians at the Porte

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street art has traveled from its underground roots makes some people uneasy. “Before, all we wanted was to earn the respect of other artists,” lamented Sowat, a 35-year-old Franco-American graffiti practitioner, as he led me through the basement of the Palais de Tokyo, a contemporary art center whose hallways and emergency exits Sowat and his frequent partner Lek have appropriated. The space is now open on a semiregular basis to the public, but at the time I visited, the only way to get in was with one of the participants or, if there was a concert, through the adjoining door of a nightclub called YoYo. “Today, to be relevant, you need a modem and an Internet connection, which changes the whole cultural dynamic,” Sowat said.

“Art shouldn’t be judged by how much it costs, nor by whether someone gave the artist permission to create it,” concurred Emmanuel Moyne, an art collector and lawyer who defends artists arrested for defacing public property. At the time we spoke, Moyne was working on four cases, including defending a 20-something train artist whom Paris public-transportation company RATP had sued for a crippling €560,000 in damages. “Sure, the law is made for protecting patrimony and public cleanliness, but does that mean that when you have authorization, a tag is a work of art and when you don’t, it’s a degradation?” Moyne said. “What’s missing is critical perspective. You have people who start with a gesture and little by little develop a style and invent something new. That’s what defines art, not a permit.”

Toward the end of the week, I had coffee with eL Seed, a 32-year-old French-Tunisian sensation and practitioner of calligraphic graffiti who prefers not to reveal his given name. Educated in the French public school system and with a master’s degree in finance, eL Seed has become one of the most modern and striking calligraphers of Arabic script, a style he invented, illegally, on the walls of decrepit buildings on the outskirts of Paris and, later, Montreal.

eL Seed held his first solo show in 2011 at Ben Cheikh’s Galerie Itinérance. Last summer, the artist’s pieces made a splash at the Leila Heller Gallery in New York, alongside work by Basquiat and Haring in a show curated by former L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art director Jeffrey Deitch. One of eL Seed’s biggest patrons is Sheikha Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, sister of the emir of Qatar, head of the Qatar Museums Authority and the art world’s biggest spender, according to *ArtReview* magazine. “He’s not Ikea!” I had overheard Ben Cheikh saying about eL Seed’s risk of overexposure to a prominent New York gallerist requesting 12 new canvases.

“Ikea actually contacted me to make posters for them, but I turned them down,” eL Seed, who once designed a scarf for Louis Vuitton, would later confide. Not that he’s an elitist. “This is for the future,” he said, showing me a photo on his phone of his latest composition, aswirl with Arabic script. It was for an iPhone case.