

Squatting the White Cube and KDG Present:

The Citizen and the Serial Killer

(urban art becomes installation) by Harlan Levey



Inspired by the work of Jerome 'G' Demuth and L'Atlas

Henri Landru stood trial on 11 counts of murder in November 1921. He was convicted on all counts, sentenced to death, and executed by guillotine within three months. Forty years later, there was a rumour that the daughter of Landru's lawyer found a picture Landru had drawn whilst awaiting execution. On the back of it, he had apparently written, "I did it. I burned their bodies in my kitchen stove".

1ST MOVEMENT: REST IN PIECES.

ONE MAN'S TRASH IS ANOTHER MAN'S TREASURE. RECYCLING OFFERS A NEW LEASE ON ANOTHER LIFE. IT WAS A DAY IN PARIS, I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT SORT OF DAY BECAUSE THESE DETAILS WERE NOT PASSED ON. ALL I KNOW THAT IN A HEAP OF GARBAGE, A LOVELY YOUNG WOMAN DISCOVERED A JEWEL: A MOUNTED REPRODUCTION OF THE POLICE PORTRAIT OF FRENCH SERIAL KILLER HENRI LANDRU. JUST AS I CANNOT TELL YOU ABOUT THE SKY, NOISE OR FOOT TRAFFIC ROTATING AROUND HER, I HAVE NO IDEA WHY SHE WAS SEDUCED BY THE PHOTO OR RETRIEVED THE GHOST FROM THE GARBAGE. BUT SHE DID. A FORGOTTEN PHOTO JUST GOT REINCARNATED. THIS STORY STARTS WITH A MURDER. IT WAS NOT COMMITTED BY HENRI LANDRU. IT HAS NOT EVEN HAPPENED YET, BUT PLANS ARE BEING MADE COLLECTIVELY. IT'S BECOMING A POLITICAL CONVERSATION, BUZZING IN THE BACKS OF BARS, AT SHOWS AND HUSTLING AROUND THE COMING COMMUNITY: SHOULD WE PUT THE TERM 'STREET ART' TO REST? AFTER ALL, IT MORE THAN IRRITATES MOST OF US AND LIKE SO CALLED 'DEMOCRACY' THERE IS A RELEVANT DEBATE OVER ITS ACTUAL DEFINITION ANYWAY.

Is a work 'street art,' because it is given a home smack in the centre of pedestrian life or because it speaks street? Is it a question of concrete or culture? What was once simply dismissed as teenage angst, territorialism (dogs pissing around trees, numbered consumers spraying a name into existence) and a public eyesore, has become almost too hip, hopping through all forms of the culture industry while quietly drilling into the foundations of the fine arts.

The fact is, 'street art,' is as poetic as 'handschuh' (hand-shoe), the German word for 'glove'. At least the English word has some love in it. It details only the obvious, failing to even ask what art is or to provide a broad enough umbrella to shelter all the techniques and styles thrown together under it. Check out these two sets off billboards. One would be called art (in 2006, but would have been tagged as vandalism ten years prior). The other is advertising. Both are on the street.

The difference between them lies not in location, but in the invisible, in the process, the poetic movement that we cannot see. The break between art and design, advertising and creative offering, is revealed by original intent. Still, nobody says 'street advertising,' just advertising – just art – and this suggests that location has little to do with it. It also implies that just because it is on the street doesn't mean it's art. (Sorry my little street rats, but keep trying).

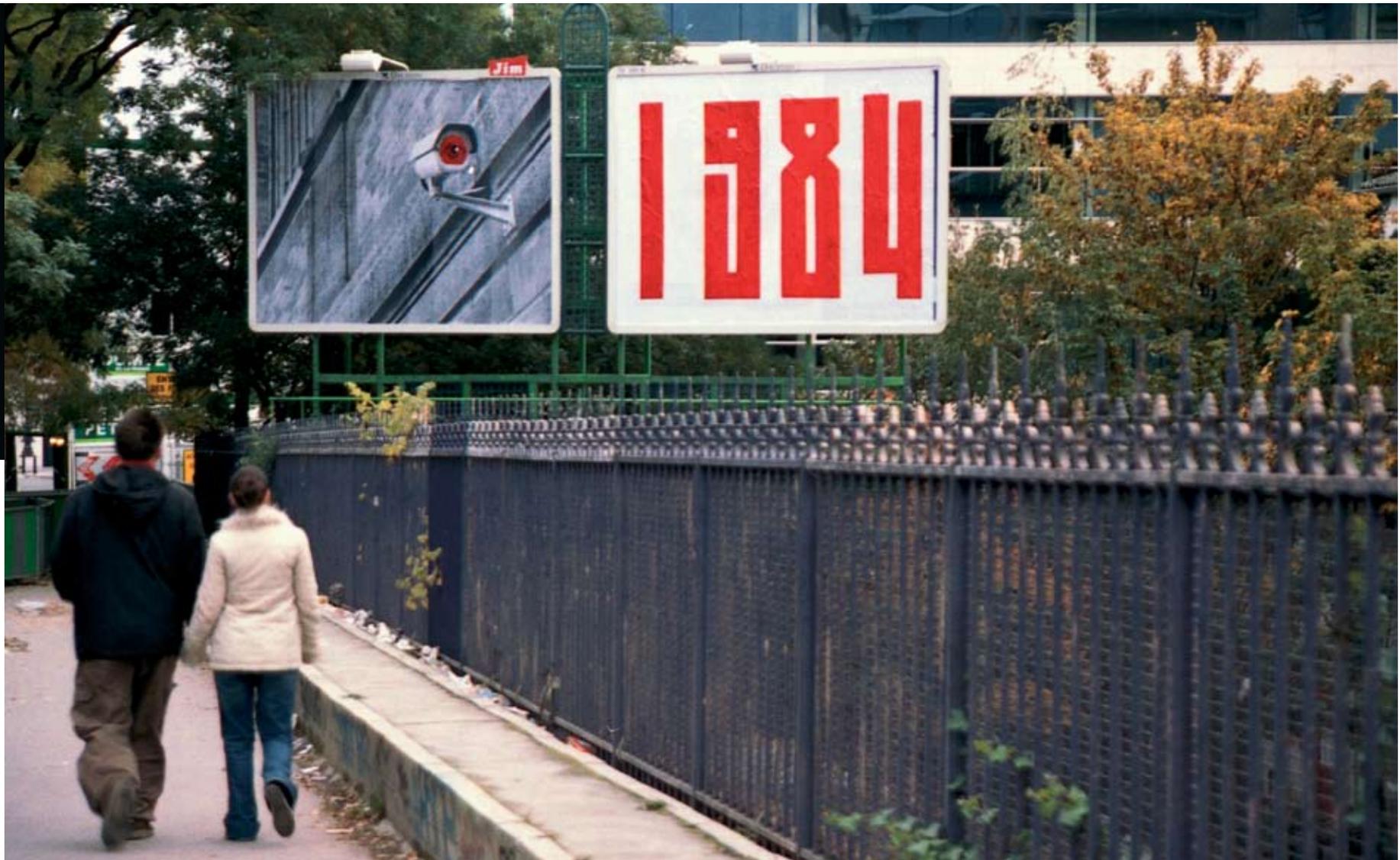
Behind one of the images is a drive to create needs and supply them, to convince us as consumers. Behind the other, the thought of a citizen, a reminder that reality and fiction often trade names. Both are mass media. Both are placed to get our eye and seduce us into a moment of pause, much as Landru seduced his victims. The corporate work can be seen as an attempt at subtle brain washing. The work of Jerome G. Demuth on the other hand is purely mass communication; organic art that embeds itself into its environment, proposing new narratives, possibilities and potential as big business attempts to design our lives. In this case, it is a warning; a form of art where sharing reflects caring. And if



we talk about calligraphy, character design or the conceptualization of a communications culture, urban expressionism is pushing envelopes and sending in anonymous requests for improved democracy and accelerated imaginations.

Good spots are not paid for by companies or reserved for the ivory of fine arts. They are bravely, and sometimes intelligently, taken. Urban expressionism is democratic in the sense that we can all (almost) afford it and anybody can add their voice to the mix. One equals one. A throw up, a tag, there is no electoral college between a vote and the voter, and no headline news to pervert things; the message is placed in the face of the citizen and that citizen can respond.

Whatever we call it, all around the world young activists and artists are getting out, getting up and putting their expressions into the swirl of visual noise that cloaks our cities.



2ND MOVEMENT: CREATIVE RECONSTRUCTION

TWO FRIENDS WERE SITTING AROUND FOLLOWING OLD THREADS, DISCUSSING THE COMPONENTS OF A CRIME AND HOW THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LAW HAS INFLUENCED THEIR LIVES. LATER, (DAYS OR WEEKS DO NOT MATTER) THEY WATCHED THE SHINING. NOT STEPHEN KING'S REMAKE OF HIS OWN BOOK, BUT THE KUBRICK CLASSIC, WHICH BETTER UNDERSTOOD THE QUESTION OF MEDIUM.

ONE RETURNED TO THE FOUND PHOTOGRAPH OF MONSIEUR LANDRU AND WENT TO WORK. L'ATLAS IS FRANCE'S INFAMOUS URBAN CARTOGRAPHER. THOUGH HIS GIRLFRIEND CLAIMS HE CAN'T USE A MAP, HIS INFLUENCES HAVE LED HIM TO CREATE LINES THAT LEAD TO NEW DEPTHS. IN HIS COINED TYPOGRAPHY, USING RED SPRAY AND RUBBER TAPE, HE WROTE: REDRUM ACROSS LANDRU'S FACE. CAN AN IMAGE KILL? CAN A CITIZEN BE CONSUMED BY A PHOTOGRAPH? WHAT DOES THE MIRROR SAY? MURDER.

THERE IS NEITHER START NOR FINISH IN THE CASE OF COLLABORATION. IT IS THE CASE OF COMMUNITY AND CULTURE ITSELF. 'ALL WORK AND NO PLAY MAKES JACK A DULL BOY.'

Art bubbles and boils while design cools and calms. Good design reveals new possibilities for supposedly better living. Good art offers us an automatic time out from such efficiency, obliging us to imagine something other. Good is dead.

We suffer from a personality schism. We are citizens. We are consumers. The two roles contradict and we are both just by being born into the world.

As citizens we receive information / As consumers we (often unwittingly) absorb it.

As receivers we evolve / As sponges we saturate.

Design tells us what to do and even want, art reminds us that it doesn't have to be like this or that and whispers that this and that are probably only products of our imagination anyway. In the stink of our rotting urban utopias, 'street' arts recycled stale walls and burnt ideas, swimming against the heavy sway of capitalism, interrupting the process of normalisation and contradicting illusions of consensus.

Their claim on public space and 'I don't give a shit' attitude have broken laws on several scales and at the same time remained faithful to democratic and artistic ethics, which gives more than shit back to the community (unlike many companies). This has also ensured that the urban art movement is caked in struggle. The struggle for something other... the struggle to get up, get seen and not get cuffed, buffed or crossed out. The struggle to improve craft, concept and the urban landscape... the struggle to pay for paint and pens or stickers and paste... and finally, the struggle for recognition of great skill. Many didn't care about this, but most have been receptive as it arrives.

So what happens as the rebels surrender their guns and are invited to the feast? Does the struggle continue? Does it become the next sub cultural context to get stuffed into a Hollywood formula and franchised into so many fragments that the community it connects crumbles and forgets what it once went outside for? Does it gain strength? Peak? Or does the stray cat get too fat?



3RD MOVEMENT: THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

OFTEN ARTISTS BECOME DESIGNERS IN ORDER TO EARN THEIR BREAD, USING THEIR SKILLS TOWARDS COMMISSIONED PROJECTS WITH COMMERCIAL AIMS. ARTISTIC INTEGRITY IS SUDDENLY PLACED IN CHAINS. IT WILL FACE A JURY (OR MARKET RESEARCH GROUP), ITS VALUE MEASURED ON IMPACT. THIS IS THE WORTH OF DESIGN. THE PRICE OF ART DETERMINED ONLY BY WHAT IT REVEALS (OR OF COURSE, WHAT SOMEBODY IS WILLING TO PAY FOR IT).

JEROME WAS PAID TO PRODUCE A VIDEO. AS A DESIGNER HE DID HIS JOB WELL ENOUGH TO BE INVITED TO EXECUTE A SEQUEL. AS AN ARTIST, HE HAD OTHER IDEAS AND KEPT THE CAMERA'S RUNNING WHEN DESIGN WAS DONE. THE RESULT: A FAMOUS ACTRESS ON CAMERA, BUT NOT PERFORMING. FINALLY, LANDRU HAD A NEW YOUNG LADY WITHIN HIS SIGHTS. THIS WOULD BECOME THE BACKDROP.

In the 'little Chicago' district of Brussels we circle for a half hour, stopping every few minutes to ask somebody on the sidewalks for instructions on how to find BOAZ. French, Flemish and English are all lost languages in this neighborhood and nobody is able to help us. After the 10th try it becomes ridiculous. Where the hell are we? A right and a left or three later and we nailed it.

Enter through the thin door encased in the garage, stumble across a small garden with an empty keg, passed a mirage of drunken tags and finally we're inside. It feels like a small warehouse, the kind of jewelled fossil some are lucky enough to locate these days. Strong in structure, neglected for who knows how long, the space looks like a squat. Don't be fooled. BOAZ has a big wallet behind it. This thing was done (al)right. 16 exciting young artists were brought in. They included: Clyde Knowland, Alexone, Jerome G. Demuth, Yassine Mekhnache, Simon Says, El Nigno, Cyril K., Babou, L'Atlas, Sun7, Tanc, Prince Off, Erris, Gysbert, Mathew Crasner and Jihef.

The show was pre-empted by a glossy catalogue full of the abstractions and theoretical blah blah that many artists seek to overcome or simply do away with. Don't let the words speak for you, they will faithfully betray the listener with poetry and prejudice. Let the images speak for themselves. At the start of its ramblings however, the catalogue stated a sympathetic mission:

"Allow the artists to work together within different medias and be close to a large and diverse audience... allow the public to enter

a world from which they too often feel excluded, the world of contemporary art."

In the chill of the BOAZ cellar, the deaths of Landru, street art and eleven young ladies lay silently together in an installation that could only be called a tomb. Like any tomb, we enter to remember and mourn, but leave looking for life and another reason to celebrate.

It is an installation with all the elements of a street piece. Recycled materials pulled from the bin, a desire to work organically with pre-existing elements, calligraphy that must be carried out swiftly, a large paste up, spray, tape, the tools and techniques that the artists had crafted on the streets were suddenly working from within the gallery. And of course, in the gallery, there is always a conceptual element, that layer of excess the show's catalogue provided, a story that must become an onion. This one does. There is the killer. There is the victim. There is blood on the wall. There is a thick steel grave. There is a story behind the work, a story behind each story. There is a map. None of this is obvious. But it is all right there in your face.

The piece becomes a bridge, taking urban arts under shelter and supporting them with cash that appears to come without the chains. Suddenly these techniques break free from the term 'street art,' they lose predicate and become subject. They are accepted by the fine art world and mutated by the time, space and comfort it offers. At the same time, the piece leads the audience out of the gallery and back to the streets where they might start to see all the stickers, stains and (sometimes not so) subtle gestures that artists and activists have offered. A Ready Made Work that keeps it real, profits from new possibilities and is faithful to what is not there.

Street Art is dead and the bridge to the tomb is flooded with traffic and horns. Five Steps Forward, Ten Steps Back, a truth is merely a path of fidelity and this was an example of two artists taking it. In the tomb, in the traces of murder we find evidence that the coming community will make its stain on the white walls of galleries while continuing its struggle for something other.



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