

Images at the Edge

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Paris pioneered the stencil art explosion in the early 1980s and continues to be its principal centre, despite official disapproval and increasing harassment of artists. The stencilled images, or *pochairs*, were influenced by the bold posters and situationist slogans of the 1968 uprising for sweeping social change. The introduction to Tristan Manco's book 'Stencil Graffiti' provides a good account of the importance of Paris in the spread of stencil street art¹, as does Lawrence Minsky's paper on US radical photographer Julian Backus' 'Ambush in the Streets' series on Parisienne *pochoiristes* to be viewed at the Cooper Union for Advancement of Science and Art, New York.²

Over the last couple of years its mark has begun to be made on Glasgow.³ I was prompted to begin cataloguing Glasgow's burgeoning stencil art scene by the *Free Ulla* piece at the Glasgow Film Theatre's door. Ulla Roder is the Danish peace activist who had spent many months in gaol over her actions against weapons of mass destruction held on the Clyde.⁴ I had recently shared a court appearance with Ulla at Helensburgh District Court following anti-nuclear missile protests at Faslane Naval Base. On further examination I found that many of the stencil artists had developed a political edge, that these pointed and often fleeting images posed telling retorts to commercial culture.

Ephemeral and often obscure in meaning and application, stencil art draws its strength from the necessary boldness of its image and ease of application. Exposed to the elements and in competition with ever changing flyers, the stencil's life is often short and unnoticed. While at first glance the topic may not be immediately apparent, more careful scrutiny will often be rewarded: themes of popular iconography and subversion of corporate logos in cityscapes



overloaded with advertising imagery. *Rogue One*, currently Glasgow's pre-eminent stylist, uses Star Wars typography and images for an anti-war message. With references to *Banksy*, the doyen of UK stencilists, *Rogue* often works in red and black on big pieces against a prepared white backdrop.

Life size vacuum cleaners on walls and portacabins across the West End and City Centre give an oblique reference to those who would Hoover up after capitalism, the situationists to be found at www.vacuumcleaner.co.uk and their associates. For more on the subversion of corporate capitalism see the ever reliable "Adbusters".⁵

Movie stars and popular heroes cast their unflinching stare from dishevelled hoardings and utility boxes: Travis Bickle, Sub-Commandante Marcos, James Dean and Che Guevara reside in Barcelona, Brighton, Paris—and now Glasgow. Images are shared and adapted by individuals and collectives across the world. Kelvinbridge's *Blitz* shares the image of the stencil gas mask download provided by German Anti Fascist Action.⁶

Increasingly in Glasgow political issues are being addressed, in particular opposition to the Iraq War. This is not a surprise. Traditionally the stencil has been a voice of protest and subversion. Learning from the vivid statements of Rodchenko and the Russian and German *avant garde* and using cheap and easily obtained materials—paper/paint, the city wall as canvas—the stencil has long been a radical weapon. In the wake of the 1968 events the aerosol became a tool of protest in Paris. Susan Meiselas' famous 'Nicaragua' photo journal of 1981 used a stencil typeface on its cover and featured Sandinista stencil slogans.⁷ Award winning US graphic artist Peter Kuper uses stencils almost exclusively. Some of his strongest work can be found in his comic book version of Upton Sinclair's radical classic, 'The Jungle'.⁸ The London based *Arofish* has recently returned from Palestine where he has been "painting on the walls and generally making a right mess to the occasional annoyance of the occupying forces." This has included "views to peace", mock windows through the infamous 8 metre high wall being constructed around the West Bank.⁹

Not surprisingly, the stencil led image has been adopted for commercial purposes, especially when a youth market is targeted, as with Nike, Lucozade and the recent Snow Patrol album cover. The current TV ads for Red Square vodka based drink

employs animated stencils. Much to the chagrin of the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign, Greenpeace has made use of "self confessed graffiti vandal" *Banksy's* work.¹⁰ The *Glasgow Evening Times* recently reported that the City Council was not amused by the careful stencilling, or "vandalism", of city walls with the Council's own Graffiti Removal Hotline Number by persons unknown. Needless to say operatives were sent out without delay to remove the offending hotline number.

Around the corner from where one of *Rogue's* best pieces has recently been removed, an 'official' stencilled drinking Russian bids welcome on the rear of an Ashton Lane vodka bar. The familiar face of Che Guevara gazes down from the gantry of the Carnival Club. Incidentally, *Banksy's* web site contains the disclaimer: "He was not responsible for the current crap TV adverts with stencils in".¹¹ Manco questions whether this adoption of street tactics improves the brands' street credibility but concludes that "whatever the message or motivation, all stencils become part of our environment...and as we discover them, part of our experience."¹²

But the stencil is a growing component of the street and radical arts movements around the world, developing and adapting, changing and continuing to subvert. In the words of some artists:

"It's a fight for better images for all eyes, against obtrusive graphics and commercials, for a better graphic thinking for everyone."

Hoernchen¹³

"We have taken branding advertising and identity and have played with it."

Faile¹⁴

"Stencils are actually quite easy to make, you know."

Banksy¹⁵



Notes

1. Manco, Tristan, 'Stencil Graffiti', Thames & Hudson, London 2002. Also see the spin off website www.stencilgraffiti.com

2. www.cooper.edu/art/lubalin/ambush

3. The best record of Glasgow's graffiti art, both stencil and wildstyle, is to be found at: www.duncancummingsgraffiti.co.uk

4. For more information about Ulla see www.free-ulla.org and www.tridentploughshares.org

5. www.adbusters.org

6. See www.ainfos.de/stencilgraffiti for more downloadable stencil images.

7. Meiselas, Susan, 'Nicaragua', Writers & Readers Cooperative, London 1981

8. Kuper, Peter, 'The Jungle Classics Illustrated'.

9. www.enrager.net/arofish

10. Keep Britain Tidy news release 02 August 04: Regional Director of Keep Britain Tidy, Justin Japp, said "...there is an old motto which says 'evil thrives when good men do nothing', this is exactly what has happened with graffiti..." The release goes on to name the 120 MP signatories to their Zero Tolerance of Graffiti Campaign, including Tony Blair who expounds, "Graffiti is not art. It's crime".

11. www.banksy.co.uk

12. Manco op cit p15

13. Quoted in Manco, Tristan, 'Street Logos', Thames & Hudson, London 2004, p98.

14. *ibid* p31

15. Banksy, 'Existencilism: Weapons of Mass Distraction', England 2002

Front Cover: Rogue One, 'Juggler'