

CHAPTER 1

THE GRAFFITI YEARS

Could we say that graffiti has been like a school to you?
From an artistic point of view, before graffiti, I started drawing as a child, just like anybody else. I don't have very clear remembrances but like most kids, I drew a lot. I can't remember what triggered my interest for graffiti. I have a few images that flash back according to what I've seen or lived. It coincides with the time when my parents got divorced and I started living with my father in the outer suburbs of Paris. I was alone with him and we lived in the street by the train station, about 20 yards away from a train yard. Before that, we used to live even farther from Paris area and move all the time, sometimes 2 or 3 times a year. That implied I had to change friends, school etc... every year until my parents got divorced. That most probably influenced my character in the years that followed. Changing schools three times in one year right when you're building your self, stability wise, it kinda sucks!

That's how I ended up there, I need to say that I was clueless about life in those suburbs and about graffiti. I do remember writing some bullshit on a wall with a spray once or twice before that. I was about 11 or 12. I know I wrote stuff like "ska" or "skin"... words that meant nothing to me. I had probably seen that on TV or somewhere. Yeah, I do remember doing that. So when I get to this neighborhood, I was like 13 or 14 and there was this train yard and I discovered the magic of it. I also went to Paris sometimes. I felt like an adventurer. I saw the tags in the street; I was amazed. This was so different from everything I knew, it was like a door to something new. This was at the end of the '80s. Hip Hop was big in the suburbs and we all wanted to be part of it. I remember the first tapes recorded from the *Deenastyle* show on Radio Nova with artists like Dee Nasty or Lionel D and all this French rap. I listened to it all day long; I knew all the lyrics by heart. But my attention was mostly stuck on the tags that were made on the tapes we traded at school. It was like a secret code that only insiders could understand; it felt magical! During the show, guys dedicated songs to their neighborhood, to their graffiti friends. It was like they were talking directly to me, I got their codes. It was the evolution, the atmosphere that guided me. But my first real contact with graffiti as a participant were the days I went exploring this train yard down my street. I was often alone at home, or outside just wandering around. That's when I went there and stayed for hours. At the time, it was those silver trains with the orange seats inside. I was just staying there, sitting down, dreaming. I didn't really think about writing at first. I just wandered around, and stared at the tags.

What part of your life does that correspond to?

I was in middle school, in 7th grade maybe. I had a lot of time on my hands and not so much to do. So the meeting

point was this yard. We used to go there with my buddy Boona (Neroy) and talk about the last Deenastyle show, the first Public Enemy album, or the Starter jacket we'd like to have. It was like a youth association except the setting felt alive. We used to stay there, and when we'd see a tag from Paris, it was like *wow!* We imagined crazy stories from the things we heard about this one or that one. It was like a whole imaginary world. French writers or rappers were our "idols". We were in the outer suburb, so we weren't at the heart of any story. Plain rumors became myths! But it didn't feel unattainable and I wanted to be part of it. So, I started writing graffiti inside the trains, then I moved to the outside. The cycle of people I met, curiosity and motivation did the rest.

It's hard for me to say when I really started writing graffiti or when I began doing only that, it was progressive. But my first steps in this world were definitely at the end of the '80s.



And what was the trigger that really made you enter graffiti?

That usually starts when you leave the institutions: school, parents, when the only thing you do is hang out with your graffiti friends, when you break the ties from other's "reality". For me, it was around 17, something like that. I moved in with the girl I was seeing back then, still in a suburb, and I started to learn the trade: stealing, writing, wandering around and trying to get it - all day every day.

At the time, a part of French graffiti was a reproduction of what we could see and understand about what was going on in the States. But back when you started, there wasn't much information about how to write, or about what a writer was. There never was a graffiti handbook. Was there some kind of model you followed?

Times were different, there was no Internet and this is really worth mentioning even though it sounds ridiculous to say. It really was different. Everything was much slower, but we still managed to ingest that information and analyze it, we got it our own way.

The beginnings of my learning process were hours spent in the yard with my buddy Boona where there was nothing going on. But I was storing all this necessary information about train movements, drivers, rush hours, afternoon slacks, etc. We would look at a partially buffed tag on a seat and imagine millions of things. Which ink could have been used, which marker pen, with beveled tip, etc. Then, I was convinced that the way I saw graffiti was The Reality. I mean that I had figured out some rules, and I thought those were The Rules followed by all, that everyone implicitly knew them. I was deeply convinced about that. When I'd come across a dude who didn't respect those rules that I saw as

so obvious, I thought he was doing it on purpose, so, I considered him as a "toy" and thought he didn't deserve respect. I based myself on this, you know. "ALRIGHT, GRAFFITI IS NEW YORK AS IT WAS ORIGINALLY." You need to paint trains, inside and outside. To be a king, you must control your line, be respected in the street, steal your gear and mostly, do that exclusively. This is certainly not The ultimate Truth, but that is how I had understood it and how I applied it.

What about *Subway Art*?

I was actually getting there. As I was saying, to me, graffiti was late '60s and early '70s painted subway trains in NYC. When I started looking for information about that at the end of the '80s in my suburb, I could either read *Subway Art* or go to the library at school, and that's it. I'd look at the few pictures I could find for so long, I probably wore them out. I knew *Subway Art* by heart. I knew each page, every single train, the mood, the smallest tag on any car, I'd analyze every detail. The more panoramic pictures by Martha Cooper enabled me to absorb the setting and the streets in the background, or how the guys were dressed, etc. I'd look at everything for hours. So that book was my bible. There were all the names in it. I also had *Spray can Art*, I considered it as a bit less respectable because it wasn't about trains, but it was still kinda cool. I'd manage to find a link between guys that were in both books. Then, I also had the library at school and I tried looking for stuff. In any history or geography handbook, you can find a picture of the subway to symbolize New York. So I'd cut it, or tear out the page, and once at home, I'd discover new names. I'd see a throw up by In, a Lee tag, Comet, Blade, PJ, or Min... And *wow*, I could link it back to *Subway Art*! And I'd create a mental jigsaw puzzle with all that. So I had this on one side, and the Parisian old

timers I could see outside on another. There wasn't even any other city to me. I still had some basic knowledge about the rest of Europe with *Spray Can Art*, but Paris, I could see it on the street, that's what mattered. FatCap, CMP, NTM, any single tag, TBA, TCP, 93MC... I came from the suburb and I had my own private museum with all the paintings on the train tracks that took me to Paris. There was a true letter school back then, beveled tags, the mastering of the lettering, throw ups and fatcaps on store shutters, tags made with shoe dye in the commuter trains.

There was also a crew culture that was omnipresent until the 90s. That was the reality. If you were going to Châtelet with a Starter jacket, you'd play the discreet card. If you were a B-Boy you had to stand for it. If you were a graffiti writer, you had to stand for your name and your status. "Oh, so you're that guy? Yes, I am, now what !?" And it was graffiti with a suburbanite spirit, it was quite violent and pretty representative of a period. To me, all of this made graffiti. And doing true graffiti as I understood it meant following all those influences. **My GOAL WAS TO DO WHAT I HAD SEEN IN Subway Art, CONTROL MY LINE AND ADD TO IT MY TOUGH SUBURBANITE CULTURE.**

So, was it a choice to start living as a writer or was it the addition of chances, like a slow marginalization?

It all comes from choices, that's a fact. The people you hang out with, for instance. If I had been by myself, it wouldn't have been the same, and I would probably have done something completely different. Same thing when you're with a girl: she often gets you back on some kind of right way. If on the other hand, you hang out with a certain kind of people, it will draw you in another direction. My personal situation, the location, chance, friendships, all played an important part in all that.

Kind of like a healthy competition?

When you're part of a group, you don't really have the right to complain, to step back; you're in an process of self-assertion next to the others. It's a bit like those initiation ordeals you can see in some tribes. In an urban setting and in graffiti in particular, you can find those too. They are different but fill in the same functions: you need to paint the biggest piece, steal the most crazy stuff, fight, prove you're here and you earn your stripes.

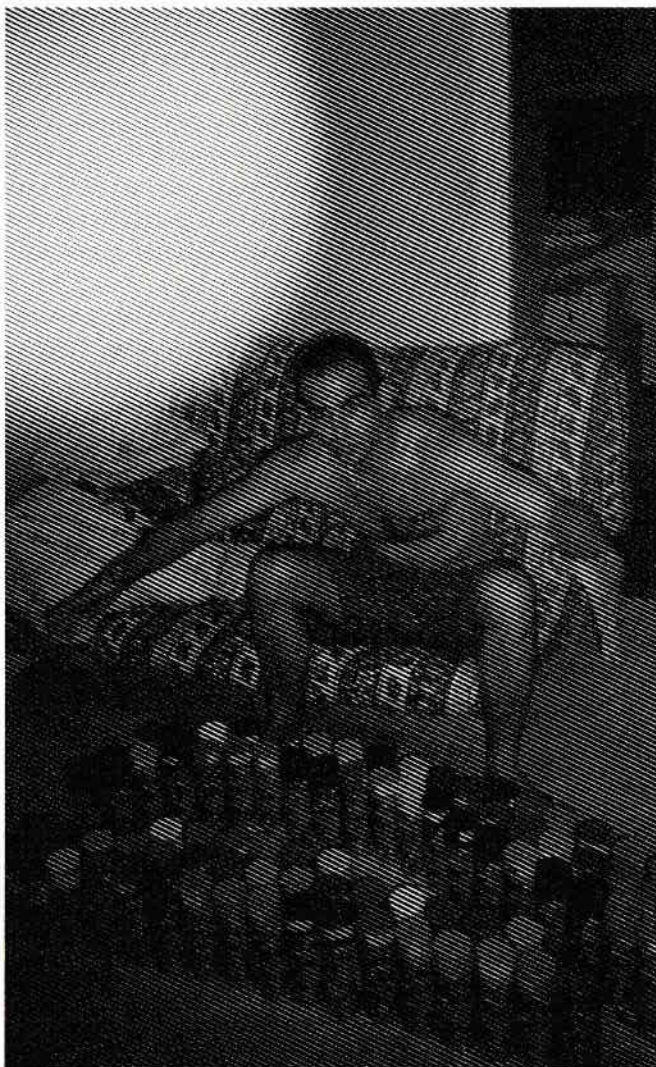
So, I suppose I had a lot to prove to myself! But life starts catching back and you find yourself doing things that exceed initiation, that end up taking you in a path that you're going to find it hard to get out of. Doing graffiti as I used to means spending all your time in the street, stealing everything from A to Z, fighting, going into custody, getting familiar with the street-life and its vices. It also means living exceptional moments, but there'll always be a moment when you start drifting.

The group you're talking about, is it UV?

At the very start, I was just with 2 or 3 guys. My buddy Neroy I told about, Run, Jeron, and there was Stero too, we were called LTK. I was on Gare Du Nord train line. I had friends, but I was the most motivated and moved mostly alone. I had bombed absolutely all the insides of every single cars of the line, I started painting quite a lot in yards, tracks, writing tags in the streets of Paris, a few subways. I mean, I started to get some attention...

And your name was already Fuzi ?

No, I used to write Opsen, I also did some other names on trains and subways. In 94-95, I met Gaz, Vans, Salo, Sit... They all came from Herblay, on the Saint-Lazare line.



We became friends and I started hanging out with them all the time. We would steal, tag and paint together every day. In 96-97, it took up some speed. We became wilder, that's when we put up UV. That's what I described in *Ma Ligne* book. We were at home, we painted a lot, created our own rules: we would beat anyone and steal from them. There were a few crazy years that helped build up our reputation in Paris.

When you mention racking, was it mostly for graffiti purposes?

No, it really was our way of living... We'd also steal to resell. Personally I used to live in a maid's room under the roofs. Most of the other members of the group had their family, so they still lived at home. But if I didn't steal, I couldn't pay my rent or eat. That was my daily reality. I asked no help from the State at all. If I didn't fend for myself, if I didn't steal some fleeces, video games and resell them, I had no money. And if I didn't steal any food, I didn't eat that night. That was pretty down to earth. So, of course, I also stole my cans, ink and markers. Racking was a necessity and also came with our way of life.

That's why I mentioned the moment when you slid into marginality.

It is a whole. To have the time to paint every day, you need to steal everything. It's also part of the graffiti culture that I believed in. So, at some point, either you work and you don't have time to do it full time, or you find another path.

Graffiti as we lived it, was not just about painting one hour a day. It was stealing cans to go paint, elaborate schemes, wait for trains to run, take pictures, spend time in the cars to bomb the insides, look for the guys we had capped or that had capped us to beat them up... And we also smoked weed and chilled a lot. So ~~BASICALLY, THERE WAS NO ROOM FOR A JOB.~~ It must be

understood that I speak for myself exclusively, but I was rebelling just about anything. I didn't want any help from the State; I wanted to fuck up the State! And it was the same for my relationship with the consumer society. Of course, I stole jackets to look good. It's nice to have brand new, fashionable clothes. But I felt no attachment to the products. To me, nothing had value. For instance, I'd steal a super expensive jacket, I'd wear it for a few hours to go paint a train, and I'd spill paint all over it. I didn't give a fuck. It lasted for a day; I'd throw it and steal another one. Same drill for sneakers. I was kind of liberated of this alienation of the brands, of the desire of possessing things. I really felt distant to it all. To me, everything was free. I realized it when I stopped stealing. Because when you go to a shop, you have to wait in line, pay, etc. At that time, I'd go in, chose, and take. Two minutes, no fuss. It became natural. I ate for free, I took public transportation for free, I'd go in subway tunnels, on train tracks, rooftops, etc. All forbidden places were open to me just because I had decided they were. I had no restrictions. I was in symbiosis with the city when all the people I saw around me seemed to be subjected to it, like prisoners and they all looked lamblike.

You were experiencing total freedom ?

I really felt I had total impunity. Penal risks were light, at the beginning at least. I knew about them and accepted them. Plus, my passion gave me wings. Some people will say I had a lot of ability, but it also requires competence. Stealing jackets with beeps without being seen, when there's a security guy at the entrance, sometimes cops dressed in civilian clothes and video cameras ain't that easy! There's a whole discipline to adopt, to learn... It became the trade that enabled me to live my passion.

CHAPTER 2

THE UV-TPK CRAZYNESS

What was your daily life like, as a group?

On Saturdays, we'd meet on platform 10 in Saint-Lazare at 2pm. There was our group, the hard core of UV: Salo, Gaz, Kilo, Vans, Tacl, Kiss, Erol and myself. TPK would join us: Eyl, Sabre, Dok, Zeab and a lot of people that gravitated around us. And it would go berserk. It was crazy. ~~THOSE~~ ~~MOMENTS ALSO FORGED THE REPUTATION OF UV.TPK~~ because we felt totally free and were dangerous...

It was our version of the meet-ups in Nation or Châtelet of the gangs before us. And when you live in a suburb and you go to Paris, it's like party time. Except that we were writers and could control the city and we wanted to enjoy it. We used the fact that there were a lot to bomb in complete impunity. The rest of the week, we worked in small teams of 2 or 3, max. We stole or wrote graffiti in the same discreet and efficient way, not seen not taken. But when Saturdays

came, it was the wild bunch! To us, it was a way to spend time with friends, to gather around our passion and take control of the field.

The reality of those afternoons was dozens of teenagers running in the streets and beating up any people that crossed our path. Twenty of us would go in a store at the same time and we'd just help ourselves. We'd run on the subways at the platform to bomb them entirely, in plain sight of the haggard people who were just doing their week-end shopping. We were teenagers who screamed, punched, stole, jumped on the railways, sang, broke, bomb everything and escaped with the speed of a commuter train.

At that time, there was an peak of madness, violence, friendship and graffiti that were all a big part of the UV-TPK legend. That's why even people who hated us or were scared by our violence could only remark the huge amount of graffiti we produced.



It has to be said, you were visually omnipresent back then.

There's a paradox in the practice of graffiti: we are writers, but our culture remains oral. There are no written rules. But there are some inherent to this practice. One of them is that the more your name is seen, the more respected it is. The more risky the places you paint (the subway being the top), the more glorious and gratifying it is. And if you get the respectability of the street by standing for your name, by physically defending yourself, well, you've got all the criteria that make you the best at this game. We were everywhere at the time, and took the game next level.

At the end of the 90s, graffiti took a turn in Paris, because of guys like you that lived it this way.

When you live it so intensely, even though writing your name everywhere is not a political demand in itself, it cannot be taken as a mere hobby. It is and it was mostly the manifestation of a total impunity. Besides we had a war shout "UV-TPK nah what!?" It was tough and aggressive and it was meant to be.

We didn't have much to lose; we didn't risk big jail time for that. We'd steal three jackets, four steaks and two cans, just to survive and repaint trains in passing. It wasn't such a big deal. But, through this way of life, we touched something much bigger than the mere fact of writing a name. We created, another way of living, of thinking, a genuine freedom of action.

So the rebellion stands in the fact of writing a name and the way you do it rather than in the name itself?

Yes. It's everything that's around it. The most simplistic way to analyze graffiti is to say it is an identity quest. "They write

their names to assert themselves, blahblahblah..." It might be the case when you're young and start writing. But, when you spend more than 10 years of your life doing it every day, with the life that goes with it, it's not about asserting yourself. We enter a far more complex sphere. **IT IS ABOUT PASSION, TRUE REBELLION, COUNTER-CULTURE, ART!**

For instance, very quickly, I didn't care about writing my name anymore. I mostly used the name of the group and many other aliases. I knew I could go to the yard by myself. I would go there to live the moment, for the adrenaline, the love of creating. When you get there, you master all the parameters of risks in the game and you write just about any name or word, just to experience the moment. That's when you touch something essential, something that comes close to pure expression, to total freedom.

You're talking about New York and the original graffiti that was still spontaneous and completely naïve. That's not the New York from the '90s you were contemporary with?

Exactly. When I started thinking about this New York thing again, I actually understood the essence of it: I felt attracted by the fact that it was the beginning, the first faltering steps of the art. It was still the early stages of it all and you'd witness the first ways someone could write his name. It felt like the whole marrow of this thing was right there. The pioneers built graffiti from the urban and popular culture of that time: music, movie posters, logos... I pictured it spontaneous with no constraints at all. That's what I liked about it and I wanted to express that on my trains, like a return to spontaneity. I knew that biting the same letters meant nothing. I didn't want to draw like a child but I did try to see it as a child, with no past references whatsoever.

I was trying to follow my feelings, my instincts, as if nothing existed before me in terms of graffiti, as if I was a pioneer too. I was trying to free myself from any rule, whether it'd be for style or proportions. I'd try not to care about the critics and let myself be guided only by my need to enjoy it. I was really trying to express the freedom of those moments in my work. That was unachievable of course and it probably was a romantic approach to graffiti. To the movement, questioning the technique was like spitting at the ultimate achievement of the graffiti artist. Most people didn't even understand the approach. That's why provocation played an important part to me as well. The more critics I got, the better I felt in this path out of pure contrariness! This search went on until it found a definition under the term of *Ignorant Style*.



CHAPTER 6

THE LIFE CHANGE

What made you stop graffiti?

I stopped when I felt that painting wasn't that meaningful to me anymore, I felt a lot less excited and street life had overridden the rest. It was a quite personal choice. I could deal with crew life as long as I enjoyed the competition I could find in graffiti. From the moment that passion faded, I started feeling the things I could see in the eyes of the other guys in the street: emptiness, vice and drifting. The only way for me to change was to leave my environment, my way of living and my friends. I loved them the way you can love the people you really know, but they ended up becoming a burden to my self-fulfilment. I needed to go away, to face life outside the group.

All the violence you mentioned must have struck back at some point?

Well, it all reached court. As I said, there was a lot of stealing

and violence, it was just normal to pay the price at some point. Never cheat yourself; what goes around comes around, right back at you. There's been investigations, custodies, hearings, jail time and fines. All that was part of our daily life but it's not very interesting. I'm not saying it was nothing at all, but I'd never have stopped graffiti or anything else because of that. Of course, when you get shit after shit after shit, that starts influencing your way of living this life. But I was aware of the risks. I rarely resented the pigs when they just did their job. I knew the rules of the game and I kept on playing.

So what did your redeployment look like?

There was a long period of time during which all I did was boxing as a way to prove something to myself. Street fights had made me lived in a pretty violent way and I wanted to experience a more healthy way to deal with it, to be fighting myself in a ring if you want. In boxing, I really looked for the moment, **THE VERY INSTANT WHEN YOU FORGET EVERYTHING AND NOTHING COUNTS BUT THE FEELINGS THAT VERY MUCH RESEMBLE INSTINCT**. That's also what I used to look for in graffiti: the intensity of the moment when reason and goal both disappear; this mix of adrenaline, stress, creativity and eternal moments. That's what pushed me back there in spite of the risks and pain. If the only goal of it all was painting your name and to be punched, nobody would ever do it. We do it because once you're there, your life makes sense. It gets pretty spiritual.

How far did you go?

I really went into it; I did some real professional fights, I travelled and followed the start of the MMA in England with the Riccio brothers. I met some great people and lived moments of a rare intensity. It was a lot like an initiatory

journey to me, as if I needed to prove something to myself. My career was pretty short because I started late and it wasn't the point anyway. But, the guys felt that rage inside me and gave me a chance straight away. For 5 years, I went to training every day. That's all I would do, exactly like I did for graffiti. My whole life was dedicated to Muay-thai. I found a rigor, a quest for perfection and a family, it was a very comprehensive commitment. It was right after that time when the street had taken over creation, so it really felt like a door to a new path to me.



So you had quit graffiti for real?

I still painted, but in a different manner, plus I wasn't in Paris anymore. Rap, Dok and Trane would often visit me and we started planning on controlling new lines. But this time, it was travel trains or freight carriages. We painted everywhere.

It was less intense and stressful because it was way easier but it was still cool. We'd paint a thousand different names but always with the same process: make as many as possible to see some circulate at any given time and take pictures of them in beautiful places. That was completely different from before.

You never really stopped finally?

From 2001 on, my experience of graffiti was completely different because my life had changed. I still painted quite a lot, but I wasn't focused on getting on My Line constantly, I didn't spend my whole time in trains anymore. I'd draw a lot and always directly on the sheet with marker. It was quick and spontaneous; I'd never retrace a line, exactly like I used to do for graffiti. I never sketched anything or started with a pencil. That's kind of what you need as a vandal writer: have an efficient line and the right flow. You need the curves to be beautiful and structured. It's hardly noticeable, but you see the difference between a guy who masters a line, a curve, a throw up, and a guy who doesn't. It's something you learn. And I translated this experience in my drawings. I also often incorporated characters and it progressively came into place. I ended up doing only illustrations guided by the line and technique I had acquired through graffiti.

When he saw that, my friend Kiss, who had always been into tattoos told me "those would be crazy flashes". It was around 2003 maybe. He already tattooed me at the time, but I didn't even know what flash-tattoos were. He explained it to me and I kept that somewhere in my head. At the time, I initiated myself to other media. I was at the very beginning of it. I was really reluctant to paint on canvas; I didn't want to become a caricature of the writer who grows older and moves on to the supposedly more serious step of painting canvas. It wasn't really a pattern yet at the time but it was

starting to be and it was already boring as hell. *Street Artist* has got to be the worst definition ever. So I started experimenting while keeping that self-taught approach, probably because I wanted to keep my freshness. I really didn't want anyone to explain anything to me; I just wanted to enjoy it in the purest meaning of the word, just express myself. Translating my feelings and making my artistic approach evolve through mastery would come later.



So you opened up to Art?

I used to be so much into graffiti, I'd live and think graffiti. To me, Art was graffiti. All the things that moved me had some connection to the urban culture, to the image of a city, to railways, to abandoned locations, to tunnels, broken stuff, violence, etc. All of those touched me and were more or less linked to graffiti. I had always read a lot but I actually never

had been interested in Art as such, or from a very distant perspective. So I started going to museums and discovering the history of Art. My artistic culture was that of a Parisian suburbanite who had a limited education because he had dropped out of school to paint trains. So apart from a few clichés and famous names, I knew nothing at all. I discovered new artists and movements. One of my first shocks was *Naïve Art* and the theories of Dubuffet. I actually found similarities between this and the *Ignorant Style*. You can do just whatever you feel like! So I jumped into painting, sculpting, writing. All of a sudden, I had a clean conscience and no inhibitions. I didn't feel the weight of the great culture on my shoulders. I didn't have any technique, I was self-taught, poor, not very mentally sane, and I still fitted into Dubuffet's criteria of selection, so I Could do *Naïve Art*!

Then I went on learning, sharpening my tastes and I started liking other movements more, like *Expressionism*. But the main point was that I could use any medium to express myself, and even more that I could do so with the same approach I had had with graffiti, that is: following my own rules. So I worked by myself, in improvised workshops, garages, shelters... and I tested everything: the different types of paints, the ways to sculpt, engraving, I was ecstatic, always wanting to learn more. I had no limit in the ways to create or in the hunger I felt to test everything. That's when I started tattoos.

SELF TAUGHT TATOOER

What did you find in tattoos that drew your attention?

It moved me because it's more modern and I found it had a lot in common with graffiti: the street references, the ritual, marginal and illegal practice, that's what I could refer to the most easily. The mystery and ostracism that the community suffered from just finished convincing me and I really totally jumped into it! I opened every single book on the subject; I learnt its history, the famous names from the past and present, etc. From the very start, I felt no complex in front of these people and their technique. I'm only interested in jail mates tattoos, sailors, gangs or anything symbolic. It looks more straight to the point. I like to see a tag flowing down in the middle of a train car; it bears a strength, a soul. I draw inspiration from it, and added my own vision, my path and my hand to it. I blew some graffiti, Hip Hop, violence and street into it. I used the punch lines the way I used to