It just looked like another asscombing office, except the workshop part was a bit more messy. He slept in a suburban industrial area, with warehouse space downstairs and the office and workshop upstairs. A veranda cut the space in half for the manager’s office and the meeting room. The guys in the workshop were observing the newcomers with a slight smell of spray paint. They wanted to give themselves a kind of French start-up with a kitchen and a relaxation area, but in a ramshackle Saint-Denis style. The start-ups were made up of underpaid young people who had the right to dress as they wished in exchange for their rights to the labor code: the new definition of freedom stamped by Walt Disney. Jack introduced me to his team. A young Asian woman was in the Digital Marketing position. A Portuguese man represented the entire graphics department. There were two empty offices, those of a couple who took photos and videos for the com’, an English woman and a Parisian. They had made their mark in rap videos. A blond girl named Lisa was in charge of events, relations, and sales. We moved to the southern hemisphere. The workshop manager was a Nigerian. I knew his graffiti. He signed Funk. He had swept up a cop who was chasing him at the time. That earned him a tour in the shade. As for the rest, the paint crew downstairs were classic graffiti artists. They tried to disguise their names, but I knew most of them. There were VMD, SLK, and other local crews. Like all graffiti artists, they tried to erase their street side as much as possible, but the accent, the hands, and the faces could not erase anything. In short, it was like a rehabilitation center for average graffiti artists. average in their careers, not in their talents, I mean. I had to be part of this social recycling.

I entered the office. A window overlooked the quays of the Seine. There were some paintings by street artists like Misstic and Obey, art toys, comic book figurines, African masks, and a guitar. A canvas behind the desk presented a poster of Jeffrey Célavie, a street-fashion feminist artist. I waited for my coffee with absolutely no thoughts in my head. I don’t like to intellectualize. I am an instinctive person. The tall, blond guy was in front of me. He was typing on the computer, so I started.

«-All these people who work here, did they decipher your coded card?

-Yes, it is. But there are two numbers on this card. The line you call out shows the code you decrypted.

What was the other code?

- Milk... An invisible ink. All you had to do was pass the card over the candle, and the number would appear on the back. It’s simpler, but some people don’t see things as simple. It’s like a little personality test.

"So, do I go to the offices or to the workshop?" He clasped his hands in front of his mouth, that condescending intellectual triangle and still that benevolent sight. Humans... As soon as you put them behind a desk, they adopt a panoply of mimics that often resemble bad acting. They mime life.

It doesn’t work exactly like that. We do an interview. You already know our graffiti, I suppose, mine and Amer’s.

- Clearly.

It was a great time. We had a lot of fun. Only, we got older in the meantime. We had to change. The graffiti artists of our generation do not shine by their professional insertion. Graffiti has taken up all the space and energy reserved for progress in society.

Is this a regret?

It’s like this. Some people say graffiti destroyed their lives, and others say it saved them. Both are true, I guess. What interests me is that graffiti artists have developed other qualities and a certain mentality—an autonomy. I’m the same... Spending my life waiting—the rules, all that—wasn't my thing. So we created this box. It looks structured here, but it’s not. There’s no real hierarchy, but there are groups that associate themselves according to the jobs. The workshop group was here first, with Amer and myself. We started by doing small street marketing jobs. Our clients were the local rappers or street artists, who were not very well known. We would stick stickers and posters on them. We were helping them develop. Nothing beats the street in terms of marketing. It’s always the best advertising. It’s our trademark. Street equals ad. We did our first big hit for the release of Lunatic’s album Mauvais Oeil. The budget was small, but because of the success of the album, other rappers wanted to work with us. We had covered the capital in less than a week. Then, clothing brands wanted to launch themselves on Châtelet. We embauched more graffiti artists. We were contacted for the release of Sheitan by Kim Chapiron. We went rollerblading and made stencils on the sidewalks of Panama. And here we are. I recruited people to be present on the internet and at events. We put a logo on a website, and we started as you see us today.

How do you deal with the fact that it is legal?

We have a lawyer who advises clients on the risks involved, but the ratio between the payment to be paid for a real ad and the one to be handed over to the courts in case of a problem is naturally convincing. We leave the responsibility to the client. He signs a release, and we keep a low profile. That’s why graffiti artists are hired. They know how to be discreet.

How do you approach customers?

He swayed back.

Word of mouth, a good reputation, targeted canvassing, and... Well, let’s just say we have an effective salesperson. That’s why you’re here, by the way. You know that street artist named Jeffrey?

"Yeah, sure, she’s super famous!"

Jeffrey was a street artist like the fashionable one. She started putting up posters in Paris, near the galleries. She got noticed by putting up posters in an American propaganda style from the 1950s. She imitated advertisements that were aimed at women, like the smoker, the truck driver, or even the interior woman who borders on the pin-up. She adorned her ads with round sunglasses on the female faces and with her cursive and glamorous signature. Lichtenstein-style print screens, a bit like D-Face, Seen, or Mike Giant, were used to enhance the art prints she sold on her website. It was catchy, but the pop-art Kai Ni style in Paris was not my thing. The girl had worked on the street for only two years before being picked up by a gallery. Easy money. She was really smart. On her website, she made anti-advertising calls. She invited her fans to paint her round sunglasses on the ads in their neighborhood and sign them with her name. It was really cool. I liked the idea of a public, shared, community artist.

Did you ever notice that logo?

-Yes. It’s a graffiti group, right? What are their names again?

"The Cool Kidz."

The logo represented a sort of owl’s head. Two adjacent arcs formed a beak in a larger circle, with two lines for eyes. It was like the V for Vendetta logo but with two owl eyes. They were always found near Jeffrey’s posters.

"Well, here it is. This logo is our logo. This is our agency. And Jeffrey is our agent too.

What does that mean?

We were first contacted by a French street artist, a guy from Neuilly, who was selling large sculptures of gorillas in fiber.

-Oh yes! I know it...

The guy was losing money, and he needed to regain his street credibility so he wouldn’t collapse before he was 50. As famous as he was, he had never set foot outside, nor had he touched a single graffiti can. So we took care of him. We put monkeys in the streets like Banksy and made little tags on his gorillas. He paid a lot of money. We saw the madness of the street art market, the Banksy madness, and all that it generated as money. Being from the graffiti world, poor relation of the Street art, the vice bit us and we started. We created Jeffrey. She is a virtual artist. an artist invented from scratch. Lisa, our press, print, and event manager, introduced Jeffrey to the galleries. She posed as his agent in Paris. She talked about Jeffrey Célavie, an artist from New York, to the gallery owners in the Marais, Rive Gauche, and Matignon who were used to hearing about him. The graphic designer created a visual identity, a website, and networks. We bought printers. The team from the workshop went to make the street collages for one or two years. Then they stuck stickers, posters, painted stencils and graffiti of the Cool Kidz and Jeffrey Célavie during their regular outings.

-But yes! I thought the Cool Kidz and Jeffrey Celavie were at war with each other. They always have their logos in the same place. That makes sense.

-That’s part of the storytelling that we put in place. We created this atmosphere of clash to raise interest and stick a bit of both during our night out. I hired a hacker to disseminate some information to Google here and there, just to flesh out Jeffrey. He set up site protection and labyrinthine chat groups to avoid being too exposed to investigations. And that’s it. On one side, we have a community of enthusiasts, and on the other, we have investors and feverish people who wouldn’t miss the next artist of the moment for anything. These entities are our lucrative fronts. Through them, we can set up somewhat complex structures and use the strength of our audience. Their reputation attracts our clientele to develop a long-term activity. The real business happens here, in the back room, where we grow quietly.

How does this affect your income?

-The clientele of the openings... They are business leaders and collectors who won’t stick their toes in the graffiti artists’ pockets. But they love the glamour of the galleries. It’s hard for us to meet them under better conditions than at openings. Just say, "I know the Cool Kidz" or "I know Jeffrey Célavie. Even though they are tempted to buy a painting by Jeffrey, we offer to make the artist work for them under the cover of our company. For them, Jeffrey is the brains of this street marketing business. When it takes off, they’re willing to pay big. They think it’s cool. They’re like part of the secret. It excites them. You follow?

Yeah, it’s clever... But why tell me so easily? I could make a big deal out of this information... I could break your little bu- siness? Isn’t that a little dangerous?

I noticed some parallels between our company and yours. You do exactly what we do. You set up little street wars and graffiti stories to fill the canteen. secrets with business leaders to feed your creativity. It’s the same business. Am I wrong?

I don’t have any business.

-Stop. I did my little investigation.

He was smiling wickedly.

"I get your little game. You’re getting paid to give bad publicity to a company that competes with the one that hires you. It’s a good idea. It came to you on its own, or are there several of you on it?

I don’t know what you’re talking about.

"I took pictures of your blinds."

He pulled a handful of the few Kodachromes from his drawer. The flash gave the impression of an exhibit. I told him:

What do you plan to do with this?

-Nothing. I took them for my own pleasure.

I take pictures of graffiti... You know, like a lot of graffiti artists. I walk around. I look at what’s going on in the streets—what’s moving. I’m a real enthusiast, you know. And I couldn’t help but see similarities in all this graffiti, despite your best efforts.

I didn’t feel very comfortable. He took over:

I need your trust because I need your talents. I won’t threaten to snitch. That would be ridiculous. I want us to partner up. You deserve more resources to do better.

You want my clientele?

-No. Not really... We already have a clientele. We want to think bigger. And we want to get out of an impasse too. I haven’t finished my little story... In everything we’ve done so far, our biggest success has been Jeffrey Celavie. His image, what he represents in the art landscape... That’s really worked out well. But Jeffrey’s strength is his participatory side. It’s a real power. You would see the passion of the public for this artist on Discord and the networks we set up! It gave us the weight and strength to go after our main client of the moment: Coca-Cola. I don’t know if you noticed, but our national logo’s artwork all features a Coke bottle.

That’s right. All the posters showed a woman drinking Coke or some other drink with the group, even in the background. I assumed it didn't matter. It was just product placement. Ultimately, it was consistent with the history of marketing, which has always gone hand in hand with feminism. The first American feminist revolutions introduced cigarettes as a whole new product to the female market. I asked out of curiosity:

«-How did you get Coca in your clients?»

The girl, Lisa, walked into the office. Jack said

right on cue.

Lisa was an extrovert, pleasant, not very tall, a little mouse who didn’t say much, but the intelligence could be read in her eyes.

«-It wasn’t easy. But I had my way. In Paris, there were only a few galleries that started to take advantage of street art. They were groping. I would enter the chosen gallery at a time when there was no one there, avoiding the assistants. I took the time to walk around. I had to wait for the gallery owner to get up from his seat. I would choose a painting that I liked better than the others, so I didn’t have to say whether the work on display was rotten. There’s always one painting that you like better than the others. Then I would simply describe what I saw. I had to drop a few references to show I knew a little about it. You have to work it, you know? So the gallery owner is curious to grasp who I am. This is the part where I explain that I work for Jeffrey. Usually, the graffiti crew has managed to put up posters nearby, a month in advance, near the gallery, and the digital marketing girl, Jo, has targeted their mailboxes and apps to receive press articles about Jeffrey. When we target someone in particular, we say we’re doing an inception, like the movie. We’ve had three deals like that. They’ve become good partners. We sell almost half the pieces at every solo show.

never sold out?

-Not yet... We’re selling high. But it did lead us to reach the Senior Vice President of Marketing Operations for Beverage Partners Worldwide at an auction.

What is this?

"He handles campaigns for Coca-Cola and Nestlé," underlined Jack.

-Why him?»

Lisa placed a buttock on the desk. It was a little overplayed.

Jeffrey takes up the posters from the 1950s. In most of them, it's a beautiful or strong woman drinking a soda. It attracts positive interaction from Parisian women. They take a large number of pictures of our street artists and relay them on their Instagram... And the insta of the Parisians bitches allows to have the attention of numerous women in the world.

You do product placement in street art and on social media?

Once the data was there, we put pressure on the brand. Since Andy Warhol's Campbell's cans, there hasn't been much of a distinction between advertising and artwork.

How do we put pressure on Coca-Cola?

-With numbers, exels, data, power points and PDFs, everything that makes companies happy. The numbers were there, and most importantly, it cost them nothing compared to their traditional marketing campaigns. Jeffrey’s fan community is pure fanaticism. They collect the posters, buy them, and sell them at a premium. They talk about it all day long. They reproduce the posters in the street. They advertise Coke, thinking they are doing anti-advertising. It’s pure ambush marketing for our client. Unheard of! Even at their best agencies,...

His excitement has subsided.

«We then showed potential future work by Jeffrey. Coke disengaged. So we took a chance.

-?

Jack stepped in.

Since they didn’t take us seriously, we put pressure on them. Jeffrey and his companions had the option of turning around. Engaging in real anti-pub campaigns and really targeting Nestlé and Coca It would have highlighted other aspects of these big brands: Collaboration during World War II, African genocide, and the decadent health of American society—all their taboos She would have sent her fans tearing up their ads, slashing, writing political tags, and harassing bad buzz about bad buzz and our teams all over the world.

This is blackmail!

Everything is blackmail.

It’s cynical.

So you’re too idealistic for us. This is business. There are sharks out there. We would unleash an army of journalists and bloggers who follow the artist. It would be good for the artist, but not for them. Because they're dropping us, we have an opportunity to make Jeffrey a truly free artist and sell as such. If not, we will go bankrupt. We have more expenses than income...

It seems a bit complicated to me. The art world can boycott you. Coke can spy on you.

- No spying. That’s why we get all the instructions in the blackbooks in writing.

- Blackbooks?»

Jack pulled a black moleskin from the desk.

It will be placed on your desk every morning. The instructions for the day or week can be found here. You answer by writing in it. We forbid all communications on phones and computers. «All of them are work-related.»

I observed the object and its disturbing simplicity. The simplicity of writing on paper was being used as a bulwark against digital espionage. It was a bit like raising hawks to attack drones. My business was twisted, but this was a level above. Champions. I turned to Lisa:

They can sue for defamation.

French law protects artists, especially when it comes to pastiche. It is inviolable. in the name of freedom of expression.

Still, it is very risky.

-Yes. But that’s what it took for us to pull out a suburban company with only middle and lower classes, artists, and outcasts. Do you have anything better? Here, we have no state support, no beautiful farmers, and even fewer investors. If they attack Jeffrey, we’ll make big publicity for the artist, and we’ll get away with it. It’s double or nothing. For me, we will always win.

Do they pay you on account?

They buy Jeffrey’s work.

This is my system. I do the same thing with the blinds.

- Yes. It’s the Bettencourt system.

It’s completely immoral.

-Yes. This is the art world.

Jack pointed at me with a tune of "N'allons pas trop vite."

«-That's why we hire you. Ever since Coke announced that they were no longer interested in Jeffrey’s campaigns, it’s been like a... crisis situation, let’s say. We don’t want to fire anyone. So we have to react quickly and well. We need to be smart. It’s a technical passage.

From Lisa’s pout, I could tell it was her baby slipping out of her hands. Jack resumed:

Amer thinks you are the man for the job.

-Amer?

The instructions in the blackbooks are handwritten by the company's CEO. And I think you can help in this transition phase too. There’s a place for you.

-I’m not the right person. I’ve never been a leader or anything else. I’ve never worked for a company or a team. I’m the most antisocial person you’ve ever seen. I’m too anti-social, even for graffiti artists. That’s what I mean.

You went to art school, and you do graffiti. You have your ass between two chairs. That must be a disadvantage in your daily life. But it's just right for us. A man only has to sell the specificity of his talents to a company... And talent is experience in a sector. Your sector, strangely enough, is exactly ours: the meeting of art, advertising, and graffiti. Rubatosis. It’s an English word for being aware of your own heartbeat. There, I had my legs crossed. The impulses of the blood in my femoral artery made my foot move slightly. Maybe the coffee Monachopsis. That’s another word for the persistent feeling of being out of place. It’s true that I had always been in the wrong place. The graffiti artists suspected me of intellectualism because I had passed the entrance exam to a school, but the gallery owners only saw me as a social educator because I worked with spray paint. It is the syndrome of the suburbanite. If you didn’t fit into a box, you couldn’t do anything in this damn country of robots. The interview situation was still crazy. That was about the only argument that appealed to me. That and the fact that I was in dire need of money, of course.

How did you know I went to art school, anyway? - It’s marked in the police file... in the occupation box. I couldn’t find the school mentioned.

-It closed.»

I had sort of burned that school after I left. The Hauts-de-Seine had the misfortune of publishing a special issue of a magazine that was distributed to every mailbox. A guy wanted to interview me. It ended up as a double-page spread in the center of the magazine, revealing a pamphlet about my old school and what it meant to me. The city council announced its closure just a few months later. Between graffiti, my school, and my own life, it seems that I am an artist of destruction. If the job was to destroy Coca-Cola’s communication, then maybe I had to catch the butterfly on the fly.

You must have had some time to learn about art history before slamming the door. What do you know about street marketing? Lisa, can you leave us, please?

I cracked my knuckles as Lisa walked out of the office.

"Street marketing" is a subgroup of modern advertising that draws on the codes of graffiti. It allows client groups to get more sympathy and attention from their targets... Because they are not quite used to this kind of approach... Because the truth is that no one can control the constant harassment of ads anymore. So the very principle of today’s ads is to look like anything but ads. Street marketing used to be used by contract workers who didn’t have the resources of big companies to make themselves known. In real life, it’s called guerrilla marketing. Guerrillas like Che Guevara Like, how to fight the official armies with little means... Today’s guerrilla marketing is a sanitized version of what it really was. It was the small alternative brands and labels that started this story. Marc Ecko, the graffiti artist behind the brand Ecko Unlimited, distributed stencils with his logo and a colored bomb to every beggar in New York, along with a shoe, promising them the second when the bomb was finished. The same goes for Jay Z, the rapper, when he was dealing cocaine in Brooklyn. He put all his money into the collage. He had the little spotters water the apple. Afterwards, he could negotiate the free recording studio knowing that his album was already highly anticipated.

very American.

- Clearly. The movement was born from poor but creative artists who tried their luck on a bluff, all sprinkled with story-telling. The big companies, which are slower, first wanted to get these artists before subcontracting with boxes like...

-Us. »

He raised his eyebrows, as if to say that everything made perfect sense, that everything was done so that we would be there, doing this interview.

-What do you think of our fake street artist idea?» - It’s interesting. Many people have the fantasy of meeting Banksy. But it’s not that simple. Often, the art world is more hermetic than expected. And the philosophy is not the right one. But with your company, you have more chances than others.

But what else?

Street artists often betray the codes of graffiti. I like the idea of the non-existent artist. I don’t like the Robin Hood side.

That’s exactly it. We looked at the Banksy question. That’s how we came up with the idea of Jef-Frey. We said to ourselves that it was a group with a leader. We removed the leader and his vigilante side. We kept the disillusioned but frank side of the pop artist and the company. Here, we love Andy Warhol. We want Jeffrey to live on her own, like a modern-day Warhol.

Jack offered me a cigarette and pulled out an old Coke bottle. I didn’t hear the "spritz," but it did help lighten the mood. Jack said:

« What do you think of Banksy?

I prefer Shepard Fairey. I love the Orwellian idea of a big brother embodied by the wrestler. Shepard used Invasion Los Angeles as his reference film. We are in a totally conspiratorial environment. I love it. His leitmotiv, "The medium is the message," is a good summary of his relevance.

Marshall McLuan

- Yes. I love it too. A visionary... Like Shepard, Banksy reproduces the idea of a movie. Banksy is none other than Tyler Durden in Fight Club. It is his film. His fantasy. A leader at the start of an activist group is impossible to capture because he arose from the imagination of a person or group. This is what a graffiti artist and his group do on a small scale. In his film, Banksy presents another character, his antithesis, Mister Brainwash, who may not really exist. He is presented as an invention of Banksy who highlights the ridiculousness of street art and the art market. We do not know if Mister Brainwash is invented by Banksy or if it is the opposite. a beautiful form of pop art. In Fight Club, it is exactly the same. All the characters are projections of the hero. Even the house represents the hero's mental space, as in the tradition of expressionist films or as in Psycho or Shining.

I read somewhere that the author wanted to talk about his wife’s cancer. I thought that was a cool read about the interaction between the biological body and the social body. Fight Club completely influenced the 2000s.

It hit me square in the heart.

- ...That’s for sure. It gets better! Banksy clearly shows Brad Pitt as a guest of honor at his exhibition. It may have been just a wink, but later I found out that Brad Pitt was Banksy’s main collector. That’s it. Banksy is an artist who was inspired by Fight Club and is backed by Brad Pitt. Incredible, isn’t it? and you do the same with Jeffrey.

and especially with the Cool Kidz. His Mr. Brainwash is our Jeffrey. And as Mister Wash, it’s very perishable. That’s why Coke escapes... Jeffrey is simply less fashionable. Despite its fanaticism, its clientism may be a little too obvious to the general public. It needs to change...

He sighed through his nose. The sigh swept up some rather long nasal hairs, which created an almost inaudible hiss. I wasn’t waiting for him to talk numbers anymore. He was clapping his hands on the table. big graffiti hands that contrasted with his angelic face. I remained stoic. Poker face. He said:

"Here you go. Research and development That’s your charge. You’re going to take on our Jeffrey, create his concepts, and find a way to stimulate his community. You’re going to organize her street marketing and give him scale. And we don’t want bullshit. With or without our partnership, we want Jeffrey to get serious, and we want her to make money. You have to keep that in mind. We’re investing in you so we can manage better, do you hear me? We pay two thousand a month in cash. You try it out for a month. You come in on Monday at nine for the meeting. You dress as you like. I’ll see to it that the complaint against you is dropped. Is that all right?

-It’s okay...»

I went home with a strange satisfaction. I could see the graffiti flying by. I could hardly believe that they gave me a job.

The impact of graffiti has been largely underestimated. However, it was present everywhere. In a kind of art evolutionism, it was still regarded by institutions with the same scorn as primitive cultures. But it was just as old as contemporary art. It was to go further when Western art did not know what to do after Marcel Duchamp. In the graffiti, everyone marked his name, and paradoxically, it was an anonymous movement. There was no canvas, no subject, not even an exhibition or presentation. Just nature. a signature that some had been practicing for forty years. The same four or five letters with the same hunger for the pure tag. A few quasi-abstract movements were repeated for entire lifetimes—thousands of lifetimes. It was an art that stood alone. It was retaliation for the mixed peoples who had become slaves, imported by history into great capitals, civilizations' hearts, and, even better, their suburbs, where one was uglier than in the city center. Were we ugly because we worked hard, or did we work hard because we were ugly? Go figure.

The graffiti took over the cities like trees, each with its own species. All became the same growing forest, a city animism, with pigments blown as if on a hand affixed in the city's dark caverns. The tag established itself on the ground of advertisements for this perfect world, where subliminal sexual messages and allusions to the perfect, white family and its unattainable American furniture were concentrated. City dwellers should say thank you for stripping away the artifice, for blurring the attention sensors, for destroying or at least showing that someone or something else is resisting. The tag would intrude into the heart of the Pax Romana and its sweet power of subjugation. These lined-up names emerged from shame. And, if the graffiti was ephemeral, its ensemble took over indefinitely. The idea of graffiti was laid down. It remained like the barbaric gestures alien to Greek democracy, this democracy that could only survive by making barbarians, slaves, and leaving behind the most exquisite corpses.