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SEP 2021



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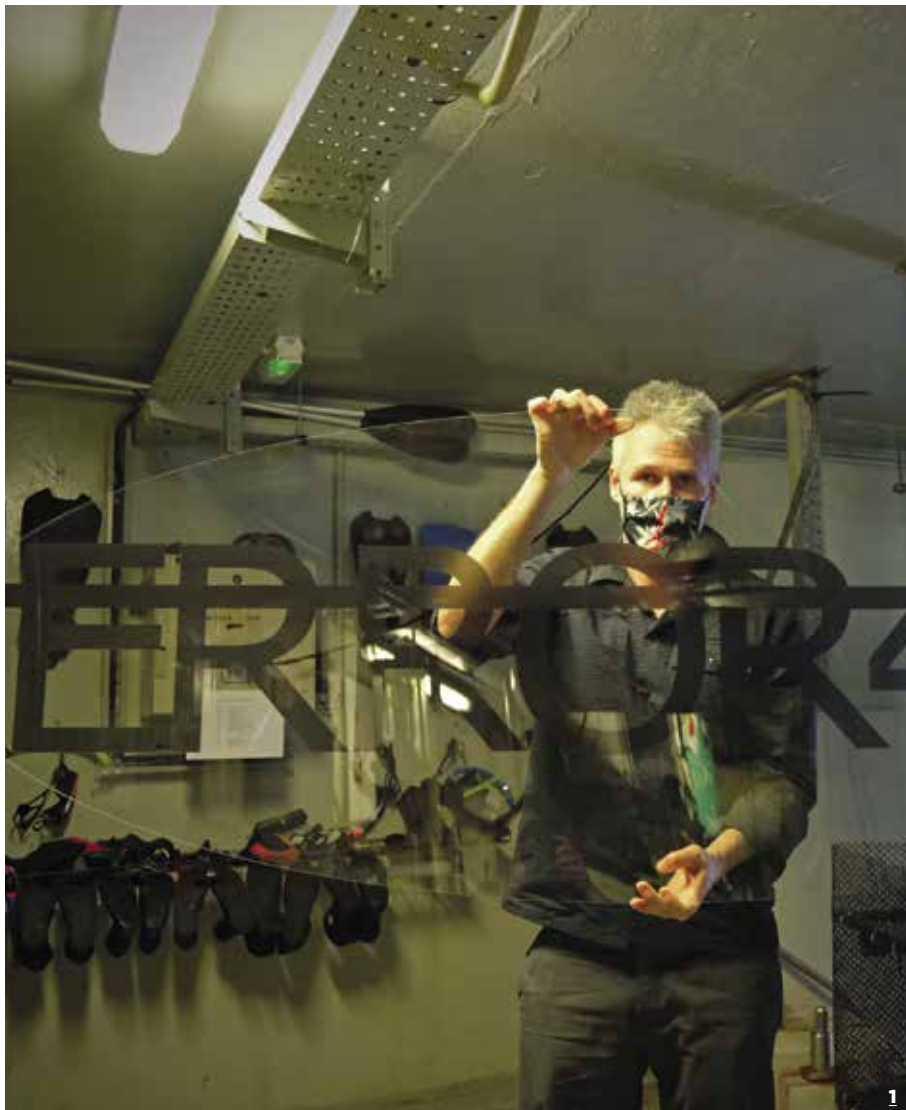
DESIGN

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW

THE ART OF CONTRADICTION

Through his crossed-out letters proposing different points of view, Rio de Janeiro-based artist Rero has perfected the long-standing French tradition of contradiction. Y-JEAN MUNDALSALLE discovers more about the artist's creative journey, the evolution of his work, and the significance of the strikethrough and ellipsis at the end of his typographic artworks.

photo JULES HIDROT



more transparent and forcing us to think more deeply. This affirmation through negation is a form of provocation in the French tradition of contradiction: making a statement and then immediately debating it, saying something and then doing the opposite.

“In my work, I say something, I cross it out,” Rero says. “I put down one way of thinking and then the opposite way of thinking, and I try to make a composition with synthesis, but it’s an open conclusion because I always write three dots at the end to start the conversation. Sometimes you can read it negatively, sometimes positively.

“The more I work, the more I can condense in one spirit. In the US, it’s difficult to accept contradiction. Contradiction is something attached to the French spirit. I’m not trying to change the world; I try to show the contradictions, to understand and to live with them because there are many things we can’t change.”

Spelling The World

Borrowing from intellectuals and ordinary individuals, the French philosopher of contemporary times fills his notebooks with words and fragments of ideas collected from public transport, city streets, the news, literature, cinema, music, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and overheard conversations. All serve as inspirations.

He tackles themes of consumption, capitalism, censorship, obsolescence, intellectual property and information technology by transforming text into images.

His works challenge reality,



The universal Verdana typeface in capitals and a bold black line striking through the letters – these two simple elements were all it took for artist Alexis Devevey, better known as Rero, to invent an instantly recognisable, impactful graphic signature.

Creating words that are opposites simultaneously raises awareness of the paradoxes we face in our complex society, making our choices and beliefs

but never with a moralistic slant. Able to synthesise his thoughts into just a few words, he explains, “All my work is this: in one, two or three words, I need to be able to create an image, a sensation. It’s tough because there is so much information and, in the end, I need to reduce to the maximum to express more; to be simple but not simplistic. It’s about less is more.

“We can express a lot with just a few words. French people like to talk, but it needs to go straight to the point when I show something. To take off all the unnecessary things is very difficult – it took me 12 years to concentrate my proposition.”

The Urban Canvas

In a constant back and forth between working inside and outside, Rero embraces this freedom of movement and refuses to set up boundaries, whether plastering his phrases on advertising billboards,

inside churches, on museum façades, in the Moroccan desert or the Amazon rainforest or vast prairies.

He inscribed “Do not cross the line...” on the iconic escalators of The Centre Pompidou in Paris and painted “No Substance”, “Oblivion” and “Decadence...” on the walls of derelict abandoned buildings.

When in the heart of nature, his giant outdoor interventions are temporary, lasting just long enough to be captured in a photograph. Examples include “Serenity” in a field of dying sunflowers with a nuclear power plant in the background, “Failure”, set against a mountainous backdrop in Death Valley, and “Wikipedia”, “Twitter”, “Google”, “Instagram” and “Facebook” on signposts by the ocean in California.

Research into materials plays an integral part in his indoor creations, as the ▶

“MY PROFESSOR SAID TO ME, ‘SOMETIMES YOU ILLUSTRATE ONE IMAGE WITH ONE TEXT, BUT I’M SURE YOU CAN USE JUST TEXT TO ILLUSTRATE WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY’. IT’S FASCINATING BECAUSE I WAS ABLE TO CREATE A MENTAL IMAGE BY PUTTING A TEXT IN CONTEXT. I CALLED IT IMAGE NEGATION BECAUSE IT WAS WITHOUT IMAGES.”



1. Rero preparing for his exhibition Immens(lim) ité at Paris Aquarium in August 2021.

2. *Mal De Mer* (French for seasickness) installation at Paris Aquarium, part of a triptych.

3. *Untitled (Burn After Reading...)*, a 2016 artwork made of a resin-coated book and vinyl letters.

4. An installation at Bogota’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 2015.

medium becomes just as important as his message. Subverting everyday objects from their original intent, he breathes new life into old books cast in resin, slate, wood, aluminium, plaster, neon, shredded paper, wall clocks, antique busts and now a T-shirt in a new collaboration with French clothing brand Maison Standards that advocates responsible consumerism that respects the environment.

Creating From Chaos

Rero was born in 1983 in Beaune, Burgundy, and grew up in the countryside before moving with his agronomist father and his family to Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso when he was three.

A year later, they returned

to France, this time to Villeneuve-sur-Lot, where his father worked on a stud farm for approximately five years. The young Rero would sketch horses and sell his drawings for 10 francs each. Following a brief stint in Saintes near La Rochelle, he arrived in Paris.

After a rural childhood, he ended up in an intensely urban environment as a teenager in the mid-'90s, where graffiti came as a shock to him. He dived head first into this new culture and spent his time roaming the streets, painting his curvy graffiti letters on walls in abandoned sites in southern Paris under the alias "Aurer".

He was arrested for vandalism when he was 16, but his mother never forbade him



5. *Untitled (Caelum Non Animum Mutant Qui Trans Mare Currunt...)* artwork printed on 597x190cm tarpaulin and displayed at the entrance and exit of the Paris Aquarium.

6. *Untitled (Time Took Our Dreams Away...)*, a 2020 artwork made of resin-coated rainbow cardboard.

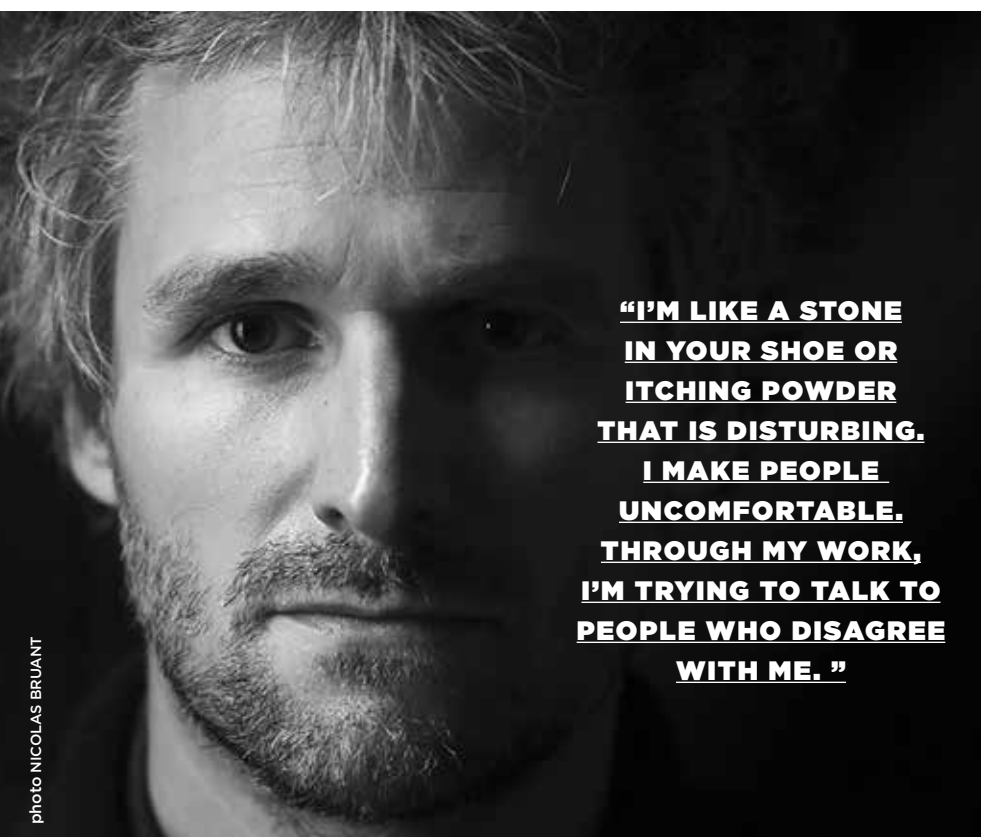
7. *Untitled (Loading...)* a 2019 sculpture co-created with artist Stephane Parain at Le Socle et Flucuart, Paris.

8. The facade of his Joseph Grand exhibition at the Backslash Gallery in Paris.

from practising graffiti as long as he stayed in school. "My mum said I could continue to do graffiti because it wasn't a crime," he recalls. "In France, we don't think badly of material destruction. We also like strikes, as it's one way to speak up, disagree and show our frustrations. If we don't kill people and destroy material things, we let people express themselves. I think it's French. I don't know if this exists in many other countries."

At the time, the Paris graffiti scene went through a second wave, and graffiti was everywhere. Rero spent hours admiring artists like O'Clock, Psychoze and JonOne. But it was just a transition period where he learnt about typography, letter design and calligraphy before freeing himself from the ego-driven obsession of tagging his name to find his voice.

After a foundation course in art and design at the London College of Communication from 2004 to 2005, where he combined text and images, he reversed his pseudonym to become "Rero" and vanished behind his plays on words,



**"I'M LIKE A STONE
IN YOUR SHOE OR
ITCHING POWDER
THAT IS DISTURBING.
I MAKE PEOPLE
UNCOMFORTABLE.
THROUGH MY WORK,
I'M TRYING TO TALK TO
PEOPLE WHO DISAGREE
WITH ME."**

punchlines, expressions and aphorisms.

He notes, “My professor said to me, ‘Sometimes you illustrate one image with one text, but I’m sure you can use just text to illustrate what you want to say’. It’s fascinating because I was able to create a mental image by putting a text in context. I called it image negation because it was without images.”

Rather than creating his own letter shapes and style in the manner of graffiti artists, he moved away from that scene and chose the basic Verdana font for its legibility, plainness and neutrality to keep the focus on his messages that are imbued with meaning.

From The Pandemic

Last spring, Joseph Grand, Rero’s sixth exhibition at Backslash Gallery in Paris, was named after a character in French author Albert Camus’ novel, *The Plague*. A government clerk attempts to write a book but can get no further than the first sentence. He cannot find the right words to express his meaning until he removes all superfluous adjectives to trim his sentence to the bare minimum subject-verb-object.

Rero believes people must rid themselves of what is unnecessary and reduce consumption in times of crisis, like the pandemic.

With this new body of work, he suggests that we alter our perspective and adapt to the situation, proposing the “Via Negativa” concept, a particular form of positivism and minimalism under challenging times, and anti-fragility, in



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which negative factors become positive principles.

In the exhibition, he adds words to mirrors, concrete, raku pottery, burnt wood, cardboard, a climbing wall, bicycle and flag, thereby metamorphosing them into artworks.

“The context is primordial,” he states. “I try to constantly interact with objects that are not supposed to be art. For example, when the French President said art was not essential, I said I would use the same weapon, create my flag in the same manufacture that produces France’s national flags and transform it into a personal symbol. However, instead of flying in the sky, the sky becomes the image on the flag, and it says Pas Essentiel



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(Not Essential). This idea of what is essential is a massive question for me.”

Questioning whether culture was indispensable to people’s lives, he plastered the same expression across the façade of The CentQuatre-Paris cultural centre when it closed because of Covid-19.

In his latest solo show, Immens(lim)ité, at the Paris Aquarium that closed last August, Rero created pieces that dialogued with various marine species, in which the ocean appeared to speak through his words.

On the walls and in the pools, he examined our values, commitments, fears and responsibilities in the face of the ocean’s immensity and mysteries, asking about the place of humans in nature and the mark they leave on it through their polluting practices.

The mural “Act without acting...” greeted visitors at the entrance; “Antifragile” marked a transparent sign lying at the bottom of the shark pool; “Nothing really matters...”

appeared in the jellyfish tank; “Resist your own resistance...” was projected onto the surface of the great basin; “If the ocean dies, we die...” in the letters of the maritime alphabet was painted on 20 wooden panels; and “How much is enough...” was printed on Dibond aluminium in the “retired” fish tank.

An engaged artist who connects with politics and the news, he concludes: “I’m like a stone in your shoe or itching powder that is disturbing. I make people uncomfortable. Through my work, I’m trying to talk to people who disagree with me. Art is the only thing that can do this because, for many subjects, there wouldn’t be any exchange if we didn’t take the opportunity to use art.

“However, I don’t like to say I’m political, as I don’t have one strong point of view. I try to find questions. The role of the artist is this: to question and digest society to help people see it a little bit clearer because sometimes they don’t have all the keys.” ■