

C215 – A Parisian Street Artist Focused on Stencil Graffiti

"I try to interact with context, so I place in the streets elements and characters that belong especially to the streets. I like to show things and people that society aims at keeping hidden: homeless people, smokers, street kids, bench lovers for example"
- C215

Christian Guémy, who goes by the moniker of C215, was born in 1973, in Bondy in France. He started spray painting in 2005 and his street art spread like wildfire. What makes him so special is the use of spray paint and stencil to draw faces of the famous and the not so well-known persons in eclectic places such as streets, public buildings (like town halls or jails) and even in an abbey. He notably painted on the walls of a research center, the CEA Saclay (Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission, Gif-sur-Yvette, France). Since I worked at CEA for a bit more than three years, it brought me to appreciate and recognize his art. C215 kindly accepted to answer many of our questions and has generously allowed us to publish some of his work.

C215 mixed art and science in transforming junk objects into pieces of art (Fig. 1, 2), and bland and whitewashed walls - a giant canvas for his exhibition (Figs. 4, 5, 7, 8). His work represents characters that made history such as, Le general de Gaulle, who was instrumental in setting up the CEA in 1945, Marie and Pierre Curie and their contributions in identifying and isolating radioactive elements (Fig. 1) notably Polonium, a metal that they discovered together in 1898,^[1] or Schrodinger and his famous cat (Fig. 4). Apart from iconic figures, individuals whose achievements are not highlighted in standard texts also find pride of place in the art of C215. For instance, Lise Meitner (Fig. 7), a Jewish Austrian physicist, who escaped the authoritarian Nazi regime and settled in Sweden. She played a major role in the discovery of nuclear fission, but somehow was left behind and did not share the Nobel prize with Otto Hahn.^[2] In one his graffiti, C215 has paid tribute to Rosalind Franklin (Fig. 8), who took the "Photograph 51" in 1951, which was an X-ray diffraction image of DNA. It is widely known now that Watson, Crick, and Wilkins, with-

out Franklin's knowledge, used this photograph to build the chemical model of the DNA molecule. The Nobel prize for revealing the structure of DNA was awarded in 1962 to these researchers but not Franklin, who died four years earlier.^[3]

Popular fiction, like a R2-D2 close to a similar robot-looking liquid nitrogen tank (Fig. 5) or crazy Homer Simpson losing control (Fig. 2) and poetry (Fig. 6) are often used by C215 to portray the lighter side of science. It is important for him "to paint the soul and history of places, so they are the soul of CEA". His art somehow reminds scientists that "they belong to a chain of stars, that they belong to a mythology by themselves".

Painting in the CEA Saclay was not straightforward since it is a highly-secure place to which the access is tightly controlled. C215 acknowledges that "it has been very special to paint in such an unexpected place where art is not supposed to pop up". There, "science [was] an inspiration for sure, even if there is science inside art". Beyond science as a factual concept, relying on evidence, it is also an imaginary field. Thus, C215 visited this peculiar research center and picked several locations. He worked together with a CEA scientist to decide what could be the subject of each spot. He also worked on several objects provided by the scientists, like posters (Fig. 1) or measuring devices (Figs. 2 and 3).

C215 did not stop at just the walls of the CEA either. He recently (2016) painted faces on the walls of the Marie Curie Museum in Paris.^[4]

— Adrien Thurotte

References

- [1] P. Curie, M. Curie, *C. R. Acad. Sci.*, **1898**, 127,1215
- [2] R. L. Sime (reviewed by Arne Hessenbruch), *Eur. J. Phys.*, **1996**, 17(6)
- [3] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/2895681.stm>
- [4] <http://musee.curie.fr/decouvrir/zoom-sur/radium215>



Figure 1: Marie Curie on the periodic table of elements ©C215



Figure 2: Homer Simpson ©C215



Figure 3: Measuring device ©C215

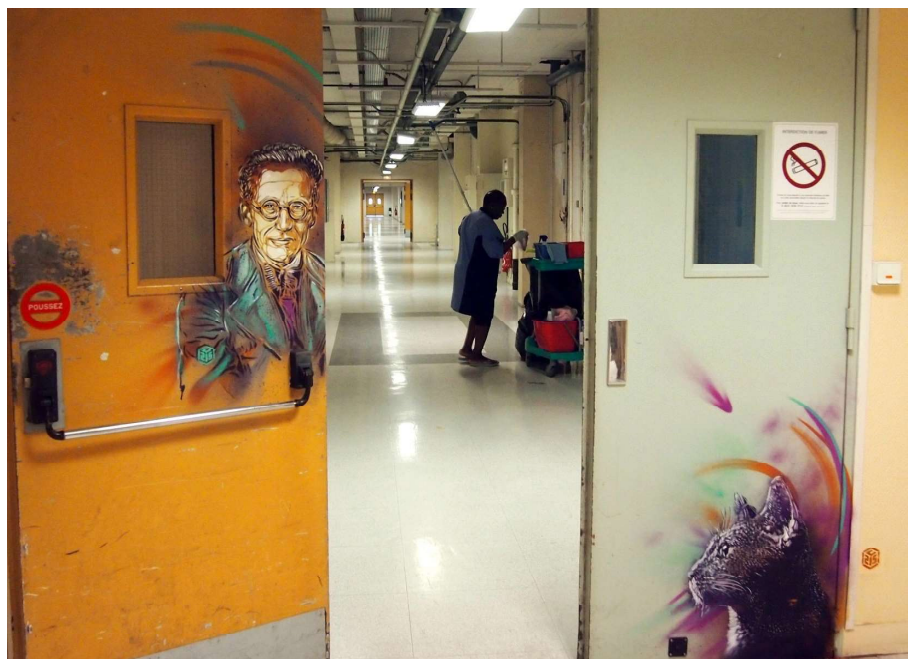


Figure 4: Schrödinger and his cat ©C215



Figure 5: R2-D2 close to a similar robot-looking liquid nitrogen tank ©C215



Figure 6: A close-up of a bird landing on a liquid nitrogen tap ©C215

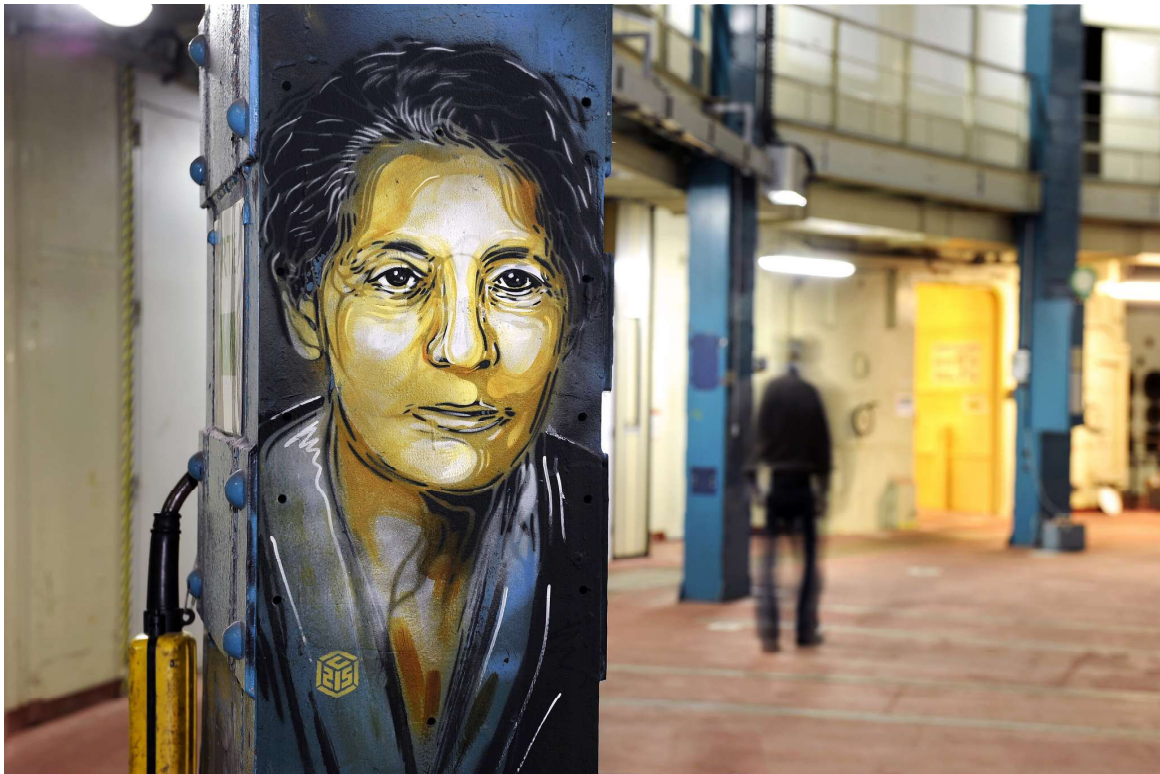


Figure 7: Lise Meitner, an Austrian physicist who played a major role in the discovery of nuclear fission ©C215

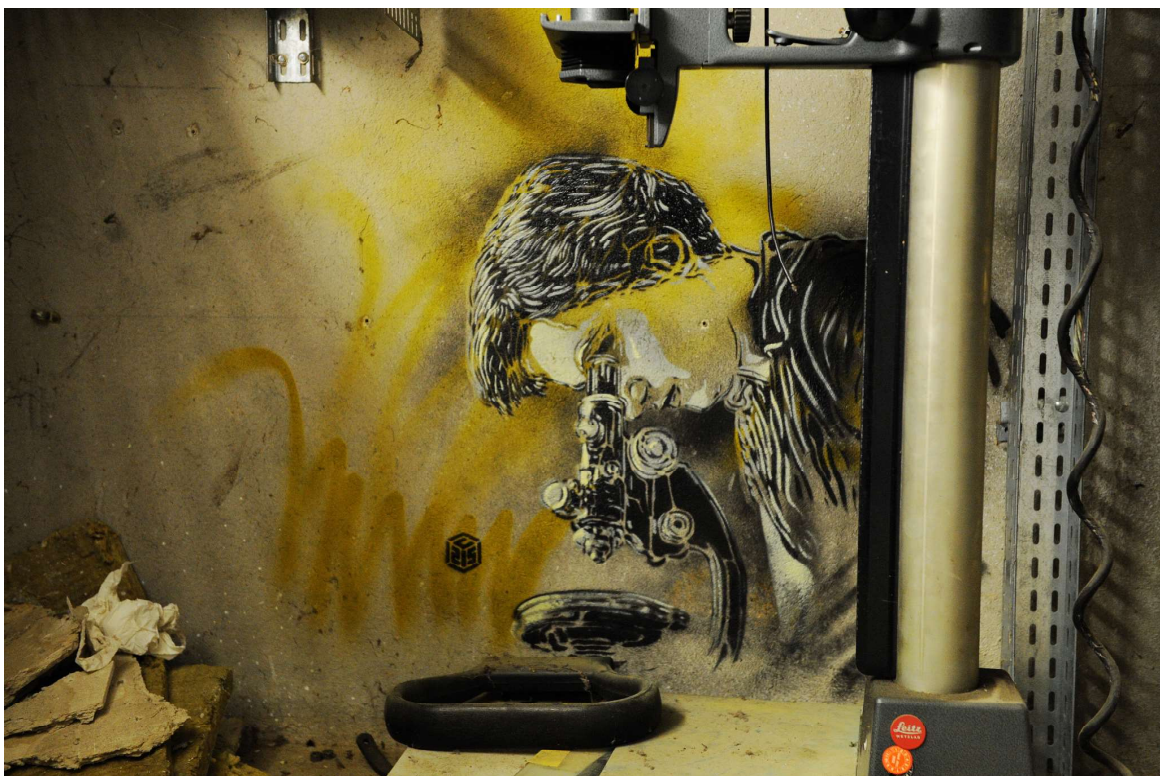


Figure 8: Rosalind Franklin took the first X-ray diffraction image of DNA in 1951 ©C215