

AMERICAN

Graffiti



Margo Thompson

Temporis

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American Graffiti

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The first appearances of graffiti “tags” (signatures) on New York City subway trains in the early 1970s were discarded as incidents of vandalism or the rough, violent cries of the ignorant and impoverished. However, as the graffiti movement progressed and tags became more elaborate and ubiquitous, genuine artists emerged whose unique creativity and unconventional media captured the attention of the world. Featuring gallery and street works by several contributors to the graffiti scene, this book offers insight into the lives of urban artists, describes their relationship with the bourgeois art world, and discusses their artistic motivation with unprecedented sensitivity.

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Margo Thompson American Graffiti



EVIL 136, *Tag*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on brick wall. New York.

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Introduction



MITCH 77, *Whole car tag*, 1981. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf are graffiti artists according to art historians and critics, and so are the painters, later featured in galleries, who began their careers ‘writing’ on or ‘tagging’ New York City subway cars.¹

The graffiti art movement began with shows at Fashion Moda, the Fun Gallery, the Mudd Club, and other exhibition spaces that opened in the early 1980s, and expanded into the established galleries of SoHo, 57th Street, and the Basel art fair. It ended just a few years later when critics, dealers, and collectors turned their attention to new trends. In the decades since graffiti art’s heyday, Basquiat has had retrospective exhibitions, a foundation was established devoted to Haring’s legacy, and Scharf continues to test the boundaries between high art and popular culture. However, subway writers on the whole have not received sustained attention from art historians and critics of art of the 1980s. Considering them as a distinct group of graffiti artists who gave the movement its name and lent it ‘street cred’, we can learn something about the way the New York art market of the 1980s assimilated a subcultural, vernacular art form produced for the most part by racial and ethnic minorities and the terms on which it was accepted.

Haring developed a reputation for drawing cartoonish figures in subway stations. Scharf actually painted on a subway car or two with spray paint, after meeting some writers. Both men acknowledged, though, that they came to graffiti art ‘crossing over in the other direction’, as Haring said, from writers who began their careers by tagging trains and public walls and later translated their designs to permanent surfaces.² They both studied at the School for Visual Arts in New York, and they shared a studio. Haring had arrived in the city from the hinterlands of Kutztown, Pennsylvania, and Scharf came from Los Angeles. They were intrigued enough – Scharf said he was ‘hypnotized’ – by the spontaneous art they encountered on the sides of subway cars to try their hands at similar public displays.³ Basquiat, by contrast, came to the New York art world from the same direction as subway writers: moving from public spaces to commercial ones. He had earned a certain reputation writing gnomish phrases under the name of SAMO in 1979. SAMO was ubiquitous in some neighbourhoods in lower Manhattan, especially near art galleries.

There are a number of reasons why subway writers have not received the serious attention their more famous peers have enjoyed. For one, the ‘pieces’ on which their careers were founded, the whole-car compositions that captured the public’s attention – both positive and negative – have all been destroyed. Another reason these artists are often overlooked is graffiti’s strong association

¹ Following the artists’ preference and for clarity’s sake, I will refer to artists who painted in the subways as writers, their practice as writing, piecing or tagging; their creations as pieces or tags. They are also graffiti artists, but not all graffiti artists were writers.

² Nicolas A. Moufarrege, “Lightning Strikes (Not Once but Twice): An Interview with Graffiti Artists,” *Arts* 57, no. 3 (November 1982), 88.

³ Moufarrege, “Lightning Strikes,” 88.

with hip-hop culture, which ties it to the mass market, not high art. As interest in graffiti art waned, a number of former writers developed careers as graphic artists while Basquiat, Haring and Scharf managed to transcend their paintings' allusions to the mass media and achieve recognition as fine artists. These distinct career trajectories were set early, as a consequence of the language critics used to analyse graffiti art: Basquiat, Haring and Scharf were awarded an art historical lineage, while subway writers rarely were. This is not to say that subway writers did not receive positive notices in reputable art magazines – they did. But their paintings remained strange and exotic even to their fans: as one writer, DAZE put it, 'Graffiti was this language that they wanted to get to know on a superficial level, but they didn't want to be able to speak it fluently'.⁴ This book seeks to correct that perspective, by taking seriously the writers' ambitions and achievements.



STAR III and various artists, *Tags*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.

One history of graffiti art would trace it back to the cave paintings of Lascaux, by way of Roman latrinalia, Kilroy, and similar acts of anonymous mark-making. The aesthetic this genealogy suggests, of letters and pictures urgently scratched onto public walls, connects with some mid-twentieth century painters whose brushwork resembles calligraphy, like Cy Twombly, or whose figures seem crude and untutored, like Jean Dubuffet. The palimpsest that graffiti builds up over time brings to mind Robert Rauschenberg, whose accretions of images from mass culture are rich and layered. Yet graffiti art derived from subway writing was in fact innocent of these influences, at least until the artists discovered them and, in Basquiat's case, consciously appropriated them. Art historian Jack Stewart, in the first scholarly study of subway writing, argues persuasively that the tags and pieces that first appeared in New York City between 1970 and 1978 were a unique efflorescence, having no connection to any known high-art source.⁵ The writers agree: even those who harboured ambitions to be fine artists from an early age honed their skills within the highly organised writing subculture. They furthermore rejected calling what they did graffiti, a

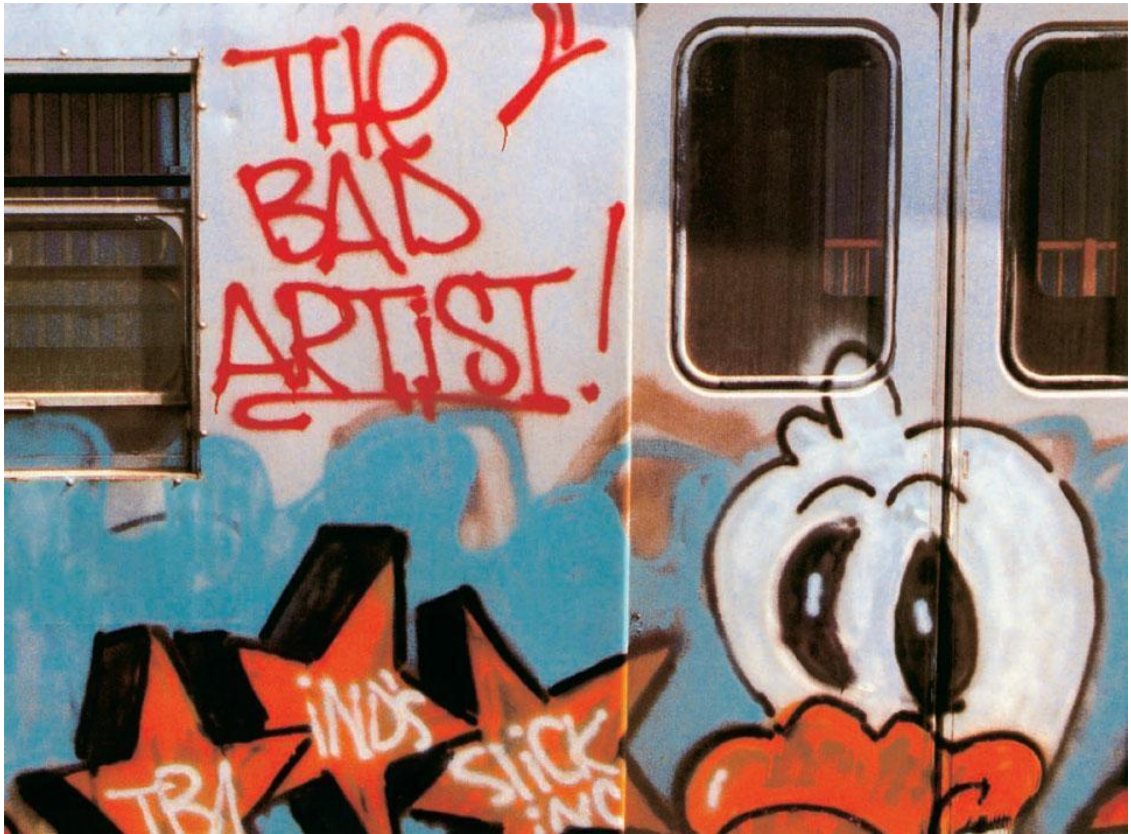
⁴ Interview with DAZE, 26 July 2006.

⁵ Jack Stewart, "Subway Graffiti: An Aesthetic Study of Graffiti on the Subway System of New York City, 1970–1978" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1989). Tags are the names subway writers adopt, and a tag is that name written in a distinctive style on a wall. Pieces, short for masterpieces, are large, colourful compositions that may incorporate the writer's tag, and cover a substantial portion of a subway car. They are further categorised by size: window-down, top-down, and end-to-end.

term imposed by the official state culture that wanted to eradicate it. 'Graffiti' designated what they did as criminal vandalism. They preferred to call their activity 'writing,' and I have used that terminology wherever possible to distinguish between what was written on the trains and what was painted on canvases. Writers insisted that their paintings should not be called graffiti, because they were made legally and for a different audience than their tags and pieces. As at least one writer recognised, calling their paintings graffiti suggested a limit to their iconographic and stylistic advancement: how much could the paintings change and still fit that designation? Nevertheless, art dealers, critics, and the artists themselves accepted the label 'graffiti art', albeit with various degrees of enthusiasm, and I use the phrase for its historical context. The following chapters establish the parameters of the movement by giving their pieces (to the extent that documentary photographs permit) and paintings the formal analysis that has been absent from existing accounts of graffiti art.

Writers developed their styles in a hierarchical system of apprenticeship, where aspiring taggers made contact with more established ones, who critiqued their designs worked out in hardbound black sketchbooks, gave them tags to copy, and perhaps invited them to participate in executing a masterpiece – a large-scale composition covering most or all of a subway car. A young writer might join a crew whose writers he admired, and prove himself by advancing the group's signature style. By devoting hours to his craft, he would master aerosol techniques, become familiar with the palettes of various spray-paint manufacturers, learn the subway lines, lay-ups, and yards, and develop a distinctive tagging style of his own. He might eventually be recognised by his peers as 'king' of a particular subway line, if his tags were ubiquitous enough and his style was impressive. Basquiat, Haring and Scharf did not participate in this well-established and self-perpetuating writers' academy. With the exception of some tags on the inside of subway cars, Basquiat's public writing was limited to the black block capital letters with which he wrote nihilistic aphorisms as SAMO. Haring drew pictures in chalk on the black paper covering expired advertisements in subway stations, using a lexicon of ideograms of his own devising. Scharf did spray paint some graffiti in imitation of the writing he admired, but cannot be said to have been a part of that culture. The frame of reference, source material, and aesthetic of these three artists differed significantly from each other, and from subway writers.

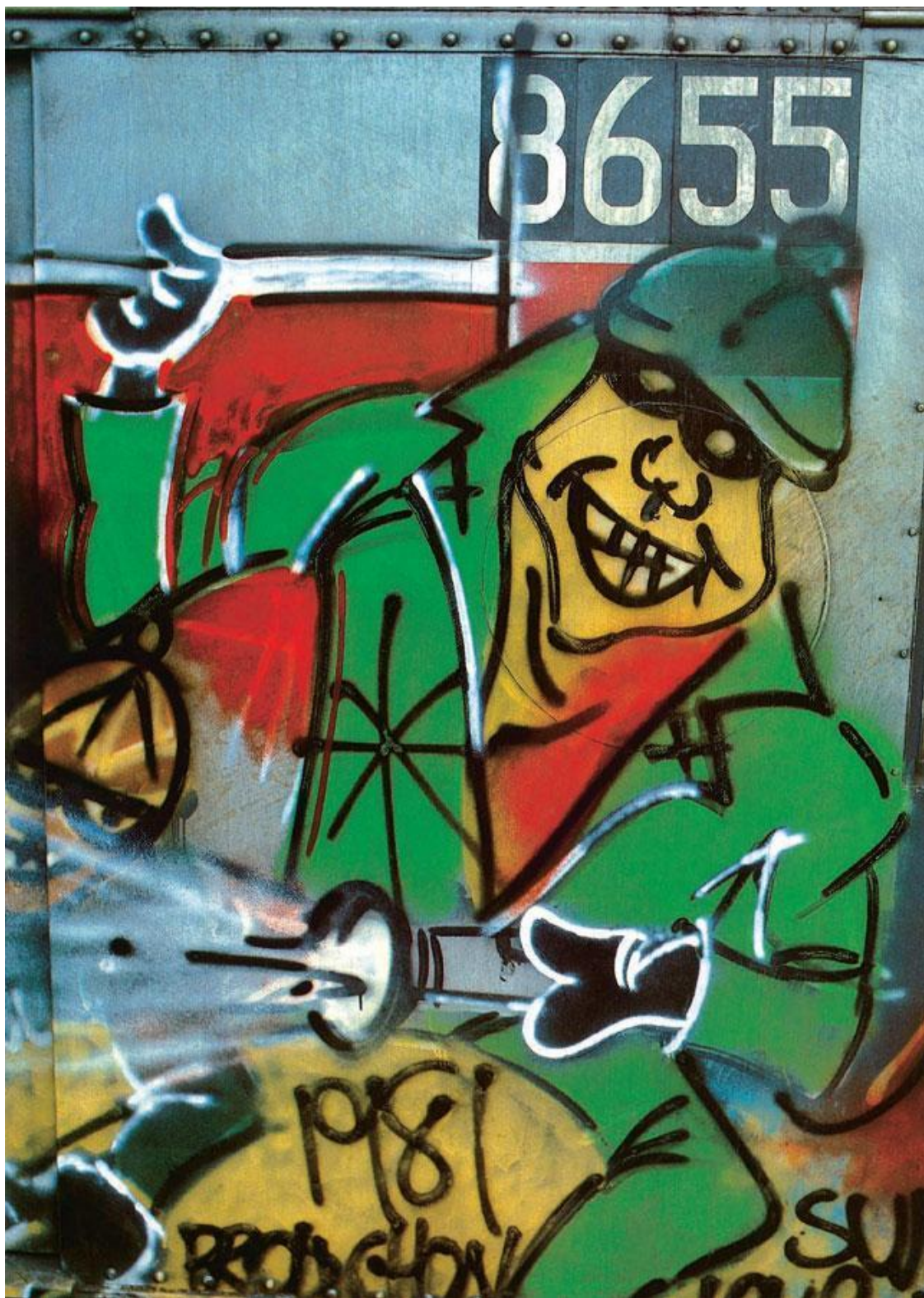
Given the stylistic disparity and the different contexts in which the artists first developed, what was the basis on which the category 'graffiti art' was consolidated? There was a critical discourse that established graffiti art as a significant trend in the early 1980s. Art critics worried over issues of authenticity, primitivism, and the avant-garde in their reviews of graffiti artists. These were the terms by which Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf, and DONDI, FUTURA 2000, DAZE and the other writers were evaluated.



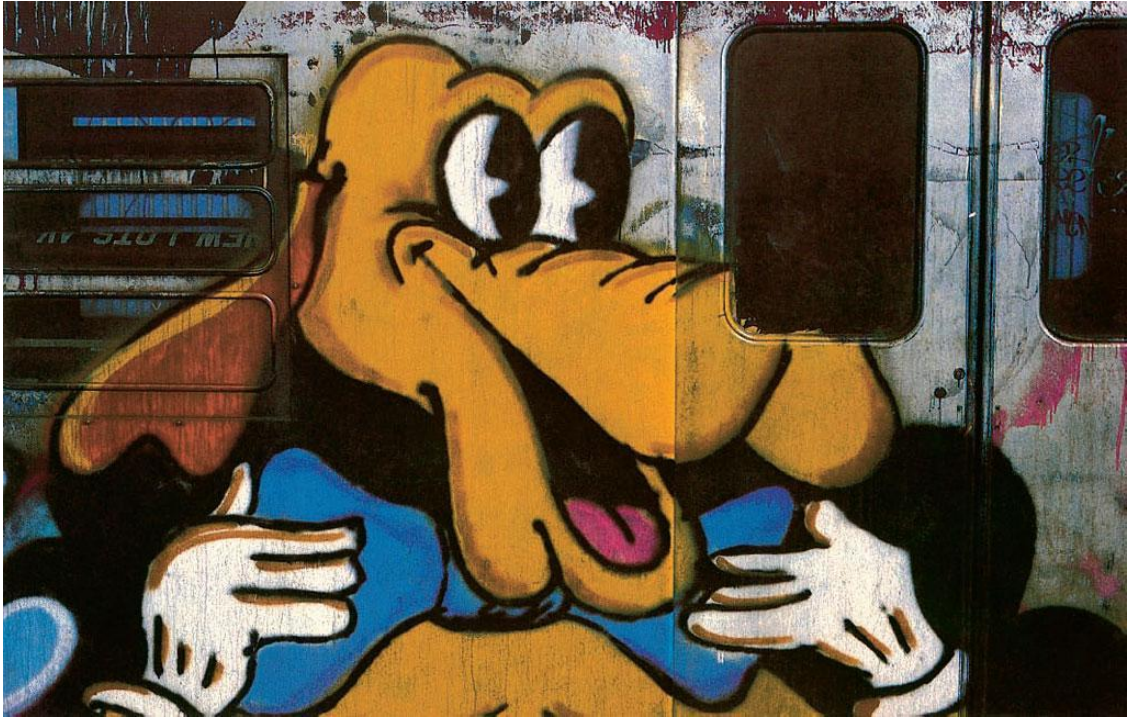
GREG, *Untitled*, 1977. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.



Various artists, *Cartoon Characters*.



KEY, *Burglar*, 1981.
Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.



MITCH 77, *Pluto*, date unknown. New York.

Authenticity

Since the early 1970s, when writers first decorated the outsides of subway cars with increasingly large and elaborate pieces, graffiti found favour among some urban intellectuals as a legitimate form of visual culture that gave voice to a racial underclass. In 1973, Pop artist Claes Oldenburg expressed his delight with the trend:

You're standing there in the station, everything is gray and gloomy, and all of a sudden one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens the place like a big bouquet from Latin America.⁶

Pulitzer-prize winner Norman Mailer wrote a book celebrating subway writing called *The Faith of Graffiti* in 1974. The title came from a remark writer CAY 161 made to Mailer, that 'the name is the faith of graffiti': the tag is fundamental, unique to its owner, not to be borrowed or copied. Mailer described the way graffiti had spread over the urban environment:

[I]t looked as if graffiti would take over the world, when a movement which began as the expression of tropical peoples living in a monotonous iron-gray and dull brown brick environment, surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and clangor, had erupted biologically as though to save the sensuous flesh of their inheritance from a macadamization of the psyche, save the blank city wall of their unfed brain by painting the wall over with the giant trees and pretty plants of a tropical rain-forest, and like such a jungle, every plant large and small spoke to one another, lived in the profusion and harmony of a forest.⁷

Some writers formed collectives: United Graffiti Artists was organised with the help of Hugo Martinez, a sociology student at City College, in 1972. They exhibited tags on canvases at the Razor Gallery in 1973. Peter Schjeldahl, reviewing the Razor show for *The New York Times*, judged the paintings as lacking in structure, but strong in the use of colour, and he singled out a few artists for their especially striking tags in the collaboration to which all the UGA members contributed. Most significantly, he observed that the works on canvas extended the 'show-off ebullience' of the tags seen city-wide on trains and walls. The efforts of the 'ghetto kids', with their 'volcanic energies', were 'unstoppable'. Those 'youths, having found an exciting outlet for their rage for identity, are not likely to drop graffiti', Schjeldahl predicted.⁸ The taggers' motivation to expression their identity gave writing its legitimacy. Because tags were uninfluenced by formal training or high cultural references but were clear, forceful declarations of ego, they had an authentic quality. To Schjeldahl, the tag was all about asserting the subjective presence of the writer, but the style with which it was executed was more difficult to evaluate because it had no reference outside writing culture. It was inevitable that the distinction between writer and tag would collapse immediately. Tags and writers spoke for themselves in a visual idiom of their own, a form of subcultural communication impervious to whomever else might be looking on.

On canvas, however, the tag seemed less a matter of faith than a trademark reproduced on demand, and this threatened the authenticity attributed to illegal graffiti. In the studio, writers no longer worked only for themselves and their peers, but for a broader public. Furthermore, the paintings were evidence that they now wanted to please this audience, whereas their tags in the subways aggressively claimed the space in a way that many perceived as menacing.

⁶ Quoted in Richard Goldstein, "This Thing Has Gotten Completely Out of Hand," *New York*, 26 March 1973, 33.

⁷ Norman Mailer, *The Faith of Graffiti* (New York: Praeger, 1974), unpagued.

⁸ Peter Schjeldahl, "Graffiti Goes Legit – But the 'Show-off' Ebullience Remains," *New York Times*, 16 September 1973, 27.

Primitivism

One of the strategies modern art has used to renew itself is primitivism, the appropriation of forms and motifs from non-Western cultures that are constructed as less civilised and closer to nature than Western society. For example, in the early twentieth century Picasso and Matisse solved the problem of how to represent a modern female form by referencing tribal sculpture from Africa. Primitivism is an attitude that reveals much about white, European society, and next to nothing about the non-European cultures that it has dubbed 'primitive'. Primitivism does not account for the power and complexity of African, Oceanic, Native American, or Caribbean cultures, but labels them exotic and finds in them certain predictable traits: these Others are represented in the West as simpler, more intuitive, less inhibited. Very often, these stereotypical qualities are judged desirable by the Westerner, such as Gauguin's Tahitians painted to represent mysticism and sensuality. In the so-called primitive Other, the primitivist finds his preconceptions about himself as sophisticated and civilised and the Other as naïve and natural to be confirmed. Subway writers knew that art world players viewed them with fascination and suspicion but with little real awareness of writing culture or even what it meant to depend upon the subway for transportation. The relationship of dominant culture to subculture that framed graffiti art is paradigmatically primitivist.

Oldenburg's and Mailer's choice of words in the quotations above demonstrate how primitivism paved the way for the acceptance of graffiti art in the early 1990s. Graffiti, they marveled, is a 'bouquet from Latin America', made by 'tropical peoples' who import the 'giant trees and pretty plants of a tropical rainforest', the 'jungle', to the grey, mechanised urban environment. To Schjeldahl, it is likewise a force of nature, 'volcanic' and 'unstoppable'. Most of the writers were African American, Puerto Rican or South American, or of mixed racial and ethnic heritage. Their cultural difference was reinforced and made visible in the writers' racial or ethnic identity that set them apart from the predominately white art world. If race was not specifically mentioned in accounts of graffiti art, it was sufficient to locate the writers as 'ghetto kids' from the Bronx or Brooklyn to secure their identity as non-white.

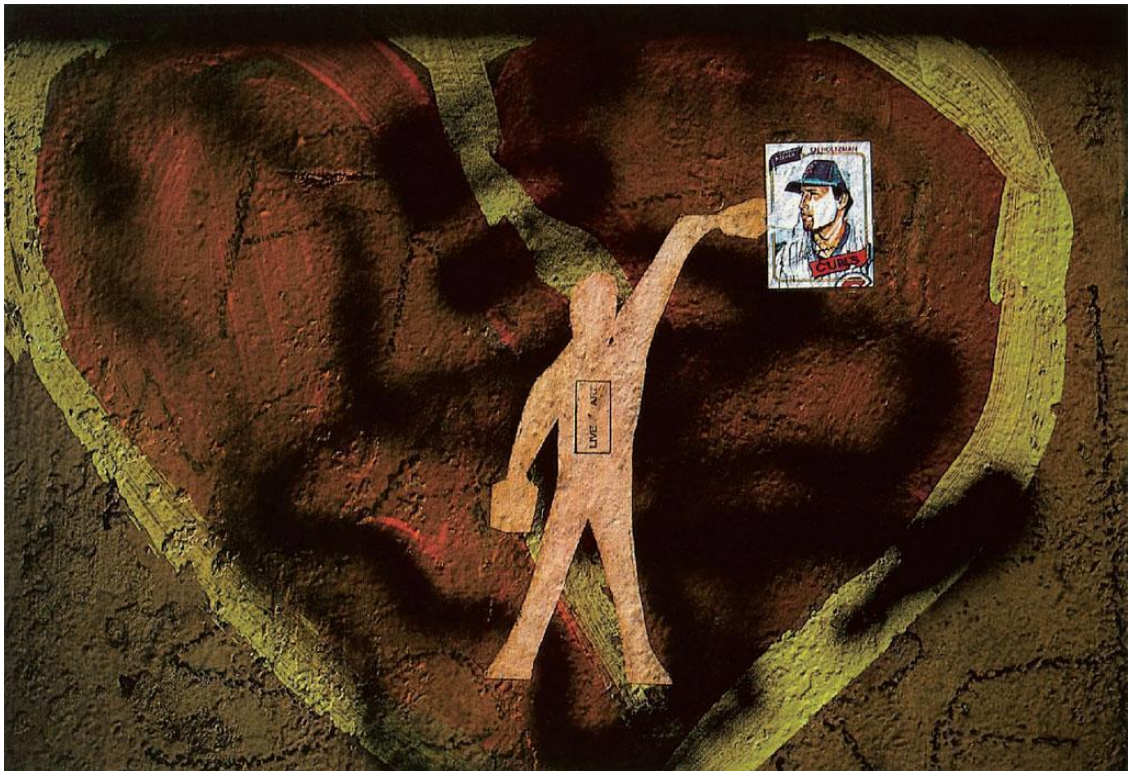


TAKI 183, *Early tag*, date unknown. Marker pen on wood. New York.

the subculture legible to its new audience. Graffiti artists drew exclusively upon American kitsch: cartoons and underground comix, heavy metal music, science fiction illustrations, and psychedelia. But because they did not often borrow from elite Western culture in their paintings, subway writers found it difficult to discourage the belief that they were in fact primitives. Consequently, their moves to develop more sophisticated themes and advance stylistically received little credit: a primitive was locked in a fixed position with regard to dominant culture, authentic but immobile. A *primitivist* – a Picasso, Gauguin, Basquiat, or Haring – chose to work with “low” culture’s material, and therefore had room to maneuver.

The Avant-Garde

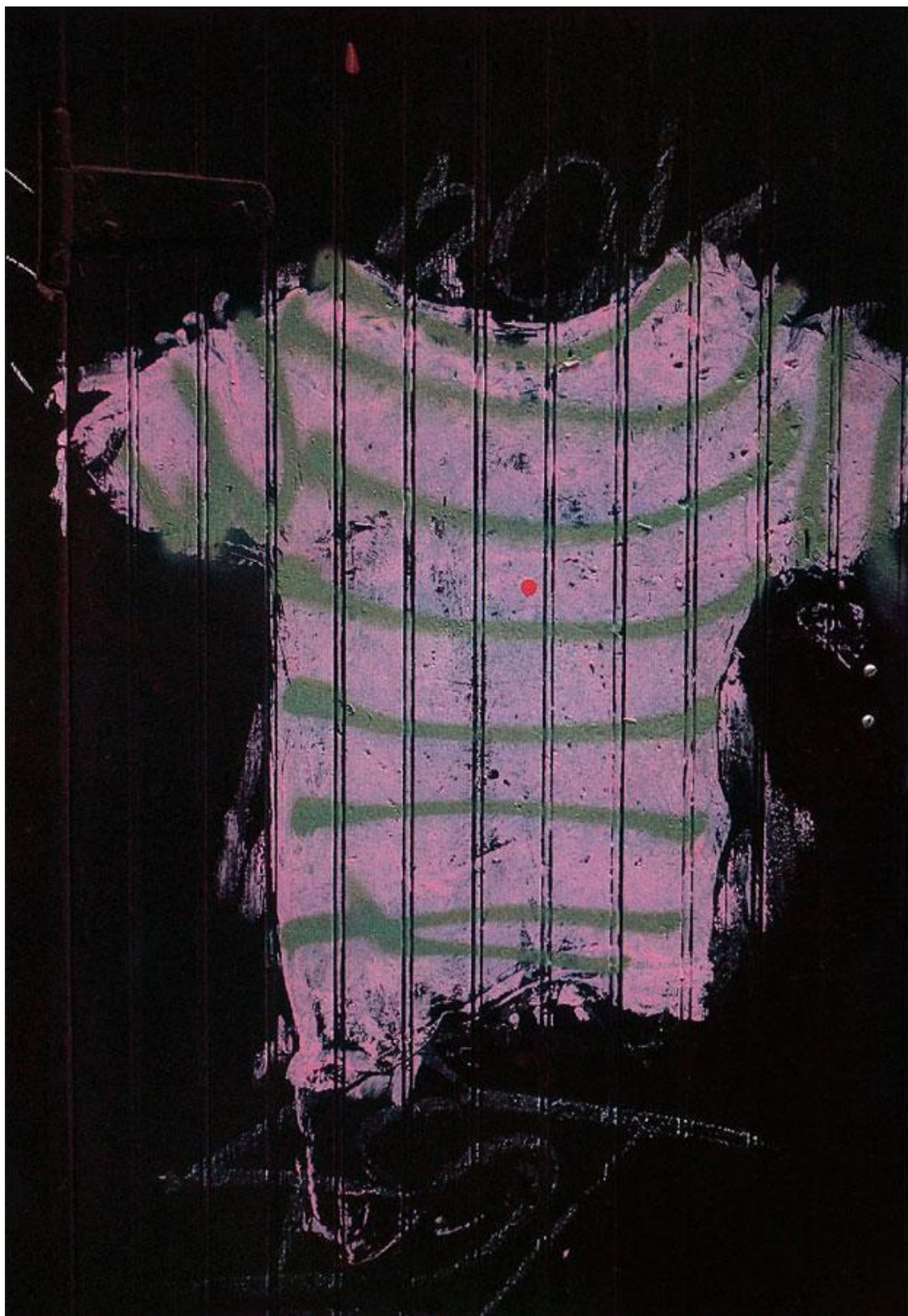
In the late 1970s, the state of the avant-garde in the visual arts was interrogated in discussions about the end of modernism and its implications. A return to painting was widely remarked, with new images and Neo-expressionism complicating the notion of art's autonomy that was the heritage of formalism: these artists blurred the categories of abstraction and representation and plundered historical styles and imagery to uncertain effects. Another, more radical avant-garde lived on in artist collectives like Collaborative Projects (Colab) and ABC No Rio that were politically engaged and mounted mixed-media installations to ally themselves with the surrounding communities and to critique social and economic inequities. A third trend that emerged simultaneously was the East Village art and club scene, which with its store-front galleries and local celebrities mimicked the established art markets of SoHo and 57th Street. This was where graffiti art was established. According to art historian Liza Kirwin, East Village artists nurtured fond hopes of being discovered and selling out, and to that end packaged and advertised their new bohemia.⁹ Doing so, they departed from the romantic, utopian, or revolutionary ideal of the avant-garde artist as a breed apart from the bourgeois mainstream. Clement Greenberg, in his 1939 article, 'The Avant-garde and Kitsch', defined the avant-garde as engaged in art for its own sake and remarked that it was inevitably connected to its bourgeois audience by 'an umbilical cord of gold'. That vital link, not the alienation or autonomy of the avant-garde, was the salient characteristic of the art produced in the East Village of the 1980s, including graffiti art.



Unknown, *The Painters: Part 1*, date unknown. Paint, ink stamp and paste-up on building. New York.

⁹ See Liza Kirwin, "It's All True: Imagining New York's East Village Art Scene of the 1980s" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland at College Park, 1999).

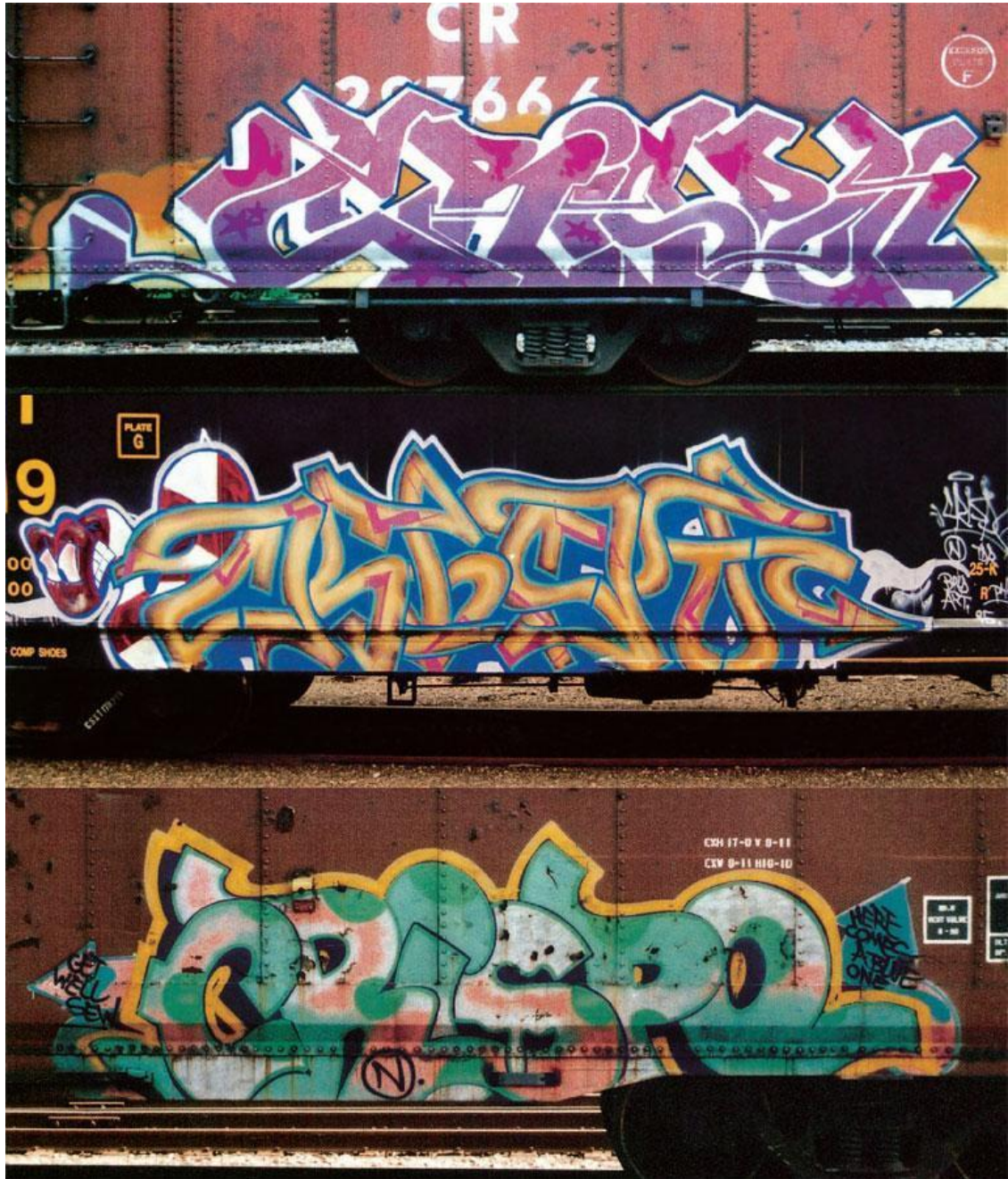
If anyone was responsible for paving the way for artists to embrace the marketplace as chief arbiter of their works' quality, it was Andy Warhol. He deserved the blame not just for his breakthrough Pop silk-screened canvases that represented American kitsch to consumers of high art, but also for his films, which featured a clique of performers who acted out their everyday personas before the camera, following the loosest of screenplays. Warhol's films and his first studio, the silver Factory, set a precedent for the self-conscious outrageousness of East Village habitués like John Sex and Ann Magnuson, who performed at Club 57 on St. Mark's Place. Some of Warhol's associates crossed over to become contributing members of East Village society, such as poet René Ricard, who wrote articles lauding graffiti artists. Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf all frequented East Village clubs, and all sought Warhol's support and friendship. In the 1980s, Warhol seemed to be operating on three levels of career promotion at once: series like 'Famous Jews', 'Endangered Species', and the 'Oxidation Paintings' were made for exhibition with no particular audience in mind; portraits commissioned by the rich and famous generated a steady income – Warhol never waived his fee; public appearances at Studio 54 and Elaine's, in advertisements and on television (*The Love Boat*) brought him to the masses. His crossover appeal to consumers of both high and low culture signaled to graffiti artists that they could show canvases in galleries for the art world elite, and maintain their reputation in the street by painting subway cars at the same time. FAB FIVE FREDDY registered his familiarity with Warhol with his 1980 Pop Art train, where Campbell's Soup cans lined up in a whole-car masterpiece. Warhol modeled the role of famous artist, and as the most visible living artist in New York City when FREDDY was coming of age, it was inevitable that the younger painter and his subway writer friends would recognise fame as the stamp of aesthetic validation.



Unknown, date unknown. Paint on wooden gate. New York.



Unknown, date unknown. Aerosol paint on building. New York.



PRE, *Tags as CRISPO*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on freight train cars. New York.

When Warhol emerged as part of the Pop art movement in 1962, there was no established critical vocabulary with which to interpret his paintings for the public. Formalist concerns with flatness and medium dominated talk about painting, thanks to Greenberg's persistent influence, but these were hardly applicable to silk-screened representations of soup cans, celebrities, and car crashes. Nevertheless, Warhol had galleries to represent him in New York and Los Angeles, and eager buyers. Twenty years later, the secondary market established that his paintings were good investments (although Warhol complained in his *Diaries* that his contemporaries Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns beat his prices at auction). For the generation of artists that came after Warhol, there was no single dominant critical voice or curatorial position that applied to contemporary art across the board. In the case of Neo-expressionism, the brash figurative painting style that graffiti art overlapped, several prominent critics took vehement stances for and against its value as an avant-garde, radical gesture. But what captured the public's imagination more than these intellectual

disagreements, were the expert marketing ploys that the artists and their galleries mobilised to establish the significance of the return to large-scale, gestural painting. Critics might howl in protest, but Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, and Georg Baselitz, among others, became art stars: their market popularity, stoked by their dealers, proved their quality. In the absence of a unified or compelling art criticism, the significance of an artist's oeuvre was measured in dollars.

The twin strategies of Warhol-style self-promotion and market validation propelled the East Village art world, which had its own talent, dealers, and press and sneered at the SoHo and 57th Street gallery districts even as it emulated them. Nightclub owners invited artists to curate exhibitions that, not incidentally, drew customers. Visual artists, musicians, and performers collaborated on multi-media spectacles at clubs, too. Artists rented small storefronts to show works they and their friends had made. Liza Kirwin characterised the East Village as 'a community whose greatest ambition was to sell out', in contrast to past bohemian communities, which articulated resistance to the middle-class norm.¹⁰ She documented the reaction among specialised art magazines and the popular press, which was to mock the neighbourhood and its resident artists as juvenile poseurs. With art, the market, and the bourgeois buyer so intertwined in the East Village, it was obvious to critics that the art that was most promoted was least performing its critical, avant-garde function – at least they could agree on this negative assessment.

'We are generous and shameless self-promoters', writer LADY PINK told *The New York Times* in 2007.¹¹ This statement was true of graffiti artists from the beginnings of their careers. These young artists were eager to show their work, to sell it, to support themselves doing something creative that they loved. They were happy for the opportunity to continue to paint long after a career on the subways would typically end. (When the writer was no longer subject to the juvenile justice system, the consequences of being caught tagging in the subway were steep enough to persuade most to stop. Generally, writing careers were measured in months, not years.) Furthermore, an art career was a paying job when unemployment among young men of colour was rampant, 86 % according to a US Bureau of Labor Statistics survey in 1977.¹² The subtext of writing – to declare one's presence in a noisy, overpowering urban environment – became the text of graffiti on canvas. Some artists like ZEPHYR, BLADE, and SEEN repeated their tags insistently, while others like LEE, LADY PINK, DAZE, FUTURA 2000, and RAMMELLZEE explored abstraction and social realism. Self-promotion had been the motivation for writing in the subway and city-wide recognition the reward. The world of galleries, collectors, and critics did not seem to operate much differently: as DONDI remarked, it was just a 'new yard' where the writers needed to prove themselves all over again.¹³ As masters of the subway, there was little doubt among them that they were capable of doing so, once they learned the ropes.

The rules of the new yard of the galleries were a set of unspoken assumptions about what constituted appropriate artistic attitudes and behaviour. As I have outlined above, notions of authenticity, primitivism, and the avant-garde helped define the way graffiti art was received by the public. As bohemians creating for the love of art, artists were supposed to be more involved in producing their work than in promoting it. To be seen as careerist or ambitious undermined the subway writer's authenticity, his status as a naïve primitive who was favoured by having his paintings displayed. Furthermore, to qualify as avant-garde, art had to inhabit a critical position with regard to the market and its audience. In this light, subway writers were much too interested in explaining themselves to their audience, in promoting an understanding of writing and the

¹⁰ Kirwin, 19.

¹¹ David Gonzalez, "Walls of Art for Everyone, But Made by Not Just Anyone," *New York Times*, 4 June 2007.

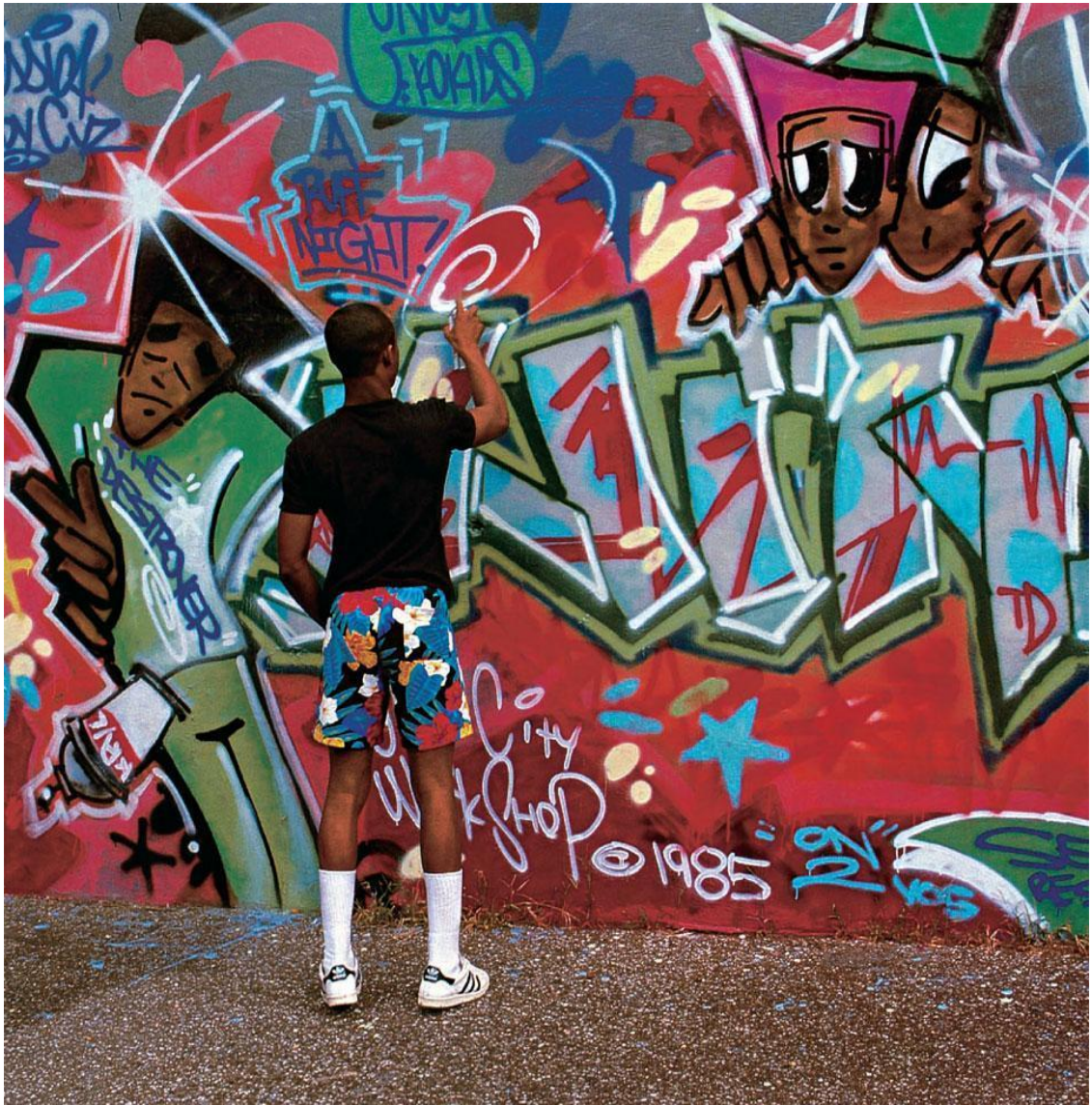
¹² Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 310n44.

¹³ Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, *Graffiti* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1983), 15.

conditions that produced it. Their paintings could be didactic, offering a glimpse into an unfamiliar world for the white, middle-class audience. Perhaps it was inevitable that graffiti art would fall out of favour with critics, dealers, and collectors because it fell short of the preconceptions with which they initially received it. But for several years in the early 1980s, the graffiti art movement did successfully negotiate the unwritten rules of the art market and the expectations of art critics and collectors. For a moment, it seemed that any talented individual could prove his worth as an artist, that class, colour, and academic credentials were irrelevant to artistic success.

Acknowledgments

While graffiti trains no longer course along the tracks in New York City, most resources on graffiti art are there. I would like to thank Melanie Bower at the Museum of the City of New York, the staff at Fales Library and Special Collections of the New York University Libraries, and the New York Public Library for their assistance. Writers were exceedingly generous with their time: I am grateful to BLADE, CRASH, DAZE, LADY PINK, and ZEPHYR, and MICK LA ROCK of Amsterdam, for their patience in answering my questions and for flagging my most egregious misunderstandings. Carlo McCormick and Barry Blinderman shared their experiences with graffiti art and artists. Joe Austin offered moral support and references. Tom Check and Nancy Witherell provided room and board on my research trips to New York. Belinda Neumann, Dolores Ormandy Neumann, and Hubert Neumann shared their enthusiasm for graffiti art. In the Netherlands, Henk Pijnenberg, Vincent Vlasblom, and Steven Kolsteren and the staff at the Groninger Museum gave me access to their archives and collections. The University of Vermont's Dean's Fund partially funded my travels there in 2007. I thank Ernesto Capello, DAZE, Steven Kolsteren, Nancy Owen, Henk Pijnenberg, John Waldron, the indispensable Emily Bernard and ZEPHYR for reading and commenting on this manuscript. Any errors and all interpretations are my own. To Court Thompson, my appreciation and love.



LASK, *Wine*, 1985. Aerosol paint on wall. Staten Island, New York.

Subway Writers



Various artists. Aerosol paint on subway cars. New York.

Not all subway writers wanted to become gallery artists. This aspiration, though, is the common thread that links the writers I will introduce in this chapter who became graffiti artists in New York City in the early 1980s. They had mastered their medium and earned reputations within a highly-elaborated writing subculture that had begun at least a decade before. To inscribe

nicknames or street names on neighbourhood walls began as a way to mark a gang's turf but it became widespread beginning in June 1971, when a messenger who called himself TAKI 183 began putting his name wherever he went in the city, and his ubiquity led to an article in *The New York Times*.¹⁴ School was out of session for the summer, unemployment among teenagers was high, and TAKI's imitators took up permanent markers and later aerosol paint to write their own names everywhere. The public walls and subway cars filled with tags, as the nicknames were known, so writers worked to make theirs distinctive with eye-catching style.

By 1973, tags were pervasive and striking enough that cultural commentators took notice. Norman Mailer celebrated the writers he interviewed in his 1974 book *The Faith of Graffiti* and imitated them in the text by giving himself the tag 'A-I' for 'Aesthetic Investigator.' Art critic Richard Goldstein wrote in *New York Magazine*, 'the most significant thing about graffiti was not their destructiveness but their cohesion, bringing together a whole generation of lower-class kids in an experience which is affirmative and delinquent at the same time'.¹⁵ The cohesion, affirmation, and delinquency Goldstein noted made the writers glamorous and appealing to the New York art world because those qualities promised a new avant-garde that was not motivated by economic gain. But among the writers who comprised the graffiti art movement of 1980–1983, the desire to become professionals who supported themselves by selling their art undermined this romantic notion of them as outsiders. It was a fiction imposed on them by their admirers alongside certain stereotypes: that all graffiti artists were young, black or Latino, minimally educated, and motivated by an unquenchable creative urge that compelled them to exercise their talents by illegal means.

Besides professional ambition, there are four aspects of writing culture that were the foundation for graffiti art as a movement: the social network of writers, their favoured themes, stylistic evolution, and criteria for the evaluation of quality. Writers went to train yards in pairs or groups to work on whole-car pieces together or their own smaller pieces individually. Such openness to collaboration and awareness of each others' styles and strengths facilitated the organisation of group shows in galleries later. Writers had a ready-made theme for their paintings, the tag, which was inherently self-expressive. They pursued this personal content further on canvas, in representations of the writing life or experiences of the urban ghetto. Writers relentlessly experimented with new styles for their tags and pieces. The process continued in their paintings, where they felt free to choose realism or abstraction depending on the content they wanted to convey. Unconstrained by the history of modern painting, they were uninhibited: they did not worry that figuration might look reactionary, or that abstraction could be merely decorative. Writers had their own stringent criteria by which they evaluated each others' pieces. Having been vetted by their peers, the graffiti artists I will introduce in this chapter had confidence in their paintings' quality.



¹⁴ "'TAKI 183' Spawns Pen Pals," *New York Times*, 21 July 1971, 37.

¹⁵ Richard Goldstein, "This Thing Has Gotten Completely Out of Hand," *New York*, 26 March 1973, 39.

SMILEY and **KED**, *Untitled*, 1980. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.



DAZE, **TRAP** and **DEZ**, *Untitled*, 1983. Aerosol paint on subway car.

Writing Culture: Social Networks and the Transmission of Skills

Writing was a social activity: even when he worked alone, a writer tagged for an audience of other writers. Before taking up a marker or aerosol can, he studied trains exhaustively. Most can name the writers who first inspired them, and where they saw their tags, like FUTURA 2000, who grew up near the IRT 1 line and was especially impressed by PHASE 2 and STAY HIGH 149. STAY HIGH had appropriated the animated character from the television show *The Saint* for his tag, giving him a joint to smoke, and also used the phrase ‘Voice of the Ghetto’, which resonated with the younger writer.¹⁶ Writers who began tagging in the 1970s in particular recall feeling as though writing was everywhere around them, as indeed it was. Trains had been covered in tags, and BLADE remembered that when the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) embarked on a comprehensive cleaning campaign in 1973, the fresh surfaces attracted an explosion of colourful ‘pieces’ – short for masterpieces, the ambitious designs that filled the entire side of a subway car. Writers began to measure their reputation in terms of quality of pieces as well as quantity of tags.¹⁷

With some effort, it was possible for a novice writer to make the acquaintance of established writers he admired, although the tags made this a hit-or-miss enterprise. LEE, famous for his 1980 handball court masterpieces, was a figure of mystery to those outside his immediate circle, according to ZEPHYR: other writers assumed his tag was his last name and there were rumours that he lived in Chinatown, so they presumed he was Asian. In fact, he was a Puerto Rican named George Quinones from the Smith housing projects in lower Manhattan. CRASH met LEE in the Smith projects by chance while visiting a relative who lived there. Even when it was known where a famous tagger lived, there was no guarantee he could be found. ZEPHYR described a fruitless attempt he and FUTURA made one day to locate BLADE: they took the subway to his neighbourhood in the Bronx where they found his tags blanketing the walls, and there the trail came to an end. They simply, but perhaps irrationally, expected to find BLADE at work on his tags, ZEPHYR said. Having no way to pursue him further, they took photographs and left. There were spots where writers were known to gather, the various ‘writers’ benches’, but it could not be predicted who would be there at any given time. One of the best known benches was at the Grand Concourse station in the Bronx, where several of the lines ran that connected the Bronx with Brooklyn via Manhattan. DAZE met CRASH there and they forged a productive working friendship, only one of countless similar fortuitous encounters.¹⁸

The public High School of Art and Design, on the east side of midtown Manhattan, was a hotbed of writing activity, DAZE recollected. As a student there in 1976, he met more established writers in the cafeteria, where he saw their black books – the hardbound sketch-pads writers used to design their own tags and collect others – and tried to copy them, eventually following them into the subways.¹⁹ LADY PINK attended a few years later, where she ostensibly studied architecture but in reality she said she learned ‘piecing and colors’ from SEEN and DOZE, older writers she met there.²⁰ There had been female writers before, but none were prominent when LADY PINK began to write seriously. She therefore had a certain celebrity but she also had to combat rumours that

¹⁶ Froukje Hoekstra, ed., *Coming from the Subway: New York Graffiti Art* (Groningen: Groninger Museum and Benjamin and Partners, 1992), 134.

¹⁷ Interview with BLADE, 25 July 2006; Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 108–9.

¹⁸ Interview with DAZE, 26 July 2006.

¹⁹ Hoekstra, *Coming from the Subway*, 108.

²⁰ Marilyn Mizrahi, “Graffiti Treated as Art by the Art World,” *Art Workers News*, September 1981, 11.

she exchanged sexual favours for men who supposedly did her tags for her. She said she worked with male writers from everywhere in the city ‘just so they could see me carrying my own bags and painting my own stuff’.²¹

Despite the competition that existed amongst writers who vied to be ‘king’ of a particular subway line by tagging with the most frequency and distinctive style, there was also collaboration. DAZE offered the analogy of how the music and lore of the blues was transmitted almost casually as more and less experienced musicians hung out and jammed together. In writing, beginners known as ‘toys’ sought out older writers from whom they could learn style. They aspired to accompany them to the yards and lay-ups where out-of-service trains parked, where writers executed the large masterpieces that might take an entire night and some twenty cans of paint to complete.²² These arrangements could resemble artists’ workshops, with the established writer planning the design. He supervised the younger writer who filled in areas of colour, and then attended to the final outline and finishing touches. NOC 167 and DONDI were respected writers who were also generous in sharing stylistic tips and other advice. NOC 167 would offer variations on another writer’s tag, while DONDI was known for his sharp eye for design.²³ Once a writer had his own reputation, he continued to learn from other writers by working with them in a friendly competition. BLADE and COMET forged a partnership that was famous among their peers. Other pairs, of which there were many, included DONDI and DURO, and CRASH and KEL.²⁴ DAZE liked to write with groups of friends, and said the writers with whom he worked were too many to name.²⁵ These collaborations produced trains with multiple pieces to fill an entire car or pair of cars, and the individual contributions were coordinated to produce a unified style.

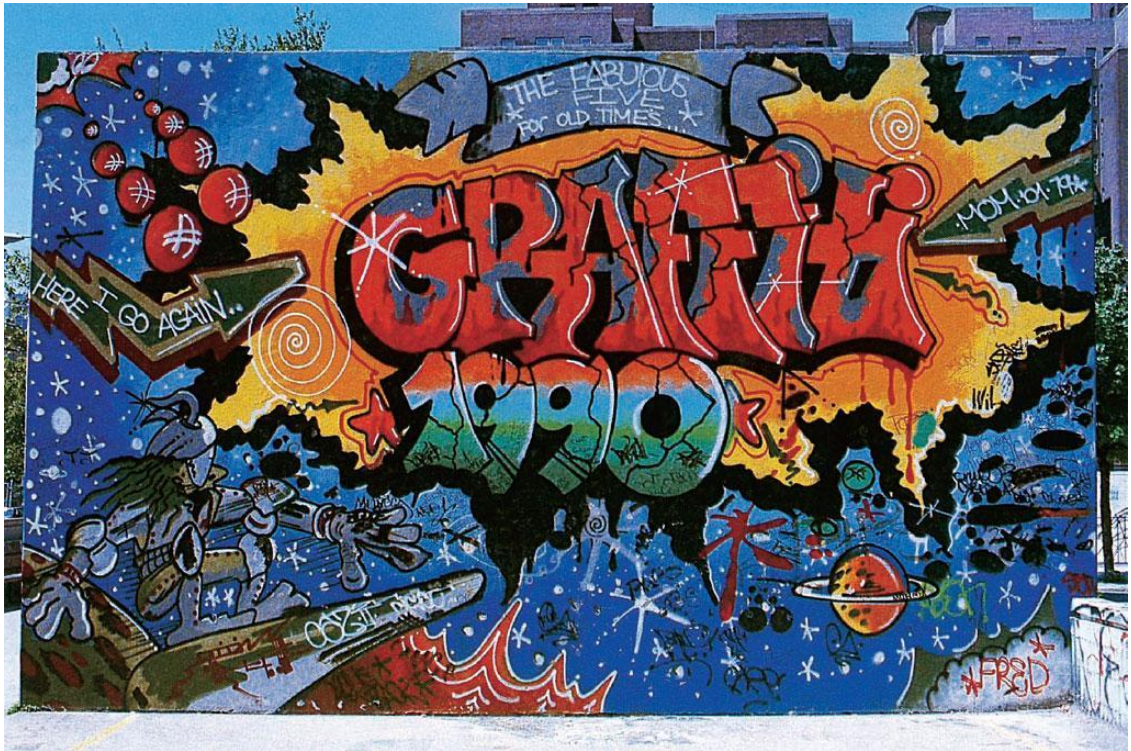
²¹ Martha Cooper, *The Hip-Hop Files: Photographs 1979–1984* (Cologne: From Here to Fame, 2004), 66.

²² Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1984), 34.

²³ CRASH, lecture at the Brooklyn Museum, 1 July 2006. Podcast. Accessed 15 December 2006; Austin, *Taking the Train*, 171.

²⁴ Andrew “ZEPHYR” Witten and Michael White, *Dondi White Style Master General* (New York: Regan Books, 2001), 11; Jack Stewart, “Subway Graffiti: An Aesthetic Study of Graffiti on the Subway System of New York City, 1970–1978” (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1989), 452.

²⁵ Interview with DAZE, 26 July 2006.



LEE, *Graffiti 1990*, 1981. Aerosol paint on wall.



LEE, *Untitled*, 1981. Aerosol paint on wall.



NOC 167, *Style War*, 1981. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.

Working partnerships multiplied when writers collaborated in groups known as ‘crews’. A writer could belong to several crews at once, and they crossed neighbourhood lines.²⁶ After three years of writing, DONDI had earned a place in the TOP (The Odd Partners) crew from Brooklyn in 1977. When it dissolved, he formed his own crew, CIA (Crazy Inside Artists), with DURO, KEL, and MARE, among others, and they dominated the 2 and 5 lines that ran from Brooklyn to the Bronx.²⁷ DAZE, from the Bronx, was friends with KEL and MARE, and joined the CIA crew to write in the 2 yard in Brooklyn. LADY PINK formed a crew of female writers called LOTA, Ladies of the Arts. LEE was one of the original Fabulous Five, a Brooklyn crew famous for multi-car designs: Henry Chalfant documented their Christmas train in a photograph published on the front page of the *Village Voice* in 1980.²⁸ The aspiring impresario Fred Brathwaite was impressed with LEE’s pieces and approached him about promoting the crew. His proposal led to LEE giving him permission to use the Fabulous Five name: thus FAB FIVE FREDDY was born, although he never tagged with the original crew.²⁹ Some crews expanded exponentially, like RTW (Rolling Thunder Writers), led by the charismatic Bil-Rock. ZEPHYR joined at the beginning in spring 1978, and QUIK was another member. By 1981, ZEPHYR says, RTW was the largest crew in the city and not all the members knew each other.³⁰

RAMMELLZEE was not a subway writer – the name he adopted was clearly too long to be a functional tag – although he was the leader of a crew of sorts. Observing writers and their pieces, he developed an intricate theory of writing called ‘Gothic Futurism’ or ‘Ikonoklast Panzerism.’³¹ Through DONDI, RAMMELLZEE met DAZE, who remembers him carrying portfolios, not the usual black sketchbooks but long connecting boards, in which he detailed how letters could be armed and the connection he supposed between subway writers and Gothic monks.³² While RAMMELLZEE believed it was imperative to recognise the significance of writing and its historical origins in the subway, some of his crew wrote on trains only after they painted canvases. Photographer Henry Chalfant said of one Gothic Futurist, A-ONE,

[He] had never painted a train, but he was a good artist, and his work started to get some action in the art world. He painted canvases. He was part of art shows. But he knew what everybody thought of him, and what everybody thought of the whole scene – that if you weren’t down on trains, you were nobody, a toy. This concerned him greatly, and he suffered a couple of years of this kind of criticism. He really wanted to do a train, and he finally went out and painted four or five trains – whole cars, top-to-bottoms – in his inimitable style. They weren’t traditional pieces, they were wild and crazy. I went to photograph them, because he insisted that I be there to get the picture!³³

In RAMMELLZEE’s clique especially, but also in other crews, they re-imagined writing as something much larger than the individual. It constituted a world of its own, with an aesthetic, an ethos, a history: it was hardly a surprise to writers, then, that others thought subway pieces were worth preserving on canvas and displaying in galleries and museums.

²⁶ Cooper and Chalfant, 50.

²⁷ Witten and White, 19.

²⁸ Ivor L. Miller, *Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters in New York City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 125; Stewart, 470–2; Richard Goldstein, “The Fire Down Below: In Praise of Graffiti,” *Village Voice*, 24–30 December 1980, 55–8.

²⁹ Interviews with LADY PINK, 28 July 2006 and ZEPHYR.

³⁰ .

³¹ .

³² Interview with DAZE, 26 July 2006.

³³ Miller, 107.

Themes

PHASE 2 was an old-school writer who had begun tagging in autumn 1971. He identified four themes in writing: ‘the centrality of naming; the concept of building language... or visual and verbal wordsmithing; the idea of constructing an identity in opposition to state and consumer culture; and the idea that resistance through cultural production is reinforced with a consciousness of ancestral spiritual traditions.’³⁴ He and RAMMELLZEE most pointedly observed that writing could intervene in the systems of power that language supported. The militaristic cast of RAMMELLZEE’s ‘Ikonoklast Panzerism’, with its reference to German tanks (*Panzer*) and call to arm letters, suggests that he understood that language is the site for a struggle between oppressive ideologies and resistance to them. Who controls language controls social and political hierarchies, and for RAMMELLZEE and PHASE 2, wild-style lettering promised to entirely reinvent written language. Historian Joe Austin, in his book on the efforts of New York City authorities to eradicate subway writing, observed that by writing on public walls and subway cars, writers claimed public space and thereby gained access to the public sphere, the realm of political discourse from which they were otherwise disenfranchised as working-class, minority youths. For writers, carving out a space of resistance was a positive move that staked their claim on the urban environment, but for other citizens it was a symptom if not the cause of the crime, poverty, and alienation that plagued the city in the 1970s.

RAMMELLZEE worked out his Ikonoklast Panzerist strategies of subversion on canvas and paper, not on trains. Other writers executed whole-car masterpieces that expressed the pressures of urban life. ‘Heroin Kills’ by ZEPHYR and DONDI was an anti-drug message. LEE’s ‘Stop Real Crime’ protested the attention and funds devoted to eradicating subway vandalism that drained resources from campaigns to curb violent crime. QUIK expressed the urgency that fueled writers: ‘The graffiti movement represents the frustration of an inner city population attempting to satisfy the public at large. New York graffiti was revolutionary and rebellious! How easy and socially acceptable it would have been if we thousands of graffiti artists simply stayed at home and painted!’³⁵ Even as city officials pointed to graffiti as the cause of urban blight, writers offered first-hand reports of life in the urban trenches.

LEE, DONDI, QUIK, and ZEPHYR addressed the typical subway writer with their clear, colourful pieces. As LEE said,

We literally cut into a fixed society, a fixed way of living. People take the train, go to work, go to the movies, go to bed – day in and day out. Then whole-car murals came in front of you, and they’re not normal. They make you start to think, ‘well, who *is* normal?’ Is it the ones that are painting the trains who are really expressing themselves and able to be free to do something like that in such a molded system?³⁶

Writing challenged those who chanced across it to think differently about their lives in the city, to consider the possibility that the subway could be beautiful and colourful, for example, rather than grimy and harsh. Graffiti was a sign of lawlessness to some, of course, but to others it seemed that writers at least were doing something to beautify the city. Writing appealed to the cultural cognoscenti as well as casual viewers because it was an alternative to the corporate commercialism of advertising and the dour restraint of much minimalist and conceptual art of the late 1970s. This

³⁴ Miller, 13.

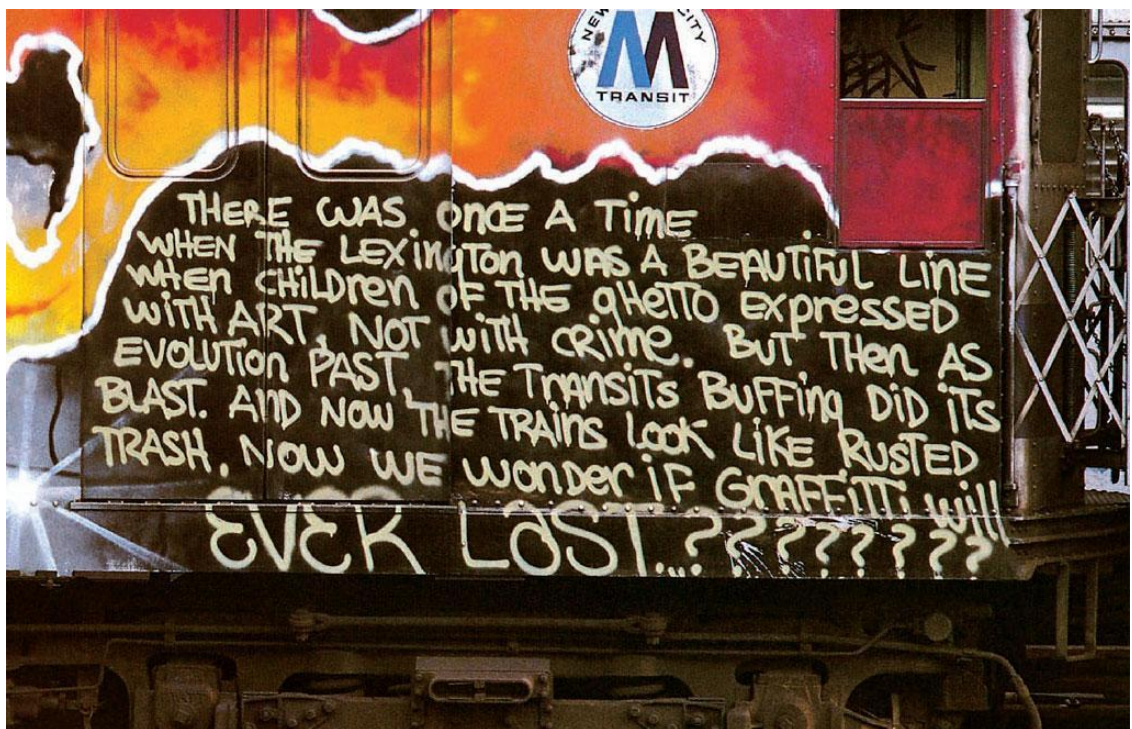
³⁵ *Graffiti Art. Artistes américains et français* (Paris: Acte II, 1991), 71.

³⁶ Miller, 87.

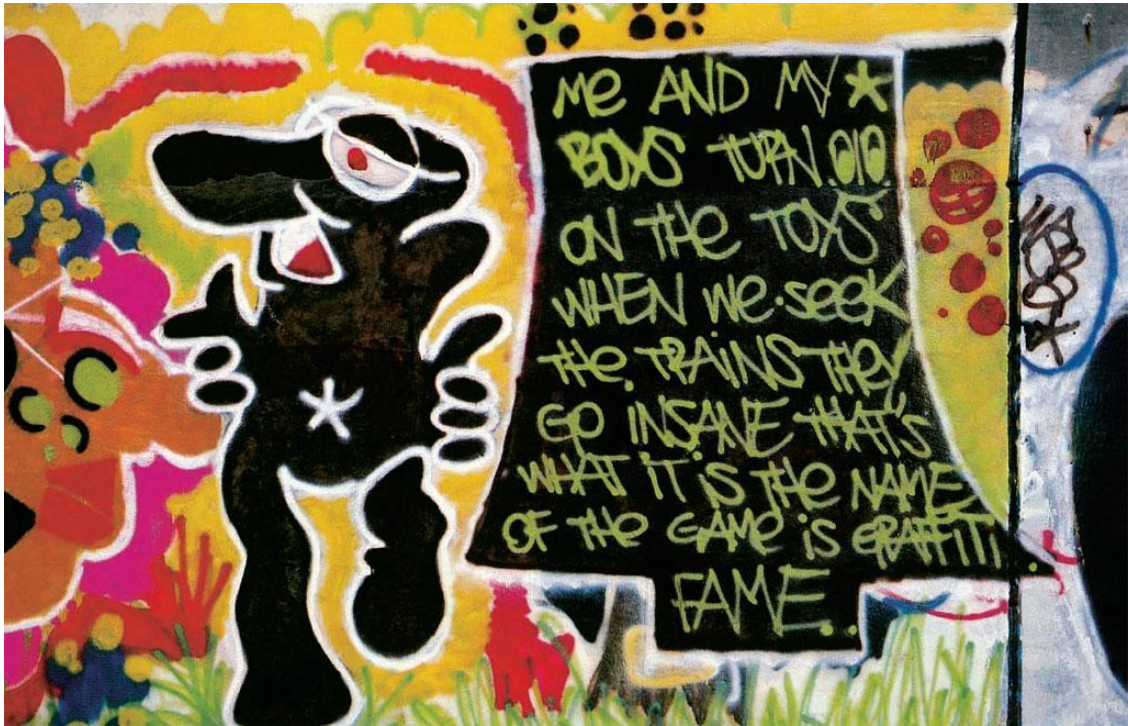
audience expected that if writing were translated to canvas, it would likewise express the social consciousness of the underprivileged in an uncalculated and authentic way.



BLADE, *Untitled*, 1975. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.



LEE, *"There was once a time..."* (detail), 1980. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.



SEEN, *Untitled*, 1981. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.

By far the most common writing motif was the tag. It was where a writer started, tattooing train interiors with permanent markers, declaring his presence; as FUTURA 2000 claimed: ‘Graffiti is an inner outcry of the soul telling you, you have to communicate... Tags (initials) on the insides of trains are saying, “Here I am, and look I’m over here,” ... It’s an answer back to our overcrowded environment, lacking heat, hot water, and money.’³⁷ Some writers graduated to the exteriors of cars, where they expanded their tag into a full-fledged masterpiece to fill the panel below the windows (a ‘window-down’ piece), to cover the windows (‘top-to-bottom’), or to extend from one end to the other (a ‘whole car’ piece). PHASE 2 compared tags to signatures: ‘Most people’s signature looks nothing like the way they write other words. So I think one’s identity is expressed through their signature.’³⁸ Writers chose their tags for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they were appropriated: ZEPHYR tried several names before adopting his from a brand of skateboard, while FUTURA 2000’s came from the name of a typeface.³⁹ DAZE chose his name ‘because of the forms [of the letters] and, at that time, no one else had a name that sounded like that. No one had a name with a “z” or an “e” in it, because those letters are difficult to come up with a style for’, but he also recalled experimenting with ‘W names’ for a period.⁴⁰ DONDI sometimes wrote as ASIA, PRE, and BUS, to try out different letter combinations. NOC 167 wrote under as many as ten tags, according to DAZE, but with a style recognisable to other writers that carried through them all.⁴¹ By contrast, BLADE was proud to have devised a new look for each of his more than five thousand pieces, never repeating himself.⁴² It was important to reveal one’s identity even when using several tags,

³⁷ Mizrahi, 10.

³⁸ Miller, 85.

³⁹ .

⁴⁰ Interview with DAZE by David Hirsh for American Graffiti Museum. DAZE clipping file, Museum of the City of New York. Austin, 56.

⁴¹ Austin, 56.

⁴² Stewart, 444, 455.

to be credited for ‘getting up’ in quantity, but the best writer’s identity was expressed in his style which might constantly evolve.

When writers became graffiti artists, turning their aerosol cans on canvases, their tags often dominated their compositions. LEE and FAB FIVE FREDDY’s first exhibition in Milan in 1979 consisted entirely of tags on canvas. The name as central to the painting inverted the more usual practice of painters signing their works inconspicuously in a corner or even on the back of the canvas. While the prominence of the tag in these and other examples signaled the graffiti artist’s roots in writing, it also fueled suspicion that the graffiti art movement was motivated primarily by self-promotion, just as writing on the trains was. For some graffiti artists, featuring the tag signaled allegiance to their subway writing past. Others embraced the opportunity to develop a new style and iconography for the new medium and scale of gallery work.

A sense of self-consciousness loosely connects the tags, dedications, and references to writing life that writers treated in diverse ways. The writer is aware of his audience and engages in a kind of public performance of his identity when he executes a piece. The tag obviously demonstrates this sort of ‘show-off ebullience’, as Peter Schjeldahl termed it.⁴³ So do shout-outs to the writer’s family or girlfriend. LEE, SEEN, and others dedicated pieces to their mothers, either employing MOM as a tag or adding an inscription, ‘to Mom’. BLADE and DUSTER both wrote their girlfriends’ names in styles that matched their own tags in whole-car pieces, a unifying design to make a matched pair of the couple emblazoned on permanently-linked pairs of cars known to writers as married couples. In an especially striking birthday dedication from 1981, BLADE outlined BLADE ‘n’ DOLORES in bright white, yellow and red against a black ground. The black letters glowed like neon, with a green aura and fluorescent decorations surrounding them adding to the night-sky effect. Such dedications extended to loved ones the fame writers claimed when their pieces ran through the city-wide transit system.⁴⁴



SEEN, *Hand of Doom*, 1980. Aerosol paint on subway car.

Writers annotated their pieces with inscriptions that commented on the writing process. Some mocked the Transit Authority police for their inability to prevent graffiti: they teased the ‘boys in blue’ to ‘catch me if you can’. Others echoed the boasts of dance-party MCs who proclaimed mastery of the beats, the rhymes, the ladies: ‘Me and my boys turn on the toys when we seek the trains they go insane that’s what it is the name of the game is graffiti fame’.⁴⁵ This inscription declared the writer and his crew’s preeminence, and it acknowledged the prestige economy that Austin shows organised the writing subculture, where fame and respect were conferred according to accepted rules.⁴⁶ It was intended for the eyes of other writers, but elsewhere writers indicated that they knew another public was reading them, too. Austin suggests that making letters legible, using mainstream media cartoon figures like Super Mario or Papa Smurf, and creating the illusion

⁴³ Peter Schjeldahl, “Graffiti Goes Legit – but the ‘Show-off’ Ebullience Remains,” *New York Times*, 16 September 1973, 27.

⁴⁴ Cooper and Chalfant, 90–3.

⁴⁵ Cooper and Chalfant, 28.

⁴⁶ Austin, 47–55.

of three-dimensions all were strategies to reach out to that audience.⁴⁷ NOC 167's 'Style Wars' piece of 1981 described the competition among writers and told the uninitiated subway rider that there was a point to the elaborately painted trains. These efforts seem designed to undermine the stereotypes of writers as anti-social hoodlums and vandals that circulated through the news media and justified official efforts to scrub graffiti from the MTA. LEE stated his intentions:

A short while after I started painting on the trains, I realized I was doing it for myself *and* for the masses of people who rode the trains. I did it for New York. I was communicating to the city and trying to reach the normal, so-called well-adjusted people, the people that weren't expecting something like this to come into their lives. I was trying to reach them in an intimate way.⁴⁸

The writers wanted to extend the prestige economy to encompass the non-writing public, to gain fame within the dominant culture. Their ambition to be appreciated on their own terms is reflected in the themes of resistance and outreach that they explored.

⁴⁷ Austin, 183–5.

⁴⁸ Miller, 189. Emphasis in original.

Lettering and Style

Writing was progressive: beginning in 1971, it evolved from simple tags, to big, colourful bubble and block letters, to the nearly illegible wild-style calculated to impress other writers. Writers graduated from perfecting the combination of letters that constituted their tags, to designing entire alphabets.⁴⁹ Individual writers recapitulated this evolution in their careers: the writing community expected them to understand the styles that surrounded them before contributing their own.⁵⁰ The possibilities for invention were endless, in PHASE 2's estimation: 'You can't put a limit on communication or how one can communicate, you've always got to look further, that's how style expanded in the first place'.⁵¹ VULCAN expressed a similar sentiment: 'Getting complicated, doing the impossible... I try to come up with new things that I've never seen before'.⁵² There is a logic to writing that tends more towards elaboration than refinement, but nevertheless advances by way of a critical process in which the writers vocally participated.

DONDI was highly regarded for his inventiveness in designing tags, from legible block to intertwined wild-style letters. In a train he painted with KEL in 1979, they responded to an impressive piece called 2 MUCH + BOND by the TMT crew. DONDI wrote under the tag 2 MANY: the numeral 2 connected to the M, the N tilted into the Y that looked like an X (as DOC observed later). The legs of the letters bent in unexpected directions, folding in or shooting out. KEL mixed upper- and lower-case letters, and the lower bar of his L zigzagged into an arrow. In both pieces, the letters were decorated with spots of colour that contributed to the effect of fragmentation and made it difficult to discern the letter shapes. A scroll to the right at the end of the car declared, 'We did it again'.⁵³ The elaborate, nearly illegible pieces were clearly meant as a challenge to other writers: DONDI and KEL's CIA were the new writers to beat. Elsewhere, DONDI appealed to the general public with his three 'Children of the Grave' trains, where his tag was crisply rendered in big block letters and the title evoked the desperation of young men's lives in the city. DONDI deliberately chose among the styles he had mastered when he designed his pieces, which proves his fluency as a writer and suggests his awareness of two distinct audiences.

Writers like DONDI were able to tune their styles to address different viewers. To use wild-style militated against outsiders understanding the content of the piece, because it was neither fully legible nor merely decorative or abstract. It competed with the desire to achieve fame in mainstream culture that is evident in some of the themes that I have described above. Instead, wild-style represented ambivalence towards mainstream society and put off subway riders. According to LEE,

The subway riders felt very intimidated and provoked by the whole evolution of wild-style in the mid-70s. Because it wasn't readable any more. It felt foreign, they were alienated, and yet they were riding with it, to work every day. They felt that they were riding in something that they couldn't understand anymore, and that scared them.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Austin, 111–13.

⁵⁰ Cooper and Chalfant, 22.

⁵¹ Austin, 114.

⁵² Austin, 173.

⁵³ Witten and White, 64–5.

⁵⁴ Miller, 87.

It also expressed the way writers felt disadvantaged, said DOZE: 'Graff[writing] is my ghetto defense. It's my weapon against my sense of helplessness. It's a code that is for us, for other graffiti artists to understand'.⁵⁵ LEE said,

There was a need among writers to come out with devastating paintings. Without money in your pockets, or any future in sight, there was a determination to create devastating work. One of the ways to vent that was through wild-style painting. You wanted to become a secretive figure that felt powerful by being anonymous, and being unreadable, and you felt dangerous like that.⁵⁶

Through writing, young men and women built a subculture in which their class and racial identities had no effect on their efforts to gain fame and respect. Even as they inserted themselves visually into the public sphere, they controlled access to their world by adjusting their style.



DONDI, *ASIA tag*, 1981. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed. Photo by ZEPHYR.

⁵⁵ Miller, 84.

⁵⁶ Miller, 86.

Evaluating Quality

Photographer Martha Cooper, who documented subway pieces and emerging hip-hop culture in the 1970s and 1980s, described the way writers evaluated their pieces:

Writers had developed what amounted to their own gallery culture on the trains. The trains were the gallery and the writers were their own critics. Their culture in many ways mimicked the art world, but they had their own art world. The kids were their own harshest critics. They could go on and on about why a piece didn't work aesthetically and which colors were in the piece...⁵⁷

DONDI, who made himself available to critique other writers' designs, recommended taking snapshots to learn from and improve upon one's efforts.⁵⁸ BLADE, too, relied on photographs to document his and other writers' pieces. Because of the MTA's campaign to clean graffiti off trains, writers could not count on their pieces lasting for long – sometimes cars were washed even before they left the yard. As much as possible, however, writers judged each others' efforts after viewing them first-hand. They measured their praise, even when they discussed writers whom they admired, as in this dialogue between DONDI and ZEPHYR about LEE:

[DONDI] When I first saw LEE whole-cars I thought they were really great, until I caught one in the Two Yard. They were great, but I thought they were a lot better until I actually saw one up close.

[ZEPHYR] They're painted real fast.

[DONDI] Yeah, there were drips and everything and I'm thinking, "Well, this is, this is okay, it's good, but..."

[ZEPHYR] But when you saw them up close they weren't as impressive as when you saw them...

[DONDI] Right, right.

[ZEPHYR] Which is the way he paints.

[DONDI] Of course, this led me to believe that he was doing these things out of a bomber mentality. And he wasn't trying to become a muralist of the graffiti scene, which eventually happened because he covered so much space.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Miller, 131.

⁵⁸ Cooper and Chalfant, 32.

⁵⁹ Witten and White, 111.



FUTURA 2000, *Break*, 1980. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed. Photo by Martha Cooper.



CRASH, *Untitled*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.



BLADE, *Whole car tag*, 1980. Aerosol paint on subway car.

Neatness counted: no matter how capable a writer was stylistically, drips detracted from his reputation.

Qualitative evaluation was closely linked to documentation of the history of writing. BLADE maintained meticulous records of his tags, and kept track of the innovations that he and others developed. RAMMELLZEE, as already mentioned, proposed that writing had roots in medieval manuscripts and the monks who lettered them, and he inspired others to elaborate his theory. NOC 167 helped young writers define their styles, and created the whole-car piece that represented the motivating notion of ‘Style Wars’ – the competition among writers to create distinctive forms of lettering and broadcast their innovations city-wide on the sides of subway cars. All three understood subway writing as an historical phenomenon independent of fine art, with a past to be mined and a future to be shaped.

BLADE

BLADE belonged to the first generation of graffiti writers, a peer of ‘Old School’ writers like PHASE 2 whose tagging careers began in the early 1970s and were documented in the 1974 book, *The Faith of Graffiti*. From the Bronx, he began tagging trains in 1972, and he kept a list of his tags, organised by train car numbers. By 1980 he had completed five thousand pieces.⁶⁰ BLADE advanced stylistic developments in graffiti throughout the 1970s: he painted clouds to establish a neutral ground for his tag, he wrote in bubble letters, he used shadows to create a three-dimensional effect, and he was the first to use a character in a masterpiece: a snowman in November 1974, on a Christmas-themed car.⁶¹ He continued to use characters of his own devising to animate his pieces, such as Joint Man, Dancing Ladies, and the Galaxy Gangster.⁶² By 1976, he had mastered not only three-dimensional forms that seem to pop out from the plane of the subway car, but also an illusion of space that extended back into the picture plane.⁶³ This facility was evident in his 1980 swinging letters masterpiece, where his tag seemed to have become animated and filled the side of the train car, top to bottom and end to end. There was a blue sky background, with puffy white clouds. Each letter seemed to pivot freely, like a car on a Ferris wheel, suspended between a pair of metal legs: the B rocked back, the A swung forward, and the D looked ready to fly up and around its axle. The letters were shadowed in black so that they looked substantial and seemed to project into space, especially against the actual sky as the train crossed an overpass, as in this photograph. Four round faces with big cartoon eyes to the right of the E were smaller than the letters and were graduated in size so that they appeared to recede into the pictorial space.

BLADE told *New York Times* reporter Grace Glueck in 1983, ‘I wanted to do the most and be the best at it’.⁶⁴ This was an unusual ambition. Generally, graffiti writers aimed for quantity, and while a distinctive style was admirable, it was not a substitute for ubiquity on a particular subway line in gaining a reputation as ‘king’ of the line. Thus, it was not inevitable that a prolific tagger would become known for producing masterpieces, because the time needed to execute an elaborate, multi-coloured, whole-car design could have been spent on scores of simpler tags. BLADE was unique in his desire to produce large, striking designs in quantity. He spent about ten hours on an end-to-end piece with his name centred over the middle doors in 1980. The blocky, blue-green letters followed the conventions of linear perspective with the vanishing point in the centre of the A. The A was the farthest back in space, and it appeared to be folded so that the whole tag angled into the atmospheric bands of white, gold, and orange behind it. This central design was set off by a pair of broad red arcs that separated the deep space from black areas of indeterminate depth at either side. An atomic blast in red, white, and blue was to the left and to the right was a pop-eyed head. Richard Goldstein, the *Village Voice* art critic, took it to be a reference to the famous painting, *The Scream*: ‘A subway Munch raises the heady possibility that art can happen anywhere’.⁶⁵ Any resemblance was unintentional, though: the artist said he was not familiar with Munch’s painting when he produced his image. Rather, he claimed to be self-referential: the figure expressed awe of the writer’s ability to break the picture plane, and craned his neck, wide-eyed.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Stewart, 444, 455.

⁶¹ Stewart, 447.

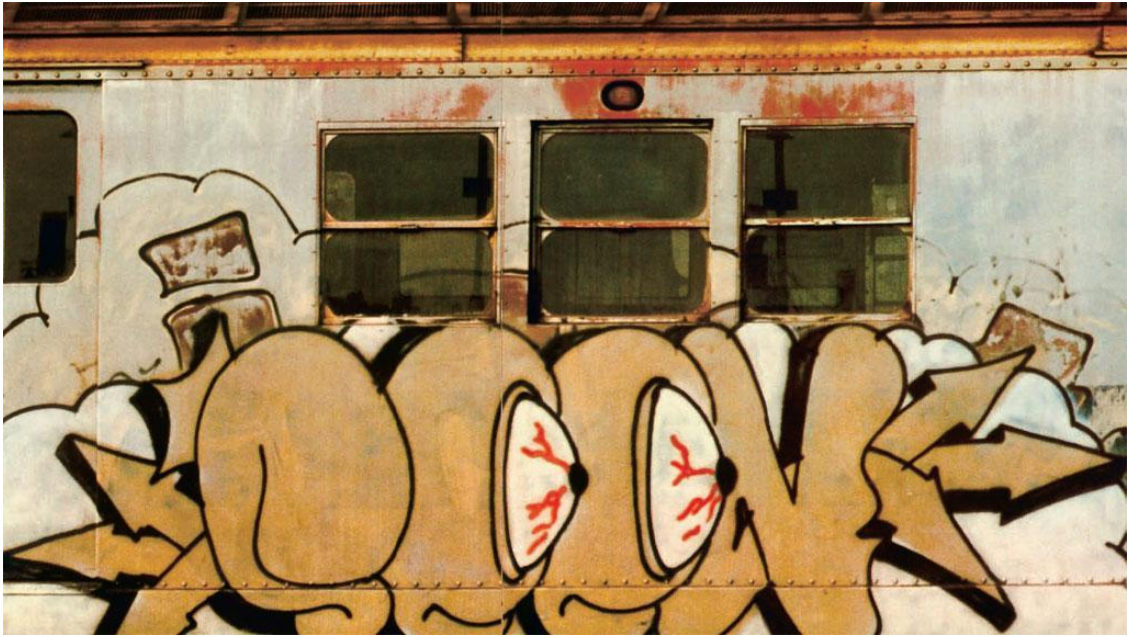
⁶² David Villorente and Todd James, *Mascots and Mugs: The Characters and Cartoons of Subway Graffiti* (New York: Testify Books, 2007), 31.

⁶³ Stewart, 448–50.

⁶⁴ Grace Glueck, “Gallery View: On Canvas, Yes, But Still Eyesores,” *The New York Times*, 25 December 1983, H22.

⁶⁵ Richard Goldstein, “The Fire Down Below,” 55.

⁶⁶ Interview with BLADE, 25 July 2006.



SEEN, *Tag*, 1981. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.

RAMMELLZEE

Queens-based RAMMELLZEE believed in the power of writing as a vehicle to reconfigure language and the circuits of power it supports, although he was not active in the yards. He described his theory of writing, 'Ikonoklast Panzerism', to art critic Nicolas A. Moufarrege in a 1982 interview in *Arts* magazine. 'Panzerism', he said, 'is connected to panzer, the tank. Armor, an armored mechanism. So when I add the –ism to panzer, it means the practice of armament'. He said he substituted K for the C in 'iconoclast' because it was a more 'evolved' letter: '...the letter "c" in its formation is an incomplete cipher: 60 degrees are missing. A "k" is a formation based on the foki [sic] of it; a certain kind of science based on the knowledge of formation mechanics...' Awareness of the structure of letters allows the writer to 'arm' them, as he believed the medieval monks had done with the points in their letters: 'When they got to the points in the Gothic texts, we extended and made arrows'. Writers, he claimed, knew Gothic script from newspaper banners, such as the *Long Island Press* and *The New York Times*. The transformation of Gothic letter to wild-style was not necessarily deliberate, but to RAMMELLZEE it was undeniable: 'All you got to do is look at that [the newspaper banner] and what we did on the trains: same thing. You've got the connection right there but we did ours in the dark and made that connection; therefore that connection is subconscious'. His own tag had evolved to be a 'military function and formation, because when I draw it, it is not R, A, M, M, E, L, L, Z, E, E; it is R, A, M, M, Sigma, L, L, Z, Sigma, Sigma. We have turned Epsilon into Sigma'.⁶⁷ He espoused that letters are in themselves meaningful and properly understanding the concepts they signify allows one to unlock the secrets of the universe. This belief is reminiscent of part of the doctrine of the Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam that called upon African Americans to empower themselves and become self-sufficient, although he denied the influence. He collaborated with A-ONE, KOOR and TOXIC to develop his philosophy, and later was dismissive of writers such as DONDI, FUTURA, and LEE, who focused on imagery at the expense of letters when they began to paint on canvas.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ All quotations from Nicolas A. Moufarrege, "Lightning Strikes (Not Once but Twice): An Interview with Graffiti Artists," *Arts* 57, no. 3 (November 1982), 90–2.

⁶⁸ Interview with Carlo McCormick, 27 July 2006.

NOC 167

According to RAMMELLZEE, NOC 167 coined the phrase ‘style wars’, which conveys both the one-upmanship that existed among writers and the conflict over graffiti on the subways and other public spaces between writers and city authorities.⁶⁹ From the Bronx, NOC 167 began tagging in 1972 but quit in 1981, he said because his mother took a job in the federal government and if he were arrested for vandalism it would be an embarrassment to her.⁷⁰ Like DONDI, he adopted different tags to experiment with forms and combinations of letters, exhibiting creativity that inspired other writers. He also offered hands-on guidance: the Bronx writer CRASH said that aspiring writers could tell NOC their tags, and he would write them in two or three different styles to practice in exchange for a can of spray-paint.⁷¹

‘Style War’ was the title and theme of NOC’s whole car masterpiece from 1981. It was a complex composition, incorporating stylised lettering, abstract passages, and narrative elements. In the centre, ‘Style War’ was written in two distinct styles. ‘Style’ was composed of wild-style letters that waved and danced, elaborated with arrows directing energy and the viewer’s attention outwards. ‘War’ was in italicised block capitals. The letters were rendered primarily in black, white, and grey – some orange in ‘War’ tied it to the flames painted around it – and decorated with starbursts and dots of various sizes which added excitement to the restrained palette. These were known to writers as ‘pop and sizzle’, and were one of NOC’s trademarks that he had adapted from the comic book artist Jack Kirby.⁷² Above the title was an abstract arrangement of white, blue, pink, and orange shapes, with dripping paint rendered in black. (Dripping paint was a sign of amateurism or lack of control of one’s medium and writers made every effort to eliminate it. Still, masters like NOC drew drips with paint in a self-reflexive gesture, much like Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein did with his comic book-style expressionist brushstrokes.) One side of the conflict was depicted to the left. A subway train shot out of the space from left to right, while a set of tracks with the perilous third rail came in parallel to the train at the top, from right to left. The space NOC articulated here was complex with two vanishing points far above and below the train. A guard tower anchored both spatial schemes while it existed in its own perspectival space to the left, where a horizon line was visible low on the end of the train car. ‘NOC 167’ against the train and ‘The Death Squad’ (the name of his crew) against the tower were situated in their own plane and made the symbolism of the scenario clear. On the right end of the car, two cartoon figures confronted each other: the one in a top hat seems to be shooting flames at the other one, a variation on the robot-assassin Necron99 from Ralph Bakshi’s animated film *Wizards*, who stood with one hand in a palm-up gesture.⁷³

NOC’s subject was the dramatic life of the graffiti writer, who competes for dominance on a subway line and eludes the Metropolitan Transit officers who would persecute him for vandalism, and it was an exceptional treatment. The theme was rarely taken up on the subway cars themselves, where the risk involved in ‘bombing’ a train with a tag of any great ambition was implicit and familiar to the other writers who were the primary intended audience. When writers like NOC 167, DAZE, LADY PINK, and LEE worked on canvas for an audience of gallery-goers who might ride the subways infrequently if at all, they began to make their former lives as subway taggers their subject. This was in part to educate their new public, and to express their sense of themselves as authentically grounded in subway writing. This iconographical shift in the artwork, from tag

⁶⁹ Edit DeAk, “Train as Book,” *Artforum* 21 (May 1983), 91.

⁷⁰ Hoekstra, 190.

⁷¹ CRASH, lecture at the Brooklyn Museum, 1 July 2006. Podcast.

⁷² Villorente and James, 69.

⁷³ Villorente and James, 69.

to pictorial narrative, established a critical distinction between graffiti on the subway and graffiti in galleries. As graffiti artists, the writers adopted a self-reflexive point of view and consciously addressed an audience outside their peer group.

QUIK and SEEN

Some writers turned their hands to canvas and found their careers gained more traction in Europe than in the United States. This was true for BLADE, and also for QUIK and SEEN. QUIK was an extraordinarily prolific writer who began tagging trains as a young teenager in 1972. A few years later, he saw canvases by the Nation of Graffiti Artists – an organisation that splintered from United Graffiti Artists in 1974—near his high school, and he made his first graffiti painting on canvas soon afterwards. He felt that writing was an outlet for artistically-inclined African Americans who otherwise had few opportunities to express themselves: ‘Our society did not encourage us to be creative. We were social misfits. Thus this sector of the population decided to create its own art world and guidelines toward creativity: not necessarily in galleries, universities, cafes and shops, but on the hard steel flesh of the New York subway’.⁷⁴ His tags sometimes had a political edge: after a subway fare increase, he turned the Q into a face that grew fangs, calling the MTA blood-suckers. He was less interested than other writers in pleasing his audience, whether it was fellow writers or the public at large: ‘My style was aesthetically displeasing; people felt uneasy with it. My letters don’t look like letters, they look like monsters or eggs with holes’.⁷⁵ QUIK’s paintings from the 1980s, and those he paints today, also challenged the viewer. The taunting face of his tags was on canvas transformed into a full-length figure of a crucified black man, symbolising the tragedy of racism in the United States.

⁷⁴ *Graffiti Art. Artistes américains et français*, 71.

⁷⁵ Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, *Graffiti* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1983), 38.



NOC 167, *Gold Chain*, 1981. Aerosol paint on canvas, 106 × 120 cm. Galerie Yaki Kornblit, Amsterdam.



LEE, *Stop the Bomb*, 1979. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.

SEEN, of the United Artists crew, was famous amongst his peers for his masterful renditions of mass-media cartoon characters like Fred Flintstone and the Smurfs. In the 1980 whole-car piece 'Hand of Doom,' a masked, muscular executioner holding a double-headed axe loomed ominously at the left of the green, lower-case lettering. A hand grasping a bloody blade emerged from the centre of the phrase. SEEN also mastered wild-style writing, as seen in a top-to-bottom whole car that he executed with MITCH in 1980. Both the colours and the composition were complex. Yellow blended smoothly into pink, which faded into blue, and the transition was uniform across letters that intertwined so ornately as to be illegible to non-writers. It looked at first as though SEEN had been lucky enough to find a clean subway car for his brilliant, busy design, because it was set against an almost uniform metallic grey background. But the windows were silvery too and the grey field had cracks running through it: SEEN and MITCH painted the entire car as a crumbling stone wall with their pieces bursting through triumphantly.

SEEN's paintings often incorporated his tag, or the tags of others in his crew such as P-JAY or his brother MAD. He produced his first canvas in 1979, and in 1981 or 1982 he says Henry Chalfant encouraged him to go to Europe to continue working on canvas.⁷⁶ There he found a receptive audience, as did QUIK; their careers outside the United States will be discussed in Chapter Four.

⁷⁶ Hoekstra, 266.

DONDI, FUTURA 2000, ZEPHYR, and LEE

Four writers began to establish themselves as graffiti artists while still active in the train yards by painting whole-car masterpieces that appealed to a public beyond their writing peers or decisively transcended the inherent design limitations of the tag. DONDI, FUTURA 2000, ZEPHYR, and LEE crossed paths at the graffiti collectives Soul Artists and Graffiti 1980, and in the production of a film about graffiti, *Wild Style*, directed by filmmaker and rap aficionado Charlie Ahearn. FUTURA 2000, who like DONDI was regarded as a master writer, helped to organise writers for commercial commissions, through Soul Artists, and working on canvas, in the Graffiti 1980 studio that will be discussed later in this chapter. ZEPHYR was active in Soul Artists and was the instigator for Graffiti 1980, and with DONDI took Ahearn to paint a train as part of his pre-production research for *Wild Style*. While DONDI, FUTURA, and ZEPHYR made the connections in 1980 that would eventually take graffiti into commercial galleries, LEE had already shown his paintings in Europe in 1979, with FAB FIVE FREDDY. His murals on handball courts in Lower Manhattan led an Italian art collector to contact him with the offer of an exhibition at a gallery in Rome. He and FREDDY would both appear in *Wild Style* and also in another film about art on the margins of the Manhattan market, *New York Beat* (released in 2000 as *Downtown 81*), starring Jean-Michel Basquiat.

DONDI

DONDI, a Brooklyn-based writer, began tagging trains in 1974. He formed a working relationship with DURO soon after he began writing, and later was influenced by SLAVE from the Fabulous Five and NOC 167.⁷⁷ His crew, the Crazy Inside Artists (CIA) rivaled the Fabulous Five's dominance on the IRT lines 2 and 5 by the end of the decade.⁷⁸ Other writers looked up to him for his graphic fluency that he refined by making up new tags, new arrangements of letters.⁷⁹ DOZE described DONDI's mastery: 'His style was very logical and smart. He taught me how the letter flows and how it should go in certain directions, that the arrows should always meet at the serifs. He taught me the art of flow and balance. His letters were simple, but always balanced'.⁸⁰ His ASIA piece from 1981 showed the flow that DOZE admired. The first A's cross-bar tied directly to the lower curve of the S, the I reversed the curve and the second A leaned into it, while the bottom of the I kicked into the second A's cross-bar. The far leg of the second A curved to echo the S and close the tag, while two arrows extended away, shooting energy outward. This final letter covered the subway doors, and the arrows pointed in the direction the door opened. DONDI added a boast at the top, 'DONDI rocks again' and typically credited his crew, CIA, at the bottom. His graphic facility enabled him to change his lettering style depending upon the audience he intended to address: a complex wild style with densely interlocked letters drew the notice of writers, while a plainer style was legible to a broader public.⁸¹



SIEN 5, *BFK*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on freight train car. Destroyed.

⁷⁷ Witten and White, 11, 18–19.

⁷⁸ Stewart, 408; Witten and White, 18–19.

⁷⁹ Guy Trebay, "Getting Up: Dondi and the Late, Great Art of Graffiti," *The Village Voice*, 4 May 1999, 39.

⁸⁰ Miller, 123.

⁸¹ Cooper and Chalfant, 70–1.



CLOWN, *Untitled*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on freight train car. Destroyed.

DONDI used unadorned letters in ‘Children of the Grave’, a theme to which he returned three times, in 1978 and twice in 1980. These were whole car, top-to-bottom pieces: ‘DONDI’ in italic capitals covered the windows. The phrase ‘Children of the Grave’ referred to a song by the heavy metal band Black Sabbath, and was written inside the letters of the tag. In ‘Children of the Grave Return, Part 2’, the letters in olive green, yellowy-tan, orange-pink, and ice blue were blocky and three-dimensional and marched across the length of the car. In the third version, ‘Children of the Grave Again, Part 3’, the letters were in a similar palette but more curvilinear, with a loop at the top of the O that joined the N’s serif in a flourish, outlined in black and casting black shadows. The effect was clean and elegant. The decorative effects lay outside the lettering, where DONDI painted a hand reaching in from the left in ‘Part 2’ and appropriated two child figures from comic-book artist Vaughn Bodé in ‘Part 3’. These elements and the caption lent the compositions their emotional resonance, a tinge of despair. The writer’s name by contrast was slick and declared a subjective presence in the face of the lack of opportunity implied by the song title. This was social criticism, rejecting the perception popularised in media such as *The New York Times* that subway writers were antisocial, juvenile delinquents.⁸² Rather, DONDI’s piece suggested that they were children in a dangerous environment, facing a bleak future, yet claiming their right to participate in the public sphere by writing on trains.

‘Children of the Grave, Part 3’ established DONDI’s reputation beyond his fellow writers: photographer Martha Cooper documented its execution. In her pictures published in *Subway Art* in 1984, DONDI’s seriousness about his craft is evident and resembles a fine artist’s studio practice. Writers prepared sketches before tackling trains to devise their designs, even labeling the diagrams with the names of aerosol paint colours to determine how much of each would be needed. All of this advance work is evident in the *Subway Art* spread, where DONDI has his paints arrayed along an open subway car door, in front of his sketchbook where he has outlined his piece and drawn the cartoon children for reference.⁸³

⁸² Austin, 154–7.

⁸³ Cooper and Chalfant, 32–7.

FUTURA 2000

FUTURA 2000 lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, near the 1 line, where he began tagging in 1971. Early on, he was aware of graffiti's expressive potential and standards of quality. He admired PHASE 2 for his lettering style and aerosol technique. Another older writer, STAY HIGH 149 was famous for incorporating a stick figure appropriated from the logo for the television show *The Saint* and the sentiment he expressed with the caption 'Voice of the Ghetto'.⁸⁴ The idea that graffiti spoke for a disenfranchised constituency resonated with FUTURA.

FUTURA's early career ended in autumn 1973. While he and his friend ALI were painting in a tunnel there was an explosion, and ALI was severely burned.⁸⁵ FUTURA ceased writing on trains, and in 1974 he joined the Navy, serving until 1978. After his tour, he returned to New York where ALI, inviting reconciliation, contacted him to ask him to join Soul Artists, a group of graffiti writers who worked out of an abandoned laundromat on sign-painting commissions.⁸⁶ There FUTURA met ZEPHYR, a younger writer who had begun tagging trains in 1977, and by the end of 1979 they were writing on trains together.⁸⁷ In spring 1980, ZEPHYR invited him to run another graffiti studio, this one supported by businessman and art collector Sam Esses.⁸⁸ Where Soul Artists was a commercial enterprise, Graffiti 1980, also known as the Esses Studio, encouraged the production of writing as fine art: graffiti on canvas. The two months spent there, and an exhibition of graffiti art in October 1980 at Fashion Moda, an alternative gallery space in the South Bronx, led to FUTURA's breakthrough design for a whole car piece where his tag was minimised.⁸⁹

'Break', as the train was titled in the absence of a tag and to indicate its significance in his stylistic development, was an atmospheric, abstract arrangement of fields of colour. FUTURA said of his intentions, 'I don't need to see FUTURA here, now I want to see just color. I want to see a couple of design elements that people would put into their pieces, and see what does that hold for us. Is that interesting? And it was, it was almost a painting'.⁹⁰ On the left, white was broken with cool tones of blue, purple, and magenta, while magenta, green, and orange dominated the car from the windows to the centre doors. Just to the right of the doors, the cloud of colour was bounded by a black outline. Bright white around a field of purple broke through, and a second cloud of warm hues completely covered the rest of the train to the right. Scattered over the atmospheric field of colours were triangles and circles in white and black. 'Break', 'Futura' and '2000' were written in thin black aerosol lines, so that the lettering was absolutely subordinate to the independent fields of colour. The clouds of brilliant hues inspired Richard Goldstein to credit the Russian expressionist painter Wassily Kandinsky as an influence, although FUTURA said he only saw Kandinsky's paintings at a museum some time later.⁹¹ The comparison stuck and was sometimes invoked when he exhibited abstract canvases in succeeding years.

⁸⁴ Hoekstra, ed., 134; Futura 2000, "Futura Speaks," available from. Accessed 20 May 2006.

⁸⁵ Hoekstra, ed., 134; Futura 2000, "Futura Speaks"; Michael T. Kaufman, "An Underground Graffitiist Pleads from Hospital: Stop the Spraying," *New York Times*, 18 October 1973, 49.

⁸⁶ Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

⁸⁷ Hoekstra, ed., 134.

⁸⁸ Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

⁸⁹ Miller, 192n2.

⁹⁰ FUTURA quoted in Miller, 120.

⁹¹ Goldstein, "The Fire Down Below," 55; Hoekstra, ed., 135. Carlo McCormick surmises that it was the Kandinsky retrospective at the Guggenheim in 1982 that FUTURA saw, and that he visited it with Kiely Jenkins, a downtown artist. (Interview with Carlo McCormick, 27 July 2006.)



DONDI, *Children of the Grave Return, Part 2*, 1980. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.

ZEPHYR

ZEPHYR, from Manhattan's Upper West Side, began writing seriously in 1977 and associated with a group of writers in Central Park. At first, like most writers, he dedicated himself to producing quantities of tags but eventually he collaborated with other writers from whom he could learn style such as NOC 167, FUTURA 2000, and DONDI. A window-down piece from 1980 may show DONDI's influence with the serifs and crossbars lined up neatly, drawing the eye through the piece to the dramatically-enlarged leg of the R at the end.

ZEPHYR painted regularly with DONDI on Sundays in the train yard near his home at the end of the 2 line in Brooklyn, and in 1980 they worked together on a whole car design of ZEPHYR's, 'Heroin Kills'. The third contributor to this piece was Charlie Ahearn, a filmmaker based in Times Square who was in pre-production on a film about writing, rap, and break-dancing that would be released as *Wild Style* in 1982. Ahearn asked to come along on one of ZEPHYR and DONDI's forays as part of his research for the film, but ZEPHYR was reluctant to take the risk and responsibility of having a 'civilian' with them. DONDI was inclined to let Ahearn accompany them, perhaps because he had already been trailed by photographer Martha Cooper when he painted his 'Children of the Grave, Part Three' train in May. Unexpectedly, Ahearn brought paints and an idea for his own piece.⁹²

ZEPHYR had made few political pieces, preferring to perfect his tag. This piece was inspired by a friend's attempt to kick his drug habit. He planned to paint 'HEROIN' with the I rendered as a syringe, while DONDI worked on 'KILLS'. The lettering and palette of each word were slightly different, but compatible, and the break between the words was precisely where the centre doors opened. To the right was a notation that this piece had been produced as a 'public service'. To the left was a red cartoon devil, not part of ZEPHYR's original design, poking at 'HEROIN' with his pitchfork. This was Ahearn's contribution. It was the 'Hot Stuff' devil from Harvey comics, which also featured Richie Rich and were intended for a juvenile audience. Ahearn's appreciation for these characters was symptomatic of the taste for kitsch cultivated by some of the downtown artists with whom he associated, while writers like ZEPHYR and DONDI preferred comics for an older or countercultural audience, such as those by Vaughn Bodé or R. Crumb. Nevertheless, Ahearn's devil worked well with the concept and design of 'Heroin Kills' and ZEPHYR considered his execution to be impressive, especially since Ahearn had no prior experience spray-painting trains.⁹³

⁹² Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

⁹³ Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

Graffiti 1980

ZEPHYR's ability to bridge different social circles, as he did with the filmmaker Ahearn and the master writer DONDI, suited him to run a studio for writers established for two months in the spring of 1980 by businessman and art collector Sam Esses. It marked a breakthrough in writers' sense of what they could accomplish. ZEPHYR said:

Every day at the studio turned into a colossal writer's convention, a veritable 'who's who in graffiti.' For two straight months, FUTURA and I excitedly greeted graffiti legends at the door – many of whom we had never met before... The studio stayed open all day, everyday, and sometimes late into the night... Serious networking took place and countless friendships were forged. Phone numbers were exchanged and late-night soirees were planned and executed... The subsequent early 80s subway renaissance changed the state of New York graffiti forever. Prior to that summer, many of us only knew each other through each other's work. The Graffiti 1980 Studio changed all that. It was a wake-up call. We realized the power of ourselves and the miraculous community we were a part of.⁹⁴



DONDI, *Children of the Grave Again, Part 3*, 1980. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.

Graffiti 1980, as Esses' studio was called, was crucial to writers making a transition from the subway to painting on canvas: it was a networking opportunity at a time when communication among writers was difficult; it facilitated collaboration and professionalism; and it inspired a sense of ambition that prepared them for the opportunities offered by Fashion Moda and the Fun Gallery.⁹⁵

As an art collector in the early 1980s, Esses supported promising young gallerists and artists. According to ZEPHYR, he had encountered graffiti at the home of Claudio Bruni, an Italian

⁹⁴ Austin, 189.

⁹⁵ Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

collector whose support of FAB FIVE FREDDY and LEE will be discussed later in this chapter. LEE had painted his terrace.⁹⁶ Preferring to develop his own relationship with graffiti writers, Esses met ZEPHYR and RASTA through his daughter who hung around with the Central Park writers in 1979. He invited them to his apartment, where they showed him photographs documenting their pieces. Impressed with their quality and dismayed that they would be scrubbed off the trains, Esses proposed that they organise a workshop where writers could work on permanent surfaces to preserve their efforts. ZEPHYR was interested in participating, and approached FUTURA 2000, with whom he worked in ALI's Soul Artists collective. FUTURA was organised and able to see projects through, an unusual characteristic among writers who were mostly younger and less disciplined.⁹⁷ Esses enabled them to rent a working space on East 75th Street from March to May 1980, and provided spray paints and canvases.⁹⁸

While writers' collectives had been established before, notably United Graffiti Artists and more recently the Soul Artists, Graffiti 1980 had a unique aim: at the end of its limited duration, Esses would have a collection of graffiti paintings by writers selected on the basis of their reputations among their peers. The writers would benefit, too, by developing working relationships amongst themselves. It was difficult for writers to make contact for a variety of reasons, including concern about letting one's identity become known to the police, the brevity of most graffiti writers' active careers, an urban geography that was divided along school zones and subway lines, and simple lack of means of communication, since in the days before mobile phones access to telephones was limited to homes, where there was competition for the line, and public booths. The Esses Studio facilitated cross-borough introductions by providing a place where writers from all over the city could meet in person, whereas before they were known only by tag and reputation.⁹⁹

Between them, ZEPHYR and FUTURA 2000 knew or knew of the most accomplished writers in the city. KEL and CRASH, members of the Rock on City (ROC) crew in the Bronx, had visited Soul Artists and thus were acquainted with FUTURA.¹⁰⁰ CRASH's friend DAZE came to the Esses Studio and executed his first canvas there, which he considered 'an experiment' towards something he might do on a train. He later realised that his move to exclusively painting on canvas began at the Esses Studio.¹⁰¹ Others from the ROC crew, KEL and MARE also worked there. The two had been part of DONDI's CIA crew. DONDI arrived one day with 'his photographer', Martha Cooper, and eventually completed three canvases. SEEN, a white writer from the Pelham Bay neighbourhood in the Bronx, began to collaborate with MITCH, whom he met through the Esses Studio. Until then, he had worked in some isolation with his crew, United Artists. ZEPHYR was committed to establishing a cooperative, professional atmosphere among these competitive young men. At the end of two months, about thirty-five paintings on canvas had been produced and new working partnerships developed between writers who took what they had learned in the studio back to the train yards.¹⁰² (Unlike United Graffiti Artists, Graffiti 1980 had no expectations that working in the studio would take writers off the subway.) In 1982, a selection of Esses Studio paintings was shown at the University Gallery at Santa Cruz alongside photo-documentation of graffiti trains by Henry Chalfant, to enthusiastic reception.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Miller, 192n1.

⁹⁷ Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

⁹⁸ Mizrahi, 11.

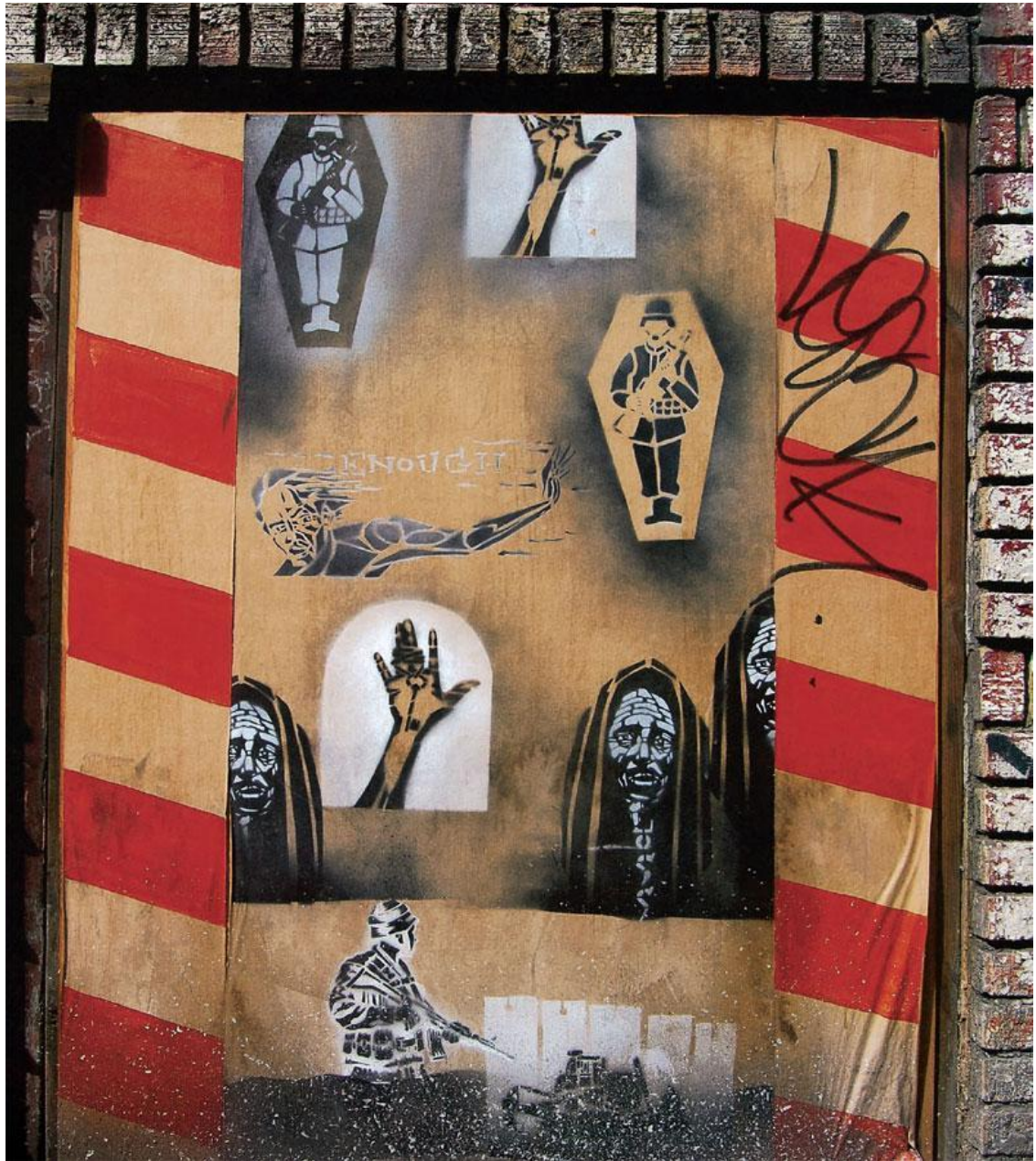
⁹⁹ Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006; interview with DAZE, 25 January 2008.

¹⁰¹ Cooper, *Hip-Hop Files*, 142.

¹⁰² Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

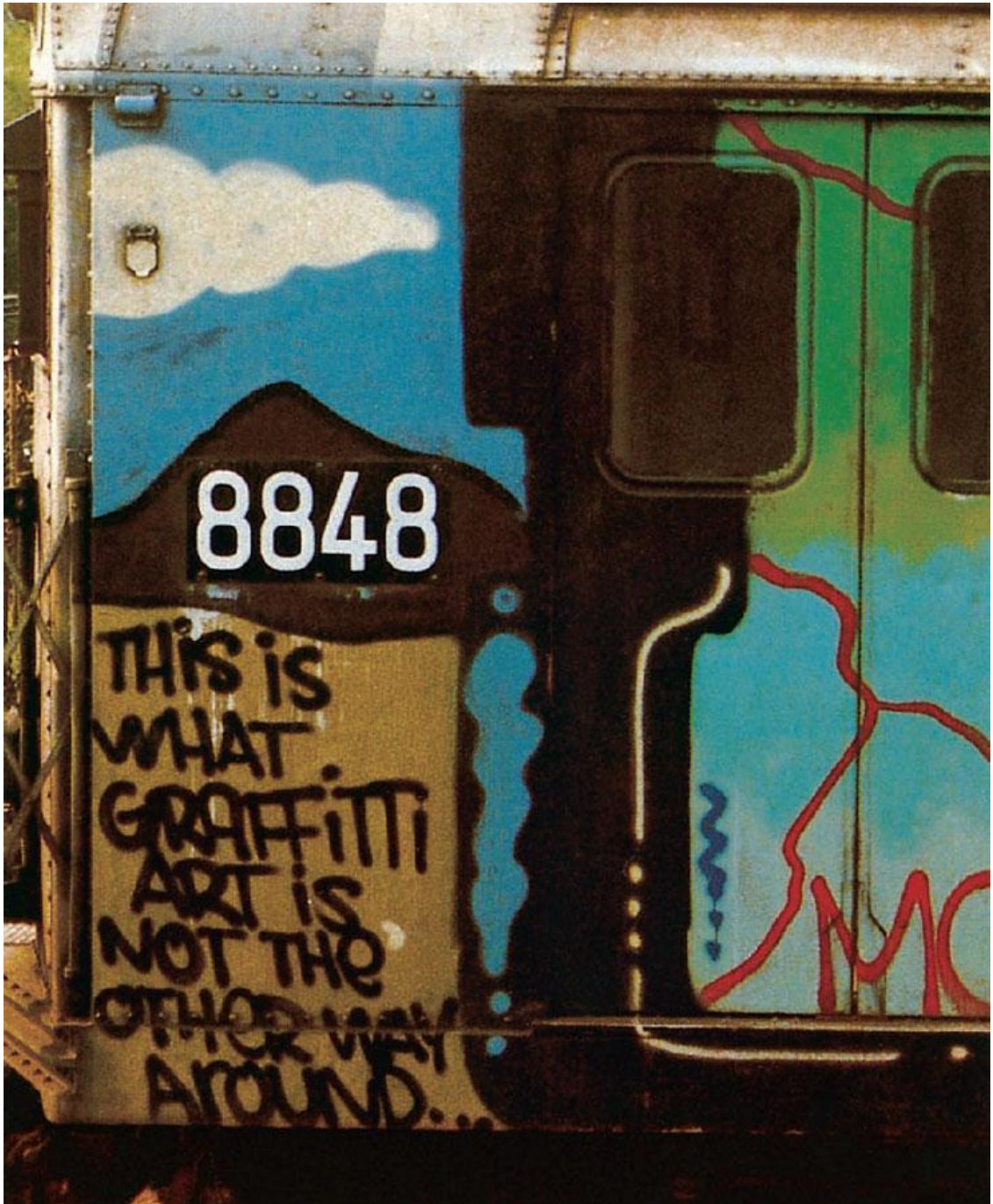
¹⁰³ Witten and White, 158.



Unknown, *Untitled*, 2007. Stencilled paint on brown paper. New York. Destroyed.



ZEPHYR, *Untitled*, 1980. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.



LEE, *Tag*, 1979. Aerosol paint on New York subway car. Destroyed.



DEZ, *In Memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1984. Aerosol paint on wall. Manhattan, New York.

CRASH concluded his experience at Graffiti 1980 with mixed feelings. The paintings produced there were excellent, he thought. He enjoyed collaborating with his fellow writers, and the studio allowed people to attempt working on canvas who otherwise might never have had the opportunity. Still, he regarded Esses as having exploited the writers, who after all did not receive compensation for their paintings.¹⁰⁴ LADY PINK, a close friend of CRASH but not a participant at the Esses Studio herself, said that such experiences shaped the writers' attitudes when they later pursued similar enterprises.¹⁰⁵ ZEPHYR felt that the writers received an education as compensation for working with Esses: they learned ambition, and the professional skills they required when Fashion Moda and the Fun Gallery began to feature their paintings. He disagreed that Esses was exploitative, and believed he was sincere in his desire to preserve on canvas graffiti that would be buffed from the sides of subway cars. Indeed, it would have been difficult to compensate the writers for paintings that had no proven market value at the time, and Esses's status as a prosperous businessman and art collector in fact conferred value to an art form that at least in the U. S. existed outside the art market system of galleries and auction houses.¹⁰⁶ The brush with commerce at Graffiti 1980 and the ambivalent sentiments it aroused foretold similar reactions among writers and their audience when graffiti art entered galleries on a larger scale in the years to come.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with CRASH, 27 December 2006. Most of the Studio 1980 paintings remain in the possession of the Esses family.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with LADY PINK, 5 June 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with ZEPHYR, 4 November 2006.

LEE

Of the graffiti writers who moved from subway to studio to produce permanent paintings on canvas, LEE was among the most accomplished. He would go to the Brooklyn Bridge subway station to see the trains he had tagged in the yards where they had been parked overnight, and to gauge the reaction of subway riders on the platform.¹⁰⁷ Early in his career, he downplayed the tag in his whole-car masterpiece in favour of images that represented an idea. His first effort to this end was the 1976 'Doomsday' train. Jack Stewart described the two-car design as 'a rambling pictorial composition of tilting tenements, flames, and a threatening horned alien monster'.¹⁰⁸ Subway riders themselves were LEE's subject in the 1977 train 'The Straphangers', where the exterior of the car has dissolved to reveal the standing passengers crammed inside.¹⁰⁹

LEE incorporated political content into his pieces more often than other writers. In 1979, his 'Stop the Bomb' train pleaded for a resolution to the Cold War. Above the title, rendered in drab-coloured but legible bubble letters, floated two clouds in dark and light green. One was labeled 'U.S.A.', the other 'Russia U. S. S.R.', and a hand emerged from each one to clasp in the middle. The handshake was located on the centre pair of subway doors so that the hands separated and came together when the doors opened and shut. At the right, a missile over buildings and trees was labeled 'War is selfish death'. The composition continued on a second car, linked by an urban skyline in front of which sat a weeping figure. To the left of the figure, LEE was painted top-to-bottom and an inscription read, 'If we the people of today destroy its beauty before they ever see it'. The text was ambiguous, referring either to the earth's beauty threatened by Cold War destruction, or to writing which could be scrubbed off the train at any time. By the time he painted this pair of cars, LEE's handiwork dominated the 5 line which ran the length of Manhattan under Lexington Avenue to the Bronx.

In the late 1970s, LEE painted the walls of outdoor handball courts near the Smith Housing Projects where he lived. In these murals, he devised narratives that attested to the power of writing: cartoon characters that visibly responded to LEE's tag written beside them. In one, a lion sat on his haunches in front of a cinderblock wall. A candle cast a glow on the wall, where LEE painted his tag in blue letters, crisply outlined and highlighted in white. The lion's roar matched the ferocity of the tag. In the upper right corner, LEE wrote, 'There is only one reason for art to know that you are alive', and signed it with a flourish. In another mural, Howard the Duck, a figure borrowed from Marvel comics, cowered behind a trash-can lid warding off LEE's tag. The letters were shaped like thunderbolts, green against an orange-red splash, and Howard's reaction, like the lion's roar, registered the writer's power.

The handball court murals precipitated LEE's career as a painter in addition to burnishing his reputation as an accomplished, ambitious writer. They attracted the notice of Fred Brathwaite, who contacted LEE and offered to represent him in pursuing mural commissions. Brathwaite posed in front of LEE's Howard the Duck mural for a short article in the *Village Voice* in February 1979. There, he identified himself as FAB FIVE FREDDY after the name of LEE's former crew. The services he offered were the 'purest form of New York art', authentic subway graffiti. He also dropped the names of artists the *Voice* reader would likely know: 'As you can see, we've obviously been influenced by Warhol, Crumb, and Lichtenstein'.¹¹⁰ One such reader was the Italian businessman and director of the Giorgio de Chirico estate, Claudio Bruni, who would eventually

¹⁰⁷ Hoekstra, ed., 177.

¹⁰⁸ Stewart, 465.

¹⁰⁹ Stewart, 472, 475.

¹¹⁰ Howard Smith and Cathy Cox, "Scenes," *Village Voice*, 12 February 1979.

introduce Sam Esses to graffiti art. He contacted LEE and FAB FIVE FREDDY, and arranged a gallery exhibition for them in Italy.¹¹¹



LAC, CEL, and LED, *Martin Luther King*, 1984. Aerosol paint on brick wall. Manhattan, New York.



LEE, *Love Sick Bomber*, 1979. Aerosol paint on subway car.

¹¹¹ Miller, 158; Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff, *Spraycan Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 7.



LEE, *Sherlock*, 1978. Aerosol paint on subway car.

LEE and FAB FIVE FREDDY at Galleria la Medusa

In December 1979, the first exhibition of graffiti art in Europe opened at the Galleria la Medusa in Rome, called *The Fabulous Five: Calligraffiti di FREDerick Brathwaite, LEE George Quinones*. Bruni in his catalogue essay argued for the importance of graffiti, as the authentic visual idiom of working class and minority populations of the urban ghettos, as part of an art historical tradition, and as utterly American in its attitude. He compared graffiti to the blues and jazz in its expressive force, writing that it is ‘undoubtedly the spontaneous pictorial expression of the new black generation’ and of young people from ‘Harlem, Brooklyn, [the] Bronx, East New York, [and] New Jersey’. Like the earlier forms of popular music whose ‘musical messages of lament and protest... emerged from the ghetto to conquer the world’, graffiti was also on track to ‘draw attention’ to the disenfranchised. He drew parallels between this exhibition and the breakthrough of other important American artists who had spent time in Rome, Robert Rauschenberg in 1953 and Cy Twombly in 1957. The allusions were deliberate, as Rauschenberg, with Jasper Johns, was a forerunner to Pop Art in his use of commercial imagery and objects in his paintings and Twombly had used both calligraphic marks and proper names that art critics compared to graffiti. Bruni wrote, ‘the Fabulous Five are the natural, spontaneous result of the fusion of American pop-art and people’s innate desire to leave their mark by means of graffiti’.

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