



It's Possible

Traveling the Paths of Urban Pioneers

by Ian Lynam

Graffiti is as old as history itself, evident even at Lascaux, where mystic visions of heaven and earth made their way from hand to wall. The first published accounts of graffiti – pathological studies on prisoners, their tattoos, and marks made on the walls of prison cells – appeared in the 1800s. These early inquiries linked graffiti to theories on criminality and the mental state of murderers, thieves, and other lowlifes – associations that still feed larger social fears. G.H. Luquet's seminal 1910 textbook on graffiti featured illustrated examples he found in European toilet stalls and army barracks, and focused on obscene imagery, including male and female genitalia, urinating stick figures, and the indisputably classic penis-nose caricature. Legendary provocateur Marcel Duchamp was the first artist to participate in the act of graffiti when, in 1919, he drew a pencil moustache and thin beard on a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and titled it *L.H.O.O.Q.* The letters, when read in French, reveal the inside joke, "She's got a hot ass." Duchamp's act of defacement instantly upgraded graffiti to a viable reactionary activity, a critical force for commentary, and – in the case of Duchamp, whose own sexuality was rather ambivalent – an avenue for personal expression.

Graffiti proliferated both in the United States and Europe, but it wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that it developed into a distinct, self-aware subculture with roots in the urban centers of New York and Philadelphia. Faced with a political and social dynamic that exploited family, friends, and entire communities, restless teenagers turned to graffiti as a way of bringing attention back to a forgotten class. Not trained as artists, or even highly educated, they forced their messages into the public consciousness using the only tool they could

Photographer Martha Cooper captured the evolution of New York City's graffiti and hip-hop subcultures through the lens of her camera. Her iconic images portray the youth, vitality, and curiosity of pioneering artists in a rapidly expanding and complex society.

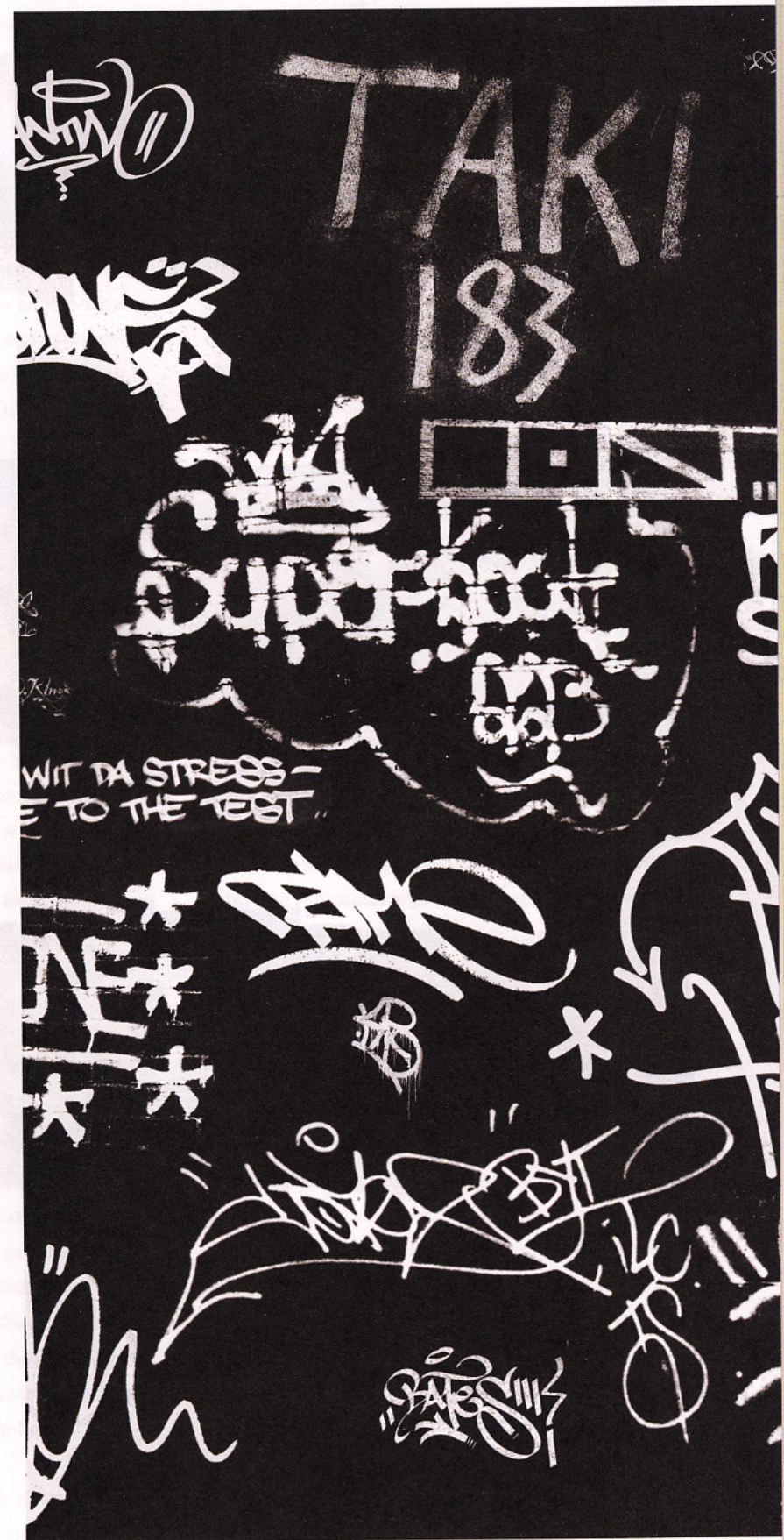


comfortably exploit – the alphabet. The earliest activists in this renaissance called themselves writers. Unlike the obvious political sloganeering or gang-related proto-graffiti, these writers communicated with tags – simple, highly personalized messages born out of a need for some measure of recognition. One of the earliest writers, LEE 163, remembers, “Shit was deep. You had Vietnam and all types of protests, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, racism and hatred at a peak, and brothers and others fighting inequality and dying trying to put a stop to it. The odds were against you. You can’t be unaffected by all of that.” Unknowingly, the work of LEE 163 and others bridged a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, and redefined our understanding of letterforms as a tool for mass communication.

Tags began appearing in crowded urban projects and throughout high-traffic public transit systems. Hand lettered with permanent markers, they became omnipresent, filling the inside walls of subway cars in a dense tapestry of ink. On the outside, spray paint covered cars from top to bottom. It was authentic and expressive; an act

of self-definition in cities that were impersonal and undefined. Initially, quantity and having your work seen (or “getting up”) was the driving engine for the graf community. But ubiquity became a problem – subway cars were filling up with tags so fast that space was at a premium. Conversely, this was an important boost. With limited opportunity, graffiti artists began thinking about the best use for the uncompromised surfaces they found. Writers learned to modify their tags, creating idiosyncratic marks infused with creativity and character that stood out among the growing visual clutter.

Regardless of its underlying social message, the public continued to see graffiti not as an effect, but as the cause of social ills, and it was to be fought at every turn. Penalties for offenders were quickly increased and barbed wire fences erected around train yards. For pioneering writers, the act of vandalism and its inherent rush were not enough to sustain their enthusiasm and participation. Older now, they had the responsibilities that come with age. Within a few years, many of the rebirth writers dropped out of the scene. It was – and remained – a



These tags, both historic (DONTI and TAKI 183) and contemporary (TWIST, COPE, and RIME), show how calligraphic variation allows writers to create personal identities that are shared throughout the urban landscape.



JUNE 19, 2005 – AIM, SCRAG, ALUMA, PRIZE



JULY 10, 2005 – AIDER, DRAMA, PUES, STAK



JULY 16, 2005 – ZEROS, AWAKE

Historian and photographer Cassidy Curtis documents the effect time has on popular graffiti surfaces at *Graffiti Archaeology*, an interactive website dedicated to capturing constant change. These images show the transformation of a single wall in a San Francisco neighborhood.

kids' game, and there was no dearth of young talent. New blood only increased tensions in the graffiti community, pitting speed against style; the first was necessary for completing the more elaborate throw-ups and pieces (short for masterpieces) without getting caught, with the latter becoming increasingly important as innovators continued to manipulate letters as a vehicle for peer recognition and self-aggrandizement. With no commercial application for their craft, writers, either as individuals or as part of a writing crew, established and participated in non-violent competition more akin to professional sports than knife fights, where getting up was the perfect mix of artistry and bravado.

This became the motivating force for stylistic innovation, spilling over into the related street cultures of hip-hop and, eventually, rap music, which featured DJ, b-boy dance, and freestyle battles. The original emotions of dispossession that fueled the graf culture were the same ones that launched these additional art-based subsets. That the language and visual cues of graffiti were adopted, maybe even co-opted, by hip-hop is no surprise. But unlike writers, who had no way to make a living from their work, hip-hop artists, with a vocation rooted in music and dance, found ample opportunity to merchandise and export their product. Entertainment companies mined resource-rich inner cities, repackaged what they found, and promoted their product from coast to coast. Before anyone knew what had happened, thousands of b-boy and b-girl clones were doing windmills, freezes, and six steps. The widespread acceptance and success of hip-hop reversed a hundred years of negative attitudes toward sidewalk and subway delinquents. Artists like Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and, to some extent, Jean Michel Basquiat, adopted stylistic innovations made fashionable by graffiti and their work became immensely popular. Films like *Wild Style* hit the big screen, featuring crossover artists like Grandmaster Flash and the Rock Steady Crew, while the graffiti documentary *Style Wars* connected with PBS viewers as the definitive chronicle of the emergent hip-hop culture.

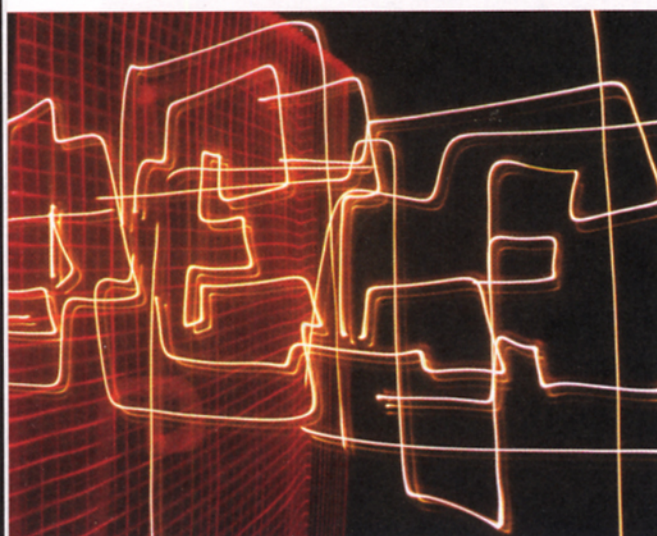
For writers, the built-in rivalries, which still exist today, accelerated graffiti growth patterns to such an extent

that, in only 30 years, original styles have morphed and multiplied into a global kaleidoscope. That speed, along with the anonymity that must go hand in hand with vandalizing private property, has left us with a rather undefined history of modern graffiti. While there may still be disagreement about who was the first to "bomb" a New York City subway train or the first to burn a wild style piece (where letters are linked in a complicated and hypnotic network of decorative, experimental calligraphy), the power of image, the need for identity, and the lure of the street continue to feed a robust writing culture. As we collectively ease into a new millennium, graffiti artists can be grouped into one of three categories. Purists (or "archaists") uphold the traditions of graffiti by perpetuating styles at the foundation of the movement. Pragmatists search out opportunities to extend their art and craft into mainstream consumer culture, and the avant-garde looks for new ways to bend letters and the rules. As expected, the avant-garde has done the most to propel graffiti beyond writing to include influences from advertising, graphic design, architecture, and illustration. This, in turn, has opened new doors for pragmatists and given justification to purists.

Letters are still at the core of writing, but as information-saturated societies merge and homogenize, graf culture has been forced to widen its self-defined boundaries. The rise of technology, mass marketing, and global consumerism in the 1990s obliged writers and other artists interested in the street to begin culture jamming – reflecting and reacting against a constant barrage of advertising images. Using posters, stickers, and stencils, they reformulated their messages for ever more modern cities whose continued visual and constructed gentrification assaulted the remaining pockets of viable urban wilderness. SWOON, the master of cut-paper posters, commented on this loss. "We are thirsting for wilderness. I believe that in seeking it, our generation creates wilderness for itself. Our walls become screeching jungles; rapacious conversations, life, death, birth and decay are written aloud all around us." In fulfilling her role as a street artist, SWOON, along with hundreds like her, continues to challenge and change long accepted views on advertising, art in public places, and the use



Printed, cut, and pasted: an emotional piece by New York City-based graffiti artist SWOON.

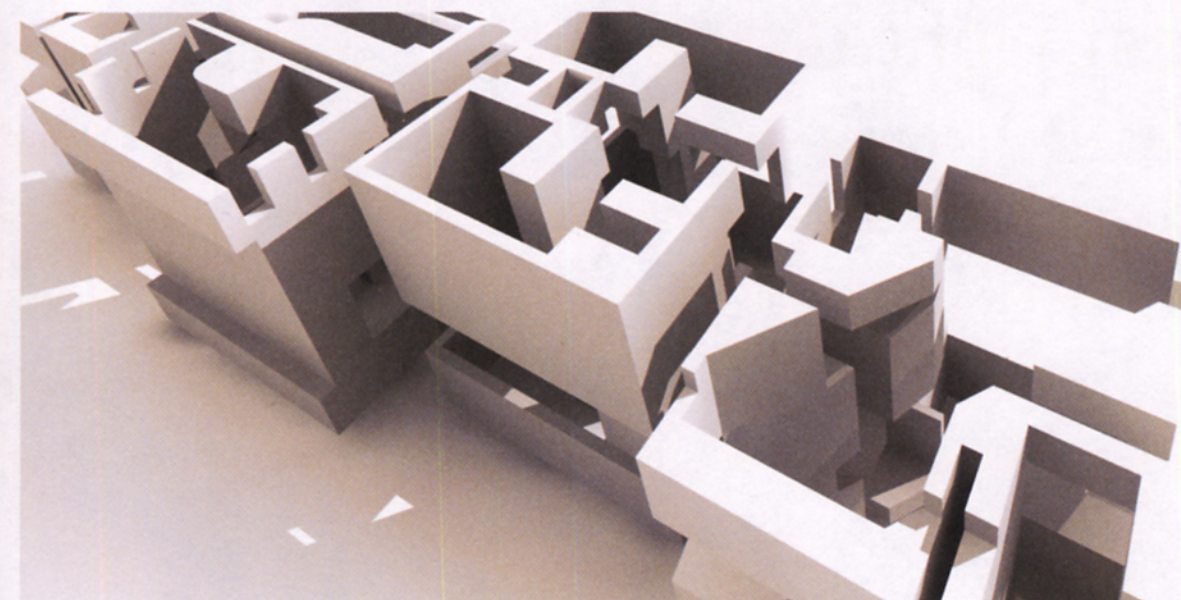


DELTA shows off his tag using Pipslab's Lumasol graffiti process.

and reuse of urban space. Marketing executives and cool hunters, in an ironic twist, are taking advantage of the popular acceptance of culture jamming and street art as illustrated by Sony's recent PSP advertising campaign – a campaign that was publicly ridiculed by the graffiti community and, perhaps, secretly appreciated by the public.

Today, the new frontier for writers still convinced that letters make words, that words are symbols, and that symbols carry meaning, is the open space made possible in the electrosphere, the indeterminate landscape of computer-generated possibility. Odd for a culture built on something as antediluvian as letters, but building (and the inverse act of destroying) is exactly what's happening. With computer-aided drafting software, writers have started shaping letters in the same way that architects create form. The term "deconstruction," coined by French philosopher and literary critic Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, postulated that writing, text, and language could move beyond the single layer of meaning imbued by its author to represent multiple layers that are constantly shifting. Deconstructive architecture is similar, defined by its unpredictability, fragmentation, and dislocation. As controlled chaos, deconstructive architecture questions, contradicts, and even undermines tradition, rationality, and, more importantly, authority. By deconstructing typography and lettering, today's tech-savvy writers such as JOKER, DELTA, and DAIM are in an exciting position. They straddle the deconstructive world of Derrida, who questioned meaning, and that of architects like Lebbeus Woods, Thom Mayne, and Zaha Hadid, who question form. The result is a hybrid "typogritecture," where letters are organized, reorganized, and sculpted in three-dimensional space without the surface constraints forced upon writers who rely on the city and street. This isn't to say that writers are no longer dependent on traditional letterforms – they are. By revealing the elemental core of letter formation, artists obsessed with breaking them apart pay reverence to time-tested forms while simultaneously keeping them fresh and lively.

Recently, the Eindhoven University of Technology in The Netherlands explored the relationship between



Together with the Dutch architecture firm Maurer United Architects, writer ZEDZ rethinks street furniture with this unconventional design.

architecture and typography when they commissioned Maurer United Architects and Dutch graffiti artist ZEDZ to connect their stark, functional campus to Eindhoven's urban core. Agreeing that cultural authenticity was key, architect and writer transformed the tag ZEDZ from dimensional typography into large-scale street furniture. If the Eindhoven project seems devoid of personality and craft (considered crucial by some), then a Swiss engineer and designer working in Zurich have created a scary hybrid of technology and graffiti in Hektor, a portable wall-mounted graffiti printer. With no writer required, motors and cables holding a spray can follow precise vector graphics paths provided by remote from a nearby laptop computer. Pipslab, an art collective in Amsterdam, has done away with spray paint altogether. Attaching light bulbs to spray cans, the collective uses multiple cameras and long exposures to photograph the physical act of tagging. The results are colorful and energetic, yet completely ethereal.

When *Style Wars* was released back in 1982, no one could have foreseen the changes in store for graffiti. Old school writers like SEEN, CASE, and IZ THE WIZ were confident that writing would thrive despite the best efforts of the Metropolitan Transit Authority. At the time, they had reason to be optimistic. No one imagined that only a

few years later, bombing subway cars would come to an abrupt end with the introduction of graffiti-proof Teflon® coatings. With that, the meteoric rise of graffiti slowed (some would even argue that it reversed course), but the subculture never stopped. Bought and sold, it has moved away from urban centers, further evolving beyond the white-hot spotlight of vandalism and assimilating ascendant cultures like skate- and snowboarding. The word itself, graffiti, conjures up new meaning, just as Derrida might have prophesied. As social experience, it remains authentic, visible, and tangible in the messages left for us throughout the city, suburbs, and exurbs. As global culture, it is computer-generated and virtual – the grist of video games and marketeers. Washed of all its historic and contemporary associations, both good and bad, we are reminded that graffiti has always been, and remains, a means for insurgent voices to speak and a way for letters to do all the talking.

WEB EXTRA What is your experience with graffiti? Join the online discussion and read an extended interview with style master RIME at FontShop.com/Fontoos