

3 Hip-hop visual arts

IVOR MILLER

Outside observers used the Italian term *graffito*, commonly defined as a “crude scratching upon public surfaces,” to define a grassroots art movement that emerged in New York City in the 1970s. Instead, practitioners commonly referred to their form as “aerosol art,” “signaturing,” “spray-can art,” “writing,” or simply “graff.” This form of public painting became an important element of the urban cultural movement known as hip-hop.

Graffiti being an art form based upon writing or painting stylized letters, its creators developed unique categories to evaluate mastery. Founding artist PHASE 2 categorized writers as “bombers,” “stylists,” and “hard-core stylists”: bombers aspire for the quantity of their signatures across the city’s walls, stylists reassemble letters in aesthetic patterns including abstraction, while hard-core stylists work with letters and figurative forms to create thematic murals.

This movement emerged in the early 1970s in New York City when local painters used active subway cars as their canvases. While Norman Mailer and a handful of journalists and photographers celebrated the phenomenon, others who viewed it as an attack on society called the painters “graffiti vandals.”¹

By the late 1970s, New York City “writers” began to produce whole-car murals that became a tourist attraction for international visitors. The origins of a cultural phenomenon like New York City writing are multiple. Some link it to archaic human impulses reflected in the graffiti of the ancient city of Pompeii, or the “latrinalia” found in bathroom stalls. Others suggested origins with the ubiquitous “Kilroy was here” tags from World War II, or the phrase “Bird Lives!” chalked on buildings and subway walls of New York City’s bohemian Greenwich Village after the demise of jazz musician Charlie Parker in 1955.

A 1971 *New York Times* article about TAKI 183, a bicycle messenger who wrote his tag throughout Manhattan, spread the idea of signaturing throughout the city. The movement, partly inspired by logos from advertising campaigns, became a media phenomenon itself – as writers aspired to see images of their “hits” in the newspapers, on TV, and in movies. The aesthetic “battles” took on David and Goliath proportions as some “pieces” covered advertisements on billboards and painters such as MICO

rendered slogans deriding political leaders on the trains (e.g. “Hang Nixon!,” 1973–1974).

The subway painting movement emerged in response to the conditions of New York City at the time. In the 1960s and 1970s, college students and adults began to hold mass rallies protesting the Vietnam War, as well as institutionalized poverty, racism, and sexism. The protesters did not ask for permission; they acted spontaneously in order to force the hand of authorities. The painters followed this strategy by presenting their views creatively in public, calling their collective actions of covert paintings on the subway “bombing,” partially in critical response to the ongoing war in southeast Asia. They recognized the subway system as an ideal public gallery for their work. It was available because the system had fallen into disrepair under the administration of city planner Robert Moses (1934–1968), whose efforts went to building roads for private cars rather than maintaining public transportation. Painters were able to communicate with their peers through their work on the trains. Founding artist MICO recalled the relationship between society and his art of the era:

At 15, 16, 17, 18 years of age that Vietnam war was going on. One of the themes I’ve always been preoccupied with is the current oppression of Puerto Rico by the US, so I mounted campaigns of writing “Free Puerto Rico” with the Puerto Rican and Black Power flags. I figured the least I could do to help the cause was to write, “Free Puerto Rico,” “Free Nelson Mandela,” “Free Carlos Feliciano,” who was also a political prisoner. I did my “Hang Nixon” piece in 73, 74.²

After Mailer’s book *The Faith of Graffiti* appeared in 1974, the next book on graffiti was Castleman’s *Getting Up* (1982), based on interviews with major painters, describing what writers actually did, as well as their conceptualizations of their work. Chalfant and Cooper’s *Subway Art* (1984) used photographs to document some of the best work in New York City of that era.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, whole-car murals dominated public vistas of the subway system. Among the master painters of that era LEE, as well as DURO, were of Puerto Rican descent. In the early 1980s the subway painters, the majority from marginal barrios of the city, participated in highly publicized exhibitions in downtown galleries. With the release of the films *Wild Style* (1982), *Style Wars* (1983), and *Beat Street* (1984), their art and related music and dance forms became known throughout world urban centers as the basis for what some called the “hip-hop revolution.” Soon afterwards, Chalfant and Prigoff’s *Spraycan Art* (1987) documented visually how the art had become a worldwide phenomenon.

Graffiti origins and ethnic diversity

The ethnic influences in this art form are dynamic and complex. Twentieth-century New York has been identified as the first “Caribbean” city, where peoples from all islands and nations met for the first time in one place.³

Aerosol art was primarily produced by Blacks and Latinos in the early 1970s with some important exceptions (e.g. ALE, COMET, FUZZ 1, LSD OM, TAKI 183, *et al.*). Some writers came to New York as immigrants from South America, or the Caribbean, and others from the interior of the USA. Still others were born in New York City, often the children of immigrants with multiple ethnic identities. All found that by participating in aerosol culture they could explore vital parts of their identities as young adults, as artists, political beings, and New Yorkers.

Considered one of the few indigenous art forms of the USA, aerosol writing developed collectively through the rich tapestry of styles that each innovator brought to the form. Several painters asserted specific ethnic identities through their work. COCO 144 integrated Taino ritual images into his signature in order to forge an identity related to his ancestral homeland on the island of Puerto Rico:

I incorporated the Taino petroglyphs into my signature. The continued use of writing my name in my paintings is important to me. Although the letters are now an abstract form, the name is still there. It's in the face of the embryo I painted in some of the Taino paintings I did.

When I was painting the Taino works, I wanted to express myself and my culture in a certain way. I was in Puerto Rico, where these petroglyphs were created. And it was a new experience for Puerto Ricans to see urban, aerosol art. At the time I didn't make a conscious connection between the Taino paintings and aerosol as underground work, but it's funny that my work evolved from the underground subways, and then here I'm combining it with something that was done 700 years ago that was also done underground. It's like history repeating itself.⁴

The conversation among writers from diverse cultural backgrounds occurred at many levels. MARE 139 observed that even if writers lived in segregated neighborhoods, the subway lines themselves became “integrated” as writers from all regions communicated with each other through their paintings:

Writers were always from a mixed cultural background. The Number One line had a lot of Latinos, Dominicans, white and black writers, because it went from downtown to uptown to the Bronx, through Harlem, Manhattan, so there was no line that was segregated. The misconception is that graffiti wasn't that integrated. I was in a lot of integrated crews.⁵

LADY PINK reported that writers' groups included artists from all backgrounds:

Writers came from all ethnic backgrounds, all classes, and the police knew to look out for a group of kids who were racially diverse – those were the writers. If a group of kids was all black or white the police wouldn't bother them. Race wasn't an obstacle for a writer to join a crew, gender wasn't either. That set in later. Barriers break down quickly when you go down into the subways . . . After you come out, you have a link, a comradeship. Once you were a writer, you were respected, you could go anywhere in the city. You were known, you had friends and connections, even if you had never set eyes on them before. It was a family.⁶

Many of the early writers, including CRASH, insist that although many of the writers were Black and Latino, the form is collective and urban:

Our art is multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-dimensional. As a teenager, most of my friends were Hispanic, white, black, Chinese, Korean. I never saw color until I was an adult, and that was how my parents brought me up. So when people tell me that [graffiti] is a black thing, I'm like "where? where? That's a lie." Most of the writers I knew were Hispanic, black, Asian, and white.⁷

Because the writers' official identities, ethnic or otherwise, were not knowable from their work on the trains, they were intentionally mysterious.

Among the achievements of this community of urban artists is to have created a space for themselves in leading international galleries and museums. They have influenced mainstream artists like their contemporaries Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Frank Stella, James Rosenquist, and Roy Lichtenstein. They created a global aesthetic movement that continues to transform the very look of many cities, and inspired the emergence of a multibillion dollar music and fashion industry.

The fate of graffiti

To regain visual control of the subways, New York mayors Lindsay (1966–1973), Beame (1974–1977), and Koch (1978–1990) waged multimillion dollar campaigns to erase the paintings and arrest the painters. In the 1980s the great majority of paintings were "buffed" in a \$150 million campaign that resulted in a "graffiti free" system in 1989. Although the murals were suppressed from New York's subways, the art form is currently practiced in virtually every major city around the globe.

As it became increasingly popular in the 1980s, the form was practiced by young people around the world who learned from movies, not from other writers. Therefore its meanings have changed dramatically in many

cases as new artists continually invent new ways of developing the ideas of the early masters, or morphing into other forms of public art without spray-paint or stylish letters.

Coming of age

By the 1990s, many leading artists in this movement had transcended all practical and aesthetic links to “scrawling on a wall”: they were sculpting in metals and wood; creating clothing fashions and websites; selling canvas paintings and writing songs. No matter their medium, their work remains connected to the idea of signaturing, calligraphic embellishment, and letter transformation. CRASH, of Puerto Rican descent, exhibits in major galleries worldwide; DASH 167, of Cuban descent, has participated in a “writers-team” that painted and lectured internationally; EZO, of Puerto Rican/German descent, paints and runs an art gallery in Manhattan; JONONE, originally from the Dominican Republic, exhibits his paintings in European art galleries; LADY PINK, born in Ecuador, paints commercially in New York City; MARE 139, of Puerto Rican descent, sculpts abstract letters in metal; NIC-ONE, of Cuban descent, ran Video Graf, a video program on the contemporary aerosol movement; SPAR, of Cape Verdian descent, runs a website (www.at149st.com) documenting the movement; TATS Cru, Inc., is a Bronx-based “graffiti-mural” company founded by Wilfredo Feliciano (BIO), Hector Nazario (NICER), and Sotero Ortiz (BG183) that paints murals internationally; TRACY 168, of Puerto Rican, Irish, and Italian descent, continues to paint in local public spaces throughout the city.

DOZE speaks

As many of the early subway painters have become prolific in the art world, they are establishing a body of work for future generations to contemplate. Among their towering achievements is to have negotiated their way through the class, race, and ethnic barriers of the art world while retaining the style, perspectives, and communal spirit of their earlier movement.

Among the many leaders of this movement, DOZE (aka Devious Doze) stands out as a globally recognized artist. His evolution was singular, as a founding member of the dance group R.S.C., a DJ, and a painter who has incorporated elements of all these forms into his work. In an interview, DOZE expresses how the collective movement and some of its teachers propelled him into his current artistic career:



Figure 3.1 Painting of people by DOZE (early 2000s).

Graffiti is an art form based on communication; it was created by the unheard masses to communicate with the people. It was only natural that the communication expanded amongst other disadvantaged youth. My experiences began as a B-Boy growing up in NYC. Later, while under the tutelage of [painter] Dondi White, I began to understand the importance of the forms of numbers and letters; I learned that the letter – through the use of slanting and leaning to imply motion – could become a figurative character unto itself.

The continual evolution of the craft expanded my own palette, sparking my interest in metaphysics and the unconscious. Once these became merged into my process, I was able to grasp a harmony within sacred geometry that took me on a journey from being a neophyte, to become an initiate, and finally a master, only to return to being a neophyte. My process today navigates my paintings through a series of experiments that the late master-painter Rammellzee called Map-a-matics. Map-a-matics are formulas that transport me into self-discovery.

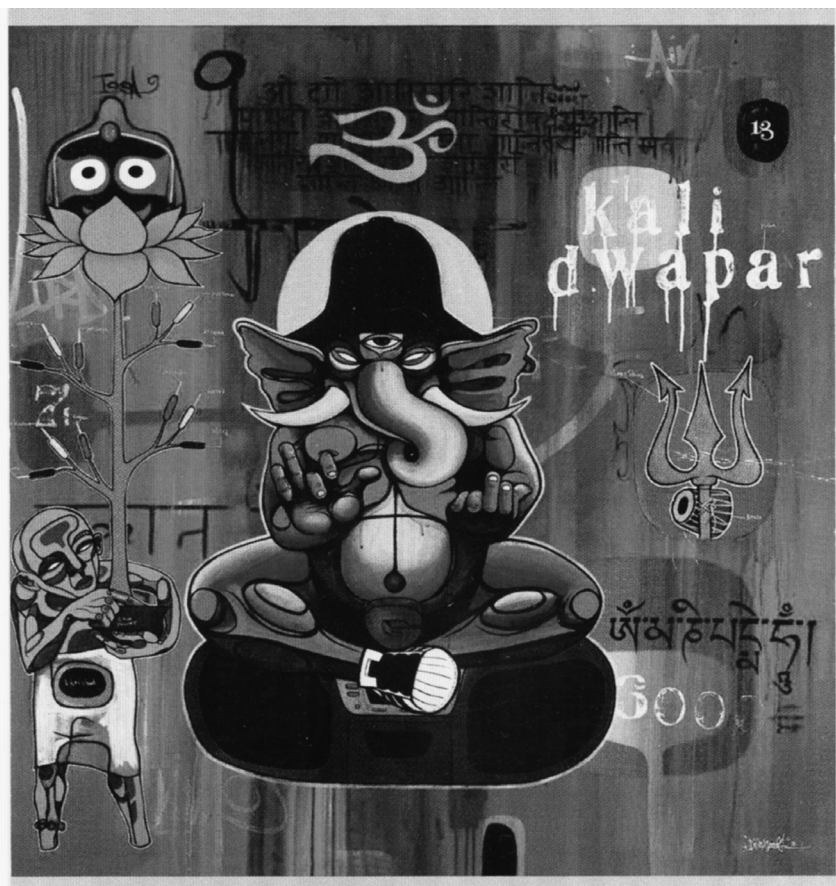


Figure 3.2 Painting of Ganesh by DOZE (early 2000s).

The twenty-one faces in this painting by DOZE from the first decade of the century have a relation to DOZE's views of "sacred geometry" and "map-a-matics" since this number is viewed as "sacred" in many world systems. For example, for the Yoruba people of West Africa and their transatlantic diaspora, twenty-one is the number of Esu-Elegbara, the god who "opens the way" for the aspirations of devotees. The shaved heads as well as the white eyes on all the figures suggest that the people are in a trance state, or somehow manifesting their shared "sacred" status as ancient-futuristic beings. One has an eye on the forehead as does the Ganesha figure in the next painting (Figure 3.2), to represent the faculty of prophecy possessed by the few. All are "interconnected" as a single community by the black line running through the work, suggesting a historical narrative of solidarity. These figures emerged from DOZE's understanding of how letters can transform into human forms:

As I see it, in the tradition of wild style graffiti, the deconstruction of the letter and then the re-juxtaposition of symbolic elements are translated into the cycle of “build-story.” As we constantly build and destroy, the world presents two faces: the natural and the artificial, both of which are clouded by the enigmatic omnipresent fog of the mysteries of creation. That is, my work has a profound element of mysticism that connects the present generations with the ancient archetypes of humanity. In my work, the interconnectedness of ALL is revealed through layers of color forms and interesting line-work that move from the macrocosmic to the unseen.

Initially, I create a dark palette for the background; bold lines and drawings and ideas are the foundation or blueprint of the piece. Tags, thoughts, bold strokes of motion create a kinetic value to the composition, then comes balance and color ports, or windows where I create a warehouse of holding cells of ideas and notes. Then I apply the glazes, through which things that were in the foreground fall into the back, the horizon, like the past sealed in time with amber. The fact that I am using acrylic-based paints, gels and mediums adds to its durability. I’m trying to visualize vibration, sound and light. I’m attempting to encapsulate that journey in the lines and shapes of the composition. Playing with depth, shadow, (e.g., the lack of color represents the void), and inter-dimensional windows. These ideas have propelled me from learning letter forms in their abstraction, to formulating the cohesiveness of letter forms and figurative work. The composition then presents the viewer with a visual journey thru the intricate layering of transparencies, gel mediums and glazes. This technique creates a somewhat stained glass effect, where nestled between the layers of transparencies are figures that weave in and out of the circulatory system. They are intertwined and connect back to each other thru the cycles of time. The line work also represents circulation, the blood that moves throughout the body and back to the heart.

Some of the techniques DOZE mentions above are seen in this bright red painting that uses “bold strokes” in the background to add a sense of flow and movement. By adding layers of glaze and lighter paint, DOZE creates a sense of multidimensions that represent events in the past that are actualized in the present, in this case the central image of Ganesha, the god with the elephant head, who is among the most popular deities in the Hindu pantheon. Ganesha is revered as the “remover of obstacles,” the patron of the arts, and the patron of letters and learning. The symbol of Ganesha as b-boy sitting on a boom box with sneakers, a kangol cap and a belt, is a brilliant pun that reverently elevates the status of contemporary b-boys, who as self-conscious artists are leaders of their generation who are aware their “godly” nature. These urban artists, in the spirit of Ganesha, must remove many obstacles to succeed in their work. The OM sign above Ganesha’s head, the small tree with lotus flower to the left, the trident and drum on

the right are commonly used with Hindi representations of Ganesha. They indicate the artists' perception that the supposedly "secular" activities of hip-hop artists in fact emerged from ancient activities of music, dance, and visual arts that were performed in the process of worship to gods. In DOZE's view, it is the responsibility of each artist to study and learn enough about the history and arts of great world civilizations to make these connections. In his work Doze attempts to fuse ideas from both old religions and modern science to create statements about the "interconnectedness" of all life, as he sees it:

I continually push boundaries by creating new vocabularies with the letter-form in an abstract figurative sense. I work both with the mathematical designs and the philosophical symbols of a lotus flower, the structure of trees, their systematic patterns, with the phi-ratio and its relation to the human body. Quantum physics, and the unified field theory have really struck a chord with me. I'm playing with ideas like sacred geometry, the propositions of Euclid, the platonic solids, the study of fractals, forms and their parallels in nature. I understand the basic structure of life to be a spiral. Energy contracts inwards and propels outwards to expand. I'm trying to express the inter-connectedness of life, developing a link between the ethereal and the abstract, the character and the letter, merging them into one, like in quantum physics everything is related in some shape or form. It's all connected to something greater than itself.

Doze exemplifies the complex approach of any artist to their work. So-called "graffiti artists" are simply artists, whether working with traditional canvas, subway cars, or the street. The enthusiastic reception of their work in galleries and from fans around the globe is a recognition of their heroic struggle to make art in spite of the obstacles facing people of their race and class.

Notes

1 Norman Mailer wrote the first book on this form. Published in the USA as *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974) and in England as *Watching My Name Go By* (1974), Mailer appreciated the criminal and rebel aspects of writing; his view that their work was art was a radical one at the time.

2 LEE, tape-recorded public presentation, Brooklyn Museum, New York, November, 2000. Revised and authorized by LEE, December, 2000. Research materials from this essay are located in the Ivor Miller Collection, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library.

3 Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early*

Twentieth-Century America (London: Verso, 1998), p. 12:

The number of black people, and especially Caribbeans, who migrated to the United States increased dramatically, from a trickle of 411 in 1899 to a flood of 12,243 per year by 1924, the high point of the early black migration . . . During the peak years of migration, 1913 to 1924, the majority headed not only for the state of New York, but also for New York City. By 1930, almost a quarter of black Harlem was of Caribbean origin.

Joseph Harris also outlined this phenomenon:

From the early years of the twentieth century, African American migration from Southern

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states resulted in the gradual emergence of large segregated communities in Northern American cities . . . This pattern of migration increased significantly after World War I. In these cities African Americans found better educational and employment opportunities that also attracted Black immigrants from Caribbean countries, notably Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and Panama. New York City became the principal recipient of this emerging international community of African Diasporans.

Joseph Harris, "The African Diaspora in World History and Politics," in Sheila

Walker (ed.), *African Roots / American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 104–117.

4 COCO 144, tape-recorded interview, New York, November, 1989.

5 MARE 139, tape-recorded interview, New York, November, 2000. Revised and authorized by MARE in February, 2001.

6 LADY PINK, tape-recorded interview, New York, May, 1988.

7 CRASH, tape-recorded interview, South Bronx, New York, January, 2001. Revised and authorized by CRASH, January, 2001.