

PIECONING

By Ivor Miller

The
Dy-
na-
mics

of
Style

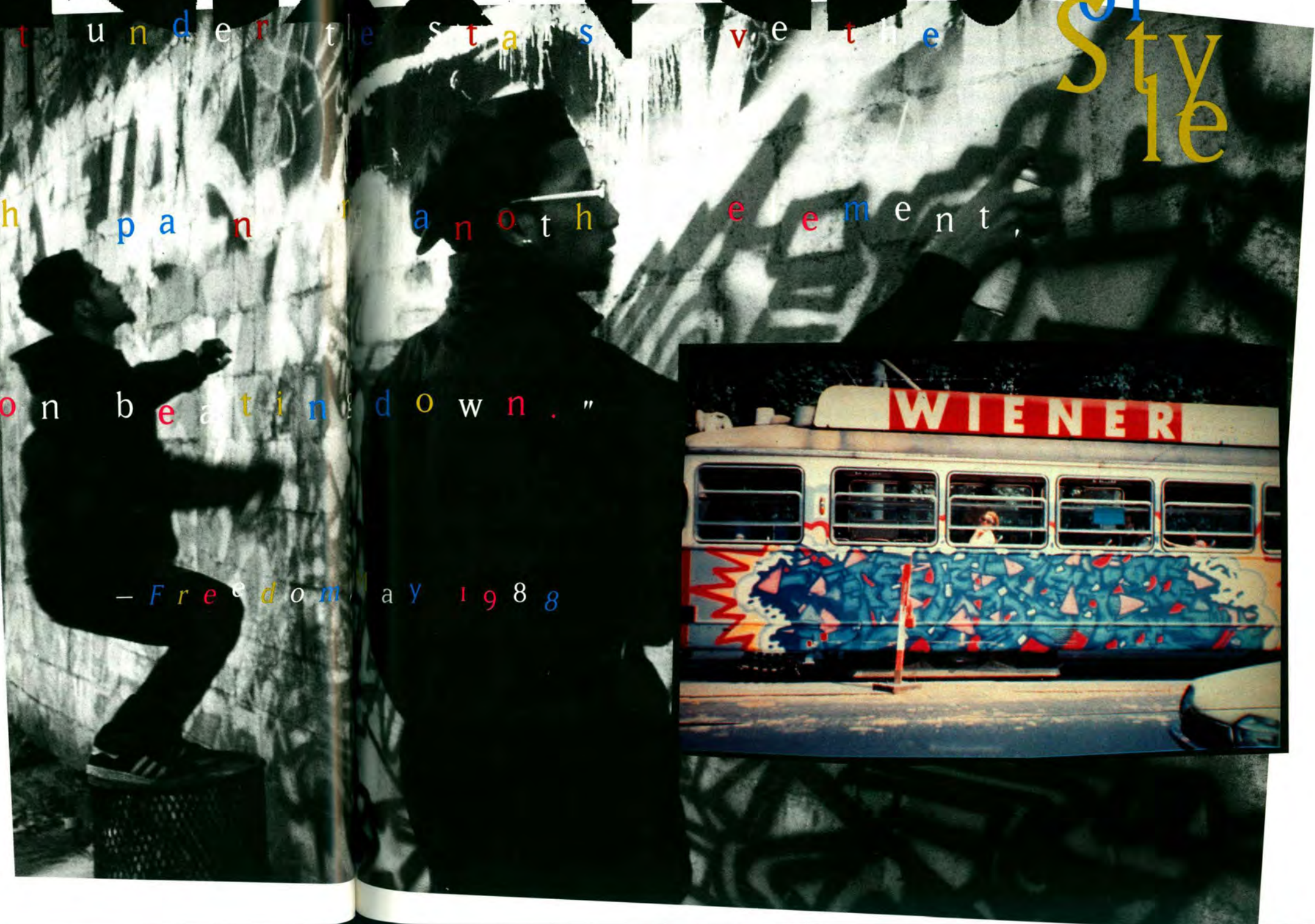
"Painting out under the stars
with the moon beating down."

feeling of the pan
another element,

with the moon beating down."

- Freedom Day 1988

In the early 1970s, the New York City subways burgeoned with a new art form based on the Roman alphabet. The artists were young (between twelve and fifteen), mostly male, and created new names for themselves which they painted in calligraphic styles



Overleaf:
Phase 2 and company
1985

Phase 2
Mid 1980s
Vienna

on the trains. By the 1980s, New York City's guerrilla artists had developed their art to produce full car murals that became a tourist attraction for visitors from around the world. The painters call themselves "aerosol artists," "graffiti artists," "painters," or "writers," and they call their work "writing."¹

Writing has a history: it has an apprenticeship tradition, a system of artistic critique from its practitioners, and specific styles that have evolved from the practice and theory of writers. Writers constantly look to earlier generations for standards of bravado and style wizardry to live up to. No matter how inharmonious they may seem to outsiders, writers form a group and share a cultural identity.

Writers don't go to an academy to learn their form; this community teaches its own artists. Originally writers practiced their signatures in local groups.

You had people like Phase 2, who would dog you if you did not write neat. So guys would be going home and practicing their handwriting, and that's how the writers corners started, where people would come over and show off their thing, but Phase was patrolling that like a sergeant-general, "this looks good, you should take that and do something better with it" and guys would take their signatures and improve them. — Amri/Bama, July 1989

As the movement gained momentum, young writers learned their craft by watching pieces go by on the trains.

From 1971-72 writing increased one hundred fold, it was getting more popular. The trains were getting marked up on the outside by single tags of spray paint. The colors of the IRT trains were mostly black & grey. Most of the tags were in primary colors — white, black, and red. I didn't see any masterpieces back then, with bubble letters or tall letters — that came out around 1972. — Lsd3, June 1992

Writers would meet at a central location where they could exchange ideas and watch each others' work on the trains. The primarily Dominican and Puerto Rican writers from Washington Heights, and the primarily African-American writers from the Bronx would meet at the "writers corner."

Writers corner was at 188th Street and Audobon in Manhattan. It was mostly Snake, Stitch, Cat 187, Coco144, Tam 144, Ace 137, Phase 2 and others. Many Broadway writers were into writing their names in tag style, but big, with a boundary around it. That to me was Broadway style. The Bronx writers were more into making filled in letters, with a bubbly style. I remember Phase 2 being the first with that style. — Lsd3, June 1992

Even writers who started piecing in the late 70s and 80s are aware of historical figures and their specific contributions.

Among other things Phase is considered as the guy who started graffiti as we know it. Originally graffiti was a fat line on the outside and a thin line around it (B'way Style). Phase is the first guy to really fill in a piece — to put an outline and fill it in. You might think, that's pretty dopey. But — that is graffiti as we know it. If you look in the Faith of Graffiti² the tags are all fat lines, because that's all writers were doing then. He has been around since the beginning, and he's a living legend. What he has done certainly has gone beyond New York graffiti. New York graffiti came and went, whereas an artist like Phase is still coming.

— Zepher, June 1992

By the mid 1970s pieces in Bronx, Broadway, and Brooklyn styles rode by on the trains, and writers began to synthesize ideas from all styles into their work. In order to challenge their own talents writers constantly worked with new letter combinations. This is one reason they created new names.

Multiple names evolved in the writers' world because of the intense competition that each writer felt. The purpose was to adapt yourself to a whole different style of lettering by having a whole new form of letters to do. — Lee, May 1988

Daze recalls:

Tracy 168 had his name up all over town as Tracy 168, but Noc would write just as much in ten different names like Boy 5, Paris, Dime, Dot, just for the style. For a while we were doing W names like Word, Warm, Won, Warped, Worm, Wish, Wisk, Wink, then Too-Swift, Too-Bad, Too-Much. Those were all Riff's names. Then we would

write Too-Word, Too-Worm, Too-Warped, and so on. — Daze, November 1988

When more and more writers joined the ranks, writing developed into an elite form, where only those who could keep up with the latest style innovations could compete and get respect.

Riff 170 had clout when I met him in 1973. He wrote other names, Worm was one of them. He was into the art aspect of taking a name and developing it on a train. He turned the points of letters into a face and things like that. He was definitely an innovator of the Bronx style. — Daze, November 1988

Through style competition writers tested the limits of their aesthetic prowess until the letters they used became abstracted. At this point some writers developed a consciousness of themselves as artists.

When I did things on the trains, it was really apparent that it said Sharp. The purpose was that people would know that I did it, and they could see it from 400 feet away. When I started to do things on the trains that were illegible, a lot of my peers said, "well, that's kind of cool, but you can't read it, how's anybody going to know that you did it?" At that point, it was an abstract concept that didn't make sense . . . I began to realize I was beginning to paint on another level. — Sharp, May 1992, Paris

At this point the movement exploded in many directions. Most writers stuck with the alphabet and abstracted it.

Wild style was an insider thing, changing names and camouflaging them with style, this was for writers, not for the public. — Daze, November 1988

Other writers began to abstract images to the point where there were no more letters or figurative references — only colors and shapes.

Futura was one of the first ones who brought spray can art to a level to where it wasn't just a letter and a character. It could also be abstract, so I respect him a lot for that. — Jon-One, December 1991

Today's writers learn from photographs in books,³ or from photos they've swapped with other writers, most of whom have their own photo archives. Style competition is no longer limited to the New York City subways — it happens on an international scale

through photos of trains, walls, and canvases from around the globe. Yet mostly writers learn through practice, by joining a "crew" as a "toy" and apprenticing with a master painter. Here painting techniques are learned, pieces are collectively painted. From the Upper West Side, Freedom recalls:

Eventually people like Seen, Caine, or Lee were doing three cars at a time, and it might be a collaborative effort. The big guys who wanted to do the big stuff were able to assemble younger guys who had the technique but just didn't have the outlines. They were training, filling in the large spots. It was a good apprenticeship. There was a real sense of passing on the tradition. Here's an example: Duro used to fill in backgrounds for Dondi. Then Dondi would do an outline for Duro. Duro went on to become a widely respected writer.

— Freedom, April 1988

The norm in community derived and supported art forms is for masters to teach beginners the basics of a technique, yet let them develop a unique style within the tradition. Writers are expected to inject their experience into the overall composition of their pieces. Phase 2 gets ideas for his work from the city around him:

Sometimes I might be walking down the street and go "Wow!" just from seeing a broken down building and catch something in there that wasn't supposed to be there, and create something from it.

— Phase 2, May 1988

Because of the economic hardships most writers face, fancy equipment is not a requirement. Writers use the tools within their reach. Necessity, coupled with improvisation as an African-American cultural style, results in spontaneity and improvisation as an important and learned technique.

Improvisation was a big part of writing. No one bought paint. So you didn't know what you were going to do until you got your paint. You had to work around what you had. — Amri/Bama, July 1989

Aerosol painting is done by and for members of a community.⁴ It is not done by crafts people who are paid to perform or produce objects for consumption; writers perform for each other for the development

This article is based on tape recorded interviews conducted in New York City from 1987-1992, and in Brussels, 1992.

¹Norman Mailer, *The Faith of Graffiti*. This was the first book on New York City writing. It documents the early forms of signaturing, with emphasis on the tall, thin signatures of Broadway style, before the fill in emerged.

²See Chalfant's *Spraycan Art and Subway Art*.

³Other examples of community oriented art forms might be women's quilting from the South and Southwest, old time music from the Appalachian Mountains, or gospel singing from urban churches.



Dero
Late 1980s

Phase 2
1992

of their culture and continuation of their way of life.

Theirs is a way of life that has produced a living, functioning art form. Within the African diaspora aesthetic products are not made to sit lifeless on museum walls – altars are adorned to serve the gods, carnival masks are made to be danced, the poetry of singers and griots is transmitted orally through performance. Aerosol art is part of this cultural continuum; it is an art in motion. Train paintings are made to ride the rails – to excite other writers into a style competition. Writers’ paintings inspire young New Yorkers to be creative.

In the mid-70s I would take the train to school. The Fabulous 5s was a new thing then – Doc, Mono, Slave, and Slug, they was Lee’s boys. To be 15 in the bicentennial year, in the wild 70s, and to take the train to school with these whole cars pulling up that the Fab Fives were famous for, was crazy inspiration. – Zepher, June 1992

Skilled writers often dress up in uniforms stolen from train yard workers, silently entering the train lay-ups at night

to bomb the steel canvases. Defying physical danger from the live rails and from the authorities, writers must be cool and collected enough to improvise a whole car painting. The final painting is a record of the daring actions of the writers, and the best paintings are not only signatures, but events. The images created by writers are results of their encounters with the trains.⁵ Thus writers who may possess great style yet paint only on canvas get little respect from other writers. Defying physical danger and the authorities is as important as style innovation. Writing is a performance art,⁶ yet the performance of painting is unseen by the public. It is done secretly and in the dark.

Writers have developed painting techniques unique to their form. Jackson Pollock, who created his own painting techniques, was well aware of this necessity:

...modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any



⁵See Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Artnews* 51 December, 1952. Rosenberg describes how Jackson Pollock and other “action painters” have transformed the concept of painting on canvas from picturesque and representational to recording an event that is an encounter of artist and canvas. There are similarities between Pollock’s paintings and the work of aerosol painters, in the sense of a spiritual drive, the use of the unconscious, and techniques of painting in a movement oriented way without touching the canvas. Yet both Pollock and the writers are influenced by the Zeitgeist; writers did not know of Pollock while they were painting trains.

⁶“Graffiti turns art into a verb.” For aerosol art as a performance see: Ellen Handler Spitz, “An Insubstantial Pageant Faded,” *Art Criticism* 4 (1988): 54, 59.

other past culture. Each age finds its own technique...⁷

Writers have pioneered the use of spray cans for complex and emotional works. The only antecedents to their techniques were the limited use of airbrush and spray guns by Diego Rivera and Siqueiros of Mexico in the 1930s.⁸ Later the U S Army created spray cans for military use. In the 1960s they were mass produced for civilians and sold in hardware stores to paint signs. The writers’ mastery of the spray can is a new phenomenon, and still largely unrecognized in the art world. Daze and Crash have left street work behind in order to hone these techniques for their gallery shows.



Riff
Mid 1970s

Stay High 149
Early 1970s



Now TV producers will ask writers “If you paint your name really big over here, we’ll give you \$200.” Forget that! That’s what they think writing is, but when they see our work, they can’t believe what we are doing with spray paint. We are five years ahead of what people understand. They freak! I don’t see any difference in our work except for the materials, and the way we grew up, our experience as individuals.

– Crash, November 1988

Painting in the Dark

As some writers will readily tell you, their form is akin to cave paintings and to hieroglyphics in Egyptian tombs. Like our ancestors, writers paint in darkened spaces inside the earth.

⁷Elizabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollack. Modern Master Series Vol 3.* New York: Abbeville Press, 1983, 110.

⁸In the mid 1930s Siqueiros established an “experimental workshop” in New York City. Here “Siqueiros encouraged experimentation with new materials and techniques for its own sake. He was interested in the use of spray guns and airbrushes, and the latest synthetic paints and lacquers...” Elizabeth Frank, 23.

A writer of the times, in the 70s, was a person that wrote his name with some sort of style and respect, not to go over other people. It seemed in the beginning there was a lot more respect – people didn't go

keep painting because they believe in their art.

And they're doing this all for free, it was incredible! I was like, "here we are, we're creating history." Cause I am sure,



Hash
1992

over each other. There was plenty of room, it wasn't that cluttered up with names. You'd have to steal your paint, you'd have to write your name enough to get respect, and have the style. – Lsd3, June 1992

While there are only a handful of master writers who have contributed important stylistic elements to the overall movement, every young painter has a first inspirational teacher, usually someone from their own neighborhood.

I was 11-12 when I started writing. Zero was a big influence on my work. He was one of the first artists in Spanish Harlem to do a lot of pieces, which is the neighborhood I lived in. I lived in the 90s, but the ten block radius was my neighborhood. Dez and Skeme were big influences. Dez was from my neighborhood, and he was really dominant at that point in time. I really looked up to him. Neither of them are painting today. – Sharp, May 1992, Paris

Even though many of the originals are no longer painting, there are still many who've learned from the masters and

that this generation won't recognize our efforts, but other generations will look back and see our accomplishments. That's what pushes me to keep on. – Jon-One, December 1991

W Contemplating Style

Writers are self-conscious artists capable of considerations of style, form, and content – they think about questions that concern any artist.

I think about rhythm a lot in my paintings. I try to make things balance. I can see if things fit and if they don't. Even if it might be artistically or stylistically good, it might not fit into a whole package. The whole painting must be strong. I adapt my paintings to their environment. With the logistics of my work, they look better on walls than on trains. My style is long and flat, it's kind of squashed down. But I like to look at train paintings more than anything. – Vulcan, June 1989



Cries of the Ghetto
Mid 1980s

Vulcan
Savage
1987

Revolt
Early 1980s

Freedom:

If you look at Keith Haring, every mark, or line has to offset every other line, it's the same with Paul Klee. In Wild Style, every shape has to bounce off another shape. That's to me what it's about. Now when you're doing it in such an intricate form, plus you have to do that within a scheme of letters, that's when Wild Style comes alive, because everything interconnects with something else. It has a harmonious composition. The whole thing has a story. – Freedom, May 1988

Many diverse elements are integrated into aerosol masterpieces, yet the effect writers want to create in viewers is immediate.

Aerosol has evolved into so many facets, that there's no real category to put them into. There's abstract forms, figurative drawings, then hard core lettering. I do a combination of all of them. I just like to get wild, I like to do wild stuff, so that people open their mouths when they see it.



You can take this art on two levels, an intellectual or a hard-core gut level. Personally, I like the hard-core paintings better. When some kid that writes on the train goes, "WOOOW!" – you know that piece is hard core. We're not going for the evaluation of art critics, who say "that's an interesting use of color," we're going for the ultimate response – "That piece is BAAADD!"

– Vulcan, June 1989

The Buff

The works of writers were vulnerable to Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) policy and erased in a \$150 million campaign¹² that resulted in a "graffiti free" system in 1989. Lieutenant Chiulli of the MTA Graffiti Vandal Squad told me:

I just think it's a disregard for public property. Mr. Gunn [the head of the MTA] does not want people to take pictures of graffiti. He feels it is promoting graffiti. We do not use the terms graffiti and art in the same sentence. And he is right. What we don't want is to let these kids get any fame. We are trying to break their spirits.

– Lt. Chiulli, May 1988

Because of the spiritual attachment many writers have to their work, Lee and others feel that an entire history of his generation has been destroyed:

When humans don't understand something, they want to destroy it, abolish it. And that's what happened. The buffing of the subways was probably the most terrible thing New York City has ever done. It was an art holocaust. – Lee, July 1989

It is only through the dedication of photographers like Henry Chalfant, Marty Cooper, David Schmidlapp, Jack Stewart and the many writers who documented their own work that we have any record of their unique history. In the early 1970s, some paintings rode the rails for years. Yet by 1984 the MTA began systematically destroying subway paintings. By 1988 all the trains were "clean."¹³

Without the trains spray can art wouldn't have become what it is. Once the trains were buffed, I feel, graffiti died, I think what you see now is just a growth of spray can art into seeing it in museums and

magazines. The trains were finished in 1988. – Jon-One, December 1991

It is a heavy thing when a community's artistic expression is erased, and when young hopefuls have no examples or heroes to live up to.

The trains are rolling cave painting, rolling galleries. When they took the movement away from painting, they killed the whole thing. What New York has done in the last ten years is erase that history of its youth. There is nothing left. We can all talk about what happened, because we knew, we did it, but people that are just now getting hip to it, there's nothing for them to see. – Lee, May 1988

Lee blames the uncompromising attitudes of the MTA for the lack of both style and respect of some of today's young writers:

...the MTA always said we were vandals, the writers were violent. The writers were not violent. Now, I'm not saying that some of the kids now who would like to be doing graffiti aren't violent. But they don't know what art is – they have nobody to imitate. I blame the MTA for that. I think that if you buff history you get violence.¹⁴

I had a great piece in a subway station. It was the one with the Mummy, and the Egyptian hieroglyphics. When I walked in there one night I seen a tag over it. I stood in the station for a while, and I started to visualize that here's a kid who has no idea of history, he is a dead-end kid. He has no knowledge of art in himself, no history to look back on. I thought, damn, it's to his disadvantage, because I know what I'm about, and I know what I've done, but here's a kid who doesn't understand why this is here and how all this evolved. – Lee, April 1988

To some painting was vandalism, the sheer fun of getting over on a big sophisticated system, but that evolved in the early 80s, after the MTA had erased the entire history of paintings from the subways, so these painters had nothing, no history to draw upon, and they were protesting. They weren't able to look up to any heroes any more, it was all gone. You have to have some type of foundation to build upon.

– Lee, July 1989

Phase 2 believes that the MTA's buffing policy was not merely a response to the writers' invasion of private and public property, as some critics have argued. He feels the government was threatened by some of the very symbols that writers were painting:

You might paint a beautiful wall, but they'll still buff it. That's the authorities saying "we don't want it because you did it." Their statement is to not accept our art no matter what level it's on. Unless maybe someone wants to go paint Disney characters all over Manhattan, they might say fine. They don't want these guys painting B-Boys with guns, which I can understand to a certain degree. But cops carry guns...so do we want to play on (in our paintings) what weapons are all about? In what sense do we say that guns are negative? For me guns are survival. It means authority. One symbol can have a different meaning to different people. Here we see death everyday, read death everyday, hear death everyday. All summer we hear gun shots. Whether someone's playing or shooting someone, it's another lifestyle out here. – Phase 2, May 1988

Even in the face of constant and severe opposition, writers continue to pass their form on to others. Writing has exposed inner city youths to forms of artistic expression that relate to their lives.

You can't look at the art and not see that it's creative, that the artists are more than thugs. Writing on trains is a way to express creativity and artistic vision without coming from a tough neighborhood. It exposed a lot of young people to art that probably would never have heard about art. They may have heard about it in a art history class, but it wouldn't have any relationship to their lives. But they can tell you who their favorite writers are.

– Vulcan, June 1989

Because of the buff, and because artists must explore new idioms, many of New York's writers have moved to Europe where there is interest and support for their work. In the spirit of the early movement, Koor, now in Brussels, is starting to do public sculpture and architecture. He wants to bring his work out into the public arena, so the "average person will receive something from it." Thus the intent and feeling of the

original painters may make itself known in new ways.

This is a movement that is moving in many directions. No matter how far you think you're going you are still in it. Growing up in the South Bronx, where I was raised, the roots of hip-hop and rap music was coming right from where I was. DJing, MCing and all of this with friends in my neighborhood...it's hard to not be a part of it. – Koor, May 1992, Brussels

You can take a writer from New York City, but you can't take the soul of the city out of a writer. Like anyone who has had an intense, larger-than-life experience early in life, writers continually look to their past to gain momentum to ride into the future.

I got my things from my past, it stays with me, no one can ever take it away from me, what I got. All the trips that I went on, from starting so simple as writing my name to being in it – all the parties, all the break dancers spinning, the energy that was produced in NY at that period, that's stayed in me. That's what inspires me to keep on, it has stuck to me. I adapt it to the 90s and I'll adapt it to the year 2000, I think it's something that everyone can relate to. It comes from the streets, and everybody is affected by the streets. I can go to Stockholm and I'll see men and children that can relate to what I do, I can go to Oslo, Amsterdam, Prague, Australia. There is a tribe of us that can relate to the streets, because they live in it, you know? – Jon-One, December 1991

The spray paint, the metal surfaces, the dark tunnels, the community of writers, the elements of danger, the fame created an unforgettable experience. No matter what format writers turn to in their struggle to survive as artists, they recall their days of apprenticeship on the trains as formative.

Some people try to paint trains today, and they never pull out, or they get buffed in an hour. They do it just for the feeling, for the spirit, just for the feeling of doing a throw up on metal, and having to watch your back because a cop may roll up on you. – Jon-One, December 1991

Ivor Miller is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University. He is organizing lecture tours for New York City writers.

¹²Nelson George et al. *Fresh: Hip Hop Don't Stop*. New York: Random House, 1985, 33. "By the end of [Mayor Lindsay's] final term in 1973, the city was spending \$10 million a year on graffiti removal." Jim Dwyer. *Subway Lives*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1991, 234.

¹³For a brief history of MTA's efforts to buff spray can paintings, and the purely destructive response of some writers, see "New Weapons in Graffiti War: Scratch Resistant Glass," by James Bennet, *New York Times*, July 26, 1992, 25.

¹⁴Lee, in "Buffed Out," *The New Yorker*, February 26, 1990, 38.

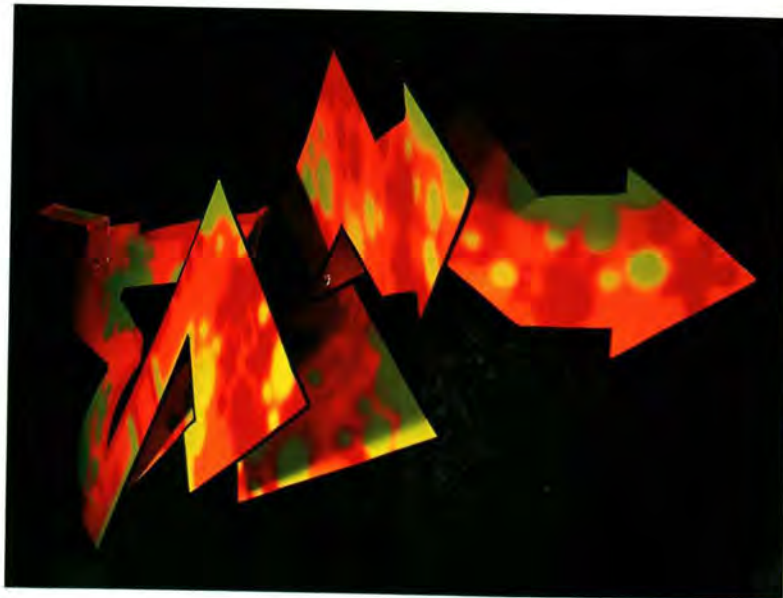
Mare 139
Q
1990

This Q is another thing. Arrows always give direction. What distinguishes wild style and graffiti letters from anything else is the arrow. The arrow is the movement, it's the definitive mark of wild style.



Mare 139*
E
Metal sculpture with spray paint
1990

The E in particular is my attempt to make a letter that's on the floor that looks like it's walking or crawling and shooting in space. E was actually my first welded letter. I'm expanding on the whole idea of the letter itself having its own space, taking control of its space. The arrow opens up the space.



Mare 139
S
Metal sculpture with spray paint
1990

This S was an attempt to create sculptural wild style. The work is all about strokes and flows and arrows.

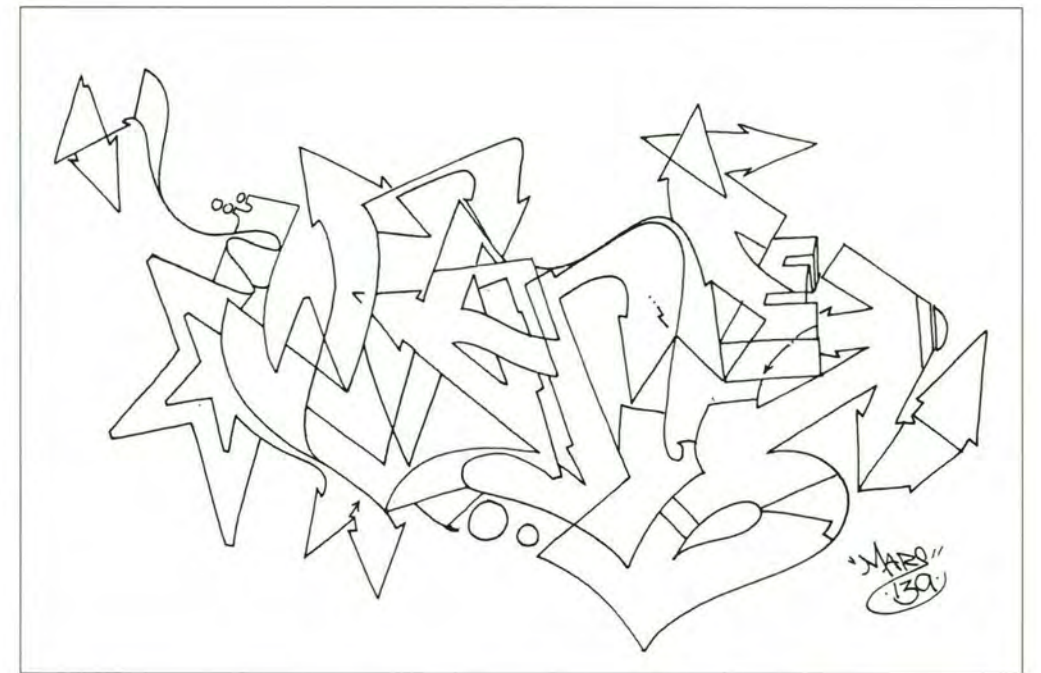
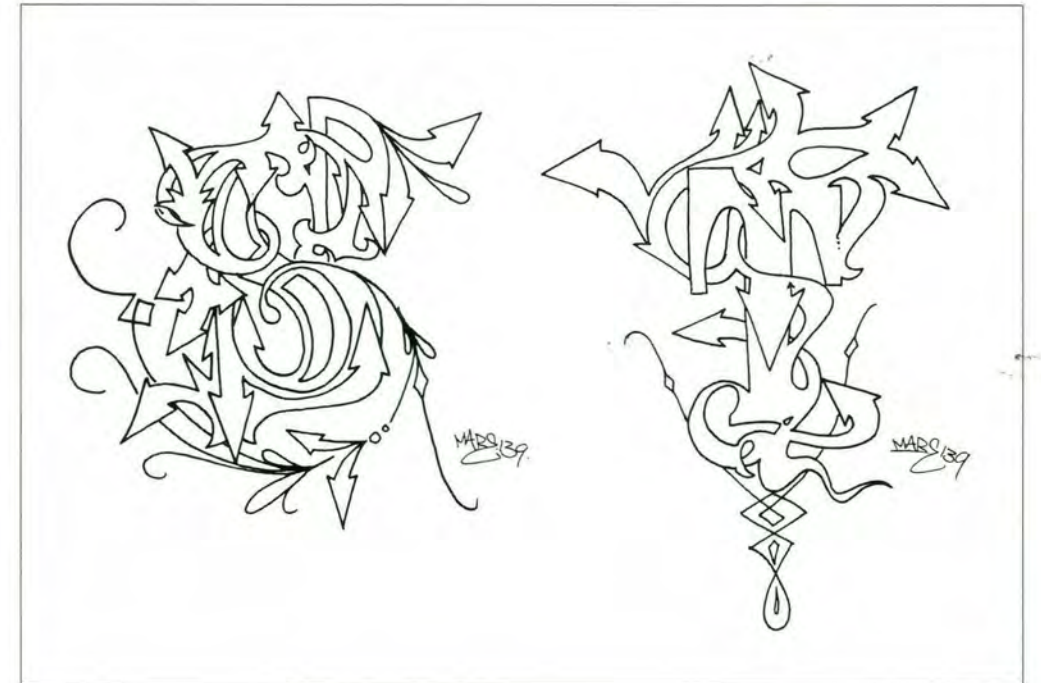


It dawned on me that what we were really trying to do was make graffiti physical on a flat surface, on the train. And one day I saw this sign of polished steel in front of a restaurant and I said "that's it, that's the future of graffiti, it's making it into sculpture!" I began to think about how letters bend and fold, and how script just curls and rolls into space. This really hit me, and I started making paper marquets and studying the forms. That year I went to England to do a lecture at a school of art and these ideas were still fresh in my mind. As I was explaining the whole idea of "signature," "calligraphy," "wild style," and the whole evolution of graffiti (simple tags into wild style), I started to talk about how letters could be three-dimensional and have movement; I found myself being very physical with my hands, I was articulating the whole thing by throwing my hands in the air like arrows, and that's something I saw with the break dancers, the boogie boys. That was like physical graffiti, and at this moment it started to make a lot of sense, it all came together. So when I came back to the States I made a little k, and it was the perfect perception, it came out exactly like I wanted it to. The science of the past, the style of graffiti, and what I understand about sculptural form worked out perfectly; they looked like they just bounced off the train. And that's what I wanted, that's what I've always seen.

Mare 139 interview
September 2, 1992

Mare 139
S & T
Calligraphiti, pen, and paper
1993

Mare 139
MARE
1993



*All illustrations of work by Mare 139 are courtesy of Voice of the Ghetto productions
All images are from New York City unless otherwise indicated



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50



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Alphabet Complex
1990
Ink, gouache, graphite,
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