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.
This article is based on taped interviews conducted in New York City, from 1976 to 1982, and in Baltimore, 1983.

Norman Miller, The Birth of Graffiti. This was the first book on New York City writing. It documents the early days of tagging and the emergence of graffiti art, before the style emerged.

Journal
Phase 2 and company (1980s)

Phase 2
Mid 1980s

Vonnie

This issue of the Dynamics of Style

on the trains. By the 1980s, New York City's guerrilla artists had developed their art to produce full, colorful murals that became a tourist attraction for visitors from around the world. The artists call themselves "aerosol artists," "graffiti artists," "painters," or "writers," and they call their work "writing." 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 craft; this community teaches its own artists. Originals 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 go home and practice their signatures, 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. - Anonymous, July 1983

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

From 1971-72 writing increased one hundredfold. 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 and 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 - just from seeing a guy coming down the street and go "Wow!" just from seeing a broken down building and catching something in there that wasn't supposed to be there, and create something from it.

Wild style was an insider thing, changing names and confusing them with style, this was for writers, not for the public. - Daze, May 1988

Other writers began to abstract images to the point where there were no more letters or figurative references - only colors and depictions. Futura was one of the first ones who brought spray paint to a level where it wasn't just a letter and a character. It could also be abstract, so I respect him a lot for that. - Mr. One, December 1981

Today's writers learn from photographs in books, or from photos they've swapped with other writers, most of whom have their own photofiling systems. And so the limits to what you can do 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 started 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 well-respected writer. - Freedom, April 1988

The norm in community derived and supported art forms is for mentors to teach beginners the basics of a technique, yet let them develop a unique style within the tradition. Writers are expected to imprint their personal 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 catching something in there that wasn't supposed to be there, and create something from it. - Phase, 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 taught painting. So you didn't know what you were going to do until you got your paint. You had to work around what you had. - Anonymous, July 1989

Aerosol painting is done by and for members of a community. It is not done by craft people who are paid to perform or produce objects for consumption; writers perform for each other for the development of.
of their culture and continuation of their way of life.

There 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 Sing. They were Lee's boys. To be 15 in the bicentennial year, in the wild, and to take the train to school with these whole cars pulling up that the Fab Fives were famous for, was crazy inspiration. - Zephyr, 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 improve 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 the images created by writers are results of their encounters with the trains. 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; 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 styles to express themselves. The Fab Fives are not painters of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique..."

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. Later the US 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.

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, 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. - Lodi, 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 1993

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. - Vukan, June 1988

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 gut paintings better. When some kid that writes on the train goes, “WOOWW!” - 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 BAAAADD!”

- Vulture, June 1998

The Buff

The works of writers were vulnerable to Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) policy and erased in a $50 million campaign* that resulted in a "graffiti-free" system in 1983. When Representative Chasuli 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 others feel that an entire history of his generation, of the many writers have to their work, Lee and others feel that an entire history of his generation, of the many writers had nothing, no history to draw upon, and they were protesting. 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 everyone is 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 absurd to blame me. I blame the MTA for that. I think that if you buff history you get violence.

- Luc, Chiil, May 1998

Because of the spiritual attachment many writers have to their work, Lee and others feel that an entire history of his generation, of the many writers have to their work, Lee and others feel that an entire history of his generation, of the many writers had nothing, no history to draw upon, and they were protesting. 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 everyone is 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 absurd to blame me. I blame the MTA for that. I think that if you buff history you get violence.

- Luc, Chiil, May 1998

It is only through the dedication of photographers like Henry Chaitkin, 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.

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-Och, December 1993

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: the writers who painted was painted 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 everyone is 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 absurd to blame me. I blame the MTA for that. I think that if you buff history you get violence.

He has no knowledge of art in himself, no education, no philosophy, no 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 kind of foundation to build upon.

- Luc, Chiil, May 1998

Because of the spiritual attachment many writers have to their work, Lee and others feel that an entire history of his generation, of the many writers had nothing, no history to draw upon, and they were protesting. 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 everyone is 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 absurd to blame me. I blame the MTA for that. I think that if you buff history you get violence.

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I drew 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 marquetry 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,” “solid 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.

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

Mare 139 interview
September 2, 1992
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KARYN L. GILMAN
Too many artists are reluctant to deal adequately with pricing procedures. Results of our survey plus insightful advice, considerations, and opinions from professionals in the field will be of help to anyone who charges for their work now or plans to in the future.

A CELEBRATION OF LIFE: AN ANNIVERSARY MANUSCRIPT BOOK
LINDSEY WINTERGALD
The curator of her guild's manuscript book reveals the challenges of the work and the rewards to its contributors.

PIECING: THE DYNAMICS OF STYLE
IVOR MILLER
The painters call themselves "aerosol artists," "graffiti artists," "painters," or "writers," and they call their work "writing." They don't go to an academy to learn their form, they watch pieces go by on the trains -- the community teaches them.

THE ART OF LORENZO HOMAR
DALE ROYBLACE
Always a component of Spanish style, calligraphy as an art form found fertile ground in the graphic arts of Puerto Rico, and a master calligrapher in the practiced hand of Lorenzo Homar.

EXPLODING THE WORD: THE CALLIGRAPHER AS TERRORIST
KEVIN II OHANAN
Responding to pressures and transformations of a world in headlong change, Denis Brown shatters and remakes the expressive elements provided by a conservative tradition.

HERMANN KILIAN: A PORTRAIT
HARRO GERE
His work is an attempt to express "all that the human mind has formed in words, and what is of value to be transmitted."

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