

# MAPPING the Aerosol Kingdom:

THE PAST, PRESENT,  
AND FUTURE OF  
AEROSOL ART

SELECTED PROCEEDINGS

In November 2002, NYU's Institute of African American Affairs hosted two days of programming featuring world-renowned artists discussing the past, present, and future of Aerosol Art. Known alternately as writing, artcrime, bombing, tagging, burning, graff, or most commonly to non-practitioners, "Graffiti," the familiar story of this artwork is its simultaneous public dismissal and celebration, vilification and critical acclaim. Catalyzed by the publication of *Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City* (University Press of Mississippi, 2002), pioneering artists, scholars, and filmmakers convened to showcase and discuss the tradition and scope of Aerosol Art, in what proved to be a successful attempt to complicate an oft-referenced, but seldom understood artistic production.

Recognizing that an all-encompassing representation of this nearly half-century-old form would be as far from possible as it would be valuable, panelists and audience members addressed as many topics and highlighted as many central figures as time would allow. Writers DAZE, FUTURA, LADY PINK, PHASE 2, VULCAN, and LEE, along with Charlie Ahearn (director of *Wildstyle*) and David Schmidlapp (publisher of the *IGTimes*), joined an audience full of artists from throughout Aerosol Art's history, participating in the introductory panel discussion and the following day of visual presentations from both sides of the metaphorical podium, to simultaneously recount, clarify, and augment a historiography of the genre and its social, political, and philosophical relevance.

What follows are selections culled from the proceedings, including Ivor Miller's keynote address, a genealogy of Subway Writing from VULCAN, and outtakes from an interview with director, Charlie Ahearn. Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire is proud to feature this small but important slice of the weekend's events, in hopes that more scholarly work covering these and the scores of other key contributors responsible for developing and advancing the genre.

# Notes from the Underground:

## Hip-Hop's INCREASING RELEVANCE

IVOR MILLER

*The following is based on a multi-media presentation sponsored by the New York University Institute of African American Affairs and Africana Studies Program on 22 November 2002. Thanks to Jeremy Brecher, Yesenia Cardona, Christie Z-Pabón, Chino (The Source), CRASH, Jill Cutler, C. Daniel Dawson, DOZE, Peter Hobbs, IGTimes, Joe Janeczek, Robin Kelley, Kyle-Style, Jayne Lovett, MICO, Laura Rice, Ted Sammons, Helen H. Tanner and ZEPHYR.*

“you know the motto /  
stay fluid even in staccato.”

Mos Def

Like any youth-oriented movement, what has become known as Hip-Hop is dynamic and full of contradictions. My recent book *Aerosol Kingdom* documents major figures in the evolution of early aerosol writing in New York City, an element in the culture that came to be known as Hip-Hop. Originating as a recreational activity, Hip-Hop became a means of resisting segregation and social invisibility. These objectives became obscured as Hip-Hop became packaged, international, commercial, and suburban. Although the power and joy in the forms originally created by teenagers became lost as the various elements of Hip-Hop began to be managed by media and other business interests, in fact Hip-Hop remains an expression of cultural resistance and rebellion. Aerosol writing may be the first art form created by and for youth. One of the artists, SPAR, commented: “In a world that said, you’ve got to do it *my* way, we found a way to do it *our* way.”

The process of research for *Aerosol Kingdom* revealed three major lessons: 1) Poverty is not a barrier to artistic creation. 2) Joint artistic activity without adult supervision can enable young people to overcome social prejudices. 3) The relationship between young people, urban culture, and advertising is a complicated mix in which one is often reflected in the other.

The impulse to create is so strong that even those with few resources can create art that communicates across language and geography. While we are taught to think of art as solely occupying the realm of the cultured elites, aerosol has taught us to think about the creative process in new ways.

By publicly announcing perspectives based on their own experiences, Hip-Hop artists have become heroes in their own communities. When VULCAN and SPON painted “Roughneck Reality” with gun-toting children, they were articulating things that were real to them. [see image 1].

Young people have the ability to create multi-ethnic, -gender, and -racial alliances that powerfully resist our national inheritance of class prejudice, segregation, and xenophobia. When WEST, a.k.a. JEW, and ARAB painted warfare in Jerusalem with reference to Hebraic, Arabic, and Wild Style writing, they demonstrated the power of art to transcend social conflict. [see image 2].

In the early movement, because many writers from around the city could only communicate through their paintings on the trains, one writer often had no idea what the other looked like, nor was it important to know. In fact, the mystique of not knowing became important. Writers became legendary figures to each other, which only contributed to their

self-esteem. As they met and formed crews, style innovation became their main focus and aspiration, enabling them to organize talented artists from diverse backgrounds. As many told me repeatedly, race and gender were not determining factors; talent mattered.

Artists like Mos Def not only embody the multi-ethnic dimensions of our society to which urban art forms are a response, but also are knowledgeable and proud of them. In the context of quoting Sly Stone, the work chant from the "Wizard of Oz," and a police radio alert, Mos Def ("Rock n Roll") raps:

"My grandmomma was raised on a reservation / my great grandmomma was from a plantation / they sang songs for inspiration / they sang songs for relaxation / they sang songs to take the minds off all that fucked up situation / I am, yes I am the descendant / of those folks whose / backs got broke who / fell down inside the gun smoke (Black people!) / chains on their ankles and feet / I am descendants / of the builders of your streets / tenders to your cotton-money / I am Hip-Hop."

Mos Def insists on Hip-Hop as a form of multi-ethnic cultural resistance tied to a long history. By referring to one ancestor on a reservation, another on a plantation, Mos Def alludes to Native American and African-American mixed communities common in the past. Dr. Helen Tanner (p.c. October 2002) estimates that 90% of U.S. blacks have native American ancestry. She told me that "after 40 years of research, all black Americans—whose ancestors lived in the USA in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—that I have



Photo: Ivor Miller

1. Design by VULCAN, characters by SPON. "Roughneck Reality," 1993. Mural at the Graffiti Hall of Fame, New York City. Spray-paint on concrete wall. The top panel reads VULCAN. The mural refers to the accessibility of guns to youth in urban centers around the globe.

contacted, have described to me their Indian ancestry. In every North American Indian tribe whose history I have researched in the Great Lakes Region and eastern North America, I have found evidence of blacks living amongst them in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century" (for more, cf. Tanner. 1995: 54-55).

Many Hip-Hop artists are very aware of their own history, and the history of marginalized urban people; and they recognize the importance of that history as a basis for interpreting and understanding the brutal realities of lower class urban life. Making connections between the past and the present is a first step in raising social consciousness.

In some ways unique and contemporary, the story told in *Aerosol Kingdom* is also related to themes in twentieth century American history: popular resistance to racial and economic segregation; inadequate schools; struggles for economic justice, freedom of expression, and identity and representation in social spheres.

The evolution of Hip-Hop resembles that of jazz: it too is a means of communication

emerging from multi-ethnic urban settings. In the process, it has created an aesthetic reflecting that communication. Early jazz innovators Jelly Roll Morton and Sidney Bechet told how their music helped bring a diverse group of people closer together:

"We had all nations in New Orleans," said Jelly Roll; "But with the music we could creep in close to other people," adds Dr. Bechet "...Jazz was the hybrid of hybrids and so it appealed to a nation of lonely immigrants. In a divided world struggling blindly toward unity, it became a cosmopolitan musical argot" (Lomax 1973: 100).

Various ethnic groups in New Orleans were able to interact in positive ways because they shared a common reference point: syncopated rhythm as well as call and response interaction. The musical blending that created jazz answered in part to the need for community among immigrants. This is precisely the role

that carnival has played in many Caribbean societies: communal interaction among the descendants of Africa, Europe, Asia and Native America, through the vehicle of rhythm, call and response, and visual artistry.

The emotional possibilities of jazz—its format of individual expression within a group—made it meaningful to communities in all nations and of all creeds who now make jazz, blending it to suit their diverse needs and realities.

In the same spirit, the present generation is using Hip-Hop. Reports from Senegal hold that young Muslims are currently creating 90% of the local Hip-Hop music. In Cuba, the form has been used to express ancestral traditions from Yoruba-derived religion (Orishas 2000). Its genius is a simplicity allowing innovators to draw from earlier genres, fusing them and Signifying upon them while making their own statement, not unlike a historian who cites earlier works in a scholarly argument.

The internationalization of aerosol art has allowed its leading artists the recognition as professionals often denied them at home. The greatest public response to exhibitions in recent years has been among European museums showing works by major aerosol artists.

Among the extraordinary achievements of this community of urban artists is to have created a space for themselves in leading international galleries and museums; influenced mainstream artists like Keith Haring, Frank



Photo: Ivor Miller

2. By DOC & WEST ONE, TC5. JEW, 1993. Detail of a mural on 161st Street at Yankee Stadium, The Bronx. 15' x 40'. Spray-paint on brick wall. The aliases ARAB and JEW writ in "wild-style" lettering are superimposed on Hebraic lettering and the message "a'salaam a'lekum" (Peace be with you) in Arabic, pointing to "wild style" lettering as a cogitate of earlier forms.



3. "Free Puerto Rico." Harlem, 1990s.

Stella, James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein; created a global aesthetic movement transforming the very look of many cities; and inspiring the emergence of a multi-billion dollar music and fashion industry.

The careers of the original artists indicate that the relationship between young people, urban culture and advertising is a complicated mix in which one is often reflected in the other. Tagging refers to abbreviated signatures usually spray-painted on public surfaces, most often buildings, buses, trains, subway stations and highway embankments.

COCO explained that "tagging" emerged in the late 1960s from politically motivated paintings insisting "Buy Black," and "Free Puerto Rico." [see images 3 and 4]

This is a marked contrast to James Baldwin's observation in "Nothing Personal"

of the empty content of advertising that promises to fulfill desires. In their rebellion, early writers used stylistic ideas from advertising but inserted their own content; they used advertising spaces to realize their work, sometimes even re-facing (painting over) advertisements.

As styles became more complex through intense competition for style mastery, the relationship to advertising remained. MITCH, for example, used its surfaces and riffed on its designs, while erasing it. [see image 5] PHASE 2 took a further step by using a billboard over the Williamsburg Bridge to contain his

work, as if he were advertising. [see image 6] One writer who found success in a leading art gallery attempted to outdo Madison Avenue by inserting his style and identity in the same contexts as corporate America. CRASH designed an illuminated sign of his name that was blazoned above Times Square in 1982. [see image 7]

If urban rebel style (in dress, speech, writ-



4. Untitled by MICO, early 1970s. Note the artist's use of the Puerto Rican and Garveyite flags

ing, movement) is an attempt to triumph over dehumanization, one can grasp how unreadable, artistic subway paintings are inherently political acts. Those disappointed that many "graffiti" messages aren't direct political state-

ments (as in MICO's "Hang Nixon", or LEE's "Stop the Bomb"), are challenged by the multi-layered letter structures that seem to camouflage more than they reveal. Unreadable names and messages with bril-



5. MITCH ad image ("MITCH 77", NYC 1977).

liance of style and color affirm the success of writers in establishing a public persona impenetrable to criminological forces that would define, contain, and evaluate them as a sociological problem.

The affront to authority that the visual art represents has been met harshly by the government of New York City. Instead of working with the creative energies of the leading painters, city authorities viewed them as invading vandals who were arrested and incarcerated. Their criminalization encouraged even greater acts of rebellion in an epic battle of Third World artists against corporate America.

Early writers coined the term "bomb" to describe their activities. Bomb: To go "all out" while painting in order to acquire fame; synonymous with "damage." LEE associated the term with "saturation bombing," from the

Vietnam War. To "bomb the system" was to saturate MTA subway cars with one's signatures. In the 1980s, certain writers were identified as "bombers," because they had mastered all disciplines of the form: insides, throw-ups, window-downs, top-to-bottoms, whole-cars, and wild-style burners, and they were "bombing the system" with their skills.

Since the 1980s, there has been reciprocal activity through advertising campaigns writers call "corporate bombing." Multi-national corporations now bomb moving vehicles, covering entire buses and train cars with their ads. [see image 8]

Some idealists—disturbed by the emergence of Hip-Hop as a commercial product—have said that Hip-Hop has become irrelevant. Perhaps the commercial product has become so; but from other sources emerge new paintings, dances, or sound tracks that knock us off our feet. Like a repeatedly rising phoenix, Hip-Hop has a way of remaking itself: when one tries to pin it down, or dismiss it, it becomes something other than what we thought. Part of this ability is related to its nature as a communal expression; if one artist lacks commitment, another will come up with fresh ideas.

Responding to the ubiquitous use of their ideas and techniques by advertising agencies, many of the artists have organized. After learning that school trained designers hired by advertising and fashion companies were using their ideas, even copying their work outright, and that companies would not hire them because they lacked art school degrees, many are creating their own companies to control their own products. Although Gap and Levi

Photo: Ivor Miller

Photo: True Mathematics, courtesy of IGTimes.

Photo: Jack Stewart

Strauss & Co. are manufacturing Hip-Hop fashions without involving their creators, many artists like FUTURA, WAYNE, and WEST have created their own companies, where they are designing and marketing their own clothing lines.

Recordings by the Last Poets in the early 1970s were foundational to the emergence of socially conscious Hip-Hop music. In a recent recording by this group, Abiodun Oyewole (1997) declared:

We can no longer wait and contemplate  
About the fate of our state  
It's time to take what we make  
Everything we create for our sake

Since advertisers co-opted their styles, and the mainstream media has censored perspec-



Photo: Courtesy of the artist

7. Crash above Times Square, 1982.

tives that reflect their experience, Hip-Hop artists attempt to control the material and content of their products.

Owned by a few wealthy companies, the news media gives us official views, or views of



Photo: David Schmidlapp

6. PHASE 2. (Untitled: Billboard), 1989. Brooklyn, New York. Spray-paint on canvas. Courtesy of IGTimes. By painting in the context of a rented, thus legitimate billboard, PHASE 2 provocatively displays his work as public art.

officials, but perspectives from below are rarely heard. Current Hip-Hop music attempts to fill that gap, or at least keep the issue of information censorship alive. For example, a recent recording by Michael Franti deals with the issue of capital punishment, using the fictitious case of a black woman executed for manslaughter, who is later proved innocent. Franti protests capital punishment, as well as the content of the news media. In one track, a pirate radio station announcer whose location is unknown questions the ability of our news media to provide the information we need to understand the issues of our day. Using a funky horn-section and a latin tinge of timbales, Franti chants:

"Live and direct we come and never prerecorded / With information that will never be reported / disregard the mainstream, media distorted / we comin' listener supported..."

It's the same recorded message you've been singing all along/ keep handing us the bible while

you walkin' off with all the gold / the bureaucratic office sends you merry-go-rounding / while the KKK police the streets by blood hounding / interest on the credit card just keeps compounding / but the FCC can never shut this pirate sound down."

Recordings like these show that Hip-Hop is still able to speak to the realities of urban life and offer interpretations of history rarely heard in the media.

With this aim, Abiodun Oyewole is producing and distributing his own recordings, most recently *Omi Tutu* (Fresh Water 2002). By avoiding binding contracts with large companies, some artists control the content of their work. For example, Abiodun's response to post-9/11 events will not be played on commercial airwaves:

America is a terrorist  
Killing the natives of the land  
Killing and stealing  
Has always been America's Master Plan...  
Giving blankets  
Contaminated with small pox  
To the natives who were here  
The beginning of germ warfare  
The beginning of White Fear.  
No respect for the land  
The trees or the air we breathe  
And Christianity was an excuse  
To bring others to their knees...

Regarding the tendency in national politics to blame foreigners for acts of terrorism, Baldwin (1985: 387) wrote: "it is reassuring to feel that the evil came from without and is in no way connected with

the moral climate of America; reassuring to feel that the enemy sent the assassin from far away, and that we, ourselves, could never have nourished so monstrous a personality or be in any way whatever responsible for such a cowardly and bloody act. Well. The America of my experience has worshipped and nourished violence for as long as I have been on earth." Like Baldwin, artists like Abiodun express their own convictions based on their personal experiences.

Many tracks on *Omi Tutu*, including the above quoted history lesson, "Reign of Terror," work to provide information about our contemporary predicaments and how to confront them intelligently. As a method of communication used to comment upon unhappy social realities, Hip-Hop maintains its relevance. Counteracting the Hip-Hop produced by big business with its negative stereotypes, promotion of violence, racism, degradation of women, and the worship of



Photo by Ivor Miller

8. Sony advertisement on CTA train, Chicago, 2002.

money, artist controlled productions are giving highly personal and intelligent messages. Here, individual achievement is cele-

brated within group solidarity, and the ultimate goal is education as a tool for liberation.

Hip-Hop is transformative ritual, but it cannot be relegated to the Department of Religion. Rappers today are praising their ancestors in the form of sampling earlier musicians; they pay homage to African and Native American deities. They refer to great works of literature, for example, in his composition "Hip-Hop," Mos Def mentions the novels of Ralph Ellison ("Invisible man got the whole world watchin'") and Richard Wright ("Native son, speaking in the native tongue"). They offer political analysis and critique the race and class structures of our society, as well as affirm the humanity of those who, being the descendants of slaves, continue to live at the economic bottom of our society. In short, they have created a culture, and are committed to preserving it.

From the "Temple of Hip-Hop" in New York City, KRS-ONE (2002) spoke about the discipline and morals of hip-hop and its future:

"This is Hip-Hop's spiritual base, and as a spiritual base, we look to guide the youth in that discipline. No culture is a culture unless it has principles, unless it has morals, unless we are unified, in some sort of principle, something we are not willing to step beyond, something that defines us... think about your role in Hip-Hop. Think about what you do everyday in Hip-Hop, this is not about right now, it's about twenty years from now... the tapes are rolling, the notes are being taken, this is the type of thinking we have to get into if this is going to survive. Hip-Hop appreciation week is a time of self-reflection; a time for Hip-Hoppers to ask "what am I doing to preserve the culture?"

Hip-Hop has already proven its relevance through longevity. Now into its third decade, the guidance of its leaders becomes increasingly meaningful as youth seek to understand the issues of our day as well as express their creative gifts.

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# The Beginning of Something New: Graffiti Art and the Genesis of Hip-Hop

OUTTAKES FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH FILMMAKER, CHARLIE AHEARN

*Chuck D once said: "Hip-Hop's just black man's creativity." I always like that comment; I don't think it excludes people, but talks about African creative sources in Hip-Hop. I like Chuck D's comment not because it can be seen to limit Hip-Hop to Black culture, but because it's a recognition of how culture can be inspired, and I think that Black artists have inspired culture to become global.*

*What we think of now as Hip-Hop was pre-dated by a number of things in the city—primarily a very strong graffiti culture in New York.*

**ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS THAT SIGNALLED THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING NEW HAPPENING IN NEW YORK WAS THE RISE OF GRAFFITI, WHICH GREW OUT OF GANG CULTURE, YET IN A WAY MARKED SOMETHING IN OPPOSITION TO IT. GRAFFITI STARTED OUT AS A WAY FOR GANGS TO MARK TERRITORY: IF THIS WAS YOUR BLOCK YOU WOULD PUT THE NAME OF YOUR GANG IN THE BIGGEST LETTERS ON THAT BLOCK AND NO ONE COULD COME INTO THAT BLOCK, SO GRAFFITI WAS A WAY TO TELL OTHER PEOPLE TO STAY OUT.**

**But when individuals started writing graffiti, it corrupted that system absolutely and in a sense led to the downfall of gang-culture. If you wanted to become a well-known graffiti artist in NY in the early seventies, it's not interesting to stay on your block, what's interesting is to go "all city," meaning that you would ride the subways and make your mark everywhere in the city, so that that no matter where someone would go they would see your name. And the very concept of "all city" is in complete opposition to the concept of gangs, which is an insular block defensive mentality. And people who were used to gang culture would be amazed at how people involved with graffiti were fearless and that someone from the Bronx would dare go to Brooklyn and hang out with people in Brooklyn.**

**People like Bambaataa are examples of how Hip-Hop can express African-ness in ways that absorb and incorporate other musical forms. It also means that someone from Japan can identify with this music and can incorporate this African-ness into what they're trying to do with the music and can add to the musical heritage. It's inclusive, and it means that this African-derived culture can contribute globally. Culture is global today, it's not about subgroups. There are different aspects of different cultures around the world, but Hip-Hop is a kind of gift of African-ness to worldwide culture. It has to do with the kind of repetition. It's not to say that there aren't aspects of Irish culture in Hip-Hop, cause there's undoubtedly certain verbal aspects of the way Irish people use words, which have gone through our culture in folk songs and that contributed to Blues; that's a long discussion: is Blues African? Or is Blues is a kind of combination of a European folk traditions with African folk traditions? I like to think of it as an inclusive culture that's global**

**Hip-Hop is about reorganization. Hip-Hop artists freely borrow from others and reinvent the form by borrowing. Rock and Roll always did that; Jazz was always about borrowing ideas from other things; but Hip-Hop is a radical form, whether you're talking about the DJs or graffiti, you're talking about people who lift things from other sources and make new things out of them by re-combining things in new ways. In other words, you're radically stripping things down to certain aspects of the culture that you want to focus on, whether it's music, MCing, or graffiti. Musically it's stripping away the melody to find the percussive element underneath; if it is graffiti it's stripping the whole process of visual creativity to a word or a name, and re-building things up from that essence, so you're building a whole culture around a word, or you're building a whole music around a percussive element. It's a refocusing of the culture, and re-fashioning around a certain simplified element.**

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REGINA AUSTIN

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