2 Writing

Ted Pearlman

Getting Up

Style, form, and methodology, major concerns of most writers, are secondary in significance to the prime directive in graffiti: "getting up." The term has been used by writers since the mid-1970s. Before that time other terms, including *getting around, getting over,* and *getting the name out,* were used to signify the same idea. Regardless of the term used, however, since the beginning writers have understood that recognition and acceptance of their work by other writers (and possibly the public in general) is dependent on their writing their names prolifically.

Hugo Martinez, director of the United Graffiti Artists organization, saw this emphasis on getting up as one of the more significant factors differentiating New York's subway writers from the creators of traditional forms of wall writings. Martinez has stated that "the significant feature of the new graffiti is its sense of purpose, the particular emphasis it places on 'getting around.' Only a youth with a sense of vocation can put in the necessary amount of work."[1]

The magnitude of this enterprise can come as a surprise to a new writer. Lee, a Manhattan writer, reacted with shock when he was first introduced to the concept of getting up. Flea I, Lee's graffiti teacher, took Lee into an underground train lay-up in the Bowery to show him how and where graffiti is written. Lee, fearing arrest, was reluctant to go in, but he steeled his nerves and went into the dark tunnel prepared to do a single black and gold "piece" that he was sure would bring him lasting fame. It was then that he learned the "awful truth." Lee recalled the incident in an interview:

> So he took me to this place and he said, "You know after you do this you have to keep doing it." I said, "What?" I said, "No, man!" I thought you just do it once and you're famous, you've got your name all over. How stupid could I be. One train! You'd only see it once in a lifetime, there's so many of them. I didn't realize then how many trains there was in this city. So he said, "You've got to keep doing it if you want to get up." And I said, "Wow, man." And I was worried like hell . . . but I did it . . . and I went back again . . . and I kept on and kept on.

Today Lee appears to be respected and admired by all of the writers in the city. P-Body calls Lee's style "the best in the city. And man, he gets up!"

Style is important to writers. By demonstrating a good sense of design and a facility with the use of spray paint, a writer can win the esteem of other writers and even that of some members of the public. However, as Tracy 168 has said, "Style don't mean nothing if you don't get up. If people don't see your pieces, how are they gonna know if you've got style?"

Writers are more than willing to overlook deficiencies in the style of a person who is known to be up a lot. The coveted title of king of the line goes to the writer who gets up the most on a particular subway route, regardless of style. Writers even manage to overlook the abysmal style of IN's "throw-ups" and acknowledged him as king of all the lines because, ugly as they were, thousands of them appeared on the trains.

Cliff 179 was painting high-status "whole cars" from his first days in graffiti, but his style was not "too swift," and he won little respect from his fellow writers until they noticed that he was getting up a lot. Today his style has improved greatly, but he won his fame from his high rate of productivity. Caz and Fred discussed this matter in an interview:

Fred:

> Some of the early Cliff pieces, they were pretty sick. All of us writers in Brooklyn really hated his stuff. It was weird looking. His stuff always dripped.

Caz:

> His stuff might have dripped but it was out there. That's what counts. No matter how sloppy it was, it was around.

Fred:

> That's what used to amaze me about Cliff. The first time I saw it I said, "This guy is no good." But then you saw this same guy all over everywhere and you said, "He really gets around!" I thought his style was bad, but it got so drummed into my head that I just came to appreciate it for what he wanted to do and how he wanted to express himself.

Form is important to writers. As the forms of subway graffiti increase in size and complexity from simple marker "tags"

to enormous, spray-painted whole cars, there is a corresponding rise in the status that accompanies them. Adopting a high-status form will not bring a writer fame, however, unless he manages to get up a lot with it. Whole-car painters are not expected to do as many works as those who adopt other forms, and they can win recognition with as few as twenty well-styled efforts. "Taggers" on the other hand, according to Keno, Son I, and other full-time devotees of the form, have to write their names at least a thousand times before they can expect to be noticed by the other writers.

With a few exceptions, writers are considered to have retired once they stop writing, and they are forgotten quickly by most of the writers who are still active. In order to maintain a reputation in the graffiti world, a writer must manage to get up continually. Blade, Jester, and Wasp have retired a number of times but stage frequent comebacks in order to keep their names alive.

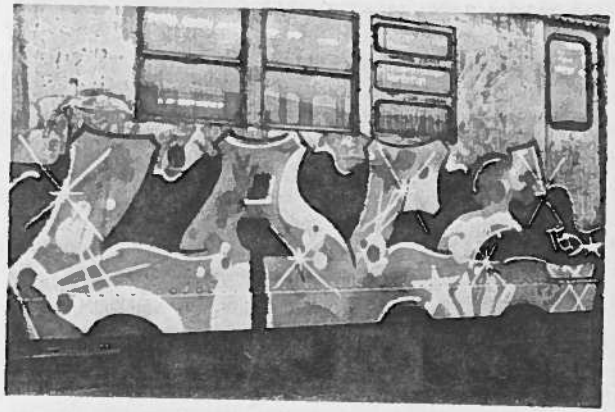
Blade is now twenty-three years old and currently is engaged in his fourth comeback attempt. He has been getting up a lot recently with big, "end-to-end," "BLADE IS BACK!" pieces, painted in geometrical letters that he has dubbed "robot style." Blade is aware of the fact that as an adult, he is subject to a charge of malicious mischief and a possible year's term in jail if he is caught writing, but, as his friend Tracy 168 has said of him, "If he's gonna stay on top, he's got to keep getting up."

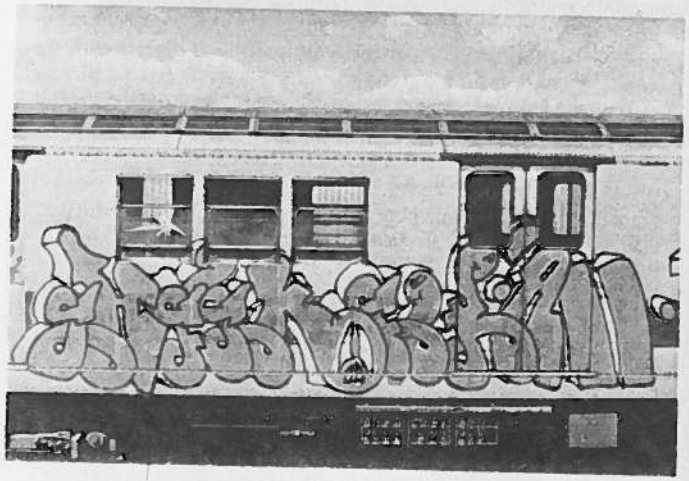
Style

Every writer would like to be known as having good style, and most writers devote long hours to practicing piece design in sketch pads and notebooks. Many writers also spend a great deal of time sitting in subway stations watching and criticizing the pieces that go by, passing around their sketches, and "autographing" each other's "black books" (hardbound sketch pads that almost all writers carry with them). Many writers put a great deal of care into these autographs, and a writer who does an exceptionally fine drawing in one of them is said to have "burned the book." A "burner" in an autograph book reflects well on both the artist and the owner of the book.

Impressive though it may be, however, style in the books does not count for much among the writers. The style that one displays on the trains means the most. Almost any experi-

Burner by Lace. *Lynn Forsdale*





Wild-style piece. *Henry Chalfant*

3-D piece by Mad and Seen.
Lynn Forsdale

enced writer can design a good piece, but translating that design into a painting on the side of a train is far different.

In order to create a burner on a train, a writer must have a good sense of design, a masterful spray-painting technique, and the ability to work carefully and diligently in the difficult conditions of the train yards and under the constant threat of capture. Writers look upon the creation of burners on the trains as an example of true grace under pressure, and those who consistently get up with style are admired for both their skill and their bravery.

Long before they attempt to paint on trains, young writers will develop their style through practice in sketch pads and often on walls around their neighborhoods. They also will frequently seek out more experienced writers to teach them the ropes. Young writers who do not have the skill or talent necessary to create designs of their own will often ask more skillful friends to "give" them styles. "Master" writers will frequently have one (perhaps a younger brother) or even a large group of young protégés whom they will bring along. Writers seem to enjoy the role of teacher and take pride in the accomplishments of their students, as well as take pleasure in the admiration and respect they receive from them. Both Bama, a famous writer from the early 1970s, and Tracy 168, an equally famous writer of a later period, take pride in the success of their teacher-student relationship and remain close friends to this day.

Even some experienced writers have never mastered the creation of style. These writers will sometimes seek assistance from more skillful colleagues, but more often they will simply watch the trains and borrow, or "bite," other writers' styles. Biting is looked down upon by most writers, and those who are bit will often become angry and seek out the biter for a confrontation or even a fight.

Bama, a writer whose unique styles were frequently borrowed by others, takes a philosophical attitude toward biting: "A lot of writers would get angry if their style was bitten. Get angry and go over there and yell, scream, punch. 'You took my style, man; what's wrong with you!' 'But I just saw you doing it.' 'I don't care what the fuck you saw, you don't ever steal my style!' But I don't want to hit anybody in the head. . . . I always took it as a compliment that other people liked my style that much." Tracy 168 takes a philosophical, if somewhat more practical, view of biting: "I don't care who uses my style. As long as they pay me for it."

Writers are keen critics of each other's styles. When they judge the merits of a piece, they generally look for originality of design, a smooth integration (called "flow") of letters, brightness of color, smoothness of paint application (black spots and, especially, drips are abhorred), sharpness and accuracy of outlines, and the effective use of details (decorations that are frequently worked into the letters of the name, ranging from simple lines, swirls, arrows, and stars to highly complex caricatures and other drawings). When writers spot a piece that exhibits poor design or technique, they will simply say "bad style," frequently backing up this contention with a detailed analysis of the piece's flaws. When a well-executed and finely styled piece is seen, writers employ any of a number of terms to show their approval. Since most writers see themselves as "outlaw" artists, many of the terms of approval have a seemingly negative ring. Among the strongest of these terms are "nasty," "the death," "vicious," "bad," and "dirty." Other terms of approval include "the joint," "juicy," "down," "down with the crew," "burner," "on," and "snap."

Since most writers like to think of their styles as being original and unique, they also like to invent names for them. When Mitch painted his name in old-fashioned Western-style letters, he called it his "Saloon Letter Piece." He has also done "Hot Dog Letter," "Earthquake Letter," and numerous other-lettered pieces. There are literally hundreds of style names in use by writers around the city, but they are rarely remembered by anyone but the artists who create them. The only style names that are in general use are "bubble letter," fat, rounded letters that were designed and named by Phase II; "3-D letter," block letters with a three-dimensional appearance, first used by Pistol I; and "wild style," a name used to describe almost any "unreadable" style. There is substantial disagreement among writers as to who first coined the term *wild style*. One writer stated that "it was some guy who lived 'way up in the Bronx who thought it up first. He went crazy later on. I think he's dead now." Tracy 168, though he does not completely match this description, has stated that he first used the term and now heads a group called the Wild Styles.

Writers who do not possess a gift for the creation of style names simply name their designs after themselves. Such names as "Chino Malo style" or "the style of Tean" help to point out their creators' views of their styles as being wholly personal and are also easy for others to remember.

Fred feels that the wide concern with style names is not entirely appropriate or correct: "There is one main style and that is graffiti itself. When you see it, you know for certain reasons that it is graffiti and that makes all graffiti part of a single style: Subway Style. Graffiti Style."

Form

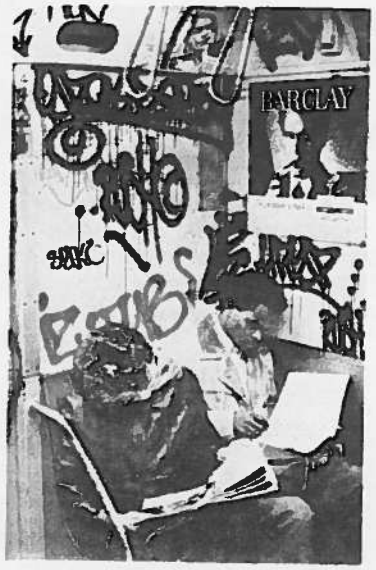
Although there are hundreds of individual styles of graffiti, there are only seven basic forms in which it appears. These forms, the names of which are known to all graffiti writers, can be distinguished generally by their size, location, complexity of design, or the materials used to create them. They are discussed here in ascending order of complexity.

Tags

Tags are the names written all over the insides of most New York subway cars. Most writers consider them to be the most basic and simplest form of graffiti. A tag generally consists of the writer's name in stylized letters that are gathered together somewhat in the style of a logo or monogram. Tags are written very quickly, often in a single, practiced movement, in a single color of ink or paint. In style, tags are about as individual as the writer's handwriting. Similarities among tags are basically a function of the tools used to create them.

Spray paint was the first tool employed for tagging, in the late 1960s, but it is rarely used today. Spray paint enables a writer to make a very large mark, but it is inconvenient for use inside the trains. It takes longer to apply and to dry than marker ink and also has a tendency to run and drip when used in close quarters, spoiling the writer's efforts to demonstrate a clean and controlled technique. The paint cans also give off powerful fumes that can attract the unwanted attention of passengers and conductors.

Niji and Dri-Mark pens were the first markers to come into general use in tagging. They had quarter-inch chisel tips and



Spray-paint tags inside an IRT car.
Lynn Forsdale

Marker and spray-paint tags.
Lynn Forsdale

were available in a wide variety of colors. They enabled writers to tag their names more quickly than had been possible with spray paint and were easily concealed when not in use. Their mark was disappointingly small, however, and when larger markers became available, the quarter-inchers were abandoned and dismissed as unacceptable "toy markers."

The most preferred tagging tool is the Uni (Uni-wide 200 is the brand name), a flat, refillable marker with a two-inch-wide tip. In tagging, a Uni is generally held with three fingers on top and the thumb below for maximum speed and ease of movement. A writer will sometimes split the tip of a Uni into a number of sections, inking each with a different color, and thereby enhancing the already wide and impressive mark of the pen by lending it a rainbow effect.

Because so many of these markers were stolen by writers in the past, stores in New York stopped carrying Unis years ago. Those still being used are either in the possession of "old writers" or are being used by younger writers who have inherited them from older brothers or friends who have retired from writing. Writers also pride themselves on their ability to make homemade markers out of schoolboard-eraser wicks and bodies made of soup cans, tobacco tins, lighter bodies, Absorbine Junior bottles, baby food jars, and other containers. For both actual Unis and homemade imitations, as well as for other refillable markers, writers use either Flowmaster ink or concoct their own from a variety of substances. In making ink, emphasis is placed on ineradicability.

After the Uni market dried up, a smaller, cheaper version of the pen was brought out by another manufacturer under the name Mini-Wide. Minis have a one-inch tip, are refillable, and are still available at certain disreputable candy stores around the city for about a dollar.

The most common marker used for tagging today is the Pilot, a long, cylindrical marker with a half-inch chisel tip. Pilots are refillable and practically indestructible and can be bought in almost any stationery or art-supply store. Their mark is not as impressive as that of a Uni or Mini, but they are easily available, simple to conceal, and, when the tip is softened with a pin and flooded with ink, it is capable of making a "juicy" mark. Any pen smaller than a Pilot is looked upon

with contempt as a toy marker. Only when there are no ready alternatives will a graffiti writer resort to the use of a Flair or an El Marko.

Some tagging is done on moving trains. Writers will walk through a train until they find an empty car or one with only a few disinterested passengers. If no police officers or conductors are about, the writers will then tag their names quickly and move on to another car. Cool Herc was one of the few writers who was willing to write in crowded cars. Supposedly he politely asked passengers to lean forward for a moment, tagged on the walls behind them, reminded them not to lean back until the ink had a moment to dry, and them moved on to the next car. Most writers, though, prefer to do their tagging unobserved and usually do it at night, in train yards and layups (places where trains are stored on unused tracks), moving swiftly through the empty, darkened trains.

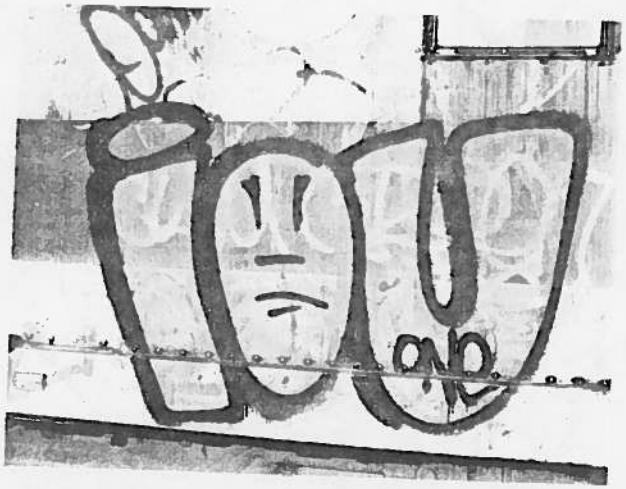
Some writers have favorite spots in the cars where they prefer to write their tags. Wasp likes to write his name on the tips of the blades of overhead fans, Maze prefers writing on the motorman's doors, and Sin I and Sage usually write on the windows. The most popular areas in the cars on which to tag, however, are the large corner panels and the wide panels under the advertisements. In a pinch the maps will also do.

Perhaps because it is the most common and least challenging form of graffiti writing, tagging carries the least status of any of the forms. Many of the writers who specialize in painting larger works on the outsides of the trains look upon tags as ugly, worthless "scribble-scrabble" and think very little of the writers who create them. There is, however, a widely recognized and honored title, "king of the insides," which is granted to the person who does the most tagging on a particular line.

Throw-Ups

Throw-ups are the fastest and easiest way to get up on the outsides. A throw-up usually consists of a two- or three-letter name that is formed, usually rounded, into a single unit that can be sprayed quickly and with a minimum of paint on the sides of a train. Throw-ups are usually done in a modified bubble letter style consisting of thick, simplified letters, incom-

Throw-up by IOU One. Ted Pearlman



SIN paints his throw-up on a junked train in the Pelham train yard because, as he explains in the box at the right, there was "Not one [in-service] train in site!" Ted Pearlman

pletely painted in one color, and outlined inexactly with a second, darker color. The question of style is never raised with throw-ups, and the writers who paint them are judged not by their command of style but by the number of throw-ups they manage to get up on the trains.

Many writers who usually do their writing in one of the larger, more complex forms will also do an occasional throw-up just to keep their names visible between more impressive efforts. Dean, for example, will do a throw-up, using the name KO, whenever he finds that he lacks the time or sufficient paint to do a full piece.

True throw-up specialists like IN, TI, W-5, and Tee will often fill entire sides of cars with their throw-ups in their efforts to become well known. Usually a throw-up artist wins the title "king of the line," which is granted to the writer who gets his name up the most on the outsides on a particular subway line. Writers who win this honored title are generally respected by their peers for the enormity of their efforts, but no one ever compliments them on their style.

The term *throw-up* is also used to refer to writing done in other forms that is lacking in style. When used to describe anything but an intentional throw-up, the term has the same meaning as *bad style*.

Pieces

Pieces, short for "masterpieces," are the names, usually consisting of four or more letters, that are painted on the outsides of subway trains. Pieces are usually painted beneath the windows over a span of less than the total length of the car. Any piece that extends above the windows to the top of the car or is extended over its entire length enters a new category.

Top-To-Bottoms

Generally referred to as *T-to-Bs*, these are names, often accompanied by drawings and other backgrounds and decorations, that extend from the bottom of a subway car to its top but not the full length of the car. T-to-Bs are usually done by writers who do not have the time, the paint, or the energy to paint a whole car.

Two-tone "quick piece" by Zephyr.
Lynn Forsdale

Style of Crash piece by Crash.
Henry Chalfant

A color-blended burner dedicated, for her birthday, "Too Mom!" by Lee.
Henry Chalfant

"Henry" piece (dedicated to photographer Henry Chalfant) and a top-to-bottom drawing by Passion.
Henry Chalfant

End-to-Ends

End-to-ends are names and accompanying decorations that extend from one end of a subway car to the other. An E-to-E rarely consists of a single name and is generally used by those who wish to write their own names and those of friends. Often two writers share in the creation of an E-to-E, painting together and sharing materials in order that their names will appear as a single unified work.

Whole Cars

A whole car is an entire subway car painted from top to bottom and end to end, including the windows. On the average IRT car this is an expanse approximately twelve feet high and fifty feet long.

Whole cars are frequently painted by groups who share paint and skills and generally work from a plan drawn in advance that outlines the design and colors to be used. A great many cans of spray paint are used in the creation of a whole car—twenty is said to be the average—and writers often selectively "rack up" (steal) paint for weeks in preparation for a whole-car effort. When a whole car is done by a group, the most experienced writers will take on the task of preparing the preliminary drawings and painting the decorations and the outlines of the names. Less-skilled writers in the group paint backgrounds and fill in large areas. A group-painted whole car usually includes the names of individual group members, in the form of tags, at the bottom or the ends of the car. Any large, painted words are usually in the form of a title, a message, or the name of the writers' group.

A number of writers are capable of painting whole cars single-handedly. Lee, Mono, Doc, Slave, and Slug, members of the Fabulous Five group, all painted numerous individual whole cars during their writing careers. Almost all serious outside writers attempt at least one whole car, and a large number do them frequently.

In order to paint the upper areas of the car, writers attempt to find boxes or ladders to climb on. If none are available or if the writers are in a hurry to complete their work, they will jump up and grasp the rain gutter that runs over the doors, hanging onto it with one hand while painting with the other. To reach areas that lie well past the doors, the writers have to

hang from a slight ridge that runs along the top of the car, bracing their feet on the small bolts that protrude from the car farther below.

To be able to create a whole-car burner is considered by most writers to be the epitome of style and skill, and those writers who achieve them are much admired.

Whole Trains

For a long time whole cars were considered by writers to be the highest possible form of subway graffiti. Over the last few years, however, a number of writers have painted even larger works. Slug, for example, once painted his name in such a way that it covered two entire adjoining cars. Lee has a number of two-car works to his credit, and Caine is known to have painted one of them as well. Such two-car murals are the largest works done thus far by individual writers. On two occasions, however, groups of writers have managed to paint entire trains from top to bottom and end to end. These gigantic works are known as whole trains or "worms."

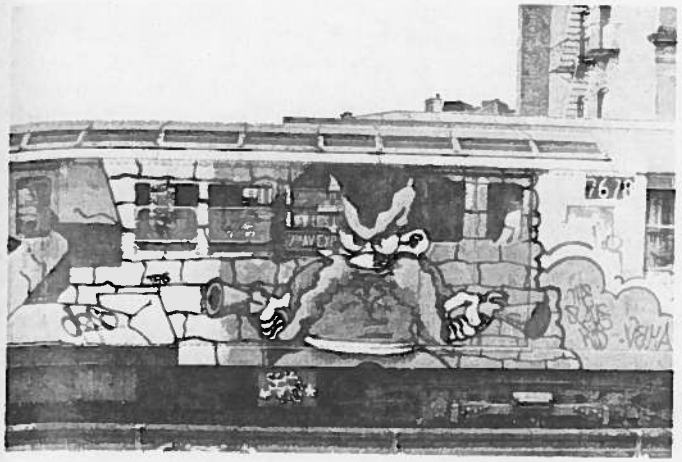
Most writers agree that the first whole train was painted in the number 7 yard by Caine, Mad 103, and Flame One on the night of July 4, 1976. Titled "The Freedom Train," it consisted of eleven whole cars painted on bicentennial themes. A number of early versions of the American flag were depicted ("Don't Tread on Me," for example), and there was also a Puerto Rican flag, the current fifty-star flag, and a free-form stars-and-stripes car.

The day after the Freedom Train was completed, it was taken out of service, photographed by the Transit Police, and was not returned to the line until it was repainted. According to Lee, the writers who painted the train were informed on by some other writer, and the police picked them up in their homes the following day. Lee believes that the arrests of the writers and, especially, the destruction of their whole train, was ". . . stupid. They did something for the United States and somebody dropped a dime [informed] on them and they busted them."

The second whole train to be created was painted on two December nights in 1977 in the Coney Island yard by Lee, Mono, Doc, and Slave of the Fabulous Five. The ten-car train was dubbed "The Christmas Train" and featured a two-

End-to-end piece by Partners in Crime (Mad and Seen). Lynn Forsdale

Detail from a whole car by Lee.
Henry Chalfant



Whole car by Dust. *Lynn Forsdale*

"Welcome to Hell" whole car by Caine.

car holiday scene depicting reindeer, Santa Claus, a snowman, falling snowflakes, and the words "Merry Christmas to New York."

There are plans for future whole trains. Fred is considering returning from retirement to paint a pop art whole train that would feature entire cars painted on both sides and their tops to resemble loaves of Wonder Bread and other familiar commercial products. Cliff would like to paint a whole train that is one continuous cartoon strip. As for Lee, he considers the painting of the Christmas Train the greatest achievement of his long writing career and has said, "I told Mono and Doc, 'I'm always down [ready]. I'm down anytime to do it again.' I don't care how aged I am, how old, I'm down to do it again. And the next time, even better."

Messages

Not all graffiti writers are content simply to write their names. Many of them accompany their works with messages. Lee 163, one of the earliest graffiti writers, used to accompany his tags with rhymes—"I'm Lover Lee/Can't You See" was one—and lines drawn from "funkadelic" music like, "Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow." Members of the Ex-Vandals group in Brooklyn used to accompany their tags with coded messages like "W.B.Y.A." ("We Bust Your Ass") and "W.N.O." ("We're Number One").

Today the most common messages that appear on the outsides of the trains are writers' comments on their own pieces. If the painting has gone well, the writers may append messages to their pieces reading, "Freak Y'all!" "I Burned!" "I Always Get Up Good!" or "Graffiti Lives!" If pieces do not come out well, the writers may explain their realization of that fact by writing "Fucked Up" or "Bad Piece" on them, sometimes accompanying that comment with an explanation of the problem like, "It Rained," "Paint Fucked Up," "No Time to Burn," or "Got Chased."

Although writers tend to avoid writing on each other's pieces, a particularly good message may attract comments written by other writers. On a recent whole car depicting a policeman holding a club, the writer appended the message, "Pigs and Informers Can Go to Hell!" Beneath that someone else had written the words "Right On!" And below that the

Message on an end-to-end by Passion.
Henry Chalfant

Teen dedicates a piece to "Spanish girls of N.Y. and 2 t. (to the) king . . . Blade!!!" Lynn Forsdale

Unsigned message. Henry Chalfant

tags of more than twenty writers appeared, all of them signifying their agreement with the original writer's message and the second writer's comment.

Lee is known for writing rather elegant messages to accompany his whole cars. Besides the "Hi Mom!" that he writes in the corner of each of his works, he also has written: "Tho Running Through All This Grime and Crime There Is Still Beauty in These Trains" and "I'm the Love Sick Bomber [meaning master writer] Just Surviving In New York City."

Some messages comment on current political and social issues. Lately antinuclear statements have predominated. Crunch accompanied one of his tags with the line "Use Your Heads Now or Lose Your Tails Later—Stop the Nukes!" Revolt and Zephyr accompany all of their pieces and tags with the words "No Nukes!" often surrounded by a drawing of a mushroom cloud.

Writers frequently dedicate their pieces to fellow writers or other friends or relatives or to popular public figures. Mono once dedicated a whole car to two graffiti squad officers, writing "This is for Hickey and Ski."

At holiday times such messages as "Merry Christmas to All the Writers," or "Happy New Years Bronx!" are appended to many pieces. Birthdays are often celebrated in the same manner.

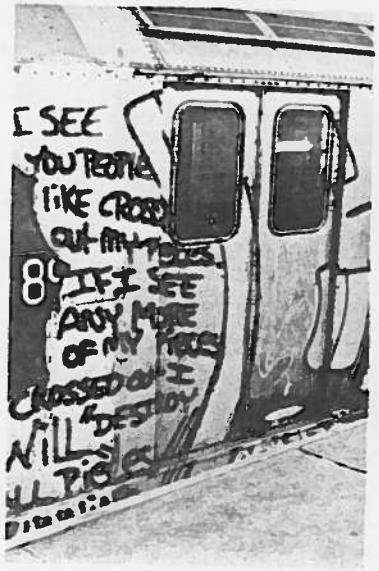
There is only one recorded case of a nonwriter getting into the act by adding his comments to a piece. As Caz tells it, he began work on a large piece one night but left before completing it when he heard a noise. He returned the following evening to finish the painting and found, "Just Missed You—Wait Till Next Time—the Watchman," written on it in large letters, with a ballpoint pen.

Backgrounding

Since the early days of subway graffiti there has been a code among the writers banning them from "backgrounding" (also called "going over" or "crossing out") each other's pieces. This code also states that once a piece has been "gone over" it is considered destroyed and becomes fair game for all other writers. Thus even the smallest cross-out can result in the eventual total elimination of a piece.

Duster crossed out in two colors by PJay. Ted Pearlman

Blade warns other writers: "I see you people like crossing out my pieces. If I see any more of my pieces crossed out I will 'Destroy All Pieces!' "



PJay whole car crossed out by the Outlaw Art group. Henry Chalfant

Backgrounding frequently takes the form of Xs or lines painted across the center of a piece. Sometimes a cross-out is accompanied by the name of the backgrounder or by an explanation of his motivation such as "Payback" (revenge for being crossed out himself) or "You Dropped a Dime [informed to the police] on Me."

Pieces by writers who are considered to be troublemakers, habitual backgrounders, or informers are sometimes backgrounded with the words "Hot 110." Although most writers are aware of the meaning of the term, its origins are unknown. Cross-outs can also take the form of art criticism, with writers painting "Toy Style," "No Style," or "Wacked Out" over works of which they do not approve.

Writers who are backgrounded usually will try to determine their offenders' identities and then will either confront them or retaliate by going over one of their pieces. This can escalate into a "cross-out war" with the antagonists, and sometimes their friends, crossing each other out for weeks or even, as was the case with Caz and Blade, for years until some sort of truce is called.

In 1978 the words "The Cross Outs" and the initials "TCO" began appearing over pieces painted on the IRT lines. TCO was rumored to be a group of "no-style writers" who took out their frustrations by backgrounding their more talented colleagues. Revenge was immediately sworn but no one could figure out who they were. Eventually TCO disappeared, but writers still occasionally speak of it. In retrospect many writers now believe that the police were behind TCO. Apollo 5 has explained this point of view. "It was the cops. They know the writers are like a family and they wanted to split us up." Tracy 168, who lost a whole car to TCO, has stated, "I don't know who did it but a lot of good pieces were lost. It was like someone going in the museum and ripping up all the art. A crime."

Racking Up

It is a tradition among most graffiti writers that all materials used in writing be stolen. The process of acquiring such materials is called "racking up." Racking up is like any other sort of shoplifting: the thief takes an object, hides it on his person,

and gets out of the store as quickly and unobtrusively as possible. Writers often rack up as a team, with one person acting as a lookout or distracting the clerk while the other grabs the goods.

One of the most common methods of racking up paint is to hide it in the sleeves or down the front of a large ski parka or fatigue jacket. Such coats are baggy or puffy looking, and a number of cans can be hidden in them without causing any suspicious lumps that a clerk or store detective might notice. Because such clothing is winter wear, much of this sort of racking up is done during the colder months and extra paint is stockpiled for use during the summer. If more paint is needed during the summer, the most popular method of acquiring it is to "rack up in your socks," hiding the cans under a pair of baggy-legged trousers.

Some rackers are better than others, and those who are best at it will often take more paint than they can use, selling the excess to other writers who are less skilled at stealing or more timid about it. There is an active black market among the writers, and experienced rack-up artists like Keno and Chino Malo can turn a profit filling orders for other writers.

One of the most spectacular paint rack ups took place during the summer of 1972. Someone had knocked out part of a wall at an upper Manhattan high school in order to get into the storeroom. The thieves had taken whatever it was they wanted, not paint, and had gone away. Later that evening Jace 2 was passing by the school and saw the hole in the wall. Looking inside and seeing shelves full of paint, he hurried off and called his group, the Three Yard Boys, together. When they heard that there was paint to be had, they hurried to the school and carried out boxes and shopping bags full of paint. According to a former member of the group, Jace carried out 103 cans that night and the other members got even more.

Another spectacular rack-up, alleged to have taken place in the winter of 1977, was not the result of a chance discovery. According to police officer Kevin Hickey, three writers carefully planned and executed a late-night robbery at a warehouse in the Bronx, getting away with more than 2,000 cans of spray paint. Only Rustoleum and Red Devil paint, the brands most preferred by writers, were taken.

There have also been a few cases of "mass racking," in which a large group of writers have entered a store, grabbed paint, and then run out. Stan 153 has described one such incident: "Thirty-two of us get together and go to a Martin Paint store. We all walk in the door and the clerks are saying, 'Where are you guys going, what do you want?' 'Don't worry about it.' Everybody's looking around and somebody yells, 'There goes the paint! Run!' So we all run back and grab an armful of paint and then somebody shouts, 'Run! Run! He's gonna lock the door!' We got away with it, we got out O.K. Who's gonna try to stop thirty-two guys?"

Small markers, used in the black books, are easy to rack up. Wasp, an acknowledged rack-up artist, has developed a technique whereby he has only to take a marker from a display, hold it in his hand, and snap his fingers in order to have it disappear up his sleeve. Large markers used for tagging, however, are usually kept under the counter in stores, and the only possible way to steal them is "Bogarting." This method requires the rackers to convince a clerk to let them see a desired pen. When they have their hands on it, the writers look it over, usually say "thank you," and then run from the store as fast as they can. Because Bogarting yields only a pen or two at a time, requires a great deal of nerve, and exposes the thief to a greater risk of capture than more subtle methods, writers usually Bogart only enough large markers for themselves, and the pens rarely appear on the black market. Writers who are unwilling to hazard a Bogart attempt either to steal markers from each other or, though they would be loath to admit it, buy them.

In the Yards

Most graffiti writing is done at night at the numerous yards and lay-ups around the city where subway trains are stored. Writers climb over walls, go through holes in fences, and vault high gates in order to get into the yards. To reach lay-ups, they climb down from station platforms and "run the boards" (walk on the running board over the third rail) or move along narrow catwalks to get to the parked trains.

As an aid to the successful scheduling of a "yard trip," many writers memorize the locations and train-storage schedules of various yards and lay-ups. Transit police officer Conrad Lesnewski has stated:

> They know what time the trains pull in. They'll tell you, "The last train pulls in at 8:32 [at a lay-up], the first one pulls out on Monday morning at 6:43. At Utica Avenue on the lower level, the train pulls in at 9:17, but they don't lay up a train on that track on Thursday." They know all that from watching and watching and watching, time in and time out. . . . They'll see a new train leave from the yard on the lines, brand new just from the paint shop. They'll follow that train all day long and all night to see where it lays up and when that train lays up at a certain yard, they'll hit it before the night's over.

In the early days when writers traveled to the yards, they carried only a few cans of paint and some markers. Today they often bring food, drink, "smoke," radios, gloves, a change of clothes, and, if a particularly large piece is planned, suitcases or shopping bags full of paint.

Yards and lay-ups are dimly lit, and writers cannot risk attracting attention by using flashlights, so much of their work is done by "feel." Writers will frequently "break night" or even sleep in the yards in order to be able to take a good look at or photograph their pieces in daylight before the cars are moved or scrubbed.

Since there are hundreds of yards and lay-up points throughout the city, writers have a wide choice of places to do their work. They generally prefer to paint in the larger yards or in underground lay-ups where their chances of being detected are slightest. Most also prefer to work in yards where older trains, like those that run on the IRT lines, are stored. The older cars (writers call them "coalminers") have a surface that is much harder to clean than that of the newer stainless-steel cars (called "ding dongs" or "rocket trains") that are used on the IND and BMT lines. Pieces painted on the older cars tend to last longer, and as a result the largest and most spectacular pieces are painted on the IRTs, known to most writers as the "burning lines." Writers tend to avoid any yard or lay-up that is rumored to be "hot," meaning that the police have arrested or chased writers there recently. As soon as the yard has had a chance to cool down, the writers return to it.

The only yard in the city that almost all writers seem to avoid is the 207th Street maintenance yard on the West Side of Manhattan, known to nearly every writer as "the Ghost Yard." The Ghost Yard would seem to be an ideal place to write graffiti since trains of all sorts are stored there in large numbers and the yard is accessible by climbing over a relatively low wall. The writers, however, tend to avoid it. Stories of the origins of the yard's nickname and its bad reputation vary greatly. Caz says that it is inhabited by the ghost of a writer who was killed there one night by yardmen and was "buried beneath the tracks." Kade has gone to the yard with the intention of writing but left when he heard "terrible screams, a dying woman's screams," emanating from the work sheds. Candy's explanation of the yard's name is far less dramatic. She says that the name is derived from the ghostly piles of salt that are stocked there every winter for use in melting ice and that workers there look like ghosts because "they're all white from the salt."

The yards hold many more tangible hazards for writers than ghosts. Trains are frequently moved in the yards, and an unwary writer could be hit by one. Trains stored in lay-ups are hazardous painting sites because in-service trains pass by them closely on either side, and the writer has to climb under the parked train or run to the far side of the tracks to escape being hit. Movement through tunnels is dangerous because the catwalks are high and narrow, it is dark, and there are numerous open grates, abutments, and low-hanging signs and light fixtures that threaten even the slowest-moving writer.

Stories abound of writers who have walked into walls, fallen into pits, been shocked by the third rail, and broken bones when falling on the tracks. Ali, the leader of the Soul Artists group, was severely injured in a tunnel lay-up when a spark from a passing train ignited twenty cans of paint that he had set beside him.

The police believe that the main hazard in the yards and lay-ups is the third rail, which powers the trains and carries a constant current of 650 volts, enough to hurt severely or kill anyone who touches it without being grounded. Most writers are aware of the danger of contact with the third rail but see its hazards as secondary to what they consider the main peril in the yards: the police. Writers will do almost anything to escape

a raid: climb under or run along the tops of trains, shimmy down three-story "el" pillars, jump onto moving trains, leap from one station platform to the other, throw themselves onto barbed-wire fences, or run tracks or running boards for miles.

Despite the risks, however, most writers seem to enjoy their forays into the yards. Among those who go to the yards in groups, a sense of shared danger, group effort, and camaraderie usually prevails. Bama has described the pleasure he derived from work in the yards:

> It was fun . . . that's the beauty of the writing. You know, you sit there in the train yard at two o'clock in the morning with four other people and you're spraying and you look down the track and you see all these brothers working on one goal—to make this train beautiful. There's so much peace in that. You got that creative feeling, that vibe that comes out of all that work happening. Everyone's looking out for the man and for workmen and the tenseness, man, it's just a weird feeling. You get close to each other when you're doing this and you've got to trust the next man 'cause if you're not looking, you hope he is.