



United Graffiti Artists 1975

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September 9-27

Artists Space
155 Wooster Street
(corner Houston Street)
New York City 10012
phone: 674-2950

Cover: U.G.A., *Collective #7*, 1974, spray paint and marker on canvas, 8 by 30 feet.

This exhibition is dedicated to our parents.

Acknowledgments

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—United Graffiti Artists

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Richard Admiral (AMRL, BAMA), *Blue Magic*, 1974, spray paint on canvas, 7 by 12 feet.

A Brief Background of Graffiti

By HUGO MARTINEZ

In the fall of 1972 I was a junior at City College, having just spent the summer working with the Queens College Summer Program. The program had put me in touch with street gangs. Here I realized the vast potential of Puerto Rican adolescents and what they might achieve by rechanneling their energies and interests. Also, I concluded that if any constructive work was to be done with these adolescents, it must be with those who showed definite signs of rebellion, of a concentration on their own needs rather than the needs of traditional education. I was anxious to continue working with young Puerto Ricans.

At City College I met a student whose father was the night watchman at the "A" train yards. He mentioned that the graffiti writers were mostly Puerto Ricans in their early teens, that they snuck in at night while his father was sleeping. This was enough to get me going. I set out in search of the writers.

I started in Washington Heights, approaching the local gang, the Young Galaxies. I knew they would be able

to provide the necessary first contact.

By 1972 the gangs were beginning to disintegrate after three years of flourishing. They had accomplished their primary goal of ridding their communities of junkies; this had been their only conscious ideology. Now there was nothing to hold them together, though they were still loosely associated in a kind of National Guard, ready to strike should conditions warrant it.

The Young Galaxies—a younger version of the infamous Galaxies, who dominated the Heights from 1969 to 1973—were headed by five "tops" or presidents, who made major decisions in unison, and were known to hang out in the 169th Street Park on Audobon Avenue. Approaching a member, I asked to rap with one of the tops. This produced a meeting with Henry 161, the Young Galaxies' public-relations specialist and himself a mediocre graffiti writer. Henry seemed to know most of the major writers and offered to get them together for me. Meanwhile, Freddie 173, the only Anglo member of the gang, gave me a tour of the neighbor-

hood's graffiti landmarks. There were hidden caves, secret hitting (writing) places, school yards, "signing-in" walls and tremendous feats: "Saint 173" high on the wall of a hospital (painted while dangling over the roof). Freddie pointed out the names of the masters with reverent admiration: Hitler II, Baby Face 86, Cay 161, Turok ... real heroes.

The tour climaxed at "Writer's Corner 188," a wall at 188th Street and Audobon Avenue. Freddie formally introduced me to the president and vice-president of the site, Stitch I and Snake I, along with CAT 87. They received me with silent suspicion and an air of being used to admiration, of expecting it. Stitch was wearing a black fishing hat, black leather buttoned-down jacket, dark gray beat-up pants and Pro-Keds. Snake wore a red corduroy jacket, Levis and Pro-Keds. They had founded Writer's Corner, converting the pink wall of the building into a tapestry of line and color. Here the best writers of Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn would come to meet, sign in, exchange gossip and, if the feelings were right, go out and



Lonnie Marrow (PHASE 2, CAD), *Hyperbolic Paranoia*, 1974, spray paint and marker on canvas, 6 by 16 feet.

hit together. Here also toy (inexperienced, inadequate) writers could look upon their heroes and perhaps get their autographs. (Only the best writers of Manhattan were allowed to consider themselves privileged to add "W.C. 188" (Writer's Corner 188) to their signatures.)

Writer's Corner would provide the initial nucleus for United Graffiti Artists.

From the masters I learned the secrets of graffiti: the moral codes, esthetic criteria, technology, nomenclature, history, legend and ritual.

Everyone knew that Topcat 126 brought Platform Lettering to New York from Philadelphia. Hitting on top of another writer's name was out. "Inventing" (stealing) was the only way to acquire spray cans or markers. Nozzles from various aerosol products were used to vary the width of the spray. A "King" was a master with the majority of hits on one line of trains or buses. When two writers go out together, one watches while the other hits.

Writer's Corner, while prestigious, was only one among many graffiti

cliques in New York. In Brooklyn there were Magic Inc., WAR (Writers Already Respected), the Ex-Vandals ("Ex" for "Experienced") and the Vanguarders. The Bronx had The Independents, Ebony Dukes, The Union and The Concourse, though Bronx writers, who came from well-defined black ghettos, banded together less than those from Manhattan and Brooklyn, where mixed neighborhoods raised a threat to identity that the cliques served to counter. These groups presented an alternative to street gangs. (Like street gangs, they

were an alternative to schools.) There was no violence in them, nor was their purpose territorial definition or defense. On the contrary, they sought an elimination of territories and the establishing of wider peer groups. Criteria for membership were, generally, the ability of the individual to get along with his peers, the way he handled himself and the quality and quantity of his work.

Historically, Manhattan and the Bronx are closely linked and have a tradition totally distinct from that of Brooklyn. This held true for the graffiti movement, despite marked differences between the two boroughs. Most Manhattan writers were Puerto Rican; most Bronx writers were black. Manhattan came to its glory first, not only by introducing graffiti in marker in 1970, through Julio 204, but also by graduating to spray paint. By the repetition of plain, one-color signatures, the Manhattan writers captured the public's attention; and it wasn't until the fall of 1972, two years after Julio, that the Bronx really came into its own with the "Masterpiece" or "Piece," as it came to be known. The Piece was originated in Manhattan, by Barbara 62, Junior 161 and Cay 161, but was not in widespread use there; also it was modest, being somewhat larger than a plain signature and involving going over or filling in one's name. With the emergence of the Bronx through writers like Super Kool 223, Riff 170 and Phase 2, the

masterpiece grew in proportions to what was later known as the "T-B" (top-to-bottom of the train). This expansion in size gave the Bronx writer room to "get on the case," using different colors and designs to transform the entire face of the train into an individual work.

In this development we can see a cultural difference between the Manhattan and Bronx writers. Latinos, perhaps because they have not suffered the destruction of the family and certainly because of the collective nature of their indigenous societies, consistently blossom in group efforts. Blacks, having undergone the assimilation of American individualism, tend to work better as individuals and often feel that groups threaten their identities. (There is no Puerto Rican "Super Fly" and no elaborately organized black gang with a long tradition.) Thus the Manhattan writers produced a graffiti life-style, eventually playing it out, while the black or Bronx writers, being indifferent to the life-style, took over and developed the art into color. Eventually, some Bronx writers redefined the movement's original principle of "collective respect." They started writing over other writer's names.

While all this was going on in Manhattan and the Bronx, Brooklyn was writing its own history, reflective of its peculiar character. Brooklyn has always been an isolated borough. It is only recently, with the emergence of discos, that many adolescents have

ventured out of Brooklyn to socialize. Moreover, Brooklyn is internally undifferentiated: its streets intertwine in endless configurations with little topographic variation. Thus Brooklyn graffiti began as a scattered phenomenon, initiated by innumerable "first writers" who were apparently unaware of each other's existence. (The most widely acknowledged first writer is Friendly Freddy.) A growth of mutual awareness occurred in 1970, somewhere around Bedford Stuyvesant. Mostly black, the Brooklyn writers, on their own, developed in a way parallel to the Manhattan-Bronx tradition: from collective, small-scale street writing to writing on trains to Masterpieces on trains. Equivalent to the wall at Writer's Corner was the Brooklyn writers' famous wall at Grand Army Plaza.

In 1972 Brooklyn and Manhattan-Bronx graffiti started becoming aware of each other. The primary bonds and sources of information were the A, D, 2, 3, 4 and 6 trains, which ran from the Bronx through Manhattan to Brooklyn and back.

The most outstanding similarity among all the writers of graffiti, particularly the masters (totaling about 150), is their economic background. All the masters were working-class offspring from working-class neighborhoods like Washington Heights, West Bronx and Flatbush. The hardcore poor of the Lower East Side, South Bronx and Brownsville—

those from homes where neither parent works—did not create ambitious graffiti. The masters were "good kids" whose parents worked for a living and participated in the American dream of becoming middle-class. The bitterness and self-recrimination that permeate the poor were absent from their environments. Among the black families it was not uncommon to find private houses, a car, color TV; in the Latino homes these articles were definite goals. High-school and even college education were fostered aspirations. These adolescents' values were significantly influenced by the white working-class movements that surrounded them: the hippies, rock music, mod clothing—mainstream American culture.

The new-found sense of power and ability that characterizes the aspirant middle class provided these youths with a new perspective on their problems. They began to feel the necessity of asserting their own uniqueness and of meeting and communicating with their peers. But the barriers were staggering. Never before had there been such an attempt to reach across the physical and psychological distances between the Latino and black communities to unify a whole generation. Unquestionably, graffiti in one form or another had always existed in these communities. Spray-paint and marker writing can be traced back to the early 50's. The significant feature of the new graffiti was its sense of purpose, the particular

importance it placed on "getting around." Only a youth with a sense of vocation could put in the necessary amount of work.

The new graffiti put anonymously owned property, usually public, up for grabs; available surfaces became potential acquisitions. The awareness that the writer could establish his own identity only by violating public, institutional property rights did not deter but rather enhanced the work. The goal was to acquire as much property as possible. It was not uncommon to hear a writer say "That's my train" or "There's my line." And the city's obvious displeasure at having its blank faces desecrated only spurred a rebellious vehemence: "I'm killing that line" or "Let's hit that building" or "We fucked up that station."

Despite its vast potential as a means of communication and alternative to alienation, the graffiti movement lacked historical awareness and thus seemed destined to go the way of all fads. It was only a matter of time before it would run out of space and lose touch with its unconscious impulses. What was clearly needed was an environment that would protect and channel the movement's energies and an organization that would develop an ideology.

United Graffiti Artists was established in October, 1972, with the immediate purpose of organizing the best writers of Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn and offering them the

opportunity to redirect their work to legitimate surfaces. The advantages of forming such a group were many and readily apparent. In this cross-sectional representation of masters, the negative as well as positive aspects of the graffiti movement could be subjected to analysis, criticism and auto-criticism. This kind of communication had been lacking within the movement, and the lack would lead to an eventual decadence and loss of ethical and esthetic values. More and more, graffiti art was being misconstrued by newcomers as a vehicle for fame through the mere quantity of hits. Eventually, graffiti would become nothing more than getting around. A vanguard had to be established that would safeguard the art from the fad that would soon follow. It was also evident that as masters began to reach draft age they would have to look for job opportunities, and art was not an avenue normally open to youths of their economic class.

But first it was necessary to get the masters together. This I accomplished at City College, through a design class I was attending. With the help of the class professor, Axel Horne, and the chairman of the art department, Mervin Jules, I acquired the use of the classroom plus wrapping paper and spray paint, enough to cover an entire 10-by-40-foot wall. On October 20, 1972, at the height of the graffiti movement, 12 writers walked into the art class to hit their names. They came armed with their own markers, rang-

ing from ¼-inch "toy markers" to 2-inch "Uni-wides." Most of them were 15 or 16 years old. Once they realized the possibilities, all vestiges of street cool went out the window. They were ecstatic. The presence of so many masters together, all the spray paint and so much room to hit created a scene of controlled frenzy.

By the end of the work it was obvious that, given the amount of space, the legitimate surface and the mutual respect of professionals, the

product was esthetically superior while maintaining its energy and impact. United Graffiti Artists was born.

Postscript: The three-year history of UGA has been marked by tremendous conflicts and important solutions—a continuing educational experience. Over 100 masters have been involved at one time or another. The group has evolved not only as a vehicle by which graffiti artists can preserve their art

form but also as a place to learn collective leadership, individual motivation and aspirations for higher education. It is within the area of alternative education—alternative both to the schools and to the streets—that its history can best be evaluated. This essay has been purposely limited to the priority of documenting the historical background of the art form and its life style. As for the works in this exhibition, I believe they can speak for themselves.

Jaime Ramirez (MICO), *Micolombia*, 1974, spray paint on canvas, 6 by 15 feet.



Notes on Studio Graffiti

By PETER SCHJELDAHL

Some people predicted that as graffiti writers began working on canvas, away from the perilous environs of subway railyards, the vigor of their art would diminish. It hasn't. The nerby flair of these young artists is not so easily lost. It continues to inform their studio work, which involves variations and refinements of their original logos, added complexities of color and design. Their one new form since going legit has been the collaborative mural—what they call the "collective"—which derives its proportions from those of the side of a subway car.

☆
Members of United Graffiti Artists work on canvas prepared with gesso and Roplex, painting exclusively with spray cans and markers, as of old. The "hard" white surface assures a maximum brilliance of hue and suppresses all textures aside from that of the spray medium itself: soft, atmospheric edges; suave, matte areas; shiny puddings. A fairly recent innovation is the occasional use of masking tape and stencils to produce contrastingly sharp edges. These artists do prize experi-

ment, but never at the expense of consistency and control. As distinct as their styles are from one another, they share certain fastidious standards of what is acceptable: no drips or runs are permitted, for instance; and occasional, usually whimsical attempts at figuration are indulged but deprecated, as are forays into abstraction where the logo, the name, is completely effaced.

☆
The graffiti logo is a schematic motif; the painting functions visually as abstract art. That it does this so well, with such boldness and apparent sophistication, may seem mysterious in view of the naiveté of its youthful makers, most of whom know next to nothing of museum art. The frequent, if fairly distant, resemblances of graffiti's gestural calligraphy, splashy imagery and grand compositional finesses to similar elements in Abstract-Expressionist, Pop and color-field painting have drawn wondering comment. They suggest the hypothesis that all big-scale painting intended to have great immediate impact encounters certain basic problems and tends

to solve them in logical ways.

☆
When these artists worked in the streets and subways, the "art" content of their work was fortuitous, existing only in the eye of certain beholders. For most people the work was vandalism pure and simple, the defacement of public and private property. Now graffiti artists are painting on surfaces that belong to them, surfaces that, moreover, are intended for museum and gallery settings. Their work is legal and openly aspires to the status of art; but it is not thereby dissociated from its origins in vandalism, which now are a sort of subject matter or secondary, literary content. No longer a criminal act, studio graffiti is still *about* criminality: specifically the crime of asserting one's identity in a way socially proscribed.

☆
What *kind* of art is studio graffiti? The nearest available term would seem to be "popular" art, given the collective and vernacular character of graffiti's forms. But in thus lumping graffiti with car customizing, pop posters, rock-album covers, printed T-shirts

and comic books, one must feel that some vital element is being ignored. That element is the peculiar expressive individuality of the graffiti writer, his use of his own identity—his name—as an artistic motif not linked to any object or function apart from itself. (Norman Mailer grasped this point in titling his book on the subject *The Faith of Graffiti*: "The name is the faith of graffiti," a graffitist had told him.) The gratuitous egoism of graffiti art, quite aside from its appeals to the eye, gives it a certain purity that no popular art can claim. The forms developed by the best graffiti artists urge us gradually away from a consciousness of their common sources, toward contemplating the mysteries

of personality.

As for the cultural significance of graffiti art, consider this paradox: in a time of reflex "anti-elitism" we are here presented with a thoroughly elitist and egocentric new form of expression from a decidedly unlikely source—in a word, from some sons (and an occasional daughter) of the People. (As often before in the history of art, the creative impulse shows not the slightest reverence for enlightened ideas.) This elitism of the streets is almost Darwinian, being grounded in a survival code of personal courage, self-sufficiency and style. An important strength of graffiti art is that in it this raw ethos has found an

objective correlative in esthetic form, allowing it direct and undiluted communication.

☆
"You're standing in the station, everything is gray and gloomy, and all of a sudden one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens the place like a big bouquet from Latin America." This remark of Claes Oldenburg's was a signal early appreciation of graffiti. Against all expectations, it holds as true for studio graffiti as for the subway "masterpiece," though in increasingly subtler ways. The art is more complex now, and the gloom it brightens is not just visual. The meaning and import of graffiti continue to grow.



Roberto Gualtieri (COCO), *Explosion*, 1975, spray paint and marker on canvas, 8 by 11 feet.

United Graffiti Artists

AMRL (or BAMA): Richard Admiral. Black American, born NYC 10/9/53. Graduated Evander Childs H.S. 1972. Attending Manhattan Community College. Residence: Bronx.

CAT 87: Juan Tapia. Dominican, born Dominican Republic 6/2/56; 9 years in U.S. Attended George Washington H.S. 1970-73. General Equivalency Diploma. Residence: Manhattan.

COCO 144: Roberto Gualtieri. Puerto Rican, born NYC 12/14/56. Attended George Washington H.S. 1972-74. General Equivalency Diploma. Residence: Manhattan.

FLINT 707: Eduardo Salgado. Puerto Rican, born NYC 7/23/56. Attended Haaren H.S. General Equivalency Diploma from Air Force, 1975. Residence: Brooklyn.

LEE 163: Thomas Lee. Black American, born NYC 12/5/55. Attended Clinton H.S. 1970-73. General Equivalency Diploma. Residence: Bronx.

MICO: Jaime Ramirez. Colombian, born Colombia 11/6/55; 6 years in U.S. Attended Erasmus H.S. 1970-73. Residence: citizen of the streets.

PHASE 2: Lonnie Marrow. Black American, born NYC 8/2/55. Attended Clinton H.S. 1970-73. General Equivalency Diploma. Attending Pratt Institute. Residence: Bronx.

SJK 171: Anatasio Kesoglides. Greek, born NYC 5/17/57. Graduated Art and Design H.S. 1975. Residence: Manhattan.

SNAKE I: Eduardo Rodriguez. Puerto Rican, born NYC 2/8/57. Attending Alfred E. Smith H.S. Residence: Manhattan.

STITCH I: Rodolfo Martinez. Cuban, born Cuba 10/14/55; 9 years in U.S. Attended Haaren H.S. 1971-73. Residence: Bronx.

T-REX 131: Darius Dent. Black American, born NYC 8/28/56. Attended Haaren H.S. 1972-74. Residence: Elmhurst, N.Y.

WG: Gary Fritz. Black American, born NYC 3/13/56. Graduated Wingate H.S. 1972. Attended Lincoln College. Residence: Brooklyn.

U.G.A. Exhibitions

City College of New York, Nov. 1972
Razor Gallery, New York City, Sept. 1973
Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, May-June, 1974

