



The great graffiti plague

Mere scrawls are out. Huge 'masterpieces' are the latest thing. Cleaning the stuff off is costing the city about \$10 million a year

by JAMES RYAN

THE LETTERS ARE SOMETIMES SIX FEET HIGH. Bright hood borders set them off from the drab subway cars whose sides they cover. Within the borders, designs of endless description—circles, loops, slashes, stars—dance before the eye in gaudy Technicolor.



Small, colorful tags like "KIRBY" were never where it is at today among the teenage creators of graffiti. From modest felt pen scrawls on buses and subway cars they have graduated to spray-paint productions which mark middle-of-the-night excursions into rail yards. Whence they call themselves, but Mayor Lindsay refers to their work as "a dirty shame."



The words, like the less ambitious graffiti that came with the invention of Magic Marker pens and spray paint cans some years ago, are almost always the signatures of teenagers followed by the numbers of the streets they live on, their building numbers, or their place in a line of kids who "write" the same name (Luis 5). To most straphangers, the signatures are without meaning. But to the ghetto youngsters who climb over subway yard fences and onto train tracks in the dead of night to spend hours on these projects, they are ambitious self-advertisements, elaborate affirmations of status and identity.

To harnessed Transit Authority officials who long for the old "Kibby was here" days and worry about kids stepping on third rails in the dark, they are a new and dangerous escalation of the graffiti craze—The Masterpiece.

The very use of the word masterpiece is sure to tighten the jaws of Mayor Lindsay and TA officials because it suggests that these grand designs fall into the category of "art." Frank Berry, the authority's director of operations, calls the wall scrawlers "graffiti pigs" and any suggestion that they are artists brings fire to his eyes. Lindsay calls the defacement of public buildings, subways and buses "a dirty shame."

Steven E. Izenberg, the mayor's chief of staff, who has said that the graffiti works are "ugly scrawlings that are mindless, unfunny and often racist and obscene," admits nevertheless that the masterpieces may be some kind of artistic expression. He points out quickly, however, that the creative urge that finds its outlet on the side of a subway car is "thoughtless and irresponsible behavior." He adds, "We have to find some other outlet for these kids."

In order to get some handle on what the graffiti craze was costing taxpayers in dollars and cents, Lindsay ordered Izenberg to conduct an extensive cost analysis. Curiously, the analysis found, about \$10 million is being spent each year to govern and clean up graffiti. Despite these millions, the study showed that there was heavy defacement, meaning that just about every available space was covered, of 63% of all subway cars, 40% of the city's buses, 50% of its public housing and most of the public schools.

No one with two good eyes who travels around the city will be surprised at these findings, but the cleanup costs will raise eyebrows: Transit Authority, \$2.7 million; Housing Authority, \$2.9 million; miscellaneous, \$700,000. The largest cleanup cost—some \$3.7 million—is suffered by the city schools system.

If the city were to step up its war on graffiti to the point where it could be considered "high" on all surfaces, the \$10 million would have to jump to \$24 million, but Izenberg thinks he has found some relatively cheap short cuts. "Most of the elaborate stuff on the subway cars is put on in the yards and on train tracks," he

says. "We'll repair fences, install alarm systems, get better illumination and possible TV surveillance."

"We've been in touch with retailers of the spray paint. Most of the stuff used on the trains is stolen from their display racks. We're asking the dealers to put empty cans on the display racks. We're trying to get a program started in which a school will adopt a subway station, make it theirs. The kids would be responsible for cleaning it up and keeping it clean."

For all of the enthusiasm, however, these efforts seem feeble before the relentless tide of graffiti. Just considering the subway system alone, where most of the masterpieces appear, riders now contribute 7.7 million tokens each to finance the cleanup effort. A thorough cleaning of a single subway car eats up the revenue from 6,000 tokens.

Berry also points out that "graffiti, to a lot of people, has become an accepted part of the environment. They feel it's innocuous next to the bigger problems of muggings, rape and things like that. And a cleanup drive would almost surely mean a raise in fare. We're just not about to get the money we need."

Still, graffiti, if not the most serious problem faced by the city, is certainly the most visible. Izenberg smiles when he recalls the two times Mayor Lindsay burst into his office and—with four-letter fervor—ordered him to clean up the mess. One time the mayor had snipped a ceremonial ribbon at the opening of a Brooklyn swimming pool that was already scarred with graffiti and the other time he had spotted a graffiti-laden bus in midtown. "I certainly got reamed out," Izenberg is called.

With such pressure from above, Izenberg has taken to his quixotic task as the city's chief graffiti fighter with rare enthusiasm. One City Hall observer likened him to the knight of old who, perceiving a damsel in distress, leaped onto his horse and charged off in all directions. But despite months of effort which included a successful fight for tougher legislation, experiments with easily removable wall coatings, cleanup sentences for offenders, publicity and youth education campaigns, the graffiti is still rampant, now highlighted by the new phenomenon of The Masterpiece.

In the face of this, Izenberg and his staff are happy about the work of Hugo Martinez, a street-wise City College psychology major who last November formed an organization of young subway sprayers called United Graffiti Artists. His aim was to get the most talented spray painters off the subways and onto canvas.

As he tells it, Martinez thought some of the elaborate stuff that he began to notice on subway cars late last year was more worthy of recognition than arrest. He noticed that many of the signatures sprayed over the subway cars were followed by the number 171. His next step was to hang out on 171st St. and talking the kids' language, convince some of them that

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subway "hitting" would bring them more trouble than fame.

Join United Graffiti Artists, he told them, and we'll try for some real acknowledgment. There are 20 members now, a number limited by the size of Martinez' one-bedroom apartment on W. 89th St. where the club meets every Tuesday night to paint. He says there's a waiting list of 43.

At these meetings, Martinez' wife Robin and their 6-month-old son, whose nickname is Eric 89, look on while kids from 14 to 21 sit everywhere painting and sketching their names and numbers and, in a few cases, those of their girl friends. Martinez, a bearded Puerto Rican in his early 20s who himself grew up on the West Side, said 14 of the 20 members come from broken homes, two are married and all except two are black or Puerto Rican.

The organization has a constitution which contains three main commandments: no writing on any public property; no stealing; and, above all, no writing over anyone else's name. Penalty is dismissal from the group.

"The main characteristic of these kids is style," Martinez said. "Style is the way they write, the way they dress, the way they talk. Style and quantity are the main qualifications for membership."

To some, style might be equated with ego. "Just be sure you spell their names right," Martinez said. "One of the members saw his name spelled wrong in a newspaper article and he flipped."

What has the group accomplished?

So far, Martinez said his group has worked on a mural at City College, and painted a series of 24 canvases for the Joffrey Ballet, executed on stage while the dancers were performing in front of them. Also, their work is set to go on exhibition in June at the New York Cultural Center.

As for the kids themselves, their main reasons for joining were "to be famous," "to spray paint as much as possible" and "to keep from getting busted."

As far as the city fathers and the Transit Authority are concerned, this new escalation of the graffiti craze, art or not, is straining their manpower and resources still further. Isenberg complains bitterly about the paint manufacturer's failure to make spray paints that are more easily removed. "You wouldn't believe how barren the technology is," he said. "As far as we've progressed in making substances that are easier to clean, we're still in the 19th century. To correct this," he said, "we're bringing in technical people from the industry to try to develop more easily removable substances."

Also, the city has been in contact with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, which developed a host of substances with special qualifications in its all-out effort to put a man on the moon.

A man on the moon by 1970. A city without graffiti by 1980? □



To clean graffiti off a single subway car costs 6,000 tokens and takes a crew the size of that assembled here. Because the spray paints are lead-based, the work of sanding off what the kids call a "masterpiece" can be unhealthy as well as difficult. Hugo Martinez has persuaded one small group of teenagers to paint their masterpieces on canvas instead.

