

STUFF

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WHY. I HATE. GRAFFITI

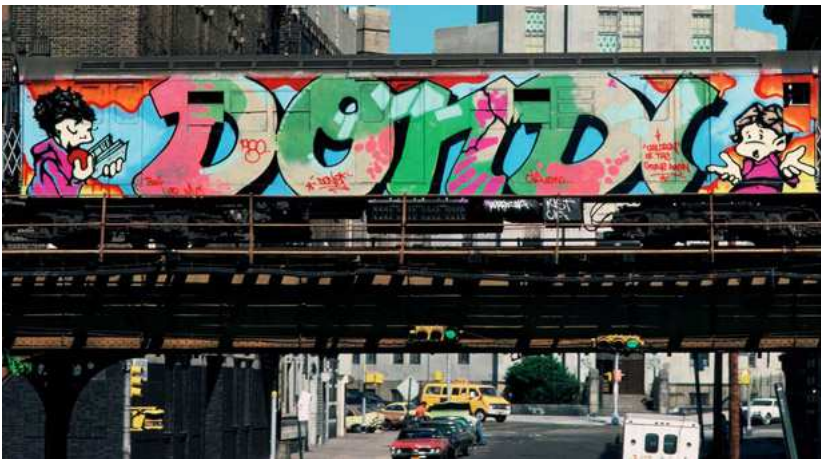
By Bob Nickas

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Style Wars (1983) Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant

Have you noticed how lame graffiti in New York has become in 2013? Especially the one-liners you see more and more of, with their pseudo philosophy and visual impairment. Where exactly is the art? And what's the message? The vast majority of the graffiti that's out there pales in comparison to the classic **Wild Style** of the late 70s/early 80s, though how could it be any other way? Is it the same in other cities? Or is the increasing irrelevancy of graffiti related to just how deadly boring and commercial New York feels right now? And to how overly policed it's become? If so, couldn't it feed off of that? Why isn't graffiti commenting on the shitty sad state of things? On its co-option? On being chased inside? Graffiti can be, or at least once was, an expedient way of inserting social, political, and cultural comment into public view. One of the best examples, a huge wall painting on a building alongside the BQE, visible to every passing motorist, ridiculing CON\$ervative GovernMEnt as nothing more than CON MEN.



As far back as the "talking statues" of ancient Rome, whose pedestals were inscribed with anonymous barbs aimed at the church and state, graffiti has been another way of spreading the news, sharing caustic opinions

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and cranky dissent for all to see. But nowadays, apart from the tags that kids still write, and probably always will, graffiti seems like an advertisement for itself, or for an overeducated, underemployed class that wants to use the street as a springboard to careers in art, advertising, and fashion. Or it's a vivid backdrop for an otherwise forgettable product. You see a tag in the street and look it up. Within seconds you're delivered to a gallery, a shop window, a clothing or skateboard line. You come face to face with the fact that the whole world is infinitely more professional and commodified than ever before, and it can only get worse. "Hip" will either go willingly or be taken forcibly, which translates as: You can sell it to us... or be ripped off. So don't feel that you've sold out before you've been bought. That's the writing on the wall, and it's been there for some time now. I really don't hate graffiti. I only despise what it, and almost everything else in this town, has become—a shadow of the shadow of its former self.

At the risk of waxing nostalgic for the supposedly good old days of graffiti covering every available surface, it's worth recalling how it felt to enter a subway train that was totally bombed inside. For some, it was nothing less than an assault. It was visceral and it was violent, and it was hard to think of it as an expression of art or joy, especially if its acidic vibe was encountered at 7 AM on your way to work. (This was the era of "Ford to City: Drop Dead.") For others, it was something wondrous to behold, to see a giant painting glide through a subway station, or along the tracks above the street. Whichever side you were on, it seemed as if there was no *Escape From New York*.

We all know that the dominant culture has a nasty habit of excluding everything that doesn't fit neatly within its frame, but there's a limit to just how willing you are to have it, or its antagonists, up your nose and in your face. Although the city has always been an unruly, infantile child, and in polite society children are best seen and not heard, social breakdown usually doesn't start with "the kids," but within the system itself. Let's not forget that whether you saw graffiti as a subcultural phenomenon or criminal defacement, it paralleled the neglect of public space in our once grand city-state. In the 70s, the subway was filthy, creepy and crumbling, and in some places it still is. How indignant could officials be towards graffiti writers, and what could they possibly say? "How dare you trash our creaking, rat-infested garbage cans!" Pre-graffiti, in the numbing sameness of the MTA's gray zone, when you boarded the D train for Coney Island you might as well have been headed for the fictional Oceania. The silvery cars you see on some lines today bear little resemblance to those ashen carriages of the not-so-distant past, with flickering lights and crackly announcements, caught in a temporal loop between 1944 and 1984. By the late 70s, that dystopian vision seemed to be rolling unstopably into view, and though Orwell may have been about 20 years off, the police state that New York has become, along with other major cities in this country, proves that he was right all along.



Style Wars (1983)

Equality of Life?

During the gruesome Giuliani administration, dictatorial and heartless to the bone, I once witnessed two cops roughly shove a man out of the subway... at the City Hall station of all places. The man, who was older, was blind and playing an accordion. It could have been a brutally banal scene from a 1950s Sam Fuller movie. Those cops threw that man away like a piece of trash, something to be dispensed with as they faithfully carried out their duty "to protect and serve." Or was he just someone to fuck with because they were bored? He may have been blind, but it was the cops who weren't able to see themselves. They didn't possess that sort of consciousness, or an ounce of compassion. There are more like them today, and they still don't.

As we reflect on this little theater of cruelty, it's worth noting the degree to which the Mayor of New York sets the tenor, and the terror, of the times, always in alignment with its economic dynamics or decline. It only takes a passing glance at a subway map to see that most of the system traverses Manhattan, the very seat of power and wealth. Trains covered in graffiti, flowing in from the city's outer boroughs—which have been historically perceived as less well off, less white, unsafe, and with higher crime rates—would at some point pass through the stations under Wall Street, Rockefeller Center, and City Hall. For the power brokers, this must have represented nothing less than a horrific intrusion, a visible sign that all was not well. It was bad for business and investment, and scaring away tourists—though the opposite may well have been true—and it had to go. Bad blood, you might say, flowing through a body that was in serious need of being revived. Our recently departed Ed Koch, the first to trumpet the uppity middle and ruling class clarion call: Quality of Life, was mayor at the height of the graffiti "plague." Intoned ad nauseam, that mantra continues to resonate, forever begging a need for clarification: The quality of whose life?

In *Style Wars* (1983), the seminal hip-hop documentary, when Koch talks about punishment for graffiti writers he chillingly remarks, "The response that I think a three-time repeater should get is five days in jail. Now obviously, a murderer, if you believe in the death penalty, as I do, you'll want to have the option of executing a murderer. You wouldn't do that to a graffiti writer." The words had barely passed his rubbery lips before he let



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out a small laugh and smiled broadly.

The mayors of modern times all seem to have been cut from the same piece of tattered cloth, men who are often mistaken but never in doubt. They bristle at the least criticism, endowed with an intolerance that makes it all but impossible to abide something as bothersome as the First Amendment. And what of our current little dictator? A man who is supremely imperious though no more imperial than a stick of margarine, who must secretly harbor a vision of the city as one giant, high-rise gated fortress, and who may yet serve one day as the Governor of both Bermuda and New York? Under his beady eyes and permanently pursed mouth, the city has been scrubbed clean, at least in the vicinity of its pricier real estate. Until the security gates roll down at night, there is less graffiti to be seen, and less of the old school writing comprised of fluidly looping lines or bold blocks of letters, with color, imagery, and words as image. What you have instead are simply printed one-liners, almost none aimed in his direction. Some are written neatly in cursive, as if penmanship counts, just as it did in the second grade. These are cast adrift in an endless sea of stickers. Printed stickers are everywhere, on lampposts and mail boxes, and on whatever surface is free, mostly with the exception of private property. They practically scream, "Look at me, read me, buy me," a pathetic bid like any other promotional scam, an offer of something or someone for sale. Walking along Houston Street one afternoon, wondering where all the graffiti had gone, an honest-to-goodness hand-painted sign unexpectedly appeared:

\$@£€\$

But so what? The word "SALES" written in currency symbols, with an "@" in place of the a, which doesn't even make sense. What's surprising is that it hadn't occurred to the writer to use an anarchy symbol for the a, which would still be worthy of some measure of animosity.



The Cunning Linguist / BNE WAS HERE

Equally deserving is the tag from whoever goes by that awful, self-satisfied name, the Cunning Linguist, and who cheerily proclaims, "Hope is the new currency!" Complete with an exclamation point, it positively reeks of a Miss America contestant from the farm-fed Midwest. Neither can compete with the sublime and matter-of-fact incendiary device that is Jack Smith's simply stated, "Hatred of Capitalism." Smith, the great visionary filmmaker, artist, and performer of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, may not have blasted his truly profound statements and "ravings" across city walls, but how amazing would it be if they landed there now? And his voice would still be timely, unfortunately for us.

"When you have police everything looks queer."

"Isn't Christianity the worship of betrayal?"

"Sadism always begins with flattery."

"Fashion is an ugly business."

"God must want to be shocked."

And then there's a personal favorite:

"I can be rented."

Smith once posed *the* basic philosophic question—"To be or not to be normal"—and it reverberates still. For just as normalcy remains a pervasive enemy, so too does the return of the well-behaved rebel. You could say there are those who are repressed and those who repress their repression, and you wouldn't want to go to bed, or even dinner, with either of them. You pass them in the street, and on the wall beyond you see a line signed by TTT, TheTypoTerrorist:

"Remember, whatever you believe imprisons you."

Jack Smith would slowly groan, irritated by every inch of it, by the emptiness of its depth, by the writer's alias, by the use of punctuation and the fact that it was all spelled correctly. Where's the typo? This matters not at all when you can only wonder, "What's the point?" Oh right, the point is for TTT to promote him or herself shamelessly. Another brilliant tag exclaims:



The Typo Terrorist, Know me Expect me Find me

How's this for an abbreviated translation: me, me, me. Maybe as the audience in New York gets blander and more self-involved, so too does the graffiti. Consider another gem:

"Slavery has evolved its called unpaid internships."

Not bad, and true. Maybe TTT is understandably bitter about being used and abused for free. Forget about being rented, today you can take your worthless degree in comparative literature and be... indentured. And if you manage to get part of the weekend to yourself, you can go out and write something like:

"When I tag it's a crime but when Banksy does, it's art."

Banksy??? How about writing PATHETIC in letters as big as the Hollywood sign? Maybe TTT went to art school and can't find a gallery? So the walls of the street will serve as a canvas... that is until being discovered and brought to the market, where you can be used and abused for a decent price.

And then there's:

"I'll stop tagging when all is right in the world."

Here, TTT heroically proclaims an intention to stay on the front lines, to risk life and limb, 'til victory! But few of these tags are written near the rooftops of tall buildings—take a bow, Jim Joe—on the sides of the city's bridges. In general, people seem to be more conscious of their personal safety, and rightly so. Do you really want to fall off an eight-story tenement just so you can write something as lame as "Love Stories Suck"? That would both suck and blow.

One of the great appeals to leaving a sticker behind is that it's faster and safer than writing with spray paint. And since this "destruction" of property is considered as serious an offense as a physical assault, the consequences of getting caught because you took your time with a can of spray paint may be deadly. Look what happened to Michael Stewart on September 15, 1983. An art student at Pratt, Michael Stewart died following his arrest by New York City Transit Police for spray-painting graffiti in the subway, in the station at 14th Street and First Ave. Stewart would spend 13 days in a coma and never regain consciousness before he expired. Try to imagine the last that he saw of this world.

Improbably, it was initially announced that he had died of a heart attack. Now, 25-year-olds have been known to die of heart attacks. It's rare, but it happens. Though not usually after laying in a comatose state for almost two weeks after being arrested by half a dozen transit cops. A month later, the official report from Dr. Elliot Gross, the city's chief medical examiner, stated the cause of death as "physical injury to the spinal cord in the upper neck." In other words: strangled. A young black man, all of 135 pounds, allegedly resists arrest and is subdued by six officers, then loses his life and no one is held responsible? As commemorated in a 1986 work by the artist David Hammons, Michael Stewart was "The Man Nobody Killed." Those officers were white, and an all-white jury exonerated them. The mayor at the time was Ed Koch. These are merely the facts, not in any way meant to be confused with commentary, simply restated from the record, from what was and remains, to this day, much more than a cautionary tale.



Left: The First Avenue subway station. Right: David Hammons, "The Man Nobody Killed, Michael Stewart, 1958-1984" (1986)

Zero Dark Thirty Years later, the officially sanctioned stop-and-frisk program appears infinitely preferable to an unspoken acceptance of stop-and-choke, although there may be a fine line between them, and one which is too

easily crossed. Recently, stop-and-frisk hit the five million mark; although that's not five million individual New Yorkers who have been improperly fondled by the NYPD, since many have endured the harassment on more than a single occasion. Stop-and-frisk offers a stellar example for The Typo Terrorist: Here's to Polite Brutality.

Now consider this: Were I to wrap my hands around your neck and squeeze the life right out of you, wouldn't that be murder? But if law enforcement applies the same sort of pressure, do you know what's happened? They have violated your civil rights. Quite a curious locution. And what will you be gasping with your very last breath? "Stop choking me"? Or "Don't violate my civil rights"? You would certainly have a greater chance of sputtering three words than five, given what little air is probably left in your windpipe. In terms of those who protect and serve, aside from "Yes sir, no sir," speaking for yourself is considered resisting arrest. Unless it's cardiac arrest. And forget about writing graffiti with a can of spray paint, as Occupy protesters so rudely discovered, because these days even writing with chalk on the sidewalk counts as the defacement of public property, and the sidewalk is exactly where your face will be, with a knee jammed in your spine, a hand over your mouth, and your head in a chokehold. The right to assemble has now become, what? The right to assemble your legal team?

In this town, disgust and indifference have always had to coexist, one perfectly canceling out the other, reminding us that the fault lines running under our day-to-day realities are almost always based on class. Everything here on God's Little Acre—all 21,000 acres—turns on a dime, on money or its lack, and if you can't grease a palm you better grease up your ass. Maybe we could use a little more anarchy around here. And not just on the parts of those two-year-old versions of ourselves. (A friend once said that she and her husband originally decided to have kids because they "didn't have enough chaos in their lives." For real!)

Just this month, the subway fare went up again, marking the fourth hike in four years, but how many of us noticed or refused to pay? Did we jump the turnstiles and let others inside, those older, less agile, or parents with strollers, by way of the emergency door? Did kids, those adorable freeloaders, crawl under as they always do, protesting in their own way? Imagine if the NYPD had to acquire a whole new set of mini cuffs to pinch those wee little wrists. "Look, Ava, the nice man from the Polite Department has a friendship bracelet for you!" And after this new fare hike, which is merely a prelude to the one which follows, and the one after that, will we see "Fuck the MTA" written on the subway walls? Oh no. People will grumble, and then pay the man.



Henry Flynt, February 28, 1963. Photo by Diane Wakoski

Back in the late 70s when I first started walking around downtown, street writing seemed to have more of an impact. This may have been due, almost singlehandedly, to the now infamous SAMO©, an anonymous entity that was eventually revealed as a collaboration between Jean-Michel Basquiat, Al Diaz, and Shannon Dawson. Beginning in 1979, and unaware of who was behind the graffiti that was suddenly appearing in lower Manhattan, the artist and musician Henry Flynt, who had pioneered "concept-art" in the early 60s, began documenting it thoroughly. Today his color photographs comprise an essential record of this work, and [the essay that he later wrote on SAMO©](#), carefully researched and based on first-hand accounts, offers the most insightful reading of what they accomplished in a relatively short space of time. One crucial element was the copyright symbol, almost always present, suggesting not only that the message had registered protection, a proof of ownership, but that it was a product, available to all, though it could not be taken from them under penalty of law. Written covertly on the fly, their identity—at times swiped by others—would turn the idea of copyright in on itself. And what did they have to say? In a number of instances SAMO© was offered as a solution to the fraud they perceived as increasingly overtaking New York, and in this respect they were nearly prophetic.

SAMO© AS AN END TO BOOSH-WAH-ZEE FANTASIES

SAMO© AS AN END 2 THE NEON FANTASY CALLED "LIFE"

SAMO© AS AN END 2 THE 9 TO 5 I WENT TO COLLEGE NOT 2-NITE HONEY BLUZ

SAMO© AS AN END TO MINDWASH RELIGION, NOWHERE POLITICS AND BOGUS PHILOSOPHY

SAMO© AS AN ESCAPE CLAUSE



Photos by Henry Flynt

They equally skewered the values of hippies, yuppies, and the "loser" generation before it had even been borne, seeing them as somehow horribly intertwined or inbred.

SAMO© AS AN END TO PIN-HEAD EXCUSES

SAMO© ANOTHER DAY ANOTHER DIME HYPER COOL ANOTHER WAY 2 KILL SOME TIME

SAMO© 4 THE SEDATE

SAMO© DOES NOT CAUSE CANCER IN LABORATORY ANIMALS

SAMO ... AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO BULLSHIT FAKE HIPPY WHACK CHEER (Somehow the © went missing.)

SAMO© FOR THE URBAN RED-NECK

This more than 20 years before the appearance of all those bearded dudes wearing flannel shirts and trucker caps, cruising around in vintage pickups, as if auditioning for a movie or a modeling assignment or their next ex-girlfriend, and maybe all of the above.

They sometimes "polled" the public and inserted themselves within the wider culture, as with their multiple choice graffiti:

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS HAS THE MOST POLITICAL INFLUENCE? A. TELEVISION. B. THE CHURCH C. SAMO D. MCDONALD'S.



Photos by Henry Flynt

SAMO© also acknowledged and targeted big brother, racial stereotypes, and the art world. Their writing often appeared on walls in Soho, which in the late 70s/early 80s was still a neighborhood with artists' studios, and where many of the more notable and "adventurous" galleries were located, along with non-profits such as The Kitchen and Anthology Film Archives. And so in addition to the general public, their captive audience would have been artists, musicians, performers, critics, curators, collectors, and dealers.

SAMO© FOR THE SO-CALLED AVANT GARDE

SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE 2 PLAYING ART WITH THE 'RADICAL CHIC' SECT ON DADDY'S \$ FUNDS

SAMO© AS AN END 2 CONFINING ART TERMS

SAMO© AS A CONGLOMERATE OF DORMANT-GENIOUS

SAMO© AS AN END 2 AMOS' N ANDY 1984

This last line echoes with an especially pointed reverberation. I remember well how a one-time member of New York Art & Language, a spin-off of the 60s conceptual art group from England, responded to the rise of graffiti as a collectible commodity being traded back in the mid-80s: he suggested opening a gallery uptown that would only sell the work of graffiti artists, and which he jokingly suggested be called White Man's Burden. This may have been a case of sour grapes turning increasingly embittered, as those days of "biting the hand that feeds you" had become, if not momentarily irrelevant and too far ahead of its time to be anointed as institutional critique, more a matter of art & languish. Compared to writing directly in the street, and anonymously, rarefied art journals and editorial boards seemed positively passé.

When SAMO© broke up, they signed off with:

SAMO© IS DEAD

Despite the group's dissolution, as Flynt notes, SAMO© had a second phase, as it was briefly continued under the sole authorship of Jean-Michel Basquiat. He would go on to a meteoric career as a painter, a shooting star who played art, ironically enough, with the radical chic he had earlier dismissed—and to the posthumous fame that has only grown since his fatal overdose in 1988. Five years earlier, the tragic death of Michael Stewart, for the victimless crime of writing graffiti on a subway wall, would deeply haunt Basquiat, who was reported to have

said, as perhaps many other young graffiti writers did back then, "It could have been me."

Previously by Bob Nickas - *It's After the End of the World*

By Bob Nickas | 3 days ago
Tags: bob nickas, graffiti, NYC, i hate graffiti, SAMO©, style wars, wild style, art, henry flynt, david hammons, michael stew art, shannon dawson, al diaz, jean-michel basquiat, Bloomberg, Ed Koch

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Well then why don't you get some paint and do better, instead of type a vag article?

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Nikolas Stanley Marceau

Best reply to a whiner. Get up and make change, fool!

Reply · Like · March 21 at 10:07pm
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Gram Bam

shut the fuck up you fucking faggot stupid article

Reply · 3 · Like · March 21 at 5:46pm
- 

Curtis Pel · Owner/ President at Coastal Cedar Direct

DID NOT READ

Reply · 1 · Like · March 21 at 6:59pm
- 

Vincent Kingston Coffee · Top Commenter · Kingston, Ontario

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Reply · Like · 14 hours ago
- 

Terri Ettinger · The Derek Zoolander Center For Kids Who Can't Read Good And Wanna Learn To Do Other Stuff

Good Too

tldr, nice pictures though.

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