Rapid Enamel

Paintings and Drawings by

A-One
Blade
Daze
Duster
Futura 2000
Koor
Lady Pink
Phase 2
Quik
Lee Quinones
Rammellzee
Kenny Scharf
Toxic
United Graffiti Artists

Photographs by
Henry Chalfant

The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago
Acknowledgments

This publication was produced in conjunction with the exhibition *Rapid Enamel* held at the Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago, from October 7 through November 10, 1984.

We are especially grateful to Richard Flood for curating the exhibition for the Society, for writing the accompanying essay, and for coming to Chicago to share his thoughts with the public in a lecture on October 14; to Carl Stigliano of New York City for assisting with many curatorial aspects of the exhibition; to Norman Madden of Rider Dickerson, Inc. for his production expertise; to Word City, typesetters and designers par excellence, for their work with the invitation and catalogue; to Tom van Eynde for his excellent photography; to David Stoy of Chromalith for his fine color separation; to John Vinci, architect and friend, for his advice on the installation design; to Patricia A. Scott, our bookkeeper and secretary for her careful attention to the myriad everyday details; to John Dunn and Sarah Kianovsky, Assistants to the Director, for their untiring work with many phases of the installation and catalogue production; and to Mary Jane Giblin, gallery assistant, for her enthusiastic help with many important tasks.

We would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance received from Gallozzi-LaPlaca Gallery, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, Tony Shafrazi Gallery and Stellweg Seguy Gallery, all of New York City, and the Rhona Hoffman Gallery of Chicago.

We are appreciative of the generosity and co-operation received from collectors Dolores and Hubert Neumann, and Norman Dubrow in New York, and Stefan Edlis and Gael Neeson, and Lewis and Susan Manilow in Chicago. We thank Henry Chalfant for his loan of photographs documenting the work of artists represented in the exhibition by canvases and drawings, and are grateful to *Artforum* for their loan of a rare Robert Smithson/Robert Fiore photograph and to Scali McCabe Solves Inc. of New York for making available a Volvo ad from 1974.

Above all we are appreciative to our Board of Directors, Advisory Board, members and friends for their continued direction, advice, encouragement and support.

This exhibition and the accompanying catalogue have been supported in part by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, an agency of the State.

Susanne Ghez
Director
The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago

October 7–November 10, 1984
LEE, Three Deaths on a Hill, 1984, 99¼ x 87 inches
Rapid Enamel

I am in a trance, the trance of love. I want to write and cannot. I can write in a trance, and this trance is called wisdom. Every man is a responsible being. I do not want unreasonable beings and therefore I want everyone to be in a trance of feeling. I am in a trance of God. God wants me to sleep. People will say that all that I write is stupid, but in reality it has deep meaning.

— Vaslav Nijinsky,
_The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky_ ¹

Almost from the beginning, those who generated graffiti were known as “writers.” Somehow, that designation continues to make sense insofar as the writers chronicle both their personal history and that of their communities. They “write” from a passionate need to belong and, if their need is being accommodated, it is because it is too vital to be denied — because their history must also be acknowledged as our history. And because their writing is art.

Graffiti was created and has been sustained by outsiders. It is a form of self-expression which remains illegal in the city with which it is most closely associated — New York. It is an act of renegade self-assertion that has grown into a visible movement which has been given aggressive cultural credibility in Europe (as in “Painting is now repeating the phenomenon that at the beginning of the century gave us jazz and the blues.”)² but rather timorously avoided at home. Critically and curatorially, it has been left to mature or die in a handful of commercial galleries and on the walls of a few passionately committed collectors. It is suspect because it makes people uncomfortable for some pretty understandable reasons and because, somewhere along the line, dollar valuation reared its nasty little head and, with it, commercial speculation. This is nothing new with art but, for something suspected of being culturally aberrant, the issue of valuation grew all sorts of warts. Had the makers of this work been graduates of any one of the hundreds of art schools flopped belly-up on the shore of creative endeavor, the skepticism would have been less assertively passive. Since, for many of the makers of graffiti-evolved work, academic articulation is supremely irrelevant, that vertical daisy chain which winds into institutional acceptability will not be broken to make room for the degreeless. Yet, to deny these artists is to deny the digital superiority of those children we are rearing to replace ourselves. Indeed, the mind/body coordination which signifies those rapidly maturing children who rule computer strategy is dominant in the mind/body coordination of those art makers who are channeling the jet stream of spray
enamel. Encased in a corona of pressurized fumes, they work with a choreographic agility that caught Twyla Tharp as early as 1972 when she choreographed Deuce Coupe for the Joffrey Ballet using a chorus of graffiti artists to materialize a backdrop in synch with her metronomic dance experiment.

How nice it is to be superior!  
Because really, it’s no use pretending, one is superior, isn’t one?  
I mean people like you and me.

Quite! I quite agree.  
The trouble is, everybody thinks they’re just as superior as we are, just as superior.

— D.H. Lawrence, from To Be Superior

Graffiti has a way of getting people crazy. It bends their sense of proprietorship into a nagging vulnerability. It threatens the fragile skein of urban order — the kind of order that allows one to plummet into the subterranean abyss without fear of meeting Charon rather than a Broadway local. All those hyperkinetic tags and speeding murals have a way of psychically scuttling the hallucinogenic cars which come hurling from the forbidden zone into midtown. Clearly, for the innocent commuters, graffiti is a kind of coding to which they are not privy. That cacophony of names scrawled in fat marker and spray enamel evokes a reaction which challenges Mr. & Mrs. Doe’s most exalted concepts of liberalism. Graffiti is the sign that the other is gaining — may even be winning. Graffiti has become a new kind of Pig Latin, only the children’s linguistic

(Kilroy comes into the plaza. He is a young American vagrant, about twenty-seven. He wears dungarees and a skivvy shirt, the pants faded nearly white from long wear and much washing, fitting him as closely as the clothes of sculpture. He has a pair of golden boxing gloves slung about his neck and he carries a small duffle bag. His belt is ruby-and-emerald-studded with the word CHAMP in bold letters. He stops before a chalked inscription on a wall downstage which says: “Kilroy is Coming!” He scratches out “Coming” and over it prints “Here!”)

— Tennessee Williams, stage directions from Camino Real

For me, graffiti awareness started with “CORNBREAD” scrawled in two-foot-high letters across a railroad trestle in Philadelphia back in the late sixties. Today, CORNBREAD is part of graffiti’s folklore — like a Big John Henry with a can of spray paint. Then, he was a regional mystery. He was also inextricably linked, for me, with Camino Real’s doomed Kilroy, with a “heart as big as a baby’s head.” During that tragic period of forced conscription and complicit deferral, Cornbread was a liberated successor of Kilroy. The name itself wound aromatically through Southern summers into the steamy political realities of a North American nightmare. It smelled like something almost as clearly as it decoded itself as a tag — as a guy making his mark in a world that has sustained maybe one too many genocidal wars and needed a legend or two as clean as Kilroy. For me, Cornbread became an anthem — the promise of solipsistic freedom in the middle of the cattle drive to Viet Nam. I realize that this is a very small, rather dated piece of autobiography but, during that period, graffiti’s poetically rude assertion of self meant a lot — continues to mean a lot. Once you’ve been “them,” you don’t rest all that easy with being “we” ever again.

He hangs in the hall by his black cravat,  
The ladies faint, and the children holler:  
Only my Daddy could look like that,  
And I love my Daddy like he loves his Dollar.

— William Jay Smith, from American Primitive
Now, obviously, popular culture is synonymous with American culture. It is, to borrow a fantasy from George Lucas, the Force. Racing to the end of the limb, I am tempted to assert that Popular Culture is the great American invention. Without it, we would be consumers of a Chautauqua circuit large enough to stuff a black hole. Popular culture, not coincidentally, is superbly available in Manhattan’s graffiti. Here, chorusing out of the blitzed horoscopes of the other New York is a brand new art form — one which has the power to redefine some major esthetic parameters. It is a movement which draws virtually nothing from the sacrosanct patronymy of high art. It has been collaged from what America has made available to those whom it refuses to assimilate — who have been forced to piece their world together through the funhouse mirrors of media and commerce.

...All hail
You people with the cleverer hands, our suppliants
In the beautiful country; enjoy her season, her beauty, and come down
And be supplanted; for you also are human.
— Robinson Jeffers, from Hands

While, in the mid-sixties, graffiti was little more than some very literal handwriting on the wall; by the mid-eighties, it has become an established form of expression for an emergent urban culture. From the isolated evidence of one man’s dominion, there formed a cloud of names that gave birth to an alphabetic din drifting south from the Bronx Badlands to Kantor and Ebb’s “If I can make it here, I’ll make it anywhere”—fantasy of New York, New York. The initial litany of names — Taki 183, Julio 124, Sly II, Phase 2, Topcat, Ali, Futura 2000 — grew until the names weren’t enough anymore and the “style wars” began. In the tunnels and on the elevated, Philadelphia Style gave way to Broadway Elegant and Bubble convulsed into Bar. Soon, the increasingly complex calligraphy demanded ever larger presentation and graffiti writers plugged into narrative accessories which expanded on and complimented the lettering. Ultimately, narratives of conscience and aspiration took over the entire subway cars which, previously, ran unpropagandized to yet another unremarked Johannesburg from yet another uncontested Soweto.

Have you ever seen an inch worm crawl up a leaf or a twig, and then clinging to the very end, revolve in the air, feeling for something to reach something? That’s like me, I am trying to find something out there beyond the place on which I have a footing.
— Lloyd Goodrich, Albert P. Ryder

As the haze of paint continues to stream from aerosol cans onto canvas, something shifts in the art world. A new medium and a range of colors (colors that simply weren’t in the world before) demand signification. The writers were always artists, only now they have conjuncted with a moment in history where appellation signifies new aspiration. Something truly remarkable has come into the art world with graffiti. Where it ends is speculation; where it is, is exciting. I think Claudio Bruni had it right back in 1979 when he asserted that the graffiti writers were “the new protagonists of American art”.8

Richard Flood
Footnotes


The title of the exhibition was suggested by Lee Quinones’s designation of himself as a “Rapid Enamelist.”
Selected Bibliography

An enormous amount of material has been written on graffiti. The following bibliography is far from complete but should provide a viable starting point for the interested.

Books


Catalogues


Articles


DeAk, Edit. “Train as Book.” (Culture is the most fertilized substance.) Artforum 37 (May, 1983): 88-93.


BLADE, In Memory of …, 1984, 32 x 44 inches
Kenny Scharf, *Double Bubble Emotion and Trouble*, 1983-84, 84 x 69 inches
PART, *Fudge*, 1984, 96 x 204 inches
A-ONE, *Liquid*, 1983, 60 x 126 inches
PHASE 2, *Crystal Phase*, 1984, 96 x 132 inches
LADY PINK and Jenny Holzer, *The Breakdown Comes When You Stop Controlling Yourself and Want the Release of a Bloodbath*, 1983, 120 x 120 inches
LEE, Study for "The Bearer," 1983, 14 x 11¼ inches
Catalogue

Paintings

1. A-ONE (Anthony Clark)
   Liquid, 1983
   Spray enamel on canvas
   60 x 126 inches
   Lent by Hubert and Dolores Neumann, New York

2. BLADE (Steven Ogburn)
   In Memory of . . . ., 1984
   Spray enamel on canvas
   32 x 44 inches
   Lent by Stellweg Seguy Gallery, New York, and the artist

3. DAZE (Chris Ellis)
   Anger, 1983
   Spray enamel on canvas
   90 x 48 inches
   Lent by Hubert and Dolores Neumann, New York

4. DUSTER
   If I Were in the Art, 1984
   Spray enamel on canvas
   53 x 156 inches
   Lent by Hubert and Dolores Neumann, New York

5. FUTURA 2000 (Leonard McGurr)
   Interkosmos, 1984
   Spray enamel on canvas
   108 x 84 inches
   Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

6. THE ARBITRATOR KOOR (Charles William Hargrove, Jr.)
   Through the Columns KOOR's Remanipulator, 1983
   Spray enamel on canvas
   72 x 128 inches
   Lent by Hubert and Dolores Neumann, New York

7. LADY PINK (Sondra Fabara) and Jenny Holzer
   The Breakdown Comes When You Stop Controlling Yourself and Want the Release of a Bloodbath, 1983
   Spray enamel on canvas
   120 x 120 inches
   Lent by Lewis and Susan Manilow, Chicago, courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

8. LEE (Lee Quinones)
   Three Deaths on a Hill, 1984
   Spray enamel on canvas
   99 ¼ x 87 inches
   Lent by Herbert and Lenore Schorr, Briarcliff Manor, New York

9. PART
   Fudge, 1984
   Spray enamel on canvas
   96 x 204 inches
   Lent by Gallozzi-LaPlaca Gallery, New York

10. PHASE 2
    Crystal Phase, 1984
    Spray enamel on canvas
    96 x 132 inches
    Lent by Gallozzi-LaPlaca Gallery, New York

11. QUIK
    R. I. P., 1984
    Acrylic spray paint on canvas
    60 x 82 inches
    Lent by Stellweg Seguy Gallery, New York, and the artist

12. RAMMELLZEE
    Untitled, 1983
    Spray enamel and marker on board
    32 x 160 inches
    Lent by Herbert and Lenore Schorr, Briarcliff Manor, New York

13. Kenny Scharf
    Double Bubble Emotion and Trouble, 1983-84
    Oil and spray enamel on canvas
    84 x 69 inches
    Lent by Edlis/Neeson Collection, Chicago

14. TOXIC
    Let's Lose Your Mind, 1984
    Spray enamel on canvas
    72 x 74 inches
    Lent by Gallozzi-LaPlaca Gallery, New York

15. United Graffiti Artists
    Collaborative No. 1, 1972
    Spray enamel on canvas
    24 x 36 inches
    Lent by Gallozzi-LaPlaca Gallery, New York
1. A-ONE (Anthony Clark)
   A-ONE, 1983
   Spray enamel and marker on paper
   3⅛ x 12 inches
   Lent by Norman Dubrow, New York

2. THE ARBITRATOR KOOR (Charles William Hargrove, Jr.)
   Three Dimensional Letter “K”, 1981
   Marker on board
   3⅛ x 10⅜ inches
   Lent by Norman Dubrow, New York

3. LADY PINK (Sondra Fabara)
   M. T. A., 1983
   Marker on paper
   10 x 7⅛ inches
   Lent by Norman Dubrow, New York

4. LAK (Ricardo Lakenpool)
   Untitled, 1984
   Ink and marker on board
   30 x 29 inches
   Lent by Jerry Kearns, New York

5. LEE (Lee Quinones)
   Study for “Three Deaths on a Hill,” 1984
   Ink and pencil on paper
   11 x 8½ inches
   Lent by Norman Dubrow, New York

6. LEE (Lee Quinones)
   Study for “The Bearer,” 1983
   Ink on cardboard
   14 x 11⅝ inches
   Lent by Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

1. Henry Chalfant
   BLADE, 1980
   Color photographs
   6⅚ x 29⅛ inches (image)
   10⅓ x 34⅝ inches (frame)
   Lent by the artist

2. Henry Chalfant
   DIEN ROLIEO, 1982
   Color photographs
   10 x 46 inches (image)
   14 x 50⅜ inches (frame)
   Lent by the artist

3. Henry Chalfant
   DOC, 1980
   Color photographs
   6⅞ x 41⅛ inches (image)
   11⅛ x 47½ inches (frame)
   Lent by the artist

4. Henry Chalfant
   LEE, 1979
   Color photographs
   8⅞ x 33 inches (image)
   12⅝ x 37½ inches (frame)
   Lent by the artist

5. Henry Chalfant
   LEE, MONO, 1980
   Color photographs
   6 x 40 inches (image)
   11⅞ x 46⅛ inches (frame)
   Lent by the artist

RAMMELLZEE, Untitled, 1983, 32 x 160 inches
6. Henry Chalfant  
   *NOC, Stylewars*, 1981  
   Color photographs  
   5\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 31 inches (image)  
   9\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 35\(\frac{3}{16}\) inches (frame)  
   Lent by the artist

7. Henry Chalfant  
   *QUIK*, 1980  
   Color photographs  
   8\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 34 inches (image)  
   12\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 38\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches (frame)  
   Lent by the artist

8. Henry Chalfant  
   *RAUL, Wayne Sach*, 1982  
   Color photographs  
   8\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 43\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches (image)  
   12\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 47\(\frac{3}{16}\) inches (frame)  
   Lent by the artist

9. Henry Chalfant  
   *SAB, Kaye*, 1982  
   Color photographs  
   8 x 40\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches (image)  
   12 x 45 inches (frame)  
   Lent by the artist

10. Henry Chalfant  
    *SEEN, Hand of Doom*, 1980  
    Color photographs  
    5\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 29\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches (image)  
    9\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 33\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches (frame)  
    Lent by the artist

11. Henry Chalfant  
    *SEEN, Mitch*, 1980  
    Color photographs  
    8\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 41 inches (image)  
    12\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 45\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches (frame)  
    Lent by the artist

12. Henry Chalfant  
    *T-KID, Booze (Cocaine)*, 1983  
    8 x 40\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches (image)  
    12\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 45 inches (frame)  
    Lent by the artist

13. Robert Smithson, Robert Fiore  
    *Untitled*  
    Black and white photograph  
    6\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 9\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches (image)  

14. Volvo Advertisement, 1974  
    Malcolm Kirk (photo)  
    John Danza (copy)  
    13\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 9 inches  
    Courtesy Scali McCabe Sloyes Inc., New York
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