AMERICAN

Graffiti



Margo Thompson

Author: Margo Thompson

Layout:
Baseline Co Ltd,
33 Ter – 33 Bis Mac Dinh Chi St.
Star Building, 6th Floor, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

© Parkstone Press International, New York, USA
© Confidential Concepts, Worldwide, USA
© A-One
© Cey Adams
© Blade
© Henry Chalfant
© ChrisDazeEllis
© CRASH
© DASH
© DEZ
© DONDI, Estate of Dondi White
© Eric Drooker
© Evil 136
© The Famous Artists
© All images created by Lin "QUIK" Felton; used with express permission only
© Futura 2000
© 'Gothic futurism,' rocks the galaxy!!!
© Jenny Holzer
© Lady Pink
© Lask
© Mitch 77
© NOC 167
© Phase 2
© Lee Quinones
© Kenny Scharf
© SEEN
© Taki 183
© TATS CRU
© Toxic
© West One
© Andrew "Zephyr" Witten

All right reserved.
No parts of this publication may be reproduced or adapted without the permission of the copyright holder, throughout the world. Unless otherwise specified, copyright on the works reproduced lies with the respective photographers. Despite intensive research, it has not always been possible to etablish copyright ownership. Where this is the case, we would appreciate notification.

ISBN: 978-1-78042-929-8

Margo Thompson

American Graffiti

PARKSTONE INTERNATIONAL


ROY

Contents

Introduction 6

Subway Writers 29

Graffiti Art and the East Village
Art Scene, 1980-1981 87

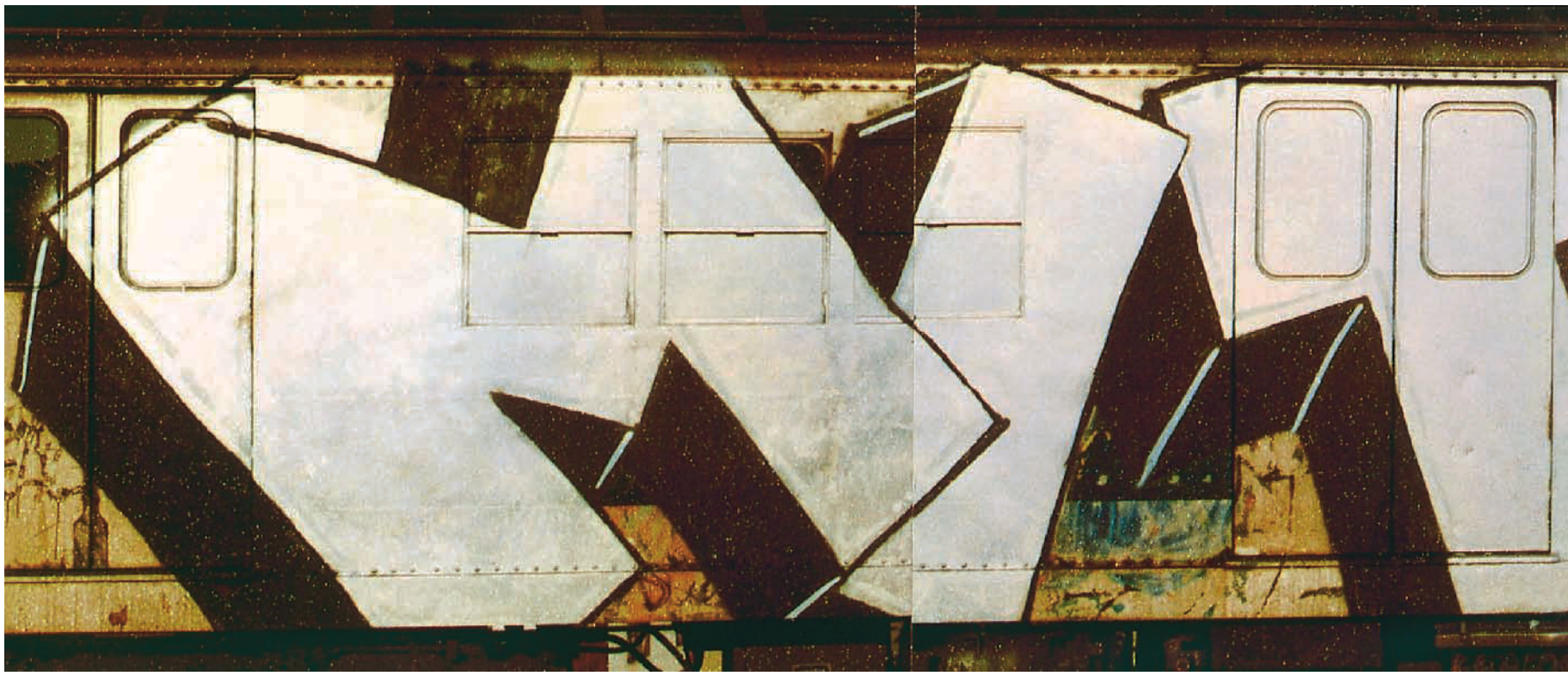
Graffiti in Galleries 143

Graffiti After Post-Graffiti 193

Notes 248

Bibliography 251

Index 254



Introduction

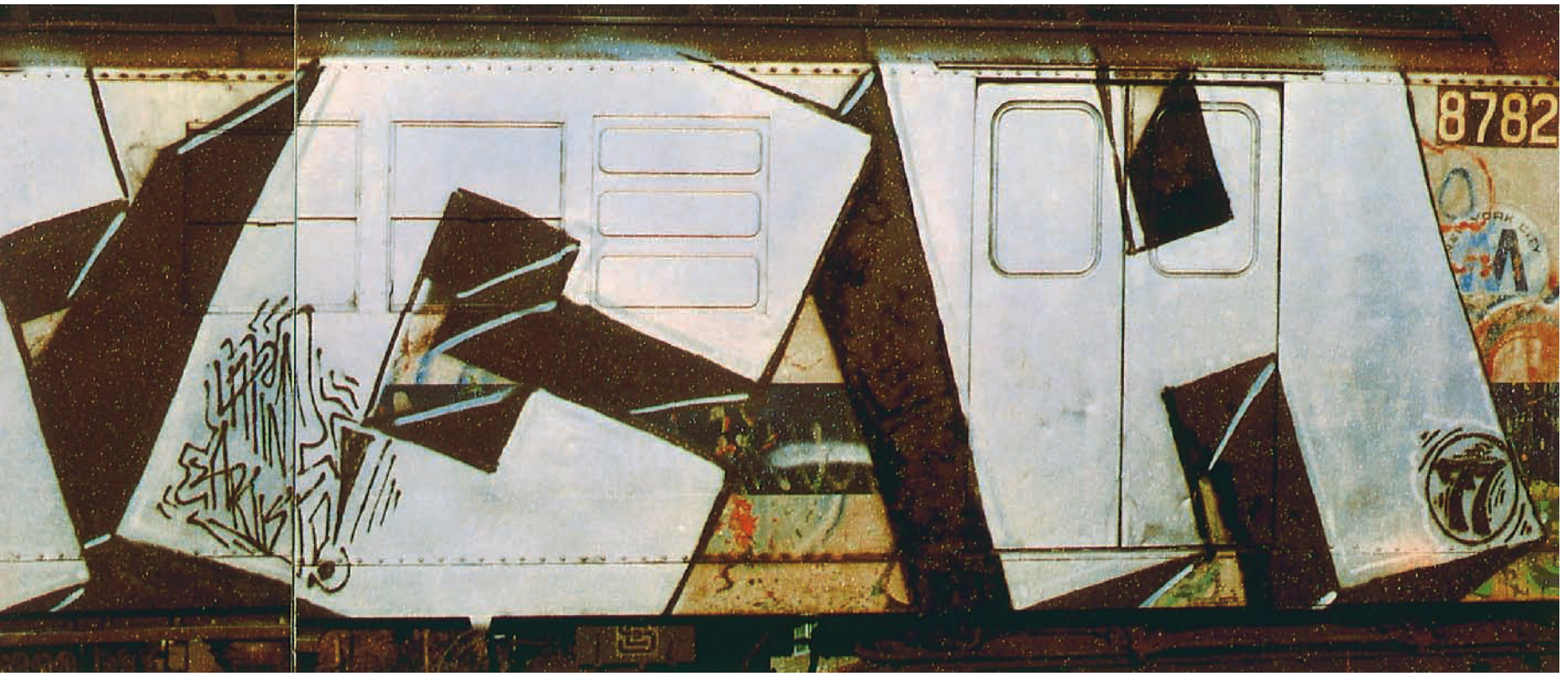
Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf are graffiti artists according to art historians and critics, and so are the painters, later featured in galleries, who began their careers 'writing' on or 'tagging' New York City subway cars.[1]

The graffiti art movement began with shows at Fashion Moda, the Fun Gallery, the Mudd Club, and other exhibition spaces that opened in the early 1980s, and expanded into the established galleries of SoHo, 57th Street, and the Basel art fair. It ended just a few years later when critics, dealers, and collectors turned their attention to new trends. In the decades since graffiti art's heyday, Basquiat has had retrospective exhibitions, a foundation was established devoted to Haring's legacy, and Scharf continues to test the boundaries between high art and popular culture. However, subway writers on the whole have not received sustained attention from art historians and critics of art of the 1980s. Considering them as a distinct group of graffiti artists who gave the movement its name and lent it 'street cred', we can learn something about the way the New York art market of the 1980s assimilated a subcultural, vernacular art form produced for the most part by racial and ethnic minorities and the terms on which it was accepted.

Haring developed a reputation for drawing cartoonish figures in subway stations. Scharf actually painted on a subway car or two with spray paint, after meeting some

EVIL 136, *Tag*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on brick wall. New York.

MITCH 77, *Whole car tag*, 1981. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.



writers. Both men acknowledged, though, that they came to graffiti art 'crossing over in the other direction', as Haring said, from writers who began their careers by tagging trains and public walls and later translated their designs to permanent surfaces.[2] They both studied at the School for Visual Arts in New York, and they shared a studio. Haring had arrived in the city from the hinterlands of Kutztown, Pennsylvania, and Scharf came from Los Angeles. They were intrigued enough–Scharf said he was 'hypnotized'–by the spontaneous art they encountered on the sides of subway cars to try their hands at similar public displays.[3] Basquiat, by contrast, came to the New York art world from the same direction as subway writers: moving from public spaces to commercial ones. He had earned a certain reputation writing gnomic phrases under the name of SAMO in 1979. SAMO was ubiquitous in some neighbourhoods in lower Manhattan, especially near art galleries.

There are a number of reasons why subway writers have not received the serious attention their more famous peers have enjoyed. For one, the 'pieces' on which their careers were founded, the whole-car compositions that captured the public's attention–both positive and negative–have all been destroyed. Another reason these artists are often overlooked is graffiti's strong association with hip-hop culture, which ties it to the mass market, not high art. As interest in graffiti art waned, a number of former writers developed careers as graphic artists while Basquiat, Haring and Scharf managed to transcend their paintings' allusions to the mass media and achieve recognition as fine artists. These distinct career trajectories were set early, as a consequence of the language critics used to analyse graffiti art: Basquiat, Haring and Scharf were awarded an art historical lineage, while subway writers rarely were. This is not to say that subway writers did not receive positive notices in reputable art magazines—they did. But their paintings

STAR III and **various artists**, *Tags*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.


5898
CHICO
CHICO
CHICO
FLY
SAB
HONDO
MIKE


SOUTH FERRY
VAN CORTLANDT PK
5898
CHICO
TRAC II

remained strange and exotic even to their fans: as one writer, DAZE put it, 'Graffiti was this language that they wanted to get to know on a superficial level, but they didn't want to be able to speak it fluently'.[4] This book seeks to correct that perspective, by taking seriously the writers' ambitions and achievements.

One history of graffiti art would trace it back to the cave paintings of Lascaux, by way of Roman latrinalia, Kilroy, and similar acts of anonymous mark-making. The aesthetic this genealogy suggests, of letters and pictures urgently scratched onto public walls, connects with some mid-twentieth century painters whose brushwork resembles calligraphy, like Cy Twombly, or whose figures seem crude and untutored, like Jean Dubuffet. The palimpsest that graffiti builds up over time brings to mind Robert Rauschenberg, whose accretions of images from mass culture are rich and layered. Yet graffiti art derived from subway writing was in fact innocent of these influences, at least until the artists discovered them and, in Basquiat's case, consciously appropriated them. Art historian Jack Stewart, in the first scholarly study of subway writing, argues persuasively that the tags and pieces that first appeared in New York City between 1970 and 1978 were a unique efflorescence, having no connection to any known high-art source.[5] The writers agree: even those who harboured ambitions to be fine artists from an early age honed their skills within the highly organised writing subculture. They furthermore rejected calling what they did graffiti, a term imposed by the official state culture that wanted to eradicate it. 'Graffiti' designated what they did as criminal vandalism. They preferred to call their activity 'writing,' and I have used that terminology wherever possible to distinguish between what was written on the trains and what was painted on canvases. Writers insisted that their paintings should not be called graffiti, because they were made legally and for a different audience than their tags and pieces. As at least one writer recognised, calling their paintings graffiti suggested a limit to their iconographic and stylistic advancement: how much could the paintings change and still fit that designation? Nevertheless, art dealers, critics, and the artists themselves accepted the label 'graffiti art', albeit with various degrees of enthusiasm, and I use the phrase for its historical context. The following chapters establish the parameters of the movement by giving their pieces (to the extent that documentary photographs permit) and paintings the formal analysis that has been absent from existing accounts of graffiti art.

Writers developed their styles in a hierarchical system of apprenticeship, where aspiring taggers made contact with more established ones, who critiqued their designs worked out in hardbound black sketchbooks, gave them tags to copy, and perhaps invited them to participate in executing a masterpiece–a large-scale composition covering most or all of a subway car. A young writer might join a crew whose writers he admired, and prove himself by advancing the group's signature style. By devoting hours to his craft, he would master aerosol techniques, become familiar with the palettes of various spray-paint manufacturers, learn the subway lines, lay-ups, and yards, and develop a distinctive tagging style of his own. He might eventually be recognised by his peers as 'king' of a particular subway line, if his tags were ubiquitous enough and his style was impressive. Basquiat, Haring and Scharf did not participate in this well-established and self-perpetuating writers' academy. With the exception of some tags on the inside of subway cars, Basquiat's public writing was limited to the black block capital letters with which he wrote nihilistic aphorisms as SAMO. Haring drew pictures in chalk on the black paper covering expired advertisements in subway stations, using a lexicon of ideograms of his own devising. Scharf did spray paint some graffiti in imitation of the writing he admired, but cannot be said to have been a part of that culture. The frame of reference, source material, and aesthetic of these three artists differed significantly from each other, and from subway writers.

Given the stylistic disparity and the different contexts in which the artists first developed, what was the basis on which the category 'graffiti art' was consolidated? There was a critical discourse that established graffiti art as a significant trend in the early 1980s. Art critics worried over issues of authenticity,

GREG, *Untitled*, 1977. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.

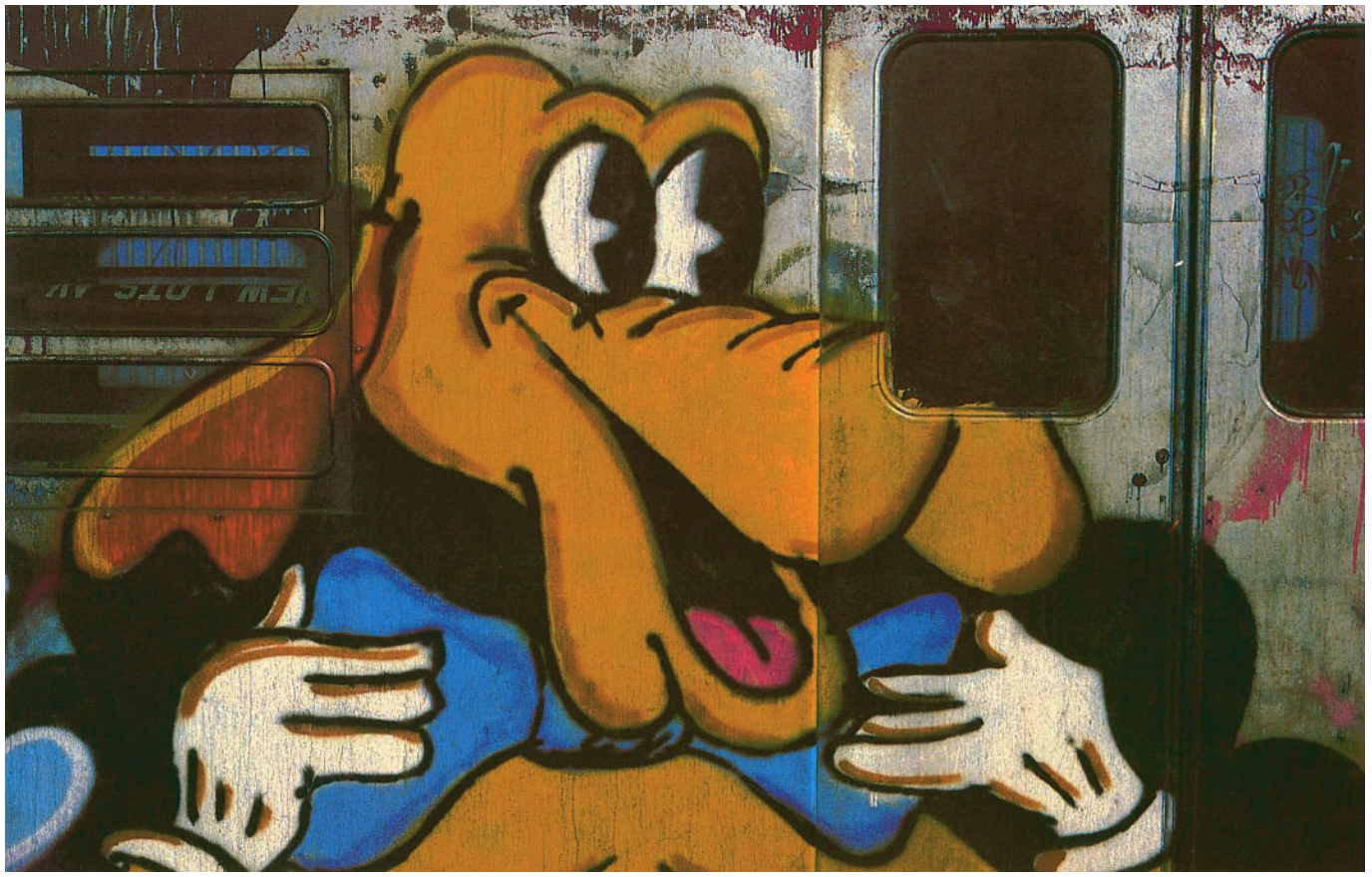
Various artists, *Cartoon Characters*.


THE BAD ARTIST!


UNITED
ARTISTS


7940
8608
9128
SORRY AMMO
DYRE AVE
UTICA AVE
LEXINGTON AV
THRU EXP
PJAY
LYNDAH


3655



primitivism, and the avant-garde in their reviews of graffiti artists. These were the terms by which Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf, and DONDI, FUTURA 2000, DAZE and the other writers were evaluated.

Authenticity

Since the early 1970s, when writers first decorated the outsides of subway cars with increasingly large and elaborate pieces, graffiti found favour among some urban intellectuals as a legitimate form of visual culture that gave voice to a racial underclass. In 1973, Pop artist Claes Oldenburg expressed his delight with the trend:

> You're standing there 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.[6]

Pulitzer-prize winner Norman Mailer wrote a book celebrating subway writing called *The Faith of Graffiti* in 1974. The title came from a remark writer CAY 161 made to Mailer, that 'the name is the faith of graffiti': the tag is fundamental, unique to its owner, not to be borrowed or copied. Mailer described the way graffiti had spread over the urban environment:

> [I]t looked as if graffiti would take over the world, when a movement which began as the expression of tropical peoples living in a monotonous iron-gray and dull brown brick environment, surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and clangor, had erupted biologically as though to save the sensuous flesh of their inheritance from a macadamization of the psyche, save the blank city wall of their unfed brain by painting the wall over with the giant trees and pretty plants of a tropical rain-forest, and like such a jungle, every plant large and small spoke to one another, lived in the profusion and harmony of a forest.[7]

KEY, *Burglar*, 1981. Aerosol paint on subway car. New York.

MITCH 77, *Pluto*, date unknown. New York.

Some writers formed collectives: United Graffiti Artists was organised with the help of Hugo Martinez, a sociology student at City College, in 1972. They exhibited tags on canvases at the Razor Gallery in 1973. Peter Schjeldahl, reviewing the Razor show for *The New York Times*, judged the paintings as lacking in structure, but strong in the use of colour, and he singled out a few artists for their especially striking tags in the collaboration to which all the UGA members contributed. Most significantly, he observed that the works on canvas extended the 'show-off ebullience' of the tags seen city-wide on trains and walls. The efforts of the 'ghetto kids', with their 'volcanic energies', were 'unstoppable'. Those 'youths, having found an exciting outlet for their rage for identity, are not likely to drop graffiti', Schjeldahl predicted.[8] The taggers' motivation to expression their identity gave writing its legitimacy. Because tags were uninfluenced by formal training or high cultural references but were clear, forceful declarations of ego, they had an authentic quality. To Schjeldahl, the tag was all about asserting the subjective presence of the writer, but the style with which it was executed was more difficult to evaluate because it had no reference outside writing culture. It was inevitable that the distinction between writer and tag would collapse immediately. Tags and writers spoke for themselves in a visual idiom of their own, a form of subcultural communication impervious to whomever else might be looking on.

On canvas, however, the tag seemed less a matter of faith than a trademark reproduced on demand, and this threatened the authenticity attributed to illegal graffiti. In the studio, writers no longer worked only for themselves and their peers, but for a broader public. Furthermore, the paintings were evidence that they now wanted to please this audience, whereas their tags in the subways aggressively claimed the space in a way that many perceived as menacing.

Primitivism

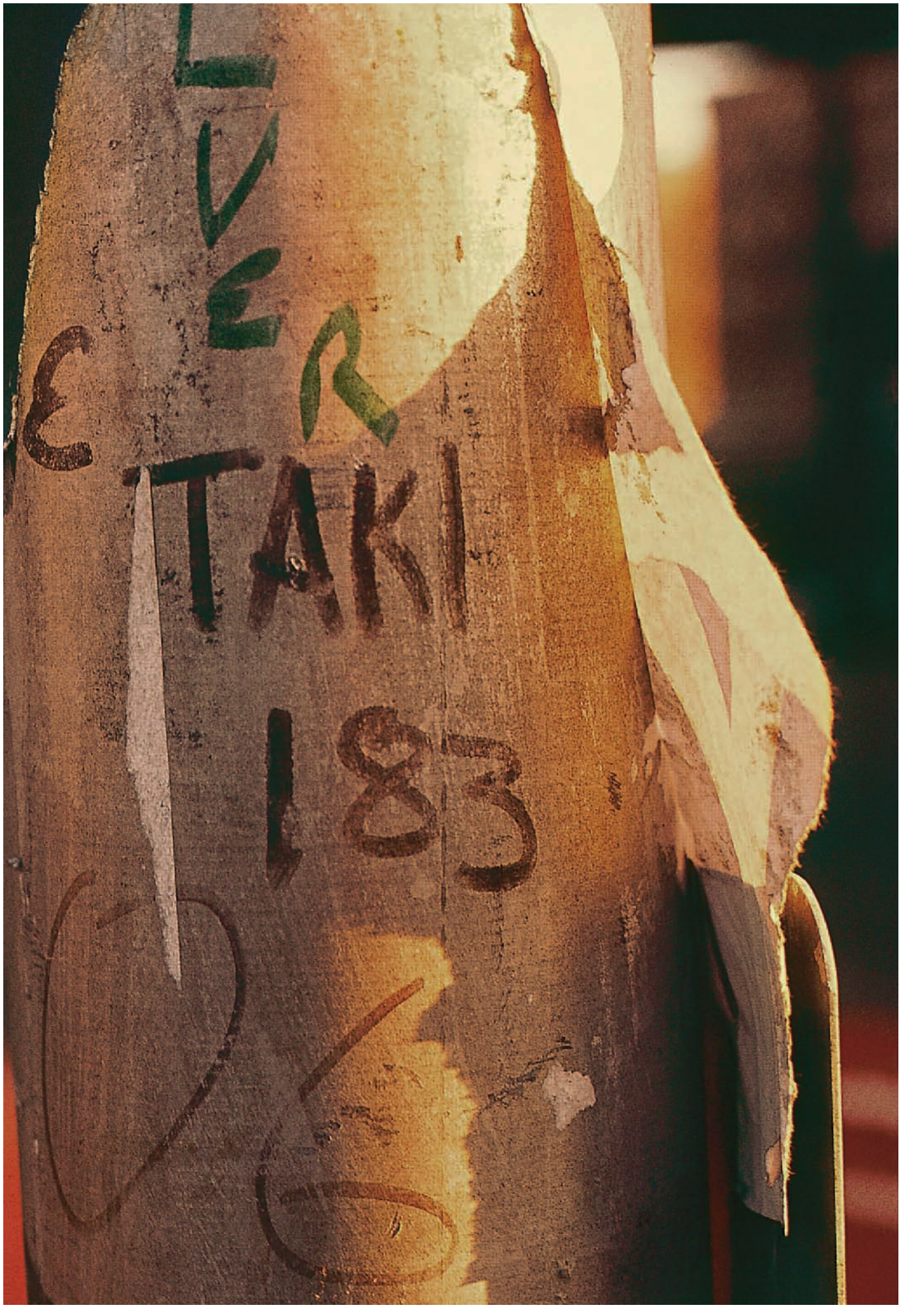
One of the strategies modern art has used to renew itself is primitivism, the appropriation of forms and motifs from non-Western cultures that are constructed as less civilised and closer to nature than Western society. For example, in the early twentieth century Picasso and Matisse solved the problem of how to represent a modern female form by referencing tribal sculpture from Africa. Primitivism is an attitude that reveals much about white, European society, and next to nothing about the non-European cultures that it has dubbed 'primitive'. Primitivism does not account for the power and complexity of African, Oceanic, Native American, or Caribbean cultures, but labels them exotic and finds in them certain predictable traits: these Others are represented in the West as simpler, more intuitive, less inhibited. Very often, these stereotypical qualities are judged desirable by the Westerner, such as Gauguin's Tahitians painted to represent mysticism and sensuality. In the so-called primitive Other, the primitivist finds his preconceptions about himself as sophisticated and civilised and the Other as naïve and natural to be confirmed. Subway writers knew that art world players viewed them with fascination and suspicion but with little real awareness of writing culture or even what it meant to depend upon the subway for transportation. The relationship of dominant culture to subculture that framed graffiti art is paradigmatically primitivist.

Oldenburg's and Mailer's choice of words in the quotations above demonstrate how primitivism paved the way for the acceptance of graffiti art in the early 1990s. Graffiti, they marveled, is a 'bouquet from Latin America', made by 'tropical peoples' who import the 'giant trees and pretty plants of a tropical rainforest', the 'jungle', to the grey, mechanised urban environment. To Schjeldahl, it is likewise a force of nature, 'volcanic' and 'unstoppable'. Most of the writers were African American, Puerto Rican or South American, or of mixed racial and ethnic heritage. Their cultural difference was reinforced and made visible in the writers' racial or ethnic identity that set them apart from the predominately white art world. If race was not specifically mentioned in accounts of graffiti art, it was sufficient to locate the writers as 'ghetto kids' from the Bronx or Brooklyn to secure their identity as non-white.

In the primitivist scheme, the writers offered fresh perspectives as outsiders to American society. They held a mirror up to the

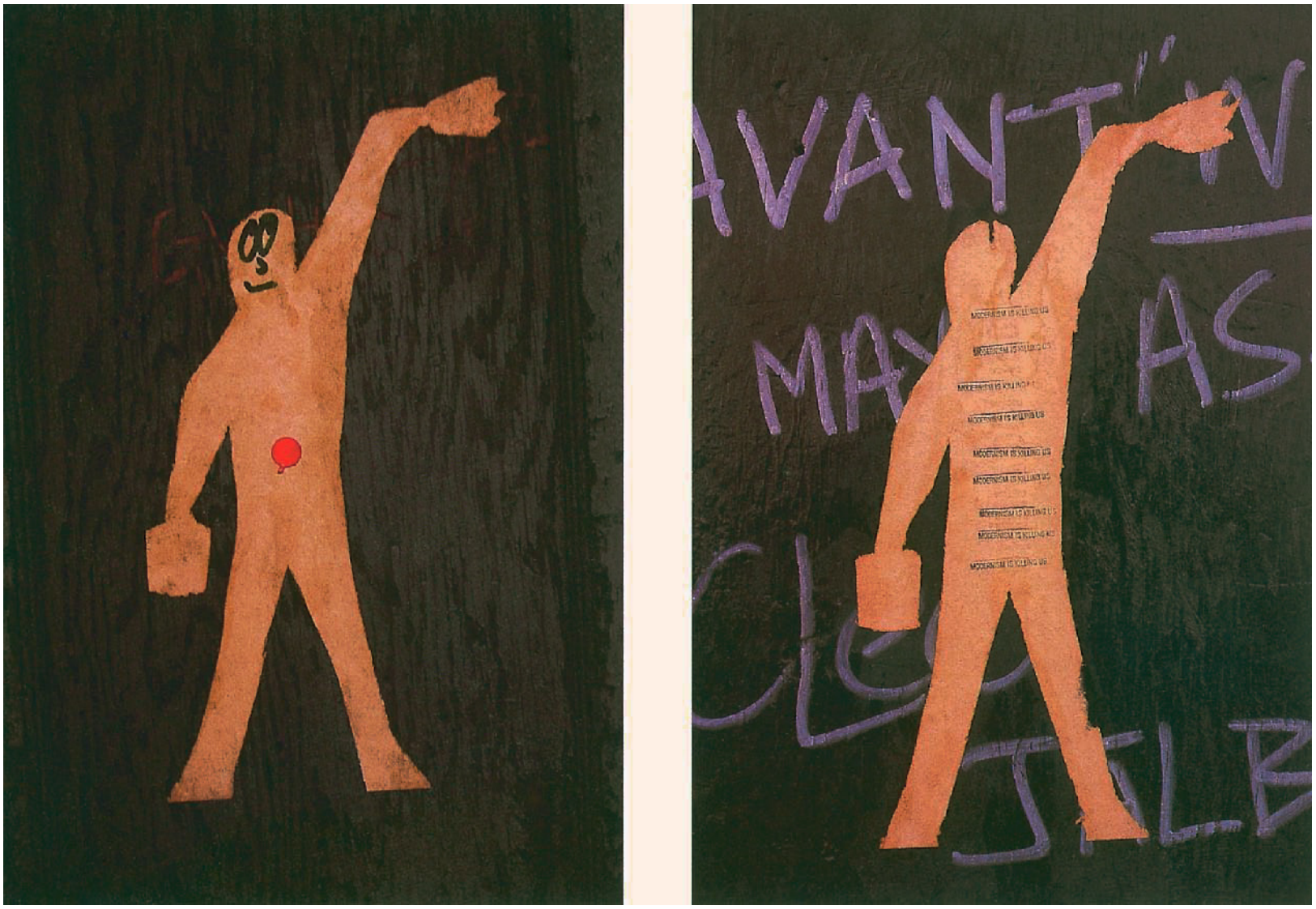
TAKI 183, *Early tag*, date unknown. Marker pen on wood. New York.

Various artists, *Tags*, date unknown. Various materials on truck. New York.


LVER
TAK
183


L DORADO CRUISES
MO 3 4600
TRAVEL PASAJES
OME TAX · INSURANCE TRAVE
CURSION
DODGE
RALPH
TEE 87
John
191
Jucks
ACY
190
"DENNIS"
177 COME
TARLITES
DADY


WRITERS CORNER
Stitch I
FLASH 191
Sniper
Cyco
Sach I
Satern I

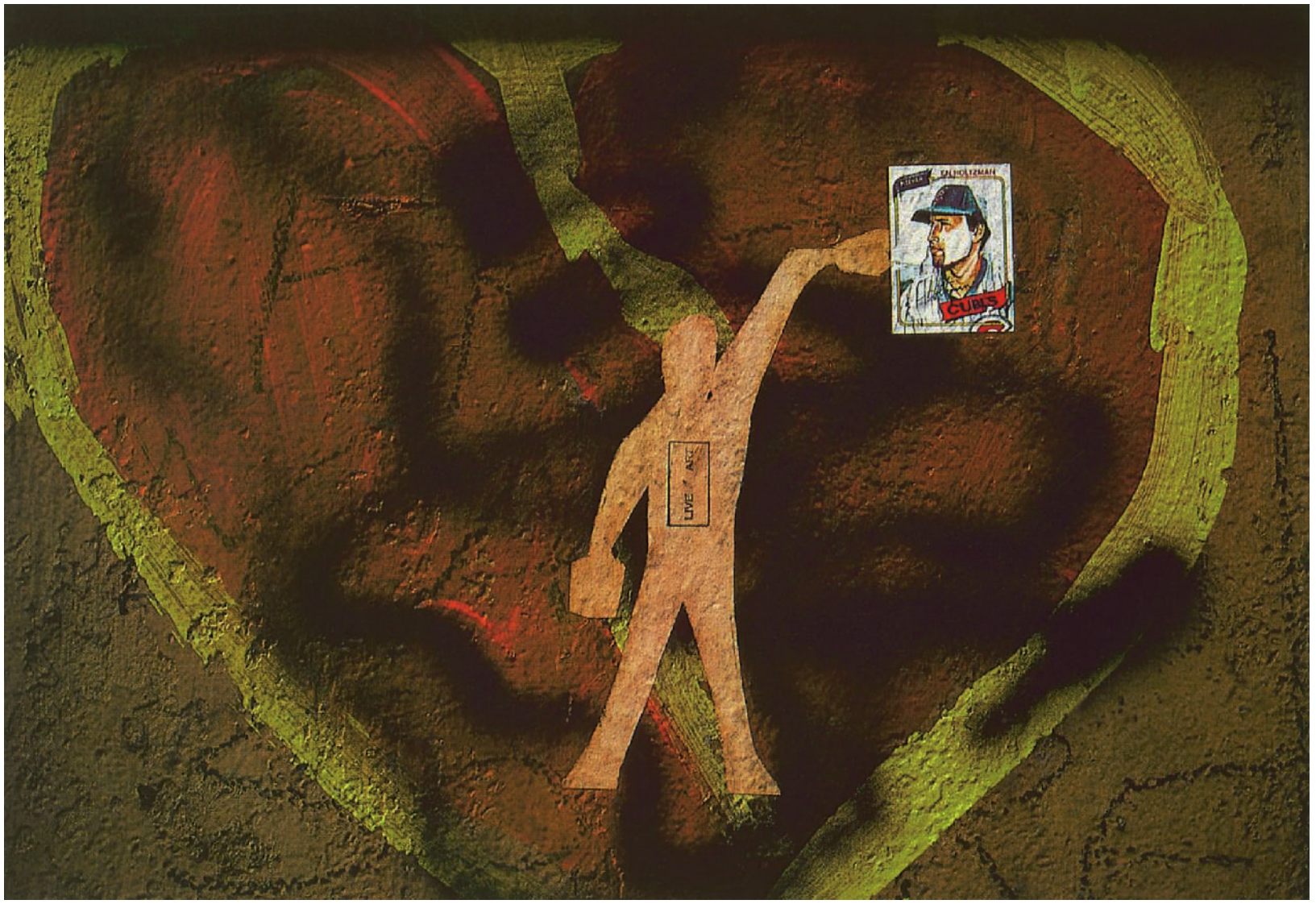


hegemonic culture. Thus it mattered when the artists referenced the mass media or high culture in their compositions, because as a point of contact it helped make the subculture legible to its new audience. Graffiti artists drew exclusively upon American kitsch: cartoons and underground comix, heavy metal music, science fiction illustrations, and psychedelia. But because they did not often borrow from elite Western culture in their paintings, subway writers found it difficult to discourage the belief that they were in fact primitives. Consequently, their moves to develop more sophisticated themes and advance stylistically received little credit: a primitive was locked in a fixed position with regard to dominant culture, authentic but immobile. A primitiv*ist*–a Picasso, Gauguin, Basquiat, or Haring–chose to work with "low" culture's material, and therefore had room to maneuver.

The Avant-Garde

In the late 1970s, the state of the avant-garde in the visual arts was interrogated in discussions about the end of modernism and its implications. A return to painting was widely remarked, with new images and Neo-expressionism complicating the notion of art's autonomy that was the heritage of formalism: these artists blurred the categories of abstraction and representation and

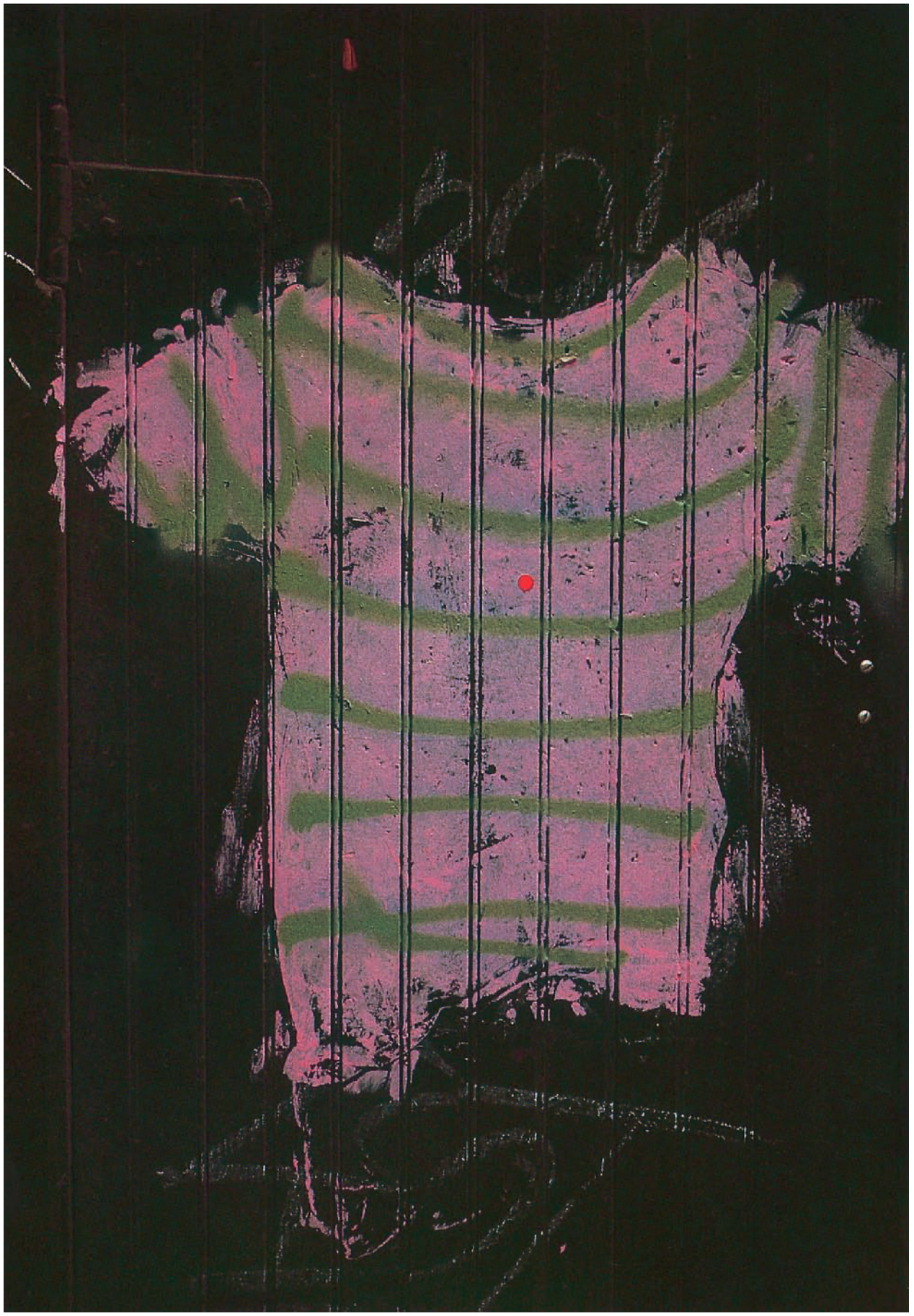
Unknown, *The Painters: Parts 2-3*, date unknown. Paint, ink stamp and paste-up on building. New York.



plundered historical styles and imagery to uncertain effects. Another, more radical avant-garde lived on in artist collectives like Collaborative Projects (Colab) and ABC No Rio that were politically engaged and mounted mixed-media installations to ally themselves with the surrounding communities and to critique social and economic inequities. A third trend that emerged simultaneously was the East Village art and club scene, which with its store-front galleries and local celebrities mimicked the established art markets of SoHo and 57th Street. This was where graffiti art was established. According to art historian Liza Kirwin, East Village artists nurtured fond hopes of being discovered and selling out, and to that end packaged and advertised their new bohemia.[9] Doing so, they departed from the romantic, utopian, or revolutionary ideal of the avant-garde artist as a breed apart from the bourgeois mainstream. Clement Greenberg, in his 1939 article, 'The Avant-garde and Kitsch', defined the avant-garde as engaged in art for its own sake and remarked that it was inevitably connected to its bourgeois audience by 'an umbilical cord of gold'. That vital link, not the alienation or autonomy of the avant-garde, was the salient characteristic of the art produced in the East Village of the 1980s, including graffiti art.

If anyone was responsible for paving the way for artists to embrace the marketplace as chief arbiter of their works' quality,

Unknown, *The Painters: Part 1*, date unknown. Paint, ink stamp and paste-up on building. New York.



Unknown, date unknown. Paint on wooden gate. New York.



Unknown, date unknown. Aerosol paint on building. New York.


CR
PLATE G
COMP SHOES
EXH 17-0 A 8-11
EXH 8-11 HIG-10

it was Andy Warhol. He deserved the blame not just for his breakthrough Pop silk-screened canvases that represented American kitsch to consumers of high art, but also for his films, which featured a clique of performers who acted out their everyday personas before the camera, following the loosest of screenplays. Warhol's films and his first studio, the silver Factory, set a precedent for the self-conscious outrageousness of East Village habitués like John Sex and Ann Magnuson, who performed at Club 57 on St. Mark's Place. Some of Warhol's associates crossed over to become contributing members of East Village society, such as poet René Ricard, who wrote articles lauding graffiti artists. Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf all frequented East Village clubs, and all sought Warhol's support and friendship. In the 1980s, Warhol seemed to be operating on three levels of career promotion at once: series like 'Famous Jews', 'Endangered Species', and the 'Oxidation Paintings' were made for exhibition with no particular audience in mind; portraits commissioned by the rich and famous generated a steady income–Warhol never waived his fee; public appearances at Studio 54 and Elaine's, in advertisements and on television (*The Love Boat*) brought him to the masses. His crossover appeal to consumers of both high and low culture signaled to graffiti artists that they could show canvases in galleries for the art world elite, and maintain their reputation in the street by painting subway cars at the same time. FAB FIVE FREDDY registered his familiarity with Warhol with his 1980 Pop Art train, where Campbell's Soup cans lined up in a whole-car masterpiece. Warhol modeled the role of famous artist, and as the most visible living artist in New York City when FREDDY was coming of age, it was inevitable that the younger painter and his subway writer friends would recognise fame as the stamp of aesthetic validation.

When Warhol emerged as part of the Pop art movement in 1962, there was no established critical vocabulary with which to interpret his paintings for the public. Formalist concerns with flatness and medium dominated talk about painting, thanks to Greenberg's persistent influence, but these were hardly applicable to silk-screened representations of soup cans, celebrities, and car crashes. Nevertheless, Warhol had galleries to represent him in New York and Los Angeles, and eager buyers. Twenty years later, the secondary market established that his paintings were good investments (although Warhol complained in his *Diaries* that his contemporaries Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns beat his prices at auction). For the generation of artists that came after Warhol, there was no single dominant critical voice or curatorial position that applied to contemporary art across the board. In the case of Neo-expressionism, the brash figurative painting style that graffiti art overlapped, several prominent critics took vehement stances for and against its value as an avant-garde, radical gesture. But what captured the public's imagination more than these intellectual disagreements, were the expert marketing ploys that the artists and their galleries mobilised to establish the significance of the return to large-scale, gestural painting. Critics might howl in protest, but Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, and Georg Baselitz, among others, became art stars: their market popularity, stoked by their dealers, proved their quality. In the absence of a unified or compelling art criticism, the significance of an artist's oeuvre was measured in dollars.

The twin strategies of Warhol-style self-promotion and market validation propelled the East Village art world, which had its own talent, dealers, and press and sneered at the SoHo and 57th Street gallery districts even as it emulated them. Nightclub owners invited artists to curate exhibitions that, not incidentally, drew customers. Visual artists, musicians, and performers collaborated on multi-media spectacles at clubs, too. Artists rented small storefronts to show works they and their friends had made. Liza Kirwin characterised the East Village as 'a community whose greatest ambition was to sell out', in contrast to past bohemian communities, which articulated resistance to the middle-class norm.[10] She documented the reaction among specialised art magazines and the popular press, which was to mock the neighbourhood and its resident artists as juvenile poseurs. With art, the market, and the bourgeois buyer so intertwined in the East Village, it was obvious to critics that the art that was most promoted was least performing its critical, avant-garde function–at least they could agree on this negative assessment.

PRE, *Tags as CRISPO*, date unknown. Aerosol paint on freight train cars. New York.