A photograph of a man in a dark jacket and cap spray-painting a subway train car. He is holding a spray can in his right hand and gesturing with his left hand. The train car is metallic and has some graffiti on it. The background is dark and blurry, suggesting an underground setting.

SUBWAY ART

MARTHA COOPER
HENRY CHALFANT

SUBWAY ART

Martha Cooper & Henry Chalfant

With 153 photographs



First published in the United Kingdom in 1984
as *Subway Art* by Thames & Hudson Ltd,
181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QK

This edition 2015

Subway Art © 1984, 2006, 2015
Thames & Hudson Ltd, London

Photographs © 1984, 2006, 2015
Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording or any other information
storage and retrieval system, without prior
permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-28212-9

Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset
Printing Co. Ltd

To find out about all our publications, please visit
www.thamesandhudson.com
There you can subscribe to our e-newsletter,
browse or download our current catalogue,
and buy any titles that are in print.

On the cover

Fred Dondi painting, New Lots Yard, 1980. (1)
Bark CC Yard as playground, the Bronx, 1982. (2)

Previous pages

1 Dondi painting in the New Lots Yard,
Brooklyn, 1980. (1)

2-3 *Art vs. Transit* (the "vs." already scribbled off the
window) by Duro, Shy 147, and Kae 207, 1982. (1)

This page

"Seen 'J'ay Kel" and "Blade," South Bronx, 1980. (1)

*Our heartfelt thanks to writers everywhere.
With your skills and passion you changed
our lives and brightened the face of the world.*

Thanks also, from Henry, to Max Heppenrother and
Nathan Fox, who digitalized and stitched the trains.

Contents

"Why don't you photograph graffiti?" Martha Cooper 006

"If art like this is a crime, let God forgive me." Henry Chalfant 007

SUBWAY ART 008

"We may have lost the trains ..." Martha Cooper 124

"... but we've gained the whole world." Henry Chalfant 126



In Memory of Dondi, Shy 147,
Smily, Panama, and Caine 1

“Why don’t you photograph graffiti?”

— HE3



What first attracted you to graffiti?

In 1975 I moved from Rhode Island to New York City with the goal of becoming a photographer for a big city newspaper. At the time graffiti was everywhere, but I had no idea what it was. Even when I was able to decipher the letters, I didn't know what they meant. In 1977 I landed a job as a staff photographer on the *New York Post*, a tabloid owned by Rupert Murdoch. We covered assignments in all neighborhoods from the Bronx to Brooklyn and worked out of our cars using two-way radios. In addition to news, we were supposed to look for feature photos called “weater shots.”

I began driving through the Lower East Side on my way back to the paper every day to see what I could find and to finish up the roll of film in my camera before developing it. As a personal project I began photographing kids playing creatively on the street — building clubhouse, making go-carts from scrap, or jumping on mattresses. One day a boy I had photographed flying pigeons showed me his notebook of drawings and said, “Why don’t you photograph graffiti?” He explained that he was sketching his nickname, “HE3,” and showed me how he had painted it on a wall. This was a revelation! I finally understood that graffiti was mostly kids writing their names. I thought, “Wow! These kids are designers!”

Graffiti is an illegal activity. How did you establish credibility with the writers so that they allowed you to photograph them?

Because I expressed so much interest in graffiti, HE3 offered to introduce me to a “King” who turned out to be Dondi. By luck, Dondi had clipped one of my photos from the *Post* that happened to have one of his pieces in the background and pasted it in the front of his black book. The photo had a credit line so he recognized my name. Dondi generously described the complicated process of painting

a train, from design to paint procurement to yards entry to execution. He taught me graffiti terminology and introduced me to other writers. The more I heard about the culture, the more I wanted to photograph it, even though I hadn't spent much time looking at trains.

What approach did you take to photographing graffiti?

I was working as a photojournalist, but I had also studied anthropology in graduate school and was married to an anthropologist. I was interested in capturing the art of graffiti within the context of the culture. I also wanted to document techniques. I was intensely curious about the specifics of painting a piece on a train, and I needed to spend time in the yards in order to understand this. I did not begin seriously watching trains until after I had spent a night in the New Lots Yards watching Dondi and Duro paint a whole-car top-to-bottom piece. After that, I began driving up to the Bronx to look for locations where I could get a clear view of trains. This turned into obsessive behavior, as I was soon getting up before dawn to catch the morning rush hour and sometimes spending five hours standing in the middle of a vacant lot in the Bronx trying for the perfect shot that combined good light with a great piece and an interesting contextual background. As the Bronx was then full of burned-out buildings, this was a fairly risky endeavor. In 1980 I quit my well-paying union job at the *Post* in order to spend more time shooting graffiti and documenting the emerging hip-hop scene.

How and when did Henry and Martha meet?

For a couple of years I had heard that there was someone else photographing graffiti, but I didn't know who this was. In 1980 Dondi, or maybe Zephyr, told me that this photographer was showing his train photos at the OK Harris gallery. I went to the opening and met Henry for the first time. I was surprised, and somewhat relieved, to see how he was photographing trains because I had assumed that his photos would be something like mine. Instead he had concentrated on the

artworks, shooting the graffiti and eliminating the context. Henry doesn't remember this, but when I met him my leg was in a cast because I had just returned from Cleveland Island in the high Arctic where I had spent the summer photographing an archaeological dig for *National Geographic*. I had had a mishap with a mask ox and torn a ligament — but that's another story.

How did *Subway Art* come about?

After I met Henry, he invited me to come to his studio. I was impressed by the large collection of train photos he had arranged in large portfolios. When I saw some of the wonderful pieces I had missed, I redoubled my efforts and began to spend even more time shooting trains. For a while we informally competed to see who could catch fresh trains first. The writers were happy that they had two photographers vying for photos of their work. We often got messages on our answering machines telling us when new pieces were running.

I had hoped to publish some of my photos as a magazine article and had sent a proposal around without success. So I began to think about a book and asked Henry if he would like to collaborate, because I felt that we would have a better chance of finding a publisher with a combination of both of our styles of shooting. We spent many hours putting together a dummy, laboriously pasting up complicated layouts, as this was years before we had computers. We called our book *Art Transit*.

We then made discouraging rounds of publishers in New York. Although we found a few editors sympathetic to the subject matter, no one was willing to print such a controversial book. We decided to try our luck at the 1982 Frankfurt Book Fair. Our dummy was so heavy that we had to make a special case for it and wheel it around, but our efforts paid off when Thomas Neurath of Thames & Hudson agreed immediately to publish it.

He returned the book *Subway Art* and the first edition of 5000 copies came out in the fall of 1984. None of us expected that graffiti would become a worldwide phenomenon.

When I arrived in New York in 1973, I was a sculptor. I found a ground-floor loft in SoHo where I made pieces in stone and wood, working in a modernist idiom and becoming increasingly alienated because the art world had embraced conceptual art and minimalism. Other sculptors were calling up suppliers and ordering, for instance, plaques of copper or a certain cut of putting stone and having that delivered to the gallery for exhibition. This was thought of as being true to materials. Art critics were talking about the “exhaustion of form,” and this had begun to affect my own motivation to create. I began watching the flourishing and rapidly evolving art on New York City's subways, which provided the more expressive visual experience that I was missing in the galleries. I remember going to the *Rancor Gallery* in 1973 and seeing cartoons by Phase II, Mico, and others. I immediately ran out and bought Jon Nair's *Path of Graffiti*.

As a newcomer to New York, I didn't know the subway system very well, so it took me a while to learn that the trains ran outside on elevated tracks as well as in the tunnels. As soon as I realized this, I saw the possibility of getting good pictures and I began to explore ways to shoot them.

Intervale Avenue was my favorite photo spot. The station, on the 2 and 5 lines in the Bronx, is perfectly situated for the morning sun. It sits on a terrace that once soared over a valley of burned-out buildings, the ruins of the Ghetto Brothers' clubhouse, and the last operating synagogue in the South Bronx. No buildings rise to appear in the background view, which made for a denser space between photos in my studio. Another feature of the station was the layup on the center track. Trains were parked there during the weekends along the stretch from Jackson Avenue to Intervale, Prospect, and Simpson.

The layups were important, as I found out in the summer of 1977 when I came across the Fabulous Five Crew's “Merry Christmas” married-couple parked at Intervale Avenue. That's when I started taking pictures in sequence, because when I walked out onto the catwalk to get the picture, I couldn't get back from the train far enough to cover one whole car in a single shot. As a sculptor, I was used to making site-proposal models incorporating panoramic photo backgrounds, which I would create by taking several overlapping shots of the area surrounding the site and splicing them together. I began using this technique to document the art on the trains. To photograph one subway car idling on the station platform, I would shoot four or five overlapping pictures. I had to be able to position myself opposite the desired car and take the photos, moving fifteen feet or so between each shot in the few moments when the train passed in the station. Later, in my studio, I would cut and splice the prints together so that they reproduced

the whole artwork, and then I would mount them in an album or on museum board for exhibition. After a couple of years I got a motor drive for my camera and that made it easier, because I could position myself opposite the front quarter panel of the painted car and wait for the train to pull away, snapping the shutter as the image moved through the viewfinder. I felt that under the circumstances this method was the best way to get a full close-up view of the artwork. I was more interested in capturing a beautiful, ephemeral work of art than in taking a beautiful picture as a photographer.

It was an accident of geography that I took so many photos of the BRT trains. Those lines ran through my neighborhood on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a short distance from Harlem and the Bronx. The greatest number of trains ran in the morning rush hour, which increased my odds of finding a good piece. The north-south orientation of the lines meant that the morning light, coming over my shoulders as I faced west, was right for photos. 125th Street on the 1 line was the closest elevated station to my home. I could make a quick run up there to catch a shot of a train as it briefly emerged from the underground before diving back into the tunnel. It was hard to anticipate where a piece might be placed on the train, and there was no time to run from one end of the station to the other when the train paused. But there were two stations — Whitlock Avenue in the Bronx on the 6 line, and East Tremont

Avenue — where you could get a side view of an approaching train before it arrived in the station.

Several years after I had begun to photograph pieces on trains, I met some graffiti writers at the “writers' bench” in the 149th Street station in the Bronx, where kids used to gather to watch trains, compare stories, exchange black books, and plan future excursions to paint. They were the core group of writers who were most active on the lines at the time. Through them I got to know other writers from all over the city and we began a very good working relationship that was to last for years. I would supply pictures and they would let me know what was going on. When they finished doing a new piece, writers would often leave a message on my answering machine, telling me what they had painted, in which layup or yard, the line it would run on, and whether it was on the “morning” or the “afternoon side.” Armed with such information, I knew where to go to catch the piece. I was always working against time, since I could never be sure if a piece would remain intact

for very long. Someone might cross it out or “blast” it. I felt like I was stalking rare big game when I went out to take pictures of graffiti: the same disappointment when you lose a great burner, and the same elation when you catch it.

After I had gotten to know some of the writers, they would tell me that there was also a “lady” who was out there taking pictures of trains. I also heard that this lady named Martha “had a lot of heart” and had actually gone to the yards to photograph the artists at work. Around this time, I showed my photo collection to Ivan Karp, who owned the well-known OK Harris gallery on West Broadway in SoHo. Ivan invited me to have a small show for a week at the beginning of September 1980. I put up about twenty photos and waited. Word had gotten out in the graffiti network and writers came in droves from all over the city, and Marty came with them.

After we met, Marty and I often talked and shared information. Each of us had plans to make a book. After beating our heads against the wall alone, we finally decided to pool our resources and try to do a book together. We realized that our ways of approaching graffiti were completely different and complementary, since Marty was a professional photographer and her photos revealed the ambience and the context of the art on the trains, while my method of photomontage emphasized the artworks themselves.

There was, at the time, a tremendous antipathy to what was seen as a graffiti plague. A trustee

“If art like this is a crime, let God forgive me.” — Lee

of the Museum of Modern Art once said to me, “Those people should be lined up at dawn and shot.” But finally, through Marty's connections in the European photojournalism world, we found our way to the Frankfurt Book Fair, where we met with Thames & Hudson, who agreed to do the book.

Over thirty years after the initial publication of *Subway Art*, the graffiti movement is alive and well in the world. There is a community of artists and enthusiasts who cross all borders and, with the internet and affordable travel available to young people, graffiti has become an international youth culture. The art form has evolved greatly through this multicultural mixing, and through the development of new tools and techniques. New forms of street art are flourishing, having adapted the graffiti artists' tactics of expropriating public space for making a public statement. Most importantly, graffiti has given a voice to the people. *Subway Art* was one of the vehicles that brought this movement to life and may it be an inspiration to people everywhere for decades to come.



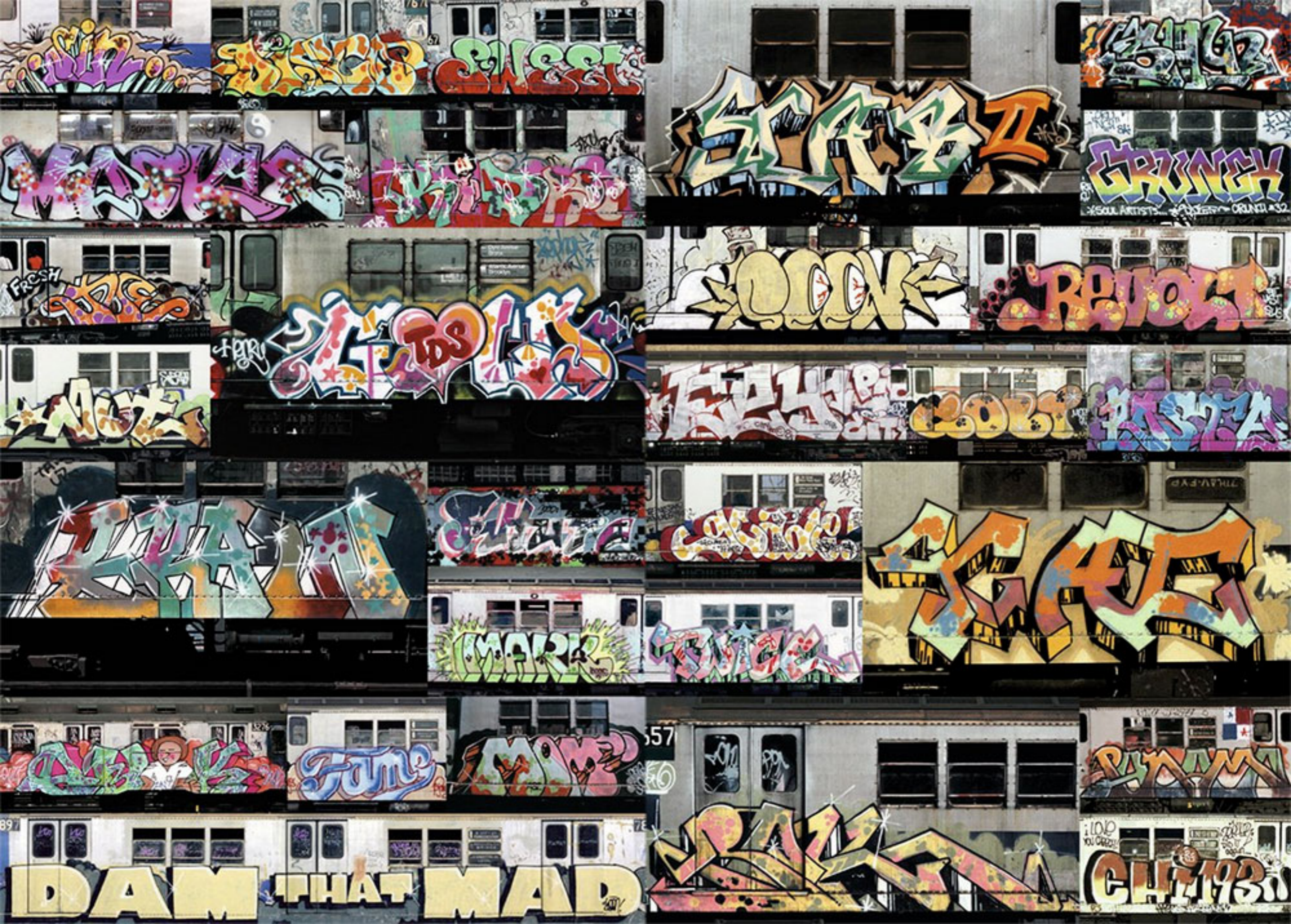
Blind, 1980. MFA



Deez and Skeme entering the yards, 1982. [w/](#)



Deez on lookout with a baseball bat in the 3 Yard, Manhattan, 1982. [w/](#)



767
Purple and yellow graffiti

Orange and yellow graffiti

Green and red graffiti

Large green and orange graffiti

Green and blue graffiti

Purple and pink graffiti

Pink and green graffiti

Large green and orange graffiti

GRUNGEY
SOUL ARTISTS
GRAND #32

FRESH
Orange and purple graffiti

Large colorful graffiti with a heart

Yellow and white graffiti

Orange and pink graffiti

Yellow and green graffiti

Large colorful graffiti with a heart

White and red graffiti

Purple and blue graffiti

Large 3D graffiti with stars

Colorful graffiti

Yellow and red graffiti

Large 3D graffiti with yellow and orange

Large 3D graffiti with stars

Green and yellow graffiti

Colorful graffiti

Colorful graffiti

Blue and white graffiti

Colorful graffiti

57
Large colorful graffiti

Orange and yellow graffiti

097
DAM THAT MAD

Large colorful graffiti

1010
YOU CREEPY
CHI 1930



REVOLUTION
PART II
ANOTHER
BOLD MOVE
PROUD...

WORLD WAR III

SOATC
SOE BONE
TAKING
ZERO

1982

224

125

223

352



Following pages

50-51 Cops in the train, the Bronx, 1981. ©
 52-53 Min, Duro, and Sly 147, New Lots Yard, the Bronx, 1981. ©
 54-55 "Diner State" in wild style and straight letters, 1982. ©





"I Love Zoo York," by AJ, 1981. ©



"Noc is Back," 1982. ©



"Eel Min," 1983. ©



"T-Rid Booms," 1982. ©



"Ed," 1978. ©



"Bada Delores," 1979. ©



"Sean Del," 1980. ©



"Duro Kat Pw," 1981. ©



Following pages

86-87 "Moby" with yellow school bus, 1982. ©

88-89 Style Wars, by Noc 107, 1981. ©

90-91 Del, by Ben2, 1981. ©

92-93 "Chase2," 1981. ©



