



VANDALS AND CRUSADERS

by **Henk Pijnenburg & Frank Essink**
for www.historyofgraffitiart.com

COLOFON

Vandal And Crusaders

The Liberation of I

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TABLE OF CONTENT

Graffiti, Jung, Martin Luther King & Synchronicity	3
The Birth Of Graffiti Art	4
The 1980's	6
Graffiti Artists	9
Blade	9
Crash	10
Dondi White	11
Futura	12
Koor	13
Phase 2	14
Rammellzee	15
Seen	16
Quik	17

GRAFFITI, JUNG, MARTIN LUTHER KING & SYNCHRONICITY

Is there a relationship between events in the sixties, the fight for freedom of the black people as symbolised by Martin Luther King with his motto “I have a dream”, and young people “decorating” the interior and exterior of subway cars with their tags? Jung’s concept of “synchronicity” means: the coincidence of multiple events which seemingly have no causal link but show many similarities. Graffiti artists tagging their names on the interior of subway carriages are born from the grave of King. “Tags” as the expression of identity play the same role as once the prehistoric artist praising the imprint of his own hand on the rock face.



Blade, The Names Enclosed Died Before 23, marker on paper, 27,5x37,5cm, 1985 (front) Private Collection

To understand the graffiti movement we have to look back to the sixties of the past century. This period is known as a Graffiti History - Vandals & Crusaders, The Liberation of I reaction to the continental society, hippies as “Homo Ludens” with student riots, and experiments with soft drugs. All over the world minorities started protest movements against many years of suppression. The Afro Americans in the United States of America were one of these minorities. Many European countries, including the Netherlands - where in 1629 the West Indian Company had been founded - , have transported millions of slaves from Africa to the United States of America from 1501 onwards. Here, black people lost their dignity because white people forced them to use their name instead of their original African names. The “X” of Malcolm X (Malcolm Little) stands for a name which most black people have never heard.

THE BIRTH OF GRAFFITI ART

In 1967, some young rebellious blacks began to tag their newly invented names on subway trains. They formed several gangs or groups, leaving their message: “Here I am”, “I have a name, so I exist”. The middle of the night, as trains were standing waiting in the lay-ups and the artists had done their preliminary sketches and experiments in black books, was the moment for the King and his apprentices to start decorating the outside of the trains. They used different caps for their spray cans. The invention of the fat cap (to fill in large spaces) meant the same for them as the invention of oil paint

in the Middle-Age for the artist Jan van Eijck. Besides the simple signature tag they developed styles such as the Bubble-, three dimensional-, mechanical-, gothic-, soft crash- and shadow 3-dimensional styles. Everything about the nightly spraying was very exciting and dangerous. To be a graffiti writer meant a struggle with cops and their dogs, informers and sky high fences, and also a struggle with other gangs. Moreover, they fought against the washing machines of the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), who used up to 250 litre of chemicals to clean one car. The fight ended when the so-called Ding-Dong trains with rust-free steel which was very suitable for spray paint, had been substituted for the new "Ridgies" with a surface where the paint could not be applied to.



NOC, Style Wars, photo Henri Chalfant 2/25, 34x129cm, 1981. Private Collection

Graffiti and trains is not a completely new idea. Around 1920 the new Russian government with Lenin sent the so-called Agitprop (agitation propaganda) trains throughout the country to make propaganda for the new socialistic ideas. Mostly black graffiti writers announced with their trains a new and hopeful epoque: Forever Free – To Be an Artist. Graffiti writers are very proud to be Americans. However they asked to be recognized.



Agitprop train (agitation propaganda), 1920

THE 1980'S

A. CONCEPTUAL ART AND NEW MYTHOLOGIES.

December 1980 the art world was surprised by an exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam of the Transavantgarde, an Italian group of artists with Cucchi, Chia, Clemente, and others. The atmosphere during the opening was very thrilling as if everybody was excited to breathe the new life.

This happening meant the end of the period of the conceptual art. Hardly recovered, a real wave burst out. Paul Groot calls it "I - navigation". The German Expressionists Baselitz, Kiefer, Immendorf and Lüpertz, were followed by the "Mühlheimer Freiheit" from Cologne, the "wild painters" from Berlin, the Figuration Libre from France and the graffiti writers from New York. For the newest art it was important to make life concrete, to use personal myths and stories. "Subjectivity" was the key concept. Not one general style, but different styles with quotations or eclecticism. "The concept" was exit; artists had to use their hands to express their ideas.

B. FOR EVER FREE: I'M AN ARTIST.

There is also a direct relationship between the sixties and the eighties of the past century. The struggle for personal freedom in many aspects of the sixties was transferred to the eighties in the fight for freedom of different countries: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Russia and South Africa. In the book "The Third Wave"

(1980) Alvin Toffler predicted the rise of minorities. According to him, national states would come under pressure of minorities which demanded political power and more freedom to define their own interests. The desire for freedom of black people continued to the eighties when they claimed their rights to be artists. Never before in the art history we have seen the development of unique new styles like rap, electric boogie, hiphop and tags and graffiti style wars on trains finally leading to paintings on canvas. The American people have to get rid of the idea that this graffiti is merely a form of vandalism. Graffiti artists are CRUSADERS, expressing their intense desire, built up through centuries of slavery, to be free for ever. "To hell with Creation – as far as I'm concerned, man himself is his own Creator. All I mean by that is that I'm not dependent on my Creator, though I may have been at one time, but now he's dependant on me." ..We've emancipated ourselves by means of all kinds of changes and developments, in the structure of human consciousness and in the physiological processes that go along with them."

"Philosophically spoken human freedom is the key problem in art."(1)

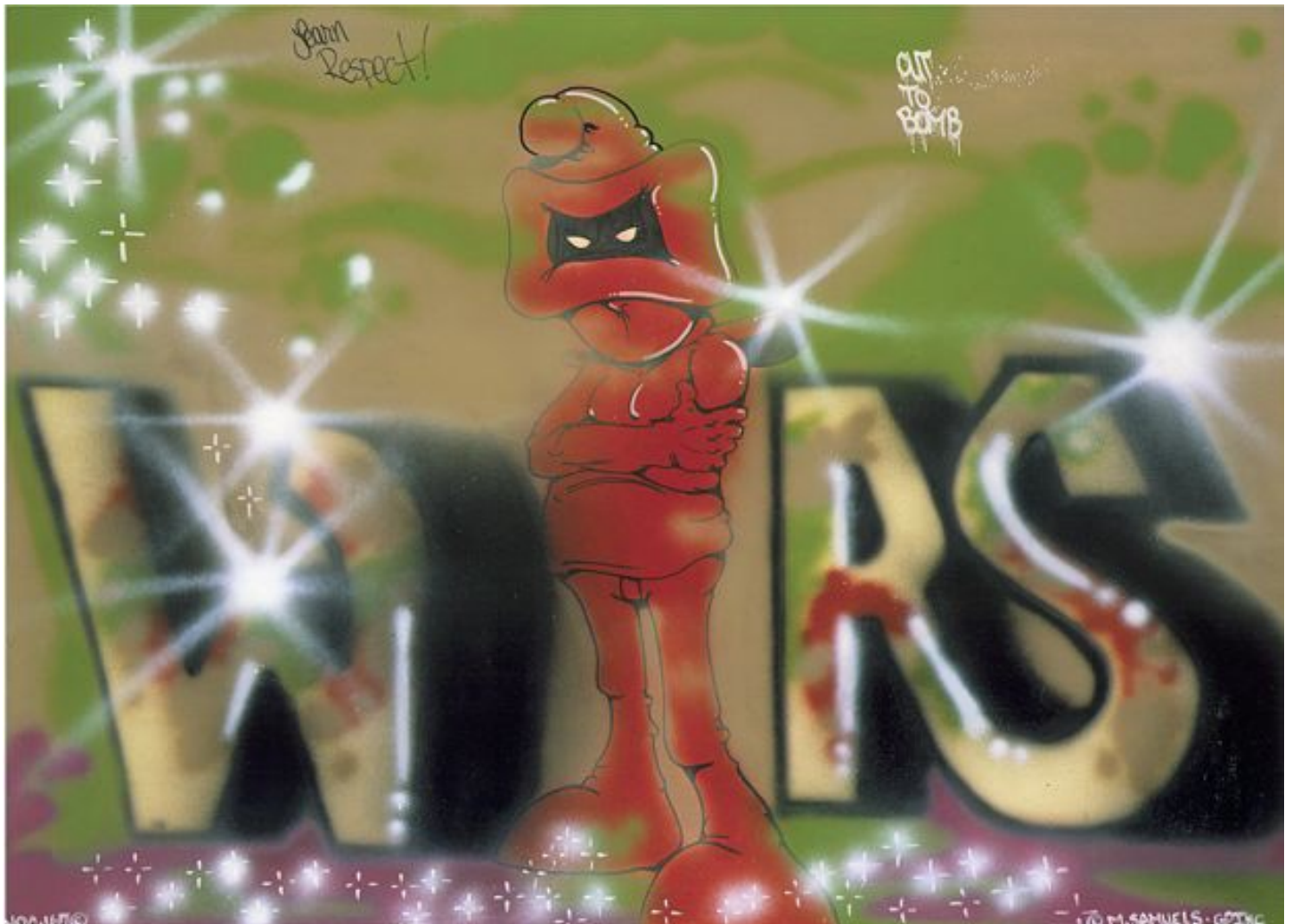
Those quotes by Beuys could certainly be applied to the artists of the graffiti movement. They don't care about creation - their creators, the white people in the United States. After 300 years of slavery, they are casting off what Rammellzee calls "the bands of steel". They no longer wanted to be chained and restricted. Graffiti writers become artists and sing their own praise. For the Americans it is of vital importance to recognize this.



Lady Pink, Street Triangle spraypaint on canvas 198x395cm, 1984/1985. Private Collection

graffiti artists in his gallery in Amsterdam with overwhelming success, followed by many exhibitions in important museums like the Boymans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Groninger Museum and the Louisiana Museum near Copenhagen. Although it is very difficult to fit graffiti artists into categories, it is possible to discern three style groups.

1. The artist which take the tags as point of departure.
2. Artists with figurative elements in their works.



NOC167, Style Wars spray paint on canvas 130x163cm, 1981. Private Collection

3. Artists with a more conceptual or abstract approach. Between group 1 and 2 we often see a combination of both. In every group we find artists which are very involved with the society and the history of black people. Artists like A-One (1964 –2001), Dondi White (1964-1998), Quik, Lee, Noc 167, Phase 2 and Rammellzee are very critically involved with the art world and the American society. Other artists such as Blade, Koor, Crash, Futura and Seen choose for absolute freedom. Finally there are artists with elements of both directions as Blast, Zephyr, Daze and Lady Pink.

GRAFFITI ARTISTS

BLADE



Blade, The Wall, spray paint on canvas 132x232cm, 1983. Private Collection

Blade has chosen for absolute freedom. He is composing his own funky music and plays several instruments. Blade did 5000 trains and is the inventor of the blockbuster letter (1977) and overlapping 3-D letter in 1974.

CRASH

Most paintings by Crash are very pop-art like and have resemblance to the work of Roy Lichtenstein. Big clear figures and characters derived from cartons and comic books, sprayed with bright complementary colours. As the name Crash suggests, all his works have to do with violence: an exploding car, jet fighters, a fire cloud or just an ominous Crash in the Hudson River.



Crash, NYC, attempts to erase my counter culture spray paint on canvas
87x87cm, 1987. Private Collection.

DONDI WHITE

Dondi White who passed away on 2 October 1998 has been regarded as a Style Master General. His soft-sprayed canvases remind us of the history of black people. Dondi is the first artist who predicts the big problems concerning the acceptance of graffiti art in his painting, a letter addressed to the art world, "Dear....., Dark continent of Kings continue the battle above ground..... Yours Truly."



Dondi White, Yours Truly, spray paint on canvas
178x130cm, 1983.
Private Collection

FUTURA

Futura is a versatile artist. He creates very beautiful abstract paintings, soft sprayed like Dondi, and influenced by his employment in the navy military. Moreover he creates various graphic designs, toys, sculptures and music.



Futura, The outburst 1989, Re-Incarnation Principle 80's-90's, especially created for the NY people in Germany, 77x99cm, 1989. Private Collection

KOOR

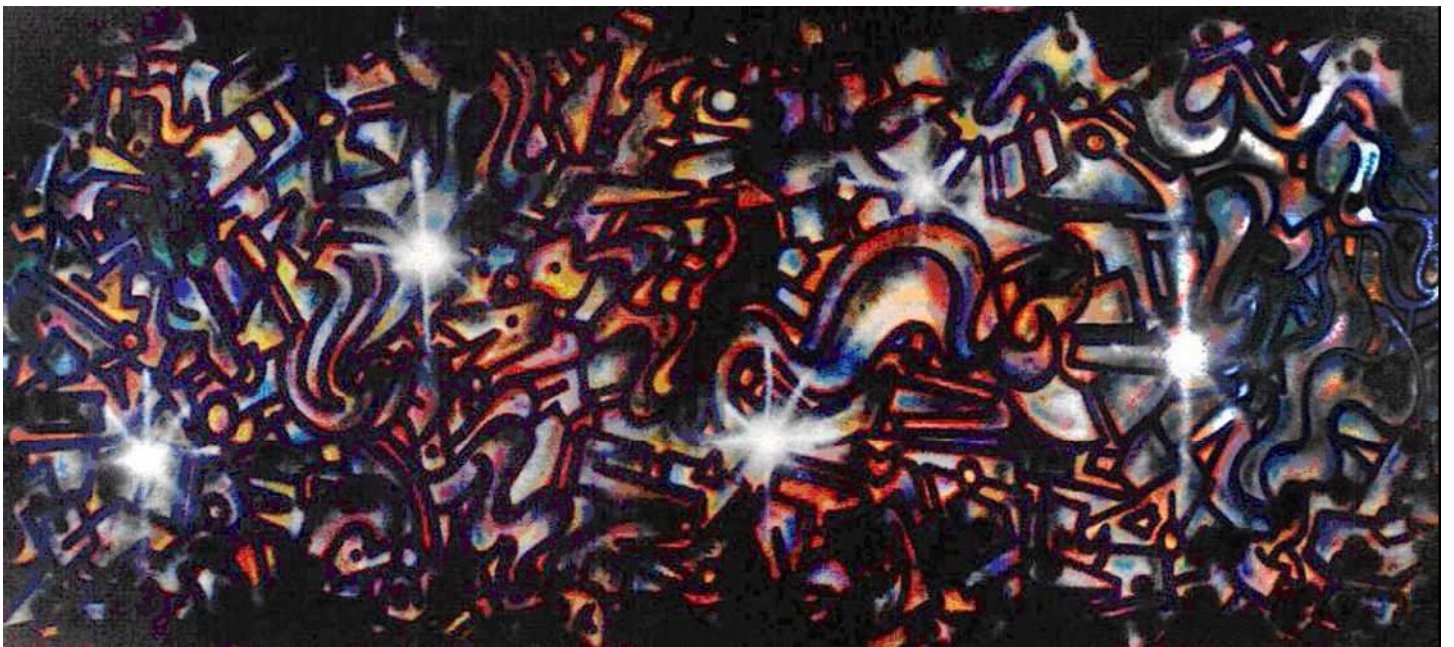
Koor was born into a family of painters and started to draw pictures from an early age onwards. Koor's work is characterised by an enormous sense of freedom, calligraphic signs of freedom. The robot that appears in his drawings is an extension of his own person. His "écrire automatique" is faster than sound.



Koor, The Chosen, spray paint/marker on canvas 108x200cm, 2003. Courtesy Gallery Willy Schoots

PHASE 2

Some of Phase 2's paintings recall the work of Cézanne, although they are not based on the close observation of nature – it is more the inner being of the works that connects them. Cézanne sought a new unity and connection of things without wishing to detract from their individuality. In the painting Majestic Athanasian Confrontation, which is owned by the Groninger Museum, Phase 2 refers to the battle of Athanasius (4th century AD) between the advocates and opponents of the problem whether Jesus Christ is God himself or merely a God of a lower order. This is an issue that still touches the black artist. In 381 AD the 2nd Ecumenical Council in Constantinople proclaimed the Holy Trinity, maintaining the Biblical mystery of the unity and separateness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Like Cézanne, the seemingly abstract painting of Phase 2 rhythmically integrates line and colour in modulations of blue, hiding the name Phase.



Phase 2, Majestic; Athanasian Confrontation, spray paint on canvas 207x454 cm, 1984. Private Collection

RAMMELLZEE

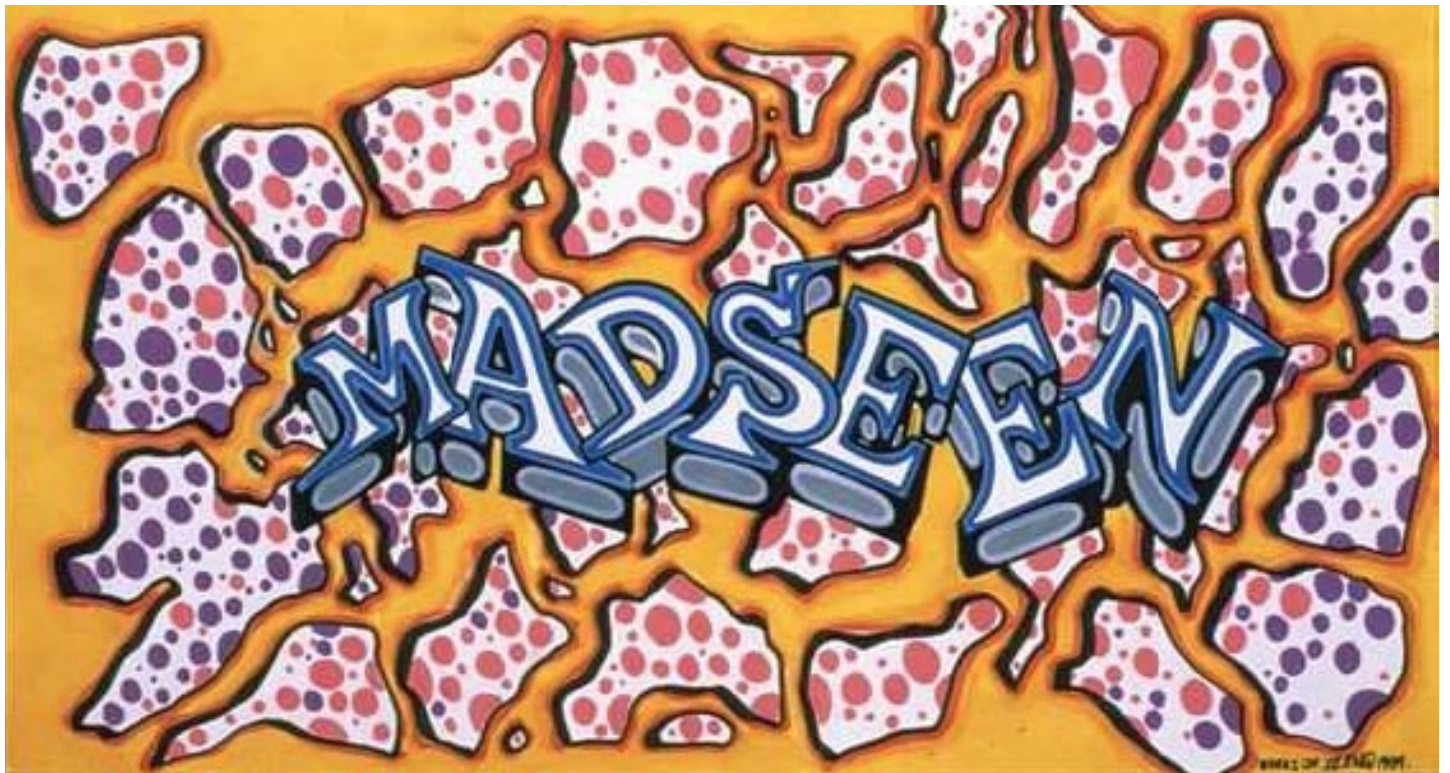
The mythical Rammellzee supposes: “I have no name, I’m no one”. Rammellzee is an advocate of the work that once started with the monks from the Gothic times and links them to the graffiti artists of the subway. Both obscure the pure form of the lettering. The monk of the Middle Ages by decorating the letter in such a way that it became illegible and the graffiti artists by making the letters unreadable in the dead of night to escape from the Metropolitan Transit Authority. Rammellzee continues to draw the line and names himself a gothic-futurist. Besides he is an Ikonoklast Panzerist: a symbol destroyer who breaks open the conventional ideas, thus creating new knowledge with light and renovation. Rammellzee attacks the language system and creates a special costume for every separate letter. By means of essays and formulas he purifies the alphabet of all falsifications and brings the letters back to an autonomic status; deprived of their history he sends his letters, in his own designed rockets, protected along the way by a Mettropposttersizer, to a safe place in the universe. He is doing research as an alchemist in his paintings, sculptures and music. Rammellzee demystifies and mystifies. His art is a “Gesamtkunstwerk” In graffiti art, music, performance, rap, break dancing, design and architecture can be combined, thus giving the movement continually new life.



Rammellzee, Mettropposttersizer Ikonoklast Panzerism, mixed media on canvas, 150x200 cm, 1985.

SEEN

From 1979 until 1982 Seen was King of the IRT Line, the favourite subway line of the older graffiti writers. Seen, like for example Blade and Lee, is honoured King of Graffiti by the amount of trains he's done. Seen worked together a lot with his brother Mad. Mad-Seen became a famous "brand" in the New York Graffiti scene of the 80-ies. It made the two more capable of doing whole trains. Seen worked a lot from sketches and drawings he made before going on trains. Seen loves the simple, big and readable letter style, which makes him very recognisable.



Mad-Seen, marker on paper 45,5x60,5cm, 1984. Private Collection

QUIK

And last but not least, Quik. Quik is whimsical and baroque. He refers in his works to his private life, the society and the art world. He points to the injustice of the white society in relation to minorities. His critical vision is ironic and always shows selfcriticism. Quik reveals in his work the same feeling as the blues in the music of Billy Holiday and Jimi Hendrix.



Quik, War Hero spray paint/marker on canvas 174x260cm, 1990. Private Collection.

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