CULTURATI

Branded as Vandals, Young Graffiti Writers Bomb On

Generation Graf

BY RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

"That's a $50,000 wall," Hugo Martinez sighs, gazing ruefully at the formerly white surface of his Chelsea gallery. His specially designed mobile panels are covered with tag on tentacle tag. "Stop writing on that wall, please," Martinez moans with a familiar sense of futility. No one is listening.

The 30 or so kids who have converged on his gallery to do throw-ups and fill-ins for a new show that opens this Saturday are casually bombing everything in sight, as part of a larger social ritual of getting props. The gallery has become a hive, and Martinez knows there's no way to direct the flow. He'll have to wait until every trace of whiteness is obliterated before plying these kids with panels of clean glass and sheet metal. He's given up trying to get them to paint on canvas: "They're like, Why write on fabric?"

It's been 25 years since Martinez opened his first "aerosol art" gallery in Washington Heights, not far from the legendary Writers Corner of the '70s—an intersection so completely covered with tags that it looked like a tropical garden spray-painted onto the stony Anglo street. Hundreds of kids were merrily defacing this neighborhood, and their infringement would soon spread to the ideal medium for transgressive show-and-tell: the subway. By the early '80s, the signature of New York's decrepitude was a train that had been "wrecked" on the outside and "mopped up" inside, leaving passengers with a sense of strangling in felt-tipped vines. But to Martinez, this cryptic calligraphy was "a statement of collective identity. And this identity is the majority, not the minority. You're the visitor here."

For this activist, graffiti—or graf, as it's called today—has always been about the imposition of a specifically Latino style on alien public surfaces. "It's our art form," Martinez says—and for a while in the '80s, graffiti was the most visible emblem of the mestizo metropole. Hiphop was the essential expression of this new reality, and in hiphop, Martinez explains, "blacks rap and Latinos write."

Yet graffiti never bum-rushed the culture like rap, in part because the best writers were too gentle for the gangsta front the market demanded, in part because their real ambition was to make it in the art world. But the galleries dumped them when the Good People decided they were vandals. Writers became the underclass of hiphop—a perfect reflection of the city's refusal to recognize its enormously vital Latino culture.

Paul Simon notwithstanding, salsa has always been the crossover music that never crossed over. But graf has become an international sensation, with some 3 million kids hitting Martinez's Web site. Thousands of kids in the boroughs bomb on, despite 25 years of active repression. Now in its third generation, the style known as "old school"—angular and signature-derived—has been passed down from legendary writers of the '70s to agile 15-year-olds like Poko. "Let it be known," he'll tell you. "I'm the illest."

Of course, the days of "masterpieces"—those whole-car makeovers of the '80s—have probably passed, thanks to heavily guarded freight yards and $70 million worth of graffiti-proof equipment. But even the Transit Authority admits that only 2 per cent of its windows are tag-free. Attempts to stop the signature scourge by covering panes with Mylar have proven futile; writers quickly learned to peel off the protection. These days, they travel with glass-cutting implements—grindstones and dentists' drills—instead of paint. The crude result, called "scratchees," is an apt reflection of the escalation of hostilities.

Zero tolerance has produced mass scratching, in the quest to hit trains in every borough, a feat known as going "all-city." The struggle for status in the world of young men, always a staple of graffiti, has hardly abated in 25 years. If anything, it's grown more obsessive as the prospect of making a dent in the culture becomes increasingly remote. "Graf is just about seeing you up," says Rehab, who wouldn't know Mary Boone from Lil' Kim. Nor would Mary Boone know that Rehab has never been in rehab ("It stands for Recking Every House and Building"), or that writers wear Gore-Tex boots (they're more expensive).

All this complexity, this elaborate encoding of culture, is lost on the likes of Clyde Haberman, the well-trained reporter for the *Times* who noted recently that "most subway riders seem to regard this mindless scratching as less threatening than the old-style graffiti. . . . But it still leaves an unsettled feeling, a sense that no one is in full control." The price of that foreboding is a control never full enough to stop the vandal hordes, but quite sufficient to kill their dreams.

The impulse to aspire never dies, but what is wished for depends on what society expects. And the public's perception of graffiti as a matrix of chaos and crime has transformed the writer's sense of what his craft is for. If anything, repression has made the magic more intense, and kids are drawn to graf as if to some holy icon. But they no longer think they are style warriors, capable of achieving anything, as the legendary writers of the '70s did. All they know is that tagging confers a kind of majesty, like an urban Xtreme sport. Which is why North Face is to graf as Armani is to white-collar crime.

ROBIN HOLLAND

Hugo Martinez (standing center) and the crew. Top: Blanca Martinez; standing from left: Shear, Poes, Bruz1, Sone, Toske; squatting: Rehab, Nato, Teck

If you can't afford the logo—or even if you can—there is always "racking," a key concept in graf, as it was in the '70s, when stealing spray paint was known as "inventing." To actually buy the paint you used would mark you as a toy. And even today, asking a writer from the Bronx to characterize his peers from Queens will get the following response: "They buy their paint."

But racking has been ratcheted up. These days, it means going into a discount store with a big bookbag and walking out with stuff to sell on the street. The money goes for "shining," or looking good. "The most important thing about graf is, there ain't no buying," says AteBall. "It's against the rules."

This is where the repression of graffiti has led. For with the collapse of aspiration has come a greater affiliation with the gangsta mystique. These days, fame means wearing the smiley slippers at Spofford, or worse. "I did six months in Valhalla," says a beaming 18-year-old. "And I met a lot of famous writers there."

Martinez remembers it differently: "He faced a week of community service." Bragging comes with tagging, and he's convinced that the clothing his writers sport was actually purchased by doting parents. "Their major crime," Martinez maintains, "is lying."

He worries more about the battle between some crews from Brooklyn and the Bronx, which began when a writer named Dolt scarred another named Scuf. The sign of this war is writing over writing, a practice that constantly threatens to erupt into violence. But this brinksmanship is as lost on most subway riders as some armageddon of ants. They cannot see the energy of a culture that will not die. All they can do is keep it down.

"I live in a bad time," says Nato. In his Calvins, he stands out in a room full of North Face—but then, Nato is a white kid from Elmhurst ("I'm proud to represent and not give my race a bad name"). At 23, his life is writing, and his brown eyes pop at the sight of spray-paint cans lying open on the gallery floor. "The fumes," he sighs. "It makes me want to do things."

"Tags, Bombs and Scratches: Emerging Artists From the New York City Streets and Subways" opens January 17 at the Hugo Martinez Gallery, 515 West 27th Street.

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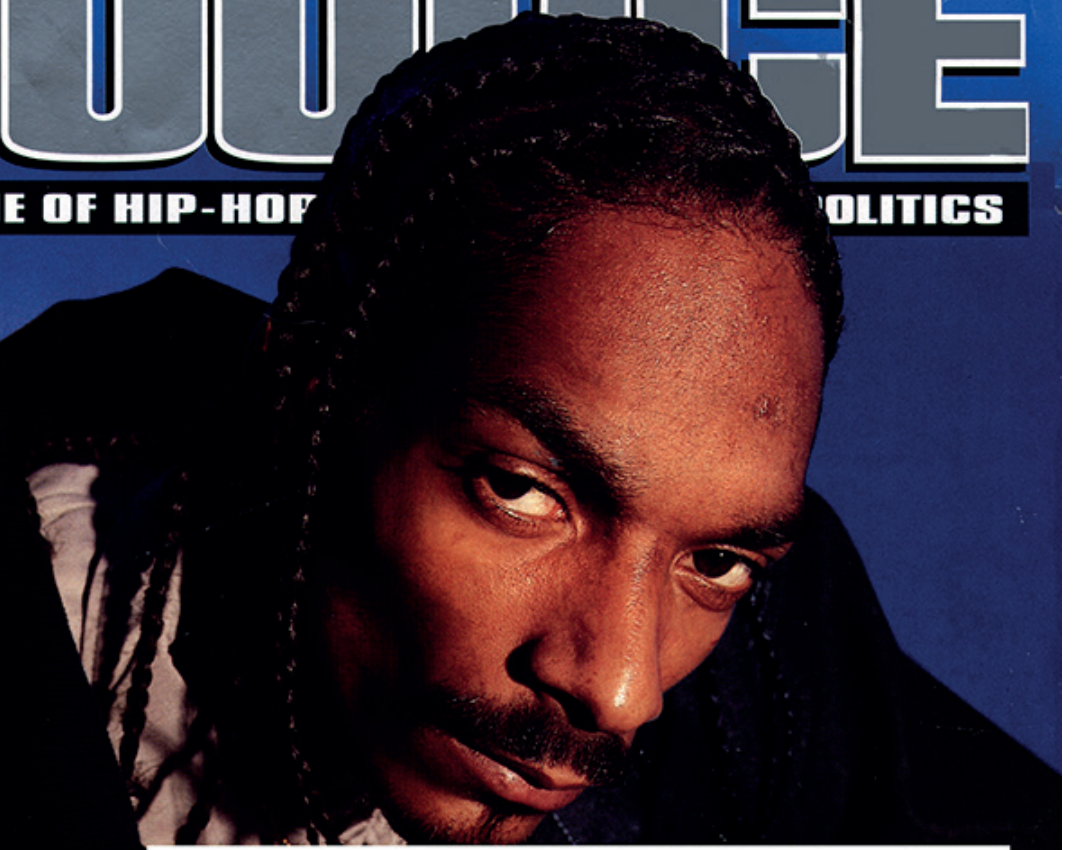

EXCLUSIVE!

SNOOP DOGG WANTS TO LEAVE DEATH ROW

CAN HE CUT IT ON HIS OWN?

NOTORIOUS B.I.G.

ONE YEAR LATER

DAZ DILLINGER

DOGG POUND SOLDIER FOR LIFE

BOMB ATOMICALLY

Long hidden in the shadows of rap music, graffiti has still managed to attract scores of fanatical artists here and abroad for more than 25 years. Rooted in transgressive expressions of youth culture in a society that routinely shuns their existence, graf was always a way for the disenfranchised to "get up" and get noticed. At its best, it's revolutionary. At its worst, an eye sore. A recent *Village Voice* article by Richard Goldstein takes note of a graf exhibition at New York's Hugo Martinez Gallery, and respectfully historicizes and describes the "aerosol art" as a vibrant, complex subculture designed by youth of color. The tag represents survival tactics and the struggle for status in an often hostile urbanscape. In some cases, spray paint has been momentarily displaced by artists equipped with grindstones, dentists' drills, and other various glass-cutting tools, as "scrachitti" has emerged on graffiti-proof NYC subways and buses. But this generation lives for going "all-city" by any means necessary. Goldstein adds, "They [the masses] cannot see the energy of a culture that will not die."

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Graffiti artists like this fellow say the "stardom" of the streets beats the chic of art galleries.

Writing's on wall for gallery grads

YOU can't help but notice the irony.

Inside the Martinez Gallery on West 27th Street, the walls are covered with graffiti, a demonstration that the secret language of scribbles and paint drips is an art form.

Outside the Martinez Gallery on West 27th Street, the walls are also covered with graffiti, proof that it's not.

Gallery owner Hugo Martinez says he is only trying to show graffiti writers that they can achieve the same kind of street fame — and make money — by creating their hip-hop styles on gallery walls instead of tenement halls.

"When they see they can get notoriety through a gallery, they stop bombing," he said, "I have 25 years of evidence."

Twenty-five years ago, Martinez, then a City College student, organized United Graffiti Artists, and turned a ragtag army of the night into the hot new "radical chic" art movement in town.

Overnight, Martinez's "artists" made small fortunes selling the urban wasteland and then went on to lead "normal lives" as doctors, lawyers and other professionals, Martinez boasts.

"They're all dropouts," Martinez says of his present proteges. "I gave them an alternative to bombing the streets. Six months after they start with me they stop bombing."

Sorry, Hugo, but they're lying to you.

While members of Martinez's class of '97 thank the gallery owner for giving them a place to create without having to look over their shoulders for the 5-0, none have given up bombing and none plan to.

"It's cool to do a gallery, but you have to keep it real on the streets," says Ader, a 19-year-old Brooklyn graffiti legend.

Ader, who gets around those pesky paint-sale laws by making his own ink out of carbon paper and alcohol, tried to retire once but the lure of tagging on blank walls in the bleakest neighborhoods pulled him back in.

"It's the adrenaline rush — knowing the 5-0 is on your back that keeps you going."

They get caught plenty of times, do their community service by painting over their colleagues' best efforts, and get right back to their canvases.

"I've had community service eight times," says Bruz, the self-declared King of Queens who carries a wide-tipped marker wherever he goes in case he gets inspired, like he did the other day, bombing a Kentucky Fried Chicken bathroom for no reason other than that it was there.

"I actually like community service cause they take me to a new neighborhood and I get to see all the other writers out there. I paint over them and think, 'Man, I'm coming back here!' "

Sometimes he doesn't wait, bombing the walls he's just painted so he can establish a foothold in a new neighborhood.

"I write for other writers," he says, "I'll bomb the whole city until they all know my name."

It's a hard life, this fame business. Subways are impossible to bomb nowadays — except for scratchiti, which most self-respecting taggers shun as primitive — and community service punishment means fame is fleeting.

"Years ago, you could hit a park and it would stay up for weeks. Now they paint right over it," says Teck, who bombs with Bruz.

Nietzsche would have loved these guys.

"Hey, it's harder now, but that makes you a better artist," Teck says.

While Martinez intellectualizes that graffiti is "the essential New York art form," the bombers seem to appreciate only one thing: that having someone see your tag on a wall, inside or outside, makes you a star.

"I look at a wall that's all tagged up and to me it's like someone else looking at the Sistine Chapel," says Rape, Aders' cousin.

"I look up and I say, 'Damn! That's good.' "

But it don't mean a thing if it ain't on the street.

"Outside, you can look at it and say, 'Damn, that [guy] was here. He's a star.' "

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Arrestan a 12 por trifulca

Casi una docena de hispanos fueron arrestados la noche del sábado, por sostener un altercado a la salida de una galería de arte de Manhattan.

La trifulca dejó a un joven de 19 años de edad herido de una puñalada. El joven fue llevado en condición de cuidado al hospital St. Vincent's.

De acuerdo al sargento Cory Cuneo, vocero de la uniformada, al menos 30 personas participaron en la riña, ocurrida pasadas las 9:25 de la noche. El grupo venía de observar una exposición de obras de graffiti en la Martínez Art Gallery, en el 515 de la calle 27.

Dentro del grupo había activistas de dos grupos rivales en pro del graffiti, manifestación artística considerada por muchos como vandalismo. Al llegar a la calle 24 esquina con la Octava Avenida, se inició una disputa posiblemente provocada por diferencia de criterios y opiniones. Agentes del cuartel 10 se personaron al lugar y arrestaron a ocho personas por conducta desordenada. Todos fueron multados.

Durante la pelea un joven identificado como Angel Arroyo, vecino del 910 de Holmes Avenue en El Bronx, recibió una puñalada en un brazo. Tres personas fueron arrestadas en relación con la agresión.

La policía identificó a los apresados como Jayson Vega, de 20 años de edad, Ambrosio Feliciano, también de 20, y Sergio Ocasio, de 16. Todos son vecinos del condado de El Bronx y enfrentan cargos de agresión en primer grado y posesión ilegal de armas.

No se divulgó si el arma blanca utilizada para apuñalar a Arroyo había sido recuperada. Los agentes ayer en la tarde continuaban investigando el caso.

JAVIER GOMEZ