

**Graffiti's New Generation**

*Goldstein p36*

**Transit Union Switches Tracks**

*Robbins p22*

**Christgau's Turkey Shoot**

*Music p126*

the village **VOICE**

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**RIDGEWAY** p48  
**SOLOMON** p52  
**LADD** p29

**A Turkey of**

**an Election**



**LETTERS**

- 6 **SEARCH AND DESTROY** Ted Rall
- 6 **SCHLOCK 'N' ROLL** Ward Sutton

**NY MIRROR**

- 10 **LA DOLCE MUSTO** Michael Musto
- 13 **HIGHER ED** Norah Vincent
- 14 **MAD ON THE STREET** Coco McPherson
- 16 **TABLE TALK** Jessica Harris
- 18 **SHELTER** Toni Schlessinger
- 20 **FREE WILL ASTROLOGY** Rob Breznsny

**CITYSTATE**

- 22 **Meet Roger Toussaint** Tom Robbins
- 26 **TOWERS & TENEMENTS** J.A. Lobbia
- 26 **TOM THE DANCING BUG** Ruben Bolling

**MACHINE AGE**

- 29 **The real Palm Beach County** Donna Ladd

**NATION**

- 33 **Columbia's Star Chamber, III** Nat Hentoff
- 34 **PRESS CLIPS** Cynthia Cotts
- 34 **THIS MODERN WORLD** Tom Tomorrow

**BOOKS**

- 77 **Womb with a view: gestation lit** Joy Press

**ART**

- 79 **Matthew Ritchie** Jerry Saltz
- 79 **'La Divine Comtesse'** Leslie Camhi

**DANCE**

- 81 **Michael Moschen; "Remembering the Funky Chicken"** Deborah Jowitz
- 81 **Lar Lubovitch** Gus Solomons jr

**THEATER**

- 119 **Comic Potential; Betrayal; Joe Orton; Harley Granville Barker** Michael Feingold
- 120 **Saved or Destroyed** Charles McNulty
- 121 **LAByrinth Theater Company** David Finkle

**MUSIC**

- 123 **Deltron 3030; the Analog Brothers** Alex Pappademas
- 124 **The Offspring** David Wondrich
- 125 **Paul Simon** Eric Weisbard

- 126 **CONSUMER GUIDE** Robert Christgau
- 128 **THE SOUND OF THE CITY**

**FILM**

- 133 **Quills; How the Grinch Stole Christmas** J. Hoberman
- 138 **Unbreakable; Bounce; Sasayaki** Dennis Lim
- 138 **Of Rugrats and Dalmatians** Richard Gehr
- 140 **The Trench; The 6th Day; The Weekend** Michael Atkinson
- 140 **The African Diaspora Film Festival** Edward Crouse
- 142 **Lies** director Jang Sun Woo Chuck Stephens

**THE HOT SPOT**

- 148 **SAVAGE LOVE** Dan Savage
- 149 **PUCKER UP** Tristan Taormino

**SPORTS**

- 197 **Chase Championships** Allen St. John
- 197 **JOCKBEAT**



**VOICE CHOICES**  
83 Pullout Guide to the City

**ADVERTISING**

- Art 78
- Body Shoppe 148-149
- Books 76-78
- Classifieds 150-196
- Clef Notes 159-160
- Dance 78-80
- Film 131-146
- Good Looks 45-47
- Holiday Guide 50-51, 53, 95
- Http 34
- J&R Music World 99-103
- Mind, Body, Spirit 55-56
- Music 122-132
- Personals 170-177
- Restaurants 16-17
- Schools 72-76
- Start Work Today 153
- Theater 82, 119-121
- Travel 146-148

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**TUNNEL OF LOVE, BROOKLYN (SEE PAGE 36).**

**FEATURES**

**THE JOY OF BOMBING** 36

The Giuliani crackdown on graffiti artists makes writing a heroic act. Richard Goldstein follows the bomb squads.

**MONDO WASHINGTON** 48

It's election month! James Ridgeway has double your recommended weekly allowance of Mondo Washington.

**TAKING BACK THE VOTE** 52

The election chaos in Florida has had one salutary effect: heightened awareness of disenfranchisement and voting reform. Alisa Solomon reviews the situation.

**RACE AND CLASS** 57

A Brooklyn junior high drama teacher told her students to call themselves "Africans" — not Americans. Peter Noel investigates the furor.

**THE DANGEROUS SON** 63

Did steroids drive a bodybuilder to kill? Sam Bruchey pumps out a tale of muscles and matricide.

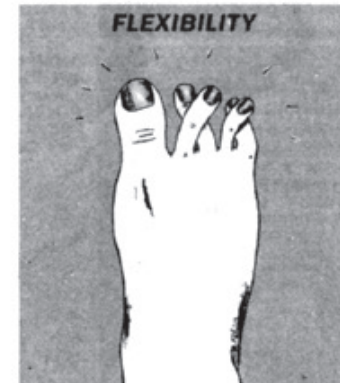
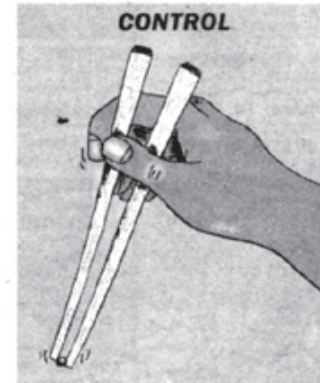
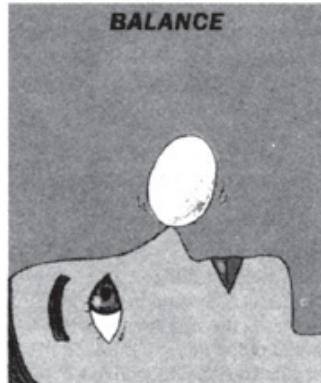
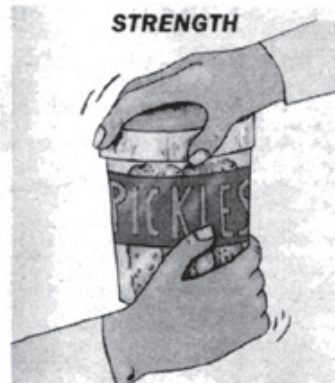
**POVERTY OUTLAWS** 71

Lenora Todaro reports on a poor people's movement in the midst of a "boom" economy.

**TOWERING EXPECTATIONS** 73

A group of SoHa residents is fighting to preserve the once stately Towers Nursing Home (site of the country's first cancer hospital). Wista Jeanne Johnson tells its story.

**ON THE COVER** ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL ADEL



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To live outside the  
law, you must be honest.  
—Bob Dylan

It was round-up-the-usual-suspects time at City Hall last week, as Rudy Giuliani announced a new crackdown on quality of life crimes. Though noise is the beef in 87 percent of complaints to police, the mayor was looking for a crusade that could land him a place in a possible Bush administration. So he targeted the homeless, as well as pot smokers, street drinkers, and those dukes of damage, graffiti writers.  
*See Goldstein page 38*

A RETIRED MEMBER OF THE MTA CREW

# the joy of bombing graffiti's next generation gets up by any means necessary







**goldstein** from page 38

yard or tunnel lay-up. With cameras and motion sensors in place, there's no time for such deliberation now, and besides, as REMO puts it, "I ain't got the patience for that." The new crews are out to hit as often and as quickly as they can. The idea is not to beautify but to bomb.

**Some writers scale buildings abutting the el, while others troll the tunnels, so their tags can be seen from passing trains. "I'm looking for the virgin wall no one else will touch,"** says FOE, the flexible flier whose name adorns the Hellgate Bridge. His goal is to "get up where a lot of people can jock it" (admire the work). Some writers are drawn to spots where kings have tagged, hoping the attention will rub off on them—that too is considered jocking, an attitude that's nearly as frowned upon as "biting," or copying someone's style. The idea is to be unique and bad and everywhere. Any surface unlikely to be buffed will do. "Nice brick walls, the dirtier the better," notes Rooftop King. "places where your stuff becomes a permanent part of it." Walls that are too high up or too neglected to be cleaned. And sites that move. Trucks and vans are the new trains, and most of them have been marked.

In the fight for lasting fame, tags are being etched onto windows with acid, sandpaper, or screwdriver blades. Sheet-metal graf (called "sculpture") is being welded onto fences and street poles. Subway signs are being unscrewed, taken home for tagging, and fastened back in place. A whole new venue—freight trains—means that writing now travels across the country, with kids along the route documenting the journey and adding graf of their own.

All this is preserved in "flicks" that are kept in vast snapshot collections. Nearly every writer owns a bulging shoebox or several photo albums of his work, and thanks to the Internet, flicks can be circulated online. By now there are hundreds of graffiti sites, including webzines like *artcrimes*, *bigtime*, *massappeal*, and *tagmag*. Graffiti chat rooms attract writers along with pretenders—and reportedly the police. A favorite sting is to log on as a sexy girl and prompt the suspect to boast about the damage he has done.

Of course, to confine your writing to the Web is to risk the ultimate graffiti diss: being called a toy. Plenty of writers will apply the T-word to anyone not from New York. California is whack because the writers there "try too hard and pay too much attention to things," according to the young man who writes REHAB. As a rule, two minutes is all the time it should take to do a throw-up; anything more smacks of concentration, not a prop-worthy trait. (No one from Cali was available for comment.)

As for the writers who travel thousands of miles to tag here in the mecca of graf, they're

tolerated but not respected (with a few exceptions, such as the intrepid Mexican MOSCO). The problem isn't that they're foreigners; it's that they're fronting—and they usually buy their paint. The graffiti code requires "racking," or stealing, the materials you use, an act of defiance that springs from necessity. After all, a night of bombing can involve up to 20 cans of aerosol at \$4 a pop. As one writer notes, "It's the most expensive drug."

But these cool-police can't stop the spread of graf beyond the ghettos. To visit the home pages of Graffiti@Yokohama or S2K Kings of Istanbul—not to mention TOP Crew of Paris, CTC Crew of Venezuela, and Aerosol Warriors of the Czech and Slovak Republics—is to glimpse the power of this code to represent all over the world. There are Old Skool pieces on the walls of every European capital. Paris has declared war on graf, Berlin tolerates it, Amsterdam celebrates it. And in Japan, there's a video game called Jet Grind Radio, in which a writer on roller skates sprays the walls of Tokyo, dodging the police.

**Thirty years after it emerged from the heady brew of street gangs and radical politics in Washington Heights and the South Bronx, graffiti is a movement that transcends race and class. Even in New York City, by most estimates, at least half of today's writers are white. Some of these homies are homing in on college degrees; others are chasing a career in commercial art and design. (Rooftop King is marketing himself as a graf-savvy model.) "Every writer I've met is the center of his friends,"** says TRIP, the resident graffiti artist at *tagmag*. "It's antisocial behavior, but at the same time, what you're doing takes a lot of balls. That's an important development thing, and so people flock to that strength."

It's these assertive writers—the best and brightest on their blocks—who get targeted by the police. Many writers believe that if you shuffle when busted, you'll get through the system quickly, but if you fight the power (say, by getting an attorney), you'll end up on the vandal squad's most-wanted list. On this level, policing is designed to crush the ego and teach submission, the usual ghetto curriculum. The real trouble begins when writers aspire to get up beyond the 'hood. As the effervescent EARSNOT notes, the police are "far more likely to arrest kids in the money area"—by which he means Downtown. Yet, because the area south of 14th Street is also the heart of club land, it's where writers from all over the city congregate. It's also where graffiti meets the edge of commerce.

Tagging is an important signifier of the street, and it's entered the repertoire of a whole group of young artists who have learned to synthesize the primitive and the pomo. Soho galleries that show *See goldstein page 44*

## from old skool to no skool

Al Diaz spent a lot of time in the 1980s writing with his friend Jean-Michel Basquiat. Their common tag was SAMO. Now, at 41, Diaz regards his progeny with the air of a silent-movie star in the age of talkies. "There are no real innovators now," he says. "It looks generic. We were definitely about style—and pretty."

He's right, in a way. Graffiti has lost its respect for beauty and ritual. Gone is the code of borough consciousness that gave the world Bronx Bubble Style as well as the loopy Brooklyn look. Platform Style (easily mistaken for Arabic) signified Manhattan—and nothing stood for Staten Island. These days, one's borough is more or less beside the point.

The meaning of respect has also changed. "There were certain people I didn't think I should write my name next to until I had gained enough recognition," says Old Skool master COCO 144. He remembers how important placement was—the way a piece fit across a train—and proper procedure: markers on the inside, aerosol on the outside. All that has been lost in the rush to get up, along with the cardinal rule in COCO's day: "Not going over anyone else's name. It was a samurai thing."

There are several reasons why the code of graf has changed. First and foremost is its status in society. Criminalization has sullied what Norman Mailer called "the faith of graffiti," replacing it with a cutthroat environment in which writing over someone seems less a violation than a dare. And high-tech surveillance has made it all but impossible to hit a train, except as it pulls into the platform (considered a mark of honor among writers today). "Speed is of the essence now," as COCO says.

But some things never change. There's still a feeling at the core of graffiti that writing is the only way to stake your claim. "Back in the old days, what you had?" asks JOE 182, the writer who started it all. "You either got fame from the gang, or you went to jail for shooting some guy. This is doing it the cool way." —R.G.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MANHATTAN DOORWAY, BRONX ROOFSCAPE, BROOKLYN IND TUNNEL, QUEENS SCULPTURE. BOTTOM: WALL BY GHOST, STATEN ISLAND.



**goldstein** from page 36

This was no news to the writers. For them, Giuliani Time has been a *nonstop* crackdown, with all the classic police techniques—from entrapment to illegal search and seizure—used against kids whose only crime is “getting up.” Nearly all the major writers have been busted, and several have done significant time or been slapped with major fines. But the response on the street is best summed up by the legendary REMO: “Getting caught is the price of fame.”

Repression has done what it usually does. Writing is now a heroic act, and the kids who master it are celebrities of the sidewalk. When Rooftop King (as he must be called here, due to a recent encounter with the vandal squad) walks down Lafayette Street, teenagers greet him every half block or so. This is more than a shy guy from Queens could ever hope for, which is why Rooftop King says, “Graffiti means everything to me.”

Status is the major reason writers are willing to risk arrest. And since respect is hard to come by in the outer-borough neighborhoods where most of them live, there are several thousand writers, according to art dealer and graffiti historian Hugo Martinez. Any hip high school student knows who the kings are, those whose ubiquity has earned them the coveted title All City. What looks to most adults like a jungle of writhing vines is a code to their kids. And given the importance of the information conveyed—the claims of glory, the determination to be visible at any cost—no wonder graffiti has endured. Despite—or because of—the aggressive attempt to extinguish it, graf is bigger now than at any time since the 1980s.

It may not be as apparent, because it isn't in your face when you ride the IRT. But a new generation of writers has moved out of the subways and on to the streets, roofs, bridges, tunnels, parking-lot walls, window ledges, mailboxes, and abandoned buildings everywhere. Their goal is not to create huge bursts of color like the “pieces” that covered trains in the 1980s. These Old Skool murals usually involved elaborate sketches and teams of writers spraying in the safety of a train See goldstein page 40