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Not Graffiti, but Style-Writing: The (Un)Worlding of New York's Street Networks, and the (Re)Worlding of the Three Train Yard

Abstract: How might a city know its people? And, how might people know their city, as their self or as their other? Each numerical edifice of course erases the knowability of some, to render the knowability of others. This essay examines the long-term effects of mid-century development strategies in New York City, specifically the ways in which urban planners used forced relocation practices, and the ways in which these practices led to urban decay. Here we will see that the city's strategic, and often disingenuous, use of data led to the disappearance of city inhabitants from the city's archives. With these strategies in mind, this essay outlines the ways in which city governance procedures functioned in aesthetic terms, rendering the city's grid as an ethereal medium ready for remaking. These development practices led to a catastrophic decay of social networks. Most notably perhaps, we find the disappearance and reappearance of entire city streets from both the physical reality of urban space and also the archives of the city, here the metropolitan government lost control of that grid when urban decay encroached too strongly. We find that world and map-making succumb to their own discontents, as the source of that urban decay can be seen to be sourced from the urban development practices. Yet, for all these de-worldings and decays, the life of New York emerges, this time from the subway tunnels neglected by the metropolitan government. The artist Phase II teaches us that the word "graffiti" is the wrong word for the aesthetics that animated the world of the street's grid, and transformed the possible use of the subway, to now serve as a communication device, rather than only one of transportation. This aesthetics was not a deleterious scrawl, but self-identified by the artists as "Style-Writing". We will see that the subway network in fact functioned as an opportunity for young people to grow robust cultural connections, connections which often crossed the segregating boundaries established by mid-century urban development. Quite different from the perception of subway art as a signal of the city's vicissitudes, here we find that Style-Writing became a key tool for the social efforts of young people seeking to reconstruct an urban world. Specifically, we will turn to the work of Skeme and his artist crews, such as the Three Yard Boys, at Lenox subway station.

Keywords: Style Writing; Graffiti; New York City; Phase 2; Skeme.

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Like we're all from the same block: The information architecture of the subway network

The work of another artist, Mare 139 bridges many disciplines, and it is his statement, that the Writers' use of the subway echoes the functionality of the "internet", that may lead us to refine that focus on networks as a focus on the technologies used in and appearing near to their communities, and more broadly deployed during, the time of the subway Style-Writers:

> The website stuff started in the early 90's with my brother [Kel] and we were the first ones really pushing the agenda of minorities online, when I first got into the whole idea of the internet being the new platform for the graffiti writer I said this is the new layup because you can post your work up and not just hundreds but millions of people could see your work and they could respond to it and the subway system if you look at a map it looks very much like the architecture of the internet.[1]

From an understanding of the New York subway as comparable to the 'architecture' of the internet, the question of the subway as an archive grew more dynamic. How did Writers in fact use the subway as an internet-like network? What were the components and mechanics of their aesthetics? In turn, how were their artworks designed, deployed, and stored in this network? How did artists address questions of storage, transmission, and exhibition of their Writing in the archival systems?

Continuing these analyses, we may consider how artists such as Mare 139, Kel, Rammellzee, Kase II, Skeme, Chain 3, Cliff, Phase II, and many others generated such structures by deploying large (and small) scale art texts on the network components (i.e., subway cars) formerly only designed for transmitting the body politic. This line of inquiry brings us to the core of our investigation, which is to examine how the subway's component structures (normally deployed as an industrialized infrastructure system) became substrates for the transmission of identities otherwise ignored, displaced, marginalized, racially stigmatized or carceralized. With these questions in mind, we may seek to examine the ways in which Writers created letter structures which could be easily scaled and executed under clandestine conditions. Individual character strings and letter formations themselves became structures for aesthetic interchange and community building, as evidenced by Mare 139's account of his brothers' participation in a "call and response" of the letter W between individual Writers and larger group-based networks:

> During this period, he and the CIA crew executed a call-and-response with the writing crews they admired – TFP, TDS, TMT and Mafia – by upping their game. For example, when TDS painted whole cars with

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[1] 2:20 in Carlos Rodriguez, "Mare139 Latin Nation," YouTube, November 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PRLUvhAPlc, acc. April 9, 2023. "Mare139 Latin Nation", 2022.

names that started with the letter W, Word (Chain3), Worm (Part1), Warm (Kool131), CIA painted Welch (Kel139), Wink (Duro), Wurm (Dondi)[2]

As suggested by Butch 2, of The Fantastic Partners crew,

> I'm from way uptown, Dondi might be from downtown, but through Writing we seem like we're from the same neighborhood more or less… Trains make it seem like we're all from the same block.[3]

Meat ax mathematics of the information broker: Beyond the government's names in the ruins of New York

By the late 1970s, the full impoverishing effects of hierarchically driven mid-century urban planning would be visible (as discussed in the following chapters). One classic example of this phenomenon is Robert Moses' Cross-Bronx expressway which had, by ink on a map, and then by jackhammer on the street, reinscribed the transportation logic of the 1929 New York Regional Plan Association's master plan across "113 streets, avenues, and boulevards"[4]. In this plan, "The business interests behind the master plan wanted to transform Manhattan into a center of wealth, connected directly to the suburbs through an encircling network of highways carved through the heart of neighborhoods in the outer boroughs."[5][6] The consequences of these large-scale mid-century urban development strategies were inherited in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Style-Writers. When interviewed by Edit DeAk, one of these artists, Rammellzee once said,

> Identity problems? I don't have on Identity. I'm a human, I'm everybody on this planet. EDIT DEAK is a government name, it should not have been given to you, and it does not govern you. Name is a necessity to a housing construction, the Identity. The government busts out N for necessity, A for housing construction. The necessity for housing construction is that it separates this name from that name.[7]

[2] Carlos Rodriguez, "Kel First Style Master", Museum of Graffiti, https://museumofgraffiti.com/kel-first-style-master/, acc. in 2020.

[3] Henry Chalfant, "All City (1985)," Youtube, July 25, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ptWz-B49H6g, acc. April 9, 2023.2017.

[4] Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 860.

[5] Jeff Chang and DJ Kool Herc, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 11.

[6] Austin quoting Phase 2, in Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2001), 67.

[7] Edit deAk, "Culture is the most fertilized substance," Artforum, 1983, https://www.artforum.com/print/198305/culture-is-the-most-fertilized-substance-35496, acc. on April 9, 2023.

In the case of Rammellzee's statement to DeAk above, for instance, how might we historically consider the inter-relations between variables of an identity, a human, a government name, the necessity for housing construction, and other cryptic terms? What about formulations from Rammellzee's cryptic document, the Ionic Treatise, where he writes propositions like: "No government owns land in this mathematical formation (N x AM x E) = □."?[8]

Consider the way that the municipal government's 'housing construction' projects would depend on large scale demographic data about the residents of New York City: real, as imagined by the government, or otherwise. Rammellzee's statement about the contested relationship between the processes of naming and the processes of land control, as well his statement about present or absent identity relates more directly to the question of housing than we might at first suspect, especially given the indirect style of his allusions.

Several decades before Style-Writers began to use the subway as a transmission device for their artworks, we find mid-century administrators laying the first moments of a long legacy of urban planning. During that era, one way or another, the multitudinous communities of the city would need to be identified, estimated and represented in countable forms so that the scope of a public project would match the number of residents. However, according to Robert Caro, much of the math behind the municipal machinery (and its housing projects) did not entirely rely on, so-to-say, real numbers:

> What statistics were available – often in obscure files, in other city agencies, of whose existence the unit would never have known were it not for Orton's encyclopedic knowledge of every corner of city government – were patently too low; [the urban planner] Moses kept them low by refusing to count the actual number of people being evicted (instead he multiplied each 'dwelling unit' by an 'average' family size so small as to bear no discernible relation to reality), and by simply ignoring the existence of 'doubled-up' families and boarders (of whom there are always a significant number in low-income areas) as well as of people living in rooming houses or hotels.[9]

Here, the abstraction of a person through the logic of an 'average' family demonstrates the ways that the data could be manipulated for the sake of visionary building projects. Such abstracting transformations erased the position of many people within the logical systems underpinning the reintegration and rehousing efforts ostensibly offered by the broader program of Title I. In other words, core informational variables – such as 'dwelling unit' or 'average' – of the mid-century urban planner's

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[8] Rammellzee, "Ionic Treatise Gothic Futurism Assassin Knowledges of the Remanipulated Square Point's One To 720° To 1440° The Ramm-?Ll-Z??" Dr. Zulu, 2019 (originally published 1979, revised 2003), http://drzulu.com/the-rammellzee-ionic-treatise-gothic-futurism/, acc. on April 9, 2023.

[9] Caro, *The Power Broker*, 967.

mathematics were designed and implemented in a series of highly strategic ways – strategies advantageous to some and disadvantageous to others.

Style-Writers lived inside the long aftereffects of mid-century renewal programs.[10] With an understanding of the data, archival, and informatic problems underlying the logic which operated the system of housing construction, we might re-read his statement like "Name is a necessity to a housing construction", or the assertion of a name where "No government owns land in this mathematical formation". These statements critique and re-frame the context of housing construction projects which depended on the control (and often the manipulation) of the appearance and disappearance of names and places in the data of the public archive. These data strategies, in turn, rendered erasures within the broader system of spatial allocation:

> Orton's unit could not repair these deficiencies. With the buildings in which these uncounted tenants had lived demolished and the tenants moved away, there was no longer any way of obtaining a record of their existence. Yet the unit did come up with a rough compilation: during the seven years since the end of World War II, there had been evicted from their homes in New York City for public works – mainly Robert Moses' public works – some 170,000 persons.[11]

Here we see the ways that the network of archival records could be manipulated to not only evict residents from physical spaces, but moreover exclude them from informational spaces.

The greater effect of the erasure of the numerical position of individuals, and the larger groupings of these individuals, within the social management afforded by these statistics led to the disappearance of a recognizable and legible mathematical position within the metropolitan information processing machinery – or the appearance of a mathematical non-position. This exclusion proved especially strong in regard to housing, and so, positionings and re-positionings upon the grid of New York. Elsewhere, the information structures underlying the engine of public housing were strategically designed, so that

> the total number of public housing units scheduled for construction during the next year or two was a mere fraction of the number of tenants Moses was telling the world that he was going to move into those

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[10] See, for instance, Mette Christiansen, "Sounds of Alter-destiny and Ikonoklast Panzerist Fabulations," CUNY Academic Works, 2019, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3401. Accessed on April 10, 2023.44, who cites Alexxa Gotthardt, "How 1980s Cult Artist Rammellzee Mesmerized Everyone from Basquiat to the Beastie Boys" (2018): "New York in the 1970s was riddled with poverty and discrimination, bolstered by deepening class and racial divides. Starting in the '50s, poor, primarily black communities had been pushed out of Manhattan all the way to subsidized housing in the beach community of Far Rockaway, where Rammellzee's family landed. For him, and for many early graffiti [sic] writers, spraying trains and walls became a way to let off steam, wield power, and claim space."

[11] Caro, *The Power Broker*, 967.

units. Analyzing Moses' soothing statistics, Orton was able to see – all too well – how the Coordinator [Moses] had arrived at them "With every project – Title I or some expressway or whatever – he would say 'Don't worry about the people living there. If they don't want to go anywhere else, we've always got room for them in public housing.' But what he was doing was using the same public housing vacancies for many projects. The same vacancies that were alleged to be available for one project had already been allocated for a previous project – or perhaps ten previous projects."[12]

Here, the hidden malleability of metropolitan information structures enabled the planners to treat the city, the grid and the resident, as, by proxy, increasingly malleable objects of aestheticized informatic abstractions. For his part, Moses himself (in) famously aestheticized the process of urban planning:

> You can draw any kind of picture you like on a clean slate and indulge your every whim in the wilderness in laying out a New Delhi, Canberra or Brasilia, but when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.[13]

By the time of Style-Writing's growth in the 1970s, the results of this mathematical cleaving machine were especially pronounced in the South Bronx, an area cut off from the rest of the city by the trenches and walls of the Cross Bronx Expressway. The presences and absences of the mathematical picture, as drawn by the "meat ax", proved to be infamously stark. Nonwhites were being evicted at over 300% of the rate that they would have been evicted had the title I programs distributed the displacement program equally among racial groups. As Caro points out,

> Although the 1950 census had found that only 12% of the city's population was nonwhite, at least 37 percent of the evictees (Moses' own figures) and probably far more were nonwhite.[14]

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[12] Ibid., 963.

[13] As quoted by Caro, *The Power Broker*, 849. Elizabeth Barlow Rogers points out that while "'Slum clearance' is a deeply suspect term today. In Moses's time, however, no one was especially critical of language characterizing slums as blighted, obsolete, cancerous parts of the urban tissue that needed to be cut away by radical surgery. He could speak of "the scythe of progress" as a reasonable means to a desirable end. Indeed, the word "progress" was particularly associated with the polemics of modernist design theory. People's lives could be upended by the march of progress in the belief that rich, poor, and middle class alike would subsequently live in a more rational and salubrious city."

[14] Caro, *The Power Broker*, 968.

Escaping administrative data strategies

"We simply repeat that cities are created by and for traffic. A city without traffic is a ghost town" said Robert Moses.[15] Here, I hope to inquire about the broader cultures of urban management, data, technology, design and many other interdisciplinarily conceived fields which created the unique aesthetic and political conditions of the apparatuses of the city, as finally used by Style-Writers. Urban space, re-designed with mid-century dreams of scale, bore multitudes. 1811 shows us the roots of the New York City block, which deployed "a uniform rectilinear grid for organizing all future development on the island" according to the historian David Henkin's book *City Reading*[16]. Whether this choice recast New York in egalitarian and democratic terms, or simply sanitized space so that it functioned as an industrial market commodity, Henkin notes that the "neutral treatment of land" lies at the core of such debates among critics of urban history.[17] The grid system "homogenized" land such that "its unique features liquidated into a uniform currency. Points on a map become interchangeable units of space distinct from one another only in terms of size and relative location."[18] It was via the etherealities of this dream – this almost nameless fluidity of a self-identically divided space, now operationalized in the early mappings of New York – that the foundational vectors and axiomatic geometries of human experience were established for the futures of the city.

It was also by this alchemical malleability of the terms of space that in the next century the Moses administration spread "playgrounds over the congested areas of the city […] as a sower might sow magic seed bidden to flower in the slums" (said the Times, as quoted by Caro); this magic resulted in an annually updated abstract map.[19] In that document, the city and its playgrounds could be transformed into a symmetrically numbered series, "playground 204… playground 240" along with an aestheticized data vision (as are all visions of data) of "outline maps" of the city, maps remaining "blank except for dots representing playgrounds":

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[15] As quoted by Annie Cohen-Solal in her *Leo and His Circle: The Life of Leo Castelli* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 387.

[16] David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 35.

[17] Henkin cites contrasting opinions among historians and critics of the grid: Lewis Mumford and John Reps made a point of "stressing its bland and brazen artificiality and its value to spectators, and others (like Hendrik Hartog and Elizabeth Blackmar) emphasizing its vision of Republican neutrality" and notes the similarity to Jefferson's 1875 land ordinance of "endlessly repeating rectilinear subdivisions" (p. 36). See also Henkin's claim that the grid "promulgated a radically integrative version of urban space in which land values (based largely in accessibility to concentrations of population) could be represented on paper at any given time and social knowledge was flattened and refashioned by market relations" (p. 36) and "Within the grid, land is homogenized, its unique features liquidated into a uniform currency. Points on a map become interchangeable units of space distinct from one another only in terms of size and relative location" (p. 36). Henkin also cites Philip Fisher's "Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency" reference to "Cartesian social space" such that the "uniqueness of place disappears."

[18] Henkin, *City Reading*, 36.

[19] Caro, *The Power Broker*, 512.

[T]o dramatize the size of the achievement, Moses gave each playground a number, and the press counted along with him: playground number 189 opens, the headlines said, playground number 194 dedicated […] playground 204 […] playground 240 […]. And he had his mapmakers prepare pairs of outline maps of the city, blank except for dots representing playgrounds. The map on the left would be labeled simply "1933", the year before he had become Park Commissioner, the one on the right simply "1937" (or "1938" or "1939"). And the contrast between the two maps was certainly spectacular, the one on the left almost empty, the one on the right covered thickly with dots. And public and press drew from the maps the conclusion that Moses wanted drawn from them: that his playground-building program was an unqualified improvement, an absolutely unalloyed benefit, to all the people of New York City.

A close inspection of the maps would have revealed some rather puzzling characteristics about the pattern formed by the dots.

Their distribution, for example, was not at all even. The areas of the maps on which the dots were clustered most thickly corresponded in the main to those areas inhabited by families that were well-to-do or at least 'comfortable'. The areas of the maps on which the dots were sprinkled most thinly corresponded in part to undeveloped outlying areas of the city that did not really need playgrounds, but they corresponded also to some of the city's most congested areas, to the tenement neighborhoods and slums inhabited by families that were poor – to areas that needed playgrounds desperately. Most of Robert Moses' neighborhood playgrounds had, in other words, been built in the neighborhoods that needed playgrounds least. Few of the playgrounds had been built in the neighborhoods that needed playgrounds most.

The areas of the maps on which the dots were sprinkled most thinly of all corresponded to those areas of the city inhabited by its 400,000 N[*] groes.

Robert Moses built 255 playgrounds in New York City during the 1930's. He built one playground in Harlem.[20]

The problems of hierarchized and unequally distributed recreational space for the city's youth only became heightened in these racially exclusive development practices.

The problems of access-reducing designs occurred not just in the continued practices of de-facto generalized segregation (often, via incarceration), but also in the way that space and scale were treated as conceptualizable figures per se. The iterative advantage of abstract scale had its limits: according to some historians, many spaces could in fact be too small to be deemed usable by the administration. This issue was shown by the fate of the vest-pocket park program:

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[20] Ibid., 509.

Moses had begun his park commissionership by enthusiastically gobbling up vacant city-owned lots in the slums with the intention of turning them into tiny parks. But this enthusiasm soon waned.

The effort involved in creating such 'vest-pocket' parks was immense. The land acquisition alone involved the approval of countless agencies and officials and, therefore, endless red tape. Designing something that would make a tiny lot attractive or useful was difficult. Because you couldn't afford to keep a full-time supervisor on duty in every vest-pocket park, those small parks located in slums quickly became filled with rubbish and winos.

The rewards involved in creating vest-pocket parks were, moreover, not at all commensurate with the effort required. If the reward was a sense of achievement, what – to the creator of Jones Beach – was the achievement in creating a tiny bit of green space or a few benches or a seesaw or two? Moses had always thought on the grand scale – that was his genius: the ability to grasp the needs of a whole city or state and devise a means of satisfying them – and this quality of mind made it difficult for him to take much interest in something small. There was something inherently good in size itself, he seemed to feel. If the reward was public applause, the size of the reward for building a vest-pocket park was small indeed; editorial writers didn't get nearly as excited about a tiny park as they did about a Randall's Island or Orchard Beach; it was the great projects that awed them: size seemed to signify significance to them, too. Whatever the reasons, "RM" [Robert Moses,] an aide would say, "just wasn't interested in anything small. He used to say, 'That's a little job. Give it to so-and-so.' And that attitude filtered down, so that the fellows weren't interested in small things either." Coupled with his feelings about the people for whom the effort would have to be made – the lower classes who didn't 'respect' or 'appreciate' what was done for them, in particular the N[*]groes who were 'dirty' and wouldn't keep his beautiful creations clean – his lack of interest in 'anything small' made him uninterested in small parks in slums."[21]

These park design processes themselves, according to Caro, were enforceable abstractions: many parks could result from one iterable park plan. These abstracted measures could be understood as algorithmically structured in "ready to go" plans, plans conceived of as sequential layers which expedited the process of decision making. One of these procedural algorithms was the "standard design" for indoor playhouses, and that plan served as only one of the variable steps at work within the "standard Park Department playground design":

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[21] Ibid., 491.

arguing about every design would have cost him his great advantage over other city departments with the WPA: the fact that when new funds became available, his plans were 'ready to go'.

A standard Park Department playground design was evolved and architects were given little leeway to deviate from it. If there was to be an indoor playhouse in the playground, there was a standard design for that, too, and if the architect wanted to make variations in it they had better be small ones.[22]

Caro goes on to point out that the apparently unusably small spaces which did not fit the formally declared features of the standard scale state-issue playground are spaces which could surely have been served by localized engagements. By 1961 such small-scale spaces left aside from the politics of state recognition would be hailed by the visionary Jane Jacobs:

> Successful street neighborhoods, in short, are not discrete units. They are physical, social and economic continuities – small scale to be sure, but small scale in the sense that the lengths of fibers making up a rope are small.[23]

As we will see in later chapters, artists such as Style-Writers exhibited a surprisingly similar conception of space, now taking smallness as an aesthetic principle strategically applicable to the specific assemblages of 20th century-built environments. The processes and philosophies driving the configuration of those built environments resulted from vast inter-borough recreational, economic and highway transportation systems. These interconnected systems were conceptual patterns arising from an even vaster system of metropolitan management and engineering – patterns seen as principles to be shared among the international community of urban thinkers and planners.

In the March 2008 "Exhibitions" section of the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, appears Elizabeth Barlow Roger's review piece "Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York". Here, "parks, housing, bridges, roads" and other structures figure as "elements of transformation" driven by these principled models, and these transformations often appeared alongside the neglect of other core components such as a "mass transit system, world-class museums, and soaring commercial skyscrapers."[24] The discourses of the "model city" offered a verdant inventory of metaphors for configuring the planners' practices. Elsewhere in this type of thinking, we find tangibly imagistic visions of a draughtsman, like those of Robert Moses, such as the miniature *Panorama of the City of New York* made for the 1964–65 World's Fair.

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[22] Ibid., 487.

[23] Jane Jacobs and Jason Epstein, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (York: Modern Library, 2011), 121.

[24] Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, "Robert Moses and the modern city: the transformation of New York," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 1, 67 (2008): 139.

These systems of scale themselves expressed and executed conceptual frameworks, both domestic and foreign urban planners of the time saw these frameworks as among the paradigmatic methodologies. Robert Caro writes of the ways that international planners saw the principles of a "democratic city" in the "system of express highways and parkways", while regional planners commissioned Moses to review:

> plans for arterial highways for the Pittsburgh Regional planning Association. He dispatched a team of aides to spend two months in Pittsburg, reviewed their findings himself, and on the basis of their reports, submitted a plan laying out a comprehensive arterial highway program for the city. He had to refuse the others, but his mark was left on them, too, for their engineers came to New York and spent weeks – in some cases, months – watching Moses' men in action and, when they returned to their own cities, applied the principles Moses had taught them in building their own parks and roads.
> Nor was the cheering limited to America. Teams of park experts came to New York from countries all over Europe, even from Scandinavia, traditional leader in park design, and went home vastly impressed. As for roads, a survey of public works in America made for the British government by a team of British urban planners said:
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> The most important development in American city planning has in recent years been the building of express highways on a large scale. New York City has led the way in the development of an outstanding system of express highways and parkways. These are so good that it would seem almost essential that England should study them… It is probably the outstanding example of democratic city planning in the world.[25]

From the time of mid-century building transformations to the time of the Style-Writers in the 1970s and early 1980s, many neighborhoods, such as the Bronx, suffered the consequences of under-performing governmental services alongside entrenched racial prejudices. The great building visions of the mid-century slowed as the 1950s turned to the 1960s, which saw the rise of competing urban theorists, like Jane Jacobs. From the mid-1950s, to the time when Style-Writing coalesced as an artistic movement in the mid-1970s, areas like the Bronx and Harlem underwent chronic decay in the face of impoverishment, conditions of impoverishment that resulted from the longer histories of prejudice and hegemony in the Americas.[26]

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[25] Caro, *The Power Broker*, 572.

[26] Specifically, point out Mindy Thompson Fullilove and Rodrick Wallace, redlining had long set the pretext for urban decline,
"The dominant policies we have identified are segregation, redlining, urban renewal, planned shrinkage/catastrophic disinvestment, deindustrialization, mass criminalization, gentrification, HOPE VI, and the foreclosure crisis. […] Segregation is an important feature of American urban life. As Thomas Hanchett has documented in

Against this backdrop, each instance of Writing signaled the discontents of a crumbling municipal order, an order built on the fissures of a mid-century's social vicissitudes of urban planning and order which had long prefigured the ultimate white-washing of the subways. Subway based Writing appeared in the social and spatial gap abandoned by an automobile-minded 'revolution' in urban infrastructure largely heralded by Robert Moses. In the 21ˢᵗ century, Style-Writing survives from its fecund epoch during the heyday of masterpieces on subway trains, now undeniable as a form of global public space.

They said "the Bronx is burning" just as Hip Hop was more generally "Born in the Bronx", Style-Writing irrefutably demonstrated the presence of not only what, but who, remained beyond the abandonment of whole districts to ashes and capital speculation (landlord sponsored arsons infamously were designed to capitalize on insurance policies). Such spatial dismissals were only echoed by the vast destruction of mid-century urban environments that preceded the construction of highways serving the upper white classes. This Writing then might be mis-known as "graffiti" insofar as its historical appearance contravened the ethos of public governance exemplified by figures like Daniel P. Moynihan, whose infamous federal memo of 'benign neglect' rendered many communities of color outside the purview of government responsibility.[27] Simply put, each name inscribed by a Writer demonstrates the presence of a community network and archival index that was first subjected to erasure in deed by municipal power-brokers like Robert Moses, and later in word by congressmen like Moynihan.

Social networks, nightmares of urbanism and vectors of decay

The legendary Style-Writer, Donald 'Dondi' White, would finally pass away from AIDS in 1998. Yet, as early as 1988, the doctor and scholar of epidemiology Rodrick Wallace would write from the Albert Einstein College medical center in the Bronx. In his writings he emphasized the idea of a "nonlinear ecosystem coupling between AIDS, contagious urban decay, and population shift."[28] Here he investigates the intersection

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his book, *Sorting Out the New South City* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), people of different races and classes were intermingled in American cities 150 years ago. The policies of separation were instituted gradually, but inexorably, leading to a radical separation by both race and class, what Massey and Denton later called "American Apartheid". Such separation continues to be a feature of American life, at this point, most prominent in the organization of residential areas.

Redlining, instituted by the federal government's Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1937, was designed to steer investment away from risky places. These were defined as those places with older buildings and non-white residents. Literally, the presence of a single N*gro family meant that an area was given the worst possible rating, thus setting up the material basis for white flight. Hanchett observed, 'The handsomely printed map with its sharp-edged boundaries made the practice of deciding credit risk on the basis of neighborhood seem objective and put the weight of the U.S. government behind it...'" Mindy Thompson Fullilove and Rodrick Wallace, "Serial forced displacement in American cities, 1916–2010," *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 88, 3 (2011): 381–82.

[27] Daniel Moynihan, "Memorandum for the President," The White House, January 16, 1970, p. 7, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/jul10/53.pdf., acc. on April 16, 2023.

[28] Rodrick Wallace, "A synergism of plagues: 'planned shrinkage', contagious housing destruction, and AIDS in the Bronx," *Environmental Research* 47, 1 (1988): 1.

of "community ecology", "quantitative approaches to geography", and the continuing policies of "planned shrinkage" municipal service cuts which triggered the South Bronx' "burnout" and the broadly recursive coordinations of contagion. Dr. Wallace's analysis aligns the "vector" of HIV with that of "a new outbreak of contagious urban decay" extending the "shredding of the social networks" in the Borough.[29] Wallace writes:

> It is found that the South Bronx process of fulminating, contagious urban decay which devastated the region in the 1970s, and its associated forced population migrations, spread intravenous drug abuse, the principal HIV vector in the Bronx, from a geographically contained center in the South-Central Bronx to a virtually borough-wide phenomenon. This has significantly complicated attempts to contain HIV infection, both by shredding the social networks which are the natural vehicles for education, and by vastly enlarging the area requiring intensive targeting. Since the 'planned shrinkage' municipal service cuts which triggered the South Bronx burnout persist, and since levels of housing overcrowding now approach those of the early 1970s in the Bronx, it is expected that a new outbreak of contagious urban decay will occur, likely again dispersing population and seriously compromising any in-place HIV control strategies. If overt AIDS itself becomes a contributor to urban deterioration in overcrowded neighborhoods susceptible to South Bronx process, we could then see a nonlinear ecosystem coupling between AIDS, contagious urban decay, and population shift. Elementary mathematical models are provided.[30]

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[29] Ibid. See also Rodrick Wallace "Urban Desertification, Public Health, and Public Disorder: 'Planned Shrinkage', Violent Death, Substance Abuse and AIDS in the Bronx" (*Social Science & Medicine* 31, 7 /1990/: 801–13) where he writes of parallels in Harlem: "This nexus is embedded in conditions of preexisting poverty and overcrowding whose impacts have been exacerbated by the loss of community and of social networks associated with severe out-migration such as McCord and Freeman noted for Harlem."

[30] Wallace, "A synergism of plagues," 1. See also, for instance p. 17: "the ratio of maximum to mean decreased proportionally more than the mean, consistent with the classic diffusion of population concentration as well as its transfer by migration. Unsurprisingly, the burnout of the South-Central Bronx which took place between 1970 and 1980 redistributed housing overcrowding along with population. Figures 12a and 14a, showing drug death and housing overcrowding concentrations for 1970–1973 and for the 1970 census, respectively, are similar. They dis- play the same strong concentrations in the South-Central Bronx, the traditional 'poverty spine' of the Bronx. We could, again, use correlation by health area or spatial correlation by map to quantify the similarity, but that seems unnecessary.
Evidently the city' s program of what Duryea (1978) called "planned shrinkage" and Mega (1978) called fire service "redlining" for the Bronx drastically changed the geography of drug abuse from being tightly and centrally distributed in the traditional poverty communities of the South-Central Bronx into a split and bifurcated pattern covering a much larger area, and embedded in a badly disorganized 'community' of displaced and disoriented refugees whose social networks appear to have been seriously truncated by the process of displacement (Wallace and Bassuk, 1987). Community disorganization and the truncation of social networks have the gravest implications for success of AIDS control programs."

The apparent genius of benign neglect and displacement driven "service cuts" in mid-century planning had led to late 20th century devolution, largely through "forced population migrations". The resultant devolution of the built environment, in the form of "housing overcrowding" led to the devolution of the "social networks" necessary for transmitting "education" about the risks at hand. Wallace's research points us to the Bronx' real history of "decay" via maladaptive urban development strategies.

By the time of Wallace' writing, The Bronx had recursively been abstracted into a "nightmare" of public service failures, escalating the idea of the borough itself into a metaphor in the public fluency: after the failure of mid-century plans, now "The Bronx" was a legible "symbol of a systemic catastrophe in American cities". As Wallace explains,

> The Bronx is symbol of a systematic catastrophe in American cities which, by the early 1980s, had degenerated from the 'urban crisis' of the 1960s to an accelerating complex of massive low income housing loss, resulting 'homelessness', disruption of essential community networks, rising drug abuse and violence, and rapid deterioration of general public health. Into this interacting maelstrom of community destruction and poverty has come the great plague of the second half of this century, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, AIDS, the overt sequelae of infection with human immunodeficiency virus, HIV, a contagious retrovirus with a long, variable, and asymptomatic infectious period which makes public health control a nightmare.[31]

The long-lasting legacies of these space-based exclusions and hierarchies continued well into the 21st century. In the scholarly analysis of experts like Wallace "essential community networks" were undermined by the mid-century policies of forced relocation.

This extreme scale of change during the mid-century of master planning functioned in part by virtue of the enabling forces of national-level legislatures. A Supreme Court decision in 1954 had granted incredible leeway to the government's execution of eminent domain. As legal scholar Amy Lavine writes:

> *Berman v. Parker's* extraordinary form of legislative deference allowed urban renewal projects to go forward across the country with an astonishing lack of attention to the welfare of the people that the program was supposed to benefit.[32]

Not only did this decision's heavy-handed, top-down manipulation of space enable extreme state willfulness in reconceiving infrastructure, but the interventions were often of a uniquely aesthetic nature. Lavine points out that

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[31] Ibid., 1–2.

[32] Amy Lavine, "Urban Renewal and the Story of Berman v. Parker," *The Urban Lawyer* 42, 2 (2010): 425.

> While it paved the way for the 'sacking of [our] cities[,]' it also established important precedent for a wide range of now commonplace police power regulations, including sign and billboard laws,' scenic landscape protections, landmark and historical preservation laws, and aesthetic zoning of all sorts. Its direction that "when the legislature has spoken, the public interest has been declared in terms well-nigh conclusive" has been repeated in dozens of cases and included in many constitutional law textbooks.[33]

Urban renewal practices thus, at least in part, resulted from a legal authorization (alongside the necessary funding) for the governing offices to function in a highly subjective order. The nearly expressivist aestheticism function of this authorization appeared in its direction, "when the legislature has spoken, the public interest has been declared". This aestheticism was perhaps only paralleled by the assertive freedom of agency exhibited by Style-Writers, themselves.

It was like the moon now: The (un)worlding and afterlife of Charlotte Street

On this question of the appearance and disappearances of urban spaces, we might consider the disappearance of Charlotte Street, as both a place and an idea, in a time when the fundamental structures providing public networks and social connection for those living in the South Bronx had undergone destruction. Not only did the street physically disappear under mounds of concrete pieces, as waves of garbage crept back across the apparent limits of sidewalks and into the traffic lane, that abstracted tar-sanctuary of the automobile. Moreover, the informational possibilities and accessibility of that street disappeared as the city trimmed the vectors of the neighborhood. Not only had the government abandoned physical programs of public resource distribution (as in the case of the defunded subway lines), but in some situations, the New York municipality abandoned the idea of particular public spaces in their data's archival structures.

In a Bronx neighborhood, claims the New York Times, Charlotte Street underwent such neglect that "Part of the street was taken off the city map in 1974 and did not reappear until a decade later":

> Mr. Carter's visit did not revive the area by itself, but people in the South Bronx say it created a much-needed spark and drew the world's attention to a burrough that was not only burning, as Howard Cosell famously informed viewers during a World Series game that October, but seemed to be dying, too.
> "What I recall more than anything else was the uncertainty," said José E. Serrano, the Bronx congressman whose district includes Charlotte Street

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[33] Ibid., 424.

and who was a state assemblyman in 1977. "Of not knowing when the building was going to burn, when the landlord was going to cut back services, when you find yourself in a building that the landlord totally walks away from. The housing stock was going to waste and abandon." Charlotte Street had been a working-class Jewish enclave in the years before World War II. By the 1970s, it was the victim of arson fires, rampant crime, a lack of city services and abandonment and neglect by landlords. It had almost become invisible: Part of the street was taken off the city map in 1974 and did not reappear until a decade later, according to the Bronx borough president's office.[34]

Hiring arsonists became a tactic of some fleeing landlords. This tactic represented one of many waves of flight and abandonment in the neighborhood, from the constricting force of the Cross-Bronx Expressway to the federal government's austerity programs which contracted urban funding across the nation. Progress did not come quickly. Still in 1980, when Ronald Reagan paid a visit to Charlotte Street after addressing the National Urban League Conference, he declared that he had not "seen anything that looked like this since London after the Blitz."[35]

When inhabitants were confronted with the space of the Bronx as a built environment, echoes of the 20th century's tragedies appeared in the minds of New Yorkers. Said one observer of a Manhattan project, located to the west of Harlem, across central park,

> Manhattantown looked like a cross section of bombed-out Berlin right after World War II. Some of the tenements were still standing […] surrounding them were acres strewn with brick and mortar and rubble where wreckers and bulldozers had been at work."[36]

By the late 1970's, reporters would describe the South Bronx as so desolate as to be otherworldly: "It was like the moon now. Nothing but minerals. Buildings had collapsed. Their wood had been consumed and their stones had crashed down. Some walls still stood, but there was nothing inside."[37] The quotation was borrowed from Kurt Vonnegut's description of Dresden after the bombings of World War II. Such images became increasingly common in the long wake of abandonment, demolition and relocation processes.

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[34] Manny Fernandez, "In the Bronx Blight Gave Way to Renewal," *NYTimes*, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/05/nyregion/05charlotte.html, acc. on April 16, 2023.

[35] Matthew Purdy, "Left to Die, the South Bronx Rises from Decades of Decay," NY Times, 1994, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/13/nyregion/left-to-die-the-south-bronx-rises-from-decades-of-decay.html, acc. on April 12, 2023.

[36] Caro, *The Power Broker*, 970.

[37] Hezakaya News and Films, "1981 Special Report: 'South Bronx,'" YouTube, May 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7g-ANr7MEwQ, acc. on 16 April 2023.

In Carlos "Mare 139" Mare's opening for his presentation "Art for the Next Century" he echoes the aforementioned dystopic sentiments while noting Style-Writing and hip hop's simultaneous efflorescence:

> This may look like a warzone, but it's the South Bronx, this is where hip-hop was born and out of nothing we invented something. Something we didn't even know had the kind of impact it is having today, and I show you this because we're gonna come back to this, to the story of Russia during the war.[38]

Mare remembers: "[…] and in the buildings – the ruins of buildings, the shells of buildings – people still lived."[39] As a point of apposition – not hierarchization – in comparison to subway Style-Writing, we might consider the work of John Fekner in his 1980 series, the *Charlotte Street Stencils* which read *Broken Promises, Falsas Promesas, Decay, Broken Treaties, Last Hope* and *Save Our School.* Despite the deteriorated conditions, Fekner's website points out that, through community efforts, the areas surrounding Charlotte Street were eventually revived:

> Not all of the buildings were abandoned on Charlotte Street. Fekner and Leicht paint *Last Hope* on the roofline of 1500 Boston Road where families were living. Years later, through the combined efforts of Alice Myers, Helen Steiner and Mary Jones, the building was finally purchased by the residents, renovated and renamed New Hope Plaza in 1983.[40]

All you see is crime in the city? Anticipations in the breaks of infrastructures

Against the background of urban decay and erasure, we may see an extended conceptual connection between claims for Style-Writing's abstraction, sociability and readability. Insofar as Style-Writing de-stabilizes and re-stabilizes forms of legibility, it requires its readers to focus first on the will embodied in the signature's detailed flourishes, and so it also disrupts the capacity to attach identity to, and by, anything except the autonomy of the author. As such, reader and Writer can both identify with each other insofar as they mutually invest in the complex multiplicity of sequenced structures that together constitute the (Style-)written word. Let us consider those who look at these reading positions together: those who seek to read Style-Writing, and those who seek to simply encounter it as a phenomenon intruding, like an out-of-place piece of "graffiti" into the visual field (and no further). Considered in this regard, Style-Writing's intricate aesthetics of sociability come to be seen as a powerful method of regulating the shifts between these two stances.

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[38] See Carlos Rodriguez, "Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE," YouTube, May 31, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfRWX8HTyx8, acc. on April 18, 2023.

[39] Ibid.

[40] John Fekner, "Charlotte Street, South Bronx, NY August 1980," https://johnfekner.com/feknerArchive/?p=72, acc. on April 19, 2023.

The question of Style-Writing vs. "graffiti" underwrites one of Skeme's most famous pieces, a subway train which reads "*All You See is Crime in the City*", which poses a dynamic question to its metropolitan audiences: in encountering the artwork on this train, does a city dweller see only the result of a "crime" or something more? Skeme's magnificent "Crime in the City" art was a piece made even more famous in Chalfant and Silver's documentary *Style Wars* where Skeme describes the production of

> two whole cars. It was me, Dez, and Mean Three right? And on the first car in small letters it said "All you see is…" and then you know big, big, you know some block silver letters that said "…Crime in the City' right?" It was a whole car […] then on the next car a cop character.[41]

In the bookended inscription "all you see is", we find a kind of epigraphical narration of its own historical performance, a meditation on the maximalist commitments of many Writers of the time, including major 3-yard predecessors such as Cliff 159 of the crew "3 Yard Boys" (3YB) crew. In the short 1976 documentary *New York Graffiti Experience*, Cliff would differentiate between Writing that pursued the achievement of "the best piece that you can do, using the most colors" and those who pursued the achievement of "putting your name up on the train on as many cars as possible."[42] One moment of aesthetic mastery did not accomplish what duration and extension could. It is in this context that Cliff would say, "You have to be recognized, that's the highest thing."[43] Treating recognition and proliferation *as aesthetics* countered the built environment's brute logic of magnitude. As Cliff explains:

> I just liked seeing my name […] I'd leave my name wherever I went […] just to say I was there. When I started to get in on trains, the first few months I just want to have as many cars as possible so people could know who I am. I want it to be recognized as an art form.[44]

As Robert Caro points out, the small spaces of so-called vest-pocket parks were opportunities apparently non-fit for the grand scope of administrators who only pursued projects large enough to, apparently, merit their attention. In the case of Style-Writers like Skeme and Cliff, the use of the subway car leveraged a robust opportunity for the deconstruction, reconstruction, and remixing of spatial experience. The train itself functioned as one interpretation of socio-spatial logic, an interpretation we may contrast with that of the automobile, and Writers seized the opportunity to confront, overtake and elevate the means of articulating that interpretation. The underused

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[41] Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver, *Style Wars* (Brooklyn, NY: Plexifilm, 2003).

[42] Fenton Lawless, "The New York Graffiti Experience," 1976, YouTube, November 19, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU9kHAQRCGU, acc. on April 18, 2023.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

spaces now became spaces for a highly detailed social praxis. Writers worked in contrast to the ordering logic of city administrators that Jane Jacobs also would critique,

> An all too familiar kind of mind is obviously at work here: a mind seeing only disorder where a most intricate and unique order exists; the same kind of mind that sees only disorder in the life of the city streets, and itches to erase it, standardize it, suburbanize it.[45]

The intricacies and small-scale fibers of the city's infrastructure were precisely the spaces that Skeme engaged with, leveraging such micro-logical, liminal spaces far beyond their supposed use, so that the neglected subway car became a city-wide communication device, echoes a longer tradition in the aesthetic strategies of a proximal, yet distinct, aesthetics: the Black Arts Movement. As Margo Natalie Crawford points out:

> Comparative studies of the Harlem Renaissance and the BAM gain more depth when we acknowledge the power of anticipation. The musical definition of anticipation, in the epigraph of this chapter, embodies the spirit of the anticipatory flows between the movements. If anticipation is indeed "the early sounding of one or more tones of a succeeding chord to form a temporary dissonance", we need to learn to hear unexpected sounds in the space of improvisation that Fred Moten so aptly calls "in the break." We need to understand the full force of the role of anticipation in the improvisation and experimentation that continue to define black aesthetics.[46]

"In the break" of the infrastructure system, which was designed for his neighborhood's neglect, Skeme would improvise in the use of the subway car itself as a canvas for aesthetic transmissions. In the infrastructure of New York, subway cars functioned as infrastructural relics from a system that Robert Moses' automobile focused, and thus upper class focused, development had patently ignored. Subways provided for economically disenfranchised demographics in ways that had been neglected by the focus on highways during the early and mid-century.

If we revisit reporters' claims that the South Bronx "was like the moon now. Nothing but minerals, buildings had collapsed" as one encounter with the poetic intersection of lunar visions and infrastructural decline, here we may also look to the 9th track of Gil Scott-Heron's debut, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox,* featuring a 1970's classic critique of the infrastructural patterns of racially divided hubris and neglect: "Whitey on the Moon."[47] The strategies of cultural and technological integration and transformation developed by Style-Writers offers an incisive perspective on the broader historical issues of infrastructure and futurism. "Whitey on the Moon"

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[45] Jacobs and Epstein, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 447.

[46] Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 32.

[47] Gil Scott-Heron and Eddie Knowles, *Small Talk at 125th & Lenox*, Flying Dutchman, 1970, LP Stereo.

offers a particularly strong infrastructural critique of the imbalanced priorities which prioritized the space exploration program while underspending on the human factors of th**e** 1960s U.S. urban crisis, and so set the stage for that crisis' growth throughout 1970s and early 1980s New York. That national strategy mistakenly disconnected futures of human planetary exploration from futures of human planetary needs.

Alongside these various cosmographic discontents, we might note that the 3 Yard at Lenox subway station also provided a crucial environment for conversations among Style-Writers. Along these lines, scholars such as Andrea Mubi Brighenti who have offered sophisticated integrations of spatial theory and Writing, applying his conceptualization of a city rendered "syntagmatic" by the Writer's "sentence in a continuing conversation" of the longitudinal "virtual wall", where orthogonally linear structures of state governance no longer "set limits and impasses" or define the possibilities of "paths and trajectories"[48]. Thus Style-Writing does not simply compete for space to declare identity but revises the form and syntagmatic connectivity of the way that urban social space is established in the first place. As Christiansen suggests of Rammellzee's aesthetics: Style-Writers "created a new spatial grammar; a sort of alternative text of reality designed to etch out a new space for different social and political reference points."[49]

Skeme Three Yard king: Subway writers and the repair of spatial enfranchisement

Based near Harlem's Lenox Station, the 3 Yard Boys (3YB) grew to be one of the most formidable crews in New York. One member, Disco, began his career "on the INDs in '72 or so"[50,] remembering he adjusted his stylus to the needs of the particular medium: "silver paint cause the train suck that sh*t up. I had to rack pound cans of silver to get a good piece or tag up."[51] When we consider the work of this member of the 3 Yard Boys, we also see how the subway, as a tool, was itself redeployed as one option among infrastructural systems that the Writers would place in a hierarchy of increasing network efficacy: "See the other boroughs had the train running through them. Queens had the buses. So the sh*t was to king the hood then the buses then move to the trains [sic]."[52] Looking at the network of the 3YB, we also see interactions between groups across geography: Disco would create works with In, Kit, and Nic outside of Harlem, at 149th street:[53] the geographic mapping of these information networks

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[48] Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain," *Space and Culture* 13, 3 (2010): 329.

[49] Christiansen, "Sounds of Alter-destiny and Ikonoklast Panzerist Fabulations," 65.

[50] Henry Chalfant and Sacha Jenkins, *Training Days: The Subway Artists Then and Now* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2014), 132.

[51] @149st. "DISCO 3yb INTERVIEW," @149st, 2003, http://www.at149st.com/disco.html, acc. on April 18, 2023.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

shows us how the Writers' stylistic sociability created, and repaired, social ties across areas previously abandoned and impoverished. Kit's own reflections on the subway network structure point to another layer of connectivity and network saturation, this time pointing out how the stylistic information would be redistributed according to an additional resource leveling and maintenance process undertaken by the MTA:

> Mark 198 Kit 17 [artwork] done on the layups in the mid 1970's this car ran on the 2 and 5 line back then the 2,4,5 trains would switch often as well as the 1 and 3 trains you could do a piece in the 3 yard and have your piece running on the 2 line the next day good times mg boys.[54]

Here we see that the routing destination of artwork produced using the 3 Yard would not be restricted to the train lines which were primarily associated with that location. The famous Jester would be remembered decades later by Mare 139 as producing key letter styles which influenced the city more broadly. Inter-city connections and influences abound. For instance, although more emphasis may be placed on the influential IZ the WIZ' role as president of The Master Blasters (TMB) or a member of Rolling Thunder Writers (RTW), IZ also "painted for The Three Yard Boys and other crews too numerous to mention."[55]

Let us look at the aesthetics of Skeme and his laying claim to the position of "3 Yard King." His practice serves as an opportunity to historicize these aesthetic inquiries in direct relation to a specific subway line and its primary site for Writing production, the 3 Yard at 148th St, Lenox Terminal. From decaying housing and escalating rental prices, to the exodus of many Harlemites with the means to migrate, the conditions of Harlem in the 1970's did not promise to support the 3 Yard's radical growth as a cultural center.

Consider the dissemination of style from the 3 Yard to other locales. As Skeme points out one of the works if fellow TMT crew member, Chain 3, was

> [was] one of my first exposures to what is called the "diamond-point style," a simple, funky letter style that was made up and perfected by Chain 3 on the handball court in the back of the 3 yard. When I saw Chain 3's piece, I just stood there for an hour staring at it and studying it.[56]

Skeme's work appears within the broader network of contemporary and prior generations of Writers, including prolific members of that site's eponymous crew, the

[54] Kit 17, untitled, Instagram, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CSq_bXuL0JcMqEG554hLyw0DKeIc-q7s-h262TY0/, acc. on April 18, 2023. See also https://kit17mgs.wordpress.com/2017/10/04/kit-17-bio-2/ for additional information from KIT.

[55] Daily Diggers, "Graffiti Legends – Iz the Wiz Rip," June 18, 2009, http://www.dailydiggers.com/2009/06/graffiti-legends-iz-wiz-rip.html, acc. on April 18, 2023.

[56] Chalfant and Jenkins, *Training Days*, 139.

3 Yard Boys, such as Harlem's Stan "Stan 153" Pratt, and writers based in other boroughs such as IZ the WIZ, Cliff 159 and Clyde. We should contextualize this inquiry by considering important stations on the 3 line that also function as intersections between multiple lines, noting the interplay between content Written across various boroughs. On this note, Craig Castleman points out, "writers' corners were established at the Brooklyn Bridge subway station in Manhattan (intersection of the 4,5, and 6 lines of the IRT), and at Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn (the 2,3,4, and 5 lines of the IRT and the D, QB, and M as well)."[57] Such "corners", or "benches" offered Writers locally centralized venues for the shared exhibition and critique of works from all over the subway network; the diamond-point style discussed above provides a key example of the 3 yard's role as an important node.

In this sense, Chris "Freedom" Pape describes the way that "platform style letters" were transported from Philadelphia to Harlem by Top Cat 126 and Blood 126.[58] The "Broadway Legend" Piper 1, described by Pape as "an original member of the Three Yard Boys," put that style to use in New York City. In this way we see that Harlem itself was a dynamic regional center for the reception and creation and transformation of subway styles from cities outside of New York. Here we see that the 3 Yard Boys, such as Piper 1, promoted key moments in the development of Style Writing's history. In this way, the Three Yard itself became a physical centerpiece of Style Writing's development – as a key integration of physical mechanisms allowing the creation and distribution of information, and cultural experiences.

Conclusion: Not "Graffiti" but Style-Writing

In the photobook *Subway Art*, Mare presents a subtle sense of an emergent "world" appearing after an initial loss: "We may have lost the trains, but we've gained the whole world."[59] In the (un)worlding of Charlotte Street, we see one symptom of that new world's precedent: contagious urban devolution rooted in governmental practices ostensibly responsible for the making and maintenance of the worlds of city-dwellers. By the mid-century, when these practices were at their height, categories such as data and mathematics gained a popular sense of ontological weight, heavy enough to ground the cosmography of abstracted urban planning. Yet, an awareness of the vectors of decay which resulted from these abstractions is an awareness of data and mathematics as highly subjectivized, aestheticized and eminently technological events, constractable by and resulting from intentionality. Space itself is perhaps the most vivid example in this regard, shown to be not a locus of being but an algorithmic

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[57] Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* (Chicago: The MIT Press, 1982), 87.

[58] Chris "Freedom" Pape, "Untitled," Instagram, February 18, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CaIzhTsMP-pK/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link, acc. on April 18, 2023.

[59] Hannah Frishberg, "New York Post: Relive the Subway's Graffiti-Filled Glory at This Bronx Exhibit," Eric Firestone Gallery, October 11, 2019, https://www.ericfirestonegallery.com/press-news/new-york-post-relive-the-subway-s-graffiti-filled-glory-at-this-bronx-exhibit, acc. on April 18, 2023.

abstraction. Here, the projects of urban world-making seem to equally appear as un-makings.

As in the case of the 3 train subway yard in Harlem, we see that this abstracted urban grid became itself a form of media subject to the world-making of Style-Writers, who could employ the apparently neglected auxillary infrastructures to generate trans-borough communities in the face of widespread neglect. Known for his powerful articulations, Phase 2 emphasizes the high value of particular flows in a "network" provided through the unique advantages of subway lines (here, for instance, the 2, 4 and 5 train). The Writers established inter-borough social connectivity spanning "Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx, which was where a lot of history was being made":

> According to PHASE 2, 'It was like one big gigantic network. We'd see names from Brooklyn and be impressed and inspired with them. You looked forward to meeting people like DINO, NOD, LA-ZAR or DEVLISH DOUG and EVIL ERIC, partly because of their styles" [...] lines that ran the length of Manhattan on the east and west sides of the island being the most prestigious. PHASE 2 remembers: "At one point it was all about the 2s, 4s, 5s [subway lines]. They traveled through Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, which was where a lot of history was being made."'

We may also consider Phase 2's leadership of the IGTimes magazine as an internationalized auxiliary space for the practice and networking of Style Writing.

As per the title of his 1996 book. "Style: Writing from the Underground"[60], Phase 2 often points not only to Style-Writing's extra-state nature but insists that it is not "graffiti" at all, but rather "Writing". More radical than it first appears, his claim suggests a guiding implication for this study. In some ways, Phase II makes comparatively little effort to reject the claim that these writings are legally unsanctioned, thus implying that violating the process of legal recognition is not a logically sufficient motivation to use the concept of "graffiti". Then, the fields within, and upon which, this Writing is inscribed suggest legitimation under auspices we might be unaware of: authorizations which do not correspond to the spectrum of political orders we may invoke in naming that writing "graffiti".

The term "graffiti" carries many valences and may either be used to refer to a specific artistic tradition, to unauthorized, illegal, dismissable and/or unwanted inscriptions generally, such as the word's etymological origins in the sense of a scrawl on a wall. Thus, as per one of Phase 2's most specific names for the tradition: "Style Writing", the category of "graffiti" for this writing is transcended by the category of "style". Phase 2's claim seems to posit a transcendence by "Style:" a transcendence of that political governance: the claims of "Style" that (may) appear beyond the horizon

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[60] Michael Lawrence "Phase 2" Marrow, *Style: Writing from the Underground: (r)Evolutions of Aerosol Linguistics* (Viterbo: Stampa Alternativa, Nuovi Equilibri, 1996).

of a political analytic determining the rightful appearance of "Writing." His claim implies the possibility of other sources of legitimation for inscription as aesthetic writing, lying sources which beyond the (academic) archive's capacity to determine the range of our usable terms. Indeed, shifting from visuality to the discipline of "Writing" is simply to agree to attempt a reading of Phase II's sense of his culture on his own terms. Suggesting an alternative to the architectural formations which had ravaged New York, Phase II's final writings include the lines:

> Had I not painted trains
> Painting wouldn't be my weapon of choice
> I am more of a draftsman.[61]

All figures are obtained by courtesy of the artist, Skeme.

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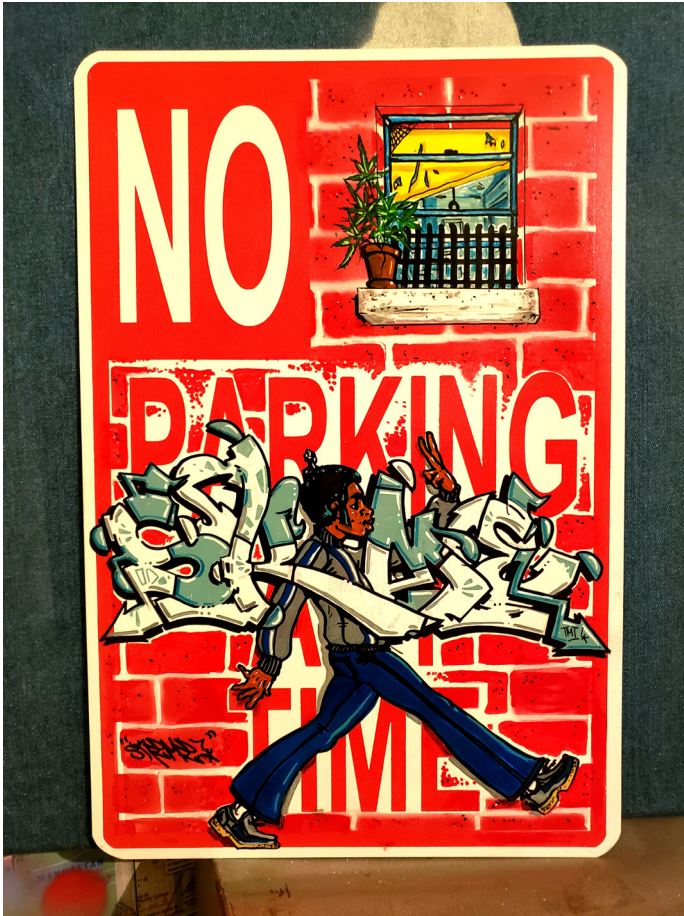
[61] Kurt Boone, "Remembering Phase 2 Through His Final Writings," Upmag, https://upmag.com/remembering-phase-2-through-his-final-writings/, acc. on April 18, 2023.

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