



Christine DeFazio

BRONX VISUAL
IDENTITY
FROM SUBWAY
'WRITERS' TO
MURAL ARTISTS

Aerosol Art from 1968 to the Present

Artist Studies

Collection Editor

JOY SPERLING

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Abstract

Following the story of graffiti from its inception in 1970s Washington Heights, to the Golden Age, and in 1980s South Bronx, author and artist Christine DeFazio explores the development of aerosol art from bombing and inter-borough competition, to painting walls and canvases, and the crackdown on train graffiti.

Through a series of interviews with 'writers' such as BG 183, Olga Correa, COSE TDS, RIFF 170, SJK 171, and STAFF 161, *Bronx Visual Identity from Subway 'Writers' to Mural Artists* illuminates the social conditions of the area, and how collaboration with Hip-Hop artists helped to cement the art forms as central to the identity of the South Bronx.

Highlighting the continued importance of the presence of aerosol artists in the community as it undergoes gentrification, this book is ideal reading for students of Art and Design, Art History, Music, Cultural Studies, and American Studies, as well as street artists and musicians.

Key words

New York City; Bronx; community; Hip-Hop; identity; culture; murals; collaboration; gentrification; Style Wars

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Gallery, Brooklyn, New York (2023)) and *Andre Ternier and Lady K Fever: Intersecting Visions* (BronxArtSpace (2024)), and the upcoming *Tales from the Ghost Yard* (BronxArtSpace (2026)) featuring The Boys from the Heights, T-KID 170, and other ‘writers’ who painted there. Most importantly, I’d like to thank my editor, Joy Sperling, for her encouragement and assistance with writing, and David Parker at Lived Places Publishing for giving me the opportunity to publish this art history.

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Learning objectives

- Evaluate how the social conditions in New York City led up to the emergence of 'writing' as an art form.
- Reflect critically on the oeuvre of one or more of the aerosol artists included in this text over time and how they have contributed to the development of the art form.
- Critically examine aerosol art as a medium.
- Analyze the connections between 'writing', aerosol art, and Hip-Hop.
- Compare and contrast aerosol art to an artwork by a New York artist from the same period.

Introduction

Walking along the streets of the South Bronx, one cannot help but notice the number and quality of the murals that adorn many of the buildings there. In particular, the easternmost areas, from Mott Haven to Soundview, are now both densely and openly decorated by mural art. The murals themselves are the work of some of the most revered artists of the genre, artists whose work now spans several generations, and whose art was begun as ‘writing’ on trains when they were teenagers, but nowadays has inspired other young so-called aerosol artists around the world to pick up a spray can and paint.

This book traces the history of aerosol painting from its inception in the subway trains of Washington Heights and the Bronx to the art galleries, museums, and commercial world of today. Chapter 1 explores the origins of graffiti ‘writing’ and traces the work of its earliest practitioners in New York City. It includes the work of the Boys from the Heights who collaborated with Bronx ‘writer’ Michael Lawrence PHASE 2 Marrow (1955–2019). Chapter 2 discusses the history of aerosol ‘piecing’ on trains in the Bronx, and describes the work of the first ‘piecing’ crew formed by STAFF 161. Chapter 3 traces the formation of the next generation of Bronx crews formed during the 1970s and 1980s, including *The Death Squad* (TDS). Chapter 4 examines the ways in which

aerosol art moved into the mainstream art world, its travel across the Atlantic to Britain and to Europe, as well as the ways in which 'writing' has become deeply embedded with Hip-Hop. Chapter 5 shows how aerosol murals of the 1980s and 1990s functioned in the Bronx, and includes a study of 'memorial murals' and 'promotional walls' produced in conjunction with the Hip-Hop music industry. Chapter 6 maps out how murals contribute to the flourishing art community and festival life of the Bronx today.

Many of the most revered 'writers' and aerosol mural artists in this study are from the South Bronx. They include PART ONE, RIFF 170, STAFF 161, Michael Christopher TRACY 168 (1958–2023), John CRASH Matos (b. 1961), the founding and current members of TATS Cru (Sotero BG 183 Ortiz (b. 1963), Wilfredo BIO Feliciano (b. 1966), BRIM Fuentes, and Hector NICER Nazario (b. 1967)), and some of the newest generation of 'writers' such as Andre Trenier (b. 1977), just to mention a few. Many artists from the five New York boroughs have traveled to the Bronx to paint or work with Bronx 'writers', beginning as early as the early 1970s, when they congregated at the famous Writers' Bench at the Two and Five subway lines at 149th Street and Grand Concourse in the Bronx, and it continues today. Artists still migrate to the area to participate in the Bronx's famous mural painting festivals, such as the Boone Avenue Walls, held on Boone Avenue and in Mott Haven each summer. Aerosol artists from around the world have come to the Bronx to paint, including the twins Raoul and Davide Perré (b. 1975), known as HOW NOSM, and Nick Walker (b. 1969).

Bronx murals are both historical and celebratory. They tell the story of the Bronx from the 1970s, and they celebrate its culture, then and now. They honor the art and activism that fueled the

'Bronx is Burning' era of the 1960s and 1970s, an era in which the community forged a way forward as a distinct cultural part of the metropolis. As HOW noted: "The Bronx and New York City are the mecca of graffiti. So everybody's dream is to come over here and paint something, or meet the legends, you know, like all the graffiti stars...oh, yeah, especially the Bronx. I mean, graffiti is all over New York, but it actually started in the Bronx, you know, like breakdancing and everything" (Smithsonian Learning Lab, 2019).

The teenagers who started the 'writing' movement began an art movement that is now one of the largest systems of street art in history. Many of them grew up in the Bronx during the 1960s and 1970s, in 'the Bronx is Burning' era, when the baseball commentator Howard Cosell allegedly paused in calling the 1977 Yankees World Series game to observe that the Bronx was burning. The phrase (which was actually never uttered), however, was symptomatic of how New Yorkers felt about the borough at the time, and it "became synonymous with urban conflagration and decay" (Ansfield, 2020, p. 107). BG 183 and artist Olga Correa (b. 1965) lived in one of the four remaining buildings on Simpson Street, on one of the blocks where the movie *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981), another term for the area, was filmed. BG 183 (2022) remembered growing up watching fires outside of his window and wondering if his home would be next. The Bronx was indubitably a dangerous place, but many of its artists also describe growing up in a close-knit, supportive community with its own civil structures, many of which were organized by street gangs modeled on the Young Lords and the Black Panthers.

The early Bronx 'writers' produced their work at a pivotal time in both cultural and visual history in New York. As children, they watched the first painted trains run on the elevated tracks of the Bronx, and as teens, they 'wrote' on the same trains. Bronx 'writer' Julius T-KID 170 Caverio (b. 1961) (2022) noted: "I am the Bronx...Graffiti for me was my voice, my scream, and that was it. It was about, Yo, hell, I am here". From the steep incline of the streets of the Bronx, you can see the Manhattan skyline. As the trains crossed Manhattan from Brooklyn to the Bronx, so did visual ideas. The Bronx always led in 'writing' style and culture. The Sugar Hill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* (1979), the first commercial rap hit, hit the Bronx months before it hit Manhattan. 'Writing' as described in this book, emerged almost simultaneously in Washington Heights and the Bronx in the late 1960s. 'Writing' became more complex, more multidimensional, and more visually detailed in the 1970s, and in that incarnation began being called 'piecing', short for 'masterpiecing' to reflect the intellectual and physical effort required to produce it. By the 1980s, artists began producing works in what was described as 'Wild Style', an even more complex and intricately designed style. Today, many artists produce aerosol 'murals', large-scale, more narrative, and much more publicly acceptable forms of the art, increasingly painted on the walls of buildings, even at the behest of owners. The overall movement, which most of its practitioners prefer to call 'writing', a term I will use throughout this book, has no official name in cultural history. Yet, the scholar Joe Austin claims that "the cultural forms that the writers developed in New York City constitute what is perhaps the most important art movement of the late twentieth century"

(2001, p. 6). Together, this collective body of work has played a pivotal role in the cultural history and community of the Bronx for the last sixty-five years. This book traces the origins and history of 'writing', aerosol art, and the work of its major artists in both Washington Heights and the Bronx from the 1960s to the present day.

1

Writing Graffiti: The pioneers of graffiti ‘writing’ lay the foundation in Washington Heights and the Bronx (Circa 1968–1974)

In 1964, Paul Simon wrote in the song *The Sound of Silence* that “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls” foreshadowing ‘writing’, one of the largest and perhaps most impactful art movements of the second half of the twentieth-century, and one started by kids from Washington Heights, Brooklyn and the Bronx who literally wrote on the walls. ‘Writing’ quickly progressed from simple ‘tags’ (stylized ‘writing’ of one’s signature) to ‘bombing’ (putting ‘tags’ up in highly visible public locations) to ‘piecing’ (larger ‘pieces’ with multiple colors and

patterns showcasing the 'writers' unique style) and finally 'style writing' (the unique 'writing' style of a 'writer' culminating in the complex 'Wild Style') between the 1960s and 1970s. Each style was a game-changing contribution by pioneer 'writers' from the Washington Heights neighborhood of upper Manhattan and the South Bronx. A longstanding and complex relationship between Washington Heights and Bronx 'writers' developed during these years because of their relative proximity and collaboration. 'Writers' from both neighborhoods established meeting places at corners and benches early on so that collectives, or 'crews' emerged to create graffiti 'writing' communities, and twelve 'writers' founded the United Graffiti Artists collective (UGA) in 1972 to begin to try to take the art more mainstream and to organize gallery representation.

There is consensus that graffiti 'writing' emerged in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City in the late 1960s, with the 'tag'. (COOL EARL and Darryl CORNBREAD McCray (b. 1953) also began writing in the 1960s in Philadelphia). The New York Times inadvertently coined the term 'graffiti' in a 1971 article on Demetrios TAKI 183 (b. 1953/54) that described what the names and numbers in his 'tags' meant. However, practitioners such as PHASE 2, who disliked the negative connotations of the word 'graffiti', began using the term 'writing' for their work, as did many of their cohorts. As he said, "First of all, don't call it graffiti. Those of us who truly understand the magnitude and depth of this culture would never refer to it as that... Technically, it's not politically correct, unquestionably due to the fact that from the very beginning we called ourselves 'writers' and what we did 'writing' (Archive.org, 2025). The early artists whose art

was ‘tagging’ literally ‘wrote’ their identifying information in words and numbers. JULIO 204 (active 1967–1970), a Puerto Rican youth (and member of the Savage Skulls street gang) from Washington Heights, marked his territory by ‘writing’ his name and street number on the wall of his block around 1967. Then, seventeen-year-old TAKI 183 became the most well-known early writer and the first to achieve ‘fame’ by tagging his name while he worked as a messenger in the summer of 1969. TAKI 183 adapted the same name and street number format, using TAKI as an abbreviation of his Greek nickname, DIMITRAKI. The New York Times wrote of him that year that “Taki is a Manhattan teenager who writes his name and his street number everywhere he goes. He says it is something he just has to do. His TAKI 183 appears in subway stations and inside subway cars all over the city, on walls along Broadway, at Kennedy International Airport, in New Jersey, Connecticut, upstate New York, and other places. He has spawned hundreds of imitators ... He’s the King”. TAKI 183’s response was that “I don’t feel like a celebrity normally. But the guys make me feel like someone when they introduce me to someone. ‘This is him,’ they say. The guys know who the first one was” (Taki 183, 1971).

TAKI 183 is often credited as being the earliest, most prolific, and most wide-ranging ‘writer’, but other contemporaneous writers participated in this same practice of ‘tagging’ their stylized personal signatures and pseudonyms around the city. However, they were not picked up and lionized by the press. TAKI 183 was one amongst several important ‘writers’ who began tagging circa 1968/69, including Steve SJK 171 Kesogrides (b.c. 1957), MIKE 171 Hughes (b. 1956), FRANK 207, and others. SJK 171

(2025) explained, "The facts are in the heights in the late 1960s, we were the ones who began writing our names with street numbers. More information came to light years later to back that up". Bronx 'writer', PHASE 2 recalled that "in Manhattan people were 'writing' even before we were. You know there's no question about that. As far as I understand it, the majority of 'writers' were in Manhattan at that time, basically on Broadway. That's where the roots of it came from, and to a degree, guys from the Bronx picked it up..." (Videograf Productions, 2008).

In 2024, the walls of the Washington Heights 155th Street subway station on the downtown BD train line were cleaned, and the long-standing advertisement spaces were removed (Figure 2). Underneath, they discovered historic 'tags', including those by SJK 171 from 1970 and CHINO 159, LEE 163d, and JUNIOR 161 from around 1971, among others, written with markers in capital block letters. Eleven-year-old SJK 171 and MIKE 171 actually began writing with shoe polish around 1968, after seeing their older brothers writing their names on the walls. Their brothers soon moved on, but SJK 171 and MIKE 171 stayed with 'writing', which at the time had become a mischievous game for eleven to sixteen-year-olds. Eddy SNAKE 1 Rodriguez (b. 1957) 'tagged' buses, inside and out, even admitting to 'tagging' the front window of a bus while the driver slept. To prove his prowess, he wrote "King of All Snakes, Ya Dig!" Michael Christopher TRACY 168 (1958–2023) also started by 'tagging' buses in the Bronx. Early 'motion tagging' often focused on vehicles and then spread to subway trains circa 1970. REE 2 Vilomar (2025) began painting buses with CANE, CHAIN 3, TEAN 5, CLYDE, and Frank FDT 56 Del Toro. 'Tags' were painted on the front and back of the buses for



Figure 2: Advertisement spaces with ‘tags’ by SJK 171, LEE 163d, and others, circa 1970–71, Washington Heights 155th Street Subway Station, Manhattan, 2024, Photographs by Christine DeFazio, 2024

greatest visibility. He called CLYDE 'King of the Buses' and recalled a 'piece' painted on the front of a bus by FDT 56, Wayne STAYHIGH 149 Roberts (1950–2012), and BARBARA 62. Eric Orr and REE 2 grew up on the same block on Daly Avenue and went to the same Bronx grade school. Orr recalled (2025), "When I started writing, I wrote mostly inside subway cars and buses, and sometimes on milk trucks that came into the neighborhood". RIFF 170 began writing at age eleven and 'wrote' on trains until 1976. RIFF 170 (2023) notes most 'writers' at this time were under the age of sixteen, except STAYHIGH 149. Jon Naar's photographs in Norman Mailer's *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974) portray these 'writers' and their 'writing' on the inside and outside of the trains, on the train station walls, on signs, on the walls of buildings, construction fences, highway underpasses, on buses, bus waiting booths, delivery trucks, and food trucks. These kids focused on 'getting up' (writing your name in as many places as possible) and 'getting around' (writing your name in as expansive an area as possible): visibility was their key objective in the early 1970s. By this point, the walls were covered with 'tags' of various sizes in a multitude of colors.

The proliferation of 'tags' is captured in a photograph taken by Dan McCoy (1936–) for the Environmental Protection Agency's *DOCUMERICA* Series in 1973, entitled *A Sidewalk in the Bronx Becomes a Playground for these Youngsters* (Figure 3, Environmental Protection Agency, 1972–77, available at: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/549865>). The mistitled photograph was actually taken on a handball court between 175th and 176th Streets and Amsterdam Avenue in Washington Heights, Manhattan, according to Curtis LEE II Ross, who tagged his name in the upper right



Figure 3: Dan McCoy, *A Sidewalk Becomes a Playground for these Youngsters*, 1974, Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/72/A_SIDEWALK_IN_THE_BRONX_BECOMES_A_PLAYGROUND_FOR_THESE_YOUNGSTERS_-_NARA_-_549865.jpg

(LEE II, 2025). The wall is covered with ‘tags’ including those of Bronx ‘writers’ Rudolfo STITCH 1 Martinez and Manhattan ‘writers’ BARBARA 62, EVA 62, and LEE II.

Artist Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), who photographed the proliferation of ‘writing’ from 1972–73, wrote that “in the period between 1971 and 1974, graffiti went from being an occasional ‘I was here marking to a fully fleshed out game with internal rules, rankings and levels of mastery’” (Gastman, 2024, p. 20). ‘Writers’ began to organize into a community. In 1971, for instance, the Bronx ‘writer’ STITCH 1 founded *The Writer’s Corner* on 188th Street and Audubon Avenue in Washington Heights, near the home

of his girlfriend, 'writer' ROCKY 184. The two met in 1969, at the location where STITCH 1 began 'writing' ROCKY 184's name on the walls, and eventually both started 'writing' their own names. SNAKE 1 and Juan C.A.T. 87 Tapia (b.c. 1957), who met in fifth grade at PS 189, became vice presidents of the crew, and began writing W.C.188 (for 'writer's' corner at 188th Street) next to their names. STITCH 1 had decided there should be a meeting place where writers could hang out and talk to each other. The corner became one of the earliest gathering spots for writers because, as ROCKY 184 (2022) recalled, this was long before cell phones, the Internet, or Social Media, so people had to hang out and talk to one another in person. STITCH 1 chose a convenient spot – 188th Street and Audubon Avenue – for 'Writer's Corner'. SNAKE 1 described it: "...we wanted other people from other boroughs to come there and write their names on that corner like we did. We got a lot of other people to come write their names on that corner...Writer's Corner 188 became much more than a street crew; it became the foundation for the burgeoning sense of the graffiti community. If you wanted to hang out with the elite writers of the day, all you had to do was go to the said corner and introduce yourself...Writers Corner became one of the first locations for graffiti artists to meet each other and tag books, if you had one at the time...If you were truly a writer of status, SNAKE 1 or STITCH 1 – and only SNAKE 1 or STITCH 1 – could confer this honor and would allow you to write the acronym W.C. 188 next to your name" (Gastman, 2024, p. 326). SJK 171 (2025) recalled that he, HENRY 161 Medina (b. 1957), JEC*, and MIKE 171 became members of Writer's Corner 188 and added W.C. 188 to their 'tags' in 1971.

A drawing by SJK 171, entitled *King of the "A" Trains!*, includes Writer's Corner 188 on the top (Figure 4). Ray BOM 5 Abrahante (b.c. 1960) (2023) recalled 'writing' around 154th Street in Washington Heights, when he met SNAKE 1. "He told me there's a big writer's bench over there...I met JUNIOR 161..." And he said, "Oh dude, you know I'm going to take you somewhere uptown. Have you ever heard of WC188? We got on the A train... Then we'd go there and meet writers. So I met his boy STITCH 1". PHASE 2 recalled, "We used to go over to Broadway and you'd be shocked because the trains were demolished and you'd go back to the Bronx and the trains were basically clean" (Videograf Productions, 2008). He says at the time there were only a couple of writers from the Bronx, Gerald SUPERCOOL 223 Wesson (active late 1960s to early 1970s), RIFF 170, and some who we don't talk



Figure 4: SJK 171, Drawing, 1971, Photograph by SJK 171©, 2016

much about, like HOTSAUCE 575. PHASE 2's cousin, Bronx 'writer', LEE 163d wrote his 'tag' prolifically in Washington Heights, as it is seen on the 155th Street subway station advertising spaces previously discussed, as well as on the trains.

The Bronx was just a short walk from The 'Writers Corner' over the Washington Bridge. This ten-minute walk led to Sedgwick Avenue, where DJ KOOL HERC (b. 1955, Kingston, Jamaica) lived in the Bronx and held his infamous parties in the recreation room of his housing project, a site now considered to be the birthplace of Hip-Hop. There, the interchange of ideas and the collaboration between artists of all kinds from Washington Heights and the Bronx was critical to the development of graffiti 'writing' in the area. SNAKE 1, for instance, attended Alfred Smith High School in the Bronx, even though he lived in Washington Heights. This creates another intersection between the two areas (Orr, PURPLE HAZE, and REE 2 also attended Alfred Smith High School). Furthermore, although SNAKE 1 and The Boys from the Heights created the earliest 'pieces', Naar's photographs from *The Faith of Graffiti* show contemporaneous 'writing' by SNAKE 1 and PHASE 2. Exact dating can be difficult due to the speed of the development of 'writing', because innovations are dated in weeks or months rather than years.

Hip-Hop is widely considered to have four major elements: rapping (also known as MCing (or emceeing)), deejaying (or turntabling), breakdancing (or b-boying/b-girling), and the fourth is graffiti 'writing'. It involves the spoken word, mixing musical tracks, dancing, and the stylized visual and verbal art of 'writing'. 'Writing's' centrality to Hip-Hop meant that many 'writers' were