United Graffiti Artists 1975
This exhibition is dedicated to our parents.

Acknowledgments
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—United Graffiti Artists

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A Brief Background of Graffiti

By HUGO MARTINEZ

In the fall of 1972 I was a junior at City College, having just spent the summer working with the Queens College Summer Program. The program had put me in touch with street gangs, here I realized the vast potential of Puerto Rican adolescents and what they might achieve by rechanneling their energies and interests. Also, I concluded that if any constructive work was to be done with these adolescents, it must be with those who showed definite signs of rebellion, of a concentration on their own needs rather than the needs of traditional education. I was anxious to continue working with young Puerto Ricans.

At City College I met a student who was a night watchman at the "A" train yards. He mentioned that the graffiti writers were mostly Puerto Ricans in their early teens, that they struck in at night while his father was sleeping. This was enough to get me going. I set out in search of the writers.

I started in Washington Heights, approaching the local gang, the Young Galaxies. I knew they would be able to provide the necessary first contact. By 1973 the gangs were beginning to disintegrate after three years of flourishing. They had accomplished their primary goal of ridding their communities of junkies; this had been their only conscious ideology. Now there was nothing to hold them together, though they were still loosely associated in a kind of National Guard, ready to strike should conditions warrant it.

The Young Galaxies—a younger version of the infamous Galaxies, who dominated the Heights from 1969 to 1973—were headed by five "tops" or presidents, who made major decisions in unison, and were known to hang out in the 160th Street Park on Audubon Avenue. Approaching a member, I asked to rap with one of the tops. This produced a meeting with Henry 161, the Young Galaxies' public-relations specialist and himself a mediocre graffiti writer. Henry seemed to know most of the major writers and offered to get them together for me. Meanwhile, Freddie 127, the only Anglo member of the gang, gave me a tour of the neighbor-

hood's graffiti landmarks. I there were hidden caves, secret hitting (writing) places, school yards, "sign-in" walls and tremendous feats. "Saint 173" high on the wall of a hospital (painted while dangling over the roof), Freddie pointed out the names of the masters with reverent admiration: Hitler II, Baby Face 86, Cay 161, Turok... real heroes.

The tour climaxed at "Writer's Corner 168," a wall at 188th Street and Audubon Avenue. Freddie formally introduced me to the president and vice-president of the site, Stich 1 and Snake I, along with CAT 87. They received me with silent suspicion and an air of being used to admiration, of expecting it. Stich was wearing a black fishing hat, black leather button-down jacket, dark gray beat-up pants and Pro-Keds. Snake was a red corduroy jacket, Levi's and Pro-Keds. They had founded Writer's Corner, converting the pink wall of the building into a tapestry of line and color. Here the best writers of Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn would come to meet, sign in, exchange gossip and, if the feelings were right, go out and
hit together. Here also toy (inspired) readers today could do no better than to use their heroes and perhaps get them autographed. Only the best writers of Manhattan were allowed to consider themselves privileged to add "W.C. 101" (Writer's Corner 101) to their signatures.

Write's Corner would provide the initial nucleus for United Graffiti Artists. From the masters I learned the secrets of graffiti: the moral codes, artistic criteria, technology, nomenclature, history, legend and ritual.

Everyone knew that Topcat 120 had been Magic Inc., W.A.R. (Writing Already Respected), the Ex-Vandals ("Ex-V" for "Experienced") and the Vanguards. The Bronx had The Independents, Ebony Dukes, The Union and The Concourse, though Bronx writers, who came from well-defined black ghettos, banded together less than those from Manhattan and Brooklyn, where mixed neighborhoods raised a threat to identity that the crews sought to counter. These groups presented an alternative to street gangs. (Like street gangs, they were an alternative to schools.) There was no violence in any of these, nor was their purpose territorial definition or defense. On the contrary, they sought an elimination of territories and the establishment of no-man's-land. Criteria for membership were, generally, the ability of the individual to get along with his peers, the way he handled himself and the quality and quantity of his work.

Historically, Manhattan and the Bronx are closely linked and have a tradition totally distinct from that of Brooklyn. This held true for the graffiti movement, despite marked differences between the two boroughs. Most Manhattan writers were Puerto Rican, most Bronx writers were black. Manhattan came to its glory first, not only by introducing graffiti in Manhattan in 1970, through Julio 204, but also by graduating to spray paint. By the second half of the Seventies, the Manhattan writers captured the interest of the hip hop world; and until the fall of 1972, two years after Johny "Juice", that the Bronx really came into its own with the "Masterpiece" or "Piece", as it came to be known. The Piece was originated in Manhattan, by Barbara 62, Junior 161 and Cey 161, but was not widespread until the late Seventies. Also it was modest, being somewhat larger in history, reflective of its peculiar character. Brooklyn has always been an isolated East Coast city, only recently, with the emergence of disco, that many adolescents have ventured out of Brooklyn to socialize. Moreover, Brooklyn is internally undifferentiated; its streets interwoven in endless configurations with little topographic variation. Thus Brooklyn graffiti began as a scattered phenomenon, initiated by innumerable "first writers" who were apparently unaware of each other's existence. (The most widely acknowledged first writer is Friendly Freddy.) A growth of mutual awareness occurred in 1970, somewhere around Bedford-Stuyvesant. Mostly black, the Brooklyn writers, on their own, developed in a way parallel to the Manhattan-Bronx tradition from collective, small-scale street writing to writing on trains to Masterpieces on trains. Equivalent to the wall at Writer's Corner was the Brooklyn writers' famous wall at Grand Army Plaza.

In 1972 Brooklyn and Manhattan-Bronx graffitiists started becoming aware of each other's work, the making of bonds and sources of information which ran the full length of the island, from which ran the Bronx through Manhattan to Brooklyn and back. The most outstanding among all the writers of graffiti, particularly the masters (totaling about 150), were those who had economic ground. All the masters were working as street painters in the neighborhoods like Washington Heights, the Bronx, and Harlem, which was his own history, reflective of its peculiar character. Brooklyn has always been an isolated East Coast city, only recently, with the emergence of disco, that many adolescents have ventured out of Brooklyn to socialize. Moreover, Brooklyn is internally undifferentiated; its streets interwoven in endless configurations with little topographic variation. Thus Brooklyn graffiti began as a scattered phenomenon, initiated by innumerable "first writers" who were apparently unaware of each other's existence. (The most widely acknowledged first writer is Friendly Freddy.) A growth of mutual awareness occurred in 1970, somewhere around Bedford-Stuyvesant. Mostly black, the Brooklyn writers, on their own, developed in a way parallel to the Manhattan-Bronx tradition from collective, small-scale street writing to writing on trains to Masterpieces on trains. Equivalent to the wall at Writer's Corner was the Brooklyn writers' famous wall at Grand Army Plaza.

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those from homes where neither par-
ent worked—did not create ambience for
graffiti. The masters were “good kids” whose parents participated in the American dream of becoming middle-class. The bitterness and self-rejection that permeated the poor were absent from their environments. Among the black fami-
lies it was not uncommon to find private homes with air conditioning. The Latino homes these articles were defi-
nitely influenced by the white working-class movements that sur-
rounded them: the hippies, rock music, mod clothing—mainstream American culture.

The new-found sense of power and ability that characterized the aspirant middle class provided these youths with a new perspective on their problems. They began to feel the necessity of asserting their own uniqueness and of meeting and com-
municating with their peers. But the barriers were staggering. Never before had there been such an attempt to reach across the physical and psycho-
logical distances between the Latino and black communities to unify a whole generation. The graffiti movement lacked historical awareness and seemed destined to go the way of all fads. It was only a matter of time before it would run out of space and lose touch with its unconscious impulses. What was clearly needed was an environment that would protect and channel the movement’s energies and an organization that would develop an ideology.

The United Graffiti Artists was established in October, 1972, with the immediate purpose of organizing the best writers of Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn and offering them the opportunity to redirect their work to other surfaces. The advantages of forming such a group were many and real, the most signifi-
cal representation of masters, the nega-
tive as well as positive aspects of the graffiti movement could be subjected to analysis, criticism and self-criti-
ism. This kind of communication had been lacking within the movement, and the task would be a difficult one, involving deceleration and lots of effort and aesthetic activity. But more and more, the graff-
iti art was being misconstrued by newcomers as a vehicle for fame through the mere quantity of signatures. Ultimately, graffiti would become nothing more than getting around a village had to be established that would safeguard the art from the soil that had soon follow. It was also evident that as masters began to reach draft age they would have to look for job opportunities, and art was not an avenue normally open to youths in their economic class.

But first it was necessary to get the masters together. This accomplished at City College, through a design class I was attending. With the help of the class professor, Axel Horne, and the chairman of the art department, Mer-
in Jules, I acquired the use of the classroom plus wrapping paper as spray paint, enough to cover an entire 10 by 40-foot wall. On October 30, 1972, at the height of the graffiti movement, 12 writers walked into the art class and gave their names. They carried their own markers, rang-

ing from 1-inch “toy markers” to
2-inch “Uni-widnes.” Most of them were 15 or 16 years old. Once they realized the possibilities, all went out to the street cool went out the window. They were sociable. The presence of so many masters together, all the spray paint and so much room to hit created a scene of controlled frenzy.

By the end of the work it was obvious that, given the amount of space, the legitimate surface and the mutual respect of professionals, the product was esthetically superior while maintaining its energy and im-
pact. United Graffiti Artists was born.

Postscript: The three-year history of UGA has been marked by tremendous conflicts and important solutions—a continuing educational experience. Over 100 masters have been involved at some time or other. The group has evolved not only as a vehicle by which artists can prove their art form but also as a place to learn collective leadership, individual moti-
vation and aspirations for higher edu-
cation. It is with the belief in the power of alternative education—alternative both to the schools and to the streets—that its history can best be evaluated. This essay has been purposely limited to the priority of documenting the his-
torical background of the art form and its life style. As for the works in this exhibition, I believe they can speak for themselves.

Jaime Ramirez (MIADC), Colombia, 1974, spray paint on canvas, 6 by 15 feet.
by Peter Schijndel

Some people predicted that graffiti writers would be working on canvases, away from the perimeters of subway railroads, the vagrants of their art (They so derisively called it). The new flair of these young artists is not so easy because they are adverse to the ideas of their studio work, which involves variations and refinements of their original logics, added complexities of color and design. Their new form since going legit has been the collaborator mural—which they call the "collective"—which divorces its proportions from those of the side of a subway car.

Members of United Graffiti Artists work on canvases prepared with gesso and Florex, painting exclusively with spray cans and markers, as of old. The "hard" white surface assures a maximum brilliance of hue and supersedes all textures aside from that of the spray medium itself: soft, atmospheric edges, unstable, amorphous shapes, hovering. A fairly recent innovation is the availability of black marking tape and stencils to produce correspondingly sharp edges. These artists do prize experience, but never at the expense of consistency and control. As distinct as their styles are from one another, they share certain distinctives of standard: originality, singularity. This is acceptable: rights or permissions are permitted, for instance, and occasion, usually whimsical attempts at figuration are indulged but degenerated, as are forays into abstraction where the logics, the name, is completely effaced.

The graffiti logo is a schematic motif, the painting functions visually as abstract art. That it does this so well, with such boldness and apparent sophistication, may seem mysterious in view of the naiveté of its youthful makers, most of whom know next to nothing of museum art. The frequent, if fairly distant, reminiscences of graffiti's gestural calligraphy, splatter imagery and grand compositional finesse to similar elements in Abstract Expressionism, Pop and color-field painting have drawn wondering comment. They suggest the hypothesis that all big scale painting intended to have great immediate impact encounters certain basic problems and tends to solve them in logical ways.

When these artists worked in the streets and subways, the "art" component of the work was fortuitous, existing only in the eye of certain beholders. For most people the work was vandalism pure and simple, the defacement of public and private property. Now graffiti artists are painting on surfaces that belong to them, surfaces that, moreover, are intended for museum and gallery settings. Their work is legal and openly aspire to the status of art; but it is not thereby disassociated from its origins in vandalism, which now are a sort of subject matter or secondary, literary content. No longer a criminal act, studio graffiti is still about criminality: specifically the crime of asserting one's identity in a way socially proscribed.

What kind of art is studio graffiti? The nearest available term would seem to be "popular" art, given the collective and vernacular character of graffiti's forms. But in thus lumping graffiti they are committing two errors, rock-album covers, printed T-shirts and comic books, one must feel that some vital element is being ignored. That element is the peculiar expressive individuality of the graffiti artist, the use of his own identity—his name—as an artistic motif not linked to any object or function apart from itself. (Norman Mailer grasped this point in titling his book on the subject The Faith of Graffiti: "The name is the faith of graffiti," a graffiti artist had told him.) The gratuitous egoism of graffiti art, quite apart from its appeal to the eyes, gives it a certain dignity that no popular art can claim. The forms developed by the best graffiti artists urge us gradually away from a consciousness of their common sources toward contemplating the mysteries of personality.

As for the cultural significance of graffiti art, consider this paradox: the time of reflex, "anti-elite" we are here presented with a thoroughly elitist and egoistic new form of expression from a decidedly unlikely source—in a word, from some sons (and an occasional daughter) of the People. (As often before in the history of art, the creative impulse shows not the slightest reverence for enlightened ideas.) This elitism of the streets is almost Darwinian, being grounded in a survival code of personal courage, self-sufficiency and style. An important strength of graffiti art is that in it this raw ethos has found an objective correlative in esthetic form, allowing it a direct and unmediated communication.

"You're standing in the station, everything is gray and gloomy, and one of a sudden one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens the place like a big bouquet from Latin America." This remark of Clues Oldenburg was a signal early appreciation of graffiti. Against all expectations, it holds as true for studio graffiti as for the subways. "Masterpiece" have style in increasingly subtle ways. The art is more complex now, and the graffiti it brightens is not just visual. The meaning and import of graffiti continue to grow.
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U.G.A. Exhibitions

City College of New York, Nov. 1972
Razor Gallery, New York City, Sept. 1973
Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, May-June, 1974

Roberto Gualtieri (COCO), Explosion, 1975, spray paint and marker on canvas, 8 by 11 feet.