

# SUBWAY ART

Martha Cooper & Henry Chalfant

With 153 photographs



First published in the United Kingdom in 1984  
as *Subway Art* by Thames & Hudson Ltd.  
181A High Holborn, London WC1V 0JZ

This edition 2018

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Thames & Hudson Ltd, London

Photographs © 1984, 2000, 2018  
Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-26211-0

Printed and bound in China by CMC Offset  
Printing Co. Ltd

To find out about all our publications, please visit

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Back CC Yard as playground, the Bronx, 1982, 100

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window) by Duro, Shy 147, and Koe 207, 1982, 100

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"Seen Fly Kat" and "Blade," South Bronx, 1980, 100

*Our heartfelt thanks to writers everywhere.*

*With your skills and passion you changed  
our lives and brightened the face of the world.*

Thanks also, from Henry, to Max Hergenrother and  
Nathan Fox, who digitized and stitched the trains.

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# "Why don't you photograph graffiti?"

— HE3

## What first attracted you to graffiti?

In 1975 I moved from Rhode Island to New York City with the goal of becoming a photographer for a hip city newspaper. At the time graffiti was everywhere, but I had no idea what it was. Even when I was able to decipher the letters, I didn't know what they meant. In 1977 I landed a job as a staff photographer on the New York Post, a tabloid owned by Rupert Murdoch. We covered assignments in all neighborhoods from the Bronx to Brooklyn and worked out of our cars using two-way radios. In addition to news, we were supposed to look for feature photo called "weather shots."

I began driving through the Lower East Side on my way back to the paper every day to see what I could find and to finish up the roll of film in my camera before developing it. As a personal project I began photographing kids playing creatively on the street — building dollhouses, making go-carts from scrap, or jumping on mattresses. One day a boy I had photographed flying papers showed me his notebook of drawings and said, "Why don't you photograph graffiti?" He explained that he was sketching his nickname, "HE3," and showed me how he had painted it on a wall. "This was a revelation!" I finally understood that graffiti was something that could be called graffiti. I asked him for his name, his address, and he said, "Wise? Those kids are designers!"

## Graffiti is an illegal activity. How did you establish credibility with the writers so that they allowed you to photograph them?

Because I expressed so much interest in graffiti, HE3 offered to introduce me to a "kings" who turned out to be Donald "Big Back" Brock had clipped one of my photos from the Post that happened to have one of his pieces in the background and passed it in the front of his black book. The photo had a credit line so he recognized my name. Brock personally described the complicated process of painting



## What approach did you take to photographing graffiti?

I was working as a photojournalist but I had also studied anthropology in graduate school and was married to an anthropologist. I was interested in capturing the art of graffiti within the context of the culture. I also wanted to document techniques. I was intensely curious about the specifics of painting a piece on a train, and I needed to spend time in the yards in order to understand this. I did not feel agoniously watching trains until after I had spent a night in the New York yards watching Donald and Pharo paint at whole car top-to-bottom piece. After that, I began driving up to the Bronx to look for locations where I could get a clear view of trains. This turned into obsessive behavior as I was soon getting up before dawn to catch the morning rush hour and sometimes spending five hours standing in the middle of a vacant lot in the Bronx trying for the perfect shot that combined good light with a great piece and an interesting contextual background. As the Bronx was then full of burned-out buildings, this was a fairly risky endeavor. In 1980 I quit my well-paying union job at the Post in order to spend more time shooting graffiti and documenting the emerging hip-hop scene.

## How and when did Henry and Martha meet?

For a couple of years I had heard that there was someone else photographing graffiti, but I didn't know who this was. In 1980 Donald, or maybe Zigzaggy, told me that this photographer was always his train photos at the OK Harris gallery. I went to the opening and met Henry for the first time. I was surprised, and somewhat relieved, to see how he was photographing trains because I had assumed that his photos would be something like mine. Instead he had concentrated on the

networks, shooting the graffiti and eliminating the context. Henry doesn't remember this, but when I met him my log was as a case because I had just returned from Elmsmere Island in the high Arctic where I had spent the summer photographing an anthropological dig for National Geographic. I had had a mishap with a truck on and then a hipster — but that's another story.

## How did Subway Art come about?

After I met Henry he invited me to come to his studio. I was impressed by the huge collection of train photos he had arranged in large portfolios. When I saw some of the wonderful pieces I had missed, I doubted my efforts and began to spend even more time shooting trains. For a while we informally competed to see who could catch fresh trains first. The writers were happy that they had two photographers vying for photos of their work. We often got messages on our answering machines telling us when pieces were turning.

I had hoped to publish some of my photos as a magazine article and had sent a proposal around without success. So I began to think about a book and asked Henry if he would like to collaborate, because I felt that we would have a better chance of finding a publisher with a combined background of being a publisher with a combined background of both of our styles of shooting. We spent many hours putting together a dummy laboriously pasting up complicated layouts, as this was years before we had computers. We called our book Art Form.

We then made discouraging rounds of publishers in New York. Although we found a few editors sympathetic to the subject matter, no one was willing to print such a controversial book. We decided to try our luck at the 1983 Pundit Book Fair. Our dummy was so heavy that we had to make a special case for it and when it arrived, but our efforts paid off when Thomas Neary of Thames & Hudson agreed immediately to publish it.

He renamed the book *Subway Art* and the first edition of 5000 copies came out in the fall of 1984. None of us expected that graffiti would become a worldwide phenomenon.

When I arrived in New York in 1973, I was a sculptor. I found a ground-floor loft in SoHo where I made pieces of art and wood, working in a modernist idiom and becoming increasingly absorbed because the art world had embraced conceptual art as its main mode. Other collectors were calling up collectors and ordering, for instance, plaques of copper or a certain cut of painting stone and having that delivered to the gallery for exhibition. This was thought of as being true to materials. Art critics were talking about the "rehabilitation of form," and this had begun to affect my own motivation to create. I began watching the *Brushing Up* program weekly at the New York City's subway, which provided the most expressive visual experience I had seen in the galleries. I remember going to the Rialto Gallery in 1977 and finding canvas by Peter Blake and others. I saw that my train car and bought Jon Naess's Path of Orpheus.

As a newcomer to New York, I didn't know the subway system very well, so I took me a while to learn that the trains ran outside on elevated tracks as well as in the tunnels. As soon as I realized this, I saw the possibility of getting good pictures and I began to explore ways to do that. Then the Interstate Avenue was my favorite photo spot. The station, on the 2 and 6 lines in the Bronx, is perfectly situated for the morning run. It sits on a triangle that once housed over a valley of burned-out buildings, the ruins of the Crown Point Clubhouse, and the last operating synagogue on the South Bronx. No buildings rise to appear in the background view, which made for a cleaner image between photos in my studio. Another feature of this station was the large set of center tracks. Trains were parked there during the weekends along the stretch from Jackson Avenue to Lincoln, Prospect, and Stinson.

The Liverpool was important as I found out in the summer of 1977 when I came across the Bahadon Five Crews' "Merry Christmas" married-couple guard at Intervale Avenue. That's when I started taking pictures in sequence, because when I went out onto the camera to get the picture, I couldn't get back from the train far enough to cover one whole car in a single shot. As a sculptor, I was used to making interpersonal models using painted plasticine photo backgrounds, which I would create by taking several overlapping shots of the area surrounding the site and splicing them together. I began using this technique to document the art on the trains. To photograph my subway art from the station platform, I would shoot four or five overlapping pictures. I had to be able to position myself opposite the desired car and take the photos, moving about 100 to 200 feet in each shot in the few moments when the train passed in the station. Later, in my studio, I would cut and splice the prints together so that they reproduced

the whole network, and then I would mount them in an album or on museum boards for exhibition. After a couple of years I got a motor drive for my camera and that made it easier, because I could position myself opposite the front quarter panel of the painted car and wait for the train to pull away, snapping the shutter as the image moved through the viewfinder. I felt that under the circumstances this method was the best way to get a full coverage view of the scene. I was more interested in capturing a beautiful, ephemeral work of art than in taking a beautiful picture as a photographer.

It was an accident of geography that I took so many photos of the BRT trains. These lines run through my neighborhood on this Upper West Side of Manhattan, a short distance from Harlem and the Bronx. The greatest number of train runs in the morning rush hour, which increased my odds of finding a good piece. The north-south orientation of the lines meant that the morning light, coming over my shoulder as I faced west, was right for photos. 162nd Street on the 1 line was the closest elevated station to my home. I could make a quick run up there to catch a shot of a train as it briefly emerged from the underground before diving back into the tunnel. It was hard to anticipate where a piece might be placed on the train, and there was no time to run from one end of the station to the other when the train passed. But there were two stations — Waldock Avenue in the Bronx on the 6 line, and East Thruway

for very long. Sometimes might cross it out or "shoot cold" but I felt like I was standing near big game when I went out to take pictures of graffiti: the same disappointment when you lose a great moment and the same elation when you catch it.

I had I had been to know some of the writers, they would tell me that there was also a "lady" who was out there taking pictures of trains. I also heard that this lady, named Martha, "had a lot of shit" and had actually crossed the yards by photographing the artists at work. Around this time, I showed my photo collection to Iain Kirk, who owned the well-known OK Harris gallery on West Broadway in SoHo. I was invited to have a small show for a week at the beginning of September 1980. I put up about twenty photos and wanted, Word had gotten out in the graffiti network and writers came in droves from all over the city and many came with them. I had actually met Marty and she had talked and shared information. Each of us had plans to make a book. After beating our heads against the wall alone, we finally decided to pool our resources and try to do a book together. We realized that our ways of approaching graffiti were completely different and complementary, since Marty was a professional photographer and her photos revealed the artifice and the context of the art of the train, while my method of photography emphasized the artworks themselves.

There was, at the time, a tremendous antipathy to what was seen as a graffiti palooka. A trustee

# "If art like this is a crime, let God forgive me." — Lee

Avenue — where you could get a side view of an approaching train before it arrived in the station.

Several years after I had begun to photograph pieces on trains, I met some graffiti writers at the "writers' bench" in the 140th Street station in the Bronx, where I used to go to watch trains, compare stories, exchange black books, and plan future excursions to paint. They were the core group of writers who were most active on the lines at the time. Through them I got to know other writers from all over the city and we began a very good working relationship that was to last for years. I would supply pictures and they would let me know what was going on. When they finished their piece, I would usually get them to leave a message on my answering machine, telling me what they had painted, in which layer of yard, the line it would run on, and whether it was on the "morning" or the "afternoon" side. Armed with such information, I knew where to go to catch the piece. I was always working against time, since I could never be sure if a piece would remain intact

of the Museum of Modern Art once said to me, "Those people should be lined up at dawn and shot." But finally through Marty's connections in the Davenport photojournalism world, we found our way to the Pundit Book Fair, where we met with Thomas & Hudson, who agreed to do the book. Over thirty years after the initial publication of *Subway Art*, the graffiti movement is alive and well in the world. There is a community of artists and enthusiasts who create all kinds and, with the internet and affordable prints available to young people, graffiti has become an international youth culture. The art form has evolved greatly through this multicultural meeting, and through the development of new books and techniques. New forms of street art are flourishing, having adapted the graffiti artist's tactics of expropriating public space for making a public statement. Most importantly, graffiti has given a voice to the people. *Subway Art* was one of the books that brought this movement to life and may it be inspiration to people everywhere for decades to come.



Blade, 1980, mo

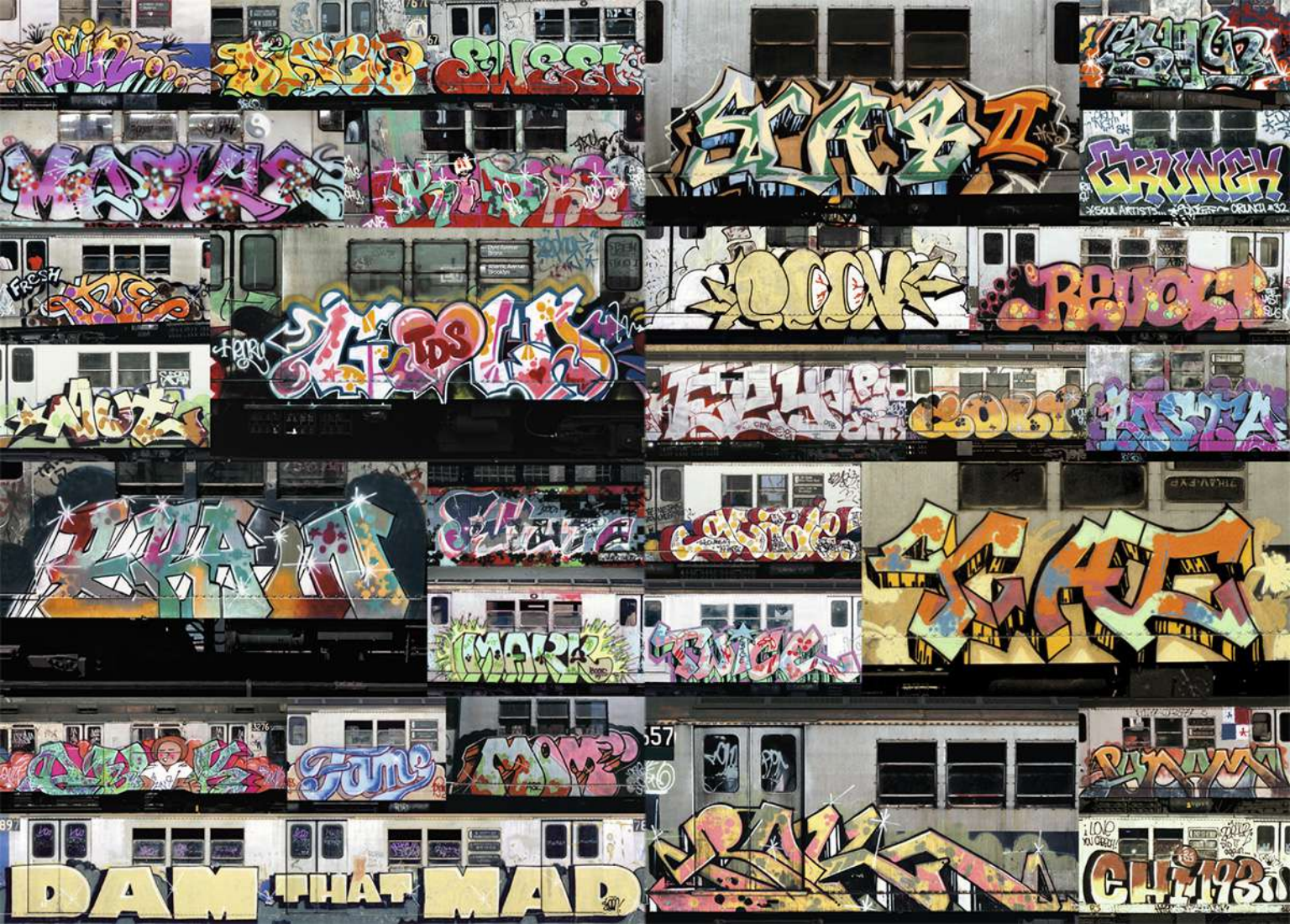


Daze and Skemo entering the yards, 1982. ...



Daz on lookout with a baseball bat in the 3 Yard, Manhattan, 1982. ...





67  
67

GRUNGH

MARKE

SCARBI

GRUNGH  
SOUL ARTISTS

FRESH  
X

FURY  
TDS

DOONE

REVOLT

ALOX

COOL  
KISS

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97  
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YOU CRAZY  
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224

125

125

352

REVOLUTION:  
PART II  
ANOTHER  
BOMBING  
PRODS...

WORLD WAR III

SOATIC  
SOE COVE  
ENK BE  
ZER

1982







Graphiti Prod. Inc., by Lady Pink, 1982. ©



Stop the Bomb, by Lee, 1979. ©



Following pages  
 50-51 Cops in the train, the Bronx, 1981. ©  
 52-53 Min, Duro, and Sly 147, New Lots Yards, the Bronx, 1981. ©  
 54-55 "Dinner Lesson" in wild style and straight letters, 1982. ©











"I Love Zoo York," by AZ, 1981. [see](#)



"Noc is Back," 1982. [see](#)



"Kid Man," 1983. [see](#)



"Kid Boogie," 1982. [see](#)



"Kid," 1979. [see](#)



"Blade Doboos," 1979. [see](#)



"Been Del," 1980. [see](#)



"Duro Kat Pos," 1981. [see](#)



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86-87 "Midgy" with yellow school bus, 1982. [see](#)

88-89 Style Wars, by Noc 167, 1981. [see](#)

90-91 Del, by Booz, 1981. [see](#)

92-93 "Chased," 1981. [see](#)







