

CITY AS

NEW YORK CITY GRAFFITI / THE MARTIN WONG COLLECTION

CANVAS



Skira RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

MUSEUM
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CITY
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CITY AS CANVAS

NEW YORK CITY GRAFFITI FROM THE MARTIN WONG COLLECTION

EDITED BY
SEAN CORCORAN / CARLO MCCORMICK



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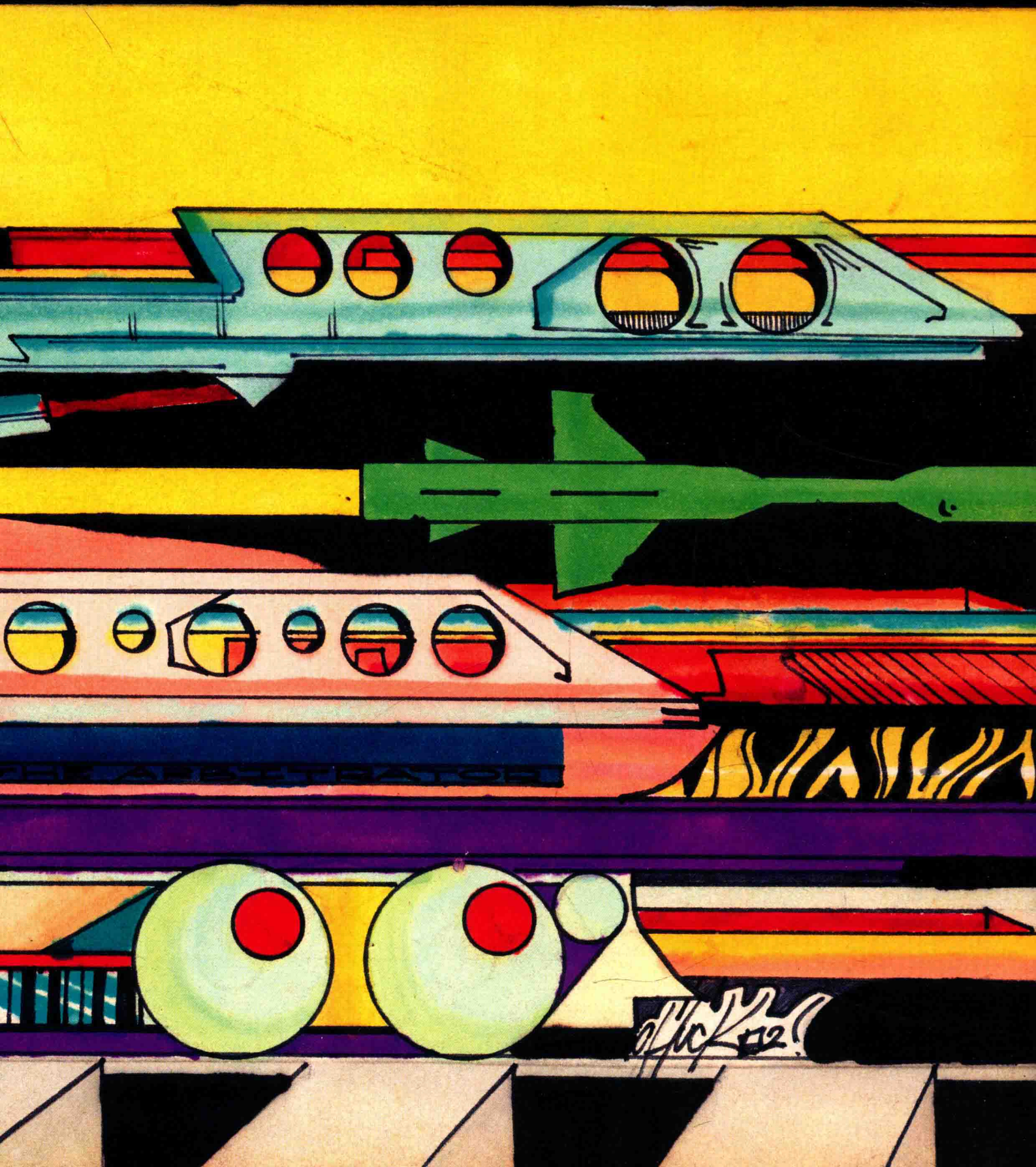
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FOREWORD



Bruce Davidson, *Subway*. New York City, USA, 1980

Susan Henshaw Jones

In 1994, Martin Wong (1946–1999), a painter and visionary collector of graffiti art, donated his vast personal collection to the Museum of the City of New York. Throughout the 1980s, Wong played a vital role in the growth of the movement by nurturing the creative talents of many of its most gifted practitioners. Comprised of fifty-five artist's sketchbooks and more than three hundred works on canvas and other media from 1971 through 1992, the archive is an invaluable document of a phenomenon that is closely associated with New York City.

Wong moved to New York's Lower East Side from San Francisco in 1978 and quickly became a fixture of his predominantly Latino neighborhood and the developing East Village art scene. His experiences in his adopted city became the focus of his art; he created finely detailed paintings of the tenements in his neighborhood and of the members of his community. An appreciation of the artistic merits of the graffiti writing and imagery he spotted on the city's walls and trains initially drew him to the graffiti movement. Wong soon came to believe in the value of these creative, albeit illegal, expressions. He befriended many of the teenagers from the five boroughs who had embraced writing and were pushing their artistic limits, and he actively sought to collect their work.

Though the marks left by graffiti writers on public spaces were reviled by many at the time, and still today, few would deny that graffiti's proliferation on the walls and trains of New York had a profound impact on the city—both in positive and negative ways. During the 1970s and '80s, the city spent more than \$300 million fighting this illicit activity, which defaced public and private property but also provided a creative outlet for hundreds of adolescents. Graffiti writing was a foundational aspect of a vibrant youth culture emerging from New York. The artistic contributions of graffiti writers,

especially when united with the hip-hop phenomenon, have become an accepted part of today's worldwide visual culture.

An ardent collector, Wong wanted to create an encyclopedic archive of graffiti art that would exemplify the range of practice and its artistic intentions. A diagnosis of HIV/AIDS virus in 1994 and his eventual death in 1999 sadly cut Wong's life and collecting short. However, the existing archive is a unique treasure that provides a window into a vibrant subculture and highlights the evolving work of young outlaws becoming mature artists.

The Museum is thankful for the generous assistance of Florence Wong Fie and The Martin Wong Foundation in bringing this book to fruition. Martin Wong believed it was essential for his collection to remain intact and in a public institution. As we near the twentieth anniversary of Wong's gift, it seems a fitting time to share this work he so passionately collected.

Susan Henshaw Jones is the Ronay Menschel Director of the Museum of the City of New York.



Jon Naar, *Redbird in the Bronx*, 1973



VISION & EXPRESSION

MARTIN WONG & THE NEW YORK CITY WRITING MOVEMENT



Jon Naar, *Graffiti Kids*, 1973



Sean Corcoran

Writing on walls—whether transmitting messages of love, off-color humor, or politics, or merely memorializing the author's presence—dates back to antiquity. It was historically seen as mere vandalism, as captured in the label “graffiti” (from the Italian word *graffio*, or “scratch”). But on the streets of America's cities beginning in the late 1960s, the practice underwent a distinct shift. Traditionally, the writer's emphasis had been on the message contained in the writing, but amid the social and economic upheavals of the era, a new self-consciously artistic movement was born, one that came of age in the '70s and '80s. Its new perpetrators (who called themselves “writers”) were not merely interested in the content of what they were writing; instead they placed emphasis on the quality and quantity—the style and frequency—of how their message was communicated. Their efforts have borne fruit: the work of present-day graffiti artists can be seen not only on city streets worldwide (both legally and illegally created), in advertising, and on apparel, but also in the art world, where it is collected by museums and sold by prestigious galleries. This transformation from an illicit expression to a valuable commodity was a long, contentious, and complicated journey with New York City at its epicenter.

When artist Martin Wong moved from San Francisco to New York in 1978, just as the New York graffiti movement was on the cusp of gaining international prominence, he was drawn to the ubiquitous writing he found on the subway cars and walls of the city's transportation system. He befriended many of the writers and became a determined advocate for their work throughout the 1980s and '90s, as this new form of expression blossomed into a cultural phenomenon. In so doing, Wong not only built a remarkable collection, (now at the Museum of the City of New York) that provides a unique window into the New York writing movement, but he himself also became an important figure who exerted profound influence on the key players of that very transformation.

Although New York City is commonly referred to as the birthplace of the modern graffiti movement, there is overwhelming evidence that it actually began in Philadelphia and spread to New York during Mayor John V. Lindsay's administration in the late 1960s.¹ Regardless of the movement's origins, teenage New Yorkers (mostly male) from throughout the city (especially Upper Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn), quickly embraced graffiti writing. They began by writing “tags”—usually nicknames combined with the number of the street where they lived—on walls in schoolyards and in their neighborhoods. Eventually writers began tagging their names in subway stations, then on buses and the interior and exterior of subway cars. As these tags traveled throughout the five boroughs, the writers became aware of each other and developed a community.

The new writing movement's first significant exposure came in 1971 with a profile of the Washington Heights writer Taki 183 in *The New York Times*.² As the article explained, “the problem [has] mushroomed during the last two years. It is also harder to deal with. The Magic Marker and other felt-tip markers are considered indelible on concrete and other rough surfaces in subway stations.”³ The author went on to quote Floyd Holoway, a Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) patrolman, who reported that “most graffiti appeared just before and just after school hours” and that he had “caught teen-agers from all parts of the city, all races and religions and all economic classes.”⁴ The article had an unintended effect: it fueled the spread of graffiti by demonstrating to writers that active tagging all over the city increased the likelihood of gaining notoriety outside their own communities. That same year, a group of teenagers from Erasmus High School in Brooklyn met one day after school and formed the Experienced Vandals (or Ex-Vandals), the first gang devoted specifically to writing graffiti. With an edict that members (Dino Nod, Wicked Gary, Wicked Wesley, King

of Kools, Conrad is Bad, Flin, and Big Time Glass Top) write their gang name first and their own tag second, the group became known for the pure volume and visibility of their name and respected by writers citywide. A chapter of the Ex-Vandals quickly formed in the Bronx, led by the writer Phase 2, with members including Stay High 149, Lee 163⁴, and Riff 170.⁵

A little more than six months later, a follow-up article in *The New York Times* described graffiti as an epidemic that was costing the MTA more than half a million dollars a year in cleanup.⁶ It went on to explain that there was little legal recourse against the youthful offenders, whom they characterized negatively: "Psychologists say graffiti are an attempt by insignificant people to impose their identity on others, if only until the wall is cleaned."⁷ The proliferation of graffiti, which appeared as mindless scribble to many, was increasingly equated with a sense that city officials were losing control. By June 1972, Mayor Lindsay was so disturbed by the sudden prominence of graffiti in the subway system that he decided to take action. He submitted a bill to the City Council that would tighten penalties for convicted offenders. A version of the bill, passed in late 1972, made it unlawful

"to carry a can of spray paint in any public building or facility unless it is completely enclosed in a sealed container. It also empowers judges to sentence offenders to remove graffiti and authorizes fines up to \$500 and jail terms up to three months."⁸

Meanwhile, writers were becoming more adventurous and sophisticated in their activities, developing new styles and techniques with the increasing use of spray paints. As trains lay idle in lay-ups and yards, teenagers ventured under cover of darkness to create new and larger designs on the exteriors of trains that became known as "pieces," short for "masterpieces." The first, created in 1972, is often credited to Super Kool 223.⁹ These new works often involved two or more colors of spray paint and were much larger than previous tags, eventually encompassing the entire side of a train—from top to bottom, side to side. Competition among writers flourished, and the style of writing on trains quickly progressed from simple two-dimensional, two-color designs, to intricate bubble letters, three-dimensional pieces painted with light and shadows in perspective, and more elaborate color combinations as writers such as Cliff 159, Hondo, Phase 2, Riff 170, Tracy 168, and many



Jack Stewart, *Beatle Bailey* by Cliff 159, 1974, © Regina Stewart



Jack Stewart, *Super Kool 223*, 1972, © Regina Stewart

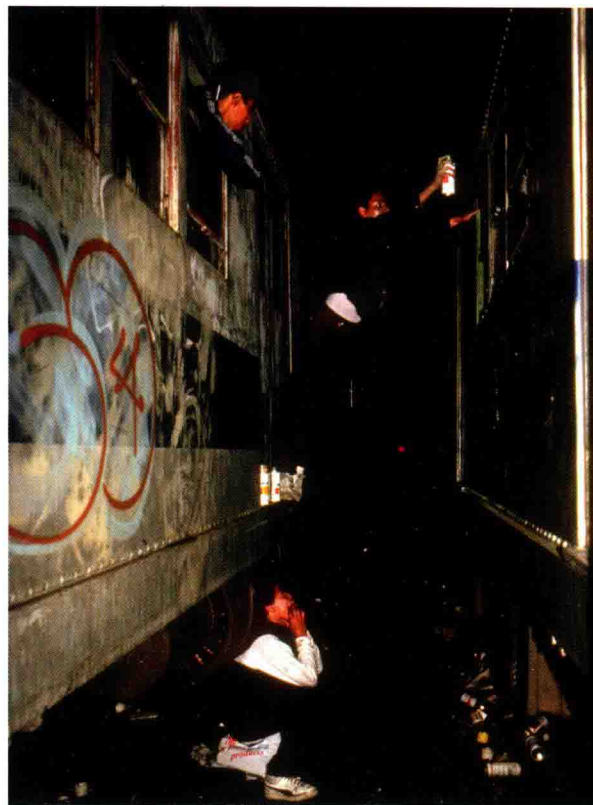
others played a game of one-upmanship. By the close of 1972, dozens of writers were creating large-scale paintings and the majority of trains in the system were now "pieced." In the view of the Transit Authority, city officials, and much of the public, the graffiti explosion was out of control.¹⁰

As a crackdown on the vandals continued, the newly formed United Graffiti Artists (UGA) held an exhibition of works on paper and canvas at City College's Eisner Hall in 1972.¹¹ Organized by Hugo Martinez, a City College junior, the goals of the exhibition were to re-channel the creative energies of the writers through legal and artistic pursuits, lead public discourse regarding the writers' motivations, and attempt to deal with the vandalism in a positive way. Martinez suggested that public funds for materials and a sanctioned location that would allow writers to continue to express themselves through large-scale paintings could have a positive impact on the writers and society at large. "Most of these kids live in an ugly neighborhood," Martinez said. "They're poor and maybe their parents are split up. But they have egos too. They want people to know who they are, like everyone else in New York. Some of us get known by writing on subways. Others write books and for newspapers. Maybe some of these kids are more creative than many of those people."¹² Members of UGA held another exhibition at the Razor Gallery in SoHo and were invited to paint onstage as part of choreographer Twyla Tharp's ballet, *Deuce Coupe*, at City Center in 1973.¹³

In March 1973, *New York* magazine published its first cover story on the graffiti craze. The article was controversial because the author, Richard Goldstein, did

not dismiss the work outright as worthless vandalism.¹⁴ Instead, Goldstein thoughtfully dissected the origins of the movement, considering the social and economic shifts in New York and exploring the reasons why the writers were unwittingly encouraged by the legal system, the media, and city officials. Ultimately, he decided:

It just might be that the kids who write graffiti are the healthiest and most assertive people in their neighborhoods. Each of these people has to "invent" his life—his language, his culture are lifted, remodeled and transformed . . . Style involves conflict, the strain of races, classes, ages, and sexes pitted against each other in the arenas of clothing, music and slang. For a long time I wondered how lower-class kids in this city were going to enter the fray. And then I began to look closer at the subway writers, and their use of color and design, at the way they dressed, putting chunks of other people's fashion together in a way that clashed, but coherently . . . And I began to feel that the most significant thing about graffiti was not their destructiveness but their cohesion, bringing together a whole generation of lower-class kids in an experience which is affirmative and delinquent at the same time . . . To me, it announces the first genuine street culture since the fifties.¹⁵



Martha Cooper, *Duro and Kist (below) watch Dondi paint a train in New Lots yard, Brooklyn*, 1980