

**Right:**  
@Martha Cooper  
Photograph:  
Martha Cooper/HHTF

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### Commentary by Dr Janice Rahn

Graffiti continues to resist the boundaries of definition. Is it a performance? Is it an example of social activism? Is it vandalism? Is it a subversive act? Rather than question the definition of graffiti it is more interesting to pay attention to the different practices. Three main themes are at the core of the graffiti impulse: the occupation of public space (Getting it Up), peer influence (Community) and a Do it Yourself, (DIY) ethos.

The content of graffiti is its context within public space. This changes when it ceases to be a random/accidental encounter, and becomes a pre-ordained rendezvous set up by the artists or gallery. As in any art form, the interface between object and audience changes, depending on the intent of the graffiti 'Writer' when communicating to a perceived audience.

Graffiti culture has evolved since 1995, when I first began to document signatures (Tags) throughout my neighborhood on a range of surfaces from park benches to post office boxes. I began to recognize repeated Tags and would bicycle across the city tracking their migration to other locations. Documentation of graffiti has always been part of its transitivity. The work is collected and mediated through personal websites and the sharing of black books at graffiti events. The sharing of information in public space is key to developing a network that continues to shape graffiti culture. The Internet was quickly adopted as the optimum medium for disseminating images and information, which changed graffiti from a regional practice to a global community. The egalitarian, yet ego-driven, self-motivated spirit of graffiti Writers lent itself well to grass roots video productions and net communities

that existed outside of gallery-museum establishments. The Internet includes an ever-increasing number of graffiti sites that link cities, Writers, and images like a gallery and reference manual. Graffiti conventions are announced and Writers can be easily located, facilitating a network within an ever-emerging organizational structure.

Underpressure (documented in the video You have to watch to Learn) was an annual graffiti event organized by Montreal writers SEAZ and FLOW to meet their peers and mentors from around the world and "...to show the public what we are all about." (SEAZ). In response to this event, I sought out women who were not invited to participate. The more I learned about hip-hop culture, the more it seemed defined by contradictions. Although it is an inclusive culture that crosses disciplines and categories of styles in painting, music, and dance, it has a tradition based on hierarchy of skills and machismo working class values.

In the summer of 2002, and /03 I made two videos about graffiti in Berlin, again as a way to explore neighborhoods. In Berlin, my documentation of graffiti as an urban art form also provoked a different interaction and language that extended beyond the limitations of tourism. A touristic tentative approach to the world is to glean what one can through didactic panels or guidebooks that give us the 'official' interpretation of experience. From this vantage point it is difficult to even know what questions to ask. Graffiti culture offers an alternative navigational tool to experience, with open curiosity, the adaptability and versatility of an ever-evolving contemporary culture.