

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC,
DANCE AND
PERFORMANCE

Village Voice, October 7-13, 1981

ART BEAT

The Politics of Culture
BY RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

Fit to Buff

I, for one, intend that this bully pulpit shall be used on every occasion, where it is appropriate, to point a finger of shame at even the ugliness of graffiti. . . .

—Ronald Reagan

Like blazing jewels, the subway cars burst from the tunnels to the platforms shining with the recognizable artifacts of childhood: fantasy, magic, ego, energy, humor, and paint. . . .

—Toni Morrison
Tar Baby

The man from ABC was uneasy. Sure the network was shooting, in the subway yards, "a film about juvenile crime, really"; but *Children of the Streets* will be "an upbeat kind of piece," in which kindly cops turn a hapless vandal on to "other forms of art." Serving as a graphics consultant to this project is Dondi, late of the West Side IRT, but now "evolved," the ABC spokesman wishes to assure me, "from spray paint to Broadway." He is referring to Dondi's gig with the Twyla Tharp troupe, which commissioned seven graffiti writers—including Daze, Crash, Pink, Zephyr, SE3, and (a new tag to us) Aeron—to appear onstage painting the backdrop for Tharp's salute to American pop culture, *Deuce Coupe*.

These days, Crash is represented by Mel Neulander, an importer who wanted to be "the first person on my block to own a graffiti work," and ended up putting some capital into "legitimizing this unique style." Neulander is offering writers he admires a bluntly commercial deal: you own what you make, I take the traditional gallery cut for what I sell. His Graphiti Productions, at 675 Hudson Street, is the equivalent of a small independent record label, the kind of company that created the market for rock 'n' roll. It opens October 29 with an exhibit by 20 writers, *Graffiti: Above Ground*. Neulander sees "graffiti-based art" as a movement that could help Greenwich Village—or at least his rapidly developing corner of the neighborhood—regain its vanguard image in the visual arts (I'll believe that when I hear it from Harry Helmsley).

Meanwhile, in the old world—Soho—the city's premiere showcase for experimental music, video, and performance art sponsored two nights of "Graffiti Rock" last weekend. Appearing at the Kitchen were Fab 5 Freddy (as the man who inspired Blondie's "Rapture" calls himself), rapper Kippy Dee, D.J. Spy, and two breaking crews, Rock Steady, and the Swift Kids. "A breaking contest," the press release from the Kitchen explains, "involves two crews of dancers facing off against each other one by one and through an elaborate, virtuosic, and spontaneous burst of mugging, fancy footwork, body twitching, shoulder rolls, and head spins, attempting to insult and out-dance the opponent." While all this was going on, the Kitchen's pristine walls were hung with canvases by Lee, Daze, Crash, Zephyr, Dondi, and Duro. And not a buffer in sight.

Elsewhere in Soho, sculptor Henry Chalfant, whose photographs put graffiti on the downtown map, is working on a semifictional film tentatively titled *Style Wars* after a car by Noc. New Wave artist Charles Ahearn is doing his own graffiti film, *Wild Style*, with the aforementioned Freddy. *Stations of the Elevated*, Manny Kirchheimer's documentary with music by Charles Mingus, brings graffiti to the New York Film Festival tomorrow (Thursday) at 6:15. *New York/New Wave*, the exhibit that drew record crowds to P.S. 1 last spring, will be opening January in Rome. Futura 2000 is somewhere in Europe, doing graphics for the Clash. Ali, a/k/a J. Walter Negro, has been performing with a group called the Loose Jointz, and now has his first single, "Shoot the Pump."

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