

On  
subway graffiti  
in  
New York

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**F**OR six years or so one of the more astonishing sights of New York has been the graffiti on the subway trains. The word "graffiti" scarcely suggests, to those who have not seen them, the enormous graphics which decorate the sides of subway cars—murals which march relentlessly over doors and windows, and which may incorporate successive cars to provide the graffiti maker a larger surface on which to paint. They are multicolored, and very difficult to read, but they all, in one way or another, simply represent names. There are no "messages"—no words aside from names, or rather simplified and reduced names, nicknames, or indeed professional names, often with a number attached. (One will not see an Alfredo, Norman, or Patrick, but Taki 137, Kid 56, Nean.) There are no political messages or references to sex—the two chief topics of traditional graffiti. Nor are there any personal messages, or cries of distress, or offers of aid. There are just large billboard-type presentations of the names of the graffiti-makers, in an elaborate script which, with its typical balloon shapes, covers as much surface as possible.

If that were all, then the view that this is art-as-personal-expression, that graffiti are controlled productions reflecting a canon of aesthetic criteria that is beyond middle-class understanding or ap-

preciation, and to be welcomed and savored rather than suppressed, might make sense. Alas, there is more. The insides of the cars are also marked-up—generally with letters or shapes or scrawls like letters, made with thick black markers, and repeated everywhere there is space for the marks to be made, and many places where there is not. Thus the maps and signs inside the car are obscured, and the windows are also obscured so that passengers cannot see what station they have arrived at. The subway rider—whose blank demeanor, expressing an effort simply to pass through and survive what may be the shabbiest, noisiest, and generally most unpleasant mass-transportation experience in the developed world, has often been remarked upon—now has to suffer the knowledge that his subway car has recently seen the passage through it of the graffiti “artists” (as they call themselves and have come to be called by those, including the police, who know them best). He is assaulted continuously, not only by the evidence that every subway car has been vandalized, but by the inescapable knowledge that the environment he must endure for an hour or more a day is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and that anyone can invade it to do whatever damage and mischief the mind suggests.

I have not interviewed the subway riders; but I am one myself, and while I do not find myself consciously making the connection between the graffiti-makers and the criminals who occasionally rob, rape, assault, and murder passengers, the sense that all are part of one world of uncontrollable predators seems inescapable. Even if the graffitists are the least dangerous of these, their ever-present markings serve to persuade the passenger that, indeed, the subway is a dangerous place—a mode of transportation to be used only when one has no alternative.

Of course the *sense* of a dangerous place is different from the *reality* of a dangerous place. The thoughtful head of the transit police, Sanford Garelik, will point out—and has statistics to prove—that the subway is less dangerous than the streets. It is well-patrolled, and the occasional sensational crime is no index to the everyday experience of the passenger. Yet the cars in which persons unknown to the passengers have at their leisure marked-up interiors, and obscured maps, informational signs, and windows, serve as a permanent reminder to the passenger that the authorities are incapable of controlling doers of mischief. One can see earlier graffiti underneath a fresh coat of paint that itself is beginning to be covered by new graffiti that mock, as it were, the hapless effort to obscure their predecessors. Thus the signs of official failure are everywhere. And

the mind goes on, and makes a link between the graffiti and the broken signs—behind broken glass—that are supposed to tell passengers where the train is going, the damaged doors that only open halfway, and the other visible signs of damage in so many cars.

The graffiti artists, who have been celebrated by Norman Mailer and others, are to the subway rider, I would hazard, part of the story of “crime in the subway,” which contributes to the decline of subway ridership, which in turn of course contributes to increasing the danger because of the paucity of passengers. (Official signs in stations warn passengers that between 8 P.M. and 4 A.M. they should congregate in the front cars of the trains, to give what protection numbers may provide against the marauders whose presence must always be assumed.) If this linkage is a common one, then the issue of controlling graffiti is not only one of protecting public property, reducing the damage of defacement, and maintaining the maps and signs the subway rider must depend on, but it is also one of reducing the ever-present sense of fear, of making the subway appear a less dangerous and unpleasant place to the possible user. And so one asks: Why can’t graffiti be controlled?

### A litany of proposals

Interestingly enough, as Chief Garelik points out, this is one crime whose perpetrator is known by the mere fact of the crime itself. The graffiti artist leaves his mark, his name, or a variant of it. Most of these names and marks are known to the police. Chief Garelik will show the visitor an astonishing “mug book,” consisting of color photographs of the work of each graffitist, accompanied by a name and address. Almost every graffiti artist becomes known. Indeed, the police have invited graffiti artists up to police headquarters and engaged in “bull sessions” with them to try to figure out the best course of action. Nor is the number of graffiti artists so great—from one perspective—as to present too diffuse a target for police action. There are, at any given time, only 500 or so. They begin at about age 11, the mean age is 14, and they begin to graduate from graffiti after age 16—by then it is presumably “kid stuff.” Or perhaps penalties rise as graffitists stop being considered juveniles. Young ones begin by marking the inside of cars, and later advance to the grand murals. There are aesthetic traditions. There are also rules, more or less observed, such as: One does not paint on another’s graffiti.

Commonly, paints are stolen. The number of spray-paint cans

required to embellish the side of a subway car is prodigious and it is hardly likely that young teenagers would have the money. In any case, the police assure the visitor that most paint is stolen. Moreover, Chief Garelik emphasizes—against the chic position that graffiti are art and fun—that the graffiti artists do graduate to more serious crime. The police studied the careers of 15-year-old graffiti artists apprehended in 1974: Three years later, 40 percent had been arrested for more serious crimes—burglary and robbery. Graffiti may be self-expression, but they are not only self-expression. For almost half the graffiti artists there is evidence that graffiti-making is part of an ordinary criminal career.

But if the police know most of them, and there are only 500, then why can't graffiti be controlled? One can go through the litany of proposals—only to end up baffled.

The first suggestion: Arrest them, punish them, make them clean up the graffiti. Indeed, for a while the police were arresting them (or giving out summonses) in very substantial numbers. There were 1,674 arrests in 1973; 1,658 in 1974; 1,208 in 1975; 853 in 1976; 414 in 1977; and 259 in the first half of 1978. As one can see, the arrests dropped radically after 1975, but not because graffiti artists could not be caught—rather because the effort seemed futile. The police began to concentrate on the more determined graffitists and to uncover more serious crimes with which to charge them. For after all, what could one do after arrest that could deter graffitists from going back to graffiti? Put them in juvenile-detention centers? What judge would do that when there were young muggers, assaulters, and rapists to be dealt with, who were far more menacing to their fellow-citizens—and who themselves could not be accommodated in the various overcrowded institutions for juveniles?

But even if juvenile graffitists were not punished by detention, could they not be required to clean-up graffiti? This was popular with some judges for a while, but it turned out that it was expensive to provide guidance and supervision (the cleaning usually had to be done on weekends, requiring overtime payment for those who taught and supervised the work), and the police believe that its main effect was to teach the graffitists the technical knowledge necessary to produce graffiti that effectively resist removal.

Could one, so to speak, "harden the target" by securing the yards in which the cars are stored, and where, as is evident from observing the graffiti, much of the work is done? (The large murals extend below the surface of the subway platform, and clearly must be done while the cars stand on sidings and the whole surface is ac-

cessible.) Chief Garelik points out that there are 6,000 cars, that one car-yard alone is 600 acres in extent, that many cars cannot be accommodated in the yards and stand in middle tracks, that there are 150 miles of lay-up track, and finally, that wire fences can be cut.

Is there a "technological fix"—a surface that resists graffiti and from which it can be easily washed off? Perhaps, but so far nothing has worked, though certainly the shiny surfaces of new cars put into service make it somewhat harder to apply dense graffiti to them. In time, however, the new surfacing wears off and will take paint. The more serious problem here is the fact that once graffiti gets on a car, it must be taken off immediately so as not to encourage other graffitiists. This is the practice in Boston where, as in other cities, the mass-transit system does not have graffiti. But the New York system, so much huger, does not have enough maintenance men, and so the policy of immediately eliminating graffiti cannot be implemented.

One could give graffiti artists summer jobs, as a way of providing them with something else to do, and indeed the police have been instrumental in finding summer jobs for 175 of the young people involved. Well, it is worth a try. But one wonders whether most jobs available for unskilled youths would match the excitement of painting graffiti onto silent subway cars in deserted yards, watching for the police, stealing the paints, organizing the expeditions.

There are more imaginative proposals, such as hiring them to paint the cars in the first place. But one can imagine the technical problems involved in handing over such good (and well-paid) jobs to 11- to 16-year-olds.

One proposal after another has been considered, evaluated, tried. The police have not given up—far from it. Their favored approach, if it could be financed, would be intensive work, on a one-to-one basis, by youth workers (students in psychology and sociology), a "big brother" program that would involve young graffitiists in other activities and introduce them to young adults who would help find other outlets for their energies. But one wonders whether the youth workers might not be converted by the graffiti artists, who do not believe they are doing anything wrong. They do see their graffiti as art and self-expression (and create albums in which fellow graffiti artists reproduce miniatures of their designs—the police have a few of these, which are quite beautiful examples of urban, vernacular art). They are not at this point in their lives engaged in the uglier crimes that are so common in New York. What arguments would the youth workers, who might themselves reflect the culture

that has given approval to making graffiti (as to smoking marijuana, and other formally illegal activities), be able to present to convince the young graffiti artists to give up their work? What could they provide them in its place?

There have been some efforts to divert the energies of the young graffiti artists from the sides of subway cars to canvases. Some of the graffitists produce canvases for sale, with the assistance of the adults who work with them. Some have gone on to art school—have indeed gained fellowships because adults working with them saw talents that could be developed. But it is hard to imagine this kind of thing making much of an impact on the problem, though it may be a solution for a dozen or two a year. Indeed, these very opportunities might be attractive enough to serve as an incentive for others to try to develop and demonstrate their talents by working on subway cars!

As one learns more about the graffiti artists, realizes that most of them are known to the police, that their more serious crimes (if they move on to them) will take place after they have given up graffiti, and that among all the things urban youth gangs may specialize in this is not the worst—then, one's anger at the graffiti makers declines. One begins to accept graffiti as just one of those things that one has to live with in New York. But this tolerance should not lead us to forget the 3-million subway riders per day who do not have the opportunity to study the graffiti problem, who are daily assaulted by it, and who find it yet another of the awful indignities visited upon them by a city apparently out of control and incapable of humane management. Even if graffiti, understood properly, might be seen as among the more engaging of the annoyances of New York, I am convinced this is not the way the average subway rider will ever see them, and that they contribute to his sense of a menacing and uncontrollable city. The control of graffiti would thus be no minor contribution to the effort to change the city's image and reality.

### **Systematic deterrence?**

But how? Chief Garelik suggests some food for thought. Why are there so few graffiti on trucks, he asks. Trucks provide great surfaces, without windows or doors. If one motive for making graffiti—as the kids tell us—is seeing one's name being sped through the four contiguous boroughs, and the thrill of the thought that one's name will be seen by people unknown, then trucks should offer an

attractive opportunity. But truck drivers beat up the kids they find trying to deface their trucks! And there are no graffiti on trucks.

Why are there no graffiti on commuter railroad trains? Their car yards are as accessible as those in which subway cars are stored, and their trains run through low-income areas. Perhaps it is because the graffiti artists and their friends don't ride the commuter lines and don't care to advertise their skill and daring in unknown places. But Chief Garelik has a simpler answer: The maintenance men for those lines use buckshot. "They do?" I asked incredulously. Well, that is what the kids believe. Either there was such an experience, or rumor of it, and that seems enough to protect the commuter cars. Certainly here is a hint of something that might work. In fact, early in the graffiti plague, there was a proposal to use guard dogs in the subway yards. It might have been impractical for various reasons. But it might have worked, too. In any event, there was such an uproar at the prospect of juveniles being bitten or mauled that the idea was abandoned.

So it is possible, perhaps, to deter graffitists. But it is not possible to deter them through the regular juvenile-justice system, in which a weary judge, confronted by many difficult and intractable problems, can think of nothing better than asking Johnny to promise he won't do it again. Punishment at the scene of the crime seems to deter marvelously: being beaten up by a truck driver or facing a burst of buckshot if you are caught. The dogs also might have worked.

In other words, there are methods to deter graffiti artists. But are there any ways to institutionalize these methods in an orderly, rule-bound, and humane system of law enforcement? It is not possible to tell the transit police, "Don't bring the kids in, just beat them up." We would not want the transit police to do so, and the transit authorities would not want to encourage such uncontrolled and uncontrollable behavior: A transit police force of 3,000 members must be governed by rule and order rather than informal sanctions, informally applied. And rule and order mean that the graffiti artists are brought into a system of juvenile justice which has more important crimes to deal with, and in which punishment, if any, will be minimal.

Is it possible to apply deterrence in a systematic way in a large bureaucratic system? It should be. Chief Garelik points out that a natural experiment, comparing the treatment of those who avoid paying tokens in two boroughs, suggests that deterrence does reduce illegal acts. In one borough, for some reason, those given sum-

mones for trying to get into the subway without paying a fare were fined on the average 99 cents; in the other, during a comparable period, they were fined on the average \$10.45. In the first borough, 20 percent of those caught were repeat offenders; in the second, only 3 percent. Obviously there are other plausible differences between the two boroughs that would have to be taken into account to explain why fare-avoiders in one are so much more commonly repeaters than in the other. But it is not unreasonable to take as a first possibility that in one borough this act is more severely punished.

Undoubtedly there is some form of deterrence that would reduce graffiti-writing. Some graffiti artists, we are told, inform on others when threatened by a term in a tough detention center. (Whether the police could deliver on such a threat is another matter.) Would a few days in the detention center have more effective results than a few weekend sentences to erase graffiti? What would be the problems in trying to test such an approach? In trying to institute it?

### **New approaches**

Aside from deterrence approaches, there are what we might call "education" or "therapy" approaches. Trained juvenile officers, social workers, counselors, or other youth workers would work with the apprehended graffiti artist, either directly or by finding some social agency with which he would be required to maintain contact. Such programs have been begun on an experimental basis. Chief Garelik favors such approaches, has gotten some grants to institute them, and needs more such grants. It is certainly premature to evaluate these new programs, though certain considerations immediately come to mind. Unlike the case with some other crimes, it is difficult to enlist a youth's conscience or sense of right and wrong to combat his desire to make graffiti. There will be problems as well in getting youth workers to discourage graffiti-writing, both because it does not offend their sensibilities, and because they may view it as a comparatively insignificant offense. Nevertheless, these new programs constitute one of the few approaches that is available, and, in light of the proven ineffectiveness of other approaches, are certainly worth trying.

Graffiti raise the odd problem of a crime that is, compared to others, relatively trivial but whose aggregate effects on the environment of millions of people are massive. In the New York situation especially, it contributes to a prevailing sense of the incapacity of government, the uncontrollability of youthful criminal behavior, and



a resultant uneasiness and fear. Minor infractions aggregate into something that reaches and affects every subway passenger. But six years of efforts have seen no solution. Graffiti of the New York style came out of nowhere, and strangely enough do not afflict other mass-public-transportation systems, except for that of Philadelphia. Maybe graffiti will go away just as unexpectedly, before we find a solution. But in the meantime, 500 youths are contributing one more element to the complex of apparently unmanageable problems amidst which New Yorkers live.

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