

This essay was originally published to accompany the **On The Street – Off The Street** exhibition at Maryland Art Place, July 19 – August 11, 1996. This version has been republished at [www.stencilpirates.org](http://www.stencilpirates.org)

## **Graphics and Ethnographics: An Incomprehensive Survey of Stencil Activism in Baltimore and Beyond**

By Western Cell Division

### **A Headnote**

"[Subcultures] conform to the structural anthropologist's definition of culture as 'coded exchanges of reciprocal messages'" -*Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige quoting B. Scholte(1)

"A symbol is nothing other than a social machine that functions as a desiring machine...within the social machine-an investment of the social machine by desire." -*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze/Felix Guattari

The work documented in this exhibition is (re)presented as a series of historical artifacts of a given cultural context. Emerging from sometimes unified, sometimes disparate subcultures and individuals, expressing mixed and overlapping messages, by its very nature it falls outside the boundaries traditionally defined by "art" and explicitly challenges these boundaries, (i.e.: private/institutional space, the commodity-economy, the cult of genius, etc.)(2)

Many of those who produced work exhibited here self-identify as "artists" and refer to their products as "art", others do not; of these, some consciously oppose "art" as a cultural category and yet others do not give the question a thought. In any case, the curator has dispensed with the terms "art" and "artist" finding them problematic, to say the least. The critique of "art" as a realm of production, alienated from all others, a modern development concurrent with the expansion of market capital has been discussed at length elsewhere.(4) Suffice it to say, within the framework of this exhibition, "art" is beside the point.

### **Between the Lines**

"Whoever can conquer the streets also conquers the State!" -Joseph Goebbels

"Can asphalt be a political territory?" -'Speed and Politics: An essay on Dromology', Paul Virilio

"The second generating force behind the TAZ [Temporary Autonomous Zone] springs from the historical development I call 'the closure of the map'. The last bit of Earth unclaimed by any nation-state was eaten up in 1899. Ours is the first century without terra incognita, without a frontier...Not one square inch of earth goes unpoliced and untaxed...in theory." -*The Temporary Autonomous Zone: the Psychotopology of Everyday Life*, Hakim Bey

"The body without organs closes round the deserted places." -*Anti-Oedipus*

Western Cell Division is dedicated to the investigation of the gaps created by cultures in collision (their fluid points of transition and the stress-cracks left behind by an in perpetual formation)-not toward their further colonization, but their proliferation-and their viability as autonomous life-forms.(5)

This exhibition is an exploration of negative-space: conceptual space not relevant (profitable) to the market and the subcultures it hosts which resist commodification; physical space, urban sites overlooked or neglected by "development" or pried open by a monkey wrench strategically inserted into high-visibility commercial or "public" space. For the subject of this exhibition is by and large, an urban phenomenon; the concentrated environment of the metropolis is where the cultural forces highlighted by graffiti come into play most dramatically. "The city has always been a box full of speeds, a kind of gear shift."(6)

Urban architecture in contemporary spectacular-society is defined by the market, in the layout of its streets and buildings and in the space provided for advertising, which has become integral to the urban landscape. With the imperial project realized (at least in geographical terms), commercialism ('war by other means?') takes over and transforms the fortress cities. In this milieu, it seems "natural" that cultural workers, disenfranchised by commodity-culture would find ways of engaging it on the field it has provided. Successful projects level this playing field, either combating the messages of the dominant culture directly (the blunt agitprop of the Lower East Side school embodied by Seth Tobocman, Sabrina Jones and Anton Van Dalen who attack social issues from a "Left" perspective)(7), subverting pre-existing messages through sly detournement (8) (veteran Baltimore stencil activist John Ellsberry's stenciled decoy of an electrical socket applied to a road sign reading "NO OUTLET") (9), or bypassing consensus reality entirely in the creation of a parallel universe (the prolific, but anonymous pavement stencils which dot multiple intersections in several cities, simple text which reads "Toynbee Ideas/In Rubric's 2001/ Resurrect Dead/On Planet Jupiter").(10)

## **Strength and Agility**

Stencils provide a ready tool in this process. With the most rudimentary technology one can achieve a clean, hard-edged graphic quality as user-friendly and "authoritative" as advertising copy. This instant accessibility to mechanical reproduction is what distinguishes the stencil as a medium from other forms of graffiti, hence, leading to other uses. Whereas free-hand graffiti, whether simple writing or wild-style calligraphy, emphasizes the personal "style" and identity of the tagger, stenciling, by its graphic quality as well as its serial reproducibility, offers a perceived authority through anonymity comparable to the images of "official" culture.(11)

By cutting a template from a stencil image printed on cardboard, another template is made. This process can be repeated ad infinitum, even without the direct participation of the activist with whom the image originated. Serial stencil projects have been realized through such use of multiple templates, distributed to various activists, applying the image independently of each other and multiplying its appearance exponentially. This has been done simply for increased exposure as in the "Bob's Head" of the Church of the SubGenius; or in John Ellsberry's chain-link and D. S. Bakker's barbed wire, each image was to be linked together, ultimately forming a visual border around a given area.

In this sense, street stenciling has less in common with other graffiti, being more akin to the samizdat tradition of poster and sticker propaganda and the networking activities of mailart and desktop publishing, while maintaining its low-tech immediacy and independence. This relation is exemplified by the large number of cultural workers who make use of a variety of these media, often as part of a single campaign as with Shepard Fairey's "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" and G.N.A.T.'s graphic barbs-"It's Later Than You Think!", "Do Something Sexy/Show Your Stuff", "Let's Play The Name Game". It is interesting to note here that while the famous Situationist slogans of the May '68 riots, ("Under the paving stones, the beach!") were graffitied freehand on the walls of Paris, their politico-lyrical substance (and its Dada heritage) has been taken up by the current samizdat movement, but exclusively through stencils and other underground print technology; in essence carried one step further along Situationist lines by detourning the means of commercial advertising to opposing ends.

## The Archeology of Ephemera

"...a dance on the earth, a drawing on a wall, a mark on the body are a graphic system, a geo-graphism, a geography. These ['savage'] formations are oral precisely because they possess a graphic system that is independent of the voice, a system that is not aligned on the voice and not subordinate to it, but connected to it, coordinated in an organization that is radiating...' and multi-dimensional...linear writing's contrary..." - *Anti-Oedipus*

"Modest or ironic markers and not haughty signatures, these graffiti are meant to be ephemeral, to be affixed in their ephemerality." - 'Traces', Jean-Christophe Bailly (introduction to *Paris Graffiti*, photographs by Joerg Huber)

This exhibition is of necessity, incomplete. In addition to documentary evidence in photographs, published articles and activist's statements, individual "pieces" serve as facsimiles and detritus of their original appearance on the street, related work carried over into other settings and media, and a few exemplary demonstrations of the graphic possibilities of the stencil as a medium. All exhibits are provided as clues to a much larger, lived whole.

A critical decision was made to bring street-specific work into the gallery environment; its purpose, implicit in the exhibition's title, is bilateral: not to uproot the work from its sites, but to restore it in its passing from those sites to its full psycho-geographical (12) context and in so doing, to open up the gallery, to emphasize its pedagogical function, treating this space as a between the domination of the market and the liberation of the street. It can be argued-and in TENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE's contribution to this exhibition, is-that to show this work in a gallery is to "co-opt" it, to groom it in preparation for the consumer. (13) For W.C.D. this exhibition is not an opportunity for the "art" world to absorb Stencil Activism, but on the contrary, to turn the space of the gallery inside-out.

A continuum of aims are laid out before us: 1) to inform those unaware of the breadth of local underground activity as well as empowering its participants; 2) to consolidate its power and demonstrate its use as part of a utopian praxis; 3) to open lines of inquiry into the continued viability of street intervention in light of the imminent decline of urban centers; 4) to renew such practices in the shadow of the freeway and the information-highway.

On the Street - Off the Street is an urban archeology project. The exhibits are not meant as discrete "art" objects, but as physical and documentary evidence, traces of landmarks. Unlike the monuments that reify moments in "official" history, these monuments are transient: in their movement through the urban landscape (their multiple appearances as well as the wanderings of those who placed them there), in their use as language (whether communicating to a "public" or between subcultural associates/antagonists), and in their disappearance either by deliberate erasure as "vandalism" (Stencil Activists generally don't expect their work to last...) or through weather, wear and the passage of time (...but are pleased when it does). Finally, they remain monuments only in our memory.

"We know that an object that is not consciously noticed at the time of a first visit can, by its absence during subsequent visits, provoke an indefinable impression: as a result of this sighting backward in time, the absence of an object becomes a presence one can feel. More precisely: although the quality of the impression generally remains indefinite, it nevertheless varies with the nature of the removed object and the importance accorded it by the visitor, ranging from serene joy to terror." - 'Formulary for a New Urbanism', Gilles Ivain/Ivan Chtcheglov (14)

--another example of Western Cell Division, 06/96

## Footnotes

1. from chapter 9, "O.K. it's Culture, but is it Art?"; unfortunately, Hebdige compromises his argument by claiming "...subcultural styles...do indeed qualify as but as art in (and out of) particular contexts..." [emphasis by W.C.D.]
2. Quotation marks, when not cited as quotes, designate terms, notions, clichés considered by W.C.D. to be questionable or inadequate, thus used provisionally within this essay. Italics indicate jargon considered current and viable (before passing into cliché?) or are used for emphasis.
3. Indeed, the institutions sponsoring this exhibition - ARTSCAPE and Maryland Art Place - identify explicitly with this program.
4. For a sketch of the notion of "art" as inherently alienated, as well as "utopian currents" of which Stencil Activism is presented here as a part, see *The Assault On Culture*, Stewart Home.
5. See Western Cell Division mission statement (cited in bibliography)
6. from *Pure War*, Paul Virillo/Sylvere Lotringer.
7. Many and varied stencil graffiti campaigns carried out since the 1980's through the present. See 'World War Three Illustrated' for published graphic work by these activists.
8. *Detournement*, defined in *Situationist International Journal #1* (1958): "Short for: detournement of preexisting aesthetic elements. The integration of present or past artistic [sic] production into a superior construct of a milieu..."
9. Ellicott City and elsewhere, 1981 (?); no longer extant.
10. Still visible in various Baltimore locations, see "The Word on the Street Turns Cryptic," Rob Hiassen, *The Sun*, 11/19/94.
11. For more on the differences between stencil and other graffiti, see "Mapping Social and Cultural Space: The Ramifications of the Street Stencil," Peter Walsh's essay accompanying this one.
12. *Situationist International Journal #1*, 'Definitions' "Psychogeography: The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."
13. TENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE, letter dated 02/10/96 ev, submitted as exhibit in On the Street - Off the Street.
14. 1953, reprinted in *Situationist International Anthology*.

## Acknowledgements

The ephemerality of stencil work was born out in its elusiveness while researching for this exhibition, in the detective maze of interviews tracing networks which parallel in time those which spawned the "stencil craze," shaking the memory tree.

In a field where virtually no published material exists, these conversations were absolutely imperative. Singled out for especially rewarding chat-time: John Ellsberry, Richard Ellsberry, D. S. Bakker, Laure Drogoul, Rick Sugden, Nancy

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