

SYMBOLS

TOTEMS

CIPHERS

# SYMBOLS, TOTEMS & CIPHERS

**November 27 - December 22, 2018**

**Curated by Scot Borofsky**

**Artists include: Richard Hambleton, Robin Van Arsdol  
Keith Haring / Angel Ortiz, Scot Borofsky  
Ken Hiratsuka, Bob Dombrowski, Kevin Wendall**

Includes an historical essay with commentaries on the work of 1970's and 80's street artists Adam Purple, Apocalynn, AVANT, Bob Dombrowski, Carlos Castro Valle, Dan Witz, FA-Q, Gizmo, John Fekner, Keith Haring, LA2, Ken Hiratsuka, Larmee, Lawren Hancher, Linus Corragio, Liz and Val, Luca Pizzorno/Anna Jepson, Michael Roman, Paolo Buggiani, Peter Missing, Red Ed, Red Spot, Richard Hambleton, R.V., SAMO, Scot Borofsky, Seth Tobacman, and Steve Hagglund.

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**The Beginnings of Street Art As I Remember It by Scot Borofsky**

I can remember hearing people at art openings during the Nineties making the claim, "I was a street artist in the East Village!". I would rarely recognize the person, and have to laugh to myself, thinking of the nights I had waited up until 3:00 AM, and slipping out to a dark vacant lot on Avenue B or C, had executed a large mural by working fast for two hours. It had to be done by dawn. I'd done it alone and managed to avoid both armed muggers and the police thirty times over three years. There were literally hundreds of artists in the East Village of the eighties who made a statement "on the street". But there also were a handful of young artists, who looked at the idea of creating public art as the culmination of Modernist thought at that point in time. They pioneered new concepts. Some created large bodies of outdoor work. And I had the luck to be good friends with almost every one of them.

As the decade of the Seventies was coming to a close, young artists arriving in the what was then thought of as the "center of the art world", found a New York City with the specter of Picasso still hanging over Modernist thought. Cubism and Picasso's study of African art was still very relevant to pictorial organization and the broadening of visual expression. Some of the late Abstract Expressionist painters had posed questions about the implications of symbols in their work, such as Jackson Pollock and Adolf Gottlieb, while Pousette-Dart asked us to look for meaning in iconic shapes. Additionally, both Jean Dubuffet and Elaine De Kooning seemed to be pointing directly back to the art of ancient cave dwellers in their work. Abstract Expressionism's style based expressive heights were succeeded by Minimalism's relatively expressiveless anonymity. Minimalism, on many occasions, involved a kind of selfless systematic or ritualized process, like a throwback to ancient ritual-based art making but also somehow comparable to the "automatic drawing" experiments of the Surrealists.

In 1981, as far as young artists were concerned, collage materials and found materials were as likely to be chosen for making art as paint or traditional materials. In those days Kurt Schwitters was still mooned over while drinking wine at openings, and the city was full of exotic collage materials for the picking. I had boxes of sorted collage materials in my studio. I once tried to get a piece of colorful cloth which I had spotted out from a pile of boxes, it turned out to be a sleeping homeless person's shirttail! Whoops! Philip Guston's retrospective at the Whitney in 1981 changed drawing in art forever. Guston dropped out from Abstract Expressionism to pursue a total purge of his expressive means through an intuitive minimalist exploration of composition, which expanded into a treatise on his daily life. His imagery spoke in a language, cartoon-like, humorous, personal, edgy, and deftly drawn.

As a result, 'underground' comic book artists, such as R. Crumb and others, and "outsider" untrained artists began to be popularly looked at and collected, like Modern Art. This consciousness was coming about simultaneously to "performance art" and the advent of "earthworks." Artists such as Christo and Jeane-Claude, or Michael Heizer, were wrapping entire buildings and constructing sculptural mounds with bulldozers. The work of A.R. Penck had a strong influence on beginnings of

Street Art. The major "Neo-Expressionist" shows were happening in Soho at the that time. I think that he was more influential on Street Artists than Anselm Kiefer or any of the Italians or the American Neo-Expressionists. But then, some of the Street Artists could be thought of as Neo-Expressionists themselves, like Richard Hambleton, for example. By the time "Street Art" came to the public's awareness, "Graffiti" had been adorning New York's walls and subways for over a decade and some graffiti "writers" had graduated to the walls of art galleries.



**John Fekner**



**Richard Hambleton**

One of the artists accredited with being the very first "street" artist is John Fekner. What I saw of his large stenciled words on abandoned buildings I at first took as painted political statements. I thought they had been created by a block association or local tenants, like the big "NO GENTRIFICATION" banners that went up across the streets in the East Village later, circa 1987. Fekner had been doing these pieces during the seventies for years before street art finally took off. I'm not saying that he was the first muralist but that he was likely the first conceptual Street Artist. John Fekner

created hundreds of environmental and conceptual outdoor works consisting of stenciled words, symbols, dates and icons spray painted in New York, Sweden, Canada, England and Germany in the 1970's and 1980's.\*

By 1981, two young artists had been working under the radar for a few years creating what was probably the first real "Street Art" beyond stenciled messages. They were Richard Hambleton, who painted expressive dark figures lounging or lunging in city lots and alleyways. These were always unsigned. And Robin Van Arsdol, an ex-marine, who signed his cartoon-like drawings of symbols with his initials: "R.V.". Richard Hambleton made "dead body figure tracings" directly on the sidewalk, before he started his well-known shadow figures. He relied on his ability to draw well figuratively and expressively and made each of his similar, black, human scale figures life-like and individually distinct in its posture and attitude. Hambleton made his gestural figures very quickly to avoid arrest. The message of "R.V.'s" imagery pointed back to the Sixties and the



**RV**



anti-war “flower-power” philosophy of American youth protesting the Vietnam war and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. “R.V.” developed a language of easily readable, specific symbols such as flowers, tanks, racing cars, mushroom clouds and “Bad Jets” (naming a few) to get his message across. (Richard Hambleton is considered by many to be the first or “Father” of street art. His work precedes “R.V.’s”. I believe Fekner was active before Hambleton but now the early work of Dan Witz (1979) has to also be considered as a possibility for “first”. Most recently I’ve heard the “we were first” claim made by “Avant’s” Chris Chambers.)



**Keith Haring**

However, at this point in time, 1981, one artist was about to bring the idea of “street-art” into the consciousness of every New Yorker. Keith Haring’s subway drawings reached many more people than Van Arsdol or Hambleton had with their work. The press jumped on the phenomena. People interacted with the work while waiting for the subway and followed Haring’s antics in the news. The press talked about the young artist’s use of symbols, such as Pyramids, U.F.O.s, barking dogs, babies and televisions. On many of his early studio pieces, a friend of Keith Haring’s, Angel Ortiz, known as “L.A.2”, filled in the space around Haring’s early figures with decorative, pattern-like marks. It was Haring’s success that crystalized, for many, the idea that art made in the public arena was about to be the most exciting thing in the art world. Beginning in 1980 recently graduated art students and quite a few “self-trained” artists began flooding into the East Village from

all over the world. The art scene and the music scene visually overlapped in the posters and stencils appearing on outdoor walls promoting bands’ gigs, performance events and art openings. Openings often featured performances and/or music.

Among all the posters promoting events, a group of as many as 12 artists began to put up small expressionist paintings on walls and surfaces in lower Manhattan. Members of this loosely defined group signed the work with the same signature: “Avant”. The group of artists called “Avant” has been represented historically by the artist Chris Chambers, one of the original twelve. While the art works themselves were not necessarily memorable, the great number of them signed alike created a kind of concept. Firstly, they were anonymous; secondly, they were linked; and incidentally, they were cooperative, the work of a group. They seemed to invite a kind of formal dialogue between artists on the streets of New York. To me, Avant seemed to be saying “I dare you”. Working mostly in the area of Soho, as “Avant” often did, was a team of two native New Yorker Art students,



**Avant**



**Samo**

Jean Michel Basquiat and Al Diaz. Hanging out with taggers and graffiti writers, the two of them brought a twist to the idea of the tag by creating a “tag” which was conceptual, a designation for an entire class of experience, not just a name like earlier Graffiti ‘writers.’ The word they invented and tagged with was “SAMO”. Although it originally meant “same-ol’-shit” to the two boys, it was open to interpretation to those noticing it and initially many people thought it was a name.

It was the press that hit on the tag and explained it to the public in articles about Basquiat. Basquiat expanded on the initial “conceptual tag” idea by creating large spray paint, blockletter phrases which exemplified a personal brand of poetic and darkly ironic humor. “Hip” by definition, it was simultaneously Jack Kerouac and Arthur Rimbaud, but written with a spray can. New York loved it. Unfortunately the subsequent market success and celebrity experience had an ultimately tragic effect on the young artist’s life. Basquiat’s written phrases in block letters are planted firmly and exactly between the Graffiti writers with whom he hung out (Al Diaz) and the Street Artists, most of whom he preceded, without being either. I say this because Basquiat never tried to work with the potentially expressive and calligraphic character of spray paint, as Graffiti writers do, and his work was not visual art, like the Street Artists, so much as it was visual poetry.



**Adam Purple**



**Linus Corragio**

Just South of the East Village, across Houston, was a spiral-shaped building-lot sized garden. It was well planted with herbs, vegetables and flowers and outlined by a spiral brick walkway. This was an amazing place to find among the abandoned and burnt out buildings, and the rubble strewn vacant lots of the East Village, which was a dangerous heroin neighborhood. The garden was known as “Adam Purple’s Garden of Eden”. A political activist who had adopted the name, “Adam Purple”, (David Wilkie) had taken over an abandoned building and the vacant lot next to it. This he had accomplished with the simple possession of a shotgun, and by firing it off occasionally at night. Adam had developed the garden into a large urban earth-work. I became friends with Adam when we met. His amazing accomplishment was very inspirational. He gave me the confidence to believe that if you were very careful, you might be able to do some large works in this neighborhood at night. Even without a gun. If you were very very careful.



Stencils give an artist the opportunity to develop artworks at their leisure in the studio, and then transfer them quickly and surreptitiously onto walls in a public location. By the mid-eighties stencils seemed to cover every available surface in the East Village. A large encyclopedia would be



### **Seth Tobacman**

necessary to completely categorize them, if it were possible. At this point, in 2018, you'd need a set of encyclopedias. All over the world, stencil art has developed in uncountable ways. One of the earliest and most prolific East Village stencilists was Mexican artist Michael Roman. Roman began working in a style which seemed to personify the character of the decadent and dangerous East Village perfectly. With his depictions of saxophone playing cats and dancing skeletons, or piles of skulls, he made reference to Mexico's holiday, the "Day of the Dead". With all the casualties lying around on the Thompson Square Park benches, the guns everywhere, and the drugs being sold on every block, the metaphor was completely appropriate. Death was a constant presence on the street. Seth Tobacman was the invisible force behind the proworker, anti-Big-Brother political designs which were stenciled everywhere possible on the Lower East Side and which were featured in almost every East Village art publication. The American Socialist Movement has a long history on the Lower East Side, where Tobacman grew up. The connection between Socialism and Street Art has yet to be discussed.

In 1982 in Brooklyn, a young Japanese sculptor named Ken Hiratsuka was beginning to carve directly into the surfaces of public sidewalks, expressing himself with a chisel-cut line. That line featured elements similar to the decorative marks made by Angel Ortiz. But it went farther than the decorative. It directly referenced design elements of many of the world's most ancient cultures. Ken has identified the Nazca Lines in Southern Peru as being particularly inspirational to him. I've also heard him mention Michael Heizer's earthworks on numerous occasions. Some of his pieces began resembling linear storyboards, clearly referencing David Smith's narrative two-dimensional sculptures while conjuring up an undiscovered pictograph language. I find that, although Hiratsuka works with a continuous line and A.R. Penck draws figurative images that the two types of work look similar. In one way, because of the "touch", but also because both artists draw lines and images which come close but never touch each other or cross over each other. Ken Hiratsuka's work, carved in stone, can be seen today in Manhattan in most of the places it was created during the eighties. There are also pieces by Linus Corragio and Bob Dombrowski which still remain. Personally, during late 1982, after coming to New York on a Max Beckmann Painting Scholarship from the Brooklyn Museum, I was moving from creating abstract constructions made from found materials in my studio, to actually making site-specific installations in the outdoor environment. Without having seen his work, I began using the same types of lines as



### **Ken Hiratsuka**

Besides using symbols, I reinterpreted some ancient Pre-Columbian patterns on local ruins. I grouped most of the work in a one block area on Avenue C between East 4th and 5th streets, near the public school building. It became an outdoor Urban Installation the size of a city block and took over three years to complete. The large installation resembled an ancient cultural ruins site and I called it the "Pattern Walk". I made other site-specific spraypaint installations in other parts of the East Village also. I worked in vacant lots near the projects and schools rather than in Soho. So I had a different audience than those who had painted within a stone's throw of Castelli's gallery. (The entire body of work now exists as a "virtual installation" on the web). Most Street Artists figured out a way to "hit and run", making their pieces fast and getting away. Both Ken Hiratsuka and myself did work in which each piece required literally hours to complete. It was an exercise in stealth and diplomacy. But since the chisel makes more noise than the spray can, I'd say that for Scot Borofsky it was one more in stealth and for Ken Hiratsuka it was one more in diplomacy! Two artists should get credit for inventing the concept of attaching sculptural work to street signs and light poles. They were Linus Corragio and Bob Dombrowski, alphabetically. It is undetermined who was the first. Corragio's work is usually an expressive and inventive welded construction made of found metal elements. They may have the overall shape of a motorcycle, racing car or boat, etc. Coincidentally, "R.V.'s" work also includes drawn symbols of similar types of vehicles. Corragio's pieces often feature the inclusion of found metal signs.

Ken Hiratsuka, which were also slightly similar to "L.A.2 's" marks. They came from various pictograph languages and were present in all types of ancient art at the earliest stages of its development. Using these lines, I began to create a language of personal symbols. I used these graphic symbols as an easily readable expressive means for my own Street Art. I used anatomical drawings, reductive editing (like Picasso's Bull cartoon), "blind" drawing (used by the surrealists), and occasional appropriation to find symbols. Forrest Bess's work inspired me. My familiarity with Pre-Columbian art from my trips to Mexico, along with courses I'd taken in art school, such as African Mask and Ancient Chinese and Japanese Art, were the foundation for my experiments. I wanted a "language of symbols" that was somehow innately "human" and universally understandable. I was very turned on by the language of symbols Keith Haring was using. Ironically, both Ken and I independently thought we were relating to Keith Haring's work when we first saw it, but in fact, "L.A.2's" expressive mark making (surrounding Haring's figures and symbols) was also speaking to each of us. While Ken worked all over on the Lower East Side and eventually all over the world, I kept the bulk of my work, during the eighties, in a smaller area, completely within "Alphabet City." imitating the territorial character of gang graffiti. I also used spray paint.



### **Michael Roman**



### **Scot Borofsky**



Linus welded them in as visual elements. I can't help but draw a connection between the use of these public signs and the symbols used by some street artists. The public signs often incorporate symbols; and the closeness of the concepts of "sign" and "symbol", well... that's it - they're often very close. Another concept pioneered by Linus Corragio and other members of the "Rivington School" were the "Massive Weldings." There were two of these created in the East Village. The better known of the two was the "Sculpture Garden" located at Rivington and Forsyth St., very close to Adam Purple's Garden of Eden. The second was constructed at an abandoned gas station which was Coraggio's studio, located at East Second St. and Avenue B, called "2B." The "Massive Weldings" were made of found metal objects and parts welded together over time. The ultimate size of the phenomenal artwork was roughly synonymous with the time allowed before the city came in to dismantle it. In other words, as big as they could make it before they were stopped. The Gas Station had a car vertically welded in as part of the "fence".



**Bob Dombrowski**



**Lawren Hancher**

Bob Dombrowski is an artist who, before creating public art, had previously performed publicly as a musician (fond of bagpipes). His early street works were mask and/or figure-like geometric designs cut out of dumpster harvested metal sheets. The two-dimensional cut-outs were painted differently on the two separate sides and were fixed onto street poles at very high levels extending out from the pole in silhouette. They were painted with geometric decoration recalling some types of ancient tribal design. Dombrowski points to early Celtic art as an influence. Dombrowski enlisted the help of his partner, artist Mary Petrushka, and installed his "signs" illegally high up on street poles during mid-day in Midtown Manhattan. They worked out of a rented limo carrying a ladder tied on top. Through the help of the Nico Smith Gallery, the artists managed to get permission from the city to install pieces on light poles all around Thompsons Square Park. This was done with a rented cherry-picker. One example remains to this day, high up on a pole at Avenue A and 9th Street. The paint has completely worn away and only the raw metal remains. This idea of attaching work to city poles has been embraced by some young conceptual Street Artists in recent years. To my knowledge, the first female Street Artist working alone was Lawren Hancher, who made hundreds of small painted and "encoded" pieces of wood and placed them each, like miniature installations, all around Manhattan for people to find. She distributed the small sticks on foot and was very creative in her installation technique. Her "encoding" consisted of different series of circles, X's, dashes and

other marks drawn with colored pastels on each individual piece of gessoed black wood. She put out thousands in total. They were done in groups of one hundred at a time. Other artists picked up this concept and distributed small objects near the museums and in other places in the city. But I believe she was the first woman to make street art and the first "multiple-distributive-installations" artist. Many of the early Street Artists who had created large amounts of outdoor work over a few years met each other for the first time at a show called the "Street Art Documentation Show" which took place at the Avenue B Gallery in 1984. Included in that show was "Red Spot", (Allen Daugherty) who was creating a type of public art experience in Soho showing artists' slides to the public by projecting them on a building side at night from his loft window. Daugherty pasted up 8 1/2 x 11 inch sheets of paper with the words Red Spot stenciled along with a large red disk on walls downtown, mostly around Soho. This was another "take" on the "tag".



**Avant and Red Spot**



**Peter Missing**

Most of the early street artists made their work anonymously. My work was always signed with a symbol. It was a triangle with a diamond at the top of it, separated by a horizontal line from a squashed orb floating above it, all within a vertical rectangle. I used the symbol as a signature and I used it as a tag. It could be interpreted in different ways, such as a figure or a mask, like a Gabon Reliquary, (West African tribal mask), can be. People often asked me for an interpretation of the symbol's meaning. Once when I was spraying it on a building someone yelled from a window across the street: "What does it mean?" I yelled back: "That's right!" The closest I could come to answering a question like that, is maybe to say that it is a visual game to inspire questioning thought. A year after I began using this design, what looked to me like the "inverse" to my tag symbol appeared on the street.



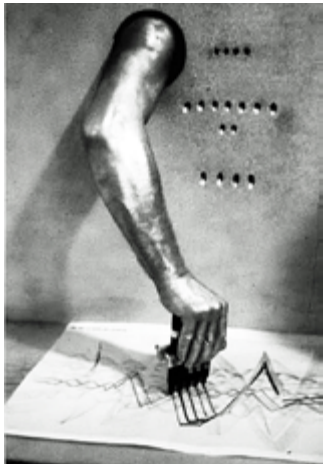
**Gizmo**

Two other artists, who's tags became very common on East Village walls, were "FA-Q", (Kevin Wendal), and "Gizmo", (Geoff Gilmore). These two, along with Ken Hiratsuka and Linus Corragio belonged to a group of hard-partying rough-and-



**FA-Q**





**Dragon Illic**

tumble artists who called themselves the "Rivington School". Almost all of these artists exhibited with the Emerging Collector Gallery, run by Christine Louisy-Daniel, who sold hundreds of Kevin Wendal's paintings. Wendal painted faces resembling art from underground comics and Mad Magazine in an expressive style recalling the COBRA Art Movement. He was directly inspired by Philip Guston. Geoff Gilmore, who at the age of 16 met Ken Hiratsuka at the Art Students League, was the first trained artist to make work on canvas using graffiti markers. He also worked out a language of personal symbols, which were sometimes quite dark and humorous, and used them in his studio paintings. Belgrade-born conceptual artist Dragan Illic multiplied the calligraphy element of graffiti in his work by attaching numerous brushes to one handle and sweeping out designs with a kind of "multi-brush". His exhibitions usually featured a performance of him using his invented painting tools which could have up to a dozen or more brushes attached and doubled as artworks themselves.

A Mexican artist, Carlos Castro Valle, made a stencil of Ronald Reagan's head on a rifle bayonet and created large outdoor pieces by multiplying the image many times in a row and writing the words "Puto Reagan" next to them. The angry tone of this anti-administration message was also picked up in work by Steve Hagglund (S. Gustav Hagglund) who made large paper collages on public walls using multiple single xeroxed sheets of white typewriter paper. Bits of selected text, images of police, dogs, and the words "Cop Shot Dreams" were repeated visually in composed arrangements and patterns. The police really hunted Steve. I learned a lot about his work in conversations while traveling together in Mexico. Steve made the xerox machine his intimate means of expression.



**Steve Hagglund**

An artist who called himself "Red Ed" (Carol Braddock) got busy painting numbers on the faces of cobblestones found on Avenue A and in the general vicinity, seemingly, following some obsessive instinct falling between Joseph Beuys and Jonathan Borofsky. The numbers had something to do with stocks being bought and sold. I've never understood the work exactly but I'm impressed whenever someone figures out how to make a blank surface into an interesting experience. There are so, so many blank surfaces staring back at us. I like the numbered cobblestones. One Italian artist, who calls his work "Street Art" was really from the "Performance Art" generation. This was Paolo Bugianni. He created a number of exciting experiences for witnesses in the East Village involving a flamboyant use of fire and a bicycle or



**Red Ed**



**Luca Pizzorno & Anna Jepson**

other prop(s). The last time I saw him he was seemingly on fire and moving down the street on a bicycle at a good clip! Relics of his performances are sometimes left as street art pieces. While Paolo chooses to personally represent himself as a "Street Artist", there were actually many types of amazing outdoor performances which occurred in the early eighties which I would not classify as "Street Art" because nothing visual and/or residual was the goal or the result. There is a difference of opinions as to whether "performance art" is "street art". I am part of the camp which believes that they are two different genres which are sometimes combined. What I thought of as Street Art, during the early eighties, was essentially work which incorporated wide dissemination of a set of symbols, or a repeated tag or icon, or object, or of some other sort of visual cipher, (coded message).

It had to be repeated all over and it had to be the "same." It was powerful because you saw it repeatedly, or because it had interesting content and/or form, or because it was conceptually inventive. Sometimes it was all of the above. It was "interesting". Or it was humorous. Sometimes it was profound and moving. It might be beautiful. It might be political. Recognition through repetition was key. One reason for the choice of anonymity by early artists working "on the street" was because Street Art was not only not for sale, it was illegal. But I think, based on the current popularity of "Banksy", the Street Artist whose identity is completely unknown, that mystery itself is also a big element of Street Art. Not knowing who did it. There is a "Billie The Kid" thing going on here and a bit of "Zorro" and "Robin Hood" too.



**Luca Pizzorno Louis Lopes**



**Carlos Castro Valle**

By 1985, It was actually hard to find a surface which did not have art on it in the East Village. I remember having a good laugh one morning when I first saw paintings by Luca Pizzorno (Italy) and Anna Jepson (Denmark) mounted on branches high in the trees of Thompkins Square Park. They must have been climbing around up there like art-monkeys in the middle of the night! Luca Pizzorno also made some very large paintings of "heads" on building sides which reminded everyone of the huge ancient Olmec heads found in Veracruz, Mexico. If you are following international contemporary Street Art these days then you know what a gigantic thing "big heads" has become! The use of found materials in the studio and interest in "primitive" art was interwoven with work created outdoors for some East Village artists like Luca. Some artists emulated these same interests but did not do work "outside", like Craig Coleman who made expressive primitive-looking figures from found wood or Dan Asher who made great drawings of





**Liz N Val**

mask-like faces using the oil stick as if it were Serengeti mud. Painter Brian Gormley worked in a related aesthetic, making masks by painting on found materials, he also made a few outdoor works in the vicinity of 34th Street and 2nd Avenue. All four of these artists, along with myself, showed to varying degrees at the Mokotoff Gallery, owned by Moke Mokotoff. I also showed at Casa Nada Gallery, run by the film artist Jim C., as did FA-Q and other early Street Artists.

Keith Haring had drawn on the blank surfaces of black paper in vacant subway poster frames, and two artists working as a team thought to cleverly reverse that idea by painting directly on the frames of outdoor billboards. They would decorate the frame and sign their names on it, "Liz and Val". By doing this they attached their signature to whatever image might go into the frame later on. They were kind of taking a page from Andy Warhol's book by appropriating popular cultural images and signing their names to them. They also created cartoonish primitive looking figures and faces which they used in their outdoor work and in their paintings and small sculptures. It was at this time that I first noticed "Apocalynn" becoming more visible on East Village walls, a young Southern female artist who seemed to loosely bring together influences from Japanese Anime art and children's cartoons while embracing nature - a combination of influences seen often in much street art today. Most of the Street Artists who had come before Liz and Val had chosen anonymity or a secret "moniker" on purpose for reasons of safety, to create mystery, and because for some, in making this new "Street Art", the message was not who had made it but that it had been made in a public location.

Soon enough, in the area of Avenue A, large figurative drawings made in the studio and adhered outside to the wall began to appear with an artist's name and studio phone number in the corner. These pieces signaled a change from work being conceptual expression to something more like promotional advertising. They were signed "Larmee", (Kevin Larmee). By 1985, changes were happening in the Alphabet City neighborhood. Within five years, most of the galleries in the East Village (almost 100) would shut their doors as gentrification took its toll. But for the meantime, it seemed like a catered movie set had popped up on every other block, and newly created celebrities were nodding on sidewalks and in limousines. It was the height of the East Village art scene. During the early-to-mid eighties the work of Dan Witz, who has gone on to be one of the more important contemporary street artists, first appeared in downtown Manhattan. Dan started by painting intricately studied humming birds on various types of outdoor surfaces. I think the first one I saw was in about 1983, but according to his bio they were begun in 1979.



**Kevin Larmee**

Like Ken Hiratsuka and myself, Dan Witz's early work required an extended period of time for each individual piece to be accomplished. While in my case it was because of scale, in Ken's it was because of materials. In Dan's it was because of the intricate and detailed technique. Witz's work has developed over time, broadening with the use of different types of stickers and with film documentation. This type of activity has indeed become much more important. It creates a historical element guaranteeing the survival of a given piece. Street Art by its nature is not permanent. Documentation becomes the art, in time. As conceptual public artists expand their work into film documentation and into technology assisted experiences, Street Art and its forms and subsequent applications continue to evolve.



**Dan Witz**

The basic instinct to bring art to people who might never get to the museum or a gallery, to infuse it into their environment and make it a common element of daily life was embraced by the early Street Artists. The idea has a whole new reincarnation in relation to the Internet which can reach many more people than any public work of art created at a particular location, or even created on a traveling object such as a truck or train. For those who began the street art movement, the door seemed to close on the first chapter of conceptual innovation right around 1985-6. When focus on Street Art resumed again it was no longer in New York and basically outside of the art world, more or less as outsider art in a world where Post Modernism had taken the high ground in the galleries and at the new art fairs. But grow and evolve it has, into a generation of outdoor artists from every corner of the globe. I looked at a site online recently which showed six hundred and thirty-nine Street Artists from around the world. I've met them aged seventeen to seventy-five years old. That last one, that's Bob Dombrowski.

Street Art keeps going, just like that rabbit, while East Village "gallery strategy movements" such as "Kitsch Art" and "Neo-Geo" have lost historical significance and the public's interest as well. I believe Street Art will continue to flourish into the future. It is not just an art movement sanctioned by the art world status quo... It is an artist created movement of human consciousness reflected through public expression. Street Art cuts out the curator, the gallery and museum and brings the "mountain" directly to "Mohamed". It restores the activity of the artist to the daily world of the people. It is the Vox Populi. I don't care where you go in this world, today almost every city or large town you can find has been improved by public art. The concepts begun with the first Street Artists have influenced architecture, city development design and large scale advertising. I hope this is just the beginning of much more research into what seems to have nearly become a lost history: the true beginnings of Street Art and also the lives of the artists who invented it. \*Wikipedia



**Paulo Buggiani**

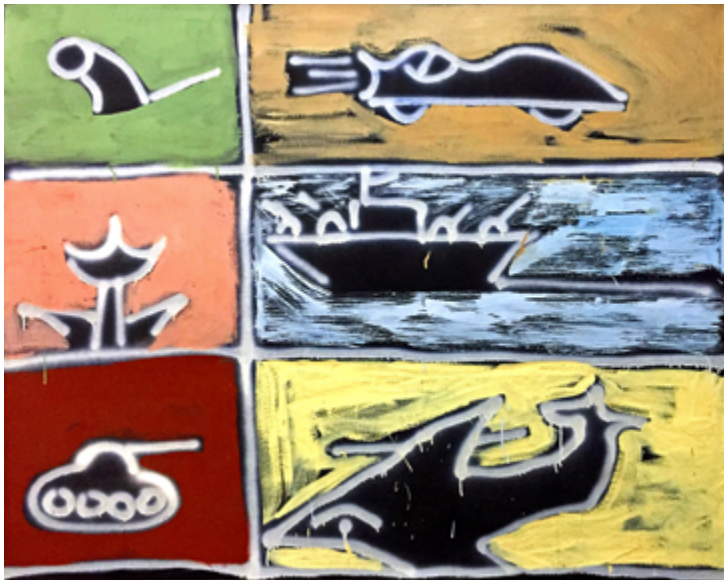


# R.V. (Robin Van Arsdol)

Artist Robin Van Arsdol was born in Denison, Iowa. He studied at Georgetown College and received his Masters degree from the NYU Sculpture Department in 1975. Van Arsdol used his initials, "R.V.", as his signature in works on public walls. "Recreation Vehicle" was what the moniker implied to most people. This idea was underscored by the types of symbols employed in his work. Notable are the different military vehicles, including: tanks, jets, and destroyers along with racing cars, mushroom clouds and tulips (to name just a few.) The symbols are at times augmented with bits of hand written text and are also sometimes personified as actors in his narrative, such as the "Bad Jet". Van Arsdol communicates a "flower-power politics" which is decidedly "anti-war" in its message and cartoonish in style. Implements of destruction and of speed share his world with pop flowers and unexpected peering periscopes. The artist often worked from his pickup truck. At times he would follow a police cruiser and turn off at a good wall or vacant lot, assured that the patrol car would not return for a while. Once the site was selected, he would roll out a white background on a wall and paint or spraypaint his symbols on top of it. Smaller pieces were done without the white background."R.V." claimed to have made over one thousand paintings outdoors in N.Y.C. by 1982-83. What must have at first seemed like political activism to the casual passerby, was spearheading an outdoor art movement.



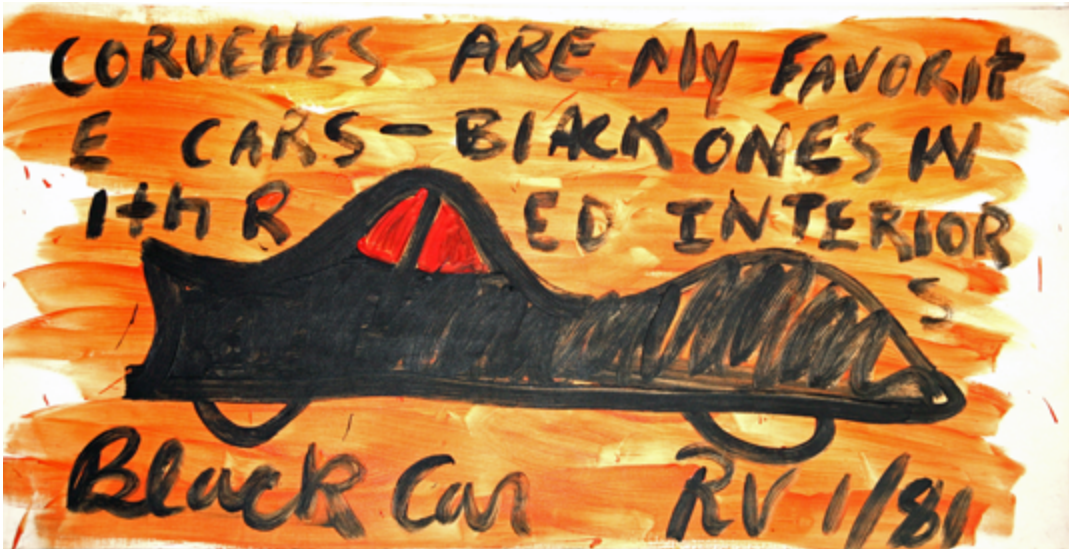
Home Burning I, 1982  
Acrylic on canvas  
60" x 48"



RV's Images, 1986  
Acrylic on canvas  
60" x 72"



Two and Three Corvettes, 1980, Acrylic on wood, 96" x 48"



Black Car, 1981, Acrylic on canvas, 42.5"x 84"x 2"



## Scot Borofsky

This early New York street artist originally came from Brattleboro, VT. After studying sculpture at Brandeis University, he received his BA in Painting from Rhode Island School of Design in 1981. Borofsky then came to New York on a Max Beckmann Memorial Painting Scholarship from the Brooklyn Museum. The artist first exhibited collage constructions made from found materials at early downtown galleries before working directly on outdoor walls. Beginning in late 1982, Scot Borofsky began using spray paint to create large murals exemplifying ideas from different sources of ancient design. Manifested as large figurative symbols and long horizontal patterns they were painted in bright contrasting colors. Some of his iconography reference "New Age" philosophical ideas popularized during the sixties and seventies, such as symbols for cross-cultural spirituality, meditating figures and symbols having to do with shamanism. There were also symbols of mythological creatures and idealistic landscapes. Borofsky's largest accomplishment took a period of three years to finish. The Pattern Walk (1982-5) in downtown N.Y.C., consisted of 18 designs in a one block sized area, painted on partially collapsed, burnt-out and abandoned buildings, creating the impression of an ancient ruins site within a modern city. The installation straddled the two sides of Avenue C, between East Fourth and East Sixth streets. The spray painter created his work in the crime filled ghetto neighborhood which culminated at the East River in the public housing projects at Avenue D, a lawless zone, during the eighties. The artist went out alone into the decaying architecture of the East Village heroin war zone at night, working between 3:00 and 5:00 am. In over 5 years working outdoors and during the execution of more than thirty large illegal murals Borofsky was never caught or arrested. Borofsky's outdoor work is conceptually site-specific and makes direct references to ancient art from various cultures. His use of spray paint on brick or cement as a medium, and repetition of a specific symbol as a signature and "tag" connects his work with the Graffiti movement, which preceded the development of Street Art.



*Triptych*, 1988, Spray enamel on canvas, 24" x 54"



*Farmers Daughter*, 1986, Spray enamel on linen, 42" x 60"



*Mixteca*, 1985, Pastel on Green Fiume Giano paper, 26" x 22.5"

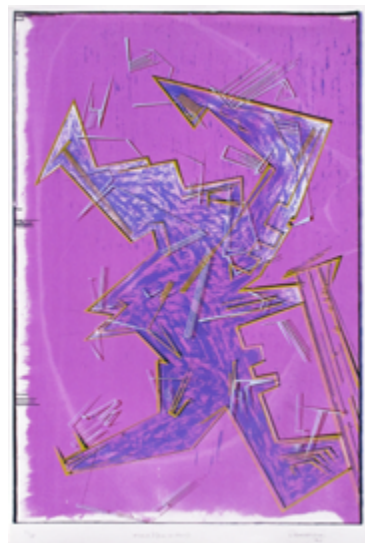


# Bob Dombrowski

Originally from Buffalo, N.Y. Bob Dombrowski received his BA at State University of New York, Buffalo in 1965 and finished his post-graduate work at Cornish Institute in Seattle, Washington in 1976. Dombrowski, who was a performance artist and musician prior to doing street art, was inspired directly by seeing Keith Haring's work. On the other hand, his work has obvious similarities to both Hiratsuka and Borofsky, in terms of design concept and in the referencing of ancient art (though the three developed independently). He has always referred to his studies of ancient Celtic art as an inspiration in his work. The artist created his pioneering pole pieces by cutting two-dimensional abstract shapes which had jagged and expressive edges out of metal sheeting. These works are double-sided and thus sculptural, yet usually seen in one-dimensional profile. The metal often came from found materials such as discarded metal shelves. The two sides are painted differently with designs complimenting the shapes and helping to create the suggestion of a face or figure, or of both simultaneously. The metal shapes were attached high up on street poles used for signs and lights. Dombrowski's balance between abstraction and specific depiction in these totemic "sky-works" is close to the line walked in the simple abstract expressive elements of West African "Gabon" reliquaries. They can be seen as both face or figure. This early street artist accomplished the installation of his outdoor pieces in Midtown Manhattan and Downtown, in the Financial District, by brazenly working out of a hired limousine parked in traffic. Not only were the installations illegal but they were accomplished by using a special tool for attaching signs to urban poles which had been "pilfered" from the city. The artist Mary Petrushka (1953-2016) was instrumental in helping to "get away" with these clandestine public art installations. Documentary video footage shows the two working together in the limousine while transporting the work, and climbing on the ladder together to install it, as traffic passes.



Spy (right side), 1985, Enamel on metal sheet, 42" x 28"



Eight of Wands, 1985 Silkscreen on paper, 38" x 25"



Spy (left side), 1985, enamel on metal sheet, 42" x 28"



Thirteen, Silkscreen on paper, 36" x 24"



Steps, 1985, Silkscreen on paper, 40" x 26"



## Keith Haring & LA2 (Angel Ortiz)

Keith Haring, from Reading, Pennsylvania, studied at the School of Visual Arts. His outdoor work was done largely in the N.Y.C. subway stations. He drew a variety of figurative symbols using white chalk directly on the black paper sheets covering vacant billboards. His symbols included a baby, a pyramid, flying saucers, barking dogs, television sets and many more. He used these symbols in juxtaposed situations, creating a narrative, much like the way familiar characters reappear in daily newspaper comic strips. Haring worked quickly to avoid arrest but as he worked in a very populated environment (subway stations), patrolled by the police 24-7, he was arrested more than once. Often times, accompanied by a photographer, he was able to capture the arrests on film or video and subsequently use the images to promote the work and public activity. The arrests made him more of a legend. Many of Haring's early studio paintings had backgrounds filled in by a friend and fellow artist, Angel Ortiz (1967-). Some of Ortiz's decorative "filler" marks are reminiscent of lines found in different types of ancient American art, and other types of ancient art, referring especially to decorated pottery, though this may be pure coincidence. Haring and Ortiz became fast friends after the graffiti artist took the street artist out to "tag" on the Lower East Side. On one occasion Ortiz was filling a surface with decorative marks when Haring drew a figure in around them. After the two had made some pieces together in this manner, Haring adopted it permanently and the combination of cartoon figures filled with designs or expressive marks became his signature style. Angel Ortiz's "decorative filler marks" have influenced countless artists from many cultural backgrounds who experienced them first through Haring's work and later through the work of "LA2", himself.



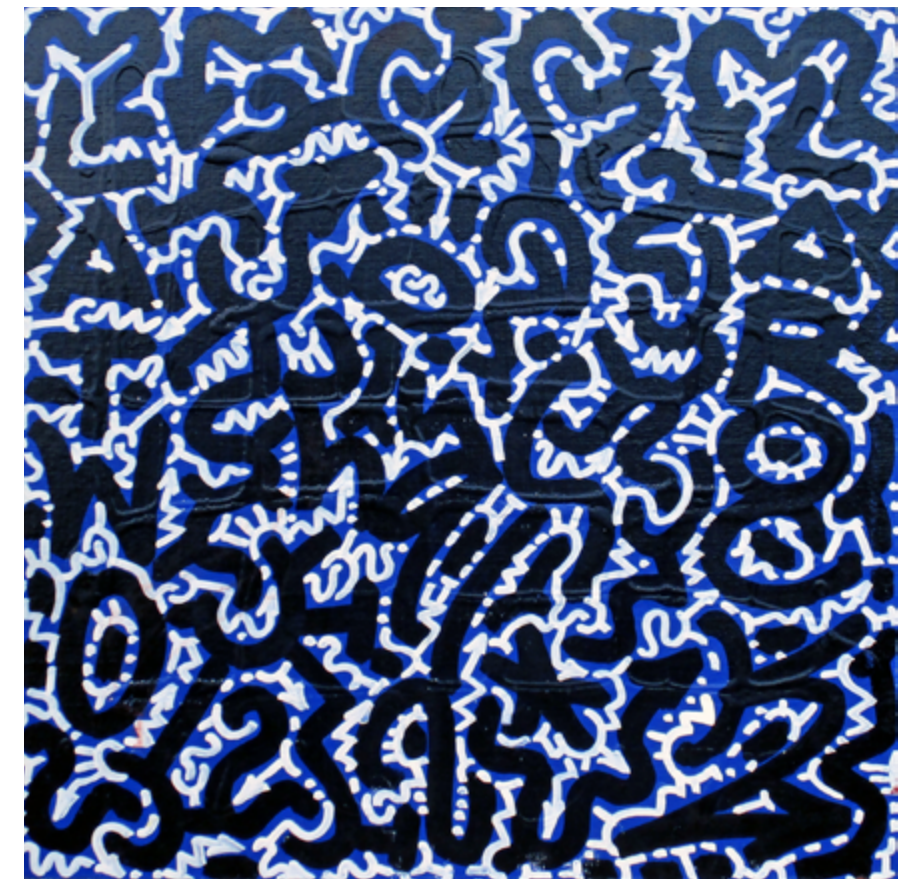
Keith Haring, *Untitled (Abstract Figure)*, 1983, Silkscreen on paper, 11" x 14"  
Published by Keith Haring Foundation



Keith Haring, *Radiant Baby*, 1982, Silkscreen on paper, 26" x 32"  
Published by Keith Haring Foundation



Keith Haring, *Untitled (Dogs and UFOs)*, 1982, Silkscreen on paper, 16" x 22", Published by Keith Haring Foundation



LA2, *Green Light*, 2011, Spray paint and oil markers on canvas, 24" x 24", Collection Jacob Ortiz



# Ken Hiratsuka

The Japanese stone carver, Kenichi Hiratsuka first arrived in New York in 1982. Born in Shmodate City, Japan, he received his BA in Sculpture from the Musashino University, Tokyo. Once in New York, he studied at the Art Students League. Hiratsuka began carving directly into sidewalks and stone surfaces, first in Brooklyn, then in Manhattan. Incising an expressive line which “never crosses”. He created public art literally “on the street”. The improvised line created by “Ken” (as his work is signed) features elements reminiscent of lines found in the art of many different historical cultures at their artistically formative stage. These cross-culturally characteristic lines include interlocking spirals, stepped lines, waves, and repeating patterns. The artist has pointed to both Michael Heizer's earthworks and the surface line drawings of the Peruvian Nazca Culture, as personal inspirations. He obviously thinks of his work in relation to earthworks of all human epochs. In his outdoor work, Hiratsuka's “one line” speaks in a visual language both suggestive and abstract, using the most basic and universal of design elements. In the studio, however, he also makes “storyboard” type narratives using a string of connected symbols, which are read in a very similar fashion to David Smith's welded sculpture, Hudson River Landscape. The storyboard type carvings are formally totemic and incised with a cipher-like language of symbols. They capture all three elements identified by this selected group of early street artists. The sidewalk sculptor was often accompanied by his close friend the photographer, Toyo Tsuchiya, who photographed his process on the street at night and also documented his brush ins with the local police. Ken's loud hammer and chisel technique made creating an artwork a lengthy process, occasionally interrupted by the threat of arrest and the subsequent court appearance which would follow. Ken Hiratsuka's works can be found throughout Manhattan and around the world. Because of the permanence of stone, most of his street art remains in existence.



*Story of Thompkins Sq. Park*, 1994  
Marble, 20.5" x 16.25" x 1"



*Air*, Marble, 1998  
10" x 14" x 1.25"



*Letter*, Marble, 1983  
14.5" x 13.5" x 1"



*Cosmic Map*, 1993, Bluestone, 42" x 35.5" x 2"



*Story Of...*, 1993, Slate, 54" x 26.25" x 1.25"



# Richard Hambleton

Born in Vancouver, Canada, he studied at the Vancouver School of Art. From 1976 to 1979 Richard Hambleton first painted "police chalk outlines" around the bodies of volunteer models, as "homicide victims" onto the surface of New York City sidewalks. His now well known signature work consisted of life-sized human figures, splashed and brushed with black paint in alleyways and other carefully chosen locations on dozens of buildings and other structures in New York and other cities, including Paris, London and Rome. The figures had the effect of being surprising and even threatening in a city where muggings and open crime were always a possibility. These figures were totemic in the same sense as any repeated cultural symbol which is always the same, yet somehow always different. The targeted public urban viewer could identify the individual figures as being done by the same artist through style of rendition and repetition of form. Hambleton's calligraphic style was born of necessity. To create the life-sized paintings he needed to work fast to avoid detection and arrest. A quiet man by nature, he carried only one can of paint and one brush. Working quickly was essential. From what I've heard, he was more and less successful at not getting caught at different times. Most of the street artists had run-ins with the law and the character of the neighborhood where they were working at the time had a lot to do with the police response. Sometimes the police were the least of our worries and dangerous people with real weapons feeling trespassed upon could be really violent. In the East Village during the early eighties, assault and murder were everyday occurrences. The black figures became a familiar public icon. The very controversial artist spent his life living on the edge and was intimately followed by the art press until his very tragic death, after a lifetime of being, perhaps, the most celebrated and haunted of the street artists, the ultimate outsider-insider in the popular art world. He is referred to in the press as The Shadowman.



*Shadow Heads (Triptych)*, 2015  
Acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 each  
Collection of Jon Satin



*Color Shadow Head*, 1984, Mixed media, 69" x 32"



*Untitled (Torso With Verticals)*, 1994, Acrylic on paper, 49" x 35.5"



# FA-Q

Kevin Wendall studied at Cooper School of Art in Cleveland, Ohio. Signing his paintings,"FA-Q", he painted expressive faces which seemed to draw inspiration from sources such as "underground comics", "Rat-Fink" bubblegum cards, Mad Magazine, and also African masks. He stated that Philip Guston's work was his greatest inspiration from the modernists. Wendall's work in spray paint on the walls of downtown N.Y.C. was a minimal but prolific commitment. But in his studio work he took his raw and expressive tagging style directly to the surface of the canvas, paper or painted panel where it became much more developed. In hundreds of drawings and paintings, he created face after face with the same range of totemic familiarity and expressive variety as Richard Hambleton did with his brushy figures. The style of "FA-Q's" paintings is also quite comparable to work from the Dutch "COBRA" art movement. Like Richard Hambleton, with whom, during the eighties, FA-Q was fast friends, Kevin Wendall can easily be described as a neo-expressionist of the streets. This artist became very familiar with the prison system during his life, and according to his dealer Christina Louisy Daniel (who sold hundreds of his paintings), much of the work was produced behind bars. He was a notorious legend in the art world during his short and stormy but prolific lifetime.



Squirrel Face, Acrylic on paper, 20" x 20"



Sperms, Acrylic on paper, 22.5" x 18"



Cat Face, Acrylic on glossy paper, 32.5" x 23"



Miss Holes, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 30" x 22"



Credits for Black and White Photos

- John Fekner.....Wikipedia  
R.V.....Artist  
Richard Hambleton.....Scot Borofsky  
Keith Haring.....Fernando Natalici  
AVANT.....Scot Borofsky  
SAMO..... Al Diaz  
Adam Purple.....Harvey Wang  
Michael Roman.....Scot Borofsky  
Seth Tobacman.....Artist  
Ken Hiratsuka.....Toyo Tsuchiya  
Scot Borofsky.....Scot Borofsky  
Bob Dombrowski.....John Cavanagh  
Linus Corragio..... Daniel Falgerho  
Lawren Hancher.....Scot Borofsky  
Red Spot.....Scot Borofsky  
Peter Missing.....Henry Jones  
Apocalynn and Louis Lopes.....Scot Borofsky  
FA-Q.....Scot Borofsky  
Gizmo.....Artist (Website)  
Carlos Castro Valle.....Scot Borofsky  
Dragan Ilic.....Artist (Website)  
Red Ed.....Scot Borofsky  
Paolo Buggiani.....Courtesy of Paolo Buggiani  
Luca Pizzorno/Anna Jepson.....Scot Borofsky  
Liz and Val.....Scot Borofsky  
Larmee.....Susan Isono  
Dan Witz.....Artist

Credits for Color Photos

- Scot Borofsky.....Scot Borofsky  
Bob Dombrowski.....Scot Borofsky  
Ken Hiratsuka.....Scot Borofsky (“Cosmic Map”.....Artist)  
R.V. ....Kevin Jager Van Arsdol  
Richard Hambleton.....Scot Borofsky  
FA-Q .....Courtesy of Van Der Plas Gallery  
Keith Haring.....Scot Borofsky  
LA2.....Scot Borofsky

Card and Catalogue Design

Shazzi Thomas

Special Thanks To

Special thanks to The Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation who funded the exhibition and catalogue. Special thanks to The Fifth Floor Foundation who provided additional funding for the catalogue.



Bob Dombrowski  
Poster



