

The recollection-images and objects in these memorial sites—peace banners, flags, crosses, teddy bears, fireman’s hats, ribbons, photographs, poems, candles, flowers—confront what cannot be represented. They are an attempt to bring them into dialogue with memory of the missing. They cry out to tell histories, lives of which they are an index. It is a road back to particular memories and partial histories. It is these inexplicable images that testify most profoundly to the forgetting of both official history and private memory. They are multisensory bits which call upon a sense knowledge that cannot be reproduced nor represented. These are rituals that are necessary and crucial for psychic survival. Let us remember that rituals, including rituals of mourning, are not final acts but beginnings.

**Postscript:** Since the writing of this essay, the shard has been removed for safety reasons. It will not be used as a monument to mark the 9/11 monument. The winning design is to have two beams of broad light projected into the night sky to commemorate those souls whose bodies remain forever lost. They await justice so that they may finally rest in peace.

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## Tagging A Boxcar In An Anxious Age

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On Wednesday, September 12,<sup>th</sup> scheduled to fly from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, I found myself instead driving a rental car from Logan, Utah to the Bay Area. I left early – at daybreak, on a clear morning, just at that turning point when summer slides into autumn. Several hours later, on Interstate 80 east of Salt Lake and along the Bonneville Salt Flats, the National Public Radio station began to crackle and fade. By the time I crossed into Nevada, and moments after turning off the radio, I slunk into a state of sad resignation. Two hours of news about the horrors of the collapse of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon were all I could take. The talk of war had put me in a sullen mood.

Ahead on the horizon were storm clouds and every mile or so a short stretch of wet pavement. There were few billboards or manmade distractions of any kind. The traffic was very light – mostly semis. The overcast sky added to the general bleakness. But as I continued driving westward through the Nevada desert I had the strange feeling of moving towards the light, even though I could see piled up clouds ahead of me. The openness of the desert seemed to amplify the sense of light and space. There is an austere beauty to the desert, and trapped in the comfort of the car, this sense of sublime beauty seemed almost reachable in real time. Looking through the windshield of the car was

like watching a movie, the panoramic view ahead existing in that second only because of the momentary quality of light – solitude in shifting illumination. Over the years I have wondered what it would be like to live in such a landscape – stuck out in some trailer house in the barren great basin. I imagine that one would die of boredom, or die and be reborn as a mystic, or perhaps one would simply just die.

It also occurred to me that the high desert landscape of northern Nevada must be geographically (along with the black hills of South Dakota) the closest equivalent in the United States to the rugged terrain of Afghanistan. Other than their beautifully proportioned and decorated mosques, I wondered what the Taliban had in the way of art. Holed-up in bunkers, caves and garrisons, not much, I speculated. I wondered also, do they even have a form of secular art? Or were they like the Inuit of the frozen Arctic, existing in a hostile environment, their life reduced to the barest essentials. Art for the Inuit on the Tundra, 100 years ago, had a completely different meaning and function than what we are accustomed to in the affluent West. Their materials were solely provided by the animals they hunted: the bones, tusks, and antlers of the walrus, bear, caribou and seal. Occasionally a bit of driftwood would supply material for sleds, and the leftover wood chunks for utensils and carvings. The concept of art was a natural extension of their lives. Their carvings were small, tended to be hand held or sewn onto their parkas as amulets. Since they did not differentiate between making a spoon or comb and the carving of a seal or bird as amulet or toy, all of what they made became part of their all-pervasive environment. My first curatorial position was at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau. The museum's collection had drawers full of tiny Inuit utensils and animal carvings. Many of these were acquired by simply being picked up off the ground. The important thing to the Inuit was not the possession of the artifact, but rather the act of making the thing. Once the little carving of the ptarmigan was

complete, and played with a bit, it was just as much a part of the Inuit's world if it had been dangling from the hunter's harpoon or left behind in the snow. But as I thought about it, I began to feel that the Inuit actually had very little in common with the Taliban. The Inuit's worldview was restricted to their own land; and, they were not religious zealots. The Taliban and their cells have a worldview, even if it bans art and free expression. I have recently been reading Bruce Chatwin's Anatomy of Restlessness – his selected writings from 1969 to 1989. In his chapter titled "The Morality of Things", the late author argued against the art world's practice of hoarding objects, of using material possession as a kind of cache to lord over the less fortunate. Chatwin had worked for Sotheby's Art Auction House at some point in his career and the experience had profoundly soured him. He was much more attracted to the possession-less Australian Aborigines. What Chatwin hated about the art world was not the art in that world, but rather the one-upmanship of the art world, controlled as it is by over-inflation, greed and hoarding. Chatwin begins his chapter on "The Morality of Things" reminding us that Old Testament prophets lived by the credo: "Thy shall not lust after things." Such fervor, based on religious ideals, leads to extreme behavior. Chatwin writes:

The patriarchs of Ancient Israel lived in black tents. Their wealth was in herds; they moved up and down their tribal lands on seasonal migrations, and they were famous for their resistance to art objects. They would have stormed into art galleries as they stormed into the shrines of Baal, and slashed every image in sight. And this, not because they couldn't pack them in their saddlebags, but on moral grounds, for they believed that pictures separated man for God. The adoration of images was a sin of settlement; the worship of the Golden Calf had satisfied emotional weaklings who sighed for the fleshpots of Egypt. And prophets like Isaiah

and Jeremiah recalled the time when their people were a place of hardy individualists who did not need to comfort themselves with images. For this reason they denounced the temple which God's children had turned into a sculpture gallery, and recommended a policy of vandalism and a return to the tents.

The American writer and amateur watercolorist Henry Miller pointed out that art is not needed by two kinds of people: saints and the totally insane. For the rest of us, art is usually there for those who have the need. For the saint, everything in the living world is alive and possessing some kind of power. Even stones and trees spoke to mystics like Mohammed. The plants and rocks also spoke to the shamans – the mystics of Native American culture who hunted and walked across the desert we now call Nevada.

In the summer of 2000, I was also driving through the Nevada desert, but on that occasion with my daughters Kelcey and Alicia. This time on I-50, advertised as "The Loneliest Road in America." We were driving west to east, from San Francisco to Santa Fe. Highway I-50 is about 100 miles south of I-80, which also cuts across Nevada east to west. Even more barren and isolated than I-80, this highway was also nearly devoid of traffic. It was midday and all morning we had been within the sight of smoke and lightening fires in the mountains to the north. At a forest service site known as Hickison, we turned off the highway and followed a road about a mile to a petroglyph site. We parked the car and walked an easy trail along a rocky dyke. Numerous petroglyphs (drawings carved into the rocks) covered the flatter surfaces of the rock outcroppings; the oldest of these rock drawings are approximately a thousand years in age. Known as the Great Basin curvilinear style, looping and meandering abstract designs were crisscrossed occasionally with anthropomorphic figures. None of these quasi-abstract designs resembled the pronghorn antelope or mule deer

that grazed and were hunted on the valley floor just below the petroglyph rocks. These rock drawings are shrouded in mystery; the meaning as sign and symbol of these gouged and pecked drawings are lost in time.

As Kelcey, Alicia and I walked from rock to rock, I began to look for the famous art figure Kokopelli, the humpbacked flute player. In the early 1970s, with my wife Victoria, we saw some humpbacked flute players along a ridge on the Galisteo Basin in New Mexico. I had not seen a Kokopelli since, or at least not an authentic humpback flute player as a rock art figure. Kokopelli is depicted in profile throughout the Southwest, his most prominent feature being a flute held to his mouth, his humped back, and a prominent erect phallus. All kinds of speculation exist as to Kokopelli's powers. He is seen as a fertility symbol, a rain priest, trickster, and seducer of maidens, among other things. We could not find Kokopelli at the Hickison site, so he was perhaps not of this region, or in hiding.

In recent years, with the increased popularity of rock art in the Southwest, the Kokopelli figure is commonly depicted on a vast array of commercial products: on book jackets, coffee cups, and t-shirts. There are a multitude of variations for Kokopelli including a sexually neutral humpback flute player, and it is always this less sexually explicit Kokopelli that is depicted on contemporary commercial products. This has caused me to speculate that Kokopelli has lost his sex, and it only reappears now as graffiti in truck stop restrooms across the American Southwest.

As I continued my drive through the high desert, dropping out of a pass east of Elko, I noticed that the railroad track paralleled the highway, as close as a few hundred yards and no more than a half mile to the north of I-80. For the next couple of hundred miles I encountered numerous trains – some of the train engines pulling as many as 90 boxcars. Many of the cars were graffitied, some simply tagged in a

continuous one color calligraphic style. A few of the cars were completely bombed, and one was a complete top to bottom, in other words, every inch of the side of the boxcar was covered in balloon style letters, "BIG 5", chunky, thick, outlined, and shadowed letters in red, yellow and dark blue.

At various points along the highway, it was possible for me to shadow the train for several miles, driving at about 70 miles an hour, running in sync with the train's westward movement. I had fun with this since it allowed me to move right next to cars that were especially beautifully spray-painted. The letter styles were at times difficult to decipher, the letters and names seeming to mock the more staid, stenciled lettering of the railroad company – Southern Pacific or Burlington Northern. The bubble letters of the graffiti artists (known as throw-ups) lean and loop and intertwine. They have all the flare of Chinese and Arabic calligraphies, all the presence and authority of the Hebrew alphabet. Where these boxcars were spray-painted was impossible to determine, but most likely in some urban train yard. Freights (as graffiti artists call them to distinguish them from trains which are subway cars) have become something of a West Coast movement, so the boxcars I was following could have been bombed in Los Angeles or Fresno. Each region of the country has its own variation of styles, and its own masters. One thing for sure, the history of bombing trains and freights is short, colorful and often dangerous.

Bombing is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century art form made possible in large part because of the invention of the aerosol spray can. The artists are young, mostly of the urban poor, or working class. In recent years, the bombing of freights and trains has become a part of hip-hop culture that exploded in popularity in the 1980's. The official grown up world fought the spray painting of trains from the very beginning. In May of 1989, New York City's Municipal Transit Authority declared victory over subway graffiti by enforcing a policy of removing all marked cars

from service. The MTA also dramatically increased security in the train yards and hardware stores locked up spray cans, refusing to sell the paint cans to minors. In large part, the loss of subway graffiti in eastern cities was answered by a new generation of freight car bombers in the 1990s. In 1974, Praeger Publishers in New York published a photo book, *The Faith of Graffiti*, documented by Mervyn Kurlansky and Jon Naar with text by Norman Mailer. It is a classic in the field of graffiti art documentation. Mailer's text seems relevant in the face of recent world events. After interviewing New York subway artists and chronicling their exploits, Mailer concluded his essay with these sage words:

It is not enough to think of the childlike desire to see one's name ride by in letters large enough to scream your ego across the city, no, it is almost as if we must go back into some more primeval sense of experience, into that curious intimation of how our existence and our identity may perceive each other only as a mirror. If our name is enormous to us, it is also not real – as if we come from other places than the name, and lived in other lives.

Perhaps that is the unheard echo of graffiti, the vibration of that profound discomfort that arouses as if the unheard music of its proclamation and/or its mass, rapt intent seething of its foliage, is the herald of some oncoming apocalypse less and less far away. Graffiti lingers on our subway door as a memento of what it may well have been, our first art of karma, as if indeed all the lives ever lived are sounding now like the bugles of gathering armies across the unseen ridge.

Graffiti and rock art are not new, they exist worldwide and they are thousands of years old. Their subjects span the entire scope of human life and aspirations, including threats, proclamations, and profanity, even the caricature of mystics. In the Kircherian Museum in Rome there is a scratched graffito of Jesus Christ drawn only a few years after Christ's apostles were preaching the gospel in Rome. Here, Christ is depicted standing with his arms spread the length of the cross and with the head of a donkey. To the left of the cross is the figure of a Christian youth in adoration. Underneath the inscription reads: "Alexamenos worships his God."

The rock artists are lost to us as individuals. We do not know their names, and even make calculated guesses as to their tribes and their time on earth. Writers of graffiti, in spite of throwing up their street names along the entire length of a freight train, are seldom seen at their labors. A handful of graffiti artists became known in the art world. When, in 1983, Tony Shafrazi included Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Futura 2000 in his New York City Soho exhibition Champions, he was acknowledging that for a handpicked few graffiti art had gone above ground. The ephemeral art of tagging a subway car and the impracticality of an art collector actually buying a graffiti train car caused a few to leave the tunnels and yards for the more profitable art world. But the real spirit of graffiti remained underground, and if we ask what type of individual writes graffiti, the answer lies in the nature of the message, the place where it is written, and the spirit of the times.

The efforts to eradicate graffiti will almost always be defeated. If you take away graffiti, you take away the people's roots. Today, in third world countries, in this country, and abroad, there are people for whom graffiti is the only visual art and writing form that they have. So, on September 12,<sup>th</sup> as I continue driving across Nevada, I found it reassuring to drive side by side with the spray-painted boxcars of freight

trains. It was nice to know that art existed before, and continues to exist now, that comes from the people uncensored. It is also nice to know that art can be made without the aid of gallery dealers, collectors, academics and studio assistants, that art can exist in some extreme state, by virtue of the impulse and will to exercise the very human need to make a mark.