

2005

# We were here : Marks, Monikers, and the boxcar art tradition

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**Burns, Matthew**

**We Were Here:  
Marks, Monikers,  
and the Boxcar  
Art Tradition**

**May 2005**

We Were Here

*Marks, Monikers, and the Boxcar Art Tradition*

by

Matthew Burns

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

American Studies

Lehigh University

April 29, 2005

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts.

4.29.05

Date

Thesis Adviser

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## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the following for their generous help:

Jill Tominosky, Bill Daniel, Mick Trackside and the Mick Trackside Photo Collection, *Faded Glory Magazine*, J. R. "Mainline Mac" McKay, Michael Poulin and Boxcar Art dot Com, Wooster Collective, John Pettegrew, Norman Girardot, John Lennon, Anthony Bleach, and Gordon Bearn.

The artists: Other, Goldenarm, Northbank Fred, Labrona, Curse, Bones, Onorok, PenOne, Deta, buZ blurr, Photo Bill, Take Five, and too many others to possibly name.

And of course my family for their undying support in all adventures academic or otherwise.

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## Project Abstract

These photographs and the accompanying discussion are part of an ongoing documentary project that attempts to chronicle the current state of boxcar art as well as archive its history. A century-old tradition, these drawings evolved from two main sources: rail workers' on-car maintenance or assembly instructions; and a wide-functioning, symbol-based system of communication used by the early trainhopping community. These markings have been a part of the American rail system from its inception and they appear in myriad forms, running the gamut from the simple printed signature to the highly detailed chiaroscuro portrait. No matter what form they take, they are messages sent out to no one and everyone; messages that announce "I was here."

My interest sprang from an involvement with the (aerosol) graffiti scene in the early-1990s. Trips to the local train yard and direct interaction with the cars forced me to notice these unusual, seemingly inexplicable little doodles and cryptic messages. A deadpan smoking cowboy, a fizzing champagne glass, a little man in a sombrero and poncho napping under a lonesome palm—these were suddenly everywhere I looked. They meant something to someone "out there."

*Box cars run by a mile long.  
And I wonder what they say to each other  
when they stop a mile long on a sidetrack.  
Maybe their chatter goes:...*

*–Carl Sandberg, “Work Gangs”*

*“When you’re first against the train, it’s like everything seems so big,  
like, “Whoa!” It’s like you’re in a yard of metal giants. I mean,  
everything is so hard, and like, so steel, and like, you’re just there;  
you’re like a little dude in the midst of all this metal and you’re here to  
produce something.”*

*–Donald “DONDI” White  
in Style Wars*

*“Message in a bottle, but the bottle always comes back.”*

*–OTHER*

## Introduction

### *Project Background*

Eighteen days into 1984, on only the third Wednesday of the new year, PBS aired a documentary by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant entitled *Style Wars*. The work was the culmination of nearly three years of filming and countless interviews with the burgeoning subculture of New York graffiti writers who had turned the City’s decrepit subway system into what one writer called “a masterpiece art gallery.”<sup>1</sup> It was a logical topic to pursue given the (in)famous state of the trains throughout the 1980s—an image that is not very difficult to conjure up when asked to give an example of what graffiti is. In fact, this “bombed out” underground is likely to be the graffiti archetype for both the artist

and the layperson.<sup>2</sup> But these decorated trains, running from borough to borough, up, down and across the island, from Battery to Harlem and back on over 2000 miles of track, were just youthful imitators following a tradition dating back to the birth of the railroad itself.<sup>3</sup>

Marking up the cars of a train is nothing new. While the utilization of spray paint to do so may be a relatively recent way to do so, there is a long history of freight trains' rolling stock carrying names and messages across the great national expanse. To be sure, where the New York subway system's artists were looking to go "all city" in the 1980s, the boxcar artist has been going "all nation" for over 150 years.

The photos printed and discussed here are of art that follows the boxcar tradition of marking cars not with spray paint, but with oil-based paint sticks (or some similar medium).<sup>4</sup> They are all photos taken in the greater northeast over a six-year period from 1999 to 2005. While they are not an exhaustive catalog by any means, and, to be sure, a small fraction of a personal collection, I feel that they are representative snapshots of the wider realm of boxcar art—a widely

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<sup>1</sup> One of the famously quotable lines from *Style Wars* is this one by MIN regarding, more specifically, "the ones and twos": trains running on the 1 and 2 lines.

<sup>2</sup> To say that something is "bombed out" or, more oftenly, "bombed," is common graffiti slang for "totally covered in graffiti." It is the adjective of "to bomb," meaning, obviously, to paint a large amount of graffiti.

<sup>3</sup> Track extent and mileage comes from the "MTA Facts" section of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority web page at <<http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us>> (19 Feb. 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Specificity of medium is really quite important, especially when aerosol-based graffiti is brought into the equation. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

unknown phenomenon that is made up of a countless number of extraordinarily diverse pieces currently running in the vast North American rail network.

My involvement with the boxcar art “scene,” for lack of a better word, stems from an involvement with the more commonly known aerosol graffiti subculture in the mid-1990s. This culture of freight train graffiti, born mostly from the demise of the subway graffiti movement, began appearing in greater force in the late-1980s and early-1990s as a way for artists to continue painting trains after the formerly wide-open access to subway cars was all but cut off. By frequenting rail yards to paint and photograph trains, I was essentially forced into contact with the cars and began noticing these small, almost innocuous drawings. These ran in direct contrast to the ostentatious quality of aerosol graffiti, proclaiming a presence not with a shout, but with a whisper time and again. More, the simplicity and modesty in many of the drawings gave rise to two clear questions: Who are these people, and why are they doing this?

These questions became (and continue to become) especially interesting when placed in the context of aerosol graffiti. To be sure, it is a question that is physically manifested on the train cars themselves when both a large spray-painted piece and a small hand-drawn moniker occupy the same space. It is only through documenting graffiti that I began to notice and then document monikers. Once one has noticed these little drawings they begin to appear, as if magically—like the Trystero post horn in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot*

49—on nearly every car.<sup>5</sup> Surely they would have been there—dates going back twenty, thirty, or more years make this clear—but they went unnoticed in the wake of these other large, bold, colorful, sprayed-on images. By looking through the graffiti, in some cases quite literally, the moniker takes on a story all its own. Unlike the vivid spray-painted letter that is unavoidably visible, the hand-drawn moniker must be found.

My desire to document boxcar art stems from this search. And while a long discourse on the role and impetus of the collector could easily be followed from here, such discourse would work against the object of this documentary project.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, this work seeks to suggest one possible history and background of the artform in addition to looking in some detail at the state of contemporary boxcar art as well as its practitioners. As is the case with any illegal act, it is by necessity a secretive activity, and any attempt to simply explain away or overly detail the work would not only take away from the artform, but also work directly against it.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the *aura* of the boxcar artist must be

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<sup>5</sup> While I would love nothing more than to take credit for this fine analogy to Pynchon, I must give credit to Andrew Hultkrans's article "Who is 'Bozo Texino'?" from the *Stim* web site <<http://www.stim.com>> (19 Feb. 2005).

<sup>6</sup> I have in mind here Walter Benjamin's brief discussion concerning objectivity, memory, and the collector. *Passagenwerk*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 204–05.

<sup>7</sup> To clarify and simplify, I am referring here to the New York State penal code, Section 145.60: "Making graffiti. 1. For purposes of this section, the term "graffiti" shall mean the etching, painting, covering, drawing upon, or otherwise placing of a mark upon public or private property with intent to damage such property. 2. No person shall make graffiti of any type on any building public or private, or any other property real or personal owned by any person, firm or corporation or any public agency or instrumentality, without the express permission of the owner or operator of said property. Making graffiti is a class A misdemeanor." NYS Legislature homepage at <<http://public.leginfo.state.ny.us>> (6 Mar. 2005).

preserved in order to preserve the art itself.<sup>8</sup> More, in reading and conducting interviews, a general consensus among the artists against overanalyzing or “making too much” of the practice has been mentioned time and again. So it is in line with the tradition itself and in appreciation of both art and artist that I seek to simply present a form of art that is widely unknown and then leave it to the viewer to take away what he will.

### *Concerning Terminology*

Throughout this paper certain somewhat obscure terms appear time and again. Mostly these have to do with railroad equipment and, more specifically, various types of rail cars. I make every effort to clarify for example, specific cars’ characteristics in the text; however, an appendix containing a small glossary of railroad terms is included for reference purposes.

Within the body of the paper, artists’ names are typed in all capital letters in order to distinguish them from the surrounding text. By inventing an identity, many artists “prefer to be know by a single, choleric noun...[o]r a maudlin adjective,”<sup>9</sup> so it is important to distinguish between, for example, the word “other” and the artist who goes by the same, or between “alone” and ALONE.

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<sup>8</sup> Again, I defer to Benjamin. However it is his oft-cited “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that brings the idea of the *aura* into discussion. See *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York, Schocken, 1968), pp. 217–252.

For artists who have chosen a more unique or unconventional multi-word name, or for artists whose moniker implies a birth name, this capitalization rule still applies—for example, COLOSSUS OF ROADS and WADE FRYE, respectively. Abbreviations are noted in-text. Unknown artists are stated as such.

In addition, it is also important to note some generalizations in regard to mediums. As mentioned above, any type of boxcar art can be labeled “graffiti” in the grandest sense. That is, it falls under the designation of unauthorized application of a medium to a surface. However, when looking at the examples of boxcar art contained here, it is necessary to delineate spray-painted art from hand-drawn. To alleviate confusion and in the interest of simplification, I use “graffiti” to mean any spray-painted art and “moniker” to imply the hand-drawn. More, terms such as “graffiti artist” and “graffiti writer” fall, obviously, into the former. The singular “writer” is used as a general catchall, and is meant to address the combined mass of both graffiti and moniker artists.

To further define the issue of mediums, the tools used are also detailed textually where explanation is necessary. However, a more exact description of various marking utensils can be found in the appendix.

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<sup>9</sup> Allen Abel. “The Art of Vandalism” from *Saturday Night Magazine* online. <<http://www.saturdaynight.ca>> (3 Jan. 2005).

## *On Sources*

Researching this topic is, to say the least, troublesome. Very little printed material on the subject exists, and aside from the occasional magazine article or reprinted artist interview, I have had to rely on primary source material. No scholarly work on this specific subject has yet been published. In searching out these drawings and attaching at least one possible reading to each, I am hoping to accomplish three main goals. First is a simple acknowledgement of an artform that is known to a very small sliver of the population. Secondly, I hope to produce some debate over what these drawings “mean” to other viewers. As I state numerous times in this paper, interpretation is all one can do. Interpretations that run in direct opposition are, in fact, one of the most interesting aspects of the art; each moniker will affect the viewer differently. More, each viewer will have a unique reaction. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I hope to force a new way of looking at the cars of a train. That is, once the existence of these drawings has been realized, the seemingly interminable wait at a railroad crossing can become much shorter. Instead of a nuisance, the train becomes an exhibit hall.

### History and Background

What *is* boxcar art? Although there is very little written on this phenomena, and while source material is desperately scarce—aside from a few



web sites and small, self-published, black and white magazines ('zines) on the contemporary movement—it has been possible to cobble together some background of the art by talking with some current railroad employees, and other boxcar art photographers as well as reading the few artist interviews available.

As stated above, distinguishing lines can be drawn within the greater sphere of boxcar art based on medium. Both aerosol and non-aerosol marks are surely considered *graffiti* in the generally accepted definition of the word. However, it is in the etymological sense of the word, a word borrowed from the Italian *graffito*—meaning a scratching or scribble—where I feel the non-aerosol side of the artform really comes to the fore.<sup>10</sup> These drawings are, at their core, just scribble (and in some case scratchings) on the cars of a train. More, it is this Italianate origin that best indicates the history of the phenomena and points to certain aspects of the contemporary movement.

### *Origins*

As the subtitle of this paper says, this artform is a tradition. In calling it so, the history of the artform should be traced back to the very beginnings of the railroad itself. Unfortunately, this has proved to be impossible. While there is ample documentation of many specifics of railroad history, this is one aspect that

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<sup>10</sup> "graffiti." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2004. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com>> (2 Mar. 2005). As an aside, one thing I find very interesting is the sociopolitical connection that is (unintentionally) made between the general public in its aversion to graffiti and the etymological

has somehow, for unknown reasons, managed to escape chronicling. But it is this fact that helps to make boxcar art what it is today: secretive, shrouded in mystery, and without definite origin. Its lack of documented history, its lack of defined *whos* and *whys*, only serves to increase fascination. The history itself mirrors the practitioners—unknown artists who are only hinting at their presence, but doing so in a way that cannot be ignored.

The origin of boxcar art is generally said to inhabit two specific worlds bound together by iron rails and wooden ties. First is the world of the railroad employee. Men who are essentially forced into direct contact with the cars, day in and day out. According to documentary filmmaker Bill Daniel, who has been working on *Who is Bozo Texino?*—“a film on the 100-year-old tradition”—these workmen began marking cars with chalk in the earliest days of the railroad.<sup>11</sup> These marks were primarily utilitarian, indicating, for example, which cars were to be uncoupled and then reassembled into trains, or which cars needed maintenance work. Marks like these can still be seen on cars today. As previously stated, these were mainly utilitarian notations and possessed no real artistic intent or merit. However, a second leg of moniker history can be traced to the same time period.

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roots of the Italian *graffito* which reside in *vulgar* Latin. This is surely a significant discourse in itself.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Daniel, Email to author, 2 Feb. 2005. Also, the use of chalk is something that is frequently recalled by contemporary artists who often refer to their medium as “chalk” even though it is usually the oil-based paint stick. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

With the massive expansion of track in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, trains had become a very viable way to transport freight and human alike. For those travelers who lacked the financial resources to purchase a ticket but still sought to pursue what author Bruce C. Cooper calls the “aura of adventure,”<sup>12</sup> the hobo lifestyle became a very practical counter method of travel. Andrew Hultkrans’s article on Bill Daniel’s film is enlightening with regard to the background of this transient group who has had a significant hand in the artform and come to be known as the second parent of boxcar art.

According to Daniel, the term “hobo” derives from “hoe-boy,” or migrant worker, and possibly ‘homeward bound’, referring to uprooted Civil War veterans making their way home by rail. Contrary to popular belief, Daniel maintains that the heyday of the hobo was the post-Civil War era, not the Steinbeck 1930's with its traveling Tom Joads. “The whole transient, jobless scene started after the Civil War,” says Daniel, “They were men who couldn't re-assimilate into society.” Coincidentally, the western expansion was peaking at the time, so many of these rootless drifters hopped freight west in hopes of finding work building bridges or “gandy-dancing” (laying train tracks). In the 1890s, according to Daniel, these “kings of the road” could always find work, and happily chose to travel from job to job, never settling down. This spirit of wanderlust characterized the Golden Age of hobo culture. The migrant workers of the Depression, notes Daniel, did not choose their lifestyle, but rather hopped freight by economic necessity, and were not serious contributors to hobo lore.<sup>13</sup>

Postbellum America was woven through with more than 60,000 miles of track for hoboes to surreptitiously ride.<sup>14</sup> Through whistle stop and metropolis, the rails carried passengers and goods. For the former who made their way onto

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<sup>12</sup> P. ii. Cooper’s book, *Riding the Transcontinental Rails: Overland Travel on the Pacific Railroad 1865–1881* (Philadelphia, Polyglot Press, 2004) is one of the most comprehensive and interesting studies of transcontinental rail travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>13</sup> “Who is ‘Bozo Texino’?” from the *Stim* web site <<http://www.stim.com>> (19 Feb. 2005).

the trains in a more covert fashion, these small towns and large cities functioned as, among other things, communication centers where information about local vicinity could be disseminated. This grapevine communication network of transients developed an “iconic code of symbols” recognizable to fellow hoboes.<sup>15</sup> Dozens of these symbols meaning numerous things, for example: “Good road to follow” (fig. 2), “Catch [a train] here” (fig. 3), “Rich people live here” (fig. 4), “Fresh water and safe camp” (fig. 5), or “Kind woman lives here” (fig. 6).

However, these symbols, while straying slightly from the workmen’s, still kept one finger in the utilitarian realm. More, these were very site-specific. That is to say, the majority of these symbols pertained to the community in which they were drawn (or carved, as the case may be). It would have been useless, for example, to have the symbol for “Good food here” drawn on a boxcar simply because the car could, at any time, be miles away from that good food. So these symbols were confined to the non-train components of the railroad, such as water towers, trestles, or viaducts.

Of course, this is not meant to imply that hoboes and rail workers were relegated to only information dissemination in their marking, or that they did not leave their personal mark on the machines they so closely worked with. Hultkrans notes that “[i]n the heyday of hobo graffiti, boxcar observers were treated to a diverse palette of visual form and expression. Beyond human caricatures and moniker tags, one could find political satire and propaganda.

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<sup>14</sup> Cooper, p. 18. The figure would jump to over 200,000 by 1900.

poetry, doggerel, religious appeals, lewd renderings of the female form, [and] sequential narrative art.”<sup>16</sup> To be sure, one of the historical hobo archetypes, Jack London, mentions application of his own moniker, “Sailor Jack,” in *The Road*, a collection of autobiographical writings from the late-1800s:

[T]here were hoboos who passed and re-passed with amazing frequency, and others, still, who passed like ghosts, close at hand, unseen, and never seen.

It was one of the latter that I chased clear across Canada over three thousand miles of railroad, and never once did I lay eyes on him. His ‘monica’ [sic] was Skysail Jack. I first ran into it at Montreal. Carved with a jack-knife was the skysail-yard of a ship. It was perfectly executed. Under it was ‘Skysail jack’. Above was ‘B.W. 9-15-94’. This latter conveyed the information that he had passed through Montreal bound west, on October 15, 1894. He had one day the start of me. ‘Sailor jack’ was my monica [sic] at that particular time, and promptly I carved it alongside of his, along with the date and the information that I, too, was bound west.<sup>17</sup>

Again, this is a moniker carved into something *non-train*, but it is still a personal declaration of presence, the “I was here” that is inherent in all boxcar art. It is that primitive desire to sign one’s name that influences the whole of the art.

So, it is clear that a good amount of marking rail cars and railroad equipment was taking place with the workers taking liberties with the cars and the hoboos with just about everything else. Between these two “parents,” it is not surprising that the tradition of boxcar art was at once birthed and solidified.

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<sup>15</sup> Hultkrans, “Who is ‘Bozo Texino’?”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Not surprisingly, all these examples are still seen today.

<sup>17</sup> London, “Hoboos That Pass in the Night” *The Road* from “Jack London’s Writings” Berkley Digital Library SunSITE <<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/London/Writings/TheRoad/hoboos.html>> (12 Dec. 2004).

## The Current Movement

*"I am chalk."*

*-RESET*

The practitioners of boxcar art in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries can be roughly divided into three main groups: rail workers, trainhoppers, and graffiti artists. Contrary to the romanticized image of the artistic freighthopping hobo, it is the first group who is currently producing the majority of the art out there.<sup>18</sup> However, there is a clear logic to this, given the direct, and thus opportunistic, daily interaction the worker has with the train. Surely, the same could possibly be said of the transient community, but this is a community that, by definition, must dwell "under the radar" so to speak. That is, making as little spectacle of their presence in the rail network is in the trainhoppers' best interest. Obsessively marking cars would run counter to this and thus draw unwanted attention. More, the artistic differences between this group and the former can never be clearly defined. For example, a drawing of a cat with some nickname written next to it could just as easily be attributed to either. Uncertainty bedevils the moniker. Still, there are a number of artists who do also hop trains

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<sup>18</sup> This is somewhat of a blanket statement, to be sure, but the consensus seems to bend toward agreement here. Any rail worker I was able to contact said the same thing: railroad employees do anywhere from 60% to 90% of the art out there. One engineer I spoke with whom only goes by GOLDENARM, vehemently insists that no less than 75% of the art is worker-drawn. (Email to author, 27 Jan 2005).

and incorporate that lifestyle into their work. The fact of the matter is that it is just not as many as would initially be expected.

Where these first two “factions”—workers and hoppers—are fairly self-explanatory, the third is, by comparison, somewhat new on the scene. The graffiti artists are the ones who are going out to the yards with a specific intention: to get their name out there. This is interesting for numerous reasons, most notably the connection to the image of subway graffiti so ensconced in American memory. More, when the demise of the symbolic hobo language—“a totally dead language”—is considered, the artists’ mission-like determination to get one’s name out there becomes something that is solely about identity.<sup>19</sup> “Getting up” is the goal, but this new generation of boxcar artists has eschewed the can of paint in favor of a piece of chalk.<sup>20</sup>

The photographs that follow are of boxcar art from each of these “factions,” respectively, and then a small sampling of monikers that cannot be lumped in with any of the former three. Beginning with a selection drawn by workers, each description is a *reading* of the image. That is, commentary presented here is a detailing and loose interpretation of the moniker coupled with any possible secondary information—artist background, location, and so on—that may be relevant to discussion of the image. I am not looking to explain the art or “figure out” what it “means.” This, as stated above, runs in direct opposition to

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<sup>19</sup> Hultkrans.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the idea of “getting up” as well as an insider’s history of graffiti art, see Steven Powers, *The Art of Getting Over: Graffiti at the Millennium* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

the artistic intention. One very prolific artist, COLOSSUS OF ROADS, whose work will be discussed in detail below, has said that it is the moniker's "mystery [that] creates legend."<sup>21</sup> Attempting to "solve" that mystery is not my goal, preserving the legend is. To clarify even further, each description is *a* reading of the image, not *the* reading of the image.

### The Images

Important to consider when looking at these images is where and when the photo was taken. Often, this differs greatly from the date and location attributed to the art itself (if one has been attributed). Considering that these photographs were all taken in the northeastern United States, the temporal and spatial distances these drawings have traveled is, in some cases, very impressive. However, while it is very gratifying to come across a twenty- or thirty-year-old moniker, some of the youngest drawings are the most innovative and exciting.

#### *Workers*

As stated above, railroad employees today do the majority of boxcar art in circulation. The following images detail approximately nine such artists or examples of monikers done by rail workers. They run the gamut from the simply

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<sup>21</sup> "buZ blurr: Vitals and Q & A" on the Wooster Collective news archive at <[http://www.woostercollective.com/2003\\_11\\_23\\_newsarchive.html#106980798603920778](http://www.woostercollective.com/2003_11_23_newsarchive.html#106980798603920778)> (26 October 2004). buZ blurr is just one of COLOSSUS OF ROADS' many pseudonyms.



worded statement to the highly detailed cartoon, leaving plenty of room in between for variation. As an aside, two specific images, figures 13 and 14, are somewhat ambiguous in their simplicity and could possibly be either category. However, based on personal experience and similar monikers I have seen, I felt the pair would best fit in this initial grouping.

BOZO TEXINO, Untitled, no date, (fig. 7).

The undisputed king of boxcar art, BOZO TEXINO's iconic cowboy has been rolling around since at least the mid-1930s in mythic status. Originally this was the moniker of two different rail workers who began drawing it around the same time. J.H. McKinley, a Missouri Pacific Lines employee, applied one, and likely the original, incarnation. The only existing document on this is an article from the July 1939 issue of *Railroad Magazine* featuring a newspaper photo from the *San Antonio Light* and one-page write-up on McKinley that shows him candidly applying the BOZO TEXINO "trademark" to a boxcar.<sup>22</sup>

The example in Figure 7 is the second version of the icon, however. In looking at the 1939 photo, it is clear that the McKinley design was far more detailed and bust-like than this with distinct ears, sideways-looking eyes, smoke trailing from a long pipe, a star on the hat, and even the suggestion of a work shirt. And while the similarities between the two are clearly evident, it's likely that the McKinley drawing was the original from which this other was derived

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<sup>22</sup> Current BNSF engineer J. R. "Mainline Mac" McKay has graciously provided the commentary as well as this article at <<http://www.geocities.com/lokomac8/bozo.htm>> (20 Jan 2005).

and, in the interest of speed, pared down to just the hat, face, and a smoking cigarette. Considering both McKinley and the other, unknown artist were both employed by railroads in the San Antonio area, the chances of the second, abridged BOZO TEXINO coming into contact with the (original) drawing was surely high.<sup>23</sup>

Having been passed around and passed down through the decades, this version is now the only one running and is well into a third generation with numerous workers, tramps, and artists carrying on this traditional design. This handing down though the decades combined with the idea of a collective now applying the moniker only helps to make that infinity-symbol in his hat's brim more of a reality.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, Bill Daniel, in his twelve-year quest to document the art and find the artist(s) behind it entitled *Who is Bozo Texino?*, came to the conclusion that "Bozo Texino is both every hobo, and no hobo in particular... [A]n amalgam of anonymous writers who have created a collective identity."<sup>25</sup>

Although never dated, this example is one of the older I have seen. The more recent versions are often done in paint marker, and not as cleanly executed. In contrast, these older examples are, like Charlie Brown (fig. 14), stylishly executed with an oil-based paint stick and have, after many years, been absorbed by the steel, becoming part of the very structure of the car.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> "buZ blurr: Vitals and Q & A".

<sup>25</sup> Hultkrans.

SMOKIN' JOE, "13475," 1996, (fig. 8).

This moniker clearly brings up the question of quantity. SMOKIN' JOE is one of the few artists working today to actually keep track of the number of drawings he's done and then incorporate that number into each subsequent drawing. More, it echoes the connection to aerosol graffiti's more-is-better mentality. Impressively, three cars down from the one in this photo was another SMOKIN' JOE from July 2000 numbered 17,113. Twenty-seven months later it would be 20,000.<sup>26</sup>

Also interesting is the icon itself. The smoking locomotive (or some other train-oriented derivative) is, logically, a common theme among workers. It is not surprising to see the artist incorporate his everyday life into his art, so it would follow that the boxcar artist would do the same. More, the actual size of the moniker is impressive, often stretching four or five feet in length on many types of cars, from large grain hoppers to open-top gondolas. One could easily read a sort of agency in the imagery SMOKIN' JOE has chosen. That is, by using the train as both subject and canvas, he is not only *proclaiming* an identity but also *reclaiming* an identity that has been lost, or at least dulled, in the wake of a surely arduous vocation. However, this reading of the train image is one that does

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<sup>26</sup> The Internet has obviously had a massive effect on just what is seen in terms of artists' work. A photo of SMOKIN' JOE's 20,000<sup>th</sup> was posted on the graffiti web site Twelve Ounce Prophet in

somewhat infect the image. It could very well be that JOE is simply fond of the imagery, enough so to define him by it. Either way, his presence cannot be overlooked.

OX, “38,” no date, (fig. 9).

(The) OX is interesting for numerous reasons, but the cryptic nature of the numbering scheme is foremost. While this is not an uncommon moniker by any means—the horned O with an X shifted down and to the right is always the same, only varying slightly in size—the number attributed to the work fluctuates wildly and with no apparent motive. Unlike SMOKIN’ JOE, these are not a count, as far as I can tell. These numbers jump from the single digits, on (seemingly) freshly applied icons, to the three hundreds and back again. Old or new, the number seems like it can be either high or low.

Surely there is a reason behind this numbering system, but a significant part of the fascination that comes with finding an OX drawing is the understanding that this reason is all but unknowable. The mystery facilitates the appeal. To be sure, OX’s cryptic numbering scheme can be seen as a sort of manifestation of the mystery inherent in all of boxcar art. These drawings, like OX’s numbers, “mean” something very specific to the artist applying them, but the exact meaning is essentially, and forever, unknowable to anyone *but* the artist. The outside viewer can *interpret* the numbers—maybe they correspond to the day

of the year, or something along those lines—but that is the extent of his access to the artist’s true motives. More, this affords the artist a certain amount of control. That is, by simply holding the “explanation” of these numbers to himself, he has created the possibility for supposition and discourse. It is by not saying anything that he says the most.

WADE FRYE, “All Blankenship’s Friends Attend the Retirement Party,” no date, (fig. 10).

Full panels like these are understandably few and far between, considering the amount of time that is surely required to complete one; however, WADE FRYE has done quite a few. There never seems to be any repetition of a single large cartoon, instead we get a whole series of offbeat, comical, almost autobiographical drawings dealing mostly with life on the railroad. Not unlike SMOKIN’ JOE in his appropriation of railroad imagery, WADE FRYE commingles life and work into a single artistic endeavor. Always one can clearly see the story being told in a single panel, but as with any workplace, inside jokes are present making for a sometimes-confusing narrative to those of us far removed from the story.

In addition to these larger pieces, he does a small, less detailed, unsigned moniker of two colliding and derailling boxcars—axles popping off and a big “Kapow!” flashing up between them—that runs with a sarcastic “Blankenship

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moniker was drawn (4 Apr. 2005).

Protects the Shove” caption. This is far more frequent than the large cartoons and definitely falls into line with the “getting up” mentality that will be seen in the discussion of graffiti artists.

Also, the full name signature would suggest no real fear of punishment, unless, of course, it is a pseudonym, and an odd one at that. If WADE FRYE is indeed his real name, it would seem that the reputation garnered by revealing that outweighs the possible repercussions as it is generally forbidden to mark one’s employing company’s cars.<sup>27</sup>

Artist Unknown, “Save Our Dept. Bring Back Justin to Conshy,” no date, (fig. 11).

Another significant aspect of the railworker faction is a message like this, sent along within the company from yard to yard in order to achieve specific ends—a simple and effective form of protest and agency by a group (“Our”) without much risk of reprisal. The use of a lone first name and the slang “conshy” (probably a colloquialism for Conshohocken, PA) serves to reinforce the idea of a specific intended audience. That is, the artist assumes that the viewer who understands, first, who “Justin” is and, second, where “Conshy” would be can do something to affect the clearly dire situation. To be sure, those viewers who do not know these things simply do not matter to the artist.

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<sup>27</sup> This information comes courtesy of GOLDENARM in emails to the author, (27 Jan 05 and 28 Jan 05, respectively).

This, like WADE FRYE or “John So Fine” (fig. 31), is based on a certain amount of insider information and requires just that to be fully understood. However, the outsider can smile at these without fully understanding. In fact, the image takes on a whole new meaning than what the artist intended when the outsider interprets it and reads a bit of oddity or absurdity into it. Thus, this “message-art,” although it would seem most concrete, is actually the most flexible in terms of interpretation.

ROY DALE, Untitled, 1985, (fig. 12).

Like contemporary artists DOUG W. (fig. 13) and RUM RUNNER (fig. 25), ROY DALE’s autograph falls into the “direct statement-of-being” school. More, with the addition of a location and date, a real sense of presence and specificity in time and space is conveyed. Reading too much into such a signature is a fruitless act. This could be any name from any place signed any time and it would still convey the same message. Simple and to the point, this baldly announces, “I was here,” the driving sentiment behind all graffiti, whether it is a large mural on a wall or a name written in wet cement.

In selecting this image, I am not looking to document the specific artist, per se. Rather, I feel that ROY DALE is an ambassador of sorts for all the writers who sign their names, unadorned, for no other reason than to announce their presence.

DOUG W., Untitled, no date, (fig. 13).

A direct relation to ROY DALE is clearly evident here. However, the sheer simplicity and unadorned straightforward presence of this signature may very well make it, even more than the other examples, the paragon of boxcar art. That is, where an artist like ROY DALE has supplemented his name with a date and a location, DOUG W. refrains from all this extraneous information, even neglecting to sign his full surname. It exists solely to satisfy the artist's desire to see his name manifest physically in some way, announcing to no one, and thus everyone, an "I AM," a human presence in a vast, inhuman network.

CHARLIE BROWN, Untitled, 1980, (fig. 14).

One of the "old guard" artists, CHARLIE BROWN is often cited as an inspiration by many. COLOSSUS OF ROADS (fig. 19), OTHER (fig. 27), and TAKE FIVE (fig. 18) are just a few of the many who credit CHARLIE BROWN with being an inspiration.<sup>28</sup> While the majority of his signatures seem to originate in 1980, a few from the late-1970s and occasionally the mid-1980s can be spotted. Again, this is an example that falls into line with the two previous; however, with CHARLIE BROWN it seems that an adoption of a nickname has taken place. One could surely hypothesize about connections to the famously unfortunate

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<sup>28</sup> "buZ blurr: Vitals and Q & A" and photographer Michael Poulin's interviews at <<http://www.boxcarart.com>> (12 Feb 2005), and Abel's "The Art of Vandalism" respectively.



protagonist in the Charles Schulz comic strip “Peanuts,” but there is no documented evidence of a direct connection.

Interestingly, all of CHARLIE BROWN’s cursive signatures have a similar look after a few decades.<sup>29</sup> As with BOZO TEXINO (fig. 7), the oil-based paint stick has seeped into the metal of the car, creating a weatherproofing of sorts. More, it is not that the chalk is sticking to the car anymore so much as it is the dirt sticking *around* the chalk—like a fossilization of the signature.

HERBY, Untitled, 1980, (fig. 15).

Second only to BOZO TEXINO (a ranking many would argue should actually be ruled a tie), HERBY (Herbert Meyer) is said to have left his mark on an estimated 100,000 cars—a conservative estimation at that.<sup>30</sup> The drawings are always dated and signed, but never captioned. This is the second-oldest original I have photographed (only by three years), not very impressive considering there are some from the 1960s still running and rumors of some from the late-1950s as well.<sup>31</sup>

HERBY’s influence is surely as widespread as BOZO TEXINO’s, even making its way into the non-boxcar art circle of railroad public relations

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<sup>29</sup> There are some examples of a less stylized printed CHARLIE BROWN out there. This may be another writer with the same name or an imitator. However, these printed signatures seem to be done in China marker or some medium other than the paint stick used for the cursive version. Imitation in general is frowned upon. Inventing or being given a name is all part of that individual identity. To be sure, while there may be two artists who go by PEN, for example, their individual styles are unique enough to distinguish between them.

<sup>30</sup> COLOSSUS OF ROADS revealed this to be HERBY’s real name on the Draw A Blank Perchance digital message board <<http://members4.boardhost.com/boxcarart/msg/1007.html>> (7 Feb. 2003). In the same discussion, upwards of 500,000 was suggested as the actual number.

<sup>31</sup> Hearsay and rumor is indeed a significant part of the boxcar art world as it helps to nurture the mystery. This tidbit of gossip was offhandedly mentioned in an Email from documentary

departments. In an article by David Parlsen, Jack Burke, “spokesman for Canadian National Railway...speaks in reverent terms of some of this traditional chalk writing.”<sup>32</sup> More, Burke specifically admires the ““very simple but elegant graffiti of a gentleman in a sombrero sleeping under a palm tree...done with an economy of strokes’.” It seems HERBY is present even in the boardroom.

This may be due to the way the image speaks to the escapist bent that is present in everyone. That desire to simply get away to someplace where a siesta under a palm tree is the only thing on one’s mind is at least vaguely familiar to everyone at some point. HERBY’s icon captures this perfectly. More, when we consider the artist’s employment with the railroad and the grueling nature of such work, the image takes on even stronger resonance.

Since word came through the rail community in late-1995 that Herby had died, there has been a concerted effort on the part of contemporary writers to preserve his pieces by carefully tracing over, or “rebuilding,” any desperately faded Herby they come across. A fine memorial and extension of the moniker’s life, to be sure, but, at the same time, an obstacle in documenting the work in its original form. As with any historic preservation, it truly is a double-edged sword. Is it best to rebuild or should it be left as it, as testament to the past? One can argue successfully both ways.

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photographer, and publisher of *Faded Glory* magazine. MICK TRACKSIDE to the author (23 Sept. 2004).

<sup>32</sup> “Art or vandalism, railcar graffiti roll across land” Wausau (WI) *Daily Herald*, 6 Jan. 2003, “Local” section, p. 1A.

*Trainhoppers, “Hoboes,” and the Transient Community*

Contrary to what would be expected, the majority of boxcar art is not done by modern-day hoboes. While this might not have been the case in the past, the current state of the artform places this group of practitioners behind both worker and graffiti artist in terms of production. As stated above, this may be due to the secrecy necessary to the lifestyle. Drawing any unwanted attention would greatly affect the trainhopper’s chances of catching a ride, so it is in his best interest to stay in the shadows, limiting his exposure until the last possible moment.<sup>33</sup>

The two images discussed below are done so under the assumption that they are in fact hobo-drawn. I have chosen to categorize them as such not because I have “proof” of their authenticity, but rather because of their historical connection (fig. 16) and invocation of traditional hobo imagery (fig. 17). They could very well be put into one of the other two main categories of artists, but I feel the sentiment they both contain fits best into this faction.

JACK LONDON, Untitled, 1993, (fig. 16).

One key thing to note here is the clever overwriting—possibly done by the artist—to make this more “historically accurate.” Like Jack Kerouac, London is often invoked as a sort of tramp archetype, and reasonably so given the author’s

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<sup>33</sup> See Duffy Littlejohn, *Hopping Freight Trains in America* (California, Sand River Press, 1993); Eddy Joe Cotton, *Hobo* (New York, Three Rivers Press, 2003); or Cliff Williams, *One More Train*

documented hobo adventures.<sup>34</sup> In fact, London had his own moniker in the late-1800s: “Sailor Jack.”

London talks about his “monika” in “Hoboes That Pass in the Night” from a 1907 collection of nonfiction entitled *The Road*. It is likely he went by at least one other name, “Skysail Jack,” the name the author attributes to the unseen hobo he is following, is most often cited by current boxcar artists (namely COLOSSUS OF ROADS [fig. 17]).<sup>35</sup>

It is this direct looking-back on and appropriation of history that says the most about this moniker and also serves to situate it in the boxcar art tradition, quite literally. What might have been even more interesting is if the artist had signed one of London’s documented monikers instead. Still, this invokes an entirely different reaction than any of the other first-last name signatures—ROY DALE or DOUG W.—discussed here. Unlike these others, JACK LONDON is a recognizable name with a history and fame already attached. To be sure, there is clearly an assumption being made that this is in fact a throwback to the 19<sup>th</sup> century author, both on my part and on whoever may have overwritten the “1993” to make it “1893.” This moniker may be no different than the ROY DALE, for example. That is, the artist may simply have the same name as the author and may have never intended it to be confused with the latter. Whatever the case may be,

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*to Ride: The Underground World of Modern American Hoboes* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2003); among others, for in-depth discussions of contemporary trainhopping culture.

<sup>34</sup> There is some disagreement with both London’s and Kerouac’s status as tramps. See Dale Wasserman, “Flipping the Meat Train” *American Heritage*, Feb. 2001, pp. 58–66. Wasserman takes a swipe at both Jacks, saying that London only made one trip and “thereafter made a book and a big deal out of it.”

it is clearly rife with possibility and uncertainty, making for a very engaging work.

Artist Unknown, "Long Road Ahead," no date, (fig. 17).

As a representative of the transient freighthopping community, this drawing, unlike worker-drawn art, plays with "hobo" longing and imagery all the way down to the stereotypical bindle perched on the character's left shoulder. Of interest here are numerous things.

First is the way the subject is situated outside a distant city, "home." This non-city area, we cannot say it is the countryside, could then function as a zone of mobility.<sup>36</sup> That is, the freedom afforded by a transient lifestyle does place the hobo in a certain space where a fixed address, the city in this example, is both nowhere and everywhere. More, while the caption is at once rather sorrowful, presenting the metropolis on the horizon as a hard-to-reach destination, it is at the same time almost emancipatory in that it hints at the distances to which the traveler has gone to "escape" from that city.

A second, more technique-oriented facet that is interesting is the artist's use of perspective. Many times a moniker is working in strictly two dimensions, even when it is very detailed—HERBY for example. This unknown artist takes the drawing and pushes it "into" the train, successfully adding that feeling of

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<sup>35</sup> "buZ blurr: Vitals and Q & A."

<sup>36</sup> Again, see Cotton, *Hobo* and Williams, *One More Train to Ride* for discussions of "living free."

distance that the caption sums up so well. In this sense, the implied distance functions as a nice mirror to the actual distance the drawing has certainly traveled.

### *Graffiti Artists*

The appearance of this final camp can be roughly traced back to the early-1990s and the demise of the subway graffiti scene. The realization that freight trains traveled all over the country was not an epiphany so much as it was a logical next step. Even in the 1980s, the heyday of subway art, graffiti artists in New York City and other major metropolitan areas saw the demise of their preferred canvas as inevitable.<sup>37</sup> The sheer accessibility of freight trains as well as their seemingly endless supply of space on which to paint, opened many artists' eyes to the possibility of a new era in train graffiti.<sup>38</sup>

While there is still a large number of graffiti artists working in spray paint, there are groups who have broken either totally or at least in part with this medium. Some artists such as NAVY EIGHT (fig. 22) and THE SOLO ARTIST will happily work in both paint and chalk while others—RESET, TAKE FIVE, OTHER—have removed the aerosol altogether in favor of the paint stick. In addition to these crossovers, there is a subsection of graffiti artists who, years ago,

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<sup>37</sup> A key undertone in *Style Wars* is this very realization. IZ THE WIZ, a preeminent and very prolific artist, expounds on the demise in the film: "It's already dying out."

<sup>38</sup> Freight trains are surprisingly easy to access, as evident by these photographs. Often, a train will be in a yard or lay-up where trains are parked from hours, sometimes days at a time. One simply has to find these holding areas with the aid of any average road atlas or city map. Also, the longevity of a piece on a metro train is only a fraction of that on the freights because of, among other things, the meticulous cleaning of the former by their respective city.

would have been lumped in with the rail workers. COLOSSUS OF ROADS and THE RAMBLER (fig. 20) are just two examples of former railroad employees who honed their craft while on the job and continue to mark cars long after retirement. More, there is a tertiary division of graffiti artists who also hop trains in the hobo tradition. While these could easily be considered under the trainhoppers category above, it is the moniker application that takes precedence over anything else, so I have chosen to place them here as they are graffiti artists first and hoboes second.

On a larger scale, this segment of the boxcar art population is the most open to discussion of their work and the artform. This can probably be attributed to youthful excitement and the willingness to aid in “getting up” by boasting about one’s work. However, this does add a new dimension to the discussion. No longer is there the mystery of who the artist may be or what he is trying “say” with his art. In fact, in some cases the artist has his own web site documenting his latest pieces complete with commentary on it.<sup>39</sup> The graffiti artist’s level of anonymity, while still withstanding this new exposure, is only a fraction of what, say, the rail worker maintains with his utter silence. The art itself becomes the topic of conjecture as opposed to the person behind it, pushing the artform into a more aesthetic pursuit. Each of these concerns will come out in the following discussions.

TAKE FIVE, “Hobo Art and Graffiti Art Forever,” no date, (fig. 18).

The caption TAKE FIVE has used here really sums up the current “new generation” mentality well.<sup>40</sup> His icon is almost ubiquitous on boxcars and gondolas, but they never appear anywhere above the lowest sections of the cars. This very specific spot selection is half of what makes the image so interesting and unusual. More his juxtaposing of two seemingly opposing symbols—the wheelchair and the railroad track—adds to the initial feelings of confusion.

In researching TAKE FIVE, I came across an interview with the Canadian graffiti artist OTHER where he offhandedly mentions that he had met TAKE. In contacting OTHER and asking to shed some light on TAKE’s curious choice of icon and placement, he replied, “Take Five? Yeah, he is [*actually*] in a wheelchair. Not only does he paint trains but he rides them too... quite a lad!”<sup>41</sup>

As noted above, as the mystery behind the drawings’ creators has been diminished by increased accessibility, the aesthetic aspect of the art has been forced to the frontlines of discussion. With TAKE FIVE, this increased accessibility to facts surrounding the moniker’s origin adds to the impact it has on a viewer.<sup>42</sup> That is, without TAKE’s personal story to background the art, the

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<sup>39</sup> Artists like OTHER and LABRONA are known for their online “photologs” where they catalog their, and others’, moniker work.

<sup>40</sup> COLOSSUS OF ROADS in an interview with Logan Hicks on the Wooster Collective website at <[http://www.woostercollective.com/2004\\_03\\_21\\_newsarchive.html#107991021434009772](http://www.woostercollective.com/2004_03_21_newsarchive.html#107991021434009772)> (23 Mar. 2004) notes the enthusiasm that this “new generation” has for the tradition, specifically mentioning artists like OTHER, FAVES, and TAKE.

<sup>41</sup> Email to author 1 Feb. 2005. Finding the artist’s email address was actually quite easy—a fact that speaks directly to the accessibility of this new generation.

<sup>42</sup> To speak more to this accessibility, the details of the accident that cost TAKE his mobility—he was hit, ironically, by a train as a teenager—are noted in Allen Able’s “The Art of Vandalism.”



image is just funny (at least) or absurd (at worst). By knowing the details behind the icon, the dedication and determination of the artist is brought out adding significant weight to the “Forever” in his caption.

COLOSSUS OF ROADS, “Sighting,” no date, (fig 20).<sup>43</sup>

Another version of the crossover artist, this time from rail worker to graffiti, COLOSSUS OF ROADS is omnipresent in the American rail system. For more than thirty years his smoking cowboy, a derivative of BOZO TEXINO, has long been able to claim iconic status, never requiring a signature.<sup>44</sup> Captions, however, are always present and run the gamut from the absurd (“Elk Meat Move,” “Cogbill Burial”) to the confessional (“Borderline Dyslexic,” “Persecution Complex”). By changing the captions on a daily basis, he removes the monotony from the image, keeping it fresh and interesting.<sup>45</sup>

COLOSSUS OF ROADS (AKA Russell Butler, buZ blurr, Sweeney) is, of late, one of the more candid artists, granting interviews and showing other work in major contemporary art galleries in the U.S. and Europe. In many interviews he

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<sup>43</sup> Coincidentally, this photo was taken from the “porch” (the covered platforms that extend at either end) of a grainer as it rolled through the Leighton (PA) Yard on the way to upstate New York, making the caption rather fitting given the chance encounter. The idea of synchronicity will be discussed in the paper’s conclusion.

<sup>44</sup> “buZ blurr Vitals and Q & A.” According to the artist, the first Smoking Cowboy image was applied on “an auspicious date,” 11 Nov. 1971.

<sup>45</sup> buZ Blurr, “Steel Road, Evanescent Route: My life on the line — The railway line. A love-hate relationship with “the railroad” and expressing it with captions/titles to a boxcar icon” from Michael Poulin “A COLOSSAL Interview with COLOSSUS OF ROADS” on the boxcarart.com website at <<http://www.geocities.com/boxcarart101/colossusinterview.html>> (15 Mar. 2005).

discusses the reasons for choosing the captions he does and what they mean (if anything), always returning to this idea of monotony and change.<sup>46</sup>

Having retired from the railroad in 2003, he still makes daily pilgrimages to the train yard in order to apply his icon in satisfaction of what he has described as a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, saying,

“Despite all the art jargon claims of conceptualism, or folk art tradition, and other rationalizations, basically the practice of making the same drawing over and over again, year in and year out, for decades is indeed a severe case of obsessive/compulsive [sic] disorder. This form of repetitive preservation is a form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome, I recently discovered. I have lots of other personality flaws that qualify for this diagnosis, which explains a lot about my past behaviors, and has given me somewhat of an excuse, or relief, I have a nameable malady. Even my use of language as obscure captions to accompany my icon is an attempt to disguise or compensate for my borderline dyslexia, and poor verbal communication skills, which is also a symptom.”<sup>47</sup>

This obsession with getting one's name up typifies, again, the graffiti artist mentality toward his work. Not unlike TAKE FIVE's "Forever," COLOSSUS OF ROADS' dedication to the tradition is manifested in his eternal return to the train yards.

THE RAMBLER, "Fort Beaumont, Texas," 1991, (fig. 20).

One of the more prolific artists running, THE RAMBLER dispatches the majority of his icons from Beaumont (sometimes "Port Beaumont," "Port of Beaumont," or "Fort Beaumont," the latter being an Army base near El Paso).

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. "[T]he language is an attempt to avoid the redundant commonness of the image."

However, it is just as likely one will see a “Reserve, LA,” Giesmar, LA,” or “Natchez, Miss.,” attributed to the moniker instead.

THE RAMBLER’s choice of icon is interesting as well. The bubbling champagne glass does not really reveal too much about the artist and that is likely the artist’s intent. To be sure, as a former railroad employee, THE RAMBLER is in the same arena as COLOSSUS OF ROADS. However, where the latter is openly discussing his work, the former is completely silent. More, THE RAMBLER is as prolific as COLOSSUS OF ROADS—or any other artist for that matter—without having to advertise “outside” the boxcar art realm either in interviews, art shows, or on personal web sites. He inhabits the traditional realm of mystery that encompasses the worker-drawn art without being a worker (any longer) himself. THE RAMBLER’s decision to reinstate the mysterious nature of the moniker, or, to be more precise, *continue* this nature, is proof that the traditional aspects of the art are still very alive.

Artist Unknown, “Temple, TX,” 1997, (fig. 21).

The female form, in numerous guises, is a very common theme, and this one is very aptly rendered. A refinement of design to incorporate a minimum of strokes is evident in the less-than-detailed face and head, leaving an almost incomplete look. However, there is no mistaking the subject matter. Where some tend toward the more lewd (or very lewd in some cases), examples like this

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<sup>47</sup> Hicks interview.

suggest both an innocent desiring and appreciation, not unlike the reaction to the pin-up girl.

This too could surely be classified under the worker heading, but the proliferation of this design and others like it should, I feel, force it into a sort of collective identity concerned with getting an image out there, a “getting up” *en masse*. Considering the majority of the female forms rendered on cars are running unsigned, it makes sense to consider the subject as a universal idealized everywoman who is functioning more as symbol than representative. This is, in fact, a form of the classic pin-up.

NAVY EIGHT, “A Girl’s Best Friend,” 2004, (fig. 22).

There are probably as many NAVY EIGHT monikers on trains as there are NAVY EIGHT pieces done in spray paint on them. A crossover artist, he is often spotted with CHIP7, ICHABOD (another crossover artist), or the numerically-named, robot-loving 667 in tall block letterforms that fall, undeniably, into the common definition of graffiti. However, his monikers are usually in a flourished, flowing script, like this and adorned with classic, and often iconic imagery from old tattoos: diamonds, hearts, crosses (as in “Rock of Ages”), and, most of the time, a stylish speeding clipper ship set in full sail. This use of classic imagery points to an appreciation and reverence for the folkloric arts, something that is enlivened when the history of boxcar art is factored in.

Also, NAVY EIGHT's proclivity for both paint stick and spray paint points toward a dyadic version of the classic graffiti artist who, firstly, has co-opted other mediums to expedite the attainment of fame, and secondly, successfully assimilated into another artistic tradition. The graffiti artist is not unfamiliar with mediums seemingly inapplicable to his art. Shoe polish, brake fluid, glass etching solution, nozzles from a variety of aerosol products, deodorant or lip balm containers, and even small rocks are just a few examples of accessories and tools that are very well known and viable to the graffiti writer.<sup>48</sup> Utilizing a stick of paint to mark a surface seems a very logical thing when put into this context.

SHRUG, Untitled, no date, (fig. 23).

Not unlike WADE FRYE's drawings, comics and cartoons are clearly a heavy influence in SHRUG's work. He does a semi-self-portrait character similar to this quite frequently and often throws in other bubbly, stylized faces, animals, or amusing figures like this toast-bearing angel. Noteworthy is SHRUG's letterforms, the actual signature the artist has applied five times around the figure on the left. These letters are clearly in the graffiti style, but the artist consistently focuses on the rendering of a character more than lettering—both here and in his

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<sup>48</sup> This is information gleaned both from personal involvement and from, among others, Steven Powers, *The Art of Getting Over*.

other work.<sup>49</sup> It would seem that he is clearly more concerned with the perfection of a style that is, like comic strip art, based chiefly on the intriguing or unexpected character.<sup>50</sup>

As for the “B 2/03” lurking above the angel on the right, it is still a mystery to me; but again, the mystery is half the appeal. While I have seen workers’ reporting marks that are very similar, they do not seem to be as logically dated. It may simply be one example of the many marks used by railworkers, or it may in fact be an artist emulating that style.

HUMA, Untitled, no date, (fig. 24).

One of the crop of new generation writers, I have only seen a few pieces by HUMA. They all seem to revolve around these nonsensical characters (or similar) doing strange things or stuck in strange settings (noteworthy is the one of a human-chicken hybrid staring out at the viewer from a barren barnyard). But the artist never works in any letterforms besides that wobbly signature; and, even more interestingly, the scenes never seem to repeat, each one being a one-time drawing. While HUMA’s work is always odd and always entertaining, he is of the same school as SHRUG—working with a character- or cartoon-based identity. Still, there is an air of uncertainty as to identity and motive just as there is in artists like OX or THE RAMBLER. The oddity of the image is complimented by

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<sup>49</sup> Other examples of SHRUG characters include a worm wiggling in the palm of a hand, a bust of a severely-distressed-looking overweight man, and versions of the angel pictured here carrying anything from a skull to a flowerpot.

this uncertainty as it makes for room to imagine the artist as an odd character himself.

RUM RUNNER, Untitled, 1997, (fig. 25).

Not uncommon by any means, especially in Pennsylvania and the greater northeast, RUM RUNNER (along with his oft-sighted partner HOLLYWOOD) is again a good example of the new generation of younger writers who have adopted the aspect of the tradition that couples a simple, straightforward iconic design with a nickname. A newer variation of this moniker has the artist replacing the railroad crossing sign with a quickly-drawn martini glass (and accompanying cocktail olive) that is very reminiscent of THE RAMBLER's bubbling champagne glass. However, unlike the latter, RUM RUNNER has been very candid about his reasons for switching to the martini glass imagery. His rationale simply being, "I like martinis."<sup>51</sup> This uncomplicated, almost innocent attitude is emblematic of the latest incarnation of artists who have at once internalized the art's background and reformed it into something new.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See also CHARLIE BROWN (fig. 14) for one possible comic book connection.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Poulin, "Beer and Boxcars: An Interview with Hollywood & Rum Runner" on boxcarart.com <<http://geocities.com/boxcarart101/rumrunner.html>> (11 Nov. 2004).

<sup>52</sup> This internalizing/reforming method is actually a rather post-modern take on boxcar art shared by a few artists both new and old and acknowledged by people who, like Bill Daniel (Hultkrans, "Who is 'Bozo Texino'?"), have spent significant time documenting the artform.

OTHER, "Catch me before I fall," no date, (fig. 26), and Untitled, 2001, (fig. 27).

Canadian artist OTHER has taken the artform to a higher level by doing pieces just like this first example (fig. 26), and lots of them, never repeating the same image twice. His ability to do intricately detailed and shaded chiaroscuro portraits like this comes from over sixteen years' experience with both graffiti and moniker art.<sup>53</sup> Originally, OTHER was strictly an aerosol artist, painting walls and trains in and around eastern Canada, until "late '97 or early '98" when he given his first paint sticks and "spray paint started its decline from my system." Now he has "alot [sic] of spray paint and it is just sitting [at his home], if someone in this city needs it come and get it" because "I have no more use for it."<sup>54</sup>

This being unsigned, I felt the style was very characteristic of his work. After an inquiring email to the artist, I got the reply: "Yup, that is a certified Other piece. The character is of a graffiti artist from Montréal who writes 'Spectre'."<sup>55</sup> Also note the stray marks on two support bars where he has "sharpened" the paint stick.

Large, detailed portraits such as the one in Figure 27 are often done in a half an hour on nights illuminated by a full moon.<sup>56</sup> Otherwise he does variations on this very alien-looking one-line drawing (fig. 27) that has become a calling

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<sup>53</sup> Email to the author 1 Feb. 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Poulin, "The Next Level: An Interview with Other and Broke" on boxcarart.com <<http://www.geocities.com/boxcarart101/thenextlevellead.html>> (11 Nov. 2004). A very informative article, the artist discusses his background as well as inspiration such as the "people who will probably only write on a train once, drunk teenagers that have found a can of spray paint while wandering through a train yard [and] the innocence of toilet stall messages."

<sup>55</sup> Email to the author 22 Mar. 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Poulin "The Next Level".



card of sorts. These little figures can be seen running both signed and unsigned—OTHER’s recognition that a signature need not be present to identify the artist is a testament to their sheer number in the system. To be sure, like COLOSSUS OF ROADS, the icon itself has become the signature.

### *Unclassified Others*

These remaining photos are not so much “leftovers” as they are simply unable to be put into any of the other groups. Often, examples such as these are more prevalent on the trains than anything else. If one was to take the mass of “unclassifiable” marks and compare that to any of the others, it is likely that the former would greatly outweigh the latter.

Here, one is a compendium of prolific artists representing the three factions of boxcar art (fig. 28). Another is an example of a true “bottle in the ocean” (fig. 29). Still another is an instance of what OTHER calls “the one timers,” unintentional artists that can be likened to people who “scrape their girlfriends names into phone booths or spray paint how much they hate their boss on the front of the factory drippy dirty and expressive.”<sup>57</sup> Finally, there is an appropriate documentation of the inevitable end to all boxcar art (fig. 30).

THE SOLO ARTIST/CRASH/THE KODAK KIDD, Untitled, 1997–2004,

(fig 28).

This is a fine example of what can happen when pieces run for a long time. In a somewhat unintentional collaboration, CRASH and THE KODAK KIDD have taken it upon themselves to strategically, and respectfully, place their work next to the preceding artist(s), producing a nice three-year collaborative collage. Interestingly, these artists each fall into a different category: THE SOLO ARTIST is a contemporary trainhopper; CRASH is a rail worker; and THE KODAK KIDD is a graffiti artist.<sup>58</sup> More, each artist is working from a different location, making this not only a journey across time, but across space as well.

Collaborations like this are not terribly uncommon. One of the more interesting and exciting things to come across is an old car that is still in use and has a multitude of signatures, all representing different times and places, and all intact.

Artists Unknown, Tic-tac-toe Games, no date, (fig. 29) and

ACES/GELI/TRASE/STAK/MATHO/Unknown, Tic-tac-toe Game, no date,

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<sup>57</sup> “Other Q & A” on Wooster Collective  
<[http://www.woostercollective.com/2003\\_10\\_05\\_newsarchive.html#106562666367258562](http://www.woostercollective.com/2003_10_05_newsarchive.html#106562666367258562)> (8 Oct. 2004).

<sup>58</sup> The attribution of each artist to different categories is based on photos I have seen in *Faded Glory Magazine* of each artist at work as well as the moniker themselves (specifically THE SOLO ARTIST’s that has had captions such as “Waiting for a train” and “Ridin’ through Denver”).

(fig. 30).

This is another common theme seen frequently. The game usually takes one of these two forms. First is where the players are clearly going back and forth, one after the other, in the usual manner (fig. 29) as a way to kill time perhaps. The second version (fig. 30) functions as a game within a game, in a multi-location (often multi-player) manner with one person drawing the board and making an initial move before letting the train take it to destination(s) and opponent(s) unknown. Each ensuing move is made and signed before being sent out. This goes on until the game is completed. It becomes more than the simple children's game and takes on all new spatial and temporal dimensions when played in this manner. Here, six artists have been playing a game that looks like it will end in a tie. It is not at all uncommon to find a nothing but lonely, unchallenged X in an unplayed game begun long ago.

Artist Unknown, "John so Fine," no date, (fig. 31).

Something that often surfaces is the personal message like this one. It could be that the artist knows, or hopes, the object of affection will see the message somewhere down the line, or maybe it is just a feeling that could no longer be contained—a sort of cathartic release of emotion made possible by the availability of an anonymous outlet.

Here, it is likely the sender knew that the intended receiver would eventually see the note: the humorously strange "Don't call me pantie-hose!"

[sic] postscript hints at an inside joke that would only make sense to the parties involved.

OTHER cites drawings such as this as an inspiration saying, “the things that I enjoy the most on trains are the personal messages... the “I love so and so” and “Ned likes it in the cornhole’,” stuff written by people who will probably only write on a train once.”<sup>59</sup> If boxcar art is folkloric in its design, works such as “John so Fine” are at the very root of that. To be sure, the core has surely been discovered when messages like this,<sup>60</sup> ones with absolutely no artistic intent, serve as inspiration to those artists who both acknowledge and follow the tradition.

Artist Unknown, Untitled, no date, (fig 32).

The inevitable end of all boxcar art comes in one of two angels of death: paint or time. More than likely it will be the former, either by a repair shop or graffiti artist’s spray. However, it might be considered a more dignified demise to be taken by the elements.

This fact of impermanence is forever present in the mind of the artist. While there is always the possibility of having a drawing run for decades—always remember HERBY’s and BOZO TEXINO’s backdated monikers—it is a small possibility. Time is the real driving force behind marking as many cars as possible. While many artists will claim it is only about “getting up” or fame, the realization of the inevitable is always pushing the writer on. It is a futile struggle.

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<sup>59</sup> Poulin, “The Next Level”.

of course. Eventually time will claim both artist and art, it is just that the artist hopes to go first and leave a legacy. One prolific writer, FAVES, often applies a caption that best sums it up: “The rust will win.”

### Conclusions

The photos discussed above are a very small fraction of the art that is currently out in the vast American rail network. Any attempt to discuss the artform en masse would, if even possible, require an exhaustive amount of time and energy. To be sure, Bill Daniels’s work on his documentary film *Who is Bozo Texino?* is now well into its fourteenth year of production with no signs of wrapping up anytime soon.<sup>61</sup> The documentary project I have undertaken is one that seeks to, first, suggest one possible history of the artform and, second, detail the contemporary movement and some of its artists. As with any artform that has received little attention by the greater academic world, boxcar art is wide open to interpretation. More, the specific monikers can surely be read in countless ways. However, it is my intention to leave some of the mystery untouched. After all, this is not a puzzle to be solved. Rather, it is like a Mobius strip—mysterious, endless, and fascinatingly entertaining.

Boxcar art is working against numerous things in order to be seen. The small size, susceptibility to the elements, not to mention the speed at which these

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<sup>61</sup>Note how easily this can be likened to “Save Our Dept. Bring Back Justin to Conshy” (fig. 12).

drawings pass by any possible viewers, all make for an artform that is widely unknown. Despite this reality, the practitioners of the art who are currently working are doing so in the wake of a tradition stretching back to touch three centuries over 150 years.

Modern artists, while being more like the spray paint wielding graffiti writer than the hobo, are in deed carrying on a rich tradition of proclaiming one's existence into the vast open expanse. As Allen Abel has said, these artists take the freight train as their canvas "because it is illegal, because walls and alleys are boring, because it unites them with the hobo tradition" and "because freight cars move."<sup>62</sup> It is this movement that sets in motion the possibility for something that all the artists work with: synchronicity.

TAKE FIVE's view of the chance encounters with art in the yards and crossings revolves around this idea of synchronicity and chaos theory, saying, there's "[a]ll this art, moving around chaotically, where none of the artists are in control of where it goes."<sup>63</sup> The artists have struck a balance between being at the mercy of the train, and being in control of their medium. To quote OTHER: "It seems like such an obvious thing...Put your name on something and see where it goes'."<sup>64</sup> Whether it is the railroad employee's quest to escape the workplace, even if just for a few seconds, the modern day hobo leaving his mark on his

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<sup>61</sup> Hultkrans.

<sup>62</sup> "The Art of Vandalism".

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

means of transportation, or the graffiti artist just looking to “get up,” the message inherent in each is the same: “WE WERE HERE.”

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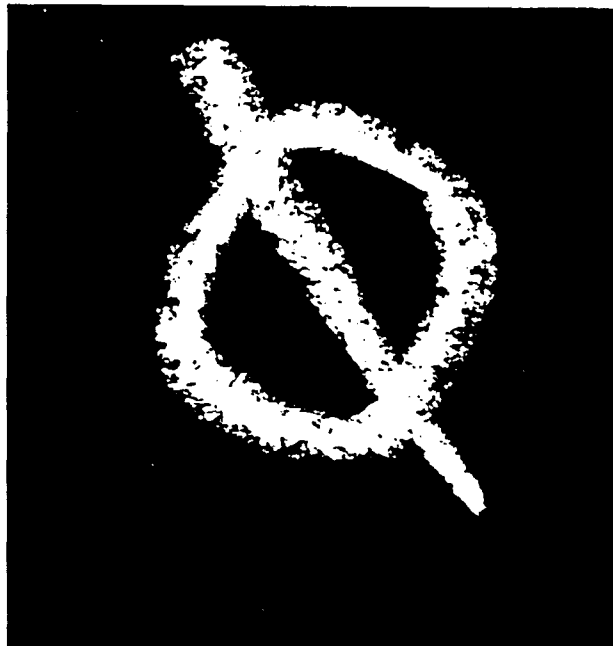
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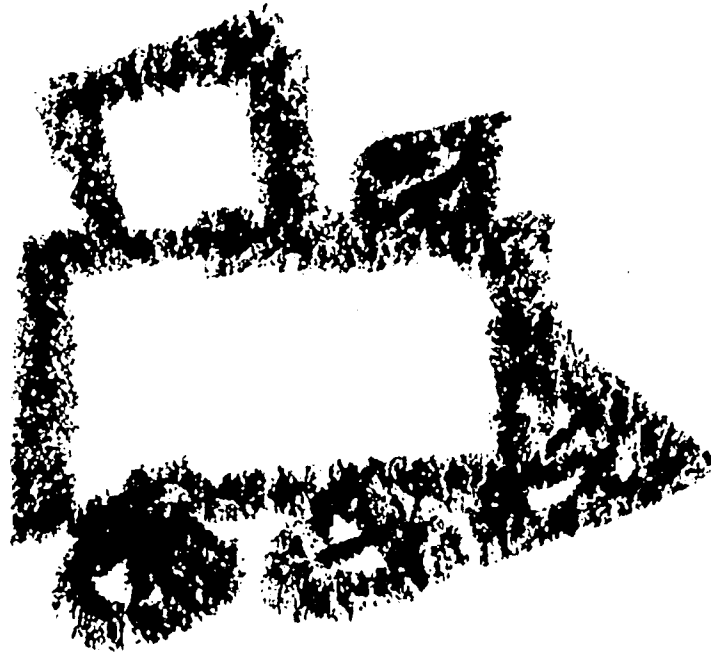
26 Oct. 2004, <<http://www.woostercollective.com>>.



(fig. 1) ED HASKEL, "We Were Here," no date. Courtesy Mick Trackside.



(fig. 2) Hobo symbol for "Good road to follow"



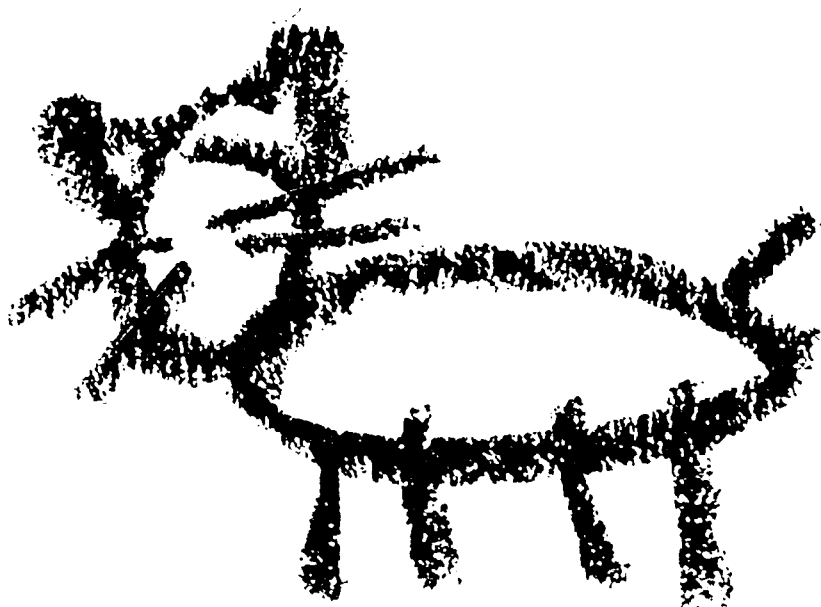
(fig. 3) Hobo symbol for "Catch a train here"



(fig. 4) Hobo symbol for "Rich people live here"



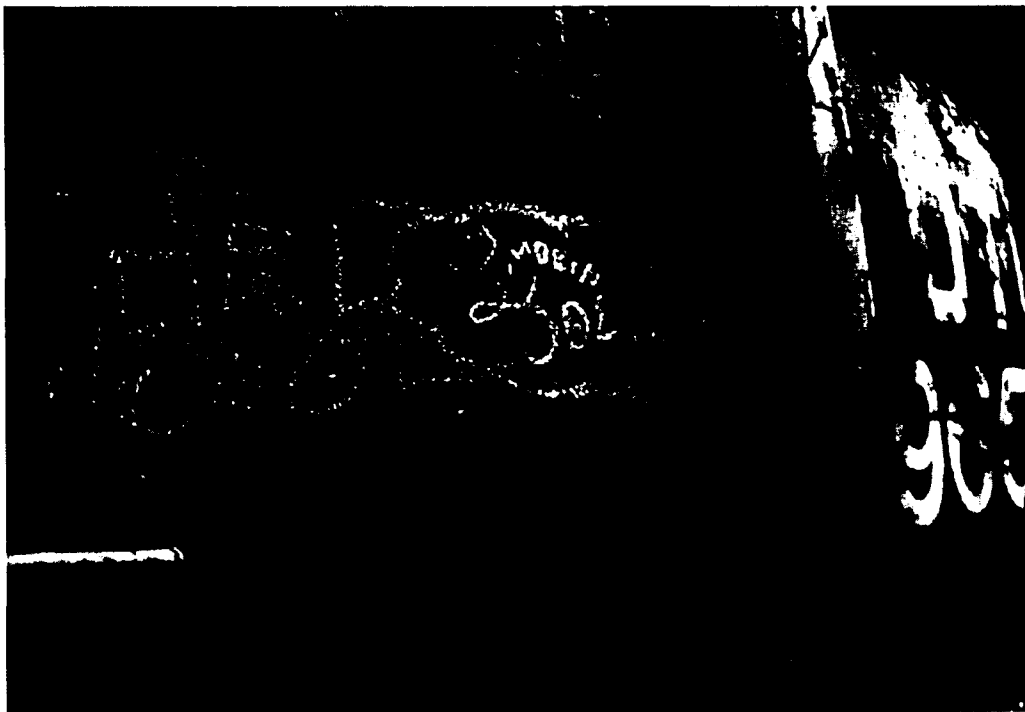
(fig. 5) Hobo symbol for "Fresh water and safe camp"



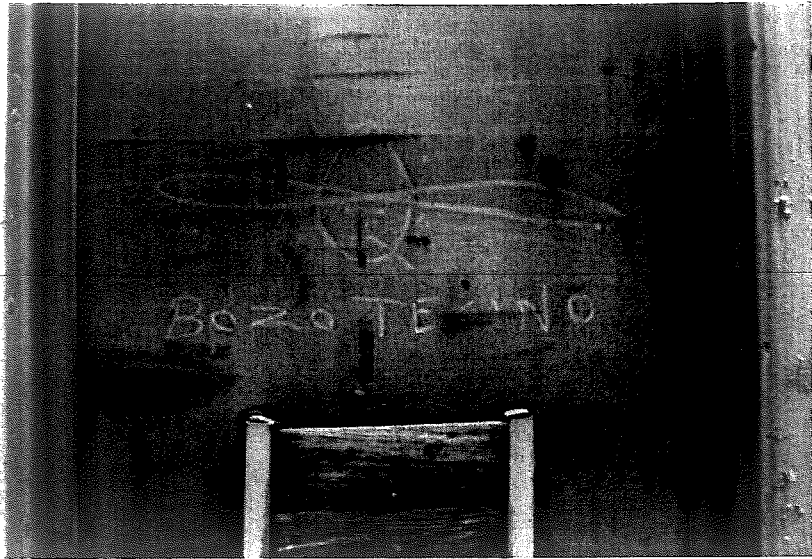
(fig. 6) Hobo symbol for "Kind woman lives here"



(fig. 7) Bozo Texino, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2000.



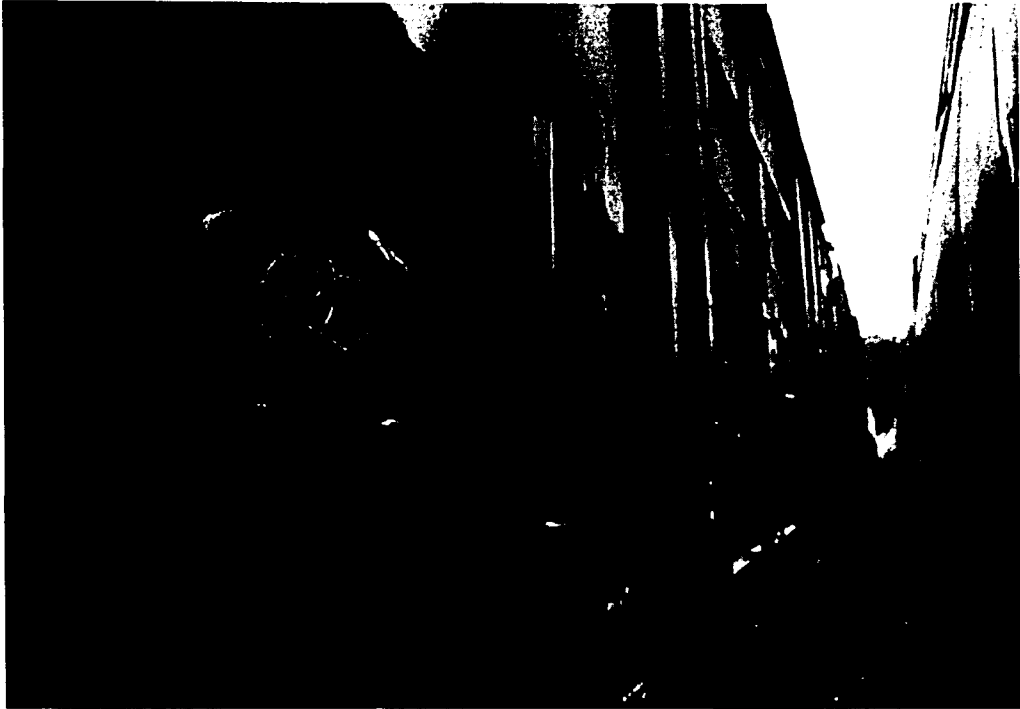
(fig 8.) Smokin' Joe, *13.475*, (1996). Photographed in Binghamton, NY, 2002



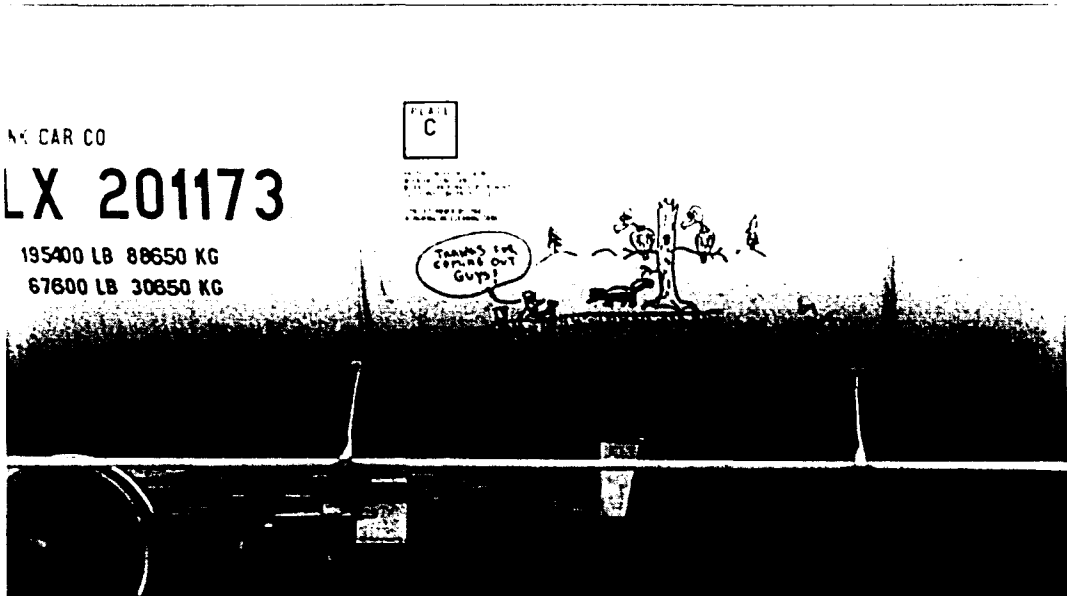
(fig. 7) Bozo Texino, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2000.



(fig. 8.) Smokin' Joe, *13,475*, (1996). Photographed in Binghamton, NY, 2002

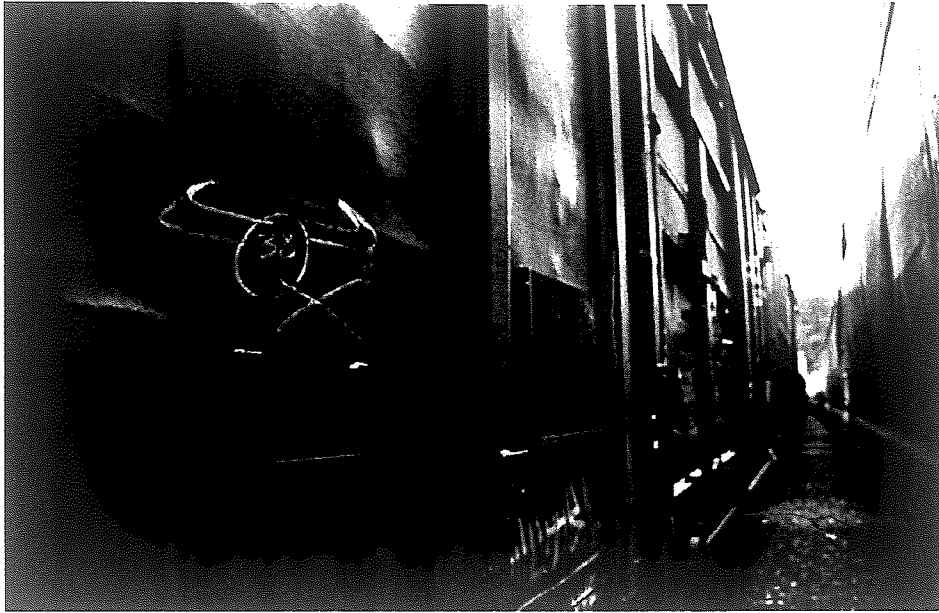


(fig. 9) Ox, 38, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2002

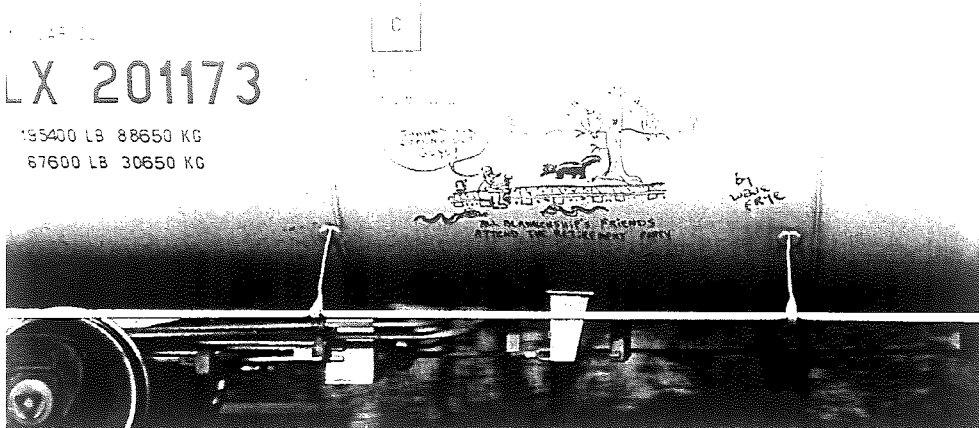


(fig. 10) Wade Frye, *All Blankenship's Friends Attend the Retirement Party*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.

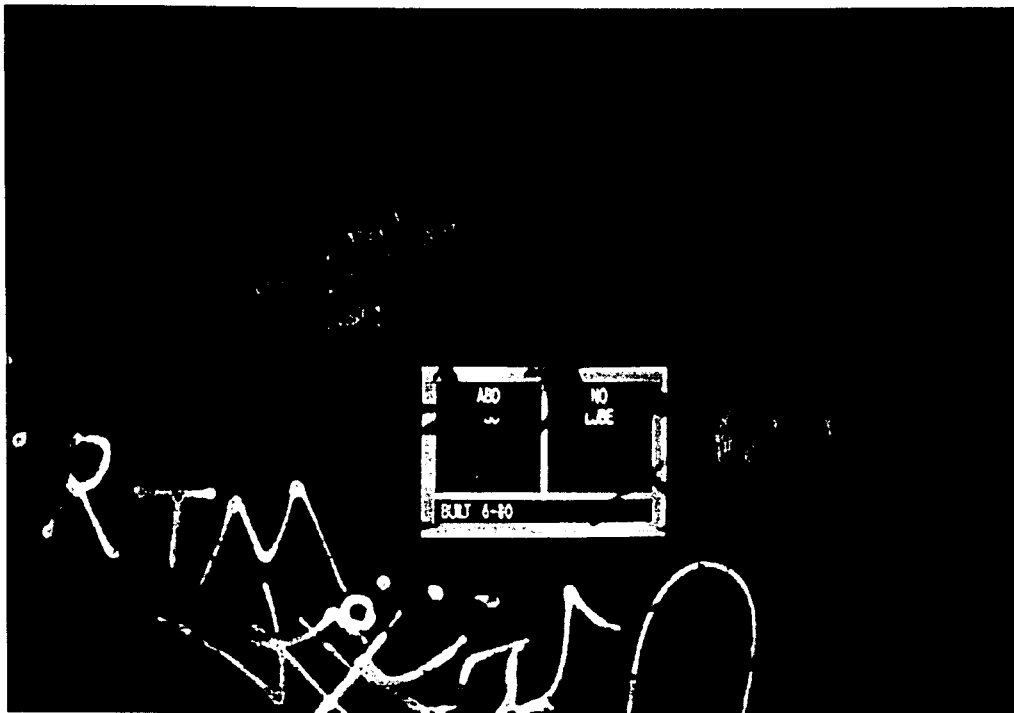




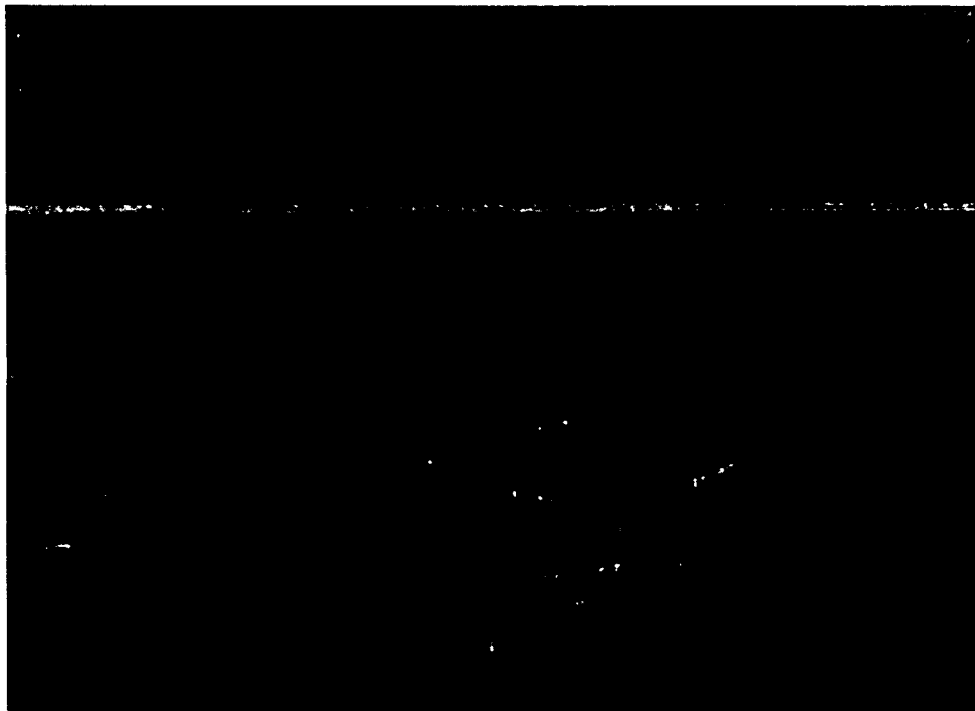
(fig. 9) Ox. 38. (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2002



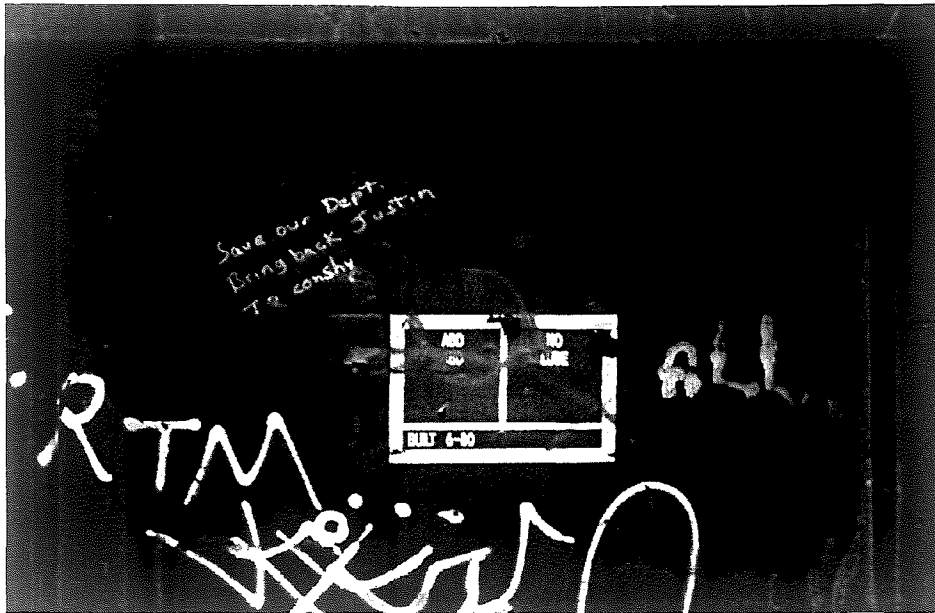
(fig. 10) Wade Frye, *All Blankenship's Friends Attend the Retirement Party*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.



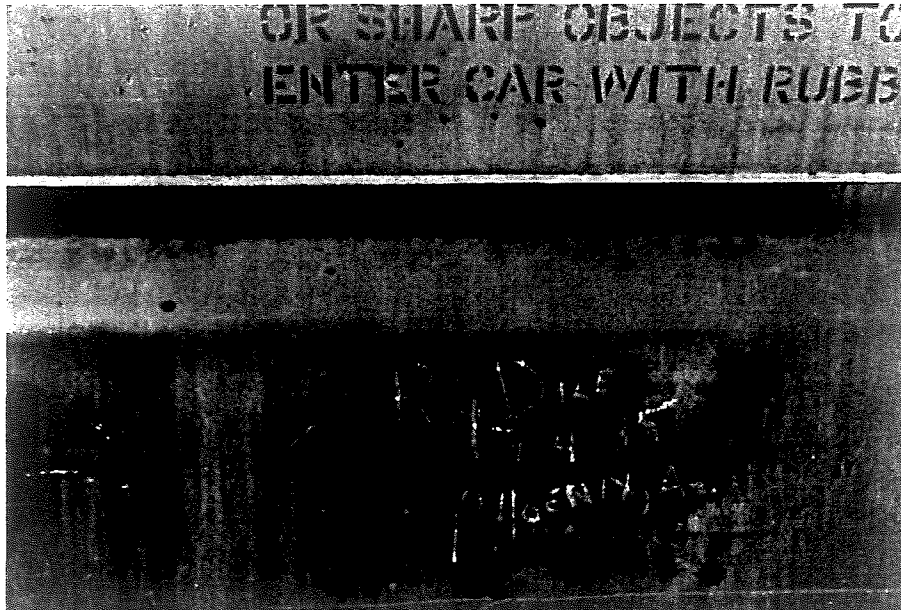
(fig. 11) Artist unknown, *Save our Dept. Bring back Justin to consy*, (n.d.). Photographed in Allentown, PA, 2004.



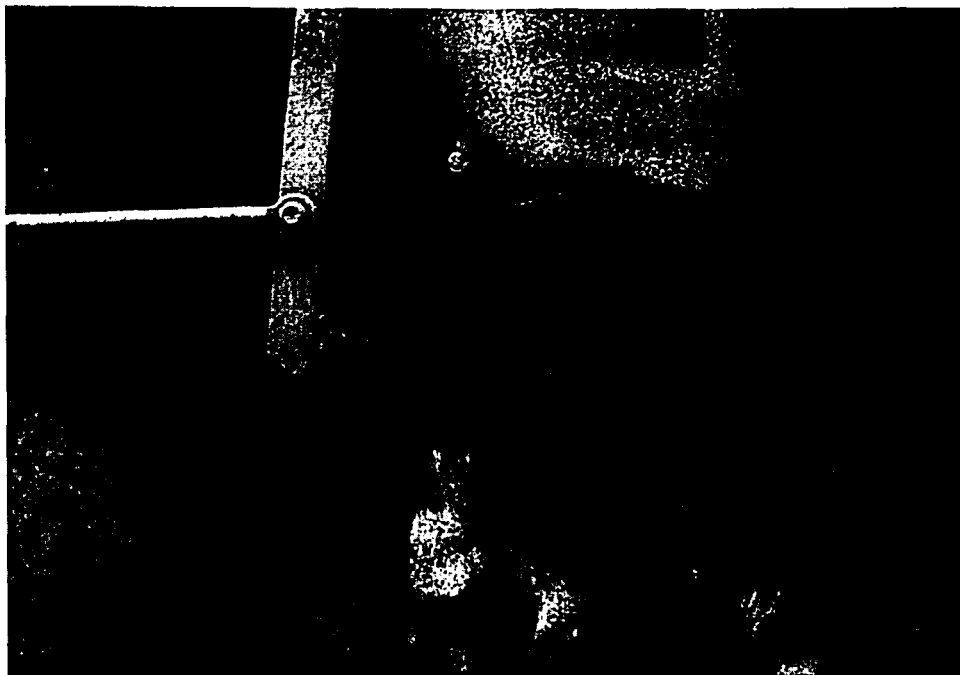
(fig. 12) Roy Dale, *Untitled*, (1985). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2001.



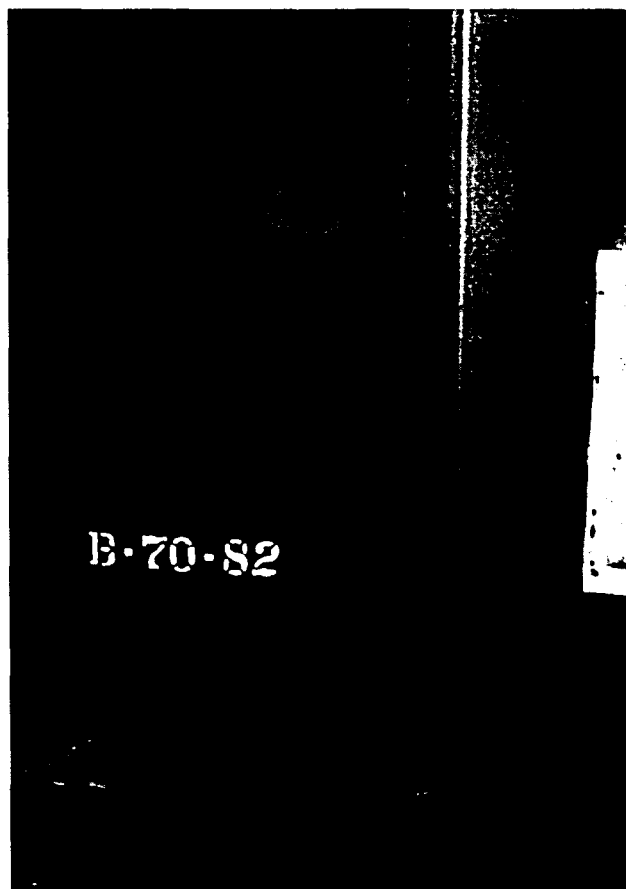
(fig. 11) Artist unknown, *Save our Dept. Bring back Justin to conshy*, (n.d.). Photographed in Allentown, PA, 2004.



(fig. 12) Roy Dale, *Untitled*, (1985). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2001.



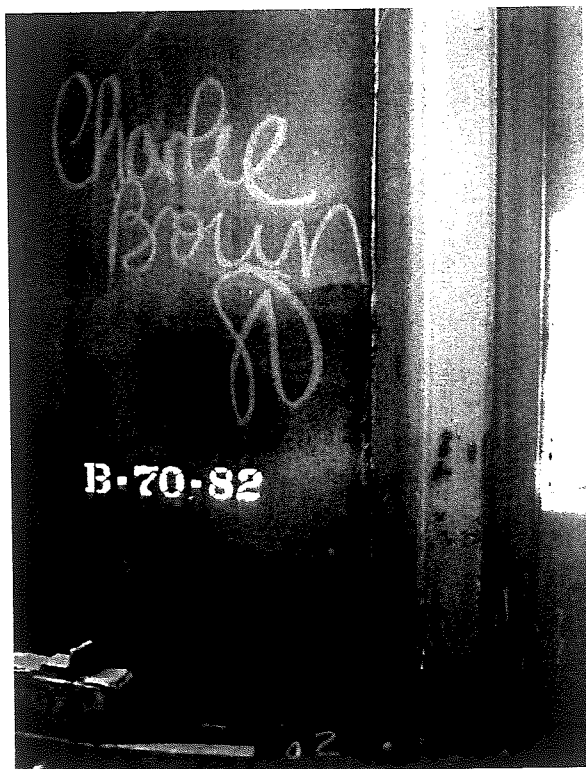
(fig. 13) Doug W., *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.



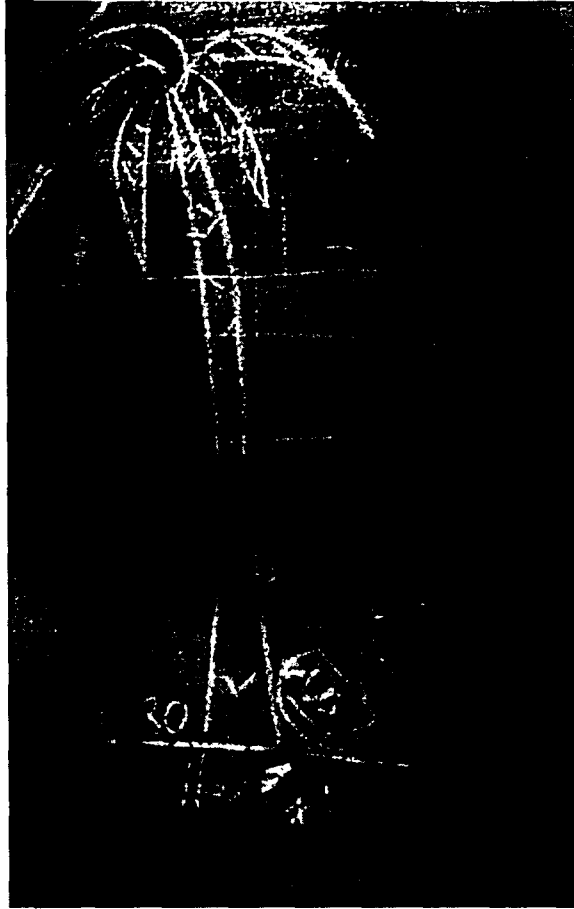
(fig. 14) Charlie Brown, *Untitled*, (1980). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 1999.



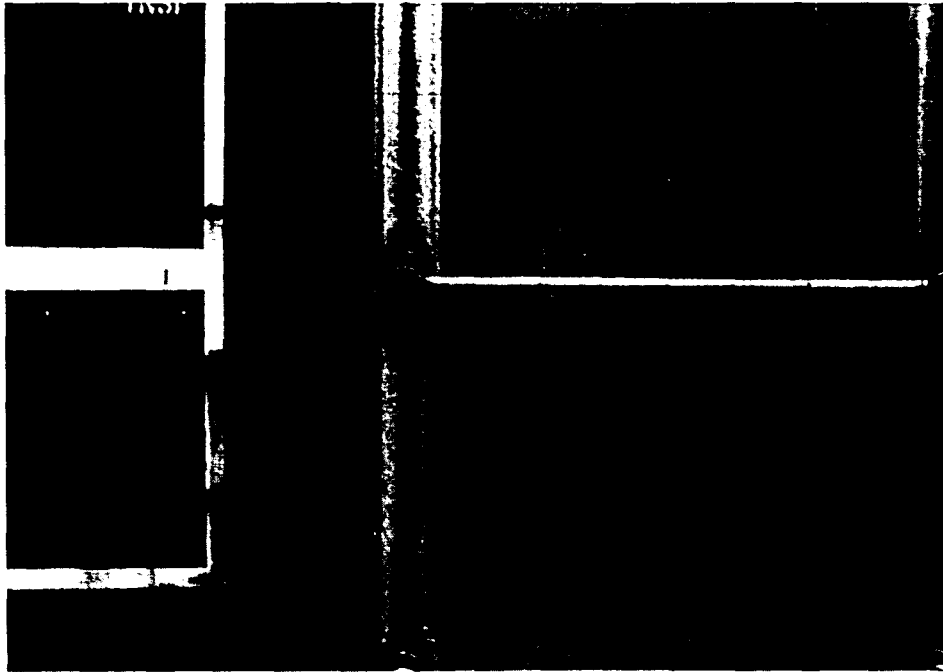
(fig. 13) Doug W., *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.



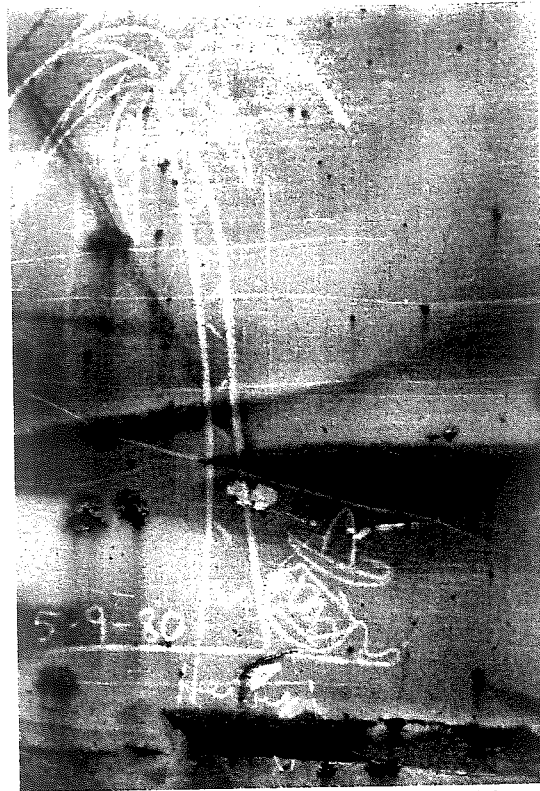
(fig. 14) Charlie Brown, *Untitled*, (1980). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 1999.



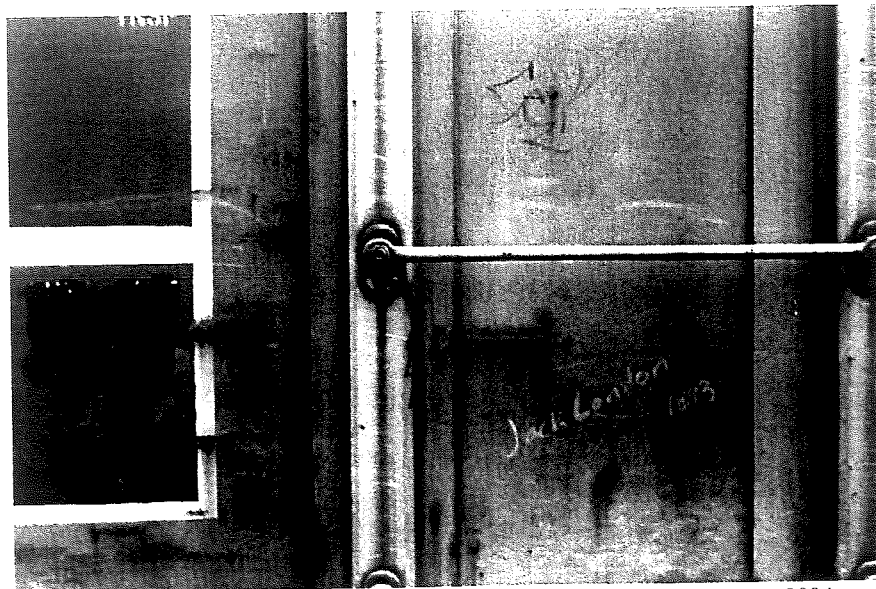
(fig. 15) Herby, *Untitled*, (1980). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA 2001.



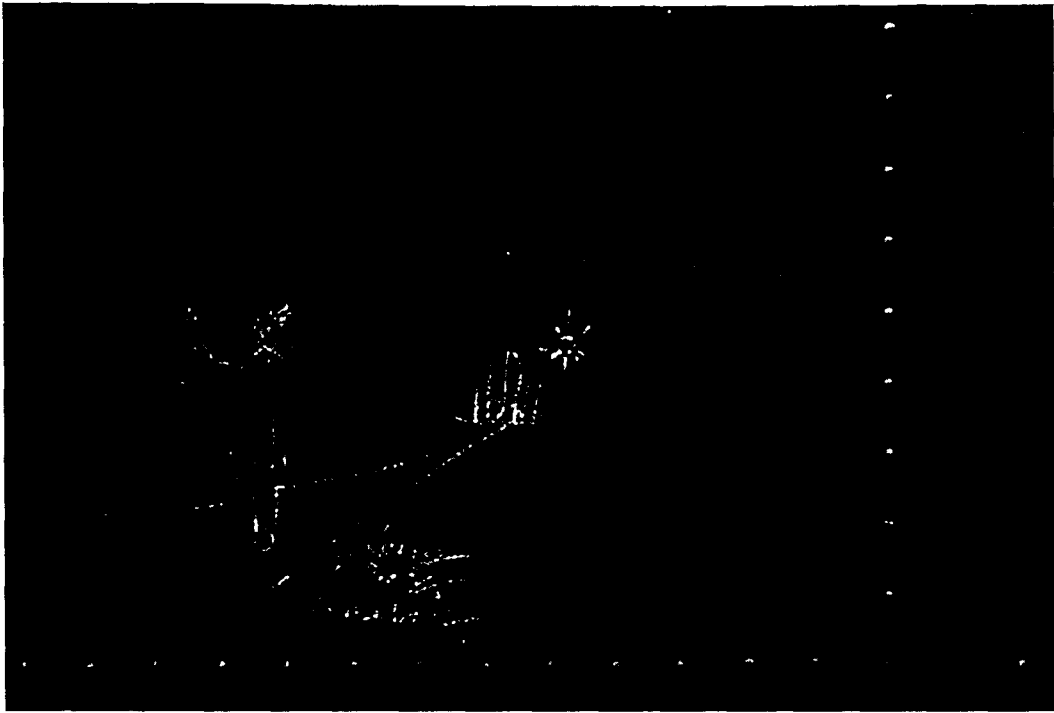
(fig. 16) Jack London, *Untitled*, (1993). Photographed in Allentown, PA, 2004.



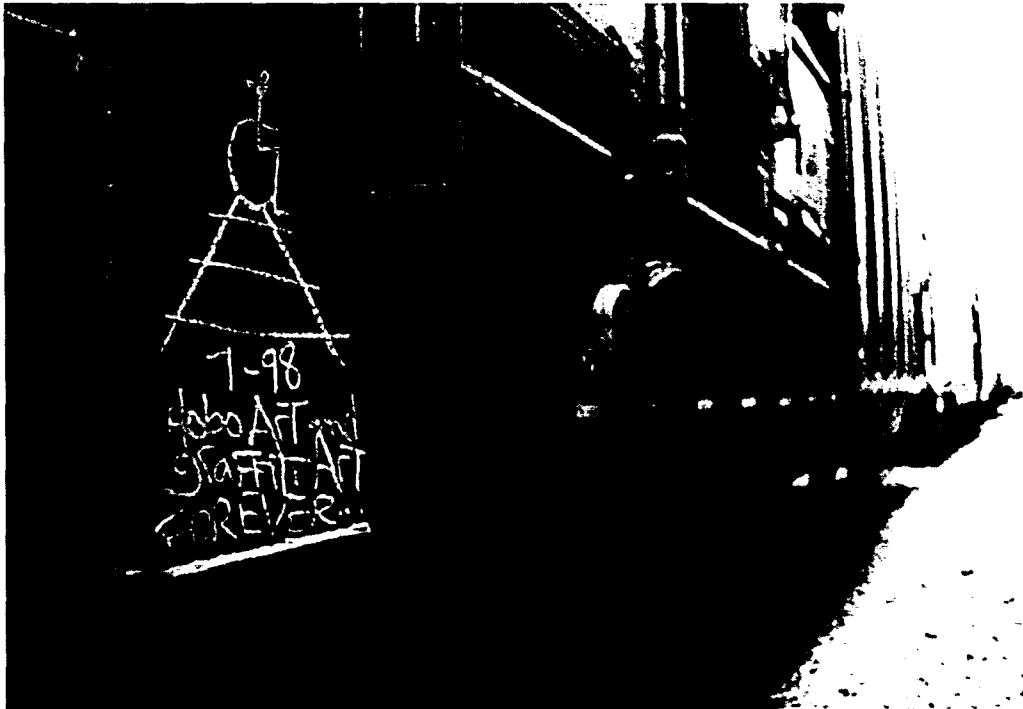
(fig. 15) Herby, *Untitled*, (1980). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA 2001.



(fig. 16) Jack London, *Untitled*, (1993). Photographed in Allentown, PA, 2004.

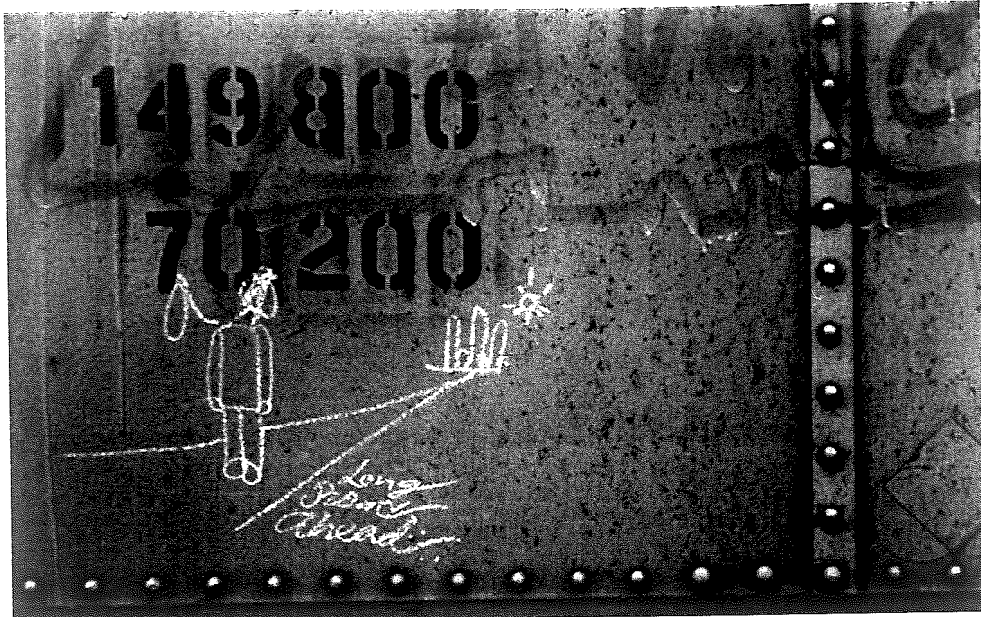


(fig. 17) Artist Unknown, *Long Road Ahead*, (n.d.). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2004.



(fig 18) Take Five, *Hobo Art and Graffiti Art Forever*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2003.

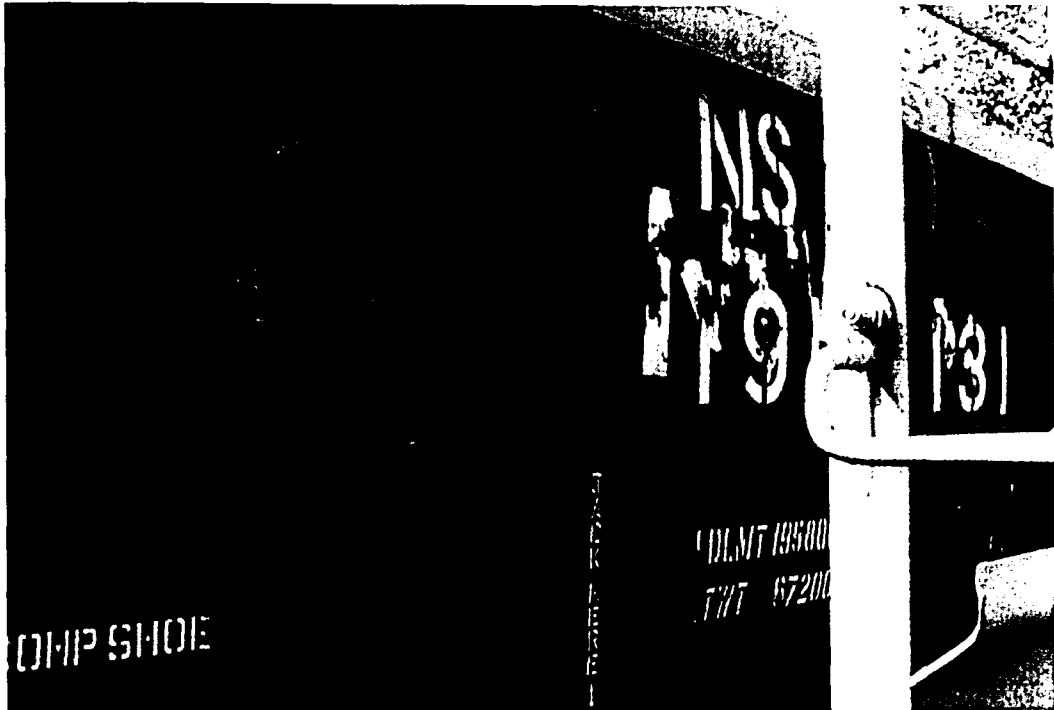




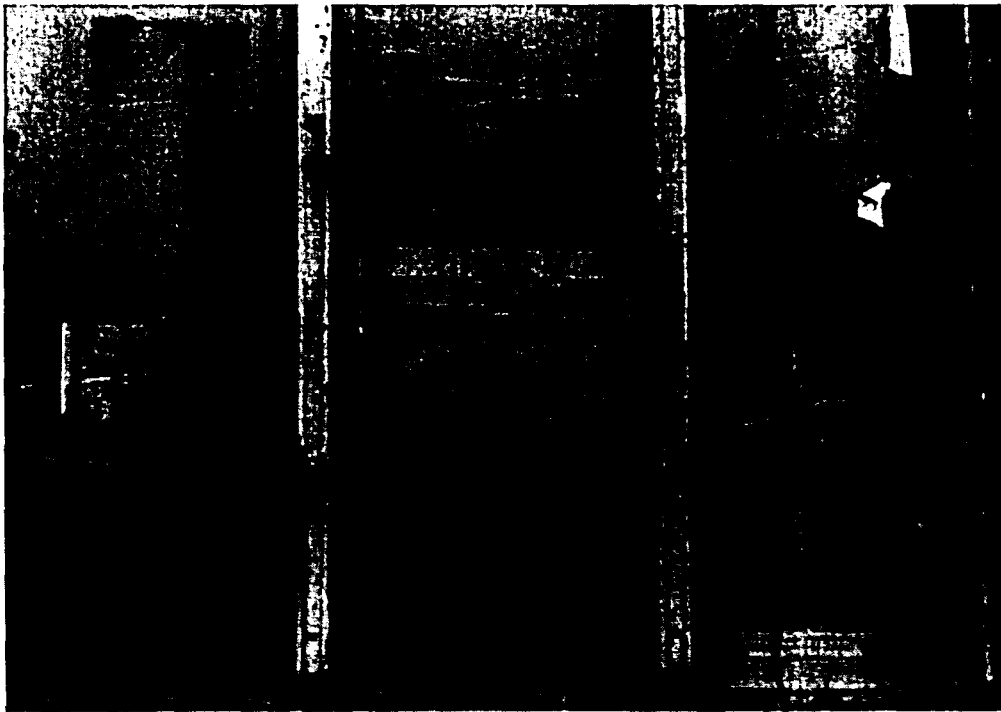
(fig. 17) Artist Unknown, *Long Road Ahead*, (n.d.). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2004.



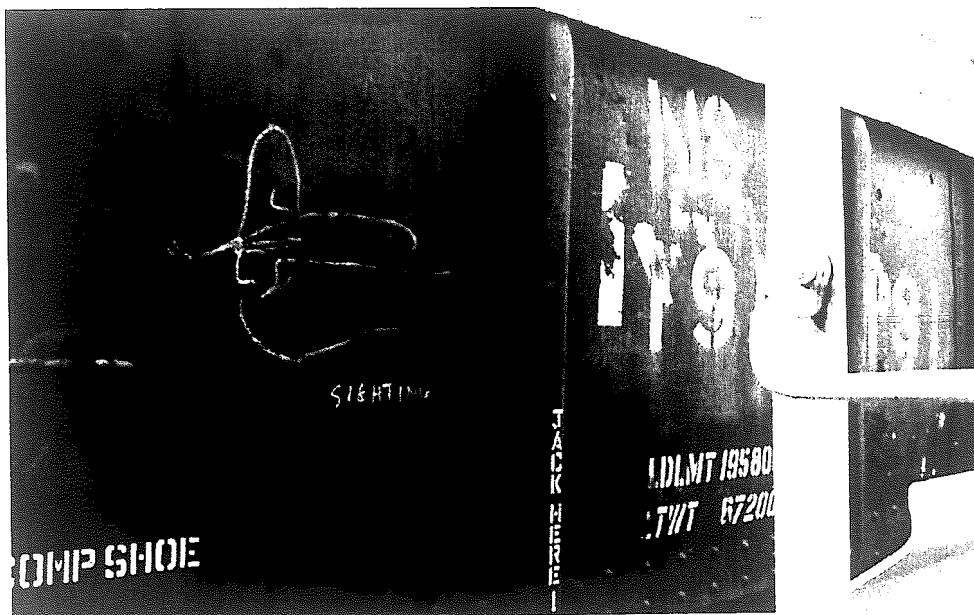
(fig 18) Take Five, *Hobo Art and Graffiti Art Forever*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA. 2003.



(fig. 19) Colossus of Roads, *Sighting*, (n.d.). Photographed in Lehigh, PA, 2004.



(fig. 20) The Rambler, *Port Beaumont, Texas*, (1991). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2004.



(fig. 19) Colossus of Roads, *Sighting*, (n.d.). Photographed in Lehigh, PA, 2004.



(fig. 20) The Rambler, *Port Beaumont, Texas*, (1991). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2004.



(fig. 21) Artist Unknown, *Temple, TX*, (1997). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2003.



(fig. 22) Navy Eight, *A Girl's Best Friend*, (2004). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.



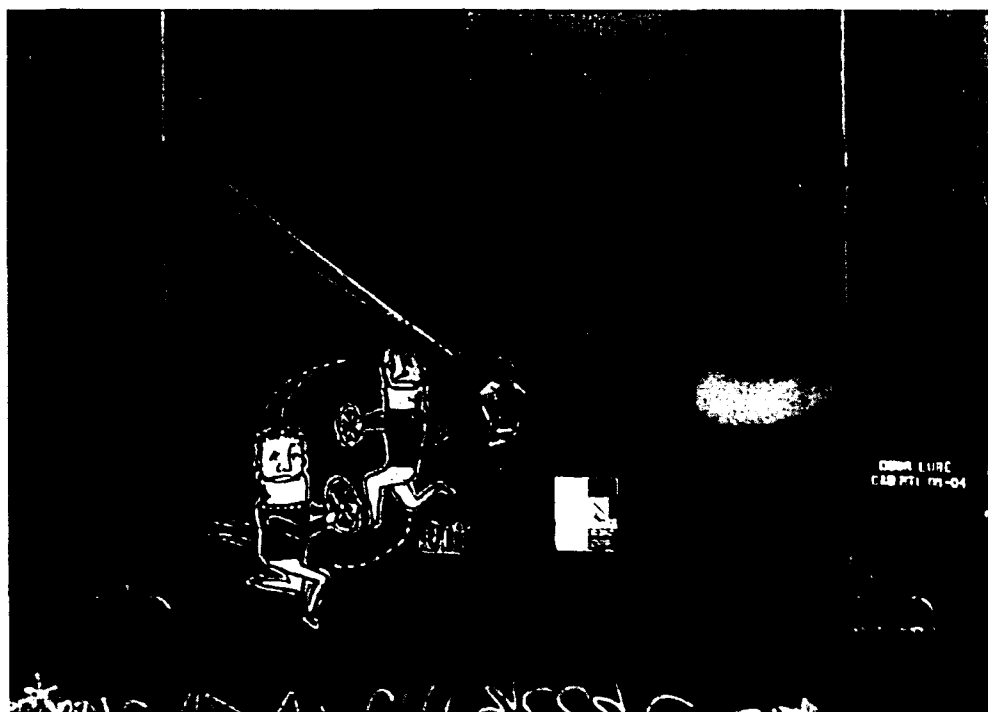
(fig. 21) Artist Unknown, *Temple, TX*, (1997). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2003.



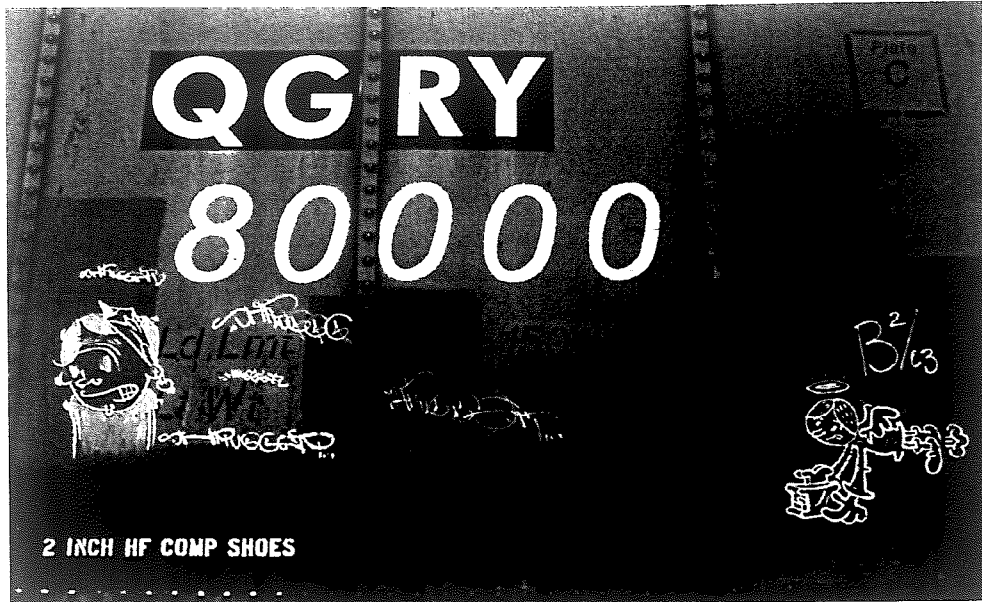
(fig. 22) Navy Eight, *A Girl's Best Friend*, (2004). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.



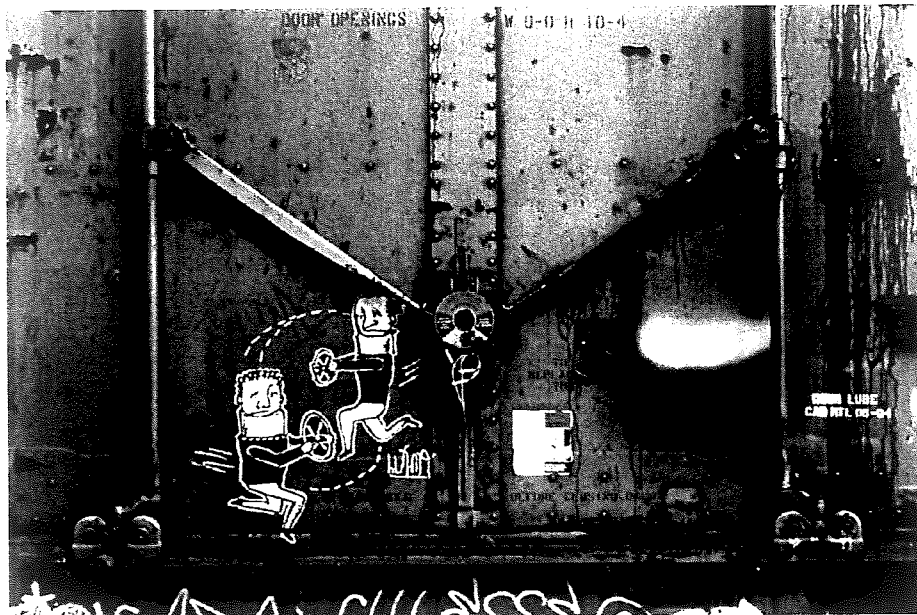
(fig. 23) Shrug, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2005.



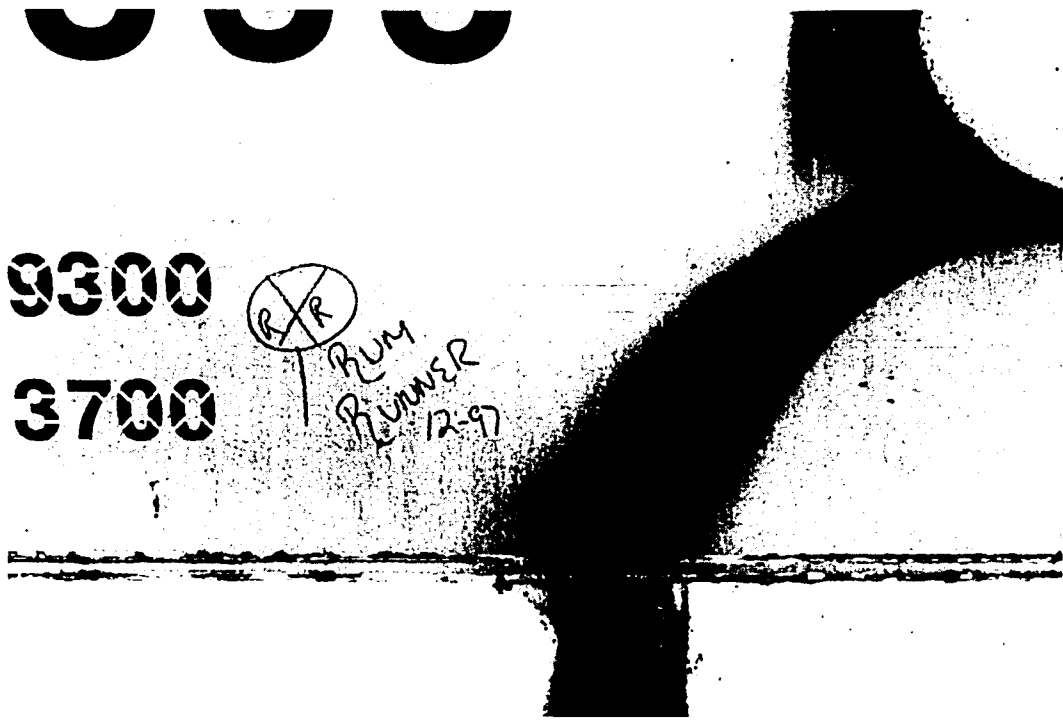
(fig. 24) Huma, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.



(fig. 23) Shrug. *Untitled*. (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2005.



(fig. 24) Huma. *Untitled*. (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.



(fig. 25) Rum Runner, *Untitled*, (1997). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2004.

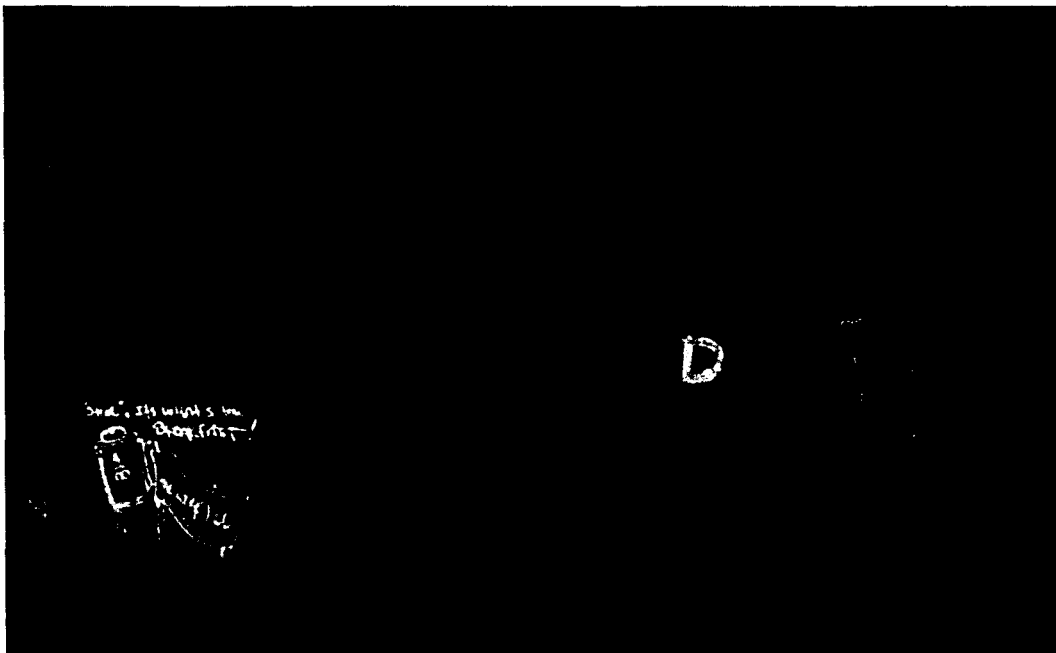


(fig. 26) Other, *Catch Me Before I Fall*, (n.d.). Photographed in Philadelphia, PA, 2004.

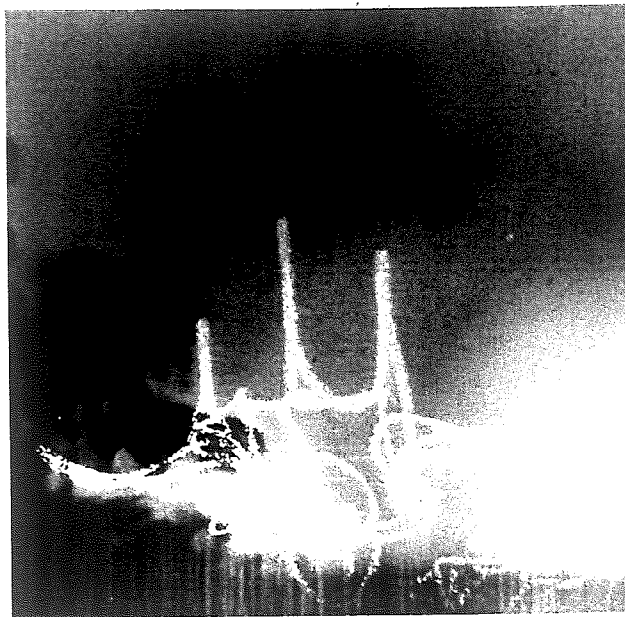




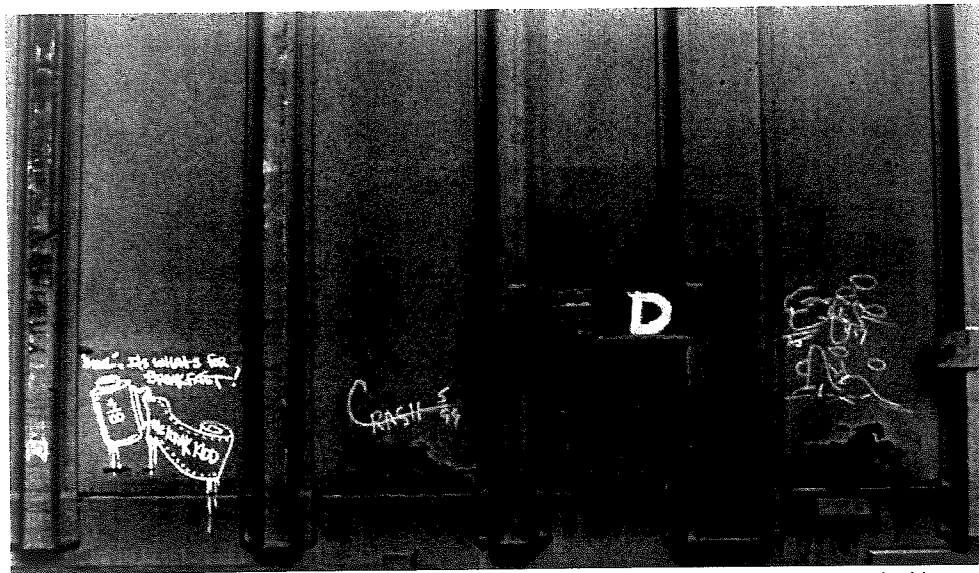
(fig. 27) Other, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Binghamton, NY, 2001.



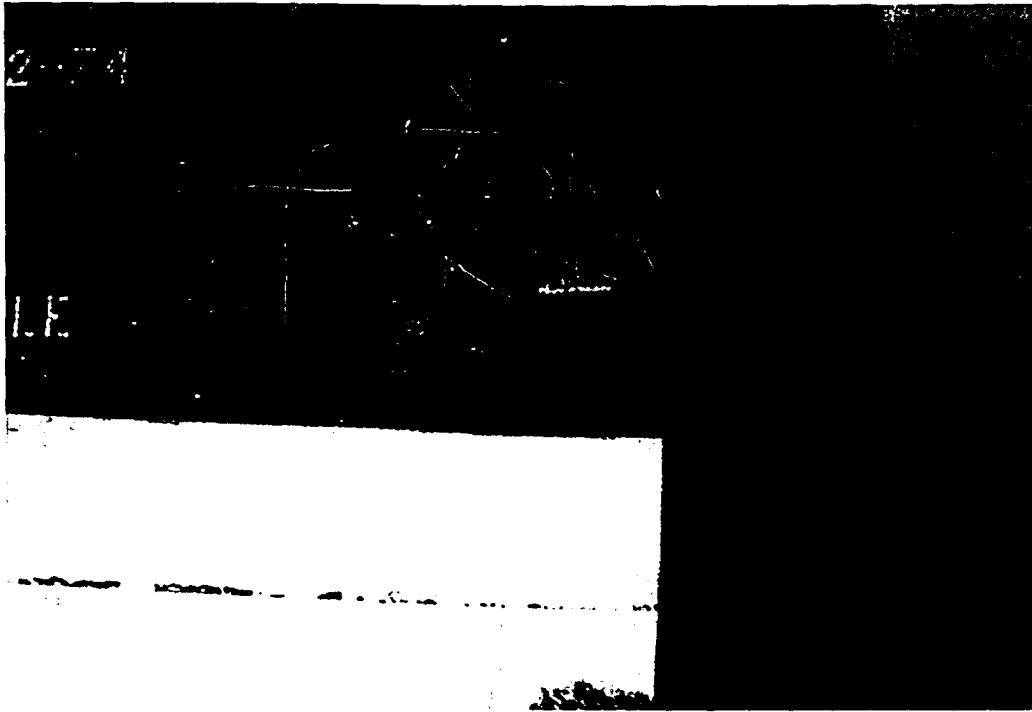
(fig. 28) The Solo Artist, Crash, The Kodak Kidd, *Untitled*, (1997–2004). Photographed in Allentown, PA, 2004.



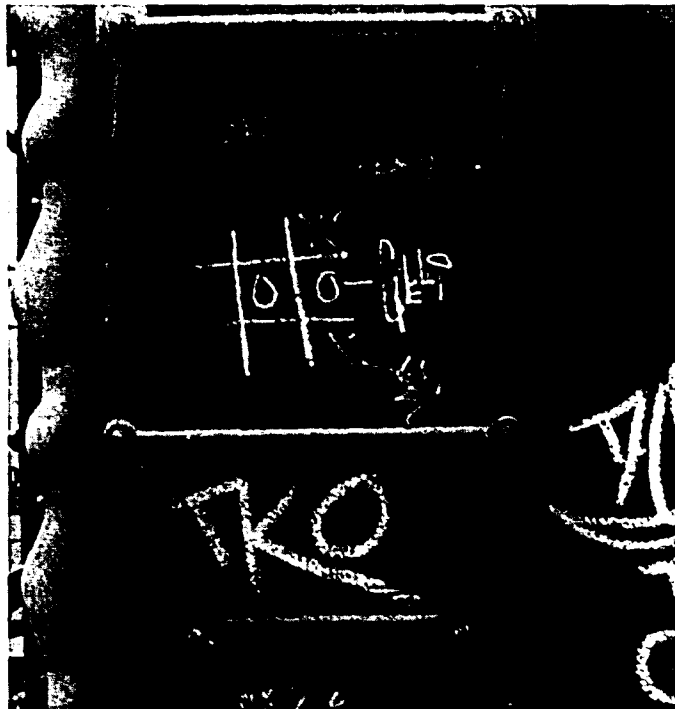
(fig. 27) Other, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Binghamton, NY, 2001.



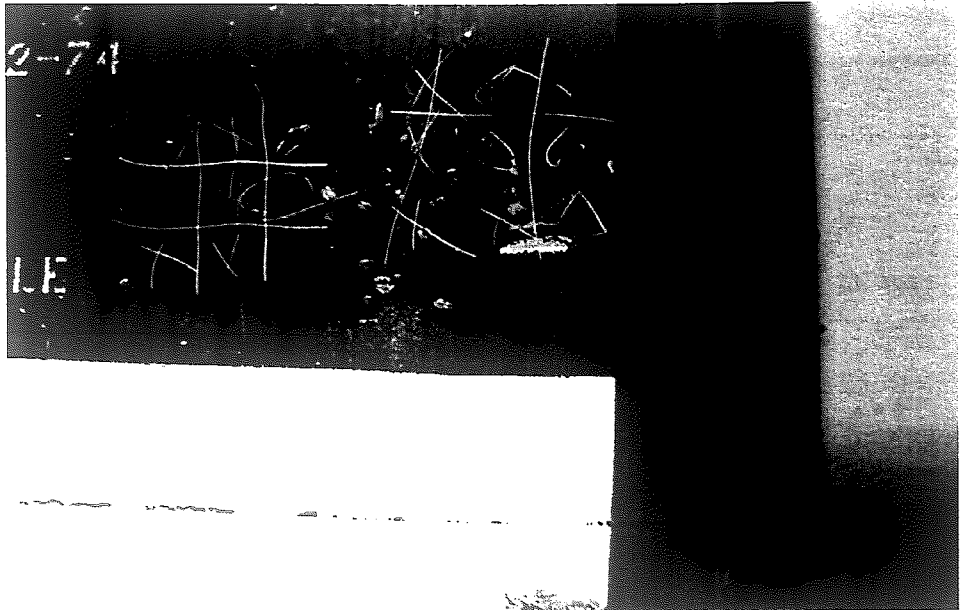
(fig. 28) The Solo Artist, Crash, The Kodak Kidd, *Untitled*, (1997–2004). Photographed in Allentown, PA, 2004.



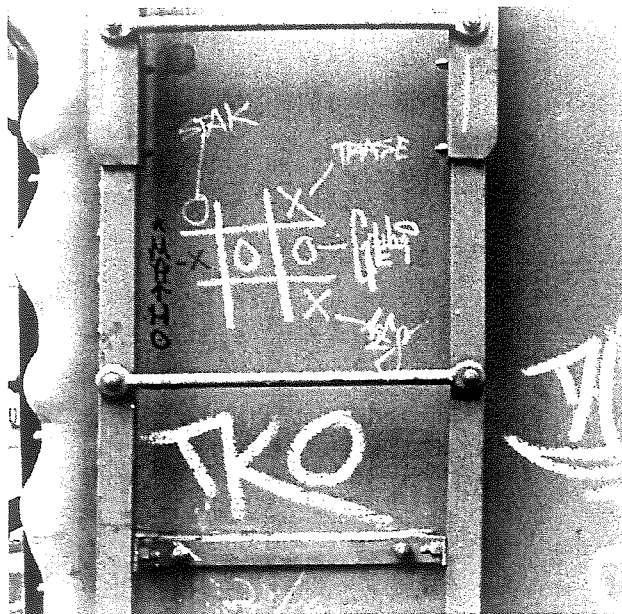
(fig. 29) Artist Unknown, *Tic-tac-toe Games*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2005.



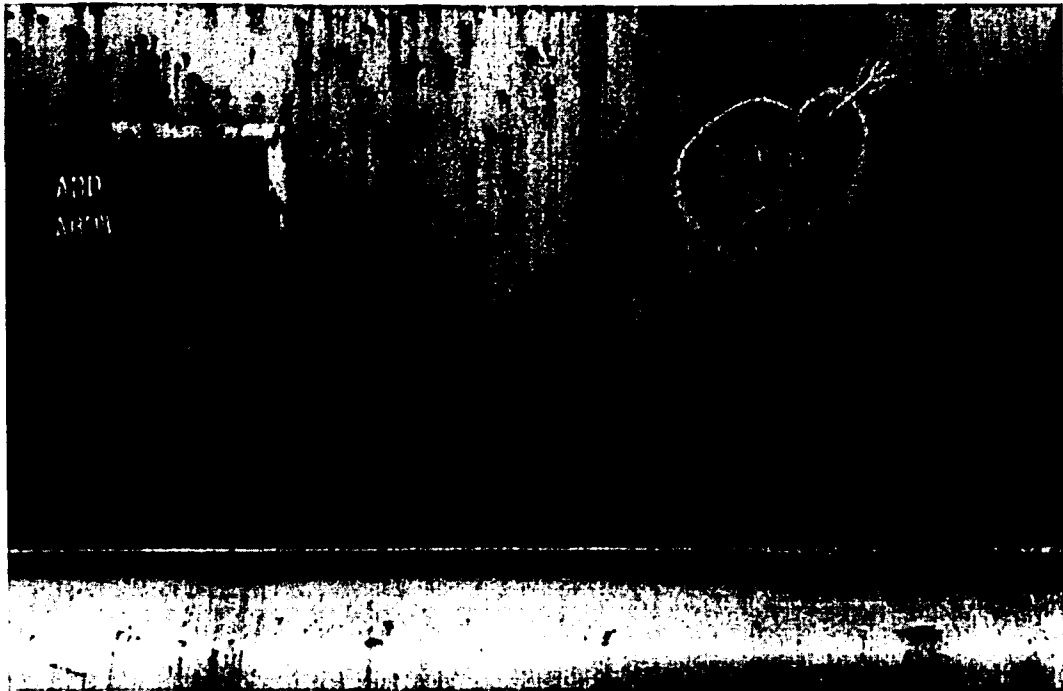
(fig. 30) Aces, Geli, Trase, Stak, Matho, Unknown, *Tic-tac-toe Game*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2002.



(fig. 29) Artist Unknown, *Tic-tac-toe Games*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2005.



(fig. 30) Aces, Geli, Trase, Stak, Matho, Unknown, *Tic-tac-toe Game*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2002.



(fig. 31) Artist Unknown, *John so Fine*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2005.



(fig. 32) Artist Unknown, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2000.



(fig. 31) Artist Unknown, *John so Fine*, (n.d.). Photographed in Bethlehem, PA, 2005.



(fig. 32) Artist Unknown, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Photographed in Rochester, NY, 2000.

## Appendix A

### Glossary of Rail Terms

(Courtesy RailfanUSA.com)

***Autorack:*** A large, excess-height car used to haul road vehicles by rail. They are very tall and very long. There are basically three types: double level, triple level, and Automax. The double level models are most common. The Automax car is an articulated double level autorack. Amtrak uses a version of an autorack on its Auto Train.

***Boxcar:*** An enclosed, water-resistant box on wheels. Access is gained through sliding doors (single or double) on either side. Boxcars come in two door types, the plug door and the sliding (corrugated) door. They can have one or two doors per side.

***Covered Hopper (or Grainer):*** Covered hoppers are used to carry grains, sand, and other things that cannot be exposed to the elements. They have round hatches at the top for loading and large hopper doors underneath for unloading as well as a covered platform on either end, often called a “porch.”

***Gondola:*** Gondolas are open-top cars that can be used for a variety of things. They are used to transport discarded tie plates, cross ties, and even sections of

pre-built track. In revenue service they can haul scrap metal and large, thick sheets of steel.

**Lay-up:** A section of track where assembled freight trains are parked for extended periods of time.

**Tanker:** Tank cars can come in many different sizes and carry many different things from corrosives to lighter than air gasses. Small tank cars have capacities of a few thousand gallons while large tank cars can carry very heavy loads and can have 8 or even more axles.

**Yard (or Train yard):** Large, multi-track areas where numerous freight trains are stored, categorized, and assembled.

## Appendix B

### Glossary of Mediums

**Chalk:** Very similar to the kind used on blackboards, only in a larger industrial size—the original marking medium. This can also refer to the **Paint Sticks** used today.

**China Marker:** A type of grease pencil that writes on glass, china, film, plastic, metal, and just about everything else.



***Paint Stick (also called Chalk):*** An oil-based paint that has been compressed into stick form—not unlike oil pastels. The word “Paintstik” is trademarked by the Markal company, which, not coincidentally, is the brand preferred by artists.

***Paint Marker:*** A felt-tip valve-action pen with an oil-based paint in place of ink. Generally requires shaking before use, similar to an aerosol spray paint can. Paint markers like permanent markers generally contain the toxic compounds xylene or toluene which add durability, opacity, and longevity.

## Author Biography

Matthew Burns was born in a once-impressive factory town in upstate New York and currently resides in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, with his wife Jill Tominosky. He has been documenting boxcar art in its various forms for nearly a decade.

**END OF  
TITLE**