

BETWEEN INDOOR AND OUTDOOR: THE GRAFFITI AND INSTALLATIONS OF

BARRY MCGEE (“TWIST”)

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis traces the transformation of graffiti as it travels from the street to the art institution by closely examining the graffiti and installations of Barry McGee ("Twist"). As a graffitiist-turned-artist, McGee looked to his environment and experiences for his art, incorporating the language of graffiti into his installations. They exhibit what I describe as his *ethnography of graffiti* because he creates them from his unique position as a graffiti writer, representing graffiti as both an aesthetic expression and established youth culture. In order to explain this re-mediation of graffiti, the thesis aligns McGee's works with the sculptural tableaux of Edward Kienholz to emphasize his use of the narrative to bring the audience into both the aesthetic and the social world of graffiti.

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For my mother and my brother, the eternal optimist.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Barry McGee is a graffitist-turned-gallery artist who brought the world of graffiti into the realm of the art institution. Known as “Twist” in San Francisco in the late 1980s and 1990s, he tagged graffiti as a way of leaving his own mark and “getting up” in the city.¹ He was most well-known for his characters of everyday objects and figures from his surroundings—bumblebees, hardware screws, and his down-and-out male figures, which he called the “everyman.” Always depicted in black and white, these characters exemplify McGee’s hand-drawn style of graffiti that demonstrate his mastery over spray-can painting and his knowledge of academic art techniques. This combination became a significant contribution to graffiti aesthetics because he invented a new style that put San Francisco and the West Coast on the map during a period when graffiti writers were mimicking the writing styles of New York and the East Coast. Ultimately, his innovative style made his transition into the fine art world a relative success.

McGee’s characters were numerous; he spray-painted images of overturned cars, policemen, screws, animals, and so on. His most significant characters were the everyman and hardware screws. These characters represented the people and events he was in contact with daily living in the city. The hardware screws represented his memories of his father, who ran an autobody shop in San Francisco, and also, possibly a visual pun on McGee’s tag name, Twist.² The everyman, who is portrayed differently with the creation of each image, represented the everyday people the artist saw while

¹ “Getting up” is a term used by graffiti writers, meaning getting public exposure or recognition for one’s pieces.

² “Barry McGee and Renny Pritikin,” Vimeo video, 8:00, posted by Kadist San Francisco, November 6, 2012. <http://vimeo.com/54001730>

tagging the streets, such as the homeless, urban youths, and office workers. These characters, especially the everyman, were presented again and again as he exhibited in galleries and museums.

Just like any other artist, McGee looked to his environment and experiences as inspiration for his artistic creations, but he created them from his position as a graffiti writer; this is what I describe as the beginning of his *ethnography of graffiti*. McGee transforms his personal experiences of tagging on the street into images and large-scale installations that tell a story about graffiti culture. This is seen in the graffiti iconography and texts he incorporates in his installations as well as the combination of painting with both spray-can and paintbrush, sculptural methods, and constant repetition of forms. His art blur the boundaries of being autobiographical and semi-ethnographic.

While this method of creation is not new to art history, the subject of his art being associated with a specific cultural group is important to consider for this thesis. Hal Foster writes in *The Return of the Real* that art since 1960s witnessed the return of subjects grounded in the materiality of actual bodies and sites. He even poses the idea of the artist as ethnographer, explaining that the subject matter of post-war avant-garde artists is rooted in the cultural and/or ethnic. This introduces a quasi-anthropological mode of representation associated with the cultural “other,” which becomes the “primary point of subversion of dominant culture” for the artist and the site of both artistic and political transformation.³ McGee’s case is unique due to his actual participation in the graffiti subculture. It gives his art the mark of authenticity that attracts many people, and at the same time, reveals intimate details of his personal life.

³ Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?,” in *The Return of the Real*, ed. Hal Foster (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 302.

Foster also notes the implications of viewing the artist as ethnographer, stating that it delves into the dangers of “ideological patronage.”⁴ Artists who take on the perspectives of the cultural other in their art cross a fine line between justly representing the marginalized and taking advantage of the primitivist fantasy associated with them for capital means. While I agree that this is a serious issue to consider, my purpose for using the term “ethnography” is not to validate (or invalidate) McGee’s representation of graffiti culture, or to even state that it is a true ethnography. Rather, it is a way to reconcile the artist’s way of representing his life in art while also representing graffiti culture and its validity as a method of artistic production.

McGee adapts his art as he transitions from producing outdoor graffiti to indoor art. His street art depict everyday objects and people he encountered tagging the streets of San Francisco. His mural for the Clarion Alley Mural Project, which I discuss in the subsequent chapter, utilizes the same iconography and style that he used for his graffiti, but also incorporates fine art conventions, such as cropping and framing. His gallery installations, a new hybrid of graffiti, sculpture and painting, include representations of other writers and artists he was close to, the urban landscape of San Francisco and other cities he visited, and the history and rituals of graffiti. His ethnography of graffiti becomes layered with meaning as he moves his practice indoors, and at the same time, increasingly different from graffiti itself. The term “ethnography” explains these simultaneous continuities and discontinuities between his graffiti and early installations, and introduces the significant role cultural context plays in the practice of graffiti.

In order to explain this argument, I use a wide range of sources, which include exhibition catalogs, published artist interviews, primary sources looking at graffiti and

⁴ Ibid 303.

urban histories (newspaper articles, graffiti texts and films), commercial and academic texts dealing with graffiti art and culture, graffiti websites and blogs, and most importantly, personal interviews I conducted with figures from San Francisco's graffiti culture and those who have personally worked with and known McGee, such as curators and graffiti writers.

Twist, or McGee, grew up writing with crews and experienced writers, who taught him the fundamentals of graffiti painting. In the 1980s, writer crews were common in San Francisco due to the publication and release of two important graffiti documents, *Subway Art* and *Style Wars*. *Subway Art* (1984) was a photographic survey authored by Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper that documented the subway graffiti in New York City. In colored photographs, the book contained images of full-train pieces produced by fabled writers, such as Lee Quiñones ("Lee"), Sandra Fabara ("Lady Pink"), and Donald White ("Dondi"). While the text brought attention to the artistry involved in producing street art, it did not provide analysis or commentary on the artists or their works. The majority of the images were only of the painted facades of the trains, giving the impression that all of New York's subways were covered in these vibrant paintings. Influenced by *Subway Art*, San Francisco writers became very concerned with aesthetics, and would even have graffiti battles against other writers to promote their styles as the best in the city. According to "Crayone," the founder of the San Francisco crew TWS ("Together with Style"), San Francisco became "the only city to ever have a full-on city battle just because of a style."⁵

Style Wars was also influential to disseminating graffiti culture nationally. First broadcasted on the Public Broadcasting Service in 1982, the documentary film featured

⁵ Rigel Juratovac ("Crayone"), email interview by Sarah Hwang, May 5, 2013.

interviews of several subway artists, members of the Metropolitan Transit Authority and then New York City Mayor Ed Koch along with sequences of the city's subways being tagged by the featured artists.⁶ The film provided a politically balanced picture of the "War on Graffiti" that was declared by Koch.⁷ It also gave a glimpse of the cultural institution of hip-hop and graffiti that was organized by the youths from the South Bronx. The combination of the film's sequences of the young graffiti artists tagging together and interviews with figures on both sides of the "war" gave the impression that the young writers banded together to fight for their claim to the city. While the film's contribution to the rise of writer crews has not been studied, it did record real moments of writers illicitly tagging trains that informed aspiring writers around the country about the new subculture of hip-hop and graffiti.⁸

One of the crews Twist was a member of was the THR crew ("The Human Race").⁹ He met the founder of THR, SR-1, who quickly became a mentor to Twist. SR-1

⁶ *Style Wars* is filmed by Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver in 1982. It subsequently became available in VHS format in 1984.

⁷ Mayor John Lindsay declared the first "War On Graffiti" in 1971. During a period when Manhattan saw an increase in crime rates, Lindsay viewed graffiti as a sign of crime and deemed it a blight to the city. He centralized New York City's public transportation systems by forming the Metropolitan Transit Authority as a way of preventing further vandalism and crime on the subways. After Lindsay left the Mayor's Office in 1973, his quality of life policies were continued by successive mayors (Abraham Beame spent \$20 million to buff all the trains). The most radical actions against graffiti were executed by Ed Koch, who introduced new train cars coated with an anti-graffiti substance that could not be marked by paint (along with the installment of barbed wire fencing and guard dogs). Though Koch accomplished many things for the city, such as saving it from declaring bankruptcy, his quality of life policies further marginalized the outer boroughs of New York City and its mostly African-American and Latino residents, perpetuating unresolved racial tensions that can be traced back to the Civil Rights Movement. For more on the history of graffiti as an urban problem, see Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Problem in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁸ In my interview with Crayone, he stated that films like *Style Wars* and *Wild Style* informed his knowledge about the culture when he started painting graffiti and breakdancing.

⁹ According to SR-1, THR was a play off of another crew's name TMR (The Master Race), a Latino graffiti crew from Queens. For more information, see Arrested Motion's interview with SR-1: "Interview: SR-1

taught Twist about various techniques that create different painterly effects and lines, particularly with the use of different kinds of spray-paint nozzles. What Twist gained as a member of THR was his motivation to create more socially conscious pieces. THR was unique for its utopian philosophy on painting, which is that graffiti is created “by all the people and for all the people.”¹⁰ They were well-known for doing collaborative pieces with other local crews in the city.¹¹ During this time, Twist began to rapidly evolve his characters, including his everyman figures. His black and white images of male figures proliferated throughout the city, and many writers who knew him personally or heard of him began to recognize them as his logo. Not only did these characters exemplify the hand-drawn style that is unique to the artist, but they also immediately identified with the writer community.

Twist was also affiliated with a group of artists he met as a student at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAi) where he received a degree in painting and printmaking. They were known as the “Mission School,” a name they acquired due to their association with the SFAi and their residence in the Mission District.¹² The Mission School had a

(Founder and President of THR Crew),” Arrested Motion, accessed June 28, 2014, <http://arrestedmotion.com/2011/01/interview-sr-1-founder-and-president-of-thr-crew/>.

¹⁰ “Interview: SR-1 (Founder and President of THR Crew).”

¹¹ THR is probably most known for their collaborations with AMPM (“All Mighty Psychedelic Mutherfuckers”) founded by Dan Plasma.

¹² “The Mission School” was a term originally coined by Glen Helfand in his similarly-titled *San Francisco Bay Guardian* article (2002), which was written around the same time as when some of these artists were exhibiting at the Whitney Biennial. The Mission School artists include Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen, Alicia McCarthy, Barry McGee, Ruby Neri (Reminisce), etc. According to Helfand, the term became officially associated with the aforementioned artists in an article by *The Guardian*. To read the original *Bay Guardian* article, see Glen Helfand, “The Mission School: San Francisco’s street artists deliver their neighborhood to the art world,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, July 17, 2002, accessed July 17, 2013, http://www.sfbg.com/36/28/art_mission_school.html

common interest in the handmade aesthetic and creating works, mainly paintings and prints, which voiced the everyday grit and poeticism of the urban environment.

McGee was married to one of these artists, Margaret Kilgallen, who passed away in 2001 of breast cancer. Both were very influenced by handmade and found objects, such as hand-painted signs, prints, and transient graffiti found on freight trains. Kilgallen was very skilled at figure drawing in a similar caricature aesthetic that is seen in McGee's characters. Her subject matter was also similar in content to McGee's; Glen Helfand described her work in his article that coined the term "Mission School" as dealing with "street scenes [that] are populated with iconic nomadic women—banjo players, surfers, and full-figured matrons."¹³ Both of their respective figures are a result of a single-stroke technique that can be seen in hand-painted signs; thus, their figures appear flat and caricatured. Even in their exhibitions, they utilize a similar method of display to present their works. In a 1999 exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Kilgallen clustered her painted panels and drawings of her feminine characters and signs close together in a corner space of a wall similar to McGee's own clustered display of framed images (Figure 1; see Appendix B for all figures).

Twist's involvement in communities of writers and artists became the formative period of his artistic career. It shaped his distinct style of writing and formalized his representation of his graffiti life. It also affected the way he views his own body of work. In a 1998 interview, McGee explained his discomfort about viewing his graffiti and gallery art as being continuous, and stated that his "outdoor" and "indoor" works should be viewed as separate entities instead. In fact, he stopped producing his trademark wall murals of his down-and-out male characters ("everyman") in 2003 and began to make

¹³ Helfand, "The Mission School."

abstract, optical-art works as a way of leaving his graffiti past behind and moving towards a new stage in his artistic career.¹⁴ However, his “outdoor” period, or the period in which McGee participated in the city’s graffiti underground, became a prominent feature in his exhibitions as he moved toward his “indoor” period, or the period in which the artist began exhibiting in art galleries and institutions. Rather than presenting graffiti as an art object or form, he portrayed graffiti as a culture or an outlet for youths who are constantly marginalized by society.

In order to distinguish graffiti as a culture, McGee chose to portray his subject with installation pieces. His installations during his “indoor” period included large wall paintings representing the history of graffiti, letterpress plate murals, clusters of wall hangings, such as framed images and empty bottles with painted faces of the everyman, animatronic sculptures of figures tagging, and overturned vehicles that were tagged by the artist. These installation pieces were effective at representing his complete graffiti world, which encompassed and confronted the viewer. They were also one of the first instances that sculpture was used to represent graffiti in the history of graffiti and street art.

Many graffiti artists who transitioned to gallery art leaned towards producing canvas paintings to represent their graffiti lives. The New York subway artists are a prime example of those who followed this trend, and their art became the subject of much exploitation and criticism by the Manhattan art world in the 1970s and 1980s. In the early 1980s, the Manhattan art galleries organized several exhibitions featuring the infamous Subway Artists and their “graffiti canvases.” These artists were known for tagging New

¹⁴ Alex Baker, “Chaos and Control” in *Barry McGee*, ed. Lawrence Rinder (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2012), 84.

York's subway trains with large top-to-bottom pieces that were colorful, dynamic, and most importantly, illegally produced. For the exhibitions, the Subway Artists tried to recreate the experience of tagging graffiti on the trains via canvas painting. Since many of these artists were very young (only teenagers) when they were exhibiting in the Manhattan galleries, the transition to canvas seemed to be the most logical solution. Due to lack of a formal art education or training, the graffiti artists saw canvas painting as being inherently similar to spray-painting trains, and possibly a way of displaying their talents as an artist versus a graffiti writer. When the artists were "discovered" by the art world, they were immediately recruited to exhibit in gallery exhibitions, and did not have the time or experience to develop their artistry. As a result, these canvases were viewed by New York's art elites as overly literal translations of their subway pieces painted on a stationary surface.¹⁵

One such exhibition was the *Post-Graffiti* show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1983. *Post-Graffiti* was conceived as an exhibition, which attributed the subway artists' "transition from subway surfaces to canvas, an extension in scope and content of their spontaneous imagery."¹⁶ Unfortunately, the show was not well received by critics. In a review printed in *The Nation*, Arthur C. Danto accused the show as being superficial in its presentation of two of the subway graffitiists, John Matos ("Crash") and Chris Ellis ("Daze"), and their works:

¹⁵ According to Richard Lachmann, the paintings produced by the Subway Artists were actually advertised as one-to-one translations of their works from subway trains to canvases. The United Graffiti Artists, a collective of New York graffiti artists founded by Hugo Martinez, promoted their artists by trying to "win their members recognition as serious artists by encouraging writers to produce graffiti-style works on canvas and various other media with a view toward their sale to art collectors." For more on this topic, see Richard Lachmann, "Graffiti as Career and Ideology," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988).

¹⁶ Dolores Neumann and Sidney Janis, ed. *Post-Graffiti* (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1983), np.

their show is advertised by Janis as “graffiti art”—as though they or the gallery had not enough confidence to display their work without benefit of a sociological excuse. But in candor, I think neither of them could survive without benefit of the pedigree and paraphernalia of the culture that formed them, which raises a question of paternalism at least. I was not even tempted to say something like, Not bad for a graffiti writer, since I think well of graffiti when it is good, and as graffiti writers they are good to very good. But working under the imperatives of gallery artists, DAZE and CRASH, for all the vividness of their imagery and the phosphorescence of their coloration, are pretty feeble.¹⁷

Even though these artists were attempting to recreate the phenomenon of the subway pieces in their studio paintings, the actual canvases of Daze and Crash lost the dynamism and excitement in producing a work on a subway train. Another of the “post-graffitists” featured in Janis’ show is “Futura” (Leonard McGurr), who commented on the artists’ intentions for their paintings: “the idea was to make graffiti on plywood...to do the subway stuff on something that wouldn’t be moving: it would just sit on a wall. That was the moment of transition, trying to capture the experience to be looked at in a gallery.”¹⁸ What Futura pointed out is that these graffiti canvases were a result of the compression of the subway graffiti experience onto a flat surface, which essentially made the art static and unexciting. The physical “flatness” of the canvas presented graffiti as phenomenologically flat in the gallery.

Barry McGee’s own “post-graffiti” works portray the graffiti experience as well, but uses a different approach by incorporating it in the installation format. The installation’s sculptural qualities allow for McGee’s street art to be conveyed as a realistic experience, and it accounts for the depth and nuances of graffiti culture that is not necessarily possible to capture in canvas painting. It is also more confrontational

¹⁷ Arthur C. Danto, “Post-Graffiti Art: CRASH, DAZE”, *The Nation*, January 12, 1985, 26.

¹⁸ Suzi Gablick, “Graffiti in Well-Lighted Rooms” in *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 109.

towards the viewer, and forces the individual to engage with it immediately, mimicking graffiti's nature to challenge boundaries. Painting requires an introspective response from its viewer, which lacks the physical engagement seen in sculpture or installations. Due to this transformation of graffiti's form in McGee's art, scholars compare graffiti and street art to Marcel Duchamp's readymades. The readymade was usually an everyday object, such as a urinal or bottle rack, that is selected and modified as sculpture by the artist. Most readymades were minimally manipulated either by repositioning the object, titling and signing it, and/or simply being chosen by the artist. In my discussion of this subject in the second chapter, I reassess this claim by examining McGee's indoor period more closely and provide a new approach to reading his gallery art.

While his installations move between indoor and outdoor, they are distinct from his graffiti and street art. His indoor works deliberately represent his ethnography of graffiti, which, to McGee, is not the same as real graffiti. As he moves his practice indoors, his representation of graffiti becomes further removed from its original form. His installations reflect his interpretation of graffiti *culture* whereas his graffiti represented the writer's impression of San Francisco. While the two are distinct, they are still connected by the artist's intervention. His installations take on another layer of meaning in this ethnography as it is displayed in the art institution, which both connects it to and removes it from his outdoor works.

The thesis addresses this subject by tracing the trajectory of the artist's graffiti as it travels from the street to the art institution. I demonstrate that McGee conveys graffiti as an artistic practice rather than an artistic form in his installations. I examine his outdoor graffiti and indoor installations closely to explain the simultaneous continuities

and discontinuities between the two. The first section discusses the artist's outdoor period when he was tagging graffiti as Twist and beginning to develop his ethnographic representation. The second section looks at his indoor period and the effect of the installation format on his ethnography. Because of the critical claims made about graffiti's movement indoors to Marcel Duchamp's readymades, I also provide in the indoor section an alternative approach to reading McGee's installations by comparing it to Edward Kienholz' installations, or *tableaus*. Kienholz is one of the first and significant installation artists of the post-war period, who also used his unique position as a non-traditional artist to reproduce real moments and sites from his life in the exhibition space. His representations of brothels, psychiatric wards, diners, and so on point out the realities of human relationships, of society, and of the environments themselves. Like McGee, he uses unconventional techniques to create his installations and found object sculptures that bring out the grittiness and shock of the real moment at hand, producing a visceral response from the viewer. Both artists emphasize the narrative aspect of the installation format to convey the world around them, making Kienholz a more suitable comparison to McGee.

CHAPTER II

THE OUTDOOR PERIOD: THE GRAFFITI OF TWIST, LATE 1980s-1990s

Barry McGee, also known as “Twist,” became a graffiti icon for his monochromatic figures of everyday urban objects, which exemplified his drawing style. His signature character, or figure, was of what the artist calls the *everyman* (Figure 2), which portrayed a caricature of the homeless in San Francisco. Though Twist’s images were caricatures of everyday life, they conveyed a sympathetic perspective toward the ever-present grit of the urban environment. When Twist began exhibiting in galleries and art institutions, he incorporated his graffiti characters and technique in his murals and installations; as a result, the artist exhibited his hybrid works both nationally and internationally, including at the Venice Biennale in 2001, and his gallery art enjoys much demand from contemporary collectors. Though both graffiti and fine art influence McGee’s art, the artist is uncomfortable about being labeled as a graffiti writer *and* artist. In a 1998 interview for his exhibition at the Walker Art Center, he explicitly described a strong division between his graffiti and gallery works:

Graffiti is very dear to me. I am very protective of it. Early on, I wanted to share the streets by trying to bring the feeling of the streets indoors. Now it’s a little more separate. I do indoor work and I do outdoor work. These contexts require peculiar attention. I like the spontaneity of the outdoors: the walls that are seasoned with layers and years of the contributions of various writers, amateur and experienced. Kids read the walls like history books, naming off each style and era in which markings have taken place. Stories are exchanged about the individual who rises above the “norms” and becomes “the kid who is up” for any given month. All very curious stuff. I’d hope in the gallery, or in an indoor context, that people can just think about it more and accept it. Or at least realize the thinking that goes into it. If there’s one thing that I’d want to come across, it’s that work in informal spaces has a lot more depth than people might first think.¹⁹

¹⁹ Eungie Joo, ed., *Regards, Barry McGee*, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998), np.

Here, the artist points out the deep history of graffiti that is visible in its very form and context. The walls tagged with graffiti contain the names of a long lineage of writers (“seasoned with layers and years of the contributions of various writers”), which lead to the sharing of oral histories (“Stories exchanged about the individual who rises above the ‘norms’ ...). He wants to show that graffiti is a culture with its own history and rules, much like fine art, yet he no longer wants to “share the streets” in the indoor context. As a successful artist who is marketed as a figurehead of the graffiti world, why would McGee separate his “indoor” works from his “outdoor” works?

According to the curator Alex Baker, McGee’s gallery art attempts to resolve the contradiction of representing graffiti as an artistic practice, and addresses the question of how art and life may be reconciled.²⁰ For McGee, this reconciliation is personal as it addresses the defining boundary between graffiti and art, which makes his gallery art even more convincing as authentic reproductions. While I agree that his installations are the results of grappling with these central questions, I argue in this chapter that the artist actually began this exploration of art and graffiti during his “outdoor” period. While he was getting up as “Twist,” he began to develop his quasi-ethnographic representation of the graffiti culture he grew up in through his images of the urban vernacular. The monochromatic images of the everyman represent the events and people Twist saw living in San Francisco’s Mission District. This outdoor period became the formative years for McGee to develop his interests in using his personal experiences as the subject of his

²⁰ Alex Baker, “Chaos and Control,” in *Barry McGee*, ed. Lawrence Rinder (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2012), 83.

art.²¹ To support this argument, I examine the artist's works, published artist interviews and statements, exhibition catalogs, and other sources dealing with graffiti and urban histories, such as newspaper articles, commercial and academic texts, and interviews, including those I conducted for the purpose of this thesis.

The Everyman: The Beginning of Twist's Ethnography

Twist became a graffiti legend for his unique graffiti characters, or figures, especially the everyman.²² The everyman is usually a generic male figure shown either as a partial or whole figure and depicted with a melancholic expression that includes drooping eyes and brows, a bald head, and exaggerated nose and lips. Sometimes the everyman is dressed in a white-collared shirt and tie, sometimes he is holding a beer bottle, other times he is wearing a backward baseball cap—his identity varies with the creation of each new image. These everyman characters resemble not only the everyday person one sees in the city, but also those who are constantly ignored by the passerby, the ubiquitous homeless population of San Francisco. In a 2002 interview, McGee explained:

The presence of this male figure is kind of like this everyman, and it is very specific to San Francisco, where there's a huge homeless population that everyone wants to be free of, a bit like graffiti. The subject has to do with graffiti and the homeless, [which are] kind of like outcasts, things that the city is trying to get rid of, or trying to hide, or pretending doesn't exist. With my work, I'm trying to reveal this.²³

²¹ I continue to refer to the periods of Barry McGee's career when he was producing graffiti versus gallery art as "outdoor" and "indoor," respectively. McGee's "outdoor" period can be dated from approximately late 1980s to early 1990s, and his "indoor" period begins in conjunction to his exhibitions from the early to mid-1990s to the present day.

²² For my discussion of Barry McGee's graffiti career, I will address the artist by his tag name "Twist." Later in the chapter, I will again refer to the artist by his given name when discussing his CAMP mural as an indication of the artist's transition to his indoor period and becoming an installation artist.

²³ Germano Celant, ed., *Barry McGee* (Milan: Prada Fondazione, 2002), np.

The artist's choice to represent the homeless in his graffiti voiced a very real social concern about those "outside" of society. Twist's representation of the everyman became even more significant as he lived in the Mission District, where there was a high density of homeless residents, during a time when the city was actively removing the homeless and other offenders of society from its public spaces. Twist encountered them on a daily basis as both a resident and writer. He witnessed the homeless being ignored, begging for food and money on the street, and camping in public spaces. The everyman provides evidence of the artist's interest in representing the real world around him from a felt perspective prior to his entrance into the gallery circuit.

McGee's focus on homelessness in his graffiti also connects to San Francisco's history and character. When Art Agnos became the city's mayor in 1987, the city saw increased rates in homelessness due to federal budget cuts made by the Reagan Administration and the rise of the AIDS/HIV crisis.²⁴ Agnos attempted to resolve the issue by reforming the city's welfare and public health policies, but was pressured by the public to execute a policy of order maintenance; this meant enforcing police to break up homeless encampments in many of the city's centers. The most significant homeless encampment he forcibly dispersed was one in front of City Hall that became known as "Camp Agnos," in reference to Agnos's previously liberal platform on homelessness.²⁵

The dispersal of Camp Agnos marked the end of the Mayor's policy of tolerance, and the beginning of his new policy of order maintenance. When Frank Jordan succeeded

²⁴ Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 187.

²⁵ Associated Press, "San Francisco's Mayor Ousts Homeless Camp," *New York Times*, July 6, 1990, accessed June 11, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/06/us/san-francisco-s-mayor-ousts-homeless-camp.html?src=pm>

Agnos as Mayor in 1992, he continued Agnos' legacy of order maintenance by implementing Operation Matrix.²⁶ Inspired by the Broken Windows theory, the goal of Operation Matrix was to improve the quality of life of everyday citizens by cracking down on signs of disorder and reclaiming the city from those who were deemed derelicts, including the homeless and graffiti writers.²⁷ The policy was comprised of two major parts: implementing law enforcement agencies to corral the homeless population in the city, and providing social services in the field to offer the destitute with the resources and medical attention they need to bring them out of an impoverished state.

Unfortunately, Operation Matrix became only known for the former. Jordan initiated the Van Outreach Program, which sent social workers, nurses and police officers in vans to patrol business and tourist districts and provide services and treatment to the homeless. While on paper this program offered a proactive and multidimensional method of helping the homeless, in actuality, it was meant to rid high traffic business and tourist centers of homeless residents.²⁸ Jordan's neoconservative approach toward the issue of

²⁶ Frank Jordan was appointed Chief of Police by then Mayor Dianne Feinstein in 1986 and continued to fill the role during Art Agnos' administration from 1988 to 1992.

²⁷ In 1982, an article published in the *Atlantic Monthly* spoke about a new criminological theory on the origins of crime in neighborhoods. Famously known as the "broken windows theory," authors George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson wrote: "at the community level, disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental sequence...if a window in a building is broken and left unrepaired, all of the rest of the windows in the building will soon be broken." Essentially, the article explained that the presence of visible signs of crime in a community, such as broken windows, graffiti and the homeless, signifies that the neighborhood is dangerous and crime-ridden. This theory was extremely controversial, and continues to be a topic of debate for many scholars and politicians. To view the original article, see George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, "Broken Windows: The police and neighborhood safety", *The Atlantic*, March 1982, accessed February 21, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/>

²⁸ The program policy justifies its plans, stating, "it is vital that the number of homeless be reduced in these areas in order to promote a clean and safe environment for tourist shoppers, and the business community." As a result, the Jordan administration encountered significant problems in coordinating the Van Outreach program. First, the program received much criticism from social services agencies for being a media spectacle rather than directly addressing the poverty crisis. Second, the amount of funding needed to initiate the program was extremely high due to the inclusion of registered nurses and police. In the end, the

urban poverty was eventually criticized on a national scale for its severity and injustice towards the homeless; the situation even gained recognition from Amnesty International for his harsh retaliations against activists and protestors.²⁹

As with any artist, Twist's upbringings as a writer predisposed him to focus his subject matter on his personal experiences. Most of these experiences are of his involvement in San Francisco's graffiti and art cultures. Twist championed a distinct hand-drawn style that required much skill to produce with spray-paint. In his characters, one can see the writer's ability to create a curvilinear mark with a medium that is difficult to control. He is also able to provide a sense of modeling to his figures by decreasing the pressure of the spray; this creates a contrast between light and dark, which only adds to the hand-drawn quality of his images. His intention of creating pieces of handmade quality and personal relevance was due to both his involvement in writer crews, and his formal education at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Twist was a member of the TMF crew ("The Most Fabulous" or "The Mellow Fellows"), one of the major crews in San Francisco during the 1980s. His involvement with TMF allowed him to be in an environment where he learned to tag graffiti from more experienced writers and be among likeminded individuals. Having chosen his tag from a scooter fanzine, Twist began his graffiti career by mastering the letters of his own tag.³⁰ The tag offered him a chance to practice perfecting his letters using spray-paint and

program was reduced to only one outreach van without an officer or nurse on board. For more on the subject, see John M. Quigley, Steven Raphael, and Eugene Smolensky. *Homelessness in California* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2001), and Sean Michael Parsons, "An Ungovernable Force? Food Not Bombs, Homeless Activism and Politics in San Francisco" (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2010).

²⁹ Sean Michael Parsons, "An Ungovernable Force? Food Not Bombs, Homeless Activism and Politics in San Francisco" (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2010).

produce his own distinct style. Twist was known to create multiple variations of his tags, which allowed him to tag a variety of letter styles and evade police officers.³¹

In a sequence of film stills by Thomas Campbell, Twist is shown tagging a variation of his tag “Twister” step-by-step (Figure 3). His control of the spray-can is steady and deliberate as he writes his name in a semi-calligraphic form with minimal amount of paint dripping from the letters. He finishes the tag with a rounded line that circles his name; the tag’s form almost resembles a copyright symbol. The execution of this tag shows not only the artist’s eagerness to get his name up, but it also demonstrates his artistic ability to create a curvilinear mark with the spray-can medium. This delineated form becomes the foundation for his later graffiti pieces; just as the line is the foundation for all art, the letter is the basis of all graffiti pieces. By perfecting the various strokes and lines with the spray paint, Twist accumulates a repertoire of forms and techniques, with which he can create more complex forms.

Twist uses similar techniques and form in his throwups, which are larger variations of the tag and is generally formed with white bubble letters overlaid with a black outline. In these forms, one can see the influence of other writers in his works. Particularly, Twist’s throwups were very similar to those of a New York writer, KR (Craig Costello). KR was known for creating his throwups with silvery ink he invented and called “Krink.”³² The use of Krink allowed for his throwups to be more visible than others that only use black and white ink. In the early 1990s, KR moved to San Francisco

³⁰ Alex Baker, “Chaos and Control”, 91.

³¹ Twist had several tags that he used during this time. Some of these are “Twisto,” “Twister,” “Ray Fong,” “Lydia Fong,” “Bernon Vernon,” and “Fonger.”

³² The name “Krink” came from a combination of Costello’s tag “KR” and the word “ink”. Krink is now an art supply brand, specializing in spray paints and markers. For more information, see “Krink: History,” Krink, accessed June 28, 2014, <http://shop.krink.com/>

from New York and befriended Twist and members of the TMF crew. KR introduced Twist to Krink, which Twist began to use for his own throwups.

When viewing Twist's throwup with KR's, one can see the influence they have on each other (Figure 4). However, the typographic forms of their respective letters are unique to each individual artist. KR uses the familiar bar or funk letters of the New York style for his throwup, while Twist's letters have the same organic delineation seen in his previous tags. Arguably, Twist's letters, when viewed next to KR's, are stylistically similar to the New Wave letters of TWS ("Together With Style"), another major crew in San Francisco and the former rival of TMF. TWS was known for championing the New Wave style, which uses chunky, volumetric letters usually filled in with colors reminiscent of the Mexican heritage murals seen throughout San Francisco (Figure 5).³³ Here, Twist seems to be choosing the distinctly "San Francisco style" to form his throwup. When viewed next to KR's throwup, the reader is able to see that the artist is simultaneously representing himself as an individual and as a part of the larger graffiti community in San Francisco. Already, he employs a simultaneous subjective and objective approach to painting graffiti within the context of lettering styles. He makes his own tag stand out next to KR's through the use of the New Wave typeface while complementing it at the same time by the use of Krink, Twist's throwup becomes a sign that tries to reconcile the representations of himself as a writer and of the writers who influenced his style. McGee continues to resolve this polarity of representing his artistic identities as being personal and communal in his later gallery installations.

³³ Rigel Juratovac ("Crayone"), email interview by Sarah Hwang, May 5, 2013.

Between Outdoor and Indoor: CAMP Mural, 1995

Twist's representations of the city from his point-of-view remain a central part of his artistic works as he moved toward producing indoor works. As he transitioned from producing illegal graffiti to sanctioned art, Twist's artistic practice gradually hybridized graffiti technique with fine art conventions. Barry McGee's (Twist) CAMP mural is an example of a work made during this "transitional" period.³⁴ Created in 1995 for the Clarion Alley Mural Project (CAMP), CAMP is a grassroots mural project founded by Aaron Noble and other San Francisco street artists in 1991, whose mission is to create a neighborhood mural program similar to the Balmy Alley murals. Located several blocks south of Clarion Alley in the Mission, Balmy Alley also contained a mural program produced and organized by community artists and arts organizations, such as Precita Eyes. Both neighborhood projects contain murals from different artists varying in subject and styles, which decorate the walls of the alleys. The key difference between Balmy Alley and CAMP is that the former focuses on beautifying and preserving the neighborhood with the display of murals, while the latter acts more as a gallery to display murals and artwork; this means that the murals in Clarion Alley are periodically removed and replaced with new murals.³⁵

³⁴ Even though McGee's CAMP mural was produced after his exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in 1994 (which I discuss in the succeeding chapter), I consider it as a transition piece between his outdoor and indoor periods. By general definition, the mural is a permissioned form of street art, making it a type of transitional form between graffiti and gallery art. Chronologically, the CAMP mural fits in as part of the transitional period since he was producing both exhibition and public art synchronously in the early 1990s after he graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute.

³⁵ Susan Cervantes, phone interview by Sarah Hwang, March 3, 2014.

McGee painted his mural on the roll-up metal door of Community Thrift, a partner of CAMP and site of several CAMP murals (Figure 6).³⁶ His mural consisted of his signature monochromatic objects and figures that could be seen on the streets of San Francisco. In fact, much of the iconography was almost identical to those he painted illegally, but this time, they were painted in the context of a community mural. The artist arranged the figures within the mural as an array of images positioned throughout the field of the garage door in a seemingly random order. In the center is a flaccid needle and around it are images of other familiar objects, such as the caricatured head of a policeman, hardware screw, bumblebee, and the dressed torso of the everyman. Each image consists of the same careful design as those he tags on the street—the use of black and white to mimic line drawing and modeling to create volume and contrast. Though much of the iconography and the outdoor viewing of McGee’s mural contain overlaps with those of his graffiti pieces, he pays attention to the formal aspects of the mural that he does not necessarily consider when tagging. This was perhaps the first time that the artist painted a concentrated amount of objects and figures on a single site. The format of the mural forces the artist to adjust his painterly practice. For example, the artist chose to partially crop the tip of the bumblebee’s left wing at the top left and the duck-headed figure at the bottom right, making the frame and limited field of the door apparent.

The placement of the mural along Clarion Alley is also significant to consider in observing the formal differences between McGee’s illegal and permissioned works. Initially, McGee’s mural was placed next to another mural by a member of the CAMP collective, Sebastiana Pastor, which no longer exists. According to the founder of Precita

³⁶ Megan Wilson, email interview by Sarah Hwang, February 20, 2014.

Eyes, Susan Cervantes, Pastor's mural depicted a feminist message about women's struggles in society.³⁷ Next to this politically charged wall painting, McGee's painting of everyday objects seems whimsical and ideologically neutral in tone. As one spends more time viewing McGee's mural, the viewer begins to realize that each object is a symbolic reference to the everyday experience of living in the urban environment. The needle becomes a metaphor for the mental and physical ailments of the homeless, the policeman's head represents the ostensibly prominent presence of law enforcement in San Francisco, and the everyman reflects the marginalized groups of society. While McGee depicts images of social relevance, his mural is not necessarily political in its message. Rather, he is articulating an ethnographic interpretation of the environment around him, of which each portrayed object becomes a footnote based on his own personal immersion in said environment.

He even includes whimsical and personal symbols that refer to his identity as a writer. The limp screw and bumblebee are common characters that the artist often tagged, so much so that they became known signifiers of "Twist" among writers. In an intimate video interview with Renny Pritikin for McGee's mid-career retrospective, he explains that his father and brother both ran an auto body shop in San Francisco and grew up around mechanical devices and hardware.³⁸ While the screw may have personal relevance to Twist, the bumblebee may not and could simply be a character that he enjoyed creating, which is not uncommon in graffiti practice. For example, many graffiti writers reproduce images from popular culture, such as characters in comic books or lettering

³⁷ Susan Cervantes, interview.

³⁸ "Barry McGee and Renny Pritikin", Vimeo video, 8:00, posted by Kadist San Francisco, November 6, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/54001730>

from street signs and music records. Even McGee's duck figure reminds viewers of graffiti's tendency to be self-referential, such as Lee Quiñones' famous Howard the Duck mural painted at his high school in the Bronx (Figure 7). Twist is essentially portraying the state of mind possessed by the graffiti writer.

His CAMP mural is one of the first instances in his artistic career when both graffiti and fine art intersect (he graduated from art school in 1991). He takes the same imagery of his graffiti and reworks them in the mural to create a product that represents both the artist and the neighborhood. Twist's identity and environment are intricately connected (just as any other writer), evidenced by his familiarity with the city and his style. The CAMP mural exhibits this complex relationship—the combined use of graffiti and fine art conventions, the incorporation of personal characters with more widely understood images, and the mural's purpose as both street art and sanctioned work. It develops into a meta-commentary on his own graffiti life, an ethnography of his own practice. The mural becomes a work that is neither indoor nor outdoor, but somewhere in-between the two.

McGee continued to grapple with his ethnographic representation of graffiti in his installations. Similar to his CAMP mural, he uses graffiti technique and images in his gallery art to represent the subculture from the point-of-view of the writer (i.e. McGee himself). However, unlike his mural, his installations are not “in-between” works; they are clearly “indoor” works. The sculptural characteristic of the installation provides a theatrical representation of this ethnography that convinces viewers as being authentic graffiti, but also asserts that these are not like his outdoor works. McGee is reminding us

that the indoor works “require peculiar attention” different from his outdoor works, that is, the indoor works are *not* to be viewed as authentic graffiti, but rather, as what they are—fabrications. Another significant element of the indoor-outdoor distinction is the illegality issue surrounding his outdoor works. For McGee (and many other writers), graffiti “operates outside the system...It’s not overseen by panels or committees that have the power to reject or censor it.”³⁹ He views graffiti as a political act in the sense that it provides an avenue for youths to voice themselves in a society that will not listen to them. While his indoor installations include graffiti tags and imagery, they are still created under the auspices of the art institution; thus, his representation of graffiti is more pronounced in his installations due to his new position as a gallery artist rather than a graffiti writer. In order to understand this distinction between his indoor and outdoor works, the following chapter lays out McGee’s indoor period and provides a new way of reading his installations that complies with the artist’s vision.

³⁹ Raphaela Platow, ed., *Barry McGee*, (Waltham: Rose Art Museum, 2004), np.

CHAPTER III

THE INDOOR PERIOD: THE INSTALLATIONS OF BARRY MCGEE, 1990-2000

Twist's ability to create pieces of handmade quality and personal relevance was developed through his involvement in San Francisco's graffiti crew culture as well as his fine art education from the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAi). Because of this, Twist's style was very innovative in the graffiti sphere at the time, which was based on the New York tradition of lettering.⁴⁰ He was able to use traditional graffiti conventions to produce image-based graffiti of a certain sentiment; in an artistic tradition that focuses on the formation of letters, Twist's ability to create figures and objects using fine art techniques, such as chiaroscuro, is impressive. His style emphasized the importance of the individual writer in a time when writing with a crew was the custom, and marked the rise of image-based street art.

After graduating from the SFAi in 1991, Barry McGee (Twist) began to shift his attention toward creating indoor exhibitions rather than outdoor graffiti. McGee incorporated the language of graffiti in his gallery installations, which blurred the boundary between graffiti and art. Many critics and scholars made the comparison of the artist's installations, as well as graffiti in general, with multiple modes of the 20th century avant-garde, including Marcel Duchamp's readymades.⁴¹ One of these advocates is the

⁴⁰ Graffiti in the '80s was based on the New York tradition that originated from the burgeoning hip-hop culture from the South Bronx. Lettering was highly valued among writers because it signified the writer or crew's style and it was the foundation for creating elaborate pieces and images.

⁴¹ In his essay "The Painters of Contemporary Life", Thom Collins takes on a similar lens as Charles Baudelaire's writings about the French watercolorist Constantin Guys and relates the youth cultures of skateboarding and graffiti, specifically the Mission School artists, as a new mode of representing the vernacular in the postmodern era. Another connection made with graffiti is with the phenomenon of Pop Art in the 1950s and 1960s. Jean Baudrillard writes in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* about graffiti's birth from the protest movements of the late 1960s and 1970s and its inherent ability to disrupt the "ghetto", or

curator of *Barry McGee* (2004) at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum, Raphaela Platow, who interviewed Barry McGee about his art and practice; she points out this comparison in their interview:

RP: As Marcel Duchamp observed, as soon as you exhibit anything within the museum walls it's considered art, just because that's the ascribed function of the place.

BM: This is true to some degree. At The Rose, there are all these things that I can't control...a truck driver and a dumpster...We have to work together for it to function. And then it's just there for people to deal with. It's similar to graffiti that way: Graffiti just sits there until someone decides they don't like it anymore, paints over it.⁴²

McGee understands the significance of context to art's reception and is extremely wary of the context in which he is presenting his own works. However, Duchamp was making a statement about the ready-made's status as an art object that primarily exhibits a surface value (its aesthetic form), while McGee is presenting his installations as an ethnographic art object that emphasizes the human element of graffiti ("...a truck driver and a dumpster...We have to work together for it to function."). Just as his illicit graffiti pieces represent his unique perspective, McGee's installations represent the subculture of

the homogenized and repressive environment of the city. Even the public opinion of graffiti indicates a link with art. In one letter to the editor in the *New York Times* from 1973, a reader describes the New York subway art from the period as "primitive pop art on the part of inarticulate people looking for some way to say 'I'm alive.'" The writer, Norman Mailer, wrote his seminal essay on graffiti "The Faith of Graffiti" also linking subway graffiti with Robert Rauschenberg's and Willem de Kooning's art. McGee's own works has been linked to Jackson Pollock's action paintings by the famous and controversial figure, Jeffrey Deitch. Deitch described McGee's 2010 mural on the famed Manhattan location on Houston and Bowery streets as "an all-over composition that compounds graffiti tags into a street art dialogue with Jackson Pollock." For a full description of these claims, see Thom Collins, "The Painters of Contemporary Life" in *Beautiful Losers*, ed. Aaron Rose and Christian Strike (New York: Iconoclast Productions, 2004); Jean Baudrillard, "Kool Killer, or the Insurrection of Signs," in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1993); Margaret F. Donaldson, letter to the editor ("Underground Confusion"), *New York Times*, October 11, 1973, 90; Jeffrey Deitch, *et al*, ed., *Art in the Streets* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2011); and Norman Mailer, "The Faith of Graffiti" in *The Faith of Graffiti*, ed. Mervyn Kurlansky (New York: Praeger, 1974).

⁴² Raphaela Platow, ed, *Barry McGee* (Waltham: Rose Art Museum, 2004), np.

graffiti as a complete sensory experience, forcing the viewer to engage with the work at hand, and make a statement about graffiti as an artistic practice.

In order to demonstrate this distinction in McGee's installations, I introduce an alternative comparison in this chapter that includes a discussion of Edward Kienholz' tableaus. Kienholz was a member of a talented generation of artists (Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Claes Oldenburg are some of his contemporaries) that emerged in the 1950s in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, eventually forsaking painting for three-dimensional art. He used the installation to represent his lived world (*tableaus*), which slowly unraveled a larger narrative about a common experience. He also co-founded the famous Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, and his series of *Concept Tableaus*, which consisted of preliminary drawings and written descriptions of potential tableaus, were one of the earliest works of conceptual art. He is often overlooked in the history of American art despite the important role he played to transform contemporary art practice and bring the art world's attention to Los Angeles during the heyday of Greenberg's modernism. By comparing his tableaus with McGee's installations, I argue that McGee used the installation format in a similar manner as Kienholz in order to narrate a history of graffiti that could be understood by his audience.

In this chapter, I closely examine three of his exhibitions between 1990-2000, which included many of the familiar works that continue to be seen in subsequent exhibits and evolved to manifest his ethnographic theme. I use many of the same types of sources as the previous chapter to support my argument along with sociological and art historical texts on graffiti, documentary films, and graffiti websites, such as "Art Crimes" (www.graffiti.org).

Moving Indoors: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (1994), *Regards, Barry McGee* (1998),
and *Indelible Market* (2000)

As McGee continued to utilize the same techniques and forms of graffiti in his indoor works, he expanded his street art exhibitions by permeating the interior and exterior spaces; he created billboards, tagged the facade of host institutions, and brought overturned cars indoors.⁴³ The curator of *Indelible Market*, Alex Baker, describes this expansion as an “*exploration* of graffiti rather than the thing itself.”⁴⁴ Unlike his outdoor works, which are made spontaneously, McGee constantly reused and reworked his indoor works in order to perfect his representation of graffiti as an artistic practice and dialogue.

One of Barry McGee’s first institutional exhibitions was in 1994 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) in San Francisco. Organized by then chief curator Renny Pritikin, the exhibition was conceptualized as a part of an initial series of exhibitions linked with the grand opening of the institution. Prior to its opening in 1993, the YBCA also commissioned a series of murals produced by McGee and two other Bay Area artists, Brett Cook and Eduardo Pineda, which would be displayed along the walls of the construction site (Figure 8). Cook’s mural was a series of impressionistic portraits of everyday people with quotes of inspiration, observation, and fear written next to their pictures (Figure 9). Pineda’s consisted of images using recognizable motifs to connect art with society; one particular portion of his mural consisted of a white worker in overalls and an African-American white collar figure wearing a suit, stretching their arms toward each other in a gesture similar to that used in Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* (Figure

⁴³ Many of these works and features are a part of Barry McGee’s later exhibitions post-2000.

⁴⁴ Alex Baker, “Chaos and Control,” in *Barry McGee*, ed. Lawrence Rinder (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2012), 95-96.

10). McGee's mural was very similar to his CAMP mural, consisting of the same monochrome figures, but this time, the figures were placed on a bright red ground (Figure 11). The artist himself commented on his use of red as a reference to the red doors he would tag in Chinatown.⁴⁵ From a formal perspective, the use of the red ground also made his figures seem more prominent and sculptural, emphasizing the grisaille effect he was able to achieve with the spray can.

Thematically, McGee's mural fit in fairly well with the social messages conveyed in Cook's and Pineda's murals. Cook portrayed the innermost thoughts and emotions of contemporary society through his portraits of real individuals. Pineda's followed the tradition of the Mexican Muralists, representing a socialist utopia where members of different ethnicities and classes coincided together in harmony. Similar to his mural for CAMP, McGee's mural depicted the mindset of a graffiti writer; though his mural was not political, per say, it did reveal his sympathetic assessment of graffiti. While the murals were as diverse in style and subject as the artists who created them, they also complemented each other in a way that corresponded with the YBCA's own mission statement to promote the arts in the Bay Area.

McGee's gallery exhibition at the YBCA was one of the first iterations of his signature wall paintings and framed objects. According to Renny Pritikin, the curator had very limited involvement with the actual curation of the exhibition, and in fact, it was Barry McGee who conceptualized and installed it in its entirety. He stated that McGee and his affiliates would lock themselves in the empty gallery for 24 consecutive hours

⁴⁵ Germano Celant, interview with Barry McGee, in *Barry McGee*, ed. Lawrence Rinder (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2012), 144.

and completed a full-scale exhibition the next day.⁴⁶ McGee lined the gallery walls with butcher paper on which he spray-painted his iconic images of objects, similar to those from his CAMP and YBCA murals. This time, however, the objects covered the entire length and area of the walls with a single everyman figure standing before them. There was also a single-standing wall in the center of the gallery covered with letterpress plates and clustered frames that extended to the surrounding floor (Figure 12). On another wall, a Buddha figure sits in a lotus position with his eyes closed and shelves of spray cans flanking either side of him (Figure 13). The use of the sepia-colored butcher paper as his surface produces an appearance of wear and time that also contributed to the wistful appearance of his objects.⁴⁷ In the side gallery that faces the open street, the artist placed another letterpress plate mural with a birds-eye view of his everyman figure walking or running (Figure 14). From the street, passers-by played the role of voyeurs looking down onto the figure.

The overwhelming effect of images throughout the exhibition space forces the viewer to investigate the room to observe every figure, side, and corner. There is a feeling of being physically enclosed in McGee's personal memories of living in the city. The overt baroque quality of the YBCA exhibition may have been influenced by the artist's time spent in Brazil.⁴⁸ In an interview, McGee recalled his time in São Cristóvão, located

⁴⁶ Renny Pritikin, interview by Sarah Hwang, March 25, 2014.

⁴⁷ The sepia tone quality is utilized again in his exhibition at the Prada Fondazione called *Barry McGee* (2002).

⁴⁸ The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation provides grants and funding for special projects conducted in the Bay Area and Hawaii, including those in the arts. The Foundation was established in 1961 by the family who founded the Hawaiian sugar company, Alexander & Baldwin. The Foundation's mission is to support work that is committed to creating new ideas and sometimes "unpopular causes." In 1992, Pritikin helped McGee complete the grant application for the Wallace Alexander Gerbode grant in exchange for the artist's first exhibition to be shown at the Center upon its opening. In 1993, McGee received the fellowship

along the eastern coast, where he was taken aback by the number of offerings given by the townspeople in a local church:

The strongest emotion I've felt was the small town of São Cristóvão, in Brazil, where I saw thousands of ex-votos in a church: legs, silver hearts, wooden inscriptions, paintings, photographs, and other things. This directly influenced my way of displaying objects, like empty liquor bottles and drawings.⁴⁹

McGee's notation of the wide array of offerings at this chapel is the exact sensation of *horror vacui* that he was trying to achieve in his own exhibition. Just as the ex-votos represent the immense love and faith the people have for their God and patron saint, McGee filled every nook and cranny of the gallery with his typographic forms and images in order to convey the sense of a lively community within the graffiti world he was once a part of as Twist. The fact that he even invited his fellow writer peers to help him design the exhibition also contributes to his notion of re-creating this sense of community. McGee attempts to de-mystify the misperceptions of the youth culture as rebellious against society and rebuild its reputation as a close-knit community.

The key distinction between the wall paintings and his CAMP mural, or any of his outdoor works, is the portrayal of the figures. These were not the usual caricatures and cartoon-like images he tagged on the streets, but rather, they were heroicized versions of their predecessors. One of his male figures stands completely naked before the array of monochrome objects. His body is truly grotesque—he has a giant torso, skinny arms and legs, a large belly, and four toes on each foot (see Figure 12). Despite its grotesque nature, the monumental figure maintains a certain amount of dignity and shamelessness

grant after having graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute and traveled to Brazil. For more information on the grant, see "The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation," The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, accessed July 16, 2014, <http://foundationcenter.org/grantmaker/gerbode/index.html>.

⁴⁹ Germano Celant, ed, *Barry McGee* (Milan: Prada Fondazione, 2002), 141.

in presenting his exposed body to the viewer, all the while keeping a smile on his face. The other difference is the expanse in which the paintings covered. The CAMP mural forced McGee to paint a limited amount of space alongside other murals. The YBCA exhibition allowed McGee to do practically as he pleased with the space. His paintings took over the entire gallery space, engulfing his audience into a representation of his graffiti world.

Another exhibition in which the artist attempted to recreate an all-encompassing experience of graffiti culture is the *Regards, Barry McGee* show (1998) at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. This particular exhibit also contained many works similar to those from the YBCA exhibit, but in a more mature form. His red mural moved indoors and contained more than just his figures. There were also tags, paint drippings, and stylized fields of white that resemble the buff markings leftover from the chemical removal of graffiti (Figure 15). These elements juxtapose each other to symbolically represent the visual battle between writers and society over the city's surfaces. His clustered masses of frames increased in number and expanded in size as it encroached the adjacent wall (Figure 16). In the adjacent gallery, there were several shelves of empty spray-cans, framed prints of the hangdog everyman, tools and a coat with spray-cans and markers stuffed in the inner pockets hanging from the wall (Figure 17). These artifacts are presented as an assortment of archaeological finds of the culture's rituals, specifically showing the viewer exactly how graffiti writers are able to transport their materials. There is even a sign above these objects, pleading with the graffitiists to resist tagging: "To All Taggers, Please do NOT mark on this truck and do NOT remove this sign. Thank you." The rebellious intention of graffitiists is twisted into a moment of comedy as

viewers realize that the sign was most likely stolen. The new edits made for the Walker exhibit also indicates McGee's interest in communicating his own subjectivity about graffiti culture. Even the title of the show, "Regards, Barry McGee," implies a certain amount of nostalgia, which is fused in his works and presented as a memoir of his graffiti past.

The accompanying catalog is as much a significant feature of the exhibit as the actual works on display. The catalog is printed in a fanzine format filled with pictures of not only the exhibition, but also, other works by the artist, photographs of Brazil and San Francisco, homeless people sleeping on open sidewalks, buff markings on walls, and other types of street imagery familiar to the artist (Figure 18). This format is reminiscent of graffiti fanzines, which were circulated among writers as a way of communicating news and pictures of new pieces that were visible at the time. A grassroots form of publication, fanzines were a way writers would be informed about the new happenings of the graffiti world. Many graffiti fanzines were simple paper booklets with Xeroxed images of pieces and text detailing current news.

The catalog's format also refers to another part of the culture in which writers would exchange sketches from their blackbooks and photographs of pieces by their heroes, friends, or even rare works that no longer existed, similar to the exchange of baseball cards. Blackbooks, or piece books, act like sketchbooks or autograph books for writers (Figure 19). Writers illustrate pieces and throwups in their blackbooks as detailed and vibrant blueprints for the eventual wall versions. In his study of New York graffiti culture, Greg Snyder described the sketches in the blackbook of New York writer "Clif"

as having “so much energy on those pages.”⁵⁰ Not only do these blackbooks and photographs record graffiti pieces and their conception, but they also consecrate graffiti as an artistic institution. Similarly, McGee is consecrating his personal memories of his graffiti life in the zine format of the catalog in an intimate manner. The catalog represents the extent to which the artist would create and memorialize graffiti as an inspirational experience to his audience. The artist described his objective best in his interview with then Walker Curatorial Assistant, Eungie Joo:

EJ: Finally, describe the body of work you are creating for the exhibition at the Walker Art Center.

BM: Large wall drawings. Bottles. Framed sketches and drawings. Metal wall. Things that float in and out of the urban mindset: A man passed out in the middle of the street. A graffitied truck. An ATM machine. An Apple Computer “Think Differently” billboard. An old-timers’ bar. A guy walking down Market Street in just a hospital gown. Burger King. A Budweiser ad. Graffitied MUNI buses. A pitbull on a chain leash. Squatter kids. A nice tag on a roll-down gate. A guy blinking uncontrollably. A 75-year-old man on a five-year-old’s bike. A woman with welts all over her body, in a fluorescent green mini skirt and high heels. A car on fire. A 13-foot-tall scribe on Nordstrom’s glass.⁵¹

While McGee was interested in creating an overall experience of the urban environment, the format of his works were still, for the most part, two-dimensional; many of his works were in the form of paintings and prints. These flat surfaces present his memories of tagging graffiti as a journal or novel that the viewer reads and internally synthesizes, rather than fully engages. The viewer’s own experience with McGee’s works is only ascertained by what is portrayed on the surface level; this was another reason why McGee moves toward installation pieces as they confront the viewer directly about the

⁵⁰ Gregory J. Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York’s Urban Underground* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 68.

⁵¹ Eungie Joo, interview with Barry McGee, in *Regards, Barry McGee*, ed. Eungie Joo (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998), np.

artist's message. With the installation, the artist is able to represent the world of graffiti that gives his audience the context in which his works can be understood. McGee realized the limitations of painting while partaking in *Indelible Market* with two other street artists, Stephen Powers and Todd James, who influenced his decision to produce installations.

Indelible Market (May-July 2000) was a joint exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania between three street artists: Barry McGee, Stephen Powers (“Espo”), and Todd James (“Reas”). The exhibition was one component of several different shows with the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and the University of Pennsylvania, celebrating Philadelphia's colorful history of public art. The curator for this exhibition, Alex Baker, met Stephen Powers, who proposed to put on a street art exhibition at the Institution. Powers asked McGee and James, both of whom he knew from tagging in New York, to be involved in the show. Powers and James conjured the idea of producing and displaying an urban corner store in the exhibition. They wanted to create a store in which the signs, product labels, and commercial packaging for goods would be designed to their liking. Eventually, the two artists sourced a real bodega from New York's Little Italy neighborhood and completely re-designed all of the signs and products that featured their particular styles (Figure 20). Billboards with advertisements parodying the capitalist nature of real billboard advertisements (“Check Writer/STAY PAID”), or even those with just the artist's tags and stacked one above the other to intrude into the viewer's visual space (Figure 21). Inside, the store is filled with typical products bearing carefully designed labels—soda bottles labeled with abstract coloration and shapes, cans with colorful bulls-eyes and stripes, and even packaged

products of “STREET CRED” and “SHIT”—and more signs warning customers of the consequences of shoplifting (Figure 22).⁵² Wall tags and chemical buffs were also added on the exterior of the bodega to recreate the urban environment from which the bodega originated.

Compared to the collaborative effort of Powers and James, McGee’s contribution was virtually separate from the market installation. Not only was it in a different gallery than the bodega, but it was also much different in form. Many of his works were in fact reiterations of previous works he created for past exhibitions. His famous red mural with monochromatic faces, tags, and stylized “buffs” of paint was displayed on one wall of the room (Figure 23).⁵³ Other recognizable pieces, such as the letterpress plate mural, bottle installation, and clustered display of frames occupied the rest of the space; the majority of McGee’s works were still two-dimensional in form (Figure 24). Overall, *Indelible Market* may have appeared to be comprised of two separate exhibitions rather than a cohesive single show. However, McGee’s contribution may have more in common with Power’s and James’ than meets the eye. What appears to be an anarchical slap-in-the-face of visual imagery can be understood as the exploration of graffiti, or the recognition of graffiti as an artistic practice and experience.⁵⁴ While Powers and James exploit the similarities between graffiti and advertisement in their installation, McGee’s wall murals and clusters exemplify graffiti’s overlap with studio painting—the relationship between medium (spray paint) and surface (wall).

⁵² The mise-en-scène of the market’s interior could be a possible reference to Apu Nahasapeemapetilon’s Kwik-E-Mart in the animated sitcom *The Simpsons*.

⁵³ Buffs are the markings leftover from the chemical removal of graffiti.

⁵⁴ Alex Baker, “Chaos and Control,” 83.

The placement of McGee's pieces before the market is also important to consider in the artist's exploration of graffiti. By placing the two-dimensional pieces of McGee's before the three-dimensional installation of the street market, the viewer must engage with the exhibition's chronology. Viewing McGee's pieces first, the audience is observing the formal qualities that are produced by the spray-paint medium, i.e. graffiti as a form of its underground roots. Once the audience moves to the next gallery, they can see the form becoming the foundation for graffiti's acculturation. Powers and James both use the language of advertisements and corporations in the urban market in order to transform it into the graffiti writer's utopia.

All together, the exhibition presented a discourse of graffiti on the level of what Benjamin Buchloh calls the aesthetic "institution."⁵⁵ Just like the Conceptual artists of the post-war period about whom Buchloh writes, McGee, Powers, and James present graffiti as having already inscribed within its language its self-reflexivity as a medium and form. The graffiti tradition is presented, here, as a type of institution. Writers learn how to build technique and form through other experienced writers, much like a studio artist will learn his craft from taking studio classes or studying under an experienced artist. And through repetition, writers perfect their craft and develop their own style, which is to be produced all throughout the city ("getting up"). Hopefully, these new accomplished writers will pass down the tradition to the new generation of writers by teaching ("schooling") them. McGee shows the language of graffiti as very much a painterly form and a product of these cultural traditions. Powers and James present the institution of graffiti as a physical structure, from which writers can acquire "STREET CRED."

⁵⁵ Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55(1990): 136.

After *Indelible Market* was exhibited in 2000, McGee began to embrace the installation format in his own work and exhibitions. Shortly after *Indelible Market* was exhibited at the ICA, it traveled to Deitch Projects in New York, where McGee included overturned vans and trucks covered in graffiti tags. He also brought along his assistant, Josh Lazcano (“Amaze”), another fellow graffitist from San Francisco. Along with Lazcano, McGee contributed billboard signs and products for the bodegas as well as his usual clustered frames and bottles. Renamed *Street Market*, the Deitch Projects show was much more cohesive and expansive compared to the original ICA exhibition with additions of several bodegas and billboards.

His switch to installation from painting can be credited to his collaboration with Powers and James, who are known to create works embodying the graffiti writer persona. As “Espo,” Powers was known for tagging his name in a large, block-like typeface on the streets that are similar in form to old factory signs painted on the side of buildings (Figure 25).⁵⁶ Espo is known in his pieces to exploit the visual form of the logo, the ultimate form of corporate culture, in order to present himself as his own corporation.⁵⁷ In fact, he transformed his own tag, which was originally a pun on the first letters of his first and last name, into a corporatized acronym, standing for his organization, “Exterior Surface Painting Outreach.” As Powers illegally painted pull-down metal doors of New York markets, he would present himself as a member of the ESPO corporation in order to

⁵⁶ The recent documentary *Sign Painters* (2014) interviews many current and retired sign painters about the profession and its history. Stephen Powers was featured as an interviewee. In the film, he considers himself a sign painter and states that he paints from “the point of view of the sign painter.” His conceptual approach to graffiti production shows the similarities in visual advertisements and graffiti both in form and content. See *Sign Painters*, directed by Faythe Levine and Sam Macon (2014, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2014), iTunes/DVD.

⁵⁷ Tristan Manco, *Street Logos* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 8.

evade police arrest. He even created a website for the “company” with the fictional Chief Financial Officer, Mark Surface, making a statement about the company’s philosophy:

The Exterior Surface Painting Outreach is a not-for-profits volunteer organization dedicated to making the world a different place. We accomplish our status by stepping up and seizing space wholesale, and selling it back to the public at retail. After paying a percentage of royalties to Revs, and reinvesting in Home Depot Futures, the rest is pure profit. We tax toys, stay tax-exempt, and hold slackers in contempt. Currently we have over 28 sites on visual lockdown in the 5 boroughs of New York. In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the come-up, grate keepers are dispatched at all hours, and have a get-over rate of 96.5%. That’s over 62% more dope than the leading brand. The bottom line for ESPO is oil-based Gloss Black, and the future holds nothing but Aluminum for the stockholders of this fine company.” –Mark Surface CFO, from the annual stockholders meeting keynote speech.⁵⁸

Surface’s commentary takes the form of a corporate speech, replacing corporate jargon with graffiti terminology (“not-for-profits”, “toys,” “get-over”, etc.). The language, here, is used to parody the complex and confusing nature of corporate jargon, which many people have trouble understanding, while simultaneously targeting a specific audience: only those who are familiar with graffiti culture (i.e. graffiti writers) can understand the satirical language Powers uses here to describe his own “corporation.”

The partnership between Powers and James in creating the market is seemingly natural as they both exhibit a similar approach to image-making. Todd James also takes on a satirical approach in his graffiti. Having grown up tagging the New York subways, many of his signs, drawings, and sculptures reflect on his personal life and graffiti experiences in the city. Many of his works explore his tag “Reas” in various media and formats, such as painting and graphic prints. He also uses “street” iconography in his pieces, such as caricatures of young and often, nude women in pink and white performing

⁵⁸ “ESPO: Exterior Surface Painting Outreach,” Espo and Art Crimes, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://www.artcrimes.com/espo/speech.html>.

everyday activities, and sculptures of automatic weapons and brass knuckles (Figure 26). His contribution to *Indelible Market* also utilized what Rachel Greene calls his “bravura and a taste for the fucked up” that were incorporated into elements of the larger, operative scene.⁵⁹ He produced objects, such as cans of “STREET CRED” and “SHIT” as well as billboard signs with the letters of REAS formed by the heads of his female figures. Along with the market, both James and Powers covered the very walls around the installation with more of their familiar and stylistically similar iconographies, such as prints of bikini-clad women and a wall painting of a cartoon bank robber.

McGee witnessed the efficacy of the market installation to grab the viewer’s attention firsthand during *Indelible Market*. Not only were visitors able to interact with the art, but it also embodied Powers’ and James’ message about the underground institution of graffiti.⁶⁰ It is able to portray the culture of graffiti in its entirety, or as Eungie Joo describes, “its attitude, process, and gestural elements.”⁶¹ This embodiment of graffiti’s culture in their art as well as their own personas also confuse whether the installation is authentic graffiti. The installation’s large scale and ability to reproduce the real world contribute to the viewer’s perception of the subject at hand as real. Scholars made claims connecting graffiti to readymades due to the reappropriation of graffiti into the art context, and failed to take into account their very different origins. In the following section, I demonstrate why the claims connecting Duchamp’s readymades and McGee’s installations fail as a framework for reading graffiti in the institutional context

⁵⁹ Todd James, *Todd James* (Hong Kong: Testify Books, 2002), np.

⁶⁰ Baker wrote, “The bodega is one of those urban holdouts resistant to gentrification and corporatization—a fitting metaphor for the graffiti writer. Alex Baker, “Chaos and Control”, 86.

⁶¹ Eungie Joo, interview, np.

and then introduce a comparison between Edward Kienholz' tableaus and Barry McGee's installations as an alternative context for reading McGee's art.

Barry McGee's *Tableaus of Graffiti*

One of the most influential contributions of 20th century art was the readymade exposed by Marcel Duchamp. In 1913, Duchamp produced his first prototype of the readymade, *Bicycle Wheel (Roué de bicyclette)*, composed of a bicycle wheel mounted upside-down on top of a wooden stool (Figure 27). As a "sculpture already made," Duchamp did not manipulate the materials of *Bicycle Wheel* as a sculptor would manipulate a slab of marble with a chisel.⁶² He chose his materials, the bicycle wheel and the stool, and simply positioned them in a manner that provided a new meaning to the object. The *Bicycle Wheel* transformed two mass-produced, utilitarian objects into a nonfunctional aesthetic form. William Camfield described the new product: "Though composed of two distinct parts (the bicycle wheel and the stool), it exists as a well-proportioned whole, human in its scale and uprightness and Brancusi-like in the dialogue between 'base' and 'object,' which share such features as light, taut, open constructions based on circles and spokes."⁶³

Arguably Duchamp's most famous readymade, *Fountain* also transformed a utilitarian object, the urinal, into a work of sculpture (Figure 28). Purchased from the showroom of J.L. Mott Iron Works, the porcelain urinal was rotated 90 degrees from its

⁶² William Camfield, "Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: aesthetic object, icon, or anti-art?" in *The Definitively unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry de Duve (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 140.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 149-152.

usual position and placed on a pedestal.⁶⁴ Signed and dated by Duchamp masquerading as the mysterious “R. Mutt,” *Fountain* caused a great scandal when it was submitted to the 1917 New York exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists. A commentary on the incident entitled “The Richard Mutt Case” in the journal *The Blind Man* defended *Fountain* as a significant work of art:

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.⁶⁵

The controversy behind *Fountain* was that it was clearly not a conventional sculpture, one that contained the visible markings of the artist’s hand on its surface, by the standards of the Salon. While supporters of the urinal pointed out the aesthetic appeal of its form, it exposed the significant role the institution plays in assigning an object’s art value. What made the urinal into an art object is the artist’s selection of it as a worthy submission for the salon exhibition. By displacing the readymade from its original context (of the restroom) and re-placing it into a new art-context, Duchamp transformed the urinal, a product of industrial design, into art, more specifically modern art.

According to Thierry de Duve, Duchamp’s readymade was a result of a new “category” of art that was no longer absorbed in the traditional disciplines, but rather in the tradition of Clement Greenberg’s modernism, which is to question the nature of art through the means of art. He states, “Duchamp[’s readymade] went straight to the most primary convention, the most elementary (I don’t say ‘essential’) of all *modernist* artistic

⁶⁴ Ibid 137.

⁶⁵ Moure, Gloria, ed., *Marcel Duchamp: Works, Writings and Interviews* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2009), 118.

practice, namely that works of art are shown in order to be judged as such.”⁶⁶ Though *Fountain* was never shown at the American Society of Independent Artists, it was recognized and even defended by some of its members as an aesthetic form. The context in which the object was presented is also important in its reception as art object; simply, by subjecting it to be judged in the context of an art exhibition elevated its status to that of art, and revealed all of the unspoken rules of the institution’s own criteria for what constitutes art. Therefore, the readymade simultaneously criticizes the nature of art as well as the institution that elevates it to such a status.

McGee understands the significance of context in which he is presenting his own works. He himself stated that he keeps his indoor work and outdoor work separate. He, too, is subjecting his own work in a similar manner as Duchamp did with his readymades; he displaces his graffiti practice from its original context of the street and re-places it in the gallery context to provide a new meaning to graffiti. However, the objectives of the two artists in re-contextualizing their art are different. de Duve points out that Duchamp’s intention for the readymade was to present it as a statement of itself as art object.⁶⁷ His presentation of the urinal as *Fountain* in an institutional context hones in on the work’s ostensive nature. McGee, too, presents his graffiti practice in the same context, but his works are shown as a statement of negation. If *Fountain* declares “This is art,” then McGee’s indoor works state “This is not graffiti.” His purpose is to convey graffiti as a practice, rather than graffiti as an art object. This is not to say that McGee does not view his installations as art. Whereas Duchamp demonstrates his art as autonomous objects,

⁶⁶ Thierry de Duve, “Echoes of the Readymade,” in *The Duchamp Effect*, ed. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 96.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 97.

McGee presents his art as a result of its social origins—graffiti as an artistic form *and* a culture.

Another key difference between the two is how these statements are communicated. The term “readymade” implies that it has already achieved its status as art in its most reductive state; all aesthetic artifice is denied in *Fountain*, reducing it to solely an object of institutional critique. In addition, the urinal is a *pre-made* functional object that is reconfigured as art. Meanwhile, McGee’s wall paintings and assemblages are unmistakably objects of artifice. The overt baroque-ness and exuberance of his works provide clear evidence of his hand in their fabrication. The rich details of his paintings mimic the spontaneity and chaos of graffiti in the streets, described by the artist himself as “seasoned with layers and years of the contributions of various writers, amateur and experienced.”⁶⁸ With these fabricated works, he is presenting a history of graffiti from the subjective experience of the writer. For many years, graffiti was a tradition that was passed down from experienced to amateur writers with certain rules and rites—this is the crux of McGee’s art. The subject of his art is the narrative of graffiti, the long history of the culture told by its participants. His indoor works become physical manifestations of this history that inform those who may not know about the inner workings of graffiti culture. Essentially, he is validating graffiti techniques as a method of artistic production.

Because of the emphasis on the narrative of graffiti, the comparison to Duchamp’s readymades is unsatisfactory. The readymade abruptly pointed out the limitations of the institution’s definition of art from within rather than provide an alternative history from a new perspective. I introduce an alternative framework for reading McGee’s indoor art by comparing it with Edward Kienholz’s tableaux. Having no

⁶⁸ Eungie Joo, interview.

formal degree in fine art, Kienholz brings his unique background and memories of living in rural American towns into his tableaux. Like McGee's installations, his tableaux bring attention to the grim reality of the places and events he represents, producing a visceral reaction from the viewer. With this comparison, I hope to bring attention to Kienholz's contributions to this history and bridge the gap between graffiti and fine art.

Kienholz was an installation artist and sculptor, who worked during the post-World War II period. He began his artistic career as an assemblage painter, combining found objects with canvas paintings. He grew up on a farm in Eastern Washington, where he learned a range of mechanical and physical skills. His ability to perform carpentry, plumbing, and other kinds of trade became the basis for his unconventional approach to producing sculpture. His sculptures consist of found objects he would find from junkyards, which would then be juxtaposed in disjointed ways and combinations to evoke the grotesque. The use of found objects is significant to Kienholz' sculptures as the aesthetic appearance of wear contributes to their grotesque nature and personal histories—each sculpture is presented with a story or persona, giving the figures a lifelike presence. At the beginning of the 1960s, Kienholz began to create immense installations called *tableaus*. These tableaux were completely large, enclosed spaces containing an arrangement of his found sculptures and objects, which referred to real human situations and environments. As viewers enter the tableaux, they move through the space encountering the sculptures, which provide a shock factor that forces viewers to confront them and the surrounding environment.

One of the artist's first tableaux of this scale was *Roxys* (1961-1962). *Roxys* was based on the brothels the artist saw living in Eastern Washington and Idaho (Figure 29).

Inside are a series of furnished rooms with mannequin figures composed from various objects, including stools, sack bags, puppet heads, sewing tables, and bedpans. These figures are posed in various positions and roles and placed throughout the enclosed domestic environment. These prostitutes, who are given names, like Five Dollar Billy and Cockeyed Jenny, are presented as fetish dolls ready to serve their customers. There is even a Madam with the head of an animal's skull standing in the middle of the room, waiting to greet entering visitors. Viewers are able to walk into *Roxys* and explore the scene around them.

Though *Roxys* represents a commonplace setting, Kienholz focuses on its grotesque nature. The figures' bodies are mutilated and deformed, and their placement throughout the brothel feels more like a house of horrors than a place for sex. Each prostitute with her own given name also brings with her a backstory that strikes at the viewer's pathos. One figure named Miss Cherry Delight is represented by a dressing table with an array of perfume bottles, make-up, and a doll's head suspended over the table's surface (Figure 30). In one of the drawers is a letter from her sister, which was sent to another address before it was forwarded to the brothel. The letter describes their family situation back at home to whom Miss Cherry Delight sends money each month, and expresses pride and happiness that her sister is doing so well financially.⁶⁹ The spatial context of this *mise-en-scène* also grabs the attention of the viewer. The interior space is an ordinary domestic setting furnished with sofas, end tables, lamps, and pictures hanging on the wall. Upon entering the unexceptional space, the viewer's confrontation of the figures' vulgarity becomes even more jarring. As the only source of light in the brothel,

⁶⁹ Walter Hopps, ed., *Kienholz: A Retrospective*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 90.

the lamps illuminate certain parts of the room while casting others in shadow. This high range of light and dark creates a sense of anxiety and uncertainty as one enters the room and meets the individuals one by one.

A later tableau, *The State Hospital* (1966), consisted of a similar fragmentary mode of representation as *Roxys*.⁷⁰ Inspired by the hospital where Kienholz worked, the tableau was constructed as a closed, sterile patient room of a psychiatric ward (Figure 31). Inside is a rusty set of bunk beds with two identical figures lying on each bed and an empty bedpan on the floor in front of them. Their bodies are naked and have a mummified appearance to them. Their heads are composed of fishbowls with goldfish swimming inside as if the figures' mental capacities are reduced to that of a goldfish. The figure above is encircled in the thought bubble of the figure below, which is made of a singular florescent tube of bright neon light. Here, Kienholz shows the audience a fragment of the real world—the private hospital room of a mental patient—that has been displaced from its “real” context of the hospital. There are no attendants or objects, and the only window in the room is the one that is barred on the door. The viewers must piece the narrative together via their interaction with the enclosed space. The viewer is presented with what is essentially a large white box. The door with the barred window entices the viewer to approach the box and look inside. Once they do look, they see the lifeless figures of the patients lit by the glow of the neon tube and the single light bulb on the ceiling. The viewer's position as the voyeur provokes mixed feelings of compassion

⁷⁰ *State Hospital* began as a part of another series Kienholz called the “concept tableau”, where the artist produced a detailed, written description and preliminary sketches of a tableau concept that is to be sold to a collector. Kienholz also draws up a legal contract for the purchaser (“Contract for Purchase of a Concept Tableau”), transferring the ownership of the concept to the purchaser and negotiating the price of the concept tableaux for one-third of the estimated price of production. *State Hospital* was never sold as a concept tableau, and in 1966, the artist took on the initiative of actualizing it in physical form.

and pity for the figures inside. As Marco Livingstone wrote about the artist in his essay, the tableau “confirms the limited lifespace of all things and bring us face-to-face with our own mortality.”⁷¹

Just as Kienholz takes on the role of casting director for his tableaux, Barry McGee presents the viewer with different components of his graffiti story throughout the exhibition space in order for the viewer to gradually come to an understanding about the culture. This tableau-style representation allows the artist to unfold the story in fragments. In the three-dimensional form of the installation, the tableaux become realized as tableau vivants, or “living pictures”, which present the subject at hand as a staged performance—much like the display of wax sculptures in a museum. Looking at McGee’s oeuvre as a whole, he is presenting the viewer with a staged performance of graffiti. His red mural presents what he himself called a “history” of graffiti, indicated by the spontaneous juxtaposition of tags, characters, and buffs. His “hyper-salon style” display of frames, which contain photographs of real figures and locations, drawings and prints, proliferate like graffiti in the urban environment as writers try to outdo each other’s pieces, testing the spatial capacity of the entire wall until it begins to swell outward. The clustered hanging of empty liquor bottles with the everyman figures remind us of the homeless population on the streets and their mental and health afflictions as well as of the overflow of offerings given to the beloved patron saints of the people of Brazil, where the artist lived for a brief interlude. The viewer gathers these bits and pieces of information as they move through McGee’s installations in order to reveal an encompassing representation of graffiti that unravels the secrets of its mysterious rituals.

⁷¹ Nancy Redding Kienholz and Marco Livingstone, ed., *Kienholz: Tableau Drawings* (Los Angeles: LA Louver Publications, 2001), 91.

McGee's creation of an ethnography of graffiti is really a reproduction of the writer's world from his subjectivity, and it is the fact that his indoor works are reproductions that become the point of divergence from his outdoor works. What the artist is presenting in his indoor works is graffiti's value as an artistic practice, which is different from an art. Graffiti as a practice is more appropriate than as an art because it includes both the form and the act in its definition. While an art is a product of an artistic practice (and sometimes as the practice itself), it primarily refers to the physical form or object. Even though graffiti has a discrete form, it is a habit, an inherent need to affirm oneself, which can be traced back to prehistoric cave paintings. Graffiti cannot be autonomous to the same degree as painting or sculpture, because it is too closely intertwined with its maker, history, and culture. The act of tagging one's name is the most intimate form of self-expression there is.

Through the combination of graffiti techniques, found objects and surfaces, academic techniques, and configuration of the installation format, McGee is displaying a new type of practice in his installations. In her seminal essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss redefines the artistic practice of the postmodern era as being "no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation."⁷² Under this new definition, McGee's installations fit in well as they display the culture of graffiti down to its intimate details. In the gallery context, graffiti's transgressive nature becomes benign and is given a certain amount of historicism that qualifies it as an alternative mode of representation. Therefore, the artist knows that his gallery works are not fit to be

⁷² Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *October* 8 (1979): 43.

considered “graffiti” or “art,” but instead, they produce a new form that reconciles graffiti as a method of artistic creation and a way of life.

When Eungie Joo asked Barry McGee in their interview together for the *Regards, Barry McGee* catalog what he believes to be graffiti, McGee answered, “I’m not sure what graffiti is. I know it when I see it, though. What I mean by graffiti is markings applied onto a given surface with almost anything that is available.”⁷³ His response to the question unveiled that graffiti is something that can only be recognized with experience. Graffiti, then, is not necessarily about the mark made, but rather, the act of making the mark. When one considers the consequences a writer faces in order to paint his tag, one recognizes the tradition and commitment the writer must possess to execute it. Graffiti, to McGee, is a practice, just as canvas painting is a practice. Therefore, the artist does not want the viewer to focus on graffiti’s nature as a mark of opposition against an institution, but instead, as a rich and close-knit community of accomplished and aspiring individuals engaging in an artistic dialogue. McGee’s installations reflect this new practice by recasting “our understanding of discrete objects, painting as action, and the use of text in contemporary art” through the incorporation of “the attitude, process, and gestural elements of unsanctioned street art.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Eungie Joo, interview, np.

⁷⁴ Eungie Joo, *Regards, Barry McGee* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998), np.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Barry McGee continues to exhibit and produce art to this day, but has left his graffiti days behind him. In 2012, the Berkeley Art Museum hosted McGee's mid-career retrospective, which included works both new and old, filling the entire interior. His filling the museum space with his art is a clear indication of his desire to provide an experience of the graffiti writer's life. Today, street art is a hot commodity in the art market. News stories about walls tagged by streets artists, such as Banksy, Shepherd Fairey, and even McGee himself, being torn down and auctioned for large sums of money are becoming more frequent. These artists' styles and logos are also being used on limited edition prints, books, and apparel, which are also sold for profit in mass quantities. In the contemporary moment where art is primarily linked to a monetary value, McGee reminds us with his installations that art is a product of the human experience, and that, in and of itself, gives it value.

Graffiti and street art are not new to the academic field. In fact, there are studies conducted in the fields of sociology, criminology, geography and archaeology. Yet, art historians and aestheticians have conducted very little research on its close relationship to visual art. Modern and contemporary art celebrates the individual experiences of the everyday, and it only seems fitting that graffiti and street art would be included in this category. By including more vernacular forms of artistic production as objects of study, we can examine the times that they manifest, and especially with graffiti and street art, we can scrutinize the direct exchange of discourse concerning the norms and conventions of society that we tend to take for granted. Graffiti should no longer be viewed as

vandalism or a form that lacks any finesse or thoughtfulness in its production because of its impact on our current culture and times.

The street art movement has invaded not only our spaces, but popular culture as well. It is now an international movement that includes innumerable styles, media and techniques, and is being featured in many of our most renowned institutions. By historicizing the present, we preserve parts of our culture that would be otherwise forgotten in the future.

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Bar or Funk style- lettering style characterized as simple block letters seen on bar signs, or vivacious lettering seen on funk albums.

Blackbook- a writer's sketchbook; also called "piece books"

Buff- markings leftover from the chemical removal of graffiti

Character- graffiti figure

Crew- a group of writers that formally come together to promote a particular writing style. A crew is also formed for protection from rival crews and camaraderie.

"Get up"- a phrase used by graffiti writers, meaning getting public exposure or recognition for one's pieces.

Graffiti- writing; writings or drawings scribbled, scratched, or painted illicitly.

Letters- refers to letterforms in a piece; writing.

New Wave- the style championed by TWS crew ("Together With Style"). It is characterized by chunky lettering and multiple coloring reminiscent of San Francisco's murals. It is described as a distinctly "San Francisco style."

Piece- a graffiti "masterpiece." It usually consists of large elaborate letters and coloring. Sometimes a piece can contain scenes or characters.

Style- refers to a type of writing or aesthetic.

Tag- a writer's name or the act of painting graffiti; also referred to as writing.

Throwup- a larger variation of a tag that is generally formed with outlined bubble letters.

Writer- another name for a graffiti artist. While the name refers to the graffiti artist's act of tagging letters, the terminology originated from the sign painting industry that boomed in the 19th century.

APPENDIX B

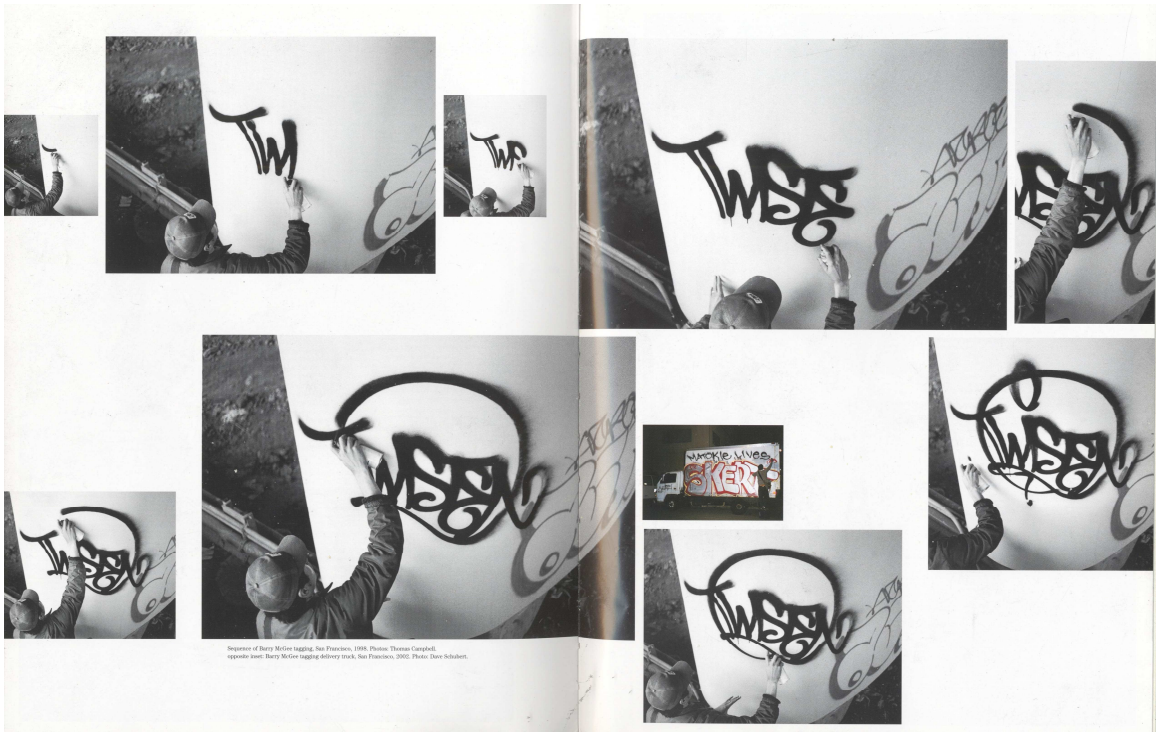
FIGURES



Fig. 1. Margaret Killgallen, detail of installation at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1999. Image reproduced from *Beautiful Losers* exhibition catalog (2004).



Fig. 2. Twist (Barry McGee), Twist painting an Everyman character, date unknown. Photo by Craig Costello.



Inspiration of Shery Miller tagging, San Francisco, 1988. Photos: Thomas Campbell.
reproduction: Barry McGee tagging delivery truck, San Francisco, 2002. Photos: Hans Schabus.

Fig. 3. Film sequence of Twist painting his tag “Twister,” San Francisco, 1998. Photos by Thomas Campbell. Reproduced from *Beautiful Losers* (2004).



Fig. 4. Twist, Reminisce and KR, Pieces on San Francisco building, c. 1993. Photograph by Jim Prigoff. Reproduced from *The History of American Graffiti* (2010).



Fig. 5. Crayone, “Ceen,” ca. 1980s. Photograph courtesy of Rigel Juratovac.



Fig. 6. Barry McGee, mural for Clarion Alley Mural Project, 1995, San Francisco. Photograph reproduced from *Barry McGee* (Prada Fondazione, 2002).



Fig. 7. Lee Quiñones, *Howard the Duck*, 1979. Photograph by Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff. Image reproduced from *City as Canvas* (2014).



Fig. 8. Construction of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 1992, San Francisco. Photographs courtesy of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.



Fig. 9. Brett Cook, portraits along construction site, ca. 1992, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Photos courtesy of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.



Fig. 10. Eduardo Pineda, detail of mural for construction site, ca. 1992, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Photo courtesy of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.



Fig. 11. Barry McGee, panel details of McGee's mural for construction site, ca. 1992, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.



Fig. 12. Barry McGee, installation view of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts exhibition, 1994, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Photos courtesy of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.



Fig. 13. Barry McGee, Buddha detail of YBCA exhibit, 1994, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Photo courtesy of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.



Fig. 14. Street view of Everyman mural, 1994, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Photo courtesy of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.



Fig. 15. Barry McGee, *Untitled*, 1998, mixed media. Photograph by Dan Dennehy. Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco. Image reproduced from *Regards, Barry McGee* exhibition catalog (1998).



Fig. 16. Barry McGee, *Untitled* (installation detail), 1998, mixed media. Photograph by Dan Dennehy. Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco. Image reproduced from *Regards, Barry McGee*.



Fig. 17. Barry McGee, *Untitled* (installation view), 1998, mixed media. Photograph by Dan Dennehy. Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco. Image reproduced from *Regards, Barry McGee*.

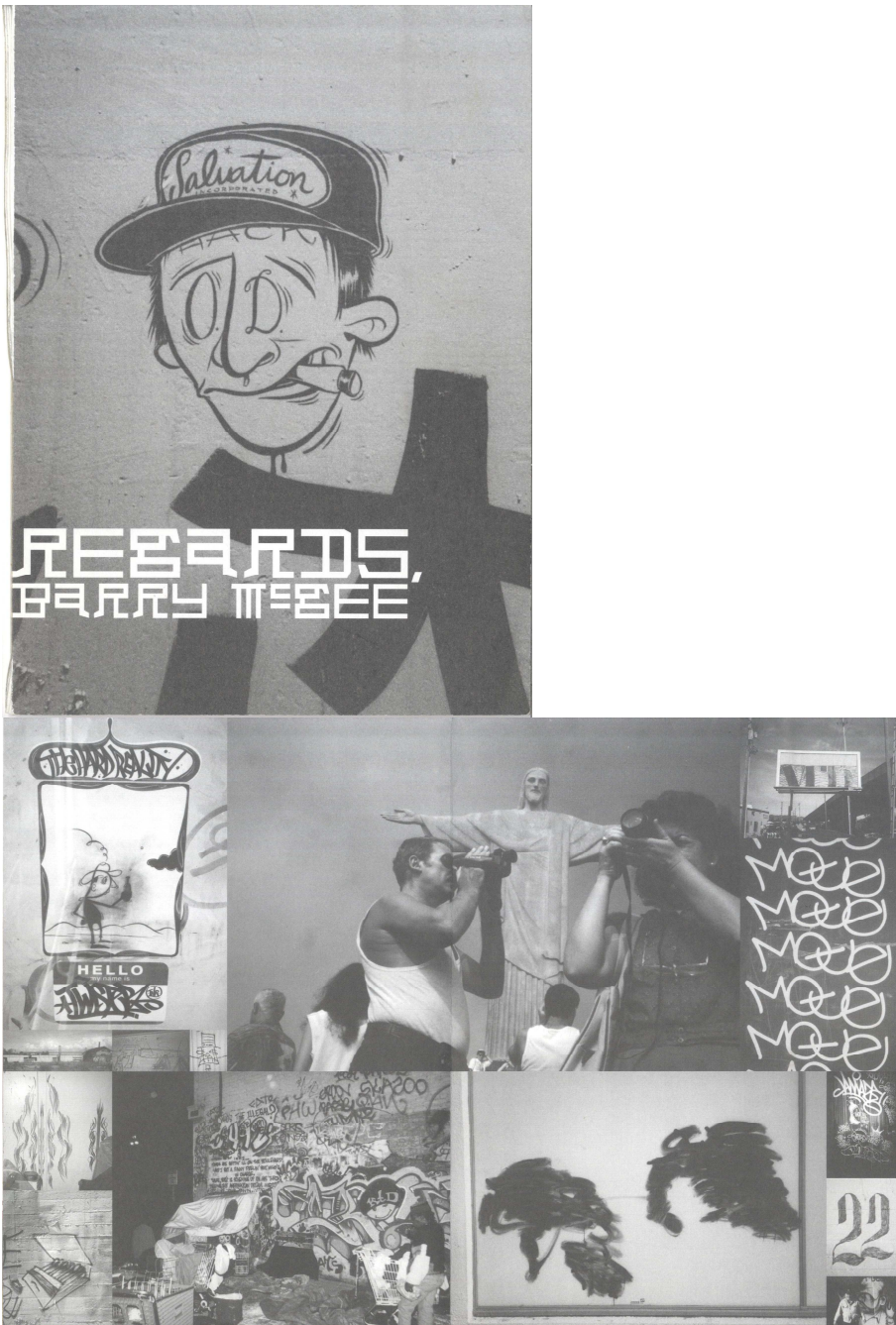


Fig. 18. Cover and sample pages of exhibition catalog for *Regards, Barry McGee, 1998*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Images reproduced from *Regards Barry McGee*.

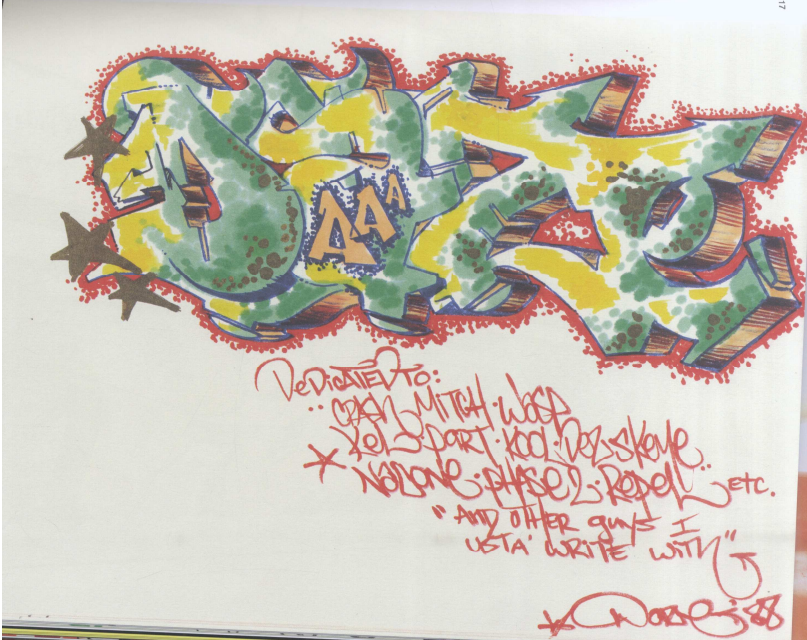


Fig. 19. Blackbook pages by Reas and Daze, 1980-1990, Martin Wong Collection, Museum of the City of New York. Images reproduced from *City as Canvas* (2014).



Fig. 20. Installation views of *Indelible Market*, 2000, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Photos courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.



Fig. 21. Installation view of *Indelible Market*



Fig. 22. Interior views of market installation of *Indelible Market*. Photograph by Adam Wallacavage. Photos courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.



Fig. 23. Barry McGee, *Untitled* (detail), 2000, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Photograph by Adam Wallacavage. Photo courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.



Fig. 24. Installation views of Barry McGee's works for *Indelible Market*. Photos by Adam Wallacavage.



Fig. 25. Top: Northern Engineering Works building, Detroit, MI, date unknown. Bottom: Stephen Powers, "ESPO," December 20-23, 1997, West Side Highway, New York. Image reproduced from *The Art of Getting Over: Graffiti at the Millennium* (1999).



Fig. 26. Todd James (“Reas”), drawings and sculptures, ca. early 2000s. Images reproduced from *Todd James* (2002).



Fig. 27. Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913 (replica of original, 1951), The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, Museum of Modern Art.



Fig. 28. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917 (replica of original, 1964), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Fig. 29. Edward Kienholz, *Roxys* (installation views), 1961. Images reproduced from *Kienholz: A Retrospective* (1996).



Fig. 30. Edward Kienholz, detail of *Miss Cherry Delight* in *Roxys*, 1961. Image reproduced from *Kienholz: A Retrospective* (1996).



Fig. 31. Edward Kienholz, *State Hospital*, 1966.

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