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Aspects of Graffiti

SEMINAR PROJECT REPORT BY SUKANYA SARKAR, GUIDED BY MR RAJA MOHANTY.

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BY MR RAJA MOHANTY.

Aspects of Graffiti

Visual Communication Seminar project submitted in
partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Master of
Design Degree in Industrial Design Centre.

By

Sukanya Sarkar

Guide

Mr. Raja Mohanty

• Industrial Design Centre
Indian Institute of Technology, Powai, Bombay-76

APPROVAL SHEET

The Visual Communication Seminar Project entitled "Aspects of Graffiti" by Ms. Sukanya Sarkar is approved in partial fulfilment of the requirement of Master of Design Degree at Industrial Design Centre.

Examiner:

Guide: *Rejishree*

Chairman:

Industrial Design Centre

Indian Institute of Technology, Powai, Bombay-76

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to Venkatesh, Vikas, IDC and walls of Bombay



The creative process is not performed by a skilled hand alone or by the intellect alone, but must be a unified process in which - head, heart and hand play a simultaneous role.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is the visual counterpart of speech. Marks, symbols, pictures, or letters drawn or written upon a surface or substrate become a graphic counterpart of spoken word or unspoken thought.

The limitations of speech are the fallibility of human memory and an immediacy of expression that cannot transcend time and place. Until the present electronic age, the spoken word vanished without a trace, the written word remained.

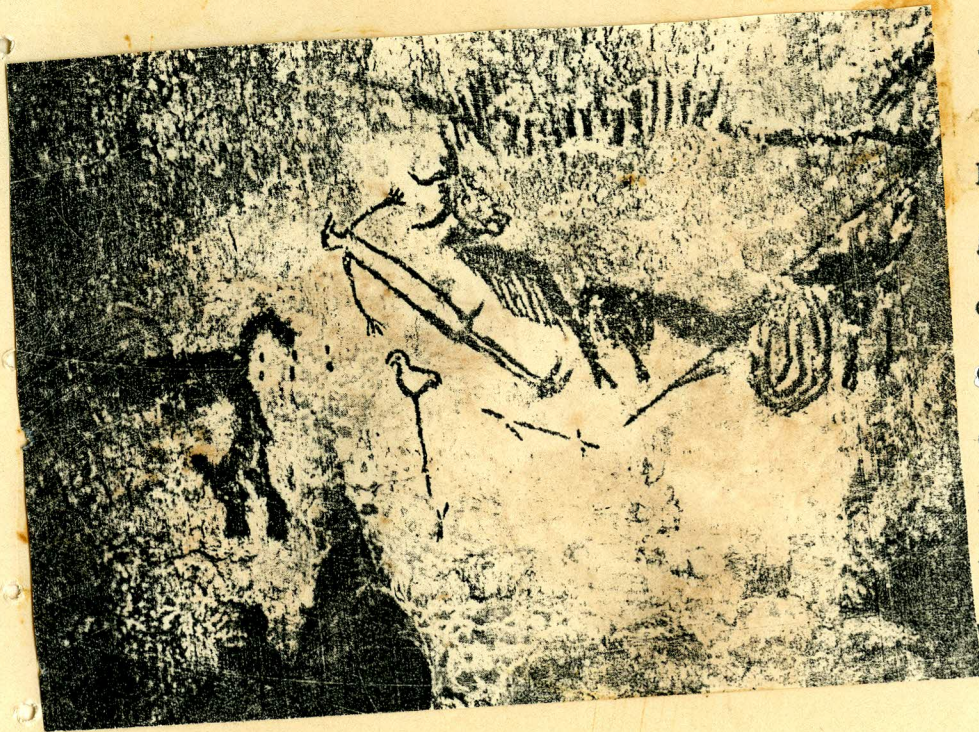
The invention of writing brought the lustre of civilization of people and made it possible to preserve hard won knowledge, experiences and thoughts.

The development of writing and visual language had its origins in simple pictures, for a close connection existing between drawing of the pictures and the marking of writing.

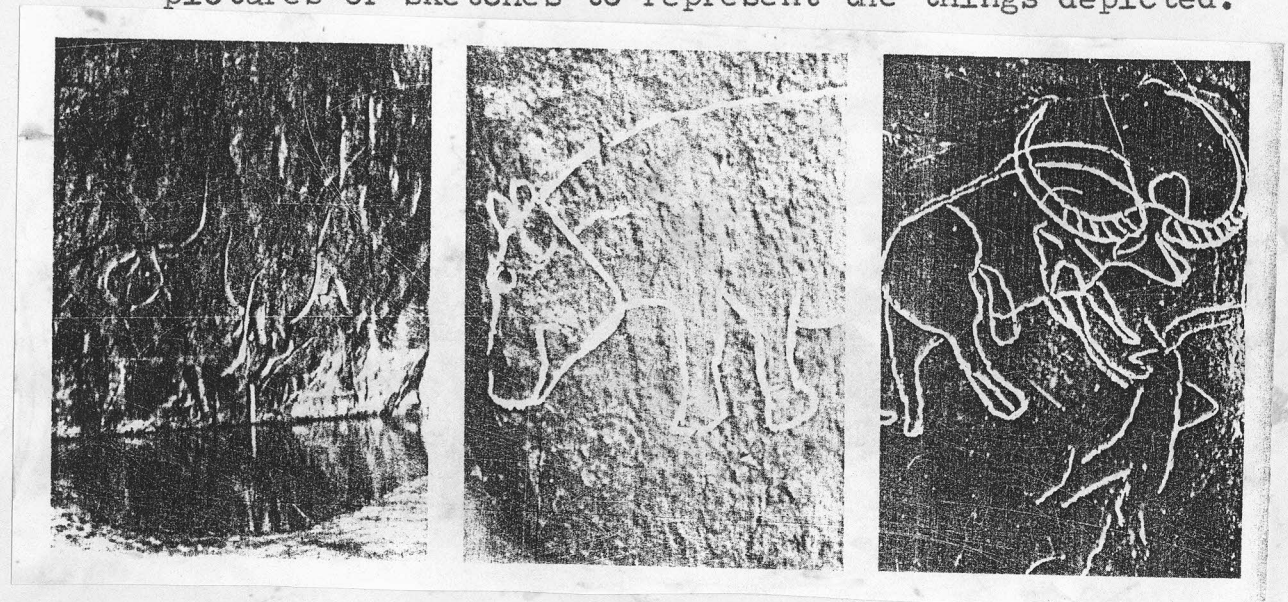
Both are natural ways of communicating ideas and primitive man used pictures as an elementary way to record and

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transmit information. Perhaps in the cave paintings the pigment was smeared onto the walls with a finger, or a brush was fabricated from bristles or reeds. This was not the beginning of art as we know it. Rather, it was the drawing of visual communications, because these early pictures were made for survival and were created for utilitarian and ritualistic purposes. The presence of what appears to be spear marks in the sides of some of these animal images indicates that they might have been used in magical rites designed to gain power over animals and success in the hunt. Or perhaps they were teaching aids to instruct the young on the process of hunting as a cooperative group effort. Abstract geometric signs including dots, squares and other configurations are intermingled with the animals in many cave paintings. Whether they represent man-made objects or are proto writing is not known. It will never be known with any certainty, because they were made before the beginning of history - the 5,000 year period during which people have recorded in writing a chronicle of



their knowledge of facts and events. The animals painted on the caves are pictographs - elementary pictures or sketches to represent the things depicted.



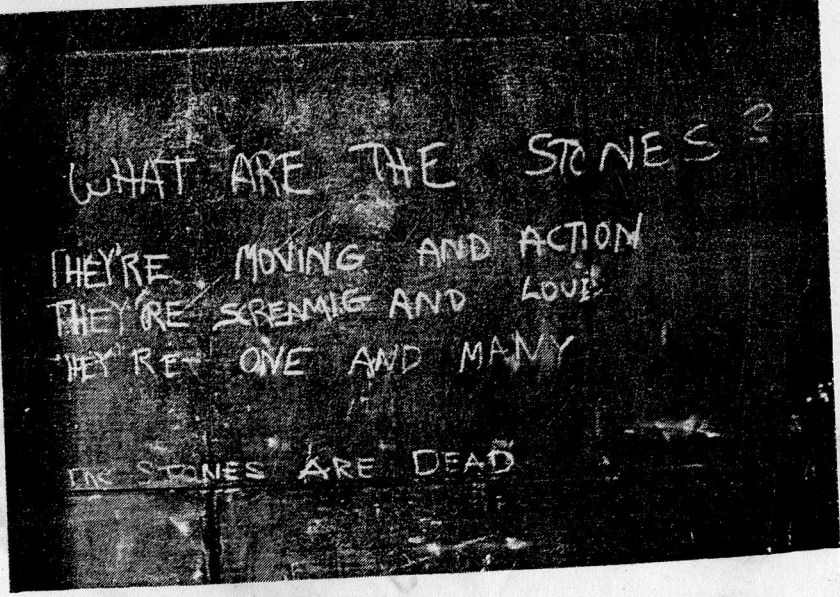
Aspects of Graffiti

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(REFERENCE TO ROBERT KOSTKA'S ARTICLE - VISIBLE LANGUAGE (1975-76))

As a natural part of our environment, graffiti is both spontaneous and functional, free from design conventions and often the sole communications weapon of an oppressed people. It can be a personal identification or it can mark the boundaries for an urban street gang. Its history is probably as old as writing itself. Graffiti has adapted personal expression to whatever space, writing tool, surface, or viewing requirements the environment demands.

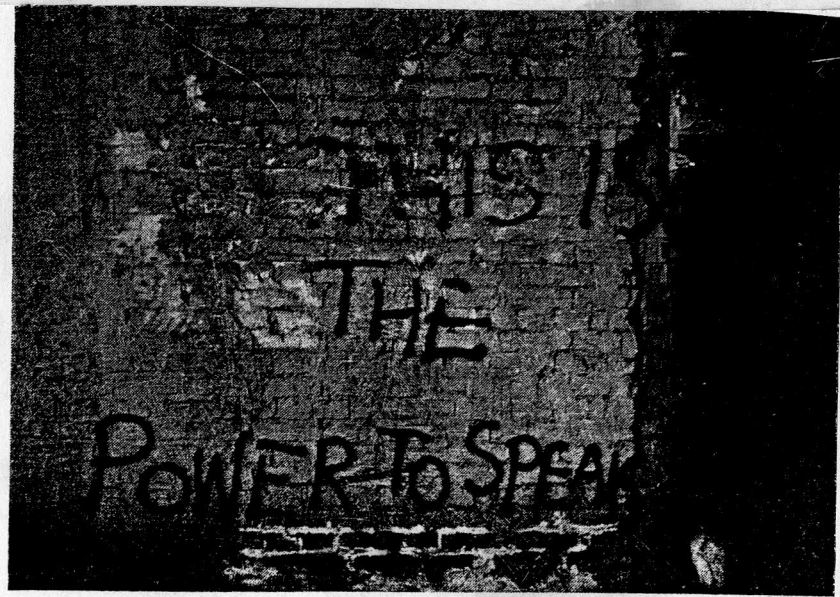
Graffiti is always new, spontaneous, and functional. It can shock us, amuse us, incite or bore us. Because graffiti is actually a highly structured communication medium, it can even instruct us. It is natural part of our visual environment, defining both the spaces and our responses within that environment. Even when it seems surprisingly new, graffiti is always familiar. Often pornographic, the content of graffiti tends to be more informational or persuasive. Experiencing



Graffiti eulogy for a Chicago street gang.

graffiti is more immediate than is the "naive sign". Graffiti is free from the design conventions of signs, as well as from economic or political limitations. It has often been the sole communication weapon of an oppressed people. Unlike the naive sign, it is not a folk-art, but a public medium and can be applied easily to any convenient surface.

Although graffiti is a visual medium, its origins do not lie within the history of art. Graffiti grew out of man's man's biological capability and necessity of expressing his immediate thoughts. For a child, to make a mark becomes a confirmation of his own developing kinetic sense, a record that his hand has moved through space. This mark becomes his own mark, an external visible sign of his identity and existence. This Kinetic dialogue evolves from mark to sign to symbol as a constant interaction between himself and his environment.



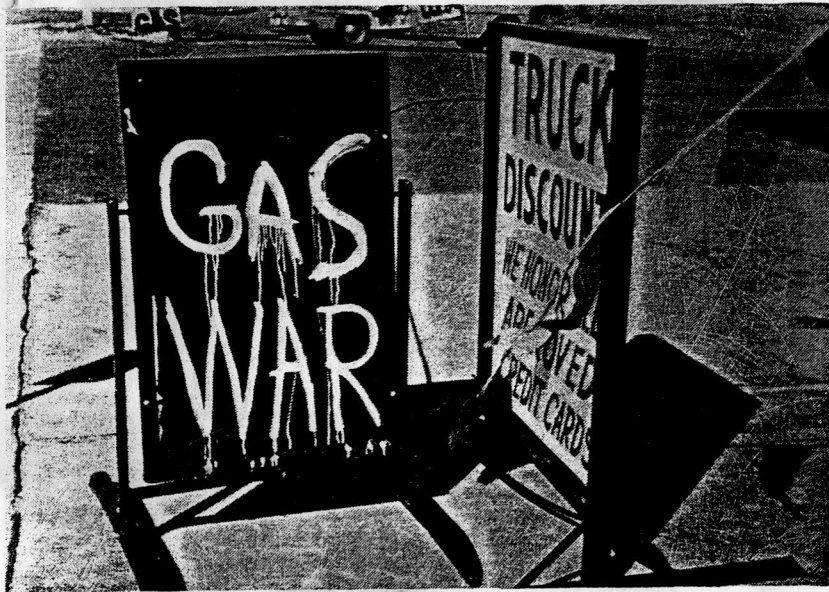
The potential of graffiti as a communications medium, Cambridge, England.

Norman Mailer describes the kinetic relationship of boys in the New York ghettos to their spray-can graffiti on buses and subway cars. They spray their "mark" on

vehicles that move through the city, which then "return to them". Identity is confirmed by the return of your own sign, still more kinetically enhanced by throwing rocks at "your car," or aggressively at someone else's identity.

Graffiti probably surfaced only after writing had ceased to be magic. The "macaroni lines" incised by Paleolithic cave dwellers used the kinetic mark as their first content, believed to be both informational and magical. The repeated and careful incising suggest complex purposes, which later developed into the pictorial images of an Altamira or a Lascaux. The Romans scratched their (and our) favourite four-letter word on carved stone signs and walls. Writing in Roman times was hardly magic and graffiti was already an alternative media.

It is difficult to understand just how magical the written word once was. One Mayan codex describes the plight of a stone carver resisting being sacrificed in order to "save his soul by becoming at one with the Gods"



Naive sign in graffiti style in Joplin, Missouri.

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because he had mis-carved a glyph. Such sanctity of the written word did not exist in Europe at that same time; illiterate monks often carefully copied a mis-spelled word from manuscript to manuscript. And graffiti flourished in Medieval England.

As the marks or signs evolved into more complex symbols, they become more demanding in their precision. A separation occurs between the pictorial aspects which stay pictorial and those than can easily be replaced by words. When the subject communicates stress, anger, fear, or overwhelming delight, there is a tendency to return to the pictorial. Graffiti lacks the objectivity and distancing found in naive sign, as the writer himself is covertly the main content and subject of his graffiti.

Most modern graffiti uses words instead of images or symbols, except for pornography which tends to be highly visual. Drawings of the human body are often fragmented and unfinished, stressing a graphic style based on the last formal art instruction, usually in grammar school. The role of pornographic graffiti is as little understood

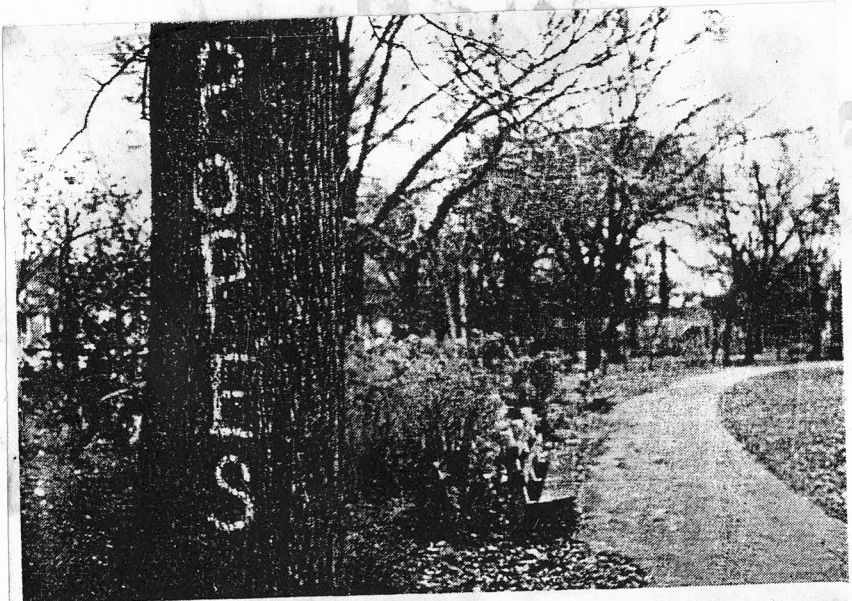


Graffiti in spray-can technique, two colors; part of the net that defines the territoriality of a Chicago street gang.

as is pornography itself. Whether it is a "release" or an advertisement is unclear, but it is most often meant to be an entertainment.

The use of graffiti among urban street gangs, such as "The Popes," demonstrates still further kinetic awareness. The gang's "territory" is usually clearly defined by graffiti - painted on walls, sidewalks, trees etc. When the Popes' territoriality was openly challenged by a rival gang, it was through additions to their own graffiti by the riváls. Instances of calligraphic aggression (such as the "Gas War" sign or the hole in a Mexico City street) frequently incorporate "design elements" closer to the naive sign. As in more sophisticated typography, when additional authority is being evoked, the graffiti is often symmetrically organized for increased emphasis.

Political graffiti tends to stay within the verbal form and is limited by the language, except for those rare phrases or images that manage to migrate. Few visual images or symbols in the long unwritten history of



Graffiti designating territoriality in Chicago.

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graffiti have ever had the international use or impact of the "Ban the Bomb" graffiti of the 1960's. Recent protest graffiti on many university campuses shows a hybrid between verbal content and visualized pornography. This often suggests a ribald political cartoon leaving open the relationship among cartoons, pornography, and graffiti.

Curiously there does seem to be an internationally uniform letter style found in most countries using the roman alphabet. It is a sans-serif, blockish kind of gothic letter usually used in all-capitals. There is rarely a mixture of styles. The international vogue for using spray cans to letter is producing a softer, more cursive style. Even though the communication itself is highly personal, handwriting is rarely used, Perhaps handwriting is too personal for the objective distancing of graffiti.

One also finds a careful placement of graffiti upon surfaces within various environmental spaces. The changing relationship of the viewer as he walks or

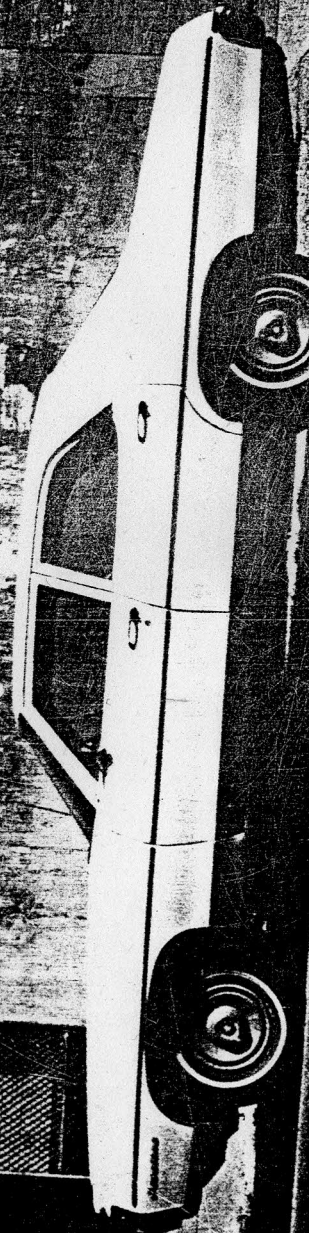
drives through the space tends to be carefully considered. With a kinetic origin, it is only natural that graffiti reflect this spatial awareness as well.

PULL THIS CHANGE
THE POEM IS YOUR SISTER
ON PAROLE

G.M.
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Women's Health Collective, Hampshire Street

PULL THIS CHANGE
UNGLOVED HAND
— NO BOUNDARY



Osborne Street Garage, Massachusetts Avenue

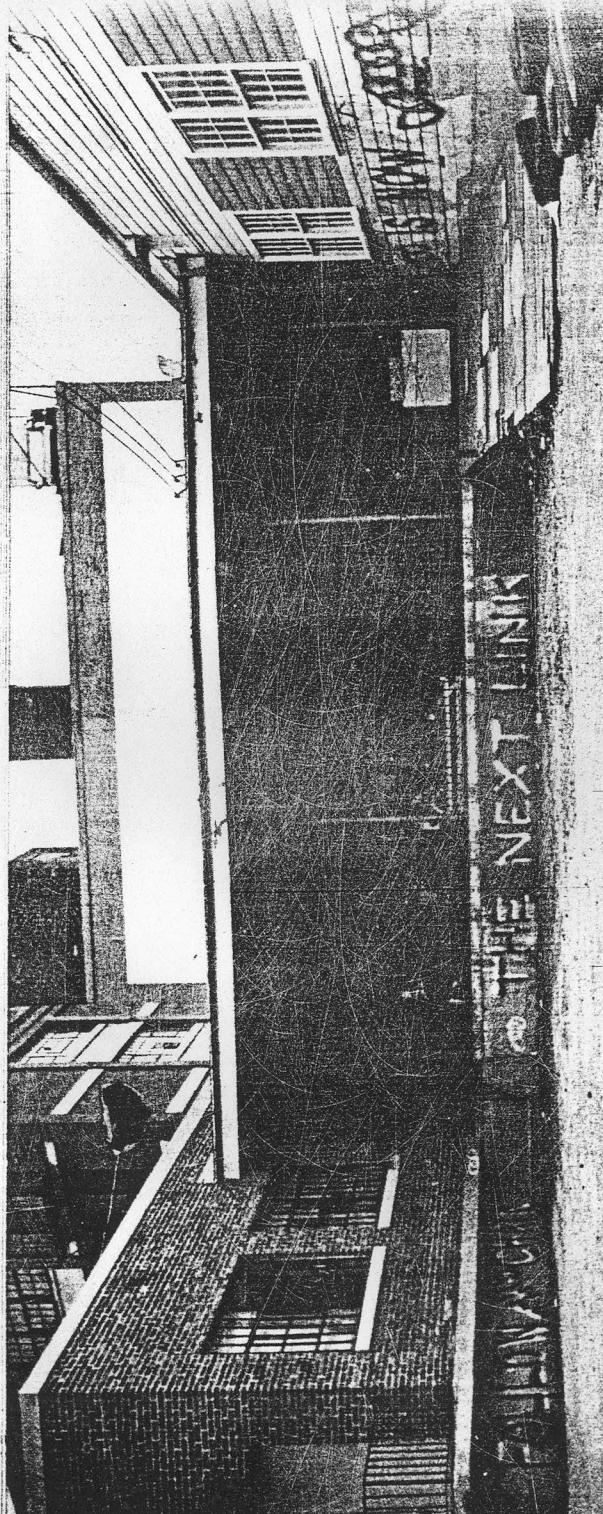
HEEL THIS CHAIN
CHEVROLET GIRL
IN TOWN

Technology Garage, State Street

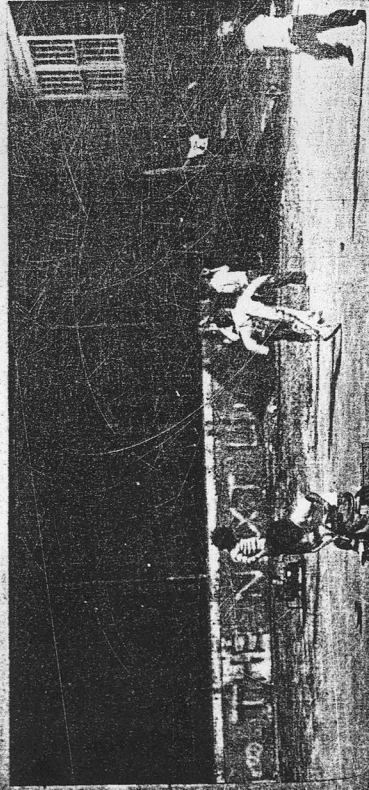
Heck this chain
Catch the man
who throws your shadow

OM

Baskin Robbins Ice Cream Store, Norfolk Street



KLH Daycare Center playground, Lansdowne Street



GRAB THIS CHAIN
YOU CAN. YOU LIVE
BEHIND THIS WALL

© M. J. 75



Deuce of Clubs Bar, Main Street



प्रेम

गर्व से कहा

हम हिन्दू है

any

Analysis

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To write spontaneously on walls takes a form of graffiti. But just to write spontaneously isn't the only reason. Graffiti is a quick means of conveying a message, a theme or an idea. It's the media of a common-man too, who cannot reach the mediums like T.V. or radio. Therefore a graffiti can catch the attention at concerned places, may be to convey an anger, a demand or a request. The written matter may be pre-decided or at the spur of the moment, it ofcourse varies from time to time, occasion to occasion and events to events.

Graffiti concerning students demands are full of rage, mentioning about the date and time of a meeting or speech.

Electoral graffiti are however occasional and comes only when elections are nearing. The graffiti contain well painted election symbols, well written name of the party and the candidate etc. The prominence as a visual remains very constant in such graffiti as the



Santosh
Love
Geeta

purpose mainly deals with propagating to as much people as it can attract.

Quite contrary to graffiti concerning political, occasional, electoral, students themes, there are also obscene and lovers writings on the walls. Mainly written at the spur of the moment, shabily scribbled anywhere, the person concerned feels like. The obscene ones are however are deeply concentrated in the public bathrooms, universities, colleges and places concerning youngsters. Lovers however prefer to mark a history of their love on ancient monuments and tree trunks for example drawing heart with cupid's arrow or mentioning their lovers name.

Supporting these graffiti another kind however can be termed as the recreational, found in class room blackboards, fast food joints, hostels, on movie posters or anywhere else for that matter. Such writings or scribblings mainly is fun and its quite creative too. It does make the reader smile or laugh even though it

conveys no meaning at all. It comes in the form of couplets, remarks, pun intended sentences or words or just pictorial expression.

GRAFFITI IS NEWS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Graffiti (Graffito in singular) as the definition goes, its just drawing or writing on the wall (marked on walls or any other surface), but the definition is altered through the history. It has come up from the level of just scribblings or drawings to information, design and creativity.

Information is, as mentioned before varies from time and occasion, but the creativity has a lot to do with now these scribblings are prominently placed to convey the message or informations.

The use of scale, that is the wall or the surface on which it is written plays an important role.

Unknowingly perhaps, the look of the surface is quite changed by the writings. For example, the graffiti written "Jai Shree Ram Kare" in Ghatkopar station makes



the piano

Delano,
I am in the
hostel, please
meet me there

Sheetal

←
the petal

use of the line created by the structure of the wall itself as if written in a note book.

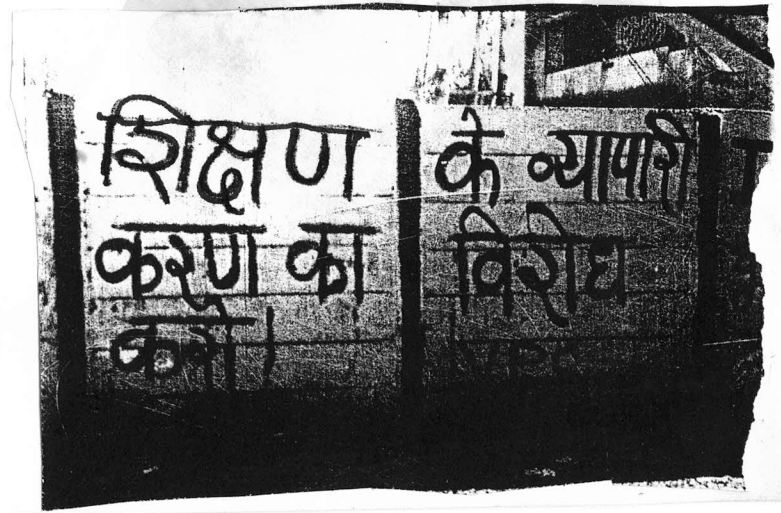
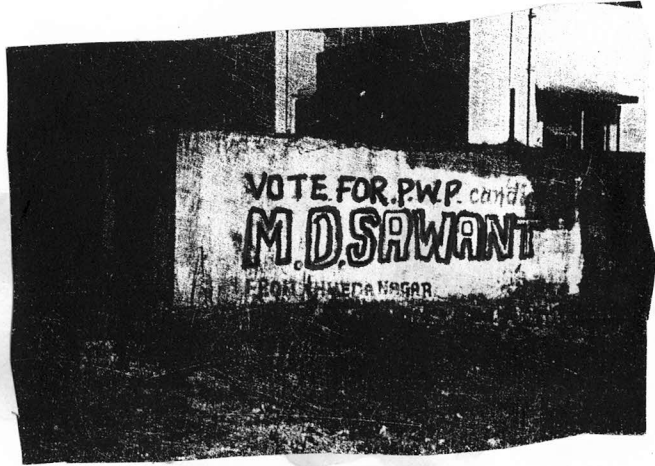
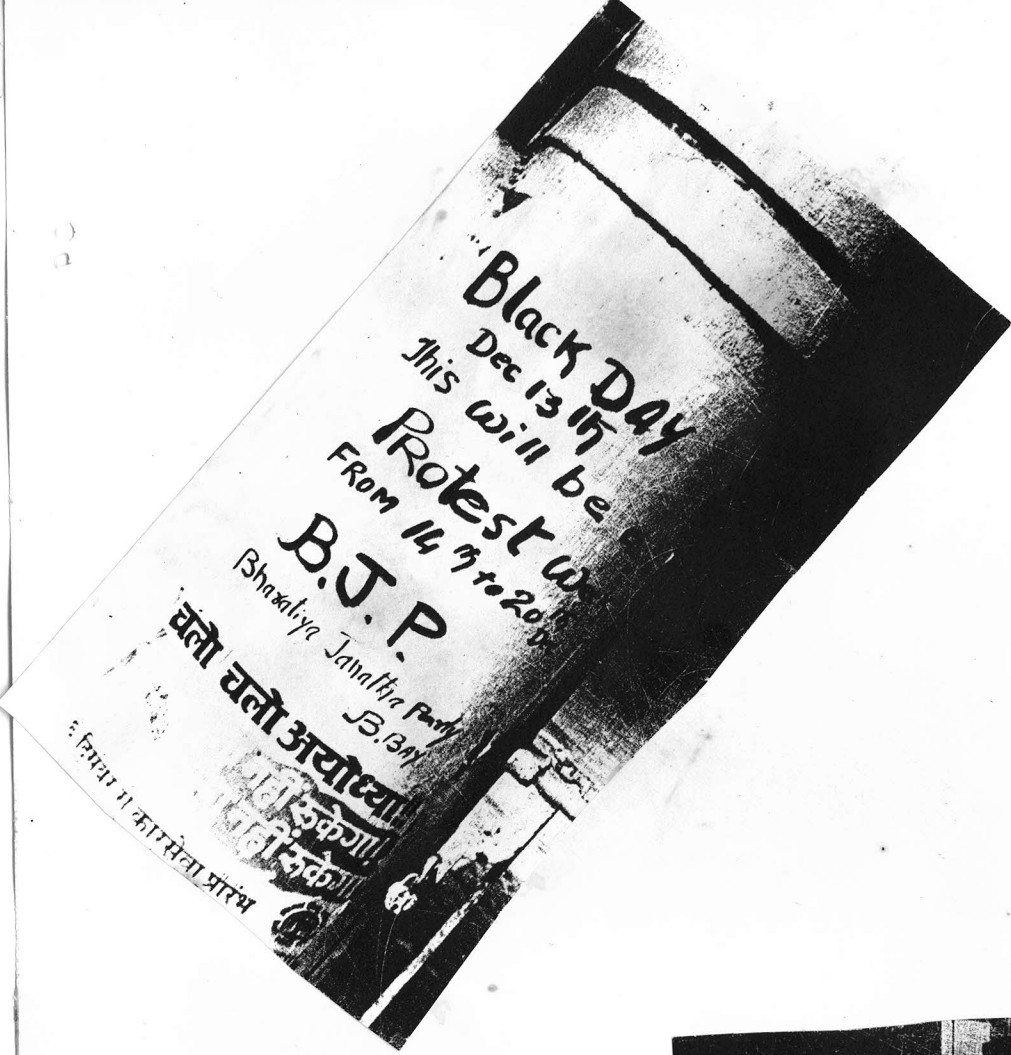
Usage of rhyming graffiti conveys messages quicker even though the meaning is literally nothing, it is successful as a message for example "Tel Lagao Dabar Ka, Naam Mitao Babar Ka".

Apart from information visual design satisfy the on lookers. There is no set design conventions or principles followed yet these scribblings on walls have an aesthetic communication. The bolder ones have however a poster quality with dominant calligraphy. The better written ones have bold and dominant, neatly written sentences. For example - the graffiti on AIDS by IHO which says very beautifully "Hamari Jang AIDS Ke Sang, AIDS Ki Jang Nirodh Ke Sang".

Away from design and aesthetic out look of a graffito. it does marks a history. For example the Ayodhya problems, which got more active after December 6th, had the whole nation involved. Many had against and many for views and hence a lot of graffiti all around.

The political issue cam down to common man. Decades after, if the walls all around are not painted, they might narrate the story later. On the contrary to a mark of history, graffiti can be short lived too. Where its written, there is a possibility of another graffiti or poster on top of it or a possibility of white wash.

Time will change, society will change, politics will change, living will change but the concept of graffiti will live on because the common man will exist always and so will other problems, which would need the walls to convey messages.





I.I.T. BOMBAY FILM SOCIETY

Programme for March 1993

FOR MEMBERS ONLY

The Entry Coupons for the month of March 1993 will be issued on 3rd & 4th March 1993 and on all Fridays & Saturdays during Film Society Office hours: Friday 6-00 - 7-15 p.m. Saturday 9-00 - 9-45 p.m.

Rates of Coupons	Monthly	Rs. 6-00
	3 Monthly	Rs. 17-00
	4 Monthly	Rs. 23-00
	GUEST COUPONS	Rs. 9-00

Entry to the guests in the Hall will be given only if they are accompanied by Primary/Associate Members.

The New Primary membership will be given only on production of 1 card or the membership form is countersigned by the respective Head/Incharge.

DAY, DATE & TIME	TITLE	CAST
Friday (05-03-93) 6-15 p.m.	ANNIE <i>Bull of</i>	Ellen Queen
Saturday (06-03-93) 9-30 p.m.		Carol Burnett Albert Finney
Friday (12-03-93) 6-15 p.m.	LAMHE	Wahe, Rehman
Saturday (13-03-93) 9-30 p.m.		Anil Kapoor Sridevi Anupam Kher
Friday (19-03-93) 6-15 p.m.	ROBIN HOOD	Nagarjuna
Saturday (20-03-93) 9-30 p.m.	(PRINCE OF THIEVES)	Amala
Friday (26-03-93) 6-15 p.m.	SHIVA	Paresh Rawal
Saturday (27-03-93) 9-30 p.m.		RAGHUVARAN

Programme subject to change without notice.

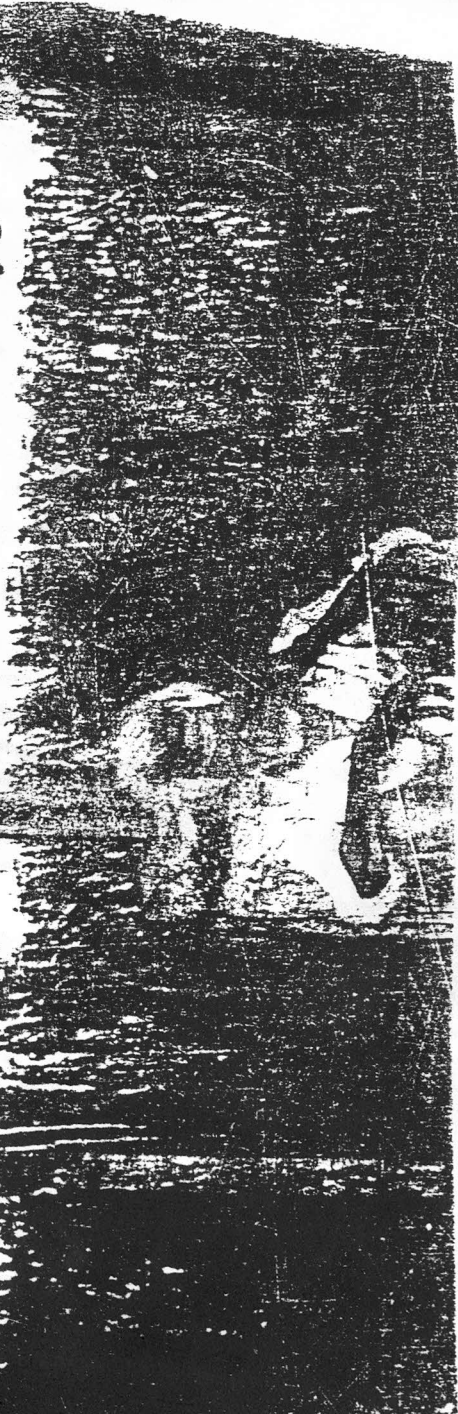
Dr. K. M. BAJORIA
Hon. Secretary

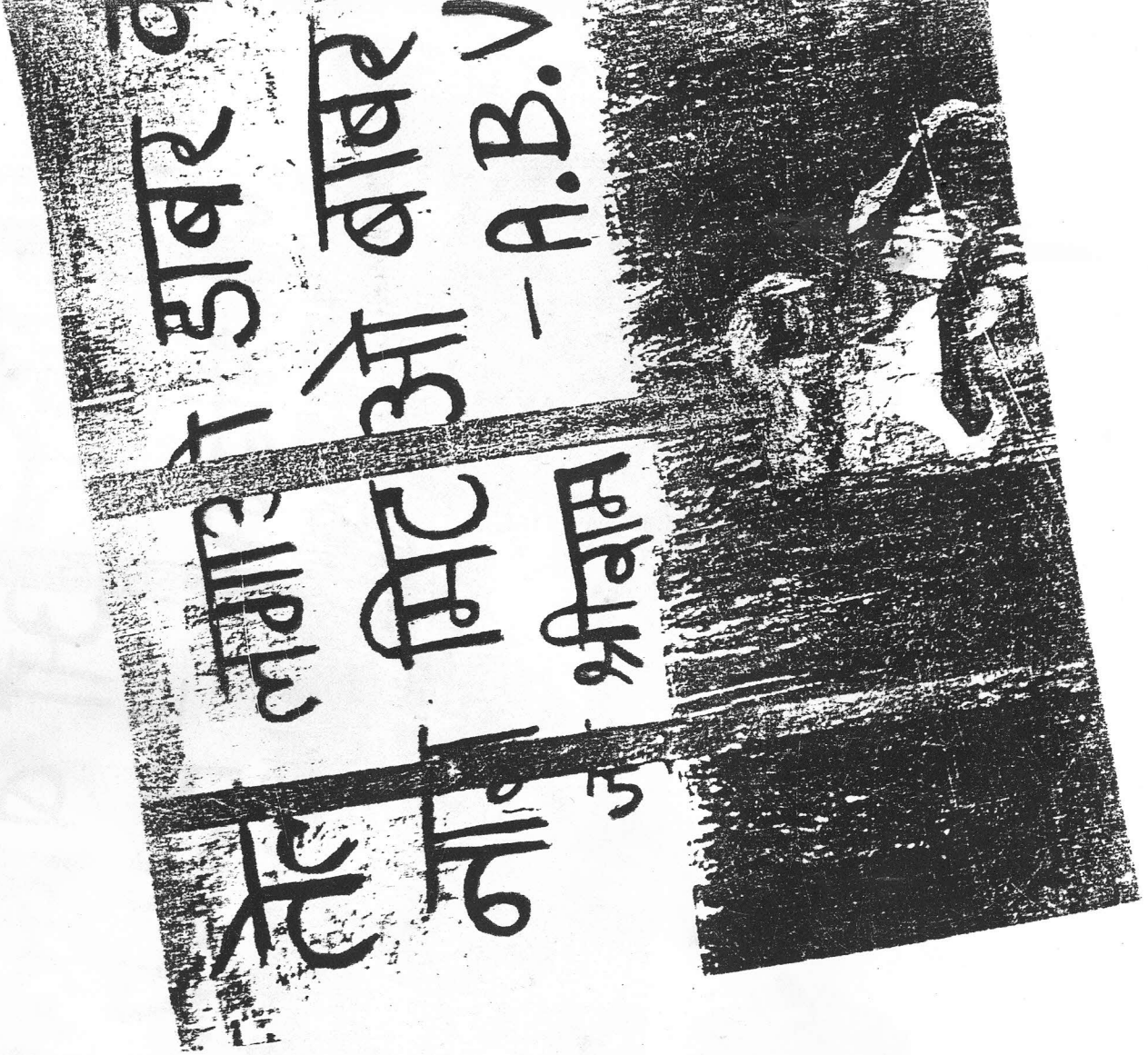
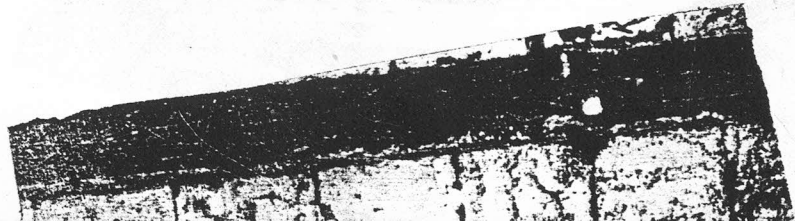
कार सेवा बंद
पर भारत बंद

साथ ही जंग
एक दूसरे के संग
देश है तंग
और सबकुछ भंग

श्री
श्री
श्री

श्री शिव का,
श्री शिव का
- A.B.V.P.





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श्रीगणेशाय नमः

श्रीगणेशाय नमः - A.B.V



S.K. Presents

ORCESTRA WITH

KUMAR WITH

MUSICAL

AKHILAKH'S ANTA VIKRAM

REFERENCES

Visible Language (1975-76)

History of graphic design by Philips B. Meggs

Marg (1987)

Art Week (March 91/June 91)

