

Adina S. Banayan
History of Photography
Research Term Paper
December 10, 2019

STREET ART PHOTOGRAPHY AND GRAFFITI IN THE 70'S

The birth of street art began in New York City in the 70's and with the help of photography, it became a global break-through movement into cities around the world. There are two photographers that are credited for this outbreak that has evolved the art world to how we know of it today. Henry Chalfant, an aspiring sculptor from suburban Pittsburg, started photographing the train cars in 1977 when he was inspired by the work of Lee Quinones on a passing subway train.¹ Martha Cooper, known as *Kodakgirl* by the graffiti writers of the 70's, grew up in her father's camera store in Baltimore and studied anthropology. She was first introduced to Dondi, a "king" graffiti writer, in 1979.² In 1984, the two photographers collaborated and published their first book together, named *Subway Art*, which sold over a half a million copies worldwide.³ The book is a collaboration of both of their photographs that document the birth of graffiti and graffiti writers in New York City, which inspired writers world-wide in the graffiti movement.⁴ In this paper, I will discuss these two photographers, how their photographs or reasons to photograph graffiti are similar and different, and their book that kick-started the movement of graffiti. I will also compare their work to another photographer of the time, Kenneth Siegel, came from a family of photographers and took photos documenting Times Square and the people there for pleasure.⁵ Siegel did photograph graffiti but did not think that the work was worthy of being noted to be specifically

¹ Max Lakin. "I Have to Get That': How Henry Chalfant Became a Graffiti Ambassador." *New York Times*. October 3, 2019.

² Barbara Graustark. "Chronicle of the Furtive Arts." *New York Times*. April 10, 2009.

³ Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant. *Subway Art*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1984.)

⁴ Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant. *Subway Art*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1984.)

⁵ Stacy Baker. "The Man Who Captured a Times Square That Is No More." *New York Times*. June 21, 2013.

photographed or documented. I will discuss how the complex history and the movement of graffiti had an impact on their photographs or visa versa.

When Chalfant arrived in New York City in 1973, “the city was in a physical crisis”. In my phone interview John Fekner, a street graffiti writer in the 70’s and multi-media artist, he explained the severity of the situation. There was “a lot of abandonment” and the government was not doing anything about the displaced underprivileged population.⁶ In my in-person interview with photographer Chalfant, he discussed the outcome of the government neglect in these communities.⁷ The youth in these neighborhoods, especially the Bronx, were often kicked out of their home and families were often moved out numerous times, not giving a sense of security. Jake Wegmann analyzed the housing issues in the 70’s in his review for Brent D. Ryan’s book, *Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities*. “This disjuncture... is at root a result of comparative durability of housing stock, and it has profound economic consequences, not least of which is a low demand for newly-built or rehabilitated housing, which may persist over a span of a decades.”⁸ Additionally, students in the public educational system did not have an art program in school, so they had no place of their own to express themselves.⁹ “*The Faith of Graffiti*” written by Norman Mailer identifies modern architecture as a major role player in the outburst of graffiti in over 50% of the buildings and subway cars.¹⁰ Wegmann explains this further, “...when the Nixon administration converted urban renewal and other federal urban programs into decentralized block grants...the modernist program of urban intervention in the United States was beset from all sides and unable to withstand the attacks from critics on the left lambasting it for failing to incorporate the voices of the people whose lives it impacted the most...”¹¹ The standardization of industry was so pronounced at

⁶ John Fekner. Interview by Adina S. Banayan. Phone, 15 November 2019.

⁷ Henry Chalfant. Interview by Adina S. Banayan. In Person, 3 October 2019.

⁸ Jake Wegmann, “Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities, by Brent Ryan,” *Berkeley Planning Journal (BPJ)* 26 (January 2013): 201

⁹ Henry Chalfant. Interview by Adina S. Banayan. In Person, 3 October 2019.

¹⁰ Norman Mailer. *The Faith of Graffiti*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1974.)

¹¹ Jake Wegmann, “Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities, by Brent Ryan,” *Berkeley Planning Journal (BPJ)* 26 (January 2013): 202

the time that there was no room for art or individualism.¹² This is what graffiti was about- putting your name out there, being an individual, saying *I was here*,¹³ and doing that graphically.¹⁴ The fact that it was considered vandalism and a crime, even though it was very often much nicer than the ugly new buildings, made the thrill to do graffiti stronger than ever. The fear of getting caught ended up adding to the game and writers' competition with each other and promoted the activity even more.¹⁵ This is the start of graffiti in the 1970's; the start of their identity.

Jeff Ferrell writes about the start of the graffiti movement, which was born and bred in the Black and Latino¹⁶ communities of New York City. "Graffiti is driven by the stylistic innovations of graffiti writers who produced complex systems of street imagery and design."¹⁷ He explains that hip hop graffiti writers confronted social and political order that "increasingly criminalized their everyday life, invent in response an elaborate alternative culture..."¹⁸ He continues writing that graffiti has spread viral over the United States, changing the look of urban life. Marisa A Gomez expands on the term graffiti and its many subcategories, such as tagging, folk art, gang graffiti, and murals.¹⁹ Graffiti writing is also the precursor for the "hip hop" culture, which has now evolved into cultural practices that include new forms of music (rap, sampling), street break-dancing, street art, billboards, and has even affected the fashion industry. Graffiti is now embedded in most of our public spaces. "Illegal and legal hip hop murals now decorate alley walls, underpasses, and other public and private city spaces across the continent."²⁰ Ferrell credits Chalfant and others for documenting the movement, which has taken hold beyond the borders of the

¹² Norman Mailer. *The Faith of Graffiti*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1974.)

¹³ Norman Mailer. *The Faith of Graffiti*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1974.)

¹⁴ Marisa A. Gomez, "The Writing on Our Walls: Finding Solutions through Distinguishing Graffiti Art from Graffiti Vandalism," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1993):635

¹⁵ Norman Mailer. *The Faith of Graffiti*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1974.)

¹⁶ Marisa A. Gomez, "The Writing on Our Walls: Finding Solutions through Distinguishing Graffiti Art from Graffiti Vandalism," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1993):642

¹⁷ Jeff Ferrell. "The World Politics of Wall Painting." *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 189

¹⁸ Jeff Ferrell. "The World Politics of Wall Painting." *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 199

¹⁹ Marisa A. Gomez, "The Writing on Our Walls: Finding Solutions through Distinguishing Graffiti Art from Graffiti Vandalism," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1993):635

²⁰ Jeff Ferrell. "The World Politics of Wall Painting." *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 199

United States, including major and small cities in Europe and the United Kingdom,²¹ Rio de Janeiro and even Dakar.

Although Chalfant had his mind set on being a sculptor when he arrived in NYC, he was attention was refocused to capture graffiti works in train cars when he saw a piece by Lee Quinones. In that instant his one thought –“oh my god, I have to get that,” changed his career path forever. It took ten pictures to get the perfect shot from his Kodak camera, but once he snapped them, he was hooked. The contrast of his solitary studio life in comparison to the thrill of photographing “vandalism” was evident to him that he clearly needed more engagement with the world in his life. For the next seven years, Chalfant was always snapping pictures of the trains. He would shoot the rapid-moving painted train cars with multiple exposures in rapid succession, and later he would collage them into train panorama prints. (Figure A) He analyzed the route of the train, the location of perfect light on that route, and waited patiently for the train to pass.²² When asked if he ever got caught with the police or an MTA official, Chalfant admitted he did. The MTA official told him he was trespassing, and he required a permit to photograph the private property of the MTA. After obtaining a permit that only lasted one day, Chalfant decided that he rather take the risk without the permit and kept photographing trains.²³

His work froze the moving art in place and stunned the public in a controversial way. He often felt alienated from his own privileged white community, and outcasted by the Black and Latino artists, whose work he was photographing. A known graffiti writer, Daze, shared when his perspective of Chalfant shifted in 1979. “We really didn’t know what to make of him, if he was a police officer or why anyone else would be interested in documenting the work we were doing,” Daze said. “He invited us to his studio, and he has these portfolios of photos. It was really incredible for us to see, in 35-millimeter

²¹ Jeff Ferrell. “The World Politics of Wall Painting.” *Social Justice* 20, no. ¾ (1993): 189

²² Max Lakin. “‘I Have to Get That’: How Henry Chalfant Became a Graffiti Ambassador.” *New York Times*. October 3, 2019.

²³ Henry Chalfant. Interview by Adina S. Banayan. In Person, 3 October 2019.

format, our work.”²⁴ Soon after that, Chalfant was called often by writers to photograph their work, almost as soon as they painted it.²⁵ Chalfant started also photographing graffiti crews and street culture. (Figure B) Although he is known as their Rockstar, the photographer notes that “some of the writers are Rockstar themselves” on their own right.²⁶ In 1984, Chalfant stopped photographing trains, and collaborated with Martha Cooper in creation of their book, *Subway Art*.^{27 28}

Martha Cooper has been taking photographs since she was five years old, when her father gave her a Brownie camera. Her father and uncle owned a small camera shop in Baltimore, which had an influence in her decision to be a photographer. She explained that her father taught her the psychological nature of photography. “You walk down the street and you see something and you’re excited by it. And you take a picture.”²⁹ She studied anthropology at Grinnell College in Iowa and hoped to combine it with photography in her later career. After working for numerous organizations and newspapers, including National Geographic, she encountered a conversation with He3 who told her to photograph graffiti.³⁰ Graffiti was all over the streets at that time. Mailer writes about the growth of graffiti at the time. “There was a period in the middle when it looked like graffiti would take over the world...No one would write over another name, no one was obscene- for that would have smashed the harmony.”³¹ At first, Cooper was unsure about photographing because she herself did not “get” graffiti. She called it “mysterious and illegible,” but when she looked back at He3 and his black book of sketches he was planning on painting on the wall, she realized that graffiti writers were graphic designers, designing their own logo.³² This is

²⁴ Max Lakin. “‘I Have to Get That’: How Henry Chalfant Became a Graffiti Ambassador.” *New York Times*. October 3, 2019.

²⁵ Max Lakin. “‘I Have to Get That’: How Henry Chalfant Became a Graffiti Ambassador.” *New York Times*. October 3, 2019.

²⁶ Henry Chalfant. Interview by Adina S. Banayan. In Person, 3 October 2019.

²⁷ Max Lakin. “‘I Have to Get That’: How Henry Chalfant Became a Graffiti Ambassador.” *New York Times*. October 3, 2019.

²⁸ Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant. *Subway Art*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1984.)

²⁹ Barbara Graustark. “Chronicle of the Furtive Arts.” *New York Times*. April 10, 2009.

³⁰ David Gonzalez. “Street Art from the South Bronx to Soweto.” *New York Times*. October 23, 2013.

³¹ Norman Mailer. *The Faith of Graffiti*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1974.) pg. 13.

³² David Gonzalez. “Street Art from the South Bronx to Soweto.” *New York Times*. October 23, 2013.

something Gomez also discusses in her article- graffiti writers as graphic designers.³³ He then introduced her to Dondi, the “King” of graffiti during 1979, which caused Cooper to leave her job to devote more time to photographing graffiti and graffiti writers. (Figures C and D) Cooper is still very much engaged with the graffiti writers, movement and photography, and she is currently the director of photography at City Lore, a center for urban culture.

Her work differs from that of Chalfant firstly in what the photograph is about. Cooper did not care much about the art of it or about getting the perfect lighting, which seemed to drive Chalfant. She wanted to interact and be personally involved with the graffiti community. While Chalfant was photographing panoramic trains from the outside, Cooper was snapping images of the inside of the trains and neighborhood locations. (Figure D) She said, “I was trying to show the context. I tried to get that combination of the ride and the graffiti on the inside as well as on the outside.”³⁴ Cooper was “trying to capture a sense of community there, how people have survived poverty.”³⁵ Additionally, Cooper’s engagement with the graffiti writers was smoother than that of Chalfant, who only was accepted within the writer community after inviting some writers to his studio. She, on the other hand, visited Dondi’s house on day one, learned about how they plan each piece, and went with them as they painted the trains.³⁶

Although their reasons and focuses were different, Chalfant and Cooper’s vision was the same. Their book, *Subway Art*, acted as their way of documenting the graffiti work that would have otherwise just been a memory for the people living in the 70’s.³⁷ Chalfant’s “I have to get this”³⁸ and Cooper’s “let’s preserve this”³⁹ thoughts turned into a reality when they finally published the book in 1984. Their strong

³³ Marisa A. Gomez, “The Writing on Our Walls: Finding Solutions through Distinguishing Graffiti Art from Graffiti Vandalism,” *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1993):635

³⁴ David Gonzalez. “Street Art from the South Bronx to Soweto.” *New York Times*. October 23, 2013.

³⁵ Barbara Graustark. “Chronicle of the Furtive Arts.” *New York Times*. April 10, 2009.

³⁶ Barbara Graustark. “Chronicle of the Furtive Arts.” *New York Times*. April 10, 2009.

³⁷ David Gonzalez. “Street Art from the South Bronx to Soweto.” *New York Times*. October 23, 2013.

³⁸ Max Lakin. “‘I Have to Get That’: How Henry Chalfant Became a Graffiti Ambassador.” *New York Times*. October 3, 2019.

³⁹ Barbara Graustark. “Chronicle of the Furtive Arts.” *New York Times*. April 10, 2009.

relationship and respect for each other and the writers they photographed is mutual, and both Chalfant and Cooper give credit to the graffiti writers they photograph.

Another photographer during the era of graffiti is Kenneth Siegel. Siegel was born into a family of photographers, especially his uncle, Cornell Capp, who was the founder of the International Center of Photography. He completed his bachelor's degree in photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology, worked as a film editor in NY's Channel 9, and became a full-time freelance photographer. His work mostly consists of photographs for The New York Times or for nonprofit organizations, but his photographs and portraits in Time Square from the mid-60's to the early 80's that he did in his spare time are his gem works. Siegel wrote, "Most of the portraits are of people I know, usually by street name. They all know me or knew of me and often asked me to take their portrait. I could not have made these images without their cooperation. They express their need for recognition, and I graciously oblige them." Siegel was a little-known photographer who tried to connect with his subjects and gave them an opportunity to open -up and share with him. Siegel died at the young age of 44 in 1994, but his work continues to document "a Times Square that is no more."⁴⁰

I am captivated by one photograph of Siegel's *Police Cops Series*, which I had the opportunity to personally view in the New York Historical Society's archive. (Figure E) The photograph features two groups of young men on a sidewalk about to engage in a fight, and a police officer standing between them. On the right side, there are two African American men with their fist clenched, ready to defend themselves or attack their opposer. On the left side, a group of four Latino men are aimlessly moving their arms to antagonize or stop the fight. In the store front window, a man pees outside to witness the fight. The police officer faces the Latino group and moves limply towards them, but his movement is unsure yet more composed than that of his surroundings.

⁴⁰ Stacy Baker. "The Man Who Captured a Times Square That Is No More." *New York Times*. June 21, 2013.

The photograph strikes a compelling comparison with Cooper's *Two Cops Patrolling Subway* photograph, which I was able to personally view at the Beyond the Streets Exhibition in the Bronx a few months ago. (Figure F) The photo is taken inside a subway car filled with graffiti tags with two police officers standing at the end of the car and a woman sitting elegantly on the right corner. The police on the far left stands firmly with his two feet far apart and his gaze looks intensely outside the window. The second officer stands in between the latter and the women, looking directly at the camera. The African American woman is holding a book and looks at Cooper, wide-eyed.

The two kodak-made candid photographs' main subject is regarding cops and their roles in society at the time. Being that New York City was in a devastating condition, the crime rates were especially high. Because of government neglect, abandoned housing projects and poor education systems, many teenagers in struggling communities were often left with tons of time on their hands to do crime and to be more violent.^{41 42} Both photographs depict this historic time of a physical crisis in very vivid ways. In Siegel's photograph, the officer is trying to break up a potential violent fight between assumed gangs, and in Cooper's photograph, the officers are protecting commuters, like the woman, from the threat of graffiti and the stereotypical crime that comes with it.⁴³ In both photographs, neither subjects that are supposed to be protected by the police show any relationship or appreciation to the police.

There is one major difference between the two photographs, which is the recognition of graffiti. Graffiti was in its prime in the late 70's and 80's, which is when both photographs were taken, but only Cooper addresses the graffiti issue. The criminology of graffiti caused tension in the public, as they tried to process its confrontation, political meaning, and aesthetic nature with its placement in the public space and legal authorities.^{44 45} While Siegel is focusing on the crime on the streets, Cooper is underlining the

⁴¹ Jeff Ferrell. "The World Politics of Wall Painting." *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 190

⁴² Henry Chalfant. Interview by Adina S. Banayan. In Person, 3 October 2019.

⁴³ Jeff Ferrell. "The World Politics of Wall Painting." *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 199

⁴⁴ Jeff Ferrell. "The World Politics of Wall Painting." *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 199

⁴⁵ Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz. *Bystander: A History of Street Photography: with a new afterword on street photography since 1970's*. (Boston: Brown Little. 2001.)

misconception of the crime on the trains. The “broken-window-effect” policy in business is what stemmed the illusion that the trains were unsafe because of the graffiti. Ferrell writes about the increasingly aggressive “wars on graffiti”, which were always associated with crime and criminalization.⁴⁶ Cooper’s image shows that there was no crime happening in the trains, yet two cops were standing on guard in broad daylight. While in Siegel’s image, there is potential violence but only one cop stands awkwardly in between to intervene the two groups. It is also assumed that Siegel’s image was taken at night, which is the time most of his Times Square photographs were taken.⁴⁷ This proves that the government was wasting their assets to fight against graffiti on the trains instead of crime on the streets. Norman writes about an interview with Lindsey the Mayor of New York at the time about the future of graffiti. “No wonder Lindsay had gone to war against graffiti. The city would finally tolerate drugs, graft, insanities of traffic, mugging every petty crime of the street, every major pollution, but it could not accept a towering rain-forest of graffiti on all the forty story walls.”⁴⁸ Additionally, there were many anti-graffiti campaigns that “mirrored” the “wars” on drugs and gangs, as if it was on the same category in criminalization.⁴⁹ The difference of the two photographs reveal the historic approach and misappropriation to crime and graffiti.

Siegel, however, did photograph graffiti, but he did not credit the graffiti writers in the same way that Chalfant and Cooper did, who named their photograph after the graffiti writer. (Figures B and D) Siegel obviously had a different approach to graffiti. He viewed it as vandalism and a crime, which is why he does not credit the writers, as opposed to Cooper, who viewed it as a graphic design work. (Figures D and G) Although it is said that Siegel only photographed people he knew, sometimes only by their street name, he did not include their name in the title of the photograph.⁵⁰ He often would name the series of

⁴⁶ Jeff Ferrell. “The World Politics of Wall Painting.” *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 190

⁴⁷ Stacy Baker. “The Man Who Captured a Times Square That Is No More.” *New York Times*. June 21, 2013.

⁴⁸ Norman Mailer. *The Faith of Graffiti*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1974.) pg. 25.

⁴⁹ Jeff Ferrell. “The World Politics of Wall Painting.” *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 190

⁵⁰ Stacy Baker. “The Man Who Captured a Times Square That Is No More.” *New York Times*. June 21, 2013.

photographs instead like “Portraits,” “Police Officers,” or “Street Vendors and Businesses.”⁵¹ He also often photographed graffiti writing on walls, without the graffiti writer in the picture or mention of the writer. (Figure G) This is a common mistake with photographers today who use the work of a graffiti artist as a backdrop to their picture, but never credit the artist of the mural. Nonetheless, he and Cooper both did candid-like photographs, in which they tried to capture the culture or context of the image, while Chalfant aimed to have a very planned panoramic shots of the painted cars. All photographers mentioned in this essay used the kodak camera to capture their photographs. It is assumed that the hand-held camera presented itself as a convenient tool to always carry around in case something came across that was worth documenting in that instant.

The photographers of the 70’s reveal the controversy of the topic of graffiti at the time. On one hand it was considered vandalism, in which Siegel did not think its work needed to be documented. On the other hand, Chalfant and Cooper were inspired by the art that graffiti presented itself, as “crimes of style”⁵² and had the desire to document it and share it to the public. By shifting their careers to only focus on photographing graffiti work and writers, Chalfant and Cooper inspired the whole movement of graffiti world-wide and changed the way we view art today.

⁵¹ Stacy Baker. “The Man Who Captured a Times Square That Is No More.” *New York Times*. June 21, 2013

⁵² Jeff Ferrell. “The World Politics of Wall Painting.” *Social Justice* 20, no. 3/4 (1993): 199

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baker, Stacy. "The Man Who Captured a Times Square That Is No More." *New York Times*. June 21, 2013.

Chalfant, Henry. Interview by Adina S. Banayan. In Person, 3 October 2019.

Cooper, Martha and Henry Chalfant. *Subway Art*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1984.

Ferrell, Jeff. "The World Politics of Wall Painting." *Social Justice* 20, no. ¾ (1993): 188-202

Graustark, Barbara. "Chronicle of the Furtive Arts." *New York Times*. April 10, 2009.

Gomez, Marisa A., "The Writing on Our Walls: Finding Solutions through Distinguishing Graffiti Art from Graffiti Vandalism," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1993):633-708

Gonzalez, David. "Street Art from the South Bronx to Soweto." *New York Times*. October 23, 2013.

Fekner, John. Interview by Adina S. Banayan. Phone, 15 November 2019.

Lakin, Max. "'I Have to Get That': How Henry Chalfant Became a Graffiti Ambassador." *New York Times*. October 3, 2019.

Mailer, Norman. *The Faith of Graffiti*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1974.

Wegmann, Jake, "Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities, by Brent Ryan," *Berkeley Planning Journal (BPJ)* 26 (January 2013): 201-208

Westerbeck, Colin and Joel Meyerowitz. *Bystander: A History of Street Photography: with a new afterword on street photography since 1970's*. Boston: Brown Little. 2001.

PHOTOGRAPHS:

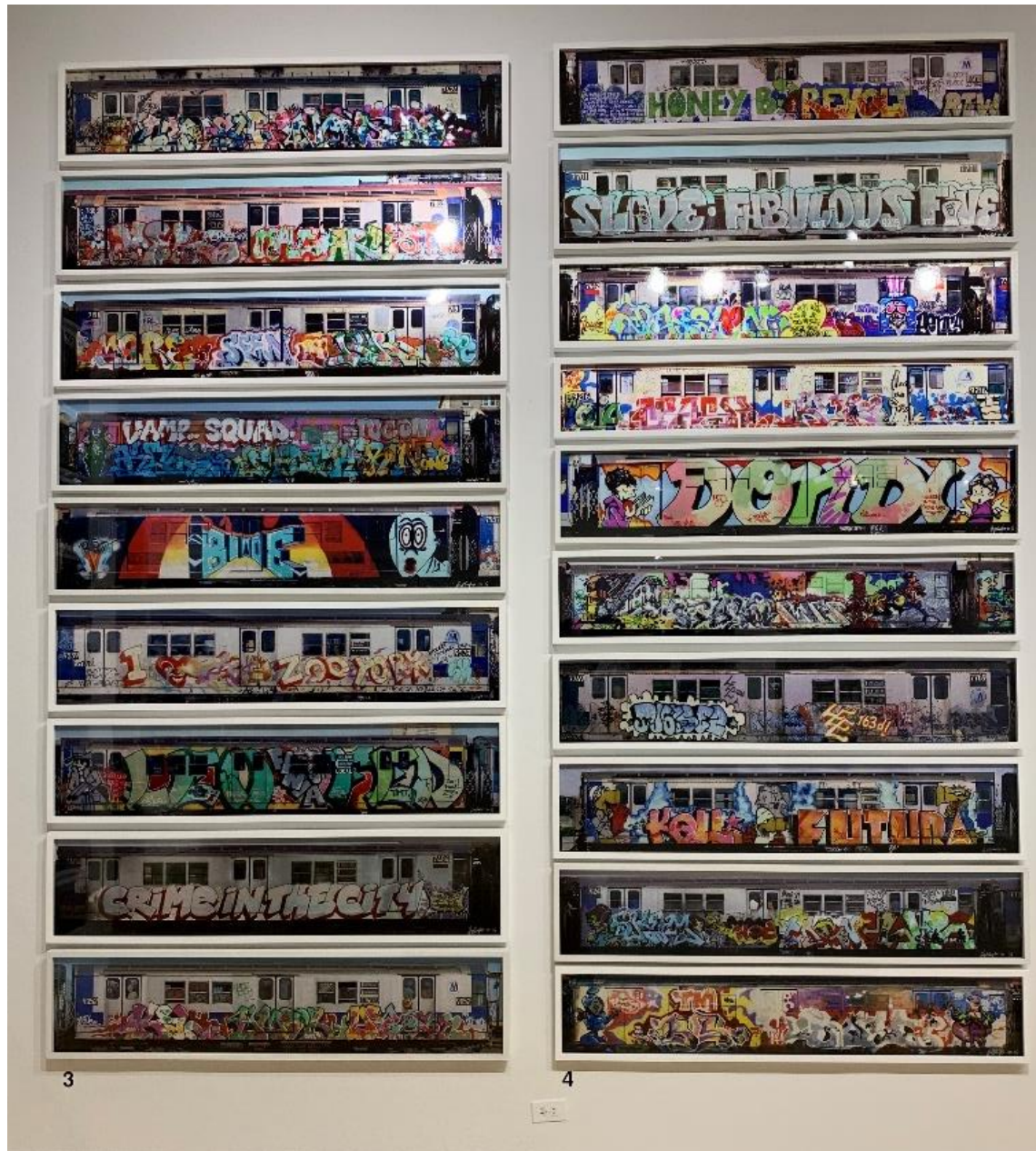


Figure A: Henry Chalfant (1940- Present) “*Subway Art Series*” (1977-1987)
Art Vs. Transit Exhibition 1977-1987, New York City, Kodak Metallic Paper, 96-inch long



Figure B: Henry Chalfant (1940- Present) *“Rock Steady Crew”* (1977-1987)
Art Vs. Transit Exhibition 1977-1987, New York City, Kodak Metallic Paper



Figure C: Martha Cooper (1943- Present) *“Dondi Painting the Yards”* (1980)

Bronx, New York City. Viewed at Beyond the Street Exhibition. Archival Pigment Print, 40 x 30 in



Figure D: Martha Cooper (1943- Present) *“Lady Pink on Train”* (1982)

Bronx, New York City. Viewed at Beyond the Street Exhibition. Archival Pigment Print, 20 x 16 in



Figure E. Martha Cooper (1943- Present) *“Two Cops Patrolling Subway”* (1981) Bronx, New York City. Viewed at Beyond the Street Exhibition. Archival Pigment Print, 20 x 30 in

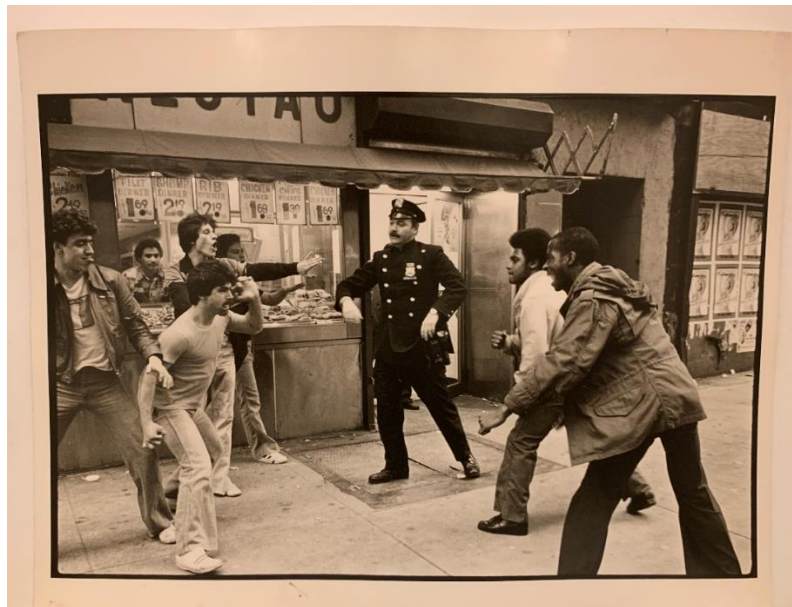


Figure F: Kenneth Siegel (1949-1994) *“Police Officers Series”* (1970’s) Kenneth Siegel: Photograph Collection (graphic), Viewed at New York Historical Society. Kodak Metallic Paper



Figure G: Kenneth Siegel (1949-1994) “*Street Scenes Series*” (1970’s) Kenneth Siegel: Photograph Collection (graphic), Viewed at New York Historical Society. Kodak Metallic Paper