



# Graf 3000, Sale of the Century

James Kalm

"June 14, 9:35 a.m. Ladies and gentlemen, it looks like another hot and sweltering day. Metro North trains into Grand Central Station were delayed this morning due to a fatality. A 14-year-old boy fell to his death while he was apparently applying graffiti in a tunnel. He stumbled, fell on to the tracks, and was killed instantly. Police are seeking two juveniles who were spotted at the time of his death for questioning." And so the life of another kid with dreams of joining the ranks of the legendary Graf writers comes to a screeching end. After more than twenty years in New York, I realize I must be getting jaded. I'm struck by the irony of this kid's death because tonight is the first of a two-night extravaganza organized by Guernsey's, the first ever "Auction of Graffiti Art."

It's also ironic that the entire concept of Graffiti runs counter to every tenet of capitalism. Why should one pay and pay big for something that is inflicted on society for free? All you would have to do is nail up a piece of primed plywood in any one of dozens of neighborhoods, come back in two weeks, and BAMMO, fresh Graffiti. No matter how much Guernsey's expected to make from this sale, it's a mere pittance compared to the millions paid by the state to try to stem the blight. If nasty mayors, get tough governors, and whole squads of undercover cops can't deter the desire to write, then how about lousy auction prices?

I'd promised the dealer that I'd pick her up in the car for the next studio visit. She'd been mugged while coming to Brooklyn on her first trip and I was feeling paternal. Driving back into Manhattan we drop her at the Broadway Lafayette stop. It's 6:00 PM and the action is about to start at the Puck Building. My 13-year-old son, who thinks Graf is cool, accompanies me. (He'd better never get on the tracks.) I've been researching and interviewing writers and the scene for this magazine for the last six months. I've known and followed some of their careers for years, and I know dealers and curators that have supported the movement, so I'm obliged to try and stay on top of things.

There's been a load of presale publicity for the last two or three months including a half-page color spread in the New York Times, banner headline adds online at artnet.com, as well as strong word of mouth. Expectations are running high. The Times article mentions a humongous canvas that was painted in the early 70's by Snake 1, COCO 144, Phase 2, and the United Graffiti Artists crew. It's been rolled up in a garage in New Jersey for the last 15 years. Estimates run as high as \$100,000 for this "Piece." A Downtown sign tagged by Taki 183 in 1969 is priced at \$20,000. The "Black Door" from "51X" 1981-84, a heavily tagged hollow core door to the gallery's inner sanctum, was estimated at \$15,000.

Thanks to some smooth talk (being a member of the press does have its benefits,) we're competed admission and given one of the beautiful yellow catalogues. Hugo Martinez is standing near the door and introduces his crew of writers, some of whom I've met or spoken to on the phone. I get more tags on the catalogue than an A1 piece book. Snake 1, Bama, COCO 144, and NATO all sign in. As the bidding starts we slide into seats behind Rich Colichio, Kiely Jenkins, and someone that I haven't seen in the city for years, Patti Astor. She's now a stunning redhead, and life in LALA Land must agree with her because she looks "Maahvaluss."

Things start off fast. The auctioneer is wasting no time in presenting the lots. Of the three above-mentioned items, not one reached its reserve. This was a harbinger for the rest of the evening. There was outspoken disappointment in the way the auctioneer handled the sale. Because of her lack of knowledge of the context of the work, as well as the interests of the audience, the presentation was cursory, and the sheer number of lots (381) made speed a factor. A few bidders seemed to be picking up a lot of bargains, or were they working for Guernsey's trying to kite the prices? There were also some European and Japanese dealers on shopping sprees.

A few surprises: Rammelzee's works consistently brought in prices in the mid-thousands, though below their estimates of \$15,000 to \$20,000.

The late Dondi White's works came closest to reaching their estimates, \$5,000 to \$6,500 for pieces estimated at \$8,000 to \$10,000.

Keith Haring's chalk on black advertising blanks didn't fair well. A small one sold for \$7,000 and two other larger pieces passed at \$15,000. Several large spray-can pieces on plywood from construction sites didn't receive a single bid. This may be in part

due to Shafrazi's refusal to certify, as authentic, any of the subway works because of rumors of numerous fakes. However, as soon as the last Haring piece closed, a sizable group of well-dressed collectors left in mass, which says something about the loyalty of his patrons.

The second night was better. The top price of \$22,000, went to lot 281A, the apartment door above Gallery 51X, 1979-83, a door tagged by Haring, Basquiat, Fab Five Freddie, Futura, Zephyr, Revolt, and even Johnny Rotten. Another highlight was a case of "Crylon Spraypaint," estimated at \$400 to \$600 that started a bidding war and was hammered down at \$2,100. The evening started with items in the \$300 to \$1000 price range, and seemed to loosen up the bidding. Kenny Sharf's pieces didn't receive a single bid, but many other works went for bargain prices.

After the first night I spoke to some of the dealers to get their impressions. Hugo Martinez, always the optimist, opined "It's kind of funny. I thought that they would've done a better job of getting the word out, but it doesn't seem like any of the collectors are here. At least we're down to earth now. We needed to deconstruct. This shows us where the bottom is. Now we can start to climb the ladder." Rich Colichio was a little down, but thought all in all it was a good thing. "It was good for the whole scene. They (the writers) were all happy, a little disappointed, but everyone got in the catalogue. They were featured on "Good Morning America," the CBS news, as well as German and Japanese TV. I've heard that Guernsey's spent about \$2,000 per artist between renting the Puck Building, the catalogue, and the advertising. Looks like those poor guys took a bath."

Two days later, almost as an addendum, The State of Art Gallery in Greenpoint opened their show "The Painted Word." This show was like a class reunion and an opportunity for the artists to exhibit work without the pressure of the auctioneer's hammer coming down on their heads. The old lions and the "newbies" were brushing shoulders. Babies and extra fat markers were running wild. It was like the United Nations of Graf writers. Kids getting tags in piece books, celeb writers mugging for snapshots, TV cameras, and a flock of media types feeding on the hype.

The West coast was represented by the likes of Chaz, one of the senior practitioners from West LA, and Mosco, an ambitious kid from Mexico City, who has tagged his way up the Coast and now resides in NYC. New York had Case 2, one of the oldest and most intelligent of the local crews, a guy who lost an arm and a leg but still hasn't slowed down, and Futura 2000, a personality who some see with ambivalence due to his ability to capitalize on the scene. As I've mentioned in previous articles, there are a number inside beefs and frictions between some of the different factions of the Graf world. I won't go into that here. Suffice it to say that there were a lot of happy Graffiti folks, and who knows, maybe we'll see a continuation of interest in exposing more of the historic and cultural aspects of this oh so American art form.



Graffiti Art. Draw or tagged by Jean Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Fab Five Freddie, Futura, Zephyr and LSD OM, Johnny Rotten. 51X Apartment Door, 1979-1983. Courtesy Guernsey's.





# Graf 3000, Tracy 168 Sues the Bastards

James Kalm

Did you ever write your name on the sidewalk in chalk, or maybe inscribe your John Hancock in wet cement? Ever carve your mark in the trunk of a tree, or scratch your initials on a desk at school? Well, if you did, then you're a Graffiti Artist. Did you remember to copy-write your tag? Well, don't worry. No one else did, either, except SAMO and TRACY 168. Pay attention now and you may learn a lesson regarding the value of creativity and an artist's ability to receive compensation from those global corporations that seem to be taking over the Free World.

I first met Tracy 168 in the early eighties. In a desperate attempt to get myself out of debt to the paint store where I worked, I did freelance canvas stretching, and a host of other odd jobs, for quick cash. Tracy subcontracted some large canvases from me. When I buzzed him recently I reminded him about the job.

**TRACY-** You remember the guy that helped me carry the canvases back to the subway? He's dead, shot in the head.

**James Kalm-** Wow, I'm sorry to hear that.

**TRACY-** Yeah, my whole crew's dead, man. That "Wild Style" is something, ain't it?

**JK-** So, what's your take on where Graf is going?

**TRACY-** Where it's been and where it's going? It's gone worldwide. We're back in the galleries and auction houses. Guernseys' is having a major sale in June, and they've asked me to participate. We were the foundation of Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop has grown like a friggin' tree and now people are looking at the roots. Seems like everything goes full circle. It's like "Pop". Everybody and their mother painted, and now you've got executives who were clos-

et writers. I was sought out by Paul Allen, you know the guy from Microsoft, the third richest dude in the world. He's a guitar freak and he just built the Experience Music Project. They dug up Jimmy Hendrix and reburied him at the museum in Seattle. Kinda' creepy, huh? They wanted my Hendrix piece for the museum.

**JK-** Tell me about the lawsuits, and how you were able to prove your case.

**TRACY-** I was writing but I didn't want to use my regular name, so I had to come up with a new name. So while I was on the low down, I came up with "Wild Style." My name was so brilliant that everybody copied it. Now I'm suing all these big corporations. I can't go into details but we've already settled with Coca-Cola, and we're going after a long list of corporations on the Fortune 500.

**JK-** How the heck did you prove that you were the "Wild Style?"

**TRACY-** When I was a kid, Professor Jack Stewart told me to copyright all my designs. So I put a little circle with a c inside it and the date. Now I'm establishing that no matter how friggin' rich you are you can't steal from these poor dumb artists any more. Those big shits have got to pay!

**JK-** Oh yeah, show me the money. What else is shaking?

**TRACY-** Well I've had three shows recently. My latest one was with a young artist named "Earsnot." It was nice to work with a young guy and help him get going. I started doing those memorials. It was getting like the Viet Nam War out there. I just wanted to get the guns and drugs off the street. I thought that if I did some elaborate wall murals it would help clean up the neighborhood and get some positive feelings going. I've got nothing against

tags but the art form has got to grow, not move backwards.

**JK-** How many trains did you paint?

**TRACY-** Oh man, it must have been thousands. Man, I did it for years.

**JK-** Did you ever get busted?

**TRACY-** Yeah, once just to see what it was like. On the clean up they treated me like a celebrity. This cop got me a sandwich and asked for my autograph.

**JK-** What do you see as the new action?

**TRACY-** They're bombing trains in Europe. Right now, right here, there aren't as many doers as there are talkers. Most of the old writers have died or gotten killed. Nowadays they hunt you down. Years ago it was more dangerous. People would just shoot you. No one ever used a moving train before. That exposed millions of people to the art form. It was a communication breakthrough. We were in the Bronx and we made connections with kids in Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan.

**JK-** Any thoughts on the "New School" versus "Old School" thing?

**TRACY-** You mean the bucket paint and brushes? Man that's the way everybody started. I used bucket paint before I got spray cans. Everybody got a can of paint and painted their names in the street. The biggest fucker always had his name in the biggest letters. I try to keep an open mind. It's not so important how you say it, as what you say.

**JK-** It seems like the thing about the biggest fuckers writing their names in the biggest letters is true in life in general, not just in the Graf world. Thanks, TRACY.

Once again I'd like to thank all those who have helped research these articles. For more information visit [bronxmall.com](http://bronxmall.com)





## Graf 3000 "In the Beginning was Graf"

When I began this series of articles those many months ago, I had the intention of finding out where Graffiti was going and not where it had been. I've always believed that you can't drive at 75 mph if you're constantly looking in the rear-view mirror. To add some historical perspective, I thought it might be of value to speak with someone who isn't "Old School" or "New School" but "Whole School." COCO 144 grew up in West Harlem on 144 Street. Now he's a father and grandfather living in New Jersey and still making his work.

**JK.** So COCO, I've been talking to some of the other writers and they give you a lot of respect. Can you give us a little background?

**COCO.** Back in '69 we started writing our names on a school bus. It turned out to be a positive experience. One thing led to another.

**JK.** What made you decide to start painting on trains?

**COCO.** I don't think that it was something that took a lot of thought. It was a good way of getting attention. It was part of the Hippie thing, the Sexual Revolution, and the music. Man, it was the best music. In '70-'71 it really exploded; lots of cats out there. It broke down barriers between ethnic and class lines. As it went on, styles developed and changed. In '72 I hooked up with Hugo Martinez and formed United Graffiti Artists. We go back a long way. U.G.A. were the first to start working on other surfaces, canvas and poster board. We had a show in '72 at the Razor Gallery, then another in '74 at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

**JK.** Where do you see Graf or your own stuff going these days?

**COCO.** That's a good question. I didn't think that it would last ten years. I'm just going to keep my ticket and stay on the ride. It touches a part of urban life. I wish I had a crystal ball. I'd like to see people keep the integrity in the work.

**JK.** What do you think its relationship to the fine art world is?

**COCO.** It's whatever is marketable for them. It was the art world that embraced us. Lots of great artists supported us. They could see that there were a lot of talented people out there. I guess that someone was making money. For me it's about the love of doing it. I wish I could support myself with the work but I can't, so I have a job so I can pay the mortgage, and paint because I love doing it. Right now I've gotten tired of canvas so I'm painting on stones...two or three foot pieces of lime stone. I'm going back to the real basics.

**JK.** Is it possible for a mature artist to still be a Graffiti writer?

**COCO.** I've pretty much never called myself a Graffiti artist. That was a name that was introduced by the media. It's evident to anyone who's seen my work that it's changed over the years. Some people thought that it was a cartoon thing for teenagers. I'd rather just say that it was a form of expression. Right away people start thinking that Graf was an outgrowth of the Hip Hop and Break Dancing culture. Those artists supported it, but when we started, we were listening to all kinds of music...R&B, Rock and even Jazz. Now it seems like it's more commercial.

**JK.** How long were you doing trains?

**COCO.** I guess I did it for about three years.

**JK.** Did you ever get busted?

**COCO.** I did some clean ups.

**JK.** What do you think of some of the writers that have lines of gear and have gone more commercial?

**COCO.** I don't want to say anything against another dude 'cause I don't know where I'm going to be in a year and a half from now. Maybe I'll apply for some grants. I'm not getting challenged much from my day job.

**JK.** Have you got any thoughts about the "Old School" versus "New School" thing?

**COCO.** I definitely want to answer that one. All these cats out there are doing it by any mean necessary. The laws have become more stringent. The materials are harder to lay your hands on. What we would have called sloppy is now the necessity. When we laid out a design we had time. Now it's about real estate. I can dig it. In New York all the good space is taken and so you've got to move up to the rooftops. The kids have to keep looking for the new frontier. I'd like to leave you with this. It seems like it's all going in a full circle. We started out doing "throwies" in the beginning. Then things got more complex, fancier. Now these "New School" guys have gone back to the basics. So I can dig the drips and slop because it's all necessary now.

Thanks again to all those who helped with these articles. Next month "Tracy 168 Sues the Bastards."

James Kaim