

GRAFFITI THE PHILLY HANDS' CASE

OR THE SURVIVAL OF THE WHIP



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In the spring of 2023, François Chastanet rode his bike through the streets of Philadelphia with his camera in hand. He was looking for local wallwriters, challenging the mainstream view in the field that the golden age of street name writing in Philly had ended in the 1990s. Dismissing the idea of repetition and stylistic decadence suggested by some critics, François aimed to prove that the street art scene in Philly has continued to thrive with new styles and unique expressions.



AVIZ (+peace sign)



*GONG (+smiley)



*KALE→



*MAG←



\$BALBOA → NP (North Philly)

Name writing in public spaces has been the dominant practice of graffiti since the end of the 20th century. This popular practice likely represents the only calligraphic school with any weight in Western culture, since we find ourselves living in a keyboard civilization.

The New York graffiti movement became the epicenter of the globalization of graffiti in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however this claim to fame is not without contest. There is a historical dispute between Philadelphia and New York concerning which megalopolis first started this "all-city" graffiti of names game in the mid to late 1960s. In my opinion, it is more important to document how these distinctive hand styles were stabilized over time than to focus on strict chronological issues.

The phenomenon that originated in New York in the 1970s and 1980s became a global archetype for urban culture, largely due to widespread media coverage, and continues to define the urban landscape to this day. On the other hand, Philadelphia's highly autarkic scene is an impressive, localized instance of

an urban signature 'school' within the inner limits of the city, and deserves much greater recognition. Philly has produced its own scriptural 'texture' beyond the individual experiments on the image of the name, i.e. a handcrafted collective visual identity that has remained stable over the years despite some evolutions.

Philadelphia is often called "Whip City" by local wallwriters. The whip (sometimes also quoted as "ism" or "swag") is the energy you instill in letter strokes. It's observable in the small joints and ligatures that appear between signs, showing traces of a cursive mentality and a vivid running hand. The notion of whip applies to all hand styles, from simple to complex, that has been carefully developed in Philly since the end of the 1960s. The old Philly hands were initially called

"Gangster Prints" and were later developed into numerous variants. I investigated the inner Philadelphia evolution of letter shapes, called in the local graff milieu the condensed "Tall Hands" and the extraordinary "Wickeds."

It's tempting to draw a connection between tall buildings' walls and tall hands, with the various abandoned factories lining the streets in Philadelphia providing a unique inscription surface that may have opened the way for monumental top-to-bottom tags unknown in other cities. Wickeds are a "Philly thing... you can't understand," very elaborate wildstyle signatures that originated in the mid-late 1970s, a calligraphic exaggeration only observable there. These different practices are an underrepresented phenomenon in American

graffiti cartography, underrated jewels in street penmanship.

The whip is like a giant that used to prowl through the streets of Philadelphia. Some say it disappeared long ago, but it still seems to make brief appearances nowadays. As a photographer, I was chasing the whip during the spring of 2023 in Philly, traversing streets and neighborhoods by bicycle several hours a day for two months. On some days, I found little, but on others, my efforts were rewarded with discoveries of rare, perfectly mastered signatures in ideal locations (no cars obstructing the view and the necessary depth to capture both the inscription and urban surroundings).

I found that some young, history-conscious graffiti artists are still fighting for the survival of the whip even amidst (somewhat valid) complaints from old-timers about mediocre consistency in some hands. This ties into the prevailing narrative that the era from the early 1970s to the late 1990s represents the supposed golden age of street name writing in Philly and that since the 2000s, everything has been just mere repetition and stylistic decadence. But each



DA→



*BE→ K (KOK) (+crown)

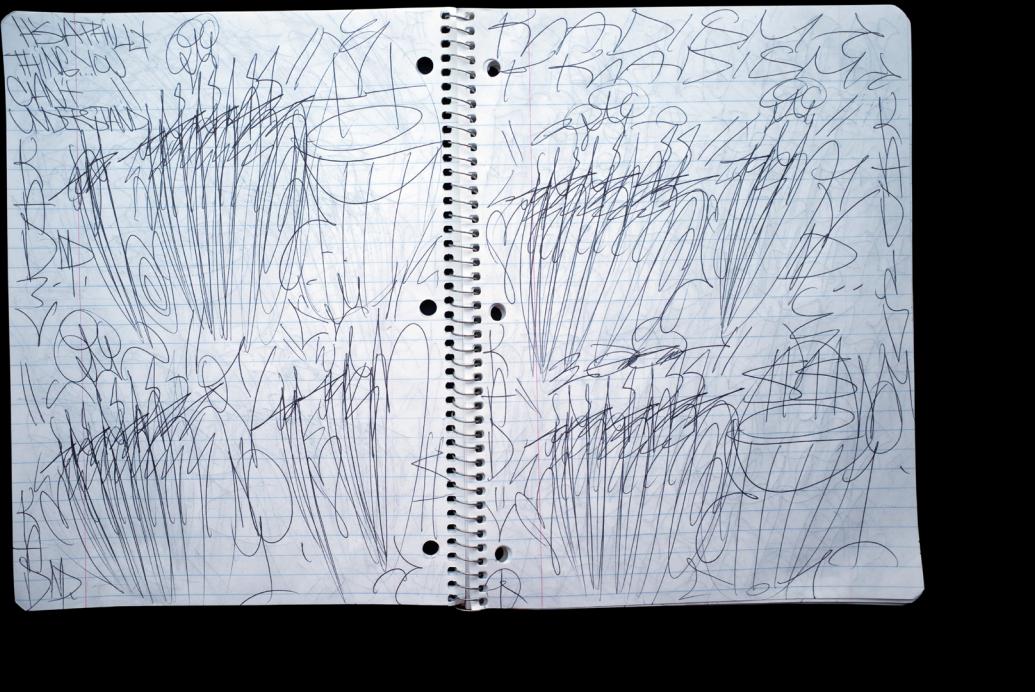




♡WACKO(+smiley) IAS



•e•YE→



IT'S A PHILLY THING... YOU CAN'T UNDERSTAND!!
(various hands) KAD, KAE/AE/DEE (phonetical spelling, wicked), KADISM (+ smileys' variations)
exercise notebook 2023

generation has its own icons from which to build its own golden age.

Philadelphia's inner population had been decreasing since the post-WWII period; what was once the "workshop of the world" faced intense deindustrialization. However, since the mid to late 2000s, the city has been regaining inhabitants with an influx of Millennials, young adults, and immigrants. Even as poverty persists, with a quarter of residents still living below the poverty line, an impressive real estate gentrification process is hitting neighborhoods like Brewery Town, Fairmount, Templeton, Olde Kensington, Fishtown, and many others that were important in the development of the Philly graff scene. With the city under widespread development, artists make heavy use of the dark tarps enveloping the fences of construction sites and backyards,

an entrance point of one of my main photo series. The municipality has taken steps to repress graffiti, though. Under the erasing program (CLIP or Community Life Improvement Program), walls and even tarps are erased or 'buffed' daily.

The Buff is a rival giant roving in Philly streets, working hard to remove vandalism from Broad Street and other main routes. Graffiti is vandalism; it's a never-ending cat-and-mouse game with cycles of different durations and reset moments. Early generations of Philly writers likely faced less adversity.

In the late 1990s, amidst anticipation for a Republican convention that was taking place in Philadelphia, the whole city was deeply cleaned, and many historical inscriptions were lost, leaving new amateurs without a calligraphic referent. In the early 2000s, a second wave of cleaning hit all the underground spaces

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of the local subways and trolley lines, signifying an even deeper loss in the local historical hands. At that time, digital photography was still in its nascent, and low-light shots were particularly poor, so no proper archives were available apart from some rare shots from practitioners/collectors. Since the 2010s, the erasing has been continuous, changing the way writers behave, perhaps favoring rapid renderings and taking less care in the execution of signs.

To convey the preparation needed to create Philly-style graffiti and reveal the secret art of tall hands and wickeds, I have been video recording the writer's never-ending apprenticeship and endless practice of traditional strokes on cheap college ruled notebooks (mainly with ball-points like 'juicy' Bic Cristal clearly preferred by most practitioners over alcohol round tip markers drying too fast): the dance of the hand, the up-and-down regular gestures of the wrist, the loops and cut-backs, etc. There is nothing worse than showing up too early in the streets with a weak hand. *Kill a notebook a day!* is a classic injunction from local writing mentors, a new version of the old

"*nulla dies sine linea*" Latin motto: achieving a respectable hand takes time and dedication through a lot of practice, both on paper and the wall.

"So many sources of enchantment, or at least of interest and the unforeseen for the trained eye. On all sides, the amateur receptive to calligraphy and able to appreciate its music finds delight, whilst others pass unhearing."

This quotation from Jean-François Billeter in his brilliant book *The Chinese Art of Writing* (Rizzoli, 1990) could easily be applied to Philadelphia's streets.

Please open your eyes and make for yourself the following visual exercise: compare an old Chinese cursive on a paper roll with Christian Dotremont's *logogrammes* and some Wicked... At the same time, think about Dotremont's definition of his own practice: "What I do in short is to exaggerate the natural freedom of writing." I hope this will bring a greater understanding of local raw aesthetics and skeletal letterforms in public spaces and do justice to Philadelphia's legacy of letters. ▶

{wicked} *DA video still



{tall hand} AVIZ→ video still

