

WILD STYLE

a story of 1980s New York graffiti through the lens of hip hop culture

To celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the release of the film *Wild Style*, Amanda McDonald Crowley spoke with its director, Charlie Ahearn, a film and video maker and artist based in New York City. In the 1970s he became part of the artists' group Colab – short for Collaborative Projects – a group of artists determined to work in contexts beyond the traditional art world and galleries. It was during Colab's art show in the summer of 1980, titled *The Times Square Show*, that Ahearn and graffiti artist Fred Braithwaite (later known as Fab 5 Freddy), agreed that they would make a film about hip hop and graffiti as an artform. That same summer Ahearn began working with Braithwaite and Lee Quinones on what has become the classic feature-length hip hop film *Wild Style*, taking its name from the graffiti painting style. What

is important to understand is that *Wild Style* is not a movie about graffiti, nor is it a documentary. It is a movie that explores the hip hop movement of early 1980s New York City.

Amanda McDonald Crowley: Tell me about the re-release? Why was it important to do this for the 30th anniversary?

Charlie Ahearn: The re-release includes several interviews and musical shorts that involve a lot of people who featured in the original movie. [It also] contains an hour of new video material. But importantly, first of all it's a lot of musical videos with people like Busy Bee, Brothers Fantastic, and Grandmaster Caz. Like *Wild Style* they are not documentaries or interviews, they are musical shorts that are meant to tell a story and they involve a lot of people who were involved in the original movie. These videos are meant to give us a grounding in the hip hop world. And they are new, taking us into the contemporary world, which I really like.

Then there are also about eight straight up interviews – with Fab 5 Freddy, Grandmaster Caz, Lee Quinones and others. Even now, I still learned a lot. Lee never disappoints me [with] things yet to discover about him – about what he was up to in the 1970s – which is a vast uncharted universe of graffiti history.

Can you tell me how you came to make *Wild Style*. It was 1980 when you started making the movie, right?

Well, I had met Lee Quinones a few times in 1978. And really central to the whole making of *Wild Style* is that I had been struck in 1978 by his large scale handball murals in the Lower East Side around where he lived north of the Brooklyn Bridge. They were beautiful, bombastic, colourful pieces of pop art, very original works done at incredible scale, and unlike anything I'd seen in the art world at that time. It was like a piece of the subway had landed on the wall. At that stage, Lee was transitioning out of painting up to three or four trains a week – he was doing whole car trains. It was an enormous amount of painting and production and also great physical risk involved in this activity. He was wanting to see how his work would look on a stationary wall. I think he felt it would give people more time to grasp the message and better understand the composition in the artwork. I've always had the very strong feeling that he was an artist of an incredible calibre – someone whose work was really important.

At the *Times Square Show* in 1980, I was talking with Fred Braithwaite. We were discussing the fact that there were graffiti artists of the calibre of artists showing in the main galleries, and that it was time to recognise them and respect this artform. We were discussing graffiti writers, and Lee's



Wild Style mural with Doze, Frosty Freeze RIP, Ken Swift, Patti Astor, Fab 5 Freddy, Lady Pink, Lil Crazy Legs, Revolt and Sharp, New York, 1983. Mural by Zephyr, Revolt, and Sharp. Photo: Marty Cooper. Image courtesy of Charlie Ahearn.

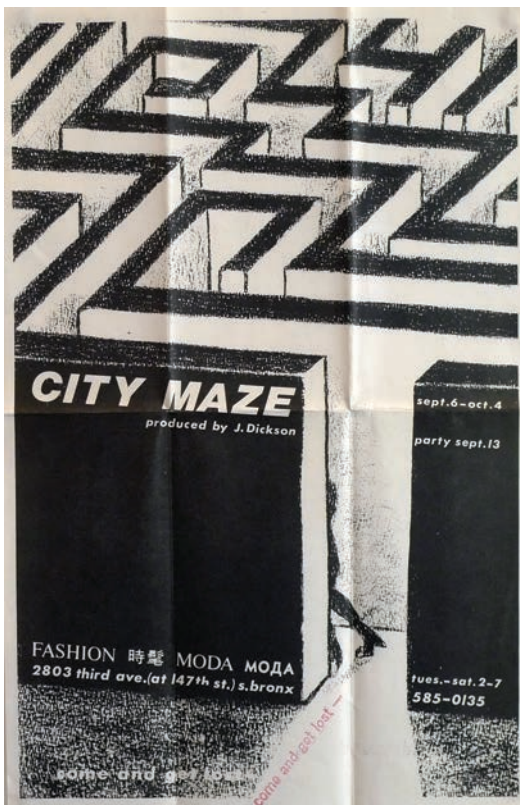


ABOVE: Campbell Soup Train by Fab 5 Freddy, New York, 1980. Photo: Charlie Ahearn.

RIGHT: Charlie Ahearn and Lady Pink with locals break dancing at Tom Warren Portrait Studio, Fashion Moda, South Bronx, New York, 1984. Mural by Lady Pink. Photo: Tom Warren.

BELOW: City Maze 1980, brochure, Fashion Moda, New York. City Maze project by Jane Dickson. Image courtesy of Jane Dickson.

BELOW RIGHT: Walton Block Party with Corey sculpture, New York, 1985. Sculpture by John Ahearn. Photo: Ivan Dalla Tana. Image courtesy of John Ahearn.





Afrika Bambaataa in the Bronx, New York, 1983. Photo: Janette Beckman. "A British magazine asked me to go photograph Afrika Bambaataa so I went to the Bronx. I met him there, and the kids were part of Zulu Nation. He's pretty much the godfather of hip hop. That boombox is really great, of course." - Janette Beckman

work in particular. He offered to introduce me to Lee. My recollection is that Lee and Fred came by the following day, and we almost immediately started working on the project. They started painting a wall right there at Time's Square. You could see which parts of the piece were Fred and which parts were Lee. It was amazing.

By the time we were working on *Wild Style* in 1980, train art had been around for a decade. It was like being in a forest where all of this stuff is piling up, and then there is a spark. The whole scene was ablaze! It was beautiful and bombastic.

What was important about working on the trains and on the streets?

Well, public space was what was available to these artists. But it was also an act of rebellion, first and foremost. These writers were living day by day. Graffiti wasn't seen as an alternative to the galleries, it was an alternative to their day to day living. The people who hit those trains saw a huge opportunity to be someone, to get some recognition for the work they were doing.

Of course in New York City it was already in motion. Graffiti on trains had been manifest for a decade before that. Henry Chalfant was already independently working, for years [he] had been working on his graffiti documentation and archive project.¹ Marty [Martha] Cooper was also independently working on her photographic documentation of graffiti works in New York.² These documentations profoundly changed

the way graffiti subway writers saw themselves. They were getting a little attention, and appreciated the recognition of their work as graffiti art.

By the summer of 1980 people hitting trains had gotten into a kind of hysteria. There was so much excitement about whole cars rolling through subway stations in New York City on a daily basis. It was a high point for that particular wave of graffiti. Certainly in the early moments there were also exciting waves, in 1972 and 1976 there were incredible waves. But the public recognition in 1980 came in several ways. There was the huge Times Square Show in June at Fashion Moda in the Bronx³ [and] there was a front page *Village Voice* article with Henry's photographs.⁴ It was a very public moment. There were pictures of these subway works and the artists, and descriptions of what they were doing and who they were.

In September 1980 Henry had a show titled *Graffiti in New York*.⁵ For a lot of these subway writers this was the first time they had met one another. Writers were incredibly secretive about what they were doing, and with good reason. There were a lot of snitches, detectives, police – the activity had been really underground. There were several ways for them to meet one another. There was The Writers Bench, at 149 and Grand Concourse,⁶ but often they didn't. That had been a meeting place for writers for about 8 years before we started making *Wild Style*.

So at that time were there any other contexts in which this work was happening – other graffiti writing or street art activity in New York?

There were other strains of public art. Downtown, Jenny Holzer was postering her aphorisms. On sheets of paper which were 9 x 11 inches (A4). Posted on streets corners and people would stand and read them. There was a lot of interest right at that moment from others coming from different backgrounds.

One of my favorites was John Feckner, working out of Queens, who had been making large scale stencils. He was inspired by graffiti writers even though he wasn't part of the movement. He had incredibly political messages. Over bridges he was writing "Wheels over Indian Trails" to create an understanding that we were standing on Indian lands and he wrote on buildings throughout the Bronx. High up on buildings he would write "Decay". And he wrote "Last Hope" high on an apartment building that was the last apartment building in an otherwise abandoned area in the Bronx. His work was more political.

Basquiat was writing in Soho. "Build a Fort, Set it on Fire" was one of the things he wrote on walls. There were many artists who were not necessarily writers who started to pick up either spray cans or stencils in the 1970s. Stenciling was becoming a very important practice in the late 1970s. A lot of this was happening as part of the punk movement. Postering was an art in itself all over the city. And all of these people were aware, of course, of graffiti as an avalanche of messages, but most people didn't know what those words meant – a lot of people didn't understand that they were names of people.

Later my twin brother John Ahearn was going through South Bronx and creating outdoor murals that were painted plaster casts of residents of South Bronx. It was part of a movement

that was strange at the time when we look back on it...one could wonder why all of these artists wanted to do work in the South Bronx. But artists were moving up there in the 1980s doing outdoor work [and using] Moda as a venue to showcase this work. Artists were going up to the Bronx to experiment with new street art forms such as Jane Dickson's *City Maze* with its cardboard wall tagged by graffiti writers Crash and Noc. But by the time of Crash's huge *Graffiti Art Success* group show at Fashion Moda there was a sense of something exploding. By then things were really heating up. And along with that there was a sense that it was part of the cultural context of hip hop culture, and this was interesting to me. The experiences for most people was that hip hop was a form of music, but gradually people came to understand that it was part of a broader cultural context of break-dancing, or in terms of DJ-ing and MC culture as people had a more personal experience of it. And graffiti was a part of that cultural context.

For me, one of the most exciting things about *Wild Style* is that it isn't a documentary, it's really a movie about a cultural movement – hip hop culture in all its forms – DJing, MCing, graffiti writing, break-dancing.

Well that's just it. What our objective was with *Wild Style* was to lay down an image of hip hop as a culture for the world. It was all interrelated. There was a lot of mixing up of the so-called four elements of hip hop. Kool Herc, who is known as a DJ, was also writing; Phase 2, who was one of the great pioneers of the early train writing, was also a dancer; Grandmaster Caz, Tony Tone, brilliant DJs in their own right might not have been the heroes in terms of writing on trains, but they were certainly all doing graffiti in their black books. The forms were all interrelated: music/ dance/ graffiti writers.

This was something that Fred was specifically interested in and [something] that we talked about when we first met. Fred was interested in finding a way to tell people that hip hop was a culture with all of these different forms. And this was also a theme that was being established independently by other people in the movement. The great DJ Afrika Bambaataa was starting to talk to people about hip hop as a culture.

Historically, in the early 1970s, Norman Mailer had written *The Faith of Graffiti*, where he related graffiti art to abstract expressionism. In 1973, the Razor Gallery had shown work by Phase 2, but by 1980 the knowledge of this earlier work and how it had happened, had disappeared somehow. For us, there was a sense that there was a whole generation of youth who hadn't experienced it. What was happening [was] that European collectors were coming to the art shows in New York City, and the work and the artists were being exported to Germany and Holland where graffiti was seen as the new pop art. So the people who were doing this work, who had done subway graffiti, saw themselves as international.

In a sense, this feeds right into the contemporary condition, where, as an example, the wonderful show that Jeffrey Deitch realised in Los Angeles couldn't come to New York City. It's a complicated world. At the same time, it's now a moment where the Museum of the City of New York will soon stage a show from the Martin Wong collection, which was left to the city fifteen years ago, and the accompanying Rizzoli book, *City*

as a Canvas⁷ which will showcase some of this important work. It's an exciting moment, but it has taken years to raise the money to do it.

Still, street art has exploded in the last decade. Mostly it is legal walls, but there are street art festivals in every major city around the world now. It seems to me that graffiti remains the bastard child or unacceptable form of street art. The relationship between graffiti and the state remains a lot less friendly. In terms of the contemporary art world, it's hard to say, the world is a large place. There are seminal artists like Gaia who are travelling the world and making incredible and important work on a huge scale. And yet, graffiti has a different relationship to all of this. When writers made the transition from trains to walls, and canvasses, they sometimes grew out of the need to operate in such public space as the trains had been. But the transition from the trains and the streets to the canvas was emotionally and creatively difficult for many artists.

In *Wild Style* we were laying down an image of hip hop culture for the world. Our responsibility was two-fold: we wanted kids from all across the boroughs of New York to come to Times Square to see the movie and have their experience of the movement validated; and at the same time we were showing the world how rich the hip hop culture was here in New York. ■

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1 <http://henrychalfant.com/>

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha_Cooper

3 In October 1980 Johnny "CRASH" Matos organised the exhibition GAS (Graffiti Art Success for America), with works by DISCO 107.5, FRED, FUTURA, KEL 139th, LADY PINK, MITCH 77, NAC 143, NOC 167, STAN 153, ZEPHYR and others.

4 As well as a full colour insert that accompanied Richard Goldstein's article, 'The Fire Down Below', *The Village Voice*, December 24, 1980.

5 At OK Harris Gallery.

6 <http://www.at149st.com/bench.html>

7 <http://www.rizzoliusa.com/book.php?isbn=9780847839865>



Times Square Show Poster, New York, 1980. Art by Jane Dickson; poster design by Charlie Ahearn. Image courtesy of the artists.