

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

While all this was going on, over the weekend (see previous entry), a young graffiti artist proceeded to cover a 3 x 4 meter section of the wall at the far end of our garden with a typically illegible sample of his work. We all puzzled over the inscription that stretched behind the comic figure of a ghetto Michelangelo, spraycan in hand. One day, when the artist came back to put on the finishing touches I asked him what the words meant. He said, "just, Michael," his name. It appeared in two different scripts: an old-style fraktur in the background with a spacy free-style over it. Michael had no trouble admitting that, all in all, it was a self-serving display of skill.

Is this what Derrida meant about *illustrating* one's signature (see entry 2)? Yet we are much closer here to the aesthetics of the medieval manuscript *illuminators*, who combined ornamental and representational motifs with writing to create very arty initials. It is also in this anonymous, monastic art form that self-portraits made their first appearance in Western art (see entry 51). The monumental, self-referential, aestheticized graffiti of our day seems to be a logical development of the artist's signature: from a modest but clear hallmark of quality, to the proud assertion of authorship, to the inventive fashioning of artistic identity, to the godlike proclamation of the any signed object as a work of art (see entry 72), to the portraiture of self as a monumental or ubiquitous graphic sign. The creative ego that has only itself to offer will eventually have to go up the walls and it is no wonder that the inflation of the ego reclaimed found its cheapest and most expedient expression in a medium using highly compressed air. Graffiti is the final flourish of the human hand that signs the totally man-made environment.

Tags are more modest in scale, but far more widely distributed. They irritate the rest of us, but give at least one person or group a fitful reflection of their own existence on the bleek and blank urban surfaces that usually only money can buy. Of course, asserting existence alone would not be worth so much trouble; the design and ductus of the tag express something of the tagger's talent and personality, while the frequency of its presence speaks for his temerity, sense of initiative, and combativity in the ongoing

competition for space and attention. But, unlike in most other art forms, fame in this outlaw medium can lead to stiff fines and a police record: it is better to remain anonymous. This is the end of the line for the artist as rebel, but also the entry point for youth in the culture of the visual arts.

Meanwhile the expensive advertisements for galleries in the deluxe art magazines consist less of illustrations of works of art than of lists of names set in large, verty legible type. Whether the names are widely known or not, their mere presence is a guarantee for a nominal claim to fame: the rest is a matter of marketing, speculation, and luck.

In Hamburg recently, an art student seeking entry into the higher spheres of the art world via another sort of underground had his name



posted in bold plain type on billboards in the U-Bahn: "Rüdiger Salzmann." In citing his name, I am fully aware that I am contributing to art history in the making. Whether or not this more sophisticated (and more costly) short-circuiting of the system proved to be an effective strategy, the artist's ego surely puffed up a bit each time he saw his own name, as mine does when my name is displayed in much smaller type (see entry 53).

Michael took special care to point out in a quite legible script on the side that his work should be "respected": that is, not sprayed over with more graffiti! This may be one of the most anarchic of art forms, and it may be free-wheeling, but it is too much work to be gratuitous.

"ego" tag foto: David A. Edelstein / graffiti "R"s by WOSHE