

Building Art Crimes: Highs and Lows

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Abstract

This keynote address for the goINDIGO 2023 symposium is a personal telling of the author's experiences in the world of graffiti documentation before, during and after working on Art Crimes (<https://www.graffiti.org>) with Susan Farrell. Art Crimes was created in 1993 and it was the first website dedicated to graffiti and street art. The paper attempts to highlight the risks to the practitioners and advocates of graffiti through personal stories and the challenges of organizing large quantities of images from diverse geographies.

Keywords

Graffiti; Hip-hop; Street art; World Wide Web

1. Introduction

I have been waiting for this moment for a long time. The moment when academics and librarians took a serious interest in documenting, researching and studying graffiti. I can remember sketching database schemas in my notebooks around 2000, before there was really the possibility of, or the capabilities of me personally putting a database behind Art Crimes. If you look at those sketches, they are very similar to what the INDIGO crew came up with for their ontology of classifying images for graffiti (Schlegel et al., 2023).

Before I helped run Art Crimes (<http://www.graffiti.org>) with the founder, Susan Farrell, I was a graffiti practitioner. Some of my early influences growing up in Fresno, California, were the local gang graffiti, primarily Mexican-American gang writing, that I saw around my town. It was always very powerful and omnipresent. I think some of the power came from the fact that when people talked about it, they were scared about what it meant. That fear made it more important to me. There were some hip-hop-style writers around, as well. Specifically, someone who wrote Scribe left a big impression on me. They were up all over

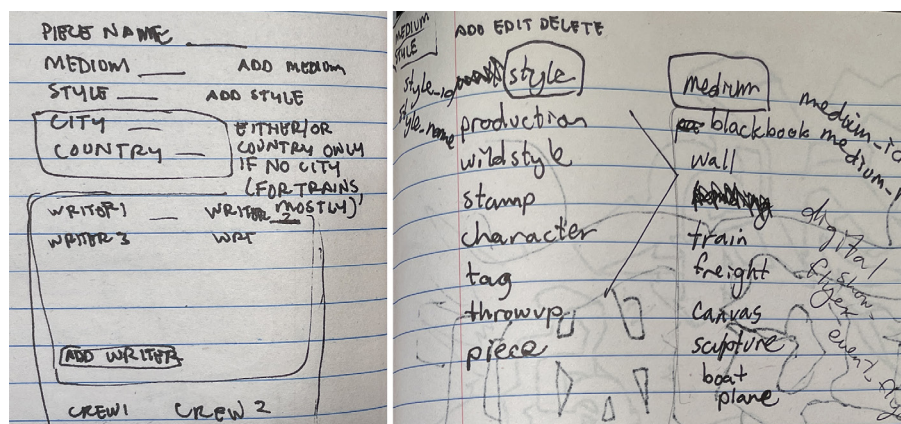


Figure 1. Images of the author's notebook, circa 2000.

my side of town and had a tag more reminiscent of New York graffiti than gang writing. I would still like to talk to Scribe and learn more about where they came from, but I have never been able to track them down.

Another influence, although not as direct, came from a road trip with my aunt in 1989 across the United States. We largely followed the Oregon Trail route in reverse in the West and continued to New York state via the north. For me, two of the monuments we saw stood out from a graffiti perspective. One was Mount Rushmore, the iconic national monument with faces of presidents carved into the side of a mountain. The other was Register Cliff in Wyoming, where settlers would carve their names into the rock as they passed. As far as I can tell, they carved their names for much the same reason graffiti writers write their names today, to say “I was here”. It is a really interesting site and I easily identified with it.

Both of those monuments struck a nerve in me. They made me think about how they permanently destroyed nature and yet are revered. On the other hand, someone putting temporary markings with spray paint or marker ink on a man-made building is vilified in our current society. The

two things just never added up in my mind, and they still do not. In retrospect, the two monuments were created by colonizers and celebrated, while gang graffiti is often created by marginalized groups with little real power in society and criminalized.

A little bit before that roadtrip, I remember watching Beat Street (Lathan, 1984) and learning a lot about graffiti and hip-hop, even if it was a Hollywood version of it. I remember learning about sketching your work and planning what it would take to do a piece before executing it on the wall. It really stuck in my mind. I was also lucky enough to take a trip to New York around 1986, and witness the fully painted subway trains, which blew me away. It has been pointed out to me by my mentor Mare 139 that graffiti writers using the MTA transit system in New York for their studio and art gallery was an early case of writers using technology to disseminate their work beyond just keeping it in black books and photo albums, a pre-cursor to writers adopting the internet for similar use cases.

2. Los Angeles, Graffiti Mailing List and Photo Trading

In 1990, I moved to Los Angeles to go to school at the University of Southern California, which really changed my



Figure 2. Photos of Register Cliff by the author, 2021.

life. It was not my first choice school, but I think I was drawn to Los Angeles (LA) because of the vibrant and famous hip-hop scene. I was studying computer science during the day and lived a hip-hop life in the evening. This double life was something that I started before college, in high school, and really has not changed as an adult and father.

One of the first things that made an impact on me in LA, besides all the graffiti, was a shop called the “Hip Hop Shop” that Hex TGO ran in Hollywood on Melrose Avenue. In the shop, there was always something going on—people breaking, there were records available, DJs were spinning. There were always people in there, hitting up black books. There were always amazing murals on the sides of the building and in the alleys all around. Hex was, and still is, one of the style gods of LA. It was the place where I got about spray tips. I remember a lot of photo albums being in there one day. I realized that documenting graffiti was something anyone could do and should do. With all the amazing art around LA, it felt natural to start taking photography and documentation seriously.

As soon as I got to college, I got access to the internet and spent a great deal of my time on it. Back then, submitting homework online was novel and rare, but I was doing that as a computer science student. I was exploring the different corners of the internet and found Usenet. Usenet is a form of bulletin board system that was broken up into different categories called newsgroups, that dealt with a specific subject matter. There were thousands of newsgroups, but two were important to me, in regards to people talking about graffiti: alt.graffiti and rec.music.hip-hop. I made many great connections on those newsgroups. They were really cool and great tools, but they did not have the intimacy that it felt like we needed since it was all out in the public. At this point, I created the first e-mail mailing list for graffiti writers around 1992. It was a way for me to connect with other people, get more information, and expand my network. Some well-known writers like Juice TC5 and Eros NEWAVE crew in New York were on the mailing list, as well as some well-known writers from Chicago. It was the real beginning of me taking a leadership role, albeit small, and to start building my national and international network.

Through the e-mail mailing list, and making other friends online, I started trading physical photos through the mail. They were usually 3” x 5” or 4” x 6” prints that you would get made at the local photo store. As you printed more photos and talked to other writers, you would find the places that made cheaper prints and did not care that you were printing endless copies of graffiti photos. It was a network within the network. Back then, zines were really big; almost all of them had pen-pal ads for people who wanted to trade photos. You would usually send 10–20 photos and it was rare not to get a package back. As you traded with someone, they would tell you about someone else that was trading and you’d end up sending more packages out to more strangers. I did not think of it this way at the time, but it was a way of preserving photos through creating multiple copies that were distributed around the country and world. It was a novel and unintentional approach to offsite archiving.

Recently, there was a show in San Francisco at the Letterform Archive called “Subscription to Mischief”, which displayed the archives of Skills Magazine. Many of the same people that I was trading photos with were also sending in packs to magazines like Skills. Lots of those relationships were with people I am still in touch with today and it played a big part in making the scene international.

3. Art Crimes

I was busy painting, making friends, and meeting people in LA while staying active online. Suddenly, the Web started happening, with new sites popping up every day. For the first time, it was really easy to see and share images online. The major technologies, at that point, for accessing the internet, had previously made it challenging to share binary files. You could do it, but downloading them and using them was a whole other set of challenges. The web browser was a real game changer for graffiti, a visual medium.

Within those first couple thousand sites, Susan Farrell put up Art Crimes (<http://www.graffiti.org>). She had been working on it as a grad school project at Georgia Tech. I joined soon after she made it live in September 1994. It was an expansion of my online experimentation with the mailing list and Usenet. I saw it as an opportunity to learn new tech and

connect technology with graffiti, which had always been a theme for me. Even if it was just Susan in Atlanta, having a friend interested in graffiti in another city was significant. She had a collection of graffiti photos from Prague and Atlanta, and it felt like a way to expand my network. It was not clear if the Web was going to be a big a thing that the public ever accessed, but it was interesting and different than what was possible previously.

Although we did not have a mission statement, we had a couple of implicit goals. We wanted to change the discourse around graffiti and make it more acceptable and we also wanted to give writers more opportunities, which manifested in various ways. For publishing, we mostly focused on legal walls or walls that were tolerated in the community, even if there was no explicit permission. We linked out to crew's and writer's sites, as they sprung up. We also provided space for others who wanted their own sites, but could not figure out hosting somewhere else. There were no big public hosting services at that time, so you had to be scrappy and most likely be connected to a university.

At this time, sites were not really database-driven. They were mostly static HTML that was hand-crafted and updated manually. You had to choose your primary organizational scheme and site structure early, because it was a massive effort to change later. We organized content geographically, starting with cities, then expanding to states, regions, provinces, countries, and continents. This was mainly due to the fact that people's photo collections were from one location and it became easier to give copyright credit to a group of photos this way. Also, at the time styles were highly localized and would be mostly from one city or area. You could see influences when one person would move to another city and influence writers in the new place.

Jake Dobkin, co-creator of the ICF crew website (<https://www.graffiti.org/icf>), the first website published by and dedicated to a single graffiti crew, told me via text while I was preparing my talk for goINDIGO, "the internet destroyed graffiti culture by making it essentially international and losing variation, which was the thing that made it great. We need a return to artisanal, locavore graf by burning the

system to the ground." I agree that a sad side effect of putting together a massive, international photo archive is that local styles have largely disappeared. It used to be really hard to learn about Philadelphia handstyles, but now you see them appear in places all around the world.

Along with the many photos that were published on Art Crimes, we created an international calendar of events, which was a significant part of the site and the culture at that time. Unfortunately, such a meaningful calendar is lacking in the current scene.

Soon after joining Susan on Art Crimes, I was sitting in the computer lab at USC. It was filled with new Mac computers, scanners and really nice monitors. It was state-of-the-art at the time. As silly as it sounds now, the university was showing off this lab to some press people. One of the PR folks from USC saw these images of graffiti on the monitor that I was working on, and asked me what I was doing. I told her about Art Crimes and she asked if we might want some press. I said, "sure" not really understanding what that meant. Very soon after she put us in touch with a Newsweek reporter who was doing a small article on the Web. We ended up being included in an article in the October 24th, 1994 edition of Newsweek, along with a screenshot of Art Crimes shown in the Mosaic browser (Rogers, 1994). It is funny, in retrospect, but it did an awful lot for us personally and the project. It drove traffic to the site and it provided a great sense of legitimacy. At the time, getting a national magazine like Newsweek to cover you was massive. Another fantastic aspect of this was it was the first time I talked about graffiti with my parents and it is a lot easier to have that conversation when your name is in an international magazine for something good.

Art Crimes continued to prosper and get accolades. We got invited to participate in an exhibition at the Historisches Museum in Baden, Switzerland in 1995. In 1996, my personal graffiti work was included in a book called Graffito (Walsh, 1996). It was not my best work. The piece was something that I did in Oakland with a now famous artist and it was not his best work either. Neither of us were happy about that. The book is not well regarded and has inaccuracies throughout.



Figure 3. Photos of Skills Magazine archive by the author, taken at the “Subscription to Mischief” show at the Letterform Archive in San Francisco, 2023.



Figure 4. Screen capture of Art Crimes (www.graffiti.org) homepage, October 2015.

The piece was included without our permission. But, even with all of that, I was okay with being featured in a book. I was excited! There is something about being included in a book that legitimizes you and is more than being included in a zine or a website for that matter, especially at that time.

During the summer of 1996 in LA, you could not miss the graffiti by the writers GK and Juse. They had pieces everywhere. Heavens (high, hard to reach locations like billboards and signs over freeway traffic), freeways, street pieces, everything in full color. In 1997 GK was arrested and ordered to pay \$100,000 in restitution and spend some time in jail. Articles appeared all through the press, including the Los Angeles Times (Blankstein, 1997), highlighting the case and they always included something about the

arresting officer, Randy Campbell. The day after the Times article ran in the paper, I went to Usenet on alt.graffiti and posted some of my thoughts on the case. Mostly, I poked at Randy Campbell and his handling of the case and what I thought was his desire for fame since he appeared in all of the articles. Apparently, he did not like that. The next day I was told by my boss at USC that he had visited the university and was asking about me. I was terrified. I was supporting myself for the first time. This was my first real job. I did not know what to do. Luckily, my girlfriend, now wife, had some connections to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) via one of her professors at UCLA. We had some connections to the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) through Art Crimes. Both were very supportive and helped out. The head of the ACLU chapter in LA got on the phone and she instructed me

to take anything out of the house that I had that might be slightly related to graffiti. I had thousands of photos, black books, paint and all kinds of things so I called a friend up to help me move everything. It was his birthday and he thought I was asking him to go out for a beer to celebrate. Instead, I totally forgot about his birthday and asked him if I could borrow his truck to move all of my stuff into his garage.

The next day, I got called into Joe Allen's office, the Dean of Admissions. Joe was a mentor and someone that I really respected. He had done a lot for me professionally. The minute I sat down in his office, he immediately started laying into me, asking me why I supported graffiti and vandalism. What made me think that I knew how the walls around a

freeway should look more than the architect who designed them? The conversation was really tough and he kept going and going. It felt like a father-son moment, more than a boss-employee moment. Then, the conversation stopped and turned. He explained that when he was younger, he had protested against the war in Vietnam and someone had planted fake evidence in his apartment. That led to him going to prison for a time. He told me that he told the police officer that they could not tell him what to do with his employees, I believe in much stronger language than that. It was really a saving moment.

This event was kind of a theme for Art Crimes. We were often pressured by anti-graffiti activist individuals. Susan



Figure 5. Newsweek cover and article that included Art Crimes, October 24th, 1994.

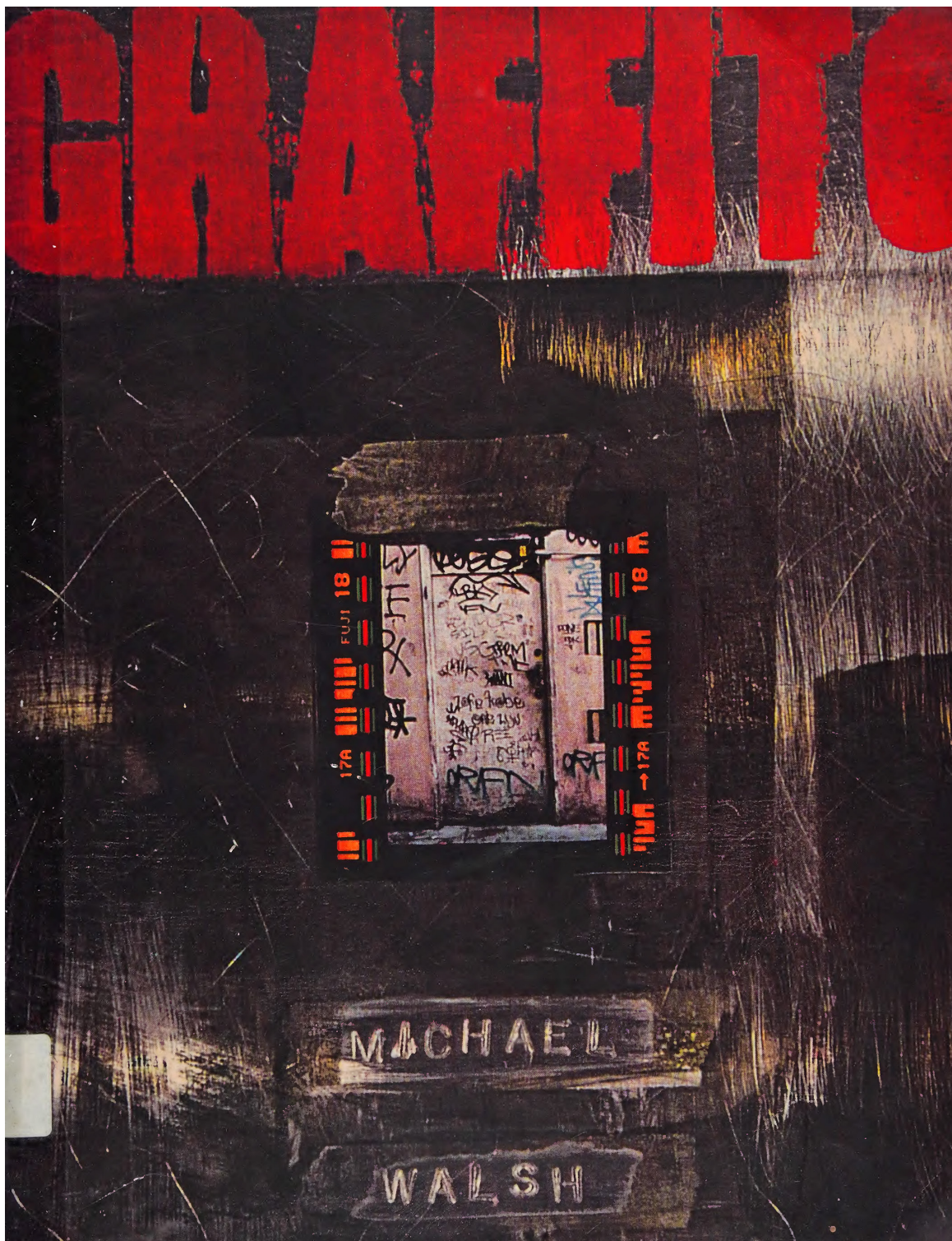


Figure 6. Graffito, October 24th, 1994.

was always adamant about retaining copies of Art Crimes on university servers. Those universities always supported us even when confronted by those anti-graffiti forces.

4. New York and Funny Garbage

At the end of 1998, I got the opportunity to move to New York City. I jumped at the chance. It was a great professional opportunity and allowed me to be closer to many of my heroes and the pioneers of graffiti. One of the places that I ended up working was a place called Funny Garbage founded by Eros and Lawe of NEWAVE crew. These two were also two giants in the design industry. It was a place where I could be myself both as a computer nerd and graffiti writer. There were always other writers of all generations coming to the office. We worked on a lot of projects related to graffiti including the book “Style master general: the life of graffiti artist Dondi White” (Witten & White, 2001). I can remember lots of people coming into the office, including Zephyr and Eric Deal from at149st.com (the site was named after the famed Writer’s Bench at the 149th Street subway station in the Bronx and was the first website that focused on New York City graffiti), sharing Dondi photos and stories when that book was being worked on. We even had a wall on the roof that we would paint regularly.

New York in the early 2000s was a great place to live. My network kept expanding. I got lots of opportunities because I lived there. Not a lot has changed since these times. As my wife told me—I love graffiti; I want to look at graffiti, show people graffiti, talk about graffiti and be around people who want to do those things too.

5. Today and Conclusion

I have recently started working on an application called Spray Street (<http://www.spraystreet.com>) which is focused on photo sharing and storytelling for graffiti and street art. I started the work when I noticed at the end of 2022 that people had stopped posting as much on Instagram. Instagram had really taken over as the platform for all discussions in the graffiti community and became the central hub. I was kind of sad that Twitter was in shambles and I noticed other communities building their own apps catered to their needs and thought it was time for someone to try something like

that for us. Some things we have done is support landscape images more akin to graffiti-style writing and lots of street art. We are in the very early stages but we are building things like classification specific to graffiti and street art images that can help drive research or get people to what they want to look at faster. As of this writing, we are not in the app store yet, but should be soon.

I have also done some early work with machine learning and classifying images. The first test was to use a fairly small amount of training data and try to get something to classify images as tags, throw-ups or masterpieces. We tried a handful of different techniques and had good results with RoboFlow for image annotation and Yolov5 for deep learning. Again, this is very early and I would love to collaborate or work with others who are interested in this type of work.

In closing, as well as sharing my story of building an early website, the intention was to convey the risks of putting this type of information out in the wild. We have learned a tremendous amount about the risks of technology and I just hope that we think about those lessons as we document art that might be considered a crime and how putting that information out in the world might have a direct impact on individual practitioners’ lives. I am not saying to stop, because I am still participating as a documentarian, historian and publisher, as well. I am telling us to keep the creator’s lives in mind when we are doing our research.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the INDIGO team, specifically Geert, Jona, Benjamin and Stefan. My first writing and beat making partner, Sleepin’ J, without you, my life would be quite different and I thank you for that. Amanda, for putting up with all those writers that have slept on our couch and listening to all the prattling on about this color or that spot. Jett, you are the best, thanks for riding along. Mare 139, we have been through some things and you have taught me a

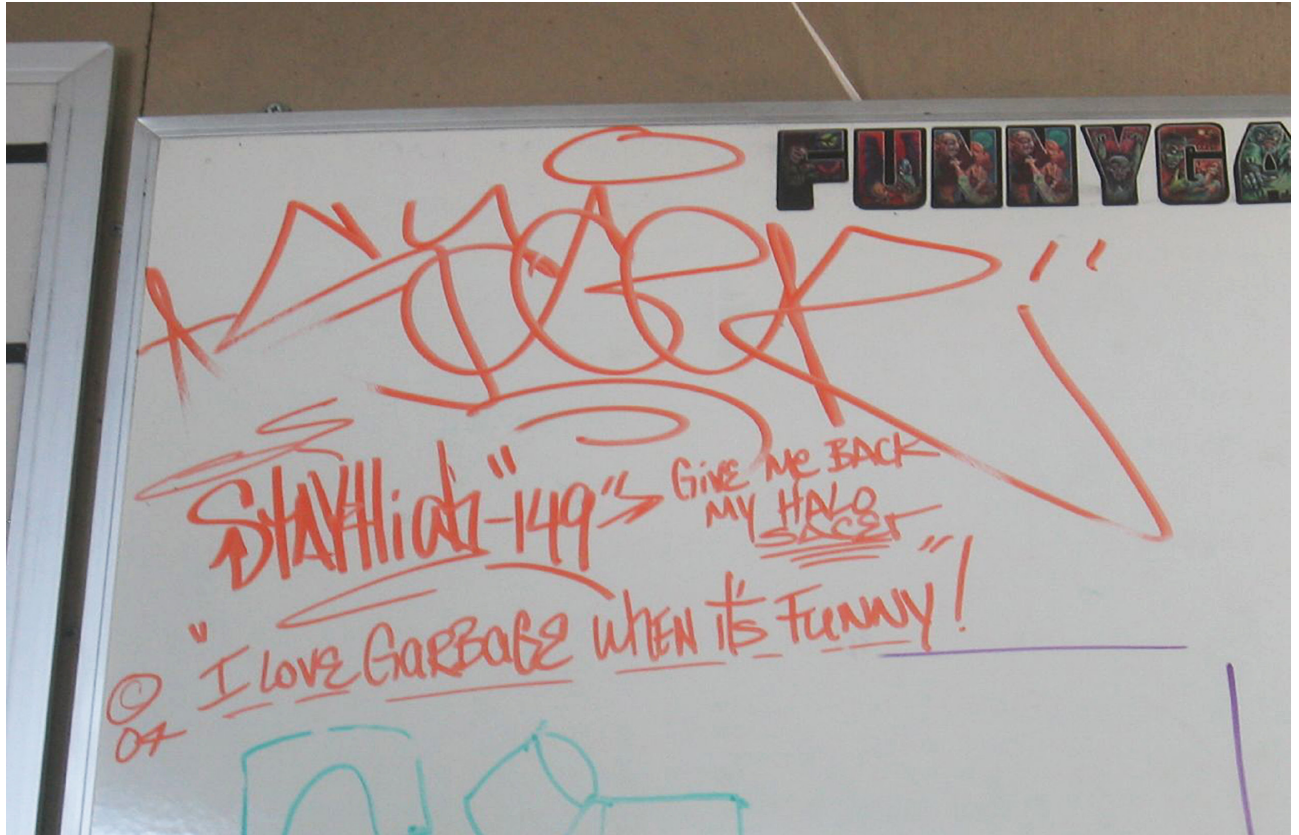


Figure 7. Photo of Sacer/Dash Snow (1981–2009) and Stay High 149 (1950–2012) tags on whiteboard in Funny Garbage offices. Photo by the author, date unknown.

ton. Peter and Chris, Eros and Lawe—what a time we had at FG. Henry Chalfant, Martha Cooper, Tony Silver and Jim Prigoff thank you for laying the groundwork for how writing should be documented, with style. Always remember to never forget, rest easy: Phase2, Bistr68, Dash Sacer Snow, Rob-One, Tempt, Dream TDK and Nace. LORDS crew por vida.

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