

Global Hip Hop Studies
Volume 1 Number 2

© 2020 The Author Published by Intellect Ltd. Show & Prove. English language.
Open Access under the CC BY-NC licence. https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00018_1

SHOW & PROVE

JACOB KIMVALL
Stockholm University

MF DOOM, 13 July 1971–31 October 2020

On 31 December 2020, the global hip hop world learned of the passing of one of its most versatile and innovative citizens: MF DOOM was among other things a lyricist, a producer, a songwriter and performer – and perhaps less known – a graffiti writer. It was the last day of a year tormented by the COVID-19 virus, and one when we had seen way too many lives cut short. Yet, even during such an extraordinary year MF DOOM's passing was unusually saddening to many of us, and thousands of fellow artists, collaborators and admirers paid tributes to him. Busta Rhymes wrote that it 'had taken him days to come to terms' with MF DOOM's passing, and initially hoping that it was just 'another elaborate scheme by the great Whodini MF DOOM himself' (@BUSTARHYMES 2021).

Within a few days after his passing, hundreds of graffiti writers around the globe also had paid tribute by making memorial pieces, something that was acknowledged by journalist Lei Takanashi as early as 4 January (Takanashi 2021). By early January I had also personally encountered two different memorials in my hometown of Stockholm, Sweden – two pieces to which I will return in a short while.

But first I would like to make a brief excursion into the phenomenon of memorial graffiti, something that could be described as a subgenre within the tradition of style writing/subcultural graffiti, and has probably been a

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.41.203.156

On: Thu, 27 Mar 2025 07:22:43

www.intellectbooks.com 217

part of hip hop culture since the very beginning. To see memorial graffiti as a subgenre – something beyond isolated specific motifs – first requires an exploration of the margins of the discourse on subcultural graffiti.

Martha Cooper's and Henry Chalfant's seminal book *Subway Art* (1984) depicts *Eulogy to John Lennon and Deceased Rock Stars* (1981), a piece by Lady Pink and Iz the Wiz commemorating John Lennon. It is published in a chapter focusing on 'Dedications'. The term 'seminal' is, in the case of *Subway Art*, almost an understatement – the book is often simply referred to as 'the bible' among graffiti writers, and was together with the documentary movie *Style Wars* (1983) central in the early globalization of graffiti as a part of hip hop during the early to mid-1980s – initially primarily in the western world, but soon truly global.

Chalfant's second book on the subject, *Spraycan Art* (1987, with Jim Prigoff), chronicled this very globalization of graffiti, and most chapters presented the graffiti scene in a specific geographic location: Manhattan, the Bronx, London, Bristol, Paris, Barcelona, etc. The two first and two last chapters stray from this formula, presenting a thematical focus, and the penultimate chapter, committed to 'Public Statements', depicts several memorial pieces: to Martin Luther King and graffiti writer Shy 147 among others.

Spraycan Art's chapter on Manhattan begins with a mural by Chico called *Tribute to Michael Stewart*, and the text briefly tells story of the death of the African American man Michael Stewart (1958–83), who was severely injured in police custody, after being arrested for graffiti, and died two weeks later. Michael Stewart's violent death is also commemorated in other mediums such as Jean-Michel Basquiat's wood panel *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)* (1983) and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* ([1989] 2009).

Chico's mural and the other commemorations of Michael Stewart correspond with the contemporary graffiti and street art commemorating George Floyd (1973–2020), as a human individual, and as a victim of police brutality. Dr Todd Lawrence's, Dr Paul Lora's and Dr Heather Shirey's database *George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art* (based in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of St. Thomas, Saint Paul, Minnesota, United States) document more than 350 posts addressing George Floyd's death. The project also documents other graffiti murals commemorating Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin and many other men and women of colour who fell victim to police brutality and violence. Whereas *Subway Art* and *Spraycan Art* documented artistically refined examples of subcultural graffiti, *George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art* document the visual manifestations in public space of a social movement demanding justice and equality, indiscriminate of style, medium or artistic status.

Martha Cooper's and Joseph Sciorra's book *R.I.P.: Memorial Wall Art* (1994, also released under the title *R.I.P.: New York Spraycan Memorials*) is, to the best of my knowledge, the only book so far entirely dedicated to urban memorial murals. It combines an interest in the social struggles and contexts of inner-city youth, with a focus on artistic murals, often commemorating victims of the crack epidemic in New York City. Indeed, the tragedy of the crack epidemic paradoxically seems to have resulted in a great deal of positive developments in the world of memorial wall art. According to Joseph Sciorra, the memorial walls provided an opportunity for graffiti artists to make a living from their art, and the paintings are thus often commissioned work from surviving friends and relatives. The economic base was, however, also closely related to the drug trade: 'Dealers seeking to honor fallen comrades could afford to pay top dollar

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.41.203.156

On: Thu, 27 Mar 2025 07:22:43



Figure 1: Tribute to Trayvon Martin at 5 Pointz (or 5 Pointz: The Institute of Higher Burnin), Long Island City, Queens, New York City. Unknown artist. Photograph by Jacob Kimvall in 2013.

for a wall, and as a result they helped establish the business of memorial art' (Cooper and Sciorra 1994: 11). Sciorra also mentions that some graffiti writers, such as Tracy 168 and Chico, for moral reasons refuse to make paintings of dead drug dealers.

Many of the artists painting memorial walls came from graffiti subculture, often utilizing formats and features from the artform. In fact, many memorials



Figure 2: Tribute to The Notorious B.I.G. at 5 Pointz (or 5 Pointz: The Institute of Higher Burnin), Long Island City, Queens, New York City. Unknown artist. Photograph by Jacob Kimvall in 2008.

in the book could be regarded as graffiti pieces: straight letters, and sometimes wild styles, with fill-ins, outlines, 3Ds and highlights, scrolls, plates and clouds. There are, however, general differences, as memorial walls are more often than graffiti pieces painted with permission. Sciorra also points out that the artist who makes a memorial painting, must consider the client's taste and religious sentiments. As such, sketches are often presented for approval. Sciorra describes an occasion when a conflict arose between the deceased's friends and his parents:

Tony Rosario's parents were deeply offended by the image of a gold chain with the figure of St. Lazarus featured in their son's memorial. They believed gold represented avarice. It was replaced with a radiant wood cross.

(Cooper and Sciorra 1994: 12)

The most striking difference, however, regards the figurative representation of individual identity. In style writing, specific individual identity is most commonly represented by a clear line drawing, often in profile. The most ubiquitous figure in the art form, the b-boy or b-girl character, with its cool, swaggy stance, is often a self-representation of the artist. The specific identity may be implicit or made explicit, for example with a plate belt illuminating the writer's name.

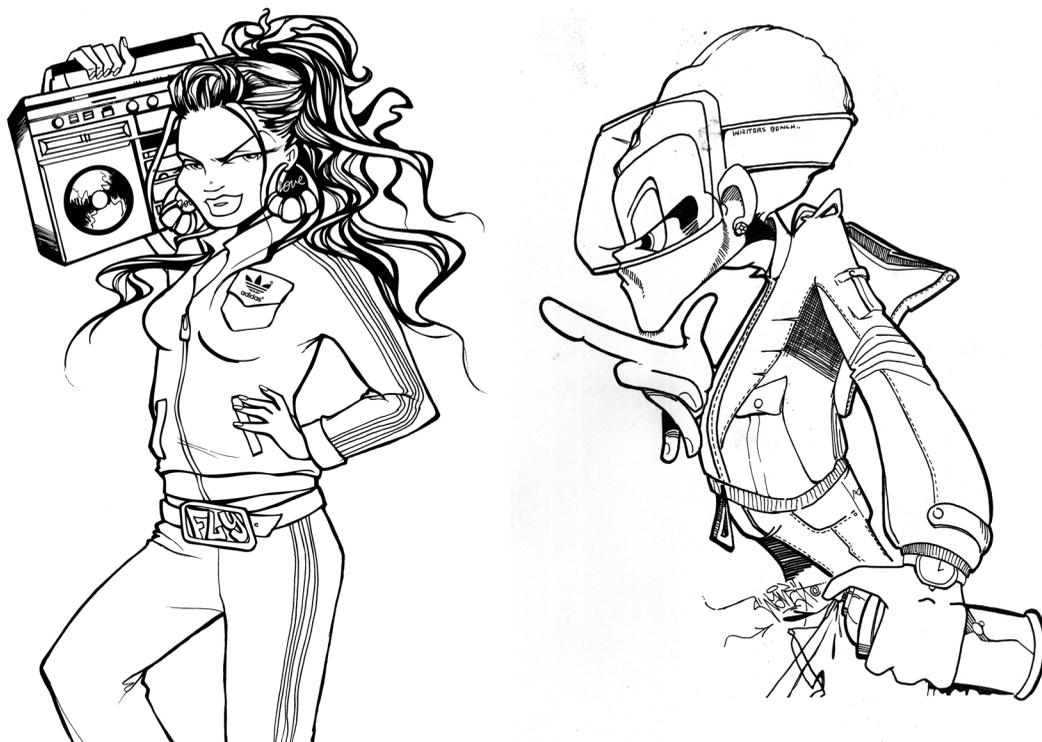
Memorial walls, at least typically, follow a more conventional, mainstream or institutional representation of individual identity, depicting the

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.41.203.156

On: Thu, 27 Mar 2025 07:22:43



Figures 3 and 4: B-girl character by TooFly (c. 2010). Previously published in *Graffiti Coloring Book 2: Characters*. Courtesy of @TooFly_NYC; B-boy character by Wane One (c. 2010). Previously published in *Graffiti Coloring Book 2: Characters*. Courtesy of @waneonecod.

commemorated through the code of the photographic portrait, often rendered in black and white, and often with symbols signifying national, ethnic or other types of broader social identity.

The memorial for Johnny Román (1961–90) follows this pattern with a black-and-white photorealistic portrait and a Puerto Rican flag in the background. A photo of this memorial wall was published in *R.I.P.: Memorial Wall Art*, where you can read that it was painted by William Cordero, on a handball court in the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and West 101st Street. The book provides no date for the mural, but as Johnny Román was killed in August 1990, it was most likely done in the autumn of 1990 or during 1991. The photo reprinted here was, however, taken by the author in October 1998, and the memorial had been significantly altered between the time Martha Cooper took her photo. Notably, however, the photorealistic portrait remains intact, a fact that underscores the significance of portraiture in the commemorative process.

Importantly, the recent memorial pieces commemorating MF DOOM differ from the general patterns on memorial murals. Many of them mimic MF DOOM's own DOOM throw-up, as seen in the cover of his 2004 album *MM.. FOOD*, and represent his super villain-mask in different ways. Two different MF DOOM-memorials produced in Stockholm will serve as cases in point for a brief concluding analysis, offering some ideas about how the case of



Figure 5: In loving memory of Johnny Roman (1990) by William Cordero alias Bill Blast, on a handball court in the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and West 99th Street, New York City. Photograph by Jacob Kimvall in 1998.¹



Figure 6: RIP MF DOOM by Otis GLB 5FD, in Tantofame, Stockholm, 2021. Photograph by Jacob Kimvall. Courtesy of Otis GLB 5FD.

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.41.203.156

On: Thu, 27 Mar 2025 07:22:43



Figure 7: RIP MF DOOM by Huge, in Snösättra Hall of Fame, Stockholm, 2021. Photo by Jacob Kimvall. Courtesy of @hugeart.

MF DOOM's untimely death provided a unique opportunity for artists around the world to commemorate the much-loved figure in ways that honour his own unique contributions to hip hop culture.

The first piece that I came across was painted by Otis GLB 5FD at Tantoväggen, an extremely busy open graffiti wall in central Stockholm. The wall is constantly repainted, and the piece probably did not last more than a few hours. In Otis's piece the tribute takes place on several different levels. The O is a stylized portrait of MF DOOM with his mask and microphone, and the message 'RIP' is written slightly above the left eye. But the tribute is also incorporated into the fill-in of the piece: a throw-up mimicking MF DOOM's own throw-up in light green with lime outlines. The artist has chosen to de-accentuate the outlines between the letters T-I-S, in order to let the throw-up shine through.

The second piece is located in Snösättra Hall of Fame, an area in southern Stockholm known for its graffiti and street art murals. The memorial is done by Huge, known for expanding on the tradition of bubble letter style, through photo realistic paintings of metallic helium balloon letters. The paintings often incorporate the surroundings by reflecting local images in the mirror-like letters. In his tribute, Huge is thus using his own signature style, to mimic MF DOOM's own signature metal mask, central in his supervillain stage persona. Compared

1. An older different version of this memorial is published in *R.I.P.: Memorial Wall Art*, from where the facts regarding the piece have been retrieved. An older, slightly different, version of this memorial is published in the book *R.I.P.: Memorial Wall Art*. The version photographed in 1998 is signed by Mr. Blast (Bill Blast), Wolfy, Zevs, Sho and one more unidentified artist. This is the same wall where Bill Blast previously had painted his famous *Sky's the Limit* (1982), a mural that featured both in the book *Spraycan Art* (1987), and in Malcolm McLaren's music video 'Buffalo Gals' (1982), as well as briefly in 'Hey You' (1984) by Rock Steady Crew.

to Otis' tribute, Hugué's work seems way more straight-forward, telling us that the person may have left us, but his persona remains. *Ars longa, vita brevis*.

What the two pieces have in common – and share with most of the other memorial pieces honouring MF DOOM around the world – is that none of them, unlike most memorial pieces, actually are trying to create a representation of MF DOOM's individual biographical identity. They don't even presume to remember or honour Daniel Dumile Thompson, but, rather, portray his stage persona, the legendary MF DOOM.

Furthermore, I would suggest that MF DOOM's consistent supervillain stage persona is what made so many writers identify and sympathize with him. In addition to his anti-heroic ethos of illegality and underground identity, the modus operandi of constantly and actively creating and developing the persona of MF DOOM – becoming *simultaneously famous and unknown* – is at the very core of how graffiti writers operate. The writer's 'name' is not a name in the traditional sense of the word, but rather a kind of stage persona. The graffiti writer becomes what he writes, and the name s/he has chosen for her/himself is both the signature and the persona as well the artwork itself. The piece is often both a picture and a performance: to have fame for your name is *to be at once famous and unknown*.

In short, the MF DOOM memorial pieces that popped up around the world are admirational tributes from artists to a fellow artist, whom they might not have known, yet were affected and touched by, and with whom they could identify.

Game recognize game. RIP DOOM.

REFERENCES

- Basquiat, Jean-Michel (1983), *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*, Los Angeles: Collection of Nina Clemente.
- Busta, Rhymes (@BUSTARHYMES) (2021), 'REST EASY ON LEVELS THAT WORDS CAN'T DESCRIBE @MFDOOM', Instagram, 3 January, <https://www.instagram.com/bustarhymes>. Accessed 4 January 2021.
- Chalfant, Henry and Prigoff, James (1987), *Spraycan Art*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Cooper, Martha and Chalfant, Henry (1984), *Subway Art*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Cooper, Martha and Sciorra, Joseph (1994), *'RIP': New York Spraycan Memorials*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Lady Pink and Iz the Wiz (1984), 'Eulogy to John Lennon and deceased rock stars, New York', in M. Cooper and H. Chalfant (eds), *Subway Art*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Lee, Spike ([1989] 2009), *Do the Right Thing*, DVD, USA: 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks.
- Shirey, Heather, Lawrence, Todd and Lorah, Paul (2021), George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art database, <https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net>. Accessed 27 March 2021.
- Silver, Tony ([1983] 2003), *Style Wars*, DVD, USA: Public Art Films.
- Takanashi, Lei (2021), 'Here's how graffiti artists paid tribute to MF DOOM this past week', 4 January, <https://www.complex.com/style/2021/01/best-mf-doom-graffiti/>. Accessed 4 January 2021.
- Villoriente, David and James, Todd (2007), *Mascots & Mugs: The Characters and Cartoons of Subway Graffiti*, New York: Testify Books.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

E-mail: jacob.t@arthistory.su.se

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8448-3588>

Jacob Kimvall has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
