

VIOLET SCRAWLER

What makes graffiti
“artists” tick... and tag

By Charles Pinning | Photos By Johnathan Beller and Charles Pinning

Imagine you are “Jen”* and you’re bored and probably like totally PMS-ing. The inside of your head is an azure aquatic frenzy of feminista eels and femme fatale rainbow blowfish and piranha crits and a dead thing on the bottom that looks like your senior project if not the rest of your life. Pull on your cargo pants and load the slots on the left leg with three fat markers – the primaries red, yellow, blue – slap on your blank art student poker face, and hit it. Within the RISD fallout zone you’re invisible. Up ahead, the mailboxes in front of the court building beckon. Being a lefty, you remove the red marker and walk by each box and scrawl a wavy-wavy *PERT* on all three of them – *PERT PERT PERT*. Bing! Bing! Bing! That’s how the next passerby will see it, like a little movie or a drum roll. A scrap of music. To some it will only be scribbling, but to you, Jen, it’s a statement. *PERT* is your gang of one identity. It’s your *tag*.

* “Jen” is an invention based upon the author’s research for this article

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"I started doing it out in San Francisco where my girlfriend, Doree, was playing in the band Cream Pie. After her gig, we were heading out to another club where this friend of mine was playing and like suddenly she like pulled this can of spray paint out of her purse and, like, in five seconds completely covered the side of a dumpster with her tag. I was like, *Doree!* But then I started doing it with her. It was kinda, I dunno... *thrilling!*" says Jen. "So when I came back to RISD for my senior year, I just kept doing it. Now I have a cell with a digital camera and we can e-mail our tags back and forth to each other right after we do it. It might be an addiction. I am slightly BPD."

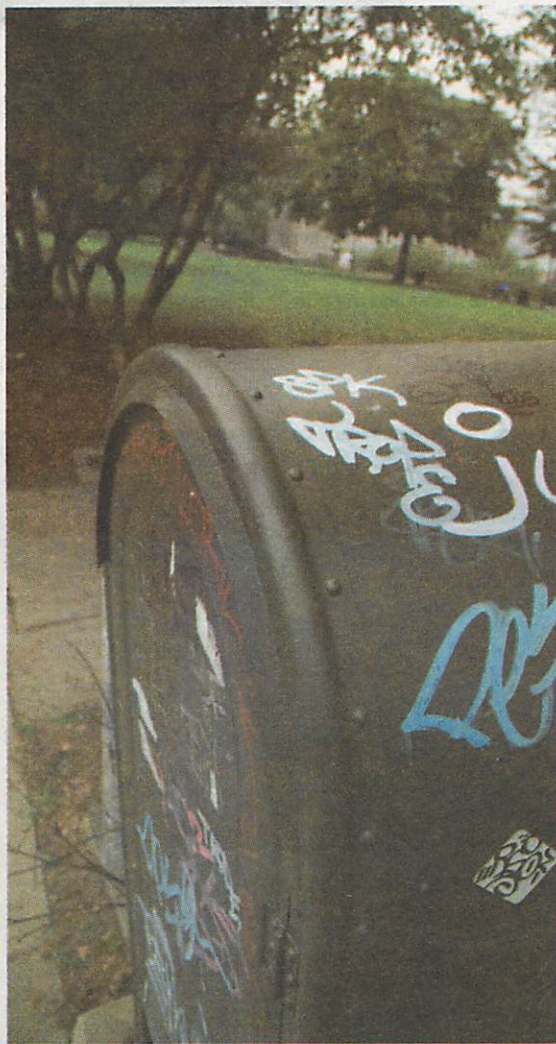
"I know some people would call it vandalism, but, I mean, I think it's kinda pretty. And I think it says something too, you know? Like, *PERT*. My whole life growing up people would say, 'Jennifer is so *PERT!*' I don't think people realize how destructive that is. I personally want people to think about what *PERT* is all about, you know?"

Down the street is Gwen – Jen twenty years from now. She is waiting for her six-year-old, SamJosh, to arrive on the school bus. "It's a shame," sighs Gwen, standing by a mailbox absolutely crawling with tags. "And go by Prospect Park and see the mess there. And then turn down by New Rivers restaurant and look what they did there... he's such a nice man." Then, lowering her voice and

same time began the last great wave of crime and violence in New York City, the subsiding of which also coincided with the clean up of graffiti.

Tagging is essentially an act of boredom – the desire for recognition without accomplishment. In Providence, it is inflicted upon the city by either recognized violent gangs, tagging crews, or individual taggers. Virtually all gang tagging happens on the West Side of Providence. Black, Asian, and Spanish, they have names like Oriental Rascals, Tiny Rascals, Latin Kings, Mexican Mafia, Spanish Nutz, Five Percenters, Lao Pride, Los Solidos, Pumpers, and MS-13. These dudes and their girlfriends are truly dangerous because they are society's forgotten with little future in sight. They have nothing to lose. They tag to mark territory, to speak to the other gangs. They only bother each other and possibly the easy pickings of loners out on the streets in the wee hours – yet another good reason to get your eight hours of sleep every night.

The East Side of Providence is a whole other story. At first glance to the annoyed, untrained eye the tags look like the same ghetto taggings. But if you study them a little more carefully (or you're a kid), you begin to notice that the names and initials are different and that they are more highly stylized, *arty*, with their arrow tipped tails and accent marks. RSO, Jumbo, JM (look closely – the same tagger, btw) Harpe, Panda, *PERT*... Until this summer, none of these appeared on



actually glancing side to side she says, "My twelve-year-old daughter told me she likes the way it looks."

Tagging is not to be confused with graffiti. It's not anything pictorial, a clever saying, or the altering of signs or sentences. Tagging is the scribble-scrabble you see on walls, fences, electric company switchboxes (those heavy-duty metal cabinets that hulk in drab green tones), windows, everywhere... especially on mailboxes. There seems to be not one mailbox in the city of Providence that is not tagged, except during a few brief weeks during the summer when the full-time students from RISD, Brown, and Johnson & Wales are gone.

Tagging first took root in the USA back in the late sixties, exemplified in the excreta of Taki 183. This bored vandal turned out to be a Greek kid named Demetrius who lived on 183rd Street in New York City. His spray-painted "Taki 183" started showing up all over subway cars and subway walls. "Taki" was a diminutive for Demetrius, the 183 referring to his street. Unfortunately, there is always a plenitude of bored youth available to wield markers and spray cans, and within a couple of years in the early seventies, subway cars in New York City were so covered with graffiti tagging you couldn't read the system maps to find out where you were going or see out the windows. Interestingly, at the

the West Side. Now, JM/RSO/Jumbo has expanded west, crossing 95 and appearing on both Broadway and Atwells Avenue, en route to Olneyville, former home of the post-RISD enclave, Fort Thunder, and the newest artist haven, the Steel Yard.

Stroll into the RISD Store and look at the array of water-based, oil-based fat markers available. Look at the end of display racks where the tags are tried out with the various marker tips. Across the street, at the Metcalf supply store, is where you can score the spray paint. Ann Hudner, RISD Director of External Relations, believes it is "unfair to speculate that the majority of tagging on the East Side is done by RISD students." James Hall, Director of Campus Design and Exhibitions at RISD, also shares her skepticism that RISD students are not responsible for significant amounts of tagging. According to Hall, "what a student does out of their studios informs work that comes into the galleries," and he doesn't see ripples of the tagging influence.

Look at the practice tags in the RISD Store again. Not only would a kid from the West Side of Providence feel completely out of place in the RISD Store, he or she would stand out like a bone hungry coyote in the middle of Al Forno.

NIGHT SCRAWLERZ, CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

RISD's in a funny spot; on the one hand, they can't come out and endorse

NIGHT SCRAWLERZ, CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

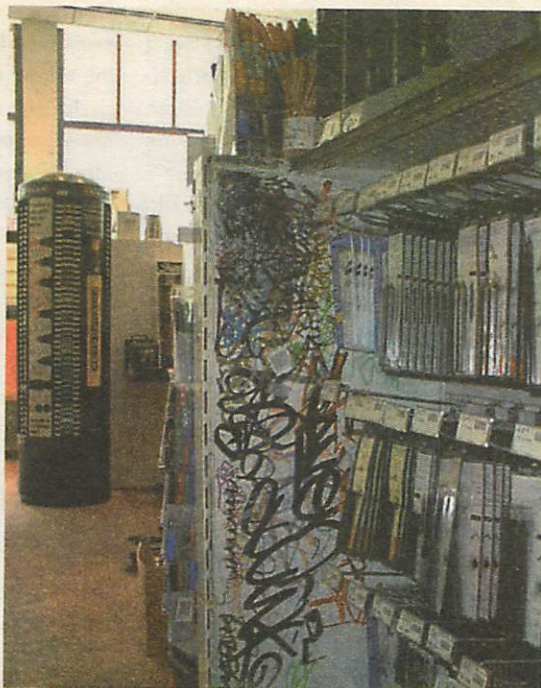
van dalism, yet they have to present themselves as cutting edge and hip to a new generation of prospective students who accept graffiti tagging as a legit art form.

It's a sunny weekend

just after RISD graduation. A maintenance worker for the Providence Post Office is smiling and whistling, scraping off decals and spraying a fresh coat of bright blue paint over the tags scrawled across a row of mailboxes on South Main Street, across the street from the Cable Car Cinema. He smiles. He's happy. He's philosophical about the tagging. "It's job security," he laughs. "I come out on weekends and do it. I get paid time and a half. RISD graduated, what, last weekend? I'll clean up these boxes and they'll stay clean, then, oh, about mid-September, they'll start getting hit again... I can tell you exactly the path a person takes: they'll hit this box, then another down there, then they turn up that street, go down Benefit. A favorite box is the one in front of that yellow Colonial on Benefit."

Now you see it, now you don't. The Post Office takes care of repainting the mail boxes on the East Side near RISD and, for graduation, the city cleans up the tagging all over the bridges and walkways near RISD along the Providence River. Now, at the end of the summer, they remain clean and unmarked. Check back again in a few weeks when the students have returned to the city.

Providence City Council woman Rita Williams represents the College Hill neighborhood of the East Side. "Tagging has gotten worse," says Williams. "There doesn't seem to be a system in place to properly address the situation." Twelve years ago, the City Council created an ordinance to address graffiti specifically, but, according to Williams, "enforcement of it hasn't been a priority of the police." Her plan is to revisit the ordinance with an eye toward increasing the punishment for the crime and to encourage more aggressive police action. As head of the City Council Ordinance Committee, she promises it will happen.



What makes the tagging on the East Side so surprising is that it's done by kids who are privileged, who are just passing through on their way to graduate school or jobs with Target or Martha or MTV. The kids on the West Side don't have many options. In a way, they can be exempt from being so pissed off. Yet, Wheeler, Moses Brown, Lincoln, RISD, and Brown students are flirting with danger without consequences, wanting to identify with the people of the street. Making their way through elite education, they realize that this tagging might be the most individual recognition they'll ever see as "artists" – after all the competition will be so stiff to get into a gallery or make a living as a fine artist, that they will end up truncating their dreams to take jobs

designing clever products for corporations. This tagging could be their final opportunity to see their name, their initials, their *presence* out there.

How do you assert your individuality when there are just so many freaking people in the world trying to do the same thing? Some say art schools have become the enemy of the artist, churning out tens of thousands of artists who will never be able to make a living from practicing their art. They are breeding grounds for frustration, anorexia, and schizophrenia. Warped out you spray your anonymous tag, scrawling the cryptic word beneath the entrance to a fancy restaurant, across a bridge spanning the Providence River.





Warhol was right about future folk having their fifteen minutes of fame, but in Providence it lasts a lot longer because the city only has two guys and a power washer to attend to all the graffiti on public property in Providence. According to Al Buco, Coordinator of Public Property, graffiti removal costs the city about \$300,000 annually. "We used to be able to help private property owners, but the problem on city property has become so much worse in the past few years, we really don't have the time," explains Buco. "We are overwhelmed." As recently as May, both city employees assigned to graffiti clean up were out for two weeks with injuries. When one finally came back, another was persuaded out of retirement to help with graffiti removal.

Providence Mayor David Cicilline recognizes the need to combat graffiti and has several proposals in the works, among them a city ordinance requiring private property owners, including businesses, to remove graffiti within a certain time frame or be fined, as well as a robust reward system for information leading to the perpetrators of graffiti. According to the Mayor, "Many property owners currently don't understand that it is their responsibility, not the city's, to remove graffiti from their property."

Sgt. Mike Wheeler of the Providence Police, a long-time officer in the so-called "gang squad," advises home and business owners to photograph the graffiti then remove it. He advocates stiffer penalties. Currently, if and when a tagger is caught (almost never) it is a misdemeanor, resulting in virtually no penalty. Wheeler believes that stiffer penalties would help. For instance, making the crime a

felony after being caught a second or third time. He also advocates requiring the vandal to pay restitution, do community service, and clean up the graffiti.

Lt. Paul Campbell, who heads the police substation in Fox Point, offers a more tangible example: "One kid we caught tagging is a recent graduate of Moses Brown who lives in an affluent suburban city. Paying restitution is obviously not a problem."

Bert Crenca, founder of AS220, draws upon his experience working with youth there, at the AS220 Broad Street Studio, and as a teacher at the RI Training School. His feeling is that instead of punishment, per se, youthful violators need to be directed into programs of community service where they are validated, given some ownership of the place where they live. "These kids do not feel connected to the system, and the real question we have to ask is *why* are they not connected?" Crenca has found that for a lot of these kids, graffiti has been their first exposure to any kind of art at all. "At the Training School, they want more exposure to graffiti – how do you do it? We try to use graffiti as a hook for learning, as a way of transferring them to other, more sophisticated art forms." Traditional punishment is not the answer, maintains Crenca. "The long-term cost of demonizing graffiti will only make the situation worse. A kid thrown into jail has a reputation; he has a bigger one when he gets out. And it builds resentment toward the system. Only by trying to connect a person to the system is there the *possibility* of good."

The best graffiti makes sharp social commentary: Commute, work, commute, sleep. Various forms of pictorial artwork can make you laugh, provoke a thought. But *tagging*? It is desperately defacing the beauty of bridges and monuments, even the soft curves of our utilitarian and silent mailboxes.

What self-respecting artist wants to jump in with the Philistines? The Bland Boringness of Big Business where you can make a million dollars doing nothing in particular, nothing that will feed your soul. Like all vigorous youth, taggers are asserting their individuality against the monolith. But know this: when you slip out into the night with your cell, a nice big fat marker, and a can of Sprayola, you are being watched. **PM**

