Beyond serving as loci of collective style, piecebooks also serve as diaries of friendship and shared adventure within the subculture. Collaborative designs, and the designs of other writers; photographs of pieces done together; the tags and phone numbers of other writers—all give the piecebook meaning and value beyond the obvious. Thus, the last afternoon of Voodoo’s return to Denver—just before he was to board a train back to Baton Rouge—he asked Eye Six to do a short piece in his piecebook, and Mac and Shoop had Voodoo tag their books.

Start:

Writing Graffiti

Tagging

The collective production of graffiti, and the sharing of stylistic and practical knowledge, can be seen in the two most common forms of doing graffiti: tagging and piecing. When graffiti writers tag, they write a practiced, stylized version of their subcultural nickname, or “tag.” They also often write an alternative personal tag, the name of their crew, or even the tag of other writers in the crew. As Rasta implies, this sort of cross-tagging benefits everyone in a crew, and promotes the crew itself:

I can go out and tag other people’s names, like Amaze or Top or Eye Six or Z13, without tagging my tag. And then I can have them tag my name, so I don’t have to tag to get my name up; or my friends don’t have to tag either.

When Mac tags, he most commonly writes “MAC” in a style that is recognizable as his to other writers; but he also regularly writes a tag for one of his two crews—most often “3XB,” occasionally “SY” or “SYN” for Syndicate. Phase3, another of Denver’s most prolific taggers, also for many years accompanied his tag with “XMen2,” the name of his crew. Some writers’ tags, while written in a distinctive personal style, can nevertheless be read by the general public; others are so stylized that they are recognized only by members of the subculture. Tagging alone or with others, taggers thus participate in social, subcultural activity, both in what they write and how they write it.

Often, writers do tag together. When visiting another writer’s apartment, a writer may, with his colleague’s permission, tag a wall, coffee table, television, or trash can. At a writers’ party, writers may likewise decide to tag in or around the gathering; at one party attended by a number of Syndicate members, one writer’s old sport coat was offered up for tagging. At the completion of a large mural, writers sign it with individual and crew tags, and may tag around it as a way of establishing the writers’ or crew’s ownership of it. These regular, social uses of tagging within the subculture should not be confused, however, with “going out tagging”—that is, with tagging as an activity unto itself.

On their way from one place to the next, or as a sort of late night adventure driven by some confluence of anger, boredom and booze, writers tag their way down streets and alleys. Such tagging is less planned than providential, a matter of mood and opportunity. Thus, despite being one of Denver’s most accomplished graffiti muralists, Eye Six at times falls back into tagging when he is “drunk and pissed off” (in Ferrell, 1990a: 10). The simplistic explanations of public officials discussed in the next chapter—that this is a dog-like marking of territory—miss the elegance and complexity of this sort of tagging. Certainly gang-affiliated taggers may tag gang names or images as a means of symbolically establishing or violating territory. And, for non-gang taggers, tagging can be a part of establishing one’s identity and reputation within the graffiti subculture, although it is certainly no substitute for executing well-designed murals. What is absent, though, from these accounts of tagging’s supposedly calculable results—tagging marks territory, tagging establishes status—is a sense of tagging itself; that is, of the incalculably rich experience of “going out tagging,” especially with other writers.

Tagging down an alley bears little resemblance to walking casually down that same alley. On a quiet summer night, with house and apartment windows open, taggers must whisper their comments on other writers’ tags which they discover, and gesture
warnings of approaching dangers. They also must be aware of, and concerned with, the rattle of the Krylon can and the hiss of the spraying paint. No tagger, of course, would be stupid enough to shake the can, as the directions recommend and as one would if painting a piece of furniture; but the gentle and occasional rattle of the spray can ball while walking and tagging causes enough noise for concern.

As already seen, concealing one or more spray cans causes additional problems, especially when wearing summer clothes. For these reasons, taggers often prefer wide-tip markers to spray cans; as compared to spray cans, markers are quick, silent, and concealable. As Rasta 68 says, Krylon can be a problem

when it's two o'clock in the morning, and it's all quiet and you're walking down an alley and all you can hear is pssssss [the sound of the paint spraying]. And then you can walk down the alley and just have a marker and it just doesn't sound. But when you hear this pssss, that sound is very distinct. You know that sound of pssss, and you know nobody's out there oiling their wheels at night!

These same concerns lead writers to prefer, or at least claim to prefer, tagging during Denver's cold winter months. As the writers explain, a cold, snowy night offers all sorts of advantages, if one can keep from freezing. Neither cops nor citizens expect taggers to be out; windows and doors are shut tight; few people are outdoors; and spray cans (or markers) can be concealed under overcoats or oversized jackets.

Whether carrying cans or markers, beginning taggers must learn to look around, to be aware of windows, balconies, lights, and sight lines at all angles. A toy's mistake is to stop, check that the spot seems dark enough, and begin tagging—only then to glance back and notice for the first time the lit second-story window behind him, or the car lights illuminating the end of the alley. And on those rare occasions when writers dare tag in open, populated settings, a remarkable degree of grace and guile is required. Writers thus recall the subtlety of their arm and body movements in public

tagging, and the ploy of looking in one direction while tagging in another; and Eye Six half-kiddingly recommends a bottomless bag or box which a writer can set down, reach into, and thereby use for surreptitious tagging. Certainly part of the pleasure of tagging is the rush of excitement, the heightened awareness, that goes with learning to tag well and unobtrusively.

Tagging well also requires technical knowledge; a tagger must learn that there is more to the moment of tagging than aiming and spraying. When taggers use spray cans, a short burst is sprayed into the air or ground before tagging, to insure a steady flow of paint before contact with the wall. (This same technique is used in painting murals.) Where this step is omitted, faint beginning lines on the one hand, or drips on the other, can result. The quality of the surface also affects the quality of the tag, and especially with markers. As best possible in the dark, taggers look for a clean, flat, non-porous canvas; brick, for example, is especially problematic for tagging with markers.

The many tags which result from this subcultural activity often draw the response of other taggers, and thus spark another round of collective action. An initial night of tagging may over weeks or months evolve into a sort of conversation among taggers, as other writers respond in paint or marker to earlier tags as they find them. In most cases, later writers will simply tag near the initial tags. Less often, they will leave a short message, or even cross out earlier tags, and tag the pejorative "toy" over or near them. Tags which are written too big are also criticized by writers as evidence of an overinflated ego, and may draw written commentary.

As before, this activity cannot be reduced to simple notions of territoriality or competition. In fact, from the taggers' viewpoint, tagging near earlier tags makes sense for quite different reasons. The existence of previous tags tells the tagger that placing a tag here will get it seen, since, first, other writers obviously come this way, and, second, the property owner hasn't bothered to remove the earlier tags. To put it another way: why should I tag a clean wall, when that clean wall indicates to me either that other writers aren't
around these parts, or that the property owner immediately paints
over any tags left there?

Many writers also share two convictions. They agree that, all
else being equal, they would rather not tag a clean spot, out of
respect for "somebody's wall" or "somebody's garage." In addition,
they agree that they won't tag granite walls, sculptures, or similar
surfaces, out of respect for their aesthetic qualities, and out of the
practical sense that such surfaces will be quickly cleaned by the
authorities. As Rasta 68 recalls, "I painted [tagged] the statue on
Colfax and Broadway.... I caught more shit for that. My graffiti
artist friends... gave me one response: it was uncool and tacky" (in
Ferrell, 1990a: 10).16 Such shared convictions, of course, serve
further to concentrate tagging and tags in previously tagged areas.

These shared convictions as to clean walls and sculptures also
begin to get at the writers' broader ethics and aesthetics of tagging,
and graffiti writing in general. Fie notes, for example, that even
when he was tagging heavily around Denver, he would "try to pick
the spot, and make sure it wouldn't totally desecrate the place—
kind of fit in, you know." When he moved to a smaller city to
attend college, therefore, he "didn't tag, just because it's a really
city. They don't have much crime.... It's just such a clean
city, and such a beautiful city, I didn't think I wanted to tag at all."
Eye Six likewise refers to the "ethics" and "standards" which have
guided his tagging and piecing (and which he regrets on occasion
violating), and notes that, for him, some tagging is "real
questionable" in terms of "the place it's put."

Fie, Eye Six, and other writers thus tend to avoid tagging areas
whose cleanliness or beauty make them aesthetically inappropriate.
Instead, they concentrate on areas where tagging will, as Fie says,"fit in"—in other words, areas whose level of aesthetic degradation
is such that tagging will do little additional harm. Certainly all
Denver writers do not strictly follow this model; but enough do so
that tags (and pieces) often cluster under aging viaducts, on
abandoned buildings, or along stretches of deteriorating, unpainted
wall. Eye Six points out that he won't do graffiti in downtown's
Confluence Park, because "there's an aesthetic already there":

Green, growing grassland. And people, you know, they want to
get away. It's in the middle of the city and they want to get away
from the urban, they don't want to see no fuckin' graffiti. They
want their kids to run around. [Instead], I go out where the
winos are, where the bums are, and where it's rotting and fucked
up, and I beautify it.

Interestingly, Denver's "kings" consistently go beyond this
sense of appropriate and inappropriate tagging to question the role
of tagging itself. Z13 has never tagged, "was never into that," and
in fact began piecing because "that's what I wanted to change, was
to really put a big art form into it, instead of just the tag." Voodoo
also avoids tagging—"I might have done five tags in my entire
life"—and for much the same reason as Z13: "When I got into
graffiti, it was just a new art form; it wasn't as much like we were
tagging on the street." Even kings who have tagged voice doubts
and disapproval. Despite his early fame as a tagger, Fie now feels
that tagging is "totally out of hand," and adds,

Like the XMen, I didn't really respect them too much, 'cause
they'd write [tag] in really weird places, and they kind of got out
of hand with it... they were just up so much, just everywhere.

Rasta likewise criticizes those who tag indiscriminately, and
emphasizes that "tags are just tags. Tags don't have nothing to do
with art.... The Syndicate believes in that...." And Eye Six holds
tagging responsible for much of the city's opposition to graffiti, and
admits to being "schizophrenic" about tagging in general, despite
his occasional involvement in it:

There was a... T and T tag team... they're all tag. They would
tag my grandfather's store; he was real concerned about it. And
he knew what I did, and he came to me asking what to do....
And I thought that was pretty fucked up. It's like, what has this
old man done? There's times I'll see this old folks' little shack,
sitting there and it's been fucked up. And then I can see why
people would be pissed. I mean, it's like this world's insane, and
you have your own little shack, your own little abode, your own
The painting of large, brightly colored picture areas—"spheres"—presents some significant challenges and opportunities. First, the use of large, bright colors on the painting can draw the viewer's eye directly to the subject matter, making it impossible to escape. This can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it can make the painting more engaging and dynamic, drawing the viewer into the scene. On the other hand, it can also create a sense of claustrophobia, as if the viewer is trapped in the scene.

To overcome these challenges, it's important to use the right colors and compositions. Bright colors can be effective in creating a sense of excitement and energy, but they can also be overwhelming if used improperly. It's important to balance the intensity of the colors with other elements in the painting, such as texture and form. This can help create a sense of depth and dimension, making the painting more visually interesting.

In addition to color, composition is also crucial. The use of large, bright areas can create a sense of movement, as if the viewer is being drawn into the scene. However, this can also create a feeling of disorientation, as if the viewer is lost in the painting. To prevent this, it's important to use strong, clear compositions that guide the viewer's eye through the scene, creating a sense of order and structure.

Overall, the use of large, brightly colored picture areas can be a powerful tool for creating engaging, dynamic paintings. However, it's important to use them wisely, balancing intensity with other elements in the painting to create a sense of balance and order. By doing so, you can create paintings that are both visually striking and emotionally resonant, capturing the viewer's attention and drawing them into the scene.
when applied in such a way as to create a large square or rectangle, it helps to define the piece’s frame of reference, to set the piece off from a lengthy expanse of wall. The white or light-colored background also contrasts nicely with the piece’s outer boundaries, which are most often spray painted black. Finally, a primed wall allows the writers to spray paint sharper, cleaner lines within the piece than would be possible on an unprimed, spongy old wall. When Voodoo finished the piece on which he had “to hold his can right next to the wall,” due to lack of primer, the other writers present commented on the remarkable style and composition of the piece. But Voodoo could only complain, “There’s not one sharp line in the whole thing.”

As the house paint begins to dry, the writers use light Krylon colors to sketch the piece’s outline on the wall. If the piece has been designed in a piecebook, the writers prop the book open and glance at the design while outlining. If a figure is to be incorporated—Bart Simpson, or a B-boy, for example—the writer most skilled in this area will begin this sketch as well. As the piece progresses, other writers known to be especially good at shading (blending and shadowing colors at their borders) or detailing (painting intricate interior designs) begin their work. “Toys”—who, if present, will have probably helped with the house paint—fill in larger, single-color sections designated by the more skilled writers, or help “erase” mistakes with “trash paint.”

All the while, the writers keep up a discussion as to the practical and aesthetic progress of the piece. They argue over the accuracy with which the images are being translated from the piecebook to the wall, and ask for help with perspective and scale (“Spot my dimensions for me”). They discuss the appropriateness of blending and juxtaposing particular colors, and of adding star-bursts, thick borders, birds, and other stylized conventions. They curse the strange disappearance of paint cans (“Now where the fuck is that Jade Green?”), and worry over the amount of paint remaining, which they judge by the feel of the cans. And as their pointer fingers wear out from holding down the spray nozzle for hours on end, they paint larger areas—areas which don’t require as precise a touch—by wrapping all four fingers around the Krylon can and spraying with their thumbs.

Increasingly, writers also include stenciled images in their illegal pieces. Z13 and Eye Six are both accomplished stencil artists who have exhibited their stencil works in local galleries; Voodoo also combines stencil with other media, and has produced stencil art for clubs and shows. For these writers, stencil art and graffiti connect by way of the spray can, as Eye Six makes clear:

The way I got into graffiti was stencil stuff. I had been doing straight stencil painting for people, and then I started seeing graffiti, and I said, well shit, I use spray paint, I’m going to try my hand at it.

As seen in the previous chapter, one of Syndicate’s first collective pieces thus included a number of Z13 handgun stencils. Z13, who has “recently started to use just a few” stencils in his pieces, also incorporated stencil effects in his railyards “HOMEBOY” piece. Using “something that I had found near a railroad car, as we were walking down there,” Z13 produced “a bunch of dots . . . circles as an effect inside the lettering.” Voodoo likewise blended stenciled shadow lettering—“all stencils, so it was real crisp”—into a nearby piece which featured a full moon, mausoleum, skeleton, snake, and other dark images.

These stencil techniques push at piecing’s aesthetic boundaries. In a subculture where writers value free-hand virtuosity in piecing, some see stencil work as inappropriate, a way of hedging on personal style and technique. Z13 notes that some of Eye Six’s early “stencil pieces” were therefore diss’d (marked over) by other writers, and Eye Six adds,

They hate it. It’s cheating, you know. Which was real discouraging when I first got into it, because I thought people would get into it. And anytime I would do a stencil piece, everybody would fuck it up. And, since they’ve met me, they’ve come to like . . . they accept my eccentricities a little bit more, but it’s still taboo.
The process of creating a piece of art involves a combination of techniques and materials that contribute to the final product. In this case, we can observe the use of color, line, and texture to create a sense of movement and depth. The artist's use of shading and contrast adds a three-dimensional quality to the piece, making it appear more realistic and dynamic.

The choice of colors and the way they are applied play a significant role in the overall composition. The artist's skill in blending and layering colors creates a harmonious yet dynamic effect. The use of light and shadow enhances the texture and depth, drawing the viewer's attention to specific areas of the piece.

Furthermore, the use of line is critical in defining the contours and details of the subject matter. The artist's ability to control line thickness and direction contributes to the overall balance and flow of the composition.

Overall, the combination of color, line, and texture in this piece creates a visually engaging and thought-provoking artwork that invites the viewer to explore and interpret its various elements.
A throw-up: Can be done in a few seconds with one can of paint. It is possible to do a twenty-foot square of spray, using a single can of paint, if the cover is right. A piece of paper, when thrown up, will cover a twenty-foot square. The result is a large, white sheet. The paper should be spread evenly over the surface, and then the results can be seen. It is necessary to have a good supply of paper at hand, and a good supply of paint. When the paper is spread, the paint should be applied evenly. If the paint is too thick, it will not spread. If the paper is too thin, it will not hold the paint. The results are best when the paper is spread evenly and the paint is applied evenly. The throw-up is a good way to cover a large surface quickly.
standards for the scene of development, but in some cases been
innovations of "kinds" like Z13 and Voodoo where you only set the
source outside the scene. Within the scene, the
senses of other writers; either from other writers in the scene or from
other stylistic sources. Either from other writers in the scene or
him to the improperly taken and used distinctive images of
When writers consider another writer of a scene, they consider
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directly bitten by other writers who have taken these innovations and incorporated them in their pieces. Z13—who defines biting as "trying to use somebody else's work that's already been done, or copying their style"—explains that in his case:

There was somebody, back when we were doing the [original] wall of fame, they were using green goblins. I don't know who it was, but they were using kind of the same type superhero character [The Amazing Zerrox] that I was doing... They were just a toy and it wasn't any quality work, I think, so I wasn't really worried about it.

Rasta likewise explains biting as "whenever you take somebody else's style... they use it and claim they did it," and notes that after Voodoo established his "organic," vines and roses style of piecing, Phaze3 and other writers bit it—they "stole all the roses."

Writers also talk about the appropriation of popular culture imagery in terms of biting. Eye Six jokingly criticizes some of Mac's early pieces which "bit" the Ninja Turtles—in other words, pieces in which Mac included slightly altered images of the turtles. In this sense, Phaze3 has also bitten a variety of pop culture characters, painting a scowling Bart Simpson character at the top of his "IN YOUR FACE" piece, and including a Calvin character (of the cartoon strip Calvin and Hobbes) in another piece described below. As might be expected, Denver writers also bite the imagery, language, and style of hip hop culture. Phaze3 talks about "biting" his "What is crime?" poem on the second Wall of Fame, in that he took a lyric from Ice-T and altered it to fit graffiti writing. And Rasta says, in reference to biting, "O.K., look at the characters. Everybody draws like a black dude—like [they draw] a B-boy."

To accuse a writer of biting the style of another writer, or of biting popular culture imagery, is to call into question the writer's willingness or ability to innovate. As these accusations push individual writers towards greater innovation, they also begin more broadly to demarcate the subcultural boundaries between personal and collective style. While membership in the subculture implies that a writer will understand the shared codes and conventions of graffiti writing, it also implies that he will understand the limits of this shared style as well, and develop a personal style not directly appropriated from other writers' innovations. "Biting" can therefore further imply "stealing" another writer's distinctive style; as Rasta says, other writers "stole all the roses" from Voodoo. In this way, accusations of "biting" not only delimit individual and collective style, but also get at issues of the authorship and ownership of style. Here writers employ the notion of "biting" in much the same way that conventional art worlds negotiate and utilize more formal notions of forgery or copyright violation. For graffiti writers, as for literary writers and sculptors, style matters; and such notions reinforce, in the breach, its primacy.

Going Over

A writer on occasion decides to "go over" another writer's piece—that is, to paint his piece so that it partly or completely covers the existing piece. The act of "going over" has to do, therefore, not simply with painting a new piece over an old one, but with the relationships between the current writer, the previous writer, and the broader subculture. As with tagging, though, this interplay of painted images cannot be reduced to simple notions of interpersonal hostility or aggressive territoriality. Instead, "going over" must be made sense of within a context of subcultural status and style.

At one time or another, all writers who piece regularly will have a piece gone over. The likelihood of this happening, though, depends in part on the status of the writer within the subculture. Writers within the same crew are less likely to go over each other's pieces than the pieces of writers outside the crew. In addition, writers are less likely to go over the pieces of writers commonly acknowledged as "kings" within the subculture. This deference is due not to any sort of violent intimidation on the part of the kings, but to the quality of their work. As Rasta says, a writer "go(es) over another piece to do something better, to challenge the person you just went over" on the level of technique and style. Since kings are
anyway, since


discovers, as Easter go, there is no respect in
easter, there is no respect on easter, the piece did not seem up a week.

therefore, after all, he said, the piece had been up a week.

"don't know why this show on. it's just the other way around,"

"no, the piece was gone over. the time, it was not collected. the piece was gone over. the other way, and the other way around,"

"first, the piece was gone over. the time, it was not collected. the piece was gone over. the other way, and the other way around."

"my name's gerry. my name's gerry."

"gerry's."
If I go up and paint on a wall... paint on your nice white garage door up the street and I do a piece on there and I think it looks cool but you don’t, and then you paint over it, then I look at it like you just disrespected my art. But, I’ve just disrespected your white garage door, and so... how can you talk about respect in graffiti?

For writers, then, going over is less an act of overt aggression or confrontation than a routine part of the inherently risky process of doing graffiti.

*Dissin’*

“Dissin’” incorporates the sort of direct, confrontational hostility between writers that going over does not. As with much of the argot and style of graffiti, the term “dissin’” comes from the world of hip hop. A street abbreviation of “disrespecting,” the term denotes an intentional insult or affront, as in Public Enemy’s (1988) “And every real man that tries to approach, come the closer he comes, he gets dissed like a roach,” or Ice-T and Afrika Islam’s (1988) “They get money for hype-type publicity, they don’t think twice, about dissin’ me!” In the graffiti subculture, “dissin’” thus refers to a writer’s (or nonwriter’s) vandilation of another writer’s work, most often by crossing out the work with spray paint or marker, or by writing derogatory comments over or beside it.

While dissin’ may result from a personal conflict between writers, or from a nonwriter’s distaste for graffiti, it most often has to do with a conflict over the status of writers or crews within the graffiti subculture. Dissin’ is most commonly used to rebuff the efforts of writers seen as “toys.” Throughout Denver, established writers have crossed out the pieces, as well as the tags, of writers they consider “toys,” at times adding commentary like “toy” or “will someone tell him he can’t paint TOY.” Crews that “get up” through prolific tagging, but don’t establish their status by doing stylish pieces, may suffer the same fate. Some Denver writers consider the XMen to be such a crew, known more for tagging than piecing. As Rasta 68 says, “Xmen... never, hardly ever did any pieces. They caught a lot of flack—people crossing out their tags, their names.”

As a subculture’s significant sign of disrespect, dissin’ thus carries connotations which going over does not; it signifies occasional conflicts and disagreements among writers who otherwise operate within shared values and styles. When someone marked over a number of highly regarded pieces in the Towering Inferno, Phaze3 spoke for the subculture by writing on an Inferno wall, “Whoever is dissen everyone show your face and I’ll beat it in!!—PhazeIII.” And when another disser crossed out “Rasta” and “Bast” tags on a set of walls some miles away, Kash wrote back, “Dis mutha fucka! to: toy: you wanna x [diss]? cant sign your name!! I smell pussy! lets battle fuca. Why you disn, toy?” These largely symbolic conflicts, though, should not be overread so that dissin’ is sensationalized as evidence of a violent “war” between writers or crews. As Rasta says, although “I’d rather have [my work] gone over than crossed out... it wasn’t worth going and getting into a fight over.”

The subcultural dynamics of dissin’ can be seen in a case which involved Mac, Japan, Top, and an unknown “disser.” Mac and Japan painted two pieces behind a gas station on Capitol Hill, and tagged them so as to indicate that these were 3XB pieces. Within a day or two, Mac’s piece had been dissed. Over the piece, someone had scrawled “Fuck off! So what! Fuck you!” Moreover, Mac’s name was crossed over in the crew signature which he had written beside the piece: “Motha fuckin’ Mac & the Third Beez.” Soon after this, Top, a Syndicate writer, happened by the dissed piece. Since Mac is a member of Syndicate as well as 3XB, Top responded. Down the wall a few feet, Top wrote: “Great job Mac and Japan. TopOne.” Next to the dissed piece, he wrote: “2-D stupid son of a bitch who dogged! Fuck U. 3XBz iz down with us. Fuck You! Syndicate.” Top’s response constitutes a defense of Mac’s and 3XB’s status, but even more so a subcultural counterattack, a dissin’ of the disser—the “stupid son of a bitch who dogged.” His response also shows that, like tagging, dissin’
"Significantly, as a form of symbolic interaction, an ongoing exchange operation among writers about scenes and plots..."
Dining and Epitaphs Nothing is better—Music is an instrument of life and death, an embodiment of the divine. What we remember is not what we see, but what we feel. Come to the banquet of life, and let us sing together. The artist is the mirror of society, and the society is the mirror of the artist. The truth is that art is not for entertainment, but for enlightenment. The beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The meaning is in the mind of the creator.