

"I pledge allegiance to the living and I will defend art from history. I will rescue art from the future, from its attrition into taste, and from the speculative notion that it will become more valuable with time. New art is most valuable to us when it is brand new. Perspective destroys art. The feeling of new art is fugitive . . . here for the moment and gone forever. It's only truly valuable before it's surrounded by the

lot of SCMTD's maintenance lot but once over the past year — for the '82 Spring Fair, where viewer response to the work was favorable according to an informal poll taken by Transit District staff.

The NY graffiti art movement, as you may know from TV specials and print media, started in the Big Apple in the early '70s as a last ditch way for ghetto youths (almost all males) to bring

the success ethic, with gallery shows of their work (now on canvas), mural commissions, film documentaries and the like. Then came hyper-kudos from the critics, who praised Dondi's "wild style" genre of cryptic lettering, called Futura "the Watteau of the spray can" and his work "space age Kandinskys."

Writing in *Art in America* last fall, journalist Suzi Gablik makes

chairperson Joe Cucchiara, perhaps the only member to advocate scheduling the graffiti bus in a routine way (as initially planned), offered insights to the SCMTD's fumblesome, bureaucracy-laden savvy as guardians of their fleet-cum-art patrons. "At first there were two conflicting recommendations before the board: the policy finance committee said the bus should be maintained in the

intelligentsia in recent publications of *ArtNews*, *ARTFORUM* and *Art in America*. Based on this, according to SCMTD manager of staff operations Scott Galloway (quoting from the board's minutes), "It was moved that the board of directors direct staff to retain the bus in a parked condition for six months' — that means not using it — and during that time district staff investigate the



PHOTO: DAN HASSID

Visiting New York graffiti artists (from left) Zephyr, Futura and Dondi pictured last year in front of the UCSC Sesnon Gallery mural they created last year.

mystique of money, while it's still owned by culture, before it becomes booty." — Rene Ricard, *ARTFORUM*, November 1982.

COLLECTORS: For Sale: Bus panels (various sizes) painted by famous New York graffiti artists Futura 2000, Dondi and Zephyr. Call Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District. (408) 426-6080, ask for Katie Heth. — *ARTWEEK* magazine (classified ad) January 15, 1983

For a town that prides itself on institutional and private support of both the mainstream and vanguard arts, there is little to compare with the strangely unsupportable case of Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District's (SCMTD) "Art Bus," a saga of public relations and arts boosterism gone awry. Even though the ruling SCMTD board of directors now views the paint job on bus #883 as a work of art, the shuttle's fate as a moving mural for public appreciation — rendered in spray paint last February by recognized New York City graffiti artists Dondi, Zephyr and Futura — is stuck in a quagmire of fear and self-contradiction on the part of its owner.

If you've never seen the graffiti bus you're not alone. For various reasons it has rolled off the gravel

Paul Hersh

their genuine esthetic before countless eyes. Far beyond a fad, these "writers" were outlaws with a soulful mission, trespassing at night on Metropolitan Transit Authority subway grounds in order to "deface" and "desecrate" (as officials say) many of the system's trains with an explosively colorful, yet simple message: their names, or "tags" — pseudonyms like Fab 5 Freddie, Crash, Lady Pink, Futura, Dondi. Neither profanity nor political rhetoric, tags are the bold announcement that these oppressed, disenfranchised artists exist.

But for many of the NYC power elite (artists included), graffiti smacks of violation, social anarchy and moral breakdown — vandalism pure and simple — so much so that Mayor Koch has recently mounted yet another (\$6.5 million) anti-graffiti drive to pull the landscape back under control.

The late '70s advent of new wave music and fashion, and its synthesis of pop culture and modernism in art, saw graffiti artists rescued by the "legitimate" framework of the NY art world. Virtually overnight these insecure artists became absorbed into

clear that "It's now nearly impossible to characterize the graffiti phenomenon, since it can no longer be reasonably attached to one set of practices (such as spray painting subway cars), or to one exclusive set of intentions."

Village Voice columnist Richard Goldstein, a longtime observer of graffiti polemics, explained the prejudice against the art that was born literally underground: "The White middle class perceives itself as an island of sanity in a sea of barbarism. Amid this panic, a Big Lie has been allowed to flourish: that the young have no capacities except for violence and destruction. All the symbols of a new generation — its sense of style, scale and solidarity — are read as evidence of nascent terrorism. There is no perceived difference between graffiti and mugging, except in the degree of audacity exercised by the perp."

"In the current climate," added Goldstein, "few publishers or owners of respectable galleries are willing to risk the wrath of those who see the form itself as savagery unleashed. It is no longer necessary to desecrate a subway car. To embrace wild style — even in the most respected venues — is to encourage criminality. And that is a censorable offense."

Back at home, SCMTD board

fleet for use in special events [a program which fell to the budget axe in '82]; and the public relations committee recommended the bus be immediately taken out of service and repainted. The primary concern of opponents to using the bus was that they felt it would foster destruction of the fleet or district facilities through the use of — what do you call it? — graffiti, and that the district should not be in the business of promoting the possible deterioration of its property.

"When the bus was offered," continued Cucchiara, "it was part of the show on the campus ["Burners," an exhibit of new works on canvas and photos of subway cars by 15 NY graffiti artists at UCSC's Porter College Sesnon Gallery] and the Transit staff thought [in response to Bruce Bratton's urging] it might be a good idea . . . The board did not act on whether or not to allow the painting of the bus — it was offered as a courtesy by staff with approval of the chair (myself). What to do with the bus had to return to the full board for a final action."

Said final action has yet to occur — primarily because of news delivered to the board last fall that the work of Dondi and Futura had been acclaimed by the NY art

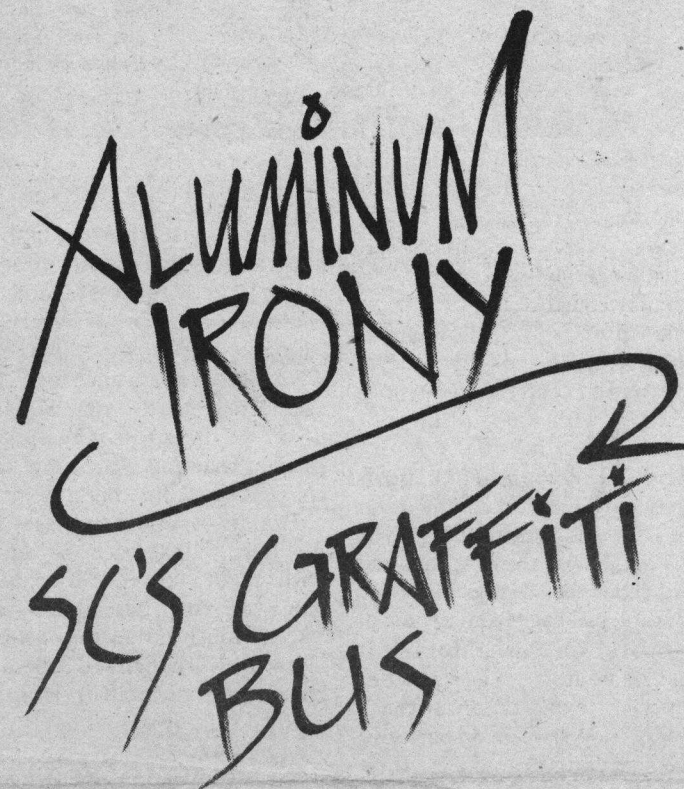
art value of the bus for economic benefits to the district."

The idea now, Galloway told the *Express*, is that "The painted panels themselves could be framed and sold or whatever. We've gone out requesting for buyers to submit [bids — of which there are at least four]. Since some of the artists involved in this thing were featured in a fairly prominent art magazine recently, there may be a chance we have something going there."

"Certainly," Galloway added, "our deficit situation would be benefited by this."

The fast-talking Galloway later said, "Obviously we wouldn't have [let the bus be painted] in the first place if we weren't supportive of the Sesnon gallery and the cause of art in the community. And the irony is that we may wind up with some negative publicity out of the thing, when it was originally proposed to us as a gimmick to get attention to the art show, not necessarily that the artists were making a contribution of art to the district that had any net value."

When Sesnon Gallery curator Philip Brookman was contacted by a SCMTD staff member — who wanted to know the artists' names — he was told about plans to sell the panels. Brookman inquired whether consultation





with the artists or a commission to the artists from the sale of their work was forthcoming. Brookman remembers being told, "Gee, we hadn't thought about *that*." So much for courtesy.

As a postscript, Galloway said SCMTD is obliged by federal regulation to keep the bus and run it, either "with the stuff on it or the stuff off of it."

The *Express* reached both Dondi and Futura to comment on SCMTD's ads for the bus. As it turns out, it was the first they had heard about the scheme.

Futura, just back from a show of his work in Paris, found it "kind of bogus . . . just another example of exploitation. If that's the way they want to do business, there's nothing I can do. It's their bus and if they want to strip the panels, fine. I don't expect to see any money; I mean, what I would get for the work wouldn't be enough to have it sent to me. I'd like to see what kind of buyers they have. I never understood the reason, if they weren't going to use it, what did they have us paint it for? I recommend the bus

company to do what they do with other graffiti: just paint over it."

Futura must know something about buyers that we don't, for his many 3' x 5' canvases now on view at the Fun Gallery in Manhattan's Lower East Side were all sold in advance for \$2500 each. Incidentally, one SCMTD driver in the know is reasonably certain that bus #833 was purchased (used) for the same price.

Dondi — whose canvases sell for only \$2000 each — agrees with Futura on the improbable value of the bus panels, and "would much rather they actually clean the work than sell it, because the nature of graffiti is to be cleaned off anyway."

"We did the bus as a statement on how it's done and to give Santa Cruz something it would otherwise never have seen. I see Santa Cruz as a place where radical statements don't really come about, but you have the beginning of one with that bus. The energy of our work scares them out of letting it run because it might influence people — just like on

the [Sesnon] gallery wall, where others followed with their own contributions."

Unaware of the artists' sentiments, Galloway felt the idea of "taking what is actually art and sandblasting and painting over it seems to be comparable to painting the arcade [Eduardo Carrillo's mural] downtown — kind of a loss to the community. But at the same time there was a feeling that perhaps we were going to be doing something of a negative value to the community, by running a bus that essentially advertises unauthorized graffiti."

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Whether to paint over or sell the graffiti bus is not the question here. In Santa Cruz, 1983, either move is ridiculous, and embarrassing to all involved. Apparently no one at SCMTD has considered making available *more* art buses — created by locals in a medium and style assuredly different than NY graffiti. Why not? A solution of this kind not only diffuses the dreaded impact of a Dondi/Zephyr/Futura roaming the streets, it would also make good on the transit district's dubious claims that it seeks to support and preserve the arts in the community. Call it public relations, call it 'making lemonade from a lemon.' No matter.

Granted, few if any regret the absence of commercial advertising on our buses, yet there are examples of authorized artwork on transit system fleets throughout Europe. Dondi spoke of the trams he saw last month in Amsterdam, where art students were paid to express their visions. SCMTD could attract at least a dozen fine, professional Santa Cruz artists and

photographers who would be glad to go out of pocket for materials for the chance to exhibit their work this way.

Santa Cruz has many people with expertise in organizing art juries and contests — no doubt some of them would love to assist wherever possible. The Radio Free Billboard art competition now

underway is a recent local instance of corporate industry (Foster-Kleiser Inc.) and community arts administrations working in tandem to evolve/reflect new images that speak to us all. Thinking in this direction, as opposed to erasing or profiting from artistic labor, is very much "Santa Cruz thinking." Or is it? □



PHOTO: DAN HASSID

Graffiti Appeal

When the *Express* asked SCMTD board member Joe Cuchiara if members of the community might be heard on what to do with the graffiti bus, he said, "Anyone interested could submit a letter to the district requesting that the item be reconsidered by the full board,

and when the item is placed on the agenda a presentation in defense of that recommendation would be appropriate."

A decision on the graffiti bus is expected from the board soon. Forward your requests for appeal to SCMTD, 230 Walnut Avenue, Santa Cruz, 95060.

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