

GRAFFITI
VERITE'

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GRAFFITI VERITE':

Read The Writing on the Wall

Reviewed by Bienvenida Matias

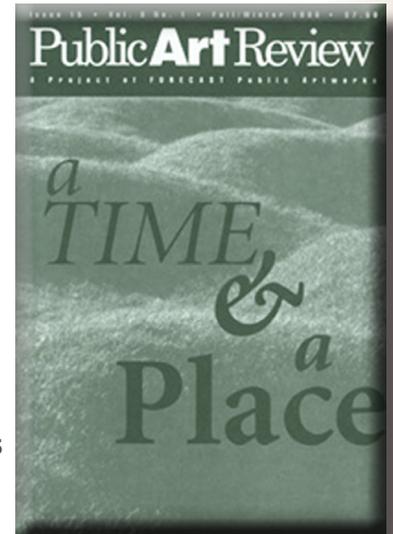
The documentary *Graffiti Verite' (Read the Writing on the Wall)* began by chance when producer/director Bob Bryan, who knew very little about graffiti, stopped his car to observe a group of guys spray painting inside a soon-to-be art gallery in Hollywood, CA. One of the artists, Toonz, invited Bryan into the gallery and into the wonderful world of Los Angeles graffiti art. Many times only the negative aspects of graffiti and the artists who produce it are told. Bryan was lucky to gain the trust of a group of writers who willingly shared their stories, and so are the viewers of this powerful, non-stop look at the aesthetics, politics, and history of graf art as told by 24 practicing artists.

The range of Los Angeles artists and styles included in the video is mind-boggling for the uninitiated viewer who might consider all graffiti alike. The artists make a compelling distinction between tag-bangers, who simply spray their names, and the serious writers who work the graffiti on different surfaces, with different collaborators: Tattoos on human bodies, canvases in art galleries, and theatrical backdrops (one for a Peter Sellars opera) are some of the more conventional outlets. Make no mistake: These guys are professionals with impressive track records. To hear them talk about spray-can control, fill-in styles, cuts, and patterns is to witness the creativity of the art.

One of the video's recurring themes is the tight connection between the artist, crew members, and mentors, who support and inspire each other's exploration of the art form. Artist Cre8 talks about the mentor who introduced him to different yards, different styles, and to

the possibility that he could make money with his art. The documentary also highlights graffiti's long history in Los Angeles, from the Mexican community's cholos of the 1930s and 1940s who delineated their gang's territories with their paint brushes, to today's Friday-afternoon writers' bench meetings of the West Coast Artists, which attract young people interested in seeing and being seen with their heroes.

Bryan captures the tense energy of the writers by not allowing the viewer space to reflect on and time to absorb all the information he packs into this video. I first viewed the video on my small funky TV set-bad move. The second viewing was on a state-of-the-art video system, and this documentary needs a large screen to bring out the details of the art. It is very much about being out on the street getting bombarded by sounds, shapes, colors. As Toonz comments, "if you want to know what is happening in a city, you need to read the writing on



the wall.

My view of graffiti has changed over the years. When I was a New Yorker I hated the graffiti which defaced subway cars and the housing project elevators adding to the confusion of an already chaotic city. Now my office is at the Intermedia Arts building in Minneapolis which is covered inside and out with graffiti. Intermedia works with the artists by providing them with the wall space to use as their canvases. This involvement is controversial. Some community politicians and residents believe that Intermedia's graffiti adds to the neighborhood's blight and encourages gangs. The art is not appreciated and the issues up on the walls-homelessness and racism, to name two-are not discussed because people can't get past the confrontational,

in-your-face production tactics needed get the work in front of the public.

Bryan lets the art and the artists speak for themselves. In an age of jazzy video effects and pulsating hip-hop music Bryan brings to the viewer a clean straightforward documentary. **Graffiti Verite'** is a very strong graf art primer which should be required viewing for young and old.

Bienvendida Matias is a documentary film and video producer and Executive Director for of the Center for Art Criticism in Minneapolis.

For more information about this filmmaker, go to:
<http://www.graffitiverite.com>

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