



The Holler Back Pigeon has landed on a few distinguished people, including here, on Allen Iverson's arm. Painted by SEVER and EWOK HM MSK at 6100 Market Street, West Philadelphia.

the same red that PAGN used to paint over graffiti. In case the message was too subtle, above her face I wrote, "This Is the Network," and next to her face I wrote, "Art is long, life is short, and I don't consider the network to be a worthy judge."

The next day, after waiting at the one-hour film developer, I delivered a picture of the freshly painted wall to Jane on the scaffolding. Jane smiled and cringed at the same time. She handed the photo back to me and said, "I understand—I'm glad you're out there." Out there I stayed.

During the next twenty years Jane moved up in the ranks at PAGN, took it over, and then spun off the anti-graffiti network as the underperforming division it was. She transformed the mural program—what was once window dressing for PAGN—into the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, a model for community building through public art that is admired and emulated throughout the world.

During the same time I moved on from graffiti and made a seamless transition into the art world, collaborating with Todd James and Barry McGee on a show we called *Indelible Market* when it was curated by Alex Baker at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, then *Street Market* when it was

curated by Jeffrey Deitch at his gallery, Deitch Projects, in New York City. The *Street Market* show eventually went to the Forty-Ninth Venice Biennale, and while it was an amazing level to attain, I had been making paintings for only two years, and I had a lot to learn about art.

So I went back down to the street—one in particular, called Surf Avenue, in Coney Island. There I found a middle ground between the graffiti I spoke fluently and the painting language I could speak only well enough to order a beer. So I ordered a beer and made paintings that looked like Coney Island signage, except I stripped out the commercial and inlaid emotional content. The resulting art was visually clear and direct, unflinchingly confronting the complexities of love and life in a way I avoided in my everyday living. Coney Island was both sandbox and toolbox, a place where I learned to make effective paintings, perform effective community service, and be an effective carny making cash in the summer sun—all useful skills when it was time to make sign painting the voice of the community, the way Stay High had once made graffiti "The Voice Of The Ghetto."





p. 17: Shelving and signage by Matt Wright. Except for the crummy “Price Club prez” sign—that’s mine.

above: Two of ten signs painted for Lambro’s corner. We had to haggle to get \$500 for the enormous job, which I split with STAK, Greg Lamarche, Nate Smith, and Ned Vena. A week after we finished, John Lambro waved me over and said, “Boy did I rip yous off—it cost me \$500 to get three little vinyl signs done.” I said, “Feel free to give us a tip.” He laughed.

that there was an endless amount of work to be done, and we wanted to extend the project for a second year. Creative Time was against the idea of doing the same project twice, so I proposed giving the Dreamland Artist Club a clubhouse, a sign shop in the heart of Coney Island that would allow us to be in the community and go well beyond our sincere but outsider contributions of the previous summer.

If you want to be inside Coney, pay rent. If you want to be a Coney insider, you have to be a carnny. One guy that understood this was Valentino of the Gents of Desire, an LA party crew renowned for their elegance and their successful quest in the pursuit of elegance. He took a week off from his high-pressure, high-paying day job as a Hollywood art director to participate in our venture. Valentino took up residence in our shop in Coney and taught me how to make full use of our clubhouse. He kicked back in his Louis Vuitton slippers, and in less time than it would take him to choose the right shade of blue for a movie set, made himself a carnny.

CONEY ISLAND IS STILL DREAMLAND (to a seagull)

“Coney Island Baby” is an achingly beautiful doo-wop song by the Excellents. It was revealed to me a few months ago, washed up on my shore like a Ballantine 40 bottle with a love letter inside. We set up a stereo in the sign shop to play it repeatedly and speakers to broadcast it onto Surf Avenue during the dead of winter.

In summer 2005 there was no need for it—the aural competition was too strong on Surf Avenue, even for a piece of ear candy like “Coney Island Baby.” As I stood in the doorway

of the shop, to my left, two doors down at Eldorado Bumper Cars, a percussive voice slashed open the pockets of passersby with: “BUMPBUMPBUMP YOUR ASS OFF, YOU RIDE YOU DRIVE, THE LIGHTS ARE FLASHING, THE CARS ARE CRASHING....” It’s a money-making mantra that even Crazy Eddie would respect. Not to be outdone, sitting right next to our door was a greasy fat man with dreads and a crushed-glass vocal, chanting, “MAGIC MOUSE, ONE DOWAR.” The Magic Mouse is an inch-long plastic mouse with a thin piece of filament that you tie to a button on your shirt. As you wring your hands, the mouse seems to be running over them. The chant, the hypnotizing movement of his hands, and his toxic-hippie apparel all conspired to make people freeze, and the low price got kids to pry the paper from off their parents. The Magic Mouse man’s black dress socks expanded with currency—good thing he kept his socks secured in a running-shoe safe with a Velcro lock.

While both of these barks were great, it was Valentino who put the entire block in the “gent check.” He arrived on a muggy Monday, acquiring two folding chairs and a table and setting up shop out front. He placed a large bottle of boot-leg Gold Bond on the table and started to chant, “POWDER, POWDER! STAY DRY, STAY FLY! BE LIKE MALCOLM AND GET SOME TALCUM! NOT DOPE, NOT ‘CAINE, HOOK YOU UP JUST THE SAME. POWDER, POWDER.” It performed magic, knocking the Magic Mouse man off his pitch, squelching the bumper car squawk box, and introducing a new product to the island home of illusory commodity: smoothness, dryness, flyness, all in powder form. Only fifty cents. Less than one one-thousandth of your rent.

Everyone has an emotional investment in Coney, and we value that by making work as fried, greasy, sweet, cheap, fun, and flashy as any other experience you can have there.

Employees
must
wash
Hands

Employees
must
wash
Hands

*TROUBLE
MAKERS
LOCAL
4



opposite: 1201 Surf. "Aritst." It wasn't planned, but one out of three Coney Island signs is misspelled, so we kept it.

below: That's your boy.



That was the moment, two months after we opened our sign shop/social club, that we finally hit our stride. It felt like we were right on time. We had created something new in a place that had literally seen it all. We were a functioning sign shop that made signs only for local amusement or for our own amusement. We accepted no commissions, made no concessions, and just soaked up the salt air and the salt attitude of the place and put it into the work we were making there.

Let me go back to the start. We got the keys on June 6, giving us twelve days to empty out the place, hook up the electricity and plumbing, and get everything to a reasonably finished look for the opening on June 18. I got a twenty-yard dumpster, and before we put anything in it, the neighbors were already putting trash in and taking trash out of it. Two interns from Creative Time showed up. One of them, nice as he was, fled when he saw us carrying out jars of piss from the deli that had been in operation there two years before. The other, Ned Vena, a recent arrival from real estate called the Real Estates, started dragging out trash like it was the latest craze.

Once the dumpster was 30 percent over its limit from a long day of detailed demolition by Lew Blum and Dan Murphy, we called in the architect, Matt Wright, and the builder, Mike (just Mike). Matt is a veteran Brooklyn sign painter—I'd coaxed him into being a partner in the shop, as long as he didn't have to talk to anybody. The deal we made was that the front of the shop would function as a meeting place for the Creative Time people, and we would paint signs in the back, in an accurate and functioning representation of every sign shop Matt had ever had the (mis)fortune of working in. So I

divided the place in half and told Matt my ideas for how it should look. Matt just nodded, and I went away for a week.

When I got back, I breezed through the door, and it was the best thing ever. The front was 30 percent smaller than I wanted, and it had a six-foot-tall counter that was pure intimidation. The wall behind the counter curved at the top so it looked like a wave of Matt's bashed-out signs were going to crash on you. Then they hit me with the coup de grâce: the counter was on a hinge so it completely swung open, allowing for materials to be easily moved in and out and for better ventilation. It was a surprise that P. T. Barnum would approve of. Fredini, the host of America's Favorite Burlesque Gameshow *This or That!* and longtime Coney presence, tells us that the tall counter is classic Coney architecture: "They built them so high so they could shortchange people."

We could, but we weren't really selling product. A few people were clued in that they could buy original art from us for a fraction of what was being asked in galleries, and the proceeds from those sales would go straight to Totonno's Pizza and Seaside Car Service. Other people would try to commission signs for their summer homes far from Brooklyn, but we couldn't do it; we had too much Coney work. We agreed to paint signs for anyone who needed them within a ten-blocks radius, and we would be busy for a few years trying to do them all. The only complaint was that we usually took too long, but it was free, so nobody busted our balls too bad.

Scott from the bumper cars looked at a sign I was installing on his ticket booth and said, "This stinks." I was revving up to protest when he waved his Kool in my face: "Nah, listen. I have lugs on my bumper cars that have to be



top: That guy was rushing us to leave. EVERY single day.

bottom: Matt Wright sign. I got a lot of free tries. I never won.



Denny and his ice cream shop. Our contribution to his already excellent signage was the “Hard Ice Cream 12 FLAVORS” sign by Valentino.

torqued to thirty-two Newtons per meter. None of this pounds-per-square-inch shit. They can’t be twenty-five, they can’t be forty, they gotta be thirty-two.” At this point I was looking at every flaw in my work and wincing in embarrassment. I replaced the offending work a week later. When he came out to look at it, he said, “Thirty-three, maybe thirty-four....Oh, well, whatever.” I took the abuse gladly. This was Brooklyn, after all. What doesn’t kill you makes you.

The Dreamland Artist Club was about providing service to a really special place in the world. Coney Island is a place that’s been weary and worn for most of the last century, but it has a beauty that remains, in spite of arson, poor race relations, and developers and city officials vandalizing the place. It’s our summer home; it’s the place we let our guard down for an hour or so; it’s our common denominator. Everyone has an emotional investment in Coney, and we value that by making work as fried, greasy, sweet, cheap, fun, and flashy as any other experience you can have there. Soon, they are going to turn Coney into a concrete-covered Styrofoam mall, like the crappy ballpark they built over the Thunderbolt roller coaster. You can’t blame us—we’ll be part of what they will kill. We stand for the low-down, the fast one, the carny’s patter as you pass, drinking in public, shooting the freak, Eak the geek, Mayor Dick Zigun, Together Forever, the guy with the snake, his man with the macaw, the break-dance gangs (both of them), and partying under the boardwalk. All that is going or gone. We worked hard at appreciating it while it existed: our work is sworn testimony.

Valentino lit a Lucky Strike and worked on his flash. A skeleton with a Fred Perry shirt and a hat with a stingy brim holds a blackjack.

Another skeleton is wearing a V-neck sweater and holds a pistol. A third is in a mod suit and wields a knife. There are maybe a dozen designs more: The hooded sexecutioner with an axe and a lightning bolt. A peckerwood genie (essentially a white guy with a mullet, moustache, and shades) rising from a magic lamp. Some *chicas*, some scripts, and some crosses round out your choices. If you want something different, you’d better be an extraordinary person with an extraordinary vision—otherwise you’ll take (gladly) what’s offered. Most of the designs offered were taken, and the price of Valentino blessing you with his vision was five to thirty-five bucks.

I tell him that there are Bloods and Crips in Coney, and he says it would be great to tattoo “Boney Island” on a Crip. Before the sun sets the next day, he’s got a do-ragged youth named Eric in his chair, claiming “Hoover Crip.” Not only that, he’s got a cousin that’s a Blood. He says they shoot at each other, but they’re family, and they hang out. It’s Coney Island, after all, and the place gets boring without friends. After about thirty seconds, I realize Eric is the most important person we’re going to impact here. And Valentino, scion of Southern California—a place whose abundant cultural resources include gangs of stoners, *cholos*, and Popsicle vendors—knows exactly what it means to carve an identity for yourself out of your neighborhood. So, Extraordinary Young Boy and Old Head with Extraordinary Vision collaborate on art for the most endangered place in Coney Island: the chest of a seventeen-year-old gang-banging black youth.

The tattoos Valentino blessed Eric with were authentic manifestations of the ballpoint gangster drawing style you’ll find in classic issues

of *Teen Angels* magazine (Valentino brought a short stack of *TAs* east with him). His tattoo gun is an official jailhouse tattoo setup: Walkman motor and a guitar string, powered by D batteries in a paper-towel roll. But Valentino himself is the most official and authentic adult Eric is going to cross paths with anytime soon. He's a self-made Mar Vista myth, born of a mispent youth and carefully constructed adulthood. He's a Gent of Desire, the living memory of the "Touch of Class" look, a wholly American style born in complete poverty and dereliction. It's the product of aspiration and inspiration; its designation is the top hat, the white gloves, and the cane. These three items together form a symbol that you can find heralding the high life in every run-down city in America, and Valentino has codified the look into seven laws that Gent initiates are required to uphold. The best part is that true Gents of Desire are already living the Dream; Valentino just puts them on the team.

Eric is such a Gent. Actually he's a Boy of Elegance, which is a purgatory for Gent prospects. In any case, even without a membership card, he's already living up to several of the laws: he's projecting the fantasy (#1); he'll run up or shut up (#6); he's not half-steppin' (#5); he suits up and shows off (#2); and he'll never go back (#7). The rest will manifest, as you will soon see.

So Eric gets tattooed, and he gets invaluable insight into a sustainable model for his adulthood, if and when he gets there. In the course of the week that he's in Coney, Valentino yells at Eric, boxes him, lends him smokes, challenges him to a push-up competition, and meets his family (older sister-slash-guardian-slash-backup plan), all while holding a street-level

ways-and-means-committee meeting. He never tells him the obvious; Valentino just provides an example for consideration.

How do I know lickle yout learned him lessons? A week after Valentino departed, Eric came through, looking for a hookup. He said, "I need to hustle some money—can I see some powder?" Every day since Valentino had left, I'd put out the folding table with the Gold Bond powder and the sign advertising it. In the week Valentino was selling powder, no one took him up on his offer. Eric went out and sold ten pours in ten minutes. Valentino had the right product and the right pitch, but he was the wrong pitcher. Eric stepped right in the path of people and told them true, "You, this is that smooth," and—presto—he got that change-o. The top hat, the cane, and the glove work magic again, turning a boy into a Gent.



Valentino and friends



DUBLIN & BELFAST

Dublin is a small town, but has more vitality per square meter than any city twice its size. In the early 2000s a lot of cultural initiatives were happening there, and at the forefront of most of them was a curator named Declan McGonagle, who had seen a piece I had created for the Liverpool Biannual in 2002 and had arranged to have it installed on the City Arts Centre in Dublin. Declan thought the work, installed on the outside of the building and facing a major intersection, was perfect for catching people in what he calls “the third place” (the first two being home and work, the third being your commute). He believes the third place is ideal for showing people art, when their attention is up and their guard down. Since I do all my best work in the third place, I fully embraced the idea, and it has become a part of my vocabulary.

Pigeons mate for life, so they make sure they pick a partner they are coo with. Painted at the Tivoli Theatre. That moniker on the lower right is courtesy of painting doyenne Mimi Gross—she invented that when she was three.

Working alongside Declan was Ed Carroll, who tapped a hundred shoulders to introduce me to everyone he thought I should know in Dublin. The last shoulder that Ed tapped on my behalf belonged to Professor Brian Maguire at the National College of Art and Design. He nominated me for a Fulbright award, and after eight months of watching my in-box, I got the email saying I won.

The Fulbright grant enabled me to travel from New York to Ireland to paint a series of walls in Dublin and Belfast in 2008. It was a remarkable time. I had recently become a father, and possibilities started emerging everywhere I looked. The objective of my Fulbright project was to paint with Irish youth, so the first thing I did was go to All City Records, a music and art-supply store in Temple Bar, Dublin, to get a bunch of spray paint. I also found the Irish youth I would collaborate with: the FOES crew, a group of graffiti writers who were in their usual positions holding up the walls of the shop.

Originally, I was going to do paintings about two fictional characters who were trying to find each other and love each other, and I thought it would be great if they were sending painted messages back and forth, but I really had no idea where to take this. Then, the first day I got to Dublin, I saw the most amazing graffiti near Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin's Liberties section that said, written in correction pen, "Please call me, I am home, the door is open," and it had a phone number. It was written all over the neighborhood and was pretty much exactly what I had imagined in an art context. It had already been done, and so much more effectively—by two people actually trying to connect with each other—that it rendered my attempts moot.



above: The Garda were on the scene within ten minutes of me writing this. I was already headed to the boozier.

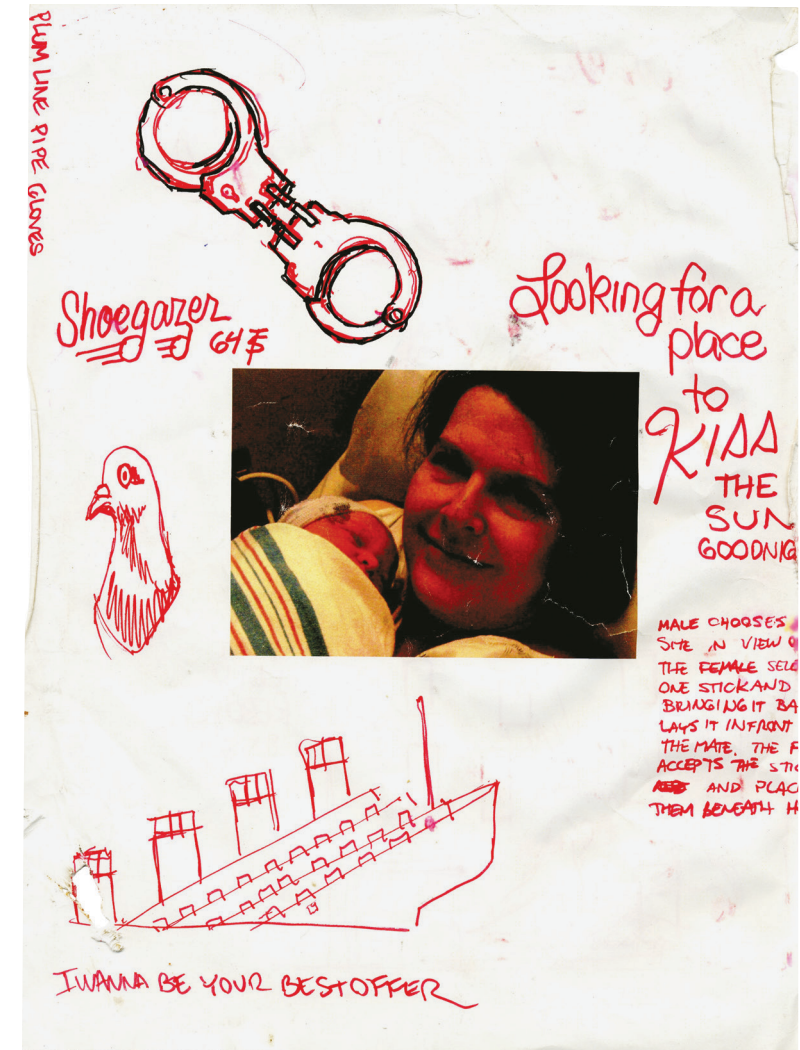
opposite: Sketchy on the details. The Radisson in Belfast is nice—half a block from the boozier.



opposite, top: The bandstand in the Lower Shankill, Belfast

opposite, bottom: I got some death threats and some marriage proposals. Shout out to REVS, who did the phone number thing first.

below: Sketched on the DART train from Dublin to Dún Laoghaire. Those are notes on the mating of pigeons, rendered kind of filthy by the crop. I'm also looking for a place to kiss the son goodnight. Say hello to Malcolm and Maryanne.





So, hitting the reset button and trying to take stock of what I could do, I realized that I had my own life and personal dramas to draw from. I had a six-month-old child at home, and I was traveling back and forth, dealing with leaving and returning. So, on the back of the Bernard Shaw pub in Dublin, I painted, "Baby is crying—Rent all spent—Car got towed—Lost the remote—No hot water—Fridge is empty—But I ordered food—Please come home." Titled *Baby Mothersday*, it describes a very New York version of wanting your loved one to come home—it isn't quite a home until both people are there sharing it. It was painted in black and silver spray paint—the original elements that I had used as a kid, trying to figure out at seventeen what expression meant to me. But at the same time, the perspective is that of a forty-year-old person who has responsibilities and is trying to make sense of life and trying to make art of it.

Ed Carroll (again!) secured me a grant from the Irish Youth Foundation, and I got my hands on a large scissor lift, which allowed us to paint a huge wall on the side of the Tivoli Theatre in the Liberties. The wall, like my paintings, depicts several emotional icons, each involving an epiphany or a query about love. All together they form a mural I titled *Signs Your Relationship Is Thriving*. The wall was quickly done, like the work I did as a kid under duress, and is a screenshot of my mind, with ten things going on at once. And again I used the basic elements of roller paint and spray paint. In painting with the same tools the youth use and painting in a similar fashion, I was making a point of showing a way of growing up with graffiti.

Everybody I painted with in Dublin was fully confused at first by the work we were doing. I had the confidence that I was on to something, but I was not sure if what I was doing was having any effect on the FOES crew. Six months after I left, I found out that one of the crew had gotten a gig with renowned poet Damien Dempsey. He was painting Dempsey's poetry in the streets of Dublin, in a style similar to mine. His friends were appalled that he was ripping me off, but I disagreed. At worst, it was like an employee taking pens from the supply closet. At best, it fulfilled the promise of the Fulbright: to instill new ideas and watch them take root and flourish. I was amazed to watch it happen.



Ed Carroll
Arts programmer, Kaunas, Lithuania

Steve’s Fulbright scholarship on the island of Ireland is a short story—and, importantly, part of a longer narrative that began sometime in 2002. In that year, *Waylon Saul* (Steve’s series of aluminum signs, which pictorially narrated exchanges between the fictional Waylon and his correspondent Saul) came to the Liverpool Biennial. I was working with Declan McGonagle, Alexa Coyne, and a few others to program a two-year inquiry into the role of art in society. We sought out artists like Steve Powers

who felt that art was not just something for Sundays.

Steve actively participated in our work and also in the documentary we produced (which can be viewed online at <http://vimeo.com/4780943>). Niall O’Baill, a community-based artist, also linked up with Steve to orient him to the narratives of young teenagers who were using art and culture as their homegrown tactic to build resilience in the face of drugs, violence, and poverty.

Steve’s distinctive practice draws out the narratives of street life, its people and places. You see it in the Fulbright work in Francis Street, Dublin, and Shankill Road, Belfast. *Call Me, We Need to Talk, Hope This Finds You Well*, and *Worth Less* are all fragments of exchanges among strangers, yet somehow intimate, too. The Fulbright project conceals a longer story from the creative community bench. This story is a testament to friendship and the time it takes to create a local ecology for a little epiphany of beauty.



On the left is a wall that FOES painted for Madvillian, and on the right, two of my pieces. There’s a visual continuity between their graffiti and my writing that even now is a relief to the eyes. Wheat pastes and stencils never jibed with graffiti—well, except with REVS, but you aren’t him.

The permanent temporary home of graffiti, the blue construction fence. Almost perfect, except "Victor seeks comer" should have been "Victor seeks loser." Garda came right away for this one, too, but too late. I was done and already getting my hair did by KONK.





above: Signing in at the job site

opposite: When you see DJ Krystal Klear, ask him to do his impression of me. He'll say in a singsongy voice, "You're my giver, I'm your taker!" while grabbing his ankles. It's pretty spot-on.

right: I wrote Open Door 64 as a backup name years before I discovered it's a great Bible quote (Revelation 3:8) and a useful metaphor for being there for those you love.





That wall surface is called "pebble dash."
The only people who like painting it are
graffiti writers. We. Love. It.

Pigeons mate for life,
so they make sure they
pick a partner they are
coo with.





opposite: Opposite the Tivoli Theatre. Twenty-four-hour manned security in operation. Hopefully the surgery was successful and they will be back to doing nothing soon.

top: The light of my life

bottom: This is slang for snogging, so it's said.





This wall faces a row of houses that I watched for any sign of life for a half an hour, while kids from the local school trooped past. Finally, a woman popped her head out of one of the homes, and I ran across the street and asked her what I should paint. She said, "Tell them to play nice." Done.



PHILADELPHIA

The work I painted in Ireland for the Fulbright went into an application for a Pew Center for Arts and Heritage award. Every year the Pew grants a select group of artists and organizations money and the ability to make great things happen. Paula Marincola is the director, and I have been fortunate enough to have had a dialogue with her. I proposed my idea for a *Love Letter* project in Philadelphia, and she countered that the only way I could possibly win a grant would be if I teamed up with the Mural Arts Program.

Zoe Strauss photographed a woman on Fifty-Second Street who was wearing this gold chain. We (with permission) snatched the chain, and it was painted up on Sixtieth Street by SEVER and EWOK HM MSK.



opposite: *Half Pint*, courtesy of Kenny Meez, Pat Griffin, and BRAZE.

top: I'll shape up with an ill shape up.

bottom: Make a note of it.

Mural Arts had never before been invited to write an application for a Pew grant, and now their best hope of winning one was joining up with an unrepentant vandal who was still dead set against the way the program made art. Paula told me, "If you win, it has to be a genuine collaboration. You have to stop being the lone wolf, and Mural Arts has to make real art." Suddenly, difficulty entered my dream, with a rolling suitcase and an eye on the couch.

We won the grant, and difficulty moved in for good. At my first meeting with Mural Arts' Jane Golden as Pew grantees, I laid out my vision for the look and feel of the project. Jane stopped me and said, "You mean it's going to be all words? No pictures?" I dug in. "No pictures." Jane crossed her arms like she was tying her oxfords and, once tight, told me, "You have to sell the idea to the residents of West Philly, one community meeting at a time." I could feel the fear building in me, but I remained cool and asked, "How many meetings?" We had about nine months before we were to start painting. Jane thought ten meetings would do it. She then assigned me a handler who also had disconnected roots in the community, and together we started planning meetings.

PHILADELPHIA





As soon as the paint hit the wall, doubt disappeared and the neighborhood started to get excited.



opposite: Who's that goldbricking on the left? I won't put him on blast.

next spread: Thank Jah, Philly is the kind of town that respects the shortcuts, like the one our neighbor is taking here. New York City would put a lock on that gate. STAK and Greg Lamarche handled the *Home* wall. In addition to Michael Jackson, they put graffiti godfather IZ in the pile of refrigerator magnets. Rest in peace and piece to the two of them, respectively.

that might have held thirty-seven, a contingent of women from the block association filed in and took three rows of seats in the back. I didn't even present my proposal—I just opened the floor to questions. Instantly, every single member of the block association asked me a two-part question simultaneously: How much money is being spent? How much are you getting paid? Why is the city spending money on art and not the sidewalk? Why wasn't that money going to the playground up the street? Is this propaganda for SEPTA [the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority]? Are you working for SEPTA? Why are you coming into our neighborhood with this? Why don't you do something about the drug dealers? When can we see drawings? Why aren't you doing more for the youth of the neighborhood? And finally, Who are you to speak for us?

I'd been watching the Handler since the questions started ricocheting off the walls, and she'd maintained an unbroken stare into her phone. Finally, she rolled out of her lean against the back wall and stepped outside. This is it, I thought: this is when it all goes down in flames. But the fear dissolved and resolve took hold. I tabled all the infrastructure questions that were way beyond my scope, then worked through all the questions that were within. I closed with a short explanation of my motivation. "I'm from Sixty-Third Street, and that's only a walk from

here on Sixtieth Street. Regardless of where you live, we are all here because of love. The love I put on these walls will speak to your sons and daughters in a way that no one else is speaking to them, and even if they have no love in their own lives, they will know love exists." One of the women in the back asked, "Yes, but why here?" Caroline Bardwell, who led the group, sighed and said, "Because he's from here." The Handler returned to the meeting to see us all eating pizza, building a consensus bite by bite.

The meetings refreshed my understanding of the West Philly mentality, and opening a sign shop at Farragut and Market Streets made me a vested community member. I started knowing names and faces. I started getting stopped on the street and receiving phone calls looking for work for nephews and sons. One woman burst into the shop, saying, "I thought you said you had ex-cons working here!" I asked the ex-cons in the room to raise their hands, and five went up. There was still suspicion that I wouldn't follow through on my promises, but I earned a reserved "We'll see" from the neighborhood.

Regardless of any doubt, I felt my roots reconnecting, and I was drawing on the strength of home. The closer I got back to the neighborhood, the more I could see fractures along parish lines or numbered cross streets, even block to block. The divisions mostly had the tenor of sibling rivalries and were more interesting





above: Primary colors, primarily, up on Sixty-Second Street. Pat Griffin made this look good. I think Darin Rowland and Lew Blum looked out, too.

opposite: This was the first time El Josh used spray paint to draw something. Those phones turned out good, huh?

than distressing. But they meant that as we met with groups more than a few blocks away from Market Street, we'd have to navigate the anger felt toward big sister Market Street, who always got all the attention. Ten meetings, it turned out, were not enough, so we added a few more at the farthest edges of the neighborhood, the last of which was punctuated by two attendees standing and yelling, "This ain't Market Street, this is Haddington!" Then they stormed out.

We finally reached the day when it was time to start painting, and Jane sent me to one last meeting, with the Mural Arts Program Design Review. A meeting with the Design Review board is standard for every mural project, and I was warned that if I didn't pass muster, Design Review would hold up the project until it was satisfied with my community work and the artistic direction I was taking. At this point I had only eight walls planned out, and the remaining forty-two were unknown quantities. I made my case right from the start: "I have to create the work as I go: block by block, wall by wall. I want to allow myself the inspiration I will get when I'm out on the rooftops and I'm ready to speak in the voice of the community." The three-person panel was two-thirds uncertain of my approach. The remaining third, Parris Stancell, a muralist who had the longest history with the program besides Jane Golden, ruled in my favor. "I believe that's the only way to do it. I look forward to seeing what you speak." I had the panel's blessing to go back to West Philadelphia with a thousand cans of spray paint and eight hundred gallons of bucket paint, to repaint the very rooftops I had painted as a youth.



As soon as the paint hit the wall, doubt disappeared and the neighborhood started to get excited. We started painting the day the news broke that Michael Jackson had died, and as we were whitewashing the wall, people kept coming by, saying, "You should do a glove up there." "Do Michael Jackson moonwalking up there." We were painting a jumble of magnet letters as if they were stuck on a fridge, so we tucked "Michael Jackson" into the letters, starting with a blue *M* at the top of the roof. As soon as the letters were in place, I would point out MJ's name to the people who asked, "Why aren't you doing something about Michael?" When they saw that we had and that their suggestions had been heeded, they took ownership of the wall. The power of that ownership went far beyond anything I had created up to that moment, and

community ownership became the goal of every wall we've painted since that moment.

After a week of painting, Jane realized we'd painted thirteen walls she had never even seen sketches for, and she called me up and demanded to know why I was painting out of the Mural Arts loop. I told her to come out to West Philly to ride the train with me, and if she objected to anything, we'd paint over it. The following morning, on a bright Saturday, Jane and I met at the sign shop and rode the train in a cool silence. I pointed out every wall and told what had inspired each sentiment. When the last wall was passed, Jane exhaled and said, "OK, it's really good. I get it." She sounded the same note of acceptance as she had when I'd shown her the photos of the *Mona Lisa* wall in 1987.



opposite: SEVER is a beautiful man. Shout out to the lady who asked, "Why's it say 'See me like beautiful I see you?'" It's no typo—no typos in art.

below: Megawords magazine continually features the phenomenon of staggered buff marks that occurs in Philly when Anti can't be bothered to match paint on successive buffs. SKREW MSK painted my vision. He doesn't like how it turned out. Oh, it's alright.





Allen Iverson's arm. Iverson was an early adopter of tattoos in the NBA and a personal hero of mine for his legendary "practice" press conference. We kept the best tattoo he had ("hold my own") and replaced the others with our own designs. Since the roof is property of the Wheels Of Soul motorcycle gang, we paid tribute to their beloved former leader, JR. RIP. When on Market Street, visit JR's Tattoo for all your tattoo needs.

With Jane on board and the neighborhood excited, our train of thought went express. We started painting bigger and more aggressively. One building on Farson Street, a calamity of concrete and broken windows, got tackled with type across two stories. We knew we were really pushing graffiti into the equation here, and I waited for the complaints, but I never heard a discouraging word. A few years later, the building was for sale and was written up in the Philadelphia real estate press as a unique opportunity to own a piece of the *Love Letter*. It was a mind-boggling reversal of fortune for the graffiti writers who worked on the project. Once, what they had painted was charged as thousands of dollars in damage; now it added thousands of dollars to the asking price of a property.

We had several amazing curbside conferences. The best occurred as I was painting the Post-it Note wall at 4915 Market. I was writing "Remember the good" and had gotten as far as "Remember" when a woman walked by and asked what I was going to write. When I told her, she said, "No, that's terrible." So I came down off the lift and asked her what it should say. She replied, "Remember, you can always get divorced." I said, "That's terrible, too." We both laughed, and she said, "Ask one of these kids what it should say." Right on cue, a twelve-year-old named Nassir appeared in front of us, and I asked him what he thought. He thought for exactly one second and said, "Remember, sometimes it hurts, sometimes it doesn't." Perfect. Nassir rode off on his bike, and I thanked the woman for her intervention. I asked her how close she lived, and she said, "Oh, I hate this neighborhood—I'm moving back to the suburbs."

We hired West Philly residents to work on the project, one of whom got the job after cops chased him into our shop for smoking a joint. They had to let him go when they couldn't find the roach. I thought he was good at thinking on his feet. He then spent his first day complaining that he couldn't work because he'd partied like a rock star the night before. I fired him the next day when he was four minutes late.

One West Philly resident that stuck with the program was James B. Jones. He saw me on Market Street early on and told me he'd known of me in the 1980s and would like to paint. The next time I saw him, he had a paper bag full of loose black-book pages, all filled with full-color pieces. He was a self-described bookworm, somebody who drew in books and had never graduated to painting walls. Now, after a couple decades in the wilderness, he was ready to start painting. Hired. The day before we start painting, he tore his Achilles tendon, so I moved him to a position as office manager. The job was pretty easy: draw in his black book all day and talk to people when they came in the shop. One day I watched him suffering for a lack of minutes on his phone, so I sent someone up to Fifty-Second to get him reconnected, and that gave us the idea to paint the *Prepay Is On* wall. James was touched that we mined his misfortune for a diamond in real time, and I was happy to have him take ownership of the wall. The woman who owned the property we painted *Prepay* on called me, upset that it wasn't the right message. So I went to her beautifully maintained house to explain the wall and the larger goals of the project. She pulled out a file of messages that she felt the youth needed to see. One was a Photoshopped montage of Barack Obama

in front of the White House and, in the background, a thugged-out youth in a tank top and sagging jeans. A headline blared: "THIS HOUSE HAS A DRESS CODE. PULL YOUR PANTS UP." It was a first to have a property owner suggest a harder image than the one I'd painted. I wasn't the right messenger for her message, so I explained *Love Letter* until she got on board with us. I went back to the shop and told James if he ever needed an idea for something to paint, to go check Miss Parks up on Fifty-Sixth Street.

Back in 1987, when Jane had asked me to join the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN), I'd said "No way" because (1) I was PRO-graffiti and (2) I would have been made to do perfunctory work. And even Jane, talented and focused and grown-up as she was, had to paint some pretty boring—and boringly pretty—work from time to time. In the 1980s PAGN painted hundreds of walls, each one more boring than the next. PAGN is now so far removed from the mural business, they painted over my *Daycare Carfare* mural the first time I painted it. The buff man, JR, told me, "I knew you painted it—I thought you did it for some girl." (He got that right.)

There are still PAGN murals all over Philadelphia—the boring walls are like distant relatives cut out of the will of the Mural Arts Program. While painting *Love Letter*, I spotted on Market Street the perfect PAGN mural—a nature scene with no relevance to the neighborhood. Twenty or more years after it was painted, Jane granted us permission to paint over it and, in the same breath, issued the directive that we needed to draw more from the community input we'd received at meetings. When I looked at a list of suggestions, the words "Islam Is Peace" jumped out. I remembered the guy who'd

suggested it at several different meetings. He had gone deeper with the explanation every time: Fifty-Second Street for him was where the Muslim movement had emerged in the 1960s; it had done a lot to break the hold of drugs and gangs on the neighborhood. He was also interested in, and maybe even wary of, the messages we were sending, being savvy enough to understand that even the smallest "We Buy Houses" flyer on a telephone pole says something about the neighborhood at the same time it says something to the neighborhood. So I took his suggestion and had it painted on the wall. As our crew member Darin was painting it, neighbors asked what it was going to say. Upon learning it, they cheered and pumped fists in the air. That was an unprecedented response for us.

I was having trouble explaining to Suroc what we were going to paint on the mural, when a youth walked by wearing the Phillies cap and Sunni beard kit seen throughout Philadelphia: "Yeah, we're gonna paint that guy!" The cherry on top for me, as an artist and ex-graffiti kid, was having the thrill of doing a bit of détournement to that inane PAGN mural, the way the Situationists did to inane comic strips. Jane understandably cringed when I showed her, but I made the point that when we added our new elements, the neighborhood immediately took ownership of this wall that had been merely decoration. What had been ignored is now a source of power for the area. Upon hearing that, she was cool with it: salaam.

The more walls we painted, the more we were able to weave in words from the neighborhood. There were also memories I pulled in from the past, the first being a piece painted by Clyde in 1980 on a roof at Sixty-First Street.

He painted his name in dripping letters that looked like a bomb pop, so in the same location we painted the *Nice Dream* wall and based the look and colors on his piece. I'd run down Clyde some months before at a writer's meeting in Fairmount Park. I knew he'd be there, and he didn't disappoint. I passed him my number and told him to watch the space of his 1980 triumph. When he saw what we painted, he pulled out his phone and called me: "Yo, thank you—that's great! Do you have the picture of the piece I painted?" All I had of his piece was a color Xerox that we'd worked from, that had been soaked in a summer shower and nearly ruined.

But then Johnny Goldstein, man about town, coaxed his friend Mr Blint to come out and meet me at the shop. Mr Blint is a giant of mythic proportions in Philadelphia graffiti. He was not only a prolific painter who built solid networks between Philly and New York, he also photographed every great wall in Philly's golden era from 1979 to '83. In 1983, when he'd had enough of writing and writers, he'd turned away from graffiti and never looked back. Attempts to reach him and bring him back into the fold were made across the intervening decades by his legendary friend Razz and others, but Blint never took the bait. Finally, hearing something was happening on his beloved WFIL rooftop, Blint visited me at the shop at the shop with a photo album under his arm. The photo album contained perfect 35mm shots of the Clyde piece and a hundred more. He filled in a lot of lost memories of West Philly, and in return I reconnected him with some of the memories he had cut himself off from.

I took Blint up on the roof of the WFIL Building at Forty-Fifth and Market. This

CURBSIDE CONFERENCE PATRICK GRIFFIN



Patrick Griffin
ICY Signs

I had worked for Steve once before, but it wasn't on anything like this or anything this large. He had called about twenty graffiti writers and painters from around the country, and we all set up shop in an old check cashing place. It was like a little graffiti/sign painting camp. At first, it was seemingly well organized—he split people into groups and assigned them addresses and walls for the murals he wanted them to paint. As soon as people were done with their murals and Steve had approved

them with a ride-by on the train, he'd have another sketch ready to be painted.

I was there for two weeks and worked on at least nine or ten different murals, maybe more. It got a little crazy toward the end, but it was interesting to learn how Steve worked: he'd make up color schemes as he handed you the new artwork, and I'm pretty sure I painted one mural based on a drawing on a cocktail napkin. He had us running all over West Philly, taking measurements, climbing through backyards and onto roofs with questionable support capabilities. We were just driving these huge articulated lifts down Market Street with bikes in the basket, picking up other people heading back to the shop. It was pretty fun and a little sketchy. We definitely got a few "Why are all these white boys climbing all over these buildings?"

top: *Hug Me Like I Hug the Block.* James B. Jones had his cousin in the shop, and she said, "You can't say that—that's what drug dealers say." I said, "Why can't drug dealers be loved?"

bottom: The day we painted the fiftieth wall of the Philly Love Letter was the day of the blizzard of 2010. The paint froze to the consistency of gelato. El Josh replaced Rodney

Dangerfield as SKREW MSK's hero by painting through the storm until dark. We drove the lift twelve blocks to get this flick, and the cops pulled us over along the way. They were just curious about how crazy we were. Once they understood the lifts were going to be pulled from us the next day (rain, sleet, or snow) and we had to get it done, they let us off with a "Good luck, yo."



Passerby: "Are you gonna paint the background?" Me: "Better than it already is? Impossible."

building is the cradle of teen culture in America, where Dick Clark launched *American Bandstand* and where subsequent generations of inner-city youth expressed themselves without Dick's permission. Blint and Razz had painted their names up there in the late 1970s, and all through the '80s I'd stared at their names, which had been permanently preserved thanks to the access ladder to the roof having been removed.

When we started *Love Letter*, getting permission for the WFIL roof was the big prize, and it proved to be an extremely difficult roof to get. The building was owned by a business incubator. In spite of charging us above market rent for our sign shop, the owners would only allow us to paint the building if we painted something that advertised their mission of encouraging entrepreneurship in the neighborhood. It took seven rounds of sketches until I finally hit the on the combination that opened the lock: "I been a raconteur talking my dream—I been a saboteur killing my dream—I been a amateur just dreaming—now I am an entrepreneur living the dream." They granted me permission, with one condition: we couldn't paint directly on the brick. They instead allowed us to attach aluminum panels to the roof. My take-away from this is that people are so against graffiti that they will accept 275 permanent holes in their wall over a coat of paint that could

be power-washed off in an hour. The only word for this is *bananas*.

Razz told me that being on the WFIL roof felt like being on top of the world, and Mr Blint, reticent about his past on the ground, started talking like he was right back in 1980. Both of them asked, "Put me up," and I did: I painted the classic avatar of Philadelphia graffiti, the smiley face with the top hat, holding two checks made out to these self-made entrepreneurs of style, Razz and Mr Blint. Next to the face, a banner proclaims "Royalties for royalty." I could offer no more, and I could do no less. *Love Letter* is a valentine to a mother and child, a neighborhood and a city, and also, in the heart of its heart, from a grown-up to his childhood. It's the affirmation that the thousands of cans my peers and my heroes emptied were all in the service of love: love of life, love of adventure, and love of graffiti.

Rest in peace, Razz, and sail on, Mr Blint.





SYRACUSE

The bridges that cross Fayette and West Streets in Syracuse, New York, were handbuilt in the 1940s from Carnegie steel and the toil of countless people. They were built for a Syracuse of great industry and stand as faithful reminders of the industrial ideals of utility, dependability, and (yes) austerity.

left: Dedicated to the local paramedics at Eastern Ambulance of the Near Westside. Their good days are when people are peaceful and they have nothing to do. They never have a good day.

next spread: The first coat of paint was the most important. We lovingly primed the bridge with as much care as we gave the topcoat. Reports are it still looks brand new.

SPRING COMES **SUMMER WAITS**





Mess it up? Wipe it off.

In the era when the bridges were built, sign painting was a viable profession. Like many other professions in Syracuse, it went away because a machine replaced hands, heart, and head. After sign painting as a trade was nearly extinct, it became interesting to me as a medium for art. I learned to paint signs as they had been painted for generations, but I used the letters and colors to talk about love and life instead of commercial concerns. The font I employ was prized by sign painters for its clarity and versatility—qualities that serve me well when I am talking about complex things like love. My use of the sign painters' craft is about the importance of hands, heart, and head being present in my work. The work we were called on to create to renew Syracuse's Westside needed to possess these qualities.

The words we painted were drawn from the neighborhood. The font already had been painted on one side of the West Fayette Street bridge in an ad for local car dealership Romano Ford in the 1960s and again in the '70s. The colors we chose are the federal government's official safety colors, which are used in every industry—a specific blue, red, yellow, green, and, especially, orange. The gloss black had been used to paint the bridge when it was first built. The innovations of the color and the content are layered over that history of the

black paint. These painted bridges represent what I believe is the future of Syracuse: taking what has value from the past and remaking it for the future in a way that respects both tradition and innovation.

A Love Letter to Syracuse is meant to be from Syracuse to Syracuse. We found, as we were painting, that the love letter is also dedicated to industry: to the trains that pass over the bridges, to the act of painting hot steel in the summer, to collaboration, to polite drivers, and, especially, to improvisation. After painting the two West Street bridges, we realized the design I created for one of the sides of the West Fayette Street bridge would be unreadable from most angles and impossible to paint without blocking off traffic completely. So we had to rework it on the spot. We did what any good signwriter would and worked with the architecture of the bridge to make the words fit with grace and ease. The result is different from our original design, but it serves the words and Syracuse well.

I learned to paint signs as they had been painted for generations, but I used the letters and colors to talk about love and life instead of commercial concerns.



For 70 years these trestles have been
a visual barrier between downtown
Syracuse and the Near Westside.

To this end Steve Powers, d/b/a Mark Surface
International proposes to connect the two sides
of the tracks using visual imagery and text with
input by community members gleaned from com-
munity meetings and door-to-door contact. The
project will be painted over a 10-day period in
late August.

Steve Powers wants to know...

What do you LOVE about Syracuse?

STORES ARE CUTE

What do you HATE about Syracuse?

PEOPLE DONT RESPECT
PROPERTY & STEAL TOO MUCH

Love **A**
Letter
FOR YOU

Maarten Jacobs
Director, Near Westside Initiative
The Warehouse/350 West Fayette
Syracuse, NY 13244

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Steve Powers wants to know...

What do you LOVE about Syracuse?

LOTS OF PEOPLE INSIDE
LEAVE KEYS FOR QUADS

What do you HATE about Syracuse?

THROWING TRASH OUT
THE WINDOW.

Love **A**
Letter
FOR YOU

Maarten Jacobs
Director, Near Westside Initiative
The Warehouse/350 West Fayette
Syracuse, NY 13244

We have at least ten
cards that say "NOTHING"
for both questions. That,
in addition to what the
paramedics told us,
inspired the *Nothing To
Do* bridge.

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Steve Powers wants to know...

What do you LOVE about Syracuse?

DIVERSITY. GOOD PEOPLE

THINGS TO DO

What do you HATE about Syracuse?

RACIAL DIVIDE

Love **A**
Letter
FOR YOU

Maarten Jacobs
Director, Near Westside Initiative
The Warehouse/350 West Fayette
Syracuse, NY 13244

WATCH OUT FOR EACH OTHER

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Steve Powers wants to know...

What do you LOVE about Syracuse?

I LIVE HERE
FOREVER

What do you HATE about Syracuse?

NOTHING
-YOUNG KIDS W/ ~~DRUGS~~ GUNS

Love **A**
Letter
FOR YOU

Maarten Jacobs
Director, Near Westside Initiative
The Warehouse/350 West Fayette
Syracuse, NY 13244



I PAID THE LIGHT BILL
JUST TO SEE YOUR FACE

