

# Houston's Graffiti Culture *By Nimra Haroon*

Graffiti. This disruptive, colorful, and self-boasting style of popular art has permeated walls for centuries, including in Houston. Modern graffiti has been around since the 1960s when gangs or “crews” created social order with preservation of writing and began spray painting names and messages on walls, as expressions of protest, violence, or leisure.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly graffiti has become a more mainstream and accepted artistic style through its appearance on clothing, advertisements, music covers, computer font styles, public art murals, and more. Much of Houston’s graffiti scene corresponds with the rise of the hip hop scene, as rappers like Bun B, Slim Thug, and others have spotlighted local graffiti artists and represented their artwork in music videos and album covers.

Houston has a shorter, less documented graffiti history than cities like Philadelphia and New York City that pioneered the movement. Nevertheless, Houston maintains a unique collection of events that have paved the way for graffiti’s success.<sup>3</sup> In 1979 Edie Scott and Scott Prescott formed a group known as the Urban Animals that was

notorious for its graffiti art, bar-hopping, crosstown skating, parking garage surfing, and roller hockey. Art Car Parade photographer George Hixson remembered the first time he saw them, when, from around a corner, they suddenly appeared on roller skates, a “wild and fascinating collection of artists and other art-inclined people.” The group reached its high point in the late 1980s with several hundred members. The group consisted of lawyers, electricians, dancers, bartenders, filmmakers, artists, and a Harris County deputy. Although famous for its rebellious behavior, the Urban Animals group was unique for its charitable efforts in the community.<sup>4</sup>

The Commerce Street Artists’ Warehouse (CSAW) was founded in 1985 as an affordable home and studio for Houston artists, including graffiti artists. Located in a warehouse on the far eastern edge of downtown, the space had a performance area and exhibition space. Although CSAW dealt with internal leadership struggles, it maintained the facility as a living and studio space for up to forty artists at a time for over two decades.<sup>5</sup>

*“There’s this whole back and forth about what is street art, what is graffiti, what is public art, what’s a mural...”*

*—Angel Quesada, visual artist and muralist<sup>1</sup>*



*GONZO247 painted this mural in Houston's Market Square District in spring of 2013. The Houston Arts Alliance and the Greater Houston Convention and Visitor's Bureau commissioned it as part of the "Houston Is" campaign, promoting the city's eclectic personality and diversity.*

*Photo courtesy of GONZO247.*



*The Houston Food Park at 1504 St. Emanuel Street opened June 22, 2013. The parking lot is open to the public and serves as grounds for the food park. Several artists' graffiti and tagging can be viewed circling the building.* Photo courtesy of author.

In 1989, Houstonian graffiti artists GONZO247 and MERGE360 of UPC, Underground Productions began documenting their activities—legal and illegal—and established a pen pal system with graffiti artists in other cities, exchanging videos of their work. The two then compiled these videos from around the world and created a video magazine, *Aerosol Warfare*, which sold worldwide. Although it covered many aspects of hip hop culture, it focused on graffiti. In 1992, the duo established the “Wall of Fame,” which still runs today on Palmer and McKinney Streets as a legal spot for artists to graffiti. In 1994 ChristianAZUL and Christopher Karl “BeZerk One” joined *Aerosol Warfare* and established Aerosol Warfare Gallery in 2000.<sup>6</sup>

Tagging, a way of signing one’s name anonymously, has been prevalent in Houston streets and on other artwork. On June 13, 2012, University of Houston art student Uriel Landeros was accused of spray-painting Picasso’s *Woman in a Red Armchair* at the Menil Collection. While Landeros faced up to ten years for felony graffiti and criminal mischief charges, he was sentenced to two years. After fleeing to Mexico, he turned himself in to authorities in January 2013.<sup>7</sup>

Union Pacific and BNSF Railway companies have dealt with this kind of graffiti vandalism for decades. Railcars

tagged with graffiti require a different removal process than city property because the cars are nomadic and cross state boundaries. For abatement of railcar graffiti, a non-mechanical repair order is issued and held until the railcar is empty and near an appropriate paint shop.<sup>8</sup>

### ARTISTS

Researching graffiti artists is difficult because they often conceal their identities to prevent criminal prosecution. Often going out at nighttime to tag and paint, they are rarely known to the public, especially when their pursuits are illegal protest pieces meant to rock the public eye.<sup>9</sup> Many such graffiti artists have left their marks on Houston. In November 2013, the *Houston Press* released a list of “Houston’s Top 10 Graffiti Artists,” which acknowledged legends such as Jade, Colors, Weah, Prime, Bekit, and Kaze, and showcased the best artists including: Howie, Abels, Article, Weah (Daniel Anguilu), SKEEZI181, Ack!, Machine & Machete, Colors Onor, W3R3 ON3, and GONZO247.<sup>10</sup>

NEKST is often regarded as the greatest graffiti artist to come out of Houston. Once stating “my work is about scale and visibility,” Sean Griffin, or NEKST, was known for his bold letters and fearless attitude and did not shy away from any territory. He began writing his name as NEXT in 1996,

but soon evolved to NEKST.

He planned his structure, size, colors, and location in high-traffic areas to make a statement. Starting in Houston, his graffiti crew was DTS (Def Threats) and eventually became part of the MSK crew, or the Mad Society Kings, known for having some of the world’s greatest and most famous graffiti artists. NEKST painted in New Orleans, San Francisco, Detroit, Los Angeles, Miami, and other cities. Some of his best work was done during a six-month detention in a Dallas prison, where he drew dozens of



*The Urban Animals united for their thirty-fifth anniversary in 2014 at Numbers Nightclub in Montrose.*

Photo courtesy of Sylvester Garza.

portraits of fellow inmates with pencil and paper. Voted “Best Graffiti Artist” by the *Houston Press* in 2003, NEKST died of an apparent overdose in December 2012, shaking the global graffiti community.<sup>11</sup> Daniel Anguilu recalls, “He painted on stuff that didn’t belong to him, and he did it well . . . he did it all over the place, vivid, big. No one could deny him. I mean this guy passed away and there’s like a memorial piece that someone has done for him in every major city of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

Those who mourned NEKST’s passing knew the impact he had on the art scene, but for Vizie, losing NEKST also meant the loss of a brother. Like his brother, Vizie paints colorfully vibrant pieces and masterful murals. While he has his own style, it is not too different from NEKST’s, and both are often referred to as kings of the graffiti world, especially in Houston. Vizie participated in the *Call it Street Art, Call it Fine Art, Call it What You Know* exhibition at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston in 2013. His piece titled “NEKST” spanned three walls and featured a rainbow-hued mixture of their names. Vizie commented, “my piece intertwines my graffiti name with my brother’s, NEKST. I feel his name is something.”<sup>13</sup>

Native Houstonian Mario Enrique Figueroa Jr., or GONZO247, began his career as a graffiti artist in 1984. He became one of the first to capture the graffiti subculture by producing a video magazine series in the 1990s. Interested in giving artists a place for experimentation, he and partner MERGE360 founded Wall of Fame as a legal place for artists to graffiti. GONZO founded Aerosol Warfare Gallery in 2000 and introduced street art to the masses. Today, the gallery serves as a local street, urban, and graffiti art resource. GONZO began as a traditional graffiti artist, using spray paint to create letters and words on walls. Since then he feels he has evolved as an artist, also trying



*Dead-Lee, GONZO247, and MERGE360 painted this image in 1993 at Summer Street in Houston. Photo courtesy of Aerosol Warfare.*

new techniques and media. GONZO has worked his graffiti magic around house designs, automobiles, skateboards, helmets, fashion apparel, interior design products, and more. GONZO observes of his evolving style, “I still consider myself a graffiti artist. Right now, there’s a bigger umbrella called street art and that encompasses, for most people, everything under the sun that you can put on a wall. All of that is still technically considered graffiti. . . . The style of art I’m working on right now – it’s aerosol art. It’s artwork that, if you didn’t see me do it, you would look at it and ap-



*This 2009 piece on the parking lot side of XL Parts at 3000 Crawford Street is the last legal piece NEKST painted in Houston. Many, including Daniel Anguilu, have fought to save this wall, one of NEKST’s last remaining pieces. Photo courtesy of author.*



In September 2012, two murals appeared on a railroad bridge over the Gulf Freeway. “REMüV HATE” was done by Remüv and appeared northbound. “Be Someone” by an unknown artist appeared southbound. City authorities have not removed either piece.

Photo courtesy of Ashley Nicole Photography.

preciate it for what it is, versus seeing it and thinking, ‘that’s a piece of graffiti, I’m going to move on.’ I try to blend different styles to create a unique piece of art.”<sup>14</sup>

Another artist, Daniel Anguilo, creates works of intricate shapes and political messages seen across the city. A painter and muralist, Daniel began painting graffiti at a young age, using freight trains and walls as his canvas. Born in Mexico, he came to the United States when he was fourteen and began trading photos of freight trains with people, similar to a pen pal system, and painting with the name Weah. Discussing his past, Anguilo states, “To me graffiti really opened my eyes to the world. If it wasn’t for graffiti or the fact that I was doing graffiti, I would not know anything. But that’s the people who do, live graffiti. There’s guys who come around, they just do things here or there. We actually, all of us, all of the guys I painted with, that’s all we did. For years. Not one of us didn’t have something to do with illegal graffiti.”<sup>15</sup>

Now coining the term “muralist” for himself rather than graffiti or street artist, Daniel has painted for Art League Houston, Texas Art Asylum, Houston METRO, The Station Museum, Aerosol Warfare, The Glassell School of Art, Lawndale Art Center, Houston Bahá’í Center, the Mexican Consulate, and dozens of other places. He has traveled the world, participating in graffiti art exhibits. Daniel does graffiti through passion and dislikes the “street cred” and market value that people seek, saying, “The only way I know how to approach anything is through the activist mind. I don’t have an artist mind. When someone offers me something, I think more progressive, like okay cool, what can this do? How is this beneficial, how is this gonna do something? And how is this gonna, how, how, how? And artists think differently. They’re more like ‘how’s this gonna push my career.’”<sup>16</sup>

Daniel continues to reflect on his past with graffiti and still misses it. Unfortunately, graffiti has a violent side, which Daniel dealt with in his past, “All of my friends have been stabbed, shot, gone to jail. Not one of them has ever stopped and said ‘what the f\*\*\* are we doing’. . . But I look back and I never say ‘don’t’ . . . man people should

do graffiti. . . . It’s good. Take you to jail, you learn places nobody’s ever been to; you make a lot of friends, good and bad friends, but it will open your eyes.” At one point the graffiti scene got so dangerous that local people began fleeing the city, while others never visited. “People didn’t even like coming to Houston to paint because they were getting jumped,” he added.<sup>17</sup>

Through collaborations, mentorships, and shared exhibitions, graffiti has impacted a variety of artists. Born in Laredo, Texas, Angel Quesada is a visual artist, curator, art preparatory, and arts administrator who has individually organized over twenty exhibits and painted seventeen murals and public arts works in Texas. In discussing graffiti’s perceptions, Angel states, “On the artist side, there can be a lot of bad messaging. . . . Very few think about their imagery—what impact it has on the general public, and I think that is something that can be improved. . . . On the other side there are detractors in the fine arts community that don’t see it as a viable art form. It’s just monkeys making marks.”<sup>18</sup>

Visual artist Kelyne Reis moved to Houston in 2009 and met GONZO247 who exposed her to graffiti. She asked him for private lessons, and her first assignment was to “create an alphabet,” which she explains “each real graffiti artist has” as a symbol of recognition. She practiced at the Wall of Fame, experimenting with spray painting. Kelyne did not realize the impermanence of graffiti and had to deal with someone painting over her work, “From the moment that you put your things there, that’s it, and then you move on and do something else. Somebody else can come and use this piece of wall, but I didn’t know that. . . . It’s like a war. Being in the war, being a soldier, you have to protect yourself.”<sup>19</sup>

## ERADICATION EFFORTS

While the new millennium has allowed many artists to shine, graffiti without permission remains illegal. The City of Houston Visual Blight Ordinance addresses all graffiti and vandalism restrictions. The city leads several graffiti abatement programs and has a section of its website dedicated to “Wiping Out Graffiti,” noting that “the decision to create graffiti, not ‘art,’ has consequences.” Inspections



*Daniel Anguilu is famous for his murals that are formed by intricate shapes, elaborate designs and powerful messages on human rights and justice. This piece is painted along Pak's Food Store at 301 West Alabama Street.* Photo courtesy of author.

and Public Services (IPS), a division of the Department of Neighborhoods, the General Services Department, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, the Public Works and Engineering Department, the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office, and Solid Waste Management Department's Environmental Service Center all collaborate to eradicate graffiti. The Environmental Service Center provides free paint for citizens who have been victims of illegal tagging.

The website has a "Take Action" link, providing tips and advice on removing graffiti, and explaining its distress on the community. It states: "Graffiti comes in all shapes and colors and can be found on buildings, highways, fences and other surfaces. It's often done without permission and it's against the law. Graffiti is an eyesore that decreases property value, is a drain on tax dollars and makes residents feel unsafe. The City of Houston and several local organizations are doing a number of things to decrease this vandalism, such as painting over and removing graffiti on public property and other areas in designated corridors. Property owners are also encouraged to plant trees or ivy to cover walls and fences that have been marked with graffiti."<sup>20</sup>

The East End often receives graffiti. The Greater East End Management District Graffiti Abatement Program began operating in 2001 and cleaned its 100,000th graffiti site in March 2013. The Greater East End Management District has four trucks it uses to remove graffiti, and covers sixteen square miles in the city.<sup>21</sup>

### **PLACES THAT WELCOME GRAFFITI**

Although Houston has anti-graffiti efforts and laws against graffiti, street art graffiti seems to have been embraced recently as the government and local businesses have commissioned public murals. Several places have welcomed the public to graffiti in a safe, legal environment. While the Wall of Fame and Aerosol Warfare continue to provide a place for painting and exhibiting graffiti and urban art,



*Aerosol Warfare serves as an urban art workspace and mecca for exhibitions and workshops.* Photo courtesy of Aerosol Warfare.



In October 2011, Aerosol Warfare and CKC StART Street & Urban Arts unveiled a mural titled *Linking You to the World in the Houston Public Library's underground parking garage*. GONZO247 and MERGE360 were lead artists with Carolyn Casey serving as visual and project manager. Deck Wgeef, Joseph Echavarría, Siego & Gabriel Prusmack helped with the dedication.

Photo courtesy of GONZO247.

the Kingspoint Mullet in Southeast Houston is perhaps the most exciting place for the current generation to legally graffiti. At nearly 17,000 square feet, it is the largest graffiti art space in Texas. It also houses Overspray Art Supply, which sells paint and art. With every inch of this space covered in paint, the Mullet provides a gathering space for graffiti artists, as hundreds of artists from around the world have left their mark there. Although it has recently faced eviction, Jonathan Estes and SKEEZ181 opened the Kingspoint Mullet in 2011 and hoped to expand the center into a charity, raising funds for autistic children.<sup>22</sup> Tragically Estes was killed in August 2014, but the Mullet continues to promote his legacy of a welcoming space for graffiti.

### GRAFFITI EXHIBITIONS IN HOUSTON

Many fine arts institutions and public spaces have come to support the art form and held graffiti and urban arts exhibitions. In the fall of 2011, Aerosol Warfare teamed up with CKC StART Street & Urban Arts and the Houston Public Library to paint a mural in the central Jesse H. Jones Library parking garage.<sup>23</sup> From November to December 2011, DiverseWorks exhibited *Grandalism: EPISODE*. “Born and raised on Houston’s north side,” *Glasstire* notes that “EPISODE’s influences come from old school Northside crews like RAGE\*KTK.” His legal writing for the past ten years used many materials, including stickers, markers, and paint.<sup>24</sup>

The Station Museum of Contemporary Art held *Call it Street Art, Call it Fine Art, Call it What You Know* in 2013. Curator Jordan Poole called the works of these artists “an expression of personal anarchism.” He added, “as the world becomes more corporatized and monotonous, and thus continues to render our lives evermore insignificant, these artists articulate the sentiments and attitudes that carry a message of personal growth.”<sup>25</sup>

In June 2013, four artists were called on to create an outdoor mural at downtown’s GreenStreet, formally known as the Houston Pavilions. Like the Market Square

mural, the GreenStreet art is part of the “Houston Is Inspired” marketing campaign, with four key words plastered on walls that surround restaurants, shops, and offices. GONZO247 painted “tasty,” Gabriel Prusmack painted “hip,” Kelyne Reis did “funky,” and Wiley Robertson painted “inspired.”<sup>26</sup>

### PERSISTENCE OF GRAFFITI

Graffiti continues to evolve with variations of its original block lettering and other forms such as wheat pasting, an inexpensive way to adhere posters to surfaces. In 2012 Houston filmmaker Alex Luster, along with writer Tony Reyes and producer GONZO247, released the film *Stick ‘Em Up!* chronicling the inner-city art form, which Alex had been capturing since 2007.<sup>27</sup> The movie offers insight “into the minds

and motivations behind some of Houston’s most active guerilla street artists, capturing the lifespan of their art—conception, creation, placement, and ultimately removal by the city’s abatement enforcement.” It features commentary by city and law enforcement officials, such as Sheriff Adrian Garcia, and street artists Give Up, Shepard Fairey, DUAL, Eyesore, Cutthroat, and Bomit.<sup>28</sup> Luster said his film “covers street art from birth to death” and that “it’s not a good documentary if it doesn’t show both sides. Ninety-nine percent of street art documentaries are one-sided. They are all about the artists and why they do it. There is no negativity to what they do. So we decided to step out and show several sides of the issue. I wanted it to be real, fair, and balanced. I want stories of real life people who will add to the story.”<sup>29</sup>

“Who knew that the style-ized signatures of inner city kids would go on to have such a monumental impact on popular culture?”

—Jon Naar, author of *The Birth of Graffiti*<sup>30</sup>

From restaurants to city government, many have embraced graffiti and street art as a true art form. Depending on one’s views, personal taste, and artistic intent, every individual has definitions for the words graffiti, street art, urban art, neo-graffiti, murals, vandalism, and crime that differentiate which words are synonymous and which are not. In our urban context, graffiti will continue to endure, transform, and regenerate. It is up to the public to maintain its story and purpose.

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