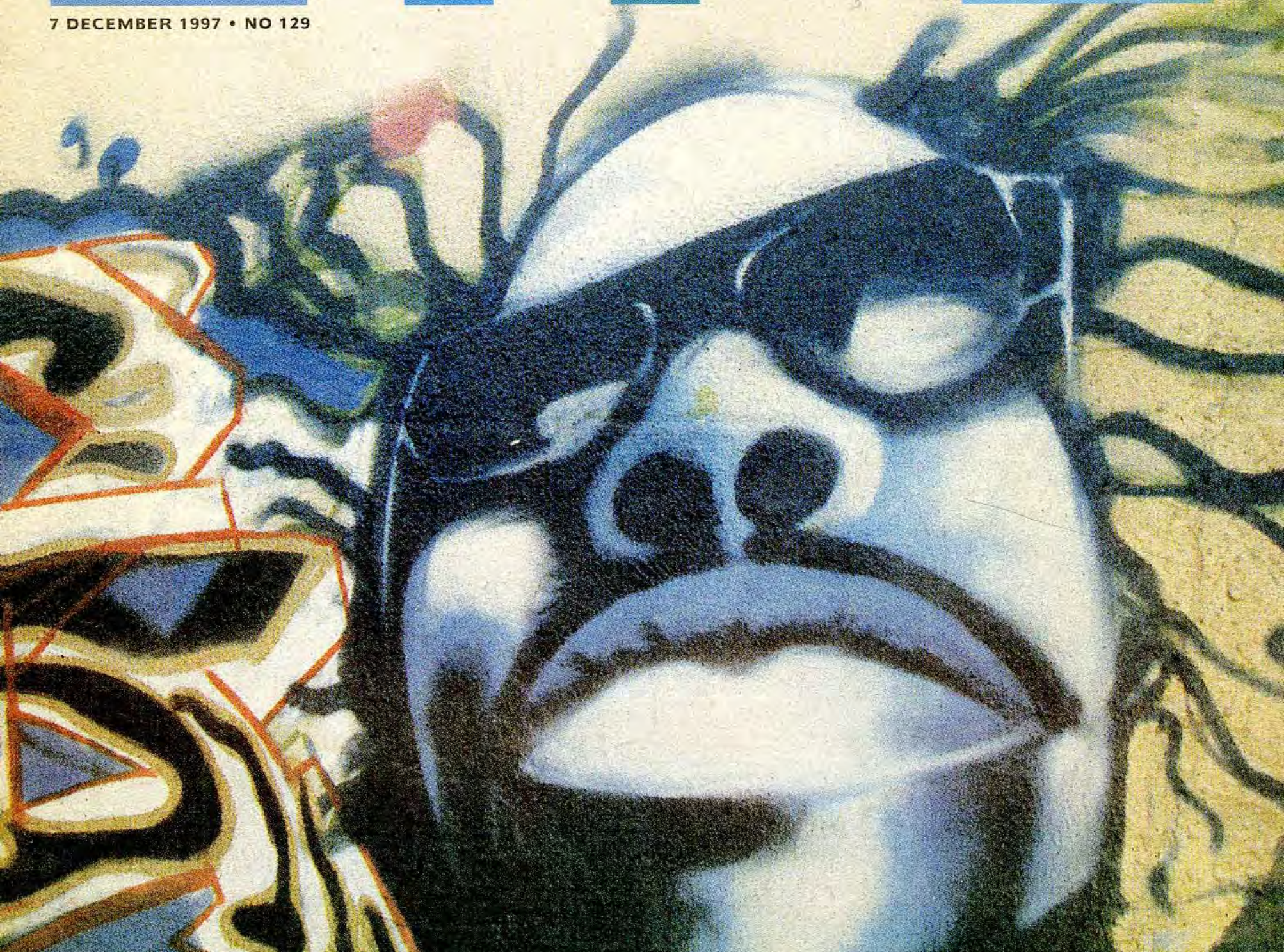


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Grffiti: who says it's art?

PARTY WITH MICHELLE GARFORTH IN THE MILE-HIGH CLUB
GETTING PAID TO TRAVEL • ARE ALL MEN OLD GITS?

photographs by alexandra murphy

writing wrongs

What propels adults to scribble on walls? Are they vandals, desperate for attention, or serious critics of our time? Kevin Rose interviews some prolific graffiti artists.



hoping to film some graffiti in progress, a man points a camcorder across Vanguard Drive in Cape Town at graffiti artist Sky One. Sky has spray-can in hand. On the wall behind him, in big blue and white 'wild-style', looms his 'tag', or graffiti signature. Sky scowls at the cameraman.

'In Amsterdam or Australia,' he says slowly, 'I'd be entitled to go over there and kick his head in.'

Cops have used film to catch 'taggers' before, but this guy's probably just a home-video fundi. Still, an unauthorised recording has been made of a writer in the vicinity of his tag. It is the violated principle that angers Sky, not the broken confidence of his graffiti name. A public connection between the tag, 'Sky 189', and its owner, 23-year-old graphic design student Evaron Orange, already exists: Sky is rated by followers of the genre as third best graffiti artist in South Africa.

A prolific writer, Sky has pieces up in Athlone, the Bo Kaap, and along Mill and Orange streets in Cape Town's city bowl. He is a travelled and experienced writer, having competed at the 1995 Australian 'Euroglyphics: Manifestations of Phatness' competition. He has been commissioned by churches, nightclubs and universities. Earlier this year, he joined a team of artists in making a series of free-standing murals – like extra-large birthday cards – to commemorate Mandela's 79th birthday. Sky is an 'aerosol artist'. Anything that can be done with a spray can, he can do, and only six or seven artists he has worked with in Cape Town can claim the same level of expertise. Most writers, he says, become no more than 'glorified typographers'.

His style stems from the great '70s wellspring: New York subway graffiti. Back then, a tag would usually represent the initial of a name and a street number – 'K219', for example, or 'East36'. 'Over time you saw the "phattening up" of tags,' says Sky.

'Someone would come up with a brighter tag, so you'd say "Fine, I'll give mine an outline and colour it in"'. The 'phattened up' tag often becomes the work itself. Thus, most graffiti pieces are self-reverential: advertisements for themselves and their writers, at least for those in the know.

Sky chose his tag because, 'wherever you go, there's always a sky. It's got mood swings, but it's always there.' The '1' shows he is the first (and so far only) writer using the tag. The '89' commemorates the year he completed his first major piece.

Sky is an exponent of 'wild-style': the art of redefining the letter in complex, interlocked constructions. His colleague Kane Seven, who is also in



with an image of a mantis, 'a huge avenging bug'. Then he wrote, 'Here's Looking at You. Hologram Strikes Back With Love'.

Hologram is playing with the idea that art, placed in a public place, invites interaction. He uses an anagram as a tag: 'Holo', a common Swazi surname, combined with a foreshortening of the artist's 'real' name. More puns: above the word 'Holo' he draws a halo.

Hologram is the master of the cunningly simple statement. 'I'm a TV Watching Man' he wrote outside a popular city nightspot, and signed it 'Pan'. Others done under the same name are: 'Split is What I Do Best', 'All a Man Wants is a Hole He Can Trust' and 'My Calculator is Ruining Me'.

The 'Pan' persona represented 'the mischievous trickster, who plays a flute and dances a merry jig,' says Hologram. This anarchic identity gave him the space 'to go out and make cryptic statements about society. I wrote satirical one-liners that were essentially about men: their orientation, their consciousness.' 'I'm a TV Watching Man' was Pan's indictment of the resigned male ego, a despairing lament of alienation.

'Hologram' is the artist's matured graffiti persona: 'embracing, balanced, positive', where Pan was chaotic and incomplete. Hologram uses transcendental images – like the mantis, which is also a Khoisan god.

'Pan would work in the early hours of the morning, after a night of priapic indulgence,' says Hologram. 'I prefer to work in broad daylight, normally on a Sunday, around 1pm. But the ideal is to do it during rush-hour traffic.'

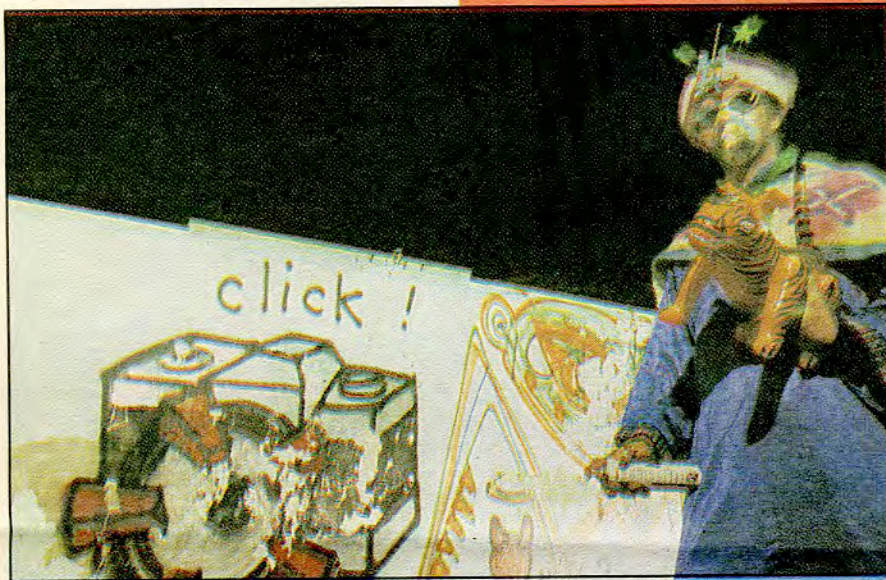
The choice between furtiveness, or brazen writing is important, because Hologram's question to the graffiti artist is, 'Are you a vandal, or are you a critic of your time?'

Didi, too, is unsure about the right or wrong involved in her graffiti: 'The last few pieces I did in daylight. I decided I didn't want to steal about like a thief in the night. I just wanted to get out there; do it; get the adrenaline rush.' Maybe in the New Year, she imagines, there could be a fresh burst of 'Didi-ism' on the walls.

Back on Vanguard Drive, Sky makes no comment. He is still scowling, as the man with the camcorder jumps into a car and drives off. Perhaps Sky would quote the adage, 'Graffiti is not vandalism, but a very beautiful crime'. Or an anonymous New York predecessor who once wrote: 'Graffiti Is An Art, And if Art is a Crime, Then Let God Forgive All'. ☺

'The dummy is also a hushing device. Like, maybe you wanted to scream then, but weren't allowed to.'

PREVIOUS PAGE Didi, 'the little devil', and her trademark dummy. ABOVE Aerosol artist Sky One. LEFT Hologram Strikes Back With Love.



his mid-20s, collaborated with Sky on several city bowl pieces. Seven uses the newer European technique of playing off shades of paint to create a 3-D effect. The pair, along with Ice and Falco, joined forces to create Athlone's Vanguard Drive piece – a full wall or 'top-to-bottom-end-to-end' and the largest 'join-up' – individual pieces that meet up – in the peninsula.

This kind of co-production allows writers to get more – and better – work out. 'Although we each practise our own outlines in our spare time,' says Sky, 'there's the danger of becoming stagnant.' Working together on 'join-ups' keeps the work fresh.

Not all graffiti artists work this way. Nor do they all hail from the hip hop tradition. 'There's this girl, Didi,' Sky remarks, 'who also did some stuff at the Nelson Mandela thing. She's got work up around town.' Frowning, he shakes his head: 'She does dummies.'

I meet Didi in the warehouse space that she has rigged up as a studio. 'Evaron?' Didi asks. 'That's his real name? Where did I meet him?' Puzzled, she says: 'It's probably part of my escape from reality – I forget things. My slogan is "I Remember", but to tell the truth, I don't remember much.'

Thankfully, she keeps a sketchbook,

a visual diary of her exploits on Cape Town walls. 'Here we go...' Didi pauses at a page on which her trademark dummy, a child's pacifier, is depicted. 'This was May, maybe even April. This was the first one I did.' Next to the bold, childish sketch appear the words: 'I Remember'.

Didi discusses herself in the second-person. 'She was born on the streets of London. Her mother was a prostitute. So Didi's very... urban,' she says. 'She started off as a platinum blonde, but now she's a cyberpunk type.' Long-limbed, a mobile expression, she is composed entirely in red with a shock of cropped red hair, topped off by a red cap that sprouts two little horns. 'She's a good little devil,' she says. The cap is Didi's tag – she incorporates it into her pieces as a kind of colophon.

The dummy piece, done in Observatory, has since been painted over. But more have appeared all over town. 'The dummy symbolises childhood memory,' she says. 'But it's also a hushing device. Like, maybe you wanted to scream then, but weren't allowed to.'

Didi's themes are not vague, simply oblique. 'Shhhhh: He Told Me Not to Tell', reads another of her pieces. 'In a limey accent, "Didi" sounds like "did

'e', as in 'Did he?'; she points out.

The innuendoes persist in another of her icons: the green alien – elongated face, thin, lipless mouth, huge oval eyes. One bears the message: 'I Was Abducted'. 'People who have been abused often create fantasies,' she explains, 'because they're easier to deal with. And I've often heard of people who literally believe they'd been abducted by aliens.'

'The alien is really a friendly character. There was a guy who stencilled aliens along the freeway. I wanted to say hello, so next to one of his, I painted an alien saying 'hello'. But he never said hello back.'

Sometimes, however, graffiti interaction is not welcome. 'Someone I'd been involved with began a dialogue on the walls,' Didi says. 'He was really angry, because I'd needed to move on, so he started writing comments on my pieces. I didn't want to carry on, so I stopped writing for a while.'

One night in Observatory, a graffiti artist called 'Hologram' stumbles into the fray between Didi and her unwelcome respondent.

'Didi had done this big camera going "click"; Hologram says. 'Next to hers was some graffiti by a guy I call 'Frigid', because that's the word he always uses – "Frigid is a Fake Con Artist", or "Frigid: Blame Mum Not Men". I respond to negative graffiti.' He did so in this case by covering it