

Representation and Reconstruction of Memories and Visual Subculture

A Documentary Strategy about Graffiti Writing

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Abstract

Graffiti Writing is a visual movement engaged in the Hip Hop subculture. It spread globally over the past decades as a creative manifestation and a public statement of urban artists, being contested by the public domain values. Despite the large amount of material documenting it, such as films, documentaries, magazines and books, it remains a marginal subculture, less known by the large audience in its deep characteristics. The following article presents a work-in-progress practice-based research, whose objective is to investigate and connect the contribution of animation to the documentation and communication of the subculture of Writing, deciphering its interpretation for the uninformed audience. This is accomplished by a documentary fieldwork, with testimonies and memories emerged from the interviews to three activists of the Writing movement.

The interviewed are artists that operate in different fields, surfaces and styles. The fieldwork is conducted as a mediation interface, focusing the research on the province of Ferrara, in Northern Italy. The documentary work is developed in a specific geographical context, with representation strategies and narrative reconstruction for the disclosure of this subculture. This is accomplished with the development of an animated documentary short film. Thanks to the documentation strategy it is possible to represent and reconstruct the Writing memories. This option allows the exploration of new concepts with the encounter of two distinct visual arts and mediatic approaches, that are urban art and animation, moreover it allows the definition of an authorial language appropriate to the project and its theme.

Keywords: Graffiti, Street Art, Subculture, Animation, Documentary, Short film.

1 - Introduction

Aerosol Art or Writing is a movement that has always had difficulties in counting itself completely, privileging the evident and superficial aspects¹ (Piazza 2018: 6). In Italy, documentations of the Writing subculture have always been focused on the “capital” cities, such as Milan, Bologna or Rome. Rarely the stories come from people who experienced this subculture in smaller cities, where the influences of globalization usually arrive later. The key-idea of the current project is to give voice to lesser known writers that work in smaller, provincial cities, approaching the movement in a different way. Furthermore, the present

theoretical-practical research aims to document the Writing, analyzing the aspects that characterize the lives of those who join this subculture as a lifestyle, instead of the most known and superficial characteristics, such as the artworks in the public space. Being that, as Alessandro Ferri states: “The general public perceives Writing as a grouping of signs or doodles on a wall which have neither face nor identity”² (Ferri 2016: 14). This project has the primary purpose of representing the interviewed artists and their work in the Writing subculture frame, defining the fieldwork in the Ferrara province, a peripheral area near Bologna,

1 - Piazza, C., 2018. Buio Dentro. Shake Edizioni, Milan, Italy. 6.

2 - Ferri, A., 2016. Teoria del Writing. La ricerca dello Stile. Professional Dreamers, Venice, Italy. 14.

Italy. The theoretical part of this investigation establishes on the research about the history of this movement, from its conception in the U.S.A. to the arrival in Bologna. It analyses the documentation and divulgation media about this subculture, in order to better understand and define the strategies and the visual language to produce a short-film animated documentary. The animated short film does not aim to document exhaustively the Italian Writing, but rather to present its most fascinating and arcane aspects.

2 - Brief History of Writing

Thanks to the mass media and the easiness of diffusion and sharing of contents over the Internet, currently the terms “graffiti”, “street art” and “Writing” are part of a common language, reaching the outsiders to the movements. Due to the great conceptual scope that the word “graffiti” brings, it is used as a vague concept to understand areas that are sometimes distant from each other³ (Musso 2015). Consequently, it is important to define key-terms, understanding the distinctions between “graffiti”, “Writing” and “street art”. The term “graffiti” comes from the Italian word “graffiato”, which means “scratched”. “Graffiti” is applied in art history to works produced by scratching inscriptions or figurative drawings on walls. The use of the word ends up including any graphic applied to surfaces in a way that constitutes vandalism. For example, in the documentary *Style Wars* (1983), directed by Tony Silver (1935-2008), detective Bernie Jacobs uses the word “graffiti” to define the act of “applying a medium to a surface”. Henry Chalfant, co-producer of *Style Wars* (1983), in the book *Subway Art* (2015) declares: “We are aware of the strong objection that some writers have raised to using it [the term “graffiti”]. They say that is the name given to the art form by the oppressor, that it is the nomenclature of the criminal justice system, and that it is used to denigrate and control people.”⁴ (Chalfant and Cooper 2015: 127). It is evident that those who join the movement prefer to use the terms “Writing” or “Aerosol Art” instead of “graffiti”, in fact the curator Claudio Musso speaking about the writer PHASE II, one of the pioneers of New York, states that “He

3 - Musso, C., 2015. Graffiti? Non usate quella parola! Anche sì..., *Artribune Magazine*. Accessed July 21, 2020, URL: <https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2015/11/graffiti-street-art-marcello-faletra-libro-postmedia-books/>.

4 - Chalfant H., Cooper, M., 2015. *Subway Art*, third ed. Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, England. 127.

hated the word “graffiti”, preferring “Aerosol Art”⁵ (Papa 2019). Likewise, the Italian writer and theorist, Alessandro “DADO” Ferri affirm that he agrees with PHASE II, according to which it is better to speak, in a more technical meaning, of Aerosol Art, or of Writing⁶ (Ferri 2016: 15). The practice of graffiti began long before the Seventies of the 20th century⁷ (Faletra 2015: 29). Informal writing in public spaces is an old practice, probably as old as writing itself. People of all types in the history of mankind feel the desire to symbolize their own existence in every place and time, leaving a personal trail for others to see.⁸ The first drawings made by humans in caves may be interpreted that way. In fact, since the first records of hunting and animal movement reproduction, the practice of drawing/writing in public spaces has been particularly visible in different moments of history. In the 20th century, the practice acquired unprecedented worldwide intensity and became the central feature for several subcultures. In *Kool Killer or The Insurrection of Signs* (1976) Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) writes that: “In the city’s signage, graffiti until now had always built the bas-fond - the sexual and pornographic low-world -, the abject, repressed inscription, of urinals and vacant lots. The walls had only been conquered in an offensive way by political slogans, propagandists, full signs for which the wall is still a support and language a traditional medium.”⁹ (Baudrillard 1976). The most sophisticated of these twentieth-century movements is the Writing tradition that develops in New York City’s subways during the 1970s and then becomes part of the landscape of several cities around the world.¹⁰

2.1 - Birth and Definition of Writing Movement

As written at the beginning of the chapter (2.), writings on public walls have always existed, since the dawn of civilities. The practice of recording thoughts, exposing political slogans or writing obscene phrases is a common activity even in the second half of the 20th century. In the late Sixties the phenomenon was so rooted that, for example, in New York, in 1967, the metropolitan management

5 - Papa, S., 2019. Le opere del fondatore del Writing Phase II a Bologna, *Zero Magazine*. Accessed June 10, 2020, URL: <https://zero.eu/it/news/le-opere-di-phase-ii-a-bologna/>.

6 - Ferri, Teoria del Writing, 15.

7 - Faletra, M., 2015. *Graffiti. Poetiche della Rivolta*. Postmedia Books, Milan, Italy. 29.

8 - “Tag: Name Writing in Public Space”, Conference website, accessed July 10, 2020, <http://thetagconference.com/>.

9 - Baudrillard, J., 1976. *Kool Killer or The Insurrection of Signs*.

10 - “Tag: Name Writing in Public Space”

established a \$ 25 fine or 10 days of imprisonment for those who would write on the walls of the metropolitan. The graffiti under discussion used to be obscene, religious, philosophical, or political phrases¹¹ (Nelli 2012: 15). In the same year, in Philadelphia, the names CORNBREAD and COOL EARL appeared written on public surfaces. These aliases wrote on the walls visually took possession of the city and captured the attention of the local media¹² (Ferri 2016: 18). CORNBREAD and COOL EARL defined the role of the modern writer, with the aim of gaining fame.¹³ There is no way to identify exactly the beginning of the Writing¹⁴ (Ferri 2016: 18). In fact, there are several hypotheses about the first appearance of graffiti as a creative practice, called Aerosol Art or more simply Writing, making it difficult to establish its birth. Some claim that the Writing appeared in the metropolis of New York, others in Philadelphia, respectively in two of the first academic essays about this subject: *Graffiti a New York* (1978), by Andrea Nelli, and *M.T.A. - Mass Transport Art* (1988) by Jack Stewart (1926-2005). However, from the witnesses of the first generation of writers, New York would be the incubator of the Aerosol Art¹⁵ (Faletra 2015: 24). Since 1968 and continuing for two years, JULIO 204 has written his name on the streets of New York with a marker, leaving his own neighborhood, Washington Height. Then, in 1969, the name THOR 191 appeared. From their tag, it was possible to understand their tastes and influences. But it is mainly with the name of TAKI 183, that the inhabitants of the metropolis and the press realized that this type of graffiti was something new and different, in fact, in 1971, an article of the New York Times dealt with Writing presenting it as a phenomenon rooted in the urban fabric¹⁶ (Nelli 2012: 16, 17). From these years on, in New York, especially in the districts of Manhattan, Bronx and Brooklyn, the number of names written on public walls increased exponentially, with a number added to the pseudonym, often that of the residence road, called "tag" (TAKI 183, JULIO 204, TOPCAT, PHASE II, BIG BIRD 159, IRENE 159)^{17 18} (Faletra 2015: 23) (Ferri 2016: 18). What

marks a separation between writing on public surfaces, and Aerosol Art, is that in the second the name is fictitious, composed of nicknames, numbers, names of the heroes of comic strips; these aliases are therefore a mask of the birth's name. This is the adjunct value attributed to a practice that is commonly nameless, to individualizing an individual rescue, a need to affirm one's own unity¹⁹ (Faletra 2015: 30). The movement's "second period", identified between 1971 and 1974, is characterized by the fact that the tag is written in three-dimensional form and with stylistic modality inspired by various visual stimulus of that time: comic strips, neon signs, art deco, psychedelic graphics^{20 21} (Faletra 2015: 23, 24) (Nelli 2012: 28). The transition from the use of the marker to spray paint marks an evident stylistic progress in Writing, determining an evolution of primary forms and the conquest of a further dimension²² (Ferri 2016: 18), with the possibility of creating larger traces. BARBARA 62, CAY 161 and JUNIOR 161 in 1971 invented the "masterpiece" or "piece", a graphite of larger dimension and outlined by an outline, painted with spray paint and often filled with other signs²³ (Nelli 2012: 18). The tag was characterized by three-dimensional effects and "baroquisms" of scripture, which transform a signature into an arabesque ideogram²⁴ (Faletra 2015: 27). In 1972, the sociology student, Hugo Martinez, established United Graffiti Artists (UGA), a group that brought together about ten members, collectively considered the best in New York, including PHASE II, COCO 144, NOVA I and others. The crew taught in Aerosol Art labs at the city college and designed live scenography for a modern ballet show, creating a dialogue between spectators and artists²⁵ (Nelli 2012: 20 - 24). Writers started to gain recognition in the arts and galleries circuit. In fact, in 1973, there was an exhibition of canvases painted by PHASE II, MICO and others at Razor Gallery²⁶ (Chalfant and Cooper 2015: 7). The following phase, after 1974, was marked by the birth of "Wild Style" (claimed by TRACY 168, PHASE II, BLADE and PEL), a style characterized by fragmented shapes, arrows, and letters that overlap and intersect, resulting indecipherable to those who do not

11 - Nelli, A., 2012. *Graffiti a New York*. Whole Train Press, Rome, Italy, 15.

12 - Ferri, *Teoria del Writing*, 18.

13 - Subway Outlaws website, accessed June 24, 2020, <http://subwayoutlaws.com/>.

14 - Ferri, *Teoria del Writing*, 18.

15 - Faletra, *Graffiti. Poetiche della Rivolta*, 24.

16 - Nelli, *Graffiti a New York*, 16, 17.

17 - Faletra, *Graffiti. Poetiche della Rivolta*, 23.

18 - Ferri, *Teoria del Writing*, 18.

19 - Faletra, *Graffiti. Poetiche della Rivolta*, 30.

20 - Faletra, *Graffiti. Poetiche della Rivolta*, 23, 24.

21 - Nelli, *Graffiti a New York*, 28.

22 - Ferri, *Teoria del Writing*, 18.

23 - Nelli, *Graffiti a New York*, 18.

24 - Faletra, *Graffiti. Poetiche della Rivolta*, 27.

25 - Nelli, *Graffiti a New York*, 20 - 24.

26 - Chalfant and Cooper, *Subway Art*, 7.

belong to the movement²⁷ (Faletra 2015: 24). In New York, in 1975, graffiti were everywhere, but the phenomenon was still poorly documented that those outside the movement had no idea of what these colorful Writings are and what they mean²⁸ (Chalfant and Cooper 2015: 6). With the flourishing interest by journalists, researchers and photographers, in the eighties, Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant documented the growing movement of Writing in New York City, translating this phenomenon and the works themselves, as something ephemeral. Chalfant, in the book *Subway Art* (2015), states: "I imagined that graffiti would die out in a few years and that I would have an unusual photo archive. I photographed in the spirit of historic preservation."²⁹ (Chalfant and Cooper 2015: 126).

2.2 - The International Aerosol Assault

When the movement integrated into the metropolitan system of New York it gained considerable attention from the media, who started to attribute to the phenomenon of Writing the term "graffiti". The growing interest of journalists, researchers and photographers created the basis for Writing to spread to other metropolitan cities. In the early Eighties, the phenomenon spread globally thanks to the means of the time. International crews, fanzine networks, inter-rail travels were, among others, key-means in which writers become protagonists³⁰ (Caputo 2009: Cover). The first fragmented and superficial images of painted trains arrived in Europe through music videos, TV series and films set in the marginal neighborhoods of New York. The opening credits of the series *Welcome Back, Kotter* (1975) by Gabe Kaplan, Alan Sacks, Peter Meyerson, where painted metro trains appear (the series is broadcast in Italy from 1980), and the films *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) by John Badham and *The Warriors* (1979) by Walter Hill showed the reality of New York, where Writing pieces were an inevitable scenario in the filming of that time³¹ (Caputo 2009: Cover). But the European public did not understand what that paintings on the walls meant. Only in the first half of the Eighties, with the help of the first videotapes of films and documentaries on the subject, entitled *Style Wars* (1983), *Wild Style* (1983), and *Beat Street* (1984), thousands

of young people outside the United States learned the techniques, utensils and dynamics of a movement still unknown³² (Ciancabilla 2015: 10).

"I started in spring 1983, I saw a picture of graffiti with some text next to it in a magazine. [...] I started drawing and looking around, but there was nothing in the city, except anarchy signs. [...] I tried finding some more information on Writing, but it was quite impossible until *Wild Style* was shown at the cinema."³³ (CEMNOZ in Caputo 2009: 20)

Style Wars (1983) portrays writers such as SKEME, DONDI, MINDONE and ZEPHYR, but also reinforced the role of the Aerosol Art in the emerging Hip-Hop culture, incorporating break-dance groups such as Rock Steady Crew, and featuring rap music on the soundtrack. Hollywood productions paid attention also to the movement, consulting writers like PHASEII and giving international exposure to the culture in the film *Beat Street* (Stan Lathan, 1984). Photography fulfilled the role of disseminating knowledge on a large scale, thanks to a true market for amateur prints, made by the writers themselves or through self-produced and specialized magazines, called fanzines. Through photographers interested in the movement, the first official publications that documented Aerosol Art were born, such as *Subway Art* (1984) by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant and *Spray Can Art* (1987) by H. Chalfant and James Prigoff³⁴ (Ciancabilla 2015: 10). The same Chalfant recognizes that: "*Subway art* was one of the vehicles that gave life to this movement and that can be an inspiration to people everywhere in the coming decades"³⁵ (Chalfant and Cooper 2015: 7). The Writing subculture also found a way of dissemination through artists travelling outside the United States, such as FUTURA 2000 with The Clash and DOZE with Rock Steady Crew³⁶ (Chalfant and Cooper 2015: 126). Hip Hop and Aerosol Art arrived in the main European cities, especially those that have a metropolitan network, continuing the New York Writing tradition³⁷ (Schmidlap in Caputo 2009: 72). In Paris, SKKI and JAYONE wrote at Trocadéro, QUIK exhibited in Rotterdam at the *Post-Graffiti*

27 - Faletra, Graffiti. Poetiche della Rivolta, 24.

28 - Chalfant and Cooper, *Subway Art*, 6.

29 - Chalfant and Cooper, *Subway Art*, 126.

30 - Caputo, A., 2009. *All City Writers*. Kitchen93, Bagnolet-France. Cover.

31 - Caputo, *All City Writers*, Cover.

32 - Ciancabilla, L., 2015. *The Sight Gallery*. Salvaguardia e Conservazione della Pittura Murale Urbana Contemporanea e Bologna. Bononia University Press, Bologna, Italy. 10.

33 - Cemnoz in Caputo, *All City Writers*, 20.

34 - Ciancabilla, *The Sight Gallery*, 10.

35 - Chalfant and Cooper, *Subway Art*, 7.

36 - Chalfant and Cooper, *Subway Art*, 126.

37 - David Schmidlap, in Caputo, *All City Writers*, 72.



Fig. 1 - "Skate Tough" painted by DUMBO, Giardini del Guasto, Bologna, 1985-1987. Ph: Texas BBS.

exhibition and Milan welcomed American masters, thanks to the art galleries that brought artists like PHASEII and A-ONE into the city³⁸ (Piazza 2018: 21).

2.3 - The Arrival to Bologna

Bologna is a city with the reputation for being the epicenter of countercultures in Italy³⁹ (Caputo 2009: 154). In fact, by the end of the Seventies and the first Eighties were present creative university non-local groups, which revealed the youths' dissatisfactions and concerns, preparing the city to welcome new thoughts and languages. Like many Italian cities of that time, Bologna was experiencing a period of decadence, like the homeland of the first Writing, which was the basis for the emergence of new cultural and multidisciplinary expressions⁴⁰ (Naldi in Caputo 2009: 233 - 254). In 1984, with the exhibition *Arte di Frontiera: New York graffiti*, curator Francesca Alinovi brought for the first time in Bologna some of the greatest exponents of the vanguards of New York, showing the best of the first generation of American writers (FUTURA 2000, DONDI, DAZE, LEE, CRASH, A-ONE, TOXIC, RAMMELLZEE,

38 - Piazza, Buio Dentro, 21.

39 - Deemo in Caputo, All City Writers, 154.

40 - Fabiola Naldi, "Love of Indifference" in Caputo, All City Writers, 233 - 254.

ZEPHYR). After that event, Bologna became one of the first European capitals of Writing⁴¹ (Ciancabilla 2015: 9). The New York subculture soon found fertile soil in the area between the railway line and the industrial sites that were gradually abandoned; in these spaces the first generation of Bologna writers was formed. First among all has been DEEMO (a.k.a. First Shot / Dayaki / Dumbo), who started between 1985 and 1987:

"My very first letter piece with character is also the first ever done in Bologna, and is still there where I painted it, after more than two decades. I went to the concrete garden called Giardini del Guasto and just did it. That was an early skate, so I wrote "Skate Tough" with a skater character on one side and my first tag "Dumbo", in all its primitive glory. It's been featured in books, even postcards I think."⁴² (DEEMO in Caputo, 2009: 154 - 155). (see Fig. 1)

After this first Writing piece, DEEMO spread the tag "One Shot" over the city, with the aim of arousing curiosity in

41 - Ciancabilla, The Sight Gallery, 9.

42 - Deemo in Caputo, All City Writers, 154 - 155.



Fig. 2 - "Blind Justice" painted by RUSTY, railway line Bologna-Ancona, 1992. Ph: Texas BBS.



Fig. 3 - Piece painted by PHASE II, Link Club, Bologna, 1994.



Fig. 4 - Piece painted by TUBE2 a.k.a. SAED in 1996-97, near Ferrara. Photo 2020 (© Mattia Ronconi).

other young people and starting the characteristic “game” of competitiveness in Writing. The idea worked well, thus MAGMA and MINED joined the movement, then RUSTY and SHAN R (a.k.a. Deda from the rap band *Sangue Misto*) followed. They were the first incarnation of the SPA crew⁴³ (Caputo 2009. 158). (see Fig. 2) The yellow walls of the Livello 57 hosted the SPA crew pieces (RUSTY, DEEMO, DADO, CIUFFO, BENJA) for several years⁴⁴ (Caputo 2009: 234). In addition to the city’s native writers, the self-managed and occupied youth spaces (such as Link, Livello 57, Crash and XM24) and Bologna itself, attracted PHASE II that established in the city for some time “predicating” the dogmas and theories of the discipline. The New York artist

had the first contact with Bologna in 1984. In the Nineties his relationship with the city became more intense after the exhibition-festival *Dal Muro alla Pelle* (1994) in the self-managed space Link⁴⁵ (Papa 2019). (see Fig. 3) Thus, in the following years, young people from the provincial areas of Bologna (an example is Ferrara and the surrounding small cities), participating in events and concerts in Bologna, known the Writing and had been influenced by the characteristic style developed in that city. (see Fig. 4)

3 - Documentation and Divulagation of Writing Subculture

In the decades of the Seventies and Eighties, photography was the main media for the documentation of the Writing subculture. The information was written behind the images

43 - Caputo, All City Writers, 158.

44 - Caputo, All City Writers, 234.

45 - Papa, “Le opere del fondatore del Writing Phase II a Bologna”.

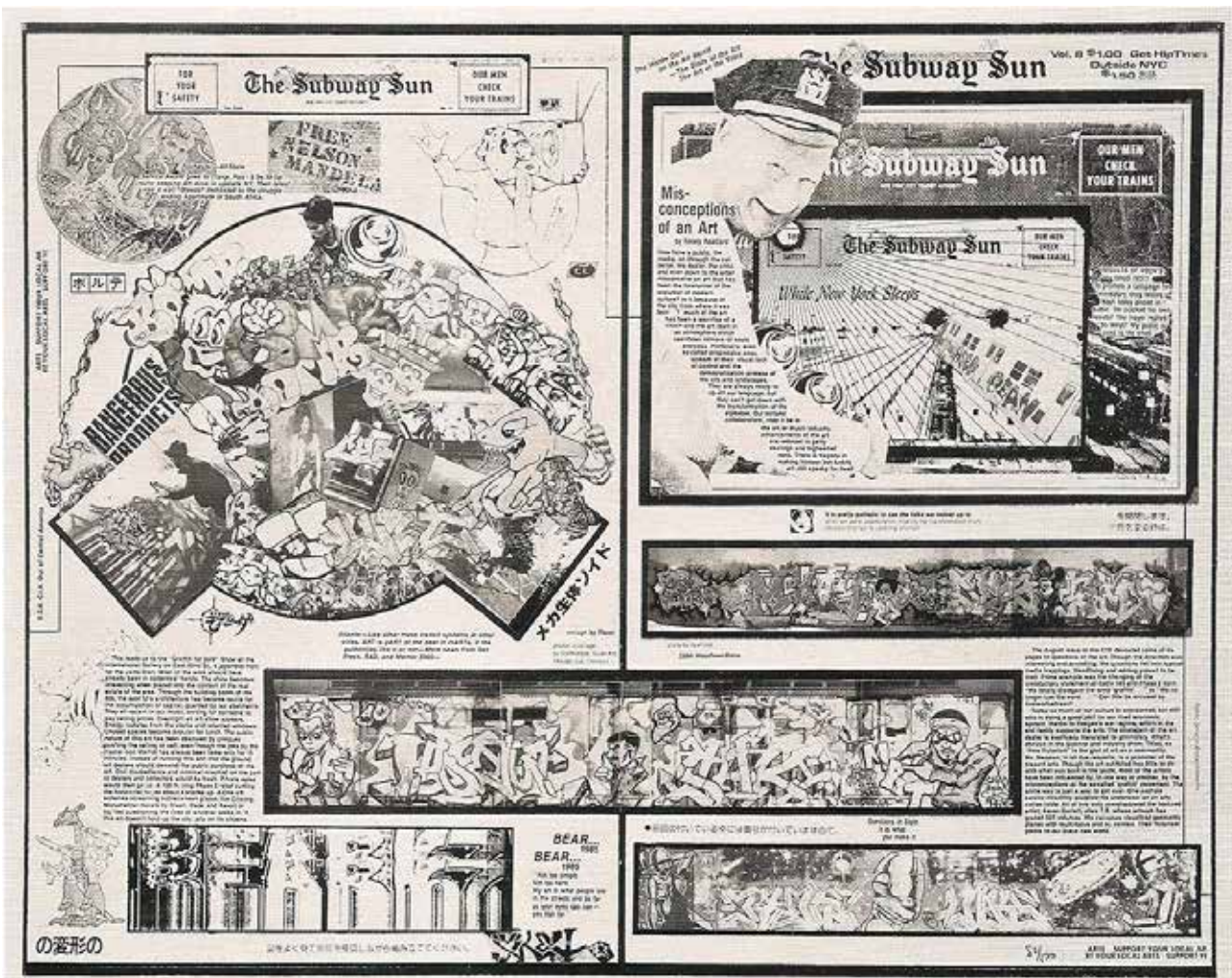


Fig. 5 - IGT Vol. 8, The Subway Sun, 1987. IGT Archive, from the book “All City Writers” (2009), p. 75.

such as the artist's name, year, country. The circulation in the U.S.A. and Europe of the material was possible through a network of exchanges between writers. From the second half of the Eighties, this practice evolved, giving rise to the first fanzines specialized in the theme and self-produced by those who joined the movement. In the same period, other people realized the importance and ephemerality of this subculture, feeling the need to document and analyze it. In fact the first editorial and cinematographic projects were born, such as *Subway Art* (1984) by photographers Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, and the films *Style Wars* (1983) directed by Tony Silver, *Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1983) and *Beat Street* (Stan Lathan, 1984). These first works are one of the factors that contributed to the global expansion of the movement. In the successive years, along with the spread of Writing culture around the world, documentation projects increased, both in editorial and cinema sectors, following the most varied formats (interviews, photographic collections, real action footage, etc.). Nowadays, in addition to the "conventional" medias, digital photography and the internet allow the artists to share their work globally, easily and faster⁴⁶ (Chalfant and Cooper 2015: 126), favoring the advent of other channels, new formats of documentation of this subculture.

3.1 - Editorial

The first media of propagation and documentation of the Writing movement, after the photographs, were the fanzines, self-produced and illegal. These publications were generally composed of twenty-four A4 format sheets printed in black and white. They collect photos and information revealing how in each city a typical aesthetic of the area is recognizable, thus helping to define the different Writing styles⁴⁷ (Caputo 2009: 66). (see Fig. 5) With the growth and global expansion of the subculture, over the course of four decades, the amount of produced material that documents, analyses and communicates the Writing movement grew in the most varied forms. Nowadays the fanzine market is diversified and present all over the world. Publications are in black-and-white or in color with different formats and contents, such as only photographs, or with interviews and/or texts telling anecdotes related to images. In parallel to this circuit, exists registered editorial projects and some academic publications, in which the contents are variable. It is possible to find books about the history of

46 Chalfant and Cooper, *Subway Art*, 126.

47 Caputo, *All City Writers*, 66.

Writing movement, writer's stories, social-cultural analysis and so on. The analysis of some of these publications is useful in defining which themes are addressed within a wide subculture, and how they are presented to the audience.

3.2 - Cinema

In the history of the Writing subculture cinema played an important role for global diffusion. In fact the first fictional and non-fictional films from 1983 about the New York Writing movement, such as *Wild Style*, directed by Charlie Ahearn, and *Style Wars* by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, placed the basements for a wide production of short and feature films that document the phenomenon in different ways. Nowadays there is an endless production of amateur and professional films, which can be subdivided into two main categories, but sometimes are mixed together: one uses interviews with artists as a basis, analyzing the movement in several ways, the other bases on real shoots of the actions and processes of painting trains or walls.

3.3 - New Media

The advent of digital photography, internet and social media altered the processes and modes of documentation and diffusion of information, also inside subcultures and marginal movements, enabling rapid and global sharing of contents⁴⁸ (Chalfant and Cooper 2015: 126). As a result, projects are rising with new formats and methods of use, for example from photographic archives published on social media channels, to podcasts and web-talks with artists and experts of the Writing movement. In July 2020, for example, it was possible to participate in the web talk *Valorizzazione dell'Archivio Fotografico nel Graffiti Writing*, thus having the opportunity to hear important points of view about the documentation and divulgation by researchers and archivists of this subculture in Italy. (see Fig. 6) That opportunity made possible to get to know some documentation projects, their objectives and characteristics. In this part of the report, the key aspects of each project were analyzed in order to outline their purposes.

48 - Chalfant and Cooper, *Subway Art*, 126.



Fig. 6 - Image from the Instagram post of the web-talk “Valorizzazione dell’Archivio Fotografico nel Graffiti Writing”.

4 - Conclusions:

A documentary Strategy Through a Visual Concept

By the analysis of the history and the documentation projects from the Writing movement, it is evident that the existing material analyses and exposes the phenomenon from the large metropolises and/or presenting the well-known artists. Therefore, the choice to document the movement from a provincial area was applied in the development of a short-film animated documentary. After identifying some of the first artists to practice Writing in the territory near Ferrara, a provincial area of Bologna in Italy, the work proceeds with the documentation through the interviews to these writers. The artists on which the project is based are: MASK, class 1979, SAED from 1985 and RASH born in 1994. The three come from small cities in the province of Ferrara and joined the Writing at different times. Even though the three knew each other – MASK during the interview stated that “Writing is a microcosm in which everyone knows each other” – they have their own style and type of approach to the movement. Due



Fig. 7 - Photo from a blackbook portraying MASK in front of his piece, 1996 (© Mattia Ronconi).



Fig. 8 - Newspaper article from a MASK's blackbook, 1997 (© Mattia Ronconi).

to the differences between these artists, it is possible to represent the subculture in a relatively broad and general way, despite the geographical limitations of the framework. The objective is to record the personal choices and experiences that led the artists to start spray-painting graffiti, going through an analysis of the characteristics that they find important in the practice of Writing. The purpose is to explain to a general audience the aspects beyond the superficial images painted on the public walls. Another important step of the project was to collect documenting material from the artists (sketches, photos of the artworks, articles, fines). (see Fig. 7 and 8) Thus, it will be possible to implement these materials in the animated short film.

In addition, the sound content of the documentary is based on the recorded audios of the interviews, in order to keep the visual part of the animation for the purpose of representing the artists and their visual works. This option

provides the opportunity to explore new concepts with the encounter of the aesthetics from urban art and authorial animation, including the objective to define an appropriate visual language to represent the subject of the project. After recording the interviews, it was important to proceed with an accurate analysis of the contents, using a video editing software to separate each part and make an index of the themes. This decision helped to organize a list subdivided by artist, topic of the report, salient points and duration. The use of a table that summarizes the subjects of the interviews is advantageous to define the storyline and the base script to develop the short-animated documentary. As each interview had a length between one and two hours, several memories emerged: personal stories, points of view, plans. Thereby, the list of themes was essential to divide the reports into macro groups and choose what to use for the development of the narrative and what to omit. (see Fig. 9)



Fig. 9 - Conceptual Map for the storyline with the topics from the interviews (© Mattia Ronconi).

For the storyline it is followed a chronological timeline, starting from the discovery of the movement by the artists, ending with their choices not to stop this activity. The topics deal with numerous subjects that characterize the approaches and points of view of the interviewed writers. After the presentation of each artist, the short-film exposes what characterizes the choice of painting graffiti, starting by the negative aspects (spent of time, money and energy, dangers) until reaching the positives facets that explain why the artists continue this activity (strong emotions, lasting friendships, unforgettable memories). The decision to deal with these issues aims to provide the audience with information about a marginal and contradictory movement, at times called “art” by some and identified as “vandalism” by others. Thus, there is not a definitive conclusion. Although the subjective filter of the director may be visible, it can

provide the necessary information for the viewer, enabling it to generate a thought and elaborate personal conclusions about the reported subject. Despite the project is intended for a short documentary film, the defined storyline tries to follow the classic three-act structure of the narrative: at the beginning the protagonist has a problem, then makes efforts to find a solution and finally solves the problem⁴⁹ (Blazer 2015). In a way the artists and the Writing movement are introduced at the beginning, then follows the problematic (the negative aspects derived from the choice to join this subculture) and the short film ends up presenting the motivations that justify their decisions. The climax of the narrative is reached with the story told by MASK, which is itself a micro-narrative. This anecdote summarizes

49 - Blazer, L., 2015. *Animated Storytelling: Simple Steps for Creating Animation and Motion Graphics*. Peachpit Press, San Francisco, CA, USA.



Fig. 11 - Blackbooks of MASK, used to archive sketches, photos, tickets (© Mattia Ronconi).

the characteristics of the practice of Writing presented throughout the short film. The climax is reached when a security guard tries to shoot the writers and the viewer can feel the danger and the adrenaline of a Writing action.

Through the theoretical research presented in this article, it is possible to state that PHASE II was a pioneer of the New York City Writing movement, defining its foundations, executing style and influencing this subculture all over the world. He was also a master “collagist” and his works are known inside of the Writing movement thanks to his collaboration as an art director of the fanzine *IGTimes*, among the others⁵⁰ (Schmidlap in Caputo, 2009: 74 - 75). (see Fig. 10)

Maybe due to PHASE II, the collage technique became commonly used between the writers, to make flyers for the events, and even in the layout of many sketchbooks. The sketchbooks, called “blackbook”, are used since the birth of the Writing, to collect sketches, color palette studies,

50 - Schmidlap D., in Caputo, *All City Writers*, 74 - 75.

photos and other relevant documents for the artist, as memories or reference images. (see Fig. 11)

As the objective of this animated documentary is to represent a visual subculture and illustrate three artists with their artworks, numerous techniques are used, for example spray-paint, “Writing textures”, collage and visuals inspired by the “blakbook-style”. The use of a “blackbook-style” as infographic solution allows to illustrate dates, photos or other relevant information to better explain the narration, accompanying the regular frame by frame animation. In the Writing movement the research for a personal and unique style is one of the un-wrote rules. The signs on the walls are communications of individuality. The writers describe themselves through a language made of shapes, compositions and color palettes. Thus, the style is a filter of multiple experiences through a pictorial language, representing the writer itself, its character and background⁵¹ (Ferri 2016: 13, 14). In fact, after making a board with a collage of photos of each artist’s artwork, it

51 - Ferri, *Teoria del Writing*, 13, 14.



Fig. 12 - “Style-board” with pieces of MASK (© Mattia Ronconi).



Fig. 13 - "Style-board" with pieces of RASH (© Mattia Ronconi).

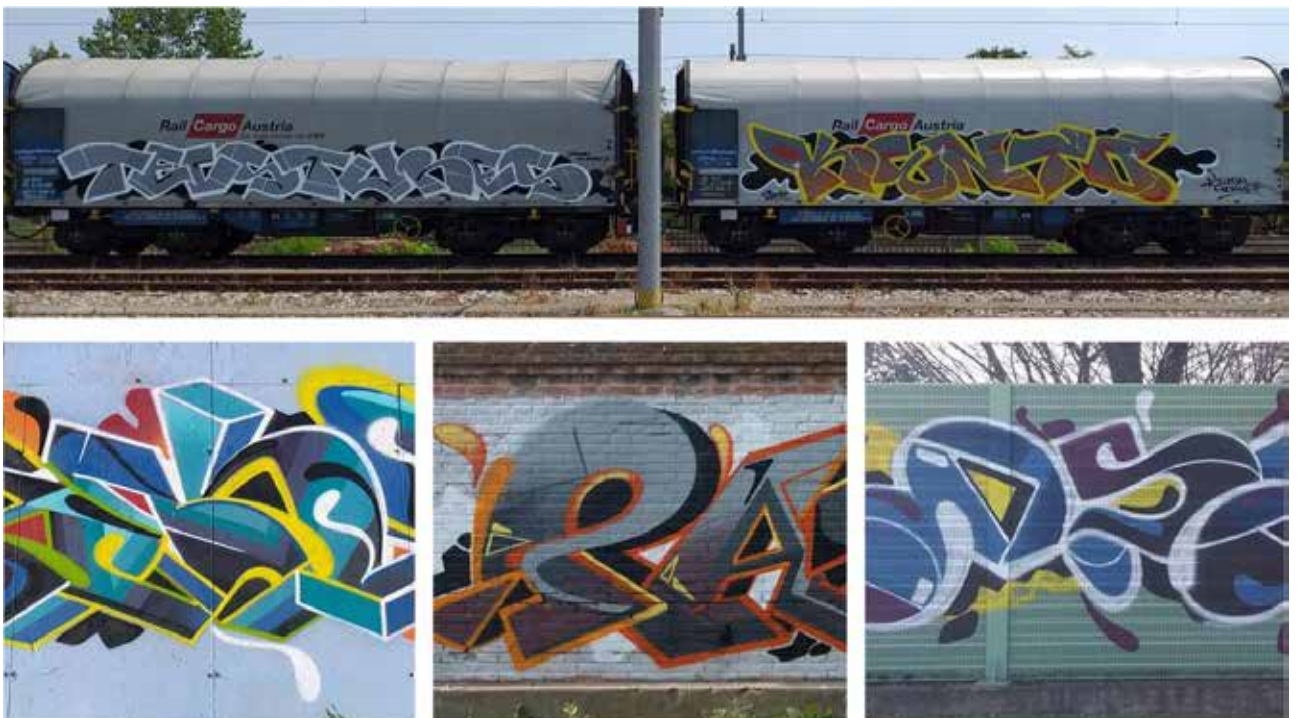


Fig. 14 - "Style-board" with pieces of SAED (© Mattia Ronconi).

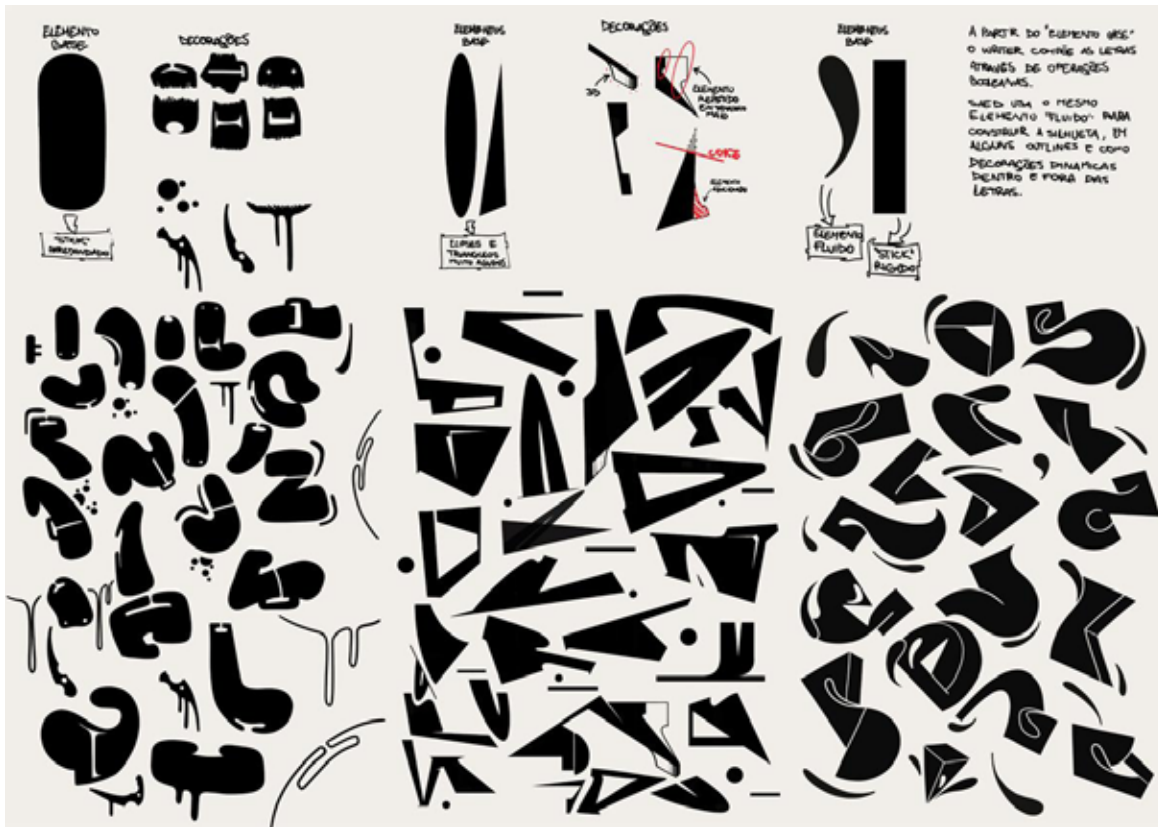


Fig. 15 - Studies of the base shapes used by each interviewee in its pieces (© Mattia Ronconi).

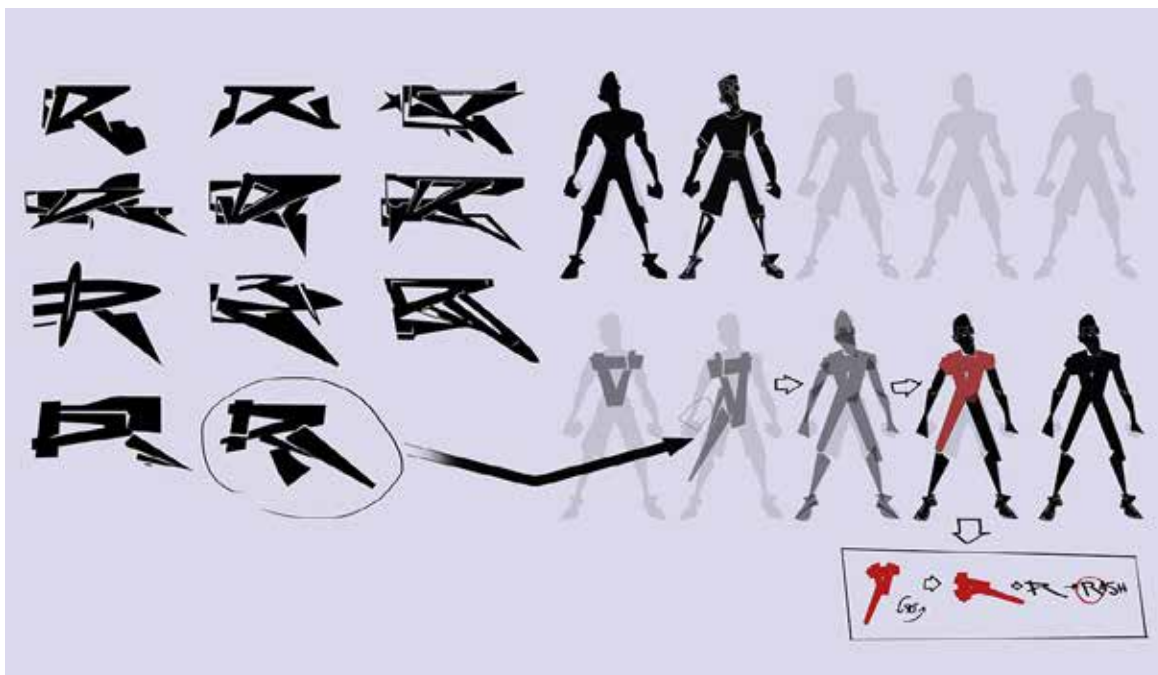


Fig. 16 - Silhouette studies for the character RASH, by using his R letter (© Mattia Ronconi).

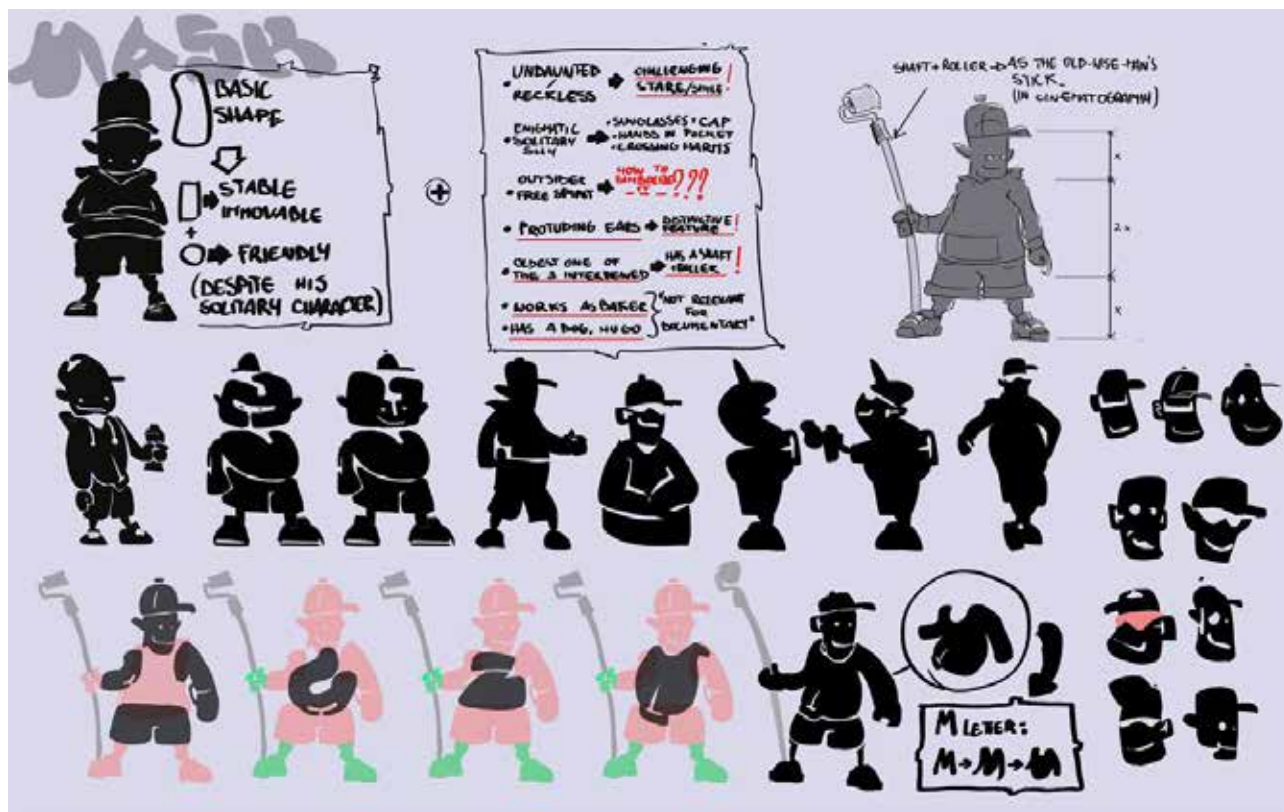


Fig. 17 - Silhouette studies for the character MASK, by using his Writing base shapes (© Mattia Ronconi).

emerged that there were base-shapes and composition logics used in the creation of the letters. (see Fig. 15) Several pieces of the same artist are identifiable as made by the same person, even if the inscription is different. In the same way, it is possible to recognize different artworks made by different writers, identifying who painted each one. (see Figs. 12, 13 and 14)

That is the reason why the exploration of the aesthetics and techniques for the characters of this on-production short-film is based on the visual language of Writing. Any character, with its shapes and colors, is inspired by the “styles” of the artworks made by each artist. In this way, the characters represent not only the artists themselves, but also their works, thus becoming “beings” composed of abstract forms, the same forms that are recurrent in the composition of the letters of each interviewee. (see Figs. 16 and 17) In addition, this option permits to maintain the artists’ anonymity, necessary due to their illegal activities, through these almost tribal “masks”. (see Fig. 18)

In fact, these “masks” are inspired by the visual language of Writing, with the intention to represent the artists, while simultaneously maintaining their anonymity. In a way this happens in the subculture itself, in which the artists want to be recognized (getting up) within the movement through the tag itself but maintaining anonymity as people belonging to a society made up of rules that tend to discriminate.

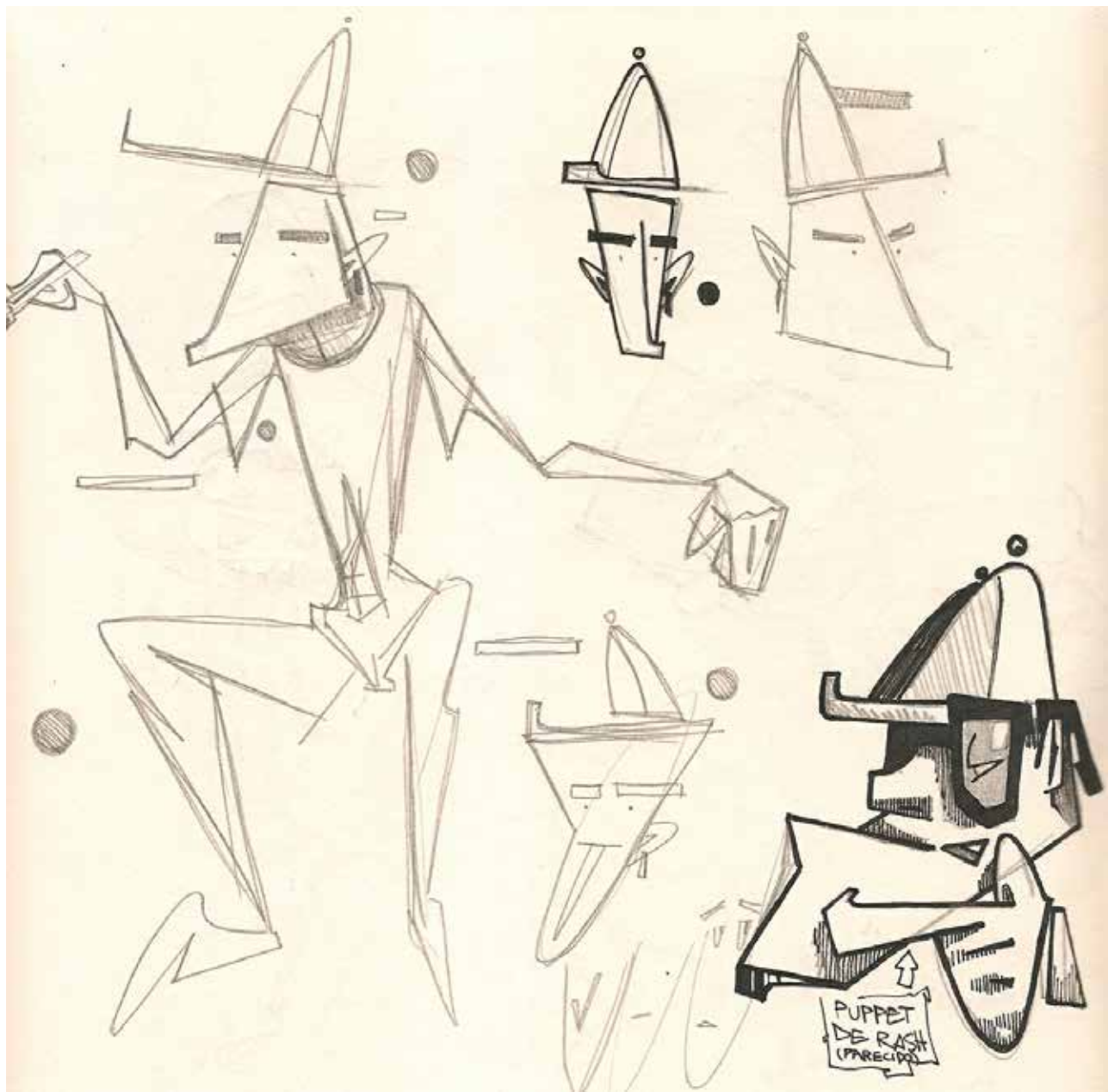


Fig. 18 - Concept study for the character RASH, by using his Writing style (© Mattia Ronconi).

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