STREET WISE

THIS SPRING, THE WILDEST, FASTEST, MOST CRIMINAL, LEAST COMMERCIAL, AND DEFINITELY MOST URBAN OF ART FORMS WILL BE TREATED TO ITS FIRST MAJOR MUSEUM RETROSPECTIVE. WILL ONE BUILDING BE ABLE TO HANDLE SO MUCH STREET?

Some critics might argue that "street art"—whether this loaded term refers to straight-up graffiti or more interpretive activities like skateboarding—has no business in a museum. The whole point of street art in the first place was as a radical act of dissent, a rebellion against the very forms of art sanctioned within museum walls. Street art has an essential element of criminality to it and if that outlaw spirit is institutionalized, doesn't the very substance of the art disintegrate before the eye? Well, these arguments only hold if one sticks to the old idea of the museum as an elite organization split off from the rest of the community. What if the separation between the museum and the street weren't as rigid? The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles will use these questions—as well as many others—in their first blockbuster exhibition since curator and dealer Jeffrey Deitch took over as director last year. No one expected Deitch to be a conventional, by-the-book leader, and he has immediately experimented with the principles of what a museum can do by planning the retrospective "Art in the Streets." From the early days of vandals hanging on to the sides of Brompton subway cars to the tricks performed in Los Angeles skate parks, from its subversive rap and punk origins to its spectacular embrace by mainstream culture, street art will be explored in the exhibition through the various and divergent threads that weave together (and, in some countries, such as Brazil, Chile, and Iran, are still being sewn) to create one of the most influential art movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Deitch is no stranger to the genre. In fact, he was a regular fixture on the downtown New York scene of the late '70s and '80s, which galvanized the street-art movement. But to curate around such an ambitious theme, he relied on certain key figures who could tell the story from a first-person point of view. Among them: Fred Brathwaite, a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy, the pioneering artist, curator, and all-around master of the New York scene, and Aaron Rose, the L.A. native who ended up creating a vital platform for many street artists in the early '90s. "What is very rewarding about this project is that it's being put together by a community of people with whom I've had a dialogue since 1975," Deitch explains. "In particular, Fred and Aaron are friends and collaborators going back a long, long time." Here, Deitch speaks separately with these two confidants to discuss their respective parts in a far-reaching movement one that could never be contained in a single voice, a simple explanation, or a mere scratch. —CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN
A pioneer of the early hip-hop and graffiti movements, Fred Brathwaite was one of the first individuals to publicize street art as pop art in the late 70s. He got his Fab 5 Freddy nickname as a member of the Fabulous 5 graffiti crew and went on to introduce mainstream audiences to hip-hop with 1983 cult film *Wild Style*. He cemented the link between early hip-hop and graffiti culture in 1988 as the first host of *MTV Rap*. Today, Brathwaite remains active in the art world, most recently exhibiting 10 multimedia works at The Cosmopolitan hotel in Las Vegas.

JEFFREY DEITCH: I think this is for Andy Warhol’s Interview. We should start by discussing your genealogy with Andy, and how you had the remarkable insight to contact [writer, former Interview editor, and TV host] Glenn O’Brien and ask to participate in his show *Glenn O’Brien’s TV Party*.

FRED BRATHWAITE: I was a fan of Andy’s since I was a small kid. I recall seeing an ad of famous people on an airplane together. It was a caricature drawing. There was Muhammad Ali, there was Miles Davis, and there was Andy Warhol. I had a fascination with him since I was little, and then I saw his work and the thing that he did. As I got older and more curious about the scene, I reached out to Glenn O’Brien, who was doing a music column in the magazine called “Glenn O’Brien’s Beat.” I loved the way he wrote about all different kinds of music—funk, rock, new wave, and punk. I wanted to interview him for my college radio station. I was attending Medgar Evers College [of The City University of New York] for a short period. So that’s how I met him, and Glenn told me he was going to do a public-access TV show called *TV Party*. He said he wanted to have me on as a guest, because at that time I was also telling him about the beginning of hip-hop music—rap music, if you will, because at the time it really wasn’t known as hip-hop. And I was also telling him about graffiti and that I had been a graffiti artist and was interested in moving into the art world. I told Glenn, “I’d love to be a cameraman on your show.” He said, “Fred, you’ve never done that before. You can’t be the cameraman, but I’d love to have you come by and be a guest on the show.” When I showed up for the first episode, the guy who was supposed to operate one of the two cameras wasn’t there. Glenn looked at me and said, “Fred, get the camera!” I became one of the show’s cameramen and a regular guest. That was the beginning of my friendship with Glenn and many of the cool people that I would meet.

DEITCH: You had a remarkable role as an artist, as a connector of people, and you had an instrumental role in film. How did you discover that art was going to be your path?

BRATHWAITE: I grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. My father grew up with Max Roach, who became a prominent member of the bebop jazz scene in the ’40s and ’50s. That was the most cutting-edge American music. Growing up, there were always lots of my father’s creative friends in the house talking about what was going on in the world with culture and politics. It was a time of the anti-war movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power movement. All of these things were discussed passionately in my house every day. As a young kid living in and out of the room, I got snippets of this world, and as I became a teenager I began to look at the things I was involved in—the things going on around me. And I saw a similarity, a connection, between what we were doing in the streets and those earlier conversations about politics and art. Suddenly these things were much bigger than we realized. And I started getting really curious about art. I read about the Dadaists and the Futurists and the Constructivists—those kind of movements which were reflect-
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DEITCH: It’s fascinating how these key events are so important when you look back in history, and how a show like “Beyond Words” brought this whole scene together and defined it.

BRATHWAITE: Yeah, it did. And you know what was also interesting about that time? It did bring people together. In that downtown scene there weren’t really that many people of color hanging out. It was just a handful of us—me, Jean-Michel, Pat Griffin, who was a young archivist. But we had all these different people in a room together—Latin and black guys from the Bronx and Lower East Side hanging out, mixing, dancing with punk-rock, new-wave arty types. Everyone was enjoying each other’s company. It was amazing to be in the room, because things that didn’t happen on a regular basis. But that was really representative of what New York is. In fact, Afrika Bambaataa, who was one of the DJs at “Beyond Work” later made a song called “Planet Rock,” which was inspired by playing in front of a new breed of crowds all those spiky-haired kids enjoying this stuff. “Planet Rock” changed the face of contemporary music. It created the electro-beat sound.

DEITCH: You’ve been talking about the interrelationships between new music and new art. Can you expand on the idea of how graffiti was involved with rap and punk music?

BRATHWAITE: That’s great the way you put that. Jeffrey. When I was looking at the Russian Constructivists, these esquire artists actually painted on trains. It was a heavy influence. They were bringing art to the people, to the masses, and breaking it out of the stuffiness of the art world, which is a monolith. We use the term pop in the art world, as in Pop Art, but we forget that its root is popular—popular culture. As we’ve become more sophisticated and we have more means of accessing information, we can put these stories together for ourselves, as opposed to only relying on some person in the art world. We can now dictate some of these rules ourselves. And by the fact that thousands of people have experienced aspects of this particular culture, they’re able to understand it. They’re able to put the pieces in place. *Wild Style* was a key to putting faces on individuals and allowing people to see that we were just young folks trying to break out and do something interesting that touches a lot of people. Our main aspiration for *Wild Style* were the movies that would play on 42nd Street in Times Square. That’s the old 42nd Street with all the Kung Fu and horror films. That’s where our target audience would gather for entertainment. We wanted a film that would appeal to our target audiences, and now that film resonates 30 years later as a cult film. *Rolling Stone* voted *Wild Style* number 7 of 25 greatest music movies of all time. It’s so much more than we could have asked for, but really it’s just a reflection of the popular vote. We’re not from the classic background of those who had the large, loud voices of the art world. We’re not those people. But we were determined. Our objective was to do it by any means necessary, particularly Jean-Michel. It was going to be music, it was going to be film, it was going to be art, and it was definitely going to happen. We were fighting this battle, but of course doing good work along the way. It’s great that it’s still alive and thriving and there are new players jumping in and adding new pieces. It keeps it from getting stale and boring.