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Dr. Julie Mackey says Philadelphians create artistic graffiti, beginning with names only and advancing to stylized 'signatures'

Is graffiti art? A jury of one says that it is

"The graffiti movement is a lot like rock 'n' roll in its pre-enlightened phase. To me, it announces the first genuine teenage street culture since the fifties."

—Richard Goldstein,
New York magazine

"I am appalled, nauseated and angered by many of the sights I see enroute to and from City Hall. We have to take the bull by the horns and eliminate this abominable desecration."

—Joseph L. Zazyczny,
Philadelphia City Councilman

"There are bad graffiti artists and good ones . . . the ones I interviewed felt they were beautifying ugly places. They thought subways without graffiti were dark, grotesque places. Of course, this doesn't mean

that some of them aren't doing it just to mess up the wall."

—Dr. Julie Mackey, Philadelphia
artist, social scientist
and history professor

By Dick Pothier
Inquirer Staff Writer

Dr. Julie Mackey, a Philadelphia artist and history professor, has spent two years studying Philadelphia's graffiti. As a result, she gets into a lot of arguments.

That's because she believes urban graffiti can be a valuable form of "urban folk art." She also believes that most Philadelphians dismiss graffiti as crude vandalism and defacement. And she's right, of course — at least about most Philadelphians. But that doesn't change her opinions.

Dr. Mackey has been reaching

some important people with her theories — and they're listening, if not being converted. Recently she spent two hours talking about and exhibiting photos of graffiti in the Communications Colloquium Series at Penn's Annenberg School of Communications.

She has been on TV talk shows. She has even had her students at the Moore College of Art out photographing and studying various forms of graffiti. In fact, she says, comparing the graffiti of Philadelphia with that of the "graffiti capital of the world," New York City, leads to some intriguing sociological and cultural conclusions about Philadelphia.

But only if you're open-minded enough to consider graffiti as something more than vandalism, Dr. (See GRAFFITI on 3-D)

Graffiti: Vandalism or folk art?

GRAFFITI, From 1-D

Mackey insists.

"In New York, artists and other people go down into the subways just to watch the trains come in ... the artistic community in New York has been very supportive of the graffiti artists, and of course this hasn't really happened here. New York seems to be a much more 'public' city ... here there's an inwardness, a tradition, that wouldn't encourage support of something like this," she says.

There's even a basic problem in semantics involved, she believes. Dr. Mackey studies only "signature" graffiti — not "content" graffiti, which can be anything from sheer obscenity to statements like "God is alive and well and living in Pismo Beach."

Philadelphia's graffitists are nearly all in the signature-graffiti school. Even Police Commissioner Joseph F. O'Neill, who has formed police anti-graffiti squads and is certainly no admirer of the "graffiti is art" school, agrees: "Our graffiti is not obscenity. Philadelphia is unique among major cities in that the graffiti artists specialize in script or scroll lettering."

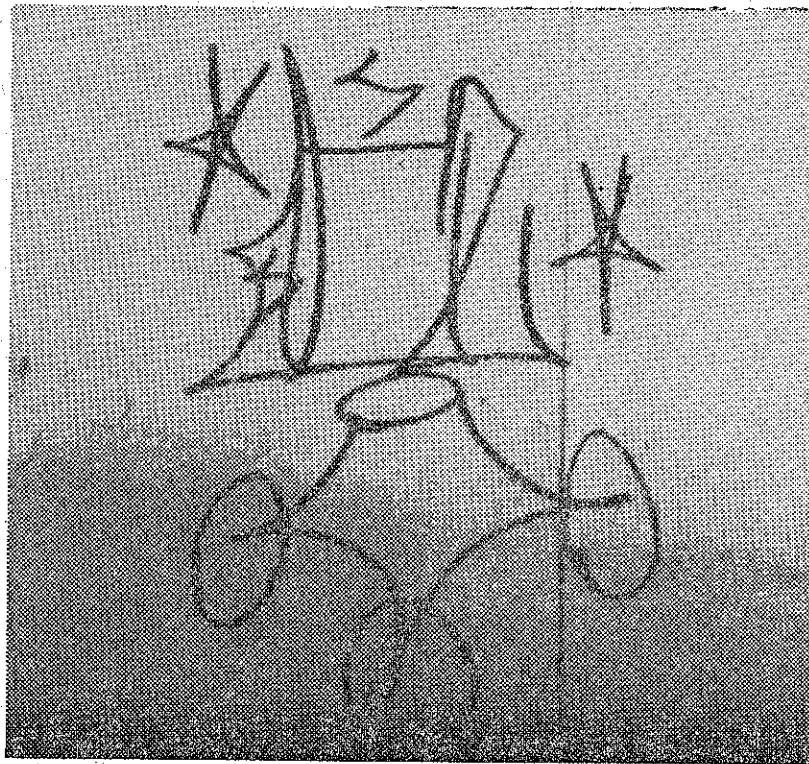
There's been a lot said and written about graffiti in recent years, of course. But Dr. Mackey is apparently the first artist to analyze Philadelphia's abundant graffiti in such detail that she has discerned what she sees as four major evolutionary periods in graffiti, dating from the late 1960s when graffiti first became popular. (And it first became popular in Philadelphia — not New York, she believes.)

She is also apparently the first to do much theorizing about the cultural implications of various kinds of graffiti, including the belief that graffiti is a reliable reflection of the moods and attitudes of Philadelphians as compared to New Yorkers.

Risky and illegal

(And before we go on about the subject, it is time to point out that it costs Philadelphians at least \$2 million a year to clean up graffiti. At least 1,000 teenagers have been arrested recently for defacing public buildings and subways, among many other things, and those arrested are charged with vandalism and pay fines of several hundred dollars. Wielding a spray can in the name of graffiti is risky, illegal, and usually expensive.)

Dr. Mackey isn't in favor of the ac-



THE ROCOCO-STYLE graffiti here is more elaborate than the other styles. The names may not be readable and design becomes paramount over identity.

tivity itself — but, she says, it's there and it can tell us something about our children and our city's culture.

As part of her study, she interviewed a number of graffitists — most notably, "Bingo" and "Kidd," who usually signs walls as "Kool Klepto Kidd." (The "klepto" is a reference to the graffiti tradition that the cans of spray paint are usually stolen.)

Bingo and Kidd are now retired from graffiti, Dr. Mackey says. Both are black youths from West Philadelphia who hit their peak of graffiti productivity at the age of 17. "When the kids hit about 19, it's no longer a thing to do," she points out. "Most of the graffiti artists in Philadelphia today are between 13 and 17."

Street orientation

Why do the graffitists do it? The theories are numerous, but Dr. Mackey believes it's essentially a way for ghetto youths to express their identity. "But the signatures, at least the good ones, are designs — not simply writing your name on a wall.

In carefully analyzing hundreds of examples of Philadelphia "signature graffiti," Dr. Mackey finds an artistic evolution through four district periods, beginning in the late 1960s.

• First, what she calls the classic style: simple, unattached letters, little decoration — simply a statement of identity.

• Next, the "baroque" style: more elaborate decoration and embellishment around the name, sweeping "tails" or serifs on the letters, perhaps painted eyes in the letter "o" in such "wall names" as Koolkap.

• The third stage, Dr. Mackey says, might be called "rococo," with even more elaborate decoration around the name, which itself may be unreadable, as the name itself evolves into a kind of abstract design and the design element becomes paramount.

• Last, and most recently, what she terms the "decadent" stage: The design itself has taken over completely, the name is probably illegible, and the "artist" is identified by other graffitists through his design and style, not his name.

"Some of them are simply enigmatic — I don't know what they are, and I'm trained to read these things. They began as names, but now they're designs." Bingo and Kidd, she adds, were "classicists." They believed that "if you can't read them, they're not satisfactory graffiti. But it was clear to me that they sat around discussing others' work, just as artists do."

But no matter how much artistic quality she sees in Philadelphia's graffiti, Dr. Mackey admits, she's still in the vast minority of graffiti-watchers.

And she doesn't expect Philadelphia to ever be anywhere near as tolerant of graffiti as the residents of, say, New York or Los Angeles.

But she's prejudiced. The other day she pointed to a dull, institutional-brown wall at Moore College of Art and said: "Isn't that wall boring? It would be alive if it had graffiti on it."

"I think it all came out of the expressiveness and turmoil of the late 1960s and the 'street' orientation of that period. That was also a time, of course, when there was a major sense of being somebody for urban black youths." Author Norman Mailer, in his text for the photo study called "The Faith of Graffiti," writes: "In the environment of the slum, the courage to display yourself is your only capital."

Dr. Mackey notes that New York City graffitists use bold, colorful designs while the Philadelphians are more "restrained, dignified, almost artistically 'classic.'" The graffiti in New York is more exuberant, and I think that is an accurate reflection of the cities' culture, too."