

## THE BROOKLYN RAIL

WINTER 2003

### BROOKLYN'S NEW POWER BROKERS

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### Graf 2000 Da house in Brooklyn Martinez Gallery

Albert Camus states in *The Rebel* that "to make a work of art is an act of rebellion." That realization is the punch that has provided Graf with its cult status as a means of challenging the status quo and having some "bad boy" fun along the way. Since its emergence in the cultural conscience during the mid '60s, Graffiti has come to represent a whole subculture of activities that include Hip-Hop, break dancing and VJ-ing. In a lucky person that gets to mix their passions with their profession, and Hugo Martinez is one such individual. The recent opening of his gallery on Greenpoint Avenue is the culmination of a project that began with a Graffiti exhibition, "The Painted Word" around the corner at the now defunct State of Art Gallery in June 2000. Martinez had previously operated a gallery on West 27th Street in the early days of the Chelsea boom. He found this Greenpoint neighborhood an inviting environment to establish his vision of a Hip-Hop, Graffiti salon. It must be one of those cosmic ironies that the venue, which features the work of artists who call themselves "WRITERS," is located in what was the Eberhard Faber factory, the first pencil manufacturer in the Western Hemisphere. However to call this space merely a gallery is to limit the multifunctional nature that it was designed for. In like the ultimate appliance that grinds coffee, paints walls, plays the finest music, and dices tomatoes, all in one.

The gallery consists of a downstairs space with natural lighting on two sides, while upstairs is the café-bar and dance/performance space. The café was designed and built by Marleen Kaptein and Sign Roodnat and qualifies as an ingenious artwork in its own right. All the café tables and chairs are designed to fit into matching niches in the wall, like special tools in a fitted case. Depending on the number of fixtures in use, interesting voids appear in the wall. Nato, one of the "writers" represented by the gallery, has applied a floor to ceiling spray can mural to the construction.

During a brief chat, Hugo Martinez expounded on some of the ideas that drove the project. "The premise actually started out with a discussion with N55. We started talking about conventions. It intrigued me because I've always loved breaking conventions. I'm a gallerist that's not interested in having a gallery per se. I wanted to do something that's more interesting, something that has the ability to be other things. Originally my concept was don't make a vitrine. Even in Chelsea I had a vitrine. It had flat walls it stayed the same. It did have walls that move around, but still it was devoted to trying to picture yourself, your rich as, having those paintings in your place. So it has this slick Saks Fifth Avenue function. It couldn't be other things. I didn't want that. Graffiti culture is a multifarious lifestyle, so why are we restricting ourselves to having just something on the walls? When you looked at Sgt. Peppers it was a beautiful

price from the outside it intrigued me, and there was all this mystery that was brought into it. If Lennon, one of our major cultural thinkers, was doing this in the sixties then why did that have to end? There are four elements, Graffiti which is visual, Hip-Hop which is music, break dancing, and VJ-ing which is another type of music that involves sampling, which is respectful to history. Now no longer is history obsolete, it becomes special. It's the basis of culture. In Third World countries or China when someone gets old they get venerable. I thought why isn't that happening here? So how y'all got Old school and New school together. I don't want to have any conventions going on other than when you walk out of here, everything has respect, and integrity, that is not diminished by the others presence. Its increased by the other presence. There's



Photo by Art Director

no reason why music should take away from painting. No reason why painting should take away from poetry, or conversation."

After a couple of visits to the space, I began to appreciate the unusual dichotomies that in mission and design embody. One is the play between the inside and the outside. Since it first began appearing in galleries, the question of whether real Graf could exist in the artificial realm of fine art has been asked. With the current show by Chano Oquet, curated by Antonio Zaya, this question is given a reverse definition. Oquet's altar (the distinction between "altar" and "installation" is made very concisely in Robert Farra Thomson catalogue essay) is composed of front sections of two automobiles, propped on a stack of pallets, and placed together like the two faces of Janus. There is an Automat ramp leading from the gallery doorway up to the open doors of the cars. They are filled with toys, stuffed dolls, a guitar, trombone, and potted trees, that are sprouting out through the sunroof. Bucket seats are stacked around the platform, the hood is festooned with Christmas lights, and an age of space hang from the cars ceiling. The Afro Caribbean influences including voodoo are rich and various. On the walls surrounding the altar are pieces by Misico. The energetic spontaneity of the works seems to rupture the benign gallery space and plunk it back onto the streets.

The Martinez Gallery with its exhibition and performance spaces represents a dynamic and potent opportunity for the community to interact and express their artistic juice whether in the visual, performance, musical or poetic spheres. I see it as a kind of cultural Swiss Army knife, a thousands and one uses, and a hip sensibility. Welcome to the naves.

—James Kalm