

## The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

### The Phantom Street Artist

Interviewed in Lost Angeles, California, March 16, 2008

Born: 1973 in Manhattan, New York City, New York

“When the story is destroyed, the feeling of historicity disappears as well. I remember the early seventies in Czechoslovakia as a time when something like a ‘cessation of history’ took place...

“History was replaced by pseudo-history, by a calendar of rhythmically recurring anniversaries, congresses, celebrations, and mass gymnastic events; by the kind of artificial activity that is... a one-dimensional, transparent, predictable self-manifestation (and self-celebration) of a single, central agent of truth and power.

“And since human time can only be experienced through story and history, the experience of time itself began to disappear: time seemed to stand still or go in circles, to disintegrate into interchangeable fragments. The march of events out of nowhere and to nowhere lost its story-like character and thus lost any deeper meaning as well... life became nonsense.”

— Václav Havel, from *Stories and Totalitarianism*, in *Open Letters, Selected Writing 1965-1990* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1991) p.333-334

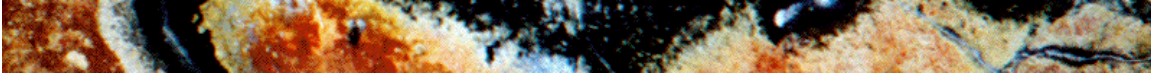
#### Phantom Street Artist:

My first experience of being mentored was to a graffiti artist, who was my mentor on the streets: Eddie Glowaski, originally known as “Caine 1.” Caine 1 achieved great recognition for painting his full cars top to bottoms, but through a case of mistaken identity was shot and killed, while the spirit of his expression went on to receive great international recognition. That was during the great movement of graffiti artists who received international recognition in the mid 80’s.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F04E1DD133BF936A25750C0A964948260>

Eddie was being chased by thugs in his neighborhood. The word out on the streets was that Caine 1 was making BIG money, so the thugs wanted to jump him for his money, and they chased him through the streets of Queens. He climbed up a fire escape and began pounding on an old man’s window to be let in for safety. Yet this was an old man who was previously robbed, and vowed never to be taken again. What was someone actually pleading for help, to be let in for personal safety, appeared to the deaf mute old man as someone trying to break in. The old man took a gun and, out of self-protection, shot Eddie.

Eddie was mortally wounded, as a result of his being a hemophiliac. He was taken by ambulance to a local hospital, Elmhurst General in Queens, where the doctors never discovered that he was a hemophiliac. They tried to stop the bleeding, but



through a series of errors they were not able to stop it. He died that morning. He was eventually buried outside of the city where his work went on to achieve great resonance in the community. People like Lady Pink and Lee Quinones know of his work. Kenny Scharf referenced his work. Keith Haring referenced his work as well.

**LS:**

*How old were you?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

I was a kid. I was very young. I was one of the little kids that everybody hung out with. We were like their protégé's; we were known as Tracy's kids. There were always younger kids that used to hang out with them, who were instructed, and, to some extent, would rob for them, break in to things, and things like that. Very much like in the film "Oliver Twist."

**LS:**

*What was happening to you?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

I was a street kid interested in the arts. I was starting to spray paint. I encountered these people that were spray-painting the streets and subways. I started to hang out with them, and go and hit the trains, spray-painting the trains, tagging the city streets.

My Mom was moving from place to place because she couldn't afford housing, so we would only stay in certain places for a certain amount of time, and then she would be served with an eviction notice. The department of sanitation would pack our clothing items, pick up your belongings, pack it into boxes, and take off with it. I remember it clearly since the city storage facilities were located a few blocks from the World Trade Center.

How do you like the oranges?

**LS:**

*They're good, are they from a store or are they off trees?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

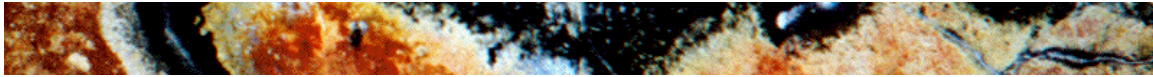
They're off these trees, locally. Here, have some more.

**LS:**

*Did they send you to school?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

In New York I never really spent any time in school. Because the schools were a really harsh environment, and not conducive to learning... I was only interested in the arts. Only later on, after my experiences of being displaced — when I got into a



wrestling program out on The Island (Referring to Long Island, New York, whose urban and suburban communities center around New York City. — Ed.) with people like Paul — did I become influenced by doing well in school, as a value. And that's when I really accelerated, and did very well in school.

**LS:**

*At what age did that transition happen, when you started to ...*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

Junior high school: Finley Junior High School. We were moving in and out of the city, going to different schools, you know. We were getting evicted at one location and relocating back from The Island, back and forth to the city. I encountered the wrestling program at the high school — they had a feeder program at junior high school — and eventually I got in to the program of Lou Giani.

So I had a really great experience of working with the true, early, authentic, street graffiti artists; and then I had the opportunity to train in mixed martial arts, in wrestling. That altered and transcended my perceptions, my personal outlook, my existence, and my very being.

**LS:**

*Can you describe that transition? Were they two incompatible things? Did one eventually displace the other?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

I never saw any differences. They were complementary. To me the opposites reconciled: the arts were very much like wrestling, they were of likeness in form. I never saw them being different at all.

**LS:**

*Do you think that means your view of the arts was odd?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

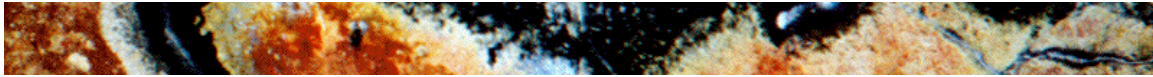
Again, that's a subjective criteria. For me, in the arts, the greater the difference the better.

**LS:**

*Did you recognize it as art, even in the beginning, or was it just self-expression.*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

I think expression in the proper channel is really the important value: expression and individual pursuit. Living with your passions is an important, integral part of self-development.



**LS:**

*Can you remember when you didn't have a passion?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

Never.

**LS:**

*That's interesting. Most people don't have passion.*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

Without passion most people lack direction and purpose.

**LS:**

*So what was it? Was it the mentorship to these graffiti street artists?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

That's right. The mentorship to the individuals, and, mind you, I'm not even discussing the incredible adversarial condition and tragedies that I faced in my upbringing.

**LS:**

*What can you say about the family, if it's relevant?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

There's so much to discuss in terms of sharing my background... Well, the upbringing was about social services, in and out of foster homes. Catholicism played an important part in the upbringing; there were factors in the church that really affected our development. Eviction notices, electricity being turned off, constantly being relocated. A single, first-generation, immigrant mother with kids, a lack of opportunities and forward development, a certain way of being, a lifestyle that was more about not having.

**LS:**

*Were you frightened?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

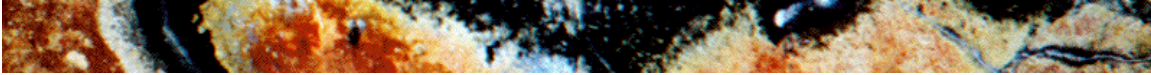
Well, you know you live with your fears. You live with the reality of your circumstances. That was the reality, you know, it was just, "Here it goes again."

**LS:**

*Did you feel your mother was strong?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

She did the best she could, considering her difficulties. It was admirable, but it was a big responsibility trying to transcend the difficult circumstances we faced. She was



pretty much abandoned by her family, so we didn't have relatives. We were basically wards of the state, the welfare system, foster care.

That's why people like this, you know, in the wrestling program Lou Giani created ... it really maximized the potential of the individual. He really helped out the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised, and the outsiders. I was always surrounded by a group of positive individuals who were trying to better their lives, with the understanding that they were outsiders, were marginals; perennial obstinance.

**LS:**

*How do you see this journey that you went through?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

I really appreciate it, and I wouldn't change anything, you know, except for the loss of great people in my life, the loss of individuals to insanity, tragedy and murder. Those are the only things I would change. Abuse: the things that you can affect with some sort of personal change.

But for every time that I look back retrospectively, each of those individuals who provided mentorship in my life directed me to a higher sense of purpose, a greater sense of self towards destiny.

**LS:**

*Can you think of mistakes you made, opportunities you lost?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

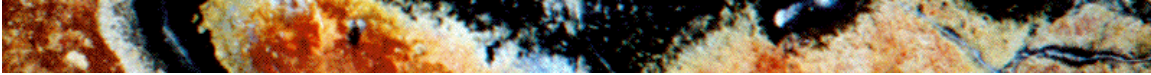
The one thing that I've learned, through all these great role models, is that the most important thing you have is your ability is to change your perceptions — thoughts, feelings — into the positive. If you live in regret, you're not living in the positive, today or tomorrow. So I really don't have any regrets or loss.

Lou Giani's program was very much about working to maximize yourself, your potential self, and I walked away from the program not necessarily achieving great laurels, or great athletic achievement — like a Paul Widerman, who's one of the best people to come out of the program — but I achieved great insight, a great understanding of community, and how role models play an important part in the development of individuals' lives. That insight is something you can never really take away, and that discourse continues with me today, in all of my development, in spite of tragedies. Life teaches us to carry on.

It's very complex, and I'd love to be able to share a little bit about the background in depth as well. Which I'd like to do at some time in the future. A lot to share.

**LS:**

*What can you say about it now?*



**Phantom Street Artist:**

It would take more than the session that we're doing now, in terms of all the stories, from the earliest stories of graffiti, to the difficulties of being placed into foster care at a very early age, having my sisters taken away. One is a ward of the state for schizophrenia. Another was raped and became severely clinically depressed. She stopped talking and she hasn't uttered a word. She hasn't spoken for over 20 years as a result of her tragedy. She actually speaks when there's music; she's able to express herself only in the solace of music.

My work is directed toward having a channel, and those great, formidable mentors. My early life impressions allowed me to find a way to vindicate, or channel my creativity, or my direction, or my commentary.

Working with bands like Rage Against the Machine, doing shows, and having my work become iconoclastic, doing great commentary by projecting images on the cathedral in downtown Los Angeles, in defense of those who have been abused by the clergy. Making use of political texts and statements, and now creating works of art which challenges our society by questioning our culture.

**LS:**

*Do you think that you're still changing, and do you know how you're changing?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

Still changing, but don't know how. I sent you examples of the work which, if you want, we can go back to the room and I can show you more videos, or the album cover that I did about Los Angeles, that was distributed all over the world, and, as a result of it, I'm getting shows.

**LS:**

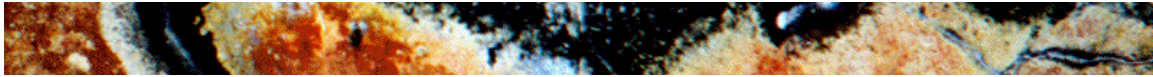
*I'd like to talk more; I want to squeeze out more "juice." Going to visuals is hard to follow, I mean I can, but in terms of making a text. This is a problem I often have with artists and musicians: neither work verbally. In a sense I'm pushing you through a medium that's not your primary one, so there's resistance. I have to keep pushing for stories, for tales: tales of struggle, and transformation, and passage.*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

There was one story where I was working with my friend, my graffiti partner. We went out on the double R's — that's the way the trains were known: by their double letters, but now they've become single letters. We were painting the lay-ups in New York City with a couple of graffiti artists, Slip One, BP9.

We were set up that night. When we came back after we were done painting, we came off the railroad tracks, coming down underneath the elevated train station where we were going to exit, but the cops were waiting for us. We'd been set up.

They each tried to grab onto us, and we basically bolted out of there and ran to the next station. Little did we know the cops had been following us, and they had



already caught one of the taggers where they handcuffed him in the restroom. They were waiting for the rest of his crew to show up.

We got to the next station and they were there as well, so we had to keep running to the next elevated station, getting higher and higher, until we got to the Queensboro Plaza. Are you familiar with that station? It's right over Long Island City and its projects. The elevated stations were really tall, they got really, really tall.

I crawled underneath the platform in the station, and that's where I found a whole city of homeless people who were living with couches, like vagabonds, who were actually surviving underneath these subway platforms. Living there. I waited there for a couple of hours, until about 4 or 5 in the morning and then I got out and caught the next train.

Unfortunately the cops had already been notified of my place and location, and they'd already been to my place. But luckily, in this particular instance, my Mom was getting evicted. We were relocated to Huntington, Long Island, where I joined the wrestling program, with the great people in that program — like Gadson, Picozzi, Gafney, and Paul Widerman — developed by Lou Giani.

Through these role models, like Paul and Lou, I realized that I could maximize my potential and really do well in school, and in my education. When I finally got out of high school I had a 3.46 GPA, and I got an academic scholarship to go to one of the Cal State universities, where I inevitably got a degree.

**LS:**

*It sounds like that was a surprise to you.*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

I needed role models. I needed mentors to provide guidance. I didn't have to be the angry chump, you know? I could channel that anger through the arts, and through martial arts. It's directed in a manner where it affects: this Phantom Shadow figure — and that's who I'm being interviewed as, as the Phantom Street Artist — the anonymity represents everyone, it's The Everyman.

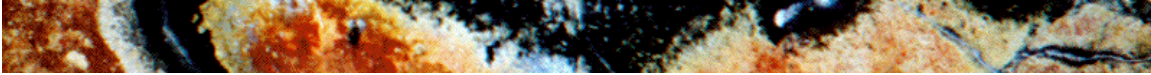
**LS:**

*Is this image you, or is it your alter-you?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

The image is me, the image is potential, in a world of images, in the world of ourselves, in the world of projected images, the image is everyone, and it's an archetype in the world of appearance. The shadow figure that comes in and spray paints images on the streets, with social commentary and messages. Here, I'll read it to you:

"I am the Street Phantom; the Street Phantom is the voice of our generation. It is everyone, it is Everyman, and it is the spirit of our time... The Street Phantom uses urban walls as a canvas for commentaries on political and social expression. The



Street Phantom is the spokesperson of our time, effecting change through mobilizing individual activism. The artist coins political phrases that reach out to our generation in need of a voice and representation. The elusive street artist comments on our condition by voicing thoughts of a personal, intimate nature that transcends cultural prejudice.”

Coming out of the difficult background that we came out of — very difficult to talk about — like we’re talking about adversarial situations. It sometimes really affects people, destroys people, some never make it out of those conditions.

**LS:**

*Some say that there’s a natural inclination for people to grow and learn, and they’ll find the direction they need in whatever environment they find themselves. Some people learn quicker than others. Some people are lucky. But how does a kid know?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

The support system is really important. The support system wasn’t there for me as a youth, which is why I searched for mentors, and was lucky enough to find them. I still use the mentorship process today.

**LS:**

*I’ve looked for mentors too, but generally I have not found them. I do like older people. I sense that a key to finding mentors lies in finding something to respect, and then you can find people who have that thing.*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

Yeah, there’s a meeting ground. And maybe that’s it, it’s the respectability that develops, that opens the door to teachers, it begins the initiation process whether they’re old or young. Don’t you think?

**LS:**

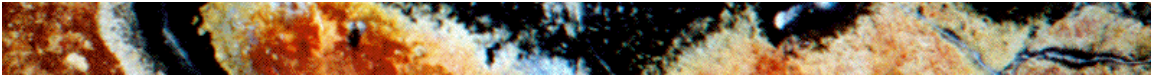
*Yeah. My son goes to a school that is laudable in not manipulating at all, but they also don’t provide mentors. They feel that kids don’t need them. Part of this project, in a sense, is to argue that they do.*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

My life is a living testimonial. The mentorship process has greatly influenced my life. It provided a respite, a salvation from a broken home that could not offer role models, in a world of contingent values. The relationship with those mentors provided a model for growth and transformation.

**LS:**

*A lot of young and angry people strike out against whomever is near them. Why didn’t you strike out against those people? How did you recognize them as allies?*



**Phantom Street Artist:**

I didn't strike out against those individuals because, I think if you really look at it, any kind of adversarial condition has to have an initiation process. Certain initiates are called into that process, and that's when you have to have respectability, and you have to work within a guideline, being chosen as initiates to that development.

**LS:**

*Did the people that you worked with know this?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

Did they know? No, I don't even think they knew they were creating... does Paul or Lou talk about the initiates, or the initiation? Mysticism, shamanism, those esoteric concepts are very tangible forms in my life today.

I found people that were passionate. I was lucky.

**LS:**

*Did you find them, or did they find you? You must have put your hand up, in a sense, saying, "I'll listen," or "I am listening," and they were clever enough to recognize that. Most people don't. Most people are too busy with their program: constructive, destructive, obedient, disobedient, whatever.*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

I was lucky. When you got into the wrestling program Lou would have people write — he very much pushed self-development — he would have people write about what they thought, what they wanted from the program, what they thought about being in the program. He really got you to reflect and think about it.

**LS:**

*What could you say to kids who haven't yet found mentors?*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

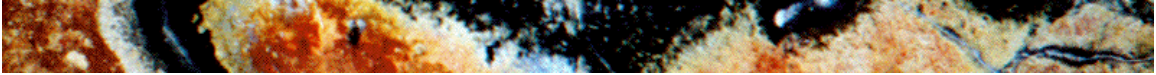
Look for mentors; it's a very simple learning process. Look for the mentors. Channel, find purpose, and look for your destiny. Search for the moment when opportunity will knock on your door. Try to find your place in the world, and make your mark in that world either through accomplishments or through your voice. This gives things value. This is value.

**LS:**

*So does that mean that you might tell people, "If you can't find a way to transform yourself, then look to culture and find your reflection in it?"*

**Phantom Street Artist:**

It's always a question of where we place ourselves, how we're part of the fabric, how we mirror ourselves into culture and society. A great philosopher talked about



being engaged in, or becoming part of a cultural discourse. You just hold up a mirror and reflect the culture of the time.

The shamans would go in to the caverns of the sick, the lost, and the tragic, where there was a loss of self, a loss of identity. The shamans would carry mirrors around their necks that would provide a reflection, so that people would have a sense of connection, an identification with their own projection.

And the struggle continues. To keep working towards that, day by day. Allow life to be the fabric of a giant, potential canvas: life as theater, to cast ourselves in new roles, to write new stories for ourselves.