

40 YEARS
KALDOR PUBLIC
ART PROJECTS

2004
BARRY
McGEE



2004 BARRY McGEE

PROJECT

The stars were aligned...

28 October – 5 December 2004

Metropolitan Meat Market, Melbourne

Water wall mural

28 October – 5 December 2004

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Compelling art to me is a name carved into a tree. Sometimes a rock soaring through a plate of glass can be the most beautiful, compelling work of art I have ever seen.

Barry McGee in Germano Celant, *Barry McGee*, Fondazione Prada, Milan 2002

BARRY McGEE

View of **The stars were aligned...** 2004
at the Metropolitan Meat Market in Melbourne

Photo: Garry Sommerfeld
Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects



2004 BARRY McGEE

In the years since Basquiat's death, the boundaries between street art and gallery art have largely been restored, with predictable results: the New York scene is lagging behind European competitors. What makes McGee's work so invigorating is that it draws from within and beyond the parameters of American art almost indiscriminately. In this respect, he's a very political artist, but not a polemical one. By keeping it real, he also makes it new.

Richard Goldstein, 'The new real thing: Barry McGee throws up in Soho', *Village Voice*, 6 April 1999

INTRODUCTION

Along the lines established by the likes of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, San Francisco-based Barry McGee has emerged from being an outdoor wild-style graffiti artist called Twist to become an indoor artspace artist of challenging installations in museums and galleries around the globe – including his 2003 Kaldor project on the site of the former Metropolitan Meat Market in Melbourne. But he still maintains the balance between the powerful social impulses of the street and the milder-mannered art world. His monumental installations are multilayered graveyards of visual and aural dissonance, which include piles of wrecked trucks and cars on their sides; psychedelic wallpaper; empty flasks of booze painted with empty-eyed men; banks of video monitors; and an assortment of drawings, sculptures, metal press-plates and stripped-back spray-cans. The mood is derelict and apocalyptic.

ARTIST

Barry McGee

born 1966 in San Francisco, California, USA
lives and works in San Francisco

Barry McGee, aka Twist, grew up in a multiracial working-class family in San Francisco. Everyone drew, especially his father, who made a living customising cars. McGee did his first tag in 1985, and got his name Twist from the title of a scooter magazine. He won a scholarship to the San Francisco Art Institute, graduating in painting and printmaking, and quickly jumped from decorating discos to showing in alternative spaces and then to creating installations at museums such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum of Art in Los Angeles and in galleries in downtown Soho and beyond. It was a non-profit gallery called The Luggage Store that first asked him to do something indoors, and other opportunities spread from there. But he did work as a printer in a letterpress shop as a back-up plan.

One significant fellowship award took McGee to Brazil where he noted that artworks displayed in churches were presented in a cluster. He absorbed this kind of display in his subsequent work. In 2001, his work featured in the Venice Biennale. In 2006, he courted controversy with a design he did for Adidas. McGee painted his Ray Fong caricature of an Asian boy on a limited-edition sneaker; some Asian-American groups thought this racist and the hullabaloo hit the international media. A mass email pointed out that McGee was half-Chinese American, and the image depicted the artist as a young boy. McGee remained silent as he rarely grants interviews.

Unlike New York, where so much of graffiti was kickstarted, San Francisco is a quieter place to make art – as it has been since the days of the beat poets – allowing McGee to move more easily from street-low to the white-cube-high and back again. While achieving success in the established art scene and selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars, McGee continues

to paint his primitivistic cartoons of down-and-outs on buildings and trains as well as canvases.

The street artist, though illegal, gathers 'respect' along the grapevine, rather than through the channels of PR and marketing that operate in the commercial art world, and though Twist rarely gets painted over by other artists, the work can get buffed over by squads of city cleaners. He has been caught and has done eight hours of community time cleaning up New York parks.

Now that his signature face is hip, he's stopped drawing it on the street.

I'm back to straight tagging. It gets the job done and it always aggravates. I'm interested in that.

Barry McGee in Andrew Jeffrey Wright, 'Barry McGee; TWIST' in *Swindle*, no 14, 2007

PROJECT

In Australia for his Kaldor project in 2004, Barry McGee chose the site of the old Metropolitan Meat Market in North Melbourne for *The stars were aligned...*

He transformed the space into an apocalyptic circus where a mix of autobiography, political comment, urban overload and total anarchy battle for supremacy. His over-the-top audiovisual installation was the kind of thing your average viewer might cross the street to avoid: 11 oddly-angled defunct trucks and vans piled on top of each other with their doors flung open, headlights flashing and wheels still turning; banks of monitors screening op-art harlequin shapes and surveillance camera footage of street gangs like dim transmissions from some deep-ocean diving bell. The walls lined with painted boards and ad-hoc accumulations of totemic objects. Writhing mechanised mannequins poised to graffiti mirrors and booze bottles painted with McGee's abject outcasts completed this image of the underside of contemporary consumer culture.

At the National Gallery of Victoria across town, McGee painted a mural over the glass waterwall at the front of the building, which served as a kind of alternative billboard for the event.

WORLD EVENTS: 2004

- _ Athens hosts the Olympic Games
- _ Boxing Day tsunami devastates Asia
- _ Tasmanian-born Mary Donaldson weds Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark
- _ Term 'podcasting' coined for downloading a program as a digital file
- _ Social networking website Facebook takes off
- _ Wi-fi cellphones, or internet phones, introduced
- _ Bomb outside the Australian embassy in Indonesia kills 11 people and injures up to 100
- _ Riots break out in the Sydney suburb of Redfern over the death of an Aboriginal teenager
- _ Fire in the Momart storage warehouse in London destroys works by Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst and others
- _ Art Gallery of NSW establishes the biennial Anne Landa Award for video and new media arts
- _ Biennale of Sydney, *On reason and emotion*, curator Isabel Carlos
- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects listed on Australia's Register of Cultural Institutions
- _ **14th Kaldor project:** Barry McGee's *The stars were aligned...* is installed in Melbourne's Metropolitan Meat Market along with *Water wall mural* at the National Gallery of Victoria

THEME

Graffiti

Graffiti has been around since Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Generally it means any kind of public mark, writing or sign. Today, the medium and materials most commonly used are spray paint and fibre-tip markers.

Graffiti, rap and breakdancing exploded from New York's South Bronx, Brooklyn, Brownsville and Lower East Side in the early 1980s, and spread to the furthest corners of the world. The creative ruses and the poaching activities of the street kids were felt and absorbed by many artists, and continue to be – in the teeth of much civic opposition. The streets, with their danger and the nightly roll of the dice, remained as selfish as an empty stomach in a consumer society. Carrying Uniwide 700 markers, with their long-lasting fat-cap wide-spray Krylon paint, aerosol guerrillas in coyote fur-lined hoods 'bomb' ten-carriage trains, top to bottom with the windows up. The writers' message in jungle greens, hot pinks and Spanish browns would then be catapulted beyond the village or borough and right across town.

'We play chess with the subway lights and trains. You don't know where the entrance is, you don't know where the exit is, you don't know when the floor is gonna drop ... You're not going to concentrate or manipulate nothing.'

Rammellzee: (see his website www.gothicfuturism.com)

This evokes the painters by torchlight at the hidden rockface of Lascaux, France, some 19 000 years ago. What are those bears with wolves' heads and reindeers with webbed feet? Ways of conquering fear? Ways of making human beings more fertile? Who knows?

In the early 1980s, artists with tags like Daze, Lee, Dondi and Futura were beginning to evolve the popular 'bubble' lettering, by changing the structural mechanisms of their letters, incorporating arrows, extension bars, corner launcher extenders, whip launchers, star launchers.

Some graffiti artists like Rammellzee delved into calligraphic history and re-interpreted the alphabet, seeing language as 'military function formations, conceived from territories and lands'. He understood the talismanic power of letters rooted in the pictogram, the hieroglyph, the head of an ox that became an A, a house, a shelter-sign: see www.gothicfuturism.com/rammellzee/01.html.

To keep the graffiti writers off, the NYC Transit Authority spent millions on special buffers and paint solvents and plastic finish in corporate grey – more money than the government assigned to the National Endowment of the Arts. The kids call the faded cars 'ghosts' or 'flashbacks' or 'legends' and then get with the ephemerality by inventing a 'throw up' style.

But by the mid 1980s, the form had moved from the street to the art world. A sub-culture far removed from the level-as-a-desktop cool of much contemporary art at the time, with its lifeless postmodern spaces, graffiti looked like the cultural enemy of all the 'non-spaces' of shopping malls and airport lounges, of the airless corporate lobbies like necropolitan sets where the smart money makes deals, or the colourless brick motel rooms up and down our coasts. It also represented a way for graffiti writers to parlay street cred into an art career.

Formerly spraycan bandit SAMO (for 'same old shit'), Jean-Michel Basquiat was the first Afro-American artist to make it as an international art star. Working aboveground, he initiated new-wave graffiti with oblique messages, combining Caribbean voodoo with inner-city exoticism on large canvases. Images of skulls and mask-like heads with snarling, biting, chewing teeth. Names like Papa Doc and Idi Amin evoked 'bad nigger' vibes. Cryptic phrases included 'invent enemies' and 'prfct'.

Another well-known graffiti artist from the era was Keith Haring. A white boy from Pennsylvania, with his famous radioactive baby icon, he made crisp cover-the-earth images that seemed to combine Pac Man and caveman. Haring brought pop art and graffiti to the commercial mainstream.

While many 'writers' find their niche in commercial design, very few since Haring and Basquiat make it into the white art world and know what it takes to achieve a one-person show. Born in Bristol, England, Banksy is probably the most famous street artist today, whose stencil works appear on walls around the world. He has said: 'People look at an oil painting and admire the use of brushstrokes to convey meaning. People look at a graffiti painting and admire the use of a drainpipe to gain access.'

After 25 years of active repression, graffiti has not only endured but evolved into an international movement with thousands of devotees. Does including graffiti in the cultural canon shatter the presumption of criminality that has kept it apart from the mainstream? And does it broach the rarely asked question of whether our standard for judging art is founded on truth and beauty or on class and caste?

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

- **Christina Fernandez** (USA, b1965)

Lavanderia #1 2002 (printed 2009)

type C photograph; 76.2 x 101.8 cm (image)

Gift of Geoff and Vicki Ainsworth, 2009 206.2009

- **Philip Guston** (USA, b1913 d1980)

East Tenth 1977

oil on canvas; 203.2 x 255.3 cm (stretcher)

Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation purchase 1988 39.1988

- **Juan Davila** (Chile; Australia, b1946)

Mexicanismo 1990

oil and collage on canvas; 280 x 434 cm

Purchased with assistance from the Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1992 299.1992

- **Cy Twombly** (USA; Italy, b1928)

Three studies from the Temeraire 1998–99

triptych: oil on canvas; 256.8 x 206 x 5.6 cm; 264.2 x 206 x 5.6 cm; 263.6 x 198.8 x 5.6 cm (frame)

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SELECTED REFERENCES

- _ Banksy, *Wall and piece*, Random House, UK 2007
- _ Germano Celant, *Barry McGee*, Fondazione Prada, Milan 2002
- _ Sophie Forbat (ed), *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney 2009
- _ Aaron Rose & Christian Strike, *Beautiful losers: contemporary art and street culture*, DAP/Iconoclast, Chicago 2005
- _ Andrew Jeffrey Wright, 'Barry McGee; TWIST' in *Swindle*, no 14, 2007

Websites

- _ Barry McGee, Deitch Projects
www.deitch.com/artists/sub.php?artistId=1
- _ Barry McGee, Gallery Paule Anglim
www.gallerypauleanglim.com/Gallery_Paule_Anglim/Barry_McGee.html
- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects
www.kaldorartprojects.org.au
- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Investigate McGee's background and outline the experiences, skills and training that have contributed to his art practice as evidenced in his 2004 Kaldor project. Identify examples of this in *The stars were aligned...* and *Water wall mural*.

McGee has incorporated a wide range of materials and media practices into his work. Identify as many as you can. Would you consider them to be derived from street, commercial or fine art traditions? Assess McGee's success at integrating these disparate techniques into one unified whole. Propose how you would categorise his practice: sculpture, drawing, painting, installation or something else all together.

Imagine the process of developing, composing and displaying *The stars were aligned...* List the steps one by one. Where might McGee have sourced his materials from? In what ways could this work be seen as a readymade in the traditions of Marcel Duchamp? Investigate the idea of an artwork being both the object and subject simultaneously. How has McGee done this? Discuss the challenges for the artist, Kaldor projects and the audience that McGee's work presents.

Discuss the mood of McGee's *The stars were aligned...* Outline some terms you would use to describe it. If someone stumbled across this work and did not know it was an art project, what associations might they make? Do you think McGee is conscious of these? How does such a work confront not just an audience but the notion of what art can be or is? Consider the context and site for each of the two works in McGee's Kaldor project. Are they simply sites for the presentation of the artwork or would you consider them as important an element of the artwork as its materials?

Investigate the street culture that developed in New York in the early 1980s. Outline the creative forms that it spawned. Discuss the impact they had on wider popular culture and how they infiltrated the art world. Are these forms still vibrant and in full effect today? Discuss New York as a hotbed of creative expression at this time. Research what life in the city was like then. In your opinion, why was it the perfect incubator for such forms of expression by a new generation?

Research the breakthrough work of Jean-Michel Basquait and Keith Haring. Locate examples of their work. Examine how they translated their street practice into a form that the art world could embrace and assimilate. Was it always a comfortable fit? Should it be? Discuss the issues that new artforms or avant-garde practices face when they are embraced by the mainstream. Investigate how McGee is attempting to balance his street practice with the fine art world.

While graffiti has, for many people, very specific connotations of urban decay and criminality, it actually has a long history beyond this stereotype. Research this history and develop a timeline of how its practice has developed. Create a dictionary of graffiti symbology and style. Can its evolution be seen over time? It was suggested in the thematic essay that more money has been spent by the New York City Transit Authority to combat graffiti than has been spent on grants for artists. Examine how the criminal aspect of graffiti has, on the one hand, elevated its status as an 'on-the-edge' artform while devaluing it in the so-called 'fine art' system. Investigate the issue of breaking boundaries, definitions and the law in the history of art. Why does graffiti still sit on the outside?

Discuss the merits of graffiti as an artform: is it or is it not art? Examine why, despite ongoing attempts to discredit or repress it, it continues to evolve, as an artform and in popularity and acceptance. Does the infiltration of street-art practices question 'whether our standard for judging art is founded on truth and beauty or class and caste', as the thematic essay says? Outline your position on this statement.

Like most contemporary artists, McGee effortlessly moves between low and high artforms. Investigate how he keeps his practice sharp and informed, as well as credible in both arenas. Discuss how and why contemporary art practice can reference high and low artforms and be presented within both contexts.

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