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National College of Art & Design

Faculty of Design

Department of Visual Communication

Graffiti, Hip-Hop & the City

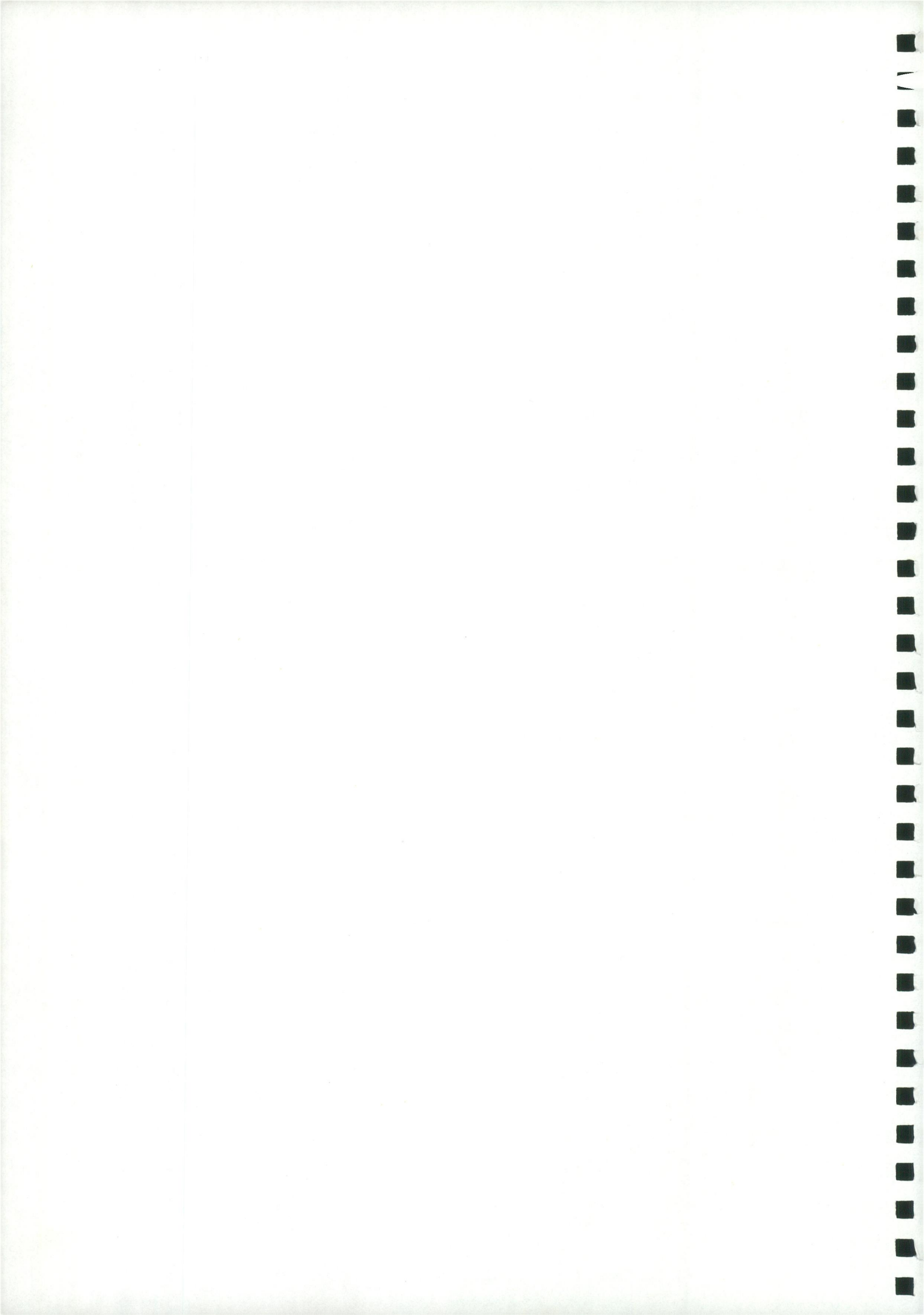
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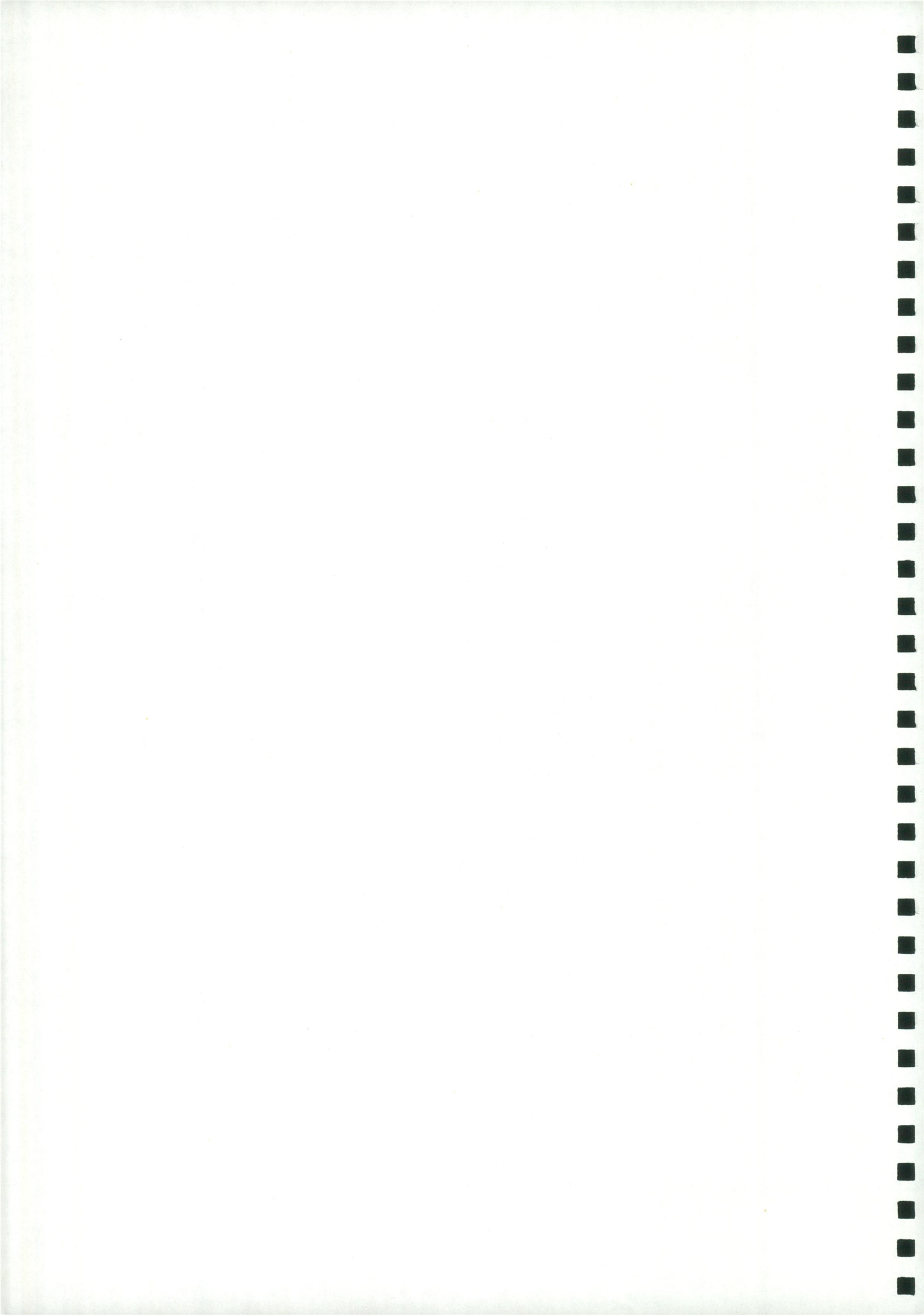
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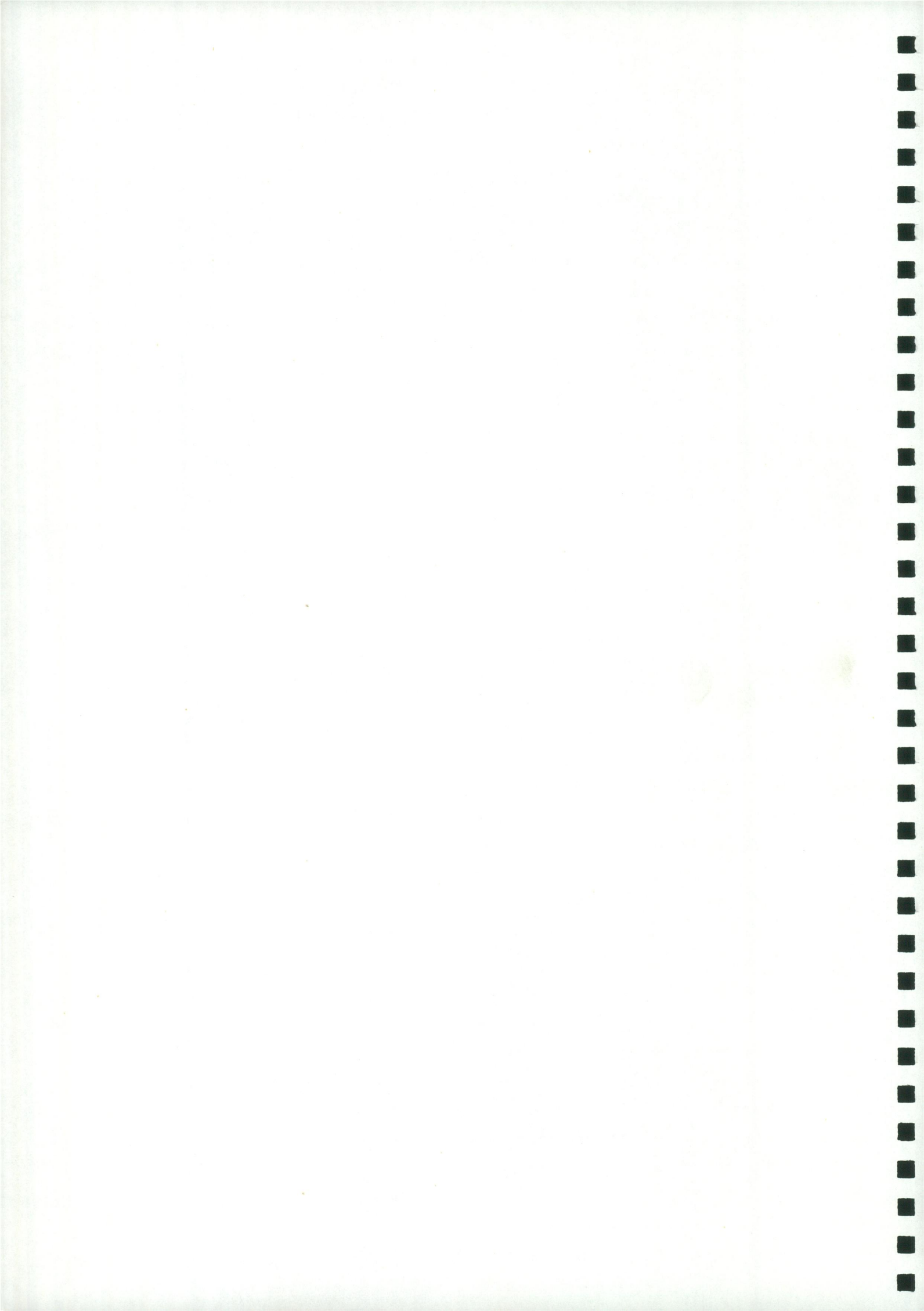
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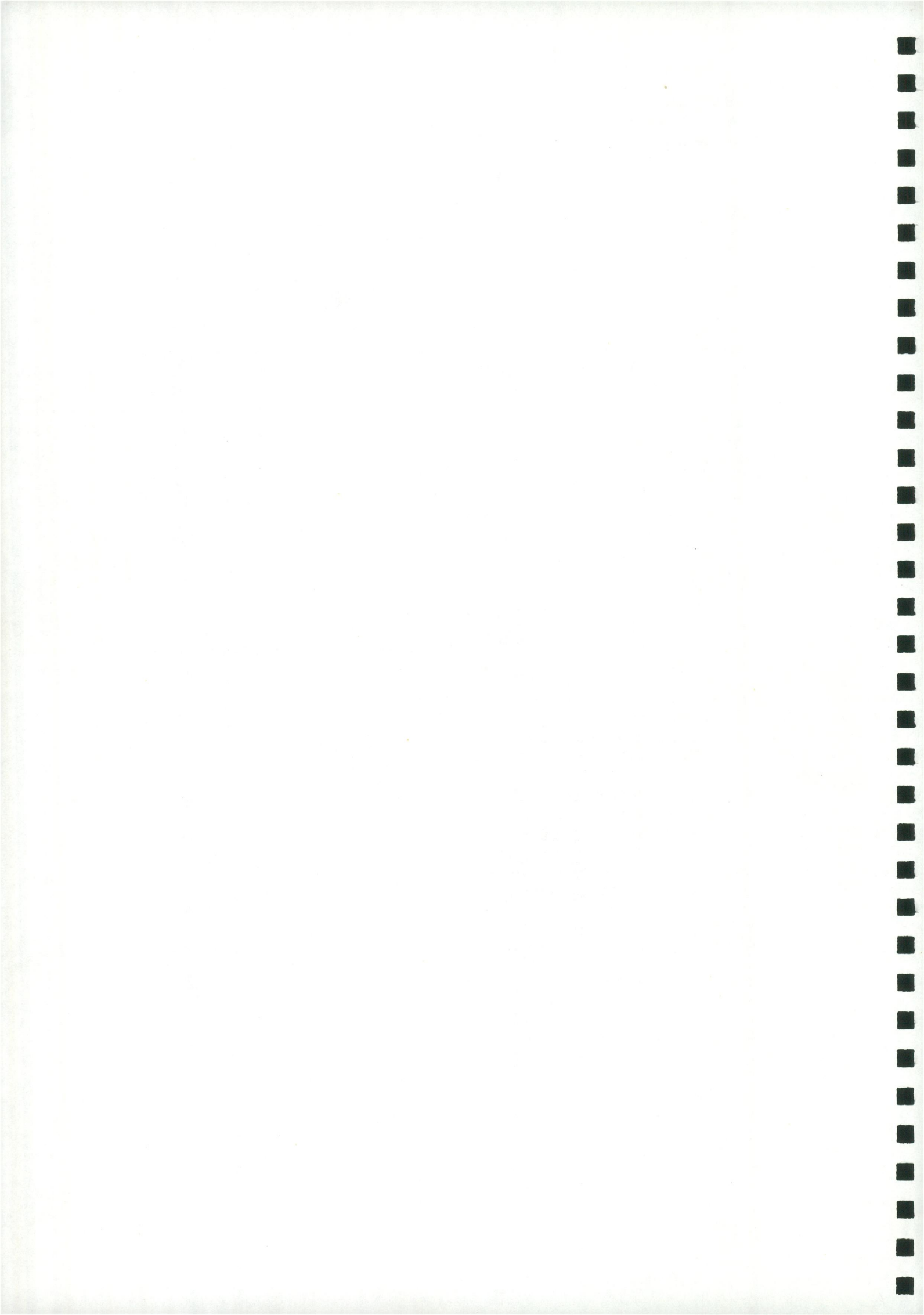
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Graffiti has been around since the beginning of civilisation. But over the last twenty years, there has been an explosion of a new type of graffiti in the cities of the western world. This type of graffiti is quite different from its predecessor. "Graffiti" comes from the Italian *graffiare*, which means to scratch. It has been used over the ages to describe different sorts of wall writings. Usually it took the form of political, sexual, humorous or self-identifying messages, which are marked onto walls. Nowadays the word is used to describe the sprayed pieces of work, that began on the subway of New York city. I will be working with the latter definition.

I would like to clarify the difference between these two types of graffiti. The historical form was word based. It communicated something. It was anonymous and unique. The new type of graffiti had different intentions. Rather than being word based, it was letter based. There was no attempt to communicate through the written word. It relied on a signature, which would take on many different forms. They would make this mark repetitively, in various different forms. This was a way of asserting your identity, of becoming famous. It quickly became popular and competitive. It had a tendency toward this.

This new form of graffiti began in New York in the late 1960's. It is now a feature of every city of the western world. From one city to the world is quite a fantastic growth rate. It also reflects its innate popularity in other cities. It is culturally non-specific, it belongs to the culture of the city.

In my thesis I shall give an overview of graffiti, looking at its history and position today. It is an urban art form executed by youngsters. The three elements that I want to investigate are:

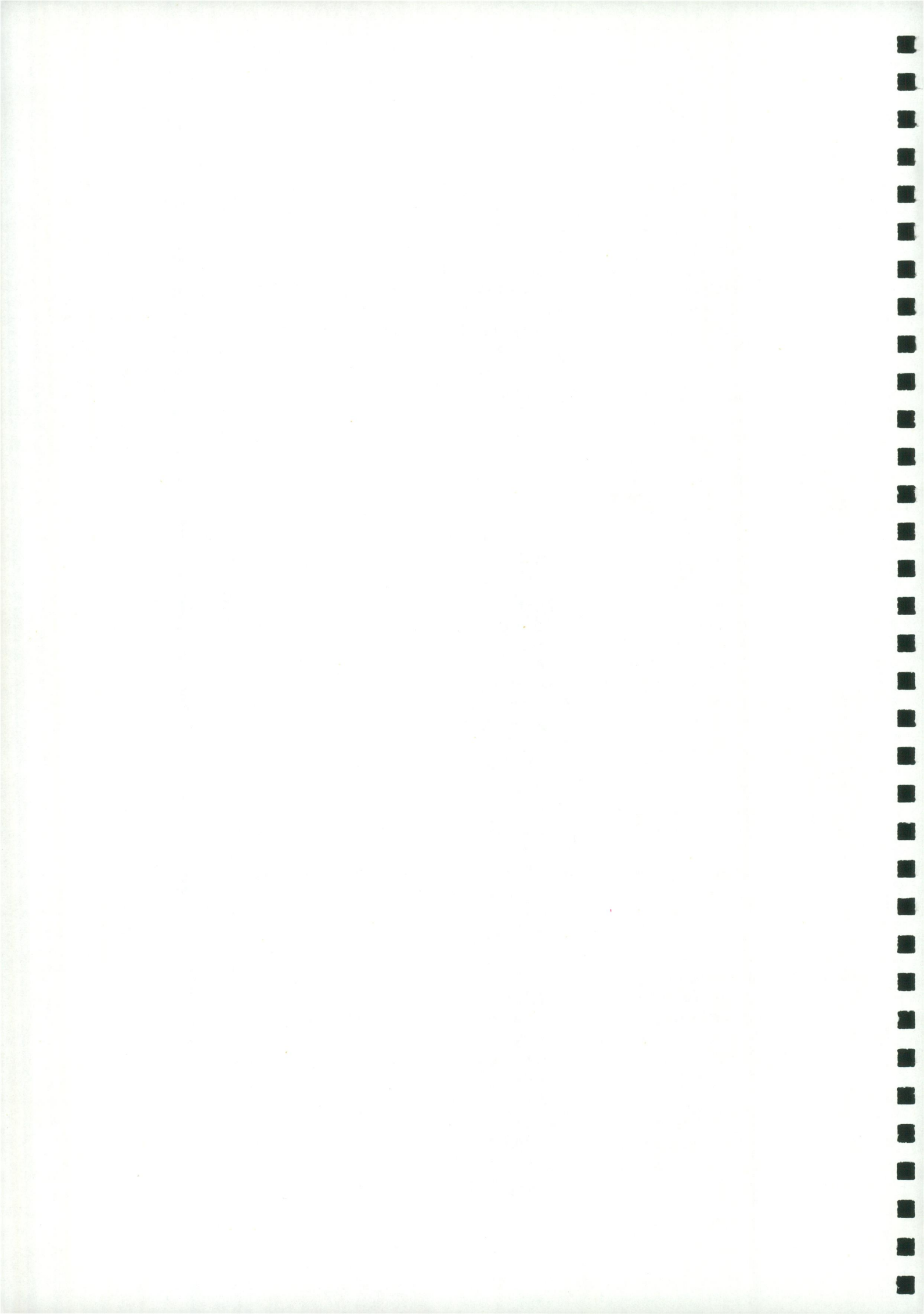
1. The history of youth culture and its evolution.
2. The effect of commercial & fine art on graffiti's evolution. How graffiti evolved its own style & reference points.
3. The shifting attitudes & awareness of ethnic minorities.

These three elements led to graffiti's inception, in New York. To trace these elements, I begin in the 1950's. Although most of my investigations are applicable to all American pop culture, I am focusing in on the location of New York. This is the city where graffiti began, the elements gelled here. They can be clearly identified.

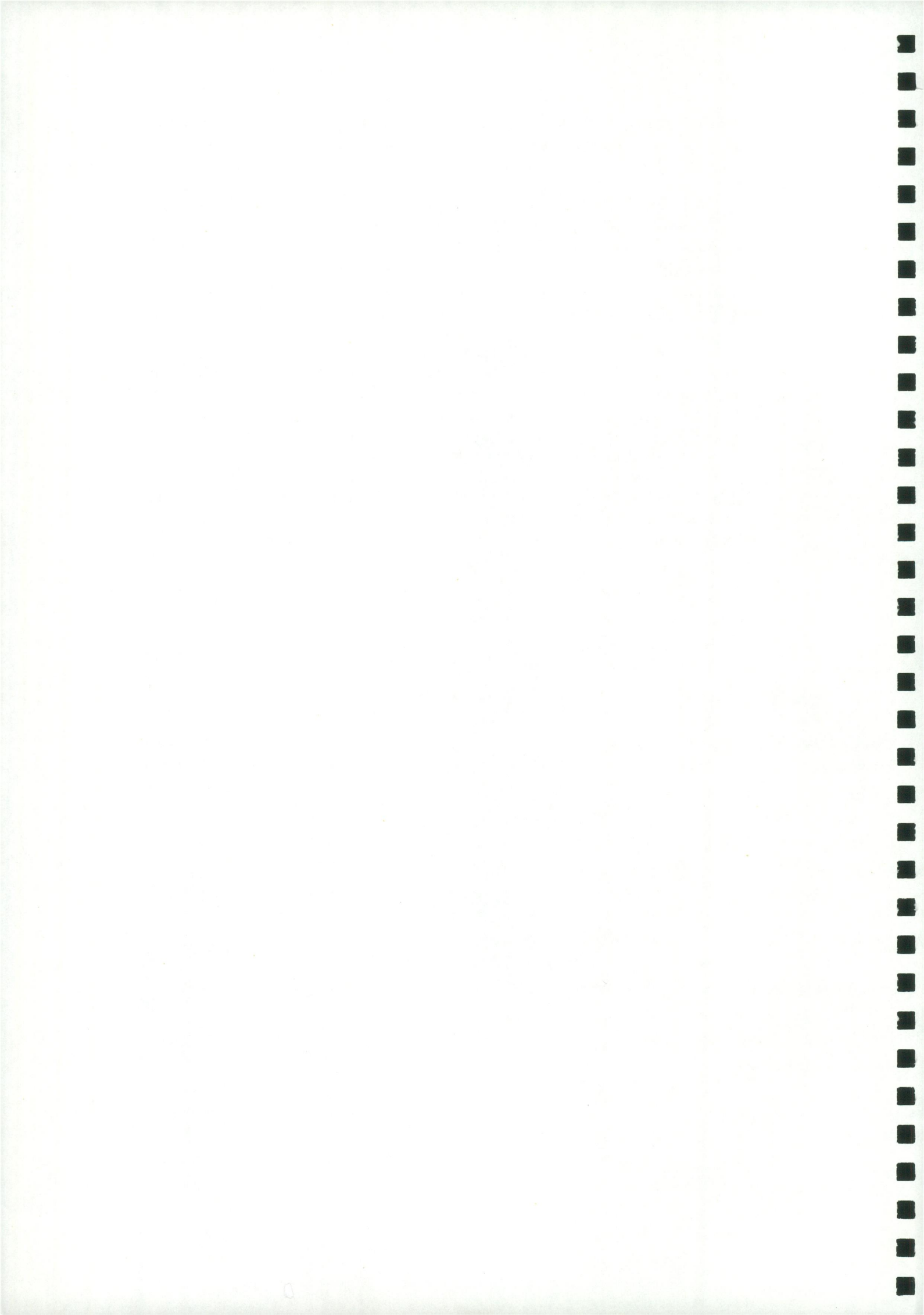
My research work for this thesis has mainly come from books, photographs & magazines. I did some groundwork in Dublin, but there is by no means enough material to give a comprehensive idea of how graffiti effects the city. All the literature I have gathered, is no substitute for the impression graffiti has if part of your environment. They are giant murals advertising an invisible culture. They are a presence in the city, a constant dialogue. Even if you don't pay attention to it, it has a very strong effect on the vernacular of city life.

The thesis shall work in a chronological order. I begin in the 1950's, looking at the three elements outlined earlier. By the 1970's, once graffiti was established, I shall investigate how the style developed. I finish up looking at the state of graffiti today & its future. Let me give a clear definition of graffiti. It is a type of wall art that has become prominent, over the last 20 years, in most cities in the western world. It is rendered by the spraycan & it is performed by people aged on average of 15-25 years. It began in New York in the late 1960's & then spread throughout the world. Graffiti is illegal.

I am interested in how the phenomenon spread to all other cities in the western world & how different societies received it.



I first became involved with graffiti, while visiting other countries. I had time to appreciate it in San Francisco and Paris. There were many areas in Paris that were covered in graffiti. Through every turn there would be a "tag" & if you looked a little harder you could stumble on some more colourful work. These areas made an impression on me. On returning to Dublin, I set about looking for bits & pieces. I discovered some work out on the East wall (fig. 1) & beside Croke Park. I also spotted some half attempts out on the D.A.R.T. tracks. Some of this work is quite well done, but it is very old & weather beaten. One gets the feeling that the graffiti in Dublin is performed by isolated individuals. There is no sense of unity, behind the graffiti in Dublin. No attempt to communicate. At the moment we have only little pockets of activity in various suburbs. I think there two reasons for this. Firstly, there is no population base for it. There are no established minority groups, who could identify with it. There is no climate for graffiti in Dublin. The population are very against it. One writer based in Dublin told me of a time when, he & an accomplice broke into Pearse St. station, to paint a "piece" on the line. After painting for only 15 minutes or so, a patrol car of Gardai picked them up, brought them down to the police station & physically assaulted them. The Gardai released them & apologised for their treatment in custody, explaining that at the time there were threats from the I.N.L.A. of bombing the city! It was quite clear that the Gardai knew what the writers were up to. They just wanted to give these writers a hard time. The physical arm of the law reflecting Irish society's view on the subject.



Chapter One The Fifties

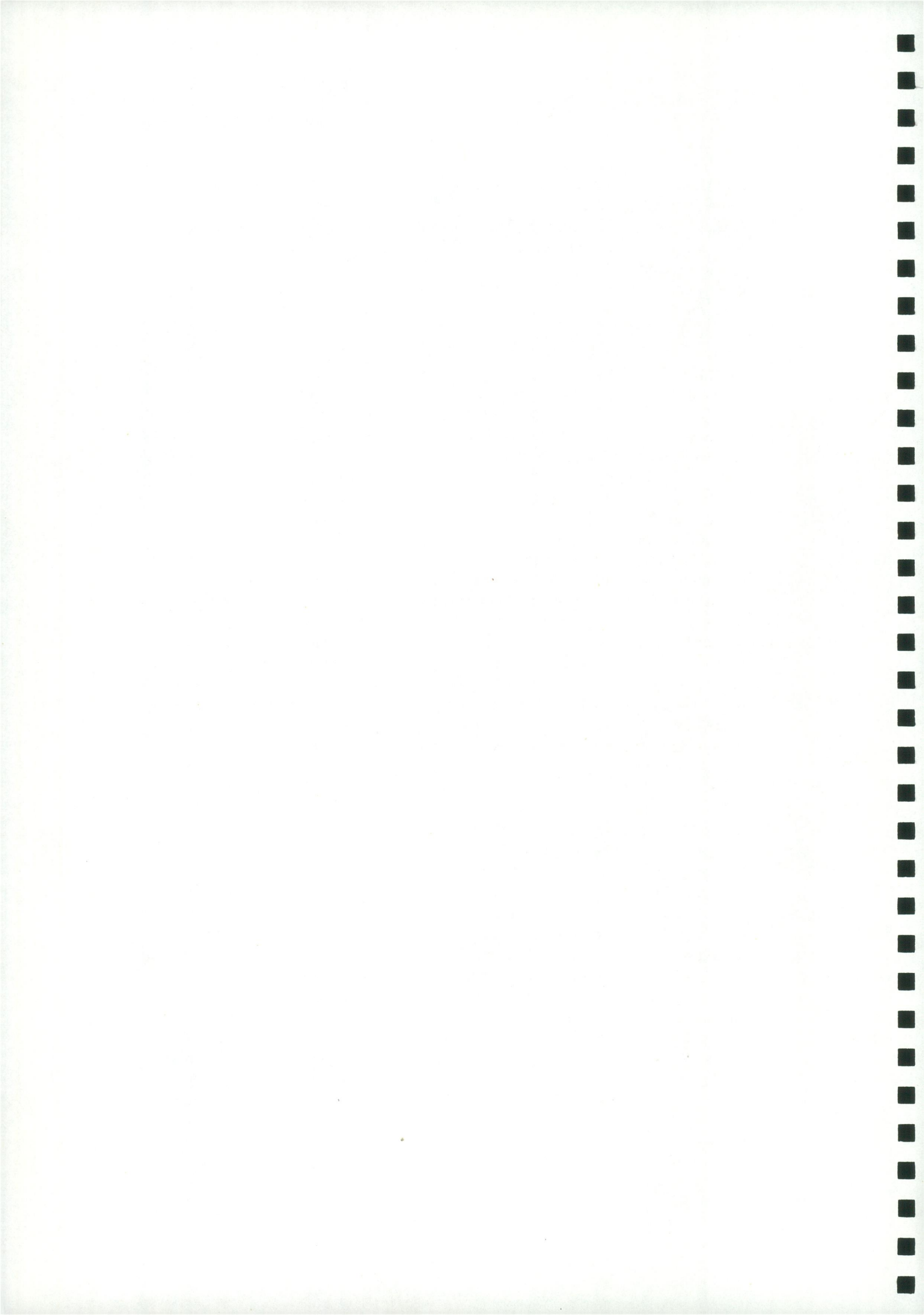
I would like to begin with Rock'n'Roll & the birth of youth culture. Rock'n'Roll turned the popular music of the time on its head. This was because it was the first form of music that was geared for a certain age group. This age group was the teenager. It was recognised as a new lucrative market by the music industry, who had just introduced the long playing record in 1948. In the fifties, the progress through life was changing. The economy was enjoying new prosperity. The war was over, the factories were moving again. Teenagers were getting jobs. They had more time in between school & settling down. With this free time & money, teenagers began to indulge in consumption. They were searching for an identity. So they got stars, like Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley & Bill Haley and the Comets. People who they could identify with, singing songs about what they wanted to hear about.

The teenager became more than an age group in the mind. It was a new identity based on consumption. It rebelled against the established flow of maturity, being able with their new economic viability, to express the angst & confusion that comes with puberty. The teenager was a rebel & a delinquent. Rock'n'Roll was the new voice of the teenager in the 1950's. It soon became their own music, their own heroes & their own fashion. A new branch of expression was formed. Rock'n'Roll spread throughout the western world, through the medium of recorded music. The media of the day feared the consequences of allowing expression to, young people with adult money, but without adult conditions. e.g.: career, marriage, mortgage etc.. This was a reflex reaction. Pop music was set in motion. The pop world revolved around the teenager as they were the consumer.

Rock'n'Roll was the launch pad for youth culture. Today it is diverse. It allowed for new forms of expression to a previously silent generation. Before rock'n'roll, there was Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire & Frank Sinatra. They catered for all the family & had no particular relevance to the youngsters. The heroes for the children of the family, were sport stars, who excelled at complying to a set of rules. I think the new accessibility of recorded music was the incentive to produce a new music.

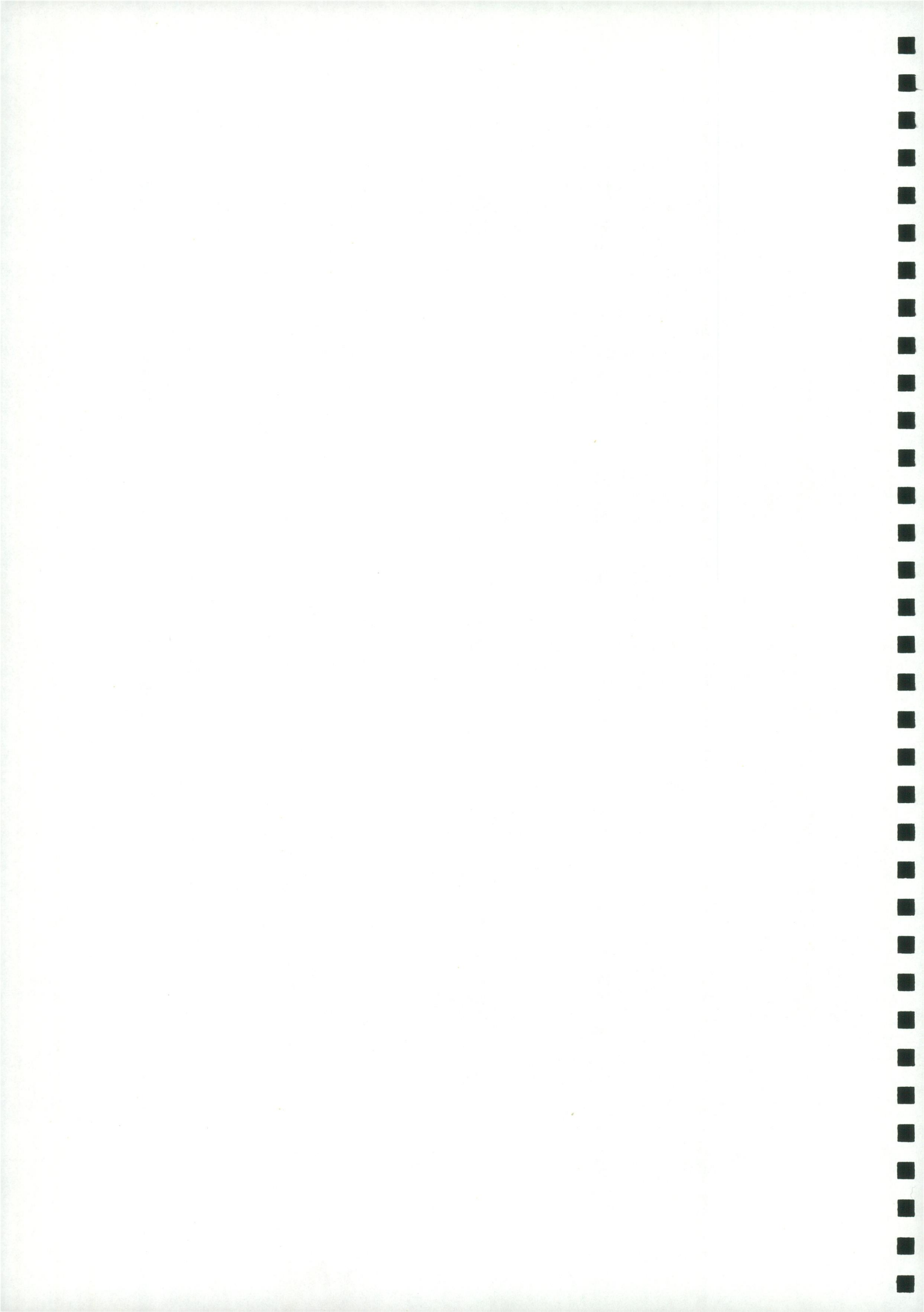
There is many different genres vying for young peoples money. Bands for 12-16 year olds, Intelligent rock bands for 18-25 year olds. Dance music also has many different categories. hardcore, happy house, ambient, jungle, teeny techno. These categories don't hold much meaning in themselves. It indicates the eternal evolution of musical categories, manufactured for popular consumption. Nowadays the pop age span is between 12-40. All this spawning from Rock'n'Roll & the rise of the teenager. The categories of the moment hold the consumer allure of indefinability.

Since the 1950's there has been a change in attitude. There has been a growing sense of urban awareness. Before the 1950's, the population were still governed by white ex-colonial mores. The customs & modes of behaviour were rural, there was neighbourliness, that wasn't relevant to city life. It didn't cater for the intensity of this life & the cultural mix that made up New York. There came a shift in focus. Old boogie woogie jazz moved into the cities & turned into bebop modern jazz. Salsa which is rooted in Cuban folk music, enjoyed its most dynamic period in New York in the 1950's . Some of salsa's greatest stars came out of this time. Stars such as Tito Puente, Eddy Palmieri & Ray Barretto. In 1958, Leon Bernstein's "West Side Story", hit Broadway, becoming one of the most successful musicals ever. It was set amongst the Spanish & negro gangs in Harlem. These cultural events helped change the mores of the city. It helped express the new awareness of the city. There was an easier flow of interests, jazz & salsa were becoming more popular outside their eth-



nic base. There was more aggression in city living as well. Bernstein's 'West side Story', was a new brand of films & musical, that portrayed more realistically the struggle of the streets.

Marketing was born in the 1950's. It was a new requirement of the post war consumer boom. It told the manufacturers where there was a need for this or that product. But necessity was a front, it began to tell manufacturer's where there was a market for this or that product. Items of consumption came to the masses. Marketing also influenced the advertising & design world. It would give feedback to how popular this type of ad was or that type of ad etc.. It began to supply designers with particular audiences who they had to reach. Thus imagery diversified & the integrity of some ads increased, while other ads kept bombing us with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. For the public this diversification was an exercise to verse them in the new requirements of legibility. They became visually sophisticated & semantically literate. Advertising became sensitive & aware of itself. This in turn influenced the hermetic typographers. Typographers, or rather, type designers, sit at the outer ends of the design chain. The changes that come in typography, come very slowly, as opposed to photography & illustration. They carry years of history on their shoulders & there are strict rules & responsibilities that come with it. This has been changing a bit with the computer & there are now more typefaces than ever being produced, but not without much complaint & debate over the fall of standards. But a need to communicate with new audiences with a particular purpose, has put demands on typefaces. This began with advertising at the start of the 20th century & it renewed itself in the 1950's. Type designers responded by supplying new typefaces that met these demands. This new push came slowly, typography being the slowest cog in the design chain. Herb Lubalin, Ed Benguiat & Pushpin studios all began their careers in the 1950's. They became the important designers in the 1960's. But in the 1960's, there were more type designs that were direct influences on the form that graffiti took.



In the 1960's, new bands had arrived & the market carried on. The format was basically the same, but there was a growing awareness amongst record companies of the enormous buying power that the youth market had. They had become the biggest buyers of recorded music. This can be seen in the success of the Beatles. In a stretch of 4 years they had become the biggest selling recording artists. They still hold many of these records. This gives an idea of how powerful the world of pop music was then. In its genesis there were only a few golden calves to worship & they were important for everybody. The music market is older & wiser now, there are a much greater amount of bands to supply the buyers. Thus, a diversification of the musical genre. The young too, were becoming aware of their numbers. There was an attempt to harness this power. The hippy movement was the first movement to attempt this.

Hippies stem from the Beatniks, a counter culture that began in the 1950's. It abandoned progress through life opting for a life free of constraints. This lifestyle was popularised through the work of Jack Kerouac. Beatniks however were not organised or aware of themselves as a movement. Their lifestyle was labelled as such by others. The hippy movement took up many of the beatnik attitudes. But they were very aware of their position. They were bedded in youth culture. There was an attempt to forge a complete lifestyle out of their ideologies. They attempted a whole philosophy to life through music, fashion & art, furnishing a rebelling youth, with a complete lifestyle. There was a sense of unity & common youth at this time. There were many demonstrations against the vietnam war & some of the biggest rock concerts yet. The hippy movement is important because they showed the power of unifying & completing its expression beyond music. Forming a whole counter culture that spoke only to its members.

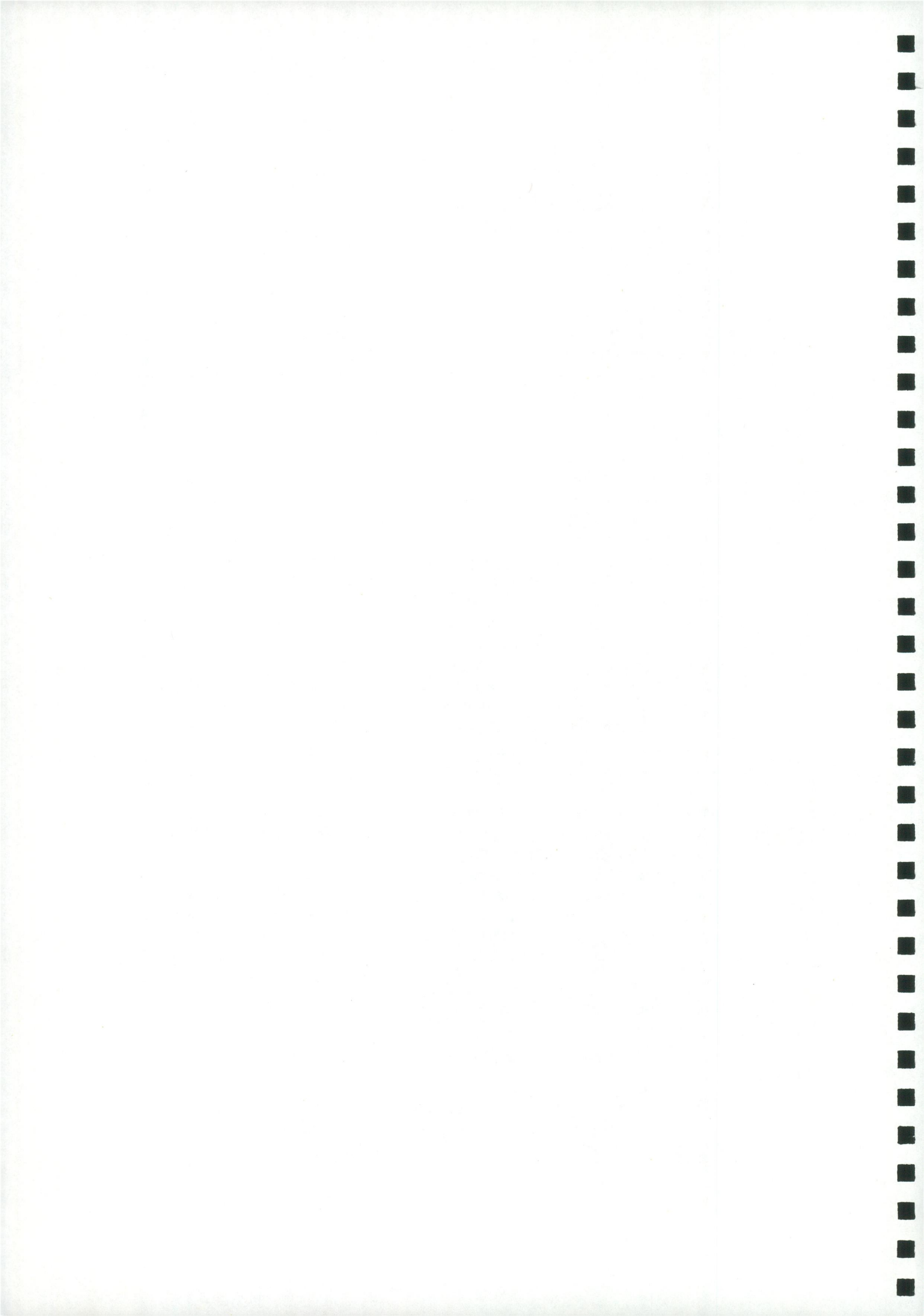
The music of the african-americans was changing too. They had, since their arrival as slaves, formed many types of music. The three major categories would be blues, jazz & gospel. Rock'n'roll borrows heavily from the blues. Its rhythms, progressions & melodies are directly from the blues. The only major difference would be that rock'n'roll is specifically for recording & is performed by white people. There were sociological reasons why this was so. There was no possibility that a negro artist could sell to a white audience.

With the mass exodus to the cities and the birth of pop music, these original musical forms changed. Blues & jazz were popular forms of music, but they weren't designed for the pop market. They weren't geared for consumption. Soul music was the first african american popular music form. It came from the cities. It reflected it's urbanity in its lyrics & it also reflected a purpose. Curtis Mayfield was aware of this in 1969 when he said:

"Our purpose is to educate as well as to entertain. Painless preaching is a good term to describe what we do"

Rock critic & sociologist, Simon Frith adds:

"The political significance of black music became clear in this period against the background of the changing nature of the black struggle in the U.S.A., gone is the oblique blues based social commentary, replaced by a more assertive expression of black consciousness" frith, p176



Soul music was also commercially popular. Its main audience was black, but it was good crossover material as well.

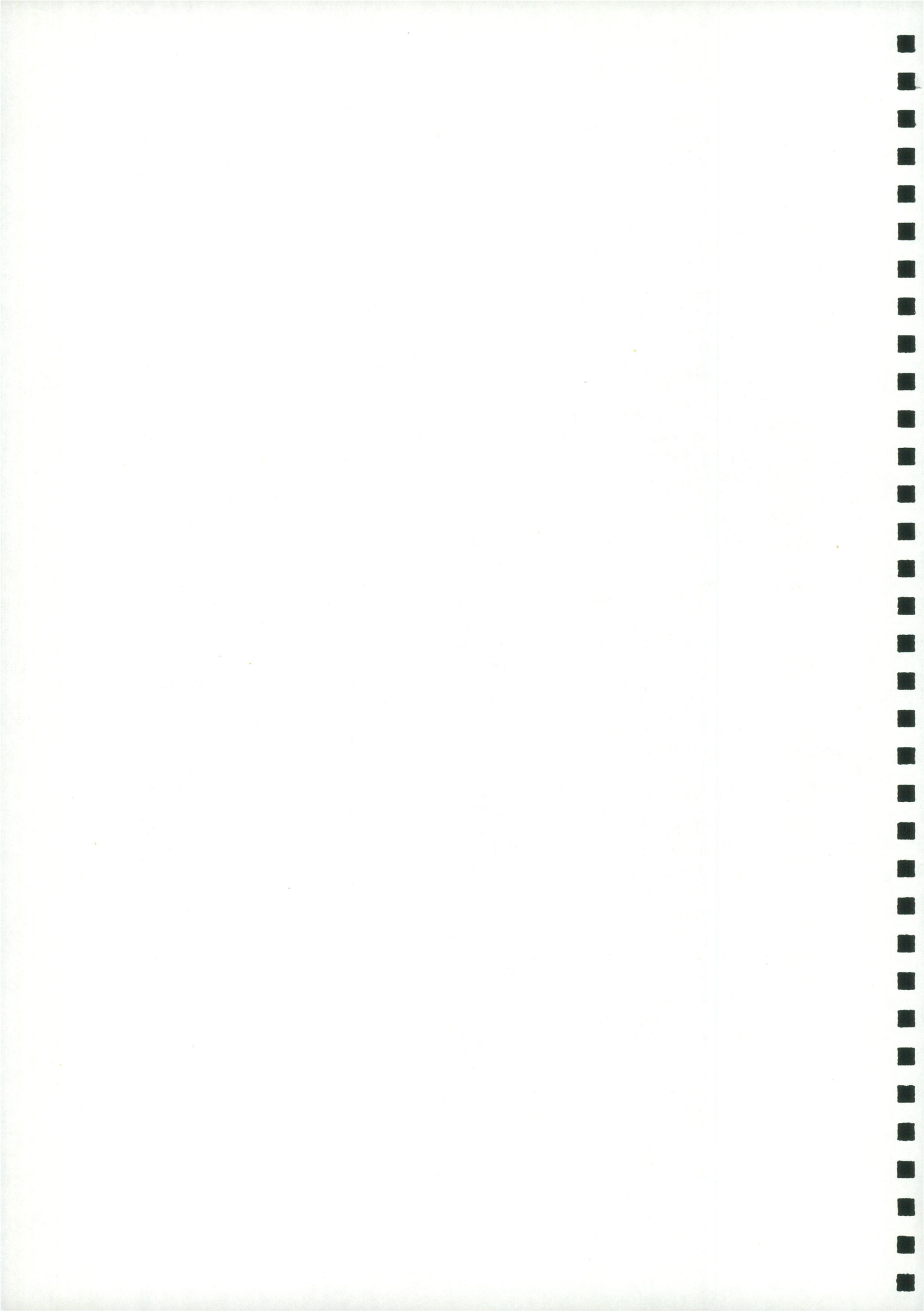
The 1960's was the time of much political activism. Dr. Martin Luther King who led the civil rights movement until his assassination in 1963, was a major leader for the black population. Much of Dr. King's work was based in the southern states of the U.S.A.. Malcolm X was another important leader. He was based in the urban environment, he held many rallies in Harlem. His speeches were an effort to assert the black city populations identity. His message was 'black is beautiful.' It is also worth mentioning the Watts riots of 1963, in Los Angeles. Watts is a black neighbourhood. This rioting caused riots in other urban black areas. This unrest culminated in the formation of the black panther party in Oakland in 1969. This was a radical group that wanted to actively protect the black population from the police. They proposed the taking up of arms. The black panthers spread rapidly throughout the states, but they were quickly quashed by the F.B.I., who deemed them a terrorist group. These factors indicate evolving urban identity that led to the birth of graffiti.

There was a constant search for a means of expressing their situation. The influence of the youth movement is apparent after 1960. Let us look at the youth movement aside from its music.

The first pieces of graffiti came about in the early 1970's, at the same time as the death of the hippy movement. So gone was the psychedelic poster. These were the visual banner for the hippies. They were fly-posted up & around the city to advertise festivals, concerts & the like. The influence of drugs on the design of the poster was easy to spot. These posters were a bombardment of the visual senses. They relied on their sensuous appeal. They were part of an environment, they suggested a way of life.

The psychedelic poster (fig. 5) used vibrant & complementary colours. The imagery & lettering would be distorted, so that they would blend into a colourful swirl. What you ended up with was a decorative image rather a effective piece of communication. Most posters of this sort take a great deal of time & scrutiny to read, they were close to illegible. The general public would see these images but wouldn't read them. This conditioned the general public, from the instant they saw one, they would either switch on or switch off. These posters communicated to a particular individual & thus a dialogue was created with a particular segment of the population. I think the form & content of psychedelia influenced graffiti's style. Graffiti also distorted the letters & toyed with them, free of any concerns for legibility. What is different though is that graffiti is unique, whereas psychedelia through the medium of posters, was repeatable.

Graffiti had the same approach as the psychedelic designers, but the letterforms that graffiti artists used were straight out of the commercial art world. The sixties design world was bringing out a lot of new typefaces (fig. 3 & 4), to communicate to its diverse audience. Typefaces that attempted realistic qualities, like bubbles or a metallic sheen. A lot of these typefaces can be seen on the record sleeves of rock bands of the time. The funk & soul records of the time had a particular leaning to these covers. They would use colourful lettering. We are now getting closer to the beginnings of graffiti & these factors are relevant to the form that graffiti took.



Chapter Three The Seventies

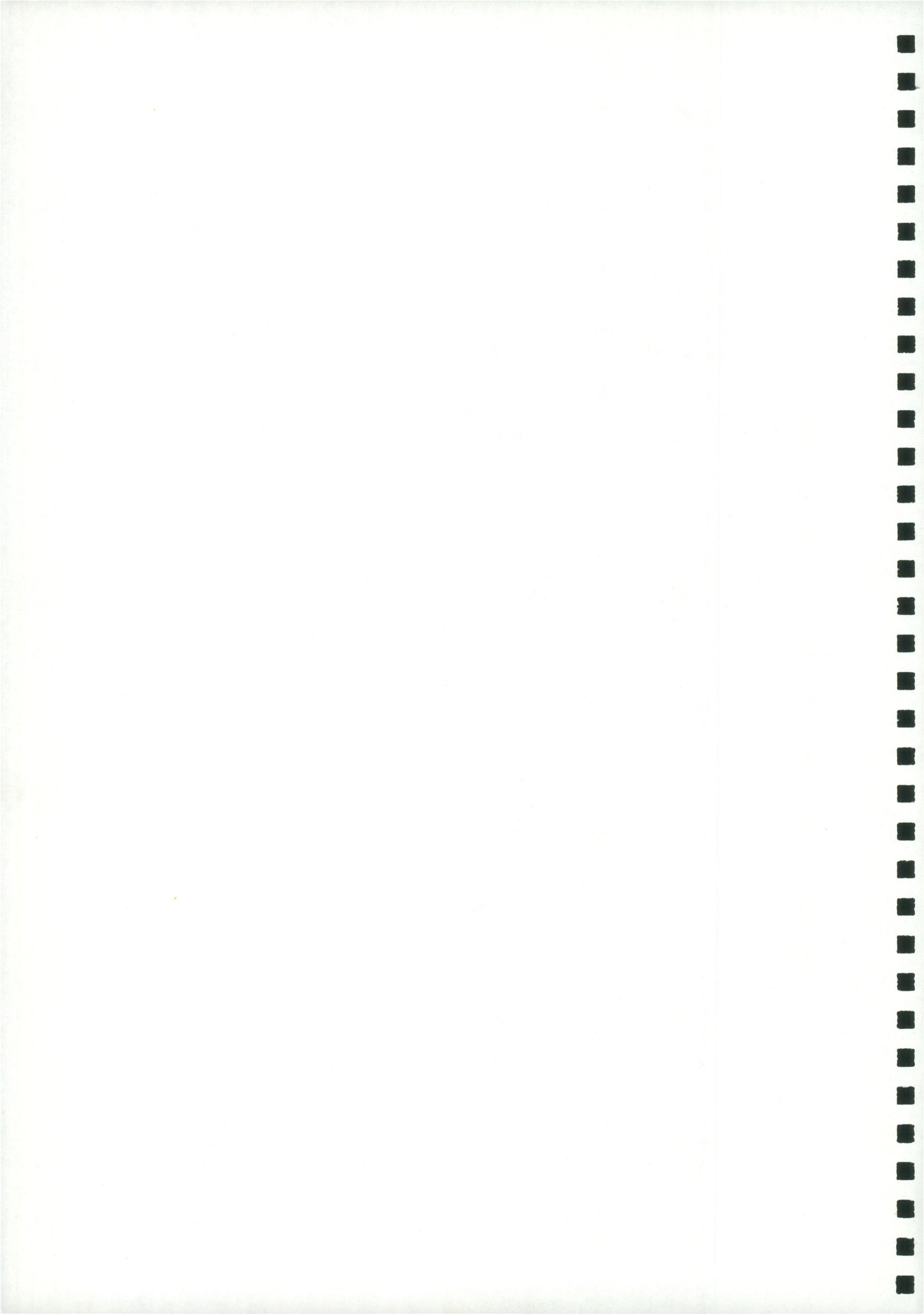
Before I go into the history of graffiti's development, I shall look at the direct influences. It is part of the evolution of the urban environment, so it is necessary to see how the city & its identity evolved. For the minority groups living in the city, music that expressed their views was especially important. The slick sounds of soul were already very popular, but soul music was still a long way from life in the city. In the late 1960's a relatively famous soul artist had moved from the south, up to New York city. Living in the city affected his sound. He began to use heavier drum beats, "fatter" bass lines. The instruments were played in a percussive manner as opposed to in a melodic way. His name was James Brown. This type of music was happening on the streets & was more relevant to the urban environment. In slang, it was fresh & ruff! This type of music came to be known as funk music (It was originally called "street funk"). James Brown was the man to catch for the best beats. In 1971 he released "Say it loud (I'm black & I'm proud)". Funk music was the new expression of city life. It was a strong expression of identity. It began to speak about the ghetto lifestyle which is still prominent in hip-hop music. The visual imagery of funk music was a clear influence for many of the early writers (fig. 6,7 & 8).

In 1972 Marvin Gaye released "Whats going on?". This was a very influential album, by a major soul artist. It questioned all the things that were going on in America; the Vietnam war & the poverty of city living. This was a number one seller in the R & B charts. Donald Byrd released "Street lady" in 1973. Donny Hathaway released "The ghetto" in 1974. These are but a few of the major soul artists who began to use the sound of funk music to express the despair of city living. There were countless of other funk bands who kept playing, some adapting their sound to suit the latest craze; the discotheque. Others formed hip-hop groups.

Hollywood also dropped in on life on the streets during the early 1970's, releasing a spurt of films based around the urban African-American community. It was a new location for an old formula, detective exploring the seedy underworld. The films were filled with sex, drugs & violence. They had titles like, "Trouble man", "Superfly", "Cleopatra Jones", "Shaft" & "Black Caesar". They rather naively tried to portray the ghetto lifestyle, that had come apparent in the music. The streetscape in these films featured graffiti & the soundtracks were always very funky. Funk music soon became very popular. It was good dance music. It was played in the discos & this affected its sound.

This was the climate in which graffiti began. Let us trace the history of its beginnings. Folklore has it that that, it all began with a young messenger boy. On his errands in & around the city he would scrawl on the places he passed. This would take him to subway stations & environs of all Manhattan. He wrote 'Taki 183'. The 183 represented where he lived in New York; 183rd street. Soon enough his name was all over Manhattan & also a few other signatures as well. These were also performed by teenagers who took up on Taki's cue. This practice became known as tagging. Most of the writers came from poor or lower income environments. They had names such as 'Stay High 149', 'Barbara 62', 'Cool Stan' & 'Phase II'. The names were chosen so they could be quickly & creatively written.

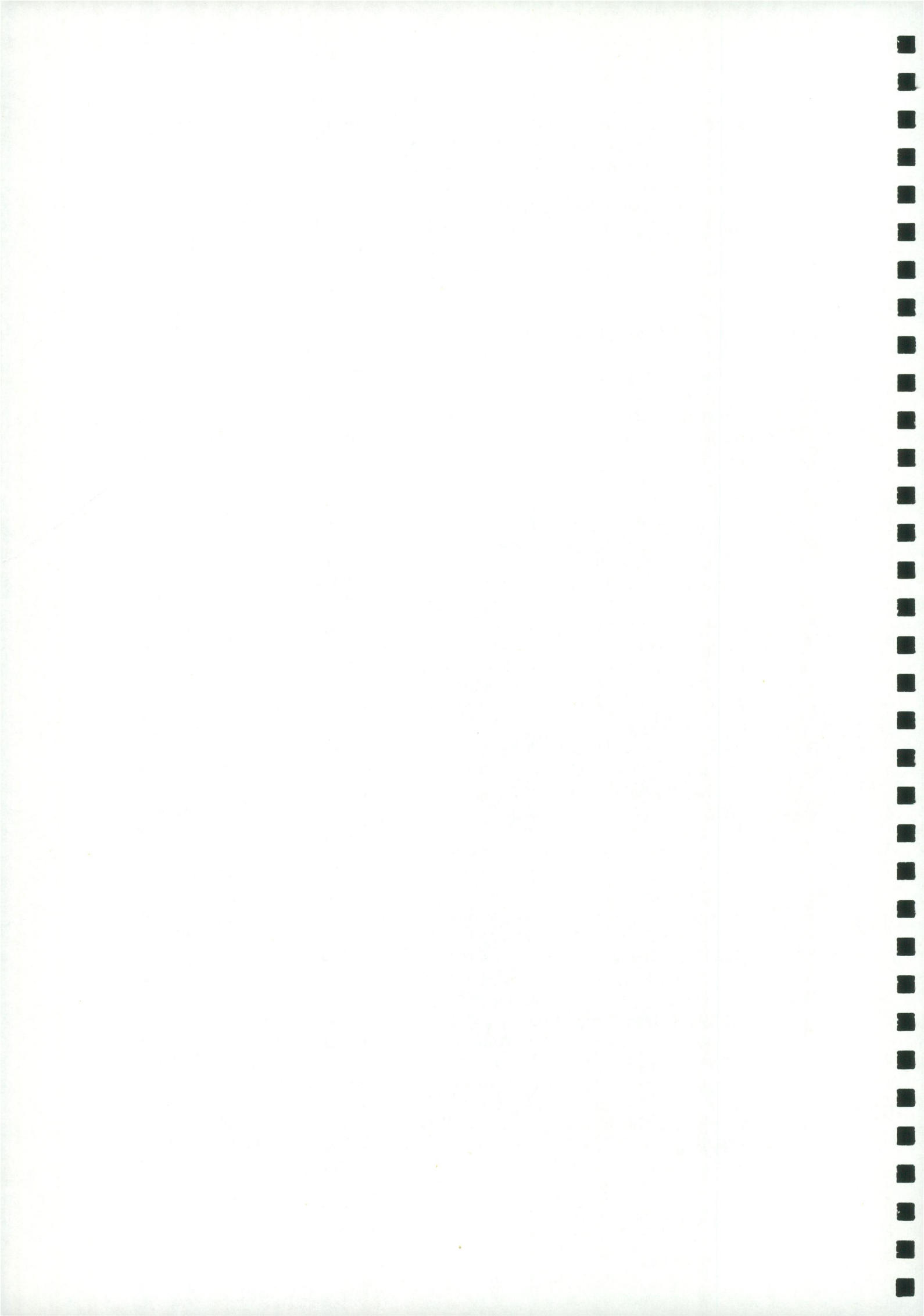
In 1971, the New York Times ran an article on this growing phenomenon. They tracked down Taki 183 & interviewed him. The article was good humoured, but once the other kids on the streets realised the potential of getting their names in



print, there was a huge explosion of tagging all over the city. The powers were soon alarmed. As the numbers of taggers rose, the writers found it harder to make their names to stand out. They began looking for new venues to put their names. This led many writers to the outside of subway trains, which were clean compared to the interiors. Tags were the first marks to be executed, but the new urgency led the writers to use different materials. The marks got bigger & ambitions grew. There are three main categories of graffiti: the tag, the throw-up & the piece. The tag is a signature performed in seconds. The throw-up is a doodle. It usually involves the initials of the writer, coloured in. Throw-ups take a few short minutes to do. The piece, (a slang word for 'masterpiece') is the most spectacular form of graffiti. It varies in size but they are approximately 40 spraycans worth. They are designed & regarded as the pinnacle of spraycan excellence. Think of the tag as pissing on a lamppost & the piece as digging for a bone. The tag as I have said was the first to come about. With the competition that grew there was a need to find new locations & better materials, so their work couldn't be wiped off so easily (permanent markers are not permanent enough for the risk involved!). This led them to the outside of the trains which were still clean & to using aerosols. They first began spraying the outside of trains while in the stations. Then somebody had the idea of breaking into the yards. This gave them a lot more time to produce more ambitious work. The development of the piece shows all the innovation of graffiti style. The first pieces used letter forms from the world around them. They first used bubble writing & adding 3-D effects to give the letters more body. These were fairly crude attempts at first (fig.2). Soon a few successful styles emerged which were copied by all the aspiring writers. This became known as 'biting'. It led to a very clear graffiti style. One of the most prominent styles to emerge was called 'wildstyle' (fig. 9). It involves the complex manipulation of the letters, weaving them in & out of each other. Some serious visual acrobatics were done in the name of wildstyle. But it wasn't so much a style as a specific direction. It was completely illegible & the more indecipherable the piece was the better. It signalled a whole new approach to the letters that spelled out their names. They were treated only as scaffolding for the writers to improvise & explore the graphic possibilities of the spray paint. There was one key condition to how the pieces came to explore new letter forms, they weren't restricted by commercial obligations. This was realised in the late 1970's. Technically, graffiti was evolving all the time. The first pieces on the trains were really crude compared to the work that was being put up only 8 years later. Also the writers were becoming more organised. They had quickly, from the beginning organised themselves into crews. This was a necessity, if they wanted to do anything more than tags or throw-ups. But it was also a social activity, a way of meeting new friends. Writers corners were established. These were places where different crews could meet up & look at some of the trains roll by, with some freshly painted 'burners'- especially good pieces. So a community was established, with graffiti as their dialogue.

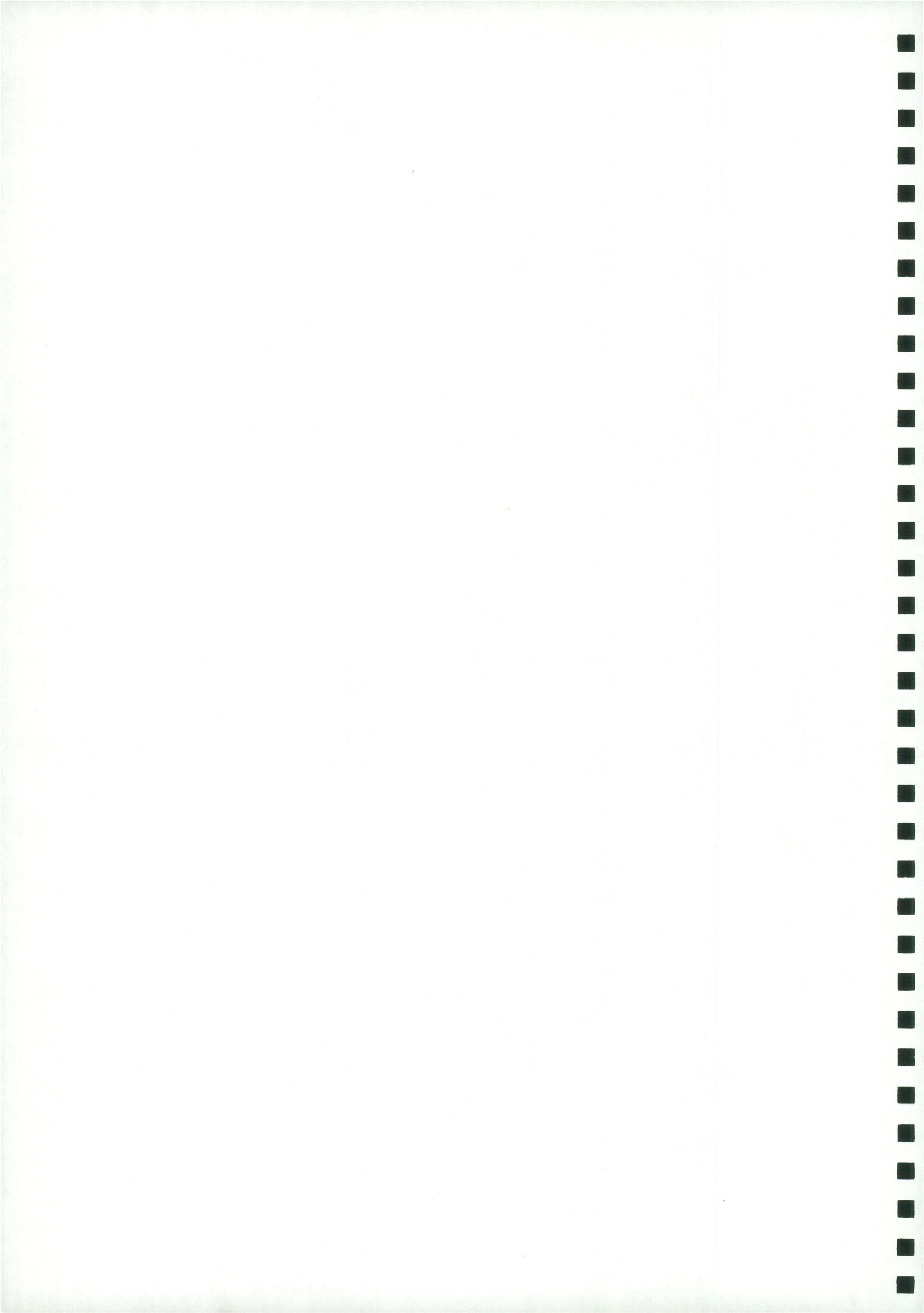
The news about graffiti was spreading around the states. It began to feature in other cities, who wiser with the experience of New York's problem, tried to stamp it out as quickly as it appeared.

By the mid 1970's, the city council & the media took graffiti a lot more seriously. In 1975, the mayor of New York, John Lindsay, stated that the stamping out of graffiti was his number one goal in office. He described it as "degrading & the worst form of pollution in city life." Castleman p232. In 1976, the police department set up a graffiti task force. They would ride the subway & guard the train yards. The biggest blow to the writers came in 1977 when the metropolitan Transit Authority (M.T.A.), introduced 'buffing'. Buffing was a way of cleaning the trains with chemi-



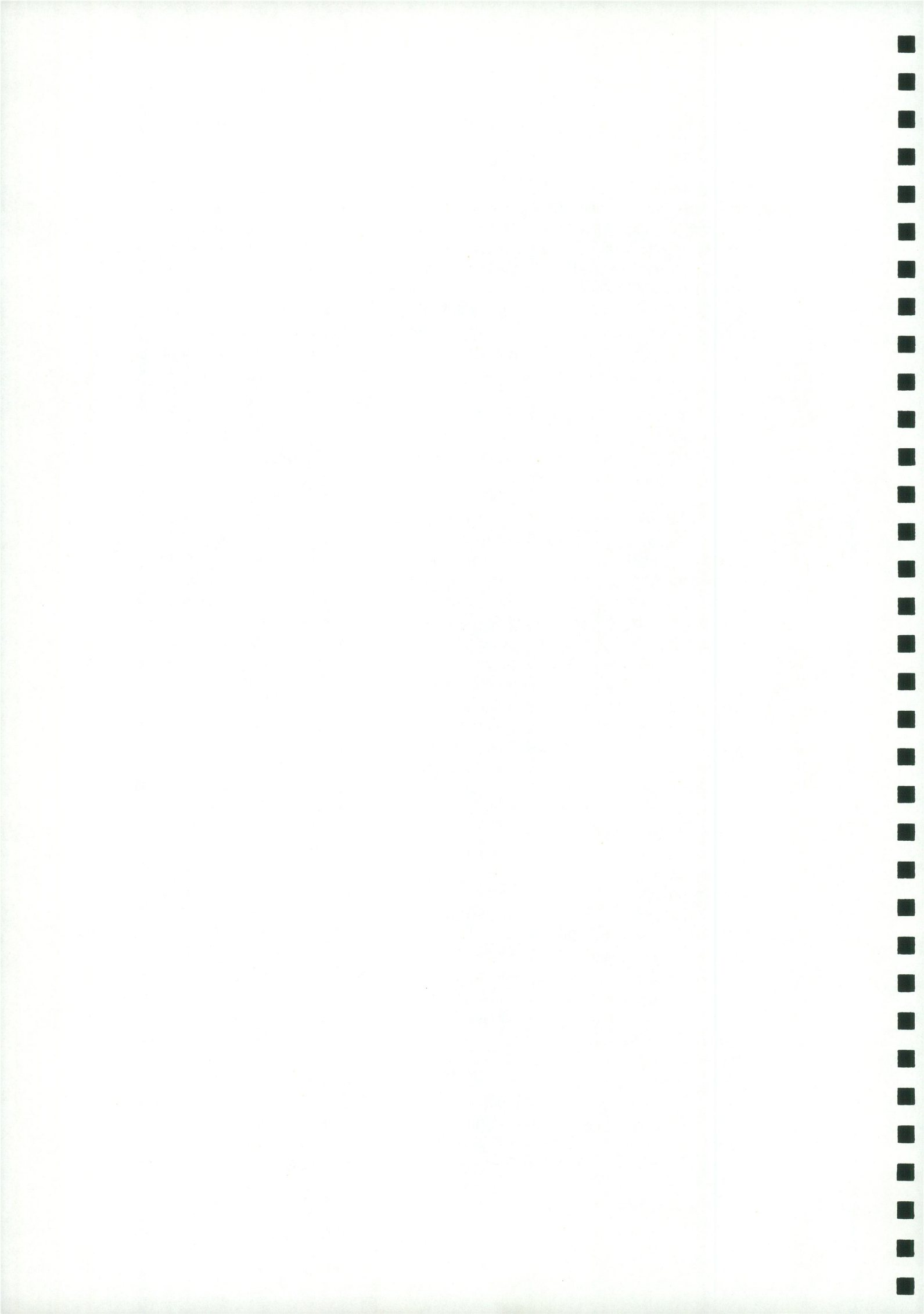
cal compounds that dissolved the spray paint. Paintings that took 4 to 5 people 4 hours to complete would be wiped away in half an hour by the buff. There was a real battle going on for a while but the writers knew that from now on that their pieces would never last longer than a week on the subway. Some wouldn't even make it out of the train yards. By 1982 New York city's budget for the battle against graffiti was 10 million dollars. The city's view of graffiti, was that it destroyed public property. That was a part of every citizen's right. It signified disorder, a loss of control. This is what the city needed to guard. To make the city look as controlled as possible. It also wanted to impose its own aesthetic on the city. The city, because of the potential chaos, is planned to be regimented. It represents the fundamentals of civilisation, it puts this across in its construction. Any deviation from this order is frowned by the authorities.

When Taki 183 began marking his name up on the streets, he began a whole new system of communication. The young kids were taking written language the most legitimate form of communication & rearming it for their own purposes. Graffiti soon covered the whole of the public domain, but it couldn't be read by the majority of the population. It was illegible, except for those who were initiated.



In this chapter I shall look at the birth of rap music & the packaging of a whole lifestyle. The exporting of the lifestyle to other countries. the continued reaction to graffiti in New York. Hip-hop is crucial to the development of graffiti around the world as it was the medium through which the whole phenomenon spread. Hip-hop & graffiti share the same roots, they both come from the boroughs of New York city. They were both performed by black & hispanic kids. Graffiti was a contemporary of funk music & funk was the big brother of rap music. Musically, rap & funk are very similar. The main difference would be that rap features a rhythmic monologue as the vocals. Some regard rap as the just an extension of funk's sound. Funk music is defined as a percussive music. Each instrument is used to add to the beat rather than add to the melody. This gave Funk music a very heavy sound that had never been heard before. The vocals in funk music were the only part in the music that wasn't percussive. Vocals were either melodies or chants. Rapping was a natural progression. It gave the vocals the power to ride with the music & also to get a message across. This completed funk's sound & also dispersed any links that remained between funk & soul. Rap music was born. There were a few pre-cursors to rap. Isaac Hayes released 'Ike's rap' in the mid-seventies. Gil-scott Heron & the Last poets were going around since the early seventies. These artists used only the conga drums & the voice. They were going back to their ancestral music, a bit too esoteric for their most of their urban counterparts. It was in the discotheque that the first rap records were played. The Sugarhill Gang's 'Rapper's delight' & the Fatback Band's 'King Tim III', were both released during the summer of 1979. These two bands were both funk bands. In looking to add to their sound they used a slang technique off the streets. These two records were highly successful. Many records followed. After three years rap had gained it's own identity. When they began, rappers would use a live group, but after a few years they had started to use the back-beat played on a record player. This is the form of today's rap line-up. This gave rap an accessibility that a full line up couldn't achieve. Anyone could have a go at it. Rap music embraced street culture; graffiti & a new form of dancing that had developed from from the sound. This was called breakdancing. This was a music that the urban kids could to relate to. It was performed by, their own people. It was an extension of their ability to express city living. A whole new community evolved. The young New York writers were a part of a youth culture, that included break-dancers, rappers & D.J.s. Their creations were a way of communicating with each other.

In the early 1980's there was a hip-hop explosion. There were films, books & videos, that described & promoted the culture of rap music, breakdancing & graffiti writing. Rappers like Afrika Bambaataa & the rock steady crew & writers like Lee & Phase II were made the new heroes of the city. In films such as 'Style wars' & 'Breakdance' this new lifestyle was shown across the world. People in Europe were enthusiastic about what they saw. They had been keen to pick up on the latest fads that broke over in the U.S.. As the popularity of rap music grew to pop proportions, rap bands would tour Europe. They would bring graffiti backdrops for the stage, to recreate the atmosphere of the urban environment. This was the first time that many European kids saw graffiti in the flesh. It was through Rap music that the culture of the city, was transported intact to Europe. Once it reached new venues some of the customs of graffiti from New York were adapted. In New York for



example, the art evolved on the side of a moving train. This practice never really took off in other cities. At the start, trains were painted in Paris, Munich & London, But they were rarely seen by anyone. The writers in these cities were relatively few in numbers & the sullied trains could be easily taken out & cleaned. So graffiti in all cities except New York Evolved on walls (fig. 10). The style in Europe, was at the start, borrowed wholesale from the states, without having to go through ten years of struggle & strife. But after a few years Europeans developed their own style. All the other cities that were receptive to graffiti, were also receptive to Hip-Hop music. There was a strong base for it. It appealed directly to the youth, who identified with the young New York writers. There was an innate quality in all these cities to develop this art form. There was an invisible population looking for a new branch of expression. Something that would relate to the growing awareness of the city. Something that had begun in New York fifteen years previously.

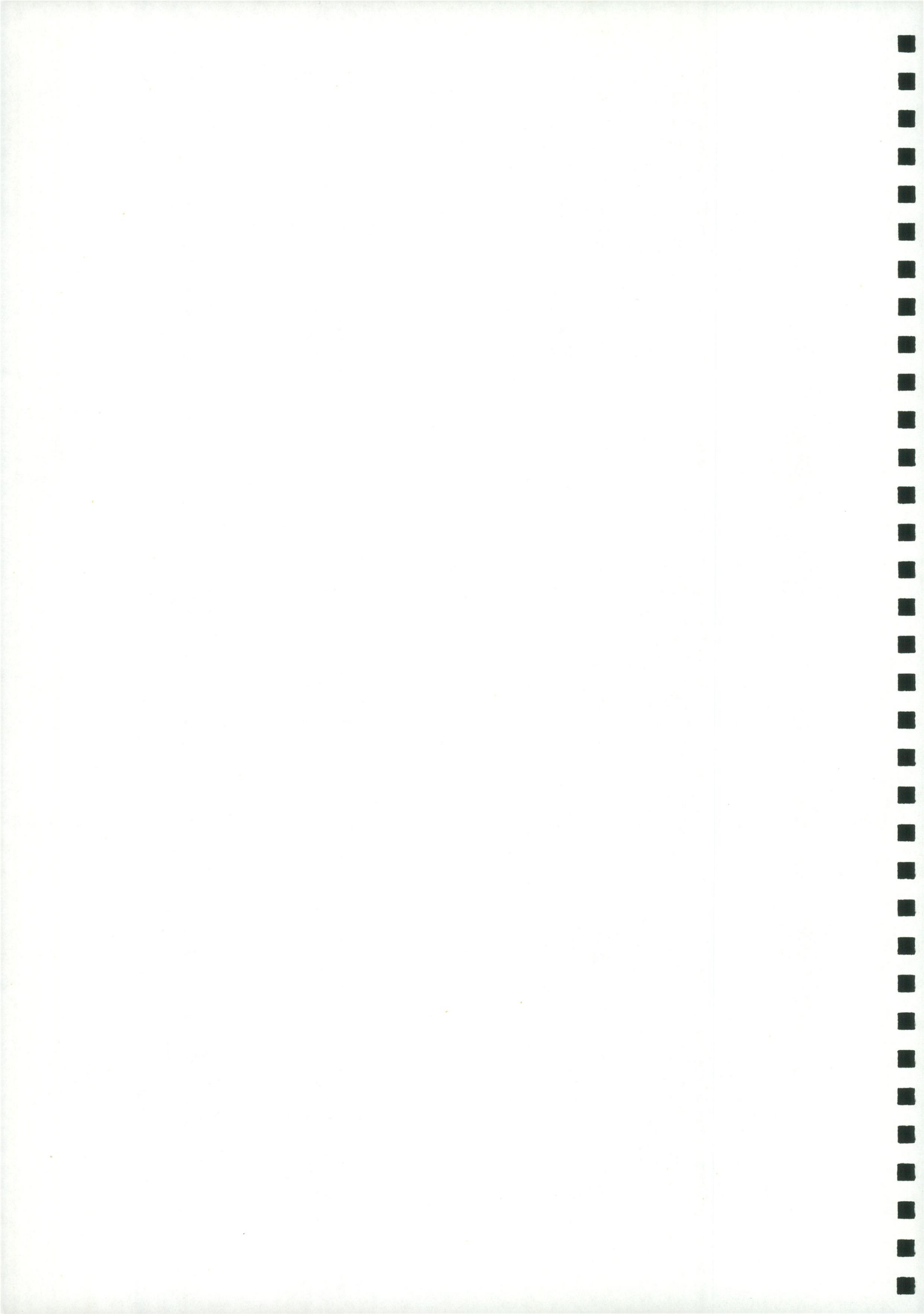
Graffiti in New York, now the Mecca of graffiti, was changing too. Because of the cities active work against graffiti, especially on the subway, writers had to seek out new venues. The city's view of graffiti was explained by sociologist, Nathan Glazer:

"I have not interviewed the subway riders, but I am one myself & while I do not find myself consciously making the connection between graffiti & the criminals who occasionally rob, rape & assault passengers, the sense is that all are a part of one world of uncontrollable predators. It seems inescapable even if the graffiti writers are the least dangerous of these, their ever present markings serve to persuade the passenger that indeed, the subway is a dangerous place." Castleman, p176

Graffiti writers went back to their neighbourhoods. They realised that they were now respected by the younger kids in their areas, along with the rappers & D.J.s. They made a conscious effort to fix up their neighbourhoods. They painted in the parks & over derelict buildings. These were ideal places to paint because in their own neighbourhoods they had loads of time to execute their work. The work also lasted longer. It was up to the community to decide if the work was good enough instead of the automatic removal of pieces from the subway. If it was good, it could remain for years. Out of this came a practice, that is in every graffiti city. The graffiti hall of fame. These were unofficial areas that were given over to writers to paint their best. There is a very famous hall of fame in Manhattan at 116th & Amsterdam Avenue, just south of Harlem. The biggest writers from New York put up a piece. This practice identifies a trend. The writers had to put their work up on the trains, to get their names around. Now the audience was coming out to the neighbourhoods to check out the graffiti. The return to the various boroughs made a lot of sense. Tagging was all about location. Taki 183 first put up his name in his own neighbourhood, marking out his turf. The 183 in his name was to let everyone know where he was from. The whole lot after that was on the same thought, asserting the identity of a hidden youth. Now that it was established they could return to their 'hoods.

In Europe, some city councils had fairly lenient views on the practice of graffiti. Wolverhampton in England, actively promoted it. They would give over areas & help young artists to paint there. One major graffiti artist from Wolverhampton, Goldie, is now a big jungle artist. In Munich, the police turn a blind eye to graffiti writers nocturnal habits.

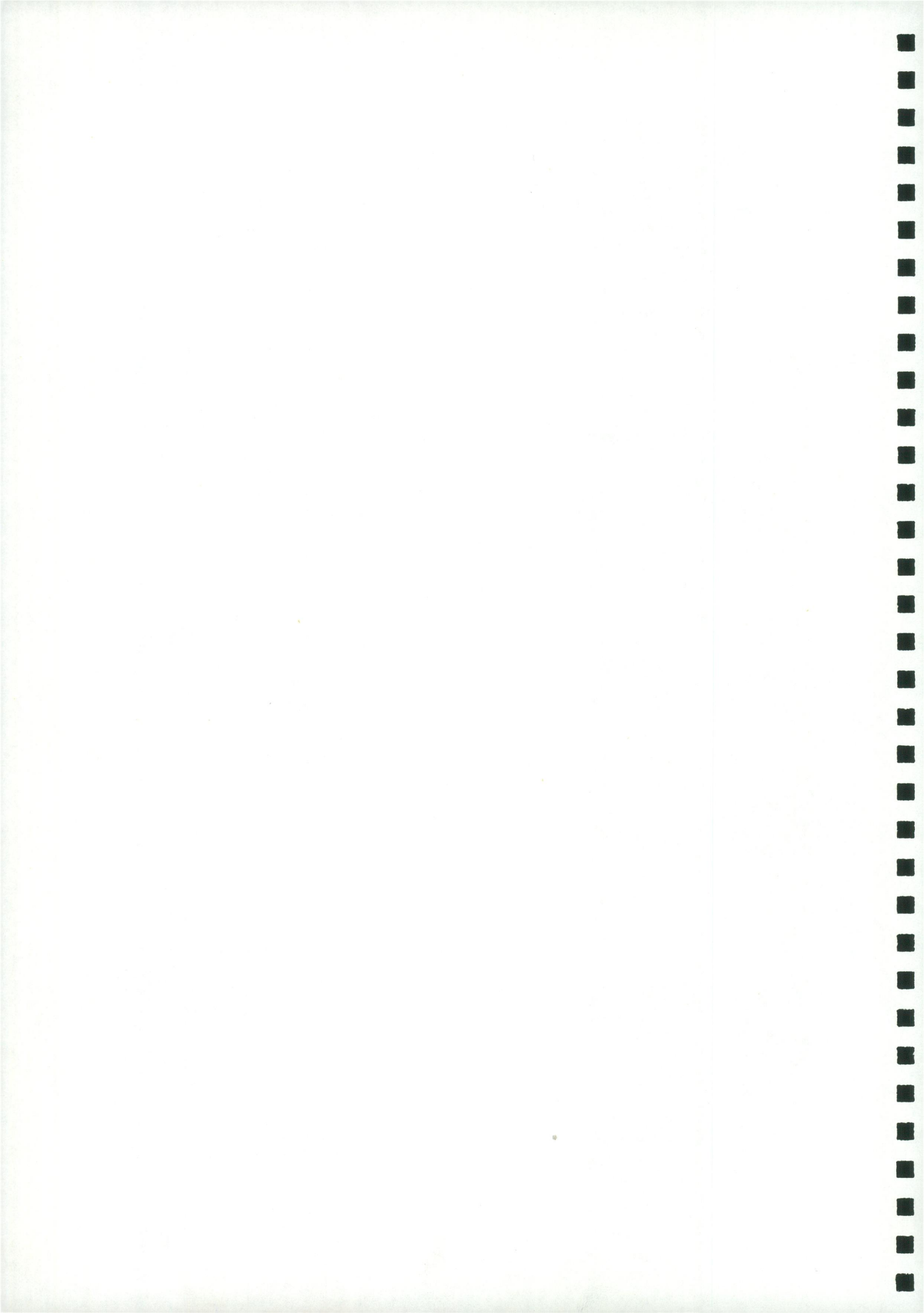
In the 1980's, there was a growth of interest in graffiti from the art world. This included the exhibiting of street writer's work in the galleries & the influx of trained artists on to the street. One of the most famous graffiti writers to become successful in the galleries was Jean-Michel Basquiat. But Basquiat was never a graf-



fiti artist in the hip-hop sense of the word. He began working on the streets, but he never bothered with employing the spray paints as a magic wand that created beautiful works. He dealt directly with city life, about drug abuse, fear, the glamour. His work was usually poems & doodles. His tag while he was a writer was 'Samo' (fig.11). This reflects his attitude toward the life of a writer. He didn't build his persona up on the walls, with bombastic imagery. This was the reason why his work was successful in the galleries. Where Basquiat's work belonged to the street environment, it could work elsewhere, it wasn't dependent on its surroundings to give the work its' meaning. A lot of other writers couldn't work in or for galleries. This begs the question of the function of graffiti on the streets. Why does it sit happily on a street wall but not as a valued work of art in a gallery? I think 'environment' is the key word here. The gallery environment is, starkly different from the street. A gallery exhibits. It reduces the art down to itself (plus a petit leaflet, giving you a little background on the artist), once down to it's essence, it then inflates what it has left & and gives it a capital 'A'. The original intention of the work has been transformed through this process & a price tag has been added, that has more to do with the gallery owner's livelihood than the art that is being shown. This is a very rigorous process for any art form to go through unless it was created with this process in mind. Graffiti, hip-hop graffiti belongs to the streets. John Barnicoat speaks of the psychedelic poster:

" The display of one hippy poster is as ridiculous as placing one Art Nouveau article by itself as an object of taste. It can be done, but the true effect is achieved only if an entire environment is created: indeed it is a way of life." barnicoat, p64

I think the same applies to graffiti. You cannot view it as a movement running on its own, it is part of the culture of the city. It is on the streets to embellish the environment. It operates on this level, for it to work in galleries it has to adapt.

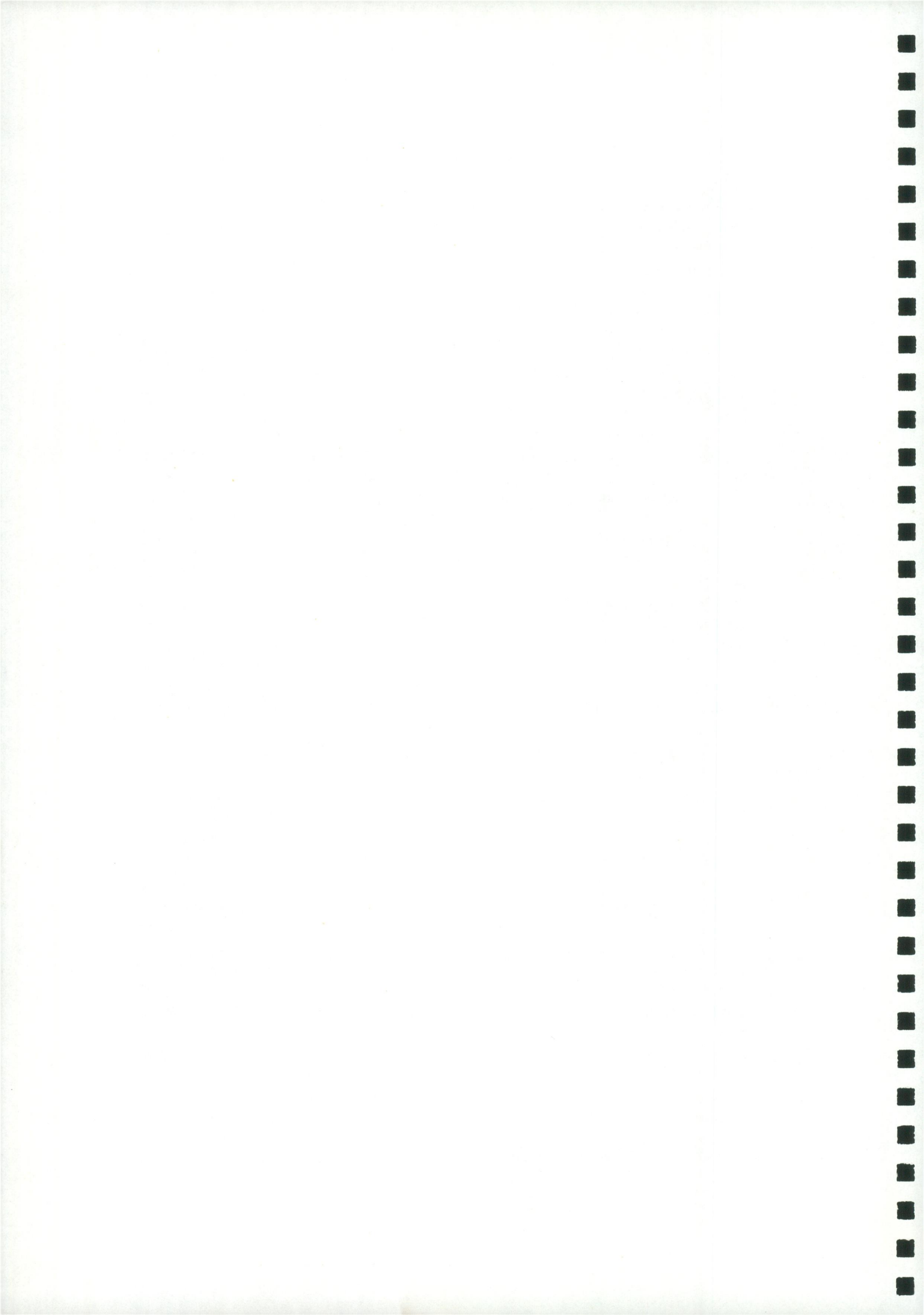


In this chapter, some of the possibilities explored by writers. How graffiti has been employed by the media. The state of rap music in the 90's. It is true that graffiti is well established in many cities. It is close to becoming legal. In Wolverhampton, they actively promote it. In Munich they don't bother with it. In other cities, you will find shop fronts that have pieces, advertising what the particular retailer sells, painted on their metal screens that protect the shop at night. This goes against the the unwritten principles that governed the practice. It was illegal. It was outside of everyday society's scope of activity. The fear among many writers is with the slow legitimisation of graffiti, that the work will become staid and boring. Will graffiti become no more than urban decoration, happy to rest on it's stylistic laurels?

Cost & Revs were two graffiti writers who looked at this question. They felt all the daring, rebellion & improvisation had gone out of graffiti, leaving it a field of blind egoism & conformist vandalism. They believed that while all the other graffiti writers were becoming technically excellent with spray paint, they lost touch with the original intentions of graffiti. So Cost & Revs changed format. They began to use wheat paste posters, which they posted all over the city. The message on these posters was clear & I think strikingly similar to Taki 183's original scrawls. Their posters featured simple slogans such as, 'Cost was here', 'hello my name is Cost', 'machine Revs' & 'turkish Revs' and so on. These posters were pasted everywhere in the island of Manhattan. These posters are the equivalent to Cost & Revs tag. Their bigger work are usually murals. They did a mural about Rodney King, called 'King of the pigs' (fig. 12). They opened up a telephone line, which they advertised at the bottom of their posters. When you ring this line, you get a recorded message. The person on the other line calls herself the 'Grandmother of Graff'. She rattles on about how her boys 'were holding up graffiti standards, in an age of decline'. You are then invited to leave a message. In an interview with Cost & Revs they explain how they feel about graffiti:

"Graffiti has changed in the 1990's; nowadays, just writing your name on walls, just putting it up everywhere is the same old, same old. Scrawl on the streets, write on the streets, write on the trains, then it gets cleaned off the next day, talk a lot of garbage- I'm too old for that now. You've got to try something different." Artforum p.32

Cost & Revs are just two of a group of graffiti artists, who are actively seeking new ways of expressing oneself on the street. The slogans on the posters remind you of the early tags. 'Cost was here' & the like seem very egotistical, but they hark back to the naivety of the first tags. They maintain the tradition of asserting oneself in the public domain. If you want to get a word in in New York, you've got to shout. What gives Cost & Revs a whole new approach is their eagerness to employ new media. This change is crucial to the message that they are putting across. They have in a way exposed what other writers tie up in flamboyant spray painting. 'Cost was here', 'Machine Revs' I am deadly. When you reduce a piece, you realise that these are the type of statements that they are making. They are flat statements. The painting is the real reason behind the piece. Cost & Revs have extracted these bare statements & placed them clearly, in a new medium. These posters deliver an entirely different feel, they are curious, but you are reminded of the pieces, you will see



elsewhere. It is a reminder of what graffiti is talking about, outside & before the egos. There is also a much longer tradition of fly posting in many cities. It was a cheap, but illegal form of advertising. The message on these posters is now completely legible, but still fairly incomprehensible:

'Revs 'Graffiti writers do have a message, its just that nobody knows what it is. It's not a strict statement, it's a way of life." Artforum p.33

I think Cost & Revs are broadening the means of expression in graffiti. They use direct marketing methods to gain an audience & they subvert the original message. There are now new ways of talking to each other.

Also in the 1990's graffiti has been paid it's dues by advertising. I would like to discuss an advertising campaign, that relied heavily on graffiti for its visual base. It sold Nike runners. It was released to the public in the summer of 1995, in New York city. The advertising agency was Wieden & Kennedy who are based in Portland, Oregon. The campaign tried to move itself to the streets, using illegal advertising methods, such as stencilling & flyposting. They wanted to attain ultimate street credibility by portraying themselves as part of the growing mythology of the city. They began the campaign, by sticking the Nike 'swash' on to graffiti splattered walls. They allowed these logos a few months to weather, then they took photographs of them in their environment. They used these images as bus & subway posters. They based a series of adverts around the street basketball courts in New York. They listened to the slang of the players, who would recount tall tales of famous street ball players who for whatever reason didn't make it to the N.B.A.. Next came a wave of billboards that had Nike shoes painted in a graffiti style (fig. 13). Many of these posters are been ripped down as soon as they come up, by young kids who see these posters as the freshest thing yet.

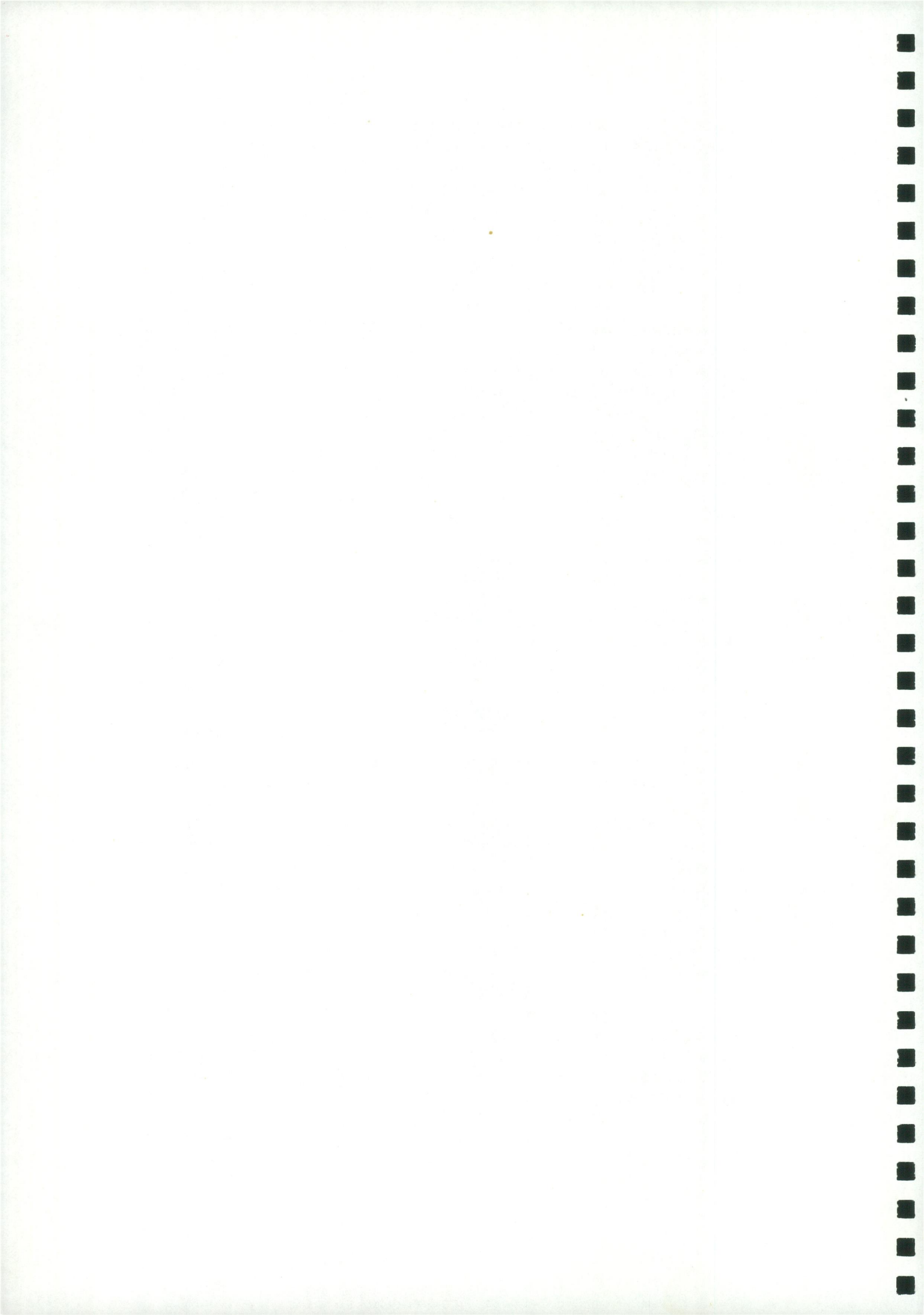
John Jay, art director of the campaign, explains the aim behind the campaign:

"We wanted an ongoing dialogue with young players. We recognised something that New York represented something very special in the spirit of basketball... its an important market & we wanted to show respect for the subject." Ads International p.48

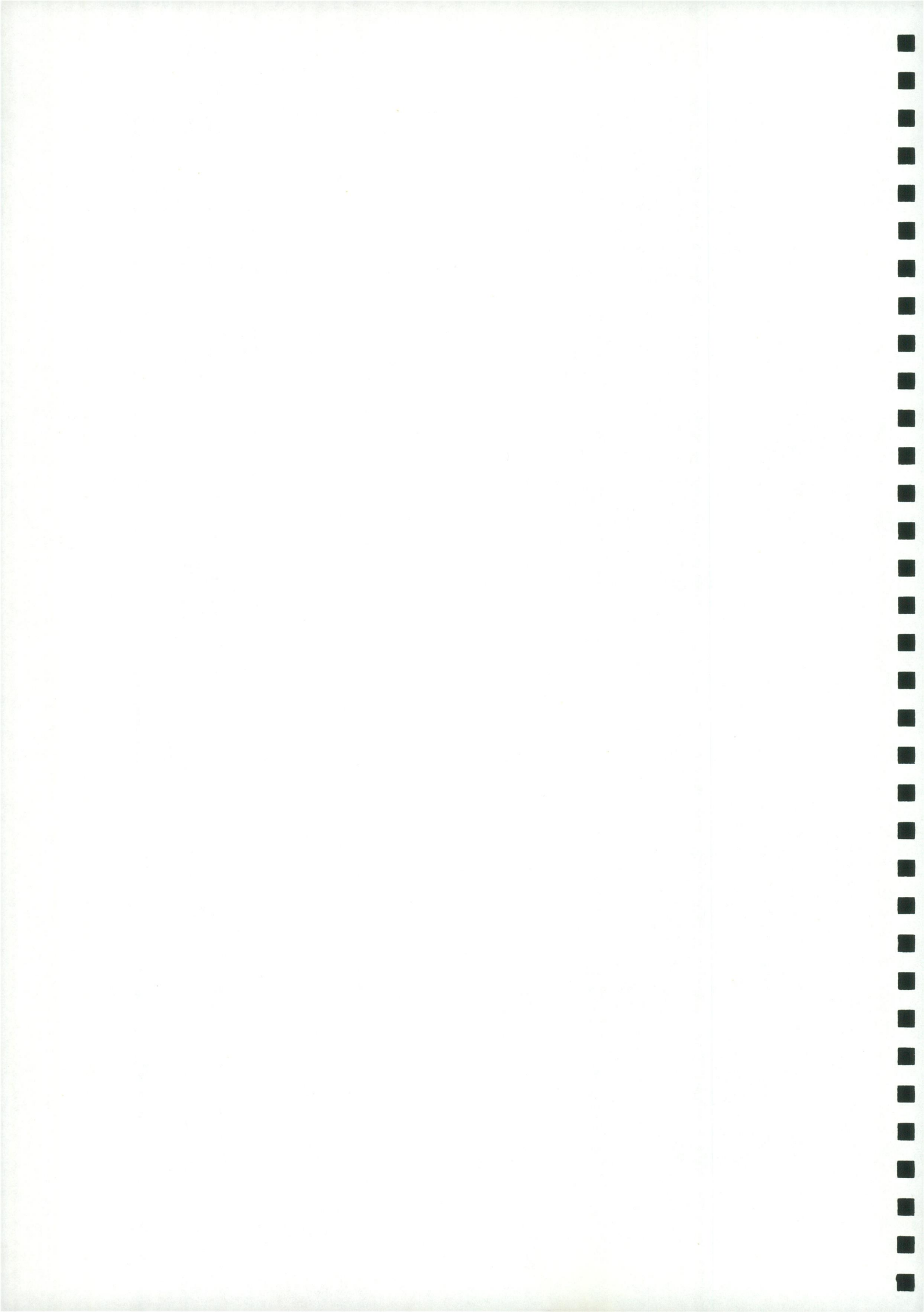
The campaign was based on the streetball player, one aspect of city living, the imagery was all graffiti based which was viewed as the visual extension of city living. It created a fantasy cityscape which they re presented to the city dwellers. I think its funny that Wieden & Kennedy are based in Oregon. They had only moved there from New York, a year previously, thanks to the new possibility of telecommuting, to create a more peaceful environment to work in!

This ad campaign caused some arguments in the advertising world. Some agencies found it cynical & deceptive, for the biggest sportswear corporation to employ the advertising techniques of the little people. These techniques are the preserve of people who can't afford commercial advertising & are alienated by it. By starting their dialogue on this level, they were addressing the audience on a more direct level. They were stepping beyond the commercial advertising world & employing guerrilla advertising techniques. This campaign adds assists the legitimisation of graffiti. The nike campaign reminds me of Cost & Revs' campaign. Nike also had a telephone line, where you could a message as to who you think was the greatest streetball player of all time. Wieden & Kennedy won a gold award at the 1995 One Club advertising awards for the Nike campaign.

I wonder what this means for graffiti. Is it a crowning or an insult ? In one swift campaign a corporation preyed upon the visual vernacular of the streets, wild posting & graffiti. They know that there is authenticity here that no amount of flashy



T.V. & magazine ads can ever attain. They are also aware that even though the people who populate these ads couldn't afford Nike's runners, there is a nation of people who yearn to be 'down' with the streets. This ad campaign has helped the growing mythology surrounding the streets. In reality there are social frictions that are reduced to material desires & passivity brought on by media credibility. Graffiti & Flyposting had come about almost in contention to advertising. Graffiti was the proclamation of the young urban identity. It was a shout out to the rest of the city, 'yo, we exist & we are outside the law.' Graffiti shared this meaning with hip-hop. But hip-hop was like all musical forms was swallowed up & established as a musical genre. (This is because music is easily commodified, this has even become an intrinsic part of music making.) Nowadays hip-hop's most 'radical element is the most conservative. Gangsta rap, causes media outrage, but this only part of a cycle. The more it outrages the adult readers, the more it sells to the rebellious kids. The process of teenage rebellion has been turned into a happy mechanism of pop culture, because it has become inevitable & boring. Is the Nike campaign the visual equivalent of gangsta rap? Is it that, on a popular level, this urban lifestyle has been mythologised & disembowelled of its meaning simultaneously? This ad campaign has not recognised the position of urban youth. It has glamourised them to sell runners. By bringing this lifestyle under the public eye they have sanitised it, keeping the deeper meanings out of view. This argument can be aimed also at the earlier films of the early 1980's that broadcast the lifestyle across the world. I think there is a difference, the lifestyle was only fledgling then, it was treated only as a fad then, not as a accepted fact of city life.

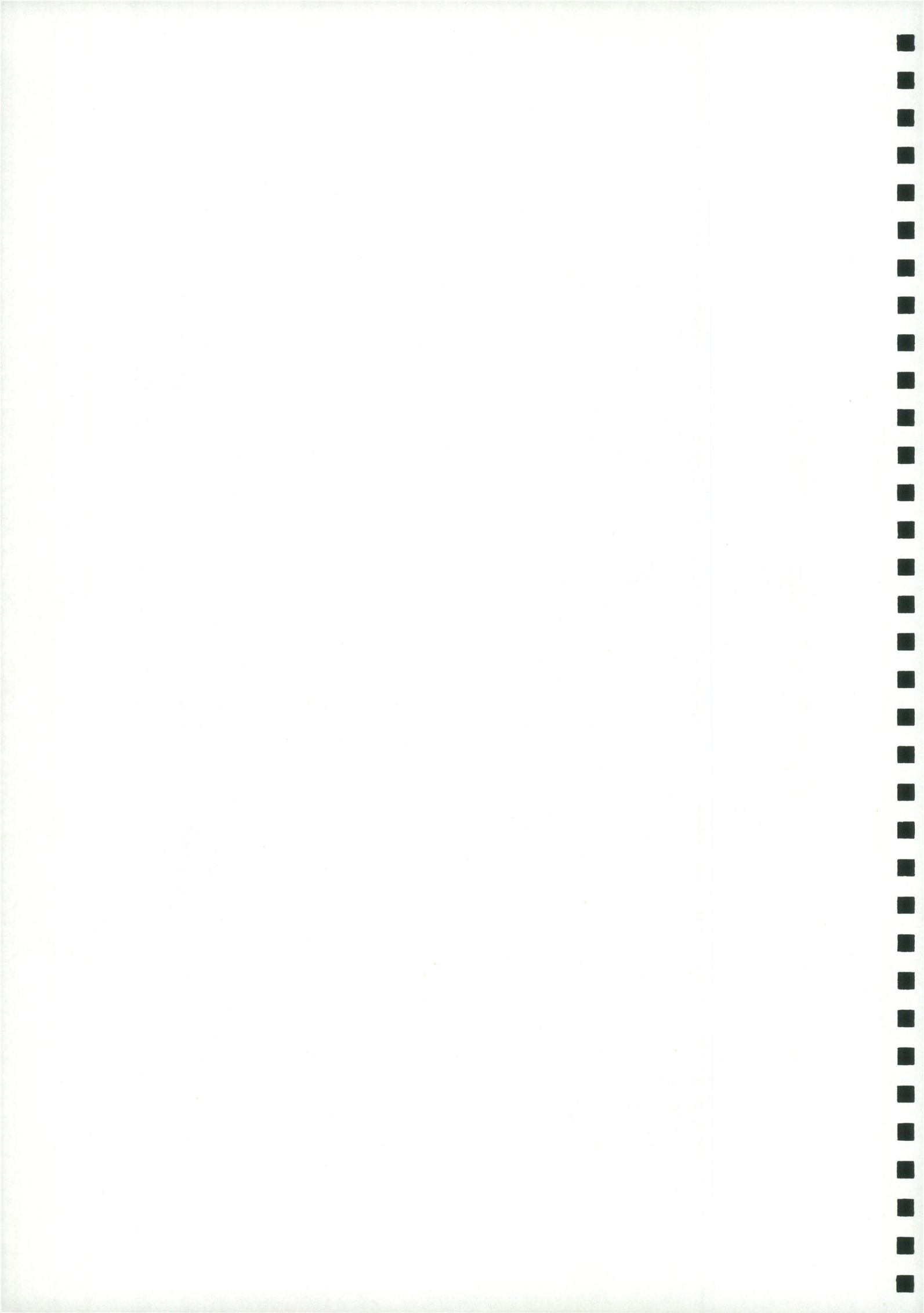


Conclusion

I have tried to explore the subject of graffiti from a distance. I wanted to place it into the larger scheme of things, the culture of the city, which over the last fifty years has changed a great deal. New York is the city to discuss for this subject. New York in many respects is the most advanced city in the world. It is the biggest city in the first world, it had the means. New York, leading by example, has changed the mores of society. Gone are the rural traditions of value & justice. There are a new set of morals for life in the city. It was only possible in the U.S. that these changes could've begun. The cities of Europe are very much set in their ways. More importantly the cities of Europe only began to take in minority groups, in large amounts from their colonies, after the Second World War. The minority groups that received graffiti & hip-hop in Europe, were only a generation away from their homelands. These minority groups in New York were crucial to the change in attitude. They were part of the country for the previous generations, along with all the European nationalities.

Music is a common theme in this thesis, it ties all the decades & cultural changes in its definition. Music, once it was released as a recorded medium, became the the most important factor in pop culture. The long playing record was released in 1948 in the states, the birth of rock'n'roll followed seven years later. Rock'n'roll capitalised on this new medium. This was the first music form that was designed for mass production. Ever since the fifties the music has held this special position. It held this position because music is the most accessible medium. It can pass through space. It belongs to anybody. Because of this, most youth cultures can be identified through their preferred musical genre. They even hang their definition on it. The music industry is well aware of music's pervasiveness. When it comes to selling records, they embellish the music with so many connotations that give it more meaning than just the sound. This has always been important feature of pop music. It employs all the other mediums to sell records. This began with album covers & T.V. appearances (by 1955, T.V. was a part of one in three american households). As the rise in the sales continued, they discovered more ways of getting the stars into the pop consciousness. If Elvis was a black man swinging his hips on T.V., he would've been thrown into jail. Milli Vanilli are another good example of the influence of the visual in the world of pop music. There were for a time two bands, one wrote & recorded the music, the other mimed it to the viewers. It is easy to guess the who were the ex-models & who were the out of work session musicians. When they were exposed in the early 1990's, They exposed a truth about the pop world that had been staved off in years previous. Were we the listener, really prepared to buy rather inane pop ditties, off a bunch of middle-aged session men? No we weren't. Were we prepared to buy the same ditties off a pair of tone deaf hunks with dreads (as they hilariously displayed whilst trying to acquit themselves). At the end of the day no, but we would've liked to. This is an example of the music industry's desire to create more than just a tune.

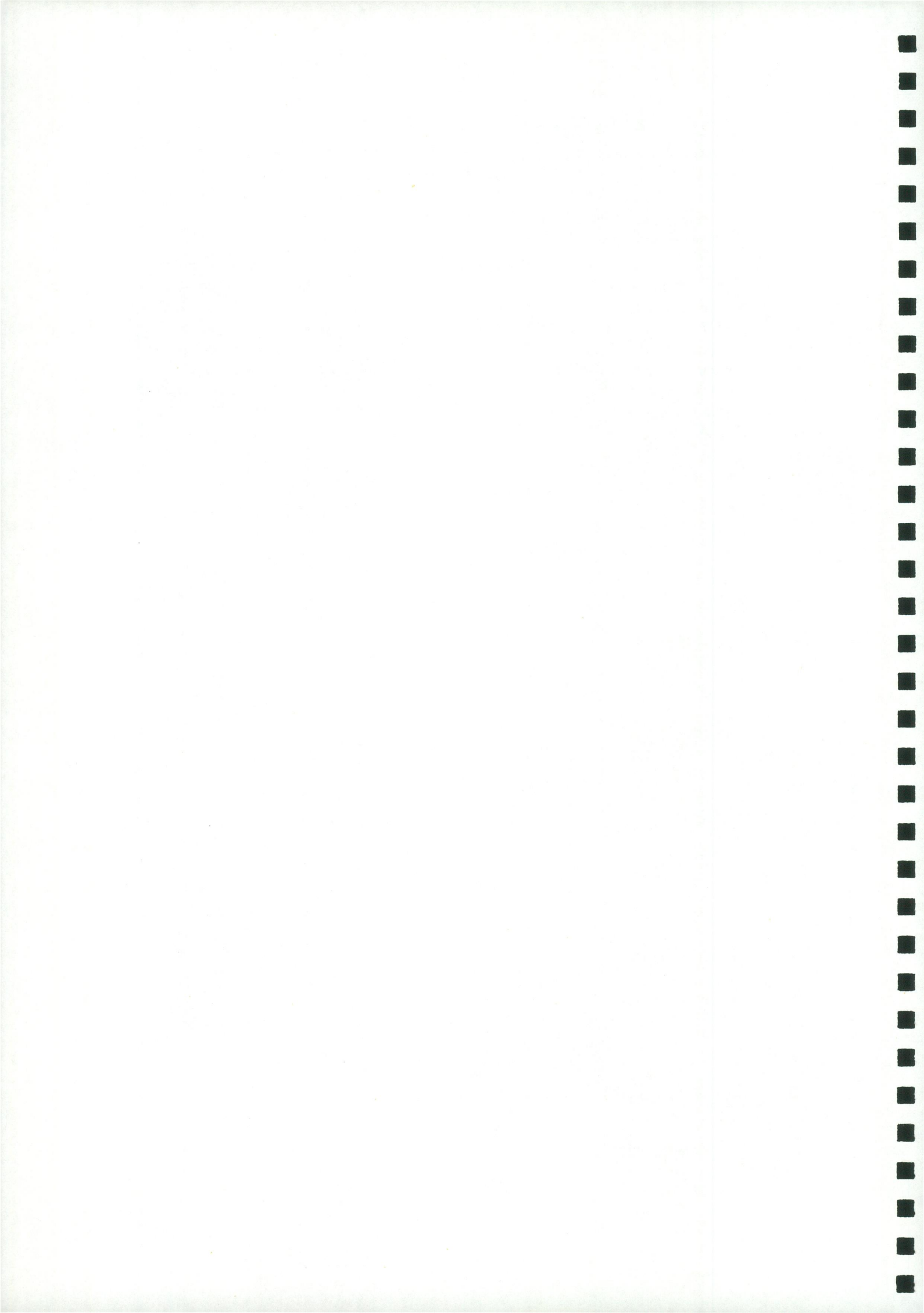
For hip-hop music, graffiti & breakdancing were the extensions of the music, the mode was established, that was fantasy land. This is how graffiti spread. But there is something more than just the industry's imaging. Graffiti (unlike that much maligned form of aerobics, breakdancing.) had qualities that allowed for youngsters a new means of expression. It gave them new avenues to explore. Graffiti can only really be looked at as part of a greater scheme, that can be traced back to the urban



environment. It boils down to living in the city & finding a way to express this:

"Black popular culture, music, dance & style articulates a supportive culture for youth, creating a space, which enables them to resist. As such culture is a lived practice enabling the young black person to make sense of particular conditions of existence...Breaking, rapping, hip hop, wearing distinct clothing, spraypainting graffiti on subway cars, are all visible symbols of resistance." Brake p.127

This expression also demands a response. There are people who react negatively & some who act positively, only to counter the views of the establishment. There has been a long history of this that goes back to Hepcats, the original homeboys who frequented the jazz joints of Harlem. They too had a distinct code of dress & slang. The Zoot suits that they wore stood out a mile & the jive, they spoke, was unintelligible to the common citizen. This shall continue in various forms, as long as the inequality remains. The new music or art may be accommodated, but the black cultural response is to move elsewhere, happy to take any financial advantages of inclusion in middle class culture.

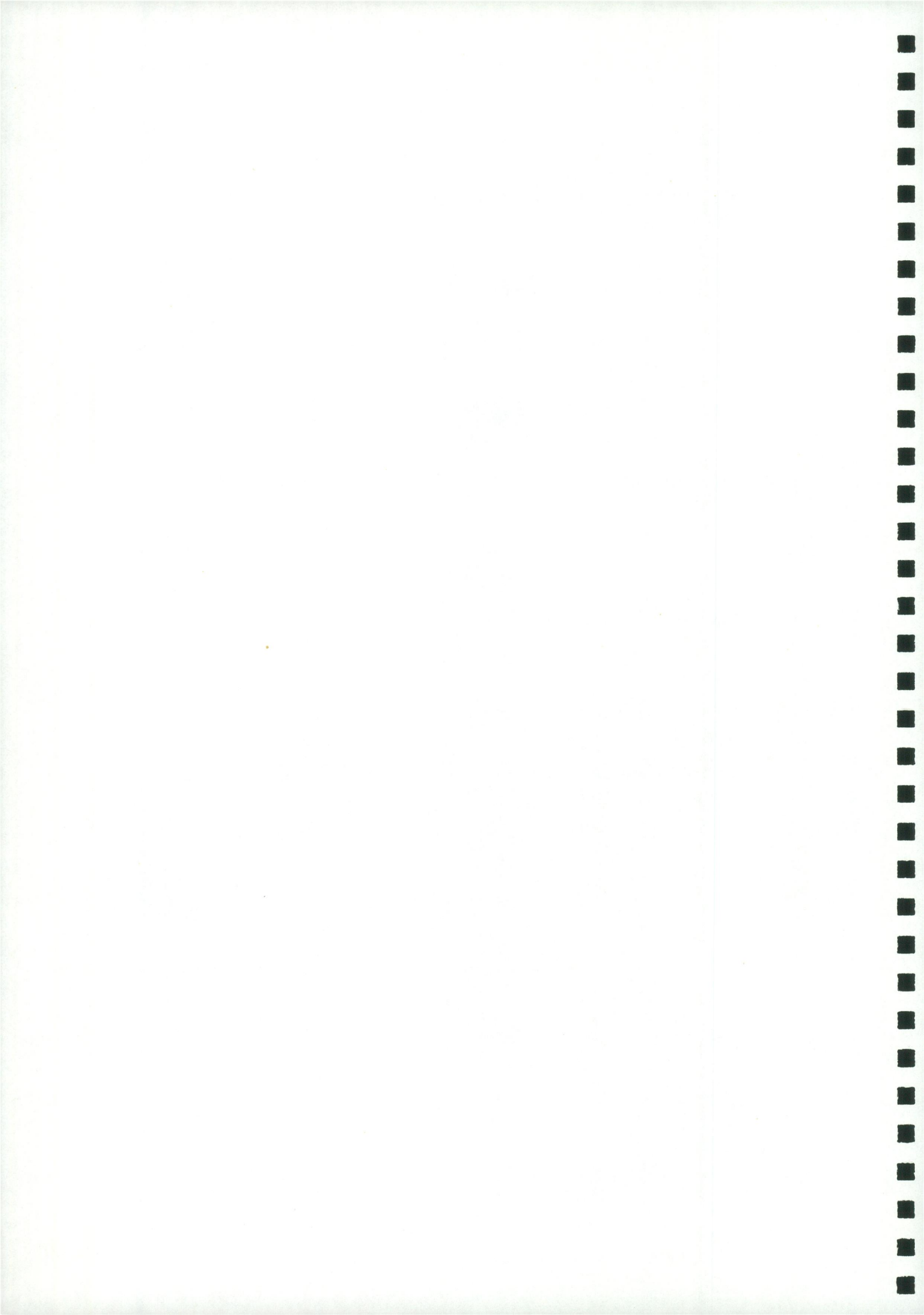


Books

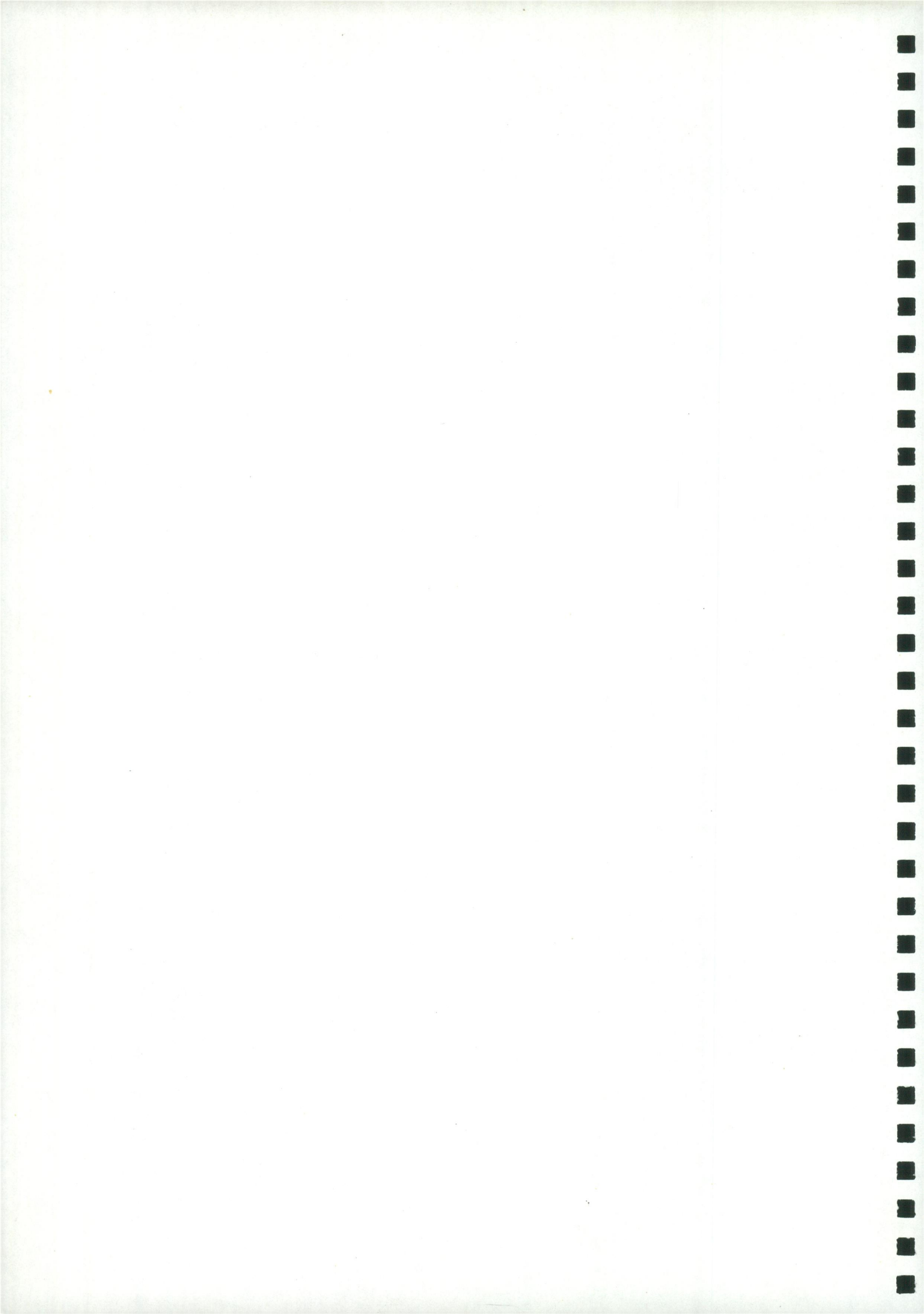
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Plates

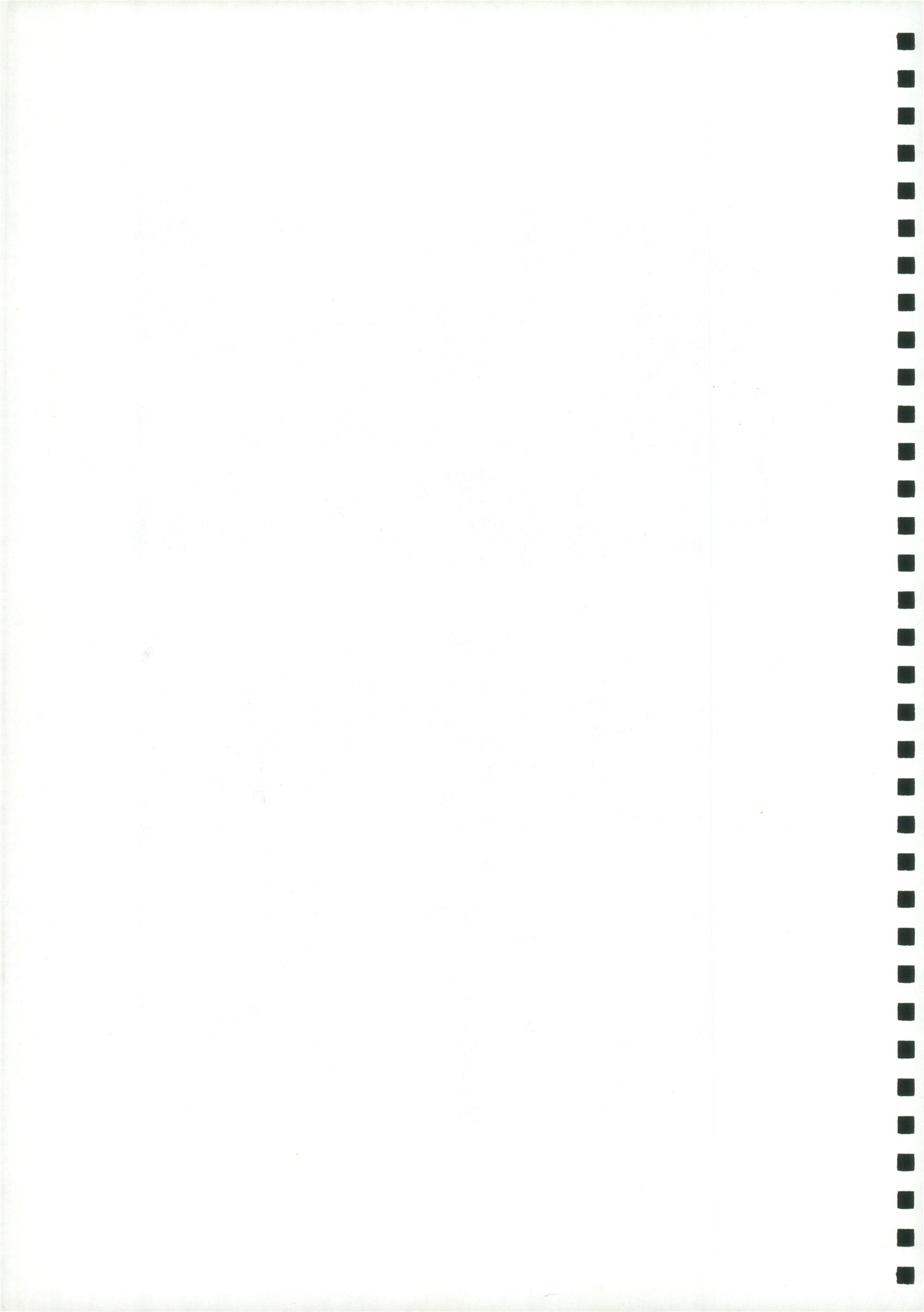




1. Wildstyle, Dublin, 1995, near the East Wall



2. An Early piece from New York, 1972



Marianna Black

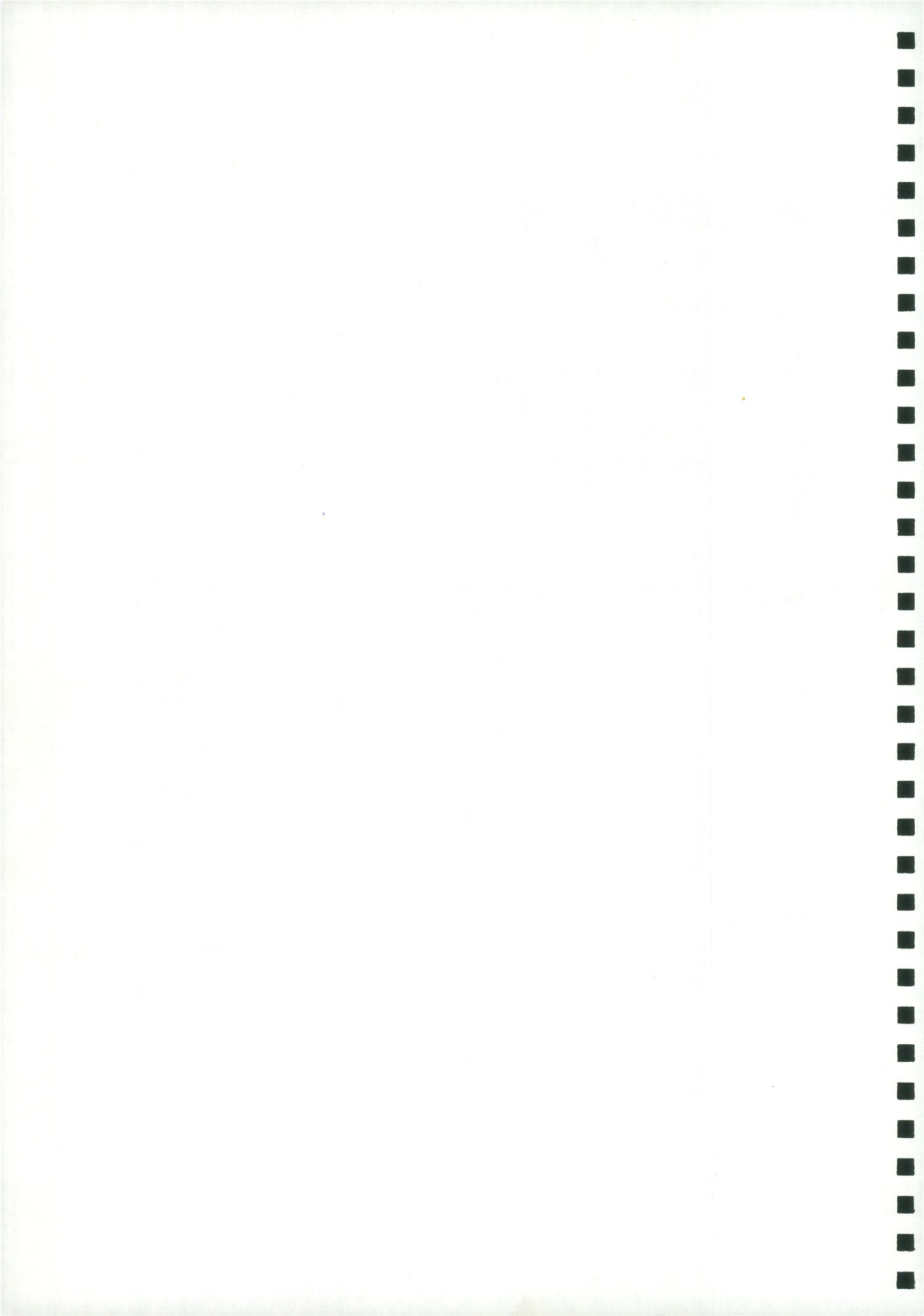
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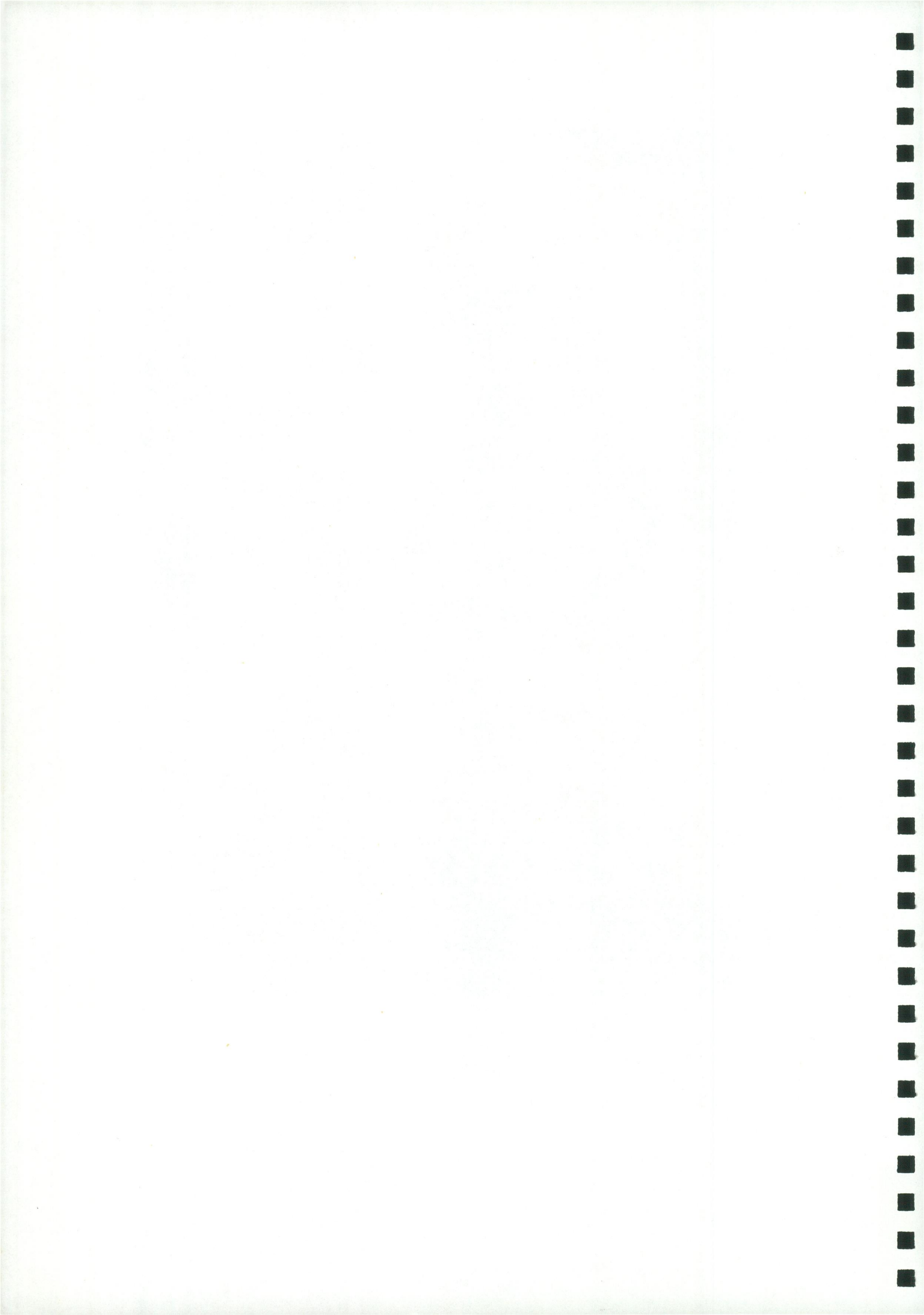
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5. Poster by Victor Moscoso, 1969

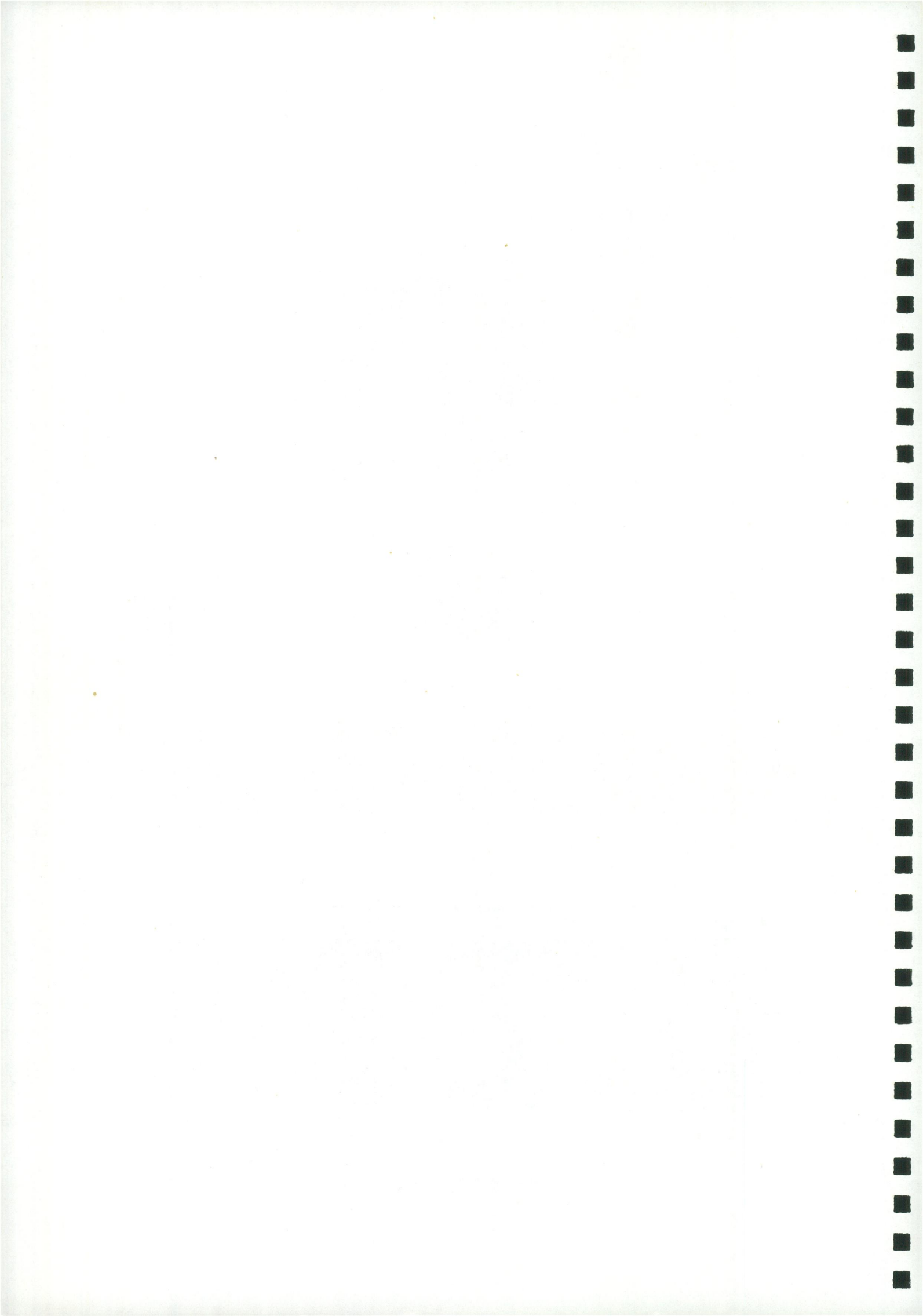


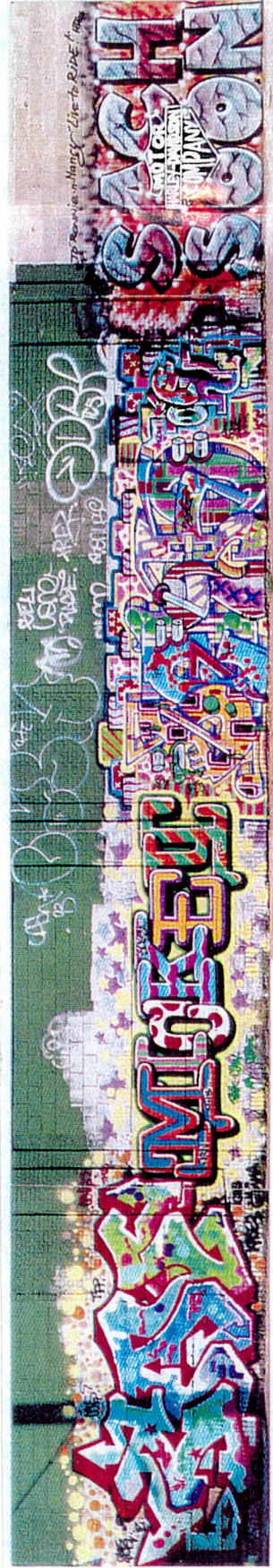


PARLIAMENT

WINNERS

6.,7. & 8. Some Examples of the lettering off funk records, that had a direct influence on the writers

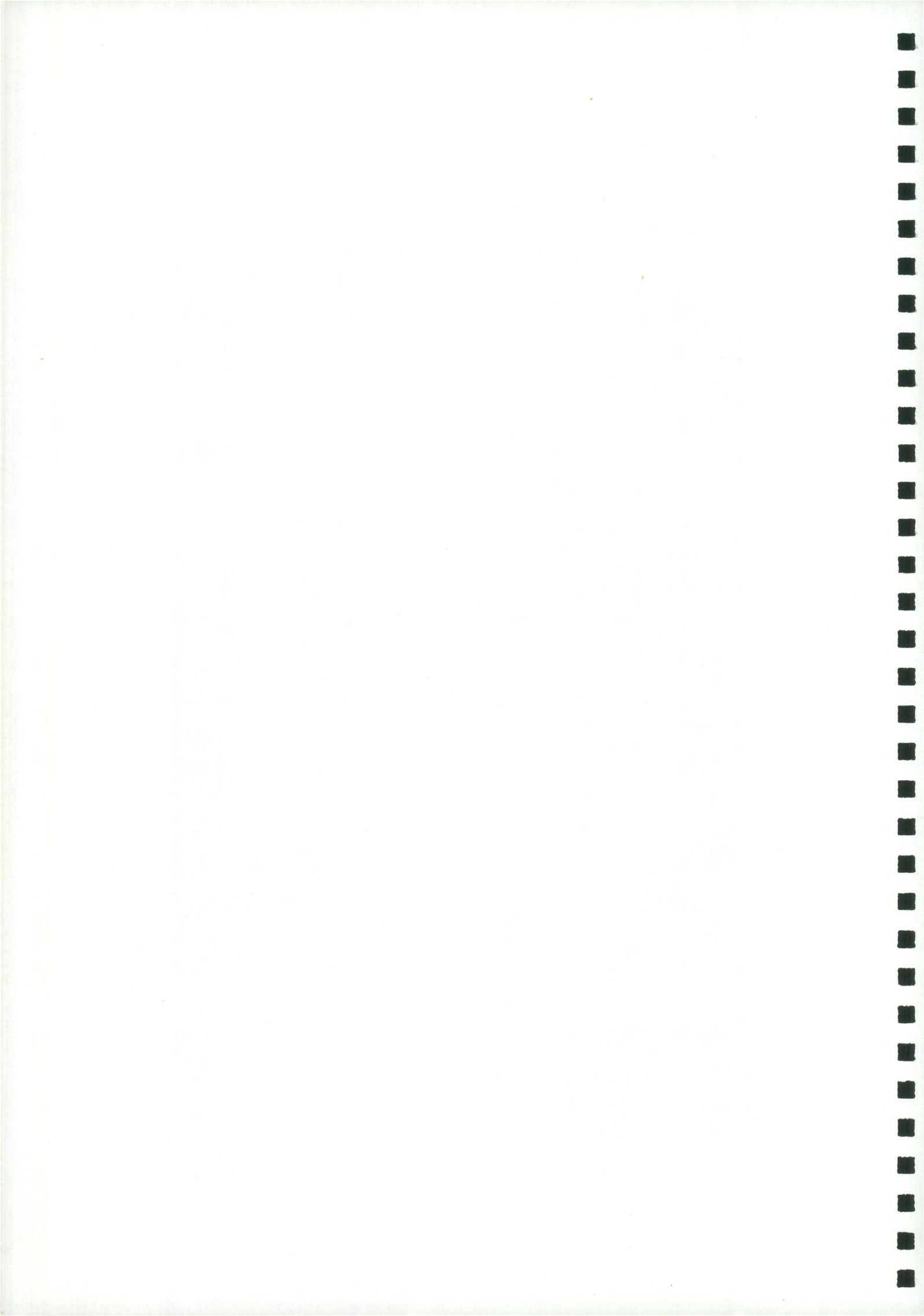




9. Wildstyle, New York, 1995

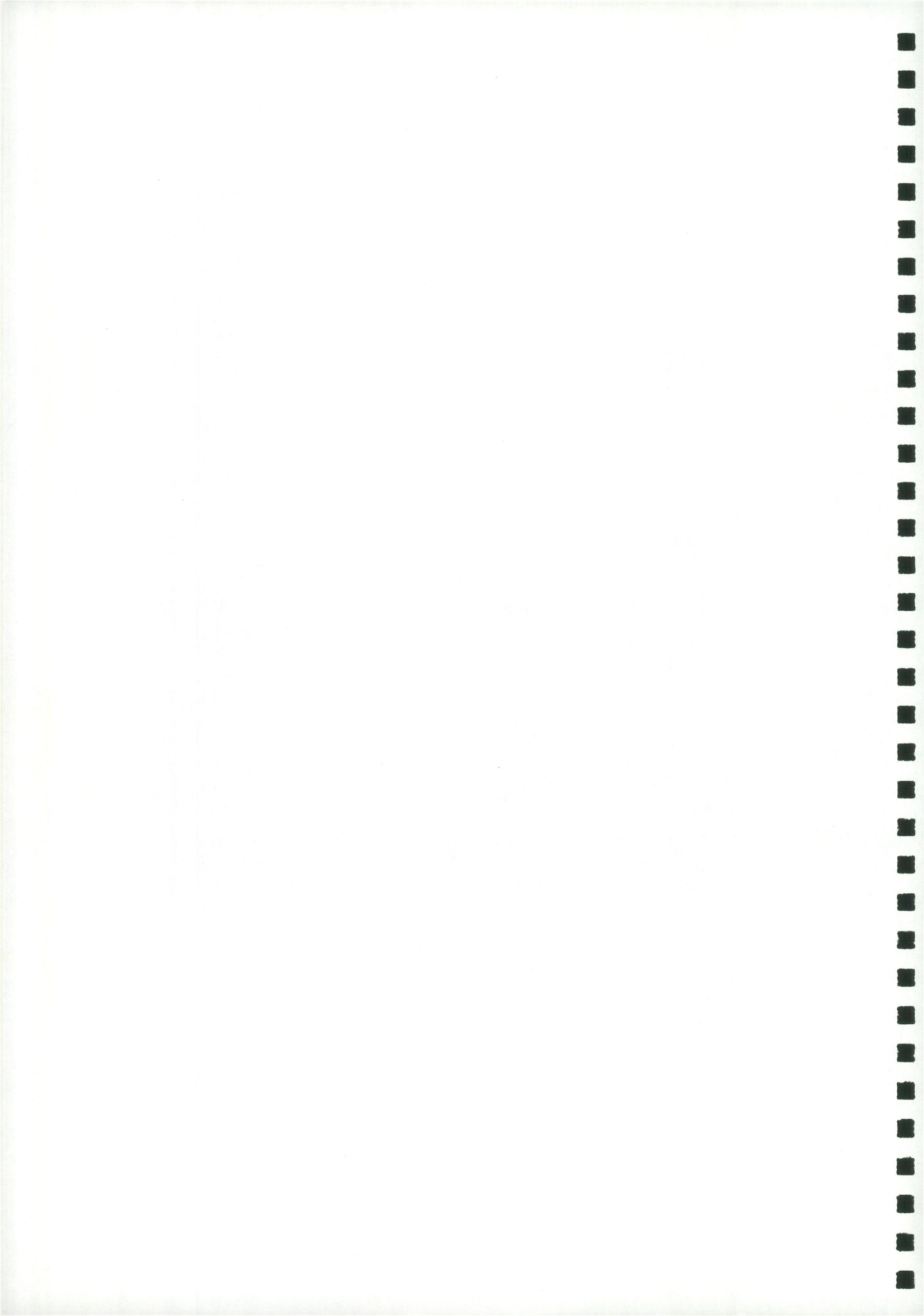


10. Wildstyle, the Netherlands, 1995



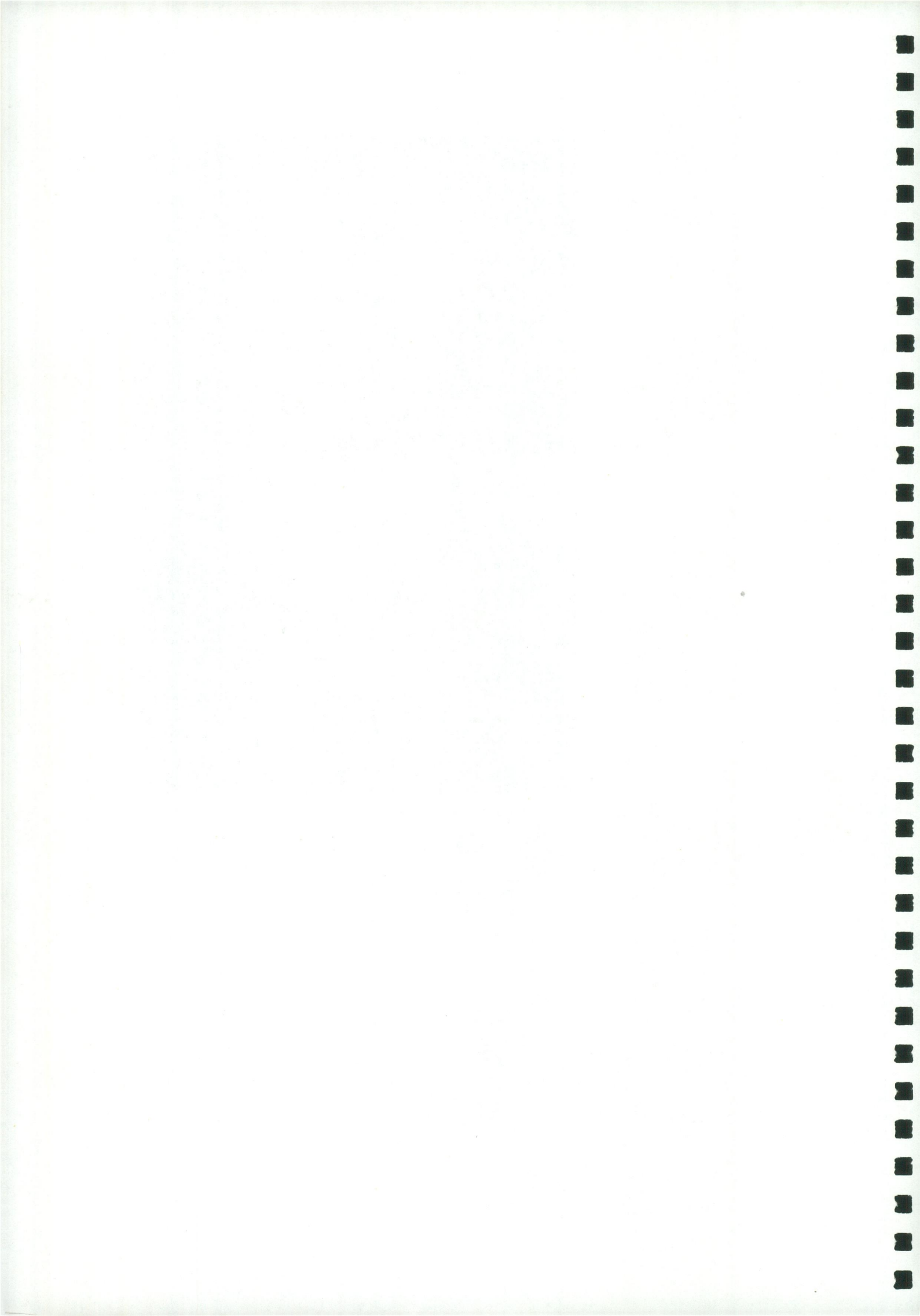


11. One of Jean-michel Basquiat's pieces, New York 1982





12. A detail from 'King of the pigs' by Cost & Revs, New York, 1995





13. Nike billboard by Wieden Et Kennedy, 1995

