



## Urban tags: Calligraphy and cacography

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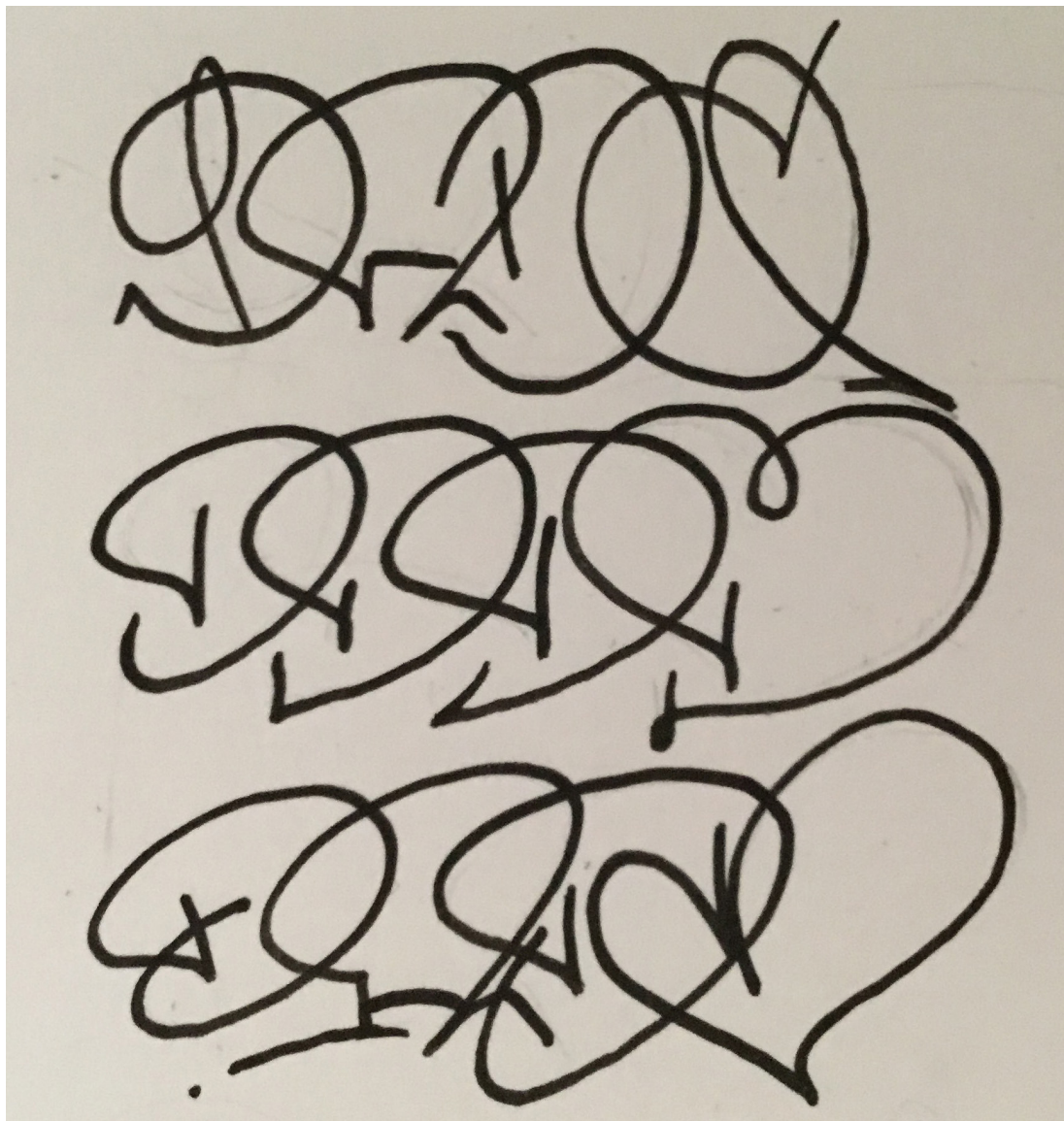
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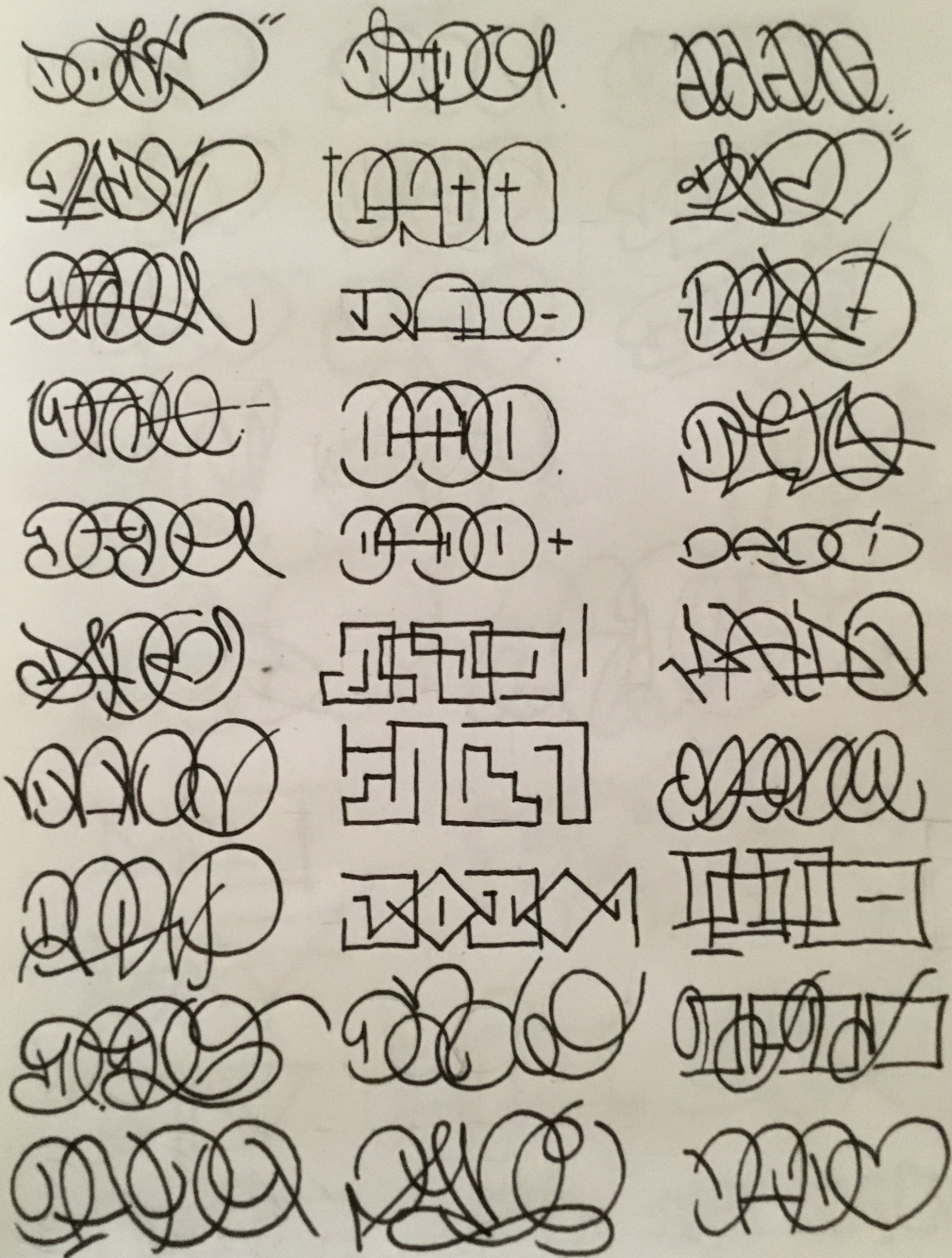
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Tagging

# 54Lo sQuaderno





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Tagging

*a cura di / dossier coordonné par / edited by*

**Javier Abarca, Orestis Pangalos & Andrea Mubi Brighenti**

*Guest artist / artiste présentée / artista ospite*

**DADO**

*Editorial*

**Lachlan Macdowall**

*Ramo? Meet Ahab: Beat Street and the Migaloo Boogaloo*

**Vittorio Parisi**

*Haunting the neoliberal city: Illegal graffiti and the “infesthetics” of urban interstices*

**Lisa Garcia**

*Urban tags: Calligraphy and cacography*

**Julian Windisch**

*Province poetry – Praise of the rural tag*

**Charles Nolan Vanlinden**

*Atlanta Style: Mapping the Local in the Digital Age*

**Konstantinos Avramidis**

*Tagging a WWII detention centre in Athens: Drawing biographies on/of the walls*

**Peter Bengtsen**

*Exploring tags through videography*

**Dina Yunis**

*The Protestor's Weapon: The Beirut Tag*



# Urban tags

## Calligraphy and cacography

**Lisa Garcia**

### Introduction

We usually designate as tag a writer's signature, illegally appended onto an urban surface. Two competing discourses about tagging are commonly found. On the one hand, the writer's technical virtuosity and the calligraphy of the tag are emphasised. The term "calligraphy", applied to the letters' form, appears to be used by artists and graffiti expert. Here is, for instance, a testimony by Keith Haring:

Often, I'd take the trains to museums and galleries and I was starting to see not only the big graffiti on the outside of the subway trains but incredible calligraphy on the inside of the cars. (Haring, in Gruen 1991: 44)

Incidentally, one can observe that, in the West, handwriting attracts attention also because it seems like an old-fashioned activity (this is less true for the Chinese characters or the Arabic alphabet than for our Latin alphabet).

On the other hand, however, tag writing is also often described in terms of doodle, stain, parasitic noise: it is the point of view developed by politicians, the media, and even, sometimes, graffiti writers themselves. Thus, the tag tends to be depicted in simplistic terms, as either beautiful or ugly, in a sort of black-&-white interpretation.

Based on this preliminary remark, the question posed here is: Is the tag to be regarded more as *calligraphy* or *cacography*? The term "calligraphy" literally means "beautiful writing", from the ancient Greek words *kalós* (beauty) and *graphein* (to write). Calligraphy is handwriting executed in an artistic and expressive way. By contrast, cacography, less employed, is formed by *kakós*, "bad" and *graphein*. Cacography is normally associated with spelling mistakes, rather than with the letter's appearance. Hence, strictly speaking, there is no antonym for calligraphy. Here, we employ the term cacography to designate that antonym, even though acalligraphy would be more accurate, since the prefix *a-* signifies negation. The prefix *caco-*, has to do with an unpleasant characteristic, as in cacophony for example, a combination of unpleasant sounds. One is reminded that in one of the earliest scholarly writings about graffiti, Jean Baudrillard (1976) used the expression of "visual cacophony" precisely to refer to tags.

### Tagging, the unpopular expression of urban art

Before considering whether tagging is calligraphic or cacographic, let's start with a piece of evidence: the tag tends to be the most unpopular expression in urban art. Tagging is usually despised by two different communities: uninitiated people (passers-by) – to whom tags appear as a childish practice, scribble, chaos, buzz, signalling a weakening of social control – and insiders. Indeed, to some

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artists and writers, tagging represents the graffiti's early sketch, the first step before starting serious production. It is not uncommon to have tagging regarded as a by-product of graffiti, interpreted as a worthless scrawl or a filthy mess, comparing to the accomplished pieces (Saavedra 2017: 6).

The alleged inferiority of the tag is usually explained with reference to issues of technical skills, as well as of size. According to the graffiti's own rules, tagging can be unproblematically covered by a throw-up or a piece, while the reverse is not granted. Despite that, precisely their lack of popularity may give tags a greater formal freedom, escaping the stylistic categorization of much graffiti.

*The tag is one of the few public expressions of handwriting  
in cities now marked above all by typography*

### **Which handwriting for the tag?**

It is impossible here to go into the details of the different types of forms used by the writers. Every signature is the result of a particular national and local culture. Nonetheless, a

few general characteristics can be outlined. At school, we learn to write in block letters and italics (*corsivo*), but not calligraphy. Italic (*corsivo*, from the Latin word *currere*, to run) is the fastest way to write. In the 1960s, graffiti pioneers such as Taki 183 could only use the scriptural codes they knew: block letters and cursive writing. Their primary purpose was bombing the urban space, following a quantitative strategy. As noticed by Martha Cooper (2008: 8) earlier tags "looked naive and unpolished compared to the slick tags of today". Style wars began once the urban space was saturated with signatures. Calligraphic research was a strategy to shine again, adding quality to quantity. In *Getting up*, Craig Castleman (1982: 55) already observed: "In order to make their names more noticeable, many writers began to embellish them". Despite stylistic evolution, cursive writing and block letters are still quite widespread. In Madrid, for instance, Menda has taken up Muelle and *Flecheros'* style in cursive writing, with arrows and trademark symbols.

Since the invention of mobile-characters printing by Gutenberg, around 1450 (freely inspired by earlier Chinese techniques), calligraphy has become increasingly less appealing. In a world where typography dominates the scriptural panorama, could the tag be a way to reconnect with calligraphy? We know that each writer draws inspiration from one or more other writers who function as graphic referents — consider for instance, Blade in the US, Muelle or Juanmanuel in Madrid, etc. With these "calligraphy masters", the young writers start their learning process, like Flea I, "Lee's graffiti teacher" (Castelman 1982: 19), or Ersi with Ars in Madrid, a more experienced classmate who guided him in the formal development of his signature. The tag can be a real challenge that requires the help of an initiated person — a professor of calligraphy who would draw the first lines to set an initial example. Extensive practice based on repetition is then required. Any medium will do: a paper towel, a fogged shower enclosure, a sketchbook, a black book, etc. To achieve the best forms, one has to practice one's signature introducing variations, including a range of icons (such as stars, halos, arrows, etc.), until the desired result materialises. If traditional calligraphy needs a horizontal substrate — such as a piece of parchment, or paper — it is not uncommon to see tags inserted into a rectangle, or square. The graffiti writer unconsciously returns to the page format, in order to put emphasis on the signature, in the vastness of the city. Sometimes this calligraphic work is so sophisticated that the signature may become unreadable — at that point precisely, for some it becomes an undecipherable scribbling, a cacography.

The term cacography may difficult to interpret: there are no cacography workshops, and no studies about the topic. Ugliness has never been really attractive. The metaphor of dirt is often used in the media and in political discourse. Graffiti are measured in terms of millions of euros spent on removal.

Sometimes, we find explicit mentions of its ugliness. Significantly, *El Mundo* titled an article “Grafiti con ‘f’ de feo” (*feo* means *ugly*) (Robles 2013). Calligraphy is produced in an artist’s studio, tags in the streets. Constraining factors – such as available time, weather conditions, lighting, etc. – are clearly different. Also, tags are mostly vertical, rather than horizontal, put on rough rather than smooth surfaces, which can lead to drips and inaccuracies. Spray painting and markers clearly differ from pen and ink. In short, tagging involves a series of constraints which lead to the impossibility of formal perfection. In addition, tagging it can be intentionally anti-aesthetic, deliberately cast against “good taste” (examples from Madrid include Sosa, Itzo, Pateo and Geray).

What would, for instance, an elaborate tag and the frantically circles scribbled by Cy Twombly in *Bacchus* (2005) have in common? Both are dripping handwriting, so more a cacography than a calligraphy. Yet, as we know, Twombly is sold at 15m dollars, while tags are not considered worthy the cost of their erasure. Depending on the place, either placed in the streets, or an institution such as a museum, the same scribbling can be described as beautiful, or ugly. Cacography becomes beautiful, and expensive, when it is under control, contained in a frame. The spatial context clearly influences our aesthetic judgments when it comes to deciding between calligraphy and cacography: in that moment, a range of additional subjective factors, including emotions, intoxications, artistic philosophies, and so on, similarly come into play.

## Conclusion

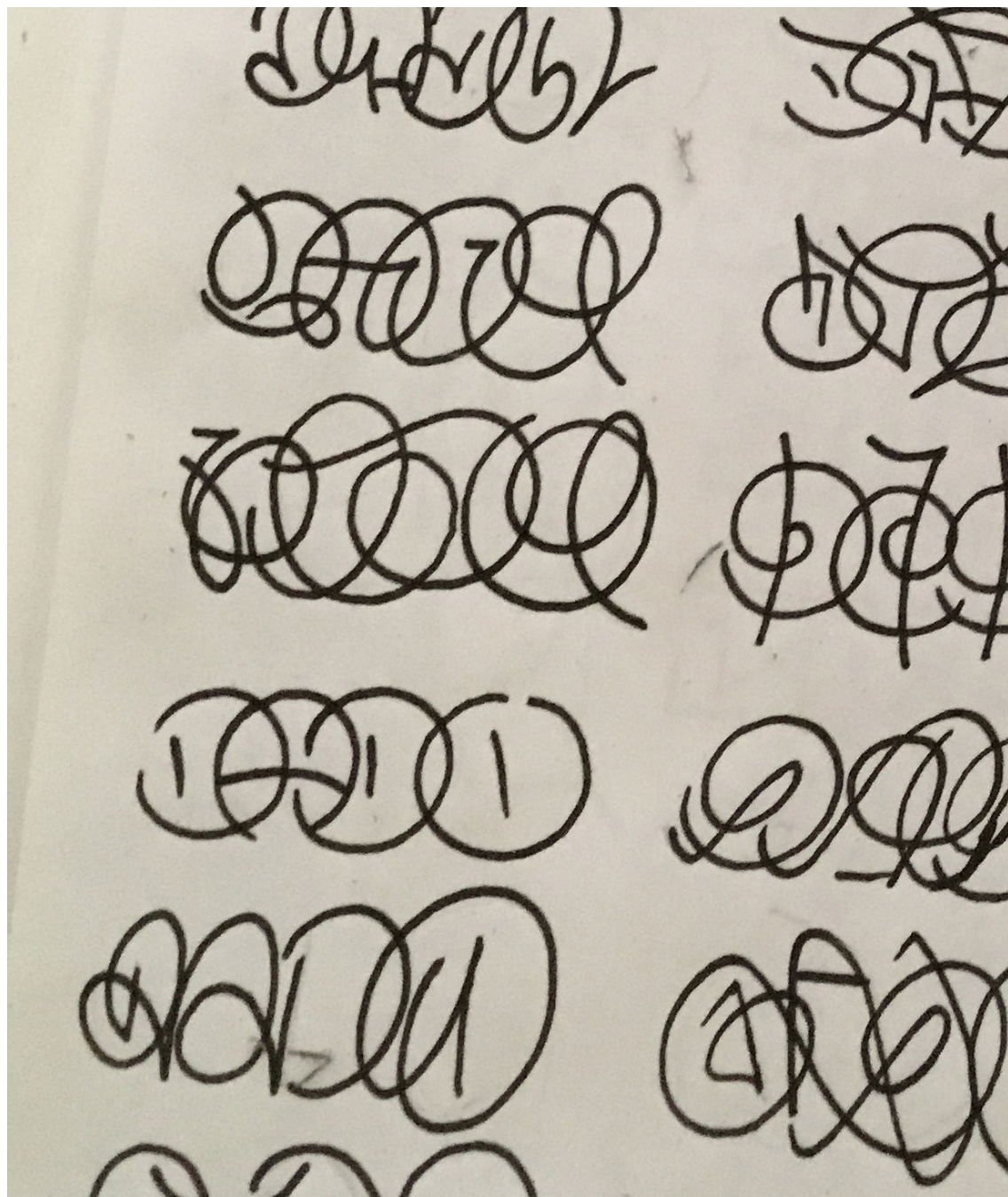
The tag is one of the few public expressions of handwriting in cities now marked above all by typography (signage, advertising, etc.). While typography seeks to be legible and functional, tagging represents but the expression of a name. Therefore, it can be twice disturbing: first, it disrupts the neutrality of public space, second, it is not functional. Because of this, tags have been compared to hieroglyphs, scribbles or drawings. Incidentally, this reminds us of the visual nature of the writing: well before symbolic communication, writing means laying down a set of lines. As remarked by François Chastenet (2016), name writing may communicate “nothing but gestural dexterity”. Tagging thus it brings us face to face with the materiality of writing, with the writer’s gesture. Tagging pays a tribute to handwriting, giving back its pictorial thickness.

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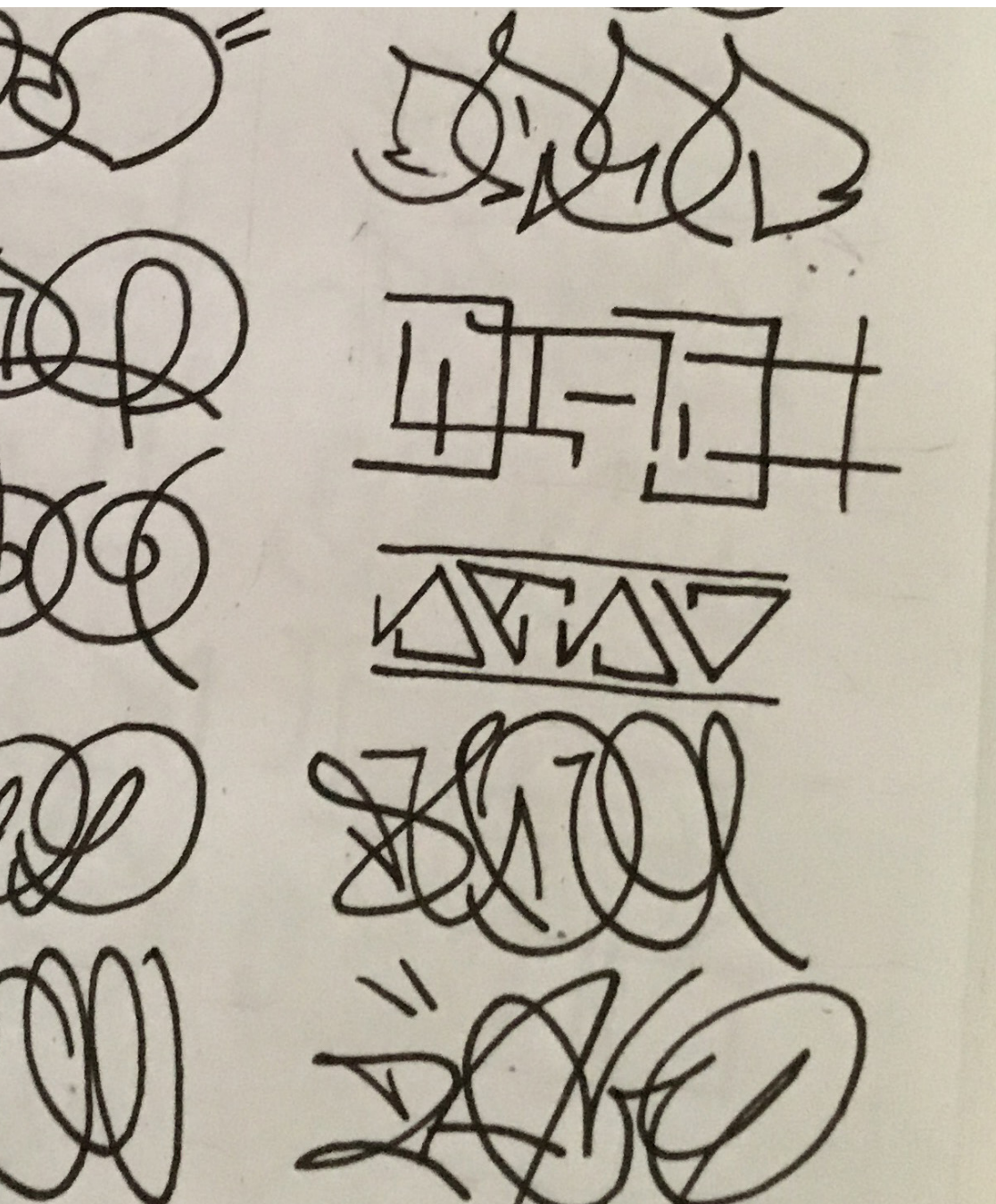


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**edited by // Javier Abarca, Orestis Pangalos & Andrea Mubi  
Brighenti**

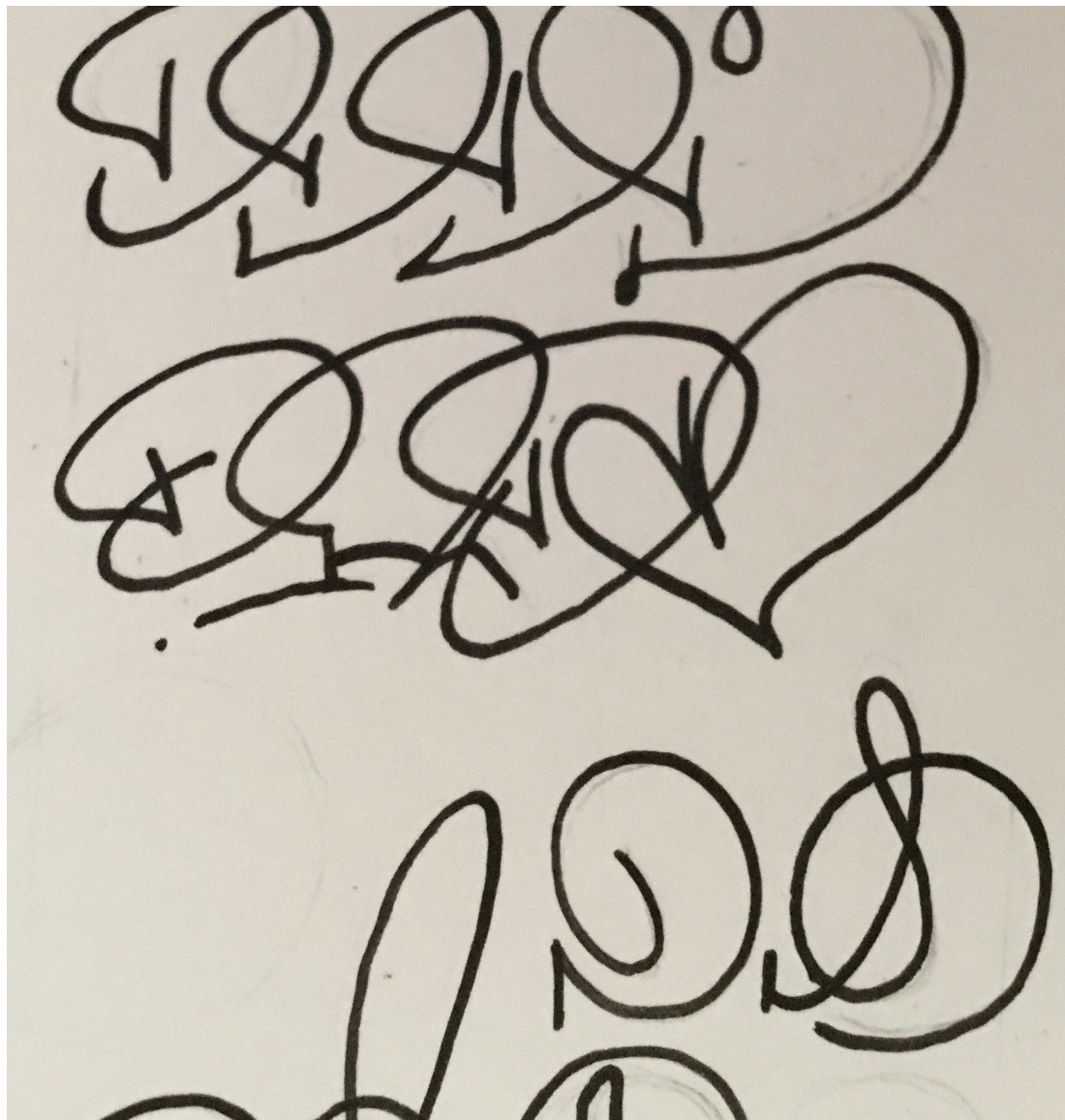
**Guest Artist // DADO**





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54

In the next issue:  
Tagging

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