

Chicago Loosies:
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Kool Thing: On Cigs and Myths and Doing What

By [Chris Reeves](#)

In a previous life rhythm, Breanne Trammell operated, out of her home in Fayetteville, Arkansas, a project space called Public Storage in which she invited friends and artists of interest into this space/home to put on exhibitions that would be archival in nature (and would later be, naturally, archived). Like Public Storage, this book is an artist archive project, a collection of artist ephemera gathered by the ecstatic non-academic criteria of "I like this." Unlike Public Storage, this book has Breanne inviting an artist into her archive without their knowledge. Far from an artist-as-stalker-cum-photo-archive-cum-public-exhibition maneuver from other art histories via Vito Acconci or Sophie Calle, the identity of the artist featured here, possibly calling themselves "Kool Cig" (or maybe someone less pseudonymous who just likes Kool Cigarettes) remains unknown.

Like many a graffito or tagger, the anonymity is as much about carving an identity understood through the repetition of phrases or images that pop up throughout various city sites as it is to evade legal capture (non-city ordained mural and paintings remain unsanctioned effervescence, particularly in Chicago where spray paint remains illegal for sale in the city). In April of 2023, Reddit user CWW5 posted in r/Chicago: "why do I see

the graffiti tag "CIG" everywhere? I always wonder what it means and can't find the answer, so I figured I would ask here." Responses ranged from "stupid bored kids," racially essentialist claims around menthol cigarettes and "street cred," an obscure reference to Sonic Youth's song "Kool Thing" (the song appearing on the album "Goo," which has a Raymond Pettibon drawn image of a person smoking on it), and "some good art." Rather than try to decode what it means (a fool's errand as the struggling Redditor's replies attest) we might be better equipped to consider what it does. What follows is four short odes to whatever Kool Cig might/could be:

KOOL CIG GRAMMARS: HISTORICAL PRECEDENCE & PHONY FORMATIONS

Way back in 1982, Rammellzee, the subway writer, artist, and one third of one of the strangest hip hop singles of that decade ("Beat Bop" with K-Robb and Eszter Bailant, produced and with album art by Jean Michel-Basquiat) self-published a pamphlet called *Assassin's Knowledge of the Square: Points 1-720*. In *Assassin's Knowledge*, Rammellzee, wanting to better understand his own forays into letter drawing as a subway writer, analyzes calligraphic history (of 14th C. Monks) and concludes that a given letter's ornate ornamentation visual obfuscation was the letter writer's way to withhold language from power (various papacies). While this is historically inaccurate (medieval illuminated manuscript creation was almost always at the service of the church), Rammellzee's notion of "Gothic Futurism" nonetheless readdresses the visual history of language to connect to his own contemporary art making and situation.¹ The subway writing and graffiti of Rammellzee's day wasn't simply a reconfiguring of the gallery system or a critical refutation of abstraction and abstract expressionism (those ideas around graffiti and writing came later and mostly from (white) critics, gallerists, and art historians). Rather, what graffiti and writing could do instead was to supply a new grammar, one that spoke to the potential of realizing fantastic personal mythologies.² Rammellzee wasn't just a subway graffiti writer, he was also acting in the lineage of holy visual writing, and this self-appointed connection empowered him to further weaponize the letter, and thus language. Full of swoops, depictions of protective armor, and resisting the "phony formations" of the standard alphabet, Rammellzee dedicated himself to liberating the alphabet from the corrupting social forces that stunted its symbolic potential. Said Rammellzee in 1982: "Always remember: one of Lee (Quiñones) last trains said, 'Evolution will take over.'

¹ Sun Ra, another artist who cultivated and lived a fantastic personalized mythology, thought of language on similar terms. Ra believed in a multiplicity of meanings forever inherent not just in the semantic but in the visual aspect of language (its possibilities for balance and difference). Says Ra: "A covenant of Arkestra": it's like a selective service of God. Picking out some people. Arkestra has a 'ra' at the beginning and the end Ra can be written as 'Ar' or 'Ra,' and on both ends of the word it is an equation: the first and the last are equal.... That's phonetic balance." Ra believed meaning in language could be decoded through the universal language of equations, a sentiment that Rammellzee also held, styling his own name as a military formation of the letter (looking most similar to the Epsilon symbol), and legally changing it by the 1990s, saying, "why merely name oneself when identity is the result of a mixed-up math, the sum of complex calculations and multidimensional coordinates?" The Lettrists of the 1950s held a similar contempt for the weaponization of language by modern life, focusing on individual letters instead.

² It's difficult to understand this particular desire to cultivate a mythology of self outside of context of these painted A and CC subway lines traveling through a then dystopian New York City which stood as a bombed-out testament to late capitalist failure and investment hubris. Yet, its precisely on account of the city's precarious state that there seemed to be a freedom for artists to cultivate their own self-fashioning and mythology. I am thinking of Jose Esteban Muñoz's idea of "disidentification" which, generally, is a process of fashioning the world by working with or against dominant ideology. Performing the reality of a given situation (e.g., Muñoz talks about the defiance of public drag). "Shuffling back and forth between reception and production." Rammellzee's NYC contemporaries such as Klaus Nomi or David McDermott, in their dedication to their respective queer resistance to normative behaviors and attitudes (the former an alien, the latter a time traveling dandy) are particularly potent examples of this tendency. See: José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U Minnesota Press, 1999).

KOOL CIG AND THE FLUTTERING HISTORIES: MYTHS

Rammellzee folds time into his own mythological schema by placing his work within a continuum, stating “when the monks realized what power they had, they hid the letter in the darkness of Hell, where it lay dormant for 400 years, before the subway writers rediscovered it, by the dim light of its illumination, and began to armor it for a new future.” By his own formulation, Rammellzee belongs to Monk culture rather than Graffiti culture, collapsing time to let a powerful minor gesture of the past (the ornamentation of letters) coalesce with a contemporary one (letter writing) to address a forever problem of language’s inability to fully represent what it signifies. Which brings us back to Kool Cig and what those words and their shapes might signify. Kool is an exclusively menthol cigarette. Since, 2016 in Chicago, there has been a partial ban on the sale of menthol cigarettes, a move that seems to be on the heels of the FDA’s own proposed nationwide ban of menthol in cigarettes (still TBD). While this isn’t the space to talk about this entirely racially coded legislation that trumpets health concerns while keeping access to actual health care for the very same individuals this law targets out of reach (e.g., “you won’t *need* to go to the doctor if we just take away the unhealthy stuff that isn’t socially popular”), we can say that to christen oneself after a controversial object is to identify with that controversy. To call oneself a partially banned object is to announce yourself as something potentially dangerous. At the same time, this isn’t the typical nickname posturing of the tough guy (reserved for the world’s Snakes, Skulls, Lowblows, etc.). This is a more thoughtful pseudonym, one that uses the familiar repetition of advertising products in a non-functional way, evoking a barely attainable object of desire that really has no business being out of reach (like health care). But also, when letters become a stand-in for a person, much like when an image does the same, meaning becomes myth in that the subject has willfully surrendered their identity over to flexible reception. Like advertising it’s targeted at us to make our own meaning, but unlike advertising it doesn’t really have anything to sell other than a galvanizing of mythic possibilities. Who or what is Kool Cig and why does it exist and why is it everywhere in the city and what on earth am I supposed to do with something that doesn’t tell me what to do with it and escapes any easy calculus of profitability or use value?

KOOL CIG AND TRANSMUTATIONS: CHANGELINGS

Transplanting to another space is always an exercise in controlled assimilation. How does one retain the markers of their specific identity while also finding themselves in an indeterminate commons? In Chicago, there is the no-ketchup-on-the-hot-dog city identity sect, but for those looking for a less food-based *raison d’être*, understanding how a relationscape – the way a city’s human and non-human actors move through us – can be tricky to navigate for the recently arrived. With this in mind, what do we make of Breanne’s first major Chicago project being about seeing the environment of the city through a series of arbitrary landmarks chosen by the presence of an anonymous someone else? Again, there’s some art historical resonance: groups like the Situationists and Canada’s General Idea aimed to bring to light the realities of experiencing topography through the seemingly unremarkable that littered their respective landscapes, but Breanne’s project, while sharing some symmetry, is distinct from these historical ambitions and their respective political maneuvers (diagnosing power’s imposing of a poverty of imagination in how the world could be seen in the former, queering normative standards of media vision in the latter). It’s tempting also to see a psychological profile: Breanne seeing Kool Cig and then, through photo collecting and publishing an archive of encountered images, Kool Cig is seen through Breanne, and this transmutation becomes a miniature diagnosis on the feeling of anonymity all throughout the city. Yet, that also doesn’t quite fit the playfulness of the project. Perhaps, regarding landing on a firm compass needle that aligns “concept” with “intention,” we can settle on the notion

that this project is something akin to a love letter to the micro that makes up the macro of Chicago. Like any politic of encounter, the effects are felt wide and far even if they do not have the ocular or network force of what we might properly coin an "event." But what makes this micro, two words crudely painted: "Kool Cig," among all the other micro, notable?

KOOL CIG AND LOVE: HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN

Unique from "around the city" photo collections that showcase the chained-up bikes or sewer lids of a given ecosystem, the act of archiving an ubiquitous, seemingly apolitical tag can be understood as a didactic one. For one, it highlights a kind of do-it-yourself mark making that reminds that space is actually ours. Secondly, and following that gesture, it galvanizes us to think about what minor interventions into dominant spaces we might also be able to achieve, a kind of "I want to do that"-ism. In short, Kool Cig might be you, but it could also be us, and that mini lesson is a forever resonant one.