

ANALYSIS

VANDALISM ON CAMPUS

Six months of vandalism costs York over \$40,000

By ANDREW CLARK

Between January and June of 1987 there were 156 incidents of vandalism at York University, causing a total of \$40,631 in damage to both University and private property.

Acts such as the destruction of trees and the defacement of buildings are age-old problems; another type of vandalism also occurs at York with startling frequency: the vandalism of art. Vandals have many reasons for destroying works of art, from sheer boredom to hatred of the piece. But the results are always the same: irreparable damage to both the piece and the artists themselves.

A major part of this year's second annual York Mural Exhibition has already been vandalized. The exhibit features the work of six visual arts students whose creations were chosen by professors to be exhibited around the York campus during the 1987 school year. A mural created by Janet Morton, entitled "The Big Decision," which was hung in the Founders cafeteria, was defaced one and a half weeks after it was put on display. The vandals removed oil paint from the mural and scratched the words "Hate It" in red ink across its surface. "When I first saw it I felt like somebody had kicked me in the stomach," said Morton. "I'm not someone who believes art is sacred, but there should be a respect for an expression whether or not you like it, because in a very real way an expression is what someone is."

"Siting the Super Nova," by Alex De Cosson, is another winner of the mural competition. De Cosson's work, which was positioned outside, directly east of the Ross Building, had become a watering hole of sorts for vandals, according to Morton, having been vandalized on a daily basis since the beginning of the exhibition. Along with Morton and De Cosson, artists Diane Gange,

whose work is in the Ross Building, and Steve Holland, whose mural is at the Winters cafeteria ramp, have also had their work defaced. In all, four out of six works of art from only one competition were vandalized in the first three months of the fall term.

In a study conducted in 1973, Stanley Cohen outlined five basic types of vandalism. According to Cohen, certain forms of property destruction are tolerated because of the times (usually very limited and specified) at which they occur: Hallowe'en, for example. Cohen refers to this as ritualism. In addition, society gives certain groups, such as university students, "license" to commit acts of vandalism, he said.

Certain kinds of vandalism are accepted as the norm for our society, Cohen explained. Writing on washroom walls or in library books typifies this kind of vandalism. Vandalism is more likely to occur in a walled-in environment such as a university or a prison, confining itself to that specific local. Abandoned buildings and enclosed areas also encourage vandalism, he added.

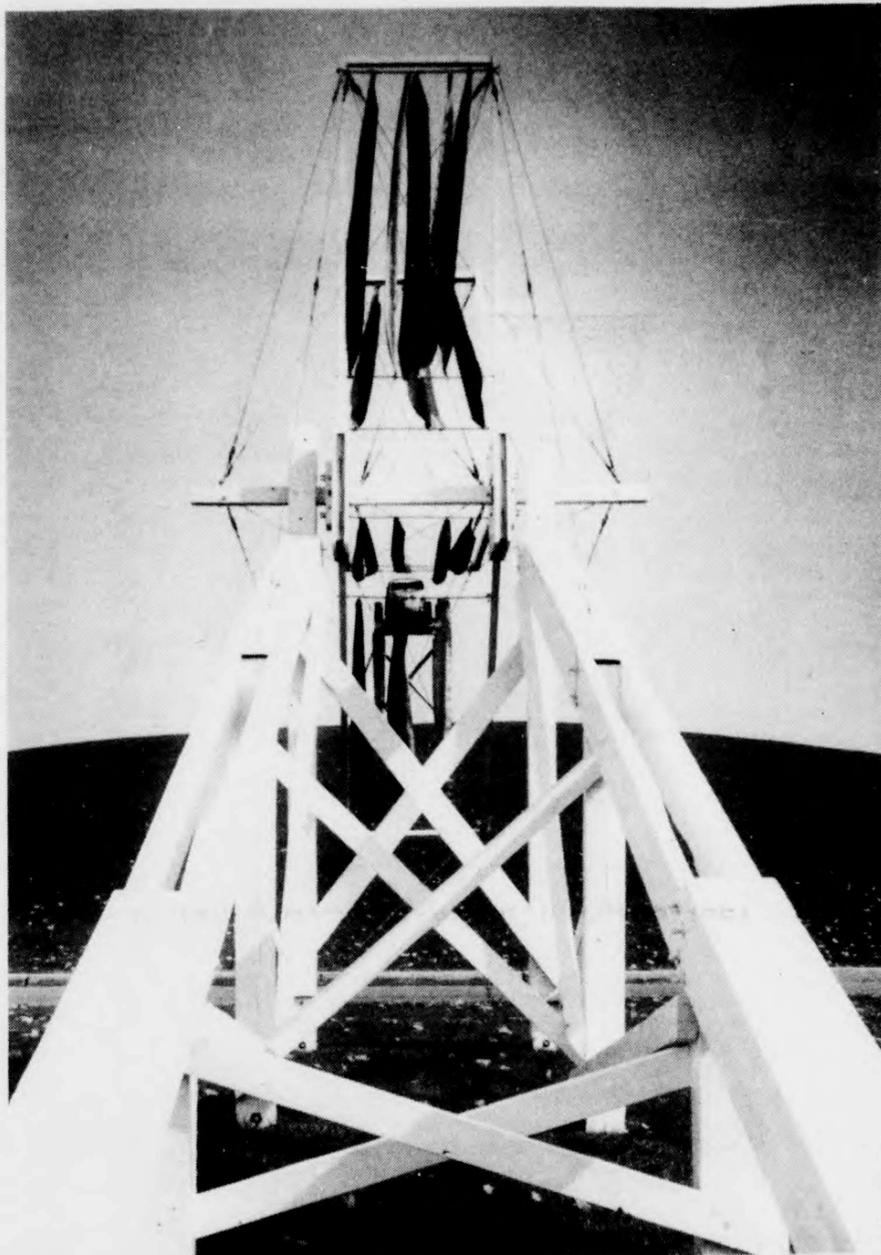
York vandals fall into four out of Cohen's five categories. First, tactical vandals deface public or private property for an ideological cause, such as anarchism. Vindictive vandals, on the other hand, destroy the property of those whom they feel have wronged them: for example, professors, or Beaver Foods. Frequently, vandals indulge in defacement of property, as a form of competition: seeing who can throw the stone further, is an example of this. The most common form of vandalism at York falls into the fourth category of malicious vandalism. These vandals derive satisfaction by destroying the property of others. Their targets are unknown to them (unlike vindictive vandals), and boredom is often the cause.

According to Professor David Wiesenthal of York's Psychology Department, vandalism is most common amongst 15- to 16-year-old boys, who commit such acts of destruction in groups. After this age, the power of these groups breaks down, as the males begin to take part in sexually mixed groups where this behaviour is not socially rewarding, Wiesenthal explained.

In a poll of high school students who had never been caught for vandalism, twenty-five percent said they had slashed tires in the last year. Ninety percent admitted to committing some act of vandalism in the last year. Vandals are usually characterized as problem kids from broken homes. However, this judgement can be misleading, according to Wiesenthal, as only one percent of those who vandalize are caught.

Wiesenthal describes vandals as people who are searching for stimulation, which acts of vandalism serve to satisfy. For them, it is a form of recreation, he said, and more often than not they do not themselves consider their acts to be vandalism. Some psychologists believe that the motivation which compels some individuals to create compels others to vandalize, Wiesenthal added.

Vandalism of art is prevalent at all university campuses. At Brock University in St. Catharines, nude female figures compris-



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ing a sculpture were ripped from their fixtures and placed in stairwells and in private residences, in positions implying sexual activity. The people responsible were Education students at Brock who saw the act as a practical joke. The artist, Yvonne Singer, pressed charges.

Today, whenever a piece of art is exhibited in a public place, the key problem is security. Insurance companies are reluctant to insure sculpture, and institutions are afraid to contract works which are outside of mainstream style or content. "Anything that sticks out or calls attention to itself may attract vandals," Wiesenthal explained.

Director of York Security, Michael O'Neil, feels that some artists at York invite vandalism. O'Neil cites De Cosson's "Super Nova" as an example of this kind of seduction. Security felt that a ladder which allowed people to explore the work from inside the automobile (situated on top of the traffic circle in front of the Ross Building) would tempt vandals, he said. Vandalism did occur, but whether in answer to an invitation, or as a denial of the right of others to enjoy the work, is debatable.

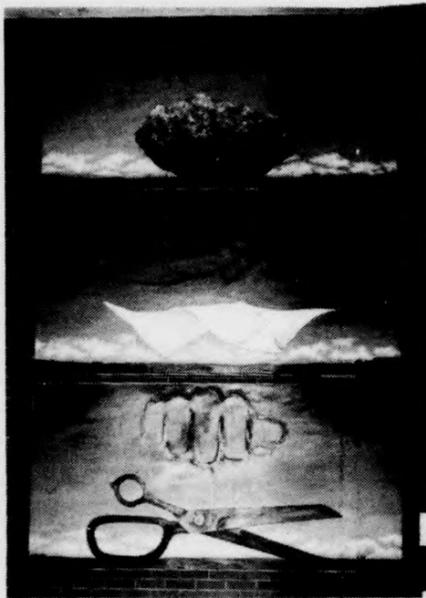
Many people are unaware of the financial value of the art on York's campus. "Sticky Wicket,"

located outside the Administrative Studies Building, and donated to York by American sculptor Mark Di Suvero, is a statue which York could never afford to buy.

Toronto's subways are graffiti-free because vandalism is not allowed to progress beyond its early stages, according to Julian Porter, former chairman of the TTC. "If you don't clean up immediately, you can't get rid of it," he said. "Graffiti gets people thinking about (more) graffiti."

York has pursued this same approach to vandalism with moderate success. York Provost Tom Meininger credits this improvement to better self-policing by the York community, along with a willingness to get involved, in preventing vandalism. According to Meininger, vandalism was a problem at York five years ago, but due to better security facilities and more student involvement, a lot of progress has been made.

While vandalism against art is a problem, York artists are not discouraged, according to Janet Morton. "It's hard not to take it personally, but this vandalism has actually inspired me to do more out-of-gallery work," she explained. "I would rather have hate for my work than indifference. I've hardened my skin to vandalism a bit."



Janet Morton's "The Big Decision"

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