



\*photos by Claire Sykes

# SPRAYBACK

## Women's voices cut through the graffiti din

by Sara Singer

"Stop rape now"  
"Rapists beware"  
"Fight back, be free, live strong, love yourself"  
"Dethrone the patriarchy"

These are among the many messages being expressed by women across the campus — from bathroom stalls to construction hoardings. Graffiti has given a voice to many women who feel silenced.

Graffiti takes many different forms and serves many purposes, as anyone who visits a women's washroom at York can witness. In the wake of the Montreal massacre, graffiti has served as a means of available and anonymous expression for women threatened by the fear of violence.

Claire Sykes, a York fine arts student, used graffiti after the massacre to expose the way the media turned the event into a spectacle. She says she wanted to make a statement about violence against women at

York.

"It was empowering to do but also a statement," Sykes said in an interview. "I was scared and upset by the massacre and I was sick of the way the media had portrayed the issue which I wanted to expose in a blatant and aggressive way."

One year after the massacre, Sykes and her friends planned their most visible piece. It appeared on the construction hoardings around the Vari Hall site.

"We put the names of the fourteen women along the wall so everyone who walked down it had to be reminded of the issue of violence against women. I didn't want people to forget," said Sykes. "On a symbolic level it represented violence against women in the institution."

Sykes said the anonymity of graffiti is what made the piece possible. It also allowed more of a focus on the issue and prevented it from being a form of self-aggrandizement.

"Graffiti is a dialogue — you can say what you really feel. It's a way of getting a

message across that you couldn't do anywhere else."

"Graffiti has no rules, you don't have to conform to any aesthetic standards and you aren't responsible to anyone. And yet it still has the effect of being very public."

A week after the graffiti was put up, it was whitewashed out by the university. Sykes said she felt the covering up was a silencing for her and a denial on the part of the university to deal with rampant sexism both within and outside the university.

Sykes was fortunately able to salvage her graffiti by photographing it and mounting the photos as a gallery exhibit last year.

But not all graffiti is saved from obliteration — particularly those discourses which take place in the women's washroom.

Barbara Godard, a York English professor, conducted a

study on women's graffiti on campus and in restaurants around Toronto in 1987 and 1988.

Godard, along with an assistant, followed the development of the graffiti by checking up on it weekly, and keeping track of its gradual buildup. This allowed Godard to look at the graffiti in steps rather than as an end product.

The most common graffiti scenario, Godard noted, is the 'problem situation' in which women seek advice on personal issues. In this sense, graffiti functions as a form of self-help among women, a "comfort station."

Godard found various genres of graffiti ranging from discussions on politics and feminism to debates on graffiti writing itself. According to Godard, many of the authors expressed concern and disappointment that their words could be wiped out with the swipe of an Ajax sponge.

"These expressions seemed to suggest that the activity of writing was something of a political gesture and that the fear of containment of speech among women was very strong," she wrote.

According to Godard, the fact that graffiti takes place means that there are not enough opportunities for women to be heard in society. "If women and other marginal groups had a forum to express their ideas, they wouldn't need to use graffiti."

But the fact that graffiti is transitional and anonymous takes away from its effectiveness in giving women a voice that is heard, since graffiti is not taken seriously and is regularly removed.

"Graffiti may work as a form of empowerment but it is very qualified because it is still going on within the space of a washroom which means women obviously have a limited forum for their [speech]."

However, according to Godard, women's washroom graffiti remains a conversation among women, dealing in issues of vital interest, where writers can count on other women to hear and respond to their voices.

Recent graffiti has appeared encouraging women to name their attacker or date rapist. In this sense, graffiti functions for women as a means of circulating information widely to those most concerned.

"Graffiti by women on rape, violence and naming names is part of a discourse on the body, on power relations and the fear of not being heard," Godard wrote.

In this sense it is a way for women to talk back.

## Bodies and minds

### Tai Chi puts women in control of their health

by Kerry Hobbs

As women age, our bodies change and we generally face more health problems than men. Although we can't turn back our biological clocks, we can decrease our symptoms and slow down the aging process through Tai Chi exercise.

"As we grow older, our bodies shrink and our joint stiffen," says Judy Millen, an instructor and member of the women's committee for the Toronto Tai Chi Association.

Tai Chi is a Chinese exercise developed six centuries ago as a way to improve health. It consists of 108 movements that slowly stretch and turn the body, loosening joints, massaging internal organs and improving muscle tone.

Practice of Tai Chi has rejuvenating qualities.

"Tai Chi puts the whole body through all its motions, turning the body back into its logical architecture, by getting the body in shape to do its job," says Millen.

Over time, stretching changes the skeletal structure. For women, the waist disappears and hips become square. For

men the pelvis area widens. These physiological changes provide more space for internal organs to drop down into the pelvis where they may be more readily massaged by Tai Chi's movements. The resulting increase in room for the lungs allows for greater efficiency of breathing.

Being a weight-bearing exercise, Tai Chi strengthens bones through increased blood circulation, which elevates calcium and bone marrow levels. This is especially important to menopausal women who are prone to osteoporosis, a disease that decreases bone volume and mineral content by replacing healthy bone with fatty and fibrous materials. This weakening of the bone can cause spontaneous fractures.

The many blood vessels in the breasts are strengthened through increased circulation — an advantage for breast feeding. Tai Chi also helps reduce the likelihood of breast cancer.

At advanced levels of Tai Chi, the heart rate increases to aerobic levels without causing stress on joints as is the case with running and other high impact activities.

"It's really hard to injure yourself if you follow your instructor's advice," says Millen, since Tai Chi is also about learning to relax and has the same effects on the mind as meditation.

