

Graffiti: rupturing society's beliefs and expectations

By LEN-CLER CUNNINGHAM

Art does not come down and lie in the beds we make for it. It slips away as soon as its name is uttered; it likes to preserve its incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets its very name.

— Jean Dubuffet

Anything is art if an artist says it is.
— Marcel Duchamp

From the hallowed confines of City Hall, where the most civic minded and public spirited among us have rose in order to benevolently guide the rest, has come the recent decision to spend \$53,000 on cleansing the city of graffiti.

As Toronto attempts to portray itself as a 'World-Class' city for the Summit, the "Spring Shine" beautification program will inevitably extend to the eradication of various other forms of visual filth — the homeless, prostitutes, and street vendors.

Thus, Toronto interprets 'World-Class' as an aestheticized city where everyone is happy and nothing every happens; poverty, sex for sale, and the unlicensed sale of commodities simply does not occur.

Fortunately, the repressive paranoia accompanying the Summit could have the exact opposite effect of that intended. The graffiti clean-up program is a direct challenge, if not invitation, to anyone possessing an index finger, two bucks for a spray can, and the most meagre of artistic inclinations.

Unfortunately a possible consequence is that those motivated by the urge to relate against the Summit, and the anti-graffiti campaign, may

well be those whose limited artistic imagination is the visual equivalent of animals pissing on bush to mark their territory. This analogy is an obvious reference to the odious game of 'tag,' whereby one person 'hits' a fresh building with their moniker: Pez, Galooch, Zircon, Fresh (you've seen them somewhere), and the rest follow suit.



Artist Mark Pauline's educational poster.

The lone dissenter against City Council's attempt to purge Toronto of graffiti was Ward 7 councillor Roger Hollander, who defended graffiti as a form of artistic expression for those denied other venues. Two questions arise: is this a valid statement? And how the hell did this guy get elected to one of the most conservative pro-development

councils in the history of Toronto?

The latter question is best left to students of urban politics. As to the former, any question dealing with validity and art witnesses the inevitable marching out of Marcel Duchamp. When he placed a urinal in an art show and called it a fountain, he was attempting to break the institution's stranglehold on artistic production and prove that "anything is art if an artist says it is."

Duchamp may have succeeded in redefining what an 'artistic object' is, but he failed in liberating these objects from institutional control, and the laws of commodity production. Galleries, museums, and wealthy patrons simply assimilated this new art ethic and continued, stronger than ever, as the arbiters of good taste.

The institutionalization of art, and artistic production, effectively denies it the power to cajole people into questioning fundamental aspects of social conduct and authority. By confining art to "art institutions" it becomes a neutered and powerless form of entertainment or, at the very least, "an exhilarating distraction."

Yet, outside the strictures of these institutions art regains its ability to liberate people from near-ritualized expectations and patterns of behaviour. West Coast artist Mark Pauline engaged in a series of "billboard modifications" in the late '70s. By altering either the text or image of billboards or affixing posters of copulating cats with captions such as "slaves" and "In the domestic cat, as well as in larger felines, the neck bite during copulation is a common purpose," onto Banks, Pauline twisted not only the authority and effect of advertising images, but hopefully disrupted the traditional attitude



AD FOR WORKAHOLICS ANONYMOUS: West Coast artist Frank Discussion's situationist cartoon/poster. Make your own at home.

towards one's relationship with the bank.

Graffiti is equally as capable of rupturing expectations and attitudes. Prior to the unveiling of the airmen's memorial on University Ave., someone spraypainted "Gumby goes to Heaven" on the base. When Alfred Sung turned the front of his store, Club Monaco, into a gigantic package mailed to Queen St., "Return To Sender" was painted in perfect block letters to depict a postal stamp. And U of T's physical education centre had "ARCHITORTURE" scrawled across its dull grey concrete walls.

The textual message of each is inevitably altered for anyone who had seen, or possibly only read about, these selective acts of graffiti. Instead of a solemn memorial to fallen airmen, one laughs at Gumby ascending to his heavenly rest.

Sung's Club Monaco is no longer a gracious gift bestowed upon Queen St. and its denizens, but an unwanted and unwelcome intrusion into the urban landscape. "ARCHITORTURE" makes a subtle observation on the visual violence perpetrated by oppressive design; a debate York students are well versed in.

War memorials, commerce, and structural monuments to academic endeavour, are not only denied the respect which is traditionally theirs, but the very premise of knee-jerk respect for these institutions is attacked.

In the York walking tunnel amid the childish cartoons, borrowed and stale slogans, and inane declarations of love which one expects from ten year olds, someone spraypainted the statement, if not plea, that "Art is not a mirror, art is a hammer." And so it should be.

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