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Is it art? A wall at Queen and Soho Streets is covered with "graffiti tag" players' handwork. The impromptu artists have been leaving their marks on buildings all over Toronto. The rage for "graffiti tag" — in which teams of artists armed with

spray paint cans try to outdo each other's work — began last summer and has resulted in thousands of dollars in damage, police said. Downtown residents want stern measures against the culprits.

'Graffiti tag' game no fun for residents as buildings defaced

By Shelley Page Toronto Star

Metro police and downtown residents are losing in a game of "graffiti tag" that's causing thousands of dollars of damage to buildings across the city.

A group of doodling bandits are playing tag with each other on downtown and west-end buildings and it's out of control, said Constable Gary Brennan.

"People are coming in and destroying everything the community has worked hard to clean up," said Brennan, who works at the Parkdale mini-police station.

Brennan has followed the work of the graffiti artists since the frantic game of "tag" began last summer.

Spray paint

On almost any wall in the west end are the stylized words scribbled in felt pen or spray paint.

There are about 20 prevalent symbols across the city, including Swirl, Fresh, Aztec, Joltz and Sonix, said Brennan.

"There's a story or a game behind it once you start looking closely," he said yesterday as he showed off some of the best, or worst, examples.

The game goes like this: Each time one artist leaves his mark on a building, the dozen or so people involved in the game must find the spot and add their mark. Then it's a race to the next clean wall.

Angry residents living in Parkdale are trying to help the police catch the culprits, who are scarring the backs of buildings, fences, telephone poles and doors.

Sheila Lippiatt, vice-chairman of the Parkdale Community Policing Committee, said area residents are watching for the vandals and may set up a reward fund for the arrest and conviction of the law-breaking artists.

"These guys should be paying for the damage they're doing," she said.

Residents and police greeted a decision this week by Toronto City Council to spend \$51,000 to clean up graffiti during the June economic summit, but said it is only a Band-Aid solution.

But Toronto Alderman Roger Hollander has come out in favor of this "art of the people."

"Graffiti is a sign of life," Hollander said yesterday in a mini-tour of his favorite graffiti spots — a cluster of handmade billboards off Queen St. W. with messages against government and calling for aid for the homeless.

He accused some Toronto councillors of being out of touch for voting for the graffiti cleanup, which will start in May instead of June because of the summit.

Police say a cleanup won't solve the problem and residents have to start complaining when their property is defaced.

"It happens so often somebody has to see them," Brennan said.

He said it costs \$100 to clean graffiti off a door and \$400 for a brick wall.

Suspended sentence

Brennan arrested the man responsible for writing PFD — which stands for Pink Floyd Dude — on hundreds of Toronto buildings.

The young man received a suspended sentence and was put off probation. Brennan said the young man had caused \$7,800 damage.

Last Sunday, police made an important break in their battle against the doodlers.

Two men accused for painting the words PEZ and ZIRCON were arrested and charged with mischief over \$1,000. They will appear in court April 4.