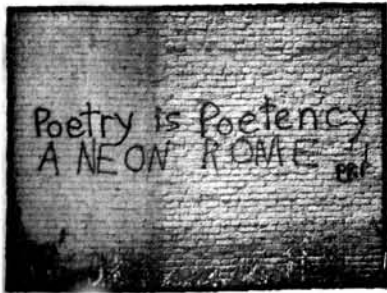


Whether they're the art of the people or vandalism, graffiti say a lot about Toronto

The writing on the wall



By Leslie Fruman Toronto Star
Photography by L.A. Morse

Resist the Rectangle. Eat the Rich.
Ah, excuse me?
Empty slabs of concrete may have inspired them, but bylaw-toting politicians are defying them. As Metro starts its major clean-up for the pin-striped types arriving for the June international economic summit, graffiti like these have been slated for obliteration.

And for those scrawling the messages, the writing is, shall we say, on the wall.

Police are on graffiti patrol, and last week they arrested and charged two doodle bandits with mischief over \$1,000. The city recently voted to spend \$51,000 to erase the what-does-it-mean-anyway mess from city walls, and now a Parkdale business group is offering a \$250 reward for the arrest and conviction of graffiti vandals who cost them thousands of dollars in clean-up costs.

While residents and business groups applaud the city's efforts to rid their neighborhood of the spray paint mess, others take a more reflective stand.

At least Toronto Alderman Roger Hollander was trying to. At a recent meeting he called his colleagues uptight about graffiti, and then faced an unexpected barrage of criticism for his comments. Graffiti, said Councillor Fred Beavis, are done by hoodlums, and "I'd like to see them jailed."

Battered but not beaten, the graffiti fans say that with the clean-up comes the cover-up of an important form of expression. They urge graffiti haters to forget politics for a minute, and ponder their meaning and motivation.

Graffiti, says graffiti collector and novelist L.A. Morse, are trying to tell us something.

In bold missives on an unlikely screen they shock us out of our billboard, TV, and newspaper complacency with messages we'll never see in those media.

You'll never see a headline blare "Eat The Rich," no newscaster will ever implore you to Wise Up, and you'll probably never see a billboard passing on this clever warning: "Little Brother Watches Back."

"I'm not condoning vandalism, and nobody likes to see obscene or racist messages on the sides of buildings, but I think this city tends to equate cleanliness with quality," says Morse, who has taken photographs of Toronto graffiti over the past 10 years.

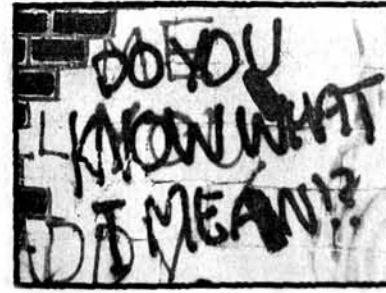
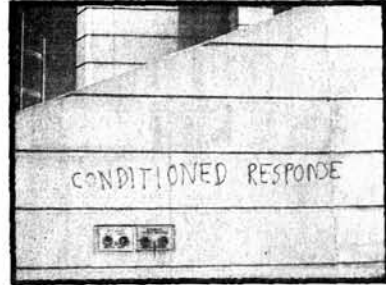
"I don't see it ruining the urban landscape. I think it adds to it. It makes me laugh, and it makes me think. I photograph it so I can keep it, because tomorrow it may be gone."

If ever Marshall McLuhan's phrase "the medium is the message" applied, it's in this context. Try to move the messages left on walls to a more mainstream medium and something is lost in the translation.

Here's an example: "Resist the Rectangle" (the message), spray-painted in defiance on the side of a boring, rectangular-shaped building (the medium), has little meaning when transferred to the clean white page of a newspaper.

"Every day we are bombarded with hundreds of signs telling us to buy this, buy that, to conform in various ways," says Barbara Goddard, who teaches

IS GRAFFITI/page B7



Is graffiti street art or vandalism?

Continued from page B1
social and political thought, literature and women's issues at York University.

"Graffiti are an attempt to put our own voices in and create a dialogue. It's a creative voice against the monotony of blandness."

Modern society didn't invent graffiti, and it's not likely that a law or politically sanctioned paintbrush will completely silence the startling and sometimes obscure messages they leave behind.

If recorded history tells us anything about graffiti, it's this: They just won't go away.

Graffiti — the plural of graffiti, from the Italian "to scribble" — have been found in abundance on the ancient monuments of Egypt, the buildings of Pompeii, and the walls of Rome. Historians and those who study writing (paleographers) are delighted by the finds. The messages etched into stone include election addresses, rude caricatures and lines of poetry that throw light on the everyday lives of ancient peoples.

Our graffiti shed light on our way of life, too.

People who watch these things notice differences in the kinds of graffiti we see in Toronto, compared to graffiti scrawled on walls in Montreal.

"Toronto graffiti are more about

angst, about things relating to post-modern life," says York University assistant sociology professor Greg Nielsen. "It's so psychoanalytic, so much about individual crisis instead of larger, more far reaching political statements."

Goddard agrees, saying that so much of the graffiti in Quebec are political.

"Even graffiti about 'me me me' are political in Quebec if it's written in English. That's a statement in itself."

And it can serve a useful purpose, too. Goddard says there's a wall on Rue Rene Levesque (formerly Dorchester St.) in Montreal where prostitutes write messages to each other, warning of dangerous customers and manipulative pimps.

Revolution and graffiti often go hand in hand. And where there is a fettered press, defiant graffiti abound.

In a black suburban slum of Johannesburg in South Africa, for instance, angry residents have spray-painted a message on the sides of the tin shacks: "Don't Pay Rent." It's a protest against the poor conditions imposed by the government in its policies of apartheid.

South American cities have battled with graffiti-stained buildings

and monuments for years. In Brazil recently, Rio de Janeiro's mayor set up four giant blackboards, and invited the graffiti artists and vandals to write anything they wanted. At the end of the day the boards were erased, and the next day started with a clean slate.

Andrew Ol, (aka Owen) a Toronto artist who in the past sprayed his messages about the inadequacies of modern architecture, would like to see a similar program in Toronto.

"Instead of spending all this money to clean up the graffiti, why doesn't the city spend a little more and set up a great graffiti contest, or give these kids some walls to create something on?" he asks. "I'd love to help them set up a program. I know a lot more about graffiti than any politician."

In fact, he makes a living from his spray-paint art. While once his canvas was the side of a building, he is now represented by a gallery, and "I have other legitimate forms of expression now," he says.

He explains the frustrations that motivated him in the past.

"It was a reaction against the gray walls," he says. "You never see meaningful graffiti sprayed on bright blue buildings, or on beautiful old churches. The idea isn't to destroy something beautiful."

He says that by spraying mes-

sages such as "Color Concrete" and "Architorture," he tried to shock an unsuspecting public into thinking about the uncreative world around them.

To those who think graffiti are offensive, Ol counters with this: "I find billboards with pictures of women spreading their legs and trying to entice people to go to the Bahamas for a vacation more offensive than any graffiti I've ever seen," he says.

He recalls a fast-food ad campaign a few years ago that showed a gigantic hamburger above the word "Incredible." A graffiti whiz colored in the letters "c" and "r" to give another message: Inedible.

"A few days later all the billboards were gone," he says.

Goddard, who, with a colleague, is involved in a study about graffiti in women's washrooms on campus, says that sometimes graffiti messages find their place on walls illegally because there is no legitimate outlet for what the graffitiist considers legitimate concerns.

"Feelings about the environment, or nuclear weapons protests aren't always explained in a satisfactory way in the mainstream press," she says. "Some feel compelled to get their message across. I'm not condoning anything illegal, I'm just explaining why I think it happens."