

GRAFFITI VANDALISM? STREET ART AND THE CITY: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Graffiti is primarily a product of an urban environment that local governments need to engage with creatively, not merely take a strict zero tolerance approach where engagement is seen as a diversion that hopes to tame a vigorous and diverse form of expression. This paper is in two sections. The first looks at graffiti and street art in the City of Melbourne within the framework of vandalism, a label imposed upon it by local and state governments, sections of the media and general public. It also attempts to give voice to those who are described as vandals by acknowledging their art form's own histories. The second section briefly discusses the concept of the dérive – here a purposeful walk through the city's laneways allowing graffiti to prompt direction and analysis – and documents that process.

GRAFFITI VANDALISM?

I did a few paintings about vandalism just to reclaim the term, and just go, you want to say I'm a vandal, fine I'm a vandal. I'm quite happy to be a vandal. If you tell me I can't do something that doesn't mean I'm not going to do it. I think vandalism can be really, really positive. Vandalism can highlight certain issues and be a really empowering thing. I encourage people to vandal when it is like that.

Melbourne graffiti artist Vexta, in Nicholas Hansen's film *Rash*, 2005

Street art in Melbourne, as in many other Australian cities and suburbs – as well as internationally – is a fraught conversation. In 2006, just in time for the Commonwealth Games, Melbourne was declared by the local council to be a zero tolerance zone for graffiti, a place where graffiti “will be removed within 24 hours” of the council being notified of its presence, and where “The City will act as an advocate for legislative change to give Victoria Police greater powers to deal effectively with graffiti vandals” (City of Melbourne Graffiti Plan, 2006). The Love Melbourne group – which included their chair, Major General David McLachlan AO (Rtd) the Victorian state president of the Returned Servicemen's League; John Webster, the general manager of the Herald and Weekly Times (*Herald Sun*); Shane Healy, the general manager of talkback radio station 3AW; Bill Horman, the president of Neighbourhood Watch; City of Melbourne councillor David Wilson; Scott Chapman, Director of Marketing, City of Melbourne; Deidre Willmott, Government Relations, Commonwealth Games Corporation; Assistant Commissioner Gary Jamieson, Region 1 (Central) Victorian Police; as well as other government, social and business leaders – had as their objective the “eradication of any uncontrolled graffiti within Melbourne, through tougher policing, new anti-graffiti legislation, commissioned works, education, penalties, establishment of graffiti squads and more”. Love Melbourne, while supporting the Games clean-up would like to see the “blitz” extended “beyond the Games, for up to five years ... what we're trying to achieve is a cultural change” (*Herald Sun*, 23 January 2006).

All this was happening at the same time as *Stencil Graffiti Capital: Melbourne* by Jake Smallman and Carl Nyman, the first book honouring Melbourne's street art, was being published; the establishment of the City Lights street art gallery in Hosier Lane, which has one of the highest concentrations of graffiti in Melbourne; Nicholas Hansen's graffiti film *Rash* was being screened; and graffiti walls were becoming familiar enough to be used as backdrops for wedding photos.



Wedding Party Hosier Lane

Vexta, in the quote I chose to use as the epigraph of this piece, qualifies her use of the term “vandal”, but newspaper articles that have helped to prompt her appropriation of the term generally do not. Headlines continually marginalise street art as a major crime performed by organised violent gangs: “Police tear into vandalism gangs” (*Herald Sun*, 16 February 2006); “Paint Vandals” (*Herald Sun*, 17 March 2007); Train travellers “held hostage by graffiti vandals ...” (*Herald Sun*, 23 January 2006); “New lines drawn in graffiti war” (*Herald Sun*, 4 March 2005); “Continuing war against graffiti on trains. Mindless vandalism or creative expression?” (*Age*, 23 April 2003); “Attack on Graffiti: Police have unleashed a war on Melbourne’s graffiti menace” (*Herald Sun*, 21 January 2006). This aggressive and militaristic language, especially from the *Herald Sun*, has been consistent over a number of years, used in what that newspaper has labelled, the “Graffiti Wars”, in which it promotes itself as being on the “Frontline” (*Herald Sun*, 23 November 2007). Steve Beardon, founder of Residents Against Graffiti Everywhere (RAGE) wrote in a feature article for the *Herald Sun*: “The difference between art and vandalism is permission. Graffiti is a criminal act, along with its culture.” (*Herald Sun*, 25 January 2006).

A vandal, apart from the historical reference to the Germanic people of the fourth and fifth centuries who invaded parts of Western Europe, is generally understood in terms of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that is, as being a wilful or ignorant destroyer of property, or of anything beautiful, venerable, or worthy of preservation. Yet for most graffiti artists their work is not about destruction so much as being an addition to the environment, a considered placement. It is not the slashing of seats, nor is it the smashing of windows; it is not permanent nor is it a physical attack, but it is illegal. Sixten, a visiting street artist from Sweden says: “From the beginning you just want to make things beautiful. I like doing spots that are hard to reach or high risk, or you risk getting caught or whatever because it is definitely an adrenalin rush and its lots of fun doing what you’re not allowed to do.” (Hansen 2005) Doing a piece “gets the adrenalin pumping” (Norska: interview with author, 2008); the thrill of making a work is potent. Demote, who has been doing graffiti since the 1980s says:

Where I choose to place things is environment specific ... I don't go out to fuck things up: I go out there to do something creative ... The fundamentals for me are understanding the history of the art form, understanding letter forms, understanding the people who pioneered different things – and understanding the moral issues of placement' (Dew 2007: 195).

Dlux, a Melbourne stencil artist, claims there is an ethic within stencillers' circles about which sites constitute "fair game" – artists, he says, avoid heritage buildings and, for the most part, residential properties. He also says that racist and sexist stencils generally will not last long on the wall. "People [other artists] react much more negatively to sexist or racist graffiti. They get covered over much more quickly. People will add their own messages to offensive stencils ..." (Age, 16 August 2003).

"Fair game", the "moral placement" of a work, the desire to "want to make things beautiful", these are the ethics that most street artists abide by but, as Vexta says, there will always be some people "who are essentially trouble makers to the core, and they don't really have codes of practice" (Hansen: 2005). For Vexta, graffiti "encourages people to debate" and hopefully brings them together (Dew 2007: 241). Vexta's call to paint under the banner of vandalism is a call for her community to respond to the labelling and media portrayal of their practice. Hers is an ethical vandalism. What Beardon sees as vandalism as defined by the *Shorter Oxford*, many of those who make graffiti see as a means of communication in a world that often has little time or space for the voices of young people. Graffiti artist Tais Snaith says it is a way of "trying to claim [the city] while we can. It's a way of documenting a group of people who lived in that town, at that time and not just rich business people." (Hansen 2005) Vandalism becomes the voice of a prolific, dedicated, loosely connected, subculture that makes art on the walls of the city in a number of styles ranging from tags to full pieces and stencils.

What Beardon emphasises in his *Herald Sun* article, besides the dire criminality of vandalism, is that graffiti, to be art, needs to obtain the permission of those in authority, whereas the artists themselves would argue that permission legitimising the work is gained from their peers and graffiti's own prolific history. A section of the *Melbourne City Council (MCC) Graffiti Management Plan*, primarily a document of prohibition against graffiti, under the heading "Diversion", speaks of the provision of legal walls, designated areas where artwork is sanctioned through a permit system:

The City of Melbourne will work with property owners, managers and occupiers, graffiti writers, Victorian Police and local communities to investigate providing legitimate avenues for murals and street art to be displayed.

The City of Melbourne will engage with the arts community regarding murals and street art, for example, in conjunction with cultural festivals or arts development projects in the public domain.

The City of Melbourne will positively engage with graffiti writers in mentoring and arts programmes to facilitate opportunities for legitimate artistic expression and to divert their efforts away from illegal and towards high quality work.

Melbourne City Council (MCC) Graffiti Management Plan, 2006

The City of Melbourne sees legal work as a diversion from the illegal. It sees the funding of street art projects as a way of hopefully curtailing the output of artists and restricting them to council-sanctioned spaces, where the emphasis is on high-quality work. But what is not acknowledged is that for an artist to be able to create such work they must be experienced and, as in any other field where expertise is demanded, there is an apprenticeship that needs to be served and a range of skills developed before one becomes proficient and able to build up the personal style that is so often admired by pedestrians, train travellers and councillors alike. These skills, for a graffiti artist, are honed on the street, on trains and in railyards, and they often begin with tagging, targeted as the

worst of what the council and many residents see in graffiti. It is just not possible to divorce most street art from tagging; a form that also has its own styles and levels of expertise. On the MelbourneGraffiti.com website each artist interviewed is introduced through their tag. Of the twenty-nine artists I viewed on the site (25 February 2008) the diversity of styles and possibility of expression was extensive.

It [doing tags] started off as friendly influence then became a passion ... I practised a lot on my tags until I got good, before I actually started doing graffiti in the streets and basically it became a part of my life. I love doing it. I love colours ... You put the fat cap on your spray can, which is a fat nozzle that comes out ruler length. You can work so quick ... With a spray can you can just spray – shwwitt, shwwitt – and it's done. Is it art? Most definitely (Norska: interview with author, 2008)



Norska painting in legal Tunnel Project

The principal difference between legal street art and its illegal counterpart may be neatness. Legal art is done where permits are obtained, the artists are often contracted, paint is usually purchased by the owner of the property or local council and the wall is worked on over consecutive sessions that have been determined in consultation with local businesses and people living in the immediate vicinity. Illegal work is created under the pressures of, often, having to work at night, being aware that police or other authorities may have you under surveillance and working quickly (which graffiti artists do, with great skill and very conscientiously) to move on before one is possibly threatened or arrested. This type of pressure and material restriction is alleviated in legal work, which enables artists to perhaps consider their skill levels more minutely, or begin to think of the whole wall

as one unit, a unit made up of separate pieces still, but one that may be interconnected through colour choices or fill between the individual artist's works.

The Tunnel Project in Princes Park, Melbourne, June 2007, which I helped to instigate, was organised through The Artful Dodgers Studio and funded by MCC and the Juvenile Justice Department. Mentors and professional art workers cooperated with street artists to graphically unify a large and heavily used bike tunnel that had a history of being tagged and graffitied. After initial discussions between the graffiti artists a limited colour range of pastel shades was decided on, while repeated patterns and motifs, derived from the work being produced, were inserted between individual works linking otherwise disparate pieces:

It was a struggle. I was working with other artists who were a bit cocky nosed – no names – telling me how I should change [my work]. Usually, when I paint in such a place [as the tunnel] I just usually find my own wall and zone out. But there was so much paint [that] I wanted to get a bit more colourful, define my style a bit. The struggle with it really was trying to make it fit in – I'm a sucker for proportions and I like to paint quick. It gets the adrenaline pumping ... I learnt a few things here and there. It was good in the end to collaborate with people. I made great friends out of it (Norska: interview with author, 2008).

Time, and the ease of working during the day under proper health and safety conditions with the support of local counsels or private property owners, gives a particular look to a wall. Pieces done illegally under often very trying conditions make for a different aesthetic, not only because of the pressures of the occasion, but also, significantly, because the walls are developed under a different time, time that is chaotic.

In another recently completed (November 2007) MCC-sponsored street art project in Union Lane in the city centre, 540 square metres of legal walls were painted by more than eighty artists, from adolescents to men and women in their late twenties, with varying skill levels. As of February 2008 very little tagging has been done over the work. Most graffiti artists will respect the work of other artists, especially if that work is of a high standard. In the Tunnel Project, an artist, when leaving an unfinished work for the night, sprayed 'respect' on the wall to denote that it would be completed soon and requesting that no one tag the space. The work was not damaged in between these painting sessions. There is also minimal tagging on the Union Lane project, most of which either raises issues about the work's legitimacy or discusses the work's quality.



Comments in Union Lane

Fuck Legals (Legals) wrong.

You can't burn me, and never will. Give up.

Toy!!

Not fine enough for art. Not illegal enough 4
graffiti [sic]

Not fine enough for art. Not illegal enough 4 graffiti. The council's current attempt to legitimise some graffiti, which stems, in part, from the motivation of curtailment, if not eradication, sits uncomfortably with those artists who see that it is the work's very illegality that defines their practice. The tension between the law, city spaces, residents and the graffiti artists themselves makes for a complex and fraught discussion, but one that needs to acknowledge the voices of those making the work, and the work's own developing history of styles and movements, as much as those who may criticise it. Legalising graffiti, making it comfortably visible, drawing the artists into the public gaze, making a more homogenous product overlooks the work's own internal unfolding. What sits underneath – or rather alongside – the push for legal exhibitions and legal walls is street art's own history of illegal exhibitions and gatherings.

Perhaps one of the reasons Stan, Bones, Renks and Meow, who made up the 70K crew, were targeted by police and councils, apart from their prolific output, was their style of writing. Whereas Demote, the graffiti artist of long standing, originally from Sydney, can place himself within a perspective of graffiti that refines what he sees as particular styles, styles that are often commented on as being what people enjoy most about street art, the 70K crew consciously eschewed sophisticated designs for rough and intentionally crude writing. Fine lines and sophisticated colour design gave way to large broad rolled tags that occasionally took up the whole face of a building. 70K, the 1970s Kids, a name that harks back to the simplicity of earlier styles, were the ones to be

arrested and jailed. One of the most audacious crews, they tagged every window in an empty multistorey building in little Lonsdale Street that was earmarked for demolition. In August 2007, after an extensive investigation by the Transit Safety Divisional Response Unit, Renks was arrested and sentenced in the County Court to three months goal. The sentence, imposed by Judge Wood, overturned a ruling by Magistrate Sarah Dawes, who considered Renks “a talented artist” whose remorse was genuine. Judge Wood found Dawes’ ruling of a \$30,000 fine and 250 hours of community service “far too lenient” (*Herald Sun*, 23 August 2007). Vandalism is criminal and punishable with a jail term.

Smallman and Nyman, writers on Melbourne graffiti, when defining Empty Shows, that is, illegal exhibitions, do not shy away from the use of the term “vandal” when describing the people who were involved in the shows. They link vandal with the term “artists”, making them interchangeable. By legitimising graffiti in the eyes of those who sit on council and that “loudest group” – “The people in the CBD who want graffiti removed [who] obviously are owners of property”, as stated by Melbourne City Councillor David Wilson (Hansen), the council is attempting to bring the artwork within a field of control through its power to grant permission. But in the eyes of some in the street art community, creating legal walls is robbing the work of its core practice, which is one of illegality.

The main thrust of the *MCC Graffiti Management Plan* is one of eradication and control:

Graffiti is seen as something out of place, which must be erased in order to return the social space to its proper condition. Removal is thus a way of reappropriating the space ... Removal strategies are founded upon the assumptions that graffiti is a blot on the visual field and that its erasure returns the urban landscape to a pristine condition’ (Young: 55).

This “pristine condition” is a neutral field that does not actually exist in any urban landscape. Cities are chaotic: there is always construction underway, advertising continually changes scale and technology, businesses go in and out of business, new people move into the neighbourhood bringing with them their own idiosyncrasies, there is pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and new concepts of what kinds of businesses and residences make up a city are proposed and acted upon, all within the boundaries of one metropolis. Graffiti highlights the fact that a city is dynamic and that it reflects a tension between the needs of those who live, work, govern and play within its precincts. English graffiti artist Banksy said in 2003 when he was visiting: “The walls of Melbourne are very noisy, but not in a shouty New York kind of way ... It makes everybody, whether they like it or not, feel more free” (Smallman & Nyman: 86, 2005). It is graffiti’s uncontrollability that marks it primarily as vandalism. By engaging with the city outside the acceptable channels of commerce and property laws, graffiti artists seem to threaten a perceived order of the city, and this requires direct action, such as fines, jailing and the banning of the sale of spray paint. Recently, an email was forwarded to me that read in part:

I am one of the lawyers working on a lawsuit which has challenged a New York City law prohibiting the sale or possession of spray paint and broad-tipped indelible markers to anyone under 21. The Court has agreed that the law infringes on artists’ First Amendment rights. We won the first round, which was to get a ‘Preliminary Injunction’ – that means that for now, the City cannot enforce the law. But the lawsuit is not over.

Michael L. Spiegel, 14.2.08

New South Wales and Queensland, as well as cities in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, in an attempt to prevent vandalism, have also banned the sale of spray paint, either totally or to people under the age of eighteen. The Victorian State Government's Graffiti Prevention Bill, which is in draft form at time of writing, further criminalises graffiti, reversing the burden of proof from the prosecution's need to prove someone is in breach of the law to the street artists, who now need to prove they have a lawful excuse to carry such items as stencils, paint and paste. Liberty Victoria President Julian Burnside QC has said: "The presumption of innocence has a very long and honourable history and I don't think it is a good idea for politicians to jump in on the spur of the moment and reverse it just because there is public irritation about a particular form of conduct" (*Age*, 21 September 2007). The use of a term such as "irritation" is a far more measured and accurate term when referring to graffiti than is the more emotive and violent language used by certain press agencies and organisations such as RAGE.

I got arrested once ... that was a really interesting experience to see how much what we were doing really was illegal and hated by authorities. Like the police they really really hated me, and hated what we were doing. That kinda shook me up and I realised the violence of authority...

Civil, in the film *Rash*, 2005

Since the lead up to the Commonwealth Games and the desire to make Melbourne a clean and safe city, state and local authorities, with the support of such coordinated groups as Love Melbourne and RAGE, have consistently increased the pressure on street artists to cease their art practices by criminalising them, unless such practices happen within areas sanctioned by authorities. At the same time street art is purchased by significant galleries and private collectors, is traded among graffiti artists, and exhibited extensively. It is used consistently in advertising, as it was on 24 February 2008 in the *Age* colour supplement, *Sunday Life*. Two boys, dressed in the uniform of Brighton Grammar School, an Anglican school for boys from ELC to VCE, are standing in what looks like the popular graffiti site, Hosier Lane, holding a street map. Behind them is a colourful wall of graffiti. One of the boys is looking apprehensively into the distance, while another concentrates on the map. They seem at once scared and excited. The ambiguity of the boys' placement in the lane, their stance and facial expressions are close to the place graffiti is meant to hold in the public domain as portrayed by the media. The caption reads: "We teach boys. We encourage your 14 year old to get lost. We send boys out to discover the secrets of the city ... We know they are learning life-skills, but they just think they are having fun." Vandalism sells a private school education. Even the MCC, with its zero-tolerance policy, is using graffiti to promote the city on its tourist information website, That's Melbourne, where it declares: "Culture capital, graffiti capital, open air art gallery – whichever way it is said, Melbourne has plenty to offer to the culture vultures of all ages, just by walking the streets."

The Victorian Government's proposed legislation would criminalise just such practices, which includes all forms of street art, not just tagging. Allison Young, the academic employed by the Melbourne City Council to write a report on graffiti in that city, says of the legislation: "If convicted under the proposed legislation, street artists will face penalties of up to two years imprisonment or a maximum fine of about \$25,600. A sliding scale is intended, with repeat offenders being sentenced more severely ..." (*Age*, 20 May 2007). The Graffiti Prevention Bill allows for the search, with a warrant, of persons and their residences, and the seizure of their property. It is also possible to detain and search a person and their vehicle without a warrant when "a member of the police force has reasonable grounds". The legislation states that consent is required to make graffiti "that is visible form a

public place” and that “a person must not, without lawful excuse, possess a prescribed graffiti implement” (Graffiti Prevention Bill, Exposure Draft). But what is lawful excuse?

The Bill doesn't say. Will people have to prove they're enrolled in an art class that uses aerosol paints? If a gallery sells your stencil art, will it be lawful for you to have the tools of your trade in your bag if you are searched by police? If you are travelling by train to your studio from the art-supply shop, with the bag full of spray paint, will police believe you have a lawful excuse? Or will you end up at the police station waiting to be charged? (Young, *Age*, 20 May 2007).

It is this tension between an understanding of vandalism, legality, permission and art practice that drives not only the debate around graffiti, but also graffiti itself. Local and state governments who enact legislation criminalising graffiti in the name of specific interest groups need also to consider the dynamics of graffiti, its cultural worth and its striving for a voice. In a changing urban environment these challenges should be addressed as the *Executive Summary of Jeju Declaration, Changing Cities Are Driving the World* (2008) suggests – in creative and innovative ways, promoting cultural diversity, social cohesion, and the reduction of social exclusion which are the fundamentals of peace and equality; priorities for the leadership of local government.



Abstract

Passionate Journey: A graffiti *dérive*

*The *dérive* is certainly a technique, almost a therapeutic one. But just as analysis without anything else is almost always contraindicated, so the continual *derive* is dangerous to the extent that the individual, having gone too far (not without bases, but...) without defences, is threatened with explosion, dissolution, dissociation, disintegration. And thence the relapse into what is termed 'ordinary life'... (Chtcheglov 1964: 372).*



System Compass

Graffiti is uncontrolled, which makes for an aesthetic of disorder, invites the pedestrian or train traveller to participate in experiencing painterly eruptions that expose the disorder and defacement upon which “the smooth surface of community is founded” (Young 2005: 50). The foregrounding of this disorder may be the basis of that threat that people say they experience when they witness graffiti; however, by walking the laneways of Melbourne – an unplanned network itself (Bate 1994) – by allowing the graffiti to determine my direction and purpose, I became witness to, and through that witnessing a participant in, a landscape that wrought a change on my person. The uncontrolled, repetitious displays of artworks began to disclose another world that sat alongside the one normally walked through. At one point, when I was leaving an alleyway and passing a particularly dense series of walls and interactions, I felt overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of work I had seen and the commitment of those who produce it. The city was being turned on its head. Artists were operating throughout the city in a consistent and dedicated fashion, which was emphasised through persistent styles and individual tags. This dedication and repetition made for a connectedness between laneways. Styles began to tell stories.

Mine’s more advertising on the street [than traditional art practice], more making logos and trying to do stuff, similar things so people can recognise them. Not doing something different all the time, because no one will really know. You can put your name there, but I prefer to do it with logos ... Some people do tags, some people do logos or similar things to get noticed. You have to change them; sure you’ve got to change them, it would be boring if not, but you try and keep the same element to stuff (Sicks1: interview with author, 2008).



Sicks1, Union Lane



Sicks1, Lush Lane

These walls and doorways that I was exploring had successfully, temporally, inverted my appreciation of what constitutes the city.

In the 1950s Guy Debord, with members of the Situationist International, developed a concept of the *dérive*, which they described as being “a passionate journey” as well as a thought-full process, an “ecological analysis of the absolute or relative character of fissures in the urban network” (Debord 1958: 45). It is a practice in which “one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives of movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there” (Debord 1958: 50). It is this practice that I attempted on Monday, 18 February 2008.

THE DÉRIVE

As I drove into Melbourne the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s AM radio station 774 announced extensive train delays due to vandalism. I knew that as part of the State Government’s graffiti strategy private transport company contracts meant that if a train was graffitied it was to be taken out of service until cleaned, and this could be a reason for the delays. But travelling home later in the day, by train, I read in *MX* (the free newspaper handed out as you enter the station) under the heading of “Rail Chaos”, that a “copper gang” had hit the trains. “Copper cable thieves delayed trains on three Melbourne lines for up to eight hours today. Connex staff discovered ‘significant’ lengths of copper cabling, used for signalling systems, had been stolen at 4am ...” (*MX*, 18 February 2008). The term “vandalism” now extended to organised theft.

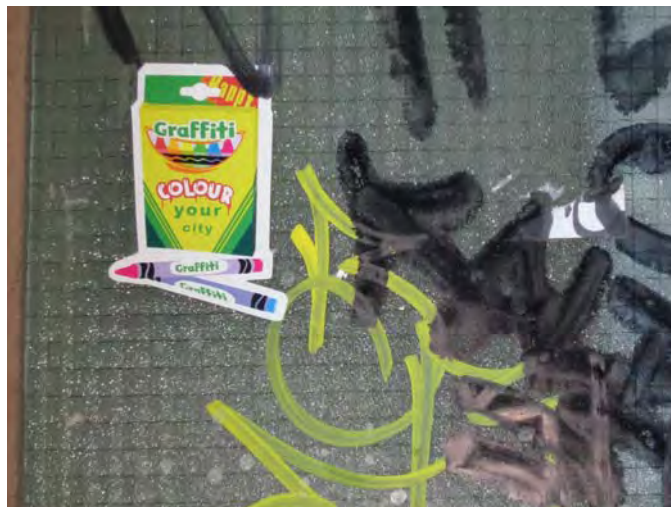
On the drive into the city that morning my friend had suggested beginning the *dérive* at ACDC Lane because he had walked through it himself a few days earlier with a visitor from Hong Kong. The laneway runs off Flinders Lane, between Russell Street and Exhibition Street and tags mark its entrance. Nicholas Hansen, director of *Rash*, a film on the Melbourne graffiti scene, said in discussion after the showing of his film at the 69 Smith Street Gallery, Collingwood, that tags function as the colonisers of an area. They appear first, paving the way for other artists to develop their work. Tags are written, and then a stencil may be sprayed. Posters and stickers either sit beside these works or begin to obliterate earlier pieces that have faded, or that newer artists don’t appreciate. There may even be rivalry between artists using the laneway, which means works are defaced or gone over completely, or maybe because there is just no more space left. A large piece could be introduced that is then surrounded by smaller stencils and posters. A resident who doesn’t like the work may paint out sections of the wall, as I saw happen to the work of Prism, a stencil artist, in Mclean Alley. The wall is suddenly a palimpsest of icons, logos and writing. It is a conversation being held in public between members of that public, and it is messy. It is not a formal discussion such as legal works, which may be considered within a developing aesthetic, but an informal discussion in which people may interject and create different dialogues over time.

The first stencil on the walls of ACDC Lane was of a young boy on a bicycle. He is accompanied by a bird, which is perched on his head between a hat made of feathers and a rabbit carried in the basket on his pushbike’s handlebars.



Stencil Boy

Duckboard Place: In Duckboard Place, which connects to ACDC Lane, I discovered the work of a well-known artist who paints faces over and over, using only recycled materials. In a corner, above the right hand face of one of the two heads he had painted in this laneway, was a small sticker by Mr Happy, approximately 10 x 5 centimetres that declared, "Colour Your City with Graffiti brand crayons, a Happy product".



Happy

Finders Lane: Passed minor construction works on Flinders Lane, the city's key commercial gallery precinct that houses Australia's densest concentration of commercial galleries. A tag sits directly opposite gallery signage, establishing a playful and revealing juxtaposition, pitting one show against the other. The tag signifying graffiti's illegal exhibitions, or Empty Shows, created in abandoned buildings in and around Melbourne.

When a venue was found, a date for a show was set and word spread through a network of vandals and artists. For several days leading to the opening, they silently accessed the site creating works directly on the walls inside. Details of the opening were then spread by discreet flyers and word of mouth so as not to alert the authorities. Opening night, the crowds numbered well into the hundreds ... [providing] artists with an opportunity to exhibit without compromising their ethics' (Smallman & Nyman 2005: 11).

And in the rotunda at the Edinburgh Gardens in North Fitzroy, an inner city suburb of Melbourne, stencil and other street artists held exhibitions, called See Saws, approximately once a month. People would display their work and "at the end of the night anyone could take home a piece of art" (Dew: 11, 2007). This informal and unofficial event reflects a community with a vital culture. As Anne McDonald, curator for Australian prints and drawings at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, which has collected the works of street artists Marcsta, Dlux, HaHa and Vexta, has said, "We focused on Melbourne because it seemed to be the most dynamic area of stencil art". The gallery has purchased 300 stencil designs by more than thirty artists, which took "three years to compile". They document the explosion of street art in Melbourne between the [19]90s and 2004, when the city's council announced a widespread graffiti clean-up operation before last year's Commonwealth Games ... (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 2007).

Hosier Lane: Popular with tourists, Hosier Lane is a council-sanctioned graffiti laneway. It has a high profile and is in close proximity to Federation Square, the Australian art complex. The laneway is being continually reworked; it is probably where the boys from Brighton Grammar were photographed. The rubbish bins are tagged, as are the windows, walls, doorways, and even the road surfaces. It is a beautiful mess. The tagging of the road surface recalled chalk writing I had seen in Shanghai produced by an unemployed woman. Every day she wrote her story in meticulous characters on footpaths throughout different precincts of the city; as soon as she was finished, the characters were walked over, rained on and obliterated. The impermanence of her work – and the persistence of her actions – were similar to the work in Hosier Lane. Both, in quite different ways, expose their cities to a life other than that generally displayed on the city's walls, or within the city's shopfronts, that world of cleanliness, ease and prosperity. This parallel city of graffiti disrupts the spotless and sanctioned advertising through its frayed appearance, a messiness created through its production, like the clothes or hands of a builder's labourer, who, having left work late, you might see on a tram sitting among the suits and dresses of office workers. The woman in China, while she wrote the characters that explained her predicament, knelt on the ground as if she were scrubbing the floor. When you spray a stencil it is difficult for your fingers not to be stained by paint.



Hosier Lane

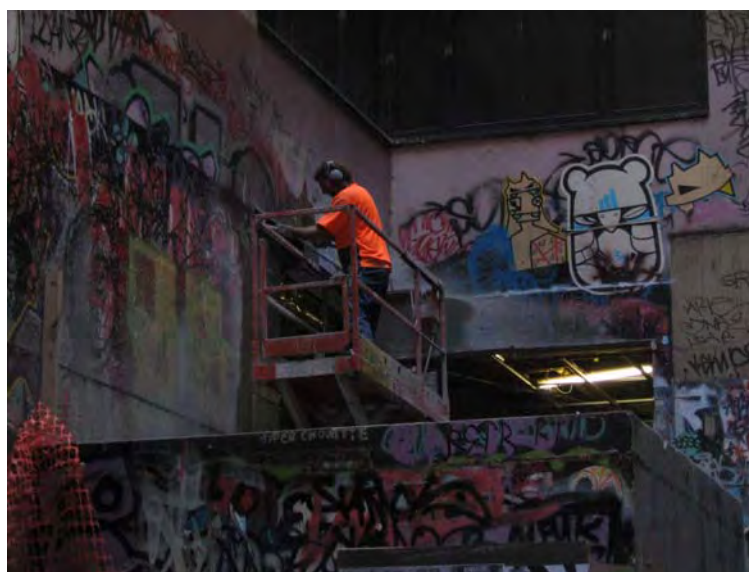


Shanghai Street

Lush Lane: Off Flinders Lane, directly opposite the boutique Adelphi Hotel, is a converted warehouse and part of the city's expanding urban renewal. Two stencils and a small three-dimensional object make for a discreet personal discovery, even though the wall's multiple histories and numerous visitors are obvious.

Australia the Gift: Crossing Swanston Street I wanted to make a note of which laneways I had been drawn into. Near the corner of Flinders Lane and Swanston St is Australia the Gift, a souvenir shop with its own FM radio station that advertises tourist sites in between playing classic hits. Here I purchased a turquoise pen that had the words "Melbourne Australia" inscribed on it and the picture of a running kangaroo printed on its side. The shop was busy: people were looking at and purchasing beach towels, bamboo didgeridoos, kangaroo skins, Melbourne mugs and caps, hand-painted returning boomerangs and, in brown paper bags with "Koala do-do" printed in green on them, chocolate-coated peanuts. The confusion and colour of this shop reflected some of the sense of confusion and messiness that I had experienced in Hosier Lane and would later encounter in McLean Alley. Even though graffiti is being bought by the National Gallery of Australia, and buyers travel from overseas to purchase direct from artists, it still has, for most people, an illegality, a cultural appeal something akin to the merchandise in Australia the Gift.

Centre Place: "All cities are geological; you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends" (Chtcheglov 1953: 1). Off the narrow and packed Flinders Way Arcade, high up on the walls in Centre Place, a small return, are the City Lights light boxes that have been displaying temporary exhibitions curated by gallery director Andrew Mac since 1996. Centre Place is wrapped in graffiti, now extending even over the display cases. This site, where only two months before I had watched two women and a young man painting huge, intricate cute images in fine line and soft colours, was now in the process of being dismantled to make way for a walkthrough to Elizabeth Street. Pneumatic jack and hand-held sledgehammers were being used to smash through the west wall as I spoke to the foreman of the site.



Construction site

Union Lane: This is the site of a recent Melbourne City Council legal graffiti wall. It has been said that graffiti, that which drives my *dérive*, is a mess, one that “must be erased”, that it “is uncontrolled” and gives “the impression of a lack of order on the streets” (Young: 60, 2005). But it is this very mess that is one of graffiti’s most potent aesthetic appeals for me.

Department stores: The shortest distance between Union Lane and the entrance to the department store directly opposite is a straight line. Just inside the store’s large glass doors is a perfume counter. Behind glass-topped counters, sales assistants busily clean and arrange merchandise. The light is as bright as the new stores at Melbourne Central, which has one of the first legal walls in the city and leads out into Swanston Street. This uniform brightness, in which everything is neatly displayed, contrasts to the changing ambience of the street. Out the back door, past watches and small leather bags, suits, casual wear and socks, an eye-catching dribble of black paint in an alleyway leads me to the rear entrance of another department store and an expensive array of men’s suits. Tags and writing have begun to use the natural drips and splashes of inks and paints in the design of lettering. There is an intentional messiness, a look of controlled mistakes within the works. It is this controlled drip – like the street’s ambience – which contrasts to the shops’ bright interiors that leaves a lasting impression as I cross the street.



Melbourne Central

Church of St Francis: Graffiti has been scratched into the second last pew on the right hand side of the aisle. “Linkin Park” it reads, twice.



Linkin Park

Zeveboom Lane: The site of my first stencil.

Little Lonsdale Street: Here, a sign plastered with stickers, small stencils, posters and tags has a distinctly Australian feel because of HA HA's paste up of an Australian Rules footballer at full stretch. Banksy has been described as "a modern-day cross between Michelangelo and the Scarlet Pimpernel" (Age, 15 January 2008); Perhaps HA HA could be seen as a modern-day Ned Kelly, after one of his most recognisable stencils. A car park, to the right of the sign, has been tagged with huge loose scrawls, sprayed from fire extinguishers filled with paint, which cover a two-storey expanse.



Stickers, stencils and tags

McLean Alley and Flanigan Lane: I felt malleable, yet my concentration was strangely focused. I was beginning to get tired and yet I was smiling. The layering of graffiti in this precinct was dense and complex, creating chaotic conversation. Works had been painted over with a broad brush, broken windows of a boarded up basement had been delicately tagged, stencils overlaid each other, tags and stencils reached above the second storey of buildings and down to street level, and a small landscape painting, complete with painted frame, was partly obscured by a large bubble throw up. From here I turned into Latrobe Street, saturated with the energy of the artworks and the possibility of yet another, different city.



Corner Latrobe and Swanston Street

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