

## **STAY IN TOUCH**

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### WITHOUT GRAFFITI, THE WRITING'S ON THE WALL

AS part of the current wave of crime hysteria, it seems that certain media and Bob Carr, the NSW Opposition Leader, believe that the graffiti splashed around this city are a symptom of the breakdown in the moral fabric of our society. This column is more inclined to think that the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls, and that graffiti can be time capsules, giving us poignant glimpses of the things that mattered to generations past and present.

When our train between Central and Redfern passes faded capitals spelling out "Pig Iron Bob", we like to reflect that some time in the 1950s somebody cared enough to remind the populace that PM Robert Menzies sold iron to the Japanese before World War II. Around Glebe, we still occasionally see the words "Free Zarb" (with subtext "Where can I get some?"), commemorating the imprisonment of a draft resister in the early 1970s. And then there is this notation on a corner in Annandale: "18 trucks with 200 cops passed this spot at 12 midnight 1.2.77 taking, sneaking, uranium to White Bay." They all speak volumes about their times.

The first graffiti were cave paintings. The message was: "These are the woolly mammoths we want to hunt." It's amazing what those Neanderthals managed without spray cans. Once people started writing, graffiti took a great leap forward. The ancient Italians (who invented the word, from the verb "to scratch") were prolific. More than 3,000 messages have been deciphered on the walls of Pompeii, including the personal: "O Chiusa, I hope that your ulcerous pustules reopen and burn even more than they did before"; the political: "Vote for Lucius Popidius Sabinus. His grandmother worked hard for his last election and is pleased with the results"; the philosophical: "No-one is a gentleman who has not loved a woman"; the ironic: "I am surprised, o wall, that you, who have to bear the weariness of so many writers, are still standing"; and the prophetic: "Nothing in the world can endure forever".

For graffitiists, the years leading up to AD 79, when Vesuvius buried Pompeii, were clearly a Golden Age, which didn't really come again until the 1960s. "Make love, not war" was the perfect example then - a powerful idea delivered with brevity and wit. Propaganda soon moved from walls to T-shirts, badges and car stickers. Its last gasps came in the mid '70s, with the likes of "Shame, Fraser Shame". Then we seemed to have nothing more to say.

By the '80s, graffiti had been taken over by neo-Neanderthals who swirled and squiggled all over buildings and train carriages. We used to wonder what they were trying to tell us, until we realised that the only content was "I am here". They were ornate signatures or "tags" - beautiful but pointless. Even without a message, they said a lot about their era.

The last holdouts for meaning were a bunch called BUGAUP (Billboard-Utilising Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions) who made subtle and often hilarious alterations to advertisements. Their Marlborough billboard had the cowboy riding through a landscape of gravestones, and the message: "Come to marble-row country." Sadly, it looked as if BUGAUP had bugged off by the mid '80s.

But now we like to think a new generation is emerging in the BUGAUP tradition. First there were those women who were let off a vandalism charge after they altered an underwear ad showing a woman sawn in half by adding the words "Even if you're mutilated ..." to the slogan "You'll always feel good in Berlei". Next "We think more about what goes into your bra than your boyfriend" was improved by adding "in" to "bra". Welcome back AD 79.