

IT NEEDS TO BE DONE:

Forty years of writing
graff in Canberra

Caren Florance

If you walk, ride or scoot around Canberra's many bike paths, you will see a lot of graffiti and street art activity: quick tags, underpass throw-ups, fully resolved and highly colourful murals. There's as many graphic urban interactions as there are opinions about them, but it's fair to say that the city has come a long way in the almost forty years since the first hip hop-inspired graff mark was made on a Canberra surface.



Woden Drains, 2021. Photo: : Thomas Edmondson.

Tuggeranong Arts Centre is celebrating these four decades, with a particular focus on 'southside' activity, an entity that seems to stretch south of the Lake, and from Weston Creek to Tharwa, across to Queanbeyan. Everything else is 'northside', with a notable subdivision that is purely 'Belco'. The first thing to understand is that territory is everything.



Kambah oval, 2020. Photo: Thomas Edmondson.

Canberrans would be forgiven for thinking that 'street art' is a title that encompasses all of these graphic urban interactions, but the one thing said in every interview for this project has been: street art is not graff. And graff is not street art. It's a fundamental rift that is negotiated carefully by the current ACT Street Art Coordinator, Lisa Petheram, who manages the extensive network of 'legal walls' that has grown and developed since the mid-1990s. We have so many now that there's a [formal map](#) that allows the plotting of weekend explorations, and there are many more sites that, if not absolutely legal, are tolerated. Or they are 'permission walls', privately owned and independently negotiated or commissioned.



Woden Drains, 2021. Photo: Thomas Edmondson.

The jewel in the legal wall crown, especially from a southside perspective, is the Woden Drains, a long section of the town centre's Yarralumla Creek stormwater drain that snakes alongside Callum Street, past the CIT, the Woden Youth Centre, and, tantalisingly, the Woden Police Station.

It is rumoured to be the longest permanent legal wall in the southern hemisphere, a fact that would put it on the world map if substantiated. It has been legal, (apart from [a short blip in 2015](#)) since the late 1990s, when two Belco writers asked and got it, which, once the young ACT Legislative Assembly got their heads around the issue, was the way things got done. It didn't last long in Belco hands, though, once the southside writers got wind of the decision. Woden Drains is perfectly suited as a gathering place. One side of the drains is low, stepped, leading into the concrete conduit, and the other side is vertical concrete panels that equally divide the space into paintable units.

Graffiti crews have staked out particular areas, visitors from out of town use other areas on their weekend excursions to a safe space, and other writers have a go at panels that look worn and unloved.



Woden Drains, 1988. Photo: DISE.

It's a place where guys (and I use that word deliberately) can come on the weekend with their mates and a few beers and spend some quality time writing up their letters. It's a far cry from the first few decades of graffiti activity.

You'll notice that I keep saying writers. While street art can incorporate text, it's predominantly image-based. Graffiti can incorporate characters (often cartoon figures), but it's predominantly text-based, and the words are called letters. Street art reaches outwards: it's inclusive, and the artists want to give you pleasure and perhaps a teachable moment.

Graffiti, on the other hand, is a closed shop, and might well be beautiful, but unless you're embedded within its community, don't think that any of it is actually painted for you. The less you can decipher the letters, the more it's for written (aka painted) for each other. Some people seem to be able to negotiate both artforms, but they will encounter resistance from the graffiti purists, and there's a lot of those.

Woden Drains is a great introduction to the different levels of graffiti activity. The most basic one is, of course, tagging. Sometimes a first foray into aerosol use, but usually done with a marker pen, tagging is pure territory-staking: I was here. Next comes a throw-up, a quick aerosol opportunity done as an outline or in bubble-writing. Sometimes there's a rough single-colour fill, but anything more than that makes it a piece. A chromie is a black outline with a chrome-silver fill. A piece (short for masterpiece) is more complex, with a minimum of three colours, often a mixture of rolled paint and cans, and demonstrates a style unique to that writer.

The second thing to remember is that style is important, especially if you're an Old School writer. A fellow writer should be able to recognise your style, no matter what letters you're writing.



Wildstyle at Woden Drains, 2021. Photo: Thomas Edmondson.

Woden's a good place to experience a production, which is a coordinated row of pieces, all painted at the same time, usually by fellow crew members, with the pieces united by a shared colour palette. Which means that they pooled their paints and worked together, usually over a weekend with some beers. In the early days they'd work all night, under cover of darkness. The productions are pretty slick these days because 'legals' give them the luxury of time.



Woden Drains - Launceston St underpass, 2020. Photo: Thomas Edmondson.



Creepshow Crew Production at Holder-Coombs underpass legal wall, 2020. Photo: Thomas Edmondson.

Four decades is an eon in graff time. The majority of tagging is done by 'toys', or newbies, those who are inept, thoughtless or don't take the craft seriously, and often during the school holidays. A graff generation might be the period of time between a group of teens starting college and getting their first real jobs after uni.

There are many older guys who still write regularly, but they juggle it between work and family commitments. There aren't many who have done it for decades, but JINKS and SETH have. They are two of the longest-running writers in the ACT, but even then they represent two generations.

JINKS (@eviljinks) was present for the first moment of southside graff in 1982. A couple of disclaimers:

1. something similar might have happened in the northside around the same time, but getting around Canberra was pretty hard back then and no-one is left to tell that story,* and;
2. yes, there was lots of toilet-door, punk, political graffiti in the mix back then, but this was done in the name of hip hop culture, and that's a whole different animal.

The moment in question took place in the Kambah Adventure Playground, and they were early-teen schoolboys heavily into breakdancing. This is before Canberra even had its first video shop (1983) so the only exposure they had to graffiti and hip hop was via the tv show Countdown, a few record covers, and one of them knew a guy who was stationed in Canberra with the Marines. They didn't know about New York Style, or tagging, or train-painting, they just knew that words needed to go up onto walls with spray paint, so they made it all up for themselves.

Jinks said that the kid in question, who later went by the name DEVIL, said that he did it 'because it needs to be done', and it's a phrase that JINKS himself has carried with him for forty years as a credo: he does it because it needs to be done. It's a notion that goes deeper than fame: it's an aesthetic impulse, an urge to see something happen the right way, or a new way, and doing it because no-one else is doing it for you.



Photo: FBA Future Beat Alliance by PEX and SPYDR, late 1985, Image credit JINKS



Photo: Partial RENEGADES by DEVIL, 1982, Image credit: Jinks.

By around 1986 things were ramping up. Canberra had a small, tight scene, with crews that kept to themselves as they built up skills and rhythms. There were a lot of police chases, so JINKS and his friends became super-organised, organising a legal crew name that painted permission walls while also doing more adventurous things at night under a different name. Things got too hot, they changed it up. 'Changing it up' meant changing their writing names, sometimes weekly. They were highly cautious, keeping paints, design sketches and photographs in hiding places well away from their homes. There were rarely photos, because getting them developed and printed was problematic: you risked being reported to the police by the photo lab. This was well before the conveniences of digital photography. They had to work with a very restricted palette, as the range of paints available was small: basic hardware cans in about 8 colours, and they innovated with things like Tuxan shoe paints and nozzles from all kinds of domestic spray cans.



Back of government buff, Woden Drains, painted on bare concrete by JINKS in 1987. Photo: JINKS.

JINKS says that while his initial buddies eventually dropped off over time, getting jobs and families, he stayed in the scene. He met and wrote with new Canberra writers, but mostly corresponded with international writers that he met when travelling. Over the last year he's been checking in on his New York friends impacted by COVID. After having an international collaboration destroyed at the Woden Drains, he asked for, and got, his own dedicated practice space upstream, where he does his own thing unimpeded.

He's an excellent writer, able to do wildstyle, the most intricate, impenetrable form of graff writing deeply influenced by New York Style, which has dominated world graffiti since the release of the documentary *Style Wars* (1983, but not shown in Australia until a few years later) and the book *Subway Art* (M. Cooper & H. Chalfant, Thames Hudson, 1984). He's seriously holding the flame for Old School graff.



JINKS, 2020. Photo: Thomas Edmondson.

The use of New York Style typifies Old School writers, who adhere strictly to the New York graff culture rules developed in the 1970s and early 80s by young, culturally diverse artists competing for recognition and turf. The ultimate goal for these writers was to paint the subway trains, and this goal was transferred to pretty much every city with urban trains in the world, including Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. *Subway Art's* first edition hardly sold, because pirated photocopies were distributed around a galvanised underground network.

STOCK, who wrote in Canberra in the 90s and early 2000s, says that he first encountered New York Style in his Melbourne school library, and it resonated with the local train graffiti he was seeing. Soon he was faithfully copying NY designs and working on his own. Terms that graff writers use every day – all the technical terms I used above, and the use of ‘the Buff’ to describe anyone erasing graff – come from NY graffiti culture and those two resources.



Civic Drains, 2000-01. Photo: STOCK

SETH is another Canberra graff veteran, also from Kambah, but while the 80s belonged to JINKS, the 90s were his era. Like JINKS, he's travelled a lot, and has international connections. SETH states that he 'got into graff for all the wrong reasons'. He liked a bit of 'beef', which is the aggressive interactions between crews or writers, especially over turf. His gateway was breakdancing and skateboarding. Skateboarding and graff are strongly connected, especially in Canberra where we don't have a train culture, and skateboard parks were a natural place to situate the early legal walls. The old Woden skatepark was privately owned, and when it went bankrupt the owners smashed it up. Dereliction is something that encourages the congregation of writers and taggers: we don't have lots of it at any one time in Canberra, although there's a fair bit of destroyed housing commission property along Northbourne Avenue at the moment, and it's quite obvious that it's a popular hangout. The old Woden skatepark, and the walls of the Woden squash courts were iconic spots in the first decade or so of graff activity – the Squash Courts because the Board at the time allowed activity because they backed onto a quiet spot near takeaway food, a perfect hangout spot. Later, when the Board changed personnel, attitudes changed too, and they started buffing.



Photo: Woden Squash Courts, 1991, Image credit: SETH

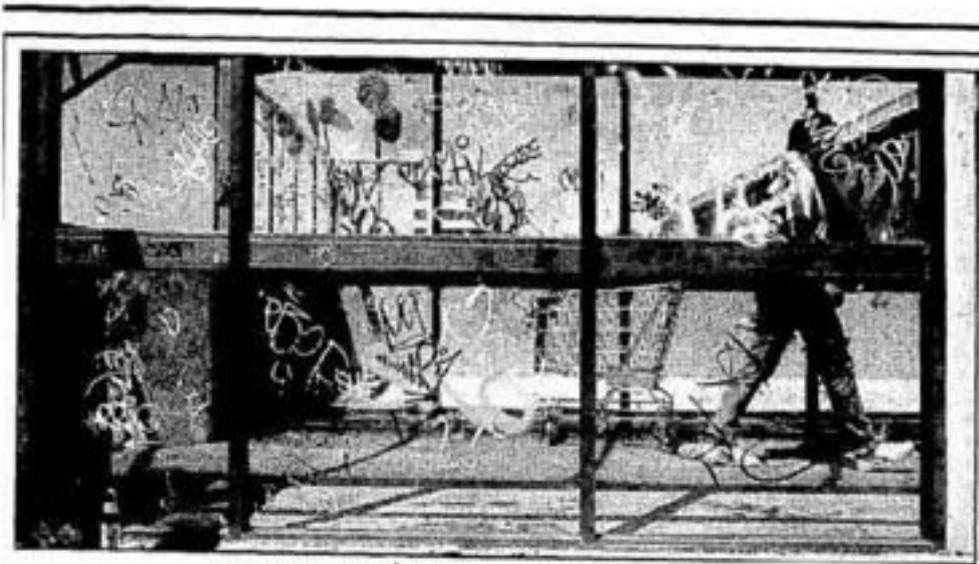
The ACT's overall change in attitude was not a smooth one. Before self-government, the attitude towards graffiti was that it was pure vandalism: the (Federal) police patrolled, chased, caught, and either fined or made the offenders scrub it off.* Early attempts to discourage tagging included periodic competitions for schoolkids to paint murals in the interiors of the concrete bus shelters, many of which survive now.



Photo: Woden Drains 1988, Woden Youth Centre under construction behind, 1988. Image credit: @Parlifunk

For the first few years after the first Territory elections in 1989, the newly-elected representatives were fully preoccupied for a few years with the job of establishing a system, working with budget lines, and implementing it all. The police were business as usual, catching, chasing, warning, but policy debates about graff damage and deterrent strategies were slow to get started, until well into the early 1990s.

The first constructive debate about graff was orchestrated in 1992 by Helen Szuty, an Independent elected on the same ticket as Independent Mike Moore, and together they fought for a number of social justice issues, sometimes successfully, sometimes just to raise awareness. Helen had been director of the Weston Creek Community Service, covering an area that has very few amenities for youth, even now. She was one of the first people to push graff as 'art', to give it a status more connected to creativity than to vandalism. Her motion to the Assembly called on 'the Government to assist in identifying more space for graffiti art in Canberra, along major thoroughfares and in places people congregate.' It's worth reading that debate, which was intelligent and measured, but the motion ultimately failed, by one vote. What it did do was change the focus, to get the opposition to consider the idea of 'street art' as a valid concept.



Part of Woden shopping square after one graffiti attack.

No legal graffiti for ACT

By REBECCA LANG

A move to establish a legal avenue for graffiti artists to operate in Canberra was defeated yesterday, the ACT Government knocking the idea on the head because of cost and resource concerns.

An independent MLA, Helen Szuty, moved in the ACT Assembly to provide a clearer bureaucratic path for young street artists to obtain permission to paint murals on public buildings.

Abolish Self Government MLA, Dennis Stevenson, withdrew his support when his proposed amendment was not included.

His amendment called for the exclusion of the use of political messages in public graffiti.

Ms Szuty said several states had implemented successful programs already which had helped decrease the incidence of illegal graffiti.

Under the proposal lavatory blocks, community halls and centres, underpasses, bus shelters and building walls would have been subject to decoration pending approval by the Department of Urban Services.

A Liberal amendment watered down the proposal, changing wording from "coordination unit" to "program".

It was still defeated when the

In 1995 the ACT elected its second Liberal ministry, headed by the ferociously efficient Kate Carnell. Graffiti is front and centre of any ACT Liberal agenda, to this day, because they believe that visual disorder is a sign of anarchy and loss of control. It's an easy outrage mark, and gains votes from the people who like to keep things nice. Kate and her team didn't waste time.

By August of that year her government called out for public submissions for an Enquiry into the Impact of Graffiti in the ACT, run by the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment. There were many quite amusing public submissions, but also some serious feedback from the Woden Youth Centre.

The one good thing to come out of this enquiry was the recommendation to identify areas for street art practice, and so the legal walls started to happen, but not in a proactive way. Like I said earlier, you had to ask to receive.



Woden Youth Centre poster seeking graffiti art tutors in Woden Drains, with tag, 2012. Photo: Jack Crash.

On the flipside, the Liberals also started the Can-It squad, which was a bit like Neighbourhood Watch but focused on buffing graffiti, and a register of graffiti sites and tags. This meant that if you wanted to tag, you had to register your tag, and if that tag was used too often, you would be punished. As we learned from JINKS, you can understand how futile this was. Writers and taggers had learned to change tags like they change underwear, and this just increased the danger, and thus the excitement.



PSY, 1990s, Photo: @parli_funk.

In 1997 the ACT Courts sent their first graff tagger, PSY, to Goulburn Jail for 78 counts of vandalism. No-one disputes that PSY went over the top, and had been warned many times by the courts that he was looking at jail, but it wasn't a successful outcome, and by all accounts PSY has never recovered from the experience.

In the early 2000s, the ACT went back to a Labor Administration that has never lost its hold, thanks to their collaboration with the Greens and various independents. They held another enquiry into the impact of graffiti in the ACT, and also involved asking young people how they felt, via the government-funded Youth Coalition of the ACT. One of the more significant comments from that was that "young people are less likely to find the presence of graffiti threatening or indicative of danger and instead more likely to feel that a place with graffiti may be either for young people to use or welcoming towards young people. This may be quite different to other groups in the community who find the presence of graffiti disturbing and may feel unsafe or unwelcome in a place where there is graffiti."

Regardless of this insight, there are a lot of Canberrans who like their city clean and neat. There have been numerous attempts to stem the now burgeoning graff scene, fuelled by the internet's capacity to share information and photos widely.



Steve Pratt MLA in 2007, scrubbing off a mural by BYRD in Woden.
Photo: Richard Briggs, Canberra Times/ACM.

In 2007, MLA Steve Pratt called the media photographers to watch him scrub off a piece near the Woden Cemetery, and they happily watched him, knowing that it was a legal work.

(The local artists then [painted him](#) doing the scrubbing on the same site. Even [The Chaser](#) got in on that one.) In 2011, the government employed a private company, 'Canberra CBD Ltd', to have security guards with dogs patrol Civic and Braddon – and charged all the businesses in the area a levy to fund it.

That didn't last long. In 2014 they tried to introduce a phone app: Vandal Trak. These days, they have the 'Fix my street' site. Most of this is directed towards the taggers, who haven't been deterred in any way. In fact, they seem to thrive on challenge.



Photo: Replacement mural by E.L.K, 2007. Photo: Jack Crash

RUBEN, another iconic Old School southside writer one 'generation' on from SETH, doesn't have much to say about New School writers, who are essentially not wedded to the New York style. There are of course always some good ones, he says, but the legal walls and the ease of social media have stopped writers from trying to hone their craft, rather settling into a style routine, treating writing as a social occasion rather than an edgy way to improve on skills. He runs the Instagram site @parli_funk, which celebrates both old and new Canberra graff, particularly that of the southside.



RUBEN, Woden Drains, 2020 Photo: Thomas Edmondson

One thing I noticed when investigating the graff scene was the distinct lack of women, something that street art is actively addressing. Most of the graff women I've found have been girlfriends of writers who tried for a while but probably found the scene a bit intense. KIOSK succeeded more than others: she was a tomboy skater who liked to photograph graff as a teen; she described her first solo attempts as inept, because learning how to handle spray is tricky without a role-model. She found some friends with similar interests when she went to Narrabundah College in the late 90s but again, their first attempts ended up with a police warning and an embarrassing moment when her dad had to buff the spot.



KIOSK, Woden Drains, 2003. Photo: KIOSK.

It wasn't until KIOSK got to art school in 2002/03 that she met a guy – STOCK – who showed her how to negotiate the scene, and she started painting seriously with a crew – MD (MeltDown). Her work, and his, egging each other on, is fresh, playful and funky, New School all the way. She eventually moved to Melbourne, which is Canberra's loss.

Over the past ten or so years, the street art scene in Canberra has strengthened, overshadowing the graff community. Both are thriving: easy access to public spaces, it's easier to buy paints, and there's a wider range of colours available, and there's a lot of community support for colour and grit to liven up the city and suburban spaces. Dedicated outlets have opened and closed: Writers Block in Curtin was one of them. Sancho Murphy has tried a number of options and her latest offering, Sancho's Dirty Laundry in Braddon is a hub of materials, production, social interaction and exhibition. She's one of a number of women claiming the space, and encouraging other women to get involved, and they are responding: Faith Kerehona and Bohie Palecek have works all over the Territory.



Portrait of Sancho Murphy by Faith Kerehona, PCYC Building, Turner, 2020. Photo_@faithsprays



How to stay curious by Bohie Palecek, PCYC Building, Turner, 2020. Photo_@bohie

There have been a couple of recent attempts to build bridges over the long-term rift between graff and street art. The old PCYC site in Turner has been derelict for over ten years, with the insides full of pigeons, rats and masses of fresh graffiti. Veteran street artist Dai Cameron managed to pull together a gun team of both old and new graff writers, old and new street artists and a couple of interstate guest writers to [refresh the site](#) until the PCYC can finally get moving on its demolition and renewal. It's an incredibly fresh mix of graff and mural, one that might not fix any old problems, but certainly bodes well for new directions.



Participants in a Woden Youth Centre school holiday graffiti workshop tour the freshly-painted Turner PCYC site. April 2021. Photo: Jacqui Malins

On the southside, the [Woden Squash Courts](#) have been repainted as a tribute hall of fame site for the early years of graff, by a variety of old and new writers. When a wall like this is painted, it's bonded with a special chemical so that if it's tagged or there's an attempted repaint, it can be hosed off pretty easily. So it's a mural, rather than a live graffiti piece, but it serves the purpose of a style archive, which gives the community a sense of history.



MURDA MOUSE, SETH, 1991. Photo: SETH



*Woden Squash Courts project under way, 2020,
Finished Woden Squash Courts project, 2020,
Finished Woden Squash Courts project, 2020.
Photos: Martin Ollman.*

Canberra graff has a history worth exploring, rich in colour and drama. And jump on your bike or scooter to tour the outer suburb walls and underpasses. I guarantee you won't be bored.

The Graffiti Project is being funded by Transport Canberra and City Services (TCCS) and delivered by the Woden Arts Program, which is managed by Tuggeranong Arts Centre and funded by the ACT Government. Woden Community Service Youth Engagement Team is a project partner

* If you do want to dispute or add to any part of his story, there's a safe place to do it:
<https://www.tuggeranongarts.com/whats-on/woden-graffiti-project/>

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1. ACT Hansard, 15 September 1992.
 2. ACT Govt Report No. 9: The environmental, social and financial impact of graffiti in Canberra and the appropriate means of preventing graffiti damage, March 1996.
 3. Youth Coalition of the ACT, 'Feedback: Consultations with Young People about the ACT DRAFT Graffiti Strategy', June 2004, p. 7
 4. Canberra Times, 31 August 2019, 'The Canberra Politician who painted over a prize artwork'.
 5. Canberra Times, 30 Oct 2011: 'Canberra CBD to make a mark on graffiti problem'.
 6. Canberra Times, 2 March 2014: 'New Vandal Trak app is stopping vandals in their tracks'.
 7. <https://www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/app/forms/fixmystreet>

