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**Youth Action and Policy Association NSW Inc.  
Submission to the Graffiti and Public Infrastructure Inquiry  
May 2010**

The Youth Action and Policy Association (YAPA) is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. YAPA works towards a society where all young people are supported, engaged and valued.

The war on graffiti is one that has been waged for over 20 years, and one that no one is winning. YAPA, in consultation with academics, youth workers and young people, propose that it is time to re-think the war on graffiti and to acknowledge that zero-tolerance and eradication are policies are not working. It is time to look at graffiti policy and legislation in a different way, and to engage young people and graffiti writers in this process.

Of the six topics nominated by the Public Works Committee to inquire and report on, this report contains the following evidence based recommendations on three of the six topics nominated:

- **Social and economic impact of graffiti on public infrastructure;**
  - That research is conducted into community opinion and perceptions of different forms of graffiti writing and street art to better inform policy development.
  - That the impact of high quality graffiti murals and aerosol artists to increase both social and economic value in the community be encouraged and recognised.
- **Anti graffiti policies and practices to protect public infrastructure**
  - That time and space be provided to produce legal graffiti murals on public infrastructure to enhance the aesthetics of the infrastructure and to increase ownership of, and engagement with, young people and artists in public space.
- **Anti graffiti practices such as mural painting programs employed by NSW state and local government agencies;**
  - That mural painting programs are supported within a youth service environment to act as both an engagement tool as well as enhance the artistic development of young graffiti writers.

YAPA is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW.

YAPA works towards a society where all young people are supported, engaged and valued.

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## Social and economic impact of graffiti on public infrastructure

### **Recommendation**

*That research is conducted into community opinion and perceptions of different forms of graffiti writing and street art to better inform policy development.*

The discussion of graffiti in New South Wales is overwhelmed with misconceptions and exaggerations of both its social and economic impact. Whilst the dislike of 'tagging' (a graffiti writers signature stylised in form) is commonly discussed, the impact of high quality murals is often left out of discussion. In addition to this, the concept of what is 'good' and 'bad' graffiti is not discussed, only the assumption that all graffiti is 'bad'.

Grffiti is one component of the art genre *Street Art* which, as explained by Art Radar Asia (2010) is not an easily definable genre, 'it is an amorphous beast encompassing art which is found in or inspired by the urban environment ... Its definition and uses are changing: originally a tool to mark territorial boundaries of urban youth, today it is even seen in some cases as a means of urban beautification and regeneration.'

It is important to point out that not all forms of graffiti writing is 'bad'. There are many talented artists in NSW creating remarkable pieces legally. Unfortunately, to date there has been no research conducted in Australia about public opinion on the different forms of graffiti and street art. However, to assume that the entire community dislikes all forms of graffiti is a gross oversight. YAPA recently met with three of Sydney's foremost graffiti writers. These graffiti writers spoke of multiple instances where, in creating a legal mural, members of the public had approached them offering praise for their work. In addition to this, they received multiple requests for private commissions of their art.

By researching public opinion on the different forms of graffiti, the NSW State Government would be equipped with knowledge on what the community views as acceptable and unacceptable graffiti. This would alter the level of graffiti removal required, resulting in lower costs and increased community acceptance of 'good' graffiti art.

*'In order to bring an end to the costly graffiti war, we must redefine 'the graffiti problem' to make it primarily a matter of planning, not policing. Planners can play a crucial role in ending the costly war on graffiti, by working to involve a variety of stakeholders in a democratic and pragmatic compromise that takes account of genuine differences in how we value and appreciate the urban environment.'*  
Iveson (2010)

### **Recommendation**

*That the impact of high quality graffiti murals and aerosol artists to increase both social and economic value in the community be encouraged and recognised.*

There are many examples where high quality graffiti murals have enhanced both the economic and social value of public space. For example, Mays Lane in St Peters is now a well-known and popular outdoor art exhibition, increasing the amount of visitors to the area and enhancing the social value of the lane in the eyes of the community. Internationally renowned stencil artist 'Banksy' creates works in public space that are valued at over \$100,000 each, and his 2009 exhibition 'Banksy v Bristol Museum' attracted 300,000 visitors. This resulted in the museum extending its operating hours for the duration of the exhibition to accommodate the large volume of visitors. New South Wales needs to see its current and developing graffiti writers as an asset, both economically and socially, or we risk losing these assets and pushing the culture further underground.

*'The authors of a 1986 report for the NSW State Rail Authority argued that "both staff and public must accept a certain level of rail vandalism and graffiti as inevitable – which they are". Given that they could establish no link between graffiti and other forms of crime, and that graffiti would never be totally eradicated, they argued instead that State Rail ought to make the distinction between graffiti and violence "clearly, frequently and publicly" in order to ease any fearful perceptions caused by graffiti (Wilson and Healy 1986, p. 64) ... Because graffiti is constantly represented as indicative of the possibility of more serious crime, the appearance of graffiti is perceived by many observers as a signal of disorder which makes a place feel unsafe. These perceptions are socially constructed, and are open to being socially deconstructed. Indeed, it is possible that we come to see the existence of (good) graffiti as a symbol of vibrancy and energy rather than danger and crime.'* Iveson (2010)

*'Graffiti is a complex thing. Its form and location tell us much about what is happening in our city. Controlling graffiti, if that is what we want, requires that we understand and value graffiti, the taggers, the writers, the artists. Otherwise, the incidence of graffiti – and its blatant opposition to heavy-handed authority – can only increase.'* O'Neill (2008)

## Anti graffiti policies and practices to protect public infrastructure

### **Recommendation**

*That time and space be provided to produce legal graffiti murals on public infrastructure to enhance the aesthetics of the infrastructure and to increase ownership of, and engagement with, young people and artists in public space.*

The war on graffiti is one that has been waged both internationally and in Australia for more than 20 years, but it is clear that currently no one is winning this war. For example, 'NSW Police statistics indicate that if anything, incidents of graffiti have remained static or risen over recent years ... Observably, 20 years of efforts to eradicate graffiti have not succeeded. Anyone who pays attention to public spaces in our towns and cities can confirm this with their own eyes.' (Iveson, 2010). The only beneficiaries of current graffiti policies are the graffiti removal contractors making a profit out of rapid removal policies.

Graffiti policy needs to be re-thought in order to benefit our community. Eradicating graffiti and zero-tolerance are policies that are clearly not working. They are not minimizing the incidence of graffiti, but merely encouraging the production of 'bad' graffiti. As is stated by Weinberg (2003), "'Zero tolerance" is a political pitch, not a solution.'

*'Existing graffiti policies have indeed made it harder and more risky to write graffiti. In response, we have seen the growth of those forms of graffiti which are able to be rapidly executed and applied (etching, tags, stickers, etc.) at the expense of those forms of graffiti which take longer to complete (pieces, etc) ... So, while these policies have not eradicated graffiti, they have had the effect of changing its form and, arguably, eroding its quality.'* Iveson (2010)

It is possible that public infrastructure does not need to be 'protected' from graffiti. In most cases the function of the infrastructure is not altered, merely its aesthetics. Whilst common opinion is that 'tags' are unsightly, graffiti and street art also have the capacity to improve public infrastructure. A good piece of graffiti takes time as well as skill, however current policy and legislation only promotes tagging which can be completed quickly and with little aesthetic value.

*'Given that graffiti simply will not be eradicated, we ought to be mature enough as a society to accept policy measures which have the more modest goal of shifting graffiti writing practice towards those forms and locations of graffiti that are better liked (or at least more tolerable to more people).'* Iveson (2010).

*'Creating and supporting areas of higher tolerance in which high quality street art can exist is also recognition of the cultural significance that street art has for today's young people.'* Young (2005) in Iveson (2010)

## **Anti-graffiti practices such as mural painting programs employed by NSW state and local government agencies**

### ***Recommendation***

*That mural painting programs are supported within a youth service environment to act as both an engagement tool as well as enhance the artistic development of young graffiti writers.*

Mural painting programs are both popular and effective youth engagement tools. It is necessary that youth services have the ability to work with the young people that require their service in a way that best suits them by providing the young people with an activity that they enjoy. There are many young people that would benefit from youth services, but that do not actively seek them out. It is the responsibility of the youth service to promote their work, and provide accessible pathways to the service for all young people.

In 2007, YAPA consulted youth services across NSW to seek their feedback on the use of aerosol paint, such as legal graffiti walls/murals and graffiti programs through youth services. The response was overwhelming, with a general consensus that legal uses of aerosol paint have tremendous pro-social benefits to both young people and the community as a whole. A summary of responses from this consultation is provided as Appendix A.

Mural painting programs not only act as an engagement tool, but also as a way for older more experienced writers to mentor young people on the respectful way to go about graffiti as well as assisting them increase their skills in graffiti writing. By providing young people that are already engaged in graffiti writing, but are not yet skilled in the area, mentors who have more experience in the art of graffiti writing, you are not only providing the opportunity for young people to learn the appropriate and respectful ways to write, but also enhancing their skill and technique leading to higher quality graffiti being produced.

In order for youth service specific aerosol art programs to be effective and well managed, high quality policy needs to be made available to these services to assist them in navigating their way around the graffiti issue. This includes factors such as how to engage with the community, risk management, occupational health & safety considerations, engaging appropriate graffiti writers as mentors, and legal & ethical issues.

YAPA has significant experience and expertise in developing model policies for non-residential youth services, and it is our intention to develop a model policy for graffiti programs to be distributed to youth services in 2010.

**Appendix A – Excerpts from YAPA's 2007 Submission 'Review of all legislation to stop graffiti vandalism'**

**Feedback on the social benefit of providing legal uses of aerosol paint for young people**

- Legal aerosol art can provide messages of hope, harmony and joy to everyday people walking by. Murals are an awesome way to promote team work and harmony to young people who otherwise may not have the means or the opportunity to show their artistic talents in other forms or in galleries. Aerosol art is a key component to making art more accessible to young people. It can assist young people in connecting with positive aspects of their lives, creating brighter futures for themselves, preventing a feeling of not being heard or understood and promoting these aspects to the wider community. One of the NSW youth aims is for young people to better access parks and community space. And another youth policy states the aim for young people in NSW to better access the arts. Aerosol art is a means for introducing art to young people as well as a means for them to express their issues to the wider community. Aerosol art is a vital form of art to encourage a more harmonious society and to brighten our dull streets. *(Youth worker, Granville)*
- It is a primary media for artistic expression for a large youth subculture. Aerosol art is in many cases a formative artistic pursuit leading to a career such as graphic design, web design, fine art, sign writing or painting and decorating. The widespread use of aerosol or graffiti 'style' graphics in youth orientated advertising I feel is evidence of the appeal of the visual (sub) culture and it is a style and language that young people enjoy using. The significance of much of the aerosol culture and social aspects of this artform are not understood by much of the wider community and particularly older generations. The time spent together working on 'pieces', and planning works and interacting with other artists is a fundamental social part of the aerosol art culture. *(Aerosol artist, Sydney)*
- Society as a whole benefits from having a creative and imaginative youth. Providing young people with legal uses of Aerosol Paint develops this trait in youth. Furthermore, having such an environment would be seen as attractive to young people whom might otherwise find entertainment or a way to pass the time in a manner not looked kindly upon by society or the police force. *(Young person)*

## **Feedback on the legal uses of aerosol paint, such as legal graffiti walls/murals and graffiti programs through youth services**

- I feel that a great deal of valid artwork is produced with aerosol which has real artistic, cultural and commercial value, and in programs which I have run or been involved in, such as “Street Art Club” (Street Art Club- School based aerosol/stencil/art program dealing with modern street art concepts fused with practical experience in design, signage, fine art and professional practice). I have good participation and retention, and very positive feedback. My aerosol art programs have successfully been used to scaffold enthusiasm for aerosol art onto awareness of other youth issues, ie, sexual health, antismoking etc. I think the diverse range of youth and community agencies as well as commercial entities that use my services as a community artist specialising in aerosol art is evidence of its wide appeal and prominence in youth culture. (*Aerosol artist, Sydney*)
- Graffiti art is a great way to get young people interested in art in general. Through personal observation and evaluation of previous art workshops, it is clear that graffiti workshops often lead to young people's interest in a wider variety of art forms. Graffiti art and mural painting is a global trend that gets young people to express themselves with the knowledge that the wider community will be able to view, appreciate and acknowledge their artistic and often social input. The concrete jungle we live in would be even duller if youth services were forbidden to undertake mural and graffiti programs. Mural painting is empowering for young people and is a growing art form that can't and shall not be stopped! (*Youth worker, Granville*).
- In my view such programs are an enormous benefit to youth. These programs provide young people with an opportunity to be involved with creating and viewing an art form that they readily identify with. For young people from the western suburbs of Sydney such as myself, the opportunity to view art in galleries does not present itself as often as it does for youth in inner city areas - the art we are exposed to either comes in the form of advertisements created by people we don't know, or in the form of graffiti created by people much like ourselves. It is then no surprise that so many young people feel such a strong passion for the graffiti culture. Providing young people with a safe and legal environment to develop their skills and create something positive should be the foremost concern for youth services in their approach to aerosol artworks. (*Young person*)
- We have a long history of providing aerosol art workshops to ‘at risk’ young people and have found them to be highly successful in not only reducing incidents of graffiti damage to our building, but they also allow local police officers to engage with young people about the difference between legal and illegal aerosol art. A recent example of the success of this project has been with a group of under 12’s who had started ‘tagging’. When we became aware of this, as did the local police, we ran an aerosol art workshop specifically targeting them and since then they haven’t ‘tagged’ our building. The contemporary urban arts projects were aimed at reducing the incidences of illegal graffiti and to provide a structured program for young people “at risk” of entering the Juvenile Justice system. Another objective was to educate young people about the legal aspects of Aerosol Art and to promote social



skills and support young people to participate in their own communities. A number of successful programs have been run, the most recent being in October this year. It was the Front wall project, aimed at painting a new mural on the front wall of the Marrickville Resource Centre. This project gave the young people the chance to learn and develop their skills with aerosol art in a safe and legal environment. It also gave us the chance to link these young people with the Youth Liaison Officers from Marrickville Police to discuss issues concerning illegal tagging and other issues concerning graffiti. (*Youth worker, Marrickville, see Appendix B for photograph*)

- The legal use of aerosol is a medium for young people to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings whilst also displaying their creativity and talents. It also gives them the opportunity to engage in graffiti activities legally, learn skills and it prevents the occurrence of illegal graffiti tagging. (*Youth worker, Dubbo*)

- A joint initiative between Warringah Council and the Beacon Hill Bears Junior Rugby Leagues Club demonstrates the benefits to the community of legal murals. Council own the canteen block that was heavily tagged for a number of years. Council's Construction and Maintenance Department approached Youth Services about a legal mural on the canteen block. As sole users of the facility the Rugby Leagues Club were consulted on mural designs. Designs were relevant to the user group and included a memorial to 2 football former Beacon Hill Bears players who have passed away. The murals were completed in early 2004. Outcomes of this project included artwork being used in media articles and promotional material for the Beacon Hill Bears Rugby Leagues Club; major reduction in cost to Council for this facility; exposure of artwork to wider community through sporting groups; and the increase in request for Legal Murals.

Another successful project was a joint initiative between Warringah Council and a local business. The business owner's garage door was repeatedly tagged. This made the local newspaper. This project was unique in that the owner wanted whoever tagged the garage door to make contact and paint a legal mural. This did not happen and then Council became involved. Designs were approved, local residents and business owners were notified of the project and the mural was completed in June 2006. Outcomes of this project included a negative media article turned into a positive with completion of the mural; promotion of product that business sells; dull garage door turned into bright and positive artwork; and an increase in request for Legal Murals.

Also in 2006, a joint initiative occurred between Warringah Council and local business Hardware and General. The front of their timber yard was a blank brick wall that was tagged often and looked very dull. After seeing the article in local newspaper about a previous mural project, they approached Council about the possibility of a mural. Hardware and General requested that the designs reflect their business of selling timber.

(*Youth worker, Warringah, see Appendix B for accompanying photos to these projects*)



## Appendix B: *Photographic Evidence*



Marrickville Youth Resource Centre



Joint initiative between Warringah Council and the Beacon Hills Bears Junior Rugby Leagues Club



Warringah – Joint initiatives between Council Youth Services and local businesses





### **Dundas Area Youth Service Aerosol Art Mural Project - 2008**

Funded by Parramatta City Council

The mural art project aimed at reducing illegal graffiti on the highly visible council work caravans. The project also aimed to discourage illegal graffiti and promote creative legal aerosol art.

NB: These murals were painted over in 2009 as part of Parramatta City Council's Zero-Tolerance Graffiti Management Policy, despite being originally commissioned by the council and no further damage occurring to the vans.



*Before*



*After*



*Before*



*After*

## References

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Davies, C. (2009), 'Bristol public given right to decide whether graffiti is art or eyesore'

Iveson, K. (2010), 'War is over (if you want it): rethinking the graffiti problem - revised'

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Weinberg, R. (2003), 'Shooting the Messenger: *Rethinking Confrontation in the War Against Graffiti*'