

# The wars on graffiti and the new military urbanism

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*An ever-expanding number of urban authorities have declared ‘war’ on graffiti. This paper explores the role the wars on graffiti have played in the creeping militarization of everyday life in the city. Wars on graffiti have contributed to the diffusion of military technologies and operational techniques into the realm of urban policy and policing. Furthermore, new Western military doctrines of urban warfare have sought to ‘learn lessons’ from the wars on graffiti (and other crime) in their efforts to achieve dominance over cities in both the global South and the Western ‘homeland’. The blurring of war and policing has deepened with the declaration of wars on terror. The stakes have been raised in urban social control efforts intended to protect communities from threats of ‘disorder’ such as graffiti, for the existence of even ‘minor’ infractions is thought to send a message to both ‘the community’ and ‘enemies within’ that there are vulnerabilities to be exploited with potentially more devastating consequences. Increasingly, there is a convergence around the notion that situational crime prevention strategies are crucial in combating both graffiti and terror threats, because even if graffiti writers and terrorists don’t share the same motivations, they do exploit the same urban vulnerabilities. The paper concludes with a critical reflection on what graffiti writers might be able to teach us about how to evade and/or contest the militarization of urban life.*

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## Prelude: bombing the city

**A**mong the highlights of *Style Wars*, the cult 1983 documentary about hip hop culture and graffiti in New York City, are the conversations between teenage graffiti writer SKEME and his mother. As they sit together in their living room, SKEME tells us that:

‘I didn’t start writing to go to Paris. I didn’t start writing to do canvases. I started writing to bomb, destroy all lines. And that’s what I’m doing.’

His mum rolls her eyes, shakes her head and appeals to the interviewer:

‘Now that you’ve heard that, you understand what I’m saying to you when I say that I don’t understand him. He’s out there to “bomb”, “destroy all lines”. What have the lines ever done to him?’

For the 20th anniversary of the documentary, director Tony Chalfant tracked down SKEME and his mum for a reunion interview. We find out that on reaching adulthood, SKEME had joined the US Army, and

had been in it ever since. And as he tells it, his skills as a writer had come in handy as a serviceman:

‘It really prepared me for the army, because graffiti was a mission. You had to start with a draft. You had to get your material. Then you had to be dedicated. You couldn’t say, “well, I got a piece to do”, and then two weeks go by and you never do it.’

We might also speculate on whether SKEME’s experiences as a graffiti writer would have come in handy for the new kinds of terrain over which the US military and its allies increasingly seek dominance—the city and its infrastructure. As a 1996 US Army training manual put it, ‘the future of warfare lies in the streets, sewers, high-rise buildings, and sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world’ (quoted in Graham, 2007b, p. 121). This description of enemy terrain could almost be applied to the South Bronx during the 1970s, the broken city neighbourhood where the ‘war on graffiti’ was first declared against the dispossessed kids who improvised new urban artistic practices which gradually escaped that neighbourhood—first going ‘all city’, and then going global (Austin, 2001; Ganz, 2004).

## Introduction

US President Lyndon Johnson is typically credited with one of the first evocations of ‘war’ in the realm of social and economic policy, with his declaration of a ‘war on poverty’ in 1964. Shortly thereafter in 1969, President Nixon declared a ‘war on drugs’. Not long after that, in 1972, New York City Council President Sanford Garelik called on citizens of New York to band together to wage ‘an all-out war on graffiti’, followed closely by Mayor Lindsay pleading with New Yorkers to support new anti-graffiti measures: ‘For heaven’s sake, New Yorkers, come to the aid of your great city—defend it, support it, protect it!’ (Castleman, 2004,

p. 22). An ever-expanding number of towns and cities across the English-speaking world have since declared their own wars on graffiti. Urban authorities have won some battles, but in no town or city can they claim to have won the war.

While graffiti policies in different cities have their own histories which require close analysis (see, for example, Ferrell, 1996; Austin, 2001; Iveson, 2007; Dickinson, 2008), the various wars on graffiti draw upon a remarkably consistent repertoire of technologies and procedures. Casting an eye across these different contexts, this paper argues that the wars on graffiti have played a significant role in instigating and reinforcing the creeping militarization of everyday life in the city. The wars on graffiti have involved the diffusion of military technologies and operational techniques into the realm of urban policy and policing. Furthermore, new Western military doctrines of urban warfare have sought to ‘learn lessons’ from the wars on graffiti (and other crime) in their efforts to achieve dominance over cities in both the global South and the Western ‘homeland’.

The paper proceeds in four steps. First, I discuss the deepening links between militarism and urbanism. Second, I consider the contributions of the wars on graffiti to the creeping militarization of urban social control efforts, looking at how they resemble ‘real’ war-making. Third, I chart the ways in which the ‘graffiti problem’ has been re-framed since the declaration of the ‘war on terror’ in 2001, such that the wars on graffiti have been imbued with extra urgency. Finally, I ask what graffiti writers might be able to teach us about how to evade and/or contest this militarization of urban space.

## The new military urbanism

‘[T]he ubiquity of urbanization today ensures that the U.S. Army will be called upon to operate in villages, towns, and cities. Adversaries may also draw U.S. forces into urban areas in order to neutralize American

technological capabilities. If the Army is to remain superior in all types of engagements, it must overcome both the operational and analytic challenges that cities produce.’ (Medby and Glenn, 2002, p. xiv)

In a series of articles in *City* and elsewhere, Stephen Graham has charted the emergence of new doctrines, technologies and techniques of warfare seeking to achieve military dominance over urban ‘battlespaces’. The rise of what he calls the ‘new military urbanism’ has been driven by a revised analysis of *where* the wars of the present and future are likely to be fought. US military theorists are concerned that war is less likely to be fought against the organized armed forces of nation-states on conventional battlefields, where the US military has built up superior capabilities. Rather, the US and allied militaries seem increasingly likely to find themselves battling insurgents who seek to avoid that superiority by engaging in close-quarters combat and/or targeting infrastructure in cities. Cities have become attractive battlegrounds to the enemies of the West, it is argued, because of the opportunities for cover provided by urban environments. ‘Opposition forces will camouflage themselves in the background noise of the urban environment’ (DITC, quoted in Graham, 2008b, p. 39) ‘seeking the city and the advantages of mixing with non combatants’ (Major Lee Grubbs, US Army, quoted in Graham, 2008b, p. 35).

For Graham, this new military urbanism is premised on a distinction between the cities of the global South and the ‘homeland’ cities of the West, where different strategies are adopted to mitigate foreign and domestic threats. In the poor cities of the global South, two of the key strategies being devised and practiced to counter insurgent threats include de-modernization and ‘persistent area dominance’. De-modernization involves the targeting of urban infrastructures which are said to give insurgents their cover in urban battlespace (Graham, 2005, 2007a). ‘Persistent area dominance’, on the other hand, is to be achieved through the deployment of new

sensing technologies and intelligence techniques which give US and allied soldiers layers of information about urban battlespaces in real time, thereby removing any ‘home ground’ advantage insurgents may have due to their knowledge of everyday urban systems and spaces (Graham, 2009). Of course, both of these strategies are likely to have profoundly harmful impacts on wider civilian populations, who are treated ‘not as bodies of urban citizens with human and political rights requiring protection’ but as ‘physical and technical noise within an all-encompassing “battlespace”’ (Graham, 2008b, p. 40).

Different strategies have been conceived for cities of the ‘homeland’. Because the militarization of these cities is in large part justified in the name of *protecting* urban infrastructures against insurgent threats, neither de-modernization nor complete indifference to civilian rights and casualties are options. ‘Homeland’ cities are nonetheless being ‘reimagined and re-engineered to address supposed imperatives of “national security”’ (Graham, 2006, p. 257). This has involved, among other things:

‘a radical ratcheting-up of surveillance and (attempted) social control, the endless “terror talk”, highly problematic clampdowns, the “hardening” of urban “targets”, and potentially indefinite incarcerations, sometimes within extra-legal or extra-territorial camps, for those people deemed to display the signifiers of real or “dormant” terrorists’. (Graham, 2006, p. 273)

While the operational procedures in occupied and homeland contexts are quite different, there is nonetheless a thread connecting security strategies across this variety of cities. Underpinning the different strategies is a desire to establish spatial dominance through networked mobilities and surveillance capabilities (Graham, 2005, p. 175). In particular, Graham (2009, p. 385) identifies a convergence of security and military doctrine within Western states around ‘the task of identifying insurgents, terrorists or malign

threats from the chaotic background of urban life’.

In charting the rise of this new military urbanism, Graham has emphasized the profound impact of the current ‘war on terror’ in pushing this process forward. Since 2001, Western cities have increasingly been conceptualized as ‘domestic fronts’ in the ‘war on terror’. However, as he (Graham, 2004, p. 17) and others have noted, while the perceived threat of ‘terror’ is central in contemporary articulations of the city as battlespace, the militarization of urban space and policy in Western cities was well underway before September 2001. Indeed, over several years before this key date, a variety of scholars in the fields such as urban studies and criminology had drawn attention to a creeping militarization of urban life associated with new techniques and technologies of social control. They have suggested that various ‘wars on crime’ have been crucial in opening up urban life to the kinds of military interventions that have gathered momentum since 2001. What role might the ‘wars on graffiti’ have played in this process?

### Waging war on graffiti

‘Fear of crime and war have acquired a new political affinity.’ (Steinert, 2003, p. 267)

Is it reasonable to make any connection between the language of war in graffiti policy and the new military urbanism described above? The use of the word ‘war’ to describe policy responses to graffiti (and other things) is significant. As Steinert (2003, p. 266) has argued: ‘Metaphors have consequences.’ He goes on to argue that in the case of wars on crime, ‘the most important effect is that the line between warfare and police work becomes blurred’. Steinert is not alone in claiming that these metaphorical ‘wars’ are becoming more like real wars. For Hardt and Negri, the wars on crime, on drugs and on terror are not simply metaphorical ‘because

like war traditionally conceived they involve armed combat and lethal force’ (2004, p. 14). And yet, such wars are different from traditional wars in that ‘the limits of war are rendered indeterminate, both spatially and temporally’ because the enemy is a concept or a set of practices rather than a hostile nation-state:

‘A war to create and maintain social order can have no end. It must involve the continuous, uninterrupted exercise of power and violence. In other words, one cannot win such a war, or, rather, it has to be won again every day. War has thus become virtually indistinguishable from police activity.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 14)

This analysis is supported by others who are more specifically concerned with changes in urban social control regimes. Body-Gendrot (2000, p. 26) has argued that new urban social control efforts involve a ‘militarization of the police and a policization of the army’. Likewise, Kraska (2001a, p. 18) has claimed that ‘the line between waging actual war against external enemies and metaphorical wars waged against internal enemies is becoming increasingly blurred’, creating what he calls a ‘military–criminal justice blur’.

Since the 1970s, the wars on graffiti have made a significant contribution to this blurring of war and policing, preparing the ground for a further intensification for the new military urbanism in the wake of the declaration of the ‘war on terror’. The wars on graffiti have typically involved a combination of the following four strategies: a search for new technologies and weaponry; the use of intelligence and counterintelligence operations; propaganda; and the increasing role of the private sector.<sup>1</sup>

### Technology

Both the wars on graffiti and the new military urbanism are characterized by technophilic discourses in which technological innovation is seen as key in providing new

(and hopefully decisive) weapons designed for urban terrain. Nunn (2001, p. 13) has charted the ‘movement of technologies from defense to law enforcement’, and argued that this technology transfer ‘alters the interaction of criminal justice agencies with cities and citizens at large’. The wars on graffiti have contributed to the diffusion of several military technologies into everyday urban systems and spaces.

Perhaps the first and most ubiquitous technology deployed in the war on graffiti is barbed/razor wire. In September 1981, shortly after the Koch administration declared the City of New York’s second ‘war on graffiti’ (see Austin, 2001, pp. 134–166), US\$1.5 million was spent to install double rows of fences topped with razor wire around one of the subway storage yards, with attack dogs patrolling in between the rows of fencing. Declaring this trial a success, in December Koch allocated a further \$22.4 million for more razor wire fences. ‘City to use pits of barbed wire in graffiti wars’, said the *New*

*York Times* headline (quoted in Castleman, 2004, p. 27), evoking a link between the subway lines and the trench lines of the First World War. Fast forward nearly 40 years, and the sight of urban infrastructure—especially railway corridors—being protected against graffiti and other forms of vandalism by long stretches of barbed and/or razor wire is commonplace across countless cities. A technology developed for herding animals on the American frontier, and subsequently deployed in a range of military contexts including the battlefields and camps of both world wars (Razac, 2003), is now thoroughly urbanized, and the graffiti wars have played a significant role in this process (Austin, 2001, pp. 209–210) (see Figure 1).

Chemical weapons have also played a significant role in the long war on graffiti. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) in New York was the first to experiment with chemicals, concocting a chemical wash to (partially) remove graffiti from the exte-



**Figure 1** Razor wire on NYC subway line. Photo: Joe Austin (used with permission).



**Figure 2** UK Prime Minister Tony Blair takes up arms in the war on graffiti, January 2006. Photo source: [www.number10.gov.uk](http://www.number10.gov.uk)

rior of subway carriages (Austin, 2001, p. 130). Graffiti writers in New York initially referred to this chemical wash as ‘Orange Crush’, referencing both a soft drink and Agent Orange. From these initial efforts in New York, more sophisticated chemical weapons have been developed designed to make surfaces and materials graffiti-resistant and easier to clean. Among many others, NASA has even played a role in helping to devise these graffiti-resistant materials (Austin, 2001, p. 91) (see Figure 2).

In the face of such technologies, some writers remained defiant. New York writer DAZE boasted that:

‘All the fences will do is keep most of us out of the yards. We’ll still be able to hit the trains in the lay-ups, and we’ll bomb the insides and the outsides of in-service trains with tags—big spray-paint tags like nobody’s ever seen. The MTA can’t stop us from doing that unless they put a cop on every car.’  
(quoted in Castleman, 2004, p. 27)

The fantasy (or nightmare) of a ‘cop on every car’ gradually became a (kind of) reality with the widespread introduction of CCTV surveillance, another technology which has been widely deployed in efforts to combat graffiti and other forms of so-called ‘anti-social behaviour’ in urban areas (see, for

example, European Conference of Ministers of Transport, 2003; Morgon and Smith, 2006; Offler *et al.*, 2009).

At best, conventional CCTV offers a visual deterrent and an ‘after the fact’ documentation of graffiti that might assist in convicting a graffiti writer who has been apprehended. New surveillance technologies are being developed which promise to assist with the ‘real-time’ detection and apprehension of graffiti writers. These latest technologies to be deployed in the war on graffiti share some key features with the advancing technologies of urban warfare, which place a strong emphasis on real-time monitoring and analysis of behaviour in urban battlespaces (Graham, 2009). Tripwire Systems, a joint US–Australian company, have developed a new covert and mobile surveillance camera designed to be deployed in graffiti ‘hot spots’. Upon detecting motion, the *Tripwire* camera sends an alert and real-time images directly to the smartphones of security agents, who (it is hoped) will be able to catch a writer in the act. According to the marketing material, ‘Tripwire gives you the edge, and puts you back in control! ... The perpetrator will ask you “How the heck did you know we were here?????”’<sup>2</sup>

New surveillance systems are not restricted to visual surveillance. In the USA, TrapTec have patented the *Tagger Trap* system. This system combines acoustic sensors able to detect the ultrasonic frequencies emitted by spray cans, directional surveillance cameras for verification and recording of graffiti-writing activity, GPS locators and real-time alerts sent to security agencies. Like *Tripwire*, *Tagger Trap* promises to enable security agencies to ‘stop the crime in progress’. The acoustic surveillance technologies developed by TrapTec for *Tagger Trap* are now being applied across a range of domains, including military and homeland security operations. As TrapTec proudly boast:

‘With security concerns on the rise and a burgeoning graffiti repair market, TrapTec is confident that the potential market for

its technology is nearly limitless. National borders, military installations, police cars, taxi cabs, convenience stores, prisons, airports, banks, universities, and other community or commercial interests are all expected to avail themselves of one or more of the Company's detection systems.'

In Australia, the E-Nose company have invented the *graffiti-e-nose*, which can detect aerosol paint fumes at a distance of 45 metres, and then sends real-time alerts to security agencies via SMS. The smell sensor technologies on the *graffiti-e-nose* were first developed by NASA, and then adapted for use against graffiti by its university-based inventors, who have now established a consortium to commercialize e-nose technologies for further security and military purposes.<sup>3</sup> This is a textbook example of the increasingly well-travelled route of a technological innovation from initial military development via university research into use for urban law enforcement (Nunn, 2001, pp. 11–12).

#### *Intelligence and counterintelligence operations*

In many jurisdictions around the world, specialist anti-graffiti squads have been established within police services. These squads are typically tasked with advancing the war on graffiti by gathering higher quality intelligence about both the graffiti-writing culture and individual graffiti writers, and occasionally with running counterintelligence operations within graffiti-writing scenes. This police adoption of military techniques and organizational structures designed for guerrilla warfare is another instance of the military–criminal justice blur (Kraska, 2001b; Nunn, 2001). There is also evidence of a feedback loop emerging as military theorists and practitioners concerned with urban operations look to the police experience in combating graffiti and other gangs for inspiration.

Intelligence about graffiti writing and writers has been gathered and deployed in a variety of ways. Sometimes, authorities have tried to 'win the peace', by shifting a graffiti-writing scene towards legal rather than illegal graffiti writing. So, for instance, in Newcastle (Australia), a legal graffiti program run through a Police Citizens Youth Club was used to engage with graffiti writers in an effort to 'modify crew behaviour to reorient the focus of an individual from traditional [illegal] to modern [legal]' (Collins, 1997). After engaging with writers, project workers helped police in the arrest of the 'traditionalists', and promoted opportunities for 'modernists', so that they rapidly 'infiltrated' the ranks 'until an entirely modernist hierarchy existed'. The lead officer in this program argued that 'strategies run through arts bodies or youth organizations provide an ideal intelligence source for law enforcement bodies' (Collins, 1997). Arrests of prolific writers were also the aim in a covert operation in Phoenix, where undercover police posed as film-producers making a documentary about graffiti, expertly deploying their knowledge of the graffiti-writing scene to entrap writers eager to have their work publicized (Sorenson, 1997).

As in military urban operations, intelligence efforts in the wars on graffiti are also making increasing use of digital data systems. Databases of GPS-encoded digital photographs are designed to help authorities detect both 'hot spots' for graffiti-writing activity and active graffiti writers. For instance, the graffiti mapping database developed by GRIP Systems (Graffiti Reduction and Interception Programs) is now used by over 35 urban authorities across the USA, UK and Australia. The software is designed to enable coordinated data entry by a variety of 'victim groups' (i.e. property owners and managers) about graffiti activity, thereby building a spatially and temporally referenced profile of individual graffiti writers which can provide evidence against apprehended writers.<sup>4</sup>

Rumours have also circulated in several cities about police anti-graffiti squads engaging in their own brand of 'psychological

operations’, attempting to stir conflict and mistrust within the graffiti-writing scene by crossing out work with their own tags. In New York City during the 1970s, many writers believed THE CROSS OUTS crew who frequently wrote over pieces was actually the vandal squad (Austin, 2001, p. 129). In Melbourne, similar claims were made during the 1990s about the involvement of police in the CTSA crew, widely believed to stand for CITY TRANSITS SLASHING ART (Thornley, 1995).

These types of intelligence and counterintelligence work undertaken by specialist anti-graffiti squads in the name of the war on graffiti are, according to some military analysts, directly applicable to urban combat operations on foreign soil. Lieutenant Colonel Fred Renzi, a US psychological operations specialist, has argued that the military needs to develop better ‘ethnographic intelligence’ in order to combat the ‘dark networks’ which ‘come in forms with which we are not culturally familiar; and ... are impossible to “see” or monitor, let alone map, without consistent attention and the right training’ (Renzi, 2006, p. 181). Drawing directly on Wilson and Kelling’s ‘broken windows’ theory of crime control (1982), which has been one of the foundational texts for the wars on graffiti, Renzi argues that military ethnographic intelligence operations ought to take a leaf out of the contemporary criminologists’ handbook. This perspective is reflected in a review of US Army 21st Century Counterinsurgency operations, which argues that armed forces could learn from law enforcement agencies, such as the LAPD, who have specialist units set up to deal with criminal scenes involving graffiti writers and drug gangs (Milstein, 2008).

In an interesting twist, the presence of graffiti in occupied cities has also come to be a matter of strategic interest to the US military and its allies. In the emerging urban operations doctrines being developed in the USA and elsewhere, graffiti has been identified as one of the forms of insurgent communication which can make occupation forces

vulnerable. Learning to interpret this graffiti is one of the tasks for the US military if it is to become more *Street Smart* (to use the title of a report for the US Army about intelligence preparation for urban operations—see Medby and Glenn, 2002). Colonel Ralph Baker, who commanded a Combat Team in Bagdad during the US occupation, suggested that the density of anti-Coalition graffiti can be used reliably as one of the indicators of insurgent activity (Baker, 2006). In order to approximate these conditions, the Israel Defence Force’s urban operations training ground is covered with Arabic graffiti (Broomberg and Chanarin, 2007). In one of the Australian army’s urban operations training exercises, soldiers were confronted with the following scenarios to help them prepare for the specific demands of urban warfare and domestic security:

‘Fancy facing a group of angry protestors? What about spotting a graffiti artist inside a cordon? And exactly how do you tell the difference between a harmless couple walking along, and two insurgents up to no good?’ (Thomson, 2007).

The South Australian Police Special Tasks and Rescue Officers were on hand to help them out. In Iraq, the US Army have even used similar psy-ops tactics to those allegedly deployed by specialist graffiti squads, crossing out and/or modifying graffiti by insurgent groups in order to stir up conflict and mistrust among them (Lord, 2007) (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup>

### *Propaganda and censorship*

Public relations and war propaganda have also been features of the wars on graffiti. A variety of campaigns have sought to deter young people from writing graffiti, and to mobilize community support for anti-graffiti efforts. A militarized ‘with us or against us’ rhetoric infuses many of these campaigns. Once again, New York was the pioneer here, with its now infamous ‘make your mark in society, not on society’ multimedia campaign



**Figure 3** US Army Staff Sgt. from 310th Psychological Operations Company, 1st Cavalry Division and an interpreter write 'Mujahedeen in Jail' under graffiti that once read 'Long Live The Mujahedeen', 16 February 2007 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (US Air Force photo by Senior Airman Vanessa Valentine).

in the 1980s (Austin, 2001). More recently, the UK Home Office established their 'Name That Tag' poster campaign, offering £500 rewards for information about the identity of prolific taggers (as well as free fame for those whose tags appeared on the posters) (Home Office (UK), 2003). In Western Australia, the State Government has recently launched its 'Goodbye Graffiti' campaign, which involved a letterbox drop to all residents in the city of a leaflet informing them of new measures designed to curb graffiti, and the role they could play in defeating graffiti writers (along with a complementary fridge magnet ...).<sup>6</sup> The NSW State Government has resurrected a New York City policy from the 1970s, with the announcement of an annual 'Graffiti Action Day' on which residents are invited to do in a graffiti writer or clean up some graffiti.

Anti-graffiti propagandists constantly worry that graffiti is tacitly endorsed in the

marketplace, through the widespread use of graffiti-style art in advertising campaigns, music videos and other media. Graffiti writers have also established their own media, through 'zines and websites in particular, and there now exists a burgeoning industry publishing glossy books on graffiti writers, styles and scenes (see Austin, this issue). Occasionally, police and other authorities have responded to this situation with censorship. Graffiti website magazines have been shut down, art and record shops have been raided and graffiti magazines have been confiscated by police anti-graffiti squads (Iveson, 2007, p. 143). In Australia, the Commonwealth Censor refused classification for *Mark Ecko's Getting Up*, a first-person graffiti-writing game, in which the player's goal is to acquire paint, bomb the city, and evade the police and other graffiti writers.<sup>7</sup> Of course, hundreds of violent first-person shooter games have not suffered the same fate.

Efforts to make graffiti less ‘cool’ by publicly shaming graffiti writers as a form of punishment have also been a feature of propaganda efforts in some jurisdictions. In Wellington (NZ), convicted graffiti writers are forced to clean up graffiti while wearing pink vests, in the hope that the associated ‘terror of humiliation’ will stop others writing graffiti.<sup>8</sup> One critical local councillor likened the vests to the pink triangles used by the Nazis to mark out homosexuals. Her criticism was dismissed by a newspaper editorialist as a ‘barmy criticism’ that had at least ‘done the war on graffiti a power of good publicity’ (*Daily Post (NZ)*, 2008), but perhaps it was not so far off the mark. Only six months before this, in January 2008, 15-year-old South Aucklander Pihema Campbell was chased and stabbed by a property owner whose fence he tagged. Campbell died on the scene. His killer was arrested and prosecuted (and eventually convicted of manslaughter). However, the fact that in this case the victim was a *tagger* generated an alarming degree of sympathy for his killer’s actions in the wider public sphere. As Chris Barton (2008) reported for the *New Zealand Herald*:

‘The day after the fatal stabbing, Mayor Len Brown was more concerned about the defacement than the death: “Tagging is a starting point for a lot of youngsters getting on to the criminal treadmill. Graffiti in our city is an issue we absolutely want to get on top of.” ... Brown wasn’t alone in his apparent lack of compassion for the victim. Letters to this newspaper seemed callous: “I personally have absolutely no sympathy for the tagger!” And: “The tagger wasn’t murdered. He was killed. The word murder should be used to define only an innocent person’s death at the hands of someone else.” Christchurch City councillor Barry Corbett jumped into the fray, saying the alleged murderer should be set free. “If I was on the jury, I’d let him get away with it, but that’s just me.”’

Campbell is certainly not the first graffiti writer to die in violent circumstances at the

hands of vigilantes or police. Writing of these deaths, Jeff Chang (2002) has observed: ‘Make no mistake: “quality of life” campaigns have had a body count.’

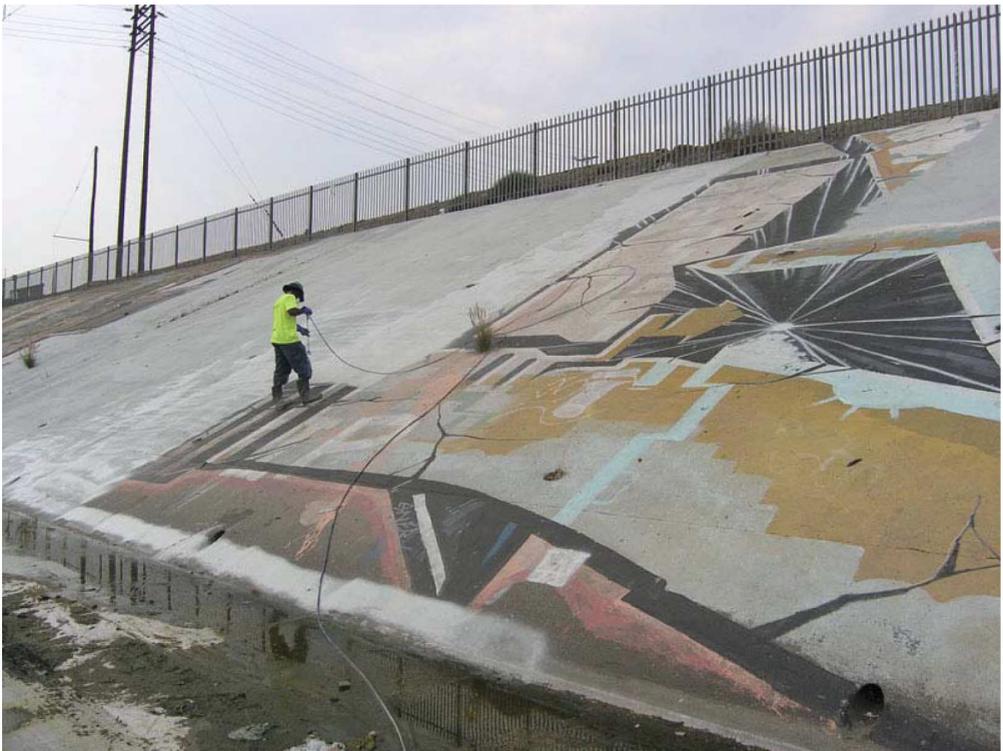
### *Profiting from the war*

The wars on graffiti, like all wars, are good for business. The wars on graffiti have contributed to ‘the massive growth of civilian markets for “security” technologies and services’ which are now ‘blurring into military–industrial ones’ (Graham, 2004, p. 17). As we have seen above, a range of companies are involved in developing new technologies designed to deter and capture graffiti writers and selling them to law enforcement agencies and property owners. Further, new businesses have sprung up to compete for graffiti removal and prevention contracts offered by municipal authorities and urban utilities. In Los Angeles, a US\$800,000 contract for graffiti removal along the LA River funded through the Federal stimulus package was awarded to BJD Resourcing, a commercial division of the US Army Corps of Engineers. In September 2009, they buffed one of the world’s most famous pieces of graffiti—SABER’s huge football-field-sized masterpiece, originally painted in 1997 (Figures 4 and 5).<sup>9</sup>

One of the troubling developments in relation to the burgeoning anti-graffiti industry is its role in policy development. Such companies have a vested interest in talking up their successes, and in talking down alternative policy approaches to the issue of graffiti. However, while representatives of the anti-graffiti industry frequently claim local victories, they must also be careful to demonstrate that the ‘enemy within’ can still strike at any time, and that the war on graffiti requires constant vigilance (and resources). Here is a feature which the war on graffiti shares with the contemporary ‘war on terror’—by its very constitution, it is a war that can never be finally won, but is rather a ‘long war’ with no end in sight. Any critique



**Figure 4** SABER's massive 1997 LA River piece, before it was buffed. (To give a sense of the scale, SABER himself is the small figure sitting near the top of the 'B'.) Photo: SABER (used with permission).



**Figure 5** An employee of BJD Resourcing paints over SABER's LA River piece, September 2009. Photo source: US Army Corps of Engineers.

of the war effort is interpreted as a dishonourable ‘giving up’, rather than a political claim (see Steinert, 2003, p. 267).

### The wars on graffiti and the war on terror

‘The biggest worry is that if the Government is unable to protect rolling stock from this sort of vandalism, it raises questions about attempts to secure it against other forms of threats.’ (Barry O’Farrell, Opposition Transport Spokesperson, New South Wales, 2005)

Since the terrorist attacks in the USA in 2001, the threat of terror has played a key role in extending the militarization of urban space and urban policy (Steinert, 2003, p. 282; Graham, 2004, p. 17).

The wars on graffiti have been subtly but significantly re-framed in light of the war on terror. In particular, the stakes have been raised in urban social control efforts intended to protect communities from threats of ‘disorder’ such as graffiti—for the existence of even apparently ‘minor’ infractions is thought to send a message to both ‘the community’ and ‘enemies within’ that there are vulnerabilities to be exploited with potentially more devastating consequences. This has translated into a convergence around the notion that situational crime prevention techniques (such as those embraced in the wars on graffiti) are crucial in combating both graffiti *and* terror threats, because even if graffiti writers and terrorists don’t share the same *motivations*, they do exploit the same urban *vulnerabilities*.

Recent discussions about vandalism and security on public transport illustrate this trend. Cornish and Smith (2006, pp. 195–196), wrapping up their book *Secure and Tranquil Travel*, put it this way:

‘Its often shocking impact upon transit systems encourages the view that terrorist activity is unique and qualitatively different from other criminal behaviours. There are

nevertheless many similarities between the different forms and methods of terrorist activity and the more mundane forms and methods of crime and disorder with which this manual has been concerned. The wide range of situational techniques available to deal with the different forms of public transport crime may, therefore, be equally apt for the prevention of terrorism.... The most prevalent forms of railway or bus terrorism—those that involve the exploding of bombs inside public transport vehicles or their planning for later detonation— ... involve some of the same crime-commission steps, and require the same types of responses as other forms of anti-social, disorderly and criminal behaviour in the vehicle setting.’

Similarly, participants at the 2003 Roundtable Discussion on *Vandalism, Terrorism and Security in Urban Public Transport* convened by the European Conference of Ministers of Transport concluded that ‘there were clearly areas where terrorism and vandalism overlapped, one example being preventative measures, such as calls for public vigilance or the use of video surveillance cameras’ (European Conference of Ministers of Transport, 2003, p. 149). They also argued that the effects of terrorism and vandalism were ‘similar in that they result in a loss of confidence in public transport services and a loss of patronage that cannot be easily reversed’ (European Conference of Ministers of Transport, 2003, p. 149).

In such analyses, graffiti is increasingly caught up in the banal ‘terror talk’ which is so central to the war on terror (Katz, 2007). The ever-present threat of terror reinforces the pre-existing notion that ‘the community’ is right to fear graffiti because it is a visible sign that the city is ‘out of control’. Graffiti writers might not be terrorists, but they might as well be—hence the troubling growth of passing references to graffiti as a kind of ‘visual terror’ perpetrated by the ‘enemy within’ (e.g. Slahor, 1994; Rosewarne, 2004; Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2008). Indeed, the threat posed to *local communities* by ‘anti-social behaviour’ has sometimes

been equated with the threat posed to the *international community* by failed/rogue states and transnational terror networks. UK Home Secretary David Blunkett drew quite explicit attention to the shared logics of his Government's campaigns against 'anti-social behaviour' and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq (both of which were launched in 2003):

'There is a common theme running through Government policy at home and abroad—the need to ensure safety, stability and order. Worries about crime and safety and the insecurity and fear created by the international situation go hand in hand.... In providing reassurance at home, we also need to ensure that people are aware of why we have taken action in Iraq to tackle a cause of global insecurity; the presence of weapons of mass destruction. It is critical that we provide long-term stability and security in the world. The two strands of the approach, local and global, go together. The old slogan "think local, act global" could never be more relevant. We need to ensure that we live in a world where we have removed the threat of instability and chaos.' (Home Office, 2003, Press release, 22 March)

These efforts to 'remove the threat of instability and chaos' involve not only the kinds of social and situational controls discussed at length above, but also a focus on self-control (Garland, 2001, p. 15). Here, concepts of territorial sovereignty are being reconfigured at both the international and the urban scales where self-control is seen to be inadequate. Just as one of the objectives of the 'war on terror' is to act on so-called 'weak states' who are accused of harbouring terror by failing to properly control their territory (Elden, 2007), so too one of the objectives of the war on graffiti has been to act on property owners who fail to protect their properties from graffiti, and/or who fail to remove graffiti when it occurs. Such property owners are believed to have failed to take responsibility for preventing the spread of 'instability and chaos' represented by graffiti, and thereby forgo their sovereignty. Recent reforms to anti-graffiti legislation in New South Wales

and Queensland in Australia, for instance, have given local governments new powers to remove graffiti from publicly accessible private property without obtaining the permission of property owners (Iveson, 2009). The City of Sydney has used this power not only to remove uninvited graffiti, but even to remove murals that have been commissioned by property owners, on the grounds that they did not seek proper planning approval (Creagh, 2008).

### If it's war you want ...

'There are moments in which war and resistance are necessary in order to be free and to live with dignity.' (Antonio Negri, 2008, p. 41)

The wars on graffiti are certainly asymmetric, but they are not one-sided. And as will have become clear in some of the quotations above, graffiti writers too have used the language of war—in particular, through use of the term 'bombing' to describe some of what they do. Even artists who are critical of the masculine domination of graffiti scenes have embraced this language—a recent book documenting the emerging genre of 'knit-fitti' is called *Yarn Bombing* (Moore and Prain, 2009).

The question of whether the militaristic stance adopted by some graffiti writers is in fact a *product* of the wars on graffiti, rather than pre-dating them, is a matter of conjecture. A 2006 review of graffiti policies conducted for the UK Department of Transport seemed to admit this possibility:

'The use of language is important. It is important to avoid the use of emotive language describing measures to tackle vandalism and graffiti as "a war". This is said to be how the perpetrators would like it described.'<sup>10</sup>

The same report, it should be noted, also commended the use of police helicopters for

routine night-time surveillance of railway lines to combat graffiti (!). Certainly, in making more elaborate, time-consuming graffiti pieces more difficult to execute, the wars on graffiti are widely argued to have shifted the balance of graffiti writing in favour of bombing over piecing (Austin, 2001; Ferrell and Weide, this issue).

What kind of ‘war’ are graffiti writers fighting? Is it a war for freedom and dignity, of the kind endorsed by Negri? Well, not quite. For one thing, graffiti writers frequently seem to be at war with one another, as well as with authorities (Powers, 1999). Further, there is a huge diversity of graffiti-writing motivations, styles and practices—and given that one of the main problems with graffiti policies is that they fail to recognize this diversity (Iveson, 2009), we should not make the same mistake. Not all graffiti writers are freedom fighters. But the practice of writing graffiti and ‘bombing the system’ can teach us a few things about fighting for freedom in the face of the new military urbanism. Here, I want to argue that technological appropriation and tactical adaptation by graffiti writers have been central to the failure of the wars on graffiti.

### *Technological appropriation and innovation*

Just as technology has played a central role in the wars on graffiti, so too technological appropriation and innovation has been crucial for graffiti writers. In some cases, this has even involved the re-deployment of military technologies and techniques against their intended purposes. Indeed, the paradigmatic implement of modern graffiti—the spray-paint can—has a military history. While aerosol technology was initially developed in the 1920s, the aerosol can was perfected and popularized during the Second World War by the US Army, which provided aerosol insect repellents for soldiers stationed in tropical areas. The technology was gradually adapted for paint, among other uses. The pioneering New York writers of

the 1970s and 1980s embarked on a program of experimentation with, and adaptation of, these spray-paint technologies for unintended uses. They tested different brands, mixed colours and made their own adjustments to ‘caps’ (nozzles), all in the search of the most effective, attractive and original paints. The wars on graffiti have also involved attempts to cut off these supplies, by restricting the sale of spray paint (especially to minors). In many jurisdictions, it is now even an offence to carry ‘graffiti-writing implements’ with the intent to cause criminal damage.

Technological innovation has not stopped there. For instance, while US armed forces dream of establishing remote dominance of urban battlespaces through robotics (Graham, 2008b), the Institute for Applied Autonomy has developed a series of ‘Contestational Robotics’ projects designed to ‘invert the traditional relationship between robots and authoritarian power structures by developing robots to meet the needs and budgets of culturally resistant forces’.<sup>11</sup> Among these projects is the robot *Graffiti-Writer*, a remote-controlled robot rigged up with an array of five spray cans, which can write linear text messages on the ground. The *GraffitiWriter* was ‘supposed to be a covert machine, similar to military robots: the machine does the dangerous work while the operator stays at a safe distance’ (Iveson, 2003). Elaborating on the project, a member of the IAA research team has noted:

‘The idea of using robots to commit acts of subversion and expression came out of different concerns within the group. On one hand, in many research institutions in the US, the primary funding source is the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) whose stated mission is “total dominance of the battlespace infosphere”, a concept that now extends well into formerly domestic spaces. While persons within our group often work uncomfortably close to this environment, we found these projects could provide us with tactics that to be appropriated and

inverted for use on the street.’ (Iveson, 2003, p. 77)

In 2004, the concept was further developed into the *StreetWriterX*, with more elaborate street-printing facilities built into a trailer able to be towed behind a car. One of its key deployments was:

‘in protest against the first DARPA Grand Challenge where its mission was to print Isaac Asimov’s First Rule of Robotics (i.e.: “A ROBOT MUST NOT KILL”) at the starting line of the military robotics event’. (IAA, 2009, Press release)<sup>12</sup>

The Graffiti Research Lab has also been active in assisting writers to re-engineer existing technologies for their own purposes.<sup>13</sup> As with IAA, one of the Lab’s founders was motivated by his own ‘pissed off-ness with the way engineering and technology had been manipulated into the service of war’ (quoted in Lewisohn, 2008, p. 151).

It should also be noted that some have profited handsomely from developing and selling graffiti-writing technologies. A variety of companies produce and supply spray-paint cans explicitly designed for graffiti writing. Colours and caps have proliferated, ‘quiet’ cans have been developed which do not require noisy ball bearings to mix the paint, and brands such as Montana sponsor artists, urban art exhibitions and publications.

### *Tactical adaptation and mutation*

Refusing to relinquish the city to urban authorities, writers have expertly identified new possibilities for graffiti even as existing possibilities are closed down. In response to target hardening efforts associated with the wars on graffiti, most cities have witnessed changing styles and spaces of graffiti. Stylistically, there has been a shift towards quickly executed tags, throw-ups and etchings and away from more elaborate work, which takes longer and thereby increases the risks (see

Ferrell and Weide, this issue; see also Austin, 2001, p. 132).<sup>14</sup> But stencil, poster, sticker and other forms of graffiti have also evolved in response to these new constraints—each of these forms can be designed at home away from the gaze of CCTV and other surveillance, and then applied quickly. Spatially, new ‘fronts’ in the graffiti wars have also been opened up by graffiti writers. Classically, when victory was declared in the war on graffiti by the MTA in New York in 1989, graffiti rapidly started to move from the subway to the freight trains and the street—not exactly ‘mission accomplished’. Such geographical shifts have been observed by both graffiti writers and urban authorities (see, for example, Austin, 2001; European Conference of Ministers of Transport, 2003; Iveson, 2007; Ferrell and Weide, this issue).

Indeed, the production of geographical knowledge is central to the tactical adaptation of graffiti writers and the mutation of graffiti. Dedicated writers and artists must map and re-map urban infrastructural systems such as train lines, sewers and storm water channels, outdoor advertising and surveillance networks (see Figure 6). And they must understand the rhythms of these systems in order to develop the camouflage that enables them to remain undetected. This knowledge of the city is acquired by hard work, and given the forces stacked up against graffiti writing, this work is not without risk. Here, there is an obvious analogy to be made with the urbanization of guerrilla warfare over the course of the 20th century. For urban guerrillas:

‘The city is a jungle. The urban guerrillas know its terrain in a capillary way so that they can at any time come together and attack and then disperse and disappear into its recesses.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 81)

As Melle Mel rapped in ‘The Message’, ‘It’s like a jungle sometimes ...’

The other thing graffiti writers share with some guerrillas is their form of organization.



**Figure 6** A hole in the fence under a railway bridge protecting the Hawthorn Canal, Sydney. Photo: Kurt Iverson.

Graffiti has adapted, mutated and persisted without leaders, without hierarchical forms of organization—there is no ‘army’ of graffiti writers in this conventional sense. Writers are much more like a ‘swarm’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004, pp. 91–93). And this is precisely why the wars on graffiti have proven impossible to win. It is also why some have been tempted to draw analogies between the challenges to authority posed by graffiti writers and terrorists. In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard (2003, p. 75) writes:

‘Graffiti is indeed a terrorist act (itself also with New York as its place of origin), not by its identity claim—“I am so-and-so, I exist, I live in New York”—but by its disinscription of the walls and architecture of the city, by the violent deconstruction of the signifier itself (the graffiti-tattooed subway trains plunged right into the heart of New York in exactly the same way as the terrorists hurtled their Boeings into the Twin Towers).’

Exactly the same, except that those Boeings killed some 3000 people, of course. Certainly, graffiti writers ‘attack’ the urban infrastructures which are ‘increasingly at the heart of contemporary geopolitical conflict’ (Graham, 2007a, p. 323) between states and terrorist networks. But what graffiti does to those infrastructures is profoundly different. It attacks not so much the property (trains can still run, walls can still stand) as the property *relation*. In using public and private property as a surface for communication, writers create a city *in common*. Individuality is asserted not through property and commodity ownership but through a style of free communication with others.

The lesson here, then, is neatly summed up by the US military analyst who observed: ‘urban geographies, like any others, do not necessarily give advantage to any side in a political contest. They present an advantage to the contestant who understands, adjusts, or adapts to them’ (Demarest, 1995, p. 3). For graffiti writers, the question of precisely how one ‘understands, adjusts or adapts’ to changing urban opportunities is not only a tactical matter, it is also a matter for *politics*—which is to say that graffiti writers discuss and debate what constitutes the ‘proper place’ for different forms of graffiti.’ Chicago-based writer and activist UPSKI urged writers to leave the public transport system alone, and to *Bomb the Suburbs* instead (Wimsatt, 2000 [1994]). BANKSY, in a critique that I think is meant to apply to conventional tagging among other things, has suggested that ‘the time of getting fame for your name on its own is over. Artwork that is only about wanting to be famous will never make you famous. Any fame is a by-product of making something that means something.’ Most significantly, I think, the question of whether or not the kinds of opportunities identified by graffiti writers are mobilized as part of a more programmatic intervention in the urban landscape is certainly a matter of debate among graffiti writers. And of course, this is also a question of great significance for establishing common

cause between graffiti writers and other critics of the militarization of urban space.

### ‘All you see is crime in the city’

‘Based on what amounts to urban geopolitical mapping, architects have become, in the urban context, the new military engineers.... Some will argue that broad social programs aimed at the supposed socioeconomic causes of economic marginalization offer a more sane and humane approach to the problem of urban violence. Still, if the general cannot control the weather and despairs of controlling the enemy, it is at least an attractive recourse to try to control the terrain. Thus, a unique feature of urban geopolitics may be the manipulation of the geographic factors of conflict. It will be interesting to see if urban geopolitics becomes translated into 21st century control architecture.’ (Geoffrey Demarest, US Foreign Military Studies Office, 1995)

As Graham and others have argued, urban geopolitics is indeed being translated into new control architectures. The wars on graffiti have helped to prepare the ground for the contemporary militarization of urban space in cities which is being advanced in the name of the ‘war on terror’. And the wars on graffiti have subsequently intensified through their articulation with this other war.

These new control architectures have profound consequences for rights to the city. As Graham (2005, p. 190) has argued:

‘reorganizing cities and their infrastructures based on notions of near-absolute security would quickly have devastating consequences on the very interactions and flows that enable urban life to thrive in the first place that cities would soon become untenable.’

Just as a city locked down against any possibility of terror would no longer be a democratic city, so too a city with no graffiti would no longer have a recognizable urban

public realm. We frequently see this recognized in some popular representations of graffiti, where it is viewed as a barometer of freedom rather than as a barometer of terror. Juxtapositions between the freedoms of the capitalist West and the totalitarian Eastern block frequently made reference to the flowering of graffiti on the Western side of the Berlin Wall (see Cresswell, 1996).<sup>15</sup> In *Little Brother*, novelist and digital rights activist Cory Doctorow imagines a near-future San Francisco locked down by the Department of Homeland Security after an attack on the Golden Gate Bridge. The on-going appearance of new graffiti tags provides a source of inspiration and hope for those seeking to reclaim their rights to the city.

Ultimately what the wars on graffiti share with the new military urbanism is that their effects are considerably broader than their stated targets. Through their concern with scouring the urban public realm for potential threats, this new ‘scopic drive’ (Certeau, 1984) precludes the possibility that anything visibly out of the ‘ordinary’ might be innocent, let alone *political*. It only registers as fear-inducing *disorder* which needs to be violently eradicated. SKEME, in one of his most influential pieces of subway graffiti, once wrote ‘All you see is crime in the city.’ Graffiti is crime, but it is much more besides. The fact that a teenager from the projects knew this, and managed to paint it across a whole subway car in such fantastic style, points precisely to the potential lessons graffiti might hold for political interventions against the new military urbanism.<sup>16</sup> As Hardt and Negri (2004) argue, our opposition to war should have not peace as its goal, but politics.

### Notes

- 1 Reflecting the widespread diffusion of the language of war in relation to graffiti policy, my account of the war on graffiti is not restricted to one city, although (as with discussions of the war on terror) New York City looms large. Nor should the following account be read as a

comprehensive analysis of graffiti policy—in each of the jurisdictions from which I have drawn examples, the war on graffiti competes with other ways of framing and responding to the ‘graffiti problem’ (see, for example, Iveson, 2009; Young, this issue).

- 2 See [www.tripwiresystems.com](http://www.tripwiresystems.com)
- 3 ‘eNose technology could help win the war against graffiti’, CRP News, <http://www.crp-news.com/html/n20080827.160575.htm>
- 4 See <http://www.gripsystems.org/>
- 5 Ironically, the ‘graffiti problem’ which now exists in Iraqi cities is also partly of the US military’s own making—with ‘gang graffiti’ written by US soldiers in their leisure time now appearing on the walls of civilian buildings and army camps, and threatening graffiti left behind in raided homes by soldiers on patrol (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2007, p. 8).
6. See <http://www.goodbyegrffiti.wa.gov.au/>
- 7 Graham (2009) has written about the US military’s use of computer games to recruit and train soldiers—apparently two can play at that game.
- 8 Some writers, apparently, are not so worried and are already flipping the intended symbolism. As one writer recently told some researchers, the vests are like a ‘badge of honour’: ‘if you have one of those jackets and you are scrubbing off a “mean as” piece, that is fame’ (Alanah May Eriksen, ‘Tagging Study Pours Cold Water on Old Remedies’, *New Zealand Herald*, 9 November 2009).
- 9 The piece was impressive not only for its size, but for its quality. This was no simple blockbuster using just a couple of colours, but a colourful and complex piece. It took SABER and other members of his crew 35 nights to complete, and they used 97 gallons of paint. See <http://saberone.com/>
- 10 See <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/crime/reducinggraffiti/>
- 11 See <http://www.appliedautonomy.com/projects.html#cr>
- 12 In a further instance of technology ‘transfer’, the Street Writer concept was recently deployed by Nike in a street marketing campaign during the Tour de France.
- 13 <http://graffiti-researchlab.com/>
- 14 Curiously, this shift is frequently recognized by transportation authorities themselves (e.g. European Conference of Ministers of Transport, 2003), but they rarely seem to think much about its wider implications.
- 15 A recent advertising campaign by Beck’s Beer in Australia to mark the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall featured a series of pictures of life in totalitarian East Berlin juxtaposed with images of the celebrations as the Wall was demolished. Above the pictures, words like

‘dominated’ and ‘repression’ have been ‘graffitied’ to read ‘liberated’ and ‘expression’, in a common evocation of graffiti as a sign of the freedoms enjoyed in the West. See [www.becksbeer.com.au](http://www.becksbeer.com.au)

16 This piece featured in *Style Wars*.

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