

# Traces of Austerity, or The Writing on the Wall

**Chris Vanderwees**

**Abstract**

In this series of photographs, I document, juxtapose, and recontextualize graffiti, signage, and written messages found in Toronto's downtown core through 2013 and 2014. I approach each image, each captured inscription, through the political and ethical demands of the trace and as communicative of other traces. Photographs in this series are meant to stand alone, but are also recontextualized through their associative connections to a larger and continuously expanding narrative that conveys marks of socio-economic inequality, difference, and privilege in times of austerity. In this sense, each photograph expresses an imminent ethical demand through the traces of unknown others. This series ultimately aims to identify existing conditions for potential collective struggle through aesthetics of the other's inscription as a political proposition. These images stage an affective and aesthetic encounter with the language of the other and the traces of that language, encouraging the viewer's engagement with possibility and difference beyond dominant ideological actualizations that unevenly distribute power and privilege in contemporary life.

“[A]t those times when we have an experience of being overwhelmed, it is not simply a question of making sense of it, of giving it a meaning, but just of making an inscription....It is less about making stories than about making marks” (Leader 44).

Here, I present a selection of images (Fig. 1-10) from 2013 and 2014 that are part of a larger street photography project where I document and juxtapose graffiti, signage, and other written messages found in Toronto’s downtown core. Each image captures the fleeting inscriptions of others who echo broader cultural anxieties and political concerns that stem from economic austerity and inequity.

These photographs are meant to stand alone, but are also recontextualized through their associative connections to a continuously expanding personal project that captures markers of socio-economic difference and privilege. The inscriptions depicted in these photographs undermine narratives that posit capitalism and the state as bearers of progress, rationality, and protection. The images also reflect cultural pessimism, the loss of faith in the neoliberal state and capitalist system to provide for its citizens, and the growing sentiment that the end of the world is immanent. Many of the images present ethical or political demands through the marks of the other who is absent at the time of exposure, but nevertheless remains present in the photograph’s traces.

I intend for the images to produce an affective and aesthetic encounter for viewers through the other’s production of speech in writing, a speech act, which makes a certain call for recognition from the viewer. This project aims to identify existing conditions for potential collective struggle, but directs this aim through the aesthetics of the other’s inscription as a political proposition. Ultimately, these images stage an encounter with the language of the other and the traces of that language as a form of resistance, encouraging the viewer’s engagement with possibility and difference beyond dominant ideological actualizations that unevenly distribute power and privilege in contemporary life.



Fig. 1. Vandalized construction sign/Bloor Street West, Toronto, Canada, 2014. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees.



Fig. 2. Man reads headline that reports the scandal of Mayor Rob Ford's use of crack cocaine being caught on video tape/Dundas Square, Toronto, Canada, 2013. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees.



Fig. 3. Graffiti echoes George Bush's comments following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks where the President urged citizens to confidently and continually participate in the American economy/Broadview Avenue, Toronto, Canada, 2013. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees.

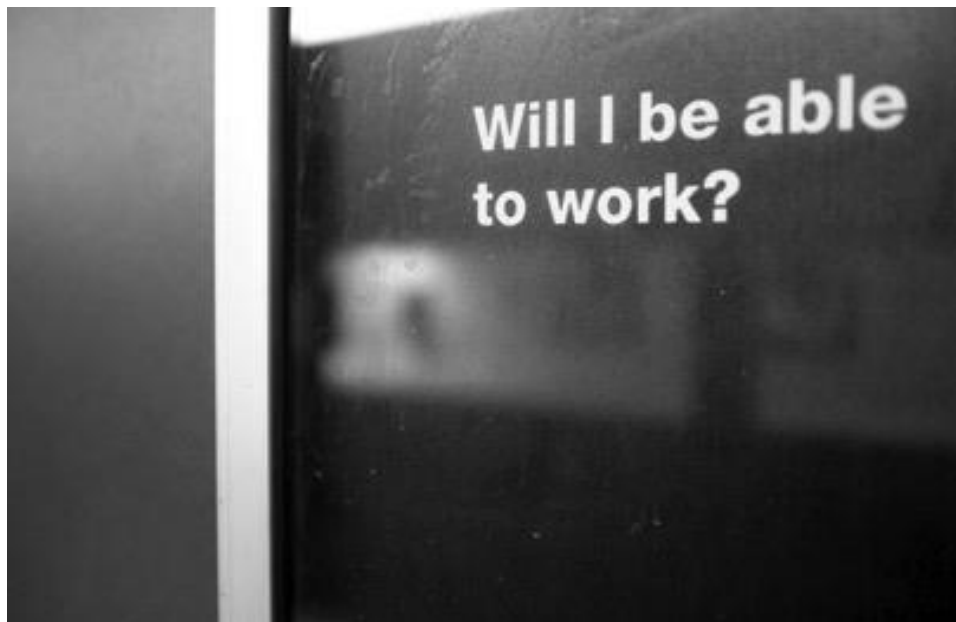


Fig. 4. Advertisement expresses fears of unemployment in an increasingly competitive and unstable Toronto job market/Yonge Subway Station, Toronto, Canada, 2014. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees

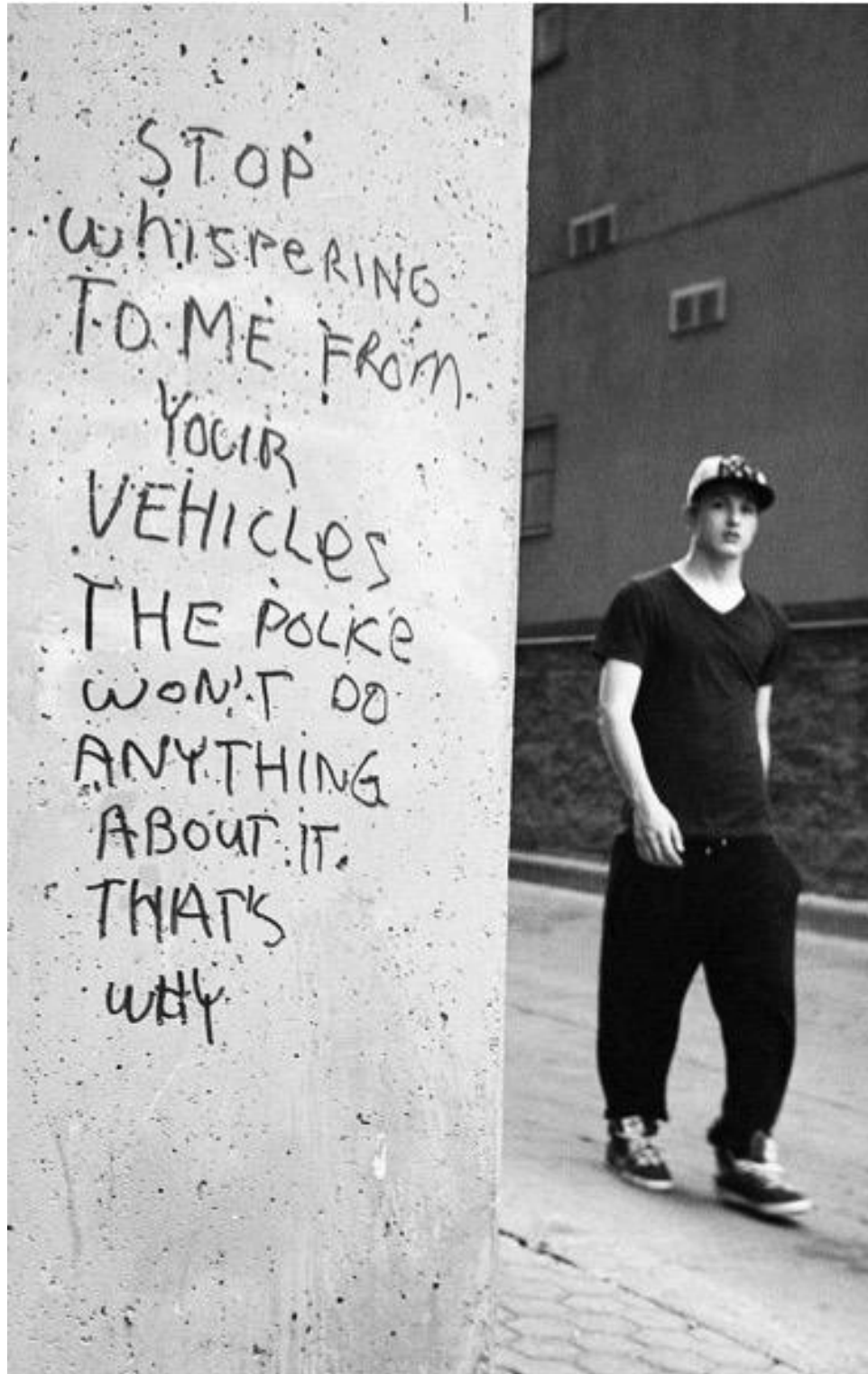


Fig. 5. Written message on a cement wall/Dundas Street East, Toronto, Canada, 2014. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees.

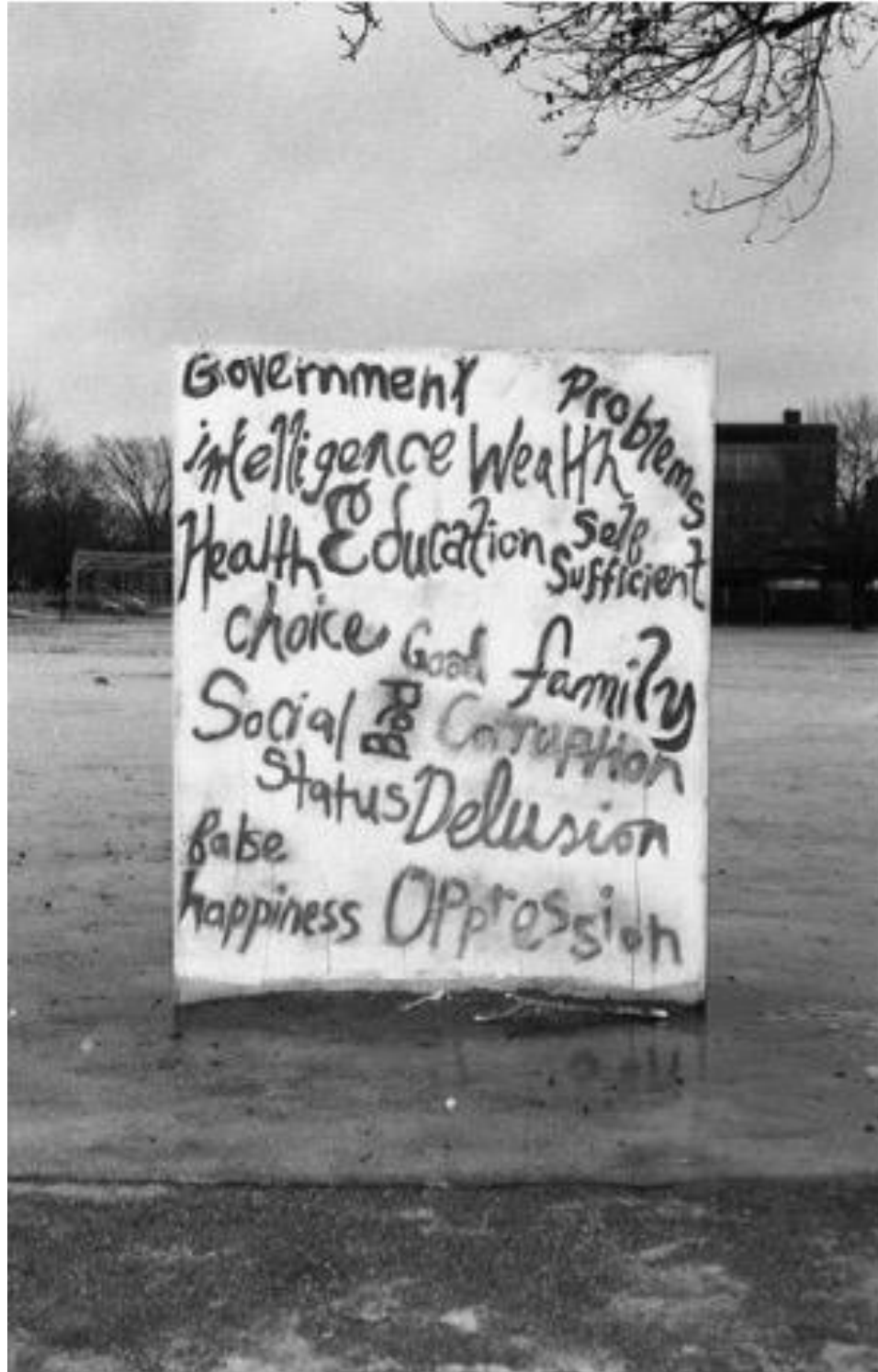


Fig. 6. Graffiti made by children from the Dundas Junior Public School/Dundas Street East, Toronto, Canada, 2014. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees.



Fig. 7. Man on the 501 streetcar to Neville Park/Queen Street East, Toronto, Canada, 2013. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees.



Fig. 8. Written message in chalk refers to the decline of sea ice in the Arctic as an indicator of radical climate change/Bloor Street West, Toronto, Canada, 2014. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees.



Fig. 9. Deronn Earle [sic], 31, was fatally shot while leaving a Moss Park apartment building in Toronto's community housing projects Queen Street East, Toronto, Canada, 2013. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees



Fig. 10. Young woman outside the Eaton's Centre/Downtown Toronto, Canada, 2014. Photo credit: Chris Vanderwees.

### Works Cited

Leader, Darian. *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us from Seeing*. New York: Counterpoint, 2002. Print.

### About the author

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