

Llocallandmarrkmarkmark

Alethea Everard at Conners Conners Gallery

By Ry Haskings

After several conversations with Alethea in regard to some of our shared localised interests in Melbourne, I am brought to consider how we develop a view of new networks and current localised scenes in our own areas, especially within the connective communities resulting from creative practices. To do this we can look back to see how these links and connections developed, as well as across the breadth of these current scenes. Often we don't need to look back too far in the past to reflect on specific times, people and groups that colour the present. It can be useful to consider groups that were niche outliers and challenged conventions to ascertain the levels of influence and manifestation into new forms that followed them.

In the early 2000s a graffiti group called the 70K was started in Melbourne by a small group of people born predominately in the 70s. The group became known for the graffiti they produced en masse across Melbourne, and sometimes further afield, in various forms, from small tags to large murals, on various urban surfaces. 70K also accumulated a certain level of notoriety due to the appearance of their paintings on walls and surfaces at seemingly inaccessible sites. Coinciding with the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne in 2006 was an effort by government to move on homeless people and clean up the graffiti. Policing of graffiti related crimes increased and this brought about the separation of 70K group members through convictions and generally forced the end of their activities together in Melbourne.

The 70K were not only noticed as a result of quantity and locations of their painting but also for unique approaches to the aesthetic and the concept of graffiti. Initially these approaches developed from an interest in European graffiti styles (although 70s crude New York designs might be relevant here also) and alongside this developed a certain punk appearance. It is difficult to isolate a stylistic approach by the group in this way but for central figures this was generally the case. One particular member painted a series of abstracted lineal shapes together that looked like they could belong to a written language but were only a series of slightly angled, curved or bent elongated forms that were intuitively composed together. In some ways this was a radical shift from the way others approached these kinds of paintings because there was no artist's name associated with them initially. A key connective device for a conventional approach to graffiti is that there is a name or a locator that can proliferate and extend relations to other gestures but also to easily organise into a portfolio of an individual's work. Anything operating outside of an accepted system, like this abstract approach, must be quickly curbed and this painter was eventually assigned the name Bones, to describe the appearance of the work and to locate their activities. The painter eventually accepted the name and used it as a signature tag but with an appearance that was still noticeably outside of the typography of recognised forms.

In some ways it wasn't difficult in these times to apply an approach to graffiti that looked to destabilise some of the conventions of the genre. When compared to other modes of artistic and creative expression, the bulk of graffiti painting was still weighed down by conventions and tradition that developed through the popular New York graffiti style of the time. An approach by the 70K developed new forms that referenced minor and outlier approaches abroad but also locally. In some ways, paradoxically, like any other kind of adverse group, the 70K came together to respond to the dominant forms and the usual practices of other groups. A key to doing this was by binding together with a name but essentially it was the quantity and locations that set the group apart and allowed for a new and noticeable field of practice to challenge all sorts of assumed modes in the genre.

Territory was an increasingly important aspect of their activities and a kind of nuanced political motivation set the group at once against the establishment of the local graffiti genre, but also against the government and institutional establishment simply by means of graffiti's illegality. It wasn't unheard of that members might one night be running from authorities and the next be running from other more conventionally graffiti focussed

groups who assumed ownership over specifically located train yards. During a time that was set alongside practices such as culture jamming, there was still new space to be defined that looked at anarchist modes set alongside post-modern attitudes. At that time the 70K were self-deprecating in jest through catchphrases that accompanied their paintings, such as 'Toy', 'Wak', '70K Dogs' and 'Graffiti is boring'. They opened out new space and territory that was being simultaneously challenged by other political, unsavoury and contentious art approaches.

Territory can be claimed strategically by a graffiti group's or individual's markings at various locations with varying degrees of ambition, from tags to larger paintings. It can be marked for the layperson to show that these groups or individuals are very active in a particular locality but also to establish to other graffiti artists their claim to particular locality's walls. Here the difference, as mentioned previously that set the 70K apart, was the territory the vast quantity of markings across multiple localities and the scale at which it was undertaken on either buildings, rooftops, trains and trucks. These markings not only firmly located the group and their activities across a large territory but they also locate the people who commute through similar urban pathways that have been marked with graffiti very physically and immediately. These markings, spanning across the urban environment in this way, can orientate locals and commuters between various shop walls and lampposts etc, to provide an identity of a place that is very different to the commercial, industrialised and legally sanctioned characteristics that might otherwise mark an area.

A kind of reclamation of industrialised space might be key here to understand new ways to orientate ourselves, but also for us to conduct activities that reflect some of the same adverse and anarchic character of the 70K in these spaces. I was reminded of how impromptu exhibitions in empty or disused spaces known sometimes as squat shows or empty shows reclaimed and orientated people locally much like this graffiti with a similar anarchic character. In comparison to markings spanning the streets, these exhibitions were different but still served a connective purpose. Primarily the function here was to bring people together for a particular event. Although fleeting and not permanently marked, the events like these provide markers in the form of reminders that result from the unique and unorthodox character of these events. I recall one particular event within the context of this discussion with Alethea; the group exhibition Underpass in 2015 curated and organised by Miles Davis and Punk Cafe. This exhibition took place in an enclosed concrete walled space with a dirt floor under the sectioned off area of the initial rise of a small bridge in South Melbourne not far from VCA where most of the exhibitors were studying at the time. The exhibition featured artists such as Alethea, Liam Osbourne and Katherine Botten with works that also instilled the anarchic character of these events and markers.

Another marker that appeared in this exhibition was a remnant tag-like signature written on one of the concrete pillars in this space by a member of the Cave Clan. The cave clan are renowned for exploring drains and empty buildings. This is a particularly unique marker that is not often seen in general day to day life and may not provide the same kind of function as a marker that can orientate us in aboveground local neighbourhoods or routes. It may not be a visible set of markers but it does provide an underground network both functionally and literally that also carries some of the same experimental and unorthodox approaches as this kind of anarchic cultural activity. The marker in the space for the Cave Clan was dated in 1999 but seeing it amongst the artworks in this impromptu exhibition reinforced the idea of this kind of communication, network and urban pathway, which at once was on the streets, but also seeping into places out of sight, or that you might stumble upon if you were curious. Here it was as if the form of this exhibition and Cave Clan signature found one another in a kind of crossing of paths. The meeting of these forms might orientate individuals but also compel those in attendance to consider the implications for related groups marked here that might share similar enthusiasms.

In the early 2000s an experimental noise/ sound art group called Klunk, who shared networks with the Cave Clan undertook a series of underground performances titled instructively Enter At Own Risk and took place in drains as well as other generally inaccessible urban spaces. For one event, inside a bridge room below the road in Melbourne's Bolte Bridge; much like the space where the underpass exhibition took place but tens of meters above ground, Klunk installed a network of small steel cables through the space that were fitted with

contact microphones. The group also brought objects with them like a car door and other steel objects to throw and hit as a part of the performance. Here the audience was a mix of noise musicians and enthusiasts, artists and urban explorers. It was a cross section of groups that might have some connections to one another outside of this experience but were crossing paths and moving through networks much like the steel cabling that crossed the bridge room. The anarchic character of this event was qualified by the police shutting it down. Those in attendance dispersed through and out of the bridge. The bridge room and the event would provide a marker for all who were there and firmly place them in time and at a moment that opened up new spaces alongside new activities and experiences.

While considering these conversations further with Alethea in the lead up to her exhibition Llocallandmarkmarkmark I am reminded of markings and how they orientate us amongst one another and through time both to situate ourselves in a moment and propel us forward through the creative activity that we are all engaged in. At a time when ubiquitous connections are sanctioned by government and business, it might be important to reflect on the anarchic character and obscurity of other more complex and nuanced physical pathways. Through this reflection we might sense how these markers both map and guide movement through these pathways to orientate, encourage, produce, archive and develop this particular creative character. In saying that, it might be best to let it be, run its course and leave it alone. This reflection as an attempt to develop an organised understanding of this network might also be counter to the kind of unregulated flow of unsanctioned activities that sustains it. Additionally, might these understandings also compromise the particular kind of energy required to open out and bring about these markers that can uniquely position, map and inflect this anarchic character moving forward.



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