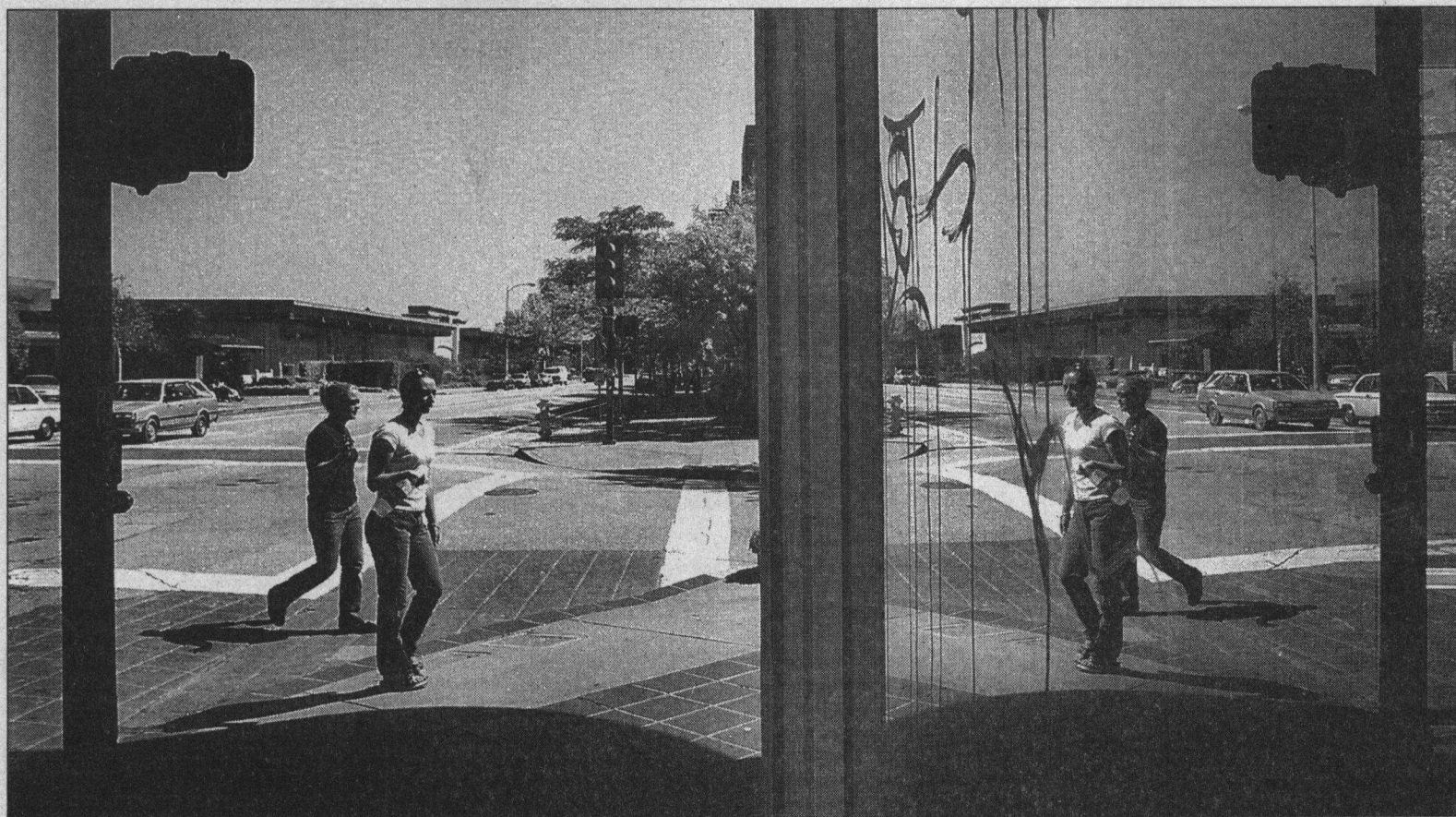


PHYSICAL GRAFFITI



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

This reflection of Front Street in downtown Santa Cruz is marred by acid-etched graffiti.

Crime + Crimmas - Graffiti Acid vandalism incidents continue to grow locally

By **DAVID PACINI**
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Acid-wielding vandals are forcing a growing number of downtown businesses to replace their windows.

Metro Santa Cruz, Plumlee's & Nelson Flowers and Union Grove Music are preparing to replace large windows defaced with acid. Jamba Juice, Zachary's Restaurant, and Borders Books, Music & Cafe already have replaced windows.

"People are really pissed," said Maya Ziegler of Santa Cruz Glass Co. "A while back we went through that spurt during New Year's with people breaking windows, and now it's people etching the windows with acid."

Santa Cruz Glass Co. also sells Armor Etch, a chemical product used to make designs on glass.

The windows of Pacific Avenue businesses have long been targets of vandals who scratch in thin letters

or forms. In fact, a casual survey of businesses on the west side of Pacific Avenue from Church Street to Elm Street, a four-block section, found 80 percent had vandalized windows.

Most etchings are subtle enough that business owners ignore them, but vandals are finding new ways to permanently deface windows with high-profile scribbling. The new form of vandalism is highly visible and appears to burn or melt the glass, often giving it a frosted look unless the acid is mixed with paint.

"We tried scraping it off with razor blades," said Mike Connor, a staffer at Metro Santa Cruz. "Someone from the downtown association came down and tried some chemical on it and that didn't work. We're going to have to replace the window."

The graffiti on Metro's window carries a tag, which identifies the vandal's affiliation, which in this case is anti-law enforcement.

A worker at Plumlee's and Nelson Flowers on Cathcart Street, who asked not to be identified, said he heard windows on Soquel Avenue businesses have been defaced also.

Peter Eberle, the director of the Santa Cruz Downtown Association, said there does not appear to be a pattern of businesses being targeted.

"Windows from the north to south have been damaged and include nationally and independently owned businesses," he said. "We encourage businesses to let police know and ask the police to be on the lookout."

Eberle also suggests merchants consider applying a protective coating or film to their windows.

Don Hansen and his wife, Eileen, own Transparent Glass Coating Co., a local business that provides that service. Don said a 6-millimeter film is impossible to cut all the way through and is impervious to acid.

He said vandals can damage the

film itself, but can't get at the glass underneath. The film, he said, is much less expensive to replace than glass. Large windows, like those at The Gap, which are covered with the film, would cost \$2,000 to replace.

By contrast, the film costs between \$3.50 and \$5 a square foot to install.

As a bonus, he said, the film stops 99 percent of ultraviolet rays, which prevents fading, and is shatter-proof.

"Graffiti tagging is self-perpetuating," he said. "If you remove it quickly, it doesn't attract more graffiti."

At Streetlight Records, manager Roger Weiss said vandals permanently defaced at least one window. He said witnesses saw vandals use some sort of portable sandblaster.

Borders was the first local target of acid attacks shortly after it opened last summer.

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