

■ EXPRESSION

# Anger over graffiti arrests

*Artists complain their rights to free speech are being violated after four held in incident*

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GRAFFITI artists are fuming after four were arrested for allegedly defacing Metrorail property and said their rights to free speech were violated.

Art entrepreneur Thulani Fesi, 32, from Langa, said graffiti provided a way for people to express themselves.

“It helps people make a statement about what they believe in and is one of the main purposes of art,” Fesi said.

One of his dreams was to see graffiti decriminalised.

Another artist from the Cape Flats, who didn't want to give his name, said police should stop viewing graffiti as a form of gangsterism.

“We just want to express ourselves,” the artist said.

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**Thulani Fesi**

Art entrepreneur

“The project is focused on spreading respect, diversity, freedom, peace and love through various forms of art, including street art,” he said.

Two weeks ago, Metrorail spokesperson Riana Scott said four graffiti artists aged 25, 36, 24 and 27, were arrested in the Strand on a charge of

malicious damage to property, with an estimated damage and cost of restoration of close to R500 000.

Scott said the suspects were seen spray painting three carriages of a train set stabled overnight in the train yard, and were then released on R10 000 bail each. “One of the suspects hails from Zurich, Switzerland,” Scott said.

Metrorail regional manager Richard Walker said It may seem trivial to prosecute graffiti artists but defaced rail precincts were proven to create a sense of disorder and unease among users.

“We will continue to adopt a zero tolerance approach to defacing of state assets,” Walker said.

Golden Arrows bus services received photos of four youths spray painting the back of their bus.

“Every day our buses are vandalised

through graffiti, cutting up of seats, stone throwing and other criminal and anti-social acts,” the bus operator said.

The City's mayco member for safety and security JP Smith said in January that the City's Graffiti Unit would be bolstered with 168 Expanded Public Works Programme workers from February to June.

Smith said illegal graffiti was a concern and can quickly change a neighbourhood.

“It can create the impression that no one cares about the area, it can discourage business and it diverts funds that now have to be used to remove it, instead of being used for community programmes.”

Smith added that illegal graffiti can be reported to 107 from a landline or 021 480 7700 from a cellphone.