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New York City Graffiti Murals: Signs of Hope, Marks of Distinction

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NEW YORK CITY GRAFFITI MURALS:
SIGNS OF HOPE, MARKS OF DISTINCTION

By:

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B.S., St. John's University, 1997

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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Acknowledgements

This started as a research paper for *Introduction to Urban Studies* in the fall, 2009 as part of the urban studies masters' degree at Fordham, and here we are, three years later. While I may have been the one pecking away at the keyboard, this thesis has the fingerprints of many on it, and I'd like to extend my thanks to them.

Dr. Rosemary Wakeman welcomed me into urban studies program in 2009, and has advised me ever since. She has been a constant source of feedback during that time, and her critiques of my research pushed me to rethink, update and improve the theory I ultimately used to frame the case studies that flesh out the thesis.

Visual arts professor Abby Goldstein challenged me to embrace the New York City D.O.T. and Groundswell for their contributions to public art. She also helped me think more critically about the darker aspects of unchecked graffiti, and make serious distinctions between vandalism and graffiti murals.

Sections of this paper were also formulated in my *Research Design* and *Urban Sociology* classes, where Drs. Ronald Nerio and Chris Rhomberg offered encouragement and valuable feedback on the process of formulating my argument. Classmates David Goodwin and Sarah Benoit likewise were amazing soundboards for my ideas.

Finally, my wife Kelly has been my bedrock, listening patiently as I describe a recent trek to some distant corner of New York, taking time out of a New Orleans vacation to find a Banksy mural near an abandoned hospital, and lending an editors' eye to more versions of chapters than she probably cares to admit. As fascinating as this subject is to me, it is only this way because I get to share it with her.

Abstract

Legal graffiti murals, far from being the nuisance that is often associated with traditional graffiti, are beneficial to the neighborhoods they inhabit. When authorities in cities such as New York overly concern themselves with the elimination of graffiti in all its forms, their zero-tolerance policies run the risk of squelching a vibrant art scene that has evolved beyond old stereotypes. In fact, when artists collaborate with building owners, graffiti murals can be just as effective at deterring vandalism as the city's current buffing efforts.

In this paper, I will present evidence that graffiti murals that have been done by artists with a connection to the neighborhood are a cost effective way to keep surfaces free from vandalism, and also create visual cues to residents that the place they call home is desirable. This is in direct contrast with blank walls, which may be seen as a sign of order within a chaotic urban environment, but offer no respite from the drab surroundings that surround many of them.

Introduction

In New York City, there exists a disconnect between those whose job it is to erase graffiti that is regarded as vandalism, and those who promote the beautification of the city through murals that are created with many of the same tools as graffiti.

If a citizen wishes to have graffiti that has been illegally created removed, they can file a complaint with the city's 311 hotline, a sophisticated system will log the request, and depending on how the owner of the property with the graffiti on it responds, the city will dispatch a cleaning crew to "buff" the space back, so that it looks as it did in its original state. Meanwhile, groups such as Groundswell and the Department of Transportation commission murals on private and public property, respectfully. The two sets of groups—the graffiti removal teams and the mural promoters—are pursuing the same goal, which is making the city a more visually appealing place, with different methods.

But there is another aspect of neighborhood beautification that occupies a middle ground between graffiti eradication and mural making: Graffiti murals. These murals are being commissioned and created outside of the system, in many cases by an older generation of graffiti writers who have sworn off the illegal past time of their youth, in favor of the artistic challenge that comes from working together with private property owners. By using the tools of a phenomenon that has negative connotations (aerosol spray cans) to create murals that directly reference the styles of graffiti, these writers are simultaneously paying homage to an art form that was born in

New York City and doing more to improve public space than any blank, buffed wall ever could.

It is these graffiti murals that I intend to explore in this paper, through six case studies in the New York City Metropolitan region and Trenton, New Jersey. I chose these particular cases because in each one, those responsible for the murals approached private property owners and convinced them to lend their property to them. In many cases, the owners allowed them to paint their property because they understood that the murals serve as a deterrent to graffiti they consider vandalism.

What constitutes “vandalism” and what does not when it comes to graffiti is an important distinction. For the purposes of this paper, I will rely upon these definitions:

Tag: (n.) A writer's name and signature. (v.) To execute a signature.

Throw-up (n.) A quickly-executed illustration, consisting of an outline with or without a thick layer of spray paint for fill-in.

Piece: (n.) Short for “Masterpiece,” an artistic and complex form of writing featuring stylized letters, color, depth, and a variety of designs. (v.) To execute a piece.

Production: (n.) A large-scale mural with detailed pieces and illustrations.¹

Buff: (v.) To remove writing or artwork.

Graffiti Mural: (n.) For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the term “graffiti mural” in this paper to describe both pieces and productions, as they share many characteristics.



Tags on a door



A throw-up

1. Eric Felisbret, *Graffiti New York*, (New York, Abrams, 2009)



A Piece



A Production

Although there are still debates about whether tags and throw-ups constitute vandalism, for the intents of this paper, that's how I am treating them. I base this judgment not so much on my own perspective, as I have observed both in forms that I consider quite beautiful. Rather, I have chosen this definition based on what I have been told in interviews. Two important aspects separate the throw-up and the tag from the piece and the production: time and space. The former require little of either, the latter cannot be executed without them. It is for this reason that tags and throw-ups are favored by those who write illegally, and it is for this reason that they are the prime targets for buffing.

My aim is not to suggest that tagging should be completely decriminalized; to do so would ignore 30 years of evolving laws, as well as widespread public opinion about the acceptability of unauthorized marking of property. Rather, I hope to show how aesthetically, spaces in a variety of settings throughout New York City, when adorned by pieces and productions, are superior to both spaces that have been tagged and those that have been buffed. Visuals will play an important role in this argument, as will interviews with those affected by the murals, on a daily basis.

Theoretical Framework

A great deal of this paper will deal with an inherent tension that exists between the building owners and graffiti artists. Some of the resistance that owners exhibit when they are asked to lend their space to graffiti artists stems from negative attitudes toward aerosol art that have been ingrained since the 1970's when its emergence coincided very closely with the bankruptcy of the city of New York.

This is not the only reason though. For starters, not every owner exhibits this attitude, and even when it comes to the owners who associate graffiti with vandalism, one cannot merely dismiss their concerns about the

effects of graffiti out of hand. In fact, there are larger forces at work that cultural Marxism can help explicate, regarding the actions of both private property owners and the governments that act on their behalf.

In *Rebel Cities*, Marxist scholar David Harvey writes that capitalism as practiced in the United States is predicated on the notion that as profits are earned, they must constantly be reinvested in opportunities elsewhere, before a competitor invests in that next opportunity first.

Capitalism rests, as Marx tells us, upon the perpetual search for surplus value, (profit). But to produce surplus value, capitalists have to produce a surplus product. This means that capitalism is perpetually producing the surplus product that urbanization requires.²

In New York City, this surplus value is manifested most intensely in the real estate market. The effects of the surplus are seen most obviously in Manhattan, where the 1811 street grid laid down that produced 2,028 blocks was proposed by Simeon deWitt, Gouverneur Morris and John Rutherford as a way to “facilitate the buying, selling and improving of real estate.”³ But the rest of the city has been affected too, in particular in neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Long Island City, Queens. In the Post World War II years, the city was the scene of countless projects initiated by the government (bridges, beaches, parks, public housing), but in the 21st Century, the business of building is, with few exceptions, the purview of the private sector. Whereas New York City Robert Moses once carved up the San Juan Hill neighborhood in Manhattan to make way for the 16-acre city-owned Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in the 1950’s, today, a similarly ambitious redevelopment that is taking place 2 miles south is by in large a private affair. Hudson Yards, a \$4.5 billion, 26-acre mixed-use development that will be centered around a platform constructed above the train yards between West 30th and 34th Streets and 10th and 12th Avenues, is being spearheaded by Related Companies, a privately held real estate firm known for building the Time Warner Center. Billed as the largest private real estate development in the history of the city, it is a prime example of how more than ever, private interests now invest surplus capital in ways that reshape the city’s physical footprint.

As Harvey explains, what has not changed is the inherent ugliness of the process.

Surplus absorption through urban transformation has, however, an even darker aspect. It has entailed repeated bouts of urban restructuring through “creative destruction.” This nearly always has a class dimension, since it is usually the poor, the underprivileged, and those marginalized from political power that suffer first and foremost from this process. Violence is required to achieve the new urban world on the wreckage of the old.⁴

2. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, (Brooklyn, Verso, 2012): p. 5

3. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, (New York, Monacelli Press, 1994): p. 18

4. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, (Brooklyn, Verso, 2012): p. 16

Given all the changes it has undergone in its 350-year existence, “creative destruction,” could very well be the unofficial motto of New York City. Although this has been the case for centuries, when it comes to real estate, it has accelerated in recent decades as the city has become, along with London and Tokyo, to use sociologist Saskia Sassen’s term, a “global city.”⁵

The most obvious example of this “creative destruction” is neighborhood gentrification, which has the potential to both promote art when new residents invest capital in a neighborhood, and threaten it, when the amount of capital invested is so high that residents end up at odds with the freedom and unpredictability inherent in artistic expression. The occupants of a brand new condominium in Chelsea who were aghast to learn that they overlooked an annual raunchy gay block party come to mind.⁶

Harvey posits that the final frontier for a space that is absorbing excess capital is the blessing of corporations, and cites Times Square as an example. The process of cleaning up the area that former mayor Rudy Giuliani started in the mid 90’s succeeded in evicting all but a few token red light businesses, but at the same time, the term “Disneyfied” was coined, to describe an area that had been scrubbed clean of any trace of local culture. Today, the area is an economic success, but it still caters less to New York City residents than to outsiders.⁷

This take over by corporate entities, or “Disneyfication,” is a real threat. Harvey suggests that Barcelona, Spain, which over the years has gradually amassed symbolic capital and accumulated marks of distinction, is a cautionary tale. The city’s architecture, history and art, combined with infrastructure upgrades from the 1992 Olympic games, make it unique. But while that uniqueness has helped rejuvenate the city, it has also drawn the attention of developers with big pockets, and the city is now threatened by bland waterfront developments, gentrification and displacement of local merchants by multinational stores.

...the collective symbolic capital that Barcelona has accumulated depends on values of authenticity, uniqueness, and particular non-replicable qualities. Such marks of local distinction are hard to accumulate without raising the issue of local empowerment, even of popular and oppositional movements. At that point, of course, the guardians of collective symbolic and cultural capital—the museums, the universities, the class of benefactors, and the state apparatus—typically close their doors and insist on keeping the riff-raff out.

The stakes here are significant. It is a matter of determining which segments of the population are to benefit most from the collective symbolic capital to which everyone has, in their own distinctive ways, contributed now and in the past. Why let monopoly rent attached to that symbolic capital be captured only by the multinationals, or by a small, powerful segment of local bourgeoisie?⁸

5. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991)

6. “Fetish Fest Organizers Erect Wall to Shield Luxe Condo Neighbors,” DNAinfo.com, June 15, 2012

7. “Times Square Lights Up City’s Economy, Study Finds,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2012

8. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, (Brooklyn, Verso, 2012): p. 105

It's not surprising that Harvey implicates museums, as they are often beholden to board members, who are often the same forces that foster private development. Graffiti of any sort is still anathema in official circles in New York, as the Brooklyn Museum learned the hard way in 2011 when lack of sponsorship forced it to abruptly cancel planned participation in the "Art In The Streets" show after it finished its run at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.⁹

Thus, the importance of the relationships that I will describe between artists, building owners and residents. While some owners are using graffiti murals as a vehicle for capital accumulation, others are—due to either their geographic circumstances or personal agendas—less affected by the market demands for the greatest surplus value. And although Harvey's arguments in *Rebel Cities* concern explicit political power, it's worth noting that the very existence of graffiti murals, or any art, for that matter, in the public sphere, signals that power is being wielded by those not traditionally associated with the top tier of society. He notes:

If capital is not to totally destroy the uniqueness that is the basis for the appropriation of monopoly rents (and there are many circumstances where it has done just that and been roundly condemned for so doing), then it must support a form of differentiation and allow divergent and to some degree uncontrollable local cultural development that can be antagonistic to its own smooth functioning. It can even support (though cautiously and often nervously) transgressive cultural practices precisely because this is one way to be original, creative, and authentic, as well as unique.¹⁰

The term "monopoly rent" that Harvey mentions refers to the power that social actors can use to realize an enhanced income stream over an extended time by virtue of their exclusive control over some directly or indirectly tradable item which is in some crucial respects unique or non replicable. Harvey defines it as something that exists if a product is either unique in its own right, like a fine wine, or occupies a central physical location.

In New York City, centrality of location is the main driver of monopoly rent, as demand for housing close to the city's center is exponentially higher than the available supply. This pressure to extract monopoly rents from residential quarters has a cascading effect on commercial and industrial areas, as real estate concerns agitate to have unproductive industrial areas rezoned for mixed-use redevelopment. The aforementioned Long Island City and Williamsburg were rezoned in 2001 and 2005, respectively.

This theoretical framework can help illuminate not only challenges that artists face, but also the rationale for my final conclusion, which is that more should be done to partner artists with building owners. That's because in contrast to Philadelphia, the twin birthplace of graffiti, New York City hasn't come to grips that spray paint

9.. "Citing Finances, Brooklyn Museum Cancels Plans for Graffiti Art Exhibit," *New York Times*, June 21, 2011

10. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, (Brooklyn, Verso, 2012): p. 110

can be a force for good. This isn't to say there aren't city-sanctioned groups promoting murals—Groundswell and the Department of Transportation for instance—but direct, unequivocal support is sorely lacking. Veng, a graffiti artist whose story I will explore later, summarizes the conundrum nicely when he notes that when he paints outside with brushes, he is ignored. When he paints the same piece with an aerosol can, he is viewed with suspicion and questioned by the police.

Artists like Veng are walking a tightrope between the freedom to create and the freedom to pollute that are at the heart of what makes a cities so much more exhilarating and unique than suburbs or the countryside. While there is certainly a place for officially sanctioned removal of unauthorized graffiti, there is no official counter weight that encourages the kind of art that Vent practices.

The fact that the city assists private property owners in their quest for monopoly rents via graffiti removal should be no surprise to anyone who observed the state of New York exercise eminent domain in 2009 to deliver privately owned property into the hands of the private developer of the Atlantic Yards arena, in exchange for a loosely-defined public benefit.¹¹ What is missing from this equation of the city doing everything it can to help capitalists extract surplus value from property (both their own and if need be, that which belongs to others) is the recognition that uniqueness is as important as the kind of investment that rejuvenates housing stock in places such as Bushwick.

Graffiti is one source of uniqueness, but it has been the source of a conflict in New York City since it first appeared in the 1970's, and part of the reason why there is such a visceral reaction to the phenomenon is that even today, many graffiti writers only consider their work to be authentic if is done without permission. The entire enterprise is boiled down to a zero-sum game: Either spaces are free of graffiti, and are therefore efficient uses of capital, or they are scarred, and are a drain on capital.

There are those who reject that notion of “authenticity” though, and embrace the tension that flows from working with the owners of their chosen canvas while still paying tribute to a homegrown artistic style. Although the state does not recognize it at the moment, a sizable number of graffiti writers who as teenagers relentlessly tagged New York City in the 70's have either grown up and evolved or given up.

Harvey also touches on the mentality of those in charge in his book *Spaces of Hope* (University of California Press, 2000) when he speaks of the “supreme rationality of the market versus the silly irrationality of

11. “Ruling Lets Atlantic Yards Seize Land,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2009

anything else,” and indeed, the phrase brings to mind a building owner in Gowanus, Brooklyn, I spoke to who rejected graffiti murals as childish and silly. It was not surprising. Research from the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program shows that murals of all sorts provide an economic benefit to the neighborhoods they inhabit, but that benefit is not as obvious as the raw forces of the real estate market that are present in New York.

To explain why painting might be acceptable with a brush but not with a spray can, and why that same spray paint is off limits when it comes to tags but is fine for murals, I will also be relying on symbolic interactionism, which is the theory that people interact with each other by interpreting or defining each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. It is, according to the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, a theory born out of “American pragmatism” and advanced by George Herbert Mead, who argued that people’s selves are social products, but that these selves are also purposive and creative. It was his former student Herbert Blumer who in 1937 coined the term “symbolic interactionism,” which he summarized as such:

1. People act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them.
2. These meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation.¹²

These two assertions are relevant to this thesis because I have found strong evidence that when it comes to graffiti murals, works composed with paintbrushes are interpreted by the general public as art, whereas identical pieces done with spray cans and markers are equated with vandalism, regardless of their legality. This thesis aims to show how the meanings that the public ascribes to murals differ a great deal from the meanings it assigns to graffiti not affiliated with murals.

Research also suggests that cities are ripe environments when it comes to symbolism that affects peoples’ behavior. For instance, in 1976, Philip G. Zimbardo, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, conducted a demonstration in which he “abandoned” two identical cars in the University Heights neighborhood of the Bronx and in Palo Alto, Ca. Although both cars featured raised hoods and missing license plates that serve as so-called ethological “releaser cues” for potential vandals, they attracted very different reactions from local residents.

In California, the car was left alone, and in fact, a resident called the police when Zimbardo had it towed at the end of the study. In the Bronx, however, it took all of ten minutes after they’d set up observation equipment for someone to poke their head under the hood and steal something. Over a 48-hour period, Zimbardo’s group observed 23 separate instances in which someone either stole something or damaged the vehicle. Most of the

12. Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction website, www.symbolicinteraction.org/ Accessed February 18, 2012

people who committed the vandalism were grown adults who acted in broad daylight, leading Zimbardo to conclude that because there was a missing sense of community, people in the Bronx interpreted their surroundings as making them anonymous.

In noting that vandalism and graffiti may be interpreted as an individual's attempt for public notoriety in a society that de-individuates him or her, he says:

I now feel that any environmental or societal conditions that contribute to making some members of the community feel anonymous—that no one knows or cares who they are, that no one recognizes their individuality and thus their humanity—makes them potential assassins and vandals, a danger to my person and my property—and yours.¹³

By analyzing the ways in which artists, property owners and residents act upon the way they interpret the differences between traditional graffiti and graffiti murals, I hope to show that what people fear is not graffiti itself, but rather what it represents, namely a loss of control of the surplus capital that is the lifeblood of capitalism. This control is manifested spatially in a way that can be broken down as such: Lose control of the property appearance, and one loses the capital it represents.

I aim to show that there is another way: Graffiti murals that simultaneously retain the energy or aura of the art form, while providing the important symbolic control that property owners need to maintain their spaces. When successfully executed, the partnerships that bring these murals to life extend a degree of power to others and perhaps most importantly, the uniqueness that is essential to New York City's identity.

Interdisciplinary Focus

This thesis is part of an urban studies program, and as such, it embraces an interdisciplinary approach. As noted in the previous chapter, cultural Marxist criticism forms the backbone of the theory that guides my research, with particular attention to symbolic interactionism, "spaces of utopia" and the "Broken Windows" theory. This situates my thesis firmly within the fields of sociology and urban studies, and I will be relying on a foreground interpretive paradigm that explores applied meaning behind concrete examples, and a background multivariate paradigm that relies on data generated both by my own observations and that of the New York City Police Department.

The second field that informs my research is the visual arts. Overwhelmingly, the writers who are the

13. P.G. Zimbardo, *Making Sense of Senseless Vandalism*, *Current Perspectives in Sociology* (4th ed., pp: 129-134) 1976, Oxford, UK Oxford University Press

bedrock of my case studies not only consider themselves artists, but also make money selling their artwork. This situates them in the larger context of professional art, as graffiti has been shown in galleries as far back as 1973.¹⁴ It also provides a sense of why their motivations for collaborating with building owners are not always purely aesthetic and in fact highlights a commonality they share with building owners who above all value the capital their buildings provide.

It is in the literature that I rely on that my varied approach truly comes through. For instance, *A Social History of Graffiti Writing in New York City, 1990-2005* by Western Connecticut State University professor Ronald Kramer, is indispensable when it comes to the graffiti-style murals. He spent five years doing qualitative sociological research for a doctoral dissertation that involved the observing and interviewing of 20 artists and document analysis. He focused on two historical trends: the increase in legal, commercialized graffiti, and the official government reaction to graffiti, which has not deviated since the “Broken Windows” thesis was first formulated.

On its graffiti task force web site, the City of New York lays out that thesis, which was originally unveiled by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in a 1982 article in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

The “Broken Window” theory—that unaddressed disorder is a sign that no one cares and actually invites further disorder—has been a cornerstone of recent governing and crime fighting strategies in New York City. This theory was the basis for the July 11, 1995, Mayoral Executive Order No. 24, that formally established the Mayor’s Anti-Graffiti Task Force as a vital part of the City’s effort to improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers.¹⁵

Kramer further expands upon the theory to show how the city integrates it into its goals of increased quality of life for all New Yorkers:

The presence or absence of graffiti determines the social, cultural and economic composition of the city. If the city allows graffiti, then surely “urban decay” will surely follow. If the city does not allow graffiti, then a condition of “urban vitality” will follow. That is, when the city fights graffiti, businesses will come to the city and tourism will boom. This will, in turn, create jobs and increase the tax base. All the residents of the city will benefit from such arrangements.¹⁶

Kramer’s argument — that the disparity between the official reaction to graffiti and the contemporary realities of graffiti writing culture is driven by political and economic ends and not the search for any real truth —

14. Hugo Martinez, a sociology major at City College of New York, organized the first major exhibition of his group, the United Graffiti Artists, at the Razor Gallery in SoHo, as described by, Eric Felisbret DEAL CIA, *Graffiti New York*, (New York, Abrams, 2009): p.298

15. New York City, “Mayor’s Anti-Graffiti Task Force” <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nograffiti/html/aboutforce.html>

16. Ronald Kramer, *A Social History of Graffiti Writing in New York City, 1990-2005*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009): p. 309

helps explain why a phenomenon that could ideally be viewed in shades of grey is instead treated by mainstream media outlets and government officials as an issue of distinct right (blank walls) and wrong (graffiti). He also notes that because the public nature of graffiti dictates that the work of amateurs be displayed alongside those of experienced writers, it makes it easier for those not familiar with the form to dismiss and fear all of it.

While one can make the case, as proponents of the Broken Windows theory do, that unregulated, undisturbed and unchallenged tagging has a way of changing the atmosphere of an area for the worse, Kramer's research illustrates how graffiti culture has changed in subtle ways over the last several decades, while official reactions to it have stayed static.

The subtlety of this change is less surprising when one reads Halsey and Young's *Our Desires are Ungovernable': Writing Graffiti in Urban Space*. Unlike Kramer, the authors do not focus on writers who work with the permission of property owners. Rather, they use an empirical focus on the language that writers of illegal graffiti use to describe what they do, to show how it separates their actions from those of someone who commits vandalism by breaking a window or smashing a sign.

Of particular interest to me is the way they address buffing, which is both the traditional alternative to and threat to graffiti-inspired murals. Working from the premise that the desires that drive artists to create graffiti are unlikely to be deterred by harsh laws or the erasing of their work, they note that:

The writer who repeatedly tags a wall that is consistently painted 'clean' by the authorities knows that there is a better than even chance that a roller brush will eventually be used to bring the wall up to pristine condition. The same writer knows that he has helped turn a porous surface into a non-porous canvas. The latter is one this body can connect with in a more visually affective way.¹⁷

Having wandered countless neighborhoods where the walls of buildings are dotted with a pastiche of blocky, mismatched swatches of paint that appear to have been hastily applied to cover up graffiti, I've wondered how these were aesthetically superior to what they replaced. And when fresh tags showed up in exactly the same place, I also wondered if it was simply a matter of the writer exacting revenge of sorts on the building owner for erasing his previous work, or if, as Halsey and Young posit, the new paint actually makes that spot a more attractive place to write again.

Of course, when one describes the desires of writers that are "ungovernable," it begs the question: desire for what? Greg Snyder, in *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*, makes the case

17. Mark Halsey and Alison Young, 2006, '*Our desires are ungovernable': Writing graffiti in urban space*, *Theoretical Criminology*

that it's for recognition by ones' peers. In some of the more virulent critiques of graffiti, this is dismissively equivocated with dogs marking their territory and gang members staking out turf.¹⁸ But recognition comes from a variety of feats: the sheer number of tags one posts around town, tags that are done in extremely hard to reach locations or, in the case of graffiti murals, the creative style and size of the piece or production. As Snyder says:

Piecing with style requires more time and more supplies than tags and throw-ups, so piecing illegally often exposes writers to way too much risk from the police. Legal walls allow writers to showcase their talents and even enjoy creating art in the light of day. This process is also one of the few times that writers can socialize with each other.¹⁹

“Piecing with style” is not an obvious concept to those who are unfamiliar with graffiti, so in order to bring the larger phenomenon of graffiti down to its most basic elements, I depart from sociology and turn to art, in Cedar Lewisohn's *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*. Like Kramer, Lewisohn spends a good deal of time situating graffiti within the loosely defined street art phenomenon. To understand how a complex, multi-layered mural comes into existence, Lewisohn argues that it is important to also see the talent inherent in a well-executed tag.

Referring to the chasm that exists between what graffiti absolutists embrace and what graffiti opponents feel, he observes that just as one uses musical notes to form songs, tags form the basis for everything in graffiti, from throw ups to pieces to murals. The general public's revulsion at the tag and the throw-up—which are far and away done without permission—actually makes possible the new relationship between writers who do pieces—which are generally done with permission—and property owners. This subtle distinction—that the “bad” tag can eventually lead to the “good” mural in the public mind—is part of the conversation that is not happening at the higher levels of power. He notes:

It's common to hear people say ‘I like the colourful graffiti; it's just those messy tags I can't stand.’ To the graffiti connoisseur, this is equivalent to saying ‘I like rock music; I it's just those noisy guitars I can't stomach.’²⁰

Finally, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* by Walter Benjamin is useful for addressing the issue of the space that is being competed for so fiercely. If it is true that graffiti has become an internationally recognized phenomenon, showcased in museums and galleries and utilized in marketing campaigns for Fortune 500 companies, and if it is also true that the Internet makes it possible to instantly share pictures of graffiti with like-minded people, why still go to the trouble to create murals that are outdoors, exposed

18. Ronald Kramer, *A Social History of Graffiti Writing in New York City, 1990-2005*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009): p. 199

19. Gregory Synder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground* (New York, New York University Press, 2009): p. 97

20. Cedar Lewisohn, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*, (New York, Abrams, 2008): p. 48

to the elements and whims of the public? Benjamin wrote *The Work of Art* in 1939, well before the word graffiti was commonly used in the United States, but his argument—that a work of art can lose its power to shock, amaze, inspire or impress if taken out of the environment distinct to it—is just as applicable now as it was then. He writes:

The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embedded-ness in the context of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. What was equally evident to both was its uniqueness, its aura.²¹

In contemporary American life, the word “aura” is closely related to “authentic,” and what could be more important to an artist than the authenticity of his or her work? The location of a graffiti muralists’ work is every bit as important as the content of it, because its embedded nature on the streets keeps it firmly in the context of its tradition. This is has not always been appreciated, as evidenced by the theft of two pieces of street art by the artist Banksy from walls in Jerusalem by gallery owner Stephan Kezsler, who has since tried unsuccessfully to sell the freestanding concrete blocks for as much as \$750,000. Kezsler has been the subject of blistering derision for his actions.²² Graffiti was born in the public sphere 40 years ago, and so its latter day reincarnation, the graffiti mural, belongs there too.

A Brief History of Graffiti

Graffiti first started appearing in New York City on the subways in 1969 thanks to writers who went by the tags JULIO 204 and TAKI 183. TAKI in particular gained widespread fame thanks to an article in *The New York Times* in 1971.²³ TAKI earned that fame in part because his job as a courier put him in subways, and so he choose a canvas for his writing that rolled along roughly 842 miles of track in four boroughs. Both of them were unknowingly following in the footsteps of Daryl Alexander McCray, who had been writing CORNBREAD around Philadelphia since 1965.

A plethora of writers soon surfaced, and over the next 20 years, the subways became the primary venue for an ever growing cornucopia of work, from simply-sprayed and written tags, and throw ups, to wild style pieces varying in depth, size, color and style. All form the basis for the legal murals that one sees today in neighborhoods across the New York metropolitan area.

As the graffiti evolved over the years, so too did the efforts to suppress it, and after a prolonged battle

21. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction: Second Version* (Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008)

22. “The Banksy Exhibition We Won’t Be Seeing At Art Basel Miami And The Reason Why You Shouldn’t Either,” Woostercollective.com, December 4, 2012

23. “Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1971

waged by the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), the last graffiti-covered train was pulled from the system, and in an April 1989 *Daily News* article announcing the event, TAKI expressed regret for his role in spawning the graffiti craze. “When you think back, and saw what eventually happened to the trains, you feel bad about it,” he said. “I never thought it would be such a big thing. But the subways were so lousy anyway...they were pretty filthy. I thought that kind of justified it.”²⁴

Victory for the M.T.A. did not mean that graffiti was gone though. It simply meant that writers had to find new surfaces, and they did, on bridges, buildings, trucks, doors, tunnels, abandoned structures, highway abutments and anywhere else that had a smooth, flat surface. In response, New York City authorities steadily ratcheted up the penalties for graffiti. The current law covers everything from the act of defacing property owned by the city or a private entity, the possession of instruments of graffiti with intent to use them to the possession of said instruments by anyone under the age of 18. In fact, a merchant who carries spray paint or broad-tipped markers in New York is legally barred from displaying the actual product in their window, and must display an empty facsimile in its place.²⁵

Pictures of the earliest graffiti illustrate how simplistic the form was in the 70’s and 80’s, and just as the style grew more sophisticated and complicated and characters started appearing along with words over time, so too did its practitioners change. Many of the writers in their teens who were writing on subway cars back then grew up, moved into their own homes, got jobs, started families and took on the kinds of responsibilities that would preclude them from engaging in risky activities such as tagging. Many gave up writing, just as they would give up pursuits like spitballs, prank calls and shoplifting. Where the writers who did not put down their cans and markers ended up is where my paper picks up.

Methodology

My method has been to interview participants in a range of locations in the New York City metropolitan area and Trenton, New Jersey. I compare the results of these on site interviews with documents and information from opposing factions: interviews with Philadelphia’s Mural Arts Project and New York’s Groundswell and the Department of Transportation that are supportive of murals, and interviews and documents from the New York City’s Graffiti Free NYC and a building owner in Gowanus, Brooklyn, which have antagonistic relationships with artists.

24. “When TAKI Ruled Magic Kingdom” *Daily News*, April 9, 1989

25. See Appendix I

I arranged my interviews and observations through contacts I made via websites and from my own personal experience. In Manhattan, past visits to the Inwood neighborhood informed me of the presence of graffiti murals there. In Brooklyn and in the Bronx, I was referred to mural sites by “Luna Park,” a photographer with deep roots in the graffiti world who displays her work on Flickr.com. For Jersey City, I reached out to the administrator of NJGraph.com and was put in touch with the SAGE Collective. The group hails from Trenton, a very different environment from Jersey City, so I also interviewed a different member of the group in Trenton. None of the artists I met in any of the aforementioned groups could recommend anyone in Staten Island, so I reached out to the Staten Island Arts Council, and they put me in touch with the nonprofit group NYC Arts Cypher. The president of Arts Cypher is not a graffiti artist, but routinely calls upon them for projects.

Finally, as part of a project that pre-dated this thesis research, I visited 5 Pointz in Long Island City, Queens because the site, a massive warehouse covered in graffiti, is simply impossible to miss while riding the number 7 subway. I revisited the site in the fall of 2012 and focused on it for my final project for the class New York Arts and Urban Expression. Although it is different in many respects from the other case studies, I include it because no paper about legal graffiti in New York City would be complete without it.

As this illustrates, my method of contact has been a combination of word of mouth referrals, e-mails and personal appeals. Because graffiti still has an extremely negative connotation in many circles in New York City, this method has helped me get to know artists who might otherwise not be amenable to talking to an outsider.

It is not perfect though, and for every graffiti artist who spoke to me about their work, there are plenty who either never responded or responded at first and then stopped cooperating. Demer, for instance, is a New Jersey-based graffiti artist who helped arrange a “Meeting of the Styles” (a multi-artist gathering held in locations around the world) in Patterson, New Jersey in August, 2010, and he was recommended to me by both Luna Park and Leon Rainbow from the SAGE Collective. Like Luna Park, Demer was part of the massive, secret “Underbelly Project” that featured the decoration by street artists and graffiti writers of an unfinished subway station in Brooklyn in 2010. He responded with enthusiasm at first but stopped responding when I tried to nail down an exact date to meet.

When it came to approaches, I tried to keep things straightforward. For instance, the following is what I e-mailed to Demer:

Hello, Patrick Verel here. Luna Park from Robots Will Kill suggested I drop you a line. I'm interested in talking to the writers, owners and neighbors of the spaces that agree to

host murals. I'm working on a paper for Fordham University about legal graffiti murals, and would really like to talk to you about murals in New Jersey. I conduct my interviews in person, and they usually last no longer than 30 minutes. You can reach me at this e-mail address, or via phone at 917-405-0537. Thanks so much. I hope to hear from you soon!

I used a variation of this for my correspondence with other writers, with the reasoning that too much detail would bore a reader, and too little would not pique their curiosity. If I did not get a response on the first try, I tried once more, and if I made contact, as I did with Demer, I contacted them three more times before moving on. In Demer's case, I tried one last time, after his name came up again in a conversation with the organizer of the Jersey City mural.

When it came to locations, I did not choose specific neighborhoods within the five boroughs or New Jersey; rather I focused on either high profile locations like 5 Pointz, or I let the artists pick the location they thought made the most sense. The advantage of this approach was that I knew that not only would they speak to me, but so would the owner of the property with the mural. This resulted in locations as varied as a downtown (Jersey City), industrial areas (Hunts Point in the Bronx, Trenton) a gentrifying area (Bushwick, Brooklyn) and a suburban locale (Staten Island).

The number of interviews I conducted was dictated by a desire to document as many corners of the Metropolitan New York area as possible in time I had to spare. Once I found an artist who was willing to talk to me, I met them in person, usually in close proximity to the space that they had been working. I attempted to interview the owner of the space, as well as at least three people who had no connection to the project. These could be local residents, business owners, or random people nearby. In Hunts Point in the Bronx, for instance, this included truck drivers parked on the street next to the mural; in Jersey City, it was shoppers on their way to and from local stores. Repeat visits were often required to include what usually ended up being 5-7 interviews, followed by transcription of the interviews.

I also took note of the contrast of the murals with the surrounding areas, which without fail were shabby, desolate or some combination of the two. The contrast of the murals with tags in the area was also evident; unlike other surfaces, most of them were unscathed. Photographic documentation of these visits illustrates these visual differences. Combined with recorded and transcribed interviews, I am confident that the true "aura" of the murals, as described by Benjamin will be revealed. To guard against my own biases about the characteristics of a neighborhood, I included in my questions one where I ask residents to describe the neighborhood in their own words. The questions I asked the three major groups involved in the murals can be found in Appendix II.

Case Study Manhattan

In the northern section of Manhattan, a little more than a mile from the block where Taki 183 first started writing his name in the 1960's, is a gritty block in the shadow of the elevated 215th street subway station. Visitors who descend the stairs from the 1 train to the north side of Tenth Avenue are confronted with a graffiti mural stretching the length of a squat, two story building on the corner of 215th Street. From an architectural standpoint, it's an unremarkable building, home to Ming Moon Chinese Buffet on the Broadway side and Broadway Mechanic Services and 5060 Auto Services Inc., on the Tenth Avenue side. Graffiti pieces that comprise the mural stretch from one end on the side fronting Tenth Avenue, around the corner onto 215th Street, all the way to Broadway. All told, the 20 or so pieces take up half the building from the ground up to about ten feet.

The man responsible for making this graffiti mural a reality is Eddie Pabellon, who goes by the tag "Crane." Crane recently re-entered the graffiti world after a long hiatus (1979-2003), during which time he only painted on canvas. In addition to this graffiti mural, he oversees two others nearby, on a building that faces the 1 train near 203rd Street, and on the back of a BP gas station at Sherman Street and Isham Ave. Crane stopped doing graffiti around the same time when he was arrested and subsequently got married. When I met him, he was driving to



The entrance to the 1 train

McDonalds with his two teenage daughters. He never stopped writing; rather he swore off walls in favor of the canvas. But in May 2003, he ventured back out the street to paint again, this time with the blessing of property owners.

His proposal to the owner of the first wall he approached, on 203rd Street, was straightforward:

The walls were all destroyed, so I told the guy 'Look, I got guys who can paint, and can actually do something that's better than what you've got there.' He said all right, and from that point, he just gave us the wall.²⁶

This pitch—that a space could be made "better" if it was surrendered to a writer who would take

²⁶ Interview with author, July 15, 2011

responsibility for it—was one that Crane repeated at 215th Street. He was not shy about his motivation for taking over the space, which was a combination of self-promotion and street credibility.

We're cleaning up to make it look better, so the public doesn't say 'Well, that's all the graffiti that they know how to do, is destroy.' The older generation is not about going out and destroying stuff. It's really about trying to make a name for ourselves again.²⁷

The man who gave Crane the go-ahead at 215th Street was Romeo, who has managed 5060 Auto Services Inc., since 1999. In 2007, he said Crane approached him with a proposal:

Q: How did you first get in touch with Crane?

A: He actually came to propose, because it was very ugly. The building was very ugly, and he wanted to make it nicer. He said, 'You don't want to do it?' I said 'It's not up to me.' So I said 'Let me talk to the boss, the landlord, and if he accepts that, we'll do it.' And you know, I have nothing against, you know, so I said 'Go ahead, do it.'

Q: So you were sort of the go between, between him and the landlord?

A: Exactly. I said (to the building owner) 'Listen, it's ugly how it is before, so let's make it nicer.' So they agree with that.²⁸

Romeo said it took Crane and his crew two Sundays to finish the first mural, and they've repainted it every spring and fall, at their own expense. The only thing he saw before the work began was some pictures of Crane's past work, and he only asked that they paint something on the wall to advertise the garage. Once the owner of Ming Moon got wind of the project, Romeo said he asked for the same. His rationale for convincing the owner of the building to let him turn it over to writers is similar to Crane's, but with an important twist: He prefers



The front of 5060 Auto Services

clean walls to murals, but he hates tagging even more, and he believes that Crane's mural is a better deterrent to the tags than buffing. In fact, Romeo turned down a city graffiti cleanup crew who offered to buff the building for free.

27. Interview with author, July 15, 2011

28. Interview with author, July 22, 2011

Q: Now, you'd mentioned the last time we talked about how the city had offered to come by.

A: Yeah, they tried to...they sent somebody who said they were going to clean it, but I'm afraid after they clean, it's gonna be again, ugly.

Q: Was that before you started working with Crane?

A: Yes, it was. It was before, when it was ugly, and I asked the guy who came here from the city, 'What is your opinion? Ok, we agree to clean it. What do you think is going to happen after that? It's gonna be ugly again, because people, they just wait.' Because, as you can see, in the parking lots outdoors, they paint the trucks. And I can send you to 231st Street and Broadway, and you're gonna see that outdoor parking lot with graffiti on trucks.²⁹

Some of what drives Crane is a desire to stay relevant in a scene that he adores. He spoke wistfully about being recruited as a teenager in the 1970's by Jack Pelsinger, the founder of Nation of Graffiti Artists, and selling a canvas for \$1,000 when he was 15. A desire for a sense of community is a factor too, as the wall now functions as a hub of sorts to other writers from around the world who want to paint in New York City. But while Crane is able to draw writers who hail from as far away as Japan, the negotiations that he has to really put his energy into are local. Building owners might be interested in the style of the art that he is promoting, or they might simply view his murals as vandalism prevention. Either way, it's worth the negotiation to him.

Q: When you approach a building owner about using their space, do you tell them that one of the reasons they should let you do this is it prevents other kinds of vandalism?

A: I explain that, if any damages are done to the wall when we paint them, we will come back again and redo it again.

Q: So if someone were to come along and tag it?

A: Right, we will come back and redo a whole new mural. It might not be the same one; it would just be something maybe better than what they had. Sometimes they'll ask us to do something for the community, which we don't mind. Like I said, it's a give and take. So if you are the storeowner or the building owner, and you say 'Eddie, I want Puerto Rican flag and a Dominican flag incorporated in your mural,' we have to give it to them. We can't say no. It's not, how can I say it? Beneficial to say no to them. They can always turn around and say 'Ok, since you can't do this for us, brush it off.'³⁰

Romeo's concerns, and Crane's response to them, are very much in tune with symbolic interactionism, in that Romeo believes that a mural overseen by a local artist sends a signal of orderliness that a buffed wall does not. He believes this even though from a monetary standpoint, it doesn't matter what he does, as a buffed wall costs the same amount of money to him as a mural. Their relationship also validates Kramer's contention that graffiti culture has changed, as theirs is one of cooperation, not antagonism. That cooperation is the bedrock of the

29. Interview with author, July 22, 2011

30. Interview with author, July 15, 2011

“urban vitality,” that Kramer notes the city seeks to promote, and it is manifested physically in the mural itself.

The community is generally supportive of what they do, he said, once they explain what their intentions are and they don’t get political. Mike, a black man in his 50’s who has called Inwood home for the last 11 years, described the wall on Tenth avenue as part of the “spice” of the neighborhood that has “flavor,” illustrates “expression,” and is better than a “beat up, chipping brick wall.” Of particular note was his answer to the question, “What is your general impression of graffiti?”



The graffiti mural on the back of the BP gas station at Sherman Street and Isham Ave

Well, it used to be taboo back in the day, you know, when it was haphazard, and defacing stuff. But this is like, meant for this, you know? They get permission, they get contracted or whatever, and they do this. I think it’s a good thing.³¹

Character, flavor, expression—these are not the kinds of words that one would use to describe a wall had it been buffed. Marisol, a Hispanic woman in her 40’s who had come to 215th Street from her home in Harlem with her daughter to receive public assistance a few blocks away, was appreciative of the colorful addition to the block.

Q: Do you think it makes the neighborhood a better place?

A: Well yeah, it does sometimes.

Q: Why?

A: Because it gives it character, and it lightens up the neighborhood.

Q: So you think it’s better than say, like a blank wall?

A: Yeah. For the simple reason is that life is beautiful. Why not? Draw something on a blank canvas and make it beautiful, and let other people see your artwork³²

Of course, this being New York, opinions about graffiti vary wildly. Lillian, a black woman in her 20’s who moved to the neighborhood in 2010 from 100th Street and Amsterdam Ave. in Harlem, had mixed feelings

31. Interview with author, July 22, 2011

32. Ibid.

about the graffiti mural. She first called it nice and bright, but then “a little distracting.” She deemed all graffiti art, and even noted that she has a friend who is an “awesome” writer. But she seemed not to be enthralled by the murals, even as she allowed that others might be.

Q: Do you think it makes the neighborhood a better place?

A: Um, not really. But at the same time, if you’re into art, it looks pretty.

Q: How do you think it compares to a blank wall, you know, like if they just painted it over and kept it...

A: Simple, plain. Less distracting. I mean, personally, I don’t think they should be doing this to the wall, unless you’re down at an art convention or something. That’s different.³³

Lillian’s perspective puts her more in agreement with Romeo, who, without prompting, mentioned that he admired Philadelphia’s murals. He cited the promotion they receive from authorities and the emphasis on appropriate sites as something that New York City could emulate.

I spoke with my friends, and the mayor, they say, because they have graffiti everywhere, they call all of them and they say ‘Guys, you want to do it somewhere, don’t do it all over the whole city. You have these walls, do it here.’ And they paint the bridges, and they paint some walls, you know? And they do it over there. I took some pictures in Philadelphia. They have a huge building where there’s a huge design in graffiti. So the city looks beautiful.³⁴

His take on New York’s support for murals is less positive.

They don’t want to see nothing like this on the wall anymore, they want everything blocked out. I believe that the city should open up spots for these kids to paint. That way you keep them away from the establishments. Just like Europe. When you go to Europe, you got walls that say permission walls.³⁵



The graffiti mural on Broadway

“Everything blocked out” versus “cleaning up to make it look better.” One represents a property manager’s impression of the city’s graffiti cleanup effort; the other is the justification given by a writer who once played the part of the vandal but now negotiates within the realm of acceptable societal behavior to ply his craft. And while the goal of both sides of this conflict is to bring about a sense of community and order to the neighborhood, the interviews with Romeo and the three residents illustrate that it’s not clear that buffing this space would be

33. Interview with author, July 22, 2011

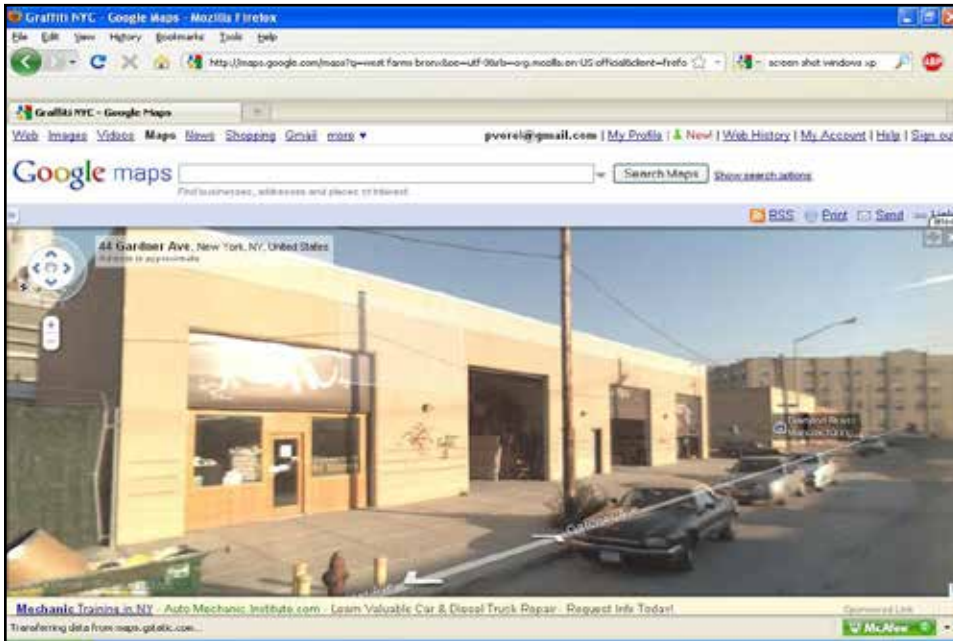
34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

preferable or even effective, given its location.

Case Study Brooklyn

36 Gardner Street, in the industrial section of Bushwick, Brooklyn, is not much to look at, nor is its neighbors. Among the major landmarks within easy walking distance is Newtown Creek, a 3.8 mile-long waterway that was recently declared a Superfund site by the Environmental Protection Agency. It is not, however, isolated, as



36 Gardner Street, circa 2009. Image courtesy Google Maps

it is one block away from Flushing Avenue, a major north/south artery for industrial traffic, and four blocks from the Jefferson Ave. L subway station. But what it lacks in charm, it makes up for in utility. For Veng, a writer from Staten Island, it (and several neighboring buildings) is the perfect canvas for his art. It's large, it's flat, when he and other members of the collective Robots

Will Kill, show up on weekends to paint, and the neighborhood is quiet, which allows for easier concentration.

Veng found this spot through his art supplies connection. The building is the warehouse for SoHo Arts Supply on Canal Street in Manhattan, which is where Veng, whose real name is Herb, buys supplies for his canvas-based work. He started writing his name around Staten Island in 1994, and graduated to a spray can in 1996. It didn't take long for him to get caught and arrested two years later, and so in 1999, he stopped tagging and started doing legal graffiti murals. He recalls painting a tornado with books flying out of it on the front of a bookstore. He was compensated for it, but at the time, money wasn't his motivation:

I think they supplied the paint for it, if I remember correctly. I was a young kid back then, and I don't even think the idea of being paid was something I was worried about. I was just happy to be out in the street painting, and this whole new thing after being out painting in the streets illegally, to come out legally in the middle of the day, was kind of surreal at first.³⁶

In addition to moving on from writing only his chosen tag, Veng has also added characters to his repertoire, and when I interviewed him outside 36 Gardner, the building was festooned with images of a frog, a panda bear,

36. Interview with author, April 1, 2010

a bird and a man with a gorilla head for a hat, as well as two extremely complex productions. Visages of Jam Master Jay, the rap group Run D.M.C., and Woody Allen were next door. Characters are actually Veng's preferred subject now, and are the bulk of the canvases that he sells for a living. But he still loves to paint outdoors on walls, and Bushwick in general, and Gardner Street in particular, is the perfect location for it.



The view across the street

It's much easier to paint out here in Bushwick, or Williamsburg, where it's a little more art friendly, and it's more of an art neighborhood, so you can get away with it a little more, as compared say, to painting in Clinton Hill, where they might not mind it as much as long as it's pretty things. So, you try to stay closer to neighborhoods like Bushwick, Williamsburg—you know, industrial neighborhoods are great because they're not populated by families. They're filled with young people, and young people usually are into arts or at least appreciate it, so that makes it easier. During the week, it's all workers and stuff, and on the weekends, these neighborhoods are semi desolate.³⁷

The connection was a fairly straightforward one, because the owner of the building, being in the business of art supplies, was already predisposed toward art. Having already painted, by his estimate, upwards of 500 murals, Veng had a pitch down pat anyway.

I've always had a portfolio, which I've shown to them of previous work I've done, and say 'This helps in the removal of graffiti, it does keep the other graffiti writers away because they understand it's the same guys going out trying to paint a wall.' Not always, but generally. You know, it looks a lot better than a peach building, some tan building with nothing on it. I can do nice landscapes, animals, and that brings attention to the business as well.³⁸

Jonny Siegel, who along with his father Marv owns SoHo Arts Supply and has been at this location since 2007, has a similar recollection. The warehouse had been at another location and, and the first place didn't have the kinds of walls amenable to murals.

Q: Why did you say yes?

37. Interview with author, April 1, 2010

38. Ibid.

A: Why not? I thought it would look nice and enhance the building. It gives it some character; it's not so drab.

Q: What did it look like before? Was there anything at all?

A: No, basically you can see if you look top, it was just painted one solid color. You can still see along the top of the building.

Q: Was there any other graffiti?

A: There were some tags originally, but once these guys do a mural on it, the guys don't tag. They respect each other, so they won't go over someone else's work.

Q: Was that part of your thinking?

A: Nah, I just thought it'd be cool to have it. Number one, it helps Herb out because it gives exposure to him, and it helps me out in that it makes it a little nicer.³⁹



36 Gardner Street, circa 2010

It's not surprising that Siegal would be loyal to a customer who lends an air of coolness to his establishment. SoHo is in the business of selling supplies to the very people who are most likely to gravitate toward the graffiti murals that Robots Will Kill create. Though it is an industrial area, the foot traffic on the block does warrant a

small retail storefront for SoHo. Siegal admits as such in conversation, and also exhibits open-mindedness to art that makes the Bushwick/East Williamsburg area an attractive destination for his customers. He said he has a "gentleman's agreement" with Veng and his partner Chris, who come and go and update as they feel necessary; Siegel's only criteria is that whatever they do, it has to "expand the mind," even if it's political in nature. He's not worried about what neighbors might think either.

Q: Have you ever heard from anyone from the city, say the NYPD?

A: Not over here. I mean, we really don't see many cops around here; you don't see much going on.

Q: Do you think that's because you're so isolated over here?

A: I think it's accepted. Number one it's tasteful, so it only enhances the area. So if it enhances the

³⁹. Interview with author, April 5, 2010

area, for any property owner, it only gives value to the area. The area itself is a lot of artists around here, so you're not going to have too many people fighting against it. And number two, it's not gang affiliated, where most tagging originally started. There's no bad thing about it. It's almost like opening a garden in an alley. I mean, you're giving beauty to something where there was nothing, so it's a good quality to have.⁴⁰

“It's almost like opening a garden in an alley.” I want to come back to this sentiment. Later in our conversation, Siegal contrasted what he was doing on his block to an abandoned building covered in tags that is giving off a distinct message of urban decay. Rather than embrace “where there was nothing,” which is an obvious reference to the solid coloring of the



36 Gardner Street, as seen from Ingraham Street

building before the murals, he equates the block with the most life affirming language of a garden. Whether he considers himself a gardener and the writers of Robots Will Kill as plants is not clear, but clearly the end goal is beautification.

Like Romeo in Inwood, Siegal has shunned the notion promoted by the city that the “social, cultural and economic composition of the city,” in Kramer’s words, will benefit by the absence of graffiti. He acknowledges the validity of arguments against allowing buildings to be abandoned and tagged, but embraces a positive use for the technique and motivation behind that tagging.

Max Brennan, the owner of Manhattan Molds and Casts, has less to gain from having murals on the outside of his shop, which is next door to SoHo Arts. Unlike Siegal, his business, which revolves around the restoration of ornamental stonework, has no obvious link to Robots Will Kill’s creations or the collectives’ fans. But he too agreed to let them take over his walls around the same time as Siegal. This is also the first time Brennan has owned a building of this kind, and also the first time he’d given permission for a mural. He called it an “over glorified garage,” and noted that Veng would have had a harder time convincing him to grant permission had it been a more attractive building. That permission brings Veng and various friends from the graffiti and street art

40. Interview with author, April 5, 2010

scene to the building four times a year, and Brennan said he was so impressed, he referred Veng to a real estate agent around the corner on Johnson Street.

It keeps the building from being tagged. They actually do respect the murals. We used to get a lot of bad graffiti on this building. You can see they'll still graffiti the doors. They'll try to work around it. But there seems to be a bit of honor among thieves. I'm not a big fan of defacing property, particularly. And these guys also have a very creative mindset. They change it often as well. I don't know a whole lot about their modus operandi. I know they've got a tie in with some German guys; I guess they take pictures of it and it gets syndicated somehow, but I've never asked Herb how he makes a living doing this, or if he makes a living doing it. But it's a pretty creative crew that shows up every now and then.⁴¹

Although his line of work is in the creation of castings for architectural restoration, Brennan clearly understands the phenomenon of graffiti, and of all the property owners, he perhaps best articulated the rationale for encouraging mural-making as a tool for fighting vandalism: Evolution. At one point in our conversation, I asked him: With so many high



The front of Manhattan Molds and Casts

caliber productions in one place, does he worry that other graffiti writers might travel to the area to see them, and then leave their own mark on other buildings in the area? He laughed the notion off, declaring that there are so many random taggers running around New York City already that they didn't need any encouragement. No, what he hopes is that the productions visually goad them to "enlarge their vision, and move beyond pedestrian scrawls."

It's one thing to have your tag, and that's another thing to generate kind of a whole allegorical, weird universe, which is what these guys create. Which is kind of very interesting. The tags, you know, some of them are ok, but most of them are calligraphic scrawls that don't do a whole lot for me. I know it's a whole sub culture, and it has a lot to do with, as I understand it, the ubiquitousness of your tag and how dangerous the location is gives you a certain ranking in the sub culture. But how far can you go with that? Like everything else, there are good artists, and there are not so good artists, and in the graffiti world, these guys really have their shit together.⁴²

Brennan is also very cognizant of the role that graffiti murals like these play in changing the character of

41. Interview with author, April 5, 2010

42. Ibid.

the neighborhood. Like tattoos, cafes and illegally converted loft apartments, the graffiti murals are tangible signs of the arrival of a new “tribe,” as he calls them, of young residents who are gentrifying the area.



36 Gardner, circa April 2011

It's certainly attracting enough hipsters that they want to hang out here and do it. I mean I know [murals are] in the Bronx. I've read articles about these wastelands where they've done murals, but it's a big blank canvas, and why not? But here, it's two blocks from the L train, the umbilical cord into Manhattan, so it's convenient, and it makes sense in that respect.⁴³

The question of whether murals contribute to the gentrification of a neighborhood is a legitimate one, as one man's progress might be construed as another man's threat to his ability to afford his home. The possibility that murals might be a warning flare of sorts that artists, who are the vanguard of gentrification, have settled in, is not without merit. In fact, when Veng speaks admiringly about how friendly industrial neighborhoods like Bushwick and Williamsburg, are, it's also worth noting what was left out. Like those two places, Sunset Park, to give an example, is a large industrial neighborhood in Brooklyn that is also accessible via the subway. There are, so far as I can tell, no major graffiti murals underway there; coincidentally there is nothing “hip” there either—no bars, galleries or restaurants catering to an upwardly mobile, artistically inclined population.

Of course, the primary reason why gentrification stirs up emotions is that gentrification is by definition, “The reinvestment of capital in the urban centre, which is designed to produce space for a more affluent class of people than currently occupies that space.”⁴⁴ What complicates a potential “local resident versus newcomer” dynamic in Bushwick is the fact that, in a globalized city like New York, local building ownership is far from guaranteed. Veng now paints exclusively at Gardner, but he didn't always, and his experience is instructive.

Trying to find new spots, I could spend weeks trying to track down an owner. Sometimes you get the owner there, but then you have to get the landlord's permission, and that's a nightmare in itself half the time. The worst case scenarios are where you've been given permission by an owner, the landlord lives in Colorado, and decides to come back for whatever reason, sees all this stuff on his

43. Interview with author, April 5, 2010

44. Loretta Lees, Tom Slater and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (New York, Routledge, 2008)

building, throws a fit, and you've lost a spot. It's happened to some guys who don't even live here, but they don't want it.

A lot of buildings are owned by people who are out of state. It's crazy. You can go in and ask and the guy who will be like 'Yeah, it's ok, but the landlord lives in Oregon.' How am I supposed to persuade someone in Oregon that I'm going to paint his building in Bushwick? It's crazy sometimes.⁴⁵

As Jonny Siegel and Max Brennan make clear, this is not the case everywhere, and in fact this gets to an important point: The local nature of many of these collaborations roots them firmly, as Benjamin would say, "within the tradition from which they sprang," namely New York City, circa 1970. Given the fact that Bushwick is currently in the throes of gentrification, it should be interesting to see if Siegel and Brennan are able to look at the trends in the real estate market and see the possibility to extract, in Harvey's words, "monopoly rent" from a new owner, thus endangering a relationship that lends uniqueness to the city.

After all, if there is criticism of the work, Veng says it's rarely for the content of the pieces. Rather, he feels a stigmatism revolves around the spray can, which is automatically linked to vandalism.

If I'd been out there doing it with a brush, which I do use a brush for some stuff, you can probably do it in the middle of the day without even worrying about it. But the minute you whip out spray cans, in certain neighborhoods, everyone takes a different view of it sometimes. They still think it's New York, circa 1980.⁴⁶

As an example of symbolic interactionism, this is almost too perfect. People act toward things—in this case spray cans—based on the meaning those things have for them, which is vandalism and crime. This meaning is derived through social interaction—seeing the mural created—and modified through interpretation, in this case past experience with crime.

So what do folks who aren't connected to the property or the art world think? Jamar, a black man in his 50's who has lived and worked nearby for 38 years, was effusive in praise for the work, even as he disparaged regular graffiti.

Q: Have you seen this mural before?

A: Yeah, I've seen it before. I seen when they was making it, doing it, and you know, it's nice to me.

Q: So you're a fan?

A: Half and half. Sometimes it don't look good on everybody's buildings. Especially my father;

45. Interview with author, April 1, 2010

46. Interview with author, July 15, 2011

my father's got so much graffiti on his building. It's crazy.

Q: I assume it's not like this.

A: Nah, not like that. I wish it were like that.⁴⁷

Jamar doesn't dismiss tags and throw ups as merely vandalism, and even if he doesn't count himself as a fan, he says its art. So it's perhaps unsurprising that when given the option of a 36 Gardner Street scrubbed clean or graced with a mural, he chooses the latter.

It's better than a blank wall because when you walk by, you don't see nothing. You see graffiti; you can tell this person's sad. Now you can look at something and go 'Oh, that's a nice job.' You see a blank wall, you'll be like 'Shit, it's just a blank wall.' There's nothing to think about.

There's "nothing" to think about. If there is a more perfect phrase that sums up the state of a freshly buffed industrial building, I have yet to find it. In fact, it could be said that that sentiment is what unites Deirdre, a white woman in her 30's, with Jamar. Although she lives in Clinton Hill, Deirdre rents studio space nearby, where she works on what she jokingly calls "boring, abstract paintings" that are nothing like the work that Veng and his cohorts embrace. She would not hang them in her apartment, she said, but said it's nice to see work outside institutions and people dedicated to making them over a long period of time. In this way, she echoed Jamar's assertion that it provides something to think about, as well as Veng's selling point that it makes the building look "better."

Deirdre does draw some distinctions between the places where murals should and where they shouldn't be located. When asked if she agreed that a mural is better than a blank wall, she demurred.

Let's put it that way. So I'm not going to say it's better. It breaks up the monotony. The city planning around here is so haphazard, that it's like another part of the collage. But yeah, I wouldn't want it like, it would be a little bit overwhelming. I mean, you hear about cities...I feel like in Brazil I heard about there just being so much graffiti, it's overwhelming. Here its like...there could be more, and I wouldn't be upset, but I wouldn't want like this entire block to be like this. Well, maybe this block, but the back and forth is nice.⁴⁸

This could be construed as a criticism of Robots Will Kill taking over almost half a city block, but I don't think it is. Rather, it's an acknowledgement that space matters—murals here, but not necessarily everywhere. The key to understanding why that might be is Deirdre's reference to the city's planning as "haphazard." This is borne out not only casual observations such as these, but also the fact that the city has never in its history actually completed a central plan.

47. Interview with author, August 12, 2012

48. Ibid.

Finally, there's Jaquay, an 18-year old black man who moved to the area in 2009 from Pennsylvania. His perspective is important because it is teenagers who have traditionally been drawn to tagging. He is attracted to it, but he's well aware of the penalties that await him. "I could get locked up for that. I'm staying away from that. That's a first degree, so I'm staying away from that. I'm drawing in books," he says. Murals like the one on Gardner Street, on the other hand, are the kind of thing he aspires to do some day. In the meantime, he also appreciates that there is something, rather than nothing.

It's better than blank wall because a blank wall is plain. You want something to look at when you're walking. If you don't have no phone or nothing to do, there's murals all around to look at. And then the next one, you can be like, you can try to be like 'Yo, I can be like that sometimes.'⁴⁹



Just behind Manhattan Molds and Casts on Johnson Ave, Circa April 2011

49. Interview with author, August 12, 2012

Case Study The Bronx

Hunts Point, a predominantly industrial neighborhood in the South Bronx, is a neighborhood of extreme juxtapositions. On the one hand, its location situates its 46,000 residents squarely in New York's 16th Congressional District, which is the poorest congressional district in the country.⁵⁰ Furthermore, it sits on a peninsula that juts into the Long Island Sound; water surrounds it on three sides; the elevated Bruckner Expressway is the fourth border. Finally, the two subway stations that serve the neighborhood, at Hunts Point Avenue and Longwood Avenue, are on the other side of the expressway, a large, dirty, forbidding structure whose main thoroughfares, access roads and entrance ramps are often choked with cars and trucks.

On the other hand, while Hunts Point residents may be resource poor, they are street art rich, in part thanks to men like Hector "Nicer" Nazario. The lifelong Bronx resident is a founding member of the TATS (Top Artistic Talent) Cru, along with Wilfredo "Bio" Feliciano. In one of the grimmest parts of New York City, they have turned their love of graffiti murals into a successful business venture, parlaying credibility built up from years of tagging and mural making into what they refer to as "guerrilla outdoor media advertising." On the website tatscru.net, they advertise custom murals, live painting and demo, outdoor media and promotional campaigns, custom vinyl banners, custom canvases and workshops.



The front gate of Borax paper

On the corner of Spofford Avenue and Drake Street, group members have taken the outdoor media aspect of the business and let their creativity blossom. Borax Paper Products occupies the better part of the block bordered by Spofford, Edgewater, Randall and Drake, and although the face it presents to the world on Spofford is a straightforward sign with the companies' name and logo, "Growing greener every day," there is a very different view on the North/South running streets of Edgewater and Drake.

50. "South Bronx is poorest district in nation, U.S. Census Bureau finds: 38% live below poverty line," New York Daily News, Sept. 29, 2010

Edgewater, which is a main thoroughfare for the Hunts Point Produce Market, is replete with cartoon characters such as Felix the Cat, Papa Smurf and Yogi Bear, as well as traditional graffiti productions. Drake, on the other side of the building, is smaller and less trafficked, which is actually a shame, because that's where the



The view of Borax Paper from Edgewater Street

real show can be found. The entire length of the building is covered with graffiti murals, including in a massive, two-story high black, white and red abstract piece by the twin artists How and Nosm, who are also TATS Cru members. The fence of a scrapyard across the street is likewise covered by graffiti murals, making this an especially brightly colored island in a very grey and black landscape.

Nicer, who spoke to me at the TATS Cru's office about a block or so away from the Bruckner, started painting subways when he was a teenager, but he estimates he started painting legally in 1988, when he asked the owner of a Fedco supermarket on Intervale and Fox Street if he could paint his wall. Very gradually, he and his friends got used to the idea of painting in front of people in the daylight, instead of in darkened tunnels and train yards.

It was kind of like; the reality of life bit us in the ass. We were starting families, and we ended up having to feed ourselves, and you're no longer in this mom and pop setting where they financed everything. You're a young adult now; you have to fend for yourself. We started working 9 to 5's, and that was like a big growing up moment for us.⁵¹

The TATS Cru is as good an example as any of how graffiti has evolved. "The Mural Kings," as they dub themselves, found a way to harness what was written off in many quarters as simple vandalism, and turned it into a legitimate for-profit enterprise. Nicer feels that new reality still hasn't set in in New York City though, and echoes Veng's observation that the culprit is the spray can.

A vandal can grab a spray can and do a swastika on a synagogue, or tombstones, or deface a hospital or some sacred place, and he did it with malicious intent. It could be just a kid that found a spray can, who's rebellious at the moment. He doesn't necessarily have to be a practitioner in the art form of it, but because of the medium that he used, he's considered a graffiti vandal.

⁵¹. Interview with author, Sept. 27, 2010

So now we use the same medium. The same tool that he used to destroy something, we'll create a portrait, or some kind of piece of art, and what ends up happening is they end up getting clumped into the same group and category. A lot of people don't have the open-mindedness of trying to filter out the good and the bad. They automatically look at the group and say they all shouldn't be respected.⁵²

Nicer said they were interested in the Borax Paper building as much because of its dimensions as for the fact that its location, with its paucity of foot traffic, makes painting without interruption easier. Eight times out of ten, he said property owners they approach for permission will say yes, because they tend to be buildings whose owners are having a hard time keeping them clean, and when Nicer makes a pitch, he says they'll do something large and colorful, keep the area around the murals clean, and bring more attention to the business in the building. TATS Cru covers the cost of the supplies themselves, and the worst-case scenario is they'll paint over it if the owner finds it offensive. This, he noted, is where having a business comes in hand.

[I say,] at the end of the day, we're not that hard to find. We have an office, we have a website, we're listed in the book. So it ain't like you're gonna have a hard time finding us. Because they're letting us use the space, it's usually a win-win situation for them.⁵³

Being local also helps. Roy Mangione, the director of operations at Borax, said an employee who lives in the neighborhood referred him to the TATS Cru. The problem, he said, was the building was "getting all marked up and tagged by every miscreant."

We gave them cart blanche on what to do as long as it was in good taste, and one of the first things they did was the cartoon wall on Halleck, and it looked really, really nice. Then we told them, 'Ok guys, now you can do Drake.' So our landlord called us and said 'You know, you got graffiti on your building,' and I said 'No, it's not graffiti, it's art.' I said we're not going to get fined for it.⁵⁴

In addition to the landlord, Mangione had to convince Mark Borak, the owner of Borax Paper, to allow the TATS Cru to paint the building. Before that, Mangione had to assign the task of painting over tags to one of his drivers, and although the cost of paint was minimal, it was still wasting the time of a worker who could have been doing something else. Now he doesn't have to worry about it.

As long as the landlord's happy with it, I'm happy with it. Everything else is good. They did a nice job. My daughter is 11; she thought the cartoon wall was great. I always drive around Drake to see what they do or what they've changed. One day it'll be one thing, the next day they'll have done the whole top to bottom on one portion of it. It's pretty cool.⁵⁵

Mangione's perspective is important for another reason. When asked if he thought the city of New York

52. Interview with author, Sept. 27, 2010

53. Ibid.

54. Interview with author, October 18, 2010

55. Ibid.

was supportive of these sorts of endeavors, he volunteered that a friend is on the NYPD's vandal squad, and that when he asked his friend how he could catch the people who were tagging his building, Mangione said he was told that cops were not arresting taggers in the Bronx, because the district attorney isn't interested in



How and Nosm on Drake Street

prosecuting them. Whether that's actually true is not known, but the fact is that Mangione is under the impression that he is alone in his quest to keep the property free of vandalism. The TATS Cru is part of that equation now. It's a state that Harvey would not be shocked to hear, as one could make the case that in New York City, industrial-zoned space, even in Hunts Point, is monopoly rent deferred. Therefore, the city has less interest in responding to the needs of its citizens.

Mangione's comments are echoed by Mark Borak, who said he'll sometimes take visitors such as vendors, customers or bankers out to the murals to show them off. He also suggested during my visit that I be sure to view the New York City skyline that was painted on a wall next to a loading dock facing Edgewater; it was something that his warehouse manager was inspired to paint after the TATS Cru did their murals. Borak said he was unfamiliar with the graffiti removal programs run by the city and viewed his support of murals as a form of community outreach. The local nature of that support is what makes it so effective.

I think it's important to support the community. These are local guys, local artists, they take pride. I think that because they're local, it's respected. So nobody messes with it. If somebody from out of town came in, who know what would happen. So they leave it. It's respected.⁵⁶

Given its location, the only pressure on property owners in Hunts Point is to make sure their buildings are adequate for the businesses they house; unlike in Bushwick, gentrification is non-existent. In some ways, this epitomizes the way that Hunts Point is afflicted with the opposite of Harvey's concept of "surplus capital." Capital is invested in the area, of course, but not to such a degree that it precludes projects that are essentially art for art's sake. This is a far cry from say, 5 Pointz, the graffiti-covered warehouse in Queens, which I will discuss

⁵⁶ Interview with author, October 18, 2010



A graffiti mural on Drake Street

later.

Which isn't to say that the murals haven't benefitted the company in terms of external publicity. Mangione showed me a Daily News story that had been done on the murals, and just as Manhattan Molds and Casts' neighbor in Brooklyn asked if the Robots Will Kill crew would paint

his building, so too did the owner of the scrap yard across the street from Borax offer up their fence. Mangione is certainly a fan.

They're doing the junkyard now, because they're making them aware, you know? It looks nice. I mean, it does. Better than, you know, somebody's initials, or, you know, something ridiculous. These guys are artists, man. I mean, you gotta see these guys work. I was out there for half an hour, in amazement at what they were able to create, with paint cans and stencils and...they have a whole toolbox full of stuff that they bring. It's pretty cool.⁵⁷

Because Borax is in an industrial area, neighbors are few and far between, beyond the occasional tractor-trailer rig rumbling by on its way to or from the Hunts Point Terminal Market. On the day I visited, truck drivers Reynaldo and Frank were the only neighbors to be found. Both were parked on Drake Street near the How Nosh mural, waiting for the call to return to the market for a fresh load of produce. Frank had come up from South Texas for the first time in five years; although Hunts Point was a regular stop for six years, he'd recently been driving to New Jersey. His impression of the murals was that they "express the inner most being of the people drawing them." He was less sanguine about tagging.

I believe it's kind of like destroying property, you know? Taking advantage of other people's property. You got logos saying about the businesses and you got all these people coming over and just painting and taking advantage of the walls. That's what I believe. It expresses who they really are too, but I believe they shouldn't do it. If they want to do that, they should start doing it more or less like in, how can I say this...you know, I mean, get themselves in some art class or something, you know what I'm saying, instead of taking advantage of other people's walls.⁵⁸

Reynaldo concurred, and although neither was especially verbose, the men did recognize that the murals

57. Interview with author, October 18, 2010

58. Ibid.

were a topic worthy of discussion, which would not be the case if the block they were inhabiting was flanked merely by plain brick walls and rusted corrugated metal. For at least a few hours, the way station for these long distance truckers was an outdoor gallery of sorts.

The notion of this work taking on the appearance of an outdoor gallery is one that is very familiar to Nicer. Three days before I met him at the Point, I attempted to visit him at the site of another mural he was working on, at Whitlock Ave and East 165th Street in Port Morris. Like Hunts Point, Port Morris is in close proximity to a highway, in this case the Sheridan Expressway, which splits off from the Bruckner only a few blocks to the south. 165th and Whitlock is also where the 6 train lurches out from underground and travels the rest of the way through the Bronx above ground. As it rises, there is a short stretch where the tracks are even with Whitlock; needless to say, it is rarely tranquil here.

I missed Nicer on this occasion due to a misunderstanding,



A graffiti mural on the opposite side of Drake Street

but the visit did afford me a view of Project A.C.T., a three block long endeavor whose highlight is a six-panel mural that completely covers the two-story brick building facing the rising subway tracks. In addition to another one of How Nasm's pieces, the building sports a fully realized subway (with tags on the car sides, no less) rising from the ground onto a curving elevated track and a bright red "I ♥ the Bronx" framed against names of 25 or so neighborhoods in the Bronx. This latter image has become so popular, it was featured in an ad for Fiat featuring Jennifer Lopez. TATS Cru weren't actually asked for permission for use of the image, and were only compensated after they threatened legal action against Fiat and the advertising agency that create the spot.⁵⁹

It's all part of an effort to combat tagging through mural making, except in this case it was spearheaded by T.K. Singleton, the community initiatives coordinator for Bronx Community Solutions. Singleton, who works out of an office at the Bronx Criminal Courthouse by Yankee Stadium, said the area had been a target of vandals who would tag the walls mere days after they'd been buffed. Instead of having cleanup crews visit it again and again,

⁵⁹. "In the Bronx, a Collision of Cars, Celebrity and Copyright," *The New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2011

she convinced her superiors to let her put \$4,000 of paint and supplies toward a series of murals by the TATS Cru and two other graffiti crews.

Four years of doing these anti-graffiti cleanup projects and it still [didn't] look like we're actually doing anything on that particular area. [So I thought,] why not do something innovative and new like a graffiti mural project that can be respected with other artists and also the community can love it, and it can be an addition to just like open art, for an area that I believe, is a very cultural area?⁶⁰



Tats Cru graffiti mural on Whitlock Ave.

Singleton views the project as both a practical solution to an intractable problem and a way to boost the cultural capital of the neighborhood. She's a self-described fan of the TATS Cru, and although it took her three months to make this project happen, she's hopeful that she'll be able to do it again in another area. It can't be

just anywhere though.

It's the areas where, most people will just say, 'You just can't do anything about graffiti,' like the high traffic areas, subway stations. Any street that's along those particular places where there's high visibility for a person's name, you're going to find a million and one kids willing to bomb to get their names up.⁶¹

Part of the reason why Singleton said this area was so appealing was the fact that it could benefit the most from increased foot traffic that the undertaking would generate. Ideally that will make it a safer neighborhood and boost local business too. Artists advertise their newest works online to a global audience, and that audience, she notes, will seek the works out in person. 5 Pointz draws fans from as far away as Japan, so why, Singleton's logic goes, wouldn't they venture up to the South Bronx? Walter Benjamin would certainly approve of the strength of the aura of this project, set in the heart of the borough. It's fitting that an art whose roots are in the grimy recesses of the subway system is showcased right next to active elevated tracks. Singleton again:

Graffiti is a beautiful art. It is an art form that some people may not respect, but I don't think Picasso was respected in his own time. Also, it's an art form that is begotten from the street from the community. When you leave something blank, that's exactly that it's going to be: a business area that's blank that no one's going to want to go down anyway. Maybe the community might walk down

60. Interview with author, Oct. 10, 2010

61. Ibid.

there because of the train. But as for someone to actually go out there and look and say ‘Wow, look at this art,’ or ‘Wow, look at that; how did they get it to be this way?’ is totally different. What you’re doing there is inviting the community out to view this.⁶²

Singleton said people did come out when this project was underway, including State Assemblyman Marcos A. Crespo, State Senator Ruben Diaz Sr. and Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., and all voiced approval of it when it was unveiled. The attendees’ emphasis on graffiti eradication was too much for Nicer’s taste (“We’re the first graffiti company of its kind, so it’s like going to a butcher to get a donation for a vegan workshop,” he said.), but the notion of creating a walking museum with alternating pieces of art was very appealing to him. It’s a subtle distinction, but both Singleton and Nicer’s emphasis on what is *created* in such a project contrasts with any emphasis on what is *removed*, and places them in agreement with Halsey and Young’s contention that writers’ motivations are not exclusively rooted in destruction. The communion, if you will, between the body and the ideal writing space, is important too.

The location is particularly ideal in this case because outside of the Bronx Museum of Art, Nicer said there are few opportunities to see art in the borough, and certainly not in Hunts Point or Port Morris.



Tats Cru graffiti mural on Whitlock Ave.

What do you have as the normal family setting here? The normal family setting is single parent homes, very few full family homes. So you have mothers who work rigorous jobs, whether its wholesale, or working retail, like clothing stores or super markets, or even if they have professional jobs like secretaries downtown, they’re working not only 9 to 5; sometimes they’re working 9 to 8, and by the time they get home, their kids are home, and it isn’t like they’re getting dressed and saying ‘Come on, let’s go to the MoMa. Let me show you the difference between a Monet and a Goya. Let me show you the difference between a Picasso, you know, Pointillism, Cubism...’

Not everyone in New York City really has that kind of leisure time to partake in the art culture that’s out there. The stuff that we’re putting out there in these neighborhoods is the modern day Picassos and Goyas and Monets that bring arts and color to other people’s lives.⁶³

62. Interview with author, Oct. 10, 2010

63. Interview with author, Sept. 27, 2010

Although the South Bronx is about the furthest thing from a place brimming with surplus capital, it does benefit from a unique local culture that gives rise to projects like this one. It's worth reiterating the fact that a multinational corporation thought enough of the images that it used them for a television advertisement starring Jennifer Lopez, albeit without permission. In this small way, residents of one of the least influential parts of the city gain an element of power.

Case Study Jersey City

It may be separated from New York City by the Hudson River, but Jersey City is very much a part of the metropolitan New York region. Two stops in on the PATH train, downtown Jersey City is less than 20 minutes



A diminutive residence in Jersey City

away from World Trade Center site in Manhattan's financial district. The downtown, which is hemmed in by the New Jersey Turnpike to the west, the entrance to the Holland Tunnel to the North, and waterfront to the east and south, is a mish mash of the historical and modern architecture.

While the waterfront sports glass-enclosed sky scrapers and condominiums that cater to urban professionals who make the short commute from the Exchange Street PATH station to jobs across the river, further inland and closer to the turnpike is the historic downtown, where new town houses are jumbled together with older brick tenement-style dwellings. Main street is dotted with independent merchants, empty storefronts and the occasional bar, restaurant or Starbucks. Although many of the merchants here cater to local residents, the district is still a magnet for visitors from other parts of New Jersey.

This is where I found Dylan Evans and SAGE Arts Collective members Luv 1 and Will Kaso. In an alley next to 172 Newark Ave, a three-story, 100 year-old brick building that currently houses Palace Drugs and Liquor, Luv and Will were supervising the finishing touches of a blue whale that covered the length of the building. They were a little far from their normal haunt, as the SAGE Collective is based in Trenton, but were there at the behest of Dylan, who lives in Jersey City and identifies himself as an "art curator and consultant" and "location scout

for film and television.” I found the group through an entry that Luv 1 had posted on the website Jersey Graf (www.jerseygraf.com), and did not expect to meet Dylan, but since he was instrumental in the project, I felt I would be remiss not to include him. He described himself as a fan of art, and said that this project came about because



A newer residence in Jersey City

Jerry Blankman, the owner of the building, contacted him after seeing some of the collectives’ work at “Raw Power,” a project that involved artists covering nearby 350 Warren Street with murals. Evans got the SAGE Collective involved in that project, and Luv 1 said that if another project came up, he should keep them in mind. This, he said, was that next project.

I can’t paint, but I really appreciate and respect what the artists do, so my way of contributing is by curating projects and just bringing what I enjoy and sharing that with the residents of Jersey City. So my strengths have just been, reach out and talk to artists, organize events and projects like this.⁶⁴

Evans’ role in this project was a combination of mediator and fixer, as he both communicated to Blankman what would be painted, and arranged through the city to have the area adjacent to the building, which is both a parking lot and a driveway linking Newark Ave. to another parking lot, closed to traffic. He also oversaw the procurement of supplies, and picked up the tab for lunch too. The design, which was proposed by the collective, was originally going to be an underwater theme with jellyfish and divers, but it morphed into a single whale, with additional elements to be added later. Evans tries to convince building owners to give artists creative freedom, and steers artists away from controversial pieces. It can still be challenging to get building owners on board though.

Some owners assume that all public art is graffiti. They don’t understand the value that it can bring to a neighborhood. So it can be tough. I do get no’s from some people, but then I also get yes’s from some people. Hopefully the neighborhood and the owners are happy with it, and that it does more good than bad. I mean, I think any art on a wall that isn’t offensive is better than a blank wall. Maybe there’s even room for offensive art some place, but that’s not what I want to bring to Jersey City.⁶⁵

Like Veng and Crane, part of Evans’ pitch to owners is if they allow him to commission a painting, “street kids

64. Interview with author, Nov. 7, 2010

65. Ibid.



The front of 172 Newark Ave

that it will prevent further graffiti.⁶⁶

Luv 1 estimated that he'd been painting on the streets for three years, even though he said he'd been doing art his whole life. At first, he started doing graffiti illegally in out of the way places, where he could “learn the craft” before doing higher visibility pieces.

It's a natural thing for myself that I just do. It's therapeutic to me, I would say. But I think art in general is therapeutic. Switches up the monotony. To me, I don't see enough human fingerprints when I travel the world. I see corporate fingerprints all over, but I don't see, you know, like the people of the community. That to me is important.⁶⁷

Luv 1's emphasis on “human fingerprints” again brought to mind Halsey and Young's ruminations on writer motivations. He doesn't look at a space that is blank or recently buffed and focus on what's there, but what it could be—a rejoinder to what he sees as excessive commercialism. Halsey and Young make a case that the allure of the ideal writing space is a strong counterweight to the penalties that await taggers; in Luv's case, a similar desire to leave “human fingerprints” is stronger than the bureaucratic hurdles that accompany legal graffiti murals.

As noted earlier, Jersey City is a relatively new space for the SAGE Collective, and as I would discover later, Trenton, where they hail from, is a very different community. When reflecting on their experiences, both Luv 1 and Will Kaso often harkened back to Trenton. Evans said he tapped them for this project because he considered Jersey City to be a bit of a “dry well,” for high quality graffiti artists, and in any case, Luv 1 and Will do not limit themselves to one area; Trenton, Hopewell and Bedminster, NJ and Philadelphia, Washington D.C.,

66. Interview with author, Nov. 7, 2010

67. Ibid.

will respect it more, and tend not to tag over it.” This is true especially if the wall he's asking to paint already has tags on it.

I'm thinking of the projects I've done, they've all been pretty well received and not marked up. I don't know if it's been an effective selling point, because you know, there's still some owners that I'm working on, getting permission. But yeah, that is something I try to use,



Luv 1 puts the finishing touches on the whale

Brooklyn and Harlem are some of the spots they've painted.

In Trenton, they target abandoned buildings for their work as often as inhabited ones, and in many cases they've taken a "paint first, ask permission later" approach. This lends a certain amount of tension to their work, because when asked about the first time they painted a wall with an owners' permission, Will Kaso launched into a lengthy story about how in July 2008, they painted an entire city block in broad daylight, and when confronted by a resident about the legality of their work, they bluffed and said the city had given them the ok. After they finished, they succeeded in petitioning the local residents to let it stay, but this is obviously not a strategy that most would get behind.

If the SAGE Collective comes across as slightly disrespectful of authority, the same does not extend to local residents. Will Kaso likes to call their work "conscious graffiti," and Luv 1 notes that even though their first mural was unsanctioned, it was primarily Dr. Seuss imagery that they figured would appeal to the community.

I think what's different about what we do is, we do it with the community in mind; it's not just to put our names up. We're doing stuff to brighten the community, and I think that's what makes it different from graffiti, and maybe it's art graffiti, just street art, or aerosol art or something.⁶⁸

68. Interview with author, Nov. 7, 2010

In addition to the purely aesthetic improvement that a mural provides, Luv 1 and Will Kaso's experience shows how their actions can produce unexpected consequences. Asked if preventing vandalism was ever a motive for building owners to employ their talents, Will Kaso volunteered that he'd once painted two images of the musician Nina Simone on an abandoned building in North Trenton (It has since been torn down). A few weeks later, a friend who lives nearby told him that the drug dealers who'd normally hang around that lot had dispersed, because the mural was drawing too much attention to the spot. He's proud that none of SAGE's works have been vandalized, but both he and Luv 1 are skeptical of possibility that good work alone is a deterrent.

Will: I think it depends. Like, I work with the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, and when they put murals in areas that are heavy with graffiti, a lot of their murals don't survive. Then it becomes a point of well, who's doing the wall? A lot of the times the people doing the walls are outside of the whole scene. So if you put cats on these walls and they have a name...

Luv 1: ...If they're respected artists, then they don't touch it.⁶⁹

This is an important acknowledgement of an essential point: It matters not only where graffiti murals are placed, but also who creates them. The impression that one gets from talking to Will Kaso and Luv 1 is that there is a very thin line between being stylistically true enough to street life so that their murals are respected, and antagonizing the authorities and suspicious neighbors. It is clearly something that irritates Will Kaso.

About a month ago, I was doing a permission wall for a friend of mine, at his art studio, and one of the residents there called the cops on me. He was like, 'He's out here doing graffiti.' The cops came, and they were like, 'This doesn't look like graffiti,' and I was like, 'It isn't. I'm just painting.' And then I told them who I was, and they was like 'Oh yeah, we've heard of you.' I'm out there for hours, just hanging out with the police officers, talking about art and all this type of shit. It gave me an opportunity to really get to know these guys, and for them to get to know me. But at the same time, how many walls do I have up here, and you're still fuckin' with me? Like, seriously?⁷⁰

Jerry Blankman, the owner of 172 Newark, greeted me at his offices at the Jersey City Special Improvement District at Journal Square, which is one stop past Grove Street on the PATH. He explained that he found Dylan Evans via Rebecca Feranec, the studio tour coordinator for Pro Arts Jersey City (She has since been promoted to executive director). Evans has been a second tier supporter of the artist tour for about the last ten years. Since he doesn't have the funds to fix up his 100 year-old building, he figured this would be one way to spruce it up. The whale is just the start though; his ultimate goal is to turn the building into a canvas for artists of many stripes.

As my capital builds up and I find the rental income that I'm looking for to do this, every phase, eventually, I'd like to have something where my entire building is nearly covered in some sort of an

69. Interview with author, Nov. 7, 2010

70. Ibid.

artistic mural. I think it works for all concerned, and the more the better, as far as I'm concerned.⁷¹

Blankman's roots in the area go deep. The building has been in his family since 1925, when his uncle started the drug store there. His father worked there, and when he was 13, he worked there too. When his father died in 1996, he took over, and he ran it for 11 years before selling it to investors, while retaining ownership of the building. He doesn't visit the space as often as he did with he ran the pharmacy, but he did swing by to see the whale, and ran into lots of people he knew; he said all praised the work.

Dylan and I worked out ahead of time, that the artists would have full creative control, but I didn't want anything that would be offensive to any race, gender, anyone like that. I didn't want anything that was adult in nature or content, and as it turned out, my two sons are great lovers of the sea and of the ocean, so the aquatic theme fit right into something that I could quickly relate to. But that was my only feedback, was people walking past and thinking it was a really cool thing.⁷²

If there's one person who understands the graffiti as vandalism versus graffiti murals as art, it's Blankman, who as chance would have it, supervises a graffiti removal program in the Special Improvement District (S.I.D.) at Journal Square. He founded and was president of the Special Improvement District that 172 Newark resides in, and does not have patience for people scribbling their names on things.

Graffiti's illegal if you're tagging somebody's building without their knowledge, whether it's beautiful or not. In many cases, it's not. In some cases, it is. Regardless of whether it's beautiful or not, if you have someone's permission, I think it's great. I think its part of the urban culture and the fabric that that we live in in an urban environment, and I think that's great. But we spend a lot of time in the SID combatting illegal graffiti, so I think there needs to be a line. If we're just going to say graffiti, that's a very general term. There's a huge distinction there.⁷³

Like Luv 1 and Will Kaso, he's skeptical of the power of murals to deter vandalism, noting that he'd recently commissioned an artist from West Orange to paint abstract art on a utility box a few blocks away. The day after it was finished, he and his assistant went out to take a picture, only to find that someone named "Marian" had written her name in white on it. Could it be that the art was disrespected because the artist was from somewhere other than Jersey City? Blankman wasn't buying it.

There wasn't any real artistic graffiti on this particular box to begin with, so I'm not sure it was territorial. I think it was just someone one just being rude. I was disappointed because I thought it was a really nice piece of art.⁷⁴

Blankman is upfront about his motivations at 172 Newark. Asked why he thought the whale might be an improvement over a blank wall, he returned to the fact that his building is in disrepair, and although he's a

71. Interview with author, Nov. 22, 2010

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

supporter of the arts, the side benefit for him is a building that is simply more attractive now than it was before. In a sense, it's a win-win, because he believes that even if a mural is not a direct link to an increase in tenancy, a strong and vibrant artist community contributes an indirect financial benefit. Even if he doesn't fill his vacancies, he notes, his building is still worth more than it was a month ago.

The culture of Jersey City in downtown is extremely important to me because my family's been there for almost a hundred years, so that's extremely important to me. But I still have two kids in Basking Ridge who need to be fed at night, and the financial aspect never leaves my mind. I'd be disingenuous if I said anything else.⁷⁵

In fact, Blankman looks down to the riverfront developments that have transformed that area of the city and wonders when the area where his building is located will change too. Following a script that countless real estate owners have before him, he's attempting to help usher in that transformation by making the area more appealing to artists.



The rear of 172 Newkirk Ave

It hasn't made it to my street yet, so the rental income and the property values are not at a point where people can pull equity out of their buildings and really renovate them so that they look beautiful. It hasn't come to that yet. So this is sort of, a weigh station, where I can get some work done, make it look nice and hopefully we do experience the boom that the waterfront has.⁷⁶

Of all the cases studies, Jersey

City perhaps best epitomizes Harvey's notion of "creative destruction" in the service of excess capital. Blankman is a bone fide supporter of both the arts and his local community, and he freely admits that both can be put into the service of raising capital for himself. Few would begrudge this strategy; as he noted, he has children to look after. And yet, it's difficult to hear gentrification spoken of so excitedly. On the one hand, Harvey might applaud a piece like this as a "mark of local distinction." At the same time, if the murals Blankman plans to install do what he hopes they will, then the monopoly rent he extracts from this unique space will by necessity be directed to efforts to further increase his capital. Improvements he makes to the building will be accompanied by higher property

75. Interview with author, Nov. 22, 2010.

76. Ibid.

evaluations, which will lead to higher tax assessments from the city, and Blankman will be forced to raise rents on his tenants.

This cycle of “creative destruction” that results in the eviction of the poor, the underprivileged and the marginalized, is at the heart of the tension that Harvey explores in *Rebel Cities*, and it’s not hard to envision elsewhere either. With both Jersey City and Bushwick, it’s not hard to imagine a scenario where artists do move in, displacing the poor, only to be displaced by young professionals, and so on, until a state is reached whereby graffiti murals are no longer appropriate. That day is still far off for Jersey City, but it is an example of why when it comes to graffiti murals, a case can be made for government-sponsored promotion. As Harvey notes, the market values marks of distinction for the monopoly rents they grant, but there is always a risk they will be overwhelmed.

In the meantime, befitting its location in the middle of a busy commercial district, the whale draws a range of opinions from bystanders. Ronnie, a white woman in her late 50’s who has lived in Jersey City her whole life, said she sometimes found herself tired of “seeing half buildings or blank, empty walls,” but she didn’t consider herself a fan of tags either. Asked if she felt it improved the neighborhood, she gave what would seem to be a positive response:

It gives you something to look at. When you see something like this, you know somewhere, someone has an interest. When you see people have an interest in a building, you feel a little safer.⁷⁷

Zimbardo would be proud. The crucial part of her response is the first part. One could easily say that a building that has been scrubbed clean is, like 172 Newark, one that has an owner who has an interest in it, but that interest is simply an economic one; nothing more. A mural means a lot more: In this case, change. Ronnie described the neighborhood as one that’s gone through a lot of transition. Once exclusively Italian and Polish, it is now a mix of Latino, blacks, Italians and Polish, along with newly arrived New Yorker expatriates. It feels like a safe neighborhood, she said, and one of the reasons why is art like the whale mural.

When it’s general art like this, or you know, urban art, it’s different than when you walk into a wall with tags. You don’t want to see TAZ and Q’s, you know, its’ different. This is art. It’s not like the subway art. We’ve come a long way.⁷⁸

Not everyone is a fan. Rama, for instance, seemed incredulous that I would even want to talk to him about the mural. A 50-something gentleman of Southeast Asian descent, he had traveled from Edison to visit the pharmacy. He said he would rather see a clean wall than a mural, even if were not explicitly connected to

77. Interview with author, Nov. 23, 2010

78. *Ibid.*

graffiti.

Q: What's your impression of it? Do you like it?

A: I don't know anything this...It looks like, ugly. I don't like it.

Q: You don't like it? How come?

A: I don't know. It looks, these kinds of things on the wall, writing on the wall, this and that, I don't like it.

Q: Oh, ok. So. Ok. Um, do you feel like it makes the neighborhood look worse or better?

A: Yeah, it looks worse.⁷⁹

It is possible that Rama didn't fully understand the question being posed; English was obviously his second language. But even if he did, and he genuinely felt that a blank wall would be preferable, he did say at another point in our conversation that he felt the neighborhood was improving, with the foot traffic around us serving as proof. So even if he is not affected in a positive way by the mural, it can be said that he is affected by others, like Ronnie, who do see it in a positive light.

Michelle, a 30-something black woman who had driven into town from Bayonne with her daughter to do some shopping, certainly appreciated it, and like Ronnie, she drew a contrast between it and tagging, which she equated with negativity. This downtown spot could use less of that, she noted.

It gives the people something to look at as they're walking through. It's an alleyway, and most people are skeptical to walk in an alleyway, because some times it's occupied by people who like to drink and do drugs. I'm surprised they're not out here today. But to look at something creative and not just tagged up there, it's a good sight.⁸⁰

With this observation, Michelle echoed Will Kaso's assertion that in some cases, the presence of a mural can actually deter questionable behavior. Tags have the opposite effect though, she said, because she's seen profanity and "not so decent pictures" along with them. Once again, it's a case of symbolic interactionism. Michelle again:

Tagging is usually done out of vengeance. You know, you're mad at someone, you're mad at the person in the building and you just want to tag something, just to let them know that you was here, and you really don't care if it's painted over or if it's clean, you know, when the bricks are clean. But when you do a mural like this, you're really putting your heart into it. So it's totally different.⁸¹

Finally, there's Junior, a Hispanic man who has lived all 52 years of his life in Jersey City. He was familiar with other instances of graffiti artists being asked to take part in sanctioned public art projects, and like many

79. Interview with author, Nov. 23, 2010

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid..

others I spoke to, he framed the issue as one of a private property owner's prerogative. This perspective is more often associated with the right of an owner to keep their property free of tags, but it can be applied in this instance too, as his answer to the question "Why do you think this is better than a blank wall, which is what was there before?" illustrates:

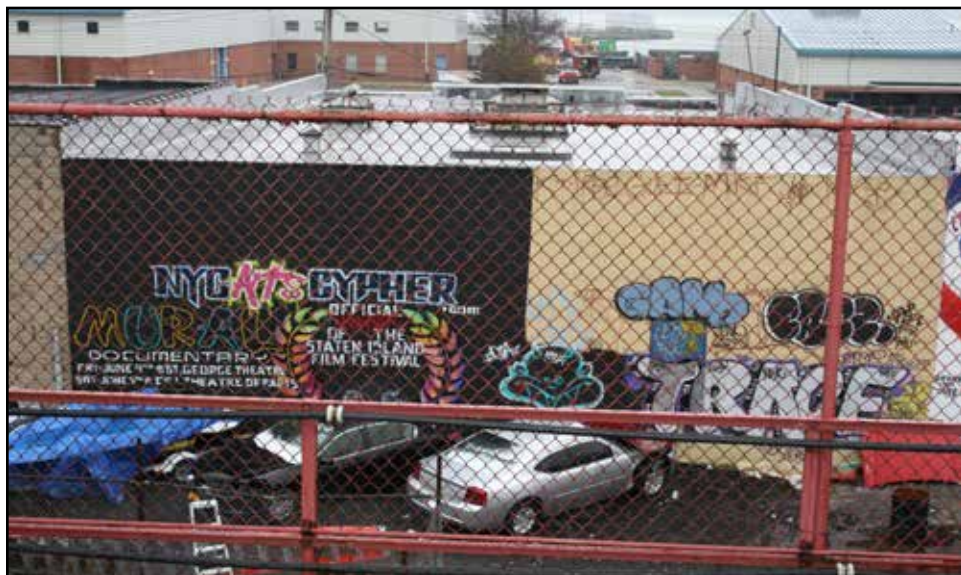
It gives people something to look at, something to talk about, something to attract them and if the building owner is ok with it, who am I to say they can't do it?⁸²

His impressions of the neighborhood would also please Blankman, as he said it's gentrifying as more upscale restaurants and bars open.

It's changed over the last 20 years, dramatic change, dramatic improvement. I've been here when downtown Jersey City was pretty much the slums, and today it's a nice place to live. ⁸³

Case Study Staten Island

As removed as Jersey City might seem to be from New York City, it's a trifle compared to Staten Island. My journey to locate graffiti murals in the cities' most suburban of boroughs brought me to Stapleton, a neighborhood on the northeastern corner of the island, three stops from the Staten Island Ferry on the Staten Island



**NYC Arts Cypher Mural at the Stapleton SIRR
(Staten Island Railway)**

Railroad (SIRR). Like nearby Brooklyn, Stapleton has an urban feel to it, thanks to access to public transportation and the Stapleton Houses, a public housing project that many members of the hip hop group Wu Tang Clan called home.

It is also the home of NYC ArtsCypher, a nonprofit group whose mission is "To promote positive values through arts and

entertainment programs, projects, & events with a focus on emerging artists and teens."⁸⁴ Charlie Balducci, the groups' founder, met me at NYC Arts Cypher's Broad Street office. Although Balducci has supervised the painting of murals around Stapleton, including one visible from the elevated SIRR platform, he was most interested in

82. Interview with author, Nov. 23, 2010

83. Ibid.

84. New York Arts Cypher website, <http://nycartscypher.com>, Accessed March 3, 2012

talking about a project that was just getting underway about two miles inland, next to St. Peter's Cemetery.

Leewood Real Estate, a prominent developer on Staten Island, was looking for a way to jumpstart a stalled development for a 24-unit condominium in West New Brighton that had been



Another view of the mural at the Stapleton SIRR

languishing behind a beat up construction fence since 2007, and one of the ideas it pursued was having the fence, which stretches 200 feet, repainted with a mural. Wayne Miller, who joined Leewood in December 2010 as vice president of sales and marketing for The Clover Club, as the development is called, knew Balducci from grant proposal meetings they'd both attended; Balducci for NYC Arts Cypher, and Miller for the Staten Island Shakespearean theater company, which he runs. Balducci took the idea and ran with it.

[Miller] had initially thought of just doing a mural, and I twisted it and made it a lot more complicated for myself and the organization by incorporating a program where it's not us just doing the mural, but we would team up four kids with four artists, and sketch something out with the kids involved and then have the kids be there to help with the actual creation of the mural, because it runs hand in hand with what our program is.⁸⁵

Balducci lined up artists to paint the fence, and he also worked alongside the New York City Department of Probation to find teenagers who'd been arrested for graffiti. The intention, he said, was to show them "the positive side of graffiti, the consequences of vandalism and to give them an opportunity to have an outlet to express themselves in a safe environment."

The project cost \$5,000, with \$1,500 going toward the paint, \$500 to \$600 for each artist and the rest going toward a videographer and transportation. Balducci viewed it as much a proving ground for his organization, to show how it can work in tandem with people who would normally be leery of those whose main tool is a spray can.

They'll bring the attention to the site, my artists will get the opportunity to use this big showcase of work, the organization of course put it together, so we get the kudos, and everybody involved

⁸⁵. Interview with author, March 29, 2011

really just benefits from the quality of life. Those particular construction sites always look ragged and run down and water logged and splintering. We're gonna beautify that, and so I'm hoping that it also starts a trend.⁸⁶

When we spoke, Balducci was just gearing up for a new season; he estimated that the previous summer they had done ten murals. Half were requests from owners; the rest came from his solicitations. Of all the people who are involved in promoting the art, he is the most adamant in emphasizing the collaborative aspect of his work, even going so far as to distance himself from the “selfishness” inherent in the pursuit of “throwing your name out there,” which he said was the essence of graffiti. In a way, Balducci is on the far end of the spectrum of those I interviewed, because he equates the word graffiti with a concept that is strictly illegal.

The graffiti art is all about self expression and putting your name out there and getting known and “getting your ups” and stuff like that. We don't approach it that way. We approach it more like, ‘Well what would you want us to do?’ approach, and I think that allows a lot of sensitivity for it, because we're not coming in with the attitude, or to be stand offish. We're coming in the premise of, ‘Ok, you've got a wall. We acknowledge that. You have a business; you own a hardware store. Why don't you let us do something that advertises your hardware store on this wall, and at the same time, we can put in some imagery or things that promote our business and promote those particular artists?’⁸⁷

Anyone who glanced at the construction fence at Clove Place would understand that there was a lot of negotiation with the property owners; save for the six signatures of the artists involved, there is nothing that resembles traditional graffiti murals. Rather, the fence is a mixture of butterflies, flowers and the slogan of the development, “The Lifestyle You've Earned.” Even compared to the blue whale in Jersey City, it's tame, to the point of almost being anodyne. And like Jersey City, it's using graffiti style art in the service of marketing of real estate, with the goal of gentrifying the area.

In any case, painting is just one facet of what NYC Arts Cypher does, along with dance, film and music, and the groups' mural by the Stapleton railroad station illustrates how the group is also involved in promoting traditional New York style lettering. What's just as important is how Balducci views his larger role in Staten Island.

I look at everything as something that can be better. I always look at things to be progressive and to move to the next level. I feel like a blank canvas is just something that needs to be painted. So I drive around the neighborhood and I look at walls and architecture and different textures, like stucco and concrete and brick, and I'm thinking ‘How can we create something on there that would beautify the neighborhood and would help people promote things?’⁸⁸

86. Interview with author, March 29, 2011

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

Wayne Miller said the mural is meant to evoke a “mid 60’s kind of psychedelic painting,” that will hopefully remind the 55-and-over set of the summer of love in 1967. Aside from that theme, Miller said they asked that the name of the development be included, along with a monarch butterfly, which is a key part of the branding within the club (the Monarch Club, the Monarch Roof, etc.). He takes pride that everyone involved got to include some input.



The construction fence advertising the Clover Club

It was a rare opportunity for the business community to partner with not only at-risk kids, but with the art world, and this has been very well received by the Council for Arts and Humanities here on Staten Island. A lot of artists have commented to me personally about what a fabulous thing we were able to do. We served a lot of constituencies, and we’ve been very happy with the response to the building project, where people have actually called up and said ‘Hey, that’s really gonna go on, isn’t it? It looks interesting. It looks like the kind of place I want to know more about.’ So we’ve accomplished all of our objectives.⁸⁹

Miller is appreciative of graffiti as an art form, having gone to art school and grown up around theater. In particular, he recognizes the need to guide the teens who have an artistic ambition to an outlet and “utilize that talent and that creative urge that’s burning inside of them.” To him, tagging is not necessarily the sign of a wayward soul lashing out at the world; it’s the sign of a need for an outlet.

Most of the people I know say, ‘Graffiti? Vandalism. Put them in jail.’ It’s very cut and dry. That’s why I was so happy to be able to bring this to fruition, because I think that if you look closely at

⁸⁹. Interview with author, April 25, 2011

what we've done here, you can see the young people who worked on this are really talented. This gave them an opportunity to put forward their creativity in a positive manner.⁹⁰

Once again, Kramer's assertion that there is a gray area where authorities only see black and white comes into play when the question is one of urban vitality. It's much easier, from a political standpoint, to stand firm on harsh sentencing rules for graffiti vandals, than it is to recognize the validity of, as Miller puts it, "the creative urge that's burning inside of them." But if they did, it would naturally lead to a realization that those talents might be harnessed for good, via the graffiti mural.

This is the first time Miller has worked with Balducci on this kind of project, and he said that Balducci's prior experience with others, such as an optometrist Miller counts as a friend, helped a lot when it came time to convince Leewood executives to give them a shot. The fact that it's a partnership between "at-risk kids with spray cans in their hands" and "guys who drive Lincolns and build real estate



A side view of the construction, with houses on Clove Court in the background

projects" makes it interesting for him. There's also civic responsibility. Asked why his mural is better than a plain wooden fence, Miller fell on the realm of perceptions. The weathered, ill-kept fence signified that the project had stalled in a weak economy, was a blight on the neighborhood, and was a "constant visual marker for the bad time the United States is in right now." A mural is a rejoinder to several preconceived notions.

By doing this, you're putting a piece of art in the community; you're reminding the community that things aren't all that bad, that there are good kids. And you know, this is Staten Island, which is a conservative, blue-collar community. To show that community that the kids with their baseball caps on backwards and their pants rolled up and hanging around their waists with a can of spray paint in their hand, are capable of doing good work, and good things that not only help business but beautify the community, is kind of what made this all worthwhile.⁹¹

90. Interview with author, April 25, 2011

91. Ibid.

By the time I visited the site, the fence had already been painted, but if the fence was anything like the construction site itself, it's easy to see how it could be construed as blight. The foundation of the development had been poured and the first floor had been started, but the standing water and overgrown vegetation on the site attested to the amount of time it had sat fallow. Where once there stood two houses and a flower shop, there now was only deferred progress.

Geoff Rawling, one of the artists who Balducci recruited for the project, met me at an Italian restaurant near the Jersey City waterfront. Rawling, a white 51-year-old Rockaway, Queens resident who grew up in England, does not fit the profile of a traditional graffiti artist, nor does he consider himself to be one, even though he appreciates graffiti style. Instead of writing a tag, he excels at creating illusions that make it look like there are holes in solid surfaces. He likes to tell a story about getting caught painting on the side of the Berlin Wall in 1979. One of his first jobs as a teenager was painting a sign for the very first Tesco store on Well Street Market, Hackney, in the East End of London. The neighborhood had deteriorated since the store first opened in 1919, but the store was still there in the 70's when Rawling found work there just the same.

I painted all kinds of Jamaican, Pakistani kind of foodstuffs and stuff on the outside, because that was what the neighborhood was like, mostly. We had a big Jamaican market called Ridley Road. So it was very colorful, bright stuff. I actually had a job in the warehouse there, which lasted about six weeks, and they realized I was useless at that, so it was better to pay me to paint instead. I learned very young that once you do one painting, everyone else hires you. They say 'Oh, this guy is painting this,' and next thing, you're doing the dentists' office, and you're doing the pet the store and you're doing everything in that neighborhood.⁹²

Rawling's London pedigree made him an outsider in New York City when he moved here, and he recalls being called a sell-out by fellow Lower East Side artists both because he was willing to work for payment and because he used brushes along with spray cans. As versatile as an artist can get with different size spray can caps, Rawling said that for detailed work or 3D pieces, he prefers to use a brush. For him, spray paint is best used for filling in big spaces.

A lot of guys didn't like that because they'd see it as some kind of...you know, graffiti to them was the spray can and it was doing it for your love and your neighborhood and all of that stuff. You know, I totally understand, but I came across the Atlantic, and I have to make a living.⁹³

Like Veng in Brooklyn, Rawling has as much, if not more invested in traditional, canvas-based art, and considers his murals to be a form of publicity, akin to the kind of buzz that is generated by a placing a red dot—signifying a sale—on a piece of art in a gallery during an opening. He doesn't do outdoor murals for himself

92. Interview with author, April 19, 2011

93. Ibid.

anymore, but he does appreciate the desire to be out in public, noting that graffiti is a true art when one can express themselves freely on a wall, and the best place to do that is “in a neighborhood where there’s a lot of big gray ugly walls that no one cares about.” Where better to, in Walter Benjamin’s words, “shock, amaze, inspire or impress?” He sees his role as a mentor to teens who want to stretch their creative wings but who either don’t appreciate the severity of their actions or understand the alternatives.

What I teach the kids is, if you go up to that guy who owns the lot there and it’s a big old dirty lot, and you say, ‘I wanna paint that wall,’ he’s 90 percent gonna tell you, ‘Go ahead.’ As long as it’s not his frontage, you know? The trouble is, a lot of these kids, they don’t think like that; they want their name out there. And those to me aren’t the real graffiti artists. Some of these kids just want to put their name out there. That’s just territorial. They don’t have an art form, they’re just being ‘Yo, I’m here.’

And if they do it on the front of your business, I understand why you’d be mad. Even as a kid, I wouldn’t have done that, because I understand. Why would you want someone writing graffiti on the front of your building when you’re trying to sell pizza? It doesn’t appeal to the business. But if that pizzeria has a wall against the subway, which the subway goes by every day, and you say ‘Guy, I’ll paint a big pizza pie, and I’ll do a whole freestyle artwork,’ they’ll love you, they’ll probably pay you. So there is a fine line there.⁹⁴

Rawling provides an excellent role model for aspiring artists, but he has no delusions about the motivations of the teens who illegally write and spray tags around town. He knows there’s a certain badge of honor for being “the graffiti kid” in school. He also scoffs at the notion that harsh penalties will deter them, because by virtue of their age, they’re not considering the consequences of their actions—even if a felony awaits them down the road. To that end, he echoes Halsey and Young’s assertion that it’s fruitless to simply forbid the writer from tagging. Give them an outlet though, and murals like the one at Clove Place become not just an alternative to tagging; they become a tangible goal for erstwhile taggers.

I’ve seen the shyest kids who were really talented, sit down in a group and do absolutely nothing verbally, or eye contact, but if you get them drawing, they start going, and they’re listening to you. They don’t even want to look at you, because they’re ghetto kids; they’ve got too many issues. But they can let it out, and they are listening to what you’re saying, you know what I mean? ⁹⁵

Jeff Li, the company’s vice president and project director, echoes Miller’s emphasis on giving teenagers an outlet. First and foremost on the company’s agenda is to stir up excitement for the project. But Li is also versed enough in the world of street art that, when asked what his general impressions of graffiti were, his response was that, “in the right context, it can be an art unto itself.” He noted that Jean-Michel Basquiat, an artist who started out doing graffiti in the 1980’s, for instance, ended up teaming up with Andy Warhol.

94. Interview with author, April 19, 2011

95. Ibid.

One of the things that we liked was that Charlie's taking kids who've had run ins with the law prior to that, specifically for graffiti, and they're providing a place where they can learn their art yet at the same time provide a venue where they can do it legally.⁹⁶

Li also agreed with Millers assertion that Staten Island is not like the rest of New York City. Aside from being more suburban in nature and conservative politically, he said one does not see graffiti on Staten Island in a "positive way." Until Charlie Balducci came along, he said he hadn't seen "quality graffiti" either, which is another indicator of the fluid interpretations that graffiti can elicit. Where the interview was really the most revealing was when I asked Li to be more specific with regards to the right context for graffiti. There is a difference between graffiti that is intended to be art and graffiti that is intended to be defacement, he said, but identifying where that line exists is hard.

If you see graffiti that's just all over a mailbox and has no artistic content to it, then it's more of an issue for me. I think it has to be respectful of people's property. Certainly an active business that is trying to maintain a clean storefront, I don't think that's appropriate. I don't know that you could call that graffiti, but those space invader aliens... you see those all over the place. There's one right over by the Highline Park.

And that guy's gotten pretty famous. It's pretty small, it's pretty unobtrusive, and it's all alone there on the corner of 14th. So is that appropriate? It looks nice there by itself, but if you start tagging the entire Highline, I don't think they'd be very happy with that. You see stuff like in the pavement, with the robot man stuff. Again, is that appropriate? Some guy probably has to dig that out when they do the streets.

So the appropriate... It's like the Supreme Court says with obscenity. I'll know it when I see it.⁹⁷

Li was referring to the works of Invader, a French urban artist who embeds ceramic tiles into the walls of buildings to create small homages to the 1978 arcade game Space Invaders. That he would cite this type of art as an example is not terribly surprising, as the medium of street art, be it in the form of wheat pastes or stencils, has become much more popular since the release of the 2010 Oscar-nominated documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, which featured Invader. The intention of the creator of a piece of street art, which is what Li was wrestling with, is a tricky concept to fully explain, and while



The defaced section of the mural

96. Interview with author, May 10, 2011

97. Ibid.

it's not surprising that someone who is a property owner would shun vandalism, it's instructive that Li is willing to consider that not everything that is unauthorized is necessarily vandalism.

As chance would have it, Clove Place was the perfect place to see that very divide. While interviewing Miller at the site, I



The development's most prominent neighbor is a quiet cemetery

noticed that a section of the fence where Balducci had thanked Randy Lee, the NYPD 120th precinct, Montana Paints and the New York Department of Cultural Affairs had been defaced. A red "X" had been spray painted through the NYPD shield, and "Kill Cops" covered the "Special Thanks" section. While Miller got on the phone with Charlie Balducci, a woman walking a dog nearby told me that there was more vandalism just down Clove Court, the U-shaped street next to the development.

Miller and I found the development's shared mailboxes had been defaced with a crudely drawn red five point star, a heart and the tag "Marz" and a unintelligible black scrawl; a fence nearby likewise had black spray paint of what appeared to be the word "Penas." In less than an hour, Balducci arrived, and armed with white spray paint, covered over the offending works on both the construction fence and the mailboxes. It was a vivid illustration



The defaced mailboxes

of the fact that when it comes to vandalism, there can sometimes be no deterrent strong enough to discourage someone with an axe to grind. There were few obvious "releaser cues," of the sort that Phillip Zimbardo spoke of, for instance. The Clove Place construction site was not in the best shape, but the neighborhood, while

not terribly flashy, was tidy and well maintained. It's also worth noting that the vandalism was directed at a part of the mural mentioning the police, not all of it. It's possible that this was precipitated by someone lashing out against the harsh measures the city promulgates as part of its Broken Window's theory, or it could be any number of reasons. But the important take away from it, as far as I'm concerned, is that the vandalism was directed at a very distinct symbol of power, and not at the flowers, butterflies or other aspects of the mural that the teens worked on. Miller's reaction, and Balducci's rapid response, also makes a compelling case for anyone who doubts that mural makers take ownership of their creations.

Kent, a white man in his 40's who has lived for the last two years with his girlfriend in the house that abuts the site on Clove Road, approved of the way the mural caught the eye, noting that he first thought it was graffiti, because their house had been tagged before, but "then when you take the step back and you see the beauty of it, and the detail that went into the work."

I don't know if I want to say calmer, but it catches your eye. It takes you into a better place, with the butterflies and the...It just puts your mindset in a different space.⁹⁸

Kent noted that the neighborhood was both figuratively and, with its proximity to a cemetery on two sides, literally, dead. He moved to the house after the development had broken ground, and said he'd wondered if construction would ever start again. He guessed that the tags on the mailboxes and the "Kill Cops" had



Charlie Balducci buffs the mailboxes

been done by someone on Clove Place, although he declined to say who he thought it might be. Asked whether the mural made the neighborhood a better place, he said that it gives it "an asterisk."

Not that it's a bad place, but it definitely...It brings a little bit of life to this little area right here, with the cemetery. The colors and all definitely brought it up, especially during the wintertime.⁹⁹

Down on Clove Place, Tom, a while man in his 60's who has lived there for 26 years, begged to disagree.

⁹⁸. Interview with author, April 25, 2011

⁹⁹. Ibid.

Although his wife, who was the one who tipped me off to the vandalism on the mailbox, insisted that I speak to him about the mural, our conversation lasted a mere 96 seconds. He didn't like it, he didn't consider it art, and his general impression of all graffiti was that it's "a mess." That last observation was revealing because as straightforward as the flowers were, to him they still held an aura of edginess that was too much for him.

Q: What do you think of it?

A: I don't really like it. I don't know... I would just rather see a plain fence. I don't think its art, for me. It looks like graffiti to me.¹⁰⁰

Loiuse, also white and in her 60's, was more open to the mural. A resident from across Clove Road for the past six years, she was on her way home from the gym. She wouldn't go so far as to say it made the mural a better place, as she preferred to see actual houses at the spot, but it was an improvement over a yellow fence with random tags on it.

When I see graffiti, it looks like it's kind of a low life neighborhood, you know? It doesn't look good, no. I don't like it. You're talking about the graffiti and the scribbling and all that? Yeah. But something like this to me is artistic. Somebody's expressing themselves.¹⁰¹

Case Study Trenton

Trenton was not in the original plan. The city, which is 60 miles southwest of New York City, is within the



The side of TerraCycle

New York Metropolitan region, but its central New Jersey location puts it much closer to Philadelphia (34 miles). When I first started visiting murals, I focused on New York City and its immediate environs, because the city occupies a singular place within the realm of graffiti. But while perusing njgraph.com for a contact in Jersey City, I stumbled

on a video report from CNN about an annual party thrown by a company called TerraCycle. It was sort of a block party, except instead of pony rides and clowns making balloon dogs, the entertainment was a slew of graffiti writers unleashing their best swoops, swooshes and twists with spray cans. I knew I needed to learn more about

100. Interview with author, April 25, 2011

101. Ibid.

this place.

As it turned out, the organizers of the graffiti writing at TerraCycle were the same ones I'd interviewed in Jersey City: The SAGE Collective. Will Kaso and Luv 1 weren't available for interviews, but fellow SAGE member Leon "Rain" Rainbow was extremely outgoing and helpful, going so far as to give me a tour of the collectives' many murals around Trenton. TerraCycle, where we met and spoke, was in a desolate industrial section of town, sharing space with a car impound lot, a power substation and a few forlorn houses, including a clearly abandoned one with only half its aluminum siding still attached.

I also met TerraCycle spokesman George W. Chevalier III there. The company started at this location in 2003, and they started allowing artists to paint on it shortly after. In 2007, they started throwing "graffiti jams," and every year since then, they've buffed the entire two-story building clean before opening it up to the community. The rest of the year, the outside of the building facing the street and the expansive courtyard behind it is open to a cavalcade of artists both green and experienced. On any given weekend, young men and women can be found milling about on the grounds, working on pieces, refining techniques and trading ideas about future projects. Graffiti is not just a feature of the building exterior either; visitors to the building find it on the interior walls too.

Chevalier said the company's embrace of graffiti goes deeper than mere aesthetics. TerraCycle's business plan revolves around collecting products like used plastic pens and juice pouches and repurposing, or "upcycling" them into useful products like bags, pots, ice melt, fertilizer and a sundry of other products. As the company notes on its website, "Graffiti in fact is a form of waste as people typically pay to remove it and at TerraCycle we embrace all forms of waste!"¹⁰²

Chevalier expanded further:

Trash is something that people just like to push away and not think about, and graffiti is kind of a scourge on the urban landscape; most people just want to kind of paint over it and not think about it. We said you know what? These guys are talented, why don't we embrace it? But if they're throwing up a quick hand, and it's basically defacing property, that's shitty. If they're coming in and we're embracing it and giving them an opportunity to spend some time on it, the results, they speak for themselves.¹⁰³

When TerraCycle started out here, in what was once a distribution center for *The New York Times*, it had all the room the company needed. They expanded into other facilities in Trenton over the years, and today,

102. Terracycle website, <http://www.terracycle.net/en-US/graffiti-at-terracycle> Accessed April 15, 2011

103. Interview with author, April 22, 2011

the space is mostly used as offices. The neighborhood is as utilitarian as one might expect in an industrial corner of a town where 30 percent of the residents live below the poverty line.¹⁰⁴ In this sea of grays, blacks and browns, there is the flash of green accompanying a posse of whimsical cartoon super heroes, red surrounding the second



TerraCycle's closest neighbors on New York Ave

half of the phrase "Eco Friendly" and purples, oranges and blues of the pieces adorning the front of the building. Chevalier said artists are given free reign in the courtyard behind the building, to the point where he once felt compelled to have a bikini added to a drawing of a busty woman in the court yard when a group of fifth graders visited on a tour. The anything goes attitude works there, because the courtyard is hidden from public view. Not so for the sides of the building facing the public.

That's where visitors see us and get their first impression. So it's a little bit more toned down. It's not quite corporate, because it's still graffiti, but it's a little bit more, I think, digestible to the random various guests that we get. I mean, we get business people coming in. We don't want to jar them too bad.¹⁰⁵

Front/back distinctions aside, Chevalier said his company sees itself as young and fun, and as such, the original tan and white scheme of the building would be a mismatch.

It didn't fit with our energy and our style, and also, it's a little bit drab, just because like I said, it's a post-industrial scene here. So we figured it would be a good way to brighten everything up and make it a bit more cheerful and express our personality a little better.¹⁰⁶

TerraCycle has developed a relationship with several artists that is tight enough that they have been given keys to the courtyard for after hour access. One of the employees, who is himself a writer, photographs many of the finished pieces, and Chevalier said they're considering publishing a book of the photographs. In addition to the exterior walls of the building, an unused trailer and a now fallow loading dock are fair game for writers; the

104. "New statistics show nearly 30% of Trenton residents live below the poverty line," The Times of Trenton, September 24, 2011

105. Interview with author, April 22, 2011

106. Ibid.

varied surfaces make it an exquisite environment for graffiti. The recycling ethic of the company even trickles down to the writers; during my visit, one 20-something gentleman volunteered that he paints used spray cans and gives them away as gifts. Chevalier said it's nice to be associated with such a hip young crowd, and it also brings them closer to the community.

They do lots of good stuff in the community, and they do lots of good stuff for us. They're instrumental in the graffiti jam; they actually do graffiti classes. They don't approach it from the standpoint of



Artists work on the other side of the building

'All right, this is how you become a vandal.' They approach it from the artistic standpoint. They literally spend classroom time doing sketches, working on style and all that, and then they use our walls. In doing that, we're kind of a part of that. More people in the community get to hear about TerraCycle. So it does work both ways.¹⁰⁷

That connection came very early on. Rain recalls meeting

TerraCycle CEO Tom Zachy at a party between 2000 and 2003.

I hadn't seen him in a few years, and then one of my friends, a dude that I knew that worked there was like 'Oh yeah, he got this warehouse down in Trenton now.' And he was like, "Yeah, you should come down; he might be open to, you know, having you guys paint down there, or doing some projects with you."¹⁰⁸

That was in 2005, and like the TATS Cru's arrangement with Borax Paper, it started with a sign for the business. In an arrangement that would please David Harvey, the company leveraged cultural uniqueness in the service of the bottom line. But when it opened the gates of the courtyard to writers of Rain's ilk, they didn't just make available a space to while away the hours. They also embraced what Harvey touts as "collective symbolic capital, to which everyone has, in their own distinctive ways, contributed," in a way that is not obviously tied to their bottom line. Unlike the construction fence mural in Staten Island, the graffiti murals at TerraCycle are a permanent feature of the companies' physical landscape, and as such, a vehicle for Trenton's still evolving graffiti scene. As Rain tells it, this space has allowed writers to practice their own styles and learn new ones from others, be they locals or visitors from New York or Philadelphia. He said TerraCycle understands the benefits of their

107. Interview with author, April 22, 2011

108. Interview with author, March 13, 2011

work.

I think TerraCycle's one of the only companies that really, really capitalizes on having legal walls. I think it really works because they're a young, hip company and they're trying to show that. Like, 'Oh, we're different, we're not the standard corporation.'¹⁰⁹

Rain got his start young, writing in books and occasionally tagging when he was 13. He started seriously painting in 2003, doing productions, organizing events and teaching classes on aerosol writing. He estimates that he works 24 to 30 hours a week for a web design



The courtyard behind Terracycle

company, and thinks of graffiti murals as part of what he does.

There's definitely money involved with certain things that I do. I do commercial work, and it's not always what I want to do, as far as I might be painting somebody's logo, which is fine. But that wouldn't be something that I would normally do. I think that I enjoy using aerosol; I enjoy painting with the guys I paint with.¹¹⁰

He still writes illegally, at what he calls "chill spots," which are lower risk painting areas like dead train lines or abandoned buildings. Up until recently, he also had access to two sides of a TerraCycle warehouse at the end of Roberts Avenue. The bulk of that space faces a wooded area and a culvert, but another side of the building is visible from the railroad tracks that carry Amtrak passengers up and down the East Coast. This location provided a high profile perch for the group until July 2012, when the company that TerraCycle had been renting it from changed its mind and restricted access to the site.

This hasn't deterred the group though; for example, from Sept 21-23, 2012, the group organized "Windows of Soul," a block party featuring artists painting on abandoned buildings in downtown Trenton. This is the niche that the SAGE Collective, which is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit, has carved out for itself.

Most of the community embraces us as far as when we do legal walls in the city. We're in some of the worst areas of the city. Places where most people wouldn't go, we go and paint. A couple years ago, we did a little schoolyard in a real cutty alley, but there was kids that came to that park every

109. Interview with author, March 13, 2011

110. Ibid.

day, you know what I mean? So it's like, you know, they loved it. I've had the old ladies hold the flash light for me, or bring me stuff to drink on a hot day, and you know, that type of thing, the police have come, and once they see you have permission, or you tell them you have permission, it's just like, 'Oh, ok,' and they're like, 'Why don't you do the character leaning against the wall?' or whatever.¹¹¹

The work that Rain and Will Kaso do is perhaps the best example of putting art to work in the service of community. Rain embraces legal painting in part because like Nicer, he has business interests tied up in it (he also does body painting), but also because he does not see it as any less interesting than illegal work.

When you are doing stuff in the street, you learn how to paint fast and clean, you're in and out, you're learning how to whip the can, your mind is just going, and you're thinking of all the possibilities, and you're hearing all of the sounds, and everything. When you're painting a legal spot, you're thinking, 'How dope can I make this? How beautiful can it be?' or just working out the different angles. It just has the aesthetic, you know?¹¹²

Working in a place like Trenton presents challenges that are different from those in New York City. Rain said he tends to steer clear of buildings that are owned by corporations or chains. He feels the city of Trenton supports them, befitting its status as the state capital, but the city is also the home of county, state and federal authorities that are not as accommodating. So the collective's work tends to be focused on neighborhoods outside the



downtown. Even in neighborhoods where murals are welcome, Rain has found himself negotiating with local residents about what is proper and what is not. For example, in response to an elderly woman's request, he once changed an angel and demon drawing in an alley to a mural that was inspired by the phrase "An idle mind is the devils'

One side of the building net to the train tracks that has since closed.

playground."—A devil reaching into a person's head, which contained drugs and guns. She hated that too.

So I tried to get my friend Ross, and we did this beautiful mural. It had like beehives and mad flowers, but the way I did it was hot. But Ross did this character, and she was black, and it was in a black area, but he painted her blue, just because you, it's his shit, you know what I mean? If he wants to paint her blue, he can paint her blue. But the woman said because she was blue, she looked like a demon! Heh heh heh. But you know, but the building owner, he seen us in the paper

111. Interview with author, March 13, 2011

112. Ibid.



A graffiti mural in Trenton organized by the SAGE Collective

a couple of times, and he said, ‘That woman is crazy! That’s not graffiti, that’s art.’¹¹³

Rain tends to steer clear of politically tinged graffiti, but he is very much in tune with Harvey’s notion that murals—being an original, creative, authentic and unique phenomenon—are an explicit symbol of power. Harvey cautions that monopoly rent derived by symbolic capital is forever in danger of being captured by multinationals and powerful segments of the local bourgeoisie, whereas Rain makes the case that even though no one has exclusive control of the U.S. citizenry, the elite need to feel in control. The existence of graffiti is a direct challenge to that because it is an exertion of control over physical space.

Other than our name, we’re not gonna paint, all the [political] stuff that the government would be afraid of, but just the fact that they don’t have the control petrifies them.¹¹⁴

He also scoffs at the notion that blank walls might be preferable to murals, making a point that was seldom brought up: It’s silly to debate the question of mural versus blank walls when our public spaces are already dominated by commercial advertising.

What’s the point of all these billboards along Route 1? Why is that better than seeing the sky? You know what I mean? So the way that I’m looking at it, is that, if there’s places for people to have paid

113. Interview with author, March 13, 2011

114. Ibid.

spaces in our society, then there should be places for people to have free spaces in our society. Why should the corporations that have tons of money be able to be the only ones that put what they want out there? Why can't we express ourselves and what our views are? You know, a lot of what we do is just color and style, but in our reality, we should be able to express that freely.¹¹⁵



A finished graffiti mural on the side of the TerraCycle building

TerraCycle has an obvious connection to graffiti in the sense that it dovetails with the company's self image as a hip, young company. But in inner city Trenton, that rationale is not as common. Rain said that unlike in New York City, Trenton does not have much illicit tagging, so when he approaches a building owner to ask permission for their space, graffiti prevention is not part of his selling points. But that doesn't mean there isn't a benefit to the owner.

Basically I'm taking the burden of maintaining that space away from the owner. A lot of the walls might not be tagged, but some of these walls if they haven't been maintained for 15 years, they have splotches of where they were tagged 10 years ago and someone just put a big mess over it, or just from having shitty paint; the paint's flaking up, or there's something crappy in the wall. We'll paint over it and the way that I look at it, it looks better than what was there.¹¹⁶

And what of those who see the work of artists like Rain? As with Borax Paper in Hunts Point, TerraCycle is in a very desolate part of town, so finding neighbors who were willing to talk about the collectives' work was very difficult. Sylvester Street, which runs perpendicular to the building, features several houses whose back yards border the courtyard, but few residents were around during my visit; one declined to speak, and another asked that I call him at another date, only to rebuff me when I did. I was also rebuffed by the business behind TerraCycle on Hillside.

Brian, the owner of the next closest business, Hawkins Towing, did take a few minutes from his job dispatching tow trucks around the region; his two storage yards full of car carcasses are the defining feature of this end of New York Avenue. He's been here for 15 years; he said he took over from another auto body shop that had been there previously. He had mixed feelings about the goings on next door. On the one hand, he said the neighborhood

¹¹⁵. Interview with author, March 13, 2011

¹¹⁶. Ibid.



Another SAGE Collective mural in Trenton

was rough, so anything that was “constructive” would make it a better place, and that what was going on was neat. At the same time, he hedged when asked if the murals made the neighborhood a better place.

Yeah. I mean, either way I guess it doesn’t make a difference. To me, it doesn’t, you know? But its pretty neat, because it kind of

goes with their you know, it’s a Terra Cycle thing.¹¹⁷

He echoed Rain’s assertion that graffiti is not something that he sees in Trenton as often as in New York City.

I don’t think it should be done on stuff that people don’t want it on, obviously. You see a lot of it. I know there’s lot more of that in New York than there is here, I think. I see a lot of trucks graffitied on, stuff like that. You do see it here, but not as much as you see it in New York.¹¹⁸

Sindy, whose mother has lived on Brunswick Avenue, a block uphill from TerraCycle, since 1995, was much more emphatic in her endorsement of the murals. The house where her mother lives is a little further away from TerraCycle than the houses on Sylvester Street, but I figured the lack of response from the residents there warranted a walk a block further.

Q: Are you familiar with murals that are over there around the corner?

A: Yes, I am.

Q: What do you think of them?

A: Oh, I like them. Every time I go by there, I just like to drive my car really slow so I can admire everything, you know?

Q: Really?

A: It’s really nice. I like it.

Q: Is that on your way? I mean, this is sort of the more main thoroughfare.

A: No, no. But if I’m coming off of work, which, pretty much that’s why I’m here, my mom

117. Interview with author, April 22, 2011

118. Ibid.

babysits my kids. So I'm getting off of work right now, and I come from Route 1. And I'll come from down the back way here, and up the street. That's how I see it all the time.¹¹⁹

Philadelphia Mural Arts

No paper about graffiti would be complete without a chapter on Philadelphia. Like New York City, the “City of Brotherly Love” has a rich history of graffiti, with Philly resident Darryl McCray, AKA CORNBREAD, making headlines in March 1971, four months before Taki 183 did in New York. Perhaps just as important, the city was also the site of the Graffiti Alternatives Workshop (GAW), which was founded in 1972, and “provided alternatives for writers and involved them in art projects around the city.”¹²⁰

GAW has been gone for some time, but today the city is home to a plethora of public murals on a scale that few cities in the United States rival. The Mural Arts



A mural in Philadelphia organized by the Philadelphia Mural Arts Project (Image courtesy of Philadelphia Mural Arts)

Program is a huge reason why. Founded in 1984 by Jane Golden as part of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network, the group works with community groups to create murals throughout the city. It has to date produced upward of 3,000 murals, most of which are the size of a three-story row house.¹²¹

With a history stretching that far back and a collection that large, in a city that is the sixth largest city in the United States and a mere 93 miles from New York, it's a natural place to look for ideas. The city's leaders have somehow found a way to embrace public murals, why can't New York City?

To get a better sense of what the group does, I contacted spokesperson Amy Johnson for a 32-minute phone conversation. One of my first questions was, how do they choose where to commission a mural? Some of her answers were similar to those I'd heard from the artists I'd spoken to in New York. They look for walls that face traffic, so the finished product might be included in tours of the neighborhood, walls that are in good shape

119. Interview with author, April 22, 2011

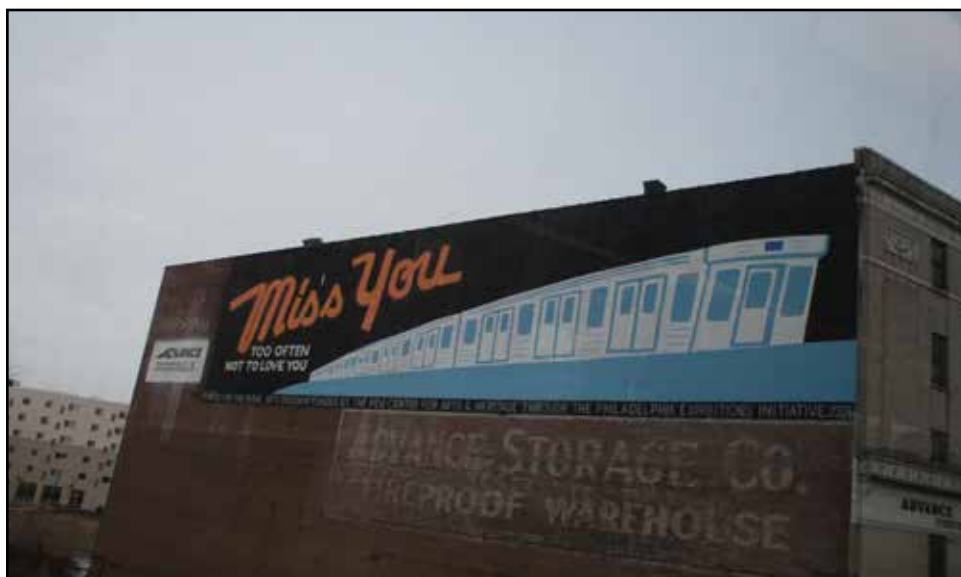
120. Gastman, Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, (Harper Design, NY 2011) 78.

121. Philadelphia Mural Arts Website, <http://muralarts.org/about/history>, accessed October 11, 2012

and made of stucco, concrete or brick—though not historic brick—and walls that are ideally near a green space that might lend itself to a garden.

More than that, is there an anchor in the community to help us communicate information about the project and gain support from the surrounding neighborhood, such as a CDC, or a block captain or a church group? Is there some place that might be able to provide meeting space, and ongoing sort of oversight for the project, so that if there are any problems, in addition to the property owner there, are others that can monitor, and let us know what's going on?¹²²

Because the Mural Arts program has been around for so long and is so well known in Philadelphia, Johnson said the group rarely has to “sell” a mural to a property owner; fully half the murals commissioned are done at the



A mural by the artist ESPO that was done as part of the Philadelphia Love Train project

request of the owners. The average mural measures 30 by 35 feet, and takes six months to complete. During that time, the group follows a 144-step process involving meetings and consultations with a sundry of residents, the property owner and the artist. It's an exhaustive gauntlet, but it's one that has resulted in only one project failing to materialize after it was

started. Perhaps just as important, it insures that caretakers exist (i.e.: block captain, church group) for murals once they're completed; located as they are outdoors, murals are vulnerable to the elements and require occasional maintenance.

This intense style of formalized, grass-roots level negotiation is in marked contrast to the often haphazard, “gentleman’s handshake” agreements that are the hallmark of most of the collaborations that I found in New York City. So too is the variety of murals in the city. Just as there is a gulf between what is acceptable to Stapleton, Staten Island and Hunts Point, so too is there a noticeable difference between How’s and Nosm’s mural in City Center and David Guinn’s *The Heart of Baltimore Avenue* in West Philadelphia. That’s not an accident, as Johnson said they no longer think of themselves as an anti-graffiti program, but rather a pro art program.

¹²². Interview with author, July 21, 2011

Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods, with many different stories and cultures, and so the artwork really does reflect those commonalities and those differences. So when you go to North Philadelphia, for example, you'll see more Latin influenced murals with imagery of Puerto Rico, for instance. In south Philadelphia, you may see more murals of Italian American heritage, but also Mexican and Vietnamese, which are incoming cultures. In West Philadelphia, you may see more murals that highlight the traditions of African Americans.¹²³

This isn't to say that the murals don't serve as a deterrent to graffiti vandalism. In part because of the sense of ownership of the murals that is instilled in the community, and in part because Mural Arts reaches out to graffiti artists whose work might be covered up and offers them a chance to be involved in the final product, they are largely left alone. "It's about a climate of respect and our community engagement process, which creates a sense of investment and likability that contributes to the longevity of our work," Johnson says.¹²⁴

Now, Philadelphia has a lot in common with New York City, but real estate pressure is not one of them. So although the installation of murals throughout the city is laudable, it is not, as is the case with New York, something that is done in the face of intense pressure to extract monopoly rent from the capital. It is, however, very much authentic in the sense that Walter Benjamin advocated something should be. Whether one prefers that an artist work alone to pursue his or her vision of the proper mural, as many of those I spoke to in New York do, or engages in intense collaboration, the way Philly Mural Arts advocates does, there can be no doubt that the work of the muralists is "embedded in the culture of tradition." It is for this reason that New York would be wise to embrace, if not the entire 144-step process used in Philly, the notion of mural arts as something more than just temporary adornments for spaces awaiting rejuvenation. Johnson notes that the group is not exclusively concerned with supervising murals; it also acts as a middleman between property owners who want to commission an artist on their own. They get a request at least once a week.

Mural arts can serve a resource and a clearinghouse for those kinds of requests because we can connect the talent that we know of with folks who have opportunities that for whatever reason, we're not able to take on directly. It's wonderful to be a kind of conduit for employment.¹²⁵

Johnson agrees that putting a mural on a wall is a more tangible sign of an investment in the community than a buffing might be, because the former necessitates community engagement. The engagement that her organization brings forth is much more formalized than what is evidenced in the graffiti murals I've featured, but the result is similar. The biggest difference is Johnson's group has the official support of the city; the artists I have featured earlier do not.

123. Interview with author, July 21, 2011

124. Ibid.

125. Ibid.

Murals have the ability to bring diverse constituents together, people who might not otherwise have had occasion to meet one another around a common and positive purpose. So new connections are made and connections are formed, and as I said, other positive opportunities can come from that, not necessarily directly but in a catalytic way.¹²⁶

The Philadelphia Mural Arts program is also interested in proving that its murals have a real, tangible effect on their surroundings, beyond vague notions of “community.”

In the course of my conversations with Johnson, she recommended two studies to help me understand the demonstrable effects of murals on neighborhoods: The work of Susan Siefert, a professor of social welfare and director of the Urban Institute at the University of Pennsylvania and Mark Stein, a



A mural by ESPO that was done as part of the Philadelphia Love Train project

city planner who runs the Social Impact of Arts Project. Focusing on individual neighborhoods, they combined census records, child welfare outcomes and property sales, and layered that with information they gleaned from cultural organizations in the neighborhood. Their definition of a cultural activity was generous, including science museums and libraries. Their *Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project* was published in 2005 by the University of Pennsylvania and was the basis for a report from The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), which describes itself as a national leader in the financing of neighborhood revitalization.

After reviewing the benchmark data that Siefert and Stein collected, the TRF staff interviewed people involved in community development and cultural activities and examined the arts and culture-related investments within its portfolio and reflected on how those investments relate to its model of investor-driven change. One of the groups’ conclusions would find favor with the artists I interviewed.

In a city like Philadelphia, which has lost half a million residents over a fifty-year period, the recovery of a vacant wall or a vacant lot is akin to fixing the “broken window;” it sends a signal about civic and public norms and neighborhood capacity. It is a relatively low-cost, high impact form of place making that creates something authentically public out of a deteriorated piece of real estate.¹²⁷

126. Interview with author, July 21, 2011

127. Jeremy Womak, *Creativity and Neighborhood Development*, (The Reinvestment Fund, 2007)

“Place-making,” a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces, is not a term that I have utilized in this paper, but “authentic” in the sense that Benjamin describes it, certainly is, and “sending a signal” is in line with symbolic interactionism’s premise that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them.

The other document relevant to this notion of empirically driven evidence of the usefulness of murals in neighborhoods comes from the Econsult Corporation. The group was commissioned by Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the City of Philadelphia to examine commercial corridors in Philadelphia and produce a framework to help funders, the City, and other interested parties better understand the effectiveness of interventions for commercial corridors. Their analysis combined extensive data gathering with econometric analysis to investigate the drivers of commercial success for all 265 of the retail corridors in Philadelphia.

Among the findings of the study were two interventions that demonstrated a “significant relationship to corridor success”:

- Business Improvement Districts, which improve the physical environment for businesses
- Pennsylvania Horticultural Society land stabilizations, which convert trash-filled lots into green spaces.

The study also suggested that three additional interventions offered some indication of a positive correlation to corridor success:

- The City of Philadelphia’s Business Security Improvements program, which reimburses business owners for security measures
- Philadelphia Local Initiatives Support Corporation investments, which provide gap financing for housing and other development initiatives; and
- Mural Arts Program projects, which bring communities together to convert abandoned lots and blank walls into public works of art.¹²⁸

As result, one of the five policy actions recommended at the conclusion of the report is an endorsement of the mural programs, using language that distinguishes murals quite plainly from empty walls.

Because appearance matters, there should be more efforts like *PHS land stabilizations* and the *Mural Arts Program*, because they are effective and cost efficient ways of replacing eyesores with symbols of care.¹²⁹

I asked Johnson to comment on this notion of a mural being a “symbol of care,” and pressed her to explain how it might differ from a freshly cleaned wall. She cited one that was completed in her own neighborhood, on a

128. *Commercial Corridors: A Strategic Investment Framework for Philadelphia*, (EConsult, March 2009)

129. *Ibid.*

former carriage house turned auto shop that she called a “big gray cube of a building.” Like all of the Mural Arts’ commissions, this mural went through extensive revisions based on community input, which as I noted earlier is not something I feel is necessary in all the case studies I’ve detailed. But her story does speak to the power that public art can have on a community, especially when it’s reflective of the neighborhood it is located in.

The block where the mural was painted had some mixed use housing. There was a section 8 house, which is public housing, mixed right into the fabric of the block, which is not unusual in Fairmount. The neighbors had had some trouble with former tenants; there had been some gun violence and other problems. So one of the tenants had had to be evicted. It made the neighbors slow to warm to the current tenant, because they didn’t really know what to expect, and didn’t want to take a chance on getting to know this family.

Well, the current tenant made these wonderful shish kabobs that she brought to the mural dedication as part of the refreshments, and everybody loved the shish kabobs. And so that changed their attitude about her and her family, and the neighbors then were like ‘Oh, this is somebody who’s making a contribution and who we want to really get to know and want to really welcome. Now, Fairmount is a mixed neighborhood demographically and financially in every kind of way, but it’s considered fairly affluent. So you don’t necessarily expect a story like that to come out of a project like that in Fairmount. And so what that said to me was, really anywhere in any situation, murals can positive and unexpected affects.¹³⁰



The Heart of Baltimore Avenue. Image courtesy of davidguinn.com

130. Interview with author, July 21, 2011

NYC Mural Makers

Philadelphia is not alone in its support for public art. In New York City, officially sanctioned art installations are peppered across the city’s 468 square miles. The New York City Department of Transportation is just one of the agencies that is responsible for bringing art to the public, but it is an important one because of its size. The agency is responsible for 6,300 miles of streets and highways, over 12,000 miles of sidewalks, 781 bridge structures and six tunnels. It also maintains over 1.3 million street signs and traffic signals at more than 12,000 signalized intersections, over 300,000 streetlights, and 69 million linear feet of markings.¹³¹

Since October 2008, art has been part of that equation, via its Urban Art Program. In conjunction with community organizations, the agency turns public plazas, fences, barriers, footbridges, and sidewalks into canvases for temporary art. To date, it has commissioned 85 “site responsive” projects. Its mission is stated as such:

Artists help to transform the landscape from ordinary to extraordinary with temporary, unexpected interventions — colorful murals, dynamic light projections, thought-provoking sculptures.

Emily Colasacco, the program’s manager, said her department was created at the behest of Jeannette Sadik-Khan, who has been the department’s commissioner since April 2007. Sadik-Khan tasked Wendy Foyer with creating the program from scratch, and Foyer brought Colasacco on board. The program is split into three different areas: “pARTners,” “Barrier Beautification” and “Arterventions.” Of the three areas, the first bears the closest relation to the collaborations described in the case studies in this paper, with the second playing an important role too. That’s because both programs often work through the medium of paint on outdoor surfaces that might otherwise be the target of vandalism.

When it comes to the barrier beautification, the agency collaborates with the volunteer group New York Cares, artists and designers to produce murals on the concrete barriers that separate bicycle



**“Fictional Landscape,” a 500 foot-long painting alongside the Manhattan Bridge Ramp in Brooklyn by Abby Goldstein.
Photo Courtesy of the D.O.T.**

131. New York City Department of Transportation website, “About DOT” <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/about/about.shtml>, accessed October 21, 2012

lanes from cars, trucks and other vehicles on the road. Materials for the murals are provided by the D.O.T. via a \$2,500 stipend, and the department chooses the location. Artists take responsibility for the translation of their design on to the barriers, and the murals are required to remain for 11 months.

The pARTners program is similar in that it pairs artists and community organizations together at sites owned by the department. The D.O.T. announces its list of “priority sites” twice a year, and artists and organizations are solicited for their ideas. Proposals for alternate sites are encouraged, and concepts for “site-responsive art” are expected to be completed within six months. Once a project is completed, it is exhibited for 11 months, with responsibility for maintenance and site remediation falling on the creators. The D.O.T. reimburses not-for profit organizations up to \$5,000 for costs incurred for the project.

pARTner projects really run the gamut, from a plot of maize grown between concrete blocks in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, to an abstract metal sculpture at East Fordham Road and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. But the program is also responsible for a number of murals, including several on a corrugated metal fence under the Manhattan Bridge in DUMBO.

Colasacco says installations make for good vandalism deterrents.



“Silver,” a 10-foot tall sculpture created by the found-object Bronx-based artist Christian Marche as part of the D.O.T.’s pARTner project.

I find that when we install a temporary art project, whether it’s a sculpture or a mural, graffiti tends not to happen on the sites. There’s always an issue of tagging in certain areas, but I find if it’s a really good, quality work, they tend to stay away from the project. So with a lot of our footbridges around the city, the ones that we’ve painted tend to remain in better shape than the ones we don’t put murals on. So we are trying to do more murals on our footbridges.¹³²

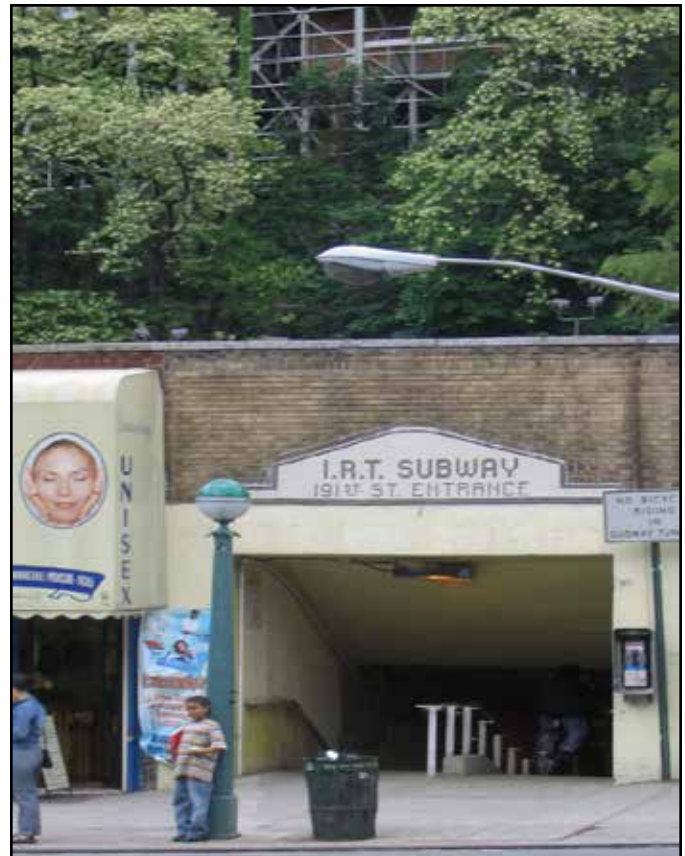
Since deterring graffiti vandalism is the kind of thing that graffiti removal crews would be interested in, I asked Colasacco if they’d ever worked with the ones in Graffiti Free New York, who I’ll describe in the next

¹³². Interview with author on October 25, 2011

chapter. Her answer was yes—once, at the entrance to the 1 train subway station at 191st Street and Broadway, in Washington Heights.

This particular entrance leads to a three block long tunnel to the mezzanine of the station, which at track level is 180 feet deep, the deepest in the entire subway system. Colasacco said the D.O.T. commissioned a mural at the tunnel entrance as a pilot project in 2008, in collaboration with Brooklyn-based Groundswell Community Mural Project.

Originally, they were just going to go up to the site and repaint the tunnel that leads to the 1 train. It's super long tunnel, and it's a huge graffiti issue, because it's dark and there isn't much patrolling over there. Instead of just painting it solid color, we decided to commission an artist and work with a group of students to paint an actual mural over there, and we found that the mural really did stop the tagging.¹³³



The entrance to the 191st Street subway station, circa 2005. Photo courtesy of WikiCommons

Unfortunately, because the tunnel is three whole blocks long, the mural, “New York is a Roller Coaster” by artist Belle Benfield, only extends a short distance into the tunnel from the entrance. The rest of the tunnel had to settle for less, and it has made a difference.

We focused on a really nice, detailed mural on the entrance, but within the full tunnel, we couldn't use the same style mural. We could only do a very basic leaf design, so the tagging still popped up in the tunnel, but it didn't pop up on the tunnel entrance, so it was a very interesting study on, if you can produce a better mural, a more detailed mural, it really will stop vandalism.¹³⁴

A visit to the station bore out this assertion. Three years after its installation, the entrance showed some minor signs of age—a scrape here, a scuff there, with some fading. The abstract leaf signs inside the tunnel were a disaster in comparison. When I visited the station, it seemed as if every other inch of the walls was either encrusted with dirt, tagged with amateurish drawings and tags, or both. It was very clear that even if real effort had been put into this part of the project, little had been devoted to the maintaining of it. In this instance, it might actually be preferable to whitewash the walls more frequently, light the tunnel differently, or coat the walls with a different

133. Interview with author on October 25, 2011

134. Ibid.

surface. I shutter to think of how uninventing a space it must be at night.

Since this project seems to have been most successful in deterring vandalism in the area where most attention was paid, I asked Colasacco why Groundswell, the D.O.T. and the vandalism squad haven't teamed up since.



The entrance to the 191st Street subway station, circa July 2008.

The programs just have such different missions. They're just going in and wiping away graffiti and painting it the original color, whereas Groundswell and other programs really try to create a really interesting, exciting experience for pedestrians and bicyclists. So it's taking it to the next step. It's not just painting over; its developing a site responsive piece.¹³⁵

Jessica Poplawski, Groundswell's program manager confirmed this for me, via e-mail correspondence.

Q: When the city sends one of its graffiti removal trucks to a private building to clean it of tags and such, does it ever refer the building owner to your group to do a mural in place of the graffiti there?

A: No, we do not work directly with the NYPD or the vandal squad. When potential community partners approach us about starting new projects, they do often site deterring graffiti as one of the reasons to pursue a large-scale outdoor mural.¹³⁶

In a follow up question, Poplawski said she could not say exactly why Groundswell does not work with the NYPD, beyond speculating that the group is "process-oriented toward creating community-driven and community-designed imagery, not solely focusing on beautification."

Groundswell has been, its words, "bringing together artists, youth, and community organizations to use art as a tool for social change" The group's website explains further:

In 1996, a group of New York City artists, educators, and activists founded Groundswell based on the belief that there is something unique and powerful about the collaborative art making process. This process combines the sanctity of personal expression with the strength of community activism.

Groundswell's programs are based on principles of individual, group, and community development.

135. Interview with author on October 25, 2011

136. E-mail correspondence, October 12, 2011



The tunnel leading from Broadway and 191st street to the station

Collaborating with communities, we strive to physically and mentally build up the individual, group, and community during the making of the mural or other artwork.¹³⁷

This is very similar to the goals of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, and indeed, many of the murals that Groundswell spearheads are as ambitious in scope as those in Philadelphia. The group's emphasis on working with

children of low-income and working class families (Up to 800 young people annually, ages 14 to 21) brings to mind the work that Charlie Balducci is doing with NYC Cypher, but on much larger scale. And although they see themselves as more than simple beautification, Poplawski affirmed that one of the selling points for their murals was a deterrent for vandalism, and that they often refer artists to building owners looking to organize a mural of their own. As the preceding case studies illustrate, even graffiti murals organized between owners and artists require collaboration and attention to neighborhood sensitivities. In fact, when asked to describe how they convince both private and public building owners to let them use their wall for a mural, Poplawski's answer is very similar to the artists in my case studies, but with more formality.

We often go out on foot. We use a press kit for introductions highlighting our history and the suite and scope of the work. The owner is NOT asked to contribute any funds, and we honor them on the mural and in our press announcements. If the wall owner agrees, they sign a contract specifying that the work will remain on the wall for at least 5 years.¹³⁸

Could a group like Groundswell work as a clearinghouse of sorts of artists (graffiti-inspired and otherwise) who building owners could turn to in lieu of the blank slate offered by the NYPD's graffiti removal teams? It might be difficult to convince some graffiti artists to go along, as many already have enough work to keep them busy, and many might not conclude from visiting a space that it's high profile enough to warrant their time. Groundswell also currently advertises that all their artists hold either bachelors and/or masters degrees in fine arts and have experience working with youth; these requirements would need to be waved if the field were to be truly

137. Groundswell Website, <http://www.groundswellmural.org/our-story>, Accessed November 15, 2012

138. E-mail correspondence, October 12, 2011

open.

That said, the groups involvement in such a project would go a long way toward changing attitudes about public art, even art that is inspired by graffiti. The groups non- explicit goal of promoting the “sanctity of personal expression” lend it an air of authority when it comes to authenticity, and its embrace of the low income residents jibe



“Justice Mandela,” a Groundswell Mural by Chris Soria on the side of the Brooklyn Detention Complex in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn

extremely well with Harvey’s exhortation to share symbolic capitol in an equitable fashion. The way Nicer speaks of introducing art in rough and tumble areas of the South Bronx, his TATS Cru would certainly make for a fine partner to the group. As my last chapters will illustrate, there are attitudes about graffiti murals that are very much in need of change.

Graffiti Free New York

As noted in Appendix 1, New York City’s 336-word long anti-graffiti statute covers a wide spectrum of activities, from the act of creating graffiti to displaying spray paint and markers in store windows. While the New York City Police Department is responsible for enforcing the laws, the removal of graffiti falls to several different agencies. “Graffiti Free NYC,” which is a partnership between the Mayor’s Community Affairs Unit, the Economic Development Corporation, and the Department of Sanitation, seeks to “allow New Yorkers to take graffiti removal into their own hands by either calling in sites for cleanup or driving their own cleanup efforts.”¹³⁹

Befitting its multi-agency status, information about Graffiti Free NYC can be found on the websites for the NYPD, the Community Affairs Unit, and most prominently, on the Economic Development Corporation (EDC). It is on the EDC’s website that a 1,600 word-long 2009 press release trumpeted the removal of “more than 170 million square feet” of graffiti, as well the recent addition of ten new graffiti power wash trucks purchased with

139. Graffiti Free Website, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/cau/html/graffiti/graffiti.shtml> Accessed November 16, 2012

federal funds, for a total of 27 trucks.¹⁴⁰

How serious is the city about the conditions on the street? The same release also noted that since 2007, a “Street Conditions Observation Unit” or SCOUT program, has traveled every block in New York City every month, reporting conditions that negatively impact quality of life, thus increasing by 60 percent the amount of graffiti identification. As noted in the last chapter, that’s 6,300 miles of roads. The numbers cited are impressive: graffiti removed from 3,891 sites, totaling an estimated 2.5 million square feet. Another 727,800 square feet removed by the Parks Department. Almost 2,759,500 square feet of graffiti buffed from streets, bridges and highways by the Department of Transportation, bringing the running total to 6 million square feet of graffiti removed by City agencies to date in 2009.

But murals? No mention. Nor is there any mention of murals on the Community Affairs website, which is where one is directed to file a complaint of graffiti with the city for cleanup consideration. The NYPD’s webpage contains a downloadable pamphlet “Combating Graffiti: Reclaiming the Public Spaces of New York,” which breaks down graffiti into categories (Hate, Gang, Satanic, Street and Generic), and has a list of 14 agencies listed under the section “Resources.” Even the aforementioned Department of Transportation is referred to only for “cleaning of street signs.” Notwithstanding the work that TJ Singleton is doing in the Bronx that I described in chapter 8, there is little obvious coordination between the creators of legal graffiti and the erasers of illegal graffiti.

But why? According to Ray Carrero, quality of life director for the Mayor’s Community Affairs Unit, the problem is that many building owners care as little for art that’s authorized as they do for art that is illicit.

Q: Have you ever suggested to a building owner as one way to combat the tagging that they commission a mural, whether it’s by a graffiti artist or another artist?

A: Well, this conversation has gone back and forth throughout the years, with various owners. Has the issue of commissioning a mural at any specific location come up? Sure it has. But the final decision on that would have been made by the building owner. Obviously the city can’t force a building owner to do a mural.

Q: But is it something where, when people call you and say ‘Hey, I have this problem,’ is it something that you say ‘Well, this is another tactic, as opposed to just painting over it’?

A: Well, in all honestly, there are several different ways to address this problem, and murals, or having a mural commissioned, is not the only one. So, their options are given depending on the owner, and how he sees it. A lot of times they would see a mural and they would consider that graffiti as well.

Q: So that’s definitely not considered an option, huh?

140. *Mayor Bloomberg and City Council Announce New Steps to Make Graffiti Removal Faster and Easier in NYC*, July 9, 2009. <http://www.nycedc.com/press-release/mayor-bloomberg-and-city-council-announce-new-steps-make-graffiti-removal-faster-and>

A: No.¹⁴¹

Carrero confirmed a couple of important points regarding graffiti removal and murals. In 2009, when city law required that property owners “opt in” to the cleanup process, thus putting the burden of proof on the city, the cities’ cleanup crews buffed a total of 8,949 buildings. In 2010, the law was changed to an “opt out” system, making it property owners’ responsibility to confirm whether or not they wanted graffiti to remain. That year, the number of buildings visited by Graffiti Free NYC jumped to 18,481. While the amount of resources dedicated to buffing more than doubled, Carrero confirmed that no city agency took on the task of promoting murals. He was sympathetic to owners who prefer to keep their walls blank.

Some owners are really old school, and they don’t see the difference between a mural and graffiti. And lot of times the murals are pretty impressive. Some people would consider them artists. These people can put things up that you can stop, admire and enjoy. Sometimes, you know, in all honesty, its just crap.¹⁴²



A graffiti mural on the Lower East Side that was mistakenly buffed in 2010. Photo courtesy of DNAinfo.com

It is fair to ask whether the director of quality of life is in the position to pass judgment on the artistic merits of murals, but I don’t actually think Carrero is a philistine who can’t be bothered to learn about art. Rather, he sees his role as an advocate for a larger process that’s more inclusive, where collaboration is paramount. And while he endorses the idea that

a graffiti mural created by a locally known artist can deter vandalism, he is extremely wary of the deleterious effects the wrong mural might provoke.

The problem that we encounter when we do something like this or when something like this is done, is content. What are you putting up there? Will it be offensive to the surrounding community? Is it going to be a bunch of guys leaning on a light post smoking a joint, or is it going to be Martin Luther King or Malcolm X or some musical artist, like Jennifer Lopez, coming up from The Bronx or something to that effect. It totally depends on content.

141. Interview with author, March 5, 2011

142. Ibid.

We've had some beautiful murals done in the past. One mural that was commissioned was a picture of a pit bull that was owned by a local drug dealer. The local drug dealer loved the dog, so he had the mural done. And it was well done, but was it appropriate? The people in the community didn't think so.¹⁴³

To some extent, Carrero's suspicions are understandable. When I asked if the cleaning crews had ever buffed a mural that was not supposed to be erased, I was thinking of a mural on the Lower East Side that an owner had buffed after misreading the notice sent to him by the city, only to see it tagged again anyway.¹⁴⁴ His response was a reminder that for city officials,



**The same wall was tagged less than 24 hours later.
Photo courtesy of DNAinfo.com**

graffiti is not considered just a nuisance. Images have the power to inspire, but they can also intimidate.

Back in '95 and '96, when we first started the program, one of the first things that we took on that I lead was actively going and looking for these gang murals and so on, getting the owners to agree to have them removed, and then coordinating with the local precinct to make sure that the guys doing the removal weren't harassed in the process or worse. So, do we have a history where we do that? Sure. Does it happen now? Sure.¹⁴⁵

Carrero said gang-related murals aren't as much of an issue as they used to be, and insisted that the city only buffs them if a building owner asks them to. He is familiar with the work that T.K. Singleton is doing, and agrees that the graffiti murals she got the TATS Cru to paint are cheaper than constant buffing. And yet, as his previous quote illustrates, the bad old days are still very much on his mind. At best, he exhibits a neutral attitude when it comes to beautification efforts. Sometimes a building with a graffiti mural on it will be sold, and when the new owner asks the city to buff it, Carrero said the artist will threaten to sue, on the misguided notion that their graffiti mural enjoys some sort of legal protection. While it may technically be true that the graffiti murals enjoy no explicit right to exist, it's a depressing example of how authorities in New York City bend so easily to the whims of those wielding capital. From the perspective of officials like Carrero, graffiti murals are more of an

143. Interview with author, March 5, 2011

144. *East Village Mural, Painted Over in Anti-Vandalism Campaign, Replaced by Graffiti*, DNAinfo.com, April 20, 2010.

145. Interview with author, March 5, 2011

incidental benefit than a resource worthy of cultivation.

He neatly encapsulated that indifference when I asked if the city promoted murals as a form of tourism. After all, tourism is such a vital aspect of the city's economy that NYC & Company trumpets not only the number of visitors to the city (50.9 million in 2011, breaking the 50 million mark for the first time), but also the economic impact of each visitor:

Total visitor spending from New York City tourism in 2010: \$31.5 billion

Total wages generated by New York City tourism in 2010: \$17.3 billion

Total NYC jobs supported by visitor spending in 2010: 310,156

Total taxes generated by visitor spending in 2010: \$8.1 billion

Each New York City household benefited by an average of \$1,350 in tax savings as a result of travel and tourism¹⁴⁶

Surely, given the success that the Philadelphia has had in making murals such an important part of its identity, and the fact that mainstream art stores such as Lee's Art Shop in Midtown Manhattan advertise "Manga and Graffiti Arts" supplies in its fliers, New York City would give a shout out to the form.

No, we don't. That would lead to other problems. Once we start and we make that as a tourist attraction, then we open ourselves up to opinions. Opinions as to, 'I'm an artist, I did this. It wasn't commissioned by the city, but why aren't you including it? It's just as good as Phillipe Renour's wall on 22nd street' or something like that. You can't set the precedent.¹⁴⁷

Tourism promotion is not the gist of this paper, of course, but I bring it up as a way to illustrate just how powerful the hold graffiti has on officials in New York City. Forget notions of uniqueness or authenticity; even a framework that is tied to money is not embraced. And there is money to be made from graffiti-related tourism, as evidenced by tours offered by Graff Tours¹⁴⁸ and Levy's tours, just to name two examples.¹⁴⁹ Carrero's excuse for avoiding graffiti mural promotion—that it would be improper to choose which ones to promote—is a cop out that obviously stems from the old suspicions that I delved into earlier. The truth is it wouldn't be difficult to identify someone with the right background to collaborate with a group like Groundswell to identify locations and even encourage their creation. If the city sees buffing as one of its duties, then it should embrace the opposite side of the coin—art creation—too.

146. NYC & Company Website, <http://www.nycandcompany.org/research/nyc-statistics-page>, Accessed November 20, 2012

147. Interview with author, March 5, 2011

148. Graff Tours, <http://grafftours.com/> Accessed December 10, 2012

149. Levy's tours, <http://levysuniqueny.com/tours/from-graffiti-to-galleries-brooklyn-represent/> Accessed November 20, 2012

The Clean Slate Fan

Up until now, I have focused exclusively on the owners of buildings who have chosen to turn their buildings over to artists for use as a canvas. The reason for this is simple—although they are in the minority, they provide a valuable example for others to follow in their path. I hope that in my interviews, I have given voice to their hopes, concerns, challenges and rationales for their actions.

But what about those owners who, when faced the prospect of graffiti on their buildings, choose not to cover it with a mural, but with a fresh coat of regular paint, courtesy of the New York City’s “Graffiti Free NYC?” Might their rationale likewise provide some insight into the situation? I figured it would be worth tracking someone down. At Ray Carrero’s direction, I was able to access a vast online public database of that the city maintains



The exterior walls of 363 Bond Street

of every building it has ever visited and buffed. I chose to focus on Red Hook and Gowanus in Brooklyn, since both neighborhoods are industrial, easily accessible, and prone to graffiti, as they are mostly deserted at night. When sorting through the records, I took into account the type of building that had been visited, and only zeroed in on buildings with large, flat sides, preferably along well-traveled

roads. The idea was to only interview someone whose building would be suitable for a mural in the first place.

After a couple of false starts, I found my connection at 363 Bond Street, which had been reported for graffiti on July 7, 2010, and according to records, it had been visited July 23, 2010, when it was buffed. Asher Lang, the operations manager for Friedknit Creations, welcomed me to his office there, which sits less than half a block away from the Gowanus Canal. He estimated that the company, which imports children’s clothing, had been there for 22 years. The visit on July 23 was actually Graffiti Free’s second visit, to buff some graffiti that had resurfaced after a more thorough buffing that the city completed of his building and the one next door, in February 2010. Before that, he’d been sending an employee out to buff graffiti on the building, using either a bucket or a

spray can of a matching shade of gray. He was pretty sanguine about the process.

Graffiti comes and goes. It's basically kids in the neighborhood, I guess. If you notice the neighborhood in general, it seems to be a very graffiti prone area. Maybe it's because it's on a dead end street. It's also an area where there's not much residential, especially this part of the area near the canal. So kids have been writing, and we've been cleaning. We like a clean building and we try to keep it that way.¹⁵⁰

The cost is actually pretty minimal; Lang estimated it costs no more than \$30 to \$60 for a couple gallons of paint. Taggers always seem to paint in areas that have not already been buffed, he noted, which would seem

to contradict what I speculated in chapter 3 when I talked about Halsey and Young. Of course, even the casual observer can see that 363 Bond has been coated more time with paint than can imagined; the result of the never-ending tug of war between taggers and buffers. From a tagger's point of view, no single surface is more desirable, nor is there any spot that is higher visibility. And indeed, the building



Mismatched buffed walls of 363 Bond Street

has served as a veritable jungle gym for the city's clandestine writers.

They moved to the gates, they've done it on the walls of the side of the building, and then one time they did it off the roof of the building. We couldn't figure out how they did it. But when you walk outside the building, and you look all the way on top there, they get to the places where you don't even think it's possible to get to.¹⁵¹

The city's graffiti removal trucks may have made their presence known, but when I visited the site, it was a far cry from clean. Graffiti was not especially prevalent, but blocks of oh-so-close-to-matching paint that were evidence of a piece meal buffing were. A crude rendering of Bart Simpson's head graced one of the security gates. Lang said he'd accepted the city's offer to buff his building because it meant he wouldn't have to do it himself, and while he's never been approached by anyone looking to use either side of his building for a mural, he said that if they did, he'd probably turn them down, because he doesn't want to attract attention to the building.

150. Interview with author, July 28, 2011

151. Ibid.



The security gate at 363 Bond Street, on 1st Street

would say graffiti on a building causes other graffiti, even if it's a nice mural. That's what I would think.¹⁵²

Lang's perspective on graffiti, and on graffiti murals in general, is one less of hostility than of paternalistic dismissal. When asked why a blank wall might be better than a wall with a mural, he noted that one does not graffiti one's own house. The inclination to make a mark on a building is indicative of the "mindset of a child," as he put it, and when I asked him if he could reconcile the fact that he's said that it was "interesting" that graffiti artists had tagged his roof, he assured me that he wasn't a fan.

No, it wasn't that it was interesting; it was just they were showing their artistic work, because that's their outlet. But they should take that and put it to better use, obviously, either making drawings or...they do try...I mean, some of it is just a boy and a girl, and they're just fooling around with it, and "I love you"...others it's basically stuff that's maybe they're potential artists out there trying to... this is the beginning step of their future.¹⁵³



Grffiti mural alongside the Gowanus Canal (since removed)

152. Interview with author, July 28, 2011

153. Ibid..

Q: Would you be open to that if someone like a graffiti artist approached you?

A: Probably not, only because we're not looking for an attraction. It can only cause other graffiti, you understand. I wouldn't want that.

Q: So you think a mural would attract more graffiti?

A: Yes, I think so. That would be my impression. Put graffiti and...it's not graffiti, it's a mural, and people will look to...So I

Earlier in our conversation,

he said:

We've never prosecuted anybody, and I don't think I ever would, because these kids, I don't think they're doing it to really destroy the building, they're doing it because its an activity for them, and that's part of why they do it.¹⁵⁴

Lang's attitude toward graffiti is somewhat reminiscent of Tom, the gentleman from Clove Place in Staten Island who had no use for even paintings of flowers. On



A graffiti mural on President Street in Gowanus

the one hand, he was more forgiving of its creators, as his willingness to consider them “potential artists” indicates. At the same time, his assertion that graffiti murals are a magnet for more graffiti is simply not true. Even if it is true that, in the spirit of Herbert Blumer’s “symbolic interactionism,” one tagger is attracted to the tag of another, and their collective presence sends a signal that the space is ripe for graffiti, the preceding case studies prove the same cannot be said for graffiti murals.

In fact, Asher need not have traveled far to see how graffiti murals fare. Gowanus has two major murals, alongside the Gowanus canal near Ninth Street (it has since been taken down), and in a parking lot on President Street between Third and Fourth Avenue. The latter is behind a chain link fence, but unprotected murals that face the street can also be found in nearby Red Hook. Many have been there for years, with nary a disturbance to them, or significantly more tags on surroundings than anywhere else.

But as I said in chapter 2, there is a notion described by David Harvey as the “supreme rationality of the market versus the silly irrationality of anything else.” For Lang and his company, the usefulness of his building ends at its utility for generating profit for his company. Even though his space straddles the border of a residential and industrial section of Brooklyn, he feels no need to visually engage the outside community. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, of course; as a viable business, Friedknit Creations employs New York City residents,

¹⁵⁴. Interview with author, July 28, 2011

pays taxes that are the lifeblood of the city's budget and fills a demand for children's clothing. But it could also be so much more, if only owners like Lang and officials like Carrero could be shown the value of the symbolic capital such murals impart.

In the end, Lang's specific take on this subject may be a moot one, as 363 Bond Street and its neighbor at 365 Bond Street are at the heart of a massive planned residential development that has been in the works since 2007, when the developer Toll Brothers unveiled plans to build 447 luxury apartments on the site. The company bailed on the plans when the canal was declared a Federal Superfund Site in 2010, but plans were recently revived by The Lightstone Group for an even larger development.¹⁵⁵ But even if 363 Bond Street is destined to disappear in its current form, Lang's perspective is a valuable one to take into consideration for future graffiti murals.



A shark graffiti mural on Columbia Street in Red Hook (since removed)

155. "Grand Plan for a Toxic Site Is Scorned and Celebrated," New York Times October 8, 2012

5 Pointz, Queens

Fifteen minutes. That's the amount of time it takes to get from Carnegie Hall, in glitzy Midtown Manhattan, to 5 Pointz, in gritty Long Island City. On a weekday afternoon, the 500,000 square foot former warehouse colloquially known as the "Institute of Higher Burnin" can be visited from Carnegie Hall during lunch hour, via the E train, which drops one off all of two blocks away, at the 23 St/ Ely Ave stop. The M train, which passes through Rockefeller Center, likewise stops at 23 St/Ely Ave. Or for those who are closer to Grand Central Terminal or Times Square, there is the elevated 7 train, which slowly creaks around the buildings' southeast corner on a serpentine track and stops at Court Square, also two blocks away.



5 Pointz, as seen from under the elevated 7 train

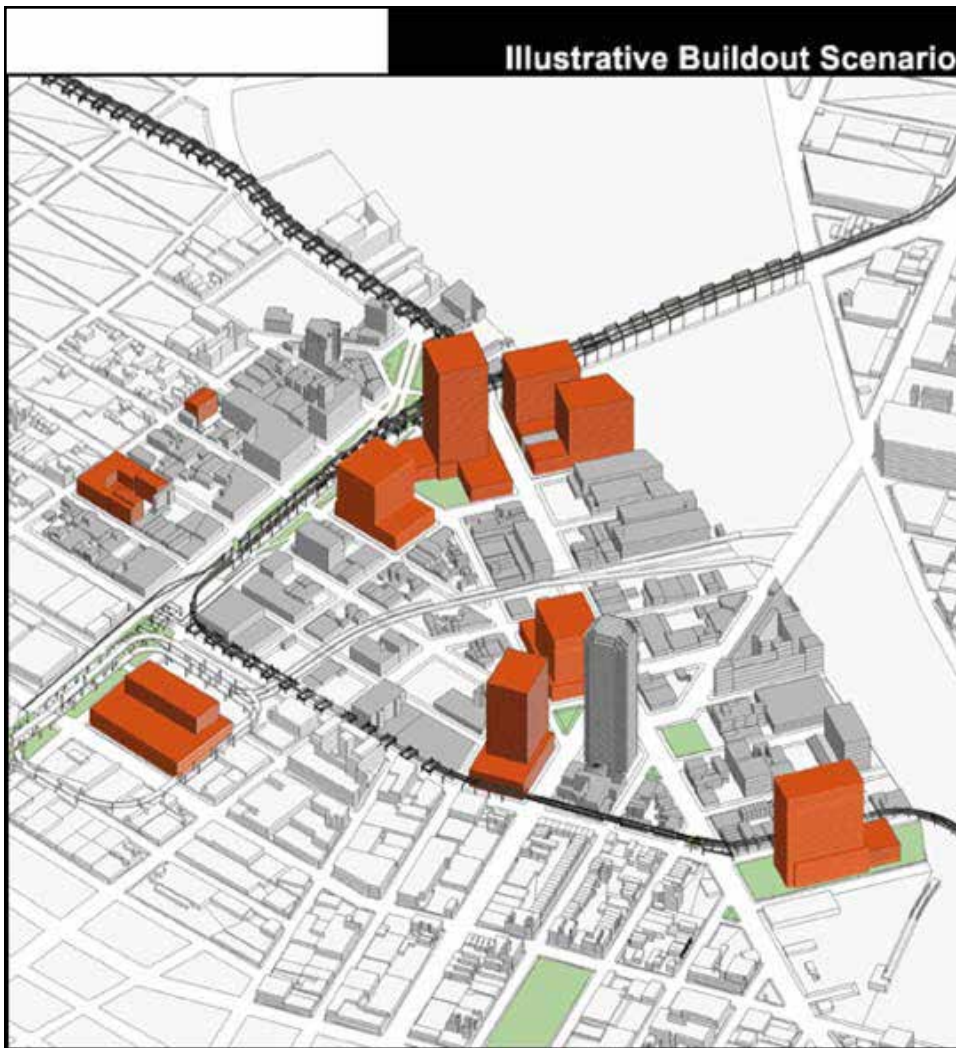
Fifteen minutes by subway.

In the scheme of New York City real estate, and the dreams, visions and fantastical amounts of capital cycling through regions in such close proximity, 5 Pointz never stood a chance. In July 2001, the city government signaled as much, when it included the building in a 37 block rezoning, adding it to the three block area that was rezoned in 1986 for the high density development that facilitated the construction of the 1.25 million square-foot Citibank tower. At the time, the plan was such:

In the Long Island City core, the rezoning replaces existing low density light manufacturing zones with higher density, mixed commercial and residential zones to allow as-of-right developments, including office buildings with large, efficient floor plates.¹⁵⁶

City planners at the time were not thinking strictly in vague terms that would be sorted out by the forces of the market; as the second page of the aforementioned document contained a graphic that helpfully identifies sites ripe for development. In the bottom right corner is a figurative bulls eye on 5 Pointz.

156. "Long Island City Rezoning: Executive Summary," <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/lic/lic1.shtml> Accessed Oct. 25, 2012



**Five Pointz can be seen in the lower right corner.
From “Long Island City Rezoning: Executive Summary”**

And so, some 12 years later, 5 Pointz, which began its current incarnation as a graffiti magnet as the “Phun Factory” and for a spell housed a vibrant artist colony called Crane Street Studios, has a date with the wrecking ball, destined to join countless art meccas cleared out in the name of progress.¹⁵⁷

But I digress. Although the fate of 5 Pointz has seemingly been sealed, the space is still worth a critical look, both in terms of its contributions as a node of a global graffiti community that still practices a great deal of its craft in the shadows, and its relation to the city’s larger fabric. Before going

into greater detail about the building, some theoretical framing is useful.

For starters, the French philosopher Michel Foucault addresses something that is often left unsaid when assessing the merits of public spaces: It is not important that a building or space is constructed in a particular fashion; what matters most is how space is experienced by people. He writes:

Our life is still dominated by a certain number of oppositions that cannot be tampered with, that institutions and practices have not ventured to change—oppositions that we take for granted, for example, between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure activities and the space of work. All of these are still controlled by an unspoken sacralization.¹⁵⁸

Oppositions that separate 5 Pointz from the surrounding neighborhood are numerous, and helpful to

157. “5 Pointz to face wrecking ball by Sept. 2013,” *Sunnyside Post*, June 25, 2012

158. Michael Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology (Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984), Vol. 2*, (The New Press, 1999) 177.



The Citicorp tower looms over a diminutive 5 Pointz

mention, because they locate the building within its context. There is the obvious, in the painted figures, glyphs and texts that cover well over half the surface of the complex. This opposition is in fact its defining feature within all of New York City—there are spaces dedicated to graffiti scattered all around the five boroughs, but none rise five stories from the ground and wrap around 3/4ths of a city block. But there are other less obvious oppositions. There is purpose: This building was constructed for light manufacturing; as noted above the area has been rezoned to exclude this kind of space. More preferable are structures like the 50 story Citigroup Building. There is the chaos of the space, when compared to PS 1, the satellite of MoMa that is stationed across Jackson Avenue. Whereas P.S. 1 sits seemingly in calm repose, behind clean concrete and a simple white façade, 5 Pointz is a garish mish mash of the low brow, high concept, simplistic and astonishingly complex. It also functions as a gallery turned inside out—whereas most spaces exhibit art inside, 5 Pointz’ exterior *is* the gallery. Additionally, the building is—thanks to its mass, color, outlet and location—a bone fide landmark that draws visitors from around the globe to see it. Although the art at PS 1 is no doubt impressive, and the architecture of the Citigroup Building is visually arresting (mostly because it stands so freakishly out of proportion with everything else), neither can compare to



P.S. 1, ensconced behind clean concrete walls across the street from Five Pointz.

the uniqueness of 5 Pointz, with an exterior that changes almost as often as the seasons. It is akin to a chameleon, a living creature that alters its skin as it sees fit.

Unfortunately, one final opposition also exists, which is to say official recognition. PS 1 has existed since 1971, and has been affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art since 2000. Citigroup is a multi-national financial services company with 260,000 employees

that was founded in 1812. The former institution is lauded as the type of culture inherently desirable to the city, whereas street art and graffiti get little to no official support from the city. The latter? As noted before, in form if not function, its space represents the high water mark for the city, which is to say maximum capital exerted from the space.

This segues nicely into Rem Koolhaas' discussion of the model of "Manhattanism." Koolhaas is known as an architect responsible for unorthodox buildings like the CCTV Headquarters in Beijing, but he has also meditated intensely on the zeitgeist of New York City development. In a chapter where he discusses how the Waldorf-Astoria hotel's predecessor was demolished to make way for the Empire State Building, he notes:

The model for Manhattan's urbanism is now a form of architectural cannibalism: By swallowing its predecessors, the final building accumulates all the strengths and spirits of the previous occupants of the sight, and in its own way, preserves their memory.¹⁵⁹

In the case of 5 Pointz, the space has been used as a cultural one since 1993, when Pat DiLillo, an artist in the Crane Studios, convinced owner Jerry Wolkoff to let graffiti artists paint the exterior. Wolkoff's son David eventually took over, and gave his blessings to Jonathan Cohen, an artist who goes by the tag "MeresOne" and who changed the name from Phun Factory to 5 Pointz. In interviews, David Wolkoff has expressed sadness that the building would have to come down, but noted that it would be prohibitively expensive to repair it so that it

159. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, (The Monacelli Press, 1997), 138

would be habitable again. While shrugging off complaints from neighbors critical of his decision to turn over his building to artists wielding those spray cans, he is also clear about what he sees as his role:

We've allowed them to have a safe haven to do their work, and now as a developer I have to be allowed to do the work I do, to create what I consider art, which is building buildings — which is an art form as well as an economic driver.¹⁶⁰

In the same interview, Wolkoff expressed confidence that the loss of the building wouldn't leave the neighborhood bereft of art, citing PS 1's presence. His view of that museum as an adequate replacement is unfortunately echoed by Joe Conley, chairman of the Community Board 2, which includes the building.

I can't see that the community would lose anything with that building. It's an outdated building, it's from a bygone era, and it's certainly not the efficient use of space.¹⁶¹

To be fair to Wolkoff, he has also stated publicly that he would like to incorporate artists' work into the new development, which would be made up of a 47-story tower and a 41-story tower, together encompassing 1,000 rental units and 30,000 square feet of retail space. And this is where the concept of Manhattanism's "architectural cannibalism" comes into play. Given the enormity of the project and the fact that Wolkoff is planning to build residential space in place of industrial space, it's almost laughable to think the same sort of artistic freedom could abound in a place that Wolkoff told WNYC could have a gym, a pool, a billiards room and a supermarket.

But just as Koolhaas documents that the majestic Waldorf-Astoria was seen as a fitting site for the Empire State Building, so too does Wolkoff believe that his towers will, in Koolhaas words, "accumulate all the strengths and spirits of the previous occupants of the sight, and in its own way, preserve their memory."

And what of the self-appointed curator of 5 Pointz? When asked why a place like 5 Pointz might be important, with its multitude of pieces presented together on nearly every conceivable space, MeresOne speaks not as someone concerned with the overall look; but as a promoter of a culture near and dear to him.

It's about people, you know? It's more enjoyable; it's kind of boring to [paint] alone. It's not a gang or anything; when they paint, they just get together and do a wall.¹⁶²

Speaking with a croak that suggests he's perhaps spent a few too many days painting without a mask, MeresOne also joked that one of the reasons why graffiti artists crave outdoor spaces like the walls of 5 Pointz and countless other mural locations over indoor spaces, is it's better on their lungs. But of course, it's really

160. "The Fate of 5 Pointz: Why One Man May Demolish New York's Graffiti Mecca," *The New School Free Press*, Oct. 24, 2012

161. *5Pointz, a Graffiti Landmark, Faces an Uncertain Future in Queens*, WNYC, April 29, 2011

162. Interview with author, December 9, 2009

just a simple matter of being seen by an audience that's either large or influential, the latter being other writers and fans of graffiti.

If you're there, other people will be there, and they may say 'Wow, there's a piece where I didn't expect to see it.' I've done some spots where you're out in the woods, like along in Jersey, you walk through a park, you ended up behind a factory.¹⁶³



MeresOne estimated that 5 Pointz hosts 1,000 different pieces

Visitors take turns “tagging” the Ricoh logo

annually, with many writers returning to the space over and over. He didn't say as much when he cited that number, but I suspect that doesn't include installations such as one that I witnessed in person—A red and white blocky “Ricoh,” whose outline he painted on the southwest corner of the complex in December 2009. When I visited the site then, a group of about 25 visitors who'd piled out of a tour bus were taking turns filling in the outlines of the letters with red spray paint, while posing for pictures. “Tagging,” it seems, is something that people will pay for the privilege to do, as MeresOne said they'd compensated him for allowing them to try their hand at the famous 5 Pointz. After they left, he quickly spray painted over it again, creating a space ready for a new, less commercially infected creation.

MeresOne has wrestled with the competing interests of art and commerce, on the one hand trumpeting the validity of graffiti and the importance of 5 Pointz, and then accepting money from groups with no interest in creating art. He is not wrong to take money to support the greater cause of 5 Pointz, (as recently as November 8, 2012, 5 Pointz was featured on the TV show *Project Runway*) as he supervises the space for no salary. When he explains the logic behind taking money from the likes of Ricoh, he pins some blame on Wolkoff's greediness. This might come across as sour grapes from someone who has enjoyed a free lunch, but it's worth noting that Wolkoff let the building fall into such disrepair that an outdoor stairwell collapsed in April, 2009, seriously injuring one of the Crane Street Studio's artists. This led to the eviction of the studio, and the building has sat

¹⁶³. Interview with author, December 9, 2009

largely empty ever since.¹⁶⁴

This raises the possibility that Wolkoff allowed 5 Pointz to fall into disrepair, thus making it easier to justify knocking it down and building something radically different in its place. In a sense, it's a moot point though; the aforementioned rezoning gave an official blessing to the eventual demolition of the building. MeresOne may be living in a world where he has to cater to corporate tourists in order to keep his operation going, but Wolkoff is a developer in a town where, as noted earlier, the demand for housing is astronomical.

When he's asked about the loss of the tenants of the Crane Street Studios, MeresOne is not terribly moved.

Q: Have things changed much since the closing of the studios inside 5 Pointz?

A: Not really. I don't have to be as conscious if the radios are as loud outside, now we can turn the music on as loud as we want to. Otherwise it's the same. There were some hypocrites who were two-faced, they'd say hello and then talk down on us and label us. So at times that would happen.¹⁶⁵

If MeresOne is a little too caught up in the importance of his art to the exclusion of others, Wolkoff is much



The past is in the foreground, the future is in the background

164. "One Artist is Hurt, and 200 Others Are Feeling the Pain," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2009

165. Interview with author, December 9, 2009

too confident that he can incorporate the past into the present. In a *New York Times* article about the impending demolition, he revealed that the space reserved for the graffiti artists would be a rear wall. This cannot be seen as anything more than a token gesture, akin to a scale model of the original Waldorf-Astoria hotel stored in the lobby of the Empire State Building.

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For the time being, the painting continues unabated, as writers can be seen daily adding layer upon ultrathin layer to the outside of a crumbling leviathan. The future of this state of affairs is in doubt, but even without the aid of architectural renderings of Wolkoff's planned development, it's possible to get a sense of say, the year 2016 by standing at the corner of Jackson Avenue and Crane



One57, dubbed the “Billionaires Haven,” under construction in July, 2012.

Street and facing west toward the Citicorp Tower. Verticality is key, not spontaneity. Monetary capital will triumph here, as neighborhood cultural capital will be ceded to more trusted keepers at PS 1.

For now, the contrast between the squat, crumbling stone building with an ever changing skin and the cool, shimmering tall glass tower just down the street, can be illustrated neatly by Koolhaas's explanation of the work of architect Hugh Ferriss, who first envisioned New York as the “mega-village.”

Ferriss' most important contribution to the theory of Manhattan is exactly the creation of an illuminated night inside a cosmic container, the murky *Ferrissian Void*: A pitch black architectural womb that gives birth to the consecutive stages of the skyscraper in a sequence of sometimes overlapping pregnancies, and that promises ever new ones.¹⁶⁷

It is important to note that this is a New York City where humble buildings such as 5 Pointz are 15 minutes

166. “Writing’s on the Wall (Art is, Too, for Now)” *The New York Times*, August 27, 2011

167. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, (The Monacelli Press, 1997), 117

from not only cultural beacons such as Carnegie Hall, but also out of this world havens where 11,000-square-foot duplex apartments now sell for \$95 million.¹⁶⁸ So it is depressingly understandable that Ferriss' vision of a void that encompasses all of the Manhattan sky, just waiting to be taken over by successive skyscrapers, extends across the East River into Queens, a borough known more for its parkland and polyglot immigrant population than its skyline. The "Ferrisian void" that will be filled between Crane and Davis Street in Long Island City may not contain the space of business the way its glassy neighbor to the west does, but in the scope of filling the void, and adding bulk to fill in the "cosmic container," it is no different.

When the wrecking ball finally meets 5 Pointz, and the name, which is an ode to New York City's five boroughs, is either retired or transferred by MeresOne to some other destination, what replaces it will pail in comparison, if for no other reason than its replacement will sync with the demands of monetary capital and the void will be overwhelmed with space primarily for generating profit. Among the oppositions that will disappear from the scene is change: The morphing, "that wasn't there last week" quality of the vast canvas that is the exterior will be replaced by something static and predictable. To expect anything less from residents within would be unrealistic. Wolkoff might truly believe he's honoring the energy and history of graffiti by providing a space for future artists work, but unless it's a space that is visible from the elevated 7 train and the myriad passersby in the neighborhood, it won't be any more appealing to graffiti artists than the dozen or so spaces around the city that are also open to artists in the know. A corollary might be the punk rock club CBGB, which closed in 2006 and was replaced 18 months later by high-end clothing John Varvatos store, which peddles \$250 shirts. Remnants of the original institution remain, but it is an echo from the past, useful for reminiscing perhaps, but not much else.

168. "Rising Tower Emerges as a Billionaires' Haven," *New York Times*, September 18, 2012



A visitor takes in the sight

Conclusion

The official position of the City of New York is that penalties for graffiti must be harsh (the sale of spray paint to minors is illegal, and hefty punishments are handed down when perpetrators are caught, including felony charges for multiple arrests of those over 18), as part of a larger strategy of crime fighting that embraces the “Broken Windows Theory.” But I propose that the city would do well to add another arrow to its quiver in its ongoing campaign against vandalism.

I envision a scenario in which a building owner of the future receives a notice from the city informing them they have graffiti on their building, and that they have 45 days to A. Respond with a confirmation that they will buff the graffiti themselves. B. Respond with a confirmation that they want the graffiti to remain. C. Ignore the notice, in which case the city buffs it with or without their permission. D. Respond with a request for a referral to a graffiti muralist. Of these four options, only the first three exist today. Artist referrals is something that Groundswell already does, and as the case studies in my paper show, there are plenty of writers who are

experienced at collaborating with owners on a project agreeable to both.

Instead of lumping graffiti together with offenses such as loitering, fare jumping, public urination, public alcoholic consumption and petty theft—which under the Broken Windows Theory are considered an early warning system for larger, more serious crimes—the city should take a cue from the private property owners who currently support graffiti murals. Taking inspiration from the street grid that Simeon deWitt, Gouverneur Morris, and John Rutherford designed, this would stay true the city’s history of aiding in the development of the private sector. The difference is that instead of sticking to a bland, unimaginative narrative along the lines of “buffing is better for business,” it can marry the support that exists for traditional public murals to the vibrant, home-grown aerosol art scene that has grown and mutated radically since it first surfaced on subway cars nearly 40 years ago.

The need to pursue a program like this has never been greater. New York City is nothing if not blessed with art venues, but at the same time, the pressure to squeeze monopoly rent from every square inch of Manhattan and sections of Brooklyn and Queens has increased drastically. One need only cast an eye to Greenwich Village and Tribeca to see how radically neighborhoods can change in ways that preclude them from being receptive to a homegrown art form that, as Nicer noted, are in many cases modern day Picassos, Goyas and Monets.

There’s a certain irony currently at work in New York City right now. The cultural cache that the city accumulated from both graffiti culture and hip hop were birthed from the chaos and bankruptcy of the 1970’s, and although this paper does not address the latter, the former is arguably in danger of becoming fetishized and thoroughly commodified, like so many key chains and shot glasses available for purchase by tourists. In many instances that’s already happened, as noted in my chapter about 5 Pointz, and in the \$169-\$2,000 a night Ace Hotel in Manhattan that now sports a lobby with 4,000 reproduced graffiti stickers on the walls.

But while graffiti and all the other variations of street art have become much more accepted in New York City, with a billboard dedicated to a revolving selection of pieces on Houston Street and the Bowery, the role of graffiti murals as a sort of anti “releaser cue,” of the sort that Phillip Zimbardo described is not appreciated. The reason why nearly every one I interviewed in my case studies approved of the murals is fairly easy to understand: in a place where money for commercial development is now sloshing around like so much seawater in a leaky boat, a graffiti mural is a symbol of something not only rooted in local culture, but also rooted in one of the best aspects of the recent past. New York City is not just a draw for visitors who clamber to see top-down run spectacles like the Empire State Building or Yankee Stadium. It is also the place where subway-borne art maintains, as Benjamin would argue, its aura, in the form of a gritty sidewalk gallery.

This is symbolic capital that's worth its weight in precious metals and shiny baubles. Other cities around the world may have sanctioned sections of town where graffiti is embraced, but New York City has something even better: A select merchant class that has embraced a global art form and done its part to elevate New York City into the upper echelon of global cities. What's especially impressive is that owners such as Jerry Blankman in Jersey City, Jonny Siegal in Bushwick, and Mark Borak in Hunts Point embrace graffiti murals because they see them as good for the neighborhood *and* good for their businesses. This is borne out by studies that I mentioned in my Philadelphia chapter, and although there are also doubters, it is the believers and the artists they embrace who deserve all the help we can give them.

It's also important to note that for all the good that has come out of the return of multinational corporations' reinvestment in New York City after the city hit rock bottom in the 1970's, it is still by in large small, locally-based business owners who embrace graffiti murals. This is not surprising, given the fact that the artists are small businessmen too. Some, like the TATS Cru, are more explicit in their embrace of commerce, but all hope to gain something from their work, even if it's just exposure. Exposure is only valuable if it's accompanied by freedom to pursue ones' art as they see fit, and as Rain noted in my Trenton case study, corporate-owned spaces are not the ideal environment. This is another way the City of New York could support small businesses even as it becomes more connected to the global economy than ever before.

Fortunately, there is awareness in some institutional quarters of the value that graffiti muralists bring to the city. Even as hubs of creativity such as Five Pointz are being zoned out of existence, occasional stories come along that crystalize the tug of war being waged between blank slate obsessives and art boosters. Take, for example, the arrest of artist Kenny Scharf, who was caught spray painting on the side of a building in Williamsburg, Brooklyn on April 19, 2013.¹⁶⁹ Scharf, a 30-year veteran of the art scene who was a contemporary of Andy Warhol and Keith Haring in the 1980's, is popular enough to be one of four artists, along with Shepard Fairey, Ron English, and Robbie Conal, to be featured in the March 4, 2012 episode of *The Simpsons*, "Exit Through The Quickie Mart." His art has graced murals both legal and illegal, and the piece he was arrested for in Williamsburg bears a resemblance to a character he painted legally on the Bowery and Houston Street. The arresting officers also seemed to know that this was not just a random tagger they'd swept up, because they asked him for his autograph.

It begs the question: If building owners in Manhattan, Queens, Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island, Jersey City, Trenton, and Philadelphia, groups like Groundswell and the D.O.T, and average New York City beat cops

169. "Kenny Scharf Arrested & NYPD Asks Him For Autographs," Artsucks.com, April 22, 2013

can appreciate the distinction between an art and vandalism, why can't the city?



“Death from Above” by REVS in DUMBO

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Appendix I

New York City Anti-Graffiti Laws

New York City, § 10-117. Defacement of property, possession, sale and display of aerosol spray paint cans, [and] broad tipped markers and etching acid prohibited in certain instances.

- a. No person shall write, paint or draw any inscription, figure or mark of any type on any public or private building or other structure or any other real or personal property owned, operated or maintained by a public benefit corporation, the city of New York or any agency or instrumentality thereof or by any person, firm, or corporation, or any personal property maintained on a city street or other city-owned property pursuant to a franchise, concession or revocable consent granted by the city, unless the express permission of the owner or operator of the property has been obtained.
- b. No person shall carry an aerosol spray paint can, [or] broad tipped indelible marker or etching acid into any public building or other public facility with the intent to violate the provisions of subdivision a of this section.
- c. No person shall sell or offer to sell an aerosol spray paint can, [or] broad tipped indelible marker or etching acid to any person under eighteen years of age.
- d. All persons who sell or offer for sale aerosol spray paint cans, [or] broad tipped indelible markers or etching acid shall not place such cans, [or] markers or etching acid on display and may display only facsimiles of such cans, [or] markers or etching acid containing no paint, [or] ink or etching acid.
- e. For the purpose of this section, the term “broad tipped indelible marker” shall mean any felt tip marker or similar implement containing a fluid that is not water soluble and which has a flat or angled writing surface one-half inch or greater. For the purpose of this section, the term “etching acid” shall mean any liquid, cream, paste or similar chemical substance that can be used to etch, draw, carve, sketch, engrave, or otherwise alter, change or impair the physical integrity of glass or metal.

Appendix II

Interview Questions

The Artists:

How long have you been writing graffiti?

Why do you do it?

When did you first do it with permission from the property owner?

How did you learn of this opportunity?

What was here before this mural?

Do you only write with permission now, or do you still do it without permission?

How is it different?

How do you choose a space, and how do you choose a neighborhood?

Is it hard to get permission from a property owner?

Do you get feedback from neighbors?

Do you get feedback from the city?

Do you feel the city is supportive of this sort of thing?

Why do you think your mural is better for the neighborhood than what was there before?

The Owners:

How did you first get in touch with this artist?

Why did you allow them to use your property?

What was there before they put their mural there?

How long did it take them?

Did you know what it was going to look like before hand?

What has the reaction been from your neighbors?

What is your general impression of graffiti?

Have you ever been contacted by the city about graffiti on your property?

Do you feel the city is supportive of this sort of thing?

The Residents:

How long have you lived here?

Are you familiar with the graffiti mural nearby?

What do you think of it?

Do you think it makes the neighborhood a better place?

Do you think it's better than a blank wall?

What is your general impression of graffiti?

How would you describe this neighborhood?

The Middlemen:

These questions were crafted for Jersey City; a variation of the set was used for Staten Island.

How did this particular mural come together?

What's your relation to the collective? What's your role?

How did you get into this?

How long have you been doing this?

So you're based here in Jersey City?

Where else do you tend to work?

So you're cutting these guys checks here. How does that work?

How did it come to be that it would be a blue whale and look like this? Was this his idea, their idea?

How hard is it to get building owners to let artists use their buildings as canvases?

How much freedom do you guys tend to get when you do these? Are they pretty willing to let them do whatever they want? Do you get a lot of pushback on that?

One of the ways things I've heard from artists is, if you let us do this, that you won't get tags, throw ups or regular graffiti on it. Do you find that's something that you mention when you talk to them?

Do you feel like the governments you work with supportive of your efforts?