5Pointz: Regulating Revolution

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You are poets and we are poets, both makers of the same strains, rivals and antagonists in the noblest of dramas . . .

—Plato, The Laws

From a distance, what stands on Jackson Avenue between Crane and Davis Streets in Long Island City, Queens, looks like the brainchild of a kindergarten art class, an explosion of frenetic splashes and mismatched hues. But upon closer inspection, the wild experiment coalesces into discernible shapes and patterns. The fog around the graffiti jungle clears, and the walls become five full blocks of flashing cultural commentary. A distorted graffiti depiction of the classic Alice in Wonderland parades a stoned White Rabbit, along with Tweedledee and Tweedledum as caricatured tourists wearing “I Love New York” t-shirts, and a revealingly dressed Alice striking a seductive pose. The Cat In The Hat bows to characters from Dr. Seuss’s One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish, upside down and drowning against a backdrop of crumbling red and black. Muscular, shirtless men hold bloodstained weapons, their figures like frames from the most unnerving scenes of Apocalypse Now, embodying the pain and violence of the Vietnam War. The flaming ethos of the site, named 5Pointz to represent the meeting ground of the five boroughs of New York City, is sprayed at the top of the center wall: “Institute of Higher Burnin’.” 5Pointz exemplifies the destruction of accepted rules and the celebration of fervent youth, a magnifying glass for the burning of the status quo in an urban playground.

I am overwhelmed by this fascinating labyrinth of expression, completely enthralled by the splatters of paint and passion, until my eyes lock with those of Biggie Smalls, The Notorious B.I.G. He looks deep into my pupils with a strange, unnerving gaze of simultaneous regret and wonder. Something agitates me about this black-and-white graffiti portrait of a rapper’s discomfort and hope. And then, my eyes land on a green tie-dye door to
the side of several larger-than-life murals. The bold purple letters sprayed onto the wood read: “Paint With Permit Only.”

Graffiti and permits? I am reminded of how I felt when I toured Universal Studios in Los Angeles, of my disillusionment upon discovering that thousands of scripts from new writers go unread every year, piling up in the dusty corners of executive offices because no name means no gain as far as the studios are concerned. Movie magic had become a numbers game, a series of careful maneuvers and manipulations to further deepen the pockets of rich producers, a product of cold and unromantic capitalism. I had believed—naively, it seems—that the spirit of making movies was all about telling a story, about putting everything on the line to bring to life an artist’s vision, not about reading the first page of what could be the next groundbreaking piece of cinema and then tossing it into oblivion because the writer’s name wouldn’t guarantee monetary success. Something about the disenchantment I felt as an aspiring young filmmaker in a world run exclusively by the dollar sign struck a familiar chord within me as I contemplated the graffiti permit.

I find, after some research, that in an attempt to minimize the spray-paint vandalism that had been plaguing public space in New York, a group called the Graffiti Terminators took a major commercial complex called the Williamsburg-Brooklyn Industrial Zone in 1993 and turned it into a place for graffiti artists across the globe to legally showcase their work. When Jonathan Cohen—a.k.a. “Meres”—took over management of the site in 2001, 5Pointz took the contradicting ideas of graffiti and public sanction even further by transforming the site into a public cleanup effort of sorts, which, according to the now extinct Madrid-based art magazine *Subaquatica*, involved “15 to 20 kids each Sunday . . . who wanted to learn aerosol techniques with Meres and help him rebuild the space; they paint the walls, clean old paintings, take care of the area” (Yague). Graffiti, legality, and sterility: I try to connect these disparate elements in my head, but to no avail. Biggie’s eyes, for a moment less distant, seem to glint with shared confusion. Something about 5Pointz just isn’t right, the same way the rooms of abandoned, unread scripts weren’t right to a spellbound cinephile who had discovered the ugly secrets behind the magic she never wanted to stop believing in.

Graffiti art is a medium that has, ever since its emergence as a method of urban territorial marking in late-1960s Philadelphia, fed off a deeply ingrained cultural belief in revolt through artistic expression. In “BOMB: A Manifesto of Art Terrorism,” a proclamation of graffiti’s role as a voice of social rebellion, street artist Raymond Salvatore Harmon asserts that “when
you pick up a can of paint and go out into the world and make marks with it you are performing an act of defiance, an act of insurgency. You are pushing against the reality being created by most of the people around you” (6). Banksy, one of the most celebrated icons of graffiti culture, known for anonymously painting anti-establishment messages in corporate-owned spaces across the globe, affirms Harmon’s belief. “Asking for permission is like asking to keep a rock someone just threw at your head,” he says. “You owe the companies nothing. . . . They have re-arranged the world to put themselves in front of you. They never asked for your permission, don’t even start asking for theirs” (160). Graffiti is a unique and highly subversive medium; almost anyone with a couple of bucks can get a can of spray paint and hijack public space. Unlike other art forms, which often depend for production on much more expensive tools, graffiti offers a relatively cheap path to expression, readily accessible to the masses. Requiring a permit infringes on this accessibility, creating the tension at 5Pointz between freedom and regulation.

If the creation of graffiti depends on a sense of absolute freedom without public consent, of rebellion and necessity, a regulated 5Pointz contradicts the spirit of the art form. What began as an honest and well-intentioned effort to minimize graffiti vandalism by providing a legal haven for artists has become the antithesis of what graffiti actually stands for. Although 5Pointz provides a tolerant framework for creative expression, the peril and consequences associated with painting illegally remain essential to the statement graffiti artists are making. Harmon predicts that “cities and councils will create ‘graffiti zones,’ functionally neutering any insurgence against the stream of acceptable forms of expression” (5). Isn’t this what 5Pointz has already become?

In his essay “The Panorama Mesdag,” which considers art that cannot be contained within the traditional boundaries of frames, Mark Doty visits the eponymous painting by Hendrik Willem Mesdag in the Hague. Seeing the Panorama, however, defies Doty’s traditional expectations. Rather than the conventional frame on a wall, the Panorama is an enormous cylindrical canvas, a 360-degree presence that transcends what we’re used to: “Art held in its place, contained, nailed to the wall, separated from the world by a golden boundary that enhances and imprisons it. What if art refused to stop there, on the museum wall? Wouldn’t the result be revolution?” (216). The Panorama refuses the accepted notions of what museum art is, becomes a roaring force grander than the physical space it inhabits. Doty’s experience reflects Harmon’s manifesto: “a revolution must occur, the walls of the art world must be taken down. We must reject all that it is in order to become the future of art” (25). Panorama, in its size and stature, shows us that our
presence is trivial against the scale of the universe; perhaps 5Pointz is also self-aware enough to suggest that graffiti will always be subordinate to the vast, all-encompassing world it belongs to. Perhaps those ignored scripts in Hollywood will also.

Perhaps fear of Harmon’s “revolution” and opposition to graffiti-as-insurgence are what drove the Graffiti Terminators to open 5Pointz almost two decades ago. After all, what is vandalism if not a public portrayal of social and cultural dissent? Of protest, through paint? 5Pointz becomes the Panorama Mesdag of graffiti, revolution contained in a museum’s walls. In his essay “The Politics of Performance Space,” about a collision of powers trying to claim control over a theater space in post-colonial Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o says that the “real politics of performance space may well lie in the field of its external relations; in its actual or potential conflictual engagement with all other shrines of power, and in particular, with the forces which hold the key to those shrines” (528). Ngũgĩ writes that the Kenyan national theater decided to showcase Western plays over traditional African performances during a time that was crucial to the public perception of Kenya’s culture and identity, thereby making a political statement based not on the content of a work but on its context. This discussion is relevant to more than performance, though, and falls right in line with the decisions of the man who sits upon 5Pointz’s “shrine of power”: Long Island land developer Jerry Wolkoff.

Wolkoff decides who does and doesn’t get to use the site’s Crane Street Studios, apartments that artists can rent as working space. He decides when to pull the plug on their stay. And now, according to the New York Daily News, he has grand plans to “build two high-rise towers” with a “Manhattan-like mix of amenities, plus stores, restaurants, a supermarket,” and even a swimming pool on the land 5Pointz currently occupies (Lauinger). The survival of graffiti is at the mercy of its “external relations,” much as the Kenyan dramas were subject to the power of the national theater, or the fate of LA’s rooms of scripts depended on the money and sensibilities of Hollywood executives. Banksy’s belief in graffiti’s power to counteract the harsh realities of society is turned on its head by the management of this site; this “shrine of power” becomes a corporate model that leads to the destruction of the artistic force it claims to foster.

But putting the hazy, uncertain future of the site aside, we can surmise that as long as artists continue to paint courageous commentary on the walls of 5Pointz, the issue isn’t money controlling art or power defeating the rela-
Graffiti has always been at the mercy of something more potent than itself—if not the commercial authority of Jerry Wolkoff, then time, weather, public cleanup efforts, and other inevitable forces of destruction and subversion. Harmon himself says that “street art is by nature a transient thing. As soon as it is spotted, it is removed by city council workers. Constant turf wars are occurring over much of the global urban landscape between the creative/destructive actions of the inhabitants and the cities they inhabit” (46). So, if graffiti is meant to be an inherently impermanent art form, something more than commerce’s undesirable but inevitable influence over art must be considered.

No matter what force acts upon graffiti, there is a distinct line between graffiti art and the external powers that threaten it. These external forces interact with graffiti, removing it only when it threatens their own interests. In the case of 5Pointz, however, corporate power and public expression engage in a ferocious confrontation that creates the very framework for the site itself, as if the graffiti acknowledges the influences acting against it. “When you take a step forward or back, the experience is nothing like approaching or retreating from a painting hung on a wall; instead, weirdly, you realize instead you are inside of something. The ‘world’ around you is a work of art, and you are its center,” says Doty (215). 5Pointz as a site, as art, is entirely reliant on its parts, and yet embodies something wholly different from the pieces that make it up. Ngũgĩ’s collision of powers, now fused to create a new entity, inspires a complicated question: “When will society begin to see the difference between the content and the container,” between individual art and the society that clutches it (Harmon 29)?

I am reminded of Angkor Wat, the great temple of Cambodia constructed by King Suryavarman II of the Khmer Empire at the beginning of the twelfth century. Without its individual bas-reliefs, stone apsaras (figures of Indian mythology), and Dravidian gopuras (towers), Angkor wouldn’t be revered as the grand architectural masterpiece it is. And yet, the power, majesty, and brilliance of Suryavarman and the Khmers that the temple as a whole represents stand in contrast with the messages of the engravings from the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic, that line Angkor’s walls. The Sanskrit text emblemizes not power, but truth and morality, ideals that are far from what we feel when we see the breadth and splendor of this temple—pure, undiluted power. To this day, when I think of Angkor, the principles and values carved into its walls are always subsidiary to the glory of the place as a whole.
Several years later, I experienced a similar sentiment in Luxor’s Karnak Temple in southern Egypt. Standing at the gates of Karnak, speechless at the hieroglyphic-stamped obelisks towering above me, I felt what most of Egypt feels about the temple as an entity. It is an inspiring symbol of the country’s rich history, a sacred representation of dynasty upon dynasty of religious and political evolution. And yet, when you step inside and take a closer look at the artwork—especially that of Amenhotep the Magnificent, the pharaoh of the eighteenth dynasty—you realize that a lot of what you think belongs in Karnak was never supposed to be there in the first place. Much of Karnak’s art was dragged across the Nile to bolster the temple’s visual impact. These subtle nuances, however, are almost always ignored. Stephen King puts it well in his sci-fi western *The Gunslinger*: “size defeats us” (221). We instinctively succumb to the bigger picture instead of the “atoms which whirl and revolve like a trillion demon planets” (222). The “sites of physical, social, and psychic forces” that Ngũgĩ describes, which are intrinsic to the meaning of any site, become reduced to their impressive outlines (529). We see the entity over its parts, the forest over the trees.

5Pointz is a contemporary temple, rooted not in religious or spiritual mythologies, but in painted mirrors of modern day truth and morality. The bas-reliefs and obelisks of this sacred palace are its spray-painted pieces, sentiments and societal reflections in the form of graffiti. But this temple as a whole, which represents a safe haven for graffiti artists, fails to embody what the graffiti stands for in the first place: “a form of cultural terrorism, an act of defiance, an individual resurrection of creative expression” (Harmon 8). Not safety, but risk and revolution. And yet, in becoming the “museum” that might offend Banksy and intrigue Doty, this mecca of spray paint art—like the temples of Angkor and Karnak—protects sensitive art from hair-trigger deaths, from the many hostile forces, natural and corporate, that can destroy it.

I stare at a whirlpool of churning white. There is a swirl that unravels on the dark asphalt blacktop at the center of 5Pointz like the stars of the cosmos. From the outside, the expanding curves form the contours of some exotic, ancient symbol, trying to carve its identity through sudden, jarring twists and turns. I step inside: I look around me, and the mysterious swirl has become the universe. Its expansiveness is visually deafening. I slowly swivel 360 degrees and allow the letters, the words, the images to penetrate me. I close my eyes and an imaginary soundtrack of an elementary school orchestra tuning all its instruments at once rings in my ears. At first, it is unpleasant, chaotic. Tinnitus. But then, when I open my eyes and look back into Biggie’s eyes,
the discordant noise settles into the familiar melody of a Bob Dylan tune never forgotten: “Admit that the waters / around you have grown . . . you better start swimmin’ / Or you’ll sink like a stone / For the times they are a-changin’.” That change, I realize, is constant; the dynamics of artistic and political power are always in flux, from revolution to revolution, forever. Perhaps the blending of two sides that are in theory supposed to remain always divorced is part of this constant mutation of our world into something always more united, just as Mesdag’s Panorama binds man with universe, and Ngũgĩ’s collision of powers intertwines politics and artistic tradition. And then it hits me that in the scheme of our society as a whole, maybe this coming together at 5Pointz of two conceptually opposed forces—art and commerce—was meant to be.

I realize that even radical art created on the fringes cannot exist in a vacuum while the world changes around it. To separate our society’s deeply ingrained capitalistic ideals from art to maintain purity of expression would be to regress impossibly into a past that is too far removed from the present world. By adapting and blurring the division between artistic democracy and corporate dominance, 5Pointz creates a twenty-first century compromise, a middle ground, hybridization. Anything different belongs to a fading nirvana.

Film schools are emphasizing production as well as mastering craft, fine arts programs are expanding courses about the international art market, and music curricula push students to take business and technology courses to better negotiate a crucial crossroads of finance and creativity. 5Pointz may cap the “defiance” and “insurgency” Harmon and the bulk of the graffiti community believe are inextricable from the art form, but despite this capping, the site has for almost twenty years provided a space where the medium could flourish without inciting a public ready to tear it down. We may lament the loss of freedom evident in 5Pointz’s “Paint by Permit Only” sign, but the meeting of graffiti with a shrine of power willing to support it has, at least temporarily, helped shield the medium from a capitalistic culture eager to vilify and do away with it.

The coexistence of corporate power and art isn’t news; it has always been a part of history. The breathtaking depictions of the Mahabharata would be merely visions in the mind of a sculptor if Suryavarman’s political might hadn’t allowed for the creation of the art in the first place. The work of Amenhotep the Magnificent would be lost in the Nile had Luxor’s Karnak Temple not provided a secure home for its preservation during the Eighteenth Dynasty of Ancient Egypt. The graffiti murals of a seductive Alice and the raging warriors of Vietnam could have been removed or painted over sooner by other forces of artistic destruction here in the twenty-first century.
if 5Pointz hadn’t offered them a home and a shield. But, as a shrine, it reminds us of the limits of corporate power and the countervailing creative outlaws.

Perhaps Biggie wasn’t disturbed so much as just saddened, acknowledging but not accepting that his inspirational verse about how the “sky is the limit and you know that you can have what you want, be what you want” has faded into an unachievable utopia. But what perplexed me about Biggie’s eyes to begin with was the strange hope that accompanied the regret. I look around me once again. From bizarre portrayals of classic pop culture to scathing portraits of political dystopia, graffiti artists have been fearless in their effort to light a match under complacence. The shouts of restless defiance that lurk beneath the spray paint are still revolutionary in their intent, screaming in voices of joy and angst that are impossible to ignore. Now, Biggie’s reserved optimism makes more sense. Throughout all this socioeconomic change, the voice of revolutionary graffiti has stood constant.

The rooms of unread scripts that years ago threatened my dreams of being a successful storyteller are no longer rooms I fear. Rather, they are bittersweet. Although it is saddening to acknowledge that my own artistic work may be subject to a greater power—one that has affected the creative process for as long as that process has flourished—this greater power now feeds my artistic drive. Making my mark as an artist comes with the simultaneous responsibility of maneuvering around commercial bulldozers as I try to preserve my passion. This task, more challenging than anything I ever imagined having to face as an artist, will require a delicate balancing act of collaboration, courage, and, like the graffiti at 5Pointz, a voice that is too loud for anyone to quiet.

WORKS CITED


