I see you, bitch. With your Pell Grant refund, I see you coming out of NYU spitting that refund check … Don’t want to share none of your Whole Foods and shit. … Let me get some of that kombucha drink, bitch . . . You stepped it up. You not in McDonalds, you in Chipotle . . . You out the hood now, I feel you. I feel you.

—Azealia Banks, “Van Vogue”

It’s my first day at my new job. I’m trying hard to pay attention though the bright fluorescent lights and brighter neon leggings are blinding me. “Ok, so your job is mostly going to be, like, going around the store asking
people if they need help finding anything. And when you see clothes out of order arrange them by color and size. And put your pointer finger between every hanger so that they’re, “like . . . this: perfectly spaced apart.” Kelly, my new manager at American Apparel, beacon of minimalist-chic modernity, looks at me with her huge green eyes and gives me an artificial grin. She has too many smile wrinkles for a 22-year-old. “It’s called our ‘perfect clothes’ policy,” she continues. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. For the next three days (I quit after three days) I perfectly space clothes apart and say, “Heyyy, welcome to American Apparel. Can I help you find anything?” while skinny trendy 20-somethings roll their eyes at my presence and rifle through “normcore” hoodies and jeans (Urban). Though based in Los Angeles, American Apparel is often seen as a symbol of the “urban” New Yorker. The store seems to be on every populated street corner of the city, its clothes regularly worn by the hip and juice-fed, and one can easily imagine its patrons working cool internships at magazines and hanging out at dive bars after work. The place is Urban Outfitters without the overplayed Helvetica indie vibe, a thrift store without the grime, simple without being unnoticeable. But looking past the neon electric glow and the model-esque clientele, the sense that this store represents the demise of the “artist’s” New York City creeps in.

Maggie Wrigley claims, in her preface to The Suburbanization of New York,

Today New York is on its way to becoming a “theme-park city,” where people can get the illusion of the urban experience without the diversity, spontaneity, and unpredictability that have always been its hallmarks. Like the suburbs New Yorkers so long snubbed, the city is becoming more private, more predictable, and more homogenized. (20)

American Apparel is just one commercial symbol of New York’s move towards the uniform, the suburbanized, the capitalist, and the immaculately clothed. Urban environments throughout America now seem to value the perfectly spaced apart. New York City has gone from a Jackson Pollock city of vibrant, random, overlapping strokes to polished condos and parallel lines. High-priced boutiques and fashionable organic restaurants have replaced the spray-painted technicolor hellhole that was the East Village, embraced and
nurtured by a thriving artistic community. This may signal not just a demise of “city culture,” but a complete redefinition of the term, a new idea of “urban.” The past generation remembers the lovable shithole that was The Village and wonders where its soul went.

Located in an area not industrial enough to be gritty but too shabby to be considered shabby-chic stands a lonely, grand, muted-yellow-grey mass of a building. It is coated with a layer of molten graffiti. Each piece of art—from the large yellow wheatpaste poster of a Native American chief holding a shotgun to the sprayed-on “Dyke” tag—is in a different stage of decay. If Gatsby had been a street artist, this is what his mansion would’ve looked like after his death. The building is a graffiti junkie, overdosed and pleading, sunken eyes wide for more. So I oblige: my friend Cooper and I dash across Bowery, laughing at the rattling sound that a ricocheting metal ball in a can of spray paint is making in my backpack. We pass by boutique bars and shops selling specialty plush toys, recognizing the absurdity of both the neighborhood and what we’re going to do. We stop behind a church to shake up the can. The sound of that little metal ball hitting the little metal trigger echoes down the whole street. Again, we are laughing. We’re going to get caught, I think. People are going to notice us. I joke that we can flash our NYU IDs. The cops would probably drive us back to campus. The humor comforts us, but the paranoia lingers. It’s 11 PM on a Monday night and we’re about to go spray-paint 190 Bowery.

It’s my third time here, and I notice how much it has already changed. Wheatpastes that were last time quite fresh, still carrying that laminated sheen of new paper, have started to crinkle and fray, the colors dulling out. Many are gone (such as the once-plentiful Ai Wei Wei portraits). It’s both reassuring to know that the mark of the illegal act you’re about to commit will vanish and depressing to realize that the art you’re about to make doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. Maybe it’s because I’m a snobby Tisch kid, but I have been taught that I should make art that’s transcendental, art that lasts. As I press down the spray paint trigger, I am giving away the right to permanence, to having my identity really matter. I’m giving up the need to give a fuck. And with this, again I feel empowered. It’s really no big deal if I make a mistake. So instead of trying to figure out some deep quote to put down, or trying to trace out some intricate design, I make a little alien face.
and tag my name. Cooper also asks me to write down the first thing that comes to mind when I look at 190 Bowery. I contemplate it for a second then scrawl out “HOLY SHIT” on an area of free space and we walk back to the dorms, high on adrenaline and maybe paint fumes. But an unfamiliar disconnect from my art came with this post-adolescent joyride of rebellion. Even before my tag dried, I felt like it no longer belonged to me. 190 Bowery had claimed it, taken my name in a style reminiscent of Chihiro’s in Hayao Miyazaki’s fantasy film, Spirited Away. I watch the letters of my name float into the air and disappear into the nothingness, and I am only a spectator. It is a humbling and frightening experience: “To play in public space is to break the rules, to trespass one’s own emotions and sensibilities upon what is otherwise meant to be anonymous, functional, and boringly quotidian” (McCormick et al. 132).

A night at 190 Bowery is no normal night. I wonder what rules, besides the law against vandalism, I am breaking here. I am technically trespassing, but I don’t feel the quaking of fear that comes with doing something I’m not supposed to. Nor do I feel the vulnerability of having revealed something profound about my psyche. I feel . . . the same. It feels more like I’m doing 190 Bowery a favor than anything, a charitable act of decorating. 190 Bowery is the cancer patient we let take infinite hits of weed and a few too many shots of morphine because we want the patient to stay at whatever cost—even if only the façade is still consistent with the vibrant spirit in our minds. 190 Bowery is the scruffy “before” picture of the new New York City, which now wears a more tailored suit, a silk Armani tie, is more presentable to realtors and investors. Hipsters, however annoying and pretentious their reputation, purchased and created the majority of the art in the city. Now, however,

formerly boho environs of Brooklyn become unattainable due to creeping Manhattanization and seven-figure real estate prices, [and] creative professionals of child-rearing age—the type of alt-culture-allegiant urbanites who once considered themselves too cool to ever leave the city—are starting to ponder the unthinkable: a move to the suburbs. (Williams)

With the hipsterization of the suburbs comes something near unthinkable twenty years ago: the transformation of artistic, disorganized, eclectic
New York City into a uniform, expensive, corporate metropolis. Though I may not value the pristine white condos that have replaced cracked and faded apartment buildings, the affluent and powerful do. One only need consider the street art Mecca that was 5 Pointz, the “Arosol Art Center” in Queens—now painted over a stark, pasty, soulless white, a poignant if not depressing step forward in the process of gentrification. This move may seem counter-intuitive. After all, the introduction of murals and vibrant pieces of street art usually indicates an up-and-coming place. However, it can also reveal a community’s most shallow and ill-informed intentions; street art can be as tame as it is defiant. Often, gentrified neighborhoods want to be rebellious without being harmful, risky without being dangerous. In other words, street art has become the cheeky graphic tee on the body of a neighborhood, maintaining its cool while still carrying a fabricated air of nonchalance:

The problem is, when a neighborhood attracts artists, it quickly becomes trendy and popular because “it’s the sign of a vibrant avant-garde culture,” says Nicholas Riggle. Who wouldn’t want to live in such a creative place? Against their will, by their mere presence, these artists have unwillingly transformed these neighborhoods . . . And indeed the rich did flock to these neighborhoods—in Berlin, and New York’s Soho or Chelsea.

(Ariandis)

Artistic communities attract the rich for obvious reasons: they are trendy, and trendiness sells. Let’s go back to my “NYU student” joke, which holds as much truth as humor. I, like many young white people, carry a combination of guilt and privilege; I always have and always will. From the age of six I have carried the shame of being a gentrifier. My family—half Chinese, half white—was one of the first of either race to move into our neighborhood in West Philadelphia. Our family was seen as a beacon of hope; I, the darling of the community. People knew I was going to go to college. No neighbor hesitated to ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, because there was a great chance that I could become a veterinarian, a writer, a dolphin trainer. And I must admit that the neighborhood improved as middle-aged white professionals moved in. They can afford the better coffee, the donations to clean up the park, the extra buck here and there to help a neighbor. As the years passed, gunshots were heard less frequently, my parents had to go shorter dis-
stances to get good-quality food, and slowly my neighbors started to look more like *me*. It’s terrible to say, but the first glimpses of gentrification do make one hopeful of a safer and closer-knit community. West Philadelphia is now seen as the Brooklyn of Philadelphia: a bluegrass band lives down the block; organic and fair-trade cafés are on every street—but the house my parents bought for such a good deal twelve years ago would now be out of their price range.

New York, especially the Village, does gentrification on steroids. Many other neighborhoods are moving in that direction. Consider, for example, the Whole Foods on Bowery—a mere four blocks from 190 Bowery. To an outsider, this Whole Foods might seem insignificant, perhaps even a *good* thing. But in a way, Whole Foods functions as the American Apparel of grocery stores.

In “Dispatches: On the Bowery Whole Foods,” Asad Raza revels in New York City’s multitude of wholesome, ethnic, small groceries, in the fact that he can still get fresh seafood from a fishmonger. Though he recognizes that “neoliberal shoppers prefer the impersonal embrace of a corporate parent, disguised as some vague moral goodness,” he remarks that “it does seem infantile to shop at Whole Foods while all around you sits the very food cultures about which Whole Foods’ publicity materials fantasize” (Raza). He wonders why people would choose the manufactured pseudo-hippie fare over the authentic, *good* food, but to me, the reason’s obvious: Whole Foods is prettier, it’s cleaner, it’s more orderly. They’re not foolish; I immediately see the appeal of shopping under a warm, energy-efficient glow for colorful produce—perfectly spaced apart—instead of bumping into shelves of dusty canned goods in a dingy, cramped shop. Besides, there is the allure of the organic sticker, the fair trade emblem. The food from the fishmonger may be organic, but it’s not *verified*—if it doesn’t have the sticker, it’s not worth it. Oh, and a raw fish will stink up your FEED canvas grocery tote. So goes the transition from the small, potentially very humane local businesses to the mass corporation.

I credit this change mostly to “slacktivism”: part of a movement for change without actually *doing* much. Slacktivists share the occasional AlterNet article, rant about the rise of consumerism from a seat in Starbucks; they often sign online petitions and make a semi-conscientious effort to buy local
and fair-trade—they shop at Whole Foods. Slacktivism is just as evident in
the art world, where there is a trend towards spaces you can visit but use only
a bit of your attention span before you leave. And so the ephemeral public art
piece becomes the perfect destination for the “slacker intellectual.” It offers
an artistically gratifying experience without demanding the time or attention
of a whole museum or even a gallery. It allows for documentation: go ahead,
take a photo for social media—you won’t seem needy or attention-seeking. A
space becomes a destination, but it is a destination of some sort of pseudo-
spiritual pilgrimage. There now exists a religion of the fad, a veneration of
the temporary. You want to show up to the party just in time to see every-
thing erupt into an ecstatic cerebral orgasm clad in flannel and vintage
polyester.

A visitor to 190 Bowery always feels late to the party. It’s a space that few
have eagerly documented, though it’s been around for over a century and has
had the temporal continuity of being coated with some outstanding street art.
The building may not have the grandeur or prestige of 5 Pointz, but it does
have historical value and immutability of content. 190 Bowery, once just
another rebellious building neglected by the rich and nurtured by the impov-
erished and free-spirited during the 80s and 90s, is now a time capsule of an
era, one of the last of its kind, and it’s simultaneously very proud of itself and
very pitiable. It reminds those of past generations, now relics themselves, of
what New York used to be. For people like me, who are too young and naïve
to view the building as anything but simply “cool” and “interesting,” 190
Bowery becomes a taxing space because it urges me to see more, to ignore or
bypass nothing.

Unlike 5 Pointz, which, though messy, has a sprawling sort of organiza-
tion thanks to its having an actual curator, 190 Bowery is a free-for-all on
stone, complete chaos. To notice an individual piece of art requires looking
extremely closely at the entire façade, and then zooming deeper and deeper.
It’s exhausting trying to absorb everything at once. It’s a time commitment
to appreciate the individual piece. That’s why the building mostly elicits a
photo-op, a quick glance, a head nod towards a space while accompanied by
a “that’s cool.” It’s a small act of artistic slacktivism to acknowledge a space
and take a photo, looking without seeing. Don’t take time, but also, don’t be
faced with what New York once was. Facing 190 Bowery comes with as much
guilt as it does sacrifice and spectacle. And as we know from our newfound fandom of the semi-ethical Whole Foods and American Apparel, this new generation will go the extra mile, pay the extra dollar, to avoid guilt.

And it’s not just about sacrificing your time, it’s about sacrificing your individual identity. My tag did not belong to me, but to 190 Bowery, because ultimately, my tag matters more to the integrity, reputation, and tradition of the space than to me. You can try to claim a piece of it as yours, but it’s never yours, or anyone else’s. For me, tagging 190 Bowery was a fun but fleeting moment; for the space, the tag is integral to its identity. It is defined by every piece and it needs every piece, whether or not the piece can be seen. But at the thought of passing multiple 190 Bowerys, the gentrifier, the kombucha-loving girl inside me, cringes—because the building also makes me grimace. Despite the new artwork going up, despite my own contribution to the building, it feels like it’s dying. I don’t know if it is worth the sacrifice when, in the case of 190 Bowery, the sacrifice will last a lifetime.

In “Temporality and Public Art,” Patricia Phillips states, “[i]n both private and public life the phenomenological dimensions of indeterminacy, change, and the temporary require aggressive assimilation” (331). However, aggression seems to arise not when an area changes, but when it remains too static. New York, in particular, favors fads. There’s a masochistic pleasure in it: the rush to see a space, among the temporary community of art lovers who flock like pilgrims to experience a space; the real possibility of missing a space; the regret of not making it, which makes one rush even faster to the next. It’s a bit sick, yes, but it keeps a city’s adrenaline constantly pumping. Something must not remain for too long: “[l]ike starlings on a trash-strewn field the hipsters alight together, peck intently for a time, and at some indiscernible signal take wing again at once,” off to pick the bones of the next city, according to “the unending churn of their tastes” (Wasik 63). If a space doesn’t elicit aggressive excitement—even of this hipster horror show variety—it is shown complete indifference.

190 Bowery has always screamed to not be ignored, yet its aggression is met with nonchalance. During my first few daytime visits, I was surprised to see how many people walked past the building without so much as a second glance—at most, a tourist would stop for a second to take a quick snapshot (I have seen visitors to Washington Square Park spend more time photograph-
ing squirrels). Places like American Apparel prove that when a space is too loud, it’s uncool. And a throwback is only cool if it presents itself to be so. A girl wearing huge mom-jeans ironically is cool; an old man wearing the same jeans because they’re comfortable is lame. 190 Bowery is not meaningful because it’s not a part of any trend; it’s not in on any joke or laughing at anything. It’s not trying to be anything. All it’s striving to do is survive in a world that simply does not have the time for it.

Ending on a cynical note about the demise of the “old New York,” with a mix of compassion and apathy, would be the logical conclusion to this essay. But recently I talked to Jay Maisel, owner of 190 Bowery, his home and photography studio. He did not fit my expectations of a free-spirited, homeless-looking man with a jolly smile and an untamed beard. To transcribe this hellish, sweat-inducing conversation would take another essay. Instead, I will adopt a near-scientific style in relating some of Maisel’s surprisingly dispassionate sentiments:

1) When asked whether or not the subject liked the graffiti, subject claimed ambivalence: it did not necessarily please him. Subject did, though, express a particular hatred for tags, as an ocean of shame crashed over this writer’s trembling body.

2) When asked whether or not subject liked the gentrification of the Bowery, subject responded in the affirmative, as now the neighborhood is a lot more “civilized.”

3) When asked about feelings regarding the painting over of 5 Pointz, subject expressed indifference: “I don’t know why everyone was so upset about it. They knew it was going to happen. The owner had to sell it.”

4) Subject insists that 190 Bowery was never supposed to be a site for graffiti. A while ago, a building down on Spring Street actually served to host curated graffiti. That space closed, and the sprawling 190 Bowery was deemed a suitable replacement in both size and location.

5) Subject acknowledges that, like 5 Pointz, 190 Bowery will one day be painted over. Subject did not reveal strong feelings about this eventuality.

However nerve-wracking and depressing my conversation with Jay Maisel was, it at least made me realize one reason why we now live in such an
apathetic and clean-edged New York. Each generation, all social classes, all
races, all neighborhoods are relying on one another to keep alive the “old
New York” (whatever that may be). I relied on Maisel to give me hope that
street art isn’t dead, that there is someone out there still preserving the New
York that I never had the chance to love. But it seems that Maisel is long past
caring, ready to pass on the blame and the burden to someone else, content
to live with the art, but ready at the first opportunity to remove it. The bur-
den is carried till there are no hands left to bear it, and it slips and crashes
onto cement like delicate porcelain. We want the hardship, commitment, but
only if it lasts as long as our collective attention span.

It’s easy to disassociate myself from the/my tag, fun to write it off as an
experiment that only a white art student could get away with, neither risky
nor self-sacrificial. It’s easy for me to acknowledge that Whole Foods and
American Apparel can be fun, convenient, and cool, while criticizing their
contributions to gentrification. I’ve contributed to a problem that has forced
many hardworking people out of their hard-earned homes. It hurts, but per-
haps it’s healthy to feel guilt (read: “check your privilege”). It’s even more
painful for me to imagine everyone in my generation turning into a Jay
Maisel: cold, dispassionate, concerned only with what’s happening within the
confines of a multi-million dollar home. Sadly, I think that it may be too late
to solve the problem, to halt, even temporarily, the problems of suburbaniza-
tion, gentrification, hipsterization. We have never learned how to feel guilt
and take responsibility for something that requires a quotidian sacrifice, when
we can now so readily abandon it, as I did my tag. Why try to fix or even con-
tribute to the chaos around us when we can walk into American Apparel and
see everything as we left it?

On a rainy day I duck for cover in a close-by store to find it perfectly
arranged. My body is bathed in the holy glow of bright white fluorescence. I
feel in control of my environment. There is nothing to fear. I am guilty of
nothing. I feel nothing but muted contentment. As I walk through, admiring
the sleek button-downs and elegant shoes, I accidentally brush past a rack of
dresses, skewing the arrangement. Before I can even turn around to try and
fix it, a small pretty girl scurries over and places her forefinger between the
hangers with the precision of a machine. When she is satisfied with the per-
flect clothes she flashes me a smile and says, “Heyyy, can I help you find
anything?” Despite everything I have been taught, that I have written, that I have criticized and debased, I cannot help but smile and think that this store, this new New York, is a demonically beautiful thing.

WORKS CITED


