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5Pointz Destroyed: The Irony of Being Vandalized

Who is to say what kind of art is right or wrong? When does fine art become a crime? Not everyone has the talent to illustrate beautiful artwork. I mean, there are multiple artistic styles and many creative minds in the world. Only few are recognized, though, and for the others, they are at home with either a pencil or paint and canvas drawing their guts out, hoping one day they get noticed as well. But is that all they can do. Hope? For thousands of years, a popular form of art has been around: graffiti. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, graffiti is writing or drawings that have been scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place. Ranging from simple written words to elaborate wall paintings, graffiti has existed since ancient times, with examples dating back to Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the Roman Empire.

According to author Nicholas Ganz's *Graffiti World: Street Art From Five Continents*, many artists tend to distance themselves from the word graffiti; they believe it is no longer contemporary. Moreover, it often conjures up images of vandalism and defacement, or it is treated as a generic term for street art. Ganz traveled through many countries to find that many artists prefer labeling their art as aerosol art (2-6).

In modern New York, some may inevitably pass a few buildings with signs of graffiti, or even traveling by train, there are still some traces of graffiti on the tunnel walls. One New York area has become famous for its graffiti. This area was best viewed

while riding the 7 train by a five-story warehouse known as 5Pointz: The Institute of Higher Burning. It was an American outdoor art exhibit space in Long Island City in Queens, New York, considered to be the world's premiere “graffiti mecca,” where aerosol artists from around the globe painted colorful pieces on the walls of the building. Unfortunately, as much as it was a beautiful sight where tourists loved visiting, about a year ago it was demolished by the owner Jerry Wolkoff, to be replaced by two rental towers.

Some history is needed. According to Richard Weir, the author of “Wall Hits a Patron of Graffiti,” he states that 5Pointz, founded by a group called the Phun Phactory, offered graffiti writers a refuge to do their pieces legally, with the landlord's blessing. In the early days of this warehouse's activities, some people were not okay with the group's decisions to make the building a legal area for artist to do their pieces. Chief among its detractors is Mariela Stanton, the chief of the anti-bias and youth gang bureau for the Queens District Attorney's Office, who argues that encouraging people to do graffiti work will just feed their addictions, some of whom are so obsessed that they have left their marks on courtroom benches and in jail cells after being arrested for vandalism. Police Detective Kevin Casey, who also opposed the idea of people being granted permission to create their art on the building, tracked graffiti crews in the 104th Precinct for 10 years, questions the Phun Phactory's policy of requiring artists to present pictures of previous work to get permission to paint on one of its 71 spots at the warehouse. “In order to be that good to put up a piece there, you have to practice spray painting somewhere—your garage, my house, Mrs. Smith's candy store,” he said. “You do not practice on paper.”

On the other hand, Pat DiLillo, founder of the Phun Phactory project, counters that his organization is not out to end graffiti vandalism, but to give aerosol artists a legitimate setting to showcase their talents. “This is an art program, not a criminal-justice program,” he said. “We give them a chance to do something positive, when before it was defacing a building.” DiLillo was doing the right thing, keeping these artists out of dangerous subway tunnels, or spraying other people’s property, it was the smart thing to do.

According to Sarah Bayliss, author of *New York Times* article titled “Museum With (Only) Walls,” 5Pointz had a vision from the curator Jonathan Cohen—tag name Meres—whose dream is to have the building “100 percent covered.” This vision, one would say had already come through for there was so much graffiti covering the building, it was hard to discern brick from paint. Bayliss also mentioned how Meres cautioned “Graffiti is a label for writers who vandalize. Aerosol art takes hours and days. It's a form of calligraphy.” So for street artists who have been spraying for years, the term graffiti doesn't even meet their standards. They want to be accepted and respected as artists—whose art is seen as an amusement, not a crime. Art has no rules, according to Raymond Salvatore Harmon, author of *Bomb: A Manifesto of Art Terrorism*, the idea is about change: “Art is an evolutionary act. The shape of art and its role in society is constantly changing. At no point is art static. There are no rules.”

On the night of November 19, 2013, 5Pointz was painted over all white, every piece of aerosol-art was gone, vanished over night like magic. A tragic decision made by the owner Jerry Wolkoff himself. When Wolkoff was asked, “Who's decision was it to paint over the building?” His response was, “Mine. Let me tell you the reason why: The

judge gave me the right to demolish my building. It would take three months. To watch the pieces go down piece-by-piece by piece would be torturous. In New York, you can't implode a building. So let me just go in and paint it in one morning, and it's over with. I had tears in my eyes while I was doing it. I know it seems like a bitter pill to take, but it's medicine. I didn't like it, but it's going to get me better. It's best for them, and it's best for me. In my new building I'll have walls for them to express their aerosol art." That said, you would think the owner had all good intentions for these artists, but why would he not tell anyone, at least let them have a last look, a little celebration, something, anything! Whitewashing 5pointz overnight was just an act of being vandal if you ask me, because it was an act of what a typical 16 year old would do, deface a building at night... the irony. Many were heart-broken that morning, shocked and devastated.

According to Marie Cecile Flaguel, a spokeswoman for the group behind 5Pointz who was mentioned in an article titled "Night Falls, and 5Pointz, a Graffiti Mecca, Is Whited Out in Queens," by Cara Buckley and Marc Santora, she says that "this is the biggest rag and disrespect in the history of graffiti, he's painted over the work of at least 1,500 artists." Also another disappointed person, Eric Felisbret, an expert on street art and the author of "Graffiti New York," said "The fact that they destroyed the art before they razed the building, it's a really big slap in-the face, so many people put so much passion and energy into it." Although the owner thought he was doing the right thing, did he really think of the effect it would have on all these people.

Even months before the whitewashing, rumors had been going around that Wolkoff would eventually be replacing 5Pointz with two high-rise rental apartment buildings—47- and 41-story buildings. But that did not stop artists from spraying; it did

get their attention though and as a result they conducted rallies where hundreds of people showed up protesting to save 5Pointz. At a recorded rally, which was given the title “Graffiti Mecca Faces Closure,” many of the artists who showed up gave speeches on how much 5Pointz meant to them, and how it was not just a building to them anymore but a community, and to take that away from them would be upsetting and sad. The fight is bigger than graffiti, bigger than the building, it’s about preserving something priceless, a piece of history and a monument known over to the world. So many from around the world have come to visit and even do pieces of their own on this building; it’s a shame that it all went to waste.

Leonardo Claudio, author of “Graffiti Artists Face Homelessness: The Battle for 5Pointz Is Lost,” (*Amsterdam-News*), reports that besides the artist who used the building’s walls as a giant canvas, 5Pointz represented hip-hop culture as a whole by hosting an array of events such as break-dancing battles and beat-boxing competitions. It is more than the backdrop to many music videos of iconic hip-hop artists and groups like Grandmaster Caz, Mobb Deep and Boot Camp Click. 5Pointz is a name that seems so distant from what the building represents. When asked about the name’s meaning, Meres, founder of 5Pointz Aerosol Art Center explained, “It symbolizes five boroughs coming to one epicenter, one point to coincide and create,” but as mentioned before, this building has attracted more than just the people of five boroughs, for people all over the world have come to spectate, create art, break dance, film music videos, and even use the warehouse as background scenes for movies.

If you aren't familiar by the movie titled “Now You See Me,” directed by Louis Leterrier, it’s a must see. Movie productions have been faking New York City locations

for decades, but there are a few things you simply can't fake—like an abandoned building that's become a legendary graffiti hub, painted over by countless artists and preserved by devoted caretakers. In the final scene of the movie, four magicians stand on top of the abandoned warehouse 5Pointz, as they perform their last trick, there's no doubt that it is 5Pointz in the flesh, because there is no other building that looks anything like it, covered completely in art, and right next to the no. 7 train line.

Truthfully, I wish I could see more movies in the area, or witness artist start and finish a piece, and If I'm lucky even get to see some break-dancing and hip-hop videos filmed. But it's all just history now. At least I actually got to see most of the art before it was demolished, but still like any tourist or anyone interested in something who wouldn't want to see more? I sure know-that I do. Now all I can hope is, when Wolkoff's plan for the two residential towers are finished, that there will still be some enthusiastic artist that will spray in the area, at least bring a little joy to the place. There's no fun in seeing only tall buildings all over the city. There needs to be a bit of liveliness, something that can make people say "Wow!"