New York City Graffiti Project: Group Perspectives  
Legal, International, Artistic, Activist, Archival  
Students from English 101.63 & English 101.450/Professor Mark McBeth

Assignment

For the New York City Graffiti Project, students form groups based on their interests. Aspiring lawyers join the legal group; bilingual students join the international group; civically-minded students join the activist group; art admirers join the docent group. Each group then researches the topic of graffiti from their group's particular perspective. Once students do some primary and secondary research, they prepare an annotated bibliography about their topic, write a somewhat traditional text, and prepare a visual presentation of their research findings.

During this semester, one group of English 101 students visited 5 PTZ to do a tour of the Aerosol Art Center (recently whitewashed). Other students visited their local neighborhoods to exhibit the local flair of graffiti artists. Others explored the Internet to discover international graffiti artists and to surmise the reasons they used this public form of art.

Visit to 5PTZ

New York City's government has had an ongoing battle with graffiti artists over the past 30 years. Many policies deny these artists the rights to express themselves, even in permissible situations. For example, 5 Pointz, the Aerosol Arts Center in Long Island City, will be razed to put in luxury condos and, as a result, New York City artists may lose their primary legal locale for street art. This group prepares a research essay that investigates the history of the center, the context of its existence, and the efforts to preserve this artistic landmark.

Research with a Purpose

Instead of considering graffiti in dualistic terms (i.e., vandalism vs. art, criminal vs. artist), students explore the meaning-making of this type of public artistic expression and how these urban "writers" convey a message to their city-wide audience. Simultaneous to their explorations about street artists — self-proclaimed "writers" — students in this course discover their own talents of self-expression and how best to convey well-articulated ideas to an audience.

Arresting Art: NYC Legal Perspectives

This group studies the laws and legal implications concerning street art in NYC. The members prepare a document that conveys the history of these laws and their enforcement. They search for individual cases of artists who have been arrested and convicted of these crimes and analyze the (in)justice of these laws and their associated cases.

Remembering 5 PTZ: Archival Perspective

New York City's government has had an ongoing battle with graffiti artists over the past 30 years. Many policies deny these artists the rights to express themselves, even in permissible situations. For example, 5 Pointz, the Aerosol Arts Center in Long Island City, will be razed to put in luxury condos and, as a result, New York City artists may lose their primary legal locale for street art. This group prepares a research essay that investigates the history of the center, the context of its existence, and the efforts to preserve this artistic landmark.

Street Art Docent: Art Tour Perspective

In many art museums, a docent acts as guide and educator to convey information about the art to museum visitors. This group researches about NYC street artists and develops a tour that they could give to a group of people. New York City has many venues with a wealth of street art—Williamburg, Dumbo, East Village, 5 Pointz, and Bushwick. The group chooses an area, documents the art that exists there, researches the art and artists, and develops a tour that they could conduct.

Graffiti Worldview: International Perspective

In this course, we focus our attention on the street art of New York City. Graffiti art originated in the United States, but the practice has spread way beyond the borders of the fifty states. This group researches the phenomenon of street art in other parts of the world. Through secondary sources (books, articles), documentaries and, perhaps, personal contacts in other countries, this group investigates how street art has manifested itself around the world.