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Wall Street Dallas

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Rachel Wilson
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Engaged Learning Final Report
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Mentor Shelley Berg

It began in a hopeful blur – walking through the streets of London, alone with a journal and a camera. It was supposed to go down like this: I would see a busker, maybe in Camden, or a whole crew if I was lucky. They'd be beat boxing, rapping in a surprisingly soulful timbre about growing up in Edmonton while crew members did backflips on flaps of cardboard box. I'd wait it out, let them finish. Then I'd move in and, as they counted the dollars in their caps, I'd begin to explain myself, talking faster and faster until I was standing there shaking like a fool, awaiting reaction. An uncomfortable silence would pass; then, like a knife through softened butter, the leader of the crew would step forward, breaking away from the crowd, a winning smile on his face. Maybe he'd say, "Follow me," and I would, of course. Cut to training warehouse, cut to shabby recording studio, cut to dingy nightclub in the packing district, cut to house party, cut to talented young artist's mother's kitchen, cut to the film department's editing lab in Meadows' Umphrey Lee. *This* is how it was supposed to go down – cinematic and inspiring, riddled with close calls but nothing to really sweat about.

Cut to young filmmaker sitting in baggage claim at the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. It's July. As I waited for my ride I checked my email, grateful to

have Wi-Fi on my American cell phone after five long weeks. There it was, the email I'd been waiting for. Waiting unassumingly in my inbox was one email from Terry McLaren – a tattoo artist I'd encountered at the world famous Fulham Tattoo Centre. Weeks earlier McLaren had told me about a rapper he knows – an unpredictable man with a penchant for abnormal body art, a slew of wild stories, and a chip on his shoulder. Either all of this accounted for or all of this aside, this man had talent. This was unanimous at Fulham Tattoo. After four weeks of being told, “you can't go there,” “that's not safe for a white girl,” and “you're an American – nobody there is going to talk to you,” this was supposed to be my big break. Only it came a week late, from across the Atlantic Ocean. The thing about interviewing strangers, I learned, is that it's not as easy as *Humans of New York* makes it look. Every stranger I encountered had a life outside of my interview – a history, a tragedy, a death and a birth and a future – and not everyone trusts you with all of this after only five minutes. So that was that. I left London with my project in shambles.

Back in Dallas, I began brainstorming ways to salvage the project. My mind travelled back to my first day in London – a rainy afternoon spent meandering down Brick Lane with my fellow students. The street seemed so different than those in Dallas: rich in cultural history, full of famous churches and cafes, and also street art. I approached the first graffiti artist I saw. He told me he had been commissioned by the city to beautify a small underpass, and that he was one of many artists London recruited in this way. As I thought about how this relates to street art in Dallas, a cultural map of the two cities began to plot itself out in my mind. I realized something: what seemed to be holding me back in London was not a lack of rap and

hip-hop music, but rather the street culture that surrounds the music scene. In every city, there stands a hierarchy: who can go where, what kinds of art belong in which neighborhoods. It's something that goes deeper than permits and contract law. It's in the details: the histories of violence, the race relations, the subjective valuation of art – the mechanics of a neighborhood as made up by its inhabitants.

As I turned my focus to examining graffiti in the streets of Dallas, it was brought to my attention that SMU's own Hunt Scholars had just voted to work with *Dallas Gives Graffiti The Brush*, a city cleanup initiative, for their annual service project. Out of the nearly twenty scholars I contacted, only two offered their opinion on the initiative and the scholars' involvement with it. I wondered why the students were so reluctant to talk about it, several of them being students in the Meadows School of The Arts. My next step was to put up a show illustrating some of the global effects of and uses for street art. I gathered input from nearly thirty attendees.

The feedback I received from the show was, by overwhelming majority, quite abstract. Many indicated an interest in street art as a unique and ephemeral beauty, in that "you could get used to seeing [a mural, tag, or piece of graffiti] on your walk to work every day, then one Thursday it's gone, and there's an iPhone billboard in its place." Many expressed that there appears to be, at the heart of graffiti wars, a complex relationship between freedom of speech and property rights. If a street artist leaves a piece on the side of a government building, is this artist stealing from the government? Or does the concept that art deserves protection come into play here?

In January, I met with Sean Fitzgerald, current president of the Deep Ellum Community Association. DECA is a volunteer community group representing all of the neighborhood's residents, business and property owners. A 22-year resident of Deep Ellum, Fitzgerald has a vested interest in building the neighborhood into a thriving, sustainable community. He acknowledges the finished product of a graffiti mural as something that brings people to the neighborhood, while the ability of the artists to both live and work in the same context is what makes a neighborhood an actual community – art as a means for gentrification prevention. He says to me, during our lunch at St. Pete's Dancing Marlin on Commerce Street, "if Pete's doesn't make it, we're gonna have a Mi Cocina in here. And to me, if that happens – we've lost." Five minutes later, Pete himself drops by to say hello and refill Sean's tea. He continues, "If we end up with an Epcot version of Deep Ellum in 15 years, we've lost."

Later that month, I was very fortunate to receive an interview with Jim Schutze of the *Dallas Observer*, whose archives with the paper span back into 1990s. Not a flag is hoisted in Dallas that Schutze doesn't see or hear about, so he was able to tell me of taggers come and gone over the last 30 years. I asked him about the extreme and apparent separation between Dallas' formal arts district and the neighborhoods rich with smaller galleries like Deep Ellum, Fair Park, and the Bishop Arts District. He describes a collection of wealthy art patrons who combined their resources with the investment efforts of the late Trammel Crow to fashion Flora Street's arts district into the beautiful, but nearly untouchable art mall we know today. "This was a real estate play by backers of the DMA who didn't like going to

Fair Park.” They created a system “where you could go straight from Park Cities to the museum of art and not see black people.”

As the cultural chasm in Dallas neighborhoods grows, some push for cleanup efforts and, ultimately, steady gentrification. Standing out in this faction is local personal injuries lawyer John Barr, or as Sam Merten of the *Observer* dubbed him, Dallas’ “graffiti czar.” Barr and his associates not only spoke out against the graffiti surrounding their Bishop Arts’ offices, but actually went out on their lunch break to cover it up. If what Bishop Arts’ needed was an aesthetic cleansing, then Barr is onto something, because the neighborhood is booming as of late. However, I ask myself – and asked Officer Jeff LaBarba of the Dallas Police Department – if graffiti is making marks on a building that one does not own without formal or legal permission, how is Barr’s vigilante beautification not also graffiti, in some convoluted way? LaBarba, who serves as the neighborhood officer for Deep Ellum, describes to me something known as the “broken windows theory of crime”. The theory, introduced in 1982 by a pair of social scientists, proposes that urban environments that go without monitoring set off signals to vandals and criminals that additional crime and anti-social behavior will be tolerated in said environment. To put it simply, one graffiti tag not removed from a wall signals to other graffiti artists and taggers, no one is being punished; this area is not being watched. Eventually, the level of crime escalates and we are no longer dealing with walls and spray paints. Officer LaBarba explains that, in his experience, “tagging a building is often a way of testing the waters” in a certain situation. He tells me of a Burger King franchise that was shut down on Live Oak Street. Within weeks of receiving its first tag, the building had

been broken into and stripped of all of its copper. While stealing from a convalescent fast food restaurant may seem like a victimless crime, LaBarba explains, this property will be unsellable because it is no longer fit for utilities like plumbing and central temperature control. The owner of the property suffers a major loss. All of this being said, when I asked Officer LaBarba how Barr's actions differed from those of a tagger or street artist, he basically alluded that this is overlooked by the department because the overwhelming majority of citizens finds graffiti aesthetically displeasing. In other words, if no one is complaining about a problem to the DPD, it's not a problem to the DPD. I asked him if, someone had decided to plant tulips in front of this Burger King rather than tag it, would there be a problem with trespassing and vandalism? Flowers are found by an overwhelming majority to be aesthetically pleasing. LaBarba deflected, and our conversation wrapped up. In my opinion, this is all the proof I need to believe that what is seen and *treated* as crime is based almost entirely upon associations with what is seen as "bad" or "ugly". Gangs have tagging wars; they don't one-up each other with tulips. That's all there is to it.

Among the many horror stories and opponents of graffiti art my interviewees described, one name was recurring. Frank Campagna is a well-known artist in Deep Ellum and founder of the Kettle Art Gallery. In 2011, Campagna's son, frontman of local punk band *Spector 45*, committed suicide after a long internal struggle. Fitzgerald speculates that his son's death is a primary source of Campagna's desire to help young artists create and, through that process of creation, find their way. He tells me that Campagna has pulled a lot of kids off the streets, showing them how he

works as a professional in street art and emphasizing “the redemptive power of shifting from illegal graffiti to work that actually has a lot more meaning to it.”

Premiering at the 2014 Dallas International Film Festival, *We From Dallas* tells the story of our city’s largely overlooked hip-hop culture. A huge part of this is street art. I spoke to graffiti artist Sergio Garcia, founder of the Infinite Crew, Dallas’ first official graffiti crew, briefly on the phone. Garcia describes working with Minus Won, a well-known Dallas graffiti artist who passed away in 2011. He says the creation of the documentary has been a unifying force in the hip-hop arts community, an opportunity to finally show the world where they come from.

What I found in researching street art, from start to finish, was reluctance – reluctance everywhere. From all the musicians I never got to meet in London to the taggers I’ll never see in action in Dallas, there is a reluctance on the part of artists to share what they do with just anyone who comes asking. Art requires trust, from start to finish. There is the painful process of learning to trust oneself as an artist. There is the inability to trust a journalist or someone in law enforcement. There are the young, misguided taggers who will eventually have to trust that there is a better way. Finally, there is trust that art is valuable – that placing this piece of one’s own soul out into the world will mean something. When art is forbidden, that trust can be broken. As far as the city officials who forbid street art, Schutze offers – “They stay in office by keeping neighborhoods happy, not by keeping artists happy.” I found that street artists are reluctant to talk about their art because it puts them at risk; art is risk, yes, but is risk relevance? This is the question that street art continuously tackles.