Wesley Marshall

Peter Tokofsky

PWR 1PT

11 December 2025

Painting a Better Future

What some may see as chaos and a disruption of peace in society actually serves as a catalyst for social change and activism. The word “graffiti” is often associated with rebellion, gang culture, and intimidation, framing it as a threat to public order rather than a meaningful cultural practice. Yet at its core, graffiti is a method of expression, a form of public art that occupies shared space and demands to be seen. Furthermore, what people see as defacing public landmarks could actually be the call for change, advocating for people who feel they don’t have a voice. In landscapes dominated by statues and monuments that reflect institutional priorities, public art emerges where official remembrance falls silent. Defacements and graffiti are more than unstructured chaos, but instead are public artistic expressions which advocate for marginalized communities by intervening in public memory, using visibility and space to permanently commemorate community heroes and challenge institutional narratives that have historically excluded these groups from public recognition.

The lines between street art and vandalism are oftentimes blurred, stemming from institutionalized discrimination. These lines are mostly blurred, due to the difference between the higher and lower class neighborhoods where street art lives. The article, “Vandalism or art? Graffiti straddles both worlds” attempts to answer this question by asserting that, “...society often fails to recognize that graffiti can also be art and a serious expression of cultural roots” (Reichenbach, 1991). What society considers socially acceptable is subjective to the person, and

some of these people see graffiti as uncontrollable chaos. However, not all graffiti is negative, and some is purely meant to serve as public memory. With these arguments over what is permissible and not comes the question, “What paint is allowed to stay and what is erased can give us insight into the neighborhood and its people” (Lennon, 2023), which comes from John Lennon’s, “Aversive racism, gentrification, and graffiti studies” Lennon implies something beyond the objectivity of what paint should be allowed on the sides of buildings, but instead points to an introspective interpretation of societal discrimination. Historically graffiti and public defacement has only been seen as destructive, relating to gangs and criminals and more broadly specific ethnic groups. However, as Reichenbach previously mentioned, graffiti could go beyond these negative implications. Graffiti and defacements can mean so much more than gang affiliations and crime, but instead serve as cultural expressions of communities that may be historically underprivileged and marginalized.

The disparity in how society treats graffiti exposes a deeply rooted bias that determines whose artistic expression is validated and whose is criminalized. The Daily Cal’s article, “Graffiti art amplifies local culture, not crime” articulates this fundamental inequality when stating that graffiti “...was something for good kids in the ghetto that had no money for art school,” (Shonk, 2025). Yet by criminalizing this form of expression, cities ensure that “...in order to have their voices heard and reflect themselves in their environments — residents must either be wealthy or criminals” (Shonk, 2025). Graffiti was a form of expression for marginalized communities who didn’t have the resources to express their talent in a place designed for it, showing the class disparity. This results in children from disadvantaged areas resulting in street art to express themselves, followed by being seen as criminals. This double standard becomes even more evident when examining Miami’s Wynwood neighborhood, told by

Rolling Stone's article, "Meet Street Artists Remaking Miami's Wynwood Neighborhood" where the same artistic practice receives radically different treatment depending on who commissions it. Anonymous artist FL.Mingo, who has been jailed for her work, observes the transformation with irony, arguing, "It's mostly out-of-towners painting murals. When we were painting it, there was illegal graffiti all over the place" (Fakhr, 2017). The street art that leads to arrests in poor neighborhoods becomes civic investments in wealthy ones. This reveals that the criminalization of graffiti has never truly been about the art itself, but rather about controlling who has the power to shape public space and which communities deserve to see themselves reflected in their surroundings. Street art goes beyond criminal activities, but in reality is a form of expression that has become a way for institutions to continue discriminating against the marginalized groups who express themselves.

Public statues and monuments function as instruments of institutional power rather than neutral reflections of history leading to marginalized groups being misrepresented or underrepresented in public memory. Monuments actively shape collective memory by presenting selective narratives, and not the entire story. Because they occupy shared civic space, statues function as public declarations of value, signaling who is worthy of honor and what stories deserve permanence. This idea is reflected, oftentimes in the southern United States in states that used to belong to the Confederacy. In Thomas Szayna's article, "Confederate Statues Symbolize Role of Racism in America" Szayna mentions that, "Challenging the visible symbols of the Confederacy in public places is about questioning why in some places in this country we continue to celebrate and revere the leaders of the Confederate cause" (Szayna, 2020). The answer to this question comes down to culture in the location. The article uses a picture of Stonewall Jackson's monument in Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederate States of

America, and shows how the culture of Richmond and its perseveration on glorifying Jackson for so many years shaped the city's identity. Notably, Richmond only displays a monument of Jackson, and not main competitors from the Union including General Ulysses S. Grant. Only displaying a Confederate general reveals Richmond's tendency to only represent half of the story, one without notice of the Union and the driving force of the Civil War, slavery. The monumentation of certain people reveals institutional bias towards a certain group, which doesn't equally represent the backgrounds and stories of all individuals included.

Richmond leaving out the complete story of the Civil War opened the door up for advocacy and the continuation of the story. During the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests came a massive surge of advocacy against Confederate monuments, seeking their teardown. In the article, "Stonewall Jackson statue removed from its pedestal on Richmond's Monument Avenue" author Nicole McMullin uses a picture of the monument after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest. In the picture, protestors used the statue as a means of continuing the story by writing phrases such as, "FUCK WHITE SUPREMACY" and, "RACISM" displaying the emotions of the protestors. They criticized Jackson, and more importantly used the statue to further their own advocacy-focused agenda and bring to light the ongoing story of a discriminatory America. The Civil War may have ended over 150 years ago, and yet people in society feel as if not much has changed. The protestors shifted the focus from the leaders of the Confederacy, a faction driven by racism and slavery and instead focused the spotlight onto advocating against the values the Confederacy stood on.

The statues of Union heroes are also defaced, however aren't meant to disgrace the monument but to call for action. The 54th Massachusetts was one of the first African American regiments where they fought in many battles, the most iconic being Fort Wagner. For their

heroism in combat, a monument was created to honor the 54th in Boston, and their heroism remains a powerful symbol of Black resistance and sacrifice. However, their monument was defaced during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 but this defacement isn't one of hatred, instead it's a statement about the limits of memorialization. The article, "Shaw 54th Regiment Memorial defaced during protests" by WCVB5 explains how the monument was defaced. WCVB5 states, "A monument recognizing the first all-volunteer black regiment of the Union Army during the Civil War was defaced during Sunday's protests" (Bradwell, 2020). While it may initially appear ironic that a monument honoring Black soldiers was damaged during protests advocating for Black lives, the act can be interpreted as a critique of how history is remembered. Memorials, no matter how noble their subjects, do not address systemic inequality in the present. Instead of defacing the Confederate monuments for disdain, the protestors are defacing this monument as a call for more action to be done in civil rights.

A different article by Mark Favermann titled, "Visual Arts Commentary: Boston's Historical Memorial to Black Lives Vandalized" states, "...Black Lives Matter is an international human rights movement that campaigns against violence and systematic racism…Isn't the 54th Regiment Memorial—an iconic piece of public art—a beautiful, strong, and prescient statement that supports these current notions?" (Favermann, 2020). Favermann points out the mission of Black Lives Matter, and the irony behind their defacement of the 54th's monument. However, Favermann's assertions come without more insight into the protestors and their actions. Favermann's rhetoric implies the protestors are almost too dumb to read the plaque next to the monument, instead of thinking why they defaced the 54th's monument. In the history of African Americans, the 54th Massachusetts is both relevant and influential for their heroism during the Civil War, therefore making little sense that Black Lives Matter would target this memorial.

Instead, the movement is bringing the 54th into the light again, except this time as a statement of how the discrimination the 54th faced during the Civil War continues into the 21st century and how the United States needs to do better in supporting marginalized communities.

Catalyzed by the Black Lives Matter protests, came the rise of abundant street art activism. Although this street art falls under the definition of graffitti, it isn't simple drawings but instead points the spotlight onto social change. Columnist Ananda Pellerin states, "In the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, artists have been quick to respond with works that seek to memorialize, to provoke and to heal" (Pellerin, 2020) in her article, "'My emotions were so raw': The people creating art to remember George Floyd" which draws connections from street art to public activism. The artists who erected these murals were attempting to memorialize Floyd, and his memory in society to fight against police brutality. In one mural near where Floyd died, lives a mural stating, "SAY OUR NAMES" with countless people's names listed behind a mural of Floyd. Among the names are people of marginalized communities, who were subjected to police brutality. Without these murals and public displays, these individuals would never be memorialized in the public eye but due to the efforts of activists these victims will be remembered. The Black Lives Matter protestors and activists used street artistic expression to advocate for their communities, to ensure their stories live on in the public eye.

The Black Lives Matter street art serves as a constant reminder of the need for social change, and not just a temporary fix. The article, "Black Lives Matter: Do companies really support the cause?" points out the hypocrisy of some companies that supported Black Lives Matter on a temporary basis. Author Fernando Duarte takes a quote from assistant professor Sherri Williams, where Williams states, "'Some of those businesses have more posts about black

people than black people working for them. People are realising that'" (Duarte, 2020). The contrast between corporate opportunism and community created street art exposes a crucial difference— street art emerges from genuine demands for justice, not marketing strategies. Furthermore, companies could easily remove #BLM statements from their websites and instagram accounts when support became politically inconvenient or economically risky. However, the paint on Confederate monuments and the murals honoring lives lost can't be so easily scrubbed from public view. The contrast between temporary social media posts and permanent street art demonstrates the difference between institutions seeking credit for supporting social movements and communities demanding sustained structural change. Street art is lasting and cannot be deleted when it threatens profit margins, unlike corporate social media posts that disappear at the first sign of controversy. This permanence demonstrates why street art remains essential to social activism as it ensures that communities' demands and memories persist even when institutions encourage society to forget.

Alongside Black Lives Matter, the Stop Asian Hate movement influenced the rise of more street artists to respond through public murals. This movement is derived from the rise of Asian hate crimes due to frustration over the COVID-19 pandemic, and most significantly the mass shooting at three Atlanta spas killing six Asian women. The article, "Street Artists Return to McKinley Park Flatiron Building to Paint Against Anti-Asian Hate" analyzes how Stop Asian Hate murals were created by artists Marcelo Ruiz and Cesar Calderon at McKinley Park, showing how graffiti works both as political expression and community storytelling. Significantly, both artists are from Hispanic heritage, not Asian, pointing out how street art allows multicultural solidarity where activists can fight for all communities and not just their own ethnic backgrounds. Most importantly, Ruiz and Calderon show how difficult times bring

together diverse communities to advocate together to ensure a better future for all groups. Street art activism functions on the basis of genuine passion for advocacy among groups of the oppressed who recognize their similar struggles against discrimination. Where traditional monuments require bureaucratic permissions and vast resources, street art can appear quickly when communities need it most, appearing in neighborhoods where communities thrive and people can always be reminded of the need for societal change. The article, “STOP ASIAN HATE Mural, New York City 2021” displays a specific mural by artist DRAGON76 which has phrases including, “CO EXIST” and “BE THE CHANGE” calling for the integration of diverse groups in society. DRAGON76 analyzes the disjointment of different racial groups in society, and calls for people to come together and unite as one to enact change against institutionalized racism. Furthermore, the mural displays an Asian male with band aids and a wrap on their forehead signifying the pain and endurance of the Asian American community and how action needs to be taken to ensure the safety of minority groups. Street art activism weaves together disparate communities in the common cause of justice, creating artwork of advocacy for the diverse, interconnected stories of all groups. This street art follows a powerful historical tradition of artists using public space to advocate for marginalized communities facing institutional neglect and systemic violence.

For some street art begins as a simple means to advocate, but can become a global sensation. Artist Keith Haring is an example of this, born in Pennsylvania during the 1950s. Haring would eventually move to New York City in the 1970s and he began using his artistic talents as activism. Haring's style is displayed in the article, “Keith Haring: The Blueprint of Social Activism” and has been described by its, “...bold lines, bright colours, and dynamic human figures and symbols” (King, 2025). Haring’s use of street art was meant to be,

“...accessible, public, and deeply entwined with social commentary” (King, 2025) which provided all communities an opportunity to enjoy and understand the deeper themes. Haring's “Silence = Death” characterized by a pink triangle, black backdrop, and dozens of his signature drawings of people became, “...an emblematic symbol of the AIDS movement” (King, 2025). Haring was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988, and sought to advocate for its awareness, using his street art style. His activism became urgent and personal as he witnessed the Reagan administration's refusal to address a health crisis decimating LGBTQ+ communities. Haring created his “Ignorance = Fear” poster to combat the stigma surrounding AIDS, recognizing that public education through street art could save lives when the government remained silent. Unfortunately Haring passed away in 1990 at age 31 due to complications with AIDS, however he is forever memorialized in his artwork that continues to inspire social activism. Haring's legacy demonstrates that street art activism has deep historical roots, connecting 1980s AIDS activism to contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate, proving that when official channels fail vulnerable populations, artists must intervene directly in public space to demand recognition and memorialize people who passed away.

Using street art to memorialize who passed away goes beyond political activism but also as spontaneous collective mourning When the basketball legend Kobe Bryant died in a helicopter crash in 2020, murals honoring him appeared all over Los Angeles within hours. Anthony Gharib of ESPN states, “In the hours and days after his passing, Los Angeles Lakers and Bryant fans found comfort in another avenue -- art” (Gharib, 2024) showing the immediacy of the memorialization of Bryant and his daughter Gigi. These works emerged organically from communities who needed immediate places to mourn and remember their hero, demonstrating the necessity of street art and its quick nature. The speed and scale of this response reveals the

value of street art, which is that it moves quickly based on human emotion and urgent social need. Just as Keith Haring used street art to respond immediately to the AIDS crisis when the government remained silent, and just as George Floyd murals appeared within days of his murder, the Kobe Bryant tributes prove that communities cannot and will not wait for official approval to honor their community members. Street art ensures that whether processing collective grief over a cultural icon or demanding justice for victims of systemic violence, communities can memorialize their heroes and express their pain, claiming public space as a democratic canvas that belongs to all people not just those with institutional power.

At first glance, defacement and street art can appear as uncontrollable chaos that represents nothing. However, upon a closer look, it can be seen as one type of street art movements that commit to societal change through the turning away of attention from institutionalized stories to the current problems of society. By addressing modern-day 21st-century discrimination instead of historical monuments, society is being called into action in such a way that civic processes have not. When marginalized groups and their struggles aren't being highlighted enough in society, street art brings them into the spotlight to ensure their voices and stories don't go unheard. Such public interventions force society into hearing people's voices and stories that may have gone unknown. The criminalization of graffiti in poor neighborhoods, while commissioned and celebrated in their wealthy counterparts, reveals that the issue has never been about aesthetics or legality, but about power and control over public space. By defacing monuments that glorify oppressive histories and creating murals that memorialize those who passed away, street artists reclaim the narrative and demand that all communities see themselves reflected in their surroundings. Street art isn't vandalism, but

instead a means for artists and individuals to advocate for their communities and society through personal expression and turning the focus onto societal issues and public memory.

Works Cited

Donna. “STOP ASIAN HATE Mural, New York City 2021.” Graffiti Street, 30 Mar. 2021, https://www.graffitistreet.com/stop-asian-hate-mural-new-york-city-2021/. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Fakhr, Ahmed. “Meet the Street Artists Remaking Miami's Wynwood Neighborhood.” Rolling Stone, 3 Aug. 2017, www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/meet-street-artists-remaking-miamis-wynwood-neighborhood-111116/. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Favermann, Mark. “Boston's Historical Memorial to Black Lives Vandalized.” The Arts Fuse, 15 Jun. 2020, https://artsfuse.org/205108/visual-arts-commentary-bostons-historical-memorial-to-black-lives-vandalized/. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Gharib, Anthony. “How artists worldwide continue to honor Kobe Bryant's legacy.” ESPN, 8 Feb. 2024, www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/39473692/kobe-bryant-murals-statue-unveiling-los-angeles-lakers. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Kerr, Justin. “Street Artists Return to McKinley Park Flatiron Building to Paint Against Anti-Asian Hate.” McKinley Park News, 18 Apr. 2021, https://mckinleypark.news/news/1559-street-artists-return-to-mckinley-park-flatiron-building-to-paint-against-anti-asian-hate. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

King, Essie. “The Blueprint of Social Activism.” MyArtBroker, 10 Mar. 2025, www.myartbroker.com/artist-keith-haring/articles/keith-haring-the-blueprint-of-social-activism. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Lennon, John. “Aversive racism, gentrification, and graffiti studies.” Sage Journals, 24 Sep. 2023, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/27541258231204009. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

McMullin, Nicole. “Stonewall Jackson Monument in Richmond Coming Down.” WRIC, 8 Jul. 2020, www.wric.com/news/local-news/richmond/stonewall-jackson-monument-in-richmond-coming-down/. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Pellerin, Ananda. “‘My emotions were so raw’: The people creating art to remember George Floyd.” CNN, 12 Jun. 2020 www.cnn.com/style/article/george-floyd-mural-social-justice-art. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Reichenbach, Jean. “Vandalism or Art? Graffiti Straddles Both Worlds.” University of Washington Magazine, Mar. 1991, magazine.washington.edu/feature/vandalism-or-art-graffiti-straddles-both-worlds/#gsc.tab=0. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

“Shaw 54th Regiment Memorial defaced during protests.” WCVB, 1 Jun. 2020, www.wcvb.com/article/shaw-54th-regiment-memorial-defaced/32733306. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Shonk, Ella Mui. “Graffiti art amplifies local culture, not crime.” The Daily Californian, 15 Oct. 2025 www.dailycal.org/opinion/the_soapbox/graffiti-art-amplifies-local-culture-not-crime/article_c0142647-fdef-4ee9-9616-ec6e842382c4.html. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Szayna, Thomas. “Confederate Statues Symbolize the Role of Racism in America, Then and Now.” RAND Corporation, 16 July 2020, www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2020/07/confederate-statues-symbolize-role-of-racism-in-america.html. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.