

Candalism

Graffiti Prayer in the age of Meta-Tags

by Erik Burke

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Prof. Stuart Cudlitz

My project, Candalism takes on many forms but is founded on the idiosyncrasies of mark making as used by graffiti artists for identity and social networking. The marks I decode and honor in Candalism are found on various doors throughout New York City during the months of April and May in 2008. The project could have been done at any time, but the time is made explicit due to the tenuous nature of the marks in and of themselves.

If you were asked to draw a line, any line, what would it look like? Would it follow the syncopated rhythm of one's palpitating heart, or the staccato vibration of a seismograph needle, or perhaps the trajectory of a skipping rock across a still pond? Whatever form that such line would take, know that it would have a uniqueness all its own.

My grandmother taught me my first math lesson when she said, "The fastest way between two points is a straight line." And although there is great merit to her statement life has taught me that a straight line is nearly impossible. One only needs to look at the imperfection of a sign painter's brushstroke to understand the legacy of the line.

Historically, Architects, Physicists, even Dictators assuming the role of cartographers, have created lines. Lines have been molded to form complete lexicons, etched into countless prison cells, even stimulated ongoing violence as in the case of the Green Line. We have grown accustomed to talking about lines both physically and metaphorically. Banks ask customers to step in line, poets recite lines, party-goers snort lines, and soldiers attack lines. Johnny Cash says, "I walk the line" and Keith Haring says, "This is where I draw the line." What other mark has come to represent so much and been so simple?

My investigation of the drippy line permutations known as tags led me throughout various boroughs of New York City. Tags can be found scattered in varying degree throughout the landscape but a high concentration is found on doors. This can be explained for numerous reasons. First, most doors tend to be recessed enough to allow

for privacy. In such a moment, one can easily write with anonymity. Secondly, doors are smoother than walls. Most writers use markers with felt tips that are easily torn up on rough surfaces. Next, tags with drips are an adopted aesthetic of the graffiti vernacular. Since doors are a hard surface drips tend to be longer and straighter. The porousness of walls absorbs paint and makes drips either non-existent or thick and overly pronounced. Lastly, and most importantly, doors serve as a social network for graffiti aficionados. They are the time sheet where writers "punch in" and add themselves to the roster of graffiti history. If graffiti was a religion, the door would be the temple.

The majority of citizens view these acts as reprehensible territorial markings, akin to the behavior of dogs. However, this form of identity tourism is not a new or unique concept. It has been adopted by the Basque in numerous Aspen carvings, hobo monikering with oil-based chinks on the side of train cars, but most notable is perhaps the popularity of the 'Kilroy was here' tag which travelled the world over during WWII. But, of the oldest scenarios is the Japanese practice of Senjya Fuda.

Japanese pilgrimages can be divided into two general types. The first type began in the 7th century when many would go on religious pilgrimage to 33 holy temples, particularly sacred to Kannon in Western Japan. Most importantly to my project are the artifacts that were left at these holy places. Upon reaching one of the many holy sites, they would affix a personalized piece of paper to the temple using a liquid glue equivalent to wheat paste.

The practice expanded to a pilgrimage of 88 Holy Sites in Shikoku by the 17th century that was to be visited in a specific order. The piece of papers that were pasted to the temples was supposed to give the individual good luck as long as it stuck to the temple.

The Senjya Fuda tradition became popular during the Edo Period (1603-1867), when many believed as long as their Fuda remained affixed to the temple or shrine gate that they would receive good fortune. Centuries later, the popularity of the fudas would lead

to government rules, forbidding pilgrims from pasting their stickers.

While the Senjya Fuda tradition may have died, it still thrives in contemporary Japanese life. One can find the stickers on cars, computers, and other personal products. Commercial shops even make personalized Fuda stickers with your family name, crest, and image of your choice.

A tangential concept amongst Senjya Fudas, graffiti, pilgrimages, and trances is linearity to form multiplicity. The best tags I encounter are the most simple and often times what are defined as "one liners". The fluid movement of the lettering runs parallel to the concepts set forth by Guy Debord and the Situationist International when experimenting with *dérive*. Through SI's experiments with geographical drifting I want to see how ritualistic identity tourism on NYC doors leads to *dérive* remixes.

Taking this quite literally I began to assume that the door was the temple. For a specific demographic it was a gathering place for worship. It was where writers would have a solitary moment of silence and leave an offering. Sometimes they would tag over another writer and other times not. Regardless the dialogue of the door grows thick as many writers circumnavigate entire blocks, boroughs, and neighborhoods, leaving branded doors in their wake, and to borrow a dated term, go all city.

If anything, the act of leaving one's mark is a universal one. From NASA's flag planting on the moon to the Lascaux caves, humans have been leaving their mark in an assortment of ways. My investigation of line drawings as interpreted by graffiti artists is just another branch of human's innate need to make an announcement of presence. But tagging alone is just tagging. However, when a tag is made beside another you have a dialogue. And there is no stronger dialogue than within the framework of doors, excuse me, I meant, within the framework of the temple.

Entering the project I knew I wanted to mark using a foreign medium in a new way. So I used a candle by dripping it onto the ground. At first I tried dripping candle wax to

create various designs but never had a suitable artifact. I then cut a stencil in metal using a plasma cutter so that I had a strong mold that wouldn't deteriorate and more importantly, would not catch on fire. The first stencil jokingly posed a rhetorical question. "Is it art or vandalism?" The phrase became unpoetic soon and I decided to make something iconographic instead of text-based. I felt this was a strong move since the space was already devoted to words and I was an outsider.

The inspiration to work on the ground as opposed to the wall came out of a desire to not intrude on the afore-mentioned temple environment. I had been looking at the works of Michael De Feo's flowers as well as Francis Alys's 'Green Line' and wanted to find a middle ground. These two examples serve as departure points for the 2 pathways I see in Graffiti.

My icon became an opened envelope with an eye inside the fold. I chose the envelope since it represents a device used to conceal stories, information, and, quite literally in the case of my study, letters. The envelope is open, symbolizing the unlocking of the door as I decode the tags. However, in the opened section is an eye representing a reawakening of vision. I adapted the Freemason eye and harked back to Egyptian iconography as well as an Orwellian 'big brother' society of surveillors.

As of yet, I am still unsatisfied with my icon. From an insider perspective, the icon conceptually compliments the project. However, as an outsider it is very murky and lacks substantial content. In the future I would like to rework the icon.

Graffiti, very simplistically, has two momentums behind it: its physical nature and its story. The symbiotic relationship of these elements is especially significant since the mark making of graffiti is a tenuous one at best. The story which initially supplementally serves the visual outlives the mark and becomes the mark through folkloric oration. The stories of Espo's doors, Revs pages, and Smith pieces will forever be crystal clear in writers head; even after the fact that there are few if any remaining.

Metaphorically speaking, if graffiti was kinetic energy, the more tenuous the mark the quicker it would become potential energy. The question then becomes, how does one extend the life of that energy? None of Francis Alys 'Green Line' remains although many in Palestine see its memory today. The artist Song Dong, who breathed on Tiananmen Square during a frigid New Year's Eve for 40 minutes until a layer of ice formed under his mouth. Although short lived, the piece entitled 'Breathing, Part 2 (19996) "breathed life" into the same spot that saw the violent events of June 1989.

Locally, while walking through the Lower East Side one will inevitably step on a Michael De Feo flower. The surplus of these remaining marks dulls the potential for someone to tell the story. However the magnitude of the serendipitous mark adds to the collective story so that it may unfold upon the marks inevitable evaporation. This is perhaps why we eulogize at death and not at birth.

Another artist working in Beijing who capitalizes on temporal public expression is Zhang Dali. In 'Demolition: World Financial Center, Beijing' (1998) he spray paints silhouetted heads on walls of buildings slated for demolition, only to come later with a chisel and knock out the shaped void. His and the aforementioned artists' stories involve illuminating the unseen and expanding the longevity of memory.

After completing the first Candalism I realized how long it takes to drip wax (probably about 5 minutes per artifact). It's not in fact a long period of time. It is more of an arduous period of time; a time consisting of kneeling on a hard and dirty surface, generally at the footstep of many a drunkard's pissing spot from the previous night. So if you can bear incredible stench you may have a career in this field.

While dripping the first Candalism on avenue B in Alphabet City I also realized that my body language took on a different context. I transitioned away from the typical on-guard tagger posture and into a prayer pose. The nature of working with the wax and at ground level reduced me to kneeling. Instantly bystanders mistook me for an individual in prayer or mourning and passed without a whisper or inquisitive remark.

The obviousness of kneeling alone while hovering above a lit candle derailed my project at the very beginning. I knew from that moment I wanted to include some form of prayer and religious iconography to theatricalize the procedure. As quoted by Robert Cooper from *Landscapes of Light: An Anthology of Prayers*, "[T]he attention required by creativity is not simply an illuminating parallel to prayer. It can be prayer in itself. The true artist not only looks, but sees - and this deep looking is a spiritual activity."

The intersplicing of Graffiti and Religion is a quite easy metaphor to make. Both tend to believe their path is a righteous path and above all a pure one. They both follow ritual behavior patterns, worship in certain places, read certain texts, and can recite these texts. Beginning to understand the similarities I decided to not just create temporal wax offerings but to perform a sermon where I would read the text off the wall as one would recite a benediction. Strangely enough I could recall from memory various prayers from going to Catholicism in the 4th grade. It was odd knowing something could be so embedded within a person that they could recite it verbatim many years later.

Juxtaposing graffiti and Roman Catholic prayer I remixed "Our Father" to develop into "All Writers". I used this prayer as the benediction when I visited the doors.

Generally, I would begin by stating, "In the name of the Kings, the Toys, and the Moldy Growth." I would then kneel before the door and recite the verse while beginning scandalizing the ground beneath me. It was from this point that I began to merge with the work of Caedron Burchfield (a.k.a. The Minister of Propaganda) who would deliver the Manifesto while I continued dripping the wax relief.

All Writers (conversion of 'Our Father')

Our writers who art on walls, drippy be thy name. Thy famedom come, thy race is run, by police, rabid dog, and rival crew. Give us this day our mops so full and forgive us our trespasses as we cross out those who trespass against us. And lead us not into bad

hand styles, but deliver us from deliverance.

-Na'mean.

Hail Markers (conversion of 'Hail Mary')

Hail markers full of pigment. The hand is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst writers and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, indelible. Holy markers, mother of streaks, pray to get over, now and at the hour of our buff.

-Na'mean.

Together we crafted a spectacle, transforming everyday nooks and crannies into street temples. We serenaded the tags off the wall and into a verbal prayer. When complete we drifted the neighborhood to find the next temple in waiting.

In 'Christ is the Morning Star' by Robert Cooper he draws a parallel stating, "[T]he idea of liturgy as "performance" - as a type of theatre - is not new, and it should suggest to those responsible for it that there are things they can learn from performance artists through observation and personal contact. So, look for opportunities to involve performers in imaginative liturgy: they can encourage and help the Church in the challenging task of creating worship which involves action as much as words."

Exemplifying this is Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping. For close to a decade the Reverend has been exorcising Starbucks and Preaching at Wal-Mart's in an attempt to use parody to uproot what he sees as the enemy: Consumerism. As fanatic as it may seem his passionate sermons have lead him to preach at rallies across America and to the creation of his recent film, 'What Would Jesus Buy'.

Although inspiring for his contemporaneous gospels and knack for playing the part, the Reverend's Town Crier approach differs from my own. Instead of calling attention to a problem I try to illuminate an underground social network. I visit the door just as Rev. Billy visits the Mall, except while he executes on a public level I operate on a private one. My performances are in the vein of actual prayer from the perspective of the

prayee not the preacher. Tranquillness hovers throughout the intimate moment of Candalism while quite the opposite is felt with the Rev. However, above and beyond, we both share extreme common license on a re-appropriation and devirginizing of the gospel vernacular.

Pilgrimages

Gauging by a completely different context, my Candalism pilgrimage would never have been conceptualized and realized if it were not for the high-volume of graffiti on New York City doors combined with my personal intrigue for vindicating the rationale behind such marks. The marriage of supply to belief is an important component to the idea of a pilgrimage. This is most important because one cannot begin such an endeavor without a tremendous amount of faith in what one is doing. Muhammad, Jesus, and even to a lesser degree, Elvis Presley imbued people with so much conviction for a particular way of life that those individuals would cease to flow with physical society and be challenged to search for answers completely differently. Some went on to Mecca, while others went to Graceland.

In contemporary times the term pilgrimage is unassociated to religion and instead paired with powerful leaders and/or celebrity. The Mausoleum of Lenin in Red Square saw the first secular pilgrimage only to be trumped by capitalist ventures such as Disneyland, Graceland, and Burning Man (yes, Burning Man is all about revenue now too). It was reported by the Bureau of Land Management that over 47,000 people visited the week-long creative free-for-all in the Black Rock Desert last summer (2007).

To some degree, members of every major religion participate in pilgrimages. Many individuals have embarked on sacred journeys in search of the truth in an attempt to leave the facts of the world behind. But what is the truth? For some, it's a communion with gods and/or goddesses, others have political motives, and some begin go on pilgrimages because of tradition. While most people conceive of the trip as

geographical, it is equally, if not more important to envision the travel as a traversing of the mind. It is during prolonged periods of time, such as during pilgrimages that one has the solitude to be introspective in order to find divinity or, at least discover a new perspective. Whatever the impetus, the prototypical pilgrimage is a spiritual voyage to various places of specific importance.

The top pilgrimage places from antiquity are, in no particular order: Karnak (Egypt), Thebes (Egypt), Kurukshetra (India), Delphi (Greece), Epirus (Greece), Ephesus Temple of Diana (Turkey), Baalbek (Lebanon), and Jerusalem (Israel). Pilgrims of Judaism visit the last, where they pray to the Wailing Wall. Christians travel to sites related to Jesus, the Apostles, Saints, Christian Martyrs, and the Virgin Mary. Buddhists on the other hand travel throughout India and Nepal to places visited by Gautama Buddha, while Islamic pilgrims follow the prophet Muhammad. The largest of which is the pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj), which every Muslim is expected to visit at least once in their lifetime. The contested largest Christian pilgrimage occurred on April 2, 2005 when 4 million people filled Vatican City for the funeral of Pope John Paul II.

The varying degree of locations for pilgrimages is proportionate to the plethora of immediate reasons to begin such pilgrimages. Gandhi's historic salt march would never have occurred if the British had not imposed a tax on salt; just as local New Yorkers would not go on Ghostbike vigil rides if fellow cyclists were not fatally struck by automobiles. Walking has been crucial since the dawn of time for commenting on human agency, politics, geography, and history.

Of the contemporary derives that have influenced my project are those by a barefooted Ma Liuming and a paint dripping Francis Alys. Ma Liuming, grew out of a 1990's generation of Beijing artists which began to dramatically push the envelope in China. His nude walk on the Great Wall contrasted the everlasting nature of the structure with the fleeting existence of the individual.

In Alys's exploration of walking as an action first and metaphor second he redrew the

famous "Green Line" that divides Palestine with countless punctured buckets of green paint. Born in Antwerp, Belgium, in the late 50's, he literally followed in the footsteps of Guy Debord and the S.I., incorporating wandering into numerous interventions throughout the world after honing the ability for walking to accomplish what words cannot. Of the words he does use to explain his work my favorite is, 'Sometimes something poetic becomes political and something political becomes poetic.'

People have also parodied performance artists. Stavros interpretation of an egocentric artist uses a Nokia phone and GPS to create 'Position Art'. During his walk of Rome he created The World is my Canvas, which was a continuous line creating the image of a footstep when viewed in Google Maps.

Self-Assessment

In hindsight, when I approach a project like Candalism I'm not totally sure what to make of it. I see it in numerous layers that cannot be extracted from one another without imploding the idea in on itself like the last move in jenga. I see the theater of the liturgy and the awkwardness of stumbling across someone, me, proselytizing on the subject of graffiti. I see the alternative approach at mark making with wax. I see, smell, hear, and feel the influences of people like Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping and Lawrence Ferlinghetti the esteemed Beat and bohemian poet who ended his poem 'Loud Prayer' with "...oh man."

Looking at Candalism as a culminated mass I can however see flaws where I would like to improve upon. First I would begin with the stenciling object. During critiques there were multiple comments to design the candle receptacle further and remove the image of Jesus. I agreed that this apparatus needed more specialization and ceremonial flare. Following the comments I photo-shopped Dondi White, a cult figure in the early NYC graffiti scene, into a silhouetted crucifix pose that I would adhere to the candle

container. This sacred object would contain the wax salvaged by Stuart Cudlitz from the Union Square clandestine memorial following the events of 9-11.

Certain faculty responded that I should incorporate more technology into the candle in order for it to be more efficient and instantaneous. Although there is always a need to tech-out projects, I felt that the analog sense of the piece served the context, as well as giving adequate time for Caedron to speak the benediction.

The one aspect of technology that I only began to cover was that of incorporating Candalism with the Internet. Using Google Maps, I entered all the locations and tags with their respective decoded meta-tags onto the Internet. From this point I remained flustered. At first I wanted to connect these locations in a project hypothetically called 'Tagmine', in order to see the line that was created. Then perhaps use this line to represent the tag of that specific neighborhood. However, the amount of Candalisms was too small (only 20 or so) and widely disseminated across New York City.

The next failed concept was to use the decoded words to create poetry. The relationship of the words to one another was ambiguous enough and easily malleable. I imagined an API scraping, meta-tag linking, haiku powerhouse. however lacked the technical know-how to further this concept.

The largest problem with Candalism has nothing to do with a 'what-if' scenario. I see the largest problem as the inability for the project to fully speak on its own in the aftermath. I think a large component of any projects success rate is for it to be succinct and self-sustainable. For example, if one goes to the MOMA and a painting lacks the description is it still as good? Or on a larger level, if one is at an ATM in a foreign country is the probability that you will be able to get cash out high or low? This last one may pertain more to one's bank account but you get my drift. The stand alone quality of any project is what society can sink their teeth into. The broadness of Candalism weighs against its ability to be memorable and/or viral.

In the future I would like to sharpen Candalism into a weapon of fast instruction. Since it is tailor made to illuminate the social networking of graffiti while disguised as ceremonial liturgy I hope that people will find the entrance point either comical or blasphemous. The project is archived using web 2.0 techniques on Google Maps, Flickr, blogs, and Instructables so that it will continue to be adapted, linked, and commented on.

As far as myself, I will continue to learn the traits of embedded narrative. My interest in place, networking, and the internet hopefully will take several notes away from Candalism and into the next project. Until then I will revise the work and continue performing. After all, the main teaching by the lord Graffiti is repetition, repetition, repetition...

Notes from March 26, 2008

At the MOMA exhibition dubbed 'Design and the Elastic Mind' is a piece at the entrance called Hektor which I saw a while ago on a graffiti site. It basically uses two motors to pull a spray can attached by cables to draw images. It works of x, y coordinates and can draw just about any preloaded image. What was interesting was that they used it to write out the title of the show in a very basic typeface. However instead of turning the can off when it finished a stroke and went to say, dot an "i" or cross a "t", it continued to make the mark, showing all the connectivity in the structuring of our alphabet. I saw this as a departure point to follow investigate the concept of ritual and linearity in urban environments.

Notes from March 28, 2008

Just cut this new stencil with the plasma-cutter at school. Wanted to test out new ways of mark making based around ritual. So far had a bit of a problem when pulling stencil away because it grabs the metal and some letters don't stay affixed to the ground. Tried the process again this morning down by the Morgan stop. However poured cold water over the stencil first hoping that the oil and water would repel one another. Worked a bit better but still need to make a few adjustments.

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