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“Us” and Experience: Finding Meaning in Street Art Through the Collective

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It is not often that I feel like a tourist in my own country. At Haji Lane, I see spray-painted murals littering the walls, some oversaturated with lurid colours and some an alluring monochrome, and tell myself, “What an anomaly this place is!”

Haji Lane sandwiches itself between unassuming streets, amidst rumbling construction sites and tour buses, almost hidden by the main road. Inside, a whole other world unfolds where foreigners unleash their open-mouthed wonder. I mirror their expressions as I walk. It is one of the few places where graffiti is not something to get rid of. Rather, their garish distortions of the English text create a homely insulation for the youth of Singapore to make a statement of themselves.

Metal pipes. Cement walls. Thin trellises with creeping vines. Everywhere. This street is their oyster.

This is property of SP PowerAssets Ltd. The pasting of notices or advertisements on this box is prohibited. Legal action will be taken against offenders. The electrical box may try, but it is no exception. It puts up a feeble fight against the stickers of Mobile Legends characters (a game I played obsessively as a kid), logos of old-fashioned rock bands that haven’t emerged mainstream in decades, and unintelligible text bleeding paint as if it were a fresh wound—a mosaic of magnificent proportions.

This outlandishness is dotted across the whole stretch of dwarf shophouses, a bustling hipster village emanating charm accompanied by an unobstructed view of the blue sky—as well as the Pan Pacific Hotel.

It really is quite an eyesore, erected like a skyscraper in the backdrop. It is a stark contrast to the youthfulness of Haji Lane, an unrelenting monolith of glass and a constant reminder that you are in fact in Singapore’s city centre. You are once again reminded that in this insulated paradise, creativity is allowed, yes—so long as it is within this designated area. When I

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realise now that those unassuming streets are unassuming because they are not within the legalised zone for street art, they become barricades. The green sign Haji Lane becomes the gate to a dam, holding back the endless innovation and individualism flowing within.

Electrical boxes a few streets ahead are barren, sleek, a few scratches away from the pristine standard-issue design. Not a speck of paint is out of place in those buildings, with walls that never knew the beauty of non-uniform colour. They are buildings, and that is where their similarities with Haji Lane shophouses end. And they span for miles and miles of terrain, the standard sight across Singapore.

Upon seeing this jarring disparity, I wonder, is Haji Lane really a beacon of creativity? Or is it a prime example of something more sinister—controlled individualism, which labels street art as "vandalism" outside the legal cocoon?

In a video documentary entitled "The 'Legal' Street Art of Singapore" (2019), VICE Asia explores the perspectives of two contrasting street artists in Singapore: Yip Yew Chong, who has been practising since 2015, and graffiti crew RSCLS, founded in 2006 by Zulkarnaen Othman (ZERO). While Yip looks back on his murals with fondness, believing that there can be peaceful coexistence with the law and the creativity in street art, RSCLS believe the opposite. They sidestep the law by spray-painting on scraps, which are unprotected property. "Even a small tag in Singapore means more than a huge mural I painted," ZERO says, showing respect to those who violate the law to establish individualism and portray an authentic self. RSCLS introduces viewers to an expansive mural depicting "the dark side of history". Their leader's exasperation at how the mural is slated for removal for its portrayal of a controversial event hints at how censorship has stifled the creative scene, including any meaningful message it aims to send through the medium of graffiti. Meanwhile, Yip works within the regulations to create works that reflect Singapore's rich history and finding meaning by evoking nostalgia.

Through these two vastly different perspectives, we get a nuanced view on the local street art scene, and creativity as a whole. While the law definitely has its drawbacks, one can opt to collaborate with official institutions to make their creations known. However, in reality, the process to gain official permission is likely to be lengthy and tedious, which sets a high barrier to entry for just the ability to indulge in this art form. Depending on the location, one must submit a formal application to the National Parks Board (NParks), or any other relevant authority. Simply having a hobby and a creative vision isn't enough to gain official approval. Thus, to these artists, controlled individualism is salient in our society, and if the artists want their artworks to be seen and heard, they have to go through the tedious application process.

But is this true of just Singapore, or is this a universal fault line shared by all governing authorities? The journal article "Limiting Law: Art in the Street and Street in the Art", Tatiana Flessas and Linda Mulcahy (2016) narrate the challenges to the long-standing view that street art should be classified as "vandalism". They highlight that "the expectation that [street art] is produced *illegally* is part of its essential identity" positing the view that part of the appeal of street art quite possibly lies in its illegal nature, echoing RSCLS' opinion. However, there is more to it than meets the eye. "There is no reason to use law to legitimate art". Street art depends on passersby, artists, and other actors in the community, being inherently collaborative; this makes art difficult to confine, let alone categorise by the law. Flessas and Mulcahy (2016) therefore posit that street art should exist without legal disruptions, as they risk oversimplifying its complex value.

The law and street art do not have a straightforward, diametrically opposed relationship. While the law suggests street art should be labelled as vandalism, this article highlights how we do not have to confine our evaluation of art and creativity through the simple lens of the law. It expands my question by bringing attention to how street art is, at its core, an *experience.* It is the reaction, rumination and emotion of people who respond, and add to, the artwork, which changes over time with the nudge or help of an array of strangers coming together to create a mosaic of their own. This shared experience makes art stands on its own, liberating itself from the confines of how it is perceived by the law.

I believe RSCLS are right to quote the communication theorist Marshall McLuhan in saying that "the medium is the message"—the vehicle of the message is just as crucial as the message itself. The very existence of the law, which dictates that all graffiti outside legal bounds is destined for removal, connotes the idea that not only is creativity obstructed, the messages that communicate through it are also obstructed, messages that want to reach its audience which is the greater public. This is how the law exerts control not just on creativity, but voice. Hence, Flessas and Mulcahy (2016) advocate for a broader evaluation of what makes street art valuable and meaningful. If we were to agree that graffiti is innately a medium of defiance, of rebellion against the rules, we would be forsaking the murals in beloved Chinatown which do nothing but exist as beautiful documentations not only of our painful past, but also the struggles of our ancestors for the sake of our liberty and freedom.

Thus, what gives creativity value has never been the artists themselves. Nor has it been the labels deeming it beautiful, crude, ingenious, "rebellion", or "vandalism". Even the term "controlled individualism" is merely the trappings of our insistence on constructing value out of art and its surroundings. Where there is law, there is creative rebellion. Where there is no law to

spin meaning out of art, still, we rely on nostalgia - sentiments, a recollection of emotions and experiences, what is important to us, and what we desire in the past that allow us to make sense of the present and what is to come.

Therefore, what gives creativity value is *us.* The greater audience. The hivemind that seeks to manifest meaning from our volatile environment—be it contributing to graffiti by tacking stickers on an electrical box and calling it an experience, or even painstakingly spending hours on a mural only to have it removed for straying off the socially-acceptable path. These different ways to interpret the creative scene are just emblematic of a deeper human instinct: *to make meaning.* Graffiti is just a manifestation of this.

Bionote

Wu Chloe is a Psychology undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She is deeply interested to understand art more deeply and to fathom the human mind.

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