

**The Pictures on the Walls:
Understanding and Defining Street Art Narratives of Delhi**

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by

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For Didā, Dādu and Jethu.

Introduction

On the Hermeneutics of Seeing

The very idea of the beginning of visual perception must start with an account of how one encounters the 'visual' in everyday life. It must start with the personal because each viewer is unique in his or her perception. In spite of the constant reiteration and regurgitation, each articulation is somehow different. Beyond the basic structural formulae that language and limited vocabulary allow us, there are finer nuances of expressions that keep each string of ideas uniquely structured, finding its place in a body of thoughts like a fingerprint or a DNA strand among the infinite samples made of the same basic units of proteins and telomere. Despite the approaching saturated homogenisation (of popular culture) through different media, the visual mosaic of the world expansively inspires some amount of speculation as to why or why not some things should be looked at with intent. The training of the mind evolves gradually when one chooses to seriously *peer* into the stuff that has caught their eyes. Mindless glossing over innumerable visual data constitutes the first steps towards an art viewing tendency in an age that is experiencing an explosion of information and images.

The first thing that strikes regarding the 'visual' is light. Light plays the most important role in the visual. This is the foundation of any visual practice. Needless to say, the entire realm of visual media depends on the manipulation of light. How to capture and shape lights/shades in pigments and spectra lead to the plethora of formal curiosities that have dawned on mankind. The other tendency is the desire to record, to create memories out of the many things that we see. Thus the exploration of media on which a visual record must be imprinted becomes significant. While it will be unsafe to ponder on the questions of the agency that one has, to filter out what or what not to see, it is often observed that beyond the physiological inhibitions of seeing, it is almost impossible to unsee what the eyes have encountered. In this way the current state of art production has become extremely ocularcentric. (Rose 2011: 7) Whether or not one can remember or recall is quite another question. Evading that debate, I would like to assume that here the crux does not lie in the ability to recall, rather on the manner of it. Each person with his or her limited agency has the mobility which allows him or her to negotiate the continuous supply of visual matter through sense perception of space and their possible discourses in time. In other words, each fragmented image is site, shape and time specific. (Bakhtin 1981: 84)

In order to create a meta-discourse one needs to conform to certain existent norms of discursivity or sites in this case. Making and breaking of images is consciously articulated through exercises in reproduction. That is how one stumbles upon the varied matters that come across as unprocessed data which are open to interpretation/analysis/re-production. Wordsworth's stumbling upon the daffodils (1807) in wonder or Plath's meditations on the tulips (1961) in sickness adhere to the narrative legitimization of visual processing that creates art in the first place. Their poems are accounts of a transformation or elevation of objects, otherwise mundane, laden with 'everydayness', into a realm of signification through semiotic meditation. The macroscopic projection of the cluster of daffodils as a spatial signifier places the form of the flower into an aesthetic discourse of awe and wonder. Much of Romantic art and poetry operated on that principle, whereas Plath's Tulips are a microscopic projection of the sickness and pain through visual mediation between the fetishistic significations that she imposes on the flower. It is the modern interaction of the Romantic iteration between the visual presence and a state of mind that creates the layers of meaning in objects and space. "Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. / Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in." (Plath) The continued layering and piling of data creates the palimpsestic text that needs to be teased in order to facilitate the process of meaning making. In Latin *texere* means 'to weave'. Hence, the derivation of the layers of the visual texts creates space for newer analytical methods to be tried and experimented with; a deconstruction or unweaving. Marshal McLuhan, said, "We approach a time when the total human situation must be considered as a work of art" (qtd in Russell & Gablik 12). What it implies is precisely what the Pop Art phenomena of UK and US engendered within their very discourse. Happenings, installations and graffiti from the very mundane everyday existence created fragmentary narratives which classical art would have condemned. The visual methodologies of the Pop managed to strip the deification off Art to make it readily accessible and connectible to the untrained viewers. While this notion can be debated, there have been obvious contradictions in the process. The objective of Pop was never to create meaning as much as to create an assortment or collage of objects as visual quotes that one can or need not meditate upon. That in turn made the topic so obscure that obvious theoretical haze blurred the entrance to accessibility, let alone analysis. However, Pop art created a discourse which never went out of fashion. The intention of this project is to variously locate it in my study of Wall Arts as a possible entry point.

Martine Irvine in his 2012 essay “The Work on the Street” says: “Street artists have broken the wall system even further by including the social *intramuros/extramuros* partitions as part of their subject matter. Public spaces and city walls have become a heuristics laboratory for experimentation and discovery, the results of which are brought back into studio art making, and vice versa. For many artists today, making new art is not only about negotiating with ‘art history’, but about engaging with the history of every mark, sign, and image left in the vast, global, encyclopaedic memory machine of the city.” (17) This memory machine is the ever growing network of archives and databases of street images that take the Lyotardian prediction of “computerised societies” and expand on it. It is a theoretical double bind of understanding the futility of closed spaces in terms of art visibility against the changing nature of space itself due to extensive virtualisation of the same. All the virtual three dimensional mapping activities with 360° view cameras, by the “MNCs” (for example Google Map, Street Views and Art Project) validate this fact. However the upside of such activities result in the solid democratisation of art itself that Berger hoped.

The position of street art as part of visual art logically follows the Pop methodology (the reverse, however, is seen in case of Basquiat during his prolific period of activity in the 1980s where he imports street in Pop) in creating a visual universe that Irvine talks about in his essay. He discusses the present situation of the world of the art as post-‘everything’: “It’s a form at once local and global, post-photographic, post-Internet, and post-medium, intentionally ephemeral but now documented almost obsessively with digital photography for the Web, constantly appropriating and remixing imagery, styles, and techniques from all possible sources.” (17) This condensed statement makes a general observation on ‘art’ as a category of human activity intervening with the “chronotope” (Bakhtin 84) in all the generations. Has not this been the method for most of the artists from all disciplines through different ages? At any given temporal moment in history, artists would try to make utmost use of the available resources, trying to explore the boundaries of perception (sometimes resorting to intoxications) and articulation (exploring new media) of human understanding of the universe and each other, through their methods which inevitably take technology into account. This resulted in the ‘ever-present’ (Gebser 1985) newness of forms and content of art through newer techniques (Latin *techne* means craft) that went in the cyclical process of invention, intervention, reinvention and reiteration. Chris Jenks (1995), as explained by Gillian Rose (7), says that Western culture has reached a point where the scopic regimes have equated *seeing* with *knowing*. The opinion of a person is indubitably considered as a view.

The idea behind such a social morphing, I think, is related with the common notions of a post-literate society where the decreasing attention span of an average human mind affects the way one interacts with the world. As rightly pointed out by the theorists, (ignoring the presence of the non-visual ‘Others’, like blinds and visually impaired persons) the growth of the mind has become increasingly visual. Hence, even in reading habits, graphic novels and comic books engage the minds of the children better than reading texts in black and white. With our generation in consideration, the web has changed the very perception of the visual. Due to the accessibility of the infinite stream of visual material by mere clicks and images on the screen through touch interface, the attention quotient and the affect has drastically changed the ways of visual consumptions. Street art is a form that has emerged out of this vaguely dialogic visual chaos. It is at once real and virtual. This is a logical extension of the earlier observation of street art being ephemeral. The problems of ephemerality, which constituted a major research problematic has now been dealt with, as Irvine mentions. Digital photography changes the way we look at the question of reach and mutability.

A humble, almost impossible process of theoretical engagement through personal observation is underway before it can be located in the extant canon of thoughts. The process is a tedious one and sometimes borders on irrelevance, irreverence or simply unconscious plagiarism, but it should be remembered that the process of read/write binary is continuous and infinitely diverse. And I say this being aware of our linguistic and normative thinking limitations. Bringing a ‘context’ to my present attempt, and interaction, is a possible way of understanding or interpreting the larger project of understanding Wall Art. A.K. Ramanujan in his oft quoted ‘informal’ essay “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” contemplates the paradox of ‘context’:

All societies have context-sensitive behaviour and rules – but the dominant ideal may not be the ‘context-sensitive’ but the ‘context-free’... Technology with its modules and interchangeable parts, and the post-Renaissance sciences with their quest for universal laws (and ‘facts’) across contexts intensify the bias towards the context-free. Yet societies have underbellies. In predominantly ‘context-free’ societies, the counter-movements tend to be towards context-sensitive: situation ethics... In ‘traditional’ cultures like India, where context-sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context. (54)

There is a similar paradox in case of the wall art present in India, specifically in the city of Delhi. The ‘street’ and its arts need to be read carefully keeping the contexts in mind. The existent *ways* of studies approach the streets through the lens of socio-anthropological or architectural studies which have culminated in the form of the much celebrated urban studies

as a discipline. These are ways which cannot be or not intended to be avoided since they provide the immediate foundation of the art's location and medium: the public domain. For a reader trained in literary studies it is quite a task to establish a method to the poetics of textuality of the streets avoiding/incorporating the influences of the existent tools. In order to understand the lyrical nature (or not) of street art, the beginning of this study must take a personal journey through the streets of Kolkata where I first encountered the 'pictures on the walls'. Owing to a rich and active political culture, the streets of Kolkata have no dearth of political graffiti and/or *dewallikhon*. Growing up in a neighbourhood where the walls have never been empty, some graphic or the other constitutes the first memory of wall art. Walls have always been a free canvas for people who put up adverts of their organisation, snippets of philosophical texts, local municipal information, and cultural icons ranging from writers, poets, freedom fighters, politicians to scientists and film-makers or simply cinema posters. It has always been too trivial a matter to be noticed or seriously taken into account. There have been hundreds of walls I must have traversed during my school days with utter indifference to their contents and messages.



Figure 0.1 Outside Presidency University Canteen in Kolkata, 2013. Source: Madhumita Biswas



Figure 0.2 Inside Presidency University Canteen, Kolkata, 2013. Source: Madhumita Biswas



Figure 0.3 A view of the Presidency Gym, Kolkata, 2013. Source: Madhumita Biswas

However, the transition into college made the most significant impact on my visual sensibility and revelations in terms of perceived space and wall art. The campus of the erstwhile Presidency College, now University, offered a fascinating space for expressions of student politics and a dream of a modern revolution. Though there were no spray cans to brighten up the dirt, the paintbrushes and posters never failed to leave an inch uncovered. In recent times there are more active and involved wall art cultures in the campus which was

missing around 2008-11, when I was a student. While the walls were subjected to the brushes, the canteens were subjected to torrential posters and paste ups where sometimes even the ceilings and lightbulbs were not left out. The canteen then metamorphosed into a five dimensional (the floors were excluded somehow) gallery of information and resistance. My curiosity began with an attempt to negotiate closed canteens as visual spaces and the outside wall surfaces creating a possibility of an intermural visual tension (purely based on aesthetics, in my understanding back then). Irvine observes:

The cultural wall system is capable of many reversals and inversions precisely because the major art and property regimes are defined by secular extensions of the rule of *intramuros* and *extramuros*. Within the institutional boundaries of the artworld system, we learn what the category of art is, what is excluded and excludable (the *extramuros*) and what is included and includable. Visibility regimes remain embedded in our material and symbolic wall systems like resident software always functioning as a background process. The artworld had a dream of art forms that subverted the received structures and boundaries, but never imagined that outsiders would actually be doing it. Dada didn't overturn the intramural idea of art; it required and presupposed it. Dada was the theory; street art is the practice. (18)

Much later, I encountered Hip-Hop graffiti while going through my own musical journey. For the first time with the tags and crosses on city walls, I thought the writings on the walls had no baggage of contents. It felt like a free expression in letters and colours that meant nothing significant. While I was still uncertain of my own responses, other uninformed people like me were quite opinionated about their vandalistic status and thoroughly condemned such 'messes' on the walls. However, there was no disagreement on the utility of the aesthetic embellishment to beautify the dirty walls, but nobody would take an active participation to read between the brushstrokes.

India is a country with a rich tradition of murals and other extramural arts. From the grand Buddhist frescoes and Mughal murals to the humble rangolis, alpanas and tribal wall art practices, from the rural and the suburbia to the various urban spaces, pictures on the walls always inform their viewers more or less about the dominant visual practices, political affiliations or sometimes the cultural collage of a neighbourhood or block. There are political messages, cartoons or cultural icons with lists of their achievements painted on the city walls. Not that the ambiguities of representation would be absent, but they always succeeded in drawing attention to the orientations of the sites and location. I found the walls to be immensely empowering in all the citizen activities that encompass human lives in India. John Berger observes in *Ways of Seeing* (1972): "Originally paintings were an integral part of the building for which they were designed. Sometimes in an early Renaissance church or chapel one has the feeling that the images on the wall are records of the building's interior life, that

together they make up the building's memory – so much are they part of the particularity of the building" (19)

Importing and expanding on Berger's words it can be argued that the same can be observed about the streets and localities of Delhi too. With a constant effort to evolve and reinvent the gallery space, the concept of intermural anxiety can be observed to be spilling out in a manner I have experienced in the account of my college days in Kolkata. The foundation of the street narrative lies in the lived space that Lefebvre and de Certeau pointed at. 'Walking' as an act establishes the tactic of a lived authority and power. Ley and Cybriwsky (1974) take up a similar argument and try to tease out the motives of the inner-city graffiti as the expression of territorial marking through the geographical segmentations by the gangs operating in the areas. They coin the term 'graffiti loner' as located within the parameters of understanding the 'graffiti king' who would leave a mark on an exotic space to claim geographical authority and/or marking his/her presence in the scene. The modern parkour practices too are a case of that theory in performance in a post-Hip-Hop world. In Delhi however, the practices are a little differently executed. The artists in the public domain are aware of the global response towards street art. However the situations are very different with the government having an ambiguous stance towards the practices on the walls. The executive system of the state, police for instance, is mostly clueless about its responses towards the street practices of the artists. With the all-pervading paranoia about terrorism active in the surveillance processes, they do not prioritise the art practices on the walls as a 'threat'. A little 'fine' can solve any messy situation at the ground level. However, for the bigger murals and commissioned works, proper permissions from the authorities are necessary. These authorities might be the municipal corporations or the owner of the walls themselves. Illegitimacy surrounding the import of Western graffiti styles is met with amused curiosity. The wall owners sometime take active interest in getting their walls 'painted'. Thus the countercultural citizen practice loses its significance of resisting the visual regimentation. It is devouringly appropriated in the visual collage of the already existent artefacts that cover wall spaces.

Articulating on the walls through various media establishes a more primitive desire to record for a public memory, a necessity to exist through drawing on the wall. The posters, paste-ups, mural and the graffiti that comprise the range of wall arts, have always been under direct public scrutiny and theorization since cave paintings. Berger says that *seeing* is never a

passive act such that the viewer is bound by a set of conventions and a history of growth in his/her engagement in visual practices. (7-10) For an 'untrained' viewer the street usually holds no importance through the lens of walls and the murals which would generally be ignored or glossed over due to saturated visual consumptions. Here the untrained viewer would usually mean a person not trained in visual methodologies. But even whenever an untrained viewer is prodded to respond to a picture that is present on the walls, engagement does not need to be extracted but can be expected, since walls are readily accessible to public visibility regimes. This was observed more than often during my field study. No one responded with a curt 'no comments'. However that would also be a response of sorts to everything else since the contents were hardly 'controversial'. But that is open to another debate as to what constitutes the boundaries of public acceptance or controversy in the Indian scenario. Every person would actively engage without so much of an exertion of 'sophisticated' understanding of the 'art/non-art' divide. I think the success lies in the crucial quality of engagement readiness of the texts and the readers/observers, which is harvested and extensively employed by the advertisement firms. Entertainment is necessary. 'Entertainment' derived from the Latin '*entre*', meaning 'in between' and '*tenere*', meaning 'to hold', is the key concept of visual arts. So, a reading can be facilitated if only one can be engaged first. The engagement with the considered text would facilitate the reading or responding. The narrative seems as chaotic as is sounds. The post-modern condition of a city like Delhi is further problematized by the heterogeneous nature of the city space which consists of urban-villages right in the middle of posh neighbourhoods, like the Hauz Khas village, Shahpur Jat, Khirkee Extension etc. The conglomeration of the antique monumental spaces stiling on the aspiration of a global façade creates a unique juxtaposition. The dream of 'glocalisation' in the evolving city spaces is an urban paradox that is abundant in India throughout different cities. If the future of art is as urban as Lefebvre says and David Pinder explores, then it is quite predictable that the future city would also become the hyperreal artistic projection of collective citizen art practices.

The aim of this project is to analyse and attempt a structural poetics of art on the walls in an Indian urban setting. The city of Delhi is the site to be looked at in this project counterpointing it with the dominant mural visual discourse of the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus and its vibrant political posters. The approach employed is descriptive discourse analysis of the visual texts collected photographically. The primary objective is to look at the meaning making processes of art in public spaces through trying to negotiate ways

of looking at art in Delhi. This study is based on the fact that graffiti and street art in Delhi have been steadily legitimised, institutionalised through extensive spatial negotiations and geographical co-opting by individuals, groups and organisations with significant socio-anthropological and ethnographic works to back up the research.

Certeau explains that the “panorama-city” (1984: 93) is a visual simulacrum which usually ends up being forgotten or misunderstood. The ordinary citizens live below the threshold where visibility begins. The scopic regime for the ordinary citizens begins at a place which does not have the disconnect of an elevated monumental perspective with a sublime objectivity. Therefore, the street practices are the qualifying markers of ‘interventional claim’ for citizen participation in a faceless authorial idea of a governmental regimentation. He theorised, with the example of the World Trade Centre, the optical nature of the knowledge that the urban agglomeration produces. A cluster of architectural authority dominates the scopic regime in a growing homogenisation process. The meaning of space becomes vertically aligned as the surfaces tower over an ambiguous idea of a horizon. Hence it is only logical that the attempt of the street interventions through the creative resistances of art and vandalism is a way of appropriating a visual silence that the city and its urban spaces tend to impose on the everyday lives of the ordinary citizens. There are various stages of the evolution of art perception till the time comes to formulate a vocabulary of street art that is the everyday way of seeping into the visual story telling methods of the ordinary citizens. The space which is an optical assertion provides an open text box to be engaged with, written and explored. Street art is therefore *woven* into the everydayness of the urban elan vital.

Great artworks, by virtue of reproduction, have lost the uniqueness of their meaning, says Berger, who cites the influence of Benjamin’s thinking in his formulation. The question is whether this can be treated as a possible crisis. The shift in the Hellenic museum space, a guarded vault of meaning, into an openly accessible, readily viewable open air gallery space, changes that crisis by changing the dynamics of position between the text and its readers. The equation of power reverses, with change in the transmission of meaning. However, the economic value of that meaning reduces from its prior status owing to the change in location. The online archives virtualize the gallery space further allowing remote access to the viewers. However, experiencing art in real time allows the signifying process take into account the mutability of art itself. Therefore the question arises whether the virtual galleries further challenge the notion of space as experienced and enunciated by the concept of Lefebvre’s

category of “Third Space” along with its “perceived” and “conceived” categories because virtualisation takes away the mutability of art which is also a factor in making it precious and coveted. It leaves lesser scope for the role of memory and reiteration for reproduction of art perception because of infinite image mongering, thereby reducing the anxiety of access through eidetic dilution.

Berger points out that in a painting there is no unfolding of time. The argument cannot hold true in case of street art. The most important role is played by the location in case of street art. The location with its innumerable interventions can constantly change meaning for each viewer at each passing moment thereby unfolding the time through gradual in situ deconstruction. The ephemeral nature, in addition to the unique visual conventions that the viewer employs, the lived environment, the art’s location, the weather and the intensity of light from either the sun or any other sources, pool in different modes of performance that the picture can portray.

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyses which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original. (Benjamin 220)

What meaning does reproduced art acquire in the absence of its original location? If a reproduction of the original is taken away from its sombre gallery settings to a lesser intimidating and cosy space of the home, what meaning does it acquire? Similarly, in case of public wall art the idea of gallery space is transformed from the ‘white cube’ or a protected enclosed legitimized space to an open residential or non-residential locality with the ‘art’ exposed to the natural and man-made interferences, what meaning does a picture accumulate or transmit? Does it change the perspective of the viewer from a beam like convergence of a static art, as Berger explains, to a constant flux of the location and its setting like a theatre performance? Indeed it might be so. The questions are unsettling in the case of a post-modern state of mind that Lyotard has addressed variedly. The problems of creating meaning are infinitely variable in the way perceptions are structured. Lyotard states that the post-modern comes before the modern can settle in. An idea in flux is always under the tension of composability. The making and breaking of the parts and the units of meaning is inherently established within discursivity. Each discourse might, or might not, be an amalgamation of

discrete fragments/arguments and also *be* a fragment itself of a larger more displaced or developed discourse. Therefore the sense of settlement and understanding that an established order of meaning provides is missing from a subject under construction. This is what Lyotard implied by the precedence of the post-modern over the modern art because both share a common objective of presenting the unrepresentable as he puts it. (1984:78) Only the artist has somewhat of a plan about the end result: the leitmotif. I say ‘somewhat’ because there are obviously innumerable factors beyond the control of the artist that will deter the object from its vision: the flux, the noise. This continuous deficit of a leitmotif in art is a substantial product of the age of information. With a computerised simulation of the art sphere, the perception of the wall as a concept is changing definitions and locations.

Baudrillard argued that postmodernity made it impossible to distinguish between the real and the unreal; images had become detached from any certain relation to a real world resulting in a scopic regime dominated by simulacra. The consolidation of this fact is brought about by the enunciation of the terms ‘post-internet’ and ‘post-medium’ attributed to the nature of street art, as argued by Irvine. In a meditative way, the wall has become the detached illusion of the everyday life that this post-literate urban lifestyle of microblogging has brought about, for instance social networking sites like Facebook employ “wall” as the technical term for the content page of web ‘site’. The detachment of the ordinary citizen through the mass hysteric obsession with the continuous updates and news feed can qualify the prophetic nature of *The Matrix* (1999) or even more accurately the humans on the “Axiom” space craft in Disney’s animation feature *Wall-E* (2008). Therefore Certeau’s citizen practices would very well be theories in virtuality realised in a dreamlike Lefebvrian “Third Space”. The constant data harvesting and mining that is being made possible with wearable technologies constantly challenges the scope of visual practices. The found objects or the readymade objects employed in Pop art practices may have already changed into found data and readymade data regimes. The street becomes redundant when things can get delivered at your doorstep even at the thought of your ordering it. That is what the databases and digital art collectives do, as stated by Irvine. The conception of space and the “urban” can safely evolve into the “virtual”, or in other words, the remainder of the ‘city’ as a concept in space and architectonics might just result in a digital ‘ruin’. Continuous research and development in wearable neuro-synaptic interfaces with machines may bring about a blur between real and unreal with examples like Oculus Rift, Google Glass, etc. With computer games like *The Sims* or *The Grand Theft Auto*, a positivist virtual appropriation of the

“urban” can be observed. In a setting produced on these parameters, the wall art is a much appropriated enactment of the way the “urban” is narrativised into citizen practices.

The “computerised societies” Lyotard talks about jeopardise the knowledge production in a variable of legitimations. This means the production of values in terms of meaning will heavily depend on the idea of legitimacy of data. The question, then, arises as to who approves and legitimises them. This suspiciously leads to the corporatisation of knowledge production. The fact is syncopated in this case because the major servers and data channels are owned by corporate giants like Google, Microsoft, Samsung and Apple, etc. which has evolved since Lyotard cited the example of IBM. (1984: 6) The value displacement of art that happened with the “age of mechanical reproduction” came to a fulfilment of prophecy with Lyotard’s observation of the IBM’s database. The database culture is something that drives the wall art/public art economy now as Irvine pointed out: “It’s a form at once local and global, post-photographic, post-Internet, and post-medium, intentionally ephemeral but now documented almost obsessively with digital photography for the Web...” (1) The artists have personal websites for graffiti, commissioned art and designs, for example Banksy’s portal: www.bankys.co.uk, Daku’s www.daku156.com or BOND’s www.truluv.de. Their archive of wall art creates a narrative of travels and exploration. Under the headings of their pieces, the location, and sometimes the time of composition take a huge role in describing the art. The social networking sites operate on an obscure economy of “likes” and “sharing” that lets the data pool remember the digital footprints of the end users while piling countless other photographs ready for virtual consumption. So, revoking Berger’s observation, it will be quite pertinent to ask about the position of the viewer in this bit-based holographic art economy. In the 1972 BBC series *Ways of Seeing*, Berger directly addresses the viewers in their living room referring to the gaze that they are employing towards the show as a narrow beam of convergence on their retina. However the displacement that happens with the choice of the video being uploaded to YouTube lets the viewer make a somewhat conscious choice of pausing and streaming it based on the availability of data connection. This is in a complicated harmony with the erstwhile situation of watching the show on TV. Nevertheless, Berger’s questions acquire newer layers of meaning as he suggests it would with the change of settings and the spectatorship. The ‘problems of choice’ in a complex consumer market affects the attention of the viewer due to ‘choice overload’. (Berg and Gornitzka 160) The visibility regime of the spectators of wall art also has to constantly negotiate with the choice of visual overload on the streets as the

advertisement visuals jumble with the street art that sometimes gets intentionally or unintentionally camouflaged over.

In Delhi, the overload of choices are brought about by the infinite visual object data and texts that can be indigenously found being present on the walls. The observers do not get a choice of filtering out what they might want to avoid looking at. The location of *art* among them is a sieving process. This turns around the propounded theories by subverting the western gaze of looking at art. The possibility of a Foucauldian gaze at the narrative is always already present in the equation of power between the works of art/non-art and their consumers. The urban streets embody more layers of meaning than the containment of the signified it proposes through immediate architectural rationale. The energy of the Delhi streets is paradoxical in nature as to the visual fatigue that it creates is due to the raw visual energy that it produces. It is the effect of the Lyotardian overview of the “society of the future”: “Thus the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games – a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institution in patches – local determinism.” (Lyotard xxiv)

The first chapter of this dissertation marks the entry to the Delhi street scene. The various forms and functions of the artists or writers, their politics of representation are discussed in passing, chiefly focussing on the idea of the import of the artistic traditions rooted in the west and the east. The chapter focuses on the art of Daku, a prominent (if not *the* most prominent) artist, trying to understand the politics of vandalism in the postmodern narrativity that is essential to the core of this mode of expression. Through the discussion of various works of Daku, the chapter essentially works towards defining the role of the artist as the protagonist in case of the appropriative art forms that struggle for visibility in the urban canvas. The artist is of utmost importance and the significance lies in his ability to transcend the boundaries of permission to create the seduction of defiance which is almost poetic in its appeal and practice. Yet, the chapter tries to examine the production narrative and the consequential problematics of affordability. It aims to look at the idea of space through the lens of the artist in successfully adapting it to the purpose of his pieces. It also looks at the difference that Daku creates through taking on an additional social responsibility of the artist which instead of undermining his reputation, increases his visibility and respect, ushering the conception of the post-graffiti in Delhi. The second chapter picks up from here. Instead of the

prior focus on the anonymity of the artist and the zealous defiance of the vandalistic approach of poetic seduction, the discussion in the second chapter takes a spatial turn where the intervention and the appropriation do not remain in the agency of the artist. The discussion evolves towards the understanding of space as mediated by a curatorial body. Organisational efforts, in the forms of outdoor festivals, indoor exhibitions, governmental persuasions and escalated interactivity, expand the scope of the genre of the urban art narrative. The curatorial function dictates the narrative of the second chapter in generating space as a concept and redefining the idea of gallery. The hybridity of space brought out by the multiplicity of the artists and their styles and influence sow the seeds of the postmodern framework in this chapter. The idea of the fragmentation and contradictions which would be evident by the end of the first chapter would be engaged here to theoretically tease out the ambiguities of the production narrative that is embedded in the idea of mediated visuals in the urban space. This problematic of spatiality in terms of visual politics of urban art will be discussed with the attempt to bring out a difference between the narrative of signification that is attempted in the first chapter against the spatiality of signification that is integral to the idea of curation and gallery. The third chapter tries to bring out the subversion of the agglomerated debates of the first and second chapter to understand the politics of visibility in an already legitimised enclosed space of the campus of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The visuals in the public domains of the campus are dominated by political propaganda posters put up by student bodies as part of the annual electoral ritual. This chapter aims to import the arguments of the previous chapters and possibly expand the scope of theoretical entanglements to argue the simulated nature of both the art and the space in the campus enclosure proposing the possibility of three types of narratives that are assignable to the urban arts of Delhi.

Chapter 1

Drawing on the Edge: The Story of the 'Robber'

We begin with the idea of a fluid category that tries to establish an order of *seeing* art in the streets of Delhi. The assumption of graffiti being incorporated into the purview of art is the foundation of our discourse. Khurana's (2014) socio-anthropological observations in her dissertation legitimise graffiti and street art in the realm of public arts of the city of Delhi. Her key argument traces the emergence of the locally appropriated global street scene. She studies the influences of subcultural public art practices particularly in the graffiti and street arts present in Delhi through Hip-Hop importations and cultural appropriations. Her project tests the tools of subcultural studies employed in the prevalent western readings of street art. She arrives at the observation that the graffiti on the walls of Delhi has transcended the subcultural niche into a legitimised process that dissolves the art/non-art binaries. She explores the cultural gentrification that defines the nature of graffiti as a formed expression and takes into account the knowledge of most of the artists like Daku, Yantr, Anpu, Ranjit Dahiya, Harsh Raman, and others about art traditions and the architectonics of the urbanscape through formal training in visual arts, engagement with advertisement and design firms. After having arrived at this position she advances into an anthropological reading of the architectural binaries of different locations of Delhi. The Hauz Khas Village, Shahpur Jat, Paharganj, etc., she observes, are paradoxical spaces that facilitate a dialogue between modern and antique architecture. She looks at the gallery exhibitions of street art, arriving at the conclusion that street art in Delhi has achieved a sense of Bourgeoisification departing from the revolutionary aerosol subcultural attitude to a conscious artistic form that has appropriated the global artistic register into modern Indian artistic discourse. My project takes her study as a point of departure and advances towards a possibility of understanding the arts on the walls as a postmodern textual practice. It arrives at an inferential culmination of different artistic movements into contemporary art practices through the common linkage of the walls as a formal agglomeration of site-specificity in the course of textual production defining Delhi as a postmodern city.

The scope of this chapter is to look at the various graphic arts present on the city walls, trying to trace the objective approach of Pop, Avant-Garde, Renaissance, Bazaar, Performance, Fusion and miscellaneous other artistic traditions, understanding and possibly charting an evolution through attempts at analysing and narrativising the wall arts of Delhi.

The narrative modes of description which are essential to the understanding of wall art must emerge out of looking at the art present on various walls in different locations. The modern street art in India is a paradox. While it is an accepted Western import, “essentially as a form of youthful expression giving voice to their (writers’) spirit of rebellion generally experienced at their age”, it is also a ““happening, high class, fashionable’ art form practiced by the rich kids who can afford to spend a ton of money in spray cans which are unfortunately highly expensive in India.” (Bordewekar, 2012) Clubbed with the Hip-Hop sensationalism, graffiti came to India and made an impact on the visuals of the wall narrative. Rising from the fringe of visual practices, aerosol graffiti has never been taken seriously, until recently, as a movement in India as it has impacted different parts of the world. The walls have always been the marginal yet powerful canvas in a modern city, ones that have been readily ignored but never quite unnoticed. They are the unclaimed public property belonging to everyone even if privately owned in some cases. However, in the modern cities the walls play a significant role in democratising art and other visual practices. Walls being the primary accessible surface for expression by regular citizens to advertisement firms in India, texts never fail to appear and be written over on the walls. However, these messages are often painted or written with the motive of selling products through modes of advertisements. From cement companies, dentists, astrologers, various construction materials, to coaching institutes and private tuitions, cinema posters, the walls are the raging battleground for occupation of the visual market territory to sell products even before online marketplaces emerged in the country. The walls are often engaged by those who know their market base would not constitute highly educated spectators who might reluctantly engage in the semiotic analysis of the content texts they produce. The addressee of these visuals is mostly ordinary people with basic understanding of icons and ability to associate them with brands of products. Their function operates on the ability to equate visual congruencies. The products in their tangible consumability would manufacture the layers of signified put into the colours and shapes of the adverts. Thus the visual economy of the pictures on the wall functions on the basis of product recognition rather than art viewing tendencies per se. The readability in average situations is kept in mind while coming up with adverts because the motive is not to make the spectators watch and think but rather get enticed to buy the product advertised. Street art too operates from a similar principle with a different consequence. In his conversations with Shailaja Tripathi of *The Hindu* in July, 2012 Daku explained: “I did a Daku at a Saket crossing while some construction work was going on. I am sure they wouldn’t have been able to decipher it at once but when they did they must have smiled; they must have wondered

who could have written it. Daku is like a brand... there are different brands you see across the city and they get registered in your mind... Similarly, Daku can also get there. The whole exercise is to make people think.” (Tripathi 2012)

In a tactical predisposition of this sort, street art makes a thin mark of presence in the urban settings of Delhi. The mark, sadly, tends to get lost in the crowd of walls already cloyed with abundance of visual presences. If we take our case to a rural Indian setting, we would have peeling bricks, dung cakes and their dried impressions pervade the adverts of agricultural items, equipment or anything else unless initiatives are taken to engage the population in artistic activities and conscious visual cultural rituals.¹ The coexistence is remarkable because it totally decentres the impact of the visuals and denies the gravity of the western theories of the visuals and gaze into the paradigm of art appreciation and *looking* in general. The gaze that has been carefully constructed by the studies of the Renaissance paintings and the 17th Century English Landscapes of Lorrain, Constable and Gainsborough in situ would fail to read through the clutter of visual ‘dirt’ and post-colonial aesthetics of poverty and muck. We need different tools as Kajri Jain has suggested in her work on the Bazaar/Calendar Arts of India: “We [also] had a strong suspicion that the spare, streamlined, internationalist design idiom we were schooled in was inadequate to the task of “communicating” to the constituencies in need of these crucial “social messages.” (2007:4) This was expressed in the context of the study of Indian calendar art, establishing a category of Bazaar art. Yet, with the modern street art practices that have emerged in the city, there’s a ready culmination of the erstwhile traditions. As Irvine significantly points out the contemporary situation of street art being ‘deliberately’ ephemeral and ‘obsessively’ documented for the web, we begin to understand the post-modern nature of artistic innovations and approach that aim simultaneously at expanding the variables of space and shrinking the modes of occupation through digital photography. From my observations in the street, it can be argued that the basic foundation of the Lyotardian ‘computerised societies’ stem from an advancement of the Benjaminian mechanical reproducibility married to the idea of continuous innovation and reduction of icons. What I mean is that the data channels of the online archives would create a provision for permanence that art aims for while providing a

¹ <http://www.wochikochi.jp/english/special/2012/05/india-waf.php> – “The WAF (Wall Art Festival) is an art festival held at a school in a quiet rural area across the bridge from Bodh Gaya, and celebrates its third year this February. It all started in 2006 when 50 Tokyo Gakugei University students donated money they made from working part-time jobs to an NGO in India to construct a new school building for the Niranjana Public Welfare School in Bihar.” – It is an organised mural and other arts festival that has become a tradition of sort in that place.

scope for the ephemerality which is at the very core of street art. While the nature of the memory mechanisms and digital storage spaces contracts the physical volume of data, the current street artists can afford a deliberation due to their ever-present remixability. The curator of St+Art Delhi, Giulia Ambrogi, in a personal interview (2015) explains that this is not the age of lofty notions of ‘masterpieces’. One cannot afford to maintain the certainty of location/medium (which, according to her, are equable terms), exhibition space and the haloed authenticity of the ‘piece’ without photography. The purpose of photography is integrally both evidential and archival in the case of street art. The artist can afford to paint and leave a piece because of the assurance of recordability and reproducibility that the new digital media provides. This provides an entry point into the developing artistic idioms of the blurring intermural differences. There is no purity of styles but a remix or pastiche of influences that overcame the temporal boundaries of style to converge and be performed at the commonality of site-specific interventions in a postmodern space. In the words of Nicholas Mirzoeff from his essay “What is Visual Culture?” in the *Visual Culture Reader* (1998), he argues “Postmodernism is visual culture”:

Postmodernism has often been defined as the crisis of modernism, that is to say, the wide-ranging complex of ideas and modes of representation ranging from over-arching beliefs in progress to theories of the rise of abstract painting or the modern novel. Now these means of representation seems no longer convincing without any alternative having emerged. As a result: the dominant postmodern style is ironic: a knowing pastiche that finds comment and critique to be the only means of innovation. The postmodern reprise of modernism involves everything from the rash of classical motifs on shopping malls to the crisis of modern painting and the popularity of the Nickelodeon repeats ... the postmodern is the crisis caused by modernism and modern culture confronting the failure of its own strategy of visualising. In other words, it is the visual crisis of culture that creates postmodernity, not its textuality. (4)

The veracity of this observation will be unfolded in this chapter eventually through the analysis of certain selected texts gathered from different parts of the city of Delhi. Delhi, one of the largest metros of the world, is unlike other metros, in terms of street scene. The proliferation of street art has taken place over the past few years, approximately since around 2008. Delhi is unique in its architectonics and compositions on/of the walls because Delhi is a culmination of colourful socio-political history and modern day urban poverty pitted against the pressurised globalisation dictated by the new rich economy garbed under the veneer of middle class sensibility or gentrification as Khurana (2014) has rightly explored. The underdeveloped pockets and slums are the contributing clusters of aesthetic hybridity and a conscious invisibility maintained to please the scopic regime of the new rich, the growing urban middle class and the tourists in the Indian capital city. There is a clear demarcation of the economic decorum that the unsaid rule of thumb helps channelling the citizens through

metro rail and other public transports on one hand, and produces impenetrable traffic jams of posh cars and chauffeur driven luxury coaches on the other. The paradox of economic disparity is extremely visual and almost poetic in creating a narrative that can be experienced in comparing the scenarios of congested Old Delhi locales against planned, prim and proper New Delhi avenues. The charm of antiquity keeps the spilling population, poverty and associated issues as perpetually animated exhibitory plates for the tourists to gaze and extract the thrill of experiencing the urbane third world, a gaze that produces something in the likeness of *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) to be catered to curious first world viewers. Among this clutter a hypothetical projection involving a graffiti writer from 1970's Bronx or Harlem would be highly intriguing because the motive to break the uniform visual monotony would be rendered purposeless and out of place in creating a visual dissention, where the authorities would try to keep them away from the public properties (Silver & Chalfant, 1983). Instead, it might turn out to be a paradise, a "heuristic laboratory" for art experimentations as Irvine (2012) reflects, in terms of form/location binary. The visual dissension of the street art is an almost futile exercise here in Delhi because the city lacks a sanitised, disciplined and uniform citizen practice that might be existent in a more organised first world metropolis such as New York, London or San Francisco. As Khurana (2014) has also observed in her research, the authorities of Delhi have a mixed response to the graffiti practices since the line of distinction between vandalism and art is blurred and often confused. In a country dealing with the issues of urban sanitation and planned mobility², the development narrative has hardly any space for vandalistic counter narratives. Every bit of imported or local counter-culture or subculture gets quickly absorbed and incorporated in the dominant narrative practices owing to the developing phase of the nation as a whole. The contemporary artists are aware of this fact and therefore they find the environment conducive for their explorations, experimentations and facilitations. The wall arts in Delhi do not fall into the category of resistance art that would have made sense in a situation of a political unrest as Julie Peteet observes about the graffiti of Intifada:

Graffiti, and the ways in which they were read, went far beyond a binary of occupied and occupier ... As a cultural device in a communicative process, graffiti fashioned and spoke to multiple audiences. The violence that surrounded their production and reading highlighted the notion that texts themselves are sites of conflicted readings. This means as well that both reading and writing are culturally and historically situated social practices. (1996: 140)

² <http://moud.gov.in/swachchbharat>- This site provides a comprehensive plan about urban sanitation and proposed structures of planned mobility that are going to be adopted in the process of governance.

The text as a site for conflict is a major field of enquiry for this project. The spaces of the modern city are a uniform text of the urban citizen lives and narratives in developed nations as I have stated. Hence, the conflict of the “ocularcentrism” (Jay 1988, 1993) fleshes out curiously in the case of Delhi. The centrality of the postmodern condition of textuality/visuality, in spite of Mirzoeff’s argument weighing in for the modern visual crisis, depends heavily on the reading ability or general engagement habits of the consuming citizens, where the attention span of the spectator/reader has reduced significantly due to innumerable distractions of modern life and technology. Also, the texts are non-conducive for the general public in terms of the metaphors that they employ. Yet the presence of the texts on walls that are traversed during daily commutes would have the visual incantatory effects which the artists aim for. It is the comment/critique based dialogic nature of the art that creates the environmental art function, an ethical stand that the artists have to continuously negotiate in Delhi. Margo Thompson’s observations in her book *American Graffiti* (2009) on the “Graffiti After Post-Graffiti” keeping FUTURA 2000’s art practices, seems to be in support of the development of my argument:

Their comments reflected a set of concerns about the function of art and judgment of its quality. They reacted to the comprehensive questioning of modern art’s critical autonomy that had begun with Andy Warhol and Pop Art and continued into the 1980s with the free mingling of art, kitsch, and careerism in East Village galleries. Kuspit and McEvilley resisted these shifts whereas Ramirez-Harwood and Lewis, and the graffiti artists, embraced them. Contrary to current trends, FUTURA’s *Artforum* critics insisted that art must do more than merely express the self, that it must be innovative rather than decorative, and that it must not be overly concerned with the art market. FUTURA’s paintings fell short on all counts. (194)

The fragmented attention span of the readers, on the other hand, which is an important consequential characteristic of the postmodern condition, also explains certain other phenomena in literature, society and culture. For example, the development of the T20 style of cricket from the earlier Test format, or the increase in the popularity of microblogs and listicles in the social networking paradigm from the earlier conventional format of blogs or larger articles, all point to the ‘contraction’, a declining desire for prolonged engagement with anything in modern urban human beings, additionally because of the piling options of data consumption against the limitations of time. Of course, this observation is open to debate, but the general trend of consumption tends towards the Lyotardian contraction and miniaturisation of technology. The instant gratification process which results from the constant negotiations with modern urban life, leaves very little space for non-industrial, non-utilitarian engagements. Current street art practices in Delhi counter, as well as conform to this notion by placing art in the space of everyday life that citizens can engage while giving a choice to interact with it at a personal level, while employing metaphors that remains hard to access. So, the accessibility is

both facilitation and a hindrance in the sense that it gives a chance for instant readability while keeping an obscure possibility open for deeper meaning making which would require some sort of specialisation. It is a double-edged sword which pervades the global post-graffiti wall art scenario: “The prominence of the tag betrayed graffiti writers’ primary motivation: to express themselves by asserting their presence against the anonymity of urban life and their disenfranchisement as working class, youth, and minorities.” (Thompson 197)

The graffiti which has been appropriated into the schema of artistic topography among the practitioners of aerosol graffiti here in Delhi has no major sense of conflict against an established visual/textual regime. It becomes part of the many layers that are existent, with a prospect of getting written over not just by other graffiti writers but by almost anybody who plans to engage with the walls. In that sense the appropriation by the artists follow the Pop art logic which culminates various movements in art locking them in a battle for contemporaneity. For many artists it becomes the entry point into the commercial artworld, similar to the career trajectory of Jean-Michel Basquiat. It has evolved into a form of meta-marketing tactic of artistic capabilities of the various designers and graphic artists who, unlike Basquiat, want to make a transition from the studios to the streets to gain visibility, acceptance and more commissioned work. “The ‘criminal art’ of graffiti could arise in its present form only from a crisis in the situation of art objects as commodities: while graffiti emerge as a statement of this conflict on the level of the culture of the street, we see the same crisis outlined in ‘high’ art’s inversion of art’s commodity status through recent developments in environmental, conceptual, and performance art.” (Stewart 207) Thus, the motivation seems to be just the same, only the approach has changed. Yantr, the Guwahati based artist in an interview with Amitava Sanyal for the St+Art Mumbai festival on being asked about his decision to paint large pieces, says: “Size does matter for me. I started with small sizes. But I soon realised that if I worked in that size, I won’t get the visibility I needed. When the gallery system was the only thing, many talented people were left behind, not recognised. No one knows their work. When this realisation came to me, I wanted to go out to the public with my work. I started with doing canvases, but never went to a gallery.” (2015) Thus the conflict in the course of artistic progress is based on the visibility that the street artists here are seeking. Additionally this throws a light on the decline of the gallery system and the concept of galleries in India, which I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. However, this struggle for visibility was true for the old-school graffiti writers too. But the motivations to write graffiti and tag the coaches were much recreational and stems from a marginalised mode of expression as a part

of the youthful rebellion, the raw energy, a subcultural practice of masculinity and a sense of fame derived from all that (Macdonald 2001, Bates and Martin 1980, Ley and Cybriwsky 1974). Here in Delhi, on the other hand, the art stems from a more informed craftsmanship. There is no sense of rivalry among ‘crews’ or graffiti gangs, instead there is a community feeling among the artists, which enable international artists to come and collaborate with the local artists for jams and festivals. This leads to a growth in the community at a global scale. The artists use visual baiting, which involves thoughtful texts being catered to the spectators on the streets thereafter visually alluring them to take consideration of the artists for commissioned acts. It is a much organised effort than a sporadic aimless act of vandalism. The artists are well aware of the laws and regulations (Kaur 2012). The strategy they employ is to move from the niche of illegal to that of sanctioned work.



Figure 1.1. "This is Commissioned Vandalism" by Daku for India Art Fair, January 2015. Source: St+Art India



Figure 1.2. Alternate View "This is Commissioned Vandalism", January 2015. Source: Daku 156

This is a 200 metre stencil-work called *This is Commissioned Vandalism* done by Daku in January, 2015 as part of the India Art Fair. Daku's works are hard hitting non-sentimental and point at the very irony of the art situation of Delhi while subliminally commenting on the credibility of visual art practices in the contemporary situation in India. This extensive work is rooted in Pop art idioms. It is a monochromatic stencil almost mindlessly repeating the titular phrase over a span of 200 metres. The size of the stretch has a red carpet like function that paves the entry to an art fair, only it is not. It is not the carpet on the pavement but a text on the road. One can launch into an etymological expansion of ‘text’ being woven or ploughed onto the surface. The irony lies in the fact that it subverts the very space that it inhabits just as a ‘plough’ should invert the soil/surface. It is interesting how the piece demands its

spectators to look down while walking on it or driving over it, and not placed as a piece on the visual horizon. The occupation of the surface by the print like stencil text leaves the spectator in jeopardy of walking on it; yet it exercises a sense of vandalistic irreverence by occupying the motorable area instead of the pavement or the walls on the side. The carefully chosen surface is significant. It emphasises the generic identity of street art by placing the text right on the street itself. The irony plays out in the paradox that the phrase is; it undermines the very commissioning process that made it possible. It intends to engage viewers, possibly making them question the co-existence of “commissioned” beside “vandalism”. The printed repetition of the phrase suggests an indoctrination process. A Warhol like depthless repetition provides the argumentative platform for a Benjaminian mechanical reproducibility to be invoked. The stencil,



Figure 1.3. Daku in South Delhi, 2013. Source: Daku

the monotonous white and the lack of lettering variations, all rob away the very meaning making agency that it provides. There lies the success of the artist’s name: Daku, which means ‘bandit’ in Hindi. The art is meant to be driven over; it is foundational, yet transient. The liminality of the artistic expression emerges out of locational interaction brought out by the stencilled print on asphalt canvas against

clean pavements. The inappropriateness of the canvas is the vandalism, yet it is endorsed by the authorities, emboldened and officiated by the white stencil printed over and over against the black asphalt in the manner of zebra crossings and traffic markers, and hence considered to be a part of the Indian Art Fair. It also alludes to a truly vandalistic series of tags that he has done earlier in 2013 in South Delhi (fig. 3) where he appropriated a zebra crossing to mark his territorial claim. So it leaves the viewers with a question: Is ‘art’ a sanctioned vandalism? Because in a totalitarian, politically repressed state any form of artistic expression would be considered as a political crime, and therefore vandalism. Yet in the fairly democratic absence of one, there is almost a strong undercurrent of play-acting being suggested here as a subtext. With no limitations of surfaces for the trained artists, they choose to be on the streets with walls and other surfaces as their canvases for their ‘work’. The walls in Delhi are irregular and unclaimed confused spaces where the artists can tag and bomb to their hearts’ content and no one would crack down on them. On being asked whether they face a risk of removal and prosecution, Daku says “Why would anyone? Do you think anyone gives a f—?” (Singh 2013)

Much of Daku's works scandalises the viewer into thinking alternatively about the current socio-political situation. "Over one summer night in 2011, DaKu stenciled the expletive f— on the walls of nine derelict buildings in Mumbai. He initially wanted to target then assistant commissioner of police Vasant Dhoble, and planned to write, 'F— Dhoble, let's dance.' He decided against that because he didn't want to add to the reputation of Mr. Dhoble, who had launched something of a moral crackdown in the city." (Singh 2013) "The man who has been leading this moral crusade is Mumbai cop Vasant Dhoble. He heads the so-called Social Services Branch of police in the city, a unit responsible, among other things, for enforcing nightlife regulations." (Shah and Stancati 2012)



Figure 1.4. "Fuck" in Devnagari script by Daku at Domino's, Sheikh Sarai Ph-1., 2011. Source: Daku

However, the picture shown here belongs in front of Domino's Pizza in Sheikh Sarai Phase - 1, New Delhi, tagged in the same year of his Mumbai venture, 2011. Though the context works for Mumbai, this little tag functions beyond the possibility of location specificity. The text is extremely simple: "fuck" written in Devanagari script, truly Pop in its foundation, instantaneous, defiant and readily reproducible. It is an imported expression accessible only to English speakers

who can read Devanagari script. The monotone stencil allows the word to stand out in a gross visual impact without any distractions. Other than the immediate political connotation, the problematics of the art formally adhering to Pop conventions lies in the politics of representation. Daku is known for his innovative Devanagari tags. His name, which is in Hindi, remains coherent with the script of the tags he prefers. But in case of the “fuck” tags the representation works differently through multiple reproductions. “The multiple reproduction of materials, however, makes originality appear in more and more abstract and conceptual ways” (Stewart 2008). Though the word is a common occurrence in the English speaking parlance of the educated upper middle class Indians, the question remains how much of it holds significance to a person at grassroots for whom English is a foreign language. “When you look at it, it comes as a surprise. You just go, ‘What the fuck? What is that?’ It makes you ask who did it or it makes you smile or laugh. There is someone who even made it their profile picture on Facebook! On one side, people are making fun of it and on the other, people are talking about it. In a single night you can create conversation in Mumbai. There must be people saying that I shouldn’t have done this but look at the number of people who get to be involved in this. When I was doing this I asked the taxi guy who was taking us around what he thought of the word ‘fuck’. He didn’t want to say anything at first, but then he admitted that when people get anxious they go, ‘Oh fuck yaa!’ He doesn’t know what it is but he knows some of what it means and what it’s all about. 80% of the people don’t speak English all the time but they are involved. We (those who speak English) use the word all the time but we use it in so many ways,” says Daku in conversation with Siddhant Mehta (2012). “Recently, he landed up in Mumbai, hired a taxi for a full night, painting that famous four-letter word in English – his drawings were in Hindi script. He wanted to express his protest against the moral policing campaign led by a Mumbai Police officer. The graffiti trip began from a wall in Juhu and ended at Jahangirpuri, but his taxi driver seemed unperturbed. When DaKu asked him if he knew what the word stood for, the driver said ‘I don’t know the meaning but I do know that it’s what a man says when he’s frustrated with life.’” (Kaur 2012) The intriguing response by the driver is precisely where street art in India succeeds and fails simultaneously. The humour in the situation is yet again brought out by the irony of readership. The Devanagari script has a larger readership when it comes to the walls, but in spite of the script, the language remains elusive. So, the tag would make vague and obscure meaning through disjointed iteration unless the reader has a sense of usage of the word, its political connotation and/or context. The tag works on scandalising spectators through trans-lingual semiotic performance. The theatricality of vandalism intensifies the mass production of commodity fetishized stencils based on an industrial intent of the art function itself.

Anpu Varkey opines, “Why not look at something beautiful instead of tobacco stains and film posters?” (Kaur 2012) Yantr, on being asked what it means to work in Delhi says “In the place that’s dry and ugly, you should keep beautiful things. And Delhi is no one’s city – so it’s good for a person like me and my art.” (Sanyal 2015) Since people are unfamiliar with aerosol movements, such activities would not make a difference to them unless they shocks them. The tactic that Daku employs, therefore, is to shock people into looking at his pieces and thinking over them much like the techniques employed by certain advertisement visuals. Daku is considered in the rank of Banksy in the Indian context (Singh 2013). His shock techniques, the visual puns, and explorations on typography mark him as a unique artist. He is part of a global graffiti gang who goes by the name of *Crew 156*. (the picture attached here is a hybrid wildstyle of the tag ‘Daku’ in Devanagari intertwined with the number 156 which is the name of his international collective/crew) Being one of the most



Figure 1.5. ThrowUp at Okhla, 2011. Photographed by Camille Goyet. Source: Daku

influential artists, he is considered to be one of the pioneering figures of the graffiti scenes in India. He likes to maintain his anonymity while obscurely informing that he has started his career as a consultant artist in a renowned advertisement agency in Delhi. Any discussion on the street art in Delhi would be incomplete

without a thorough discussion on Daku. The name means ‘dacoit’ in Hindi and he likes to claim that his role as a graffiti writer allows him to rob walls for the sake of street art:

“Since I was a child, I had wanted to become a street painter,” explains Daku, one of the most well-known graffiti artists in India, whose graffiti work generally comprises writing the name ‘Daku’ in different, often complex, forms. Fascinated by the indigenous creativity of local signboard painters who used typography and lettering with a certain chutzpah, Daku’s interest in graffiti is more towards the challenge of lettering rather than any actual ‘protest’. In fact, he is one of the first graffiti artists to use the Devanagari script in his graffiti work. Perhaps the sense of ‘protest’ is expressed more in his choice of the name for himself, Daku, the outlaw forever in conflict with the establishment. “Yes, that is the ‘illegal’ aspect of the dacoit; but I am the one who ‘robs’ walls, painting on them without taking their owner’s permission. Once I finish my graffiti work on a wall, I ‘own’ it, without it really being mine legally!” he laughs. (Bordeweker 2012)



Figure 1.6. LPG for aam aadmi! By Daku at Saket near LPG Station, 2012. Source: Daku

Daku explores a variety of social experiments that are possible in the visual medium. His stencil work on the rising price of the LPG cooking gas near Saket LPG gas station done in 2012 comments on the sky rocketing prices of the basic necessities of everyday life under Manmohan Singh's Government, an issue that was socio-economically pertinent for almost all the strata of consumer citizens in Delhi, especially the middle-class trader/consumer population. The description of the piece is retrieved from the Instagram handle of Daku³: "LPG for aam aadmi (common man)! LPG is also policy introduced by Manmohan Singh. Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization." With a context in place, let us look at the piece. The stencil which consists of an icon of a rocket/missile made by expansion from the body of an LPG cylinder is placed on the gate of the gas station with a signature of Daku in Hindi underneath it. It is a monochromatic red icon within which 'LPG' is stencilled in white. The impact of this image is immediate and surficial in the sense that it is simple, iconic, hard hitting and non-sentimental as per Daku's stylistics. The ambiguity, and hence the artistic play is brought on by the question whether it is a rocket or a missile. In spite of the question

being basic and naïve it signifies a motive for the propulsion of progress brought on by the then contemporary government of Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. Extremely political in its approach, the piece pierces into the simple metaphor and ready reachability for the common viewers. The Lyotardian *differend* between the categories of signifieds, the missile and the rocket, plays on the idea of a projectile body run on fuel. Yet the purpose of a rocket is significantly different from that of a missile. The detonation of the ideas would allow us to interpret the visual pun where one is rising to



Figure 1.7. Close-up of LPG for aam aadmi!
Source: Daku

reach beyond the horizon and the other as a weapon of mass destruction. The site-specific irony lies in the fact that it is located on the gate of the gas station itself further problematizing the artistic stance through performance of the intervention. A social grudge taken up by the street artist plays on the genuine commentary on budgetary strategies based

³ <https://instagram.com/explore/tags/dakugraffiti/> - Accessed on 7th February, 2015.

on Pop art tools. The art is perishable. The icon is reproducible. The context can be recurring. Unless the image had a secondary access point through the hyperreal web portal of the artist's choice of simulation, it would have been impossible to decipher that there was a further layer to the acronymous pun on LPG: "Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation." However there is an inherent contradiction within the claim itself: while the piece claims for awareness in the local spectators against the three markers of the ideology that it subverts and satirizes, it inherently jeopardises them by tapping into the tools of liberal, privatised and globalised capitalism through a specific private, globalised website in a liberal economy controlled and modified by the virtuality of the data channels. Instagram is a global photograph sharing social media platform. It is a virtual privately owned public space equitable to shopping malls. One who invests in privacy gets to render the service of free data economy that would allow a controlled data flow in a standardised knowledge production system. The confusion lies in the position of power and privilege of the artist, in deciding the politics of representation. However, while we can critique the execution and the theoretical entanglement, it would be a crime to gloss over the endeavour that the artist took in order to tap into the resources and redistribute it according to an alternate (though illusory) power hierarchy. In a sense, the artist achieves a Robin Hood like identity of the outlaw in dispersing a data based visual economy by negotiating between the virtual and the real. The surface emerges as a postmodern textual tool, a transmitter with a catalytic property. The act of art required the successful performance of vandalism that would have a subversion of the authority in spite of an active surveillance.

The patrols at the lowest levels hardly have any idea as to the significance and purpose of such activities. It is easy to escape with a little 'fine' that would bring the writers out of danger which would otherwise be inescapable in other countries with stricter graffiti laws. Sandhya Bordewekar in a conversation with Daku reveals: "But often, people of the night are not really aware of graffiti and what it is. If the artists do run into anyone when they are busy spraycan painting, they are generally taken for guys painting an advertisement. 'People are quite bewildered by the fact that we are doing this for ourselves and don't get paid for it', laughs Daku. What does he really do it for? 'I do it because there is nothing in the city when it comes to street art. If my artwork can make someone stop and think what is it, why is it here my job is done', says Daku." (Bordewekar 2012)

The artistic idiom of Daku is founded on his socio-political take on the contemporary times, much like Banksy. He is not just a graffiti writer with a purely countercultural background and beginning. While his influences on and associations with the subcultural scene are pretty foundational, he is not considered an offender in the artistic circles in terms



Figure 1.9. QR Tag by Daku opposite Select City Walk Mall, Saket, 2013. Source: Daku156



Figure 1.8. The earlier throw up redirected from the QR tag by Daku. Source: Daku

of being a “sell-out”, or an artistic outlaw. He is a true proponent of the “post-graffiti” art scene. (Thompson 193, Irvine 2012) In an attempt to negotiate with the visual practices that are present on the city walls as art or vandalism, the artist/writer must continuously innovate and reinvent with the developing technology. On that note, one of the most fascinating graffiti pieces that I have come across by Daku is the QR code tag in the manner of the French urban artist Space Invader’s 2008 project on QR code arts⁴, done in Saket opposite the Select City Walk shopping mall in 2013. Though, in comparison to his socially aware “Stop” series or his pre-election “Matt Do” paste-ups (which I will discuss later) this one stands as a rather banal addition to the numerous other graffiti produced through just another tag of his name across a city wall. However, there is fascinating inventive twist to this

⁴ <http://www.space-invaders.com/post/qrcodes/> - “In 2008, Invader takes control of a new technology: QR code; images composed of small black and white squares that allow to deliver content via a smartphone. He integrates them into his favorite material, i.e. mosaics, and he slightly modifies the image without altering the content to hide a space invader as a signature.”

tag: the QR code, which is the two dimensional Quick Response encryption code formulated by the Denso Wave for the automobile industry of Japan has numerous uses: traceability, picking, inventory management, inspection, process management, production management, data entry, dispensing and admission control.⁵ The various uses of QR code are all tied through the automatic data capture method. It is an upgraded version of bar coding system that expands in two dimensions and can hold larger amount of rich data that bar code cannot contain. It is absolutely industrial in its basic purpose but of late there are emerging numerous other uses and facilitations in popular cultural scenarios such as name tags and coffee mug prints, etc. as playful engagement with the visual style of the code as well as encryption of personal information as artefacts. Among some such uses it is quite unusual to find a gigantic QR code printed on a public wall without any specific bearing. Now, the best part of this puzzle-like narrative unfolds when the spectators point their smart phone devices equipped with a QR code decoding application at the piece and there comes an encrypted hyperlink: <http://bit.ly/12rGcYW> redirected to <http://daku156.com/saket/Daku-at-Saket-A.jpg> clicking on which we are yet again redirected to an image of a Daku tag in his familiarised Devanagari script experiments mildly imitating the 'wildstyle' typography in dual tones of green and purple over an orange bubble background. Fascinatingly, the tag in the linked image is on the same wall and same spot as the previous picture, but done back in 2011. On his Instagram handle Daku posted the picture of the QR tag with following the text: "It was one of my favourite tag, but they whitewashed the wall a year later. Scan the code to go back in time and check the original wall!" There is no deep structural meaning to the art function if one is looking for it. It is just another graffiti that marks a territorial claim over a wall. But the manner of projection with a conscious hyperreal rendering of the same makes all the difference. The process of technological innovation involves the engagement with the graffiti in a very different manner. It demands of the viewer certain prerequisites: a smart phone, with QR decoding software. This is almost a breakthrough in terms of innovation that merges with the holographic existence of the preceding tag. It allows an 'immortal' projection of the art through virtual performance of an involved theatrics by technological intervention. It taps into and establishes a newer form of visual metaphor through the introduction of an industrial code. It is almost poetic in its execution by which it reminds the spectator of the elegiac note that Auden resorted to in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats": "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/ In the valley of its making where executives/ Would never want to tamper". The

⁵ <http://www.qrcode.com/en/>

mechano-realistic nature of the physical tag blurs the boundaries of the physical wall and the virtual hyperspace that defies time and the constraints of death. It is the negotiation between the real and the unreal through the channel of a technological facilitation that allows a piece of data to be remembered forever signifying the art that produces a conceptual composite of theoretical boundaries. It is much to derive from an apparently simple tag, but the layers through time against a referral space of Saket makes it possible for a reading into the mechanisms that the tag subscribes to. The location is highly significant for this tag. This particular wall is located right opposite the Select City Walk shopping mall which is a cluster of three shopping malls. It is a highly commercialised place in the growing posh neighbourhood of South Delhi that witnesses steady traffic of mall goers and relentless performances of material and service based consumptions where the mendicants exist as a marginal invisible presence. The technology allows the advertisers – through placards, banners and advertorials – to edit them out of the beautified emphatic pictures of the plots that are for sale, bound by the same wall that territorialises them. The constant flux of the changing nature of meaning in the commodity resurfaces the poverty that is always already present and mulls over them simultaneously. The artist, too, subscribes to this paradoxical mode of expression when he uses the consumer narrative of the commodity fetishizing codes to mark the territory both in temporal and spatial sense. Space, through the medium of walls becomes the commodity canvas that has been usurped from its boundary marking presence through representation. It further allows the facilitated spectators to interact with the wall by means of their smart devices to reach a sense of gaze that is modified through a removed hyperreal spectacle allowing an illusion of ownership of meaning through the Derrida's concept of *différance*. In this way, the piece produces important problematics for the modern gaze to be understood and negotiated through the lens of technology. It is a performance of the Baudrillardian hyperreal through the holographic platform of smart devices. It also taps into McLuhan's idea of "media", the extension of man's innate ability to look through an invention that enhances that innate capacity of the sensory organs. The extension allows transcendence in space and time. The space achieves a holographic property through this extra-temporal projection. In Mirzoeff's words, "The traditional image obeyed its own rules that were independent of exterior reality. The perspective system, for example, depends upon the viewer examining the image from one point only, using just one eye. No one actually does this, but the image is internally coherent and thus credible. As perspective's claim to be the most accurate representation of reality lost ground, film and photography created a new direct relationship to reality, to the extent that we accept the 'actuality' of what we see in the

image. A photograph shows us something that was at a certain point actually before the camera's lens. This image is dialectical because it sets up a relationship between the viewer in the present and the past moment of space or time that it represents." (1998: 7)

The sensory moment achieved by the tag is filtered by spans of time and almost thrice by the passage of multiple lenses. By the time it reaches this dissertation for an attempt of analysis, there is no assurance that it will still be existent on that physical spot. In fact, in all likelihood it is not. It was a moment in space and time that the performance was made. It was static by virtue of it being painted, yet it absolutely defies staticity by virtue of its reproducibility and concurrent ephemerality. The consumable residue of this narrative is 'fun', but the procedure of unfolding is possibly 'art'.



Figure 1.10. "Stop Pretending" by Daku at Khelgaon Marg, 2013. Source: Daku156



Figure 1.11. "Stop Promising" by Daku at Kalkaji Flyover, 2013. Source: Daku156



Figure 1.12. "Stop Raping" at Saket Court and "Stop Shopping" outside Select City Walk Shopping Mall by Daku at Saket, New Delhi, 2013. Source: Daku156



Figure 1.13. "Stop Bribing" and "Stop Honking" by Daku at Okhla Phase-2, 2013. Source: Daku156



Figure 1.14. "Stop Vandalism" on Outer Ring Road, New Delhi, by Daku, 2013. Source: Daku156

“Several ‘stop’ signs put up across the city during the 2010 Commonwealth Games were later found to have been in direct contravention of the Indian Road Congress (IRC) codes. Experts say the signs not only confused drivers, but they were also a colossal waste of money as each sign cost between Rs. 8,000 and Rs. 18,000”, reports Neha Lalchandani for the Times News Network dated October 1, 2013.

The basic premise for the signs to be put up during the Commonwealth Games in 2010 was to transform the appearance of the city for the international travellers who were supposed to flock the city for the event. Unfortunately, we know how that went.⁶ But a major by-product of the games, in terms of the officiated visuality was pinned on the signs that were utter waste of money until Daku did something that confused almost everyone: “The other major violation in these signs is the inscription found beneath ‘stop’. According to the IRC, an inscription can be placed beneath a sign if the authority wants to make its meaning clear. In Delhi, authorities decided to use the space for social messages and the ‘stop’ sign is followed with captions like ‘raping’, ‘honking’, ‘vandalism’, ‘bribing’ and ‘pretending’. This was expected to be read as, for instance, ‘stop raping’. As per the code, the sign, however, effectively means that one should stop for raping.” (Lalchandani 2013) The scoop, as the citation suggests, is from the same report that informed the reader of the massive loss of

⁶ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/major-scams-hits-commonwealth-games/article542593.ece>
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/25/delhi-commonwealth-games-organiser-arrested>

money that the signs caused in the first place. The report evidently misrecognised the systematic vandalism as the work of the government. Indeed, this series is “one of the most important works of Daku done so far” as Giulia Ambrogi, the curator of St+Art India Foundation, stresses (2015). But why is it so? The answers are multiple, convoluted and are generators of meaning of what could possibly have gone into the process of conception. From his interview with *The Hindu* on this particular issue, Daku says, “These stop signs popped up during the Commonwealth Games to make Delhi look international, but I don’t think anyone really stops to look at these signs. There are some stop signs in the middle of the road with no actual use, so I decided to give a meaning to them in a very official way. These fit well under the ‘stop’ so I converted around 15-20 signs around South Delhi.” (Nath 2014)

Hermer and Hunt in their 1996 essay “Official Graffiti of the Everyday” provided much of the theoretical process, of which this particular series by Daku is almost a correspondent case study or possibly a product. The case of the signs operating as a corollary of traffic safety instructions lays foundation for the basic ‘stop’ signs which are put up for a purpose of an expected discreet governance. “The concept of governance is useful for another reason; it provides for the possibility of micro-macro links by connecting the ways in which ‘mentalities’ of government and forms of ‘knowing’, acquired in both personal and institutional settings, are related and connected in webs of regulatory configurations.” (Hermer and Hunt 458) The signs are instructive. They demand a response that is coherent to the time and location. If we are trying to understand the mode of governance through the signs, we also need to understand the regulation that must dictate the construction of a signified that is purposeful for methodical governance. Dr Rohit Baluja, president of Institute of Road Traffic Education, in conversation with Neha Lalchandani explains, “the IRC codes prescribe that the ‘stop’ sign should be written within an octagonal shape on a red background with a white border. The design makes the sign visible to road users even from a distance. In gross violation of the code, PWD has inserted the octagonal ‘stop’ signs within square blue boards, which are meant for information. This goes against the very principle of recognition of shapes and colours from a distance. Moreover, by virtue of the shape, the sign has to be seen from both sides which is not happening with these signs.” (2013) This is the precise postmodern moment where the signifier crumbles off the horizon of expectation set by a sense of governance that is flawed by its own lack of a standardised system, the lack of a sentient execution, or at the impossibility to achieve one. It becomes further problematized due to the artistic intervention.

Governance is viewed as projects that involve specific practices and discursive tactics. Taking our cue from Foucault, the advantage of conceptualizing governance as a practice is that it enables us to see the fluid, oscillating process that is constantly revising, repeating, failing and initiating its effort of constructing and positioning social objects. Governance is always an ongoing set of practices that persists until its object or target undergoes some significant shifts to a reconstructed object or is abandoned. Governance involves a repetition of attempts; it is rarely, if ever, complete. (Hermer and Hunt 459)

This dream of an “abandoned” or “reconstructed” object takes shape in the form of the ‘stop’ signs in Delhi which got acted upon by a citizen practice. The usurpation of an already failed project is the reconstruction of an idea of regulatory governance that is played upon by the artist. The appropriation of the official form leaves the people in doubt about the objects they are looking at. The authorship is called into question but the persona of the author has merged into the dominant visual regime produced by the signs which instruct the viewers to stop and think about a meta-narrative about ‘stopping’ in the lives of everyday. In India, nobody cares about the regulatory signs in the strictest possible sense. They are perfunctory in their presences. Hence, the invasive nature of the “official graffiti”, which Hermer and Hunt point at, falls short of their assigned function and meaning. Through this series, Daku tries to tap into the regulatory narrative that pervades the social and political atmosphere. They are a direct instruction on the practices of everyday life that Indian lives choose to follow or ignore. Its harsh profundity allows the viewer to question: will these ever ‘stop’? In a postmodern shuffle of signifiers and signifieds, the signs which were part of a governmental mistake get co-opted by the artist to make statements against the society become an act of vandalism, which get co-opted yet again by the government for an amusingly artistic purpose thereby complicating the baggage of authority, individuality and governance.

“Official graffiti constructs an order of surfaces on which individuals are positioned as objects to be regulated by officially ‘defaced’ surfaces that constantly surrounds the body in both public and private acts.” (Hermer and Hunt 475) In the whole process the art performs as an industrial conveyor belt on which the pre-formed signs mature and achieve a metamorphosis of meaning to be part of the regulatory narrative that needs to be out there in the public domain but is not. While providing with the instructions, it makes space for the questions that the citizens and viewers need to ask about social practices that are truly redundant and at some point criminal. For example, one sign “STOP shopping” is located near the Select City Walk shopping mall (same as the QR tag location), and creates a powerful impact on the location. The clear instruction however lies in direct contradiction of

his QR code that taps into a vocabulary he is trying to resist through this sign. This moment of performance is significantly postmodern as it harbours the contradictory narrative that stops making meaning at the drop of a spray can. Another sign saying “STOP vandalism” stands right in front of a tag by ZINE. It undermines the very thing that the sign is performing. While the intention is emerging out of an erstwhile obscurity, it is still problematic where this entire project of wall art in Delhi is leading to. The easiest answer is “nowhere”, but tragically we remain at the edge of our interpretative faculty as to decide whether or not we should ‘stop’ at that answer.

The regulatory *object* is often implicit, as in the case of road signs which imply a concern with road safety or product labelling directed at consumer protection. The regulatory *objective* may, however, change over time. (Hermer and Hunt 466, Italics added for emphasis)

It is this evolution of acceptance and the change of attitude that is brought over by these exercises, which work as the most significant merger of the postmodern sentiment of “anything goes.”



Figure 1.15. "Mat Do" Paste Up outside Green Park Metro by Daku, 2013. Source: Daku

This wheat paste throw up by Daku appeared in various locations of Delhi prior to the Legislative Assembly Elections in 2014. It's a fairly simple graphic depicting a greyscale fist from the wrist showing the middle-finger. It gets interesting with the presence of the two blue coloured segments: the blue blotch of ink on the nails and the little text below the graphic.



Figure 1.16. "Matt Do" Paste Up at Connaught Place, 2013. Source: Daku

The physical evidence of having voted in India lies in the 'indelible' ink mark that the electoral authority decides to put on the fingers of the voters in order to identify people who have already voted. This marker becomes the symbol of the democratic exercise that people have taken to flaunt on social networking sites and elsewhere. It is the most visually impactful icon associated with the idea of enfranchisement. Daku's piece takes the icon and counterpoints it with a popular expletory gesture. But for the little blue blotch, the piece would be entirely profane, bereft of the socio-political purpose. Steeped in American popular practices, the finger attempts to shock the viewer into thinking. Then the engaged viewer is led to the minute text below the visuals saying *Mat Do*. In Hindi, *Mat* stands for 'not' or 'don't' on one hand and also 'opinion' or 'vote' in bureaucratic officialdom. They are homonyms, which the artist puns on. *Do* means 'give.' Hence the entire phrase might be open to two possible interpretations: a. give opinion or elect, and b. don't elect or give. With neo-

liberal late capitalism, the popular media has contributed to blurring the priorities of youth engagements through an overload of entertaining options and recreations. As a result, the popular opinion among the youth for the longest time had been to stay away from any political engagement with democracy. This wheat paste directly addresses this issue and compels the viewer to think before engaging with the right to elect. There is no textual evidence that it is exclusively addressed to the youth, however. The Delhi election being nationally significant, this expletive remark provides a powerful socio-political commentary and critique. Yet it uses the very tools that it subverts, by virtue of appropriation. While the language is made accessible through the Devanagari script, the gesture remains significantly alien to a great mass of people. However, based on the popularity of Western films, music, celebrity culture and the accepted norms of couture ‘global villages’ in Delhi this message through the popular medium serves its purpose to create a fascinating narrative of the polity in play. While graffiti and street art contribute to the postmodern understanding of space through visual exploration and performative territorialisation, such engagement with democratic processes highlights the cynicism of imposed seriousness of the process while also contributing to a speculation. It is a statement that makes the viewer think but without providing an answer or even a suggestion of one. It performs the avantgarde exercise of shocking people into thinking and questioning (but without an end), much like the projection of Lyotard’s idea of postmodern condition. While there is the borderline subcultural ambiguity about this piece, it lacks the co-option of the regulatory message on the part of the government. The artist however, taps into the same resource, replaying the role through an iconic distant cynical voice of fragmented consciousness of governance. The affect lies, much like the disengaged space, with the few informed of the irony of pastiche that the picture and the text creates. The style that employs the western image of the expletive gesture counterpoints itself against the suggestive images of the typical Indian crude cram book graphics, widely used for the preparations of the various types of Joint Entrance Examinations, showing the dismembered wrist as the bullet pointers directing the recapitulatory prescriptive points of a chapter. An inescapable echo of that assertive cram tone can be found in this piece.



Do opine



Don’t elect⁷

⁷ An explanatory list, by the author, for example.

Chapter 2

The Agency: Call of the Gallery



Figure 2.1. “This is Not Street Art” exhibition at St-Art Delhi, 2014. Source: Self

There is no grand arrival at the postmodern moment. The death of the ‘modern’ and the advent of the ‘post’ is a linguistic attempt to come to terms with an elusive idea of chronology in a sequential narrative process that is usually constructed in order to chart out a timeline. The repeated attempt through inter/multidisciplinary studies is to make sense of a world that has been fragmented by the different ways of perception and projection. The knowledge production and the horizon of ‘ideal’ human condition has forced the various ways of looking into/at the world to a field of curiosity where coherence of all the knowledge crumbles much like what Yeats envisioned in “The Second Coming”. With Nietzsche and Barthes deconstructing the centres of coherence – God and author – and modern science working more or less towards an evidential uncertainty of truth, meaning is highly jeopardised. Nothing can be held sacred; every possibility is a referential, relative. Life seems to have taken a symptomatic turn veering away from the different methods of thinking and perceiving that the world in general allows – refraining from producing a grand conceptual narrative, instead giving birth to fragmented micronarratives that would be based on pockets of occurrences in the spatio-temporal sense of tangible ‘reality’. Everything is more or less situation based. If ‘thinking’ is not required for consequential ends, then it will be done away with as well – it is a general requisite of the process. Why is this general rambling about

everything so integral to the visual existence of modern lives? And how is it pertinent to the understanding of transforming ideas of ‘gallery space’ particularly in the case of Delhi? These are matters to be unfolded through the chapter. The humbling attempt to deal with a deluge of information is a crippling experience that does more harm than good.

Let me begin by asking what is a ‘gallery’ and how can it be defined within understandable parlance as well as parameters of space, time and language? We can readily problematize space through the consumption process-narrative explored by Michel de Certeau or the categories of space forwarded by Henri Lefebvre. The everyday space that the citizen consumes by virtue of living in it consists of layered construction of meaning that is assigned through the purposeful assertion of usage. This means every bit of the room, the hall, the corridor, the street, the foyer, the portico, the roof, the walls, the back-alley, the highway, the service lane, the library, the hospital, the town hall, the slum, the garbage dump, the sewage canal, the workers’ ghetto, the multi-storeyed buildings, monuments, the abandoned construction sites, under the flyover, every nook, crag, corner, crevice, etc. and the million other culminations of surfaces lead the observer into a plan of an ‘architectural’ or surficial model that charts the visual development that is based on its ‘purpose and use’ of man-made structures in an anthropocentric world. The examples I have drawn are all urbane being aware that the non-normative presences are not part of the gross development narrative or at the margin of visibility (not compulsively ‘visibility’) that is considered eligible to be virtualised. They are the ‘other’ in terms of visual representation of regulatory discourses and art. The spaces that matter in terms of utilisation are the spaces that imitate an industrious occupancy and an organised absence of predominant destitution as well as mendicancy. But these are internally contradictory because no lived space makes a separate effort to grow a theoretical visibility in terms of a scopic regime to fit a category proposed externally. The theory emerges from the space, its inhabitants, by their engagements with the space and building habitability in/on it. This behaviour is basic, instinctive and observable in most formations of habitats.¹

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-29415716>
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/10/141008-cave-art-sulawesi-hand-science/> - Cave paintings found in Sulawesi, Indonesia, change the perception of the origin of art since the prehistoric times. I would also like to explore the idea of transformation of a ‘gallery’ space that has evolved; how caves are integral to the formation of gallery as a space for preservation of visual memory.

The modern city is an agglomeration of lived architectural clusters, but more so a colony of surfaces. The surfaces are of paramount importance in terms of art occupancy in Delhi and visibility in public spaces by virtue of being open canvasses. The whole business of wall art works on discovering and redefining surfaces according to the location extracting meaning-making through production of texts, acting on it by the artistic interventions and other paratextualities creating a dialogue that emerges in the specific location facilitating multiplicity of gazes. It is this exercise that started affecting the whole idea of gallery systems to re-invent concepts of exhibition since post Dadaism. ‘Gallery’ originated in the mid fifteenth century from the Old French word which possibly meant a long portico or a covered passageway². With the Dadaist art commencing and commenting after the insurmountable destruction of Second World War, the idea of aesthetic was destroyed. With Marcel Duchamp’s intervention with shock tactics, coupled with the post-War film and literature, the whole idea of space came under scrutiny and a cynical turn. Till the arrival of Pop as an unannounced discipline trying to narrativise reality, space was never fully decentred from art. With Pop art and the setting of the unsettling Brechtian theatre experiments, space began to be reshuffled into a distant and contorted actuality with dystopic features caking on the succumbing wounds of the War and the slow recovery from the trauma. With Pop, the entire idiom gradually transformed within art and new avantgarde experiments with visualities of space came into play with the machineries of meaning constantly getting tu(r)ned. Many of the experiments that modern art conducts first started with the pop. The bricolage, the pastiche, the montage, etc. in the various genres of art is a consequence of the reeling memories of war, destruction, loss of meaning and the compulsive pursuit of happiness in a time when postmodernism slowly started to creep in to fill the void left by the human made calamity, the disparateness of the centres of meaning. Postmodernism emerged not only as an aid of a chronological marker of theory but as an attitude to figure out the world of sustenance. The space – living, working, recreational, industrial, etc. – had theoretical reshuffling among the debris of orchestrated human violence. The surface changed, the frames reframed and the order of seeing went beyond a technological filtration into a narrative of legitimation that Lyotard constantly dwells on in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984). The loss of certainty of life, meaning and spiritual integrity slowly affected European art and the motives of engaging with the space. Graffiti, with its form and practice in ephemerality, seemed to reflect this sentiment. More than a vandalistic

² <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gallery>

mission, it was the therapy of the youth on the walls who could textualise the whole world of surfaces as they witnessed it crumbling down at the commands of unknown faces of leaders and political prerogatives which were supposedly trying to restructure the world into a better place for living, growing and engaging with the civilizational instinct of man. The subtext, however, was always an aspiration towards a uniformly regulated as well as motivated population engaging in the Western development narrative.

At these staggering moments, the vaults of meaning began to evolve blurring the boundaries of space. The purpose of gallery spaces has always been exhibitions and corollary experimentations. In that property it achieves a laboratorial role of tinkering with visions, objects, gazes and subjects in a controlled environment devoid of variables. Mirzoeff objects to this sanitised nature of the gallery space and argues that the true nature of presentation must also take into account the lived environment of the everyday life in unfolding the meaning of texts by providing them the backdrop that is apt and requisite. He explains, “The (post)modern destruction of reality is accomplished in everyday life, not in the studios of the avantgarde. Just as the situationists collected samples of the bizarre happenings that pass as normality from the newspapers, so can we now see the collapse of reality in everyday life from the mass visual media.” (1998: 8) There is a clear problem of exclusivity in the enclosed spaces in the presence of a broader perspective of electronic media, internet, and smart devices that dominate the modern scopic regime. Irvine’s focus on the streets as the “heuristic laboratory” helps understanding the transformation of the idea of gallery as the space of performance. In the Pecha Kucha night that was organised on 13th February 2014, by the Polish Institute for the *St+Art Delhi Organisation*, Sudhanva Deshpande, a prominent actor-activist in Jana NatyaManch talked about the street being the new nexus, the meeting ground for concepts and consequences of performances. He pondered on the fact that theatre must not stay in the exclusive confines of the conventional stage and proscenium, rather it should engage, expand and redefine the concept of stage itself, venturing out with the vision of art reclaiming spaces, both lived and imaginary. Street theatre runs on the concept of crowd engagement and facilitating performances in places that are not meant for such exercises. But it is apparent that through the performances, the spaces get legitimised and appropriated into a cultural narrative that does not require separate attention in terms of history, method, or narrativity for the immediate spectators or consumers. This works right in harmony with de Certeau’s exploration of space through the lived practices of the citizens like walking and cooking, etc. and also Lyotard’s notion of narrativity which gives rise to legitimation of a

new concept or practice in either socio-scientific or politico-philosophical colloquies. The art, either in the form theatre or street art, culminates in the same notion of exhibition where the space becomes a medium of exhibition constantly in motion and as an evolving modus operandi. Visual culture studies aim to produce the narratives of everyday life elevating the representation of the ‘sublime’ from the clutches of a confined space in the discourses of visibility. The postmodern effort to define ‘sublime’ as an attempt to present the ‘unpresentable’ (Lyotard 78) is a part of a larger process that helps frame wall art as a totalising phenomenon rampant in the streets of Delhi. Mirzoeff (1998: 9) constantly tries to formulate a bridge to connect the definitions of the ‘sublime’ tracing since Longinus to the Lyotardian concepts of narrative legitimation of ideas that gets opted into the ‘natural’ from the paradigm of culture. He ponders on the necessity of the looking ‘out of the box’ (of



Figure 2.2. Graffiti Workshop at Goethe Institut, 2014. Source: Self

‘white cube’ gallery and otherwise) quite literally both in terms of space (academic and performative) and disciplines.

At this point it would be ideal to pitch ‘nostalgia’ as an integrative process that Lyotard contemplates: “If it is true that modernity takes place in the withdrawal of the

real and according to the sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable, it is possible, within this relation, to distinguish two modes (to use musician’s language). The emphasis can be placed on the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject, on the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything” (1984:79) and Mirzoeff revisits (1998:10), but more importantly it can be positivistically traced among the major curated arts on the walls of Delhi which we are going to discuss later in the chapter. Nostalgia derives from the Greek *nostos*: ‘return home’ and *algos*: ‘pain’, combined in the Latin later forming the meaning “acute homesickness”³.

³ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=nostalgia>

Nostalgia figures in a cyclical order in all the predominant visual cultures of the world. It is a sentimental signifier functionary in the representative modes of new forms and experiments of the content. Simultaneously, it is the pure re-visitation into a currently non-existing temporal condition; past, by virtue of technical remixing and contemporising narratives that becomes pertinent to the particular media that the artist engages in, through juxtaposing memories against locations or spaces bringing back (through) styles of visual narrative and subversion. Berger's speculation on the ideas of memory and renaissance art in the chapel seems to peek out here as a glyph on the stone of explanative theories. Under the segment of "The archaic postmodern" in the essay "Narrativising Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetic" Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain:

Just as the European avant-garde became 'advanced' by drawing on the 'archaic' and 'primitive,' so non-European artists, in an aesthetic version of 'revolutionary nostalgia,' have drawn on the most traditional elements of their cultures, elements less 'pre-modern' (a term that embeds modernity *astelos*) than 'para-modern.' In the arts, we would argue, the distinction archaic/modernist is often non-pertinent, in the sense that both share a refusal of the conventions of mimetic realism. It is thus less a question of juxtaposing the archaic and the modern than deploying the archaic in order, paradoxically, to modernize, in a dissonant temporality which combines a past imaginary *communitas* with an equally imaginary future Utopia. In their attempts to forge a liberatory language, for example, alternative film traditions draw on paramodern phenomena such as popular religion and ritual magic. (Mirzoeff Ed. 32)

The argument somewhat defines and binds the curated wall arts found in Delhi. The idea of an "open gallery" which is the vision of *St+Art Delhi Organisation* reclaiming and transforming the artistic landscape of the most hybrid pockets of Delhi like Hauz Khas, Shahpur Jat, Lodhi Colony and the upcoming Okhla project in 2016 – somehow in the process of envisioning an art for the people viewable by no extra effort creates a confusing tradition that is extraordinarily placed in the postmodern dictums of curation. The art and the artists import the nostalgia of a global relativism. Each artist (as will be elaborated by and by) carries their sense of nostalgia for a lost form and space to be projected in a way they can recreate an existing tradition in the ever-changing idioms of contemporary wall art. But the process is not just the resurfacing of a 'lost' form per se; it is also innovations through and through. The newer undefined abstractisms are based on the logics that the artists choose to project that makes more of a theoretical juggle of nostalgia for the processes in spite of having them shoot right out of the contemporary art modules as part of fresh innovations. There are artists from all over the world facilitated by the platform of *St+Art Delhi (India) Organisation*, curating them over the Delhi landscape to find the apt location and vice versa finding the resonant artist for a location. Of these events, I have personally witnessed two consecutive years of the festival: 2014 and 2015. The first one, however, happened in 2013 in

Khirkee Extension which was somewhat a trial run of the festival. It is not an exclusive regional exercise featuring only Indian artists, which makes it all the more important and crucial for the understanding of the new urban narrative that curated street art can produce. The concepts of exhibition space gets problematized manifold when artists from different nationalities, socio-cultural backgrounds and artistic growth amalgamate their unique sensibility in appropriating spaces in a city like Delhi that is fast growing into the definitive version of a 'global village' by virtue of the cultural osmosis that it experiences being the capital of a diverse nation like India. The new urban narrative through the medium of wall art opens up the city as a holographic text vault. The curation process is the mediation which allowed a sense of pattern to the seemingly random arts in a sporadic growth over the different surfaces. On being asked about the possible differences between 'genuine' street art and the curated ones, in a personal e-mail interview with Giulia Ambrogi, the curator of the *St+Art Delhi* Organisation, she replied:

I won't actually use the term "genuine". I think that all the expression even the "curated" ones are deeply genuine. A curator is not a client from a company which needs a specific outcome from a specific creative product. A curator doesn't seek a product at all. It is more a matter of enlarging the artist's vision, giving new inputs, challenging the artist in doing something that can be initially felt as a restriction but is not because all the dialogues are meant to create an artwork that is deeply rooted in the environment, deeply site-specific.

That said, I also think that what you call "genuine" is what I would rather call illegal street art is fundamental for the artists in view to have a complete freedom, a bit of rebellion, contestation, rage or malice which are important to think always out of the box and to always develop new ideas, valuable for a better understanding of the world, of the people and so for the approach to the curated projects the artist takes part in.

I think, the best definition is "Street art" when it is the individual expression of the artist without any organization behind (just to be punctual, sometimes artists create their pieces asking permissions directly so they are not in an illegal context still there aren't any other actors except them and the city) and "Public Art" which is a larger word that better express what it means to curate street art. (2015)



Figure 2.3. The iconic Cat mural by Anpu Varkey at Shahpur Jat, 2014. Source: Self

Delhi provides the perfect canvas for the static wall arts to take life in the synergy of stylistic between the global idioms pitched against the sensibilities that are exclusively borne out of a chaotic visual regime that Delhi produces through the multiplicity of cultural aesthetics. The demarcation of the singularly local against a global

“poly-centric aesthetic” is something that the curation negotiates and facilitates in both performance and interpretation. The art transfigures from the considerations of a standalone process generating discreet meaning to the role of a facilitator opening a vista for looking at the location in a different sense. For example, when Anpu Varkey finished the massive cat mural in Shahpur Jat (which is not visible anymore due to a construction right in front of it) which was one of the first pieces to be completed in the 2014 version of the *St+Art* festival, it became a sort of a landmark icon by which the local people could refer to surrounding areas and places in ShahpurJat. The beginning of a dialogue is what they look at, and the end of aesthetic is something that they hint at (or perhaps arrive at?). However, the possibility of a regulative intervention of the ruling machineries is never out of sight, dictating the canvases and the gallery spaces as facilitated niches where the performativity is only a trope of freedom. This problematizes the ideas of physical and political spaces explored by Jameson (1984) and Lefebvre. The pieces merge the defining parameters by constantly remixing the centrality of metaphors. Shohat and Stam explicate the problematics at large creating a possibility to open an argument that finds resolution in these exercises as their perfect cases.

As seen through this grid, visual culture manifests what Canclini calls 'multitemporal heterogeneity,' i.e. the simultaneous, superimposed spatio-temporalities which characterize the contemporary social text. The widely disseminated trope of the palimpsest, the parchment on which are inscribed the layered traces of diverse moments of past writing, contains within it this idea of multiple temporalities. The postmodern moment, similarly, is seen as chaotically plural and contradictory, while its aesthetic is seen as an aggregate of historically dated styles randomly reassembled in the present. For Bakhtin, all artistic texts of any complexity 'embed' semantic treasures drawn from multiple epochs. All artistic texts, within this perspective, are palimpsestic, analyzable within a millennial, *longue durée*. Nor is this aesthetic the special preserve of canonical writers, since dialogism operates within all cultural production, whether literate or non-literate, high-brow or lowbrow. European or non-European. Rap music's cut 'n' mix aesthetic of sampling, for example, can be seen as a street-smart embodiment of this temporally embedded intertextuality, in that rap bears the stamp and rhythm of multiple times and meters. As in artistic collage or literary quotation, the sampled texts carry with them the time-connoted memory of their previous existences. (Mirzoeff Ed. 29)

The ‘plurality’ that Shohat and Stam touch upon makes a founding statement on the Delhi wall arts, which are consciously layered by ‘multitemporal’ and also ‘multilocale’ sensibilities, seemingly random in their re-assemblage. It is ‘seemingly’ random because there are many factors at work in the curation process that go into the structuring of such a massive project scaled all over the city. It is random because there is no particularity of locations corresponding to the artists. However, extreme care is taken to research the area for the content compatibility of the pieces. For instance, owing to the religious, political and cultural diversity of the city, the artists have to be careful about being sensitive with their expressions which should not hurt any sentiments or give rise to ‘unnecessary’ controversies

that might put the organisation in jeopardy. In the same e-mail interview quoted earlier, Giulia Ambrogi explains the issues that need to be taken care of while curating a project in a city like Delhi. They are quite different from her experience in other parts of the world:

I think the biggest differences are the topics which are meaningful and somehow appropriate to be represented here with a view to bring a valuable open dialogue on the streets.

Because of various social restrictions and all the different religions which play a strong role in Indian society there are many topics that are kind of taboos. In the western countries, nudes, particular animals, dark images (like skull, blood, etc.) are common and all around, in advertisings, in magazines, the communication at all levels is often deeply graphic, many times too much, a way to activate a sort of voyeurism which is not prolific at all actually.

When international artists come here we always introduce them to Indian culture in order to let them develop pieces which can interact with a wide public without offending the culture and instead stimulating further reflections.

The other difference is that people are much more open, enthusiast and curious to this art form; everyone, even the governing bodies or older people. The reason is that it is something really new and unexpected which comes without any background ascribable to the vandalism which raged in the streets of the USA and Europe for at least three decades. I'm talking about the graffiti phenomenon that is still pretty active in the western countries, most of the times illegal, likewise, not respectful of the surroundings, hence perceived as pure vandalism. (2015)

The artists have drawn from the experiential parameters which decide the content and their treatment through the presentation and the re-presentation but it has to be agreed by both the organisation and the wall owners, who are sometimes apprehensive of the consequences of such artistic indulgences. Generally, street art professes the concept of freedom of expression in the crudest possible manner by asserting the right directly on the public visual regime. However, the irony of permissible wall art is that it takes away the freedom while promising the same to the artists under the asterisk of applied conditions. Here, presentation would simply mean the executions on the walls and by re-presentation the crux is on the archiving processes and procedures which make it uncannily similar to the idea of a meta-marketing strategy that I have discussed earlier. It further problematizes facilitated significations that the artists might or might not have pondered on, but having the collective effort run under a banner of a community-like activity makes it relevant for all the parties involved in the process. This means the piece must reflect the location, but what remains unreflected, is more or less the same sentiment garnered by the idea of restricted regulatory governance, or simply put; content domination. In that context, Shohat and Stam draw our attention to the Bakhtinian principles of embeddedness of texts. Perhaps, it is also essential to look at the idea of 'Carnavalesque' in performance of the art object on the wall during a curated event. That, however, would be more relevant to my explorations on JNU campus posters in the next chapter.



Figure 2.4. Gandhi Mural at ITO Police Headquarter by Hendrik ECB and Anpu, 2014. Source: St+Art Delhi



Figure 2.5. Gandhi Mural at ITO. Alternate view, with the artists. 2014. Source: St+Art Delhi

This Gandhi mural on the ITO building in Delhi, which is the Police Headquarters, is one of the most significant and influential examples of murals from the 2014 festival organised by *St+Art Delhi*. It is done by Hendrik Beirkich ECB from Germany in association with Anpu Varkey from Delhi. The piece is extremely safe and uncontroversial. However, a glimpse into the artistic problematic would be evident as we look at the description of the artist retrieved from his website:

german artist hendrik beikirch, also known by his alias “ecb”, creates eye-catching works of documentary and fictional portraiture that traverse the personal and the private. his distinctive monochromatic wall murals and interior works for galleries and museums confront viewers with richly storied subjects that fascinate through their sheer force of personality. at once anonymous, quotidian and enchanting in appearance – each of beikirch’s figures has a story to tell. more than mere subjects, we find in his works genuine characters, made all the more fascinating by their anonymity. the reduced color palette and striking contrasts that characterize beikirch’s portraiture underscore the vulnerability of his subjects, while the scale of these works invites viewers to consider the relationship between individual and society, viewer and subject, public and private.

looming large in the post-industrial cityscape, beikirch’s documentary works are studies in humanity. responding to cultural shifts in the perception of beauty brought about by the ubiquitous presence of digital media, beikirch rejects the sleek youthfulness that predominates in modern visual culture in favor of an aesthetic vision that couples painterly sensibility with the techniques of photorealism. the world-weariness, grit, and cautious optimism of his subjects imbue these works with a sense of the familiar. there is something reassuring to be found in the melancholy that radiates from these faces.⁴

In his description we find a particular focal motive about the portraitures he does: “anonymous, quotidian and enchanting in appearance”. The force of the familiar in an alienated space in the post-industrial cityscape offers a possibility of a dialogue between the individuals that he paints against the singular and the plural binaries. The question naturally arises: why and how did he come to paint the profile of someone who is considered the father of a nation as opposed to his project of catapulting powerful narrative anonymity that his portraits highlight? What is the necessity? In an interview with Amitava Sanyal⁵ he answers:

I draw people from the streets, people who usually do exist. I work from sketches. It’s not exactly like a photo, it’s different.

[In Delhi] It’s the police headquarters, so there was a negotiation about the face. It’s going to be the best known Indian – Gandhi. I don’t mind doing it, because it’s the first film I saw as a kid. Yes, you could say it’s going to be Ben Kingsley’s face, but really not.

It’s not only the head of police, who had to decide, since it’s their wall, he had to explain the decision to other people in the government. So they said, ‘It’s going to be something the majority of people can agree on.’ I have mostly painted faces of elderly men, because it’s easier – they are faces that, just by the wrinkles and the eyes, have a strong expression and tell a story. Gandhi has a strong face, not the young Gandhi. I have painted World War 2 veterans, but not any famous face before this.

⁴ <http://hendrikbeikirch.com/about/> - Retrieved in May, 2015

⁵ <http://www.st-artdelhi.org/ecb/> - The full interview is available here. It is dated 31st January. Year not mentioned.

From a curatorial perspective, it's a grey area of negotiation than the clear binary of success and failure. The power contained in the location/space here is attributed by the fact that it is the police headquarters. Artists from outside India or even from India cannot even dare to think of a feat of painting any government building or anywhere near it (we shall revisit this later in an interview with BOND). There lies the kick of adrenaline in vandalism. Only through a method of controlled mediation this has been achieved where the signification of space is carried out through the democratic assertion of visibility. It became a two way deal between 'burning' a monumental space while serving a civic body culminating the paradox of street art through a postmodern appropriation and subversion of space.

Another example of such censorship that transforms the spatial politics can be drawn from the piece by Yantr in Shahpur Jat in 2014. Yantr's signature style consists of bio-mechanical post-human figures exploring studies in the visualities of machines and gears in a post-industrial world. His moniker "Yantr" means 'machine' in Hindi and Sanskrit, delves into the deep relationships that life and technology share in creating meaning in a post-Industrial world.



Figure 2.6. The Drone at Shahpur Jat by Yantr for St+Art Delhi, 2014. Source: Self

His style evolves from a hybridisation of the found object metaphors interacting with the sci-fi fantastic iconisation to transform objects from everyday mundaneness to transcend into a mechano-artistic alternative reality. The drone here consists of a shape armoured in a bio-mechanical suit appearing like an alien form popularly depicted in Hollywood movies. The piece is a deep commentary on the environmental deterioration combined with a futuristic fantasy of a possible hybrid lifeform existing between a world of codes and the codes of the world. However the problem with the piece

arose not from any civic body but a local resident who demanded that the piece must not be painted, and if painted, it be after a painting of God. In the blog entry “Shahpur Jat: A Tale of Two Villages”, Amitava Sanyal records the tedious procedure of satisfying the legal demands of one of the owners of a shared space in order to keep the project going till compromises (or gimmicks) had to be made in order to ensure the completion of the piece.



Figure 2.7. The distraction piece by Ruchin Soni, Shahpur Jat, 2014. Source: Self

Sanyal describes, “Singh (the owner) raised the legitimate concern about the health and safety of those around the tall scaffolding, and asked for insurance papers. St.ART Delhi scrambled to get the papers. But Singh was not to be placated so easily. He demanded to okay the artwork of the gods. A stylistic work of Valmiki, drawn up by talented artist Bharat Gujarati, didn’t pass muster. The more experienced Ruchin Soni, who was to start painting his own wall in another part of the village, was called in defuse the tension. Soni, who grew up seeing his father paint ‘pichhwai’ drapes for mandirs in Gujarat, knew the style. Singh chose a scene from Mahabharat, a sketch was done, and work resumed. Yantr, who had kept painting as often as he could, speeded up his work.” (2015)⁶

⁶ <http://www.st-artdelhi.org/yantr/> - The interview with Yantr is dated 31st January, 2015.

A similar case of permissibility and censorship arose while painting a mural “Balance” by INTI, a Chilean artist in Khirkee Extension in the latest festival in 2015. *St+Art Delhi*’s website provides a short introduction to the artist:

INTI was born in Valparaíso, Chile. The origins of his work are inseparable from the cities of Chile, where expressive Latin music, chaotic cityscapes and less bureaucratic city-planning makes vibrant street art thrive. INTI takes his name from the Incan sun god as homage to his Chilean roots. His colossal murals pulse with the bright colours of a Latin carnival and the mysterious energy of Ancient South American culture. However, his work still remains fine, controlled and technically dazzling. With a warm orange glow, the murals often contain themes of life, death, ancient religion and Christianity, all drawn together with one or two strange characters. The characters are like a blending of all things Chilean: the Incans, the tribesmen, the peasants, the Catholics and the revolutionaries but with a strange mutant-like creepiness. Although the strong sense of Latin culture can be felt with INTI’s paintings, he has become an ambassador of South American street art worldwide. His work can be seen dominating the skyline across walls in Belgium, USA, Slovakia, France, Lebanon, Spain, Germany, Poland, Norway, Turkey, Peru, Puerto Rico and - of course - Chile.



This description, however, fails to anchor the censorship that the piece (Figure 8) was subjected to in Delhi. The purpose of inviting a foreign artist lies in the possibilities of cultural diffusion and interaction that might facilitate a transnational exchange of ideas. The narrow gauge of civic assessment in Delhi chokes that scope of growth of articulation. In a conversation with Meher Manda⁷, the organisers of the festivals were asked about the risk of content safety against more rebellious choices of texts and the government’s role in curbing those choices.

Figure 2.8. "Balance" by Chilean artist INTI at Khirkee Extension, St+Art Delhi 2015. Source: St+Art Delhi

⁷ www.festivalsherpa.com/sherp-interview-st-art-india/ - Dated 15th April, 2015.

When you go up to government bodies for permissions, do you feel your art is being constricted within the shackles of what the government finds acceptable?

Hanif Kureshi: Oh, multiple times! See, our society still needs to open up. It will take some time before we embark on to 'bold' artwork or abstract art. Gandhi and Phalke are the subjects that work, and are readily agreed upon.

..but don't you think it's sad that Gandhi and Phalke cannot co-exist with something slightly risqué, like the Kamasutra, which is also Indian?

Hanif Kureshi: That can exist in the gallery, sure, where it caters to a certain audience. On the street, it largely depends on the acceptance levels of people. One of our last art works, an idea by Chilean artist Inti has this character, and a person from the NDMC (New Delhi Municipal Council) told one of our members Thanish Thomas that it looks slightly Christian, and it cannot be allowed because "it belongs to your religion", cause he's catholic! (2015)

Talking of this piece by INTI called "Balance", he describes, "This image is a hypothetical mixture of two distant lands. Even if there isn't any direct relationship between them, they both have an essence and a cultural history which is colourful, festive and religious, where the power of belief and love goes beyond rationality."⁸ The iconography is Judaeo-Christian fused with Middle Eastern paisley motifs embedded in the robes working towards a constant reminder of death: *memento mori*, through the skull and white rose garlands located in the cuff and the collar. The piece is deeply symbolic with the dominant focus on the balance scale which has a gravity defying heart on one pan and a bunch of chains on the other. It opens up a possibility of a rich dialogic meaning derived from the symbolic binaries of the heart and the chains, the love and repulsion, the desire and revulsion, freedom and bondage, etc. which are the usual motifs that INTI keeps revisiting in his pieces. The almost post-human face is lacking any dominant gender orientation, or even a humane one. It is an eerily alien face that resembles the puppet-like features of Pinocchio fused with the possible Incan iconicity of voodoo dolls creating an almost supernatural aura around the figure. The benign glassy, beady eyes with a peg like wooden nose and the oral fissure resembling the navel evoke a sensation of 'unheimlich' while portraying a sort of sadness of estrangement. The hand holds the stem of a scale almost in the manner of holding a pen suggesting a sense of historicity, articulation and a record of deep cultural memory perhaps. Yet the heart, analogous to the expected anatomical position of the organ, is trying to defy gravity and escape the rationality that binds it down. But the irony and the paradox of the situation is that vectorially speaking, the more the heart tries to rise, the lower the chain tries to bind, keeping the cycle of binaries engaged in an eternal dialogue like Yin and Yang, which is reflected in the paisley motifs that pervade the robes. As a possible closure, the figure is the metaphor of fate holding the balance of binaries that dominate the paradigms of human.

⁸Retrieved from the St-Art Delhi Foundation's Facebook page on 19th June, 2015.



Figure 2.9. Details of INTI's "Balance", St+Art Delhi 2015. Source: Akshat Nauriyal

Hanif Kureshi's admission – "That can exist in the gallery..." – provides the most ironic defeat of the expansibility of street art as well as the important reason for the organisation to exist as a promoting key to moderate the visuality that the governing bodies dictate as the spaces of regulative remote governance. The belief that art is supposed to exist in galleries problematizes and possibly nullifies the space as well as the nature of art that works towards a sense of location, acceptance, tolerance and safety in the freedom of speech/articulation. It subverts the entire history of art trying to decentre the idea of reified spaces as the sacred vaults of meaning. In the public domain, articulation faces a more aggressive scrutiny. The tension and cautiousness that the artists need to take care of hinders them from exploration. The curatorial body works to alleviate and mediate that pressure. Thus the surveillance is not only exercised by the governing bodies here, but also the citizens with their choices, tolerance, curiosity and cultural idiosyncrasy affecting the 'desire' and wedging in a rift of multi-priority signification between freedom of expression and the spaces.

This is the manner of narrative legitimation that curation processes here in Delhi produce. The role of the curatorial team is to act as a narrative conduit for the smooth passage of a content driven through multiple levels of production and censorship to finally reach a wall, but the process almost loses out on the raw power of the wall as a site of performance.

Is an artist's individual mural left to his/her thought process or does the team get the team to get together to ideate a spreadsheet?

Akshat Nauriyal: We have an initial conversation, of course, on what the artist may be interested. We give them a cultural background of the place, obviously but there is nothing binding after that and it's all discussed via an open dialogue. The only factor is we cannot work on something that's a taboo. For instance, Lady Aiko wanted to do something around women empowerment so Giulia, our curator spoke to her and the artist decided to work on Rani Laxmi Bai. Like the Inti sketch that wasn't approved, we ultimately got it made inside Khirkee village rather than at the original, more visible location. (Manda 15 April, 2015)

It is necessary to understand that the avant-garde shock methods might just backfire in this city destroying the very scope of having a festival or gaining an ordinance in future. The relations of ideologies and religious beliefs rest on a very sensitive ground where, with the multiplicity of languages, it is easy to strike up a controversy at the drop of a hat. One thing that the curatorial process follows is to remove any sort of misunderstanding that might crop up to obstruct the facilitation of the art itself thereby mediating the relations of power between the artist's will and the democratic will of the citizens. Hence the organisation treads very carefully selecting sites and walls so that the project might last longer than the individual pieces themselves because, referring back to the conceptual idea of a gallery: a legitimate space for the exhibition must exist for the artists to exhibit, a platform for the arrival of the train. It is only logical to think that what a gallery is to the exhibition, is what walls are to wall art. And for long the legitimisation of that space has followed the graffiti logic of reclamation and appropriation that lasts till it is buffed over or bombed. But for a sanctimonious mural to exist there needs to be a process of agreement which allows all the parties to come together to set up the stage for the presentation. The basics of such are true for street theatre too, where the actors and the helpers need to clear a space and announce the happening to be attended by the available uninformed occasional spectators. The contents might be shocking or dull, but there must be the subjects present to be affected or catered to. And the expected ready accessibility of the content would allow the 'uninformed' bystander to be gradually transformed into involved spectator. So, the space allows for a multiplicity of dialogues between the producers and consumers in a fluid exchange of meanings in performance and art. The facilitation only eases the artists' quest and reduces the doubts of the wall donors. This, the essence of the post-graffiti, is the corner stone of the curation process that takes place in Delhi. It is the necessary agency that allows containment of the postmodern narrative of schizoid frenzy to meet the dominant visual regime in recreating a systematic chaos in the available media of the walls and urban spaces.



Figure 2.10. Scan of the brochure for St+Art Delhi, 2014, Side 1. Source: Self



Figure 2.11. Scan of the brochure for St+Art Delhi, 2014, Side 2. Source: Self

The ‘parties’ referred to consist of a range of organisations who are the stakeholders and collaborators in terms of space, infrastructure and the material support behind the project. The artists take a backseat and this entire group of ‘partners’ drive/assist the regulatory dictums we were discussing earlier. *St+Art*’s brochure from 2014 claims: “St-ART Delhi is an urban art festival that brings together some of the best Indian and International street artists for 50 days of murals, installations, workshops, talks and walks on the street. The festival aims to promote street art on the Indian landscape, as well as provide a collaborative

platform for artists from all over the world. 80 walls, 50 artists, 500 litres of paint and unlimited madness.” The description is a synoptic abstract, a project note meant to explain the aim and motto for the interested consumers, investors and service providers existing alongside a map indicating the locations of the pieces, the list of the partners and short description of the artists. This gets validated on attending their workshops: while they facilitate and propagate the methods, spirit and dynamics of street art, they are essentially attended by couture designers, entrepreneurs, researchers (such as myself) and ‘rich kids’ who want to explore the ‘fashionable’ art that is going to be a style statement in itself. Yet, it is necessary to facilitate open access for people from different walks without a bias, in the objective of developing an intra-urban extra-mural ‘open gallery’ system that would enable all the ‘partners’ to take away a sense of currency which would allow economic as well as visual growth for all. It is a symbiotic process which tries to understand street art based on the fact that the medium of art is the streets. Walls, with their two dimensional visibilities, have yet another third dimension that remains as the invisible backstage work to support and develop a string of texts which becomes problematized and add layers to categorise and define within the pre-defined boundaries of visual perception.

There are institutional supports, governmental partnerships and brand endorsements of the materials of the paints and other merchandises⁹. All these work in tandem to provide a coactive legal foundation and approval that the organisation has worked towards making the sanction of the wall arts possible, from a guerrilla¹⁰ mode of expression to a more consciously accepted art-scape, in order to create a conducive atmosphere for the artists to collaborate, and the initiation of the genre itself in India through a larger scale of acceptance and practice. The organisation of the project clearly does not leave the city as the primary site of citizen participation. It processes a larger goal of tactically dealing with the problems of visibility by a strategized mode of performance on the walls and archiving them in order to produce a global narrative platform of the post-global city through its visual practice investments on the wall.

⁹ <http://www.st-artdelhi.org/support/> - Asian Paints, Adidas, AllKraftz provided the material and infrastructural support for paints, clothing merchandise and stationaries respectively, in 2015. WAVE, Manlift, EasyCabs, Levi’s, etc. were such partners of elevation service, transportation and clothing merchandise, etc. additionally in 2014 who were not separately featured in 2015. The government with their various bodies like the transportation department, the police and the urban shelter development boards, PWD and others formed a major part of the support group who made it possible for the organisation to access various locations without legal interruption to aesthetically enhance different areas in Delhi.

¹⁰ http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-08-18/news/33261718_1_graffiti-artists-yantr-street-art - reflects on the presence of the guerrilla art forms on the walls of Delhi, especially featuring the works of Daku and Yantr, providing a ground zero of argument to understand visibility for vandalistic modes of expressions.

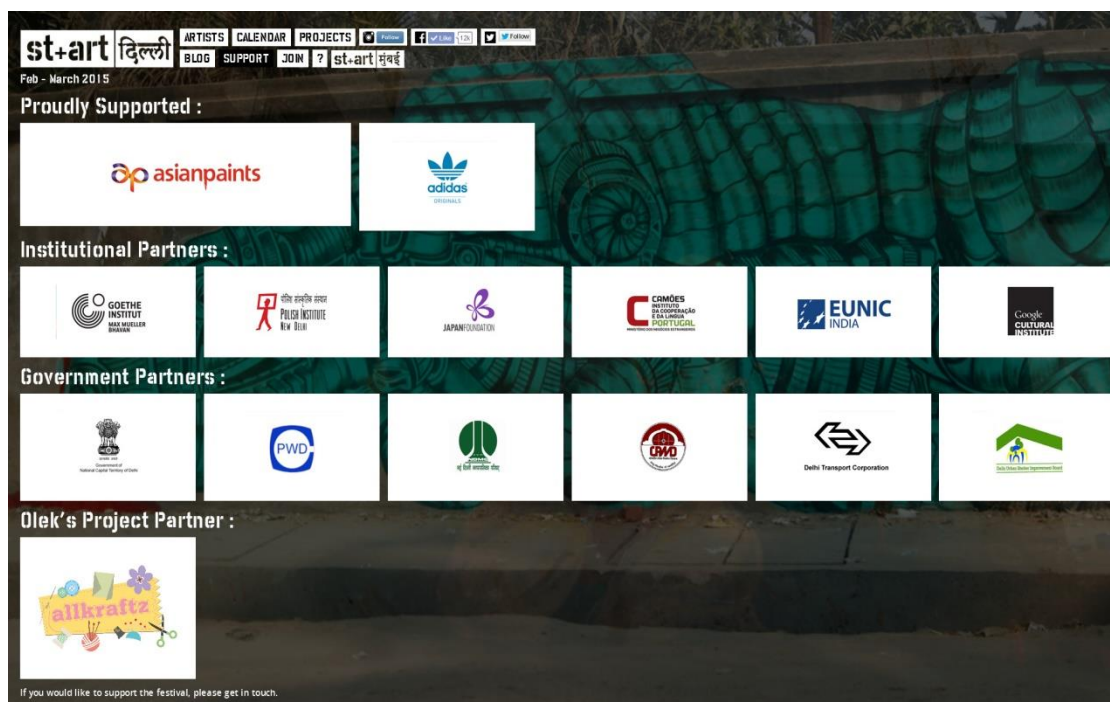


Figure 2.12. Screenshot of the Support page of the St+Art Delhi website, 2015. Source: Self

How is it going to affect the meta-narrative of the urban art idioms? How are new forms of visual negotiations to be perceived by the citizens who are largely unacquainted with the forms and purpose? And who can afford to indulge in this form? BOND, a prolific graffiti writer from Germany, who experiments with typography and visual projections and futuristic styles, in a blog interview¹¹, expresses his concerns for the growth of graffiti and street art in India: “I think the biggest obstacle for graffiti to take off in India is the high price of spray-cans. One can is around 200 Rs. and therefore unaffordable for the biggest part of the Indian youth. In the West, a common way to get spray-cans was the so called ‘racking’ or stealing from big paint shops and home improvement suppliers. In India, the moral standard regarding thievery is fortunately too high to ever make this happen. So rich kids are the only ones left who could start a graffiti movement out of boredom, in search for new kicks. I don’t know though if I like that. Something is missing there.” (Ratheiser 2010) Even then, the fact remains dated about the price of the cans: a can of professional aerosol, with reliable quality of tint, consistency and durability would currently cost around Rs. 500 on an average¹² standing in 2015. However in the same interview, when BOND was asked about his experiences while painting in India, he responded:

¹¹<http://blog.knowledge-must.com/archives/27-Interview-Bond-Talks-about-Graffiti-in-India.html>

¹²<http://www.cosmoscolour.com/products/default.aspx> - this is one of the most popular brands among the writers here in Delhi. I have used it myself during one of the workshops. It is an imported brand which claims that “somethings are not expensive but are valuable” on their webpage.

I only had the best experiences so far. Most people that I met really liked what I did and that I took some time to make an ugly spot brighter. I think most Indians have a thing for vibrant colours, so the motif itself doesn't necessarily has to be understandable if a diverse variety of colours is given. Of course I felt unsafe in the beginning, because I brought a natural fear from Germany where I had been caught several times, faced trial and paid high fines. I'm sort of traumatized from those experiences but still don't want to give painting up. Also the public opinion regarding graffiti is really bad. "Destruction of public property" is a common label for the activities of my scene. On the other hand, this is one factor why many kids do it, to break out of the restricting system and to express themselves via paint the way they want to, when they want to and where they want to.

The spots I choose in India usually are sort of f--ked up already anyway. I stay away from government buildings, traditional or religious things as well as private houses (with guards). The spots I choose nobody really cares about. My approach therefore is not a classical-anarchic one. Like I said, it's simply the aesthetic moment I look for: a nice picture and a good atmosphere. In Kashmir I probably painted the highest piece ever (Gulmarg, approx. 4500m alt.). Nobody will ever see it again, though. (Ratheiser 2010)

BOND's opinion on visibility is obviously not shared by everyone, as we have seen in Yantr's statement in the last chapter. The benign transcendental attitude seeking humble aesthetic satisfaction from the location and the sense of achieving a subliminal immortality by leaving a mark behind in an almost invisible spot is something that can be aspired to (like most of the classical graffiti writers do) but definitely not achieved or desired by many artists since it completely misses the obsessive compulsion for visibility. The 'fame' that BOND described during his workshop in 2014 is a self-explicatory reason why graffiti exists and a post-graffiti scenario grows stronger. Whether or not indulged by the bored rich kids, the art on the walls is still out there ready to be engaged in and accepted.



Figure 2.13. BOND A to Z, Shahpur Jat, St+Art Delhi 2014. Source: St+Art Delhi

BOND comes from a very different sensibility laden with experiences of prosecution and heavy fines that left him traumatized about going out seeking adventure and danger. His pieces are safe and docile in terms of politics of space but are extremely rich in terms of visual experimentation. While he does not predominantly indulge in classic ‘wildstyle’, or New York style, tags, in the sense, bending and breaking his letters to almost an illegible limit that becomes a gang code not meant for the usual reader. His style explores readability and embedding at a deeper palimpsestic level where he embeds his four lettered classic graffiti name into a disconnected thematic picture, code or narrative creating illusions and meta-textuality. In the first figure (Figure 13), he embeds the four letters of his name into the whole alphabet by creating the illusion of glue like bonding with the form of the four letters tying the alphabets together, thus also creating an inter-semiotic visual pun on the word “bond”. The piece is located inside the classroom of a primary school in Shahpur Jat painted during the 2014 festival.



Figure 2.14. BOND + ANO at Shahpur Jat, St+Art Delhi 2014. Source: St+Art Delhi

The second one (Figure 14) was also done in 2014 as a part of the festival in collaboration with ANO, a street artist from Tokyo whose defining style is the exploration of archaic pixelated videogame graphics, located at a rooftop in Shahpur Jat, thereby hiding it from the regular scopic access of the people. One can distinctly make out the stylistic difference of the two artists. ANO’s signature style is 16-bit gaming graphics. With that he

creates a portrait of himself with BOND which is placed in the O-frame glued by the same metaphor he uses in the previous piece. BOND's lettering of his own moniker follows a hybrid of crystal imagery with animated blade-like edges and fractured bonding creating a mesmerising visual paradox in only four dominant colours that merges the 2D of the portrait with the 3D of the letters.



Figure 2.15. 'Beyond' by BOND at Bakheda, New Delhi in St+Art Delhi 2014. Source: St+Art Delhi

The third piece (Figure 15) is another 'modded' (modified) throwup morphing the tag into BEYOND instead of his usual BOND made in 2014 in Bakheda, New Delhi. It is a variation of his usual taking a phonetic turn which can be deconstructed into B – OND other than the obvious play on the word. The interesting part of his embedded text lies in weaving the iconic façade of Taj Mahal into his cobweb like lettering style inducing "Indianness" in his graffiti. It is hard to distinguish the strata of the embedding since the icon of the architecture and the iconicity of the tag visually interplay into including the motif his other pseudonym 'TruLuv'. It is a possible interplay between the historic iconicity of Taj Mahal as the icon of 'true love' and his name. However the location makes it an ironic meltdown of the symbolism where the piece provides an aesthetic overhaul to a rather murky background. The colours chosen are also fascinatingly ironic since blue, red and white stand for imperial pride. In terms of the number of colours used, it is a classic example of 'piece' but the legibility of the text and the picture against the unkempt canvas make the details merge and camouflage

into the dirt of the wall. The text, I think, is extremely significant as opposed to his other pieces because it almost urges the viewer into looking beyond the surface of the image, which contradicts the Warholian pop logic while subscribing to the idea of the mechanical reproducibility of icons, and embedding texts which are iconic themselves or revel in iconicity, thereby creating a conceptual paradox. The image is a grand contrast to the locale which provides the aesthetic logic of a curated art in the first place.

In the e-mail interview with Giulia Ambrogi, I naively asked her to explain the differences between ‘high’ art and street art. Her response was:

The market. You can't sell a wall hence there is less interest from curators or art critics or galleries because there's no possible speculation. Well, few years ago in London people started to tear off walls' pieces in order to steal a Banksy or a Space Invaders and in many other cities smaller pieces made on supports easy to be removed are stolen every day. This is because since few years the so called street art is entering more and more in the market. Because of that also art critics and professors who are the cast which legitimize what is valuable or not, started to write about.

Still there is the underground background and the marginality in the market which keep street art, in the perception of the larger contemporary art world, far from the supposed great conceptual value of the "high" art which is every-day in the gallery supported by economic interests.

In terms of concepts and quality there's none. Averagely I do appreciate more the so called street artists that being exposed to different cultures and to their influences are more impactful. (2015)

Publicity and oil painting use many of the same references and celebrate the same qualities and things, share many of the same ideals. (Berger 134-142) Berger tries to argue and negotiate the rift between the fine art as opposed to commercial visuality based on the fundamental differends of ‘glamour’ and nostalgia. Glamour which is manufactured out of the idea of a social envy is the same marker that distinguishes the European oil painting as fine art objects to be owned and taken pride in against the street art that is allegedly lacking any sense of pedigree and direct objective ownership split between the debate of the tagger and the wall owner. The sense of glamour develops through the sense of affordability of a lifestyle that has been projected on the public visuality. This is what the advertisement firms tap into. But, the emotion content is, as Berger explicates, fundamentally linked with nostalgia. This is the same nostalgia that European oil paintings inspire. The enterprise of nostalgia is to connect the two temporally dislocated sensory presences by bridging them through equating a desire by means of language. It is highly debatable how the marketing firms reap the emotional quotient of the viewers in operating the marketing strategies and the intrusive salesmanship through manufacturing nostalgia. Sometimes in marketing, that nostalgia lacks any concrete reference point creating a vacuous umami like craving for an irreconcilable sense of ownership or a lifestyle. Rather than simply selling the product they

engage in creating a deep embedded reassuring envy of ownership, as Berger aptly explains. The pictures on the walls and other visual texts in the public domain work on the same principle of visibility. It is very basic in terms of producing an affect that would pervade a sense of repetition and iconicity, thereby leading the uninvolved presence of the viewing consumer into a curiosity and a craving for the unknown expression slowly accepting an expression as an art form by means of mnemonic repetition and embedding.

So what is the qualifier of 'fine' art? The speculation might lead us to one of the fundamental debates over valuation art itself: desire and its manifold cultivation. Desire can be an independent category for a dainty argument as well as a functional cementing element for various other categories of cognition. Channelling this multiplicity of desire into creating momentary private spaces through asserting one's ephemeral visual presence is the essence of street art. Curating it into manifold locations/media refracts this microscopic singular motive into a more projectile diffused idea of space thereby taking away the essence and replacing it with the Derridean concept of *différance* in assigning categories of meaning and genre which are in a constant state of flux. It is derived from the space that is owned by someone, is chosen by someone else to be painted by yet another someone, photographed and recorded by someone else before reaching the viewers. This does not mean that the exclusivity of the finished product is an exclusivity of the piece. Since the process of painting is very much out there in the public domain, the entire process becomes the formal narrative of articulation. In this entire filtrated transformative process, the value assertion works when the participating citizens reach a sense of agreement to protect and make a piece last. That assurance is entirely arbitrary. The idea of open gallery space is therefore a morphing act which has to be maintained (or not) by the citizens of the immediate proximity, by maintaining (or not) the pieces that integrally change a random space into one fit for exhibition. In the early ages of Pop, the 'found object' category worked in order to redefine art by locating the non-art objects of everyday to be decontextualized and treated as discreet objects of art, and possibly a subversive symbolism. Street art inverts this logic and exports the agency of art externally to the objects of everyday visibility in situ. The difference between graffiti and street art as 'independent' categories are argued on the same level when the graffiti 'writer', whose fundamental function is based on experimenting with letters, locations and typography devoid of any deeper message or content, considers the crossover 'artist' as a 'sellout' based on the exaggerated exhibition of desire by dislocating the stylistic persona of the genre. The function of graffiti has been numerous. The masculine pride in putting a tag in a location is the

foundation of the territorial graffiti performance which can also be traced to the desire for momentary surfacing contrasted against the desire for immortality through art. For the critic, the graffiti tag then becomes a ‘found’ category to be understood in terms of the writer’s ephemeral presence in the given location or other locations by a stylistic or political consistency. The writer’s name is then the actor performing transmission of agency with ‘fame’ as the content/script/motive and the location as the stage, prestige or polity. The aesthetic quality of the tags ensures longevity. In a site where tagging and bombing is a ritual of sorts for the artists who regularly visit in order to show off their typographic skills, the aesthetic quality of the typography ensures ‘respect’ and thereby longevity of the tag. Hence, the difference between a ‘tag’ and a ‘piece’ (short for *masterpiece*) is truly measured on the effort and the visual richness that has been put into the idea of selling stylistic concepts and visual impacts. In a personal interview with Lady AIKO (2015), she clarifies that her respect in many cities like New York, San Francisco and Tokyo is considered very high (depending on the specificity of the size of her pieces) since her pieces stays intact and do not get bombed or crossed for weeks. This achievement for the artist in terms of producer/ consumer power relations is huge since the norms of the street provide very little allowance for the undisturbed artistic monologue that is possible in a gallery space. Lady AIKO stands out in that respect rising above the democratising force that adds to the ephemerality of street art.

AIKO was born in Tokyo, Japan and has lived and worked in New York City since the mid 90’s. She received a BFA at Tokyo Zokei University in the field of graphic design and filmmaking, before taking her MFA at The New School, NY graduating with honours in Media Studies. Her work in film has been highly influential on Urban Pop; she directed the seminal digital biography on Takashi Murakami, *Super Flat* (1998) and ran his studio in Brooklyn long before he was internationally known. In 2008 she collaborated with Banksy, posing as a Japanese tourist and taking the now famous pictures of him doing unauthorized installations at MoMA, Brooklyn Museum, Natural History Museum and The Met which catapulted that artist to fame and was later used in his Academy Award winning documentary “Exit Through The Giftshop.”

After her apprenticeship and work at Murakami’s studio, AIKO teamed up with two young American artists known as FAILE, collectively creating work for the outdoors, galleries and print editions. After 5 years of collaborating in the US and international streets and museums, she departed the group to develop her individual artist career as AIKO. Her paintings utilize mixed media including spray paint, acrylics, latex enamels, oil bars, coffee stains, rhinestones, glitter and pigments. Her images often come from her daily documentation and photography, and she applies such techniques as collaging, stencilling, silk screening and hand painting to create a dense, layered image full of life and positive energy, as her name AIKO (Translation: LOVE) would suggest. After years of living in the US, AIKO has fluidly hybrid the essence of American contemporary art movements such as Abstractionism, POP Art, Graffiti and Street Art with the Japanese traditional aesthetic in which she was originally trained. Her paintings and murals tell a story, playfully portraying femininity, sexuality and the beauty of human life and her historical important is that she has the inside track to be the artist who unites Western and Eastern culture with her work. (McKenzie 2013)

The function of utilising the work of a celebrated artist exercises the same principle of ‘fame’ that would facilitate a statement on the transformation of space that we have been discussing. This means the spaces and the organisation use the credentials of the artist as a vehicle for visibility. Clearly, AIKO’s fluid role of shuffling between the studio and the streets has its impact when she paints an iconic female figure on the walls of Delhi in her familiar style. Departing from her usual Pop and Japanese idiomatic prints she wanted to cater to an Indian ethos through her work on the wall of Lodhi Colony.

Her urban Pop style of stencil prints allows the wall of a Lodhi colony block of flats to be transformed into a page from of graphic novel. With the strong borders and the comic book graphics she reinvents the image of Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi. The style works to familiarise a Pop visual into the stylistic parlance of the street. It is almost counter-narrative in its approach and differs from AIKO’s usual subjects. However, the work is the first one of the many murals that came up during the festival and maintains the consistency of the female empowerment narrative. The theme of “women empowerment” worked as a trope to cater to the form of art that reworks the iconicity of a prominent figure into working as a metaphor for strength and territorial acquisition in terms of visibility of a resistance motif. The organisation works to create mediation in terms of space and the content. It is very important because of the rejections that are disruptive to the objective target of transforming the space into an open gallery.



Figure 2.16. Rani Laxmbai by Lady AIKO at Lodhi Colony in St+Art Delhi 2015. Source: St+Art Delhi

In the conversation with Manda, the organizing members of *St+Art Delhi* were asked about the difficulties of procuring permissions for large scale projects such as the festival of 2015. To which, Hanif Kureshi, the creative director of the festival responded: “It actually was the other way round. For the first edition of the fest (2014), we didn’t really have that many difficulties. That time we’d just taken up 2-3 villages in Delhi, and the entire process was very organic at that point. Bandra (*St+Art Mumbai festival*) was a little more difficult in regards to taking permissions from societies and residents. Now, the difficulty is on another level. We suffered a lot because of the government bureaucracy. For instance in Lodhi colony, we initially wanted to have 10 art works, make it an open art gallery in that sense. But because of the ego of some junior architect at the CPWD (Central Public Works Department), we couldn’t get that going, leaving us to finish only one art piece.” (15 April, 2015)

Chapter 3

And the Rest is History: The Clichés of Political Protest Posters

Perception of space is a tricky cognitive process that involves the sensory assessment of dimensions and climatic parameters to be able to map the otherwise holographic abstract concept. The reason behind the safe usage of the word 'sensory' is because conventional ways of assessing dimensions would not 'normally' depend on smell, touch or taste. So that leaves us to the audio-visual binary of spatial perception. Space is one of the biggest illusions that are constantly being re-cognised according to the changing definitions of technology, state of perceptions and other explorations. Simply put, visual cognition dominates the ideation of space according to the sensory assessments. Lefebvre's concept of 'Third Space' problematizes the physical existence of space through the exploration of imaginary and virtual spaces expanding the logic of perceived space. Every other organ can vaguely indicate but, like the yellow spot in the retina, the eyes among the other sensory organs validate the cognition of space. Why is this discussion relevant to our current discussion of wall art? Well, in the first chapter I have developed on the vandalistic nature of true graffiti as a public spectacle, or inversely, graffiti as a public performance of vandalism, iconoclasm, radicalism or simply aestheticism. Daku's art may or may not be deemed as street art or vandalism, or any of the defined categories to fit into the specificities of the genre but it creates turbulence in undermining the structural nature of a space or its politics. With the specific studies of Daku's art on the city walls and public spaces, I have explored the necessity of radicalism and resistive textuality to create independent art spaces. It may very well undermine the graffiti logic in a larger sense, but Daku's art somewhat caters to the primal vandalistic desire of the graffiti writers through appropriation and territorialisation of spaces in Delhi. In the second chapter the study tried to progress to the idea of creation of art spaces by a curatorial intervention and facilitation to promote wall art or public art and create public awareness of the genre by being the mediatory body bridging the conceptual gaps between the government, the wall owners and the artists. It was observed that through the curatorial process emerged a narrative of negotiation and equation, which renders the role of the curator as a meta-narrator constantly at the helm of the coordinating process which locates and appropriates available spaces according to the suitable artists with their corresponding styles. In a remote way, the protagonist of the first chapter is the street artist who vandalises and appropriates spaces in his own will in order to simply articulate or make a statement, while in the second chapter the protagonist is the curator who appropriates and allots available spaces according to the artists and their styles or vice versa, thereby creating the idea of gallery in the urban architectonics.

In this chapter, the approach towards wall arts gets further problematized as the distinctions and hierarchy of multiple perspectives of the artist, the curator, the medium and the space, etc. condenses into a vehicular role for ideological warfare of propaganda and protest. The innovations of the street art narratives and definitive interventions play a minor part while the mechanistic reproductions of the historically mass produced iconic images of political propagandas dominate the driving metaphors behind these narratives. The space under scrutiny is the enclosed residential campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University, popularly addressed by its acronym JNU, located in New Delhi. The wall art in focus are the largescale political posters which are part of the pre-election agitprop narratives photographed between March 2013 and April 2015, which form the dominant visual culture narrating the fineries of the campus political space established in the university. JNU has a number of visual culture and political practices which define the extra-academic atmosphere of the campus. There is a regular pamphleteering practice; smaller greyscale printed posters adorn the hostels, academic and administrative buildings addressing a plethora of issues and happenings taking place globally or locally whether it is socio-political or cultural. However, this essay focuses on the larger posters which are often confusedly considered as murals¹ and graffiti². The overarching principles of the political practices are a microscopic and sanitised version of the mainstream political structure that governs the state politics, yet the influences and the investments of the mainstream politics on JNU campus events are immense, both nationally and internationally³. The visuals in the campus immediately inform a visitor about the passionate praxis and discourses of the influential student bodies. However, what it fails to reflect is the deeply developed scepticism that is also part of the larger aspect that defines the seat of universal learning to the ‘universe’ outside this space. The posters work by creating a pastiche of contemporary and former multimedia visual elements like agitprop designs, Bolshevik art and comic panels woven into texts (or, vice versa) with entire poems, iconic speeches or quotations to emphasise, subvert, revert and invert each other by contextualising

¹ <http://www.jnu.ac.in/sss/archive/virtual.html> - This is the link to the P.C. Joshi archive’s online portal which has a link to a virtual exhibition of the ‘mural’ traditions of JNU captured by Akash Bhattacharya, a doctoral student at the Centre for Historical Studies.

² <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2013/12/walls-speak-india-campus-graffiti-20131227115936220751.html> - Al Jazeera reports about the campus ‘graffiti’ of JNU where it clearly indicates the vibrant posters that we are going to discuss.

³ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/the-india-cables/the-cables/article1713117.ece> - This classified cable dated October 14, 2005 accessed by *The Hindu* through WikiLeaks published on April 21, 2011 dubs JNU as the “Kremlin on the Jumna” reporting on the dominance of the Left presence in the campus politics and the failure to fulfil its “stated purpose” of countering extremism of any form and encouraging democratic expressions.

concepts of resistance/protest throughout various political expressions across the globe without a specific focal point. There is no essence of ‘movement’ per se, only that each text stands out in creating the ambient lexicon of a struggle that is ensuing and continuous but never quite arriving through a microscopic isolated treatment of the national and international bearings in singular texts. The poster phenomenon of JNU is the ideal example of the Lyotardian concept of narrative realism in the postmodern uncertainty of form. “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.” (Lyotard 81) While my argument is comfortably oriented to import Lyotard’s claim, it also, in fragments, produces certain contradictions. To elaborate; the structural qualities of the posters are bound and well-defined to reflect the remnant of agitprop styles and designs of, for example, Vladimir Mayakovsky⁴, the constructivist art of Aleksandr Rodchenko⁵, the cubist-surrealist art of Picasso, surrealist art of Edvard Munch, etc. along with many other artists through the ages to present the viewers with substantially conscious stratified satires of authoritarian dictums. From policies of the government and the university, hostel crisis, death of leaders and poets, eulogy to the same, to the reportage of massacres, the allusions internally contradict with the nostalgia of an ambiguous revolution. Lyotard’s concern about the unrepresentable collapses here in the sense of the structural integrity that these posters strikingly follow which is unlike the other urban arts we have discussed so far, creating a rather Baudrillardian holographic hyperreal of visual textuality, political expressions and art. This notion, however, does not destabilise the integrity of the wall arts outside on the city walls which are highly site-specific and ephemerally performative. Being the extra-mural phenomenon within a “gated-community” the JNU posters problematize the concurrence of protest within a securely enclosed space.

⁴ http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=11904 – A collection of Mayakovsky’s posters can be found at this link accompanied by a textual description by David Elliott.

<http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner/Demo/poetpage/mayakovsky.html> - A collection of his writings and posters can be found here.

http://www.allposters.com/-st/Vladimir-Mayakovsky-Posters_c88421_.htm - A huge exclusive collection of his posters can be purchased from here.

⁵ http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=4975 – A comprehensive collection of Rodchenko’s works can be accessed here.

The Lyotardian understanding of nostalgia for the unattainable can be readily reconciled with the oil paintings that Berger (1972: 134-142) equates with advertisement and publicity; even a democratic poster practice of JNU trying to narrate a discourse of empowerment seems to be reflecting the same sentiment based on ideological capitalism. By ideological capitalism I mean the power relations between the political parties and their respect among the student community which comes under the direct influence of the parties who portray visuals of struggle either through their comrades' social networking accounts or the visually striking posters to the uninitiated entrants. Additionally, by ideological capital, I also imply the purist knowledge base of the global political history and the seminal theories which dominate the credential and credibility of the organisations in case of debates and other public meetings (which I believe is a highly commendable and necessary quality). In any case, unrepresentability lies at the core of the lack of communication or irrelevance and irreverence of the political structures and struggles that they intend to portray and end up displaying the contrary through the lived practices that Sreedeeep so meticulously points out (as discussed later on). The posters become the method which is employed as the semiotic white-ink and aestheticizing tool to bridge the possible inability to explicate their ideological arguments or frayed angst against the lack of the same. "Words, images and actions that constantly invite readers to accept a multiplicity of meanings are often ignored because an obligation to the rhetoric obstructs the acceptance of variations in thought and action. As a result, there seems to be a recurrence of posed problems and their respective straightjacketed solutions. Wherever one pans or tilts, one sees the same problems-and-solutions embedded on top of each other on campus walls and individual minds." (Sreedeeep 2015) The space that the posters define or inhabit is inherently jeopardised by the rigidity of the architectural structures which are dominantly articulated in the uniform colour codes of the buildings tinted in brick red or sandstone red imposing an attribute of uniformity which is so deceptive. The posters, in this scenario, act according to the classical claim of street art by breaking the visual monotony of the architectonic proscription. What the walls speak of are what the ideal state of sentiments that the student bodies would like to advertise as their agendas, but unfortunately the saturation of the rhetorical dramatics takes away the very essences of the presentability, sometimes ironically undermining the very struggle they set out for. street art works towards reclamation of the spaces by vandalistic territorialisation and/or through curation; one can imagine of having an arbitration that would allow the legal plausibility to the locations which would be attempted to be painted. There is a clear movement of intent and the activities which process as well as support the cause to acquire the space, which is the

essential necessity for the production of the texts. It can be questioned, therefore, how does an already sanctioned sanitised space provided for free play open up the scope of radicalism that is embedded in the act of free-play in a rigidly structured space like the JNU campus? The radical act of free expression is rather a ritualistic behaviour that satisfies the contradictory spatial paradox that isolates JNU campus as a free space for the mind, yet limiting the actions of the posters to the scopic regime approved by the authority. That in turn, feeds the romantic insularity and self-aggrandizement of the narrative of social change that is brought on by the struggles that are dissolved in the “elemental climate” of the campus, monumentalising the efforts of the open campus, which JNU is, into creating a transcendental insularity trickling into the elitist abstraction of the commonplace through the domination of space that is fundamentally visual, as we had been discussing in the beginning of this chapter. Lefebvre in *The Urban Revolution* describes:

In their very essence, and sometimes at the very heart of a space in which the characteristics of a society are most recognizable and commonplace, monuments embody a sense of transcendence a sense of being *elsewhere*. They have always been u-topic. Throughout their height and depth, along a dimension that was alien to urban trajectories, they proclaimed duty, power, knowledge, joy, hope. (22)

The alienness of evolution towards Lefebvre’s “urban society” can be readily reconciled with the idea of “the gated community” as one enters the university which has acquired the monumental status of a monastery like institution over the years of dramatic impact on and around the society. However, within this image of established presentability one can remain ever-disoriented by the glimpse of micro-alienations which result out of the dominant ideological co-optation that the rhetoric of visual culture offers on the campus. What it fails to reconcile with is the resonance of equivalent amount of deliberative chaos that the society yields. While the posters collectively have a turbulent impact, they make no space for the introversion to sustain meditative speculations. In many ways JNU is an insular space often considered utopic by both its internal community of teachers, students, staff and also the people outside. The sentiments are often reflected in various news or magazine articles that try to understand and represent the idea of JNU, its space and its politics. It is at a disconnect with the considerably different kind of paradigm of the South Delhi that surrounds it. “The gated community of JNU — protected from the noise of the aspirational Ber Sarai and Katwaria Sarai, the elite IIT, a middle-class Munirka and the consumerist arcades of Vasant Kunj — for long prided itself on its boutique liberalism. Earlier, if a butterfly flapped its wings around a Latin-American dictator, it could cause a storm at JNU, but a storm at, say, Munirka, would rarely bother a butterfly on the campus,” writes Dharminder Kumar in an

article titled “Revolution, Meet Reality” dated August 25, 2013 in *The Indian Express*. He also writes, “Amid all the change, the one constant on the campus is its stone-age landscape of rocks and caves. A primitive terrain contains all life on campus, which a student breezily describes as ‘pyaar, padhai⁶ and politics’. The JNU terrain not only transcends all ideology but history itself, giving the campus an instinctual, elemental climate infused with power and desire.” (2013) This celebratory yet undermining attitude is steadily rising among the stakeholders of this place, regarding the paradoxes of the space and political practices of the campus as well as the academic lifestyles of the students. The space which is bound by the normativity of an educational institution, nurtures productivity, knowledge and intellect, raises an expectation of representational fluidity, a true ideological transcendence composing a microcosm for the larger expanse that it inhabits in the socio-political realm. Cardinal Newman’s *The Idea of a University* (1852 and 1858) explicated the role of the university in the growth and expansion of the mind. The pursuit of knowledge without any authoritarian intervention should be the dream of a university. In most of the facets JNU lives up to that promise of an ideal intellectual free zone where the students can indulge in free thinking and numerous activities that would enable growth and enhancement of the mind. A debate can be raised about the nature of the “free” in the free thinking and establish that no meditation is free, let alone ideological transcendence. Nevertheless any external coercion of theoretical “-isms” would naturally impact the learning trajectory of students and scholars from an in situ development towards a possibility for a necessitated ideological orthodoxy of any form to dictate the mind through visual indoctrination. The densely vegetated campus has the serene brooding environment that would be conducive for speculation and meditation. But this contemptuous illusion is broken by the overtly politicised atmosphere which influences most of the knowledge production and dissemination. Sreedeeep writes, “As an (a)political being who has frequently witnessed the frenzy of the political ramp, which is fully clothed to hide most discrepancies and sufficiently chocked by ‘questions of time’, ‘dilemmas of intent’ and the ‘dimension of facts and figures’, one is bound to be sceptical about the politics of spectacle.”⁷ (2015) The author is of the opinion that “cosy in their make-believe, the revolutionaries of JNU campus are in permanent denial”. The article is critically dismissive of the current student political practices dwelling on the core ideological bankruptcy that is rampant among the students who are rather comfort seeking arm-chair activists indulging in a

⁶ “Love, studies and politics”

⁷ <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/voices/jnu-revolutionaries-left-out-left-behind-left-in-between> - Titled: “JNU revolutionaries: Left out, left behind, left in between”, the article is a scathing critique of the Left Liberal politics of the campus.

cerebrally titillating pastime of revelling in the campus politics as an aimless diversion, just like any other leisurely activity to provide an extracurricular edge to their ‘rather dull’ academic lifestyle and curriculum vitae. In a Jimmy Porter like rant, Sreedeeep highlights the fact about “lost causes” and the general intellectual lethargy of the students to indulge in ‘something constructive’ in terms of actual knowledge networking and production of globally acceptable scholarship. It is increasingly observed that students would prefer spending time online in the virtual realm rather than physically going out and engaging in good old conversations at canteens, crossings and other celebrated public spaces of the campus in the fashion of ‘agora’ uninitiated by some specific political platforms with vested agenda. Meetings and gatherings are not entirely non-existent; there are often some dignitaries invited to the mess halls post dinner hours to give lectures and hold discussions. Yet these are not entirely random enterprises, rather they are the efforts of the student political bodies to engage in rigid ideological dialogues. The veracity of Sreedeeep’s claims is questionable and the dismissive attitude can be categorically countered but the sentiment is not exclusively attributable to him. It is visible among other people and is alarming to some extent. Whether or not the involvement of the students is as much as the visuals claim, the posters surely make significant impact on the spaces of the campus while undermining the very mode of expression and discourse. They create the contradictory narrative of the contemporary academic practices without so much as critiquing them in a self-inclusive demeanour celebrating the repetitions of the obsolete rhetoric much of which was emphatically critiqued by Orwell in his 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language.”

The posters are an integral part of the visual identity of JNU campus much like the ones in Presidency University and Jadavpur University in their unique socio-political narrative critique of space and purpose, as I have mentioned earlier. They are almost a remnant of the vigorous protest posters that the campus of the University of California, Berkley witnessed during the student movement incited by the Vietnam War during the early sixties and the seventies as recorded by Dr. Thomas Benson.⁸ The posters in JNU may not reflect the opinions of a large section of students who would rather steer clear of the political affairs of the campus but it facilitates dialogues that arise out of the intellectual debates that exist among the various student bodies of the campus. As a politically charged campus, the student bodies put major efforts in producing spectacles of propaganda and advertising of the

⁸ <https://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/digital/benson.html> - A digitised collection of the Berkeley posters as photographed by Dr. Benson can be found at this link.

party agendas. Much like the mainstream national or state political tactics, the parties evolve and include populist issues based on public sway. Hence, as Sreedeeep criticises, there is also a lot of confusion among the multiple splits that the Left organisations have developed based on subordinate ideological disagreements which often leave the uninformed or partially informed student voters paralysed to reach electoral decisions, which are then facilitated by the conventional tactics of cadre based propaganda and influence. The posters in JNU are put up by the student political organisations as part of their electoral campaign, their intellectual melee coupled with the need to expand that support base. It leads to a form of visual extremism morphing the space of the campus into an open air walk-in gallery of protest art. This study would try to refrain from conducting strict source and influence analysis. It would attempt to treat the texts as independent units of organisational expressions. It should not be overlooked that almost all of them are bound by the same over-structure of a particularity of space dictated by the consent of the authority which is the university administration in this case. This problematizes the characteristic of the protest narrative itself by segregating the idea of opposition that the posters convey. There are the ideologically warring camps of the Left Wing and the Right Wing with other presences like that of the caste and regional identity based political outfits etc. The posters would be studied contextually keeping in mind the isolated impact they create in order to define the space and the incident they address. The impact factor of the posters lies in their appeal through their simplicity of iconography and ability to hold the attention of the viewers to affect the cognition into retaining the coherent content motto. The posters in JNU are often filled with textual overload lacking brevity but never quite lacking the wit. The contrast between the posters, advertisement visuals and the street art we have explored in the last two chapters would emphasise the need for innovative simplicity in the effective visual text productions. As we analyse some of the art, rich in their allusions, quotations and visual metaphors, we will try to unpack the affect and innovation which are important for capturing attentions even with the setbacks of staticity of this form. JNU posters are paradoxical in that sense lacking the consistency of formal correspondence with the proposed ideological bent. The posters are adverts for intentions, ideologies, agenda and principles of the various organisations or simply the tool for protesting against them. The narratives are non-linear, they are synchronous in most cases; just like Berger elaborated of the oil paintings as they are multifocal in novel forms of depiction.

An interesting observation that coincides with my study of the other forms of urban arts is that the organisations just like street artists employ a similar but unique method of

acquiring the space. They tag an existing poster or a space with white chits of paper having the name of the organisation and the year of tagging. This is in direct resonance with graffiti where a writer 'tags' a place as a territorial claim or 'bombs' by intruding into a space marked by another writer, painting over their pieces or territorial markings, resulting in a graffiti war leading to elaborate palimpsests of layered texts. The layers unfold gradually and almost independently which can only be captured by a photo essay. The posters are independent layers. They are an annual political ritual that is labour-intensive and done by the students or the artists within the organisation who are sometimes ex-students, only before the university admissions once in a year. There is no concept of bombing once the posters are up on the walls until the next year comes, and all the organisations go out to book the spaces. The palimpsest is nothing close to the idea of embedded texts enhanced by the site-specificity and the architectural interplay of street art because of the uniformity of the university's planning. The contest for visibility within the recommended bindings of space makes it quasi-graffiti that lack curatorial intervention problematizing the transformation of space through the presence of the posters. However, the embedding that can be observed is the result of a collation of multiple allusions, analogies and influences interwoven with other textual apparatuses creating a saturated rubric that is often lacking in the wall arts we have discussed in the earlier chapters.



Figure 3.1. Ways of 'booking' empty spots for the posters in JNU. Source: Self, 2015



Figure 3.2. "Bombing" or going over older posters to book space for new ones. Source: Self, 2015

In case of JNU posters, the sense of palimpsest can be understood over and above the textual layers which can be actually seen on the notice boards where the posters occasionally peel off because of the weight of the layers. The layers, unlike in the wilderness of the bustling Delhi streets, are never an accident here since most of the posters come with a statutory request against the removal till a date or occasion is well over. However, the posters I am going to analyse have very few instances of the disjointed multi-textual palimpsest since the political poster phenomenon in JNU is a methodical exercise as opposed to the apparent chaos of textual emergence of street art outside the campus. Here lies the chief problematic of the narrative that the posters create. In the last two chapters, we have observed how the Lyotardian logic of the postmodern grapples in the narrative affirmation of the art in the city spaces, trying to negotiate with and evade past the unrepresentability analogous to the postmodern condition. Here, in the confines of JNU, the nature of the postmodern ideates towards a political hyperreal transforming the space into a "perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra" (Baudrillard 8) rendering the nature of the university space as a themed amusement park of protest visuals. Since there is no linearity of the posters based on any specific movement or singularity of issues and their contents, I argue, importing Lyotard's explication of the role of technology in the postmodern condition, that the visual machineries follow the process of miniaturisation through the condensation of the theoretical rhetoric

while the overall grand textuality resembles a simulative process. While issues represented in the individual posters are generated from news reports, cartoons, books and mediated happenings⁹, they are compressed within the graphics along with satirical texts, slogans and caricatures, critiqued by the singularities of ideological intent or the organisational agenda that the posters belong to. The vandalism evolving through art establishing the order of gaze and acceptance of the political figures, reduce them to an almost mechanically mass produced icons as critiqued by Benjamin (1936). It undermines the very idea of production by producing critiques of the populist media. Much like the Pop art phenomenon, these posters are superficial and self-explanatory that leave very little or no margin of interpretation to the imagination of the spectators catering them with forcibly unaporetic closed texts which are repetitive over the years. For example, in the following posters, the styles and the images are more or less the same, rehashed and reused by different organisations beyond their political leanings as influential socio-political icons like stamp-book images depicting the prominent luminaries pertinent to a particular movement or philosophy.



Figure 3.3. Iconic Communist poster by AISA behind the Central Library 24 hours Reading Room. Source: Self, 2012

⁹ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/poster-war-at-jnu/article5111699.ece> - “We might come across something interesting with a revolutionary flavour in a book or a cartoon in a newspaper might catch our attention. When many in the group are excited with the idea, we then sit and plan out the painting or the poster,” said AISA member and former JNUSU president Sucheta De, adding that Chandni Chowk was a popular destination for buying paints and brushes. “We know the shops for years now and we usually get a good bargain. Money is always an issue; we usually put in our personal resources.” (retrieved from the article dated September 17, 2013)



Figure 3.4. The iconic poster by AISF on the Eastern wall of the School of Social Sciences 2. Source: Self, 2014



Figure 3.5. Poster by AISA located on the way to the basement of the School of Languages 1. Source: Self, 2015

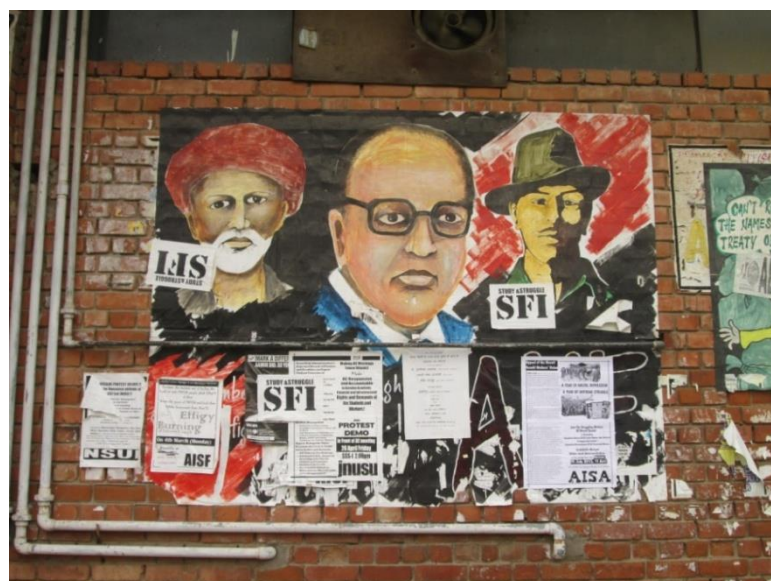


Figure 3.6. A poster by AISF on the northern wall of the 24 hours Reading Room, completely pasted over by smaller posters of different organisations almost rendering the logo invisible. Source: Self, 2012



Figure 3.7. Poster by India First in the open area of SL canteen reproducing the iconic Indian historical figures.
Source: Self, 2014

One recurring figure in all of these posters is that of Shahid Bhagat Singh. He has appeared in all of the posters cited above. The first two posters in this cluster by the organisations All India Students Association (AISA) and All India Students Federation (AISF), both Left organisations competing in the elections, use the exact same images of Marx, Lenin and Singh as their iconic representations on the posters. In fact the second AISF poster photographed in 2013 and the third AISA poster in the series photographed in June, 2015 use the exact ending couplet of their slogan against Capitalism. In the second poster by AISF they use “Marx, Lenin, Bhagat Singh/We shall fight, we shall win” and the latest poster by AISA uses “Che, Chandu, Bhagat Singh/We shall fight, we shall win”. The other repetitive icon is that of Ambedkar and Phule with the intention of addressing the Dalit voters and sympathisers. The poster of India First, whose claims to campus politics are unknown, is an organisation focussing on the issues of patriotism and Indian identity, also uses these same iconic images with the figures of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Sardar Patel added for reasons that these are influential Indian visionaries celebrated in Indian history. For a spectator uninformed about the organisational details and rivalries, it would be hard to categorise based on these competitive iconographies. The repetition can be understood as a mnemonic tactic for all the posters. The images and their roles in the history of independence and other political struggles of this country allow them to be transcended above the divisive ideologies to be followed by the different factions, and in fact subliminally unite them under their archetypal usages.

Similarly, there are other examples of rehashing the posters or their contents over the years within the same organisation. For instance the following AISA posters photographed in 2013 and 2015 respectively are the same poster on gender sensitization depicting the slogan “break the chains” in Hindi with a figure of a traumatised woman being possibly molested, held back or cloaked by many disembodied hands. The hands are symbolic of the many oppressing forces of society which jeopardise the liberty of women and dictate their being. The older poster has a motto written in English; “Fight patriarchy from womb to the world” added along with the figure and the Hindi couplet. The 2015 version is left a little more cryptic and open ended with the emphasis on the visuals without the aid of the verbal motto. The dominant colour scheme has been changed from blue to red along with the organisational logo, where the diacritical dot above the letter “i” has been changed to a star. In the 2013 version, the word chain in Hindi: “*kārā*”, is literally written in the designs of a chain. This is amiss in the 2015.

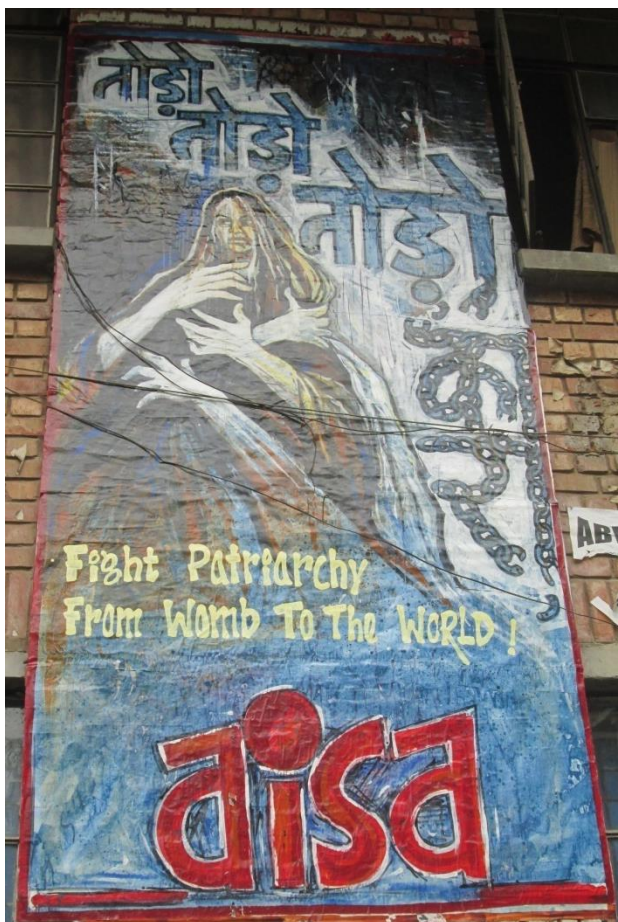


Figure 3.8. (top) AISA poster on women's empowerment on SL front wall. Source: Self, 2012



Figure 3.9. (right) AISA poster on women's empowerment in front of SL. Source: Self, 2015

Analyses of Select Posters:



Figure 3.10. SFI poster in Administrative Block. Source: Self, 2013

Figure 3.10 is a straight forward poster photographed in 2013 near the Administrative block presenting the central motto of the organisation: Students' Federation of India (SFI). It has a black background containing two male figures, one holding a book and the other a pen. The message has two parts: first a stating of assertions "Study and Struggle" and the second a tripartite ideal "Independence, Democracy, Socialism". It is a very typical academic poster that emphasises the necessity of education. It is simple and the visual impact is not strong enough as compared to the texts we analyse later. The theme is monotonous with no exploration beyond the colour black. The phrase "Study and Struggle" has a direct correlation with the actions of the figures in the text. The man holding the book seems like sloganeering and the man holding the pen holds it almost in the manner of a battering ram. The figures are kept extremely generic and the actions minimal. There is a distinct focus in the poster which helps in the assertion of the motto, but at the same time it fails to provide certain clues. For instance, the use of the book is ambiguous. Whether it is the Communist Manifesto or the Constitution, viewers cannot assert. Secondly, the way of holding the pen casts serious doubts on the motive of the action. The battering ram like action is aggressive. It can be questioned whether the poster aims to weaponise education and the cultivation of intellect or facilitate mobilisation of masses into a strict ideological mode of thinking. The insignia of the party is

in a flaming font symbolic of the suffering and struggle of the proletariat. There is a fist pumping above the party emblem embodying the symbolic spirit of protest. The overall artistic project of the poster is deeply entrenched in the Bolshevick poster art styles, just like the previous posters, with a monochromatic background and a silhouette like figures of the revolutionaries. Overall, it is an effective poster with a possibility of more artistic potential, considering that it is only an advert for the party motto. However, a problem lies in the fact that it fails to depict female participation or shed light on the role of women in the construction of their political discourse through the visual representation of their party motto. Being a poster on the emphasis of education and struggle against capitalism, the absence of women from the scope is a bit disappointing. Also, the colour black dominates the poster. The black, which is a bold background, however, comes off as a muted colour which would usually be associated with ‘mourning’ or negativity in general, seems like a poor choice for an emblematic expression of the organisational motto. The pen and the book, however, are the driving symbols of this simple poster which creates a significant visual impact. The poster, though flawed in various aspects serves its purpose. It is a generic template with no specific reference to any incident. It is a text complete in itself without further analogy or layering. It is simple and true to its motive in stating the organisational directive.

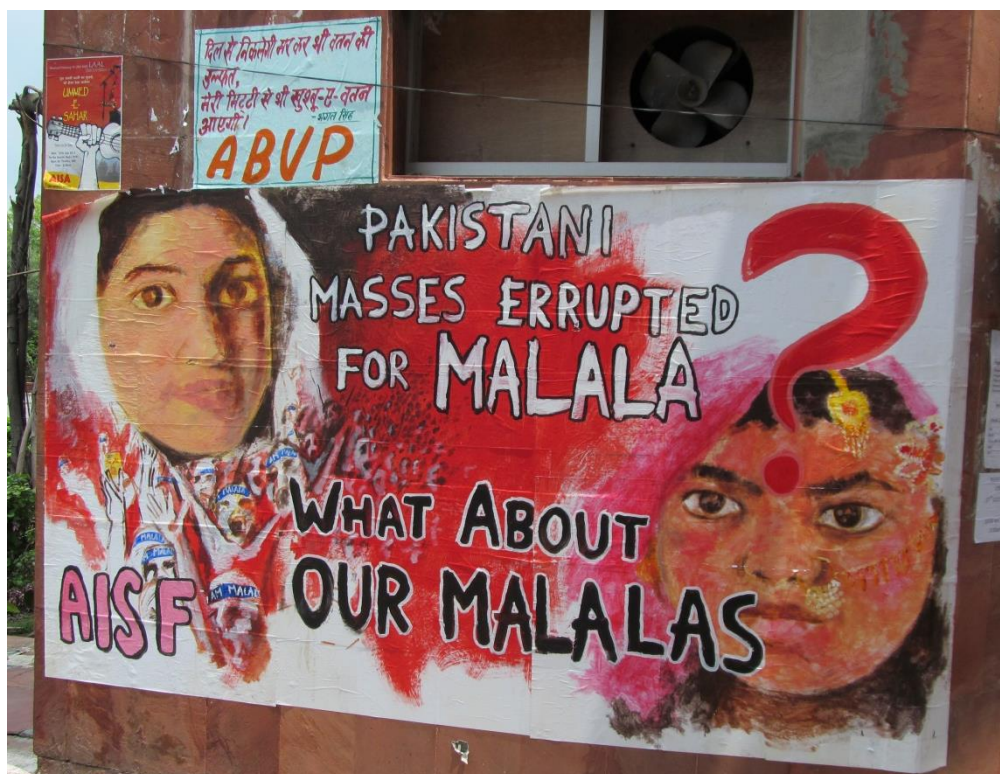


Figure 3.11. Poster by AISF in Admin block. Source: Self, 2013

This (figure 3.11) is a poster by the All India Students Federation (AISF) photographed in 2013. It is unique and impactful in its visual representation of the plight of women in the Indian subcontinent. Being situated in the Indian social milieu, this poster inspiringly draws its driving visual metaphor from the deeds of the young Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai after she was shot by the Taliban and before she was a Nobel Laureate. The poster, rich in its stylistics, alludes to the incident of the shooting and consequentially the uproar of the Pakistani people in condemning such a heinous act. The poster skillfully subverts and imports the allusion in the context of the fate of the numerous anonymous Indian girls who are deprived of basic education and are married off at an underage against their will as a part of a regressive social ritual that still exists in various remote areas of the country. The dominant colour is red which has a definite Marxist connotation and is possibly coupled with the colour of blood and revolution with an ingenious creative juxtaposition of the *sindur* (vermillion) as a mark of interrogation on the forehead of the Indian girl on the right. There is a depiction of an apparition like faceless mass protesting in the spirit of Malala who is placed at the upper left corner of the poster almost in an angelic manner. The Indian girl is smartly placed at the diametrically opposite end of the poster creating a visual dichotomy and allowing a space for comparison. The expression on the face of the Indian girl is one of anguish and discontent as opposed to the more neutral detached emotion on Malala's face. The *sindur* on the *maang* and the *tika* is intelligently shaped into a question mark which works as a visual pun, to ask the question of fate and insecurity that looms over the head of an average Indian girl. The statement on Malala is written in white while the question in black creates room for another binary. While the figure of Malala is surrounded by the crowd, our little Indian girl stands alone and helpless.

The poster is highly effective as the visual dichotomies are intelligently arranged to engage the viewers in a sympathetic resonance. It succeeds in generating empathy in them leading them to ask the same question as the poster addresses. The most striking feature of the poster is the interrogation mark which carefully coincides with the hair parting, *maang*, of the figure of the Indian girl. The punctuation is probably the driving symbol which dictates the forehead which is generally understood as the symbol of fate in the Indian traditions. Having the punctuation mark the forehead with such prominence definitely demands the viewers to ponder on that question. The educational freedom that is lacking affects the nation

building process or progress of the general mind of the country. Like the last poster which was direct with its approach on education, the subliminal message of this poster points to the same struggle for education. The focal subject combines the urge to educate girls and prevent non-consensual underage marriage as the dominant message. Additionally, it should be noted against the presence of the ABVP poster that provides a visual and a contextual contrast to the AISF poster. The ABVP poster is a Bhagat Singh quote about the celebration of his love and determination for the idea of a free India in the pre-Independence struggle context. The juxtaposition of these elements makes a unique dialogic scenario which is the essence of the palimpsest of the posters.



Figure 3.12. AISA poster on the front wall of the School of Arts and Aesthetics. Source: Self, 2013

This (Figure 3.12) is a poster by the All India Students Association (AISA) photographed in 2013 at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, commenting on the victimisation of women. It has a fairly clear feminist motive of criticising the commodification of the female body. The poster is a reproduction and an adaptation of the

1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Pablo Picasso showing five female nudes in the cubist style. The title of the painting means “the young ladies of Avignon” which Picasso originally intended to name “the young ladies of the brothel”. The poster contains a verbal text which subversively indulges in self-mockery expressing the anguish of the victims of commodification. The faces depict anguish and suffering and the poster shocks the viewer into reconsidering the taboos associated with the body. These women of Avignon are prostitutes. Their expressions are of suffering generic detachment though the postures are the allure of prostitutes on the streets. The poster shocks the viewer into revisiting the taboos associated with the body subverting the trope of the usual commodification of women in art. The two figures on the right have almost been demonised. Their faces are unrecognisable as human. The overall abstraction creates a purposeful ambiguity of the objectification. Quoting this particular piece by Picasso, the artist invites conscious male gaze to achieve the shock of the subversion, both of the commodified female bodies as well as the idea of the art that celebrates them. The postures of the prostitutes validate this observation. The verbal text alludes to the liminal existence of these women with the ‘wall’ as an important subtext that helped break the inhibitions of the sufferers. The cubist display of the female body cluster creates a dramatic shock purge returning the patriarchal gaze. Interestingly, the poster is housed in a rectangular groove in the architecture, framing a comparison between the flesh tones of the picture with the colour of the sandstone of the walls around creating an uncanny spatial palimpsest of the body being a construct and the architecture being a body, embedding further into the idea of subversion of postmodern gallery space. The position of the women as commodified sufferers is clear from the poster as it is an exercise in subversion. The poster is a strong critique of the gender empowerment issue with addressing the gaze directed at the female bodies. The Picasso quotation takes away the agency from the female body leaving them exposed to the multiplicity of male gaze; either as an artist, connoisseur or a client while the subversive text returns the agency back to the innate gaze of the visuals. The borders are indistinct in a typical cubist manner having sharp angular features of the female body. It subverts the accusations that are predominantly targeted towards the women by inflicting a self-deprecating satirical statement as the textual additive. A social reality where the victims are blamed for their suffering is undermined within this text. AISA subtly posits its motto as a champion for women’s cause in this poster. The art is rich and the visual effectively carries the point of resistance against patriarchy without being too explosive in its modes of expression here. In later texts we shall see that this same theme is approached more directly.



Figure 3.13. India First poster behind the Library canteen. Source: Self, 2013

Figure 3.13 is a poster by an enigmatic group called India First, photographed in 2013 behind the library canteen. The electoral role of the organisation in the campus is obscure but some sporadic posters are visible all over the campus. No one knows their specific political agenda other than their opposition to the Left ideological politics and obsession with the Indian nationalistic identity. However, this is a good example of a visually pleasing but semiotically incoherent poster. The poster offers the viewer the iconic moment in Hindi cinema where Raj Kapoor is holding Nargis in his arms from the 1948 film *Barsaat*, with icons of Satyajit Ray on the top left and Lata Mangeshkar on the top right of the poster. There are two textual phrases; “Celebrating Indianness” and “100 years of Indian Cinema”.

Though the poster is styled in the manner of kitsch film posters of Bollywood extensively found during the eighties and the nineties, there is no cogent socio-political message present in the poster other than celebrating the popular ideas of the Golden Age of Indian cinema. It is aesthetically appealing but fails to elaborate or validate its claim to Indianness. While it is apparent that there is no possible allusion to A. K. Ramanujan’s essay “An Indian Way of Thinking” or Sudhir Kakar’s “Indianness”, it is completely exclusionary of the presence of most regional cinema and other artists. The message is vague and the standpoint unclear while the poster celebrates a politically uninformed idea of the body of Indian films. While the figures celebrated would be approved by a large section of the

viewers, it would fail to produce an impact on the informed audience who would immediately be drawn to the flaws in the politics of representation in the poster. The icons celebrated here are people who have been felicitated by awards and honours, who have popularised the idea of Indian film media to the world in relative antiquity. The poster celebrates a form of an abstraction that is unfounded in any specific discourse or purpose. It would have still made sense had it not been so exclusionary about what constitutes the idea of India and its cinema. The craftsmanship on the poster raises doubts about it being done by students. The figures in the poster have been painted with mild halos around their heads which might suggest their being deified into fetishistic emblems. Such a treatment is not unusual in the Indian visual culture of kitsch and calendar arts of the gods and goddesses but it is unusual to have such a poster in a university space. The overall motto of the poster cannot be deduced, other than its ostentatious claims of ‘Indianness’ and her cinema culture, because the purpose is somehow lost in the process of rich aesthetic ornamentation.

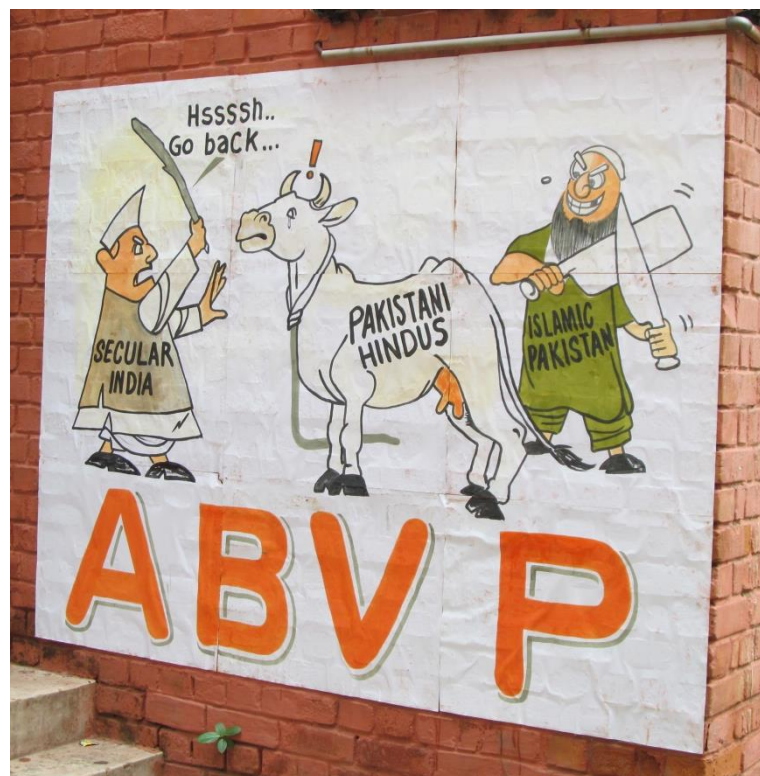


Figure 3.14. ABVP poster on the plight of the Pakistani Hindus on the western side of SSS 1. Source: Self, 2013

This (Figure 3.14) is a poster by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) photographed in 2013. The poster is minimal and possibly much older than when it was photographed. It is a political cartoon satirizing the condition of the marginal Hindu citizens

of Pakistan. The figure of the politician on the left embodies the secular India and the Islamic Pakistan is depicted as an evil butcher sharpening his blade to prepare for slaughter, while the victimised Hindus of Pakistan are embodied in the figure of the unleashed cow. It is an interesting way of forwarding the motto of Hindu Nationalism. The cartoon depicts the predicament of the Pakistani Hindus whom if India denies refuge, would lead to their eventual slaughter in the hands of the butcher-like Islamic Pakistan. It is a highly controversial poster that shocks the viewer into believing that ABVP would be able to intervene, right the wrong and no one would be left to the uncertainty and insecurity of a hostile intolerant country like Pakistan. The use of the cow as the symbol of the Hindu identity is fascinating, taking into account the latest beef ban that has been implemented by the BJP government in 2015. The poster grabs attention and succeeds in its basic purpose, but having a controversial and communally provocative statement leads to the question of power dynamic of space and visual identity of the campus. The presence of the paradoxical viewpoints and the admirable absence of censorship emphasises the nature of the university space as a utopic hyperreal where the conflicts can co-exist.



Figure 3.15. AISA poster on SL front wall. Source: Self, 2013

This poster (Figure 3.15) put up by AISA on the walls of the School of Languages (SLL&CS) was photographed in 2013. It is a rich text with the contrast of the cool tone of the blue as the canvas on which the red stands out. What is striking about this poster is that the whole of the piece is a collection of allusions and quotes just like a lot of other posters by AISA. The visual, for instance, is a distinct allusion to the cubist styles of Pablo Picasso, particularly to the painting *Guernica* (1937). Here two knights are fatally jousting above a distraught dying woman while a little girl pleads them to stop. It is accompanied by a portion of Bob Dylan's 1962 protest song "Blowing in the Wind". It is a powerful poster urging the viewers to question the legitimacy and violence of war as well as any political aggression, symbolising through visual hierarchy the interchangeability of the feminine and the land/earth on which the wars take place. The dominant blue colour seems to epitomise the pain, on which the red of the woman's dress seems to suggest carnage. The poster, though quite detached from the usual extreme Left propagandas of the organisation is ambiguous about its political grounding but succeeds to create a powerful visual impact through the narrative of collateral damage in revolution and warfare. The loss of life and resources in war and political violence are rhetorically questioned through Dylan's words and left to the viewers to resolve the obvious answers. It is also interesting to note how the gender roles of the victims and the warring characters are smartly politicised into the discourse of sensitization. Women and children are the usual sufferers of wars and conflicts as has been almost statistically established throughout human history.



Figure 3.16. India First's poster on uprooting communism at the library parking lot. Source: Self, 2013

Figure 3.16 is yet another poster by the group India First put up near the Library parking lot, photographed in 2013. The poster is simple and the message is quite clear: it opposes communism and urges the readers to “Uproot Naxalism”. The Naxalites and the communists are depicted by the militant red figures bearing arms and a battering ram charging into the pillar of Nationalist sentiments. The nationalist ethos in the emblematic form of the Ashok Stambh is held up by the tricoloured figures. The red figures are the terrorist Naxal militants breaching the integrity of the nation with a battering ram; the protectors are bleeding to protect the unity and the integrity of the national ideal. The poster is bluntly direct about its message with no ambiguity in its use of subversive rhetoric to create humour or sarcasm. The art is without any rich ornamentation while the figures look like toys, which perhaps is an unintended aporetic statement. It is unclear whether the verbal message is a quotation or not. It attacks both communism and radical naxalism in a sweeping generalisation of categorising them under the same political axiom. The dominant colour is a neutral sky blue forming the background which can be suggestive of an Imperialist bent of ideology. The communist and Marxist symbol of the ‘hammer and sickle’ has been weaponised and attached to the nozzle of the gun criticising their terror based politics.



Figure 3.17. AISA poster on the walls of the Language Laboratory. Source: Self, 2012

This poster (Figure 3.17) is on the issue of women's empowerment put up by AISA, photographed in 2012 near the Language Laboratory. It campaigns against patriarchy where the motif has been constructed around the education of young girls. We see a layered text of the writing slate probably drawing an analogy to the Lockean concept of the *tabula rasa* forming the frame within frame, where a girl with her back turned towards the viewers is writing "Freedom" on the board. There is a little half erased drawing of a flying fish drawn on top of the board. The shadow of the girl casts ominously behind her. The girl sitting on the slate along with the texts and the shadow is an interesting juxtaposition of the possible co-existence of the author, the agency and the articulation. The text is a dramatic rendition of the nameless oppression of patriarchy. With the casual presence of the flying fish at the margin the graphic is possibly suggesting the symbolic reification of 'Freedom' by distracting the viewer function, creating noise in the gaze of the spectator. The face of the girl is not shown, giving her a generic emblematic identity in her clothes, dressed in the manner of a middle class or lower middle class girl. The hiding of the face can imply shame that is still associated with the education of little girls in uninformed remote rural areas of India.

The shadow seems to be the ominous apparition of patriarchal oppression that haunts the scope of education, which is the right of the young girl. The slogan on the right side of this dramatic graphic sustains the narrative backed by the picture. The content of the slogan is a recurring refrain among most of AISA's women's empowerment posters. In fact it is a remnant of a set of posters we have discussed earlier. The party logo, here, though quite prominent, does not create any specific contrast or dialogical detail. However, the location of the poster near the Language Laboratory adds a fascinating layer of meaning where the trope of the frame-within-frame sustains a meta-discourse on the idea of language, learning and developmental blocks of children in this country. How oppression haunts the stepping stones of education and pedagogy creates a dialogue between a special facility for language research and development, bound by the standardised architecture, posed in contradiction to the lack of basic facility of learning for girls as expressed by the poster, allowing the singular anti-patriarchy motto of the poster to unfurl and grow in multiple directions.



Figure 3.18. AISA poster on the walls School of Life Sciences. Source: Self, 2012

This poster (Figure 3.18) by AISA photographed in 2012 is one of the most focused and effective visual criticism of capitalist indoctrination and rampant consumerism through visual appeal of advertisement iconicity. The poster is highly subversive in nature, satirizing popular brands, their logos and devices. The visual of this poster is more methodical than many of the posters we have discussed. It adopts the golden arches of McDonalds accompanied by a burger on the left and an impoverished child suffering from malnutrition on the right, which is contradictorily juxtaposed in order to create a comparative contrast and the Derridean sense of *différance* in asserting what capitalism is. “This is Capitalism”, written below with the word ‘capitalism’ appropriated in the renowned Coca Cola typography is almost reiterative of Benjamin’s argument about mechanical reproducibility of art in white over a red band critiquing the mindless commodity fetishism, and below that in the white band there is the party logo with the verbal text on the left. It is interesting to note how successfully the dichotomy of poverty and consumerism is interplayed, with the McBurger being a fast and junk food representative of the first world consumerist opulence against the rickety child, the victim of malnutrition. The two brands which have been lampooned here

are interestingly fast food and beverage brands almost standing for the archetypal symbols of consumerism in a hyper-mechanised world. The consumption in consumerism has been treated in the most basic sense, subverting the value laden popular food products and consumables. Their image has been pitted against the world hunger and malnutrition with the assertion to “smash it” by an authoritative stamp. The poster creates a marvellous visual impact. The success of the text lies in the fact that the viewer does not need the semiotic support of the verbal text in order to have a signified registration. In this poster the message dominates while the party logo takes a somewhat backseat. The colour of the logo corresponds to the colour of the background of the top segment perhaps subtly suggesting the important role of the organisation acting as the necessary platform to facilitate comparison as well as highlighting of poverty against consumerism. However, there is one ambiguity about the cloud like structure that supports the baby. Is it some kind of a celebratory cradle that valorises the suffering? If it is so, then the purpose of the poster is heavily defeated. However, it is also possible that the text suggests that it is capitalism which celebrates poverty in an indirect way creating a supply and demand channel for the consumption to evolve and exist.



This poster photographed in 2012 (Figure 3.19) is a specific issue based protest poster put up by AISA. It is not targeted towards general issues of education, feminism or socialist philosophy, but a more pointed resistance to the Indo-US nuclear deal under the government of our ex-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The poster warns the viewers with an ominous tone that the places where the Government of India plans to set up nuclear plants run the risk of turning into another Chernobyl or Fukushima. The message is simple and the tone is of a fervent resistive warning. The government planned to build reactors at places like Koodankulam, Jailapur, Fatehabad, Haripur, etc. So the poster makes a case that these developments must be resisted. The issue is clear and the message is plain lacking the logic for the resistance in this text, which is half expected to be there since it is a medium of protest not expected to be artistically pondered on.

Figure 3.19. AISA poster on one of the front pillars of SSS 2. Source: Self, 2012

The graphic is a powerful satirical adaptation of the Expressionist painter Edvard Munch's 1893 piece *The Scream*. The face of the character in the painting has been morphed into the emblem of radioactive biohazard with a nuclear mushroom emerging in the background. The overall structure of the painting remains the same, portraying the anxiety of modernism and man's inherent breakdown at the attempt to negotiate with it, but the significant modifications of the face and the background create a profound visual impact. The painting achieves a strong sense of 'sublime', enough to shock the readers into creating a lasting impression of the matter. The success of the poster lies in a symptomatic transportation of the present problem positing it in the lineage of Duchamp's 'readymades' like *L.H.O.O.Q.* where the objet trouvé is Munch's painting recreated in a manner to address the crisis, except the politics is motivated by a sense of protest against a governmental policy making. The visual structure with the graphics on top is followed by the verbal text, followed by party logo. The schema is generic and fits into the pillar merging the poster architecturally without creating a disharmony.



Figure 3.20. ABVP poster on the SL front wall.
Source: Self, 2015

Figure 3.20 is an ABVP poster photographed in 2015 on the front walls of the School of Language possibly put up during 2014. It is a fairly minimal but intense poster where the lack of any verbal adage increases the visual impact by amplifying the focus on the visuals. The content is simple which shows that communism is a criminally tortuous philosophy to be followed. The impactful visual subverts the communist emblem, the hammer and sickle, into a torture contraption on which a thin impoverished figure of a young man is tied up with chains. It tries to express the helplessness of the young followers who are trapped by the ideology which only ends in hurting themselves. It is a smart visual work strong in expressing its antagonism towards Marxist and socialist ideologies without resorting to their usual verbal rants against communism explicated in incoherent quotes or slogans.

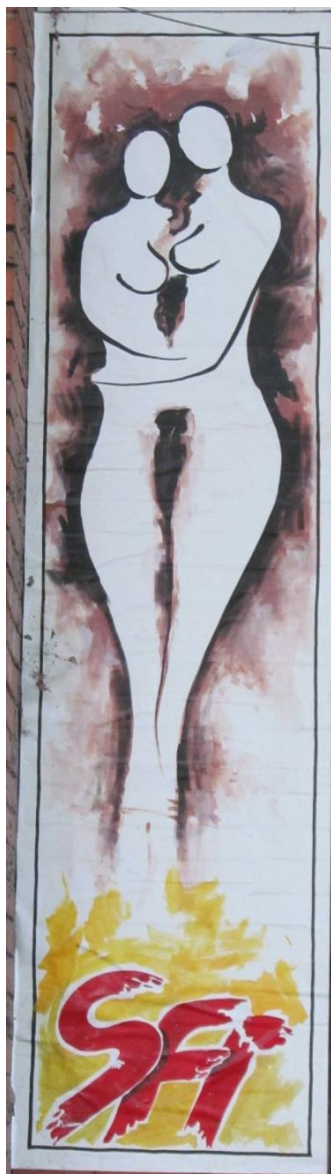


Figure 3.22.SFI poster on female homosexuality on the Eastern walls of the Reading Room. Source: Self, 2015



Figure 3.21. SFI Poster on male homosexuality at the same location. Source: Self, 2015

Photographed in the beginning of 2015 from behind the Central Library, these powerful posters (Figures 3.21 & 3.22) by SFI put up in 2014 are based on the empowerment of Queer sexuality and LGBTIQ+ liberation. These are one of the first public visual expressions on the topic of alternate sexualities and gender debates. While a lot of effort has been put in gender sensitization and women's empowerment, there have been rare occasions of Queer representation in the poster narratives of JNU campus. Thus these posters are significant in initiating dialogues on the topic. The irony of the representation, however, is embedded in the fact that SFI which is the student wing of the CPI(M) has no substantial views on this. They had an influential Queer candidate to initiate mobilisations of the conceptual representation of this

marginal community oppressed by the Indian Penal Code 377, criminalising alternate sexuality. Very few organisations have addressed this issue with SFI championing the cause through co-optation, though it is the work of an individual candidate. The representation is however focussed without verbal noises to create a pure palette, legitimising Queer sexuality through the discourse of posters in the campus. The poster on the left represents female homosexuality while the one on the right focuses on male homosexuality. The figures are generic and fluid, lacking any facial features to emphasise the act of love over the particularities of genders through visually translating the metaphorical idiom: “making the beast with two backs”¹⁰

¹⁰ Shakespeare's *Othello* Act 1, Scene 1, line 126-127

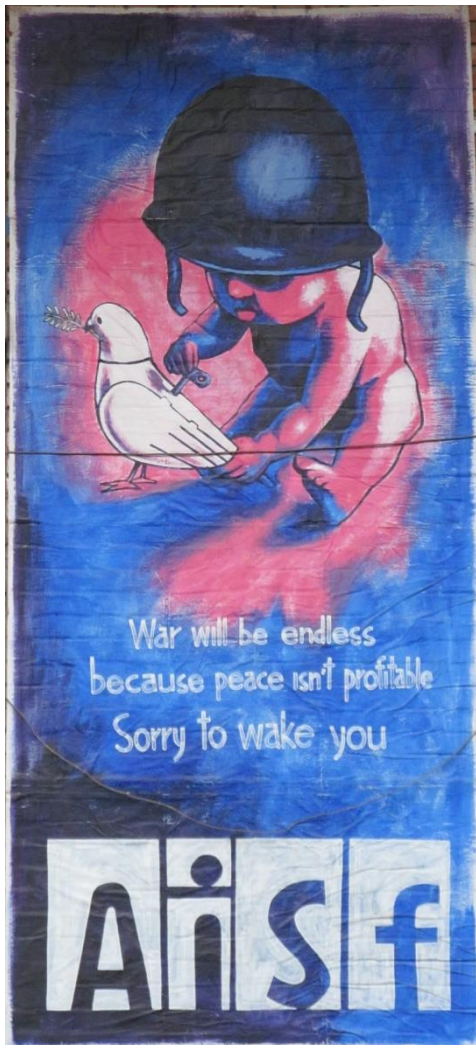


Figure 3.23. AISF poster on war mongering on SL front wall. Source: Self, 2015



Figure 3.24. AISF poster on poverty on SL front wall. Source: Self, 2015

Among the many posters that are/were present on the campus, very few have been selected for this analysis. Among them these two posters (Figures 3.23 & 3.24) by AISF stand out as the two of the best. Photographed in early 2015 these posters were located in the School of Languages. The visuals of both the posters are minimal, iconic and hard hitting. The first one in deep dominant blue is an anti-Imperialist; anti-War poster featuring a baby boy wearing a soldier's helmet fiddling with his winding toy which is a white dove with an olive branch. The poster is strongly symbolic with the accompanying text integrating strong irony and satire on the idea of apology. The dove is the classic symbol of peace, which is being toyed with by the ignorant governments to profit from war-mongering. The child with the helmet is heartbreakingly symbolic of the naïve young men drawn to the war sometimes through forced enlistment as modern cannon-fodder. The symbol of peace as a toy explores the idea that bringing up a military itself undermines the idea of peace. Peace will always be dominated by the profit it yields. The poster makes it clear that such an expectation of a profitable peace is an

oblivious choice since governments choose war, not the people. Peace is only instrumental in the hands of the “ignorant armies” who would wind it through their unknowing death and sacrifice.

The second poster is a strong statement on poverty and the condition of the poor homeless people, and mendicants who beg around on the streets. The visual fuses them to create the vivid metaphor of the ‘ticking bomb’ that would explode at any given moment. The people tied up in the form of the timed dynamite sticks are shown to be fatigued with their gestures of begging. The poster gives the ominous message of the lull before the storm that is being created by the rich and poor divide. The offshoot of late capitalism is instrumental in perpetuating the ever-widening wealth gap. The accompanying text, which ironically shushes the spectators, is a smart way of addressing the capitalist strategies of displacement and invisibilisation of the poor. (Hammond 2008) The image of the clock attached to the bomb indicates few minutes to the zero hour suggesting that the explosion is looming close; it is only a matter of time before the silence is broken into mayhem and chaos. These posters are among the most innovatively powerful ones which do not blindly regurgitate the agitprop stylistics or any other adaptive mode exhibiting effective minimalism to keep a successful balance of content as well as visuals driven to hold the attention of the viewers.



Figure 3.25. AISA poster on environmental crisis in SIS. Source: Self, 2015

Lastly, this poster (Figure 3.25) put up by AISA in 2014, photographed in 2015 at the School of International Studies, is one of the few posters that critique capitalist growth and development purely through the lens of environmental premonition. It is a powerful poster using the popular trope of online video streaming by using the buffering bar and the text “Loading...Please Wait...” The irony is brought out by the stark dichotomy of the nature versus industrialisation debate. The visual elements flesh out the contrast by the use of silhouette as the obscure face of capitalism consuming the green and lively nature gradually. The poster evokes concern with the textual embellishment on the right which says “Explain

to the future generation it was good for economy when they can't farm the land, breathe the air and drink the water." The message is clear but wisely encoded juxtaposing the natural against the human intervention through digital iconography. It encompasses, encapsulates and critiques the entirety of the Lyotardian prediction of "computerised society" (1984: 3) harmonising in arousing a paranoid vision of the future based on the present nature of consumption and technological mania. It argues the fact that all the development is actually happening at the cost of the natural resources. The poster is an eco-critical statement arousing a vision of the future that has been so often mediatised in popular Hollywood cinemas through apocalypse movies set in a bleak futuristic dystopia.

As a fragmentary inference, I would like to make a brief observation: the impact of the posters is not singularly dependent upon the content, or the aesthetic presentation, or the exclusivity of space in terms of safety, but highly dependent on the manner of agglomeration and execution. The richness of the text might be a borrowed or attributed phenomenon in some cases, but the way they are placed and structured makes all the difference in impact. Having a beautiful painting done incoherently without pertinence for an issue or the target audience and spectatorship can definitely work as an artwork but what defines a poster in an enclosed university space like JNU as a successful visual text, is the ability to merge and converge various artistic elements towards the attention of the viewer. Though the possibility of transcending the current structure is difficult enough to produce newer varieties of posters, but ignoring the concept of ocularcentrism and a structural treatment of the scopic regime, being unaware of the visual categories, is impossible. The posters are hyperreal, multifarious and diffused in their approach to burning socio-political issues. However, in the lack of a better alternative form this is the best one to engage with the space and its occupants as an urban art in the enclosed community of JNU. However, the too smug nature of the availability of space and cleansed visualities take away the harsher struggle for visibility that street art faces in the city of Delhi lacking both the elements of vandalism and/or curation. Here the unmediated space takes away the scope of resistance or protest which is essentially watered down into a meta-curated exhibition of refined 'vandalistic' efforts which are much too superficial and elitist to be drawn and engaged by the larger demography of the urban space that Delhi is. However, the effort and labour that is put in the production of these posters must not be underestimated though it should be remembered that the annual ritual is aimed at the elections and the posters are essentially 'adprop' that is advertisement and propaganda as opposed to the agitprop borrowings that they exhibit.

Conclusion

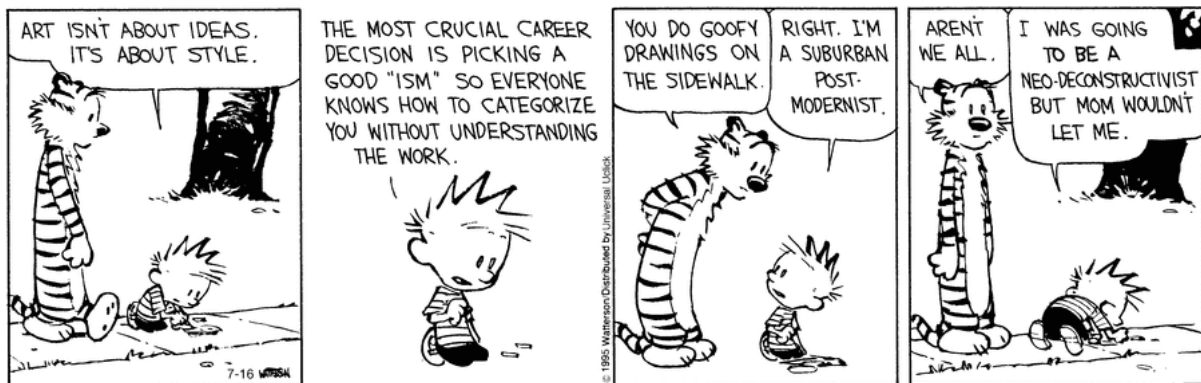


Figure 4.1. Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson, July 16, 2015. Source: GoComics

To focus on a sense of art as commodity—rather than, say, on a sense of art as play, or as experiment, or even as expression, fiction, invention, or the beautiful—enables us to examine how such categories as play, experiment, expression, fiction, invention, and the beautiful are summoned in the very process of canonizing this [graffiti] "crime" as "art." (Stewart 209)

Akshat Nauriyal ends his short web documentary *Extension Khirkee* (2013) with an aphorism by Edgar Degas: “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see” trying to provide a situated commentary on the growing street art scene of the Khirki Extension in Delhi. The problem of this category of ‘growing street art’ is determining how much of it is indigenous, in the sense that it has been born of the street itself. If art is what you make others see and not what you see yourself, then it is definitely problematic because deception or ‘artifice’ lies at the core of what the street scene in Delhi shows. It is an illusion of the ‘revolutionary’ import of street art as it is successfully co-opted by the Indian enthusiasts, occasionally backed by the government with an ambiguous treatment. So what we understand as street art is definitely not something that evades surveillance but ensures it is ‘carefully handled’, creating a transition in the form and of the scopic regime that is dictated by the sense of a remote regulatory governance that controls what we see. In other words, street art creates procedural legitimation of space through intervention, as we must have iterated a number of times by now. The visual grammar, somewhat mimicking the pure linguistic frameworks, follows a “bounded creativity” (Brown & Cagan 1996) that allows a scope of expansion as well as encryption under the mechanistic principles of communication. The lack of the draconian laws provides the artists an access to the public domain confronting a state of contradiction as compared to the graffiti laws present in other cities and societies outside India. The artists like Anpu Varkey, Axel Void, Hendrik ECB, Daku and Yantr, have made a

transition from the studios into the streets in order to expand their visibility and gain a larger audience for their work. Their works on the streets, howsoever problematized by the debates of contents and sanctioning, are indubitably street art, owing to the nature of medium, locations and elaborate production process.

However, the contentions of vandalism as a category in the Delhi streets are limited to a very few artists like Daku, Yantr, BasicShit and Harsh Raman, among whom Daku stands out. The role of vandalism applied in the category of graffiti and the socially responsible street art discussed in the first chapter works on the idea of seduction. The seduction of vandalism lies in the enthrallment of its engagement with location and generating absolute scandal. This is an important contributive factor to the artistic valuation. "It is important to remember that the crime of graffiti is a crime in mode of production." (Stewart 226) The category is purely poetic in its embodiment of the systematic chaos. The chaos which is curbed by the passion of the writer and the spirit of experimentation as well as performance under the influence of the adrenaline rush taps into the seductive charm of pure poetry without the loaded production value, ethics or commodification. Hence the criminal attribution is so integrally pointed towards the mode of production that lacks the generation of revenue and economic contribution, instead, devalues locations through subversion and defacement. The poiesis is in the restructuring of an existing visual order. The second mode which involves the curatorial intervention of appropriating space into the multiplicity of canvases leads a motivated production value, through effort and recognition, to the murals and pieces. The crime and the criminality of production are purged into acceptance through the agency of a mediator who satisfies the need for the 'value' in terms of social relevance or economic productivity. The lube of mediation allows smooth transmission of the artistic potential on to substantiated locations. The individual pieces would never escape the production rationale even if the content was attempted to be vandalistic. The paradox would always haunt the nature of that street art to be governed by a principle which is external to the artist. The appropriating drive, sometimes, loses in the process of negotiation because the space, the medium, the location requires more focused attention to remove the traces of vandalism which might aim to vilify certain socio-political or religious practices. Here, the fear of scandal and controversy stems from a sentiment directly opposite the principles of street art which thrives on it. The third category is simulation in a controlled environment. The fundamental rights provide the right to free speech, but that is typically censored to fit into mediated expression. The artist of the first chapter aimed to break the censorship under

the guise of anonymity and elusive identity, evading the persecution that could hamper the countercultural seduction. That is the category of 'speech' for him. The artist in the second chapter became the subject catering to the commission of the authority who aims at buying the essence of mass produced iconography which titillates the sense of mischief without engaging into the madness of it; thus buying the craft without the content for aesthetic adornments. The artist in the third chapter has transfused and culminated the performance of a contradictory sense of vandalism packaged in elitism of a space that requires no struggle against the established order to be captured. This category resembles the analogy of hunting for survival/pleasure in the confines of a wildlife sanctuary that undermines the very act of hunting, atrophying the logic of necessity itself. This renders the estimation of the art objects into simulated projections with scripted enactments in a miniaturized environment much like the reality shows on TV. It aims at enacting the reality that is an ingredient factor into performatively affecting the chronotopes of the urban exterior narrative. The art of this third category derives and deduces the fragmented realities in this holographic hyperreal of the scholarly "gated community." It is almost laboratorial except in its empirical consequences. The artworks are the reduced, processed preserves of the scoop of the socio-political realities stored in the sampling jars of the university walls.

There seems to emerge a significant congealed narrative of author function among these three proposed categories. The first looks away from identification or recognition to be able to operate the attempted visibility through maintained anonymity. There are perfect machineries of distraction from the figure of the author. The pseudonyms or graff monikers, the manufactured mystery around the identity, persona and the personages of the writers created by the circles and the crews are important para-texts of the art that create the idea of the 'brand' (1991: 226) that Stewart talks about. The content speaks for the politics of representation. There can be contradictory political narratives to generate a paradoxical discourse of production. "It is not necessarily the intention of graffiti writers or artists to point to the paradoxes of consumer culture; rather, the paradoxes inherent in the production and reception of graffiti are paradoxes shaped by the contingencies of this historical conjuncture." (Stewart 209) The other side of this paradox is the re-production of the contemptible 'brand' into a publicly presentable art/author function to be dealt in terms of value that would have been impossible to be asserted in the idea of defiant vandalism which got the mechanism moving in the first place. For example, other than the tags, much of Daku's socially responsible vandalistic works discussed in the first chapter refrain from leaving identity

marks or signatures for the fear of being pursued and persecuted. However, the first work discussed in the early portions of the second chapter belonging to Daku also lacks the signature in the body (it was present in other areas of the Fair), but the dynamics of anonymity has been turned. “The graffiti signature, which marked in unmistakable color the truth of desolation and abandonment, is here replaced by the mere illusion of presence and a remarkable sense of ‘public appearances’.” (Stewart 222) The institutionalized mediation of the curator changes the nature of the space but for the artist/writer/author it legitimizes a commodified visibility. “The appropriation of graffiti by the art establishment has meant the retention of the signature, but the mode of execution and reproduction, equally essential to the graffiti aesthetic, has been dropped. The point is to make graffiti a commodity; to do so, one must clearly define their status as unique objects. One must invent a self-conscious intentionality that places the artist intertextually within the tradition as it is defined by critics and the art establishment in general.” (Stewart 223) This is the point of departure for the understanding of the third category of production which formulates the author function under the organizational objectives typically invisibilizing the access channel to the authors/artists projecting the text under the organizational monikers to be solely understood as a collective authorship barring the ability to trace the categorical labour of production. The texts in that simulated space borrow the signification of the bureaucratic propaganda pluralising and denying the viability of the traceable individual author functions, thereby diffusing the responsibility of the textuality, labour as well as the politics of representation.

At the core of the debates lies the utilitarian principle of packaging the content. The art is the content brought out by the frictions of semiosis. It is important to decide whether ‘the frictions’ or is it ‘the semiosis’ that has to be highlighted through projection. It is pretty clear by now that all art, by virtue of the multiplicity of gazes, is commodified right at its genesis. The commodity needs to be delivered through the mechanisms or craft (*techne*) of signification where the signified is the refined yield of that commodity. The ‘pure signified’, which itself is a controversial and paradoxical term, relies heavily on the paratextuality of simulations: packaging. The object viewed raises the question of memory and the nature of embedding. However, the more important question here is the manner of the process that goes into creating that illusion; whether the immediate visual cognition is the consequence or the conduit of recall of that memory which has been deeply embedded through years of cultural exposures. A brilliant example of this problematic can be drawn from the recent incident of visual restoration of the Buddhas of Bamiyan through a projected three

dimensional image on a silk screen at the same spot where it stood and was destroyed by the Taliban, creating an illusion of its restoration.¹ What this implies is that the restoration is a simulation while the method is the packaging. However, one can argue or question further on the nature of this restoration as it simultaneously exists and it does not. The viewers in the site can experience or recall ‘memory’ through the augmented visual reconstruction which is essentially tangibly absent in concretion. *The Hindu* reports on June 10, 2015: “A projected image of a Buddha statue in Bamiyan that had been destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. The initiative to visually restore the destroyed statue was dreamt by Chinese couple Zhang Xinyu and Liang Hong, who are travelling through countries on the historic Silk Road route.” accompanied by the following image.

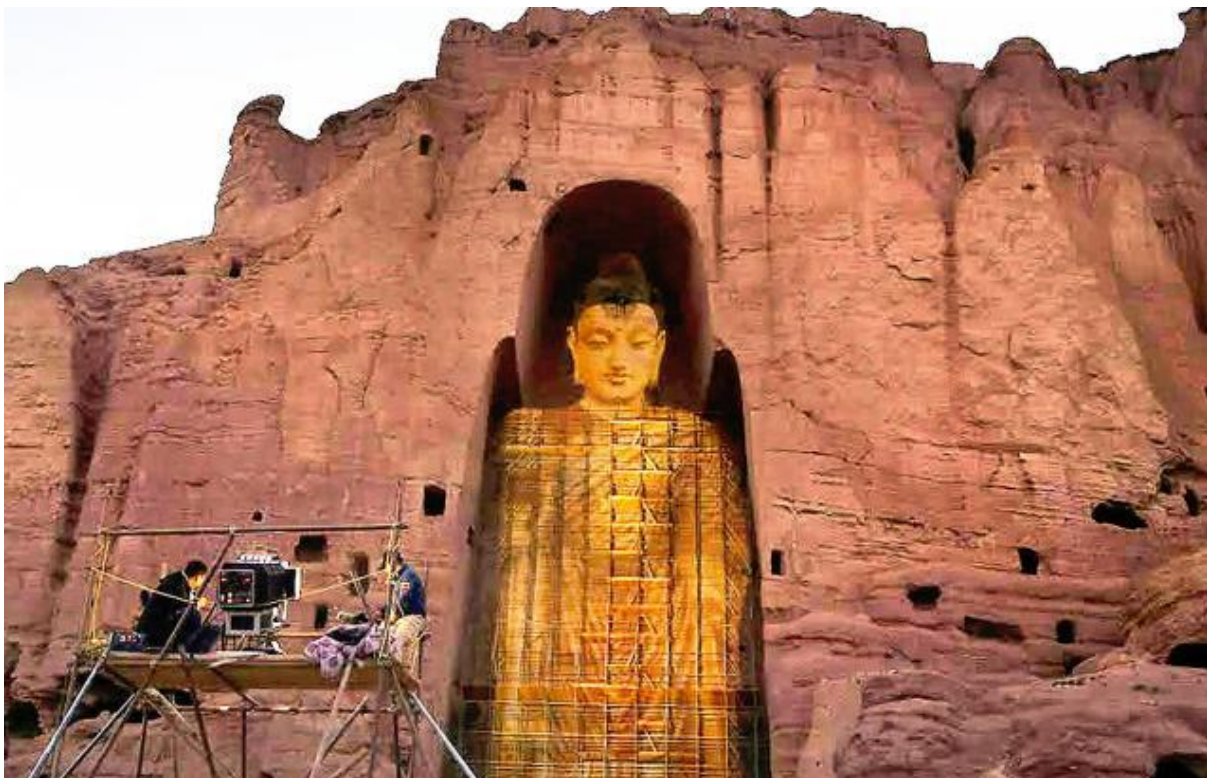


Figure 4.2. "Bamiyan Buddha ‘returns’" Source: *The Hindu*, June 10, 2015

¹ While for the rest of the world the destruction was the worst form of barbaric vandalism, the fundamentalists who mobilised the destruction argued that the statues were against the tenets of Islam and therefore had to be removed. By their logic, the statues were acts of vandalism against the religious belief of Islam. Refer for the arguments on global legalities of the destruction: Francioni, Francesco, and Federico Lenzerini. "The destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and international law." *European Journal of International Law* 14.4 (2003): 619-651.

There is a transition in the narrative of the urban art intervention which is a part of this packaged exteriorization of the public self. What it implies is that the concrete participatory form of gentility would take the virtual notions of space in the same stride as the artworks in the public realm, which are ephemeral and palimpsestic by default, due to their existence in a preformulated architectural textuality of the urban environment. Collective exteriorization of the cultural selves is a product of the prosthesis of the miniaturized technology which is wearable at will, practically obliterating the lines of distinction between man and his extension. This also takes into account the data participation, sharing and collaborative form of digital citizenship in the form of consensual uploading of the user information which are major developmental blocks for social networking and the changing forms of art in the age of newer media. The newer media have allowed increased and improved interactivity with the illusion of content control. It is illusory because they can be manipulated unless protected by a deluge of codes and firewalls. The platforms are inherently split into high energy social fragments or clusters due to preferential algorithms of technological adoption and adaptation in the daily lives of people. The availability of the images and the multiplicity of the reproduction always duplicate the amplified versions of basic human interactions. This gives rise to the newer forms of citizenship engagement with the space. It is almost a banal form of the cathartic experience now transitioning into a sort of mediated release through the augmented hyperreal that art in the open urbane environment along with the internet offers. This release is a methodical attempt to bring stability through the illusion of the upturned hierarchies as Bakhtin formulated in his idea of the Carnavalesque evolving through *Rabelais and his World* (1965), *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) and *Problems of Dostevsky's Poetics* (1984). The internet allows a provision for a corporatized democratic conduit through the social media, to be a platform for the nodal hierarchies in the rhizomatic structure of the internet to be dissolved in the apparent manner by allowing access to celebrities, politicians and people who were earlier usually beyond the reach of mundane interactions.

Art in the urban spheres, with its varied categories, cannot essentialise the same principle to allow the hierarchies of the visual arts to be dissolved and reintegrated in the visibility regime of the citizens. They are the interactive forms of art, analogous to the internet which is the coolest interactive medium as opposed to the hot nature of the inaccessible high gallery enclosures. "Any hot medium allows of less participation than a cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than a seminar, and a book for less than a dialogue." (McLuhan 1994: 23) This is an attempt to consolidate, or rather convince the

tangibility of the holographic hyperreal, to root it and interpellate the coolest category of art. It has evolved into a method of negotiation between cultural introversion against consumerist exhibitionism. The necessity of glamour plays a significant role in the urban arts that we have looked at. Much like in the sense of what Berger (146) has explained, the glamour is the marker of the valuation of seduction that these arts must create. Delhi's urbanscape offers complex elemental visual infinity of substances which would include the *differential* multiplicity that the diversity of this country can offer. Modern street art and the modern protest visuals are the remnants of a post-modern fluctuation that has been appropriated in a post-colonial space of urban opulence and contrasting poverty as a means of exteriorization of the incommunicability of modernism dominated by technological fluency. The glamour is determined by the mediation of these mechanical, illusive scopes of the world, ultimately reshuffling the sense and expectation of a settlement for a singularity compelling the mode of narratives to be in a constant state of flux.

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