

Cultural, Business, and Political Characteristics of Hong Kong Street Art: A Mini Review

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Abstract: With its towering skyscrapers and busy streets, many people think that Hong Kong is all that it appears to be. But look closely and you'll see that behind all this glitz and glamour, Hong Kong has a wealth of fascinating things to offer. As Asia's most vibrant centre for art and culture, Hong Kong has demonstrated its creative spirit in everything from world-class galleries and exhibitions to international art events, especially in street art. Over the past few years, street art has given Hong Kong's cityscape a bold and innovative look - the East meets West murals in Central, the graffiti art in Wong Chuk Hang Industrial Estate, the colourful and creative works in Sham Shui Po. The paper explains and demonstrates cultural and business aspects of Hong Kong Street Art based on its characteristics. Further recommendation of the continuing transformation of Hong Kong Street Art is proposed in the last section of this paper as well.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Street Art, Cultural and Business Characteristics, Politics, Continuing Transformation.

1. Introduction

In twenty-first century, the medium of art has moved beyond traditional boundaries, from paper, cardboard and canvas to pavements, pavements, tunnels, and the brick facades of buildings. As a symbol of radical anti-conformity, anti-mainstream and freedom, street art has grown rapidly in recent years in terms of visibility, popularity, and auction results, and is a leading representative of the art world in the new century. It is probably best known for its freedom to call for love, or to mock subversion. In any case, street art is about the spirit of non-compromise, freedom, and the courage to speak the truth. Therefore, it continues to be embraced by its global fanatic supporters. However, it is only in recent years that street art has gained a high degree of attention.

According to the Contemporary Art Market Report published by Art price, the global leader in art market databases, the enthusiasm for street art is specifically mentioned. In the auction market, the popularity of artists is judged by the number of lots sold. Street art is one of the 10 most sought-after artists in the world, with Keith Haring, Shepard Fairley, Banksy and KAWS taking up four of the top 10 spots and has established itself as one of the most dynamic segments of the art market today, while generating a frenzy of interest among collectors. If street art was once active in the suburbs of the city, now street artists have adapted to the art trade and the art trade is gradually adapting to them. Whether it is graffiti on fences or traditional works on canvas, their work is popular on social media, in art galleries and at auction houses. Art is a power tool and useful across multiple scenarios. Art can influence political opinion, preserve tradition, and critique society.

The effects from encouraging the Hong Kong Street artists can have both positive and negative effects. The artists use stencils, charcoal, spray paints among other instruments to relay their message. The paintings add beauty to the streets. The paintings embody vibrant color and change the monotonous appearance of Hong Kong's almost generic buildings [1]. For instance, the industrial area of Wong Chuk Hang is decorated by many graffiti piece giving it a variant

appeal. The murals and graffiti paintings help in giving Hong Kong a unique appeal [2]. The artists cooperate with local business to paint on the shutter of many shops in the Hong Kong region. The artists make creations in corporation with the entrepreneurs to make paintings reflective of the business's essence. The Hong Kong art scene attracts tourists from overseas who come to gaze at their beauty. The industry also attracts other graffiti artists from other parts of the world to participate in making street art [3]. Thus street-art festivals and paintings help in generating revenue for Hong Kong through tourism. Hong Kong street art goes beyond the world-class art murals and graffiti works. It also comprises of exhibitions, street performance among other art forms. The street art gives Hong Kong an aesthetic appeal.

2. From Underground to "Big Business"

The street art is evidence of the creative potential of Hong Kong artists in creating beauty. Apart from giving the streets of Hong Kong vibrancy and beauty, street art is a form of expression. Street-art like any other art form facilitates expressions. Through art artists can express their feelings and critique society. Artists can paint piece that questions political decisions and the prevailing conditions. Street art gives the Hong Kong youth a platform to be heard and air their opinions [4]. The art can create awareness among the public on various topics. Artists also use graffiti and wall paintings to preserve culture and tradition of their era. For instance, in Hong Kong one of the most popular attractions is the Hollywood Road and a mural of on narrow Graham Street. The artist expresses their view of their time by depicting the growing trend of commercialization by painting numerous shops in one mural. The artists also cooperate with business owners to create paintings that capture the essence of their business. Thus, the street-art also help non-artists to visually create their feelings and expressions. Through their creative expressions artists also make avenues to generate income among themselves [5]. The Hong Kong street-art are testament of the importance of art. However, there are some disadvantages associated with the art from.

The most famous event on the auction block in 2018 would have to be the act of self-destruction of street artist Banksy's work *Balloons and Girls* the moment it was auctioned. This act has undoubtedly put the spotlight on street art once again in societies around the world. The biggest beneficiary of this incident, which has been in the news since it fermented, has been the auction house Sotheby's, in addition to Banksy. Not only did the Banksy incident bring Sotheby's huge traffic and visibility, but experts believe that Banksy's "self-destruction" may have actually doubled the price of the work, with the auction house stating shortly after the sale: "It looks like we've got Banksy's *'The financing'*". The work was ranked number one in the 2017 'Britain's Favourite Artworks' ranking [6].

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3. Hong Kong City is the Canvas for Street Artists

It is not wrong to say that street art began with graffiti; New York City in the 1960s and 80s was a city of enthusiasm and fast pace, with a huge gap between rich and poor. In the Bronx, New York's poorest neighbourhood, the area's youth enjoyed graffiti, which later became a form of gangland occupation. The ghetto is home to a group of unemployed, out-of-school Hispanic or black youths who are seen as a social problem. The anti-racist, anti-war, anti-sexual repression, anti-authority repression movement, which touched on the racial problems of their circumstances, poverty, and the constraints of employment, formed a regional counterculture of social behaviour [3,6]. Graffiti originated on the fringes of a dying New York society, where a group of young people who could challenge the authorities reconstructed the fragments of secular culture.

In Hong Kong artists are finding new avenues to communicate and advance their skills. One such outlet artists exploit street art. With events like the sixth street art festival held in 2019 helping popularize the art form [7]. The event organized by HK walls in partnership with Hong Kong Design Centre continues to turn Hong Kong into a painter's canvas [8]. With the advancement of the art form there are some accompanying effects, street art does not challenge the traditional definition of artworks as Duchamp did but goes beyond the traditional notion of 'art space' and uses artworks to dialogue with the otherwise mundane environment, provoking a renewed understanding and consideration of public space. Its existence reveals to us that not all art depends

on galleries or museums for its presentation: street art only needs the world around it as a canvas and uses the world as material for their human comedy - the theatre in which street art speaks out is our world itself [9].

Neon-lit Mongkok has always been one of the images people have of Hong Kong, a veritable shopping paradise with its bustling streets reflecting the prosperity of the city. However, for more local street artists, Mongkok's famous Sai Yeung Choi Street is their big stage. Unlike the commercial bustle of Hong Kong Island, Mong Kok's affordable, casual, and localised approach to material goods has given the commercial district, especially the pedestrianised area, a strong sense of urban ordinariness [4]. Vivid murals by local and international artists have transformed the streets of Sai Ying Pun into a colourful canvas. The gallery also exhibits the work of street artists, and the arrival of well-known foreign artists to paint and leave an 'art mark' on Hong Kong has given street art an international flavour.

4. Street Art Continues to be Stifled in Hong Kong

The disadvantages associated with street-art vary in their nature. Some affect the environment, some affect societal organization, among other issues. Street art facilitates vandalism and the destruction of private property. Graffiti and street paintings are illegal in another place around the globe. However, in Hong Kong the art is legal [5]. Despite being legal the practice may still lead to vandalism. In Hong Kong the businesses and building owners voluntarily provide the wall space the artists need to paint the attractive murals. However, in the absence of a mutual agreement graffiti painting will be an act of vandalism. Graffiti changes the appearance of the wall at times completely, especially when the artist is using permanent paint. When artist paints a wall without the consent of the owner, they become a delinquent. The owner will then have to incur an extra cost to get rid of the artwork he did not commission. Graffiti and street artist also poses a threat to culture and heritage [10]. The artists may paint on cultural, and heritage sites thus destroying their historical appeal. Graffiti artists may also vandalize road signs and other important billboards. The Street art industries can directly or indirectly facilitate the occurrence of vandalism.

Street painting especially those that rely on graffiti spray painting are harmful to the environment. Making street art using graffiti emits toxic fumes into the environment which contribute to global warming. Research also shows that the aerosol sprays release volatile organic compounds like ethylene glycol and methylene chloride that affect the integrity of the o-zone layer [11]. Removing the street murals also require the use of environmentally degrading chemicals. The chemical pollutes the environment during removal and the disposing of the chemicals. To facilitate the industry the toxic chemicals are used repeatedly [12]. The aerosol paints popular among street artists also has menthol as a key ingredient. Though menthol does not adversely affect the environment, it can degrade health. Long exposure to menthol leads to health issues such as severe headaches and sleeping disorders. The aerosols used in painting walls will destroy ecosystems that exists on the buildings. For instance, artists may paint over moss, which eventually kills the moss [13]. The death of the moss will force other organisms feeding on the moss to migrate away from the site. The migration

disrupts the regions ecosystems. The environmental impacts associated with street art shows some of the negative effects of encouraging street art. Through their creative expressions artists also make avenues to generate income among themselves.

5. The Hong Kong Politics & Protest Recreated by Street Art

Two years ago in Hong Kong, as tear gas and violent street clashes haunted her, Hong Kong painter Chua Yu-kuen pondered how she would eventually bring them to life on canvas. About one year later, a local gallery exhibited her answer, 'As It Is_Partial', a set of her deep, ethereal landscapes reminiscent of ancient Chinese scroll paintings that capture a city transformed by civil unrest. Specific visual allusions to the protests are subtly integrated into layer after layer of faded acrylic brushstrokes. "My previous landscape work was quite subdued and far from reality; more like surrealism," said 33-year-old Cai Yujuan in an interview. "But this exhibition is very different because the relationship between me and the city has changed."

Graffiti can be a way for those who rebel against the government to vent their anger. However, those who engage in political graffiti often have different aims and philosophies. For different people, graffiti can mean different things. Some of them see graffiti as a method or technique of political practice, or even as a tool to express anti-technology. The anti-government protests that rocked Hong Kong's financial hub in 2019 brought with them a plethora of anonymous street art and political posters that hailed protesters as heroes or openly poked fun at the Hong Kong government and its allies in Beijing. Some of these works were created by people who have made their mark in the field of street art [15].

Two years later, much of the radical art of protest has disappeared and the police have effectively suppressed demonstrations. Many residents were deeply concerned about the national security law imposed on Hong Kong by the Chinese central government last summer, and the subsequent mass arrests of opposition politicians, activists and lawyers. Street artists acknowledge that anything they created could conflict with the national security law, which would criminalise any act deemed by the Chinese government to be terrorist, secessionist, subversive or in collusion with foreign powers. Institutions such as the gallery are wary of taking risks.

6. The Continuing Transformation of Hong Kong Street Art

Nowadays, it is not difficult to explain what street art is, and they include at least the following: (a) street art incorporates a strong commitment to social activism; (b) street art represents a phenomenon that is constantly changing the status quo of contemporary art through self-transformation; (c) finally street art plays a role in shaping and constructing a new cultural discourse [10].

The emergence of many street-art works has had a global impact as a fringe visual movement, a social phenomenon and an artistic expression of today's youth. As street art continues to explore new forms and possibilities as it enters the new century, however, street artists are invariably influenced by new digital media, and those working with spray cans are beginning to explore some innovative ways to perpetuate the expression of their art. Street art has come a long way, having

undergone a dramatic change from suppression to love, and the art market's apathy to pursuit. Compared to traditional art, the work of street artists is much more widely promoted across all levels of society, with relatively less reliance on galleries and auction houses. From shops selling street artists' figurines, to trendy brands co-branding with artists, art is too expensive for the public, whereas street artists' work not only clearly expresses the artist's aesthetic and attitude but is also relevant to the everyday life of the public and has a much wider reach.

7. Summary

In conclusion, street art has many effects both negative and positive. To facilitate the growth of the art form it is important to address the problems associated with the craft. For instance, using eco-friendly paints can help solve the environmental issues. The art form shows how diverse Hong Kong is in terms of creativity. The art forms continue to form part of the modern Hong Kong culture. The impact of the art form shows why the study of Arts and Humanities are important. The study helps us understand artistic impression, commentary and how they relate to society and societal problems.

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