

STREET ART AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN HONG KONG

Exploring Notions of Beautification, Gentrification, Opportunity, and Resistance Through Art

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INTRODUCTION

My interests in the arts were first piqued in March 2016 when I participated in Occidental's Alternative Spring Break service trip hosted by the Office of Community Engagement, Residential Education and Housing Services, and the Office for Religious and Spiritual Life. That year, the theme was "Exploring Citizenship: Sustaining Communities" and we traveled to Tijuana, Mexico, San Diego, and around Los Angeles. In particular, the moment that inspired this research was the trip to Chicano Park in San Diego. Chicano Park is a national historic landmark in San Diego famous for its vibrant murals and art. Though less discussed, this art is heavily politicized and was a mechanism for activism and resistance from the local community. Learning about the history of Chicano Park and the power of art as resistance encouraged me to study the arts from a sociological perspective.

As an area of study, Hong Kong is a particularly interesting region to conduct research given its nuanced cultural and political identity. Although Hong Kong is technically classified as a special administrative region (SAR) of China, it bears its own traditions, intersections, and contradictions. Besides balancing its eastern and western influences, Hong Kong also engages with debates of tradition versus modernity, local versus global, and gentrification versus redevelopment. With all these complexities in mind, this research explores the relationships between art, culture, and social change in Hong Kong. In particular, I landed on the topic of art and social change because of a series of news articles that discussed the ethics of art in various Hong Kong communities, scrutinizing HK Walls, a non-profit arts organization, for contributing to gentrification. This paper is in conversation with local news articles, offering a holistic and theoretical account of HK Walls' role in Hong Kong.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ARGUMENT

At its core, this research aims to explore the role that art plays in Hong Kong. More specifically, what role does art (street art, murals, graffiti) play in the conversation of culture, heritage, and gentrification? What organizations are situated within the nonprofit arts sector? What are the perspectives and frameworks that drive these organizations in their work? And, on a theoretical note, as a region defined by intersections (east meets west, tradition versus modernity, local versus global, gentrification versus redevelopment), how is art changing Hong Kong's history, identity, and overall narrative?

My research focuses on HK Walls, a non-profit arts organization, as a case study for street art and social change in Hong Kong. Despite the slippery relationship between culture and gentrification, I argue that HK Walls' approach towards street art, beautification, and revitalization operates from a community-based framework. By recruiting local and international artists for their annual street art festival, which is intentionally free and multilingual, HK Walls aims to create opportunities for budding muralists while instilling an appreciation for art as a whole. In doing so, the notion of high-brow art is deconstructed and made accessible to the local Hong Kong community. Additionally, the inclusion of international artists contributes to the global identity of Hong Kong as a region.

METHODOLOGY

This paper was first inspired by a series of local news articles regarding art and gentrification in Hong Kong. Upon further inspection, I began compiling relevant literature to explore the nuances of the local news articles. As a result, this paper draws on an extensive

review of sociological literature on the topics of gentrification, culture, art, and heritage. While the theoretical framework of gentrification is informed by literature centered on the United States and Europe as the primary areas of study, I draw on additional scholarly work, specific to Hong Kong, in order to delve into the specificities of gentrification, art, and culture.

In addition to the literature, I partnered up with HK Walls, a non-profit arts organization that facilitates avenues for international and local artists to create art in Hong Kong. While I was

HKWALLS

doing preliminary research back in the states, their organization popped up on numerous

occasions. Although HK Walls attained notoriety in the press for beautifying run-down areas of Hong Kong through murals, it was also scrutinized for contributing to cultural gentrification by changing the culture of certain Hong Kong communities through art. With my curiosities piqued, I was interested in digging deeper into the organization. Through this partnership, I was able to illuminate many of my questions by conducting an in-depth qualitative interview with Jason Dembski, co-founder, and Maria Wong, the managing director in their Kwai Chung office. Besides a formal interview, I decided to take an ethnographic approach to my research, immersing myself into HK Walls, though it is important to note that the time frame of this project limited what could have been a truer ethnography. I spent my summer interning with HK Walls, assisting from behind-the-scenes, which furthered my understanding of their role and impact on the community. For example, one of my clerical duties was to collect social media figures for every single article that mentioned HK Walls in 2017. Through this, I was given access to a body of news articles to read and analyze. Additionally, I digitized approximately 700 hundred business cards for their mailing list.

This research would not have been possible without the generosity of Occidental's China-Environment Program that situated me in the Chinese University of Hong Kong for the duration of Summer 2017. I enrolled as an exchange student through CUHK's International Summer School, taking a three-unit Chinese culture course in the month of July with Professor Ann Anagnost (University of Washington). Outside of class, I took advantage of being in Hong Kong, which allowed me to connect with HK Walls, immerse in their workspace, and ground my understanding of news articles and literature with real-life experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1964, the term gentrification was first coined by British sociologist Ruth Glass in relation to her housing scholarship in Islington, London. The etymology of the term draws on the gentry, or the upper ruling class who displaced the current population. She focused on the process of housing gentrification, articulating that the “working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes” (Glass 1964). For the rich who have enough money to be mobile, moving into a new environment is just another consumerist act. In contrast, the housing locations for the poor are dictated by their relatively low incomes. Therefore, gentrification directly posits two groups of people against each other: the wealthy and the poor, both of whom have inherited most of their financial history. Compounded with the sinister nature of capitalism, landowners play a huge role in facilitating gentrification. Often, landowners transform run-down apartments and cottages into expensive and enticing residencies in order to appeal to a high-brow taste, but only after the leases of older residents expire (Smith 1979). Afterwards, they then have the means to ramp up the housing prices.

Other scholars have documented that when communities go through preservation periods, this may also be followed by reinvestment and gentrification (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2013). During these moments, some communities turn to art as a means to bring life and energy into their community. In the United States, predominantly Latino communities have often used art as a means of resistance against ethnically-charged issues that are felt through racism, discrimination, housing segregation, gentrification, and other social problems. Within the Northeast Los Angeles region, Latino muralists and activists revitalized their community through vivid artistic murals after inheriting the land “in the late 20th century in the wake of white flight” (Lin 2016). With the advent of the art, Latino immigrants were able to collectively bring life and vibrancy into Northeast Los Angeles, sharing the arts and culture from their heritage in Mexico and Latin America. With cultural murals on every street illustrated in saturated colors, Northeast Los Angeles became desirable to community members for its beauty. As a result of their pulsing culture, gentrification was right around the corner with the “white return in the new millennium” (Lin 2016). However, wealthy people do not just go around with the intention of displacing families in communities. Besides capitalistic landowners, there are other mechanisms that factor into gentrification and displacement, like major cultural sites aimed to benefit the creative class of society (Florida 2003). When institutions fail to consider the livelihood of the average resident, only people with more financial mobility are able to freely participate in cultural consumption. However, communities would benefit most with a broader framework where there is an inclusivity of all people (Zukin 1995). Instead of having art and culture be co-opted by the affluent, politicizing art encourages outside migrants to critically consider their cultural

consumption. Struggling artists are also byproducts of a society where their cultural contributions increase the class of a space even if they themselves are poor (Ley 2003).

Although the art in Northeast Los Angeles was created in a bottom-up framework, where art was created by the community for the community, it is precisely this art scene that attracts wealthier individuals into a community. More importantly, the art scene in Northeast Los Angeles is inherently political because it is symbolic of Latin American culture and identity, exploring ideas of community, counter-narratives, and immigration (Reyes 2016). In an area where the land was abandoned by white people, Latino immigrants made the community their own, creating a space rich in culture and heritage. When people migrate into a community because of an artistic or creative attraction, they are not acknowledging the history of that



particular community. For richer people who can move around based on an attractive art scene, they are depoliticizing the art within the community, seeing it only for its face-value and aesthetics. However, what's

more salient in our capitalist society is not politicized or culturally-relevant art, it's money. As long as people are willing to pay money to live within a community, landlords are not concerned with ideas of culture and politics. Money supersedes these notions and the very artists who created such beautiful murals can easily be subjected to displacement because of the affluent

who seek a vibrant community culture. Therefore, it is no surprise why art and gentrification is an ongoing topic of discussion in Northeast Los Angeles.

Moving onto a more historic account of politicized art, Chicano Park in San Diego provides an excellent illustration of art as a means of resistance. In response to gentrification and other social problems, like displacement, inconsiderate construction, immigration, racism, and segregation, art was used as a mechanism to resist against these oppressive changes. In doing so, the art that exists within a particular region becomes highly politicized, organized under a theme of resistance against an oppressive ideology, like gentrification. Instead of having a mere collection of trendy art murals, organizing art under a specific theme serves as a political message from the people. One prime example of this is the creation of Chicano Park in the San Diego area. In response to the construction of new freeways surrounding the area, residents were

promised the creation of a community park, only to be shortchanged when the government's intention was to build a California Highway Patrol station (Manson 2012). In response to the government's blatant apathy, community



residents protested for weeks in order to secure their park. As a result, artists from the community used this space to document the colonial history of Chicanos in America as well as their mistreatment from the local government. As a means of resistance, Chicano activists

visually illustrated the Chicano struggle through art, even using the imposing freeways as extra canvas space. Notably, individual artists illustrated vibrant and historical murals “with most of the costs from their own pockets” (Robles and Griswold del Castillo). Without a consistent stream of funding from the government, this is reflective of the government’s indignation towards art as resistance. Local Chicano residents relied on each other to fund the extravagant art murals that define Chicano Park today.

The theoretical and historical background of art in Northeast Los Angeles and Chicano Park serves as a point of reference to conceptualize what is occurring within the art scene in contemporary Hong Kong. As mentioned earlier, Hong Kong as a region of study is intriguing because it requires an immense amount of consideration regarding its various dualities. As a former British colony until 1997, Hong Kong’s existence is a reflection of its eastern and western influences. Although Hong Kong is classified as a special administrative region of China, the political ideology of ‘one country, two systems’ plays a role in Hong Kong’s own unique identity. In particular, ideas of heritage and tourism play a major role in Hong Kong’s identity construction. As a whole, the framing of Hong Kong as a tourist city is rooted in a sense of accessibility because of its western influences. Unlike mainland China or other culturally homogenous countries, Hong Kong advertises itself as a global metropolis that welcomes tourism. With English supplementing Cantonese, that in itself tears down language barriers for foreigners and expatriates, broadening the appeal of Hong Kong as a site of consumerism, nightlife, and culture. Hong Kong tries capitalizes on its duality, blending the east with the west through ancient and modern landmarks (Henderson 2001). Notably, these landmarks are even strategically placed to present the ‘ideal’ Hong Kong, sectioning off run-down areas away from

the public while diverting the attention to majestic architectural structures (Ying and Yee 2006). However, instead of hiding and ignoring Hong Kong's poorest communities, there should be an initiative to revitalize and improve these spaces.

In particular, HK Walls, a non-profit arts organization has inadvertently played a role in beautifying various Hong Kong communities through elaborate murals. In its inception, the organization intended to create opportunities for budding artists throughout the world, but it has since introduced numerous murals throughout Hong Kong. The organization has garnered positive and negative feedback since it was founded in 2014. On one hand, supporters champion their initiative to bring art to local communities, but critics argue that the organization is contributing to gentrification in the process. Given the slippery relationship between culture and gentrification, it is important to be intentional with ideas of beautification and revitalization through art in Hong Kong. Therefore, if Hong Kong is truly invested in beautifying the community as a whole, while combatting gentrification, the first step is to utilize a bottom-up framework. This framework includes recruiting local artists, free community-based events, and an intentional regard for multilingualism (English, Cantonese Chinese, and Mandarin Chinese). By framing the notion of revitalization and beautification in Hong Kong from a local perspective first, the newly renovated region will be crafted by Hong Kong artists for Hong Kong artists, emulating the artistic and political endeavors of Latino immigrants in the United States. By supporting the local, predominantly Chinese community first, this can reign in the fears of gentrification and displacement, culturally and economically. This foundational structure will then provide a basis to incorporate the international essence of Hong Kong's identity since Hong Kong's identity is informed and shaped by incoming migrants as much as it is by local residents.

Then, Hong Kong can capitalize on “idiosyncratic locational benefits” to benefit its local residents while developing its unique identity, instead of becoming an overly Westernized region (Logan and Molotch 1987).

FINDINGS

Prior to my first meeting HK Walls, I had read up on the various articles that heavily criticized the organization for contributing to gentrification in various Hong Kong communities. Specifically, the article titled “Art and poor communities in Hong Kong: A positive influence or a stalking horse for gentrification” published by Karen Cheung in the Hong Kong Free Press informed my initial understanding of HK Walls as an organization. The article provided a comprehensive analysis of the impact of art in the Kowloon region, connecting it with gentrification. Despite having that background in mind, I was intent on gathering data with an emergent perspective. I wanted to learn about the operations of HK Walls as honestly as possible. I prepared a formal questionnaire (attached in appendix) that allowed us to converse about the history of HK Walls, tracing back to its creation, the various projects, public criticism, and their future goals as an organization. In addition, some parts of the conversation veered away from the original interview questions, offering insights to what I had not considered when my perception towards HK Walls was informed only through articles and literature. Much like how the conversation came to be organically, the inception of HK Walls, and its current operations, are very organic and free-flowing as well.

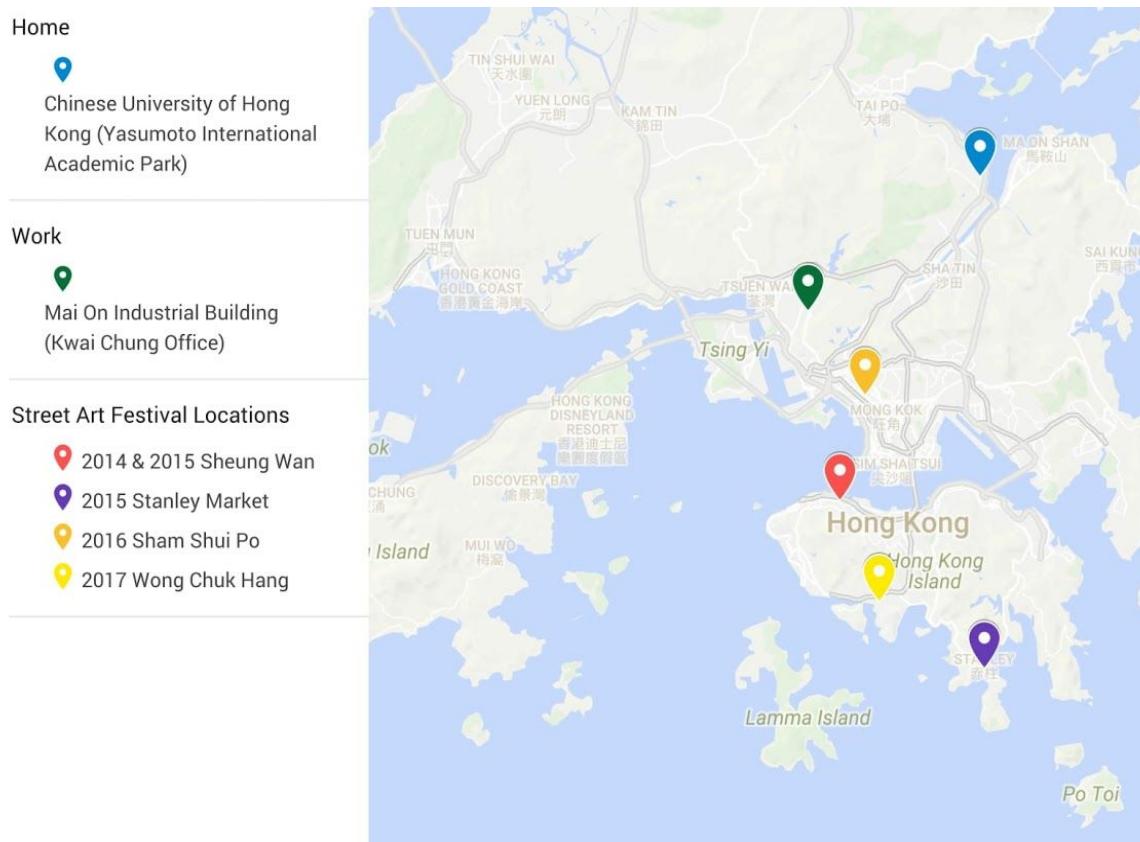
The Creation of HK Walls

When Dembski graduated with a degree in Architecture in 2009, he was discouraged by the prospects of an job in the states after the 2008 Recession. Having spent a summer abroad in Beijing, and with two former professors in Hong Kong, it made the most sense for Dembski to work abroad post-graduation. At the time, early renditions of HK Walls were expressed through a collection of Facebook albums documenting the street art in Hong Kong. Hoping to reach a larger platform, Dembski started posting his photography on his former website, www.HKStreetArt.com, while blogging about street art on another platform. Through these outlets, he connected with various artists and individuals within the arts sector.

The first defining art project for Dembski connected him with Wong, who was serving as the Head of Performing Arts for the Hong Youth Arts Foundation (HKYAF) at the time. They, among others in the non-profits sector, were posed with an artistic venture. When Swire Properties, a property, a property developing company popular in Hong Kong and Mainland China, was about to tear down a warehouse building, they turned to the arts sector to plan a last hurrah. Through this collaboration, this warehouse space was used as an art exhibition. Titled “Work in Progress” a three week long street art exhibition was held at TaiKoo Place in the Summer of 2013 (HKYAF 2013). After the success of this first project, people began contacting Dembski and Wong to connect them with artists for



various events and parties. After awhile, it became clear that their clients at the time only wanted graffiti art to seem ‘cool’. Instead of appreciating the art, it was co-opted as a marker for coolness. In response, Dembski, Wong, and Wu eventually created HK Walls as an outlet for artistic opportunity and appreciation. At its core, the organization prioritizes artists, creating “opportunities for local and international artists to showcase their talent in Hong Kong and internationally through the medium of street art and street culture” (HK Walls 2014). HK Walls’ biggest project is their annual street art festival during March, Hong Kong’s art month. The map below, created on Google My Maps, highlights the various locations of the street art festivals from 2014-2017, with additional markers for the Chinese University of Hong Kong and HK Walls’ Kwai Chung Office housed in the the Mai On Industrial Building. Coming from CUHK, it took about an hour to reach HK Walls by the Mass Transit Railway (MTR).



2014: 1st Street Art Festival, Sheung Wan

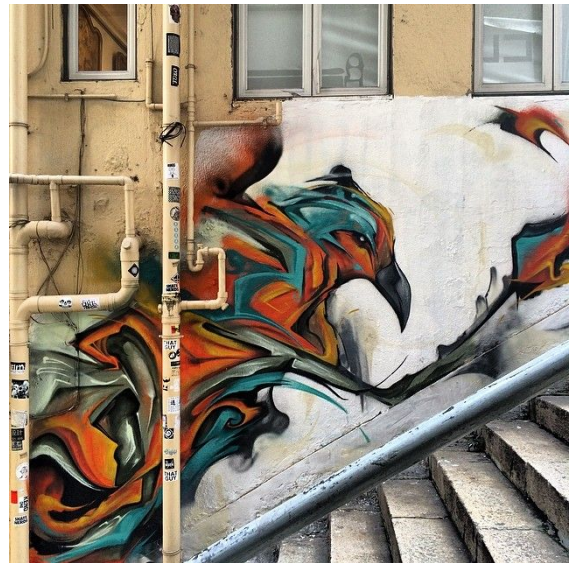
Starting in March of 2014, HK Walls held its first annual street art festival in Sheung Wan, where Dembski was living at the time, but it had its hiccups and complications. With ‘art for art’s sake’ as a core tenet of their organization, local community members responded positively. Without money for advertising or even paint materials, community members banded together to crowd-source paint goods. A local restaurant even chimed in to provide space, food, and beer for a celebratory party. Now that they had the materials to make art, HK Walls still needed to negotiate available walls for artists to actually paint on. Contrary to my initial perception, the process of picking a wall is systematic; artists do not haphazardly slap some paint on any random wall at HK Walls’ command. It is much more orderly and collaborative. With every art piece, HK Walls reaches out to the owner or landlord of that specific property to gain permission to paint on their wall. Shop owners are often receptive and energized by the prospect of a vibrant art piece. In addition, this entire process is a collective effort between the shop owner, the artist, and HK Walls. Acting as the liaison, HK Walls connects their group of artists with various shop owners to discuss the final art piece. While some owners allow total creative freedom for the artist, others may have other specifications. In the event of any possible conflict, that is when HK Walls steps in.

“We want the artists to have a voice. A lot of times we get in touch with owners, and they get picky and demanding, they want this and that. Sometimes we have to say no. We won’t do that even for commission. Remember this is all free. The more open-minded the owners are, the easier it is for us. For example, if you want a panda we might not find someone who wants to paint pandas. But it could be like “We like animals” so we find an artist who always paints animals. We won’t force the art. We won’t force someone else’s style. Some artists had bigger egos, but we talk to them; this is someone’s home, someone’s shop. They understand afterwards. They always chat and hang out before the art takes place.”

That year, 22 artists participated in the first street art festival, creating a total of 17 murals in the streets of Sheung Wan. While most of the artists were either local or based in Asia, HK Walls connected with some international artists at Art Basel, a contemporary art fair hosted in Basel, Miami Beach, and Hong Kong. As expected with the vibrant art, the first festival was very successful, capturing the attention of the public and the press while bolstering HK Walls' reputation in the eyes of future sponsors.



Whyyy 2014 (Phoenix)



2015: 2nd Street Art Festival, Sheung Wan and Stanley Market

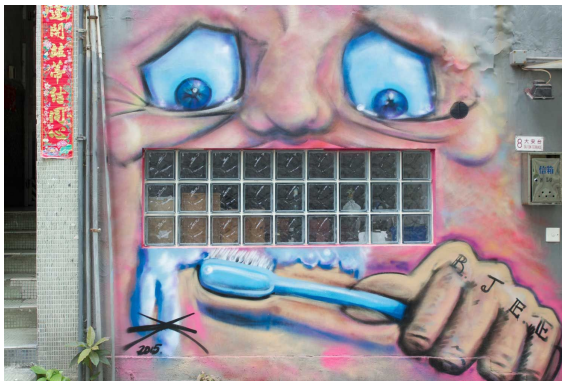
Their first major sponsor was agnès b., a famous French fashion designer with a strong international presence. To HK Walls' surprise, agnès b. attended HK Walls' festival and was enraptured with the work. In conjunction with agnès b.'s 20th anniversary in Hong Kong, agnès b. and her team reached out to HK Walls to curate street art from around the world. Through this collaboration, HK Walls received actual funding which allowed them to solidify their operations as an organization for their second annual street art festival in 2015. Besides industrial equipment and environmentally-friendly paint, HK Walls now had enough funding to actually

fly-in artists from around the world, many from Asia and Europe. To sweeten the deal, HK Walls also works with local hotels to secure housing for the artists during their stay in Hong Kong. Between the room, the flight, and the materials, everything is funded free-of-charge by HK Walls, though it should be noted that artists are not provided a stipend. The second festival was held in Sheung Wan and Stanley Market, welcoming 39 artists from 15 countries. In total, they painted over 50 murals in the area. Additionally, HK Walls implemented a pop-up print exhibition for the artists and public block parties for community members. While there were improvements and new programs, there was also a learning curve in the second festival that would define the future of HK Walls.

“We reused the same walls, added a bunch more murals, and painted over some. Everything was the same as the first year, but after the second year, we were a little heartbroken to paint them over. Let’s find another district to paint somewhere else so we don’t remove what we’ve done this year.”

With this in mind, HK Walls began scouring for another location to hold their third street art festival. Since the first two festivals were held in Hong Kong Island, they were looking to have the art festival in other regions of Hong Kong, namely in Kowloon, New Territories, or even outlying islands. The entire process of looking for a new location took approximately six months of research, but it began with a simple question: “Where do we have friends?” Their research and connections eventually led them to Sham Shui Po. HK Walls carefully considers their intentions before jumping into a new community because “anytime we do something, we need someone in the neighborhood to champion the idea. We wouldn’t have thought of Sham Shui Po if we didn’t have people who wanted us there”. In particular, this area had a community of young entrepreneurs and business owners who were interested in collaboration. On an artistic level, Sham Shui Po made sense relative to the first two festivals. In contrast to Sheung Wan, which is

fairly westernized, Sham Shui Po is representative of old Hong Kong. Most of the buildings are especially old, run-down, and in need of a refresher. However, a lot of owners do not have the funds necessary to redo their storefront, which is where HK Walls fits in. HK Walls can help brighten up the area by connecting artists with various owners to have a free mural painted on their storefront or property. In doing so, artists get the opportunity to present their art publicly while owners get to revitalize their property free of charge.



*Print House 2015 (Dragon)
Szabotage 2015 (Teeth)
Stern Rockwell 2015 (King)*

2016: 3rd Street Art Festival, Sham Shui Po

Thus far, the third street art festival was pretty consistent with the efforts of the first two. However, the attention and success from the previous art festivals attracted the attention of Vans, a famous American shoe company, as the sponsor. With Vans on board, HK Walls was able to

attain a much larger budget which would allow for more expansive art programming. The festival brought together 40 artists from 17 countries, 40 murals, another pop-up print exhibition,



three street-culture related film screenings, and 42 public workshops. Even though everything was free, open to the

public, and multilingual, like previous years, there was a noticeable branding of Vans with this particular festival. As a result, the branded nature of this festival provoked criticism towards HK Walls. In the article “Art and poor communities in Hong Kong: A positive influence or a stalking horse for gentrification?” journalist Karen Cheung of the Hong Kong Free Press provides a comprehensive recount of this controversy. From an outside perspective, the heavily branded nature of the festival felt disingenuous and unrepresentative of the art scene in Hong Kong. As a result, this third street art festival incited a debate on HK Walls’ Facebook page, bringing up ideas of art, elitism, gentrification, and opportunity. Ahkok Wong, cultural critic and lecturer at Lingnan University, argued that the event was “an advertisement for Vans and the artists that Vans supported. And what you do will affect this poorest community in Hong Kong” (Cheung 2016). Moreover, Wong makes a critique that transcends Vans entirely, calling the arts into question as a tool for gentrification. While art is necessary to energize communities that are particularly dreary, Wong points out that the real-estate market will be directly affected by the refashioning of the community. The introduction of new art pieces have the ability to increase the culture of certain communities. In relation to Sham Shui Po, Wong argued that artists, and

HK Walls' presence, are only contributing to a changing class within the community, displacing the poor in favor of the rich. In particular, he stated:

“Whoever participated in this event made life for the poorest Hong Kong community harder than ever, thanks to your ‘art’ and top-down ‘aesthetics’, the real-estate market will thank you for it. Shame on HK Walls who used the artists as a tool for gentrification, without providing the non-local artists with the cultural context of the [Sham Shui Po] community. For any artists who are local, you are stupid twats.” — Ahkok Wong (Cheung 2016)

Although some criticized Wong's inflammatory critique, his passionate assertion is grounded with literature on art and gentrification. While art is sometimes merely visual, it also carries an exceptional degree of social meaning. Depending on how art is utilized, it holds more weight than mere aesthetics. Street art is a dubious subject because its effects are so varied. While Wong is correct to criticize art's connection with increasing property prices, displacement, and gentrification, art is also closely linked with ideas of beautification, revitalization, and opportunity. Run-down communities can benefit from an artistic facelift through free street murals. Without any government initiative to improve the livelihood of the community, HK Walls stepped in to incite positive change. However, there is a clear difference between intent and impact regarding the real effects on a particular community.

Therefore, it is important to clarify how HK Walls operates as an organization. Going off the tone of the original article, I went into the interview questioning their efforts, but I left with a clearer understanding of their role in Hong Kong. To my surprise, their operations are very personal, community-based, and bottom-up. In the early days of the organization, HK Walls started most of the negotiations, asking owners for permission to paint on their blank walls. This then provided local and international artists the opportunity to share their artistic vision. Fundamentally, this process is meant to benefit the community and the artist. Through in-depth

conversations and interactions, HK Walls connects artists with shop owners to land on a one-of-a-kind street mural. The relationships created are meaningful and consensual. However, it is important to note that some people are left out of the conversation. For units that have multiple shops, the conversation between is held between HK Walls, the artist, and the overall landlord. Therefore, individual shop owners are kept in the dark, which is a worthy critique. That said, it is up to the landlord's discretion if they want to consult the shop owners who are renting that particular unit space.

Beyond that, sometimes shop owners reach out to HK Walls personally because they want a free art mural. For example, HK Walls shared an anecdote of a woman who wanted a mural for her fifty year old tofu restaurant. The shop owner was fascinated with the murals and actively took pictures of them to find a source. Since HK Walls allows creative freedom for the artist, there is rarely any logo that directs people to check out HK Walls. However, this shop owner stumbled on a mural that did give a shout out to HK Walls, which eventually connected them together. From her experience, the mural brought more foot traffic and business to her restaurant. People began taking day trips to view and photograph the art murals. At the same time, they would buy things from that particular community. While this shop owner had a positive response to her mural, Cheung's article provides another perspective. Other shop owners noticed increased foot traffic, but they found that people were only there to take photos; their revenue did not increase. However, it is important to note that HK Walls' goal as an organization is not necessarily to energize one's business. At their core, their work prioritizes art. Politics aside, the street art festival brings together a community event for artists and residents alike. Artists get the opportunity to showcase their art publicly while community members get to

participate as spectators. Moreover, the free public workshops and activities allow community members to actively participate in an artistic process of their own.

With this kind of community based framework guiding their work, Dembski and Wong were both caught off with the accusations of gentrification. While neither profess to have an academic understanding of gentrification, both expressed clear admonition of the phenomenon. Therefore, with this third street art festival, the criticism felt shocking because from their perspective, HK Walls was not functioning any differently than their first two runs with the street art festival. Looking back, the two have traced that this criticism arose through their involvement with Vans. In particular, the singular Vans-centric event became the focus of criticism from the public. The heavily-branded nature of the event was conflated with the efforts of HK Walls as a whole. That said, the core values of HK Walls, consistent with the first two street art festivals, were not jeopardized despite having the Vans sponsorship. Contrary to some public criticism, Vans' involvement is much more hands-off than it may seem. For one, Vans has no say on the actual content created by the artists recruited by HK Walls. The murals they create do not contain advertisement for HK Walls or Vans unless the artist themselves chooses to throw in an acknowledgement. Therefore, it is important to consider how the mere presence of a brand name sponsorship diminished the community-based efforts of HK Walls. The reasoning behind a big-name sponsorship with Vans is to create more fully-funded opportunities for local and international artists. The intentions of this partnership, and other partnerships, are meant to cover the costs it requires to support an artist during their involvement with the street art festival. That said, this criticism is still relevant and important within the niche conversation of art and gentrification. For a small community-based organization, it is imperative that HK Walls is

receptive to local criticism in order to better their efforts for the community. On the other hand, critics should also be understanding of HK Walls' goals in attaining a sponsorship, especially if the funds go towards creating more opportunities for artists and thus more murals. In particular, this criticism is pushing HK Walls to consider how they can facilitate other art-related events that are directly rooted in activism.



Clogtwo 2016 (Birds)

2017: 4th Street Art Festival, Wong Chuk Hang

After a controversial year, HK Walls was gearing up for their fourth street art festival. This one was held in Wong Chuk Hang in Hong Kong Island, inviting 30 artists from around the global. However, HK Walls fell into an artistic rut of sorts.

“Kinda four years in, we had already involved thirty to forty local artists and we kinda ran the gamut of local artists we knew. We don’t want to reuse the same Hong Kong artists all the time. We want to spread the work of others. The active street artists in Hong Kong... they’re not many. Maximum fifty people. That’s why the fourth year, this year, we did an open call. We found a lot of really really cool artists from that open call; hidden gems in Hong Kong.”

For example, the open call brought along Peter Yuill, a Canadian-born Hong Kong based artist, who utilized projection mapping in order to bring his street mural to life. The fourth festival continued the tradition of film screenings, workshops (Let's Make a Zine!, Urban Lettering,



Graffiti & Me), and the pop-up print exhibition, but it even incorporated a live artist battle and a charity campaign. This live artist battle was held in conjunction with Secret Walls, colloquially known as the “fight club” of the art scene. The structure is simple: two teams of artists (4x4) are competing against each other to transform plain white walls in a short matter of 90 minutes. The two teams must come up with a concept and draw in real time, while managing the roar of a live audience. Fundamentally, this event hopes to increase the public’s appreciation and fascination with the process of free-flowing art. People get to watch artists

freestyle masterful pieces in front of their very eyes. With a strict time limit, and without a measured concept, the audience is exposed to the sheer creativity of the artists under pressure. The final art battle is bustling with energy and excitement, further exemplifying an appreciation for the arts in its most raw expression.

Beyond appreciating art for art’s sake, HK Walls partnered up with 1000 Drawings Hong Kong for their first taste of activism. The organization 1000 Drawings draws on the collective art of the community through a thousand art pieces in various forms, be it doodles, photography,

collages, or paintings. Each piece is sold for 80 HKD (about \$10 USD) and all the funds go toward a local charity. This year, the charity was the Love 21 Foundation, a local charity that serves those affected by Down syndrome.



Wong Ting Fung 2017 (Fish)
Pixelpancho 2017 (Robot)
Snik 2017 (Face)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Before I formally met up with HK Walls, I tried to learn as much as I could about their organization. I learned that every year, HK Walls plans an arts festival where local community members get to watch international and local artists paint extravagant murals while participating in workshops, cultural consumption, and hands-on activities. With my preconceived notion of

the gentrification accusation in mind, I had prepared some bottom-up recommendations in my questionnaire for HK Walls to consider. To my surprise, before I even got to that part of the interview, they began discussing the exact community-based recommendations I had in mind. I had doubts about the inclusivity and intentionality of the art festivals. If the art festivals are framed from a high-brow perspective, and solely in English, that would in turn decrease interest and participation from local residents. However, the annual street art festival is a free event, open to all Hong Kong residents, with an intention towards multilingualism whenever possible. Community members are encouraged to participate in the festival; it is not specifically framed for expatriates. Instead, it is meant to be inclusive for English and non-English speaking community members.

“There’s always a crowd when the artist is painting. Photos are constantly being taken. We constantly have fans emailing us, Facebooking us, Instagramming us about how much they love it. For the last few years, we’ve been working hard to make sure the map is always available.”

While there has been criticism that the appreciation for art merely ends at a photo, HK Walls tries to encourage an appreciation for the arts through their free film screenings and workshops. For those that simply want a photo opportunity, they have an online map that details every mural that is painted. However, there is the option to participate more deeply with the arts in Hong Kong. In addition, HK Walls tries to bring art to schools and community centers directly on top of holding free workshops. Borrowing from her background in working with youth, Wong championed the idea “Art for Action” where HK Walls painted murals and provided additional workshops in children spaces. In particular, HK Walls assisted with Lantau International School, a primary school located in Pui O, to create giant murals. Incorporating the regional history of water buffalos, HK Walls flew out an artist from the Philippines to complete the project. Beyond

community inclusion, HK Walls makes a concerted effort to select a diverse cohort of artists each year, representing the artists from the local Hong Kong community, regional artists from Asia, and international artists. Artists are supported through free art materials, housing, and airfare. In doing so, HK Walls aims to make this artistic opportunity accessible to those who are passionate for street art. To their surprise, their cohorts of artists are balanced between men and women, even though street art as a culture is still very much male-dominated.

Although HK Walls is intentional in their efforts to create opportunities for artists, include the local community, and champion an appreciation for the arts, it is very crucial to note that the framework of the organization is not inherently political. Although the art being created is not done from a politicized understanding of resistance, the art is reflective of a common desire for revitalization. For regions that have been historically underappreciated and malnourished, revitalization and beautification are important things to consider for the future and living conditions of that particular condition. However, the seemingly harmless addition of art may be indicative of naive gentrifiers who want to upgrade the community without realizing that these efforts add up. Drawing on the case studies in the United States, art acts as a mechanism that can quickly facilitate gentrification and displacement unless it is done out of resistance. Within an urbanized space in a capitalist society, the increased attention and foot traffic because of art encourages landowners to raise property prices in order to capitalize on maximum profits (Smith 1979). While it begins with art, this can quickly translate to increased rent, land prices, and the entire class culture of the community is changed. In doing so, capitalists are prioritizing money over the livelihood of community members. That said, it is also unfair for run-down communities to be ignored time and time again. Even though the work being done by HK Walls

is not intentionally political in nature — it is intended as art-for-art — the street murals are nonetheless making a positive contribution to the community in a way that the government has not. In comparison to the artistic efforts in Chicano Park, where murals were painted in response to poor city planning, the murals created through HK Walls is a response to government apathy towards run-down communities. If the government created an initiative for community-based beautification projects through art, before HK Walls came to be, then the possibility of gentrification would be diminished because the process would strictly allow local artists to paint in local communities. However, on a theoretical level, this scenario is incompatible with the global nature of Hong Kong's identity. In a sense, the presence of HK Walls, and their initiative to recruit international and local artists, is more in-line with Hong Kong's duality than if the art was entirely local. Therefore, Hong Kong exists within its own category of analysis precisely because of its duality and global identity, unlike the cultural homogeneity of Latino communities in the United States.

While the relationship between art and gentrification remains contentious, this experience has influenced HK Walls' future involvements. In particular, HK Walls intends to move forward with more politicized projects, expressing their own iteration of art and activism (artivism). In particular, HK Walls hopes to create a new initiative, provisionally known as “The Sea Walls Idea”, where their organization assists in aquatic activism with informational artistic murals. Through art, HK Walls aims to shine a light on aquatic issues, sustainable living, and environmental topics. Adding onto their original mission of supporting artists, HK Walls aims to implement a three-month long artist-in-residence program where they can support an artist beyond their annual street art festival.

At the end of the day, HK Walls is passionate about artistic appreciation and expression, opportunities for artists, and community involvement. When I asked about their future plans, Dembski and Wong's go-with-the-flow attitude hearkened back to the organic origins of HK Walls. Simply put, they are not entirely sure where HK Walls will be in the future. While they intend to continue their annual street art festival, they are always flexible to include new forms of programming. They are not "bogged down to their 'brand'" because they want to be able to explore whatever interests them.

"Maybe we won't be relevant in five years. Maybe there won't be a need for us. Maybe we'll be doing something totally different. Maybe in a few years time, we will do less festivals and more other things, who knows? We will evolve with time."

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APPENDIX
HK Walls Questionnaire

Understanding HK Walls

1. How did HK Walls come to be? What was the inspiration for a non-profit arts organization to be situated in Hong Kong specifically?
2. When was HK Walls founded? What has HK Walls accomplished as an organization?
3. How does HK Walls support local and international artists? What is funded by HK Walls and what is independently sourced by the artist? What efforts is HK Walls taking to be an environmentally friendly organization with its supplies and materials?
4. What does the actual process of making a mural look like? How long does it take for the artist to complete the mural? How is the local community affected when the artist is at work? What is their perception of this work? Who is the intended audience of the art?
5. What types of murals are being created? Who decides what the art will be? What is the process of screening artists? Is it a collaborative effort between the artist and HK Walls? How much of the art is simply art versus political art?
6. Since coming to Hong Kong, what was the goal in bringing international artists to work on murals? What is the current landscape of local mural artists? Is there enough interest from the local art community?
7. Besides working with professional artists, has HK Walls considered partnering up with local schools and community centers for joint art projects?

Criticism of HK Walls

8. HK Walls has been scrutinized for contributing to gentrification in local HK communities. How has this criticism shaped the future of your organization?
9. Some research literature has stated that a vibrant culture, like art, can eventually lead to a community gaining attention and notoriety, which can influence wealthier people to move into the community. As a result, this can influence property owners to increase rent prices to make more money. In terms of HK Walls, is this phenomenon reproduced?

Future Goals

10. In five years, how do you envision HK Walls growing? What are some long-term goals of the organization? Is Hong Kong the final destination, or are there any plans to expand globally?