

On buffing

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Abstract

In the world of street art, the antithesis to graffiti writing is buffing. This painted equivalent of censorship signals not just municipal or federal authority / jurisdiction, but also constitutes its own form of abstract art. Over time, buffing becomes a game of tag, a tussle between people and authorities. And with it, the fine line of vandalism and censorship is easily blurred and conveniently crossed.

In this photo essay, I have collected and captioned several photographs which make the walls on streets analogous to the facebook wall - open to writing, layered with posts and a form of contemporary decoupage. With the increased overlap of street art and advertising as a result of the spread of digital fonts and printing, we must consider contemporary formats of spam, and scam, as well as situated them within the broader context of capitalism. When the digital becomes offline and vice versa in the global south, what defines pollution?

Keywords: buffing; censorship; propaganda; graffiti; street art; free speech; freedom of expression; wall art; capitalism; mass media; digitization; vandalism; advertising; abstract; minimal; India; Russia; Brazil

Introduction

Muralism (wall art composed mostly of images), graffiti writing (which is heavily handwritten and font-based) and buffing (a layer of material to conceal illegal graffiti or murals) all comprise different facets of the ever expanding notion of street art. And although India has a tradition of decorative wall art, things have been changing in recent years as a result of globalisation. This essay considers a variety of street art forms - while debating censorship and free speech - across spaces and contexts.

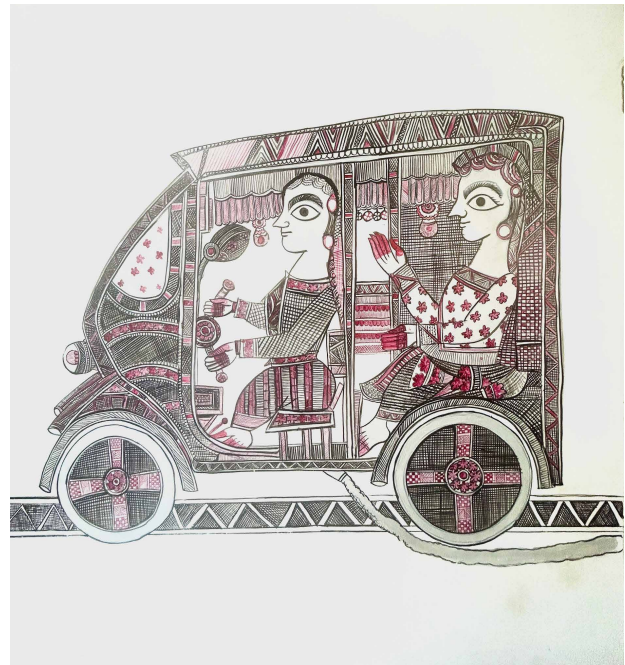


Image 1 : A folk art mural at the Press Club of India in New Delhi. This traditional, rural based form of decorative wall art, known as Madhubani, originated in the state of Bihar; in contemporary contexts it is a form of street art. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.



Image 2: Mural by artist Adarsh Balak at Lodhi Colony in New Delhi made during a street art festival in the city's allocated art district. In this case, a sanctioned mural for a government supported art festival becomes its own form of propaganda. Photo by Mita Sen, 2022.



Image 3: Photo of a St.art festival mural by a visiting artist, demonstrates how murals are a form of international cultural exchange, showcasing international artists on local walls in India's capital. In this case, street art emerges as an effective form of soft power which contributes to foreign policy dialogue and exchange. Photo by Mita Sen, 2022.

The Indian Context

Indian cities are layered with assorted propaganda, ranging from billboards to illegally posted fliers on walls. The many walls and available surfaces are used as sites of inadvertent *découpage*¹ - a craft that involves glueing cutouts onto a surface. Vibrant public transport murals commissioned by the DMRC comprises an effort to promote sustainable lifestyle and behaviours, leveraging the power of art. Unfortunately they also now serve as facades for corporate advertising.

In many city districts including that of Gurgaon, community murals on walls are a form of civic participation and an alternative form of people's propaganda in a democracy which operates at multiple scales and levels. They often

tend to reflect idealism, and aspiration. And in addition to wall art there are countless other forms of performative street theatre as well, which range from scam to activism.

In recent years, street art in India has generally followed a sanctioned festival format. Meghashree Dev notes very incisively that in recent years, "joining hands with government bodies such as NDMC, DMRC, Swachh Bharat, Ministry of Urban Development and CPWD, inadvertently gives away the artist's freedom of expression. The images created as a consequence are inoffensive and devoid of any strong meaning." By working with government agencies, artistic license and freedom of expression is certainly reduced.

1 - "Découpage" is a French word that literally means "cutting out"



Image 4: A unique infrastructural and architectural feature of Indian cities which reflects privatization as well as inequality is the guard house. These small structures are often DIY designs in which a privately hired person sits to guard and monitor the entry into a building or a home. These structures - like walls, often become the canvas for decoupage, holding layers of ads, fliers and announcements. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.

Dev's work also examines the political graffiti culture of West Bengal, noting that from 1960-1990, "West Bengal had become the epicentre of political graffiti and possessed a thriving culture where political parties and the public expressed themselves equally in the public sphere." She notes how "the graffiti tradition in India transformed in unique ways visually, with the artists actively engaging in ongoing socio-political debates." Interestingly, political graffiti culture is most widespread in two of India's most literate and also communist states: West Bengal and Kerala. This observation raises interesting questions about the correlations between political expression and education.

Aparajita Bhasin's research also provides a useful and concise starting point into the history of Indian street art. She examines the sequence of events regarding the history and evolution of street art via festivals in India. To supplement these examples of inquiry, is a useful series of prompts about how to contextualise political art and street art as forms of activism in India by The School of Politics which provides a helpful framework to chronologically analyse the assorted forms of art in the streets.² Together, these resources could provide readers as well as researchers with the necessary tools to begin to analyse street art in India within its context and with a suitably robust framework.

Nevertheless, it is the trajectory of censorship and political art in the country which is perhaps the most interesting. Not unlike in other cities and countries, as a result of the proliferation of tools of media, there has been a so-called democratisation of expression through media, specifically mass and social media. This has in turn resulted in a response to limit freedom of speech, which although a fundamental aspect of democracy has in recent years been problematic in terms of inciting verbal and physical violence as well as anti-state movements. The MAP Academy chronology on censorship in Indian art suggests that street art cannot entirely be distinguished from societal performance. It also reveals the ways in

which performance in the streets of India, specifically as protest, has often been met with violence.³ It is my sincere hope that scholars and students will engage in thinking critically about how media and digital technologies shape the experience of urban life, in addition to compromising it in many ways (privacy, surveillance, homogeneity).

Some Technicalities

To 'buff' is to paint a wall to remove the graffiti. It is often an attempt at reducing the loudness of illicit street art by painting over it in drabber palettes. This correcting or concealing of an act of vandalism, so to speak, can also be read as a form of resistance to the power of street art as communication. However, it depends on who is making the art, and also who is removing it. Buffing is sometimes simply an act to prepare the wall for another piece of graffiti; a form of artistic camouflage.

Grffiti removal, commonly called "buffing", perhaps inadvertently fills otherwise empty walls with abstract minimalist paintings, in a multi-layered and often textured style. *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal* makes "a dry, tongue-in-cheek argument that graffiti removal has become one of the more intriguing and important art movements of the 21st century."⁴ Yet there is something about this that resonates in countries such as Russia where buffing has given way to beautiful minimalistic art. Street art as a yet developing an independent genre is still debating the exact location of buffing in the history of art.

Buffing is often procedural and corrective, rather than spontaneous. In the dialogue between authorities and people as it exists on the streets, buffing sometimes becomes a game. Over time, buffing becomes a game of tag and a tussle between people and authorities. And the fine line of vandalism, and censorship is easily blurred and conveniently crossed.

2 - More: <https://theschoolofpolitics.com/blog/32-political-art-and-street-art-as-forms-of-activism-in-india>

3 - More: <https://mapacademy.io/article/censorship-in-indian-art/>

4 - Film by Matt McCormick. 2001, URL <https://vimeo.com/368367>



Image 5: An instance of graffiti in a Gurgaon market, distinct from others for the use of spray paint. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.



Image 6: An example of buffed graffiti in Gurgaon, Haryana. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.



Image 7: The tree census in the capital is an example of handwritten labelling and accounting of urban infrastructure - an activity undertaken by government authorities. In this case, incorrect counting has been struck through and corrected.

Glocal Contexts

Merrill's study of a case of buffing in Berlin explores "how street artists can oppose the *heritagization* of their works by accentuating their ephemerality through the adoption of procedures that have traditionally been used against them, specifically 'buffing'- usually carried out by city authorities." He notes that "Drawing parallels between buffed walls and buffering screens to emphasise the hybrid logics of much contemporary street art, as this article has done, further encourages the reconceptualisation of the Cuvrybrache murals as a performance that played out across urban and digital space."

In the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo, I encountered a unique form of work created by *pixadores* - graffiti taggers who cover the grey buildings of South America's biggest city with their hieroglyphic scrawl – offering placement that is highly visible and difficult to buff. These examples are also however exceedingly risky and dangerous for the artists themselves. And they also make evident the homegrown forms of graffiti and hand painting on the visible infrastructure and surfaces of a city.

Digital technologies extend the longevity and expand the audience ensuring that the often ephemeral site specific works are more easily accessible and encountered by global audiences. Facebook and online analogies raise questions of who owns the media even if we are all content creators - who shadowbans content, and why are we all tagging one another? The visibility online of discrete acts of vandalism which do not require a street audience or can be compromising therefore tends to leverage online realms.



Image 8: Some graffiti in Hoi An, Vietnam is a physical mark indicative of travelling foreign artists who tag spaces across Asia. These tags are commonly seen in old towns where western tourists have historically had privilege and access. As a communist state, propaganda and censorship in Vietnam also often takes on novel forms. But perhaps most interesting is the general lack of advertising and political graffiti in public space. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.

Within the context of buffing, emerge fascinating examples from Russia. Here, abstract shapes and colours seen in cities across Russia often become sites of unintended creativity in particular to workers' expression, as they go about their repair and rejuvenation jobs. Artist Kirill Kto was notable in this realm, often hand-painting bright and colourful statements over buffs using leftover paint he would collect from municipal workers. He and I happened to live in the same city district and as a result, I was often privy first hand to his fascinating projects, experiments and processes.



Image 9: Artist Kirill Kto has used assorted multimedia collage as a basis of his work: from cutout textile shapes stapled onto trees to actively buffing statements he found polluting. While these are personal statements of his expression, they can be difficult to distinguish from propaganda. In 2012, Kirill and his friends buffed an entire underpass overnight with a delightful series of vibrant colours, which was later re-painted over because although beautiful, was unsanctioned. He describes his works as post proto, and meta buffing. Source: Kirill Kto's Facebook.

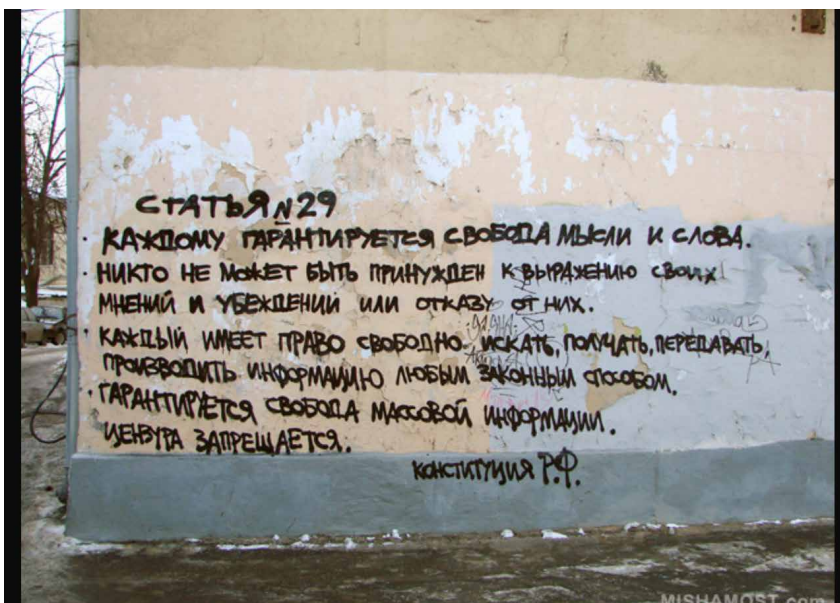


Image 10: Russian artist Misha Most's social art project reminded citizens and authorities of the importance of the constitution as a protector of everyday rights, and let everyone read the exact texts of specific articles, handwritten on walls across the city. Source: www.mishamost.com



Image 11: A popular form of stencil art in Dharamshala falls in line with Indian foreign policy, which is to critique Chinese authorities from the capture of the future Dalai Lama. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.

It is also in this context of buffering that worker art emerges as a crucial form of democratic and artistic expression in the streets, in the case of Russia perhaps notably as a site of political expression by artists while in India street has often been used by refugee communities (Image 7). The point being that these forms of art and their enabling contextual socio-political and economic facets are not easily categorised or generalised, and demonstrate a requirement of context specific analysis of where and how graffiti and other street art forms emerge.

Active legal enforcement of censoring graffiti or statements on the street - in the form of fines and arrests - has differed from apathy which is often the case in middle and low-income economies where employees are often so poorly paid that they literally cannot be bothered to deal with it until and unless it is personally interesting. It is usually less about the content, and more of the act of perceived vandalism that elicits authoritarian responses. And then at that point the question becomes about whose aims it serves, because that too often explains a lot.



Image 12: The buffing of political propoganda in this case is anti-hegemonic even if it comes within legal guidelines that enforce or contain political messaging and adverts. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.

Censorship and Freedom of Expression

Censorship in the streets refers to the suppression of speech, public communication, or other information. These days it is more frequently discussed in terms of online media.

An example of extreme state censorship is of using and allowing art solely as a support of government propoganda. Art has historically been only allowed to be used as a political instrument to control people and failure to act in accordance with the censors was punishable by law. George Orwell in his essay titled *The Frontiers of Art and*

*Propaganda*⁵, noted that every work of art has a meaning and a political, social and religious purpose; and also, that a viewer's aesthetic judgement is subject to their prejudices and beliefs. As a result, in the Indian context there is an extremely divergent possibility with regards to understanding as well as analysing street art, or art in the streets. From the range of languages and fonts, to understanding the tactics of illegal advertisers and their employees. Very often, it emerges that street art actually reveals basic human needs and tendency.

5 - More: https://orwell.ru/library/articles/frontiers/english/e_front#:~:text=It%20reminded%20us%20that%20propaganda,by%20our%20prejudices%20and%20beliefs.



Image 13: An advertising space conceals what it has described as vandalism likely against the content being advertised.

Freedom of speech as graffiti writing is not necessarily freedom of vandalism because there are increasingly municipal programs which both promote, allow and direct these sorts of activities (evident in countries like Finland, Germany and the UK). As street art becomes increasingly intriguing and boundary-defying, these tactics

of containment and definition also become outdated. And yet, several scholars have studied and noted the role of street art in typically heavily censored environments. The emergence of street art as a voice of resistance becomes an interesting way of both analysing and understanding the voices that comprise a city.



Image 14 and 15: examples of handwritten marketing and sharing of phone numbers which persist and continue to resist the sterility of digitisation. Indian graffiti is labelling and a form of handmade advertising contextualised by a shift in economic policy to closed socialist to neoliberal economics.

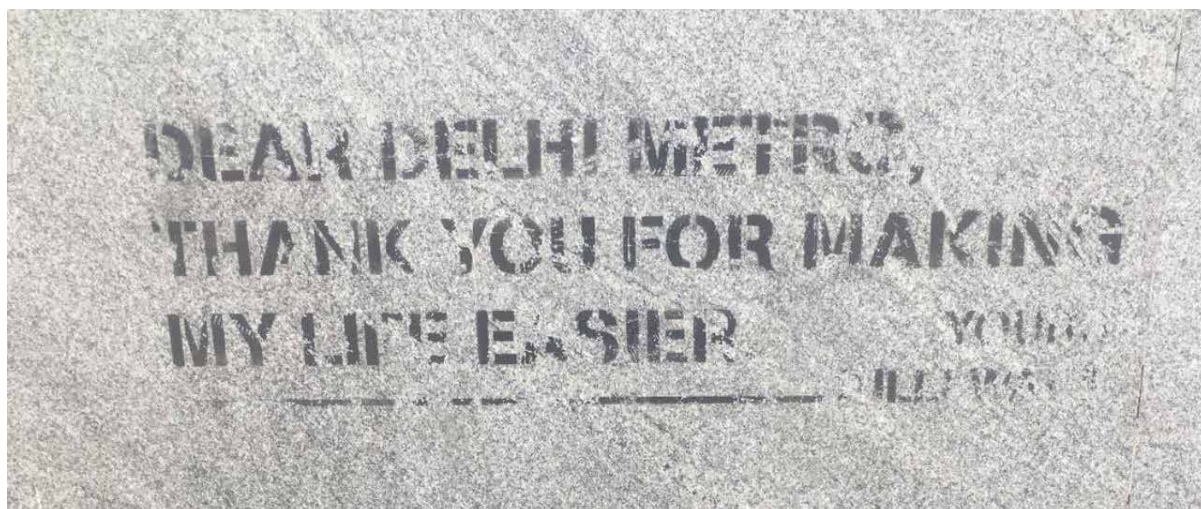


Image 16: An example of socially-oriented street art, is a stencil work which thanks the DMRC for its convenient facilities. The same project also provided a range of data around energy consumption in the city. Another famous stencil work sought to free a political prisoner.

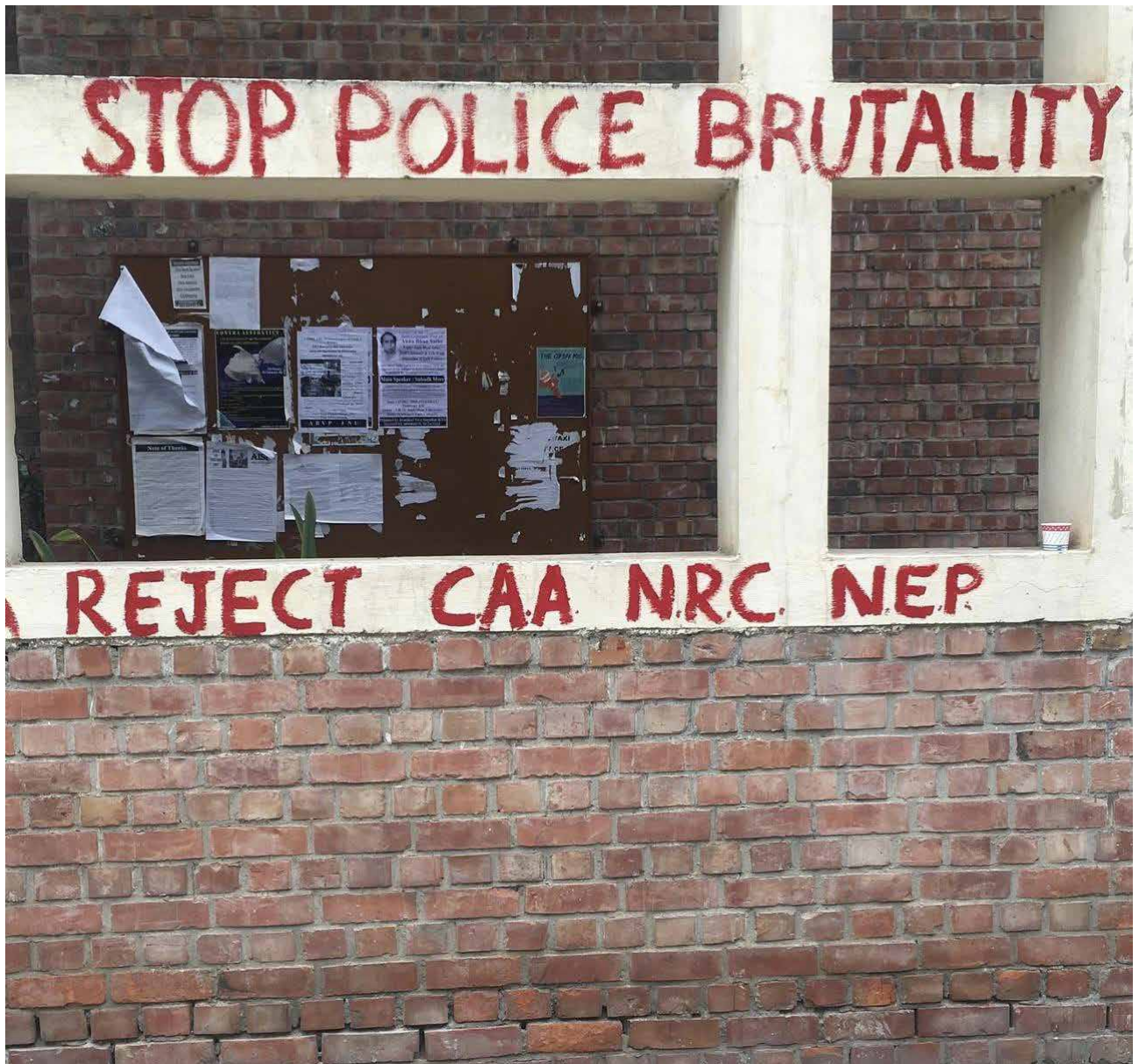


Image 17: In New Delhi, political graffiti and similar variants of street art is often found on university campuses like Jamia Milia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University. In this case, graffiti on the walls most likely by students falls into the typical anti-authoritarian street art genre while questioning the controversial CAA, NRC and NEP bills. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.

In an Indian context, inequality is what primarily keeps people away from the streets in terms of writing and the risk of grappling with legal fines and authorities. Basic literacy is still not as widespread and an assortment of

forces create a unique ecosystem of actions on the street. Spam as a form of illegal advertising is popularly removed and frequently repurposed by rickshaw drivers to mend and patch up their ware.



Image 18: A cycle rickshaw drive has repurposed ads into a more immediate material and infrastructural requirement: shading. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.

Buffing and other anti-advertisement art in public spaces is largely an act to contain or challenge political propaganda, and informal buffing which is akin to spam is more a marketing glitch in neoliberal economies. Almost the equivalent of advertising clickbait. The point is that very often art cannot be distinguished from its creator and their goals. Materiality and access matters, but increasingly a digital layer on the urban environment redirects our attention (eg: QR codes). Buffing in its varied anti-advertising formats therefore becomes a sign of resistance; unless, of course, it is the work of the state. And in Delhi, rather than political graffiti, there are more examples of advertising and marketing – people writing their phone numbers and names, for services that range from making blinds, selling drugs and addressing insect infestation in the home.

Ultimately, a systematic study of street art in its assorted forms is crucial and relevant given the rapidly changing socio-political and economic dynamics in the country, and in particular as a result of covid.



Image 19: Covid-19 social distancing remnants. an example of the communicative potential of street art. Photo by Shriya Malhotra



Image 20: Political spam as posters seems overwhelming on walls in the state of Uttarakhand, one that almost comprises a street GIF when seen from inside a vehicle. Photo by Shriya Malhotra.

Acknowledgments

Much of this article makes reference to many discussions with street artists I met while I was living in Moscow, Russia between 2010-2013. Attribution is difficult, as many of the discussions and interviews are now over a decade old. However, I would like to thank the artists and scholars I met, who boldly created a unique genre of socially and politically oriented street art. I am grateful to you for generously allowing me to spend time in the streets with you while you made work. Thank you also for teaching me to not just learn from the streets, but to always give back.

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