

Op-ed | Re-Imagining Publics

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Guy Debord once hypothesized about a ‘society of the spectacle’ in which daily life under capitalism becomes representative of and relegated to the production of images¹. The ‘spectacle’ he described was not only the production of images, but the ways in which they affected relationships between people in a society.²

The COVID-19 pandemic has re-highlighted the nexuses between public art, public space and public health. The ‘society of the spectacle’³ as described by Debord has seemingly progressed to include a range of image-making: from protests, to performance and assorted propaganda. Can these be used to communicate more effective public policy?

Examining how three overarching disciplines relate to each other in the context of being public goods may facilitate effective local and social constructions of wellbeing in cities. This op-ed will briefly explore the interrelations of public (art, health and space).

“...You see the recovery always comes ‘round again
There’s nothing to worry for things will look after themselves It’s
alright recovery always comes ‘round again
There’s nothing to worry if things can only get better...”
- Stereolab, lyrics to Ping Pong.

Life in ad-dominated global cities resembles being in a capitalist society’s museum of propaganda: consumers targeted via text and image ads, littering the built and online environments—competing forms of subliminal and intrusive political and economic narratives, supported by

various state and private entities.

In 2020, the pandemic-induced lockdowns caused cities to screech to a halt; primed for assorted forms of unsanctioned and sanctioned art in the street— from expressions of dissatisfaction, to health education and awareness-raising. Globally, artists and workers took to leveraging various forms of aesthetics to express themselves in online and offline public space. In fact, artists and essential workers are what kept the abandoned public domain vibrant with ‘good’ propaganda.

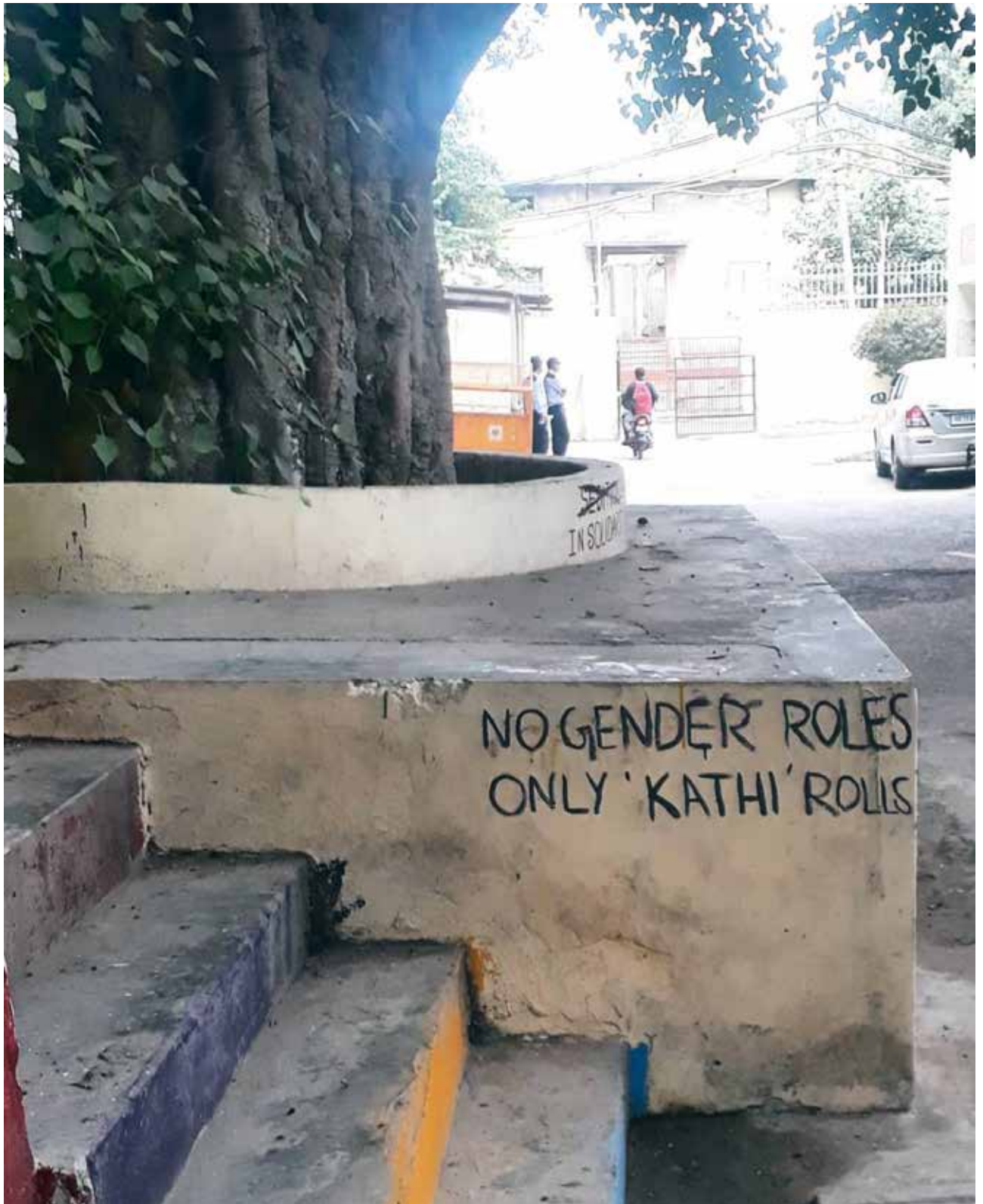
In countries of the global north, artists working in public spaces rebuilt solidarity across different factors influencing the spaces around them. People who were isolated at home began creating as a way of coping with social isolation, as well as caring for others given the lapses in state reach. Colorful, monumental murals celebrated frontline health workers like nurses and doctors, while billboards became real-estate to market ‘healthy behaviors’: from hand-washing to mask wearing to safer food preparation. Annotations and interventions signaled a continued demand for healthcare and welfare support. Innovative and catchy songs temporarily replaced phone dial tones, while jingles in various languages sought to explain the virus transmission. Grassroots organizing put community solidarity front and center, pushing positive arts impact into the public realm.

Over time, however, the digital divide made itself visible, as did the lack of investments in public health. As economies faltered, so did the illusion of how technology or a lack of resource allocation automatically places communities at

1 - Debord, G. (1994). The society of the spectacle. New York, Zone Books.

2 - ibid

3 - ibid



Photograph by Sanjana Malhotra (c) 2019

risk – particularly those in lesser-developed countries. Shared devices, cramped living spaces, unreliable service and infrastructure access and rising costs made it evident that for inhabitants in countries of the global south, information and communication technologies (ICTs) ought to be reconsidered as a tool to target ways to achieve the ends or measurable impact of improved wellbeing. ICTs won't automatically address health inequities. In fact, they tend to exacerbate them, demonstrated during the pandemic as mass-misinformation. In countries of the global south, education and lagging basic / media literacy also divides populations from accessing or discerning quality information – thereby further adding to socio-economic and environmental health disparities.

Arts in public spaces, when approached in terms of wellbeing, can potentially address some of these issues. During the first wave of the pandemic in India, it seemed as if the 'public' of art, space and health were in sync. A cognitive and conceptual re-connection seemed on the verge of enabling critical, counter- hegemonic, art-based social movements that targeted wellbeing rather than profit maximization. There was also a glaring awareness of the negative ecological and health impact of daily lifestyles encouraged by urbanization.

Artists found their expression, which ranged from satirical social media cartoons, to artist-led fundraisers for mutual aid where government accountability and civil society seemed to falter. They seemed to demonstrate different ways in which aspects of cultural life could come together and work for, rather than against, collective wellbeing.

PUBLIC ART

Art in the public realm has often historically been subsumed by cultural establishments, as well as the agendas of politicians and big companies. This is why independent and non-conforming artists like street artists play a simultaneous critical and civic role as counter-hegemonic voice, catalyzing and redefining everyday boundaries. The pandemic demonstrated how individual arts and expression

are fundamental to everyday life: for survival, outreach and engagement as well as for creative problem solving. While protests in public space often reflected dissatisfaction or disapproval, at least in democratic societies, using art as a tool for creative activism became a dialogue to challenge and subsequently address the realm of representative images with reality.

Street art is broadly defined as 'art in the streets', and includes graffiti, monuments and statues, advertisements, performances, street theatre and even protests. As part of the genre of public art, it has taken on a legal, functional almost educational and community-building role in the context of public health awareness-raising. This commodification of arts removes critique shifting to a closer production of accepted narratives. There is, therefore, potential in expanding notions of public art for wellbeing, and rethinking forms of public art such as performance, and even sculpture. The risk of classifying advertisement as a form of art would be to completely sell-out the independent nature of the arts. And yet, to go the route of free for all advertising as art, the audience (society) risks becoming passive recipients of capitalist propaganda.

Interaction between public (space, health and arts) during the pandemic shows not just a role for interdisciplinary research targeted at wellbeing, but also possibilities of investing more effectively in public goods: supporting community-building, therapeutic, critical, and catalyzing role of the arts for health and wellbeing. For instance, when considering benefits of public art for public health, psychological research and evidence from Chicago suggests graffiti in mental health institutions was an effective means for doctors and patients to communicate, while participatory public art projects gave people a sense of empowerment and agency in their spaces.

Public art connects people with place. Since public art is a mix of sociopolitical and cultural dynamics, it is important to understand how imagery impacts people. Researchers have noted that drab cities can increase feelings of sadness,

and related illnesses.⁴ Since art has the ability to slow us down, and evoke positive emotion, as a science, it could be explored for these positive benefits.

The ability of art in public space to decrease stress, create a sense of wonder, augment space, create shared identity and promote positive health behaviors are some of the ways in which public art creates positive public health impacts for its viewers.⁵ Sensory, emotional and site-specific public art also creates sense of belonging. Similarly, the co-creation of artworks with vulnerable groups such as the elderly and kids promotes inclusion and participation. These are just some of the ways in which the arts can facilitate positive health impacts in specific spaces.

OF PUBLIC SPACE

Public spaces are considered open and accessible, which has posed a challenge to social distance behaviors, and in relation to virus mutations during the pandemic. Consider for instance the relationships between public art and public space. Or public health and public space. Given shrinking civil society spaces worldwide, and the rise of right-wing governments, art in public space is an increasingly important expression of dissent and resistance.

Public space is often considered in its utility with democracy, a space for creating new interactions between art as a tool for critique, dissent and to empower counter-hegemonic social movements. 2020 witnessed creative protests in Delhi's public spaces: from the sit-ins by women of Shaheen Bagh, to more recent farmer protests in 2021. These were emblematic of creative dissent in a democratic society and of the Indian tradition of non-violent civil disobedience. Dissent and art-activism became direct ways for people to engage mechanisms like law-making, and a way to voice their concerns.

Public space is complex: cultural, aesthetic and social. Therefore cityscapes need to be responsive, pleasant and engaging for communities. In the National Capital Region, the ways in which social media filled-in for infrastructural and information shortages by the state, facilitating calls for help during the pandemic, demonstrated the practical role of arts, health and space mediated by technological advancements. When looking at the case of street art in Delhi and the district of Gurgaon, the tradition of handpainted wall art and marketing tended to move towards social issues. Mostly at metro stations or in the Lodhi Colony arts district, murals and occasional stencils have become a form of expression and engagement for many.

Murals at stations, maintained by the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) for instance demonstrate the ecological benefits of taking public transport while offering a facade to maintain

Some have observed that while the district of Gurgaon has less of a developed street art tradition because of a lack of street life and disparate gated communities, it is in contrast to Mumbai, a city that hosts monumental Bollywood tributes by self-taught muralist Ranjit Dahiya, and a beautification project known as the Wall Project.

Since public walls are accessible or visible to many, social as well as political messages are common. Across India, street theater performances are commonly used to involve people in thinking about social issues.⁶ The social role of street art remains unique given the hand-painted marketing trajectory in the country, but expression by minorities often remains a challenge.

4 - Cathey, K. (2018) 'The impact of public art projects on human health', Polyvision, [online]. URL <https://polyvision.com/about/news/the-impact-of-public-art-projects-on-human-health> (Accessed: 19/9/2021)

5 - Sogani, V. (2019) 'Public Art Shaping the narrative of the Indian cityscape', Times of India, [online]. URL <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/vibhor-sogani/public-art-shaping-the-narrative-of-the-indian-cityscape-4054> (Accessed: 19/9/2021)

6 - (2016) 'Strengthening Communities Through Public Art', Center for Active Design, [online]. URL <https://centerforactive-design.org/publicart-engagement> (Accessed: 19/9/2021)

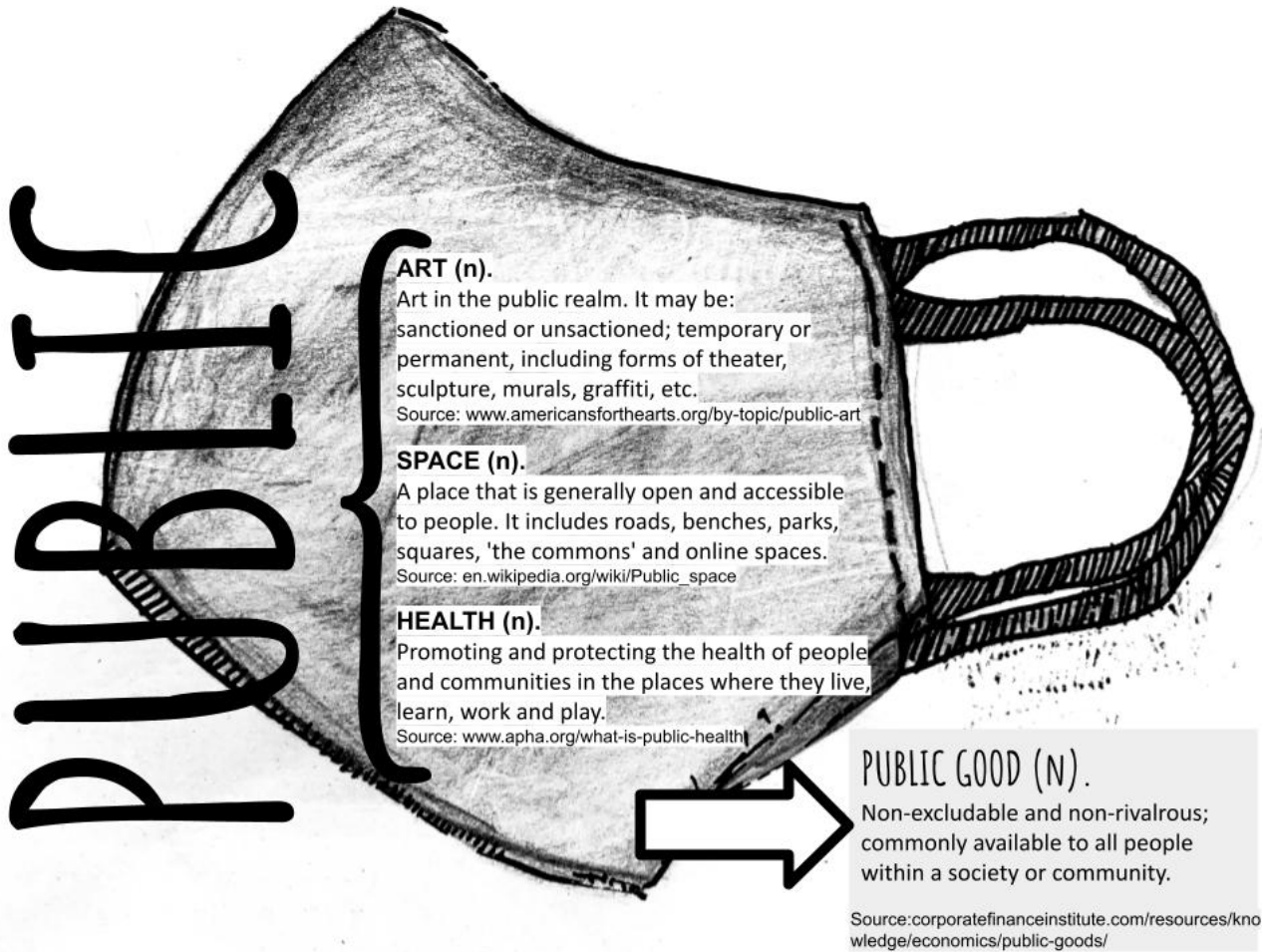


Diagram 1

This diagram is an attempt to rethink the ways in which space, health and art overlap. Art as a vehicle of expression and as a creative outlet serves perhaps more of a function than propaganda, both good or bad, as noted by George Orwell. Art in the public realm in particular serves a variety of different ends, which are mostly positive. As per this definition, art refers to more sanctioned formats than the vandalism realm, which graffiti often unfortunately falls into. Nevertheless, very often the expression on walls is more than simply writing one's name, tagging ones location or the result of an intoxicated stupor. As noted by many, street art can often correlate to freedom of expression and its repression—and in some contexts as noted by academic Alexis Lerner, as a response to the type of political systems.

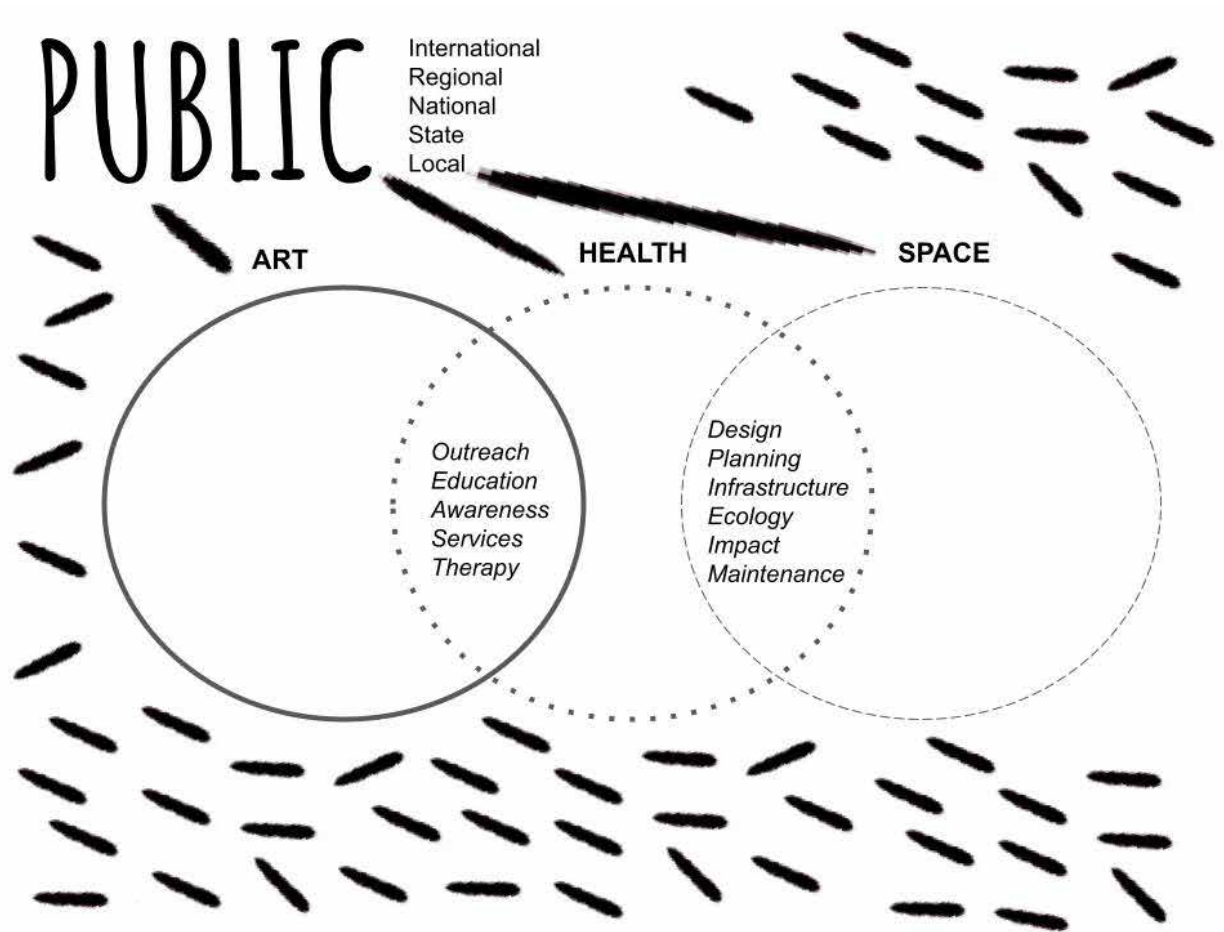


Diagram 2

Observing the theoretical ways in which art, health and space can relate to one another can help to inform the policy landscape and make it more engaging for people to be involved in: which ultimately creates more people-friendly and people-centric places. Art and policy-making stand to benefit from each other in terms of the ways in which the arts engage people as a form of education, awareness raising and communication.

OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Health and education are essential for human capital and public health. Both can leverage arts in public spaces to explain the science behind COVID-19 and its preventative behavior and connect the realms of public health, public art and public space. These links may be worth examining via a 'bottom-up' approach to build resilience that can prevent and also address future global health challenges in locally-specific ways.

As a concept, public or population health is not individual, it targets communities through prevention rather than curative interventions; it is not medical in nature, and includes socio-economic and environmental determinants of health. An example of how public health more effectively replaces economics when we consider human development is the case for preserving green spaces. From a health point of view, green spaces are good to serve our cardiovascular and mental health. Yet, from a community perspective, one that balances the ecosystem or biome requirements, conservation is also an aspect rather than rampant utilitarian economic exploitation.

Public health refers to population health, a discipline of research and practice that focuses on the wellbeing of communities, and emphasizes preventive health choices through education and awareness-raising campaigns. It includes nutrition, and even rights to access clean air and green spaces. Public health in cities includes access and provisions of food security, nutrition, therapy for mental health issues and maintaining an ecological balance as a means of preventing disease and illnesses in specific geographies. Population health thus includes nutrition, exercise, and mental wellbeing where public art has a role to play in communicating expanded notions of wellbeing by protecting people's interests and communicating choices to them.

The pandemic in many ways consolidated many counterintuitive connections: emerging networks of care and civil society filled in for the usual state inefficiencies. Homes became sites of atomization as work moved online

for those with the privileges of the internet and of consistent electricity. During the first lockdown, digital technologies offered connectivity across distances and a way of overcoming the psychological difficulties of social isolation. Video-calls over the phone offered glimpses of loved ones, at least temporarily. However, as the pandemic progressed into its second year, the socio-economic inequities plagued access to what many consider reliable information and basics such as food, the weight of the errors of a digi-based capitalist system became increasingly apparent.

\ TOWARDS COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC GOODS

In this moment of profound psychological distress worldwide occurring in real-time, we must consider whom and where the spaces for expression, speech and vision remain, how they can be nurtured, and encouraged to thrive. If it is the manufacture of images that control our behaviors through subliminal messaging then it is the sustained and independent production of unconventional and non-conformist art that can challenge the hegemony. Perhaps in this way art in public space is revolutionary as it allows expressions of creative dissent, and problem solving, as well as to re-imagine possibilities. It is a space which gives people a voice that others can encounter, too.

Societies must start to converge and target those services that will collectively promote the well being of their populations. Local, national and global spending priorities need to orient public goods to effectively consider space, art and health in ways that prioritise well-being.

From propaganda, to performance to protests, the spectacle of life during the pandemic has, thanks to information and communication technologies, made us face ourselves, and the cracks of the dominant global systems we have created. It has also revealed the ways in which counter hegemonic expression and health marketing can work effectively through independent arts. The future will not and cannot be mass-produced; it must be grassroots, inclusive and oriented around the wellbeing of people and

communities, rather than abstract notions of economic or the enforcement of narrowly defined or exclusionary moral values.

The pandemic highlighted that the fractured and devastated world we live in needs to change to revolve less around economics, and more around a concern and ethic of care for communities as reflected in the notion of public or population health, which may be addressed through the arts. Assorted minorities and vulnerable groups need protecting, and our environment needs attention. Capitalism has obscured the symbiotic relationship that existed between people and place. Investing in the commons and in public goods such as in art, health and place could be vehicles for positive change.

Acknowledgements

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(Author's note: this was written in 2021)



Image 3: Freedom!
(translated from Urdu)



Image 2: (translated from Hindi): Speak up!



Image 1: This is my India! (translated from Hindi)

= Multi-language graffiti and art seen in Shaheen Bagh, Photos by Shriya Malhotra (c) 2020