

Reflections on Working in Sri Lanka

An Interview with The Wa

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The Wa is a French artist, currently living in Berlin Germany. His works have included a recycling project with glass bottles, and sharing his CV in place of advertising as a way of generating work and promoting his art. He has also been actively writing graffiti in large format fonts that are more mural and less vandalism. His background as an artist from the Basque region remains intriguing because for one he does not have the same ego tagging format as most artists who have a graffiti background. He prefers to not sign his work, but in the style of the medium is the message, his works are immediately recognizable. They are also highly conceptual and witty. In this interview I asked him about working as a street artist in a developing country and the contrast to experiences of working in Europe.

1. Tell me about your experience in Sri Lanka .

“I went to do a residency in Colombo, Sri Lanka funded by the Goeth Institut but not knowing much of the political situation I had to navigate the curfews and all kinds of other stuff. I attended a festival and collaborated with a guy who was painting schools, he was an old man street painter. I try to distance myself from the street art packaging. It was nice to create something that was relevant for children or the elderly or sick people.”

“We made a mural, which was worked on by me and also a guy who was painting cinema ads for many years and even truck art. It was a very controlled artistic form of expression. When you present this opportunity to people that have been used to doing it as an everyday job, it is interesting. Using a white canvas or the idea of freedom of expression. These are new to a person.”

“It was fascinating to see the different styles and

backgrounds. I was more like an assistant although I was invited to be an artist. So my role was to make it cohesive, to work on the different styles. I loved it – mostly because it challenged me as an artist to be an assistant to what I perceive to be local craftsmen. There were ofcourse difficulties with translation and a language barrier. I tried to explain the idea of copies which he didn't understand but ... for instance they put this grow box onto the mural and I painted over it. This was a way of navigating a physical dimension of censorship in some way. But this was Sri Lanka in 2014, it was a difficult context to work in as a westerner.“

2. What was working in this new context like for you?

“Ultimately I think it was all very humbling. To go beyond stereo-types, to challenge prejudices. I truly value working in places that are far away from home.”

“I had to prepare myself for being able to address whatever people said about me. Whether it was true or not. I was accused of cultural appropriation, I had to also deal with being that “crazy white guy artist” and to be that man who is essentially a wallet on legs in the city. I had to also contend with the fact that it is easier for me to do stuff and get away with it in these cities and places. As opposed to local people it is easier for me to survive conflict with authorities.”

3. Tell me about the projects you did.

“One project I did was distributing stickers to the rickshaw drivers. It started out just as something for them and a way for me to encounter a more authentic version of myself. But then this was also a way for me to tag their vehicles with my work with their consent- and later even by demand. Some

guys would ask me for stickers, because the other guy had it. In some ways, the art left behind during such culturally funded festivals is like leaving behind a gift to the country.”

“Rather than preparing beforehand and bringing the stencils and work, that kind of thing is just ego really. It isn't about learning or understanding the context you are in. As a result of some cultural misunderstandings, the mural is not on my website. I still maintain it is possible to bridge art and reality in the streets. Initiating all kinds of confrontation teaches you a lot. So the experiences are not just about creating an art work but also about creating an encounter. When I do graffiti it is explicit and provocative as a dialogue with police, but I am also a white male and so the construction of myself when I am doing this activity is different.”

4. Anything else you would like to share ?

“My experience in the city, and with people, was less understanding but more of building a dialogue. The city was difficult to be in, surrounded by people, their misery and what I call “white van authority” where you are never sure if you might just suddenly be taken away or suddenly disappear. It was a difficult position to be in the country as representing a colonizer, and as a white man to be ripped off. These things make it hard to operate but when you confront this you can start to overcome prejudices and then negotiate better understanding with people.”

“For a guy coming from Germany, I needed a clear budget and timelines. But it is interesting also because it is in these experiences that you start to learn something about yourself and how to formulate and reformulate your beliefs and your life approaches. I think people should travel, encounter and confront more. That's when you start to realize that even in comparison to western liberal democracies, the realities we face in this side of the world are complicated bullshit.

Travelling to Sri Lanka really helped me open up aspects of perception. There is a role of art in this way to kind of boost this sort of experience. I am still exploring how to work independently of assistants, of institutions and of frameworks entirely.”

5. Whats next?

“I am focused more on sincerity vs. acts of illegal or legal works. Rather than producing as a slave to the market, I earn now by selling the rights to my work for example to TV or to other commercial and artistic rentals, but not the art market.”

Learn more: <https://www.the-wabsite.com/>



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