COVID-19 & the Public Sphere: Physical responses in Hong Kong and digital responses globally.

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Abstract
This essay examines the multiplicity of graffiti-based reactions to COVID-19 and its resulting lockdown laws. It utilises Jill Bennett's work, Practical Aesthetics, to examine the continuation of vigilante graffiti in Hong Kong, as well as the rise of digital street-art globally. I argue that the artform's many responses indicate the elasticity of graffiti in times of crisis. I also discuss the willingness for communities to either adapt or continue their respective practices of 'mark-making' in the public place.

Keywords: COVID-19, street-art, graffiti, protest, Hong Kong, Occupy Movement, Public Space.

Introduction

Global lockdown laws responding to the emergence and spread of COVID-19 have resulted in many studio-based artists remaining indoors, and galleries and museums entirely closing to the public. However, some graffiti artists, muralists and street artists have remained steadfast in their practices, continuing to paint the walls of their cities. Many artists continue to take over public spaces to express beauty, while others respond directly to the pandemic or protest respective state actions. The murals being made carry important messages and attest to the power of street-art during a time of crisis, indicating the artform's continued expansion during the global pandemic, and its ability to spread joy, hope, knowledge and criticism at a time when other art forms are muffled; an alternate and powerful use of public space in a climate where many other public forums are shut.

Public space, which can be considered freely accessible locations in which everybody has the right to access and congregate within, has been altered by COVID-19. Gathering restrictions, curfews and forced closures have resulted in previously free areas becoming locked off to members of the public. As the world is learning to cope with the enormous changes brought on by COVID-19, discourse and debate regarding policy changes (or lack thereof) becomes ever-more important. This is because public space is always open for debate, especially among those who are marginalised or left out of the mainstream media. Furthermore, issues like privatisation, surveillance, access to housing and corporate feudalism, which existed before the crisis, are being exacerbated by it. All of which are topics that have been, and continue to be, discussed in street-art.[1] So why is art in the public space so important right now? Because the crisis is not a levelling one. It does not target everyone in the same way; instead, it amplifies the problems faced by those already under duress.

1. Practical Aesthetics

In 2004, art historian Jill Bennett published the now acclaimed book *Practical Aesthetics* in which she applied Jacques Rancière's theory of the *aisthesis* to art. Bennett postulated that art, within contemporaneous models, exists within an "aesthetic continuum" that connects a maker with their audience. Broadly speaking, Bennet's model utilises a certain type of neoformalism in which humans "apprehend the world with sense-based and affective processes."[2] *Practical Aesthetics* cites the 9/11 tragedy and the then art-world manipulations to prove the inadequacy of routinized visual culture. This is where *aisthesis* comes in, the clarion call of *Practical Aesthetics*. Bennett states that rigid visual culture in 'new' times of crisis are incapable of accounting for the new lines of emotion and relevance. Here she suggests that because 'old' art is shaped by media structures, which in times of crisis become transcendent and ultimately incomprehensible.[3]

Fig. 1: Shona Illingworth, 216 Westbound, 2014. Image source: Shona Illingworth.

In short, Bennett claims that both old art and the media, within unprecedented times, control the imagery thrust into the public sphere during a period of crisis. Yet, because of their largely ossified nature, are only capable of providing skewed, un-emotional, un-pertinent lines of imagery. Bennett speaks of a 'practicality' of alternative forms of media in crisis which disavow historical context and meaning to favour an instinctual, formal and affective engagement with an event. Returning to the 9/11 crisis, Bennet points to installation artworks by Alfredo Jaar, Susan Norrie & Shona Illingworth to demonstrate alternate forms of media. These artworks responded to 9/11 through immersive exhibitions that focused on modes of perception. They utilised appropriate, alternative models of image making, captured the atmosphere and tactile relevance of 9/11 and antithesized informal, privatised, fact-oriented detailing of 9/11 found in traditional mass media outlets.

The detractors of *Practical Aesthetics* target the book's politically shaky premise, stating that its utopian ideology, although seeking an emotive and truthful representation of events, fails to account for power or structure.[4] Graffiti, however, speaks to this alternative ground of knowledge and display: it is not constrained to linear and factual research, but is instead connected to a social word and holds the power of political process. Moreover, it is an artform already entrenched in struggles for political power. In Bennett's words, art can "generate a set of aesthetic possibilities, which may in turn inform political thinking in regard to particular circumstances."[5] Had these thoughts been applied to graffiti, an artform cemented as a counter-public and vigilante form of protest, *Practical Aesthetics*'s gaps might have been filled. Graffiti not only has the power to impose a relatable and truthful portrayal of events in crisis, but also holds the capacity to oppose place-makers higher up on the political ladder.

2. Protest Graffiti

Street protests are arguably one of the most complex forms of political discourse which joins the trajectories of multiple actors within one society. In recent years, 'Occupy'-style movements have gained significant prominence, occurring in developed countries and cities including New York, Spain, Taiwan and, notably, Hong Kong. These movements emerge in specific sociocultural contexts and adapt specific discourses to fit local conditions. In Hong Kong, for example, where the Occupy movement began in 1997 after the state's reverting of sovereignty to China, demonstrations of protest using graffiti became a pillar of the liberation movement. These demonstrations are laden with examples of material discourse placed in visible and significant locations to 'retemporalise' controlled locations and freely spread information to the benefit of the 'Free Hong Kong' movement. Here, a particular aesthetic of fast, black-lined and message-focused grafiti grew, remained a staple of the liberation movement, and has seen reinvigorations in highly contentious periods including the uprising of 2019. Today however, the movement is becoming increasingly global. Contemporary uses of graffiti in Hong Kong utilise both Cantonese and English, and many artworks are photographed and then shared throughout traditionally Western news sources.

Fig. 2: Billy H. C. Kwok, 2019. Translation: Hong Kong add oil. This is a spin on an old Chinese saying imploring people to keep feeding the fire, or, to keep strong and continue to protest. Image source: Billy H. C. Kwok.

Fig. 3: Billy H. C. Kwok, 2019. Translation: Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times. Taken after pro-democracy marches in the suburb of Wan Chai, 16 September 2019. Image source: Billy H. C. Kwok.

Fig. 4: Anthony Wallace, *HK IS NOT CHINA*, 2019. This is outside the Legislative Council in Hong Kong. Image source: Anthony Wallace.

Fig. 5: Tangerine, *Who's Afraid of Ai Wei Wei?*, 2011. Image source: NPR.

Graffiti created for the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong exemplifies Bennett's interpretation of Rancière's notion of *aisthesis*. The artform has enabled a rapid and considered response to current political issues without constraint. Moreover, within a movement that became increasingly violent, protest graffiti in Hong Kong remained a peaceful strategy to safely spread information between civilians through public spaces.[6] This current use graffiti is no outlier in Hong Hong's history however, which has seen numerous types of street-based visual protests. During the Chinese Democracy Movement (1978-9), thousands of posters criticising social issues in the country were stuck to walls throughout Beijing; in 2011, as a result of Ai Wei Wei's detention, stencils of the artist which featured the caption "Who's afraid of Ai Wei Wei" were seen all over Hong Kong; and in 2014 during the Umbrella Movement, thousands of Post-It notes were placed on a wall outside the state's Legislative Complex, now dubbed the "Lennon Wall".[7]

3. Hong Kong and COVID-19

During COVID-19 lockdown, Hong Kong remained a hub for graffiti-protest aesthetics. One piece, for example, painted on the wall of a train station reading "There can be no return to normal, because normal was the problem in the first place" garnered attention in news sources globally. These artworks exemplify a contemporary aesthetic of protest graffiti in Honk Kong: single colour, intellectual mark-making, placed in visible locations with heavy foot traffic, much like the graffiti seen in previous years by liberation advocates. They also indicate the capability to conflate pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 protest; eluding to the 'return to normal' politicians metronomically mention is press conferences, whilst noting the broken and heavily contested environment in which Hong Kong existed prior to the virus.

Fig. 6: Unknown Artist, Hong Kong, 2020. Translation: There can be no return to normal, because normal was the problem in the first place. Image source: Vox.

Fig. 7: Unknown Artist, Hong Kong, 2020. Translation: Dog official Stanley Ho Chun-yiu, police arrest people, dog official releases people, lawless. Image source: Apple Daily.

At a time when a major force, such as COVID-19, displaces people and renders locations for gathering obsolete, the public spaces that remain accessible take on a heightened state of importance. Throughout Hong Kong at the beginning of the pandemic, simple messages on billboards and shelters urging the public to wear face masks became a common sight. Notably, many were directed to international travellers and foreign residents who weren't accustomed to the practice of wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) in public. These messages were initially ignored by a portion of Western foreigners, leading to public outcry in several news sources which was then reiterated with graffiti around the city - carrying the slogan in English, demonstrating the intended audience, "HEY YOU GWIELO! ARE YOU TOO POOR TO BUY A MASK?".[8] Gweilo (sometimes gwailou) is a common slang term for Westerners in Cantonese which has a history of pejorative use.

Moreover, 'Free Hong Kong' messages continued to circulate the walls of the special administrative region throughout lockdown periods. Examples of graffiti reading "Stand With Hong Kong" and "Hong Kong is not China", which were archetypal of pre-COVID-19 protests, remained popular during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. These instances of protest graffiti initially saw a resurgence the year earlier. In mid-2019, Carrie Lam, the chief executive of Hong Kong, presented a challenge to the Chinese President Xi Jinping by withdrawing a bill that would have enabled the extradition of Chinese citizens to the mainland. Through the pandemic, following growing concerns around Chinese-imported cases of COVID-19 putting strain on Hong Kong's healthcare system, liberation-based and pandemic-based pieces of graffiti were both present, indicating the dual-use of graffiti in Hong Kong and sustained importance of graffiti to protest-based movements placed under restrictions.[9]

Fig. 8: Unknown Artist, Sai Kung district, 2020. Image source: SCMP.

Fig. 9: Unknown Artist, Hong Kong, May 2020. Image source: SCMP.

4. Graffiti and COVID-19

These artworks speak of the informalism and adaptiveness Bennett described in *Practical Aesthetics*. They are powerful, protest-driven works emerging from an anti-austerity aesthetic, and are political utilisations of graffiti, encompassing a significant part of the contemporary political debate in Hong Kong. Furthermore, as they hold a universal aesthetic style of simple, black mark-making, their deliberate austerity elevates the messages they are sharing. This is the *aisthetic* Bennett & Rancière lauded, a reactive pursuit of artmaking which forgoes traditional aestheticism to spread a message and convey 'true' emotion.

In comparison, traditionally Western countries such as Australia, where the population is largely Caucasian, politically centrist and uphold value for free speech, the reaction to COVID-19 is different. On a local scale, much of the graffiti emerging in these countries during the pandemic raised issues including rent strikes, basic needs of survival and a continuation of conspiracy-based protests like those opposing 5G and vaccines—an entirely different response to the hyper-surveilled public space seen in Hong Kong. In Australia the few cases of graffiti as protest during COVID-19 has been done poorly in comparison to other places. As the ability to freely access public spaces for the purpose of painting has been drastically reduced/restricted in Australia, many artists, not used to making graffiti as detractors during times of conflict, or in overly surveyed and restricted public spaces, are choosing to forgo their normal practice for the time being. Many instances of graffiti in these locations are slap-dash, painted in suburban locations with lower visibility, and largely fail to contribute to a larger movement comparable with those such as the liberation in Hong Kong.

Fig. 10: *COVID-19 Rent Strike*, Melbourne, 2010. Image source: Emerson Radisich

Fig. 11: Unknown Artist, Melbourne, 2020. Image source: Emerson Radisich

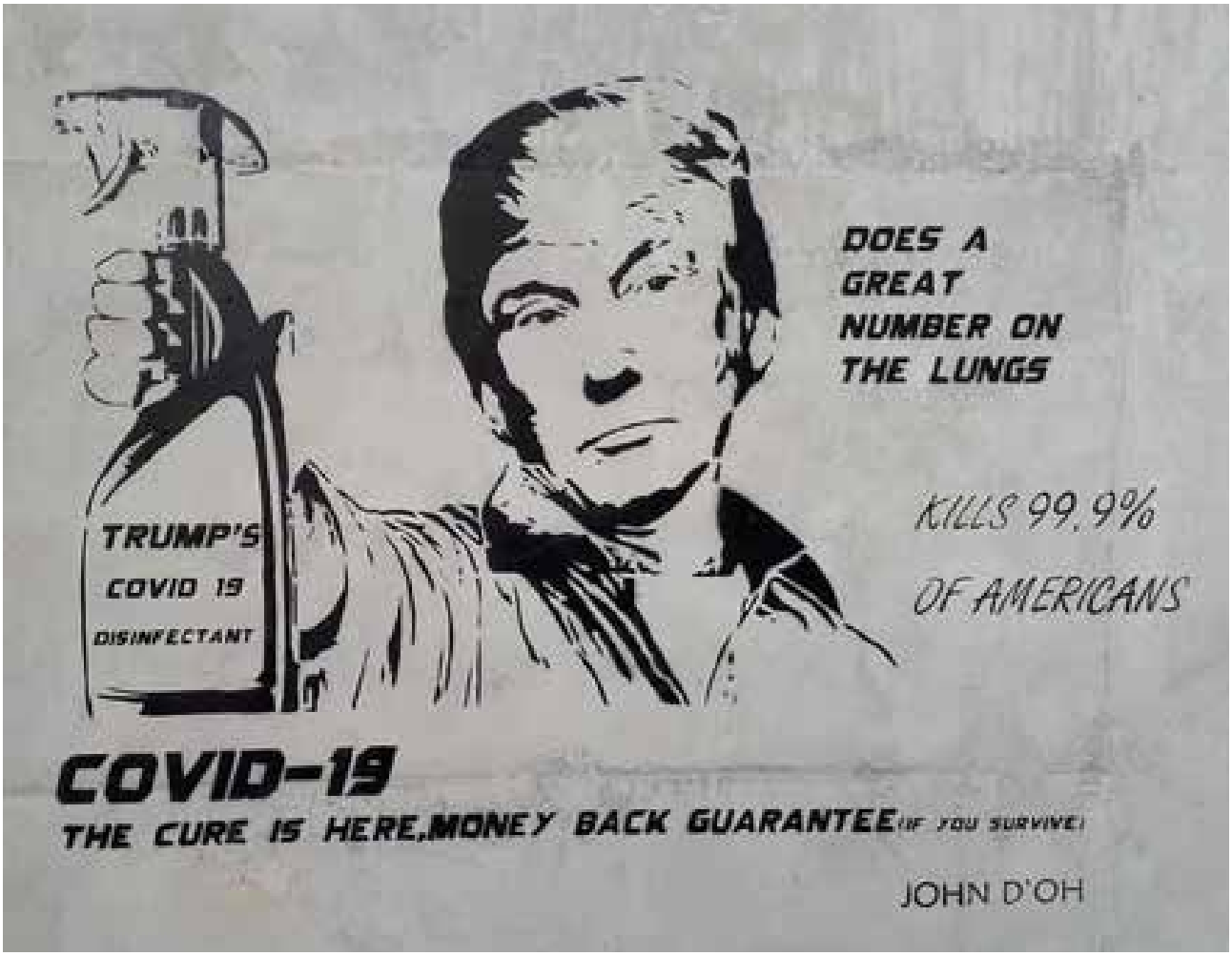

Fig. 12: John D'OH, *Trumps COVID-19 Disinfectant*, 2020. Image source: John D'OH

In an interview for Smithsonian Magazine, anthropologist Rafael Schacter discussed the significance of the digital public sphere in the context of COVID-19 responses. Schacter noted that social media is becoming used by street artists in the West, and suggested that because of reach, this is where change can be instigated.[10] Schachter and others suggest that due to increasing levels of surveillance and police presence, the act of mark-making in public places is becoming more difficult.[11] The public space has in some ways turned into the private due to COVID-19 restrictions. Areas previously accessible became restricted and temporary laws such as curfews and travel restrictions were enforced, ultimately creating a dilemma for artists to navigate. This produced a divide within street-art more broadly, where the powerful and physically present artworks such as those capturing anti-austerity, protest aesthetics occurred in higher frequencies in areas more used to lockdowns and restrictions on public places, such as Hong Kong.

On a global scale, murals that are shared on Instagram or picked up by global news sites have the capacity to speak to the world, and, importantly, discuss global issues in a way that physical artworks cannot. The digitization of street art has been occurring alongside the popularity of social media and internet use; however, as public spaces become locked off, more artists have adapted by uploading work on the internet and evolving digital public spaces further.[12] Artists working within the digital domain must remain wary, however. Audiences can end up de-sensitized to digital artworks, which can become over-generalised or overly affected by the structure and rigidity social platforms thus are at risk of taking aesthetic, rather than aisthetic pursuits.[13]

Conclusion

Most interesting is what will happen in the divide between physical demarcation of the public space, and digital reformations of public art responding to COVID-19. Graffiti can be an effective and critical artform that challenges political situations, however due to lockdown laws, an increasing number of artists globally are reformatting their practices to approach a wider audience through the internet. Although this trend has been occurring for over a decade, predominantly due to artists recognising the internet's capacity to connect their work to a greater audience (and potential customer base), COVID-19 has magnified this digital shift.

Graffiti during 2020 has demonstrated its elasticity in times of crisis. In terms of efficacy however, those places including Hong Kong which have existing histories of graffiti in times of censorship and restrictions have shown greater willingness to adapt to the ramifications of COVID-19 within the physical public forum, compared to locations such as Melbourne, which have dealt with novel limitations on physical public places.

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Footnotes.

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