

Street Art and the Struggle for Public Space

M. Zaenul Muttaqin

¹Department of Public Administration, Cenderawasih University, Jayapura City, Indonesia; E-Mail: mzaenul69@gmail.com

Abstract

As an Indonesian-language documentary film, “Coretan Seni Dibalik Vandalisme” offers a broader perspective on the street art beyond legality and democracy. The insights of artists, observers, and academics are critical to capturing the reorientation of street art, which is commonly referred to as vandalism.

Keywords

Street Art, Graffiti, Public Space, Politics

The following review refers to a documentary film which has been recently broadcast on YouTube entitled “Coretan Seni dibalik Vandalisme” or Scratch Art Behind Vandalism. This film illustrates how public space debates and street art expressions are intertwined within a broader discussion. It combines two forms of visual communication that contain criticism of power. Using a documentary film, this review explores the intertwining of two contemporary visual arts to re-examine the spirit of freedom of expression in a democratic context.

On August 17, 2021, Indonesia commemorated Independence Day amidst the increasing spread of COVID-19; the mass media is busy reporting murals criticizing the government. These murals adorn property walls in several cities in Indonesia. There is a mural depicting the face of President Jokowi with the words “404 Not Found” across his eyes, “Tuhan Aku Lapar” or God I am Hungry, and “Dipaksa Sehat Di Negara Yang Sakit” or Compelled to be Healthy in a Sick Country. Law enforcement reacted to this critical message. In addition to removing the murals, the authorities are pursuing and arresting the perpetrators. The general opinion is that these murals disturb national stability and promote vandalism. There appears to be a loss of soul in public space, which was originally a means of delivering effective messages.

Subjects and Documentary Material

Films are an increasingly popular way of spreading entertainment that was prevalent in the past. Currently, films provide a wide range of content for general audience, including events, stories, music, drama, comedy, and education (Alex 2003; Effendy 2003). With this function, films can influence the audience with specific psychological and social effects. One film genre that embraces this effect is documentary. Documentary films are considered effective for recording and reconstructing a past event. The presentation of documentary film facts relates to characters, objects, moments, events, locations, and records of events that happened (Pratista 2017).

The documentary film “Coretan Seni Dibalik Vandalisme” was produced by Dalam Rana Documentary with Aries Yulianto as director, Muhammad Al Zikir serving as producer and Miftahurrezky Kusuma F. as Director of Photography (DOP). As the director, Aries integrates each source’s interviews into a neat plot arrangement and sequence. So that the audience quickly understands the intent and purpose of making a film. Shooting using this dynamic shot technique improves the delivery of messages in the film and constructs a look and mood about actual reality. By taking pictures that focus on the informants’ narration, Miftahurrezky Kusuma F. demonstrates their awareness of the audience like they are face to face. This documentary’s expression of the point of view and personal stories

establishes itself as a powerful artistic medium. On the other hand, the visuals of the murals on the streets embody the power of effective communication. The film offers an educative side of street art expression, dichotomous on vandalism and legality. Instead of providing specific answers, this film offers further discussion regarding the differences in views between art and legality.

At least three subjects appear in this film—the *first*, Aji Prasetyo as an artist and cultural observer. *Second*, Sidnatwo and Jidoet are street art artists and Malang Graffiti Movement community members. *Third*, Deni JE is a fine art academic at the Jogjakarta Institute of the Arts. Even in one frame, the three subjects have different opinions about street art. From the perspective of cultural observers, street art has value that extends beyond the aspect of public space itself. It means looking beyond art spaces which tend to be exclusive to galleries and other closed spaces. Aji explained that the wall is one of the broadest media in modern art. Aji expanded the discussion to a comparison of street art in Penang, Malaysia, which increased visits to tourist destinations. These murals are conceptualized, and professional artists are involved in their creation.

Aji interprets today's public space as a medium for struggle. During its development, public spaces were clustered into private spaces, rented out for billboards and billboards, which of course, were not always pleasing to the eye. These billboards and billboards are legal due to the application of specific rates or taxes. The existence of tariffs then turns its back on the existence of the artists; their mural works are considered illegal. Aji compared the term illegal to not only referring to street art. On the other hand, there is the fact that advertisements for sucking up toilets and smoking posters, which incidentally do not have permission, are also allowed to spread across urban spaces in Indonesia.

Street art artists expressed a similar point; public space is a place that contains a variety of compositions, and murals are equivalent to product advertisements in public spaces that are treated differently. Sidnatwo explains that society's stigma regarding these illegal advertisements is ironic when it pertains to murals. In Sidnatwo's guess, the

installation of cigarette flyers and posters was considered typical advertising because it was done during the day. At the same time, Jidoet examines the risk factors for critical works. For Jidoet, the repression against street art artists, who have even been arrested, has hurt themselves and their families.

Deni JE, as an academic, summarizes the essence of street art as both an art subject and a legal subject. In his view, street art is closely related to political communication instruments and represents grassroots social values. The mural with protest messages expresses the majority of people's reaction at the government's handling of the pandemic. Deni stated that two things need to be clarified first behind the removal of the mural and the arrest of the artists. *First*, from an aesthetic perspective, murals, like other paintings, are art products that are interpreted based on taste. It is interesting in some cases, but not in others. *Second*, from a legal perspective, wall objects as street art media are about ownership and permission.

Regarding property permits, artistic and legal values often clash—except for street art sanctioned by the authorities. The Mayor of Malang once appreciated street art on the city walls of Malang in March 2021 (Bariroh, Hambali, and Nurhadi 2020). Through the "Make Up" program, the Mayor invited street art actors to be involved in making a mural on the Kedung Kandang Bridge. This program involves about 20 communities with 100 participants, including Sidnatwo and Jidoet.

The three subjects in the film "Coretan Seni Dibalik Vandalisme" agree that the mural amplifies public interest and records the history of the journey of the Indonesian nation. Murals in Indonesia have existed for thousands of years (Karyanto, Lombogia, and Hermawati 2020). In Maros, South Sulawesi, people introduced paintings made from tree sap and animal blood on cave walls 39,000 years ago (Gazali 2017). The artists are aware that the ideas or ideas related to creating murals must take into account the public interest, going beyond aspects of protest art (Maknuni 2021). Street art critically evaluates structural constraints through poetic means in public space (Baltrusch 2018). The murals in this documentary are expressions

of disappointment with government policies that are considered to have failed to reduce the rate of transmission of Covid-19 significantly, and the restrictive policies have instead resulted in mass layoffs (Iftakhurizaq and Dharmawan 2022).

Murals in the Maelstrom of Indonesian History

Since their inception, murals have been identified to convey socio-political messages, manifestations of grassroots voices to foster hope, and symbols of solidarity (Irwandi 2019; Dewi 2022). Murals in public spaces indicate people's efforts to criticize and protest against power (Piliang 2002; Iftakhurizaq and Dharmawan 2022). Therefore, murals function as a communication glue that restores public space to the community (Isnanta 2016).

In history, murals coloured grassroots protests in Indonesia during the colonial period. These murals decorate public spaces with messages of encouragement and effective propaganda (Purnama and Nabila 2021). For example, the mural "Merdeka Ataoe Mati" is a reaction to the return of Netherlands Indies Civil Administration (NICA) soldiers who threatened independence in the 1945-1949 range (Pramana and Irfansyah 2019; Maknuni 2021). This mural is visible on the train cars. After the 1965 incident, the meaning of murals remained pejorative. The New Order identified murals as works separated from social and political contexts. Art, including murals, must be sterile, free from elements of protest or criticism (Pramana and Irfansyah 2019). As a result of the 32 years of the New Order, the mural has maintained its pejorative meaning. The breath of freedom of expression grew right after the New Order regime collapsed. Mural artists previously considered a threat have found space for their work again (Pramana and Irfansyah 2019). Murals depicting the faces of prominent figures have appeared in several Indonesian cities (Pramana and Irfansyah 2019). Marsinah, as a symbol of a female laborer who was brutally killed, and Munir, as a human rights activist whose death case has not been completed. These are proof of the strengthening of the political nuances of murals after the New Order. Therefore, the mural is intertwined with the development of the history of resistance in Indonesia, closely related to political overtones.

The phenomenon of vandalism cannot be separated from the discussion about the struggle for public space. In this sense, the concept of the struggle for public space thus becomes a means of connecting society with the democratic political landscape (Carmona 2021). In Habermas' perspective, this public space offers equal freedom of expression and dialogue through various communication devices. The public sphere offers democracy with open voice and expression (Habermas 1992; Beyes 2022). Political communication through this documentary film is full of values as if sending a message that removing murals and arresting mural artists is a setback in terms of democracy.

Closing Notes

Throughout this documentary, the major focus has been on the substantive questions regarding the three subjects.. *First*, how to reconstruct the harmony of artistic values with legal values? *Second*, this value extends to the question of what is the responsibility of the ideal art?. *Third*, this accountability crystallizes what distinguishes the premise of "free" and "wild" in the concept of democracy?.

This 33-minute documentary has its advantages. In addition to providing insight into the relationship between street art and public space, this film inserts a preference for the attachment of street art to the history of Indonesian independence. In terms of visual, this film is well packaged and interesting. This film is not stagnant taking pictures of each subject related to street art. Aside from that, the street art portraits are displayed throughout cities in Indonesia and have English subtitles for international audiences to create a colorful impression.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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