

Graffiti Exists as both an Art and a Tool of Education

*Rudy Harjanto,

Fakultas Seni Rupa dan Desain, Institut Teknologi Bandung Jalan Ganesha 10, Bandung, Indonesia

*abrudyharjanto@gmail.com

Setiawan Sabana,

Fakultas Seni Rupa dan Desain, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Jalan Ganesha 10, Bandung, Indonesia

setiawansabana@yahoo.com

Abstract

Graffiti are created from the creator aspirations towards a specific social issue surrounding the community and it has become an integral visual aspect of a city. As a phenomenon, aside from being accepted or not, graffiti can be deemed as an artwork when its viewers understand its message, using the surrounding as a frame, creating a living gallery. One of this gallery can be observed at Kampung Babakan, Tangerang, Indonesia.

Kampung Babakan is situated side by side with a modern residential complex with modern infrastructure. The social divide however prevents residents of Kampung Babakan to enjoy these modern infrastructures. Kampung Babakan residents have a very low education rate which in turn prevents the residents to acquire higher quality living standards and they realized that education is the pathway to a better future.

The main research topic is how graffiti as an artwork can be optimized as an educational tool and motivates children to study by utilizing the available spaces on vacant walls, and other flat media available in the immediate area. The research will be done through phenomenological approach, participation method, direct observation, field visit, reference studies, and study case analysis.

The graffiti artwork revolved around educational theme, spanned into several topics, consisting mainly of math and language. With them being placed on strategic location, graffiti can become a tool to build positive social interaction. Not only it is an outlet for youth aspirations and creativity, graffiti can be beneficial to its viewers. In the end, graffiti is accepted as a beneficial artwork, by introducing basic education, while motivating the resident's children to go to school, and beautifies the environment at the same time.

Key words: graffiti, education, social interaction.

BACKGROUND

A city, how empty and lifeless, is still defined by its physical identities, big and small. Tall sky scrapers and flat municipal gardens strengthen a city's outward appearance. Amongst all the structural design, such as parking spaces, highways and housing complexes, there lies a touch of life in the form of graffiti.

The word "graffiti" originates from the Italian word "graffiato" which means "scratching", and has become synonymous to acts of applying, scratching, marking, painting of shapes and words to a physical media on public or privately owned properties. Graffiti in general is made using spray paints and wall paints in the form of tags, stencils, images and colorful murals with new inventive tools used such as tapes to create images. These images, in the eyes of the creators, can be considered as a form of art. As something that is created outside formal galleries can be considered as art, it is logical to consider graffiti as an art form (Hundertmark, 2001:1).

Graffiti has become more of a regular imagery around every city, be it having an aesthetic value or just another scribble on a physical media. Graffiti is mostly created at public places with abundant traffic; bridges, doors, walls, fences, and plenty of other places which can be seen by the public directly. By most people, these propagations of random images is considered a visual nuisance but much to their dismay, there are actual messages contained in each graffiti image. This negative attitude towards graffiti is warranted, because graffiti creators are always hiding behind the veil of night when creating the images and doing so on public properties. The messages are obstructed by the fact that the public is disturbed by bright colors and non-descript lines that have no meaning to most viewers. There are graffiti images created with subtle colors and soft messaging with direct messages relating to specific socio-economic issues. However, this is few and far between, seemingly drowned in the sea of meaningless scribbles.

For those graffiti with meaning and direct messages, they are created by the creator's aspirations towards a specific social issue surrounding the community and it can become an integral visual aspect of a city. As a phenomenon, aside from being accepted or not, graffiti can be deemed as an artwork when its viewers understand its message, using the surrounding as a frame, creating a living gallery. One of these living galleries can be observed at Kampung Babakan, Tangerang, Indonesia.

Kampung Babakan lies in the RT01/RW04, Kelurahan Binong area, Tangerang, West side of Jakarta. This small living area houses 30 families with a total of 109 people living in a tight knit community. It is observed that by the very simple housing designs built from simple building materials, the community is from a lower than average household income group. It is ironic that Kampung Babakan is directly next to a modern

housing complex with modern infrastructure and sanitation which cannot be accessed by the Kampung residents. Next to large houses where even the latest vehicle models can be seen, Kampung Babakan sits idly by as the advancement in infrastructure did not reach them at all, creating a large gap in the social and economical condition.

From the census data acquired, Kampung Babakan residents are in the lower education tier. The relatively lower level of education of the residents of Kampung Babakan means they are only able to find lower paying jobs, locking the residence in a vicious cycle of a low income, low quality life. The low quality of life causes them have a higher tendency to pursue material things instead of solving their underlying issue of low education.

A good education will empower a person and will enable him to safeguard his economic status in any given situation. Education will enable a person to identify rules and laws in his environment or the community he lives in. The awareness of his capability and potential also allows the educated person to better utilize his rights as a citizen and seek a better economic status. On this basis, the community has agreed that street art can be utilized to provide a solution where an educational theme is used to introduce basic education to the residents of Kampung Babakan. This long-term project aims at building a community that will eventually have a creative mindset, be independent and have better self confidence. The big idea is to alter the mindset of the community for them to acknowledge the betterment of life through education. The physical medium used to display these street arts are none other than the walls of the houses in Kampung Babakan, whereby the children from the community can learn at an early stage some education basics.

ISSUE

The presence of graffiti in the community cannot be avoided anymore, as it has become more and more integrated into society and has become a social norm. However, not everyone in the community favors the existence of graffiti. In fact, its existence is scorned at. There is a lot of graffiti done in a distasteful manner; it is created in a seemingly random manner, more akin to scribble than a meaningful image with a message. This type of graffiti is abundant and is generally considered a visual nuisance. There is general agreement that this type of graffiti is not a form of art as it does not contain any direct meaning to the masses nor does it contain understandable imagery.

Even then, the existence of graffiti with a meaningful message and imagery is still partly considered a nuisance. As much as the creator intended to convey a message with tasteful imagery, different mindsets and attitudes towards graffiti will automatically negate the message and effort of the graffiti creator.

This research topic discusses how graffiti as an artwork can be optimized as an educational tool and motivates children to study by utilizing the available spaces on vacant physical media, and other flat surfaces available in the immediate area.

THEORETICAL STUDIES

This research will explore graffiti through a phenomenological approach, participation method, field visit, reference studies, and case study analysis. A qualitative evaluation utilized for this paper leverages subjective methods such as interviews, observations and reference books, to collect substantive and relevant data.

Graffiti art strewn about in the cityscape are created in essence as a form of social interaction, taking part in a structural behavior of human society. Graffiti art is a tool of self-expression, delivering a message or an opinion in a complex way. As a self-expression tool, the graffiti creator creates a one-way communication with the viewers and this message can be interpreted in multiple ways by the people passing by. As such, different people will have a different way of interpreting the image created. An event, an object, will not have a meaning if not placed in a certain context for the individual who observes it. In other words, social reality is very dependant on the meaning given by another individual. This view in essence refers to the Symbolic Interaction theory.

According to the theory, every individual is moved to act according to the meaning given to other individual, object and event. These meanings are created in their own language, to be communicated to others or to themselves. Language enables people to develop their own understanding of self, and to interact with other individuals in a community. Symbolic Interaction theory insists that an individual creates meaning through communication process as meanings do not have any intrinsic tendencies towards anything and in the creation of meaning, interpretive construction contribution is needed. According to Symbolic Interaction theory, the goal of interaction is to create a similar meaning. This is important because without the understanding of the same meaning, communication will be difficult or even impossible (West et. al, 2007:11-117).

Most often an individual will assume that every individual involved in a conversation understands the same meaning. According to Ritzes (2007:595-601), this thematic approach supports the Symbolic Interaction theory where three assumptions from Herbert Blumer work (1969). These assumptions are as follows: individual acts upon meanings given by another individual; meanings are created in the interaction between individuals; meanings are modified according to an interpretive process.

Graffiti artwork, for example, might have different meanings as defined by its viewers and its creators and even to those who likes or dislikes graffiti in general. This view is supported by academicians, for example, Max Weber (Ritzer, Goodman, 2007: 34-41). Max Weber stated that society is the product of mankind, the resulting process of mankind to create and preserve steady social interrelationship. These social relationship in this regard is also a creation of mankind. Society is a functioning part which depends on each other and works together for the benefit of the greater good, which are the wellbeing of the individuals inside it. Society is composed of interacting individual (Littlejohn, 2009:784).

The act of interaction is the resulting activity of self-adjusting through joint actions, forming what is called an organization or social structure. This interaction enables an individual to acknowledge their surroundings and themselves because there is oneness of thought process and to act. The way the human mind interprets objects and events is unique to them. Thought comes from the bond of a social situation through interacting with other individuals, that's how an individual can recognize a person just from looking at the back of the head. Thought can also explain and predict what other individuals might interpret inside an interaction. These interactions are composed of many individual actions which effects each other which includes symbolic interaction.

DISCUSSION

Graffiti has become a phenomenon, despite its acceptance and rejection; graffiti has become a communication tool to carry a message. As a message medium, graffiti becomes a territorial media. Because it is territorial, graffiti became a catalyst for interaction as graffiti creators adds colors, creates shapes with strong visual message to directly deliver what they want to convey to the immediate surroundings.

Graffiti creators seemingly upholds the notion that drawing has become a need in daily life (Zaza, Walta, 2008:5) where the creation of graffiti is not just to convey a message, but to fulfill the needs of its creator to draw. Graffiti visually bridges the interaction between the creator, the people living in the city and those who observe graffiti altogether, as such, graffiti has become a media for aesthetic communication. Henry Chalfant (Lewisohn, 2010:8) stated that graffiti creators, as artists, have moved away from "bombing graffiti" to entertainment business, graphics design, web design, film, music, and choreography in an explosion of expressions. As an expression of contemporary culture, graffiti describes the willingness of society especially the youth on topics about personal life in many interesting shapes and colors. Graffiti to them has become an expression of existence through art. These creations change the void of spaces in the cityscapes into something attractive and alive.

Graffiti exists not just as a single event or an intertextual, but it notes how in the same space there are many connected contexts and other narrations. The application of psychology cognitive analysis shows that how artistic mediation resource increases the ability of an individual to learn and to save factual information (Lopes, 2004: xvi).

Most of the time, graffiti can be considered as a self-expression of an individual. The art of "scribbling" on the wall is one of the creative methods of an individual to communicate with other graffiti creators and people in general. The message content might be a visualization of identity, expression, and ideas. To that end, reasons and values why an individual creates graffiti vary wildly, but one thing for sure, is that the creators are seeking acknowledgement of their fame and the artistic appreciation of their ability.

These scribbles, stems from the boredom of individuals who are seeking recognition from their peers or to mark a territorial for which they join a group. This type of graffiti then becomes a catalyst for other individual or group to create graffiti to mark their territory as well. Without meaning, to the greater audience this type of graffiti is typically regarded as visual nuisance. As there are no aesthetic values in this type of graffiti, these scribbles are considered purely as marking, conveying a message to a closed loop community and not in the general direction of creating positive social interaction.

At Kampung Babakan, a small village in west-side Jakarta, Indonesia, the existence of graffiti goes beyond a mere scribble. The creators, considering themselves as artists, create graffiti to nurture positive social interaction between the imagery and the viewers. They create graffiti with specific themes, after long analysis and deep observation about the area. The project is a complex collaboration between artists, and according to art watchers, this type of collaboration is called a community-based art, socially engaged art, participatory art, or some call it social activism art. In essence, it is a collaborative action that expresses art as having an active part in society.

In the discussion, the artists will select individuals and create groups to corroborate in the project. Those involved are mostly seasoned graffiti artists, or any individual who pledges support for the project to finish in a timely manner. After the planning stages have been completed, the group will then ask for input from the residents of Kampung Babakan.

The project which aims to change the social paradigm of the community garners very positive responses. Graffiti artists with their varying art directions met and agreed on one idea, the idea to be a part of

betterment for a community. In their collaboration, the artists acknowledge that they are helping the community to be better and answer to a deeper call of social issues, humanity values, culture plurality and tolerance to create a positive social interaction. In building the collaboration, communication holds the utmost important aspect as differences in expression, creating, developing an aesthetic value carries a unique emotional weight. The visual art, especially paintings, holds a unique power to carry an individual to communicate with the world (Parry, 2011:3). An art can beautify the environment, which creates an aesthetic emotion. This aesthetic emotion is different for every individual, even though having a similarity in character. The emotional experience which are caused by the object of arts are heavily subjective, which depends on the “taste” of each subject. Emotional aesthetic characteristic are a correlation of various connections of shapes, colors, and lines which support a structure and shape.



*Figure 1: Mathematic Graffiti on local assembly hall
Source: Personal photograph by author, January 2014*

The project is being corroborated by various graffiti artists. They are Duo Coblón (Propagaphic Movement), RoboWobo, Garis Keras Feat. Spik Lala, Rewind Art, Andi Rharharha and Agenkultur Art Activist (AAA). Each of them have a distinct art design and different method of applying graffiti, but they joined together to help the Kampung Babakan community. Some of their techniques such as mural, stencil art, wheat paste and tape art are different and unique, creating a unique mixed gallery around the Kampung Babakan housing area.

The groups started creating graffiti art starting May until July 2013. The process is as simple as visiting, researching, discussing with owner of the house, and by empathizing with the problem of the local community. Regular intensive meetings between the artists create oneness of message, creating themes and sub themes for the graffiti they want to create. After the greater idea has been agreed upon together, the groups then present the preliminary art and open up a dialog with the community. The goal is to display graffiti art to help motivate the children of Kampung Babakan to study more and the needs for basic education for all. After the community agreed upon the concept, the groups then starts painting the walls of the housing complex, projecting the visuals on the empty walls, putting up stencils, tags, on abandoned walls and rundown buildings.



*Figure 2: English Graffiti on a resident house wall
Source: Personal photograph by author, January 2014*

The educational themes of the graffiti art are presented in a proportionate way on the walls, fences in the housing area of the Kampung Babakan community. It stands not just a testament of the artists unique sense of art, but also beneficial to its immediate surroundings. Not just on the walls and fences, the groups created contemporary art on the study table of the schools, creating a condition where the students interacts the study as well as art together, strengthening the portion of both study and art. Not just creating educational purpose, some of the graffiti artists create an interactive art with the community. For example, one artist created a Tapak Gunung (Hopscotch) guideline for children to play with, then there are imagery of numbers and animals with bright colors on walls so little children can be exposed to learning faster and do not get bored as fast compared to numbers and images on a black board. More than just specific educational themes, the graffiti artists also creates graffiti which contains encouragements; such as waking up early is good and exercise daily, or becoming a sportive and honest person.

The meaning between all of the elements at play transforms and redefines the space to be social reference in the sense of daily social interaction. This social reference is dominated by the input of visual combination in the form of graffiti artwork around the community. Creating and interpreting meaning is not necessarily a pure mental exercise, but it also carries the weight of the language used in the process. It is through the desire of the creator in creating pieces of language, stating the alternative, changing, mixing, interpreting and then to accommodate the whole to catch the real meaning from its creator (Gasparov, 2010:3). Thus, the consideration of meaning is very dependent on the creator's train of thought. As the intention of the creator is relevant with the meaning to be conveyed, not their arts (Lopes, 2004a:160).

Some of residents explain that the education theme adopts not only the aesthetic expression visually, but also serves as a function of adding to a medium of study for the children in the community. The children are no longer bound to classroom schedules as they can learn outside school hours and at anytime they intend to study.

CONCLUSION

Graffiti creators aim to create art that mix elements of space by itself or in conjunction with the message they want to convey. This connectivity fills and beautifies the physical space in the Kampung Babakan area with a distinct education theme. The involvement of the residents signifies a difference in attitude towards graffiti where they accept graffiti as a useful and contributing imagery in the immediate vicinity. The changes observed include the favorable attitude towards or acceptance of graffiti. In addition, the existence of graffiti has also created a lively meaningful and colourful environment, where before it was relatively dull and lifeless.

This type of graffiti works as it is based on the spirit of helping and motivating the children of the community to learn more and be enticed with philosophical understanding of education. The messages conveyed by the graffiti are then understood as meaningful, not only just as an aggregate of sensational messages. Therefore, graffiti exists as both an art and a tool of education, as the Kampung Babakan residents are experiencing firsthand, transcending the negative connotation of graffiti as a visual nuisance.

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