Fall 2016

Talking Walls: Freeing Art in Bali, Indonesia

Lila Chu
SIT Study Abroad

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TALKING WALLS
FREEING ART IN BALI, INDONESIA

Lila Chu
Advisor: Jango Pramartha, Artist
SIT Study Abroad
Indonesia: Arts, Religion, and Social Change
Fall 2016
Bunga dan Tembok (Flower and Wall)
By Widji Thukul

Seumpama bunga
(Like flowers)

Kami adalah bunga yang tak kau kehendaki tumbuh
(We are the flowers that you do not want to grow)

Engkau lebih suka membagun rumah dan merampas tanah
(You prefer to build houses and rob lands)

Seumpama bunga
(Like flowers)

Kami adalah bunga yang tak kau kehendaki adanya
(We are the flowers that you do not want to exist)

Engkau lebih suka membangun jalan raya dan pagar besi
(You prefer to build big roads and iron fences)

Seumpama bunga
(Like flowers)

Kami adalah bunga yang dirontokkan di bumi kami sendiri
(We are the flowers that have been fallen out from our own earth)

Jika kami bunga
(If we were flowers)

Engkau adalah tembok itu
(You are the wall)

Tapi di tubuh tembok itu, telah kami sebar biji-biji
(But in the body of the wall, we have spread seeds)

Suatu saat kami akan tumbuh bersama dengan keyakinan: engkau harus hancur!
(One day we will grow together with the same belief: you must be destroyed!)

Dalam keyakinan kami
(In our belief)

Dimanapun — tirani harus tumbang
(Everywhere — tyranny must fall)
Acknowledgments

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To my street art mentor, friend, and inspiration, Mang Gen, thank you for your constant jokes, motivation, and time spent working with me. I must give my extensive gratitude and thanks to your family—for feeding me, letting me paint your walls, proving us with a ladder and scaffolding, and being so incredibly kind and encouraging. Thank you for making this mural possible, and supporting our art. The generosity and amiability that I have encountered in this village was a muse to my work—thus I hope Desa Nyambu will accept my art as a token of gratitude, for making this mural possible.

Thus I thank Komunitas Djamur—I cannot express the gratitude and appreciation that I feel for the opportunity you have given me to collaborate, fulfilling my aspirations to paint a mural, and I hope that one day we may paint again!
Abstract

In some ways Bali’s street art manifests everywhere, in the form of abundant *banten*, decorations for *Galungan* and *Kuningan*, shrines, temples, ornaments, and the black and white checkered cloth draped over scared statues, rocks, and banyan trees. This aesthetic pleasure moves beyond the sacred, and into the street—peering out among Bali’s intricate ornaments and decorations. Declarations of *Bali Tolak Reklamasi*, and images of a Balinese woman sporting a gas mask circulate Bali’s cityscapes, along with other marks, writings, and murals finding homes on grey walls.

**Keywords:** Indonesia; Bali; Komunitas Djamur; street art; graffiti; vandalism; social change

*Dérive* – “once a process of discovery is initiated, the interested spectator may come to see the street as a space, which holds the potential for serendipitous encounters and profound aesthetic experiences” (Bengtsen, 2013, p. 77)
# Table of Contents

I. Introduction ......................................................................................................................6
   Objectives
   Methodology
   Ethics
   Brief Statement of Findings

II. Background on Street Art ..................................................................................................10
   Understanding Street Art, Vandalism, and Graffiti
   It’s Vandalism!
   Between Graffiti and Street Art
   The Evolution of Street Art
   The Inter-web
   Seni Jalanan

III. Street Art in Indonesia ....................................................................................................20
   History of Street Art in Indonesia
   Bali vs. Java
   Educating the People
   Art Activism
   Challenging Tradition

IV. Street Art for Change ......................................................................................................32
   Art for (Radical) Thought
   Temporality
   The Street Artist
   Street Art in Context

V. Komunitas Djamur ..........................................................................................................39
   Mushrooms
   Genetik

VI. Water is Life ..................................................................................................................42
   Motivations
   Finding a Wall
   Finding a Flower
   Flower and Wall
   Reception

VII. Conclusion ....................................................................................................................52

VIII. Bibliography ...............................................................................................................54

IX. Appendix .......................................................................................................................56
I. Introduction

Objectives

This paper is an attempt to understand the complexities of street art, graffiti, and vandalism—using Bali as a lens to observe how they are intertwined, and functioning as a form of art activism. I aim to uncover the various socio-political issues that Balinese artists and activists have addressed through their murals, installations, and public art exhibitions. Additionally, I intend to examine the public and dynamic nature of street art, and how this serves as a tool for free expression and activism. Furthermore, this paper will explore the development of street art and graffiti into commercial and institutional spaces, through the lived experiences of contemporary Balinese artists. These are some of the guiding questions for my research:

- What is the difference between street art, graffiti and vandalism?
- How is street art viewed in Bali?
- How is street art used for socio-political change and awareness?
- What are some of the issues addressed by street art in Bali?
- How does Komunitas Djamur function as a street art community?

Lastly, in order to further my understanding of street art and the street artist, it was my goal to participate in street art project of my own, in whatever form that may be.

Methodology

Through a serious of consultations with scholarly journals, artists, and murals, I attempted to synthesize an understanding of street art within Bali. In the last decade, many studies have been conducted on street art and graffiti, exploring their authenticity as an illegal art form, from the street and into the exhibit space. Bringing together both primary and secondary resources helped me to examine the functions of art activism in Bali; connections with street artist and art collectives throughout the ISP period enabled me to observe socio-political street
art in Bali. Furthermore, using interview and participant based observation gained insight on their roles as both activists and street artists. Two of these artists were Wayan Sujana, more commonly known as “Suklu”, and Gede Suanda, or simply “Sayur”—who kindly invited me into their homes, sharing with me their knowledge, creativity, and wisdom.

My advisor, Jango Pramartha was instrumental in connecting me with artists during the three weeks that I stayed with him. Pak Jango’s connections with various artists through his work as a cartoonist and lecture at Indonesian Seni Institute (ISI) were vital throughout my study. He introduced me to Mang Gen on my first day in the field—allowing me to remain in contact with Mang Gen and members of Komunitas Djamur during the entire ISP period. Our collaboration on the mural project allowed for a series of interviews with Mang Gen and his team. Furthermore, our relationship facilitated unstructured conversations, as both friends and artists.

Finally, to compliment by fieldwork, I spent this ISP period orchestrating and actualizing a socio-political mural with the help of street artist Mang Gen, and his art collective, Komunitas Djamur. We worked together to develop a concept for our collaborative piece—and with the help of his community, we actualized a full-scale mural in his village, Desa Nyambu.

*Ethics*

Approaching street art in an academic context defies its nature as a dynamic and anarchic form of art. Attempting to define the parameters and functions of street art is, in some respect, futile—seeing that there is no “correct” way to address this complex and boundless phenomenon. However, my role as a student prompts me to challenge this dilemma, and proceed in an attempt to distinguish street art and graffiti as a form of art activism in Bali.
As a foreigner, I face yet another moral dilemma entering Bali’s world of street art with the intentions of painting a mural of my own. Since I am not a local, producing a mural in Bali’s streets infringes on the ethics surrounding the role of the street artist. Some would argue that street art should reflect the voices of the local community—thus by imposing my presence in their spaces and walls, I risk overstepping my role as a foreign student and artist. However, I hope that my method of collaboration with the local street art collective Djamur will help to alleviate my intrusion as a non-Balinese street artist. Furthermore, I ensured that our concept for the mural would respect and address issues pertinent to Bali, with the guidance of local artist Mang Gen.

I would also like to address the criminal aspects of street art—while I recognize and study the significance of illegality, my position as a foreigner with a student visa forbids my engagement in illegal street art activity. My acquaintance with illegality was limited to the lived experiences of the artists that I interacted with.

Lastly, I hope that my collaborative piece with Komunitas Djamur will serve the community of Desa Nyambu, acting as a gift in return for their generosity and support during the production of our mural. I will forever owe my gratitude and respect to this village and all the artists that aided me, for allowing me to realize my ambitions as both a student and artist throughout my time here in Bali.

Brief Statement of Findings

In this past month I entered Denpasar’s art world through the guidance of my advisor Pak Jango, and my friend, teacher, and mentor Mang Gen. I had the opportunity to meet and work with several street artists, including Mang Gen’s art collective Komunitas Djamur. Sharing their
experiences making street art in both Bali and Java, they helped me contrast between these two islands, and discussed some of the socio-political issues that inspire their artwork. Artist Gede Suanda expressed his intentions to spread awareness about land gentrification—hoping that his artwork may cause a shift in consciousness, and serve as a symbol of solidarity for Balinese communities. Other artists such as Suklu and Pak Jango also emphasized how street art is a powerful tool for both education and communication with the public.

Secondary sources aided me in grasping some of the terminology used to classify street art—thus allowing me to improve my study of art activism in Bali. Using this knowledge I could begin to unpack the intricacies of street art—differentiating between the various forms and mediums including graffiti, murals, and installations. This all helped to bolster my awareness and appreciation for the artists that I would have the honor of meeting and working with.

Finally, my creative piece concluded my study of street art, exposing me to the practice and philosophy of Komunitas Djamur. This incredible opportunity allowed me to further recognize the work of street artists in Bali and how their creativity as a community strengthens their socio-political artwork. Orchestrating and actualizing a full-scale mural taught me in so many ways; observing their techniques and their true sense of community, I feel incredibly inspired and grateful to have witnessed and been a part of such a uniquely magical experience.
II. Background on Street Art

Understanding Street Art, Vandalism, and Graffiti

Art will always mystify definition—however, in an attempt to contextualize and set the parameters for my ISP, I will define some of the necessary terms associated with street art. Also commonly referred to as “urban art” or “guerilla art,” street art may be categorized under the broader term of “public art,” as described by Peter Bengtsen (2013) in *A Critical Examination of Street Art as Public Art*. Although Bengtsen struggles to make a clear separation between street art and public art, he emphasizes that, “the unsanctioned nature of street art serves as an essential carrier of meaning” (Bengtsen, 2013, p. 78). Street art’s illicit nature is an embodiment of its rebellious and dynamic qualities as a form of art that is uncensored and open to the public. This “unsanctioned nature,” leads right into the complexities surrounding street art, and the very beginnings of the word *vandalism*, that is most commonly bound to our perception of street art and graffiti.

The term *vandal* dates back to the 18th century during the early months of the French Revolution—when a French Bishop coined the term *vandalisme*, in response to the damage and destruction caused by a Germanic tribe known as the Vandals. *Vandalisme* “became the standard term, not only for systematic revolutionary violence, but for any act of cultural desecration, particularly against art and architecture” (Merrills, 2009, p. 156). To this day the term vandalism is globally recognized—defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “action involving deliberate destruction of or damage to public or private property.” The implications of this term are nearly always tied to graffiti and street art. Although these art forms may deserve creative and artistic merit, they are both bound to the negative connotations of vandalism, due to their illegal and unsolicited nature.
Forms of graffiti and street art have been around since the beginning of mankind—from drawings in caves to the inscriptions and vandalism in the Ancient Greek and in the Roman Empire (Illeana, 2012, p. 45). It could even be argued that it is an instinctual human act. However, the modern graffiti that we are familiar with today originated in New York City during the 1970’s, generally referring to a variety of markings, including scratching, spraying, scribbling, calligraphically inscriptions, and painting on any public or private surface (Bengtsen, 2013, p. 65). From this, terms such as tagging and guerrilla activity are born, describing the various acts of graffiti making in urban spaces. Aside from graffiti, street art refers to various forms of art displayed in public view or space. This term encapsulates art forms ranging from performances, video art, group and individual murals, wheat paste, posters, stickers, stencils, word art, and anything imaginable (Lee, 2013, 304).

In recent years, scholars have gained interest in graffiti and street art, resulting in a burgeoning of terminology used to categorize this phenomenon. Despite the surge of academic analyses on graffiti and street art, Merrill emphasizes the ongoing “struggle to encapsulate the complex, blurred and changing boundaries” between street art and graffiti (Merrill, 2015, p. 370). While scholars and institutions continue to seek a distinction between the two, there is no clear line that separates one from the other. As follows, street art may be considered a product of subcultural graffiti—encompassing various forms of creativity that still overlap with preceding concepts of graffiti writing and tagging. At this point, the terms graffiti and street art begin to fuse together, as some people may consider graffiti to be street art. Furthermore, attempting to classify street art in Indonesia adds another layer to this entanglement, since there are no native Indonesian words for these terms. The paper grapples with the intricacies of this terminology through communication with informants and references to textual sources.
It’s Vandalism!

The association of vandalism with street art and graffiti is twofold. While the illegal and unwarranted nature of street art and graffiti has tainted their existence in the art world, it is also the underlying premise of such art forms. Street artists around the world must take their work to the shadows, forced to operate throughout the night to avoid confrontation with the law. Coupled with illegality, equating vandalism with graffiti may also deny its creative and artistic attributes. Many Balinese view street art as vandalism, thus discrediting its validity as a form of art. However, creating art as a form of resistance cannot exist without this rebellious and forbidden condition. The prohibition inherent in this art form may also serve as a muse for it—as artwork created in the middle of the night with the simultaneous adrenaline of lawlessness may cause for great inspirations and spontaneous insight. Furthermore, the primary purpose of making art in the streets is to speak out against institutions and normalized ways of thinking—sparking awareness and contemplation for passing audiences.

Mang Gen, a prominent street artist and founding member of Komunitas Djamur in Denpasar, has experienced how the connotations of street art as vandalism have influenced his work. He initially expressed his affection for the streets of Bali, functioning as a big studio for creating art in public (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 14, 2016, Denpasar). For Mang Gen and many other artists around the world, the trucks, billboards, and walls of a city act as canvas for wild and uncensored expression. An urban landscape, such as Denpasar, provides the space for authentic expression that reaches beyond the constraints of elitist institutions of art—granting freedom to both artist and public. This creative freedom is born out of the illegality and taboo of vandalism. Mang Gen conveyed that this forbiddance fuels
the adrenaline that keeps the artist’s mind and body running through the night. This is the art that rebels against authority—the anarchists of art (Armstrong, 2005, p. 4).

**Between Graffiti and Street Art**

In some way, graffiti is the mother to our modern understanding of street art. Once scribbles and scratches, this medium of expression has flourished into a boundless and free flowing art form. Despite the undeniable connection between graffiti and street art, it is necessary, in some respect, to differentiate between the two. Graffiti may be considered territorial, whereas street art is re-territorial (Armstrong, 2005, p. 2). The writings and messages of graffiti are the untrained and raw expressions of human history, claiming their space and their city. Graffiti is rebellious in nature—reflecting disgruntlement with the social and political climate on a local, national, or even global scale. On the other hand, street art takes on a different meaning when it is normalized both aesthetically and institutionally. Especially in Bali, street artists seek to democratize their murals—avoiding topics that may incite conflict, such as race and religion.

Although street artists also approach many of the same socio-political issues as do graffiti writers, the acceptance and recognition of street art deviates from that of graffiti. Some consider street art as an effort towards the beautification of the dull, grey, and sterile cityscape, working with space to stimulate the minds of city dwellers. Subsequently, street art is more palatable for the average passerby, whereas graffiti is more often written-off as a form of defacement or delinquency. Street art’s broader aesthetic appeal has made space for a “new generation” of street artists in galleries and museums, whilst graffiti writers remain in the shadows (Merrill, 2015, p. 375). Notwithstanding the disjunction between graffiti and street art is the
commercialization and adaptation of the two into popular culture and formal institutions of art. This growth and prosperity resulted in a push for the legitimization of street art, and its ultimate transition from the streets to the gallery.

The Evolution of Street Art

Over the last decade, street art has emerged from the shadows and entered the global capitalist economy. Several successful street artists have held exhibitions in prominent museums and galleries around the world, showcasing art from the streets, within the exhibit space. In 2006, the elusive street artist Banksy¹ was featured in a solo-show, ‘Barely Legal,’ in a Los Angeles warehouse, and again in 2009 at the Banksy vs. Bristol Museum exhibition in Bristol, Great Britain. Then in 2011, an exhibit called ‘Art in the Streets’ was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles featuring a whole crew of globally recognized street artists (Merrill, 2015, p. 373). In addition to Banksy’s rise to fame, these prominent art shows drew massive attention from the media, marking street art’s commercial potential in the art world.

Although these developments helped to validate street art’s existence in the art world, it also worked to marginalize many other lesser-known artists (Bengtsen, 2013, p. 67). Granting that graffiti has also been commercialized and made profitable, many graffiti writers do not receive the recognition and appraisal they deserve. The work of graffiti artists and writers marks the genesis of the street art movement. Artists such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey² do not represent the “true” graffiti and street art world, or the artists that helped to shape this counter culture. Generally, the artists featured in elite galleries and museums produce commercial

¹ Banksy is a British artist who is globally recognized for his iconic stencils and murals appearing in cities around the world.
² Shepard Fairey is an American street artist, most famously known for his poster ‘Hope’ featuring Barack Obama during his 2008 presidential campaign.
artwork that conforms to normative and popular leaning, whereas the “true” graffiti and street artists are making art that goes against the system—art that “denies the concept of beauty and becomes art against art” (Illeana, 2012, again p. 55). Exhibitions that feature artists such as Banksy isolate this group of high-profile street artists from the broader graffiti subculture, creating tension between these varying factions of street art (Merrill, 2015, p. 373). It is not to say that the growth of street art is all bad—but in some way, it takes away from the ‘pure’ and inhibited nature of mark making and graffiti.

Street art has been developed to the extent that some street artists are working purely within the exhibit space and off the streets. These artists seek monetary gain and artistic recognition for their work—something that can only be found within commercialized institutions of art. Galleries and museums are reforming and rebranding street art as a marketable and profitable entity. However, the commercialization and rising popularity in street art has also benefited some lesser-known street artists struggling to survive solely on their artwork. Many cafes and other businesses have increased their commissions for murals in their storefronts due to increasing street art and graffiti trends. Mang Gen remarked that there are “so many changes now in Bali—they are making street art, and now they have work, and jobs (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 17, 2016, Denpasar).” For Mang Gen, the shift that street art faces with the recent commercialization of murals functions as a dualism.

Despite the constraints and limitation of working under commissions, Mang Gen explained that this change is, in fact, good “because we need money to make creative art (Sedana, Komang, pc, November 17, 2016, Denpasar).” A source of income gives street artists such as Mang Gen the opportunity to continue working in the streets—making free and “wild” art for the public. Another member of Komunitas Djamur, Agung, expressed that “if it’s
commercial, we just do what they want us to do; do what people order, and pay for, and ask for—we need money! (Agung, personal communication, November 17, 2016, Denpasar)” Working under such circumstances is purely for financial reasons—so that they can continue doing what they love, outside systems of capitalism. Mang Gen further addressed the inherent difficulties with painting murals under commission, explaining that, “sometimes, when we finish the mural, he [commissioner] doesn’t like it, and we must do it again—but what is the pay? It is the same (Sedana, Komang, pc, November 17, 2016, Denpasar).” Working under the agency of an employer is frustrating, however necessary for the artist to survive. Not to mention, the commercialization of street art alienates it from its founding principles of illegality and fundamental context in the street\(^3\).

Reaching beyond the issue of commercialization, murals by famous street artists such as Mike Brown and Keith Haring have gained places on national heritage registers—calling for the protecting and securing their works found in the street (Merrill, 2015, p. 375). While it is important to conserve iconic and globally recognized works of art, it is also counterintuitive to freeze something that was created in a context of temporality and impermanence. When art is established on public walls and surfaces, it is subject to defacement and vandalism. The moment a work of street art or graffiti is put out into the world, it is open to the dialogue and destruction of coinciding artists; there is no guarantee on its life span or acceptance in the streets. For this reason, the protection and heritagisation\(^4\) of street art is a complex issue that is conflicting with the nature of its authenticity as an illegal and rebellious form of expression. Section IV ‘Street

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\(^3\) Refer to section IV ‘Street Art in Context.’

\(^4\) Samuel Merrill (2015) addresses heritagisation in *Keeping it real? Subcultural graffiti, street art, heritage and authenticity*, considering pieces of street art and graffiti as subjects for heritage sites.
Art in Context’ further explores the inherent dilemma in preserving street art without defying the principles of this artistic phenomenon.

The Inter-web

Technological and societal progress has always driven the evolution of graffiti and street art. The addition of the Internet added yet another layer of complexity to this phenomenon, harboring a new platform of communication and documentation for artists around the world. Artists and graffiti writers once relied on physical photo albums to keep a record of their work; however, the invention of the Internet lifted their work into the permanence of a virtual reality. Today gangs, graffiti writers, and street artists navigate social media platforms, taking their art from the streets to the web, forming online communities to network, scheme on projects, and organize virtual protests (Illeana, 2012, p. 56). The shift to the web has been beneficial to street art communities around the world, but it has also diluted and lessened some of the art being produced in the streets, now that many artists resolve to sharing their work online. Despite the downsides of the move from the real world and into the virtual world, online networking has created real opportunities for alliances to form.

In an interview with artists Suklu and Pak Jango, they shared their experiences with an online community they formed for a ‘Back Truck’ painting project. A group of artists in Denpasar created a group on Facebook to organize painting political messages on the back of trucks, to reach out to the city dwellers of Denpasar. One of the mottos featured in their ‘Back Truck’ vandalism is the Balinese saying, sing ken ken, roughly translating to “no worries.” Pak Jango explained that this is a very common phrase in Bali, which people often use as an ironic comment by stating that everything is fine, even when it may not be. Thus they were making a socio-
political statement in their ‘Back Truck’ project, alluding to the state of disorder in Bali and Indonesia to remind whoever pulled up behind that truck, *sing ken ken*. Pak Jango said that these messages serve as a form of ‘silent resistance,’ that remind us that society does worry despite what people say. The ‘Back Truck’ Facebook group helped Suklu, Pak Jango, and their community of artists to connect, and share concepts regarding issues of social and political change—thus spreading awareness throughout Denpasar (Pramartha, Jango and Sujana, Wayan, personal communication, November 14, 2016, Denpasar).

*Seni Jalanan*

Adding to the inherent confusion in writing about street art and graffiti, this paper must address discrepancies between English and Bahasa Indonesia. This language barrier further complicates street art terminology—seeing that many English terms do not carry the same meaning in Bali, or Indonesia. There are no Indonesian words to describe street art, graffiti, and vandalism. The term *seni jalanan* is the direct translation of street art in English. The same goes for the words *graffiti*, and *vandalisme*. All three of these terms are borrowed from Western terminology, and transcribed into Bahasa Indonesian. Adding to the issue of translating from English to Bahasa Indonesian, Doreen Lee’s *Aesthetic Empowerment, Urban Citizenship, and the Naturalization of Indonesian Graffiti and Street Art* explains that:

“Artists reject the term *seni jalanan*, insisting that street art cannot be translated into Indonesian without diminishing its impact as a new and explicitly modern public domain, whereas cultural theorists, scholars, and observers attempt to make street art fit into a culturalist understanding of urban development and a vernacular lexicon of power and resistance… Street art today fulfills the mandate and occupies the position of public culture without having undergone the labor of witnessing, political voicing and reparation that graffiti and more activist art forms were tasked with in the early days of crisis after the fall of Suharto” (Lee, 2013, 309).
Not only does Lee’s remark highlight the controversy of studying street art academically, but the disparity between the meaning of the term street art, and the labor and implication of political artwork in Indonesia after the fall of Suharto. In the framework of this paper it is crucial to recognize that the term seni jalanan is loaded with connotations in Indonesia. As I take on the role of observer and artist, I must find a balance between my deliberations of street art and seni jalanan both academically and artistically.

While bearing in mind the weight of term seni jalanan, there are instances that take the pressure off of this contingency. While I was working with a student from Udayana University in Denpasar, I learned that most people in Bali do not use the term seni jalanan, but rather, they simply refer to it as vandalism. Jody pointed out that his mother for example, does not know the term seni jalanan, but it familiar with the street, and calls it vandalism. However, despite the negative connotation of the term, he explained that his mother thinks street art is a good thing because she knows how hard it is to have your opinion heard, and that “it’s like a secret rebellion (Rahmandhanu, H., Jody, personal communication, October 25, 2016, Tabanan).” Jody, who grew up and currently lives in Denpasar, exemplifies how living in an urban area will ultimately guarantee exposure to street art and graffiti. Spending time in rural parts of Tabanan revealed the disparities between city and farm life, and the generational gap, in their knowledge of street art. Despite the apparent limitations in the street art terminology around Bali, most active artists do in fact recognize the term seni jalanan. Local artists such as Suklu and Komunitas Djamur use these terms to refer to and talk about their work as street artists in Bali. Although the average city dweller may not be familiar with street art terminology, they are familiar with the artwork in their streets.
III. Street Art in Indonesia

History of Street Art in Indonesia

Within Indonesia some of the earliest art activism appeared during the revolution for independence in 1945. According to Pak Jango, expressions of “Freedom or Death” and “Independence or Die” appeared in the streets in the form of art and pictures (Pramartha, Jango, personal communication, November 14, 2016, Denpasar). By writing and painting on the walls, artists and activists could spread their messages and motivate people to stand up against their English and Dutch colonizers. Pak Jango explained that these expressions helped inspire Indonesia, granting them the strength to persevere the Dutch during times of colonial oppression.

The earliest documentation of street art in Indonesia also dates back to Indonesia’s independence around 1945, in a photograph by Cas Oorthuys. Oorthuys captured a large mural reading, “Freedom is the glory of any nation. Indonesia for Indonesians! (Bartolomeus, 2016).”

One of the first documented graffiti pieces in Indonesia

This photograph is one of the rare pieces of evidence illustrating the beginnings of street art and graffiti in Indonesia. Accessible and discoverable for all, the streets prove to be an effective platform for voices to be heard in the midst of a revolution.

Art activism also played a large role during Indonesia’s Reformasi\(^6\) (1998-2003), as artists in cities such as Yogyakarta spread their political messages throughout the streets in the form of graffiti and street art (Lee, 2013, p. 305). Graffiti accompanied student movements, leading the way for political protests during the fall of Suharto and the New Order regime. Declarations such as “Hang Suharto\(^7\)” and “Hang Habibie\(^8\)” adorned city walls, along with other violent curses written in Indonesian (ibid. p. 316). Political graffiti condemned their government for crimes of corruption and nepotism, voicing the people’s cry for justice. For many artists, street art acted as a “democratic venue for enacting a personalized urban citizenship” during Reformasi (ibid. p. 307). Street art acted as a rebellious yet innovative medium for expression amidst the censorship and high-level surveillance during Suharto’s regime. As an act of defacement, graffiti validated the nationalist belief of “People Power”, reminding them of their strength in spite of their everyday repression (ibid, p. 317). To this day, art functions as an incredibly powerful tool for protest and communication during political turmoil.

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\(^6\) The Reformasi began in 1998 with the fall of president Suharto, ending his era of the New Order period. Reformasi was a time of socio-political transition in Indonesia, emerging from the three decade long dictatorship of Suharto (Ariati, Ni Wayan, Lecture, Puri Saren Kangin, Kerambitan, September 2, 2016).

\(^7\) Suharto was the immediate usurper of power in Indonesia after the coup of 1965, and the removal of Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno (Ariati, Ni Wayan, Lecture, Puri Saren Kangin, Kerambitan, September 2, 2016).

\(^8\) Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie was Suharto’s immediate successor from 1998 to 1999(Ariati, Ni Wayan, Lecture, Puri Saren Kangin, Kerambitan, September 2, 2016).
Bali vs. Java

There are inherent differences in the worlds of street art between the various islands of Indonesia. The cities of Yogyakarta and Jakarta on Java are famous for their poignant socio-political graffiti and street art. Most of the artists that I have encountered in the field commented that Java has much more, and maybe better street art than in Bali. Many scholars and students have gone there to conduct their studies and research. Thus, Bali is an interesting subject for further study, to understand what kind of art is being made here, and how it functions differently than in Java.

Moving beyond the common remarks about Yogyakarta’s ‘superior’ street art and graffiti, some artists in Bali explained why this may be the case. They attribute this to the issue of legality and architecture. In Java, making graffiti and street art is hardly a crime; therefore the streets are rampant with the marks, messages, posters, murals, and graffiti of the cities’ artists. Jango Pramartha, a cartoonist and artist in Denpasar, explained that, “because the street art in Java is very militant, they don’t care about the police and the government—they just do it (Pramartha, Jango, personal communication, November 16, 2016, Denpasar).” Furthermore, Javanese cities bear a more suitable urban landscape for such art to take place. In contrast to Bali, the buildings that make up Yogyakarta and Jakarta are large and grey, offering an ideal canvas for the artists to make their marks. Pak Jango says that, “the buildings [in Java] are so welcome for street art, because there are a lot of big walls, big buildings…and lots of bridges; in the bottom of bridge, I see a lot of good street art around there (Pramartha, Jango, personal communication, November 16, 2016, Denpasar).” In Bali, however, the compounds, temples, and walls are decorated with traditional Balinese ornaments, leaving little room for additional inscriptions. Mang Gen also expressed how difficult it is so find a good wall to paint murals on
in Bali, and that this is one of the biggest challenges when planning street art projects (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 17, 2016, Denpasar).

In a more subtle way, the religious and traditional contexts of Bali and Java have also influenced the graffiti and street art on these respective islands. There are certain topics that are taboo, thus Balinese artists choose to avoid such issues in their murals and public art installations. Pak Jango, Suklu, and Mang Gen all made the distinction that street art in Bali is generally more “polite” than in Yogyakarta or Jakarta. Mang Gen said that, “in Bali they care about character,” and that they (Komunitas Djamur) do not paint murals about race and religion (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 17 & 25, 2016, Denpasar). The “character” that Mang Gen refers to is directly related to their traditions in Hinduism. In Bali, Pak Jango explained, they believe in *tri kaya parisuda*—a philosophy of good thinking, good speaking, and good attitude (Pramartha, Jango, personal communication, November 16, 2016, Denpasar). This is a Hindu belief that most Balinese follow in their everyday actions and doing. According to Pak Jango, tradition and religion largely influence street art in Bali—“because of the Hindu religion, they don’t want to make fights with everyone…if you do something that contrasts or conflicts on the wall, this will cause more conflict” (Pramartha, Jango, pc, November 16, 2016, Denpasar). It is evident that Balinese street artists choose to remain polite and respectful in alignment with their religious obligations to peace and respect.

Suklu and Mang Gen, who have both been active street artists in Bali and Java, also mentioned the polite nature of Balinese street art. Mang Gen expressed that Hinduism is very “soft” and *damai* (peaceful), in contrast to Islam (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 25, 2016, Denpasar). For Suklu, the contrasting characterization of Bali and Java may contribute to Bali’s lack of “underground radical art (Sujana, Wayan, personal communication,
November 14, 2016, Denpasar.” He argued that Java is much more radical because they are not afraid to talk about racism and religion (Sujana, Wayan, pc, November 14, 2016, Denpasar).

Mang Gen connects this back to religious demographics in Indonesia, explaining that since Islam is the religious majority, Java has conflicts about religion within their practices of Islam. However, since Bali is mostly Hindu, “they have unity, so they can get along (Sedana, Komang, pc, November 25, 2016, Denpasar).” This further emphasizes that religious practices permeate through all facets of Balinese life—even street art, something that is so free and uncensored yet continues to respect religious values.

For many reasons, varying pieces of street art and graffiti have a place in specific cities and countries. “Plant Banksy,” a book documenting street art from around the world, points out that “the circumstances are different from city to city…what works in Buenos Aires and Athens might not work in London or Geneva” (KET, 2014, p.7). Murals and graffiti writing may call attention to sensitive issues. Certain topics are inappropriate or out of context from one city, or even island, to the next.

Radical messages and declarations manifest through the streets of Java. Several artists in Bali pointed out that street artists in Java are not afraid to talk about race and religion in their murals and graffiti. According to Suklu, “people have to be careful when they talk about sara (race) and agama (religion),” when in Bali (Sujana, Wayan, personal communication, November 14, 2016, Denpasar). However, in Java they are not afraid, and will go ahead and make murals about race and religion. For example, during the Reformasi some graffiti writers put up messages such as “pribumi only” (Indigenous Indonesians only [live here]), targeting minority Chinese Indonesians, who were often subject to mob violence (Lee, 2013, p. 316). Anarchistic statements such as this have been a part of Indonesian cityscapes since their independence in 1945. Today,
Islam’s religious majority in Indonesia provides an opportunity for conflicts to arise within Muslim communities. Varying religious groups express their conflicting beliefs throughout in the form of writing and painting in the streets. They make statements about race and religion, heedless about offending or causing conflict with another group. Bold and uninhibited, Java’s street art and graffiti is radical in contrast to the more diplomatic social issues that are addressed in Bali.

*Educating the People*

Since the Independence in 1945, Indonesia’s urban landscape continues to flourish and develop as the works of street artists continues to outline the prevailing social and political climate throughout the country. Although cities in Java such as Jakarta and Yogyakarta are renowned for their thriving graffiti and street art scenes, Bali has also developed its own street art communities. Many of them have worked on projects throughout Bali, including this year’s World Culture Forum⁹ (WCF) in Nusa Dua, where Komunitas Djamur, Pojok, and Slinat collaborated on several murals and installations addressing sustainable development. Street art is often used as a tool to spread awareness about both local and global issues including *Reklamasi*¹⁰, tourism, land gentrification, and pollution in Bali.

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⁹ The World Culture Forum was an event in October 2016, of nearly 900 participants, featuring artists, scholars, and activists from 30 countries around the world. The WCF aims to bring people together on an international scale to discuss and approach issues of sustainable development (World Culture Forum 10-14 October 2016 Bali Indonesia. (n.d.). Retrieved November 27, 2016, from https://worlcultureforum-bali.org/).

¹⁰ *Reklamasi* refers to the controversial land reclamation of Benoa Bay by developers who plan to build artificial islands in South Bali (Ariati, Ni Wayan, personal communication, October 12, 2016, Denpasar).
Art Activism

Active street artists and mural collectives pave the way for socio-political activism throughout the country. Over the course of this field study I met with several artists who shared their experiences making art that addresses social change in Bali. Artist and activist Gede Suanda, most commonly known as Sayur, runs an art collective where he grew up, in Ubud, known as the Luden house. This art house functions as his studio, gallery, venue for workshops with children, and is a place where more recently he has been experimenting with recycled materials such as plastics and used tires. One of his longest running projects is the “Not For Sale” campaign addressing land gentrification in Bali. In 2016 Sayur was inspired to create an installation in response to the ‘land for sale’ signs he saw all over the sawa (rice fields) in Ubud. Sayur constructed a huge white wooden sign reading “#NOTFORSALE,”¹¹ in order to “make people aware,” however, “not to change the mindset of people, but hope that this will be awareness for the people in the future (Suanda, Gede, personal communication, November 24, 2016, Luden House, Ubud).” He realizes that his art cannot cause immediate change, but that it

¹¹ ‘#NOTFORSALE by Sayur’ photo by Lila Chu, at the Luden House, Gianyar, Bali, October 26, 2016
plays a significant role in shifting the consciousness and awareness of its audience. Passionate about his artwork, Sayur also acknowledges that, “this is inevitable global change that is hard to stop,” but “at least for them, this piece of art can touch their heart (Suanda, Gede, pc, November 24, 2016, Luden House, Ubud).” Art, and public art such as Sayur’s piece, are part of the effort to address social changes in Bali, such as land gentrification caused by rising tourism. Although artists such as Sayur acknowledge that it may not change anything in the immediate future, they are hopeful that it will give strength to their political aims and inspire a better future for those living on the island.

Today many activists are organizing protests and displays against Reklamasi in Denpasar, also creating murals to support their cause. “Bali Tolak Reklamasi” is their slogan; meaning Bali rejects the reclamation [of Benoa Bay]. Reklamasi is a controversial issue in Bali referring to the land reclamation of Benoa Bay; investors are pushing for the construction of artificial islands in South Bali, near Nusa Dua, to expand areas for tourist consumption (Ariati, Ni Wayan, personal communication, October 12, 2016, Denpasar). Not only would this harm and jeopardize the environment, but it would also work to further develop tourism in Bali, therefore adding to issues regarding land and water resources, traffic, and the exploitation of Balinese workers. Thus, there is a huge movement in Bali against Reklamasi, as students, activists, artists, and most Balinese reject the reclamation of their land. Pak Jango even expressed his own desire to make a mural about Reklamasi. He explained that, “in Bali people really want to make mural about reclamation;” however, “the government is so strict about this,” and there is only a mural on one wall close to the Banjar (traditional Balinese communal space) because the Banjar protects the mural (Pramartha, Jango, personal communication, November 16, 2016, Denpasar). Despite
efforts of the government to hide their protestation, signs and posters declaring “Bali Tolak Reklamasi” are visible throughout Denpasar.

Another mural community known as Slinat has painted murals spread throughout Bali, in Ubud and Denpasar, addressing the increased pollution on the island. Their iconic figure is a traditional Balinese farmer wearing a gas mask over her face, painted in black and white, with clouds that appear to be the dirty air that we breathe every day. Murals such as this cannot directly clean the air, but they can help to remind the public that this is the reality—maybe impacting the decisions they make in the future. As Sayur said, “I think people like seeing art, and questioning it, and interpreting it (Suanda, Gede, personal communication, November 24, 2016, Luden House, Ubud).” For Gede Sayur, and the other street artists I spoke with, art can be a catalyst for thought, in the minds of all the people that it touches; street art has the capacity to touch anyone—and that is why it is so powerful.
Komunitas Djamur is also an active community that addresses social issues in Bali. They have completed several projects on child abuse, to teach people about the violence that occurs against children in certain neighborhoods (Mang Gen, personal communication November 17, 2016, Denpasar). One of their most recent projects was at the WCF, addressing sustainable development, in collaboration with Suklu. Mang Gen explained that he is often been inspired by nature to make murals about the environment (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 27, 2016, Denpasar). Komunitas Djamur is one of the many art collectives, and artists, working to educate the public about social changes through their art activism and murals.

Challenging Tradition

Bali is known for its rich and unique tradition in the arts including dance, music, painting, mask making, sculpture, and so much more. These art practices are deeply rooted in religious life, accompanying all of their ceremonies, festivals, and rituals. However, the nearly inseparable connection between arts and religion has impacted the way that some Balinese perceive street art and graffiti. Older generations who lead more ‘traditional’ lifestyles in Bali are not quite cognizant of the murals painted around their cities. This disparity is also apparent between those who live in big cities such as Denpasar versus smaller agrarian villages. Today, the Balinese understanding of street art is still developing and inconsistent.

Pak Jango has also observed the perceivable disconnect that many Balinese locals in Denpasar face with the street art up on their walls. He expressed that it is “very difficult to talk about the art [in Bali]; not everyone knows about it (Pramartha, Jango, personal communication, November 16, 2016, Denpasar).” He was curious to know what they had to say about it, so Pak Jango went to talk with the women selling banten (offering) at the traditional market in
Denpasar. He asked them what they think of the mural painted above on the walls. This was a mural by Slinat, portraying issues of pollution in Bali through and image of a Balinese woman wearing a gas mask. Pak Jango found that, “the traditional market, traditional people—they don’t understand about art or mural, they think it is dirty (Pramartha, Jango, pc, November 16, 2016, Denpasar).”

Many people in Bali remain somewhat reserved in their perceptions of the arts. For example, some people in Bali might see painting that is not on a canvas—then it isn’t really art for them. Pak Jango said that, “the people always say, if you are drawing, drawing on canvas, if you take photo, put in in a frame, not just on the wall like that (Pramartha, Jango, pc, November 16, 2016, Denpasar).” Furthermore, Mang Gen reinforces this conventional train of thought, saying that, “in Bali, if you can sell your artwork, then it is art…if you cannot sell your art, then it is not art (Mang Gen, personal communication, November 27, 2016, Denpasar).” He also explained that they view the arts as something very sacred, such as a barong dance, accompanying their ceremonies and rituals. There is little room for the philosophy of “art for art’s sake” in an environment where art must have either monetary or religious value in order to be validated as art. Mang Gen differentiated that “more young people know the arts, better than the old people…for the older people, the arts are sacred, and religious…like dance with trance this is very art (Mang Gen, pc, November 27, 2016, Denpasar).” Due to generations of inseparable affiliations between religion and the arts, their understanding of the art is bound to their Balinese traditions. However, a shift can be observed in the younger generations, as they are the ones forming communities for street art, and educating others about new and unorthodox art forms.

13 'Iconic Pollution Mural by Slinat’ photo by Lila Chu, October 16, 2016, in Ubud, Bali. This is not the same mural that Pak Jango was referring to in his interactions with the women selling banten, but it is another mural by Slinat, portraying a similar image of a woman with a gas mask.
Pak Jango and Gede Sayur both attributed the limited understanding of arts to Indonesia’s educational system. Many Balinese that did not recognize murals as a form of art, told Pak Jango that it is because they did not go to school. Pak Jango tried to explain that the mural is about pollution. He asked them if they had a problem with pollution, and they answered yes; but when he asked them if they understood what this mural was talking about, they answered no (Pramartha, Jango, personal communication, November 16, 2016, Denpasar). The disconnect that many Balinese face with street art is ironic, because many of these murals attempt to defend and support the Balinese—but if they cannot comprehend it, and assume that it is just dirty vandalism, they will not appreciate nor gain from the messages and paintings that are trying to help and provide solidarity. Gede Sayur interpreted this as a spectrum of people with varying degrees of understanding. Sayur said that, “for the time being, in Bali, it is hard to convince people, especially about contemporary street art; most of the people see art as a traditional art (Suanda, Gede, personal communication, November 24, 2016, Luden House, Ubud).” Despite the challenges in bridging the gap between tradition Balinese art and contemporary street art, Pak Jango and Gede Sayur both believe that they must continue to produce street art in order to overcome the stigma. Sayur insisted that “we need to do more street art so that the role of the street artist won’t shock people (Suanda, Gede, pc, November 24, 2016, Luden House, Ubud)”;
“we must go on—just do it! (Pramartha, Jango, pc, November 16, 2016, Denpasar).”
IV. Street Art for Change

Art for (Radical) Thought

From the French student rebellions of 1968 to Reformasi in Indonesia, street art has been at the forefront of revolutions, rebellions, and protests around the world (Armstrong, 2005, p. 6; Lee, 2013, p. 305). Street art is a powerful tool for change because it is free, and in public space—it is accessible to the people, by the people. Several scholars have referred to it as forms of ‘aesthetic empowerment,’ ‘political intervention via aesthetic activism,’ and ‘aesthetic resistance’ (Lee, 2013; Visconti & Sherry & Borghini & Anderson, 2010; Armstrong, 2005). There is undeniable strength in the words and images expressed through graffiti and street art. Even in the 18th century, vandalism was already defined as “systematic revolutionary violence” during the French revolution (Merrills, 2009, p. 156). Historically, the use of street art for social change has been a vital part of our revolutions and rebellions. It functions as a universal language, a trigger, prodding our consciousness, testing our awareness.

Street art functions as a catalyst for thought. The presence of art in the streets provokes and activates the minds of passing city dwellers. Most of the street artists I interacted with believe that making street art is an effective way to spread their messages to the public, creating an opportunity for education and a shift in consciousness. Suklu explained that, “street art is good for the painter—painting helps to understand, to build consciousness…it is difficult to makes changes in the culture or economic problems in Bali, but instead it helps to build consciousness (Sujana, Wayan, personal communication, November 14, 2016, Denpasar).” Similarly to Gede Sayur, Suklu understands that street art can only help to stimulate and touch the minds and hearts of its audience. It is a “vehicle for protest,” resisting the oppression of our normalized understanding of how we a city should behave (Armstrong, 2005, p. 6). In another
study called *Reclaiming the “Public” in Public Place*, Luisa, a dweller from Milan, shared that, “by creating powerful messages in the street, [artists] make people internalize them in the long run (Luisa, dweller, Milan) (cited in Visconti et. al, 2010, p. 12).” The visual reminders left by street art will prompt awareness in the people, so they can make better decisions in the future. This sort of public art will also help to remind locals that they must not give up, giving them the emotional and subconscious strength to persevere.

**Temporality**

The impermanence and uncertainty of street art is also one of its fundamental qualities. The dynamics of graffiti and street art rely upon its transient nature, enabling deliberate forms of expression from all city dwellers. It warrants a response from other artists, the scrutiny of the law, and a reaction from the public. Furthermore, the knowledge that an encounter with an unsanctioned expression is so chanced, that it could be gone the next day, enforces the sense of the “here-and-now” of the individual within that space; it forces the spectator to contemplate the work that they are faced with, in that moment (Bengtsen, 2013, p. 76). By its nature, street art is a perishable act reflecting the rapid changes that occur in art and society, through the eyes of the street artist. From this perspective, “the street artist is an activist and archivist in one, documenting the thoughts, emotions, and reactions of the city (Illeana, 2012, p. 47).” Street art and graffiti conglomerate to form a sort of collective memory for the people, providing a space for conversations to occur. Despite its ephemeral qualities, street art mirrors and records a city’s history—unfiltered and unpolished.

Images and writing on a wall can say a lot about the state of a city. The influences and the reactions of the city dwellers are on display, and continuously updated, in response to the social
and political climate of the given space. During the Reformasi people could express their discontent with the government, and today artists and activists such as Gede Sayur and Komunitas Djamur call out injustices concerning the exploitation of rice fields, land, and human rights. Generally, this sort of street artwork bears a short lifetime. What we see on the walls is a spectacle of current times and issues.

The ephemeral qualities of street art represent some of its most fundamental properties. Movements for preservation and heritagisation\(^{14}\) go against street art and graffiti’s transient nature. While it may seem practical to maintain and restore murals, using practices involving wholesale repainting, anti-graffiti, and weathering coatings, jeopardize the dynamic processes and “turnover” of street art and graffiti, thus freezing the active dialogue that they rely upon (Merrill, 2015, p. 383). Possible defacement and erasure of murals and other forms of street art is part of the game. Considering street art and graffiti as subjects for heritagisation questions their authenticity as a criminal act. Thus the question arises—who should be responsible for the maintenance and protection of street art and graffiti sites? Paragraph eight of the Nara Document from UNESCO states that:

> “Responsibility for cultural heritage and the management of it belongs, in the first place, to the cultural community that has generated it, and subsequently to that which cares for it... Balancing their own requirements with those of other cultural communities is, for each community, highly desirable, provided achieving this balance does not undermine their fundamental cultural values” (UNESCO, 1994).

According to Samuel Merrill in Keeping it real? Subcultural graffiti, street art, heritage and authenticity, these above mentioned communities who wish to care for these sites, “value different aspects of subcultural graffiti and street art as heritage,”—thus complicating the issue of

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\(^{14}\) Samuel Merrill (2015) addresses heritagisation in Keeping it real? Subcultural graffiti, street art, heritage and authenticity, considering pieces of street art and graffiti as subjects for heritage sites.
who should be responsible for these artworks (2015, p. 384). However, a simultaneously
beautiful and serendipitous solution to this issue arose in my communications with Mang Gen.
When we spoke about the street art in Java, Mang Gen explained that the homeless people in
Yogyakarta take care of the murals, especially “when they are good, they protect them from
other people who want to vandalize them (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November
8, 2016, Denpasar).” Although this may not redress all the controversy regarding the protection
of street art everywhere, it may be the most ethical and appropriate arrangement. It is important
to “respect the living traditions” of graffiti and street art in order to maintain their essence as a
free-flowing and dynamic art form (ibid, 2015, p. 383). Embracing the lives of the people in the
streets, in coalition with the artwork on the walls, cultivates the dynamic processes of street art
and graffiti.

The Street Artist

“I think even a new born baby can make art. It is not so hard to make art; depending on
how people perceive it, and criticize it (Suanda, Gede, personal communication, November 24,
2016, Luden House, Ubud).” Following the words of art activist Gede Sayur, anyone can be a
street artist. There are no qualifying skills or requirements needed to start painting on a wall. You
just do it. There is no typical demographic used to refer to those who make street art; however, it
has proven to be a male dominated subculture, especially in Indonesia.

With perhaps with the exception of dance, singing, and making offerings, men have
dominated the arts on Bali. Nearly all the painters, mask-makers, silversmiths, and gamelan
players that I have encountered in the past three months has been men. Furthermore, I continued
to observe this at the Institute for the Arts when I sat in on a lecture by Pak Jango. Out of the
nineteen students in the class, four of them were female. This trend persisted in my experiences meeting various street artists, and Komunitas Djamur. Out of the twenty artists in the community, only one of them is a woman.

Following this logic, it is no longer to my surprise that Mang Gen expected me to be a man. The first afternoon we met, Mang Gen expressed his surprise that I was a woman. When Jango told him that a student was interested in painting a mural with him, he said that he thought I would be a boy—a “bad boy” (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 8, 2016, Denpasar). The male dominance in the arts, and street art, accounts for this confusion. It is an interesting contrast to my experience with art in America, where my classes seldom feature male students.

Artist Suklu also expressed curiosity and delight for the free from work of auto didak (self-taught) artists. He observed the work of these artists in small villages, finding “animistic energy” within drawings on stones, walls, and trees. Suklu believes that they are fine artists, the “real” artists—more so than him. He explained that, “when people live in the city, or university, people question their art, for the market… if the market is slow, spirits are slow. The people in the village don’t care…no signature—they don’t understand the market; they just want to express themselves (Pramartha, Jango and Sujana, Wayan, personal communication, November 14, 2016, Denpasar).” In some way this free form of art is at the root of street art and graffiti, where anyone who wishes to can mark the wall with their creation. Today many street artists have some sort of professional background in the arts, working in the streets to get their names out into the world. However there is something so valuable about the spontaneous traces of street art—it serves as a window into the soul of a city, a place that we are invited to peer into, and
meet the people who really live there. Through this, street art promotes local empowerment and collective consciousness.

Street Art in Context

When taken out of context, street art loses its essence—from the size of the piece to transferring it from wall to canvas, the art piece will no longer carry the same effect as it did in the streets. The medium, location, and proportions of the street are essential components of any given work of street art and graffiti. To remove the artwork’s ‘conceptual use of the street’ would diminish its implicit relevance to its intended location and place on a wall, bus, lamppost, or bridge (Bengtson, 2013, p. 70). Most street artwork in not meant to live inside a gallery; rather, it rebels against the institution of commercialization and consumerism that the exhibit space perpetuates. Street art cannot be sold, because it is on a wall, and it has not been made into a product that someone can pay for and bring into their home. Mang Gen often comments on the frustration that galleries face with street art. He says that, “in the gallery it’s so hard to find permission in the gallery, because they can’t sell the mural, because we make it on the wall (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 17, 2016, Denpasar).” Since they cannot sell it, galleries are shrewd to allowing street artists to paint their walls, since this art can only function as a display—it is not for sale.

Galleries revolve around a market—with money as the driving factor for the art that is exhibited and produced. Such properties of consumerism are the disenchantments that street art strives to abstain from. Furthermore, the rules of bureaucracy within institutions of art only work to diminish the true essence of street art and graffiti. It places a constraint on artistic creation, imposing the pressures of the formality and conventional practices of art. Then, the audience is
limited as well, Mang Gen describes, “its [audience in galleries and museums] like bourgeois, high class...how about a poor person? They cannot come; it’s a problem (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 17, 2016, Denpasar).” Even if someone of lower income could physically enter the gallery or museum for free, these spaces generally remain inaccessible for less privileged families, since high-income families are the target audience for elite institutions of art. Changing the setting in which street art is displayed, specifically the transition to the gallery, further alienates street art from its original context and significance in the street. When a passerby experiences street art, it is only for that brief moment, before they continue to their final destination. That moment is the small amount of time that the piece is granted to make an impression on the city dweller; “unlike galleries and museums with their schedules and published programs, there is no way to know what the street will hold on a given day (Bengtsen, 2013, p. 77).” The spontaneity and unpredictability of what the streets have to offer, augment its conceptual value within this chanced encounter. For this reason it is important to remember that the context of the street is a fundamental carrier of meaning for street art and graffiti.
V. Komunitas Djamur

Genetik

Komang Mertha Sedana, most commonly known as Mang Gen, is the founding member of Komunitas Djamur and under the alias Genetik, he works as a muralist, cartoonist, and artist. He also runs a small café called Maylakoo, located in Mengwi, Badung, and just a few minutes away from his compound in Desa (village) Nyambu. The café is a base camp for Komunitas Djamur where they plan many of their projects, jam (play music), and make art. It also has some of Mang Gen’s work on display and sells some graphic tees by other street art communities such as Slinat.

Mang Gen grew up in the small village of Nyambu with his two sisters and brother. Today he lives there with his grandma, mother, father, wife, and soon to be born child. Throughout his childhood he was immersed in the arts throughout his childhood, watching his grandfather make sculptures and shadow puppets for him, and his father dance barong. His grandfather used to make puppet shadows for him, sparking his interests in the arts, which began with traditional Balinese painting. At 9 years old he started drawing, and at 12 he enrolled in school, where he studied sculpture. He then studied painting at a trade school in Ubud, continuing on to college at the Institute for the Arts (ISI) in Denpasar. During his 7 years at ISI, Mang Gen also began his work as a street artist (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 27, 2016, Denpasar).

The Institute for the Arts is a breeding ground for street artists—the walls are covered in messages pushing for freedom of expression, and murals, stencils, and graffiti spread across campus walls. When Mang Gen saw his seniors at ISI making street art, he was inspired to enter the world of ‘free’ art. With his newfound interest he soon learned how to paint murals, and
collaborated with other young artists who were looking for a space to express themselves. Soon they found themselves part of a larger group, a crew of artists, a team—they called it Komunitas Djamur.

*Mushrooms*

A mushroom can grow anywhere, from anything—and art can too. This founding philosophy of Komunitas Djamur, communicates the way this community of artists thinks about the street: a big studio, where they can play in public, making art, and where people can come see it for free. *Jamur* is the word for mushroom in Bahasa Indonesia; Komunitas Djamur is the art collective that was established in 2007 by a young artist at the Institute for the Arts, Mang Gen, who is now 28 years old. (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 17, 2016, Denpasar). With over 20 members, 14 of whom are active, this arts collective creates street and public art in Bali. This community is open to all art forms, not only painters; thus bringing together people who make sculptures, photography, and videography. They participate in many public art projects around Bali, striving to educate the public about current socio-political issues through their murals and installations.

“Art is like a universe, ya, so we can make some artwork everywhere—actually the street art, we think, anytime, everywhere” (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 17, 2016, Denpasar).” For Mang Gen and his art collective, the best part of street art is the inherent freedom within its philosophy. The streets are a playground for their wild and creative ideas, free from the scrutiny and constraints of money. Furthermore, this type of art is free for everyone to see and learn from. When they want to paint a mural, the group gets together, chooses a topic, and then creates a design and they paint their story. Mang Gen explained that their murals teach
people about issues, like child violence for example: “its natural, ya, make mural about children violence, make story mural, about children who have violence in their neighborhood. When the people come to see, they naturally learn about the issue (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 17, 2016, Denpasar).” The ability to teach people is just another reason why Mang Gen is so drawn to street art. It is a powerful tool to convey stories about socio-political issues and spread awareness—potentially pushing for a shift in consciousness and action. He often says street art is like propaganda art because everyone can see it. Political movements such as Indonesia’s independence in 1945 and Reformasi of 1998 have shown some truth behind this statement, demonstrating the push of art activism in student protests and political demonstrations.
VI. Water is Life

Motivations

My curiosity with street art has mushroomed over the last few years, ultimately resulting in this Independent Study Project. The very public and socio-political attributes of street art drew me in, sparking my interest in pursuing a mural of my own. I wanted to push my love for the arts beyond pure creative expression, and expand my efforts for a greater cause. From an academic lens, the world of street art and graffiti is incredibly complex and hard to unravel. Through a combination of journals, articles, observations, and first hand encounters with street art and artists, I have cultivated an understanding for this art form and community. My perspective on the controversies surrounding street art, graffiti, and vandalism, and which qualifies as which, continues to develop and evolve as I open my eyes to new sights and ways of thinking. Moving beyond my study of this art form, I hoped for a chance to do some painting of my own. During my time here I did not expect to have the opportunity to paint a large-scale mural, let alone orchestrate one, with the help of a Balinese street art community. I must express my immense gratitude to Komunitas Djamur, and Pak Jango, for making this possible. Terima kasih.

Finding a Wall

After weeks in the field interacting with artists, street art communities, and students from the Institute for the Arts, my work culminated in a mural project in collaboration with Komunitas Djamur. Water is Life, the title of the piece, had been in the works since my first meeting with Mang Gen on November 8th. My advisor, Pak Jango, was instrumental in organizing the actualization of my dreams for a mural project. He connected me with Mang Gen on my first day in Denpasar, setting up a meeting for us to discuss his work with Komunitas Djamur, and our potential collaborations for a mural.
We discussed logistics, and the technicalities of painting a large-scale mural. The first issue at hand was finding a wall. Mang Gen and Pak Jango expressed that this is the biggest challenge when it comes to painting murals in Bali (Sedana, Komang & Pramartha, Jango, personal communication, November 8, 2016, Denpasar). Finding a big grey wall that is free of traditional Balinese ornaments is rare. Then finding a grey wall that we have permission to cover with our creations is another issue in itself. Mang Gen was kidding around, and mentioned that they always ask for permission before painting a wall, but when they are denied permission, they would do it anyway. Joke or not—my status as a foreign student ruled out this option for painting a mural. Pak Jango said that he had a few friends who are architects, and that he would get in touch with them to see if they had any walls for us. Mang Gen also proposed the Institute for the Arts as a site for our mural. ISI is already covered in the murals, graffiti, and wheat pasting of students and other street art communities. If all else failed, we would most likely find a wall there that we could paint.

Finding a Flower

Mang Gen and Komunitas Djamur have worked on many mural projects addressing social issues in Bali. At our initial meeting Mang Gen showed me pictures and discussed some of their past work, including their piece at the World Culture Forum, as well as their murals about child abuse. Expressing my interest in painting a socio-political mural, we immediately began brainstorming potential topics for our mural. At first we considered options concerning both local and universal issues, so that we could determine which ones we wanted to touch on. Combining the two seemed like the logical thing to do—so that we could address issues that have significance in both Bali, and the rest of the world. Next we were left narrowing it down
from many available topics: politics, corruption, wealth inequality, LGBTQ rights, social change, education, the environment, and race—the list goes on! Mang Gen told me that I could choose whatever topic I wanted, and to continue sketching before finalizing the decision.

In continuation, we collaborated on our concept for the mural through a series of meetings at Jango’s house and ISI. Originally, Mang Gen suggested “art culturation” so that we could discuss the mixing of Bali and other countries (such as America) through art. Between our meetings I worked on several ideas and sketches in order to develop the concept for the mural. Some sketches incorporated a cluster of hands, shaping into one planet—symbolizing global unity through the use of many hands forming into one. Another featured a tiger’s head with a Balinese cat’s body (with a balled up tail) swallowing an earth pill—conveying the globalization of Bali. At one of our meetings I showed Mang Gen my designs; he really liked the cluster of hands, but I wasn’t convinced that’s what I wanted.

Continuing to find inspiration in books that Pak Jango showed me, I hoped that I could soon piece my ideas together. Eventually I began to make a collage using newspaper, with the paper pouring out of a faucet. Then, I developed this concept into the newspaper forming into the island of Bali as it poured down from the faucet—commenting on water use in Bali, and the indispensable need for it to sustain life. In further sketches, the bountiful banana trees that I have come to love during my time in Bali helped to

15 Water, Newspaper, Bali’ drawing and photo by Lila Chu
inspire another design. A tree with two large shredded leaves sticking out, reminded me of the wings of a bird—so I sketched a banana leaf bird. Although this design had less conceptual significance, I thought that it was symbolic of Bali, and I enjoyed it for its aesthetic value.

**Banana Leaf Bird**

Mang Gen and I met the day before we began painting the mural in order to finalize my concept and design. On my way to meet him I was still unsure if I was totally convinced that I wanted to use my concept with the newspaper water pouring into the shape of Bali. I wanted to combine this idea with my design of the cluster of hands. My previous sketches featured more hands reaching out towards each other, thus giving me the idea to have hands reaching out for the water in the shape of Bali, to further illustrate the desire for water, and Bali.

**Flower and Wall**

Pak Jango was not successful in convincing one of his architect friends to let us paint his wall. Thus Mang Gen began to plan our mural on a wall at ISI, until he changed plans, and moved the site of our mural to the wall of his own family compound in the small village of Nyambu, five minutes outside of Mengwi, located near the region of Tabanan. The wall of his family compound faces the main road (not a large road) entering Desa Nyambu. Mang Gen

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16 ‘Banana Leaf Bird’ drawing and photo by Lila Chu
explained that this would be the first “contemporary art” and mural ever to be painted in his village (Sedana, Komang, personal communication, November 27, 2016, Denpasar). As mentioned earlier, most of Balinese associate the arts with longstanding traditions, such as barong dance, gamelan, and ‘traditional’ painting. Mang Gen explained that for this reason, many people in the village see this mural as contemporary art, unlike the city dwellers of Denpasar, who are a little more accustomed to murals, graffiti, and vandalism.

On the day that we began painting, almost 20 people gathered to commence the long awaited project. Members from Komunitas Djamur that I had previously met with came to help. Bull, Arsew, Gunkde Amer, Mankgen, Agung, Ardek, Sangut, Ucil, Bajinx, Gunk Risma and Timbool (nicknames) were the talented, kind, and funny members of the Djamur collective that joined us for this project. In preparation for the mural, Mang Gen and I had to acquire some additional supplies, including newspaper, glue, and crème colored paint for the background. We collected a stack of newspapers so that we could use them to collage onto the wall with glue. This is a technique known as wheat pasting, involving paper, and slathering glue behind it and over it with a roller. After we gathered all the materials and all the members that would help us with the mural, we could begin the process. Thanks to Mang Gen’s father, we had the necessary ladders and tools to reach the high areas of the wall. Dodix and Agung helped to create the base sketch for the island of Bali. After the shape was drawn onto the wall, we painted the background with the crème colored paint, followed by the wheat pasting of the newspaper to form the shape of Bali. This whole process took us the whole day, so we continued the next.

The next morning Mang Gen and another SIT student, Morgan Walker, who came to help, resumed working on the mural. Mang Gen began to paint one of the hands that would reach up to Bali, while Morgan and I touched up the mural with some extra newspaper. Then, Morgan
and I continued by painting organic blue lines all across the island of Bali, over the newspaper. The next step involved a few other members of Djamur who came back to help paint more hands reaching towards Bali. In the meantime other developments took place on the adjacent wall.

The children from Mang Gen’s compound (his nieces and nephews) and their friends from the neighborhood, took interest in our wall painting, and insisted on joining\textsuperscript{17}. Mang Gen let them paint on the wall to the left of our mural, that we did not have any plans for yet. Mang Gen and I called this “pure art,” for they truly paint without inhibitions or self-consciousness. None of them have gone to art school—\textit{auto didak}, as Suklu would call it. They don’t think about what color, where they paint, or even what it is—they just enjoy it. I was delighted to have the kids join in on our project, and inspired by their excitement to paint on a wall! I was excited too.

The children’s works of pure art prompted me to work with the marks that they left on the wall. Mang Gen’s niece, Ade, painted a beautiful swirling blue cloud over the random marks of the other children. I told Mang Gen, and so we asked her and her friends to make another one. When I saw the clouds, I envisioned an opportunity to deliberate another one of my designs—the banana leaf bird. I told Mang Gen my idea, and he told me to go ahead and do it. Thus I began painting the background behind the cloud with a light salmon pink. While we painted, the children were playing gamelan just behind the wall. Full with inspiration, I saw some of the paint

\textsuperscript{17} Photo ‘Pure Art’ by Lila Chu, November 27\textsuperscript{th}, 2016, Nyambu
begin to drip and another idea came into my mind. I finished painting the sky with the light pink, and outlines the clouds with it, using a watered down paint to drip pink rain coming down from the two clouds, thus bringing together the drawings of the other children below, into the rest of the piece.\textsuperscript{18}

We worked late into the night, until it was just Mang Gen, Agung, Bull, and I. Mang Gen and the others proceeded to paint red ornaments surrounding the hand and island over on our mural. In the meantime, I painted the banana leaf bird, with a single light bulb hanging before me—giving the rest of the wall just enough light to see. After painting the large spread banana leaf wings of the bird, I came down from the scaffolding that was enabling me to paint the bird at the top of the wall. The bird was still missing its head, however, the light bulb was hanging over the exact spot where the bird’s head would be placed, and Mang Gen joked to me that he sees the light bulb as the head of the bird. I was already hesitant about how I would actualize the bird’s head, and how I would go about painting it.

\textsuperscript{18} ‘Banana Leaf Bird, Pink Rain’ photo by Lila Chu, November 27\textsuperscript{th}, 2016, Nyambu
Mang Gen’s joke came at the perfect moment, to incorporate another aspect of surrealism in my banana leaf bird.

After I finally finished painting the bird’s light bulb head, Bull could use the scaffolding to paint the finishing text that would title my piece. At first he was hesitant, afraid of the height, and questioning the sturdiness of the scaffolding. Nonetheless, he climbed the ladder, sat on top of the scaffold, and wrote in red and blue: “Water is Life.”

Reception

The theme of water in my mural is representational of the struggle for water in both Bali, and the rest of the world. This issue also brought me back to the current crisis for fresh drinking water back home in America. This past year, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has initiated the construction of a massive crude oil pipeline stretching from North Dakota to Illinois, jeopardizing clean drinking water for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in North Dakota. The pipeline would cross the Missouri River, only less than half a mile away from the Standing Rock Reservation. An oil spill would contaminate the river, threatening the health and access of clean drinking water for the Sioux Tribe (Kennedy, 2016, The Dakota Access Pipeline). There have been massive protests in North Dakota at the reservation in a movement against this pipeline, to protect sacred lands and fresh drinking water for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

On so many levels, this water crisis resonates with that of Bali. Developers, backed with the power of investors and money, are risking access to fresh drinking water for both the Balinese and the Sioux Tribe. In Bali, this manifests in the form of tourism, large hotels, and developments such as the reclamation of Benoa Bay. Furthermore, the roles of the Sioux Tribe and local Balinese are paralleled in relation to their developers. Both are native to the land that
they wish to protect, and keep as their own—but people with more money and power are taking that away from them. They are taking their land, their resources, and most of all, their water—and water is life. Thus I chose to represent this in my mural through the hands that surround and grab Bali, and all the fresh water within it. Finally, *Water is Life* is a slogan from the #NoDAPL (no Dakota Access Pipeline) movement, thus inspiring the title for my mural.

While we painted the mural, nearly everyone from the village passing by stopped at some point to watch the scene that was developing on the street. They asked what we were doing, and what we were painting. Mang Gen explained to them that I was a student, and the theme of our mural is *Water is Life*. They all seemed entertained and curious by the idea, and enjoyed watching us paint. The children from the village accompanied us for most of our painting, sitting by the rice fields, facing our mural. At times, they participated and came over to watch more closely. Their parents came too, and observed with the rest of the group. On the Sunday that we painted, the whole village came out in the streets for their weekly cleanup and trash burning, giving them an opportunity to see the painting of this mural. It was one of the most communal experiences I have ever had.

I hope that this mural will serve as a reminder, for the people of Nyambu, and those who pass, that water is life, and this water belongs to them. It is a gift for their consciousness, to ensure that they truly know how vital their water is, and never to give it up. It is to give color to a wall that was large and grey, that will now convey this message to Bali. It is for the younger generations to keep in mind, as Gede Sayur has said, to make better decisions in the future. Perhaps this mural will help to expose the people of Nyambu to unconventional forms of art, inspiring their children to be free and creative with their art.
Water is Life
Photo by Mang Gen, December 3rd, 2016, Nyambu
VII. **Conclusion**

Through the extensive examination of both textual and personal resources, I have synthesized a basis of comprehension for the complexities surrounding street art—and how its illegal and dynamic qualities strengthen it as an art form. Various interactions and communications with local artists have assisted me in understanding their roles as activists and artists in Bali. This study has illuminated the differences between street art in both Bali and Java, demonstrating that religion and tradition largely influence the socio-political issues that may or may not be discussed within these respective islands. Bali has shown to have a more “polite,” democratic, and “peaceful” emphasis in their artwork, avoiding religious and racial controversy. I found that many Balinese artists find inspiration within nature, moving them to create many projects in defense of their land and resources, such as Sayur’s “#NOTFORSALE” installation, and demonstrations against Reklamasi.

Furthermore, this study allowed me to elaborate on the Balinese cognizance of street art, and the varying degrees of understanding established by lifestyle, education, and generation. Talking with artists from both rural and urban walks of life illustrated some of the varying perspectives on murals, graffiti, and vandalism in Bali. Moreover, it is evident that the traditional and religious values rooted in Balinese arts largely impact their perspectives on street art, and that for some, this may be seen as “contemporary art,” as it is an unorthodox form of painting that neither has a religious or economic function.

This study has also opened my mind to the differing factions of street art, and its relationship with subcultural graffiti. Examining the diversified aspects of street art has helped me develop my understanding of graffiti and other forms of mark making that many consider as vandalism—allowing me to find beauty and appreciation for all forms of writing and graffiti.
Recommendations for Further Study

There is a fascinating dynamic between street art in Bali and Java. I would suggest further research contrasting these two Indonesian islands, looking at their art through a religious lens. Furthermore, there may be interests in studying the development of street art in Indonesia from the Islam and Hindu perspective, and how tradition works to influence the art being produced. How does conflict arise within Muslim communities; how does this manifest in the form of street art? How is radical underground street art established in Java, and is this possible in Bali? Is it already happening? I would also suggest a further investigation of how Bali perceives street art, and the “spectrum” of understanding that Gede Sayur briefly talked about. How does tradition and education impact the Balinese understanding or murals and street art? How does a rural context differ from and urban context?

Another topic for further investigation is the auto didak, or self taught artist that Suklu mentioned earlier. A study on the less developed forms of street art in smaller villages could be conducted—examining the more “animistic” qualities of art that Suklu has observed on rocks and trees. How do these artists find places to express themselves?

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VIII. Bibliography

Primary Resources


Secondary Resources


IX. Appendix

Appendix A: Djamur Murals at ISI
Photos by Lila Chu, November 8th, 2016
Appendix B: Mang Gen and members of Komunitas Djamur meeting at ISI
Photo by Lila Chu, November 8th, 2016

Appendix C: Mural by WD, Denpasar
Photo by Lila Chu, November 8th, 2016
Appendix D: Meeting with Gede Suanda “Sayur” at Luden House
Photo by Harry Teplow, November 24th, 2016

Appendix E: Mural at Luden House
Photo by Lila Chu, November 24th, 2016
Appendix F: Painting Water is Life, Desa Nyambu
Photos by Lila Chu, November 26th, 2016