Welcome to the Streets: Tracing the Development of Street Art in Nepal Since 2010

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Welcome to the Streets:

Tracing the Development of Street Art in Nepal Since 2010

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Abstract

Graffiti is a process. There really is no beginning or ending to a piece. Graffiti art is practicing a design, bringing it to a wall, letting it take shape, and allowing it to interact with the environment. What makes graffiti unique, among other things, is its interaction with the environment. When international graffiti influences and local conditions drove inspired artists to bring their art to the streets, a new art form emerged in Nepal. “Local conditions” labels the forces ranging from personal drive to the history of public art in Nepal, which fuel the movement. The present study aims at tracing a history of the street art movement in Nepal from the emergence of the art form in the late early 2010’s. Using interviews with involved artists and organizers, this is a people and movement centered study. Today, street art offers a unique opportunity for communities and artists to promote social discourse on important issues and bridge the gap between artist and public spheres. How it got to this point and the different ways street art achieves (or does not achieve) its goal are brought to light in this study.
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Interviews
Welcome to the Streets

In the last six years, forms of public art new to Nepal have rapidly grown in terms of the number of pieces produced and the popularity among the public, private, and political sectors. This essay is an attempt to create a critical history of the emergence and growth of street art in Nepal since 2010. More specifically this is an attempt to understand the emergence of street art in Kathmandu through the works of different artists and organizations. Street art has spread from the Kathmandu valley to other parts of Nepal via workshops and social media. Artists tackle difficult topics ranging from domestic abuse to wildlife preservation and bring these messages beyond the urban centers. Today street art seems to be a means for “bridging the gap” between the artistic community in Nepal and the general public. Street art is a uniquely Nepali social project initiated by artists to make art accessible and to promote discussion of numerous issues and topics.

In order to understand street art in Nepal, I have dug into the very young history of the practice. This essay relies heavily on research conducted in just one month of interviews, exploration, and reading. While the conclusions drawn here are rooted in this research, there is much left to uncover and discuss about street art in Nepal, a task that will hopefully be taken on by someone in the future. For now, this essay argues for one major conclusion-- street art is in continuity with the public heritage and culture of Nepal. The major consequence of this conclusion? Street art in Nepal should be taken seriously. It is a powerful means for accomplishing two major goals: “bridging the gap” between artists and public communities and promoting social discourse through presenting pertinent social issues in the public domain through art. The thing about painting bridges though, is that they fade away; they require more attention and repair to maintain their support.

To argue this I will first introduce some artists involved with the production of street art. These artists are also important because of their pivotal roles in popularizing and spreading the methods of street art in Kathmandu and beyond the valley. Artists are the most important sources for information on the history of street art in Nepal. Without any previous research existing on the topic, the only other major source is new articles from inside and outside of Nepal. Understanding artist stories, motivations, and goals, I will argue, is necessary for analyzing the development of street art in Nepal and how the international forms of graffiti and mural art were re-contextualized to fit Nepal’s streets. Next several key definitions are presented to acclimate the reader to the particular street art scene of the Kathmandu valley. These terms, “graffiti and graffiti writing,” “murals,” “street art,” “community art,” “public art,” and “buffing,” will be key in understanding the unique context of the study.

Next the historical findings will be presented in a somewhat narrative fashion. These findings will also be supported by a brief explanation of the historical moment in which street art seemed to achieve a break point of popularity. After presenting the complex narrative of street
art’s growth I move onto a discussion of “messages.” That is, I will analyze the discourses that some murals seem to be bringing into public’s visual attention. Further I will question for whom murals are being painted, the politics of representation that complicate some murals, and the ultimate goals of street art as a social project.

Finally, I will present the argument for street art in continuity with Nepal’s heritage and possible challenges to this assertion, including the artists’ thoughts on this conclusion. The argument’s denouement will lead into a final discussion of the importance of street art, its history, and its future in the larger context of Nepal’s present and future. Again, I will argue for street art’s continuity with Nepali heritage and thus for its role in helping to promote a future vision, or competing visions for Nepal.
Artist Profiles

Artists are the most important sources for information on the history of street art in Nepal. Understanding their stories, motivations, and goals, I argue, is necessary for analyzing the development of street art in Nepal and how the international forms of graffiti and mural art were re-contextualized to fit Nepal’s streets. Below four street artists are described to give an element of voice to the movement.

Artists are the driving force behind the street art movement in Nepal; there is no arguing around it. Without the organizing and independent artists, there would be no movement. The four artists presented here are actively involved with street art through their respective organizations and independent work. Since all have been involved in street art since 2010 or 2011 they are knowledgeable about the origins of street art in Nepal. Kailash Shrestha, founder of Artudio, and Kiran Maharjan, creative head at Artlab, are both talented artists with serious investments in their local communities and the progress of street art in the country. Sadhu-X and Mr. K, two independent artists known by their street names, appear here to give voice to the independent side of the street art movement. While other artists are mentioned in this study, I am, in some cases not at liberty to discuss their details and in other cases not as knowledgeable about them. The artists here were interviewed multiple times with the exception of Sadhu-X. Their expertise and involvement in the movement means their knowledge is a great founding stone of this essay but should not be taken as absolutely true or representative of the entirety of those involved in street art in Nepal. Regardless, the stories and information from these artists are part of the backbone of the essay.

Kailash Shrestha & Artudio

Kailash Shrestha is a contemporary artist of Nepal. He graduated from Kathmandu University in 2007. His personal works focus on two-dimensional media like canvas and photography and he engages in community and public work. In the early period of his artistic career Kailash found serious “restrictions” and decided to initiate Artudio’s community art projects. Kailash is the founder and initiator of Artudio: Center for Visual Arts established in 2010, according to their website. Kailash started organizing and mentoring workshops on visual arts from 2010 in Artudio. Artudio was his personal studio, a “space of self-transformation.” It was thus opened up to the public in early 2010 in Jytha, Kathmandu until it moved to Swoyambhu, Chhauni Hospital Road. Artudio is, as advertised, “a platform for anyone interested in exploring the various forms of art.”¹ According to Kailash it provides space for people to

practice contemporary arts, receive visual education, and initiates ArtSocial initiatives to bring “transformation in the society through the arts.”

So, under Kailash, Artudio adapted the emerging form of street art in Nepal. Artudio’s focus in the streets today is community art and murals, these were the methods they began with too. With inspiration from Western graffiti artists and the local phenomenon of political graffiti and emerging street art Kailash, via Artudio, began to put art in the streets in 2011. This was around the time other artists seem to have really popularized different forms of street art. Kailash initiated the “We Make the Nation” project in 2011 which consisted of a call for all artists and the general public to participate in the painting and decoration of a large mural on the boundary wall of the Hotel Himalaya in Kupondol. This was the first street art project done by Artudio.

From then on Kailash continued initiating other street art initiatives through Artudio. I will go into further detail later but since May 2011 Artudio organized around ten other street art projects from Kathmandu to other parts of Nepal like Pokhara, Janakpur, Jhapa, and Dholaka. From some of his comments one can see that Kailash feels strongly about the issues raised in various pieces. Reflecting on “We Make the Nation” Kailash said the project was about “sharing hope through the art on that frustrating day.” Additionally, he mentioned that socio-political dialogue about local identity in a global context was the concern of the ongoing street art project “I’m You.” “I’m You” is a project in the streets using mostly stencils to put up pieces. The project seems identifies the audience and thus tries to promote a certain kind of discussion around identity. Kailash’s understanding of the social issues dealt with by street art is key to understanding the contextualization of the art form in Kathmandu.

Kailash was part of reconfiguring the international art form to fit in Nepal. Street art, including mural art graffiti writing, and community art was contextualized by Kailash in a moment of political frustration and from then on in different other localized social issue discourses. Today, with “I’m you,” Kailash is using street art to tackle an important facet of identity. These cognizant explorations of the usefulness of street art in discussing complex issues speak to Kailash’s role in popularizing street art in Nepal as uniquely styled and concerned with social issues.

Kiran Maharjan, Creative Head at Artlab

Kiran Maharjan is another graduate of Kathmandu University self fashioning a career in art. Now 26 years old Kiran graduated in 2014. He studied European portraiture in school especially. He incorporated his own style and elements into his portraiture repertoire. In 2010 Kiran had his own small studio where he painted and taught art classes. He did this for around eight months; during this time he became disillusioned with the professional art scene in Nepal.

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2 Kailash Shrestha in discussion with author, 19 October, 22 November 2016.
3 Kailash.
5 Kailash.
He tried to get his pieces into different galleries and was rejected for multiple reasons. Some places said they were not looking for more pieces and others said they already had someone else doing work like his. Kiran fostered an interest in street art and graffiti during his schooling. While in school at Kathmandu University he learned about graffiti and street art in a globalized context. His interest in street art and the rejection of his work by galleries led him to use the streets to express himself.\(^6\)

He started in the streets around 2010. For him, street art is about expressing his experiences and being part of an art form that can grow. Considering street art he said there was a “possibility it could become something bigger.”\(^7\) I think Kiran wanted to be part of the process of refining a complex art form in the context of Nepali society. As Caleb Neelon argues in “Critical Terms for Graffiti Study,” graffiti in the U.S. was shaped in part by public media and academic discussion.\(^8\) A consequence of Neelon’s argument is that artists like Kiran have to direct street art intentionally to prevent the same sort of insulating affect experienced in early graffiti culture in the U.S. Neelon does not discuss street art beyond graffiti writing but in repurposing his discussion in the context of Nepal one should recognize the cognate status of graffiti writing and mural art amongst other street art forms in Nepal. Without the various artists to give the positive, outward direction, graffiti writing might be more insular and mural art might not be such a popular street art form.

Kiran’s motivations to be involved in the street art movement further solidified when he joined up with Artlab, an arts collective that formed in 2010. He began working with them sometime around 2011. According to Kiran Artlab’s goal for street art is to make art accessible. Their website states:

Artlab was formed to create products and services through the medium of art. Our society is troubled by many problems and Artlab intends to bring awareness through a creative and a positive way, but most importantly in a meaningful way so that it becomes hard to ignore. [...] Many people feel art is very sophisticated, but art can be fun and open to everyone. Most of the artworks are presented in the indoor galleries; therefore it is in limited space for limited people. We want to change all of it and take art beyond galleries to provide creative and positive solution.\(^9\)

Today Artlab holds workshops for the public and is finishing up its Prasad Project, a two year endeavor that spread street art to new parts of Nepal and educated people about their history and the medium of street art. Kiran is engaged with these endeavors as well as other Artlab based

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\(^6\) Kiran Maharjan in discussion with author, 7, 10, 18 November 2016.
\(^7\) Kiran.
projects. His involvement with Artlab reflects his desire to be a part of an art form that can grow. Beyond just this, Kiran’s philosophy as it pertains to street art is one of contextualizing the art form to Nepal’s unique situation.

Configuring street art styles for Nepal is something that also has to make profit for organizations like Artlab and Artudio. Artlab, as described by Kiran, is self-sustaining; they sell T-shirts and stickers, do commissions, and utilize external funding for larger projects. While he sees profit making as an essential part of continuing the artistic entrepreneurship of Artlab and artists in general, Kiran mentioned his hope that street art can remain non-commercialized. Kiran fears “gentrification” of the art form. There needs to be a balance between the making ends meet part of artistic entrepreneurship and the part that aims to create social discourse through the same public space that is being commercialized by commissioning or competing businesses.10

Kiran is currently the Creative Head at Artlab. As such, his work is closely tied with the street art movement. His understanding of the movement is evident and his navigation of difficult challenges like the threat of “gentrification” of street art further show his competence in contextualizing street art for Nepal. His attitudes and motivations are important to keep in mind because they help to understand how international street art is recapitulated by way of leading artists and now promotes localised discussion in Nepal of Nepali social issues.

Sadhu-X, Independent Artist

Sadhu-X is an active independent artist in Nepal whose work is present in the streets of Nepal and beyond. Sadhu-X is another one of the big names in the street art scene and was involved from the beginnings in 2010. Another graduate of Kathmandu University, he initiated Artlab in 2010 with the help fellow artist Deadline. While still in school he learned about street art from different sources. Graffiti, for him was a way to express and be creative outside of the normalized gallery scene. Even more, Sadhu-X has an appetite for pushing into new artistic spaces. He wanted to try something new and fresh; no one was giving him orders so he took the initiative into his own hand, a position he likes to be in. Before we met he was at a tattoo workshop, still pushing himself to learn new art forms. According to Sadhu-X, however, he had no idea what he was doing with graffiti in the beginning.11

He said he got popular and people learned his name because he was putting up tags all over. But they were bad tags, he was going off of what he learned about graffiti writing and it seems like he was committed to evolving his personal styles through serious practice. Nowadays people still criticize his choices and his somewhat eclectic style; again, he likes to explore new avenues for his work. He has travelled internationally to different group shows, galleries, and street art festivals and the like. Here in Kathmandu he initiated other minor projects after leaving Artlab in 2014. Projects like “Crash,” a month long celebration of different art styles, included a

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10 Kiran.

11 Sadhu-X (street artist) in discussion with author, November 2016.
week focused on turning broken skateboards into art through different methods. “Crash” is indicative of the things Sadhu-X likes to get his hand dirty with now. Still, he’s pushing his street art styles further and further.12

Independence, for him, is really key to maintaining the revolutionary or rebellious nature of graffiti. A lot has changed in the five or so years since Sadhu-X started in the streets. As an independent artist, he wants to see more impactful projects that don’t rely so heavily on external funding. Graffiti writing is still growing in Nepal but he pointed out that so much of the street art is murals and community based projects.13 As I argue later, the promotion of mural art and community art may actually inhibit the expansion of graffiti writing in Nepal. Sadhu-X seems to recognize a similar problem, “I don’t see the revolution or the impact,” he said referring to street art today.14 Although, it isn’t his job to criticize the organizers of community art today, instead he is focused on pushing his career forward. He did not make judgements about where organizations or other artists should go in the future with street art. What he did speak to were the problems involved in community and independent organizing.

In looking forward, Sadhu-X see problems for street art in its various manifestations. Personally, money is a struggle; many of the artists I spoke with related similar feelings. Thinking about community art he wonders what will happen if external funding dries up and NGOs and INGOs cannot support the kinds of projects they are doing. Yet, he’s hopeful that more artists will come up and push street art to be more radical, more open. In this way he aligns with other artists because he hopes to see more artistic expression from the up and coming youth. Right now, however, according to him, the sort of counterculture or subculture movements among the youth in Nepal are somewhat isolated and a coming together would really push forwards the different movements.15 Overall, Sadhu-X seems to want a greater radicalization of the movement. I think that his comments also provide a basis for claiming that street artist and organization have to figure out some way to become more creatively destructive. That is, funding and organizing needs to be more grassroots; right now so much funding comes from outside of the communities that there is some level of disconnect and this could be fixed through more locally funded or entrepreneurial efforts.16

Mr. K, Independent Artist

Mr. K was one of the first artists to emerge on the Kathmandu street art scene. Highly active in the streets earlier in the movement, he wanted to engage the public, he wanted to prompt people to engage in the street art as well. When asked about his inspirations, he said

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12 Sadhu-X.
13 Sadhu-X.
14 Sadhu-X.
15 That is, “urban” movements like street art, hip hop, fashion, skateboarding and other subcultures among Nepali youth.
16 Sadhu-X.
primarily he was inspired by the forms of traditional public art in his country. Religious art and political graffiti also played a part in inspiring to bring his art to the streets. This evidences the continuity of street art with Nepal’s heritage and public art. According to him, he learned about the practice of international street art but it was not his primary influence in the streets. Later on, however, techniques and direct inspiration were drawn from globalized graffiti. The global graffiti scene seems to be the secondary influence contributing to the emergence of street art in Nepal.

Stickers printed with Rainbow Warrior were the first public “artivism” that Mr. K was involved in. They read, “The Fucking # You Have Dialed Cannot Be Reached. Thank You.” The sentiment is an expression of frustration with the inane greeting Nepali cell phone customers receive sometimes when calling other customers. There does not seem to be an explanation for this frequent service failure. This public expression of frustration initiated a period of bringing Mr. K’s and other artists’ frustrations and artistic expressions into the streets.

Then, with “WARNING” (fig x), Mr. K and Rainbow Warrior came to meet another street artist and some people seem to regard this interaction as one important locus from which street art emerged in 2010. Mr. K’s other works include passively provocative pieces; for example laughing heads over political graffiti, and pig stencils near Maoist posters. Mr. K sees his work now as commentary on and interrogation of “commercialized identities” and wants to prevent people getting their minds fried by the constant visual assault that is mass media. His works extend from the streets to the web, he remains active and seems to inspire many community members.

Labelling Mr. K as one of the originators of street art is fairly tentative, but is not especially problematic. Mr. K of course was not alone in initiating street art in Nepal. Rather he should be understood as a figure who is closely associated with the beginnings and his work is indicative of the embeddedness of early street art in a uniquely Nepali context. Dealing with political graffiti and the frustrations with the state of affairs in Nepal, Mr. K exemplifies, in a similar way to the other artists, a real continuity among street art and Nepal’s heritage and culture.

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17 Mr. K (street artist) in discussion with author, November 2016.
19 Mr. K.
20 Mr. K.
Key Terms for Street Art in Nepal

The present section deals with some key terms for acclimating the reader to the context in which street art in Nepal is growing. Inspired by Caleb Neelon’s “Critical Terms,”\textsuperscript{21} this section reconfigures some of his terms to reflect the unique situation of street art in Nepal while introducing other key terms beyond Neelon’s graffiti-centric concerns. The secondary aim of this section is to sketch a simplified picture of when and how graffiti writing emerged in the U.S. and how the international street art phenomenon informs the street art movement in Nepal. Graffiti writing, murals, the street art/community art/public art paradigm, and buffing are all discussed below.

Graffiti & Graffiti Writing

This section deals with several terms that are key to understanding the study. Beginning with Caleb Neelon’s definition of graffiti writing, this discussion helps explain “graffiti’s” contextualization in Nepal in different forms (i.e. graffiti writing, political graffiti, and graffiti). It is important first to recognize the context in which graffiti writing emerged and how Neelon theorizes from the viewpoint of an American artist. That context makes legality an important part of defining graffiti for Neelon. I argue that the Nepali context is substantially different; therefore “graffiti writing,” regardless of its “legality,” should have an augmented definition which embraces “legal” pieces.

Graffiti writing emerged in the New York City subways in the 1970’s as an unsanctioned, independent form. The stylization, personalization, and general trend to “artistry” in graffiti writing inspired other would be artists; soon graffiti writing moved beyond the subways and spread from New York to countless other cities and eventually crossed oceans and national borders. The stylized letter form and illegality are the links between international graffiti artists. The community is also an extremely important part of graffiti writing, as will be discussed later. In “Critical Terms for Graffiti Study” Neelon deals with the “vernacular and culture of graffiti.”\textsuperscript{22}

Caleb Neelon prioritizes illegality and stylized letters in his definition of “graffiti writing.” “It is ‘graffiti’ in the sense of ‘writing’ only if it deals with stylizing the letters of name, illegally;”\textsuperscript{23} this is a fine definition for thinking about graffiti writing in Nepal. Adding that graffiti writing can also include non-name words is an easy extension of the definition to begin with. But, Neelon goes on to complicate the legality component of his definition, “the notions of ‘legality’ and ‘permission’ are pretty fuzzy.”\textsuperscript{24} Questions of legality and permission can be left

\textsuperscript{21} Neelon, Caleb. "Critical Terms for Graffiti Study."
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
alone in this study. Indeed following Neelon’s complication it seems reasonable to drop the
“legality” component of Neelon’s definition for graffiti writing in Nepal since it is not something
investigated here. Rather, here, standalone pieces of stylized letters constitute graffiti writing
and the use of graffiti writing in some murals is a choice to deploy a style contingent on the
origins of graffiti writing in the U.S. Perhaps one might like to call it simply “writing” in those
cases but attaching “graffiti” to the term establishes a necessary continuity with the rest of
graffiti writing in terms of stylistic influence and the plethora of meanings contained in graffiti
writing.

There are some pieces that fit these criteria in Nepal. Graffiti writing should be
understood in context and among the other forms of graffiti such as political and “basic” graffiti.
Non-stylized words, crude spray can drawings and the like are categorized as “basic” graffiti,
which from here on are referred to simply as graffiti. On the other hand political slogans in
public spaces are difficult to categorize as either graffiti writing or simply “graffiti.” Partly this is
because of their institutional ties. Political graffiti has been mobilized especially by the Maoists
in Nepal. According to Sazeena, current managing director at Sattya, when the major project
*Kolor Kathmandu* was being formulated there was a lot of political graffiti going on and a lot of
“negativity” around the category.

![Fig. 1: Simple vandalism interacting with a corporate piece of street art](image)

Another thing that distinguishes political graffiti is the role of paid artists in its
production. Often “graffiti” is thought of in opposition to some proprietary claim on public space
by companies, organisations, or the government. These brightly painted party slogans have
been explained as promises, catchphrases, and, with the often negative connotations in mind,

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25 Not to mention the extreme challenges one would confront in this line of inquiry and the delicacy of this issue.
26 There can be serious intention behind such vandalism (Fig. 1). These transgress “graffiti” and “street art” or
“community art” in interesting ways but are few and far between so are left alone here.
27 Neelon, Caleb. "Critical Terms for Graffiti Study."
graffiti. Kiran Maharjan and Kailash Shrestha both called the political slogans that populate so many Kathmandu walls “political graffiti.”

Interestingly, as mentioned above, graffiti in a general sense is part of the inspiration for the street art movement in Nepal. Kailash said that he was inspired early on by the public slogans. The inspiration was, in part, to contradict said political graffiti with new creations. He also argued that public spaces should be used for the public. This is important in considering this definition of political graffiti. While it may not be illegal, and even inspire some artists, it is not representative of the public but of political interest and marketing in fact. So, there are three subcategories of “graffiti”: graffiti writing, political graffiti, and basic graffiti. In this article graffiti writing deals with stylized letters of words, political graffiti deals with public political slogans, and basic graffiti details crude drawings, unstylized words and so on.

One final point about graffiti writing in Nepal: graffiti writing came in from outside of Nepal and now circulates among a largely Nepali community of writers. Mark Liechty argues in *Learning to be Modern*, that Nepali driven circulation of new ideas from outside the country develops a new and unique meaning of those ideas in the context of Nepal. Since graffiti writing emerged as a result of outside influences but now is driven by the Nepalis who have latched onto it, it should be understood as a uniquely Nepali thing at this point. In this case, graffiti writing is not alone; mural art emerged as another, though not necessarily secondary, form of expression that Nepali street artists are using in an importantly localized way.

Murals

Mural art makes up the majority of the street art in Nepal. Murals are very different from graffiti writing. Whereas graffiti writing consists of letters and maybe minor characters, murals can go far beyond those limitations. In Kathmandu murals deal with various social issues and tell stories about people and places. While graffiti writing is often an individual act, murals are often painted by groups, multiple artists, and volunteers. Finally, murals may incorporate elements of graffiti writing or graffiti writing pieces in them. That is not to say graffiti writing cannot have mural like qualities, I emphasize the use of graffiti writing in murals only because it is more common. While the two forms of street art are different, they still interact.

On a meta level it is important to consider this possible interaction between graffiti writing and murals. Caleb Neelon argues that “scholars and the media are affecting the kind of

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28 Kailash, Kiran.
29 See Appendix III for examples of graffiti.
30 Liechty discusses at length the use of the English words body, face, and love among Nepali youth. He presents a model for understanding the circulation of commercialized identities in Nepal as very locally driven navigations of globalized mass media constructions like body, face, and love. For more see: Liechty, Mark. ""Learning to be Modern": Mass Media and Identity in Kathmandu." *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 1, no. 11 (June 2006: 3-29).
31 Legality may be one differentiating facet but, again, will not be discussed here.
graffiti that writers are doing, whether we as writers would like to admit it or not.” He argues that the disregard for graffiti writing by the larger public and the group referential dynamics of graffiti writing caused an intensification of self-referencing by the artists. This insulated the graffiti writing art form to those in the know; inside jokes, appropriating styles, and other citational dynamics obscured graffiti writing for the general public. The topic of citationality among graffiti writers in Nepal can be left for another study; I am interested in what graffiti writing’s seeming insularity means for the production and proliferation of street art in Nepal. If graffiti writing is somewhat insular and difficult for the Nepali public to breach, artists interested in promoting street art in Nepal may choose murals as the predominant method of “bridging the gap.” Some artists also practice graffiti writing on their own, but it is still a challenge for this method to bring social issues to the public eye.

On the other hand murals are able to communicate with the public. If graffiti writing turns inward to the writer community, as Neelon argues, then more space is left for street murals and community art concerned with expressing opinions on public issues or transmitting information. Murals can do what graffiti writing does and more. Since they can include graffiti writing and still communicate broader, more accessible messages, murals are perhaps less likely to be ignored or passed over by the public. So, murals are pieces of street art and community art which convey messages to the public and may contain other art forms such as graffiti writing. Yet, murals are not the entirety of street art.

Street Art, Community Art & Public Art

A vast array of artistic expressions in the street fall into the category of street art. Murals, graffiti writing, community art, and street performances of song, dance, or theater are considered here to be street art. Saroj Mahato, Bikalpa Arts Center Founder and Director, argued that street art should be considered to be more than just murals and graffiti. He alluded to a story about a performing artist’s antics during a public transport strike in Kathmandu. The strike stopped all public transport and, according to an Al Jazeera article, only official vehicle and ambulances were on the road along with rickshaws. According to Saroj, the performing artist took a chair and slept

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in the middle of the road in his chair.33 This performance was something Saroj considered street art. I agree.34

Street art goes beyond just what is found on the walls of businesses or boundary walls of schools and hotels. However, unless specified, street art here refers to the forms of murals and graffiti writing.35 This essay aims at constructing a history of mural art and graffiti writing referred to collectively as street art. Another scholar might find public performances of art in the streets an intriguing line of study. To define street art one must consider the different art styles. Already, two have been identified: murals and graffiti writing. Additionally, one should consider community art as partially under the umbrella of street art in Nepal.

Community art, according to Kailash, can be compared to street art in this way: community art is a method which creates with the community, aims at speaking to a certain group, and involves researching and encouraging the community to deal with a certain topic; street art, on the other hand, is created for a community, or for everyone, and is more often individually done.36 So, when community art is in the streets, it can be considered street art as it often takes the form of mural art, graffiti writing, or what one might call “living walls,” like the one found in Pokhara.37 Beyond the streets, however, there is more public art and public performances of art.

Nepal’s heritage includes a plethora of different public art forms. Sculpture, metal casting and bronzing, architecture, thangka, wood carving, wall paintings or murals, song, dance, and theater. These are more traditional art forms in Nepal compared to street art. What these art forms mean to Nepali people today is somewhat clear. Reconstruction work after the 2015 earthquake hinges on the practical use of the artistic skills involved in these art forms. Without the maintenance of the skills of artist families heritage based in the above mentioned art forms at sacred and public sites would be lost. As Anil Chitrakar mentions in his book, “we can see that as long as our artisans’ hands are around we really need not worry about our heritage being lost.”38 As mentioned before, Nepali street art ought to be considered in continuity with Nepali heritage and this is another piece of evidence to support this claim. The importance the traditional art forms hold in terms of preserving and defining the heritage of Nepal extends to the street art movement.

As will be shown, street art uses public spaces to make pertinent social issues clearer to the public. Street art pushes people to consider their place in Nepal and Nepal’s future. Therefore street art is important not because it reminds people of the past, of Nepal’s heritage (though it

34 Saroj Mahato in discussion with author, 7, 10, November 2016.
35 Street art can also include projects like “Lovism” or pieces done through use of stencils or the calligraffiti style. Lovism, a swirly upside down question mark that can be seen around Kathmandu and beyond, is not examined here. Calligraffiti and stencils fall into the graffiti writing and street art categories, respectively.
36 Kailash.
37 See Appendix IV for photos from the Pokhara wall.
does do that); street art is important because it helps the public consider the future. Accepting the continuity of traditional public art and contemporary street art as public art hinges on accepting that both categories speak to the public about how things are, how things were, and how things ought to be. Further, street art draws heavily on the symbols, stories, and characters of public heritage art, which establishes another thread of continuity in the unique Nepali context. “Public art,” therefore encompasses all of street art and the other, more traditional, public art forms in the country.

Buffing

The boundary wall of the Hotel Himalaya in Kupondol is still “happening” as Kailash described.\(^{39}\) When I visited it there were some older looking murals, a piece of graffiti writing, and a larger graffiti writing piece by Kiran. These presumably exist on top of layers and layers of paint that now cover up Artudio’s “We Make the Nation.” This was not a buff.

A buff is an act removing or defacing graffiti. It was used by graffiti artists in the New York subway system to explain how their pieces were removed. According to Neelon cities in the U.S. use neutral colors to buff pieces; “Boston uses a light slate blue gray. New York City uses a burgundy. Chicago uses a pale brown.”\(^{40}\) In Kathmandu the color of choice seems to be a cough medicine pink or plain whitewashing. Often the pink fails to fully obscure the street art. Political slogans are also buffed, covered up and painted over with the new catch phrases of different parties. Buffing is a key dynamic to street art in Nepal. According to Mr. K, his “WARNING” piece covered up slogans and advertisements; Bruno Levi’s response piece did the same on the opposite wall.\(^{41}\) When street art covers up political graffiti, and vice versa, that is part of the process for street art, that is an interaction likely to be noticed by the public and taken note of.

These interactions are not buffs but buffing plays a similar important role. For example, on his blog Sadhu-X claims “now the piece looks complete since the public directly got involved in the art itself,” when talking about hi piece “Rape Me”\(^{42}\) Neelon agrees that the buff is somewhat necessary for street art to go on, “new” spaces need to be made available through buffs so that artists have somewhere to go.\(^{43}\) In Nepal though the buff by the public (i.e. of Sadhu-X’s “Rape Me”), is an indication that street art is actually affecting the public. When people go out of their way to buff a street art piece it shows the efficacy of the piece; an “offensive” piece getting a buff means the public and the artistic community is actually having a discussion about the topic at hand. Therefore, the uniqueness of street art in Nepal is further evidenced by the reconfiguration of how the artist Sadhu-X thinks about buffs.

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39 Kailash.
40 Neelon, Caleb. "Critical Terms for Graffiti Study."
41 Mr. K.
43 Neelon, Caleb. "Critical Terms for Graffiti Study."
In addition to acts of buffing which utilize paints, street art in Nepal faces two other forms of “buffing.” First, the flyers and advertisements that populate so many walls in the city often find their ways onto pieces of street art. For example, Artudio’s handwashing project was redone after flyers covered it up. Basic print out flyers can deface pieces of street art pretty easily but can also be removed without much effort. However, larger billboards have covered up some pieces from the *Kolor Kathmandu* project and surely have effectively buffed other pieces as well. Secondly, while it is not a purposeful buff, the amount of dirt and dust combined with other environmental factors put a shorter lifespan on the pieces of street art which are actually bare out on the street. Many murals accumulate layers of grime that obscure them and indeed destroy them. Again this helps to establish the uniqueness of street art in Nepal; many street artists do not have to deal with the kinds of buffs in their work.

It is difficult to say whether environment, advertisement, or buffing causes the greatest loss of street art, especially considering murals and graffiti writing. Regardless, in line with Neelon’s argument, effort is the greatest counterbalance to all of these buffs. “Graffiti doesn’t last” (Neelon 2003), neither does street art in Nepal. But artists keep pushing the medium to create dialogue with the public. The loss of street art, the visible and trackable erosion of the art, and the occasional contempt for it is all a part of bringing the artistic community and the public closer together in dialogue. Indeed, this further establishes the connection between street art in Nepal and traditional public art; both demand constant effort, upkeep, and care from the artistic communities and the public.

45 See Appendix III for a buff example.
Fig. 3: “WARNING” (above) by Mr. K and Rainbow Warrior. “Big Leg” (below) by Bruno Levy
When Walls are Made to Speak: Historical Findings

As with every art form, street art in Nepal is emergent and cannot be located at a particular date or place. What seems to be clear, however, is that sometime in the first decade of the 21st century street art began to grow in popularity. According to the New York Times and Kailash Shrestha, French artist Invader was in Kathmandu in 2008 and put up some installations. Then around 2011 it seems several artists were involved in early independent street art projects. Mr. K, Bruno Levy, and Rainbow Warrior did various projects in cooperation, in competition and on their own. These artists are ones who can be confidently connected to the emergence of street art in Kathmandu in 2010. One of the earliest “competitive” interactions between these artists was when Levi responded to a piece done by Mr. K and Rainbow Warrior. The local pair of artists worked under cover of darkness. At that time before the popularization of the craft they did not want to be found out in broad daylight. Their piece covered up political graffiti and numerous posters in front of library in Jamal, Kathmandu.47

The very next day after Mr. K and Rainbow Warrior put up their “WARNING” piece, another artist responded with a piece endearingly named “Big Leg.”48 The two pieces flanked the entrance to the library and covered up political graffiti previously there. More importantly, the appearance of “Big Leg” surprised the other two artists. They soon found out who had painted the response: Bruno Levy. Later on Bruno Levy, Rainbow Warrior and Mr. K produced some cooperative works. All three artists continued making marks in the city. Rainbow Warrior painted letterboxes to draw attention to them, Mr. K put up individual pieces like “Mummy told me not to do politics” and Bruno Levy continued independently.49 Then, around the time when the Constituent Assembly extended the Interim Constitution of Nepal in late May 2011, Artudio planned a large scale public mural. This event was when Artudio emerged as a major initiator in the street art and community art spheres.50

The event was called “We Make the Nation.” The mural was put up on the 400m wall in Kupondol, Kathmandu and that wall today sports more recent pieces of street art. “We Make The Nation” established perhaps the first living wall for street which is still happening. Kailash said “people were not happy… They still aren’t happy.”51 The mural served as a place for people to express their hopes and aspirations for the future of their country and themselves. This major project not only showed many people what community art is about, but involved many people who had not been involved before, thus peaking further interest.

47 Mr. K.
48 See Fig. 3 with “WARNING” and “Big Leg.” Photos courtesy of Kailash Shrestha, 2016.
49 Mr. K.
50 Kailash.
51 Kailash.
Kailash, through Artudio, continued to push street art and street art projects around the city. In 2011, after “We Make the Nation,” Artudio organized several other projects: “Flying Fishes,” June 18, two large projects on hand washing in Kathmandu and Pokhara on September 26 and 30, respectively, “Uterine Prolapse,” December 9. In 2012 Artudio continued to organize murals. One was on the theme of “Stop Tobacco Industry Interference,” another was a redux of the hand washing project. Then in 2013 Artudio initiated another piece on the theme of “Against Women Violence” and also collaborated with a Brazilian street artists on “Shiva in the Streets.” Finally, Artudio initiated its continuing project “I’m You” in 2013. What began in 2011 grew into a mainstay in Artudio’s arsenal for community engagement.\(^5^2\)

Street art as a means for making art accessible and bridging the gap between artistic communities and the larger public has been employed by numerous collectives and projects besides Artudio. Artlab, founded in 2010 and Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), founded in 2011, both executed major street art projects in the last few years. In 2013 Sattya finished their Kolor Kathmandu project. This year, 2016, Artlab concluded its Prasad Project which began in 2014. Both projects focus on bringing art to the public, making art accessible. Further, Kolor Kathmandu focused on representing various districts of Nepal through street murals. That project was one of making art about the people, for the people.

Kolor Kathmandu was an immense show of force in terms of street art organization. 75 murals were painted in Kathmandu to represent the 75 districts of the nation. Kolor Kathmandu organized with numerous local and international street artists to complete the project. These murals were largely located in Kathmandu and many are still visible a few years later. Artists conducted their own research into their subject district. Every artist then produced a piece representative of their district. The murals dealt with the after effects of war, continuing violence, women’s experience in different districts, heroes past and present, different Nepali cultures, economic issues, environmental issues, and religious figures among many other complex topics.\(^5^3\)

The idea for Kolor Kathmandu came from the director of the initiative, Yuki Pouydal. According to Sazeena Nekul, current managing director of Sattya, Yuki contemplated the use of spaces beyond the galleries for artistic expressions. Further, there was a reflection on the contemporary political moment where slogans were being painted and flown in excess across the valley. Despite the popularization of street art as a means by other organizations, many artists did not feel confident enough to bring their art to the street, according to Sazeena. It seems the profitless activity of street art perhaps prevented many artists from coming out to the streets. Due to these challenges, Yuki and the Kolor Kathmandu team reached out to international artists to jumpstart the project. Soon, however, more local artist spoke up and come out to support the initiative and participate, according to Sazeena.\(^5^4\)

\(^5^4\)Sazeena Nemkul in discussion with the author, 23, November 2016.
The *Kolor Kathmandu* team received the grant required to fund the project very quickly, right at the end of 2012. From then on, the team had one year to complete the project. Their goal was to paint 75 murals to represent the 75 districts of Nepal; the artists produced 78. Artists worked alone, in pairs, with large groups of volunteers; they also worked in very different spaces across the Valley and beyond. Some of the final products still exist, others are buffed. Sattyia did publish a book in print with all the murals and some accompanying essays; this book is also available as an i-book. *Kolor Kathmandu* and its “messages” will be further analyzed later but for now I turn to the Prasad Project.

Prasad, as every writer concerned with the project mentions, means “sweet offering.” The Prasad Project recently finished up after two years of travelling to different cities in Nepal and teaching the youth about street art through various workshops. Those last two years of the project were funded by CKU, a Danish cultural organization. The project did begin in 2013 but from 2014 to its conclusion, the project expanded thanks to external funding from CKU. According to Kiran the project had a serious focus on “heroes” of the places they brought the project to. Part of the goal of Prasad was to address the issue of migration from Nepal. By focusing on hometown heroes as it were, the Prasad Project aimed at influencing the youth to see the potential and possibilities of their situation and encourage a positive attitude towards art and other forms of sustaining one’s self in Nepal. Prasad included an “urban art show” in September of 2016. That show had 25 artists, which included Kathmandu Valley artists, artists involved in the Prasad Project workshops, and international artists. *My Republica* reported Romel Bhattarai, another organizing artist at Artlab said “[w]e want to show the urban artists as well as the public that all this is possible.”

Here I want to return to Artudio’s ongoing project, “I’m You.” Understanding how street art can grapple with serious contemporary issues is easier when one considers “I’m You.” “Through this project we will be asking socio-political questions through art in public spaces and create dialogue among everyone,” Kailash told me when speaking about “I’m You.” This project

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55 Sazeena.
56 Kiran.
58 Kailash.
during the summer of 2016 stood in solidarity with Dr. Govinda KC. Artudio and community members gathered at the wall across from Artudio to produce a street art piece depicting Dr. KC. This piece was completed just two days before Dr. KC ended his eighth hunger strike for medical education reform. “I’m You” will be discussed at length shortly. In this way through the “I’m You” project and other ones, Artudio continues to engage the public in important dialogues through street art.

So what does the scene look like today? Well, there are three serious organizations, Artlab, Artudio, and Sattya, which are promoting community art and street art in different ways and to different ends. Beyond these organizations there are likely others promoting street art which I failed to locate. The community of artists is pushing graffiti writing and mural art into Nepal more and more everyday. Street art has spread from Kathmandu to Pokhara and other, less “urban” places. For example Artudio’s Dholaka outreach center and the Prasad Project’s exploration of new places for community art both reflect the spread of community oriented artistic organizations as well as the spread of street art. Further, a lot of international attention is being paid to the development of the street art movement in Nepal. Indeed, Nepali street artists like Romel Bhattarai and Sadhu-X are going beyond Nepal and are involved in international street art.

Understanding how the history of street art includes a serious focus on engaging with the public is important to understandings its continuity with Nepali culture. By examining the circumstances from which graffiti and street art arose, one can understand the uniqueness of street art in Nepal and the effects of contextualizing an external art form to the streets of Kathmandu. Engagement with the public further solidifies the “Nepaliness” of street art. It helps artists express their views and experiences to a larger audience than normally attainable through galleries which in turn really affects the art form towards being accessible and culturally focused. The artists in this study all expressed a frustration with the restrictions of a gallery focused artistic community. Bringing art to the streets was a new way to express themselves.

Further, the history of street art in Nepal seems to evidence a shift from individually produced graffiti writing and murals toward the popular, directly engaged community art methods. While the community engagement was there from the beginning (e.g. “We Make the Nation”), community art methods seems to be growing in popularity among organizers. This shift brings more and more people to the street by building their confidence and understanding of the possibilities opened up through art. In the end, the street art movement is a movement about educating people through art and about art, about “bridging the gap.” Educating may not even be the right word. The street art movement is about dialogue between normal citizens of Nepal. It

59 See Fig. 4, “I’m You.”
will continue through different avenues and influencing countless people. Street art is not going anywhere.

One of Mr. K’s tiny stencils.
Near Lazimpat, Kathmandu.
When Walls are Made to Speak: What Do They Say?

This section poses a discussion on some of the issues and topics presented by street art in Nepal. Several historical pieces are examined below. Examination of these pieces is essentially two-pronged. First, the discourse the piece engages with is interrogated and described. Then the representational dynamic between artist and public is deconstructed; an answer to the question, “for whom are these paintings,” is sought. Additionally, an analysis of the team or individual involved in producing the piece is necessary. The recent solidarity piece from “I’m You,” Sadhu-X’s “Rape Me”, two pieces on women’s rights and violence against women, and DAAS’s Kolor Kathmandu piece on Rasuwa will all be analyzed below. I take a critical look at how the messages fit into a representational politic that decides the importance or predominance of some issues or people in street art over others. Finally the section will conclude with an analysis “bridging the gap” and the roles of community art organizers versus independent street artists in engaging with and representing communities.

“I’m You” and Dr. KC

Initiated in 2013 by Artudio, the “I’m You” project hopes to ask “socio-political questions through art.”61 This project is ongoing and several different pieces were made as part of it. The most recent “I’m You” piece stood in solidarity with Dr. Govinda KC; Artudio’s message of solidarity is examined here. Stencilled onto a wall, the figure of Dr. KC speaks to the importance of his issue.62

First, one must know the conditions leading to Artudio’s solidarity piece. Dr. Govinda KC, senior orthopedic surgeon at Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital protests the corruption and failings of the health education system in Nepal. His tenth hunger strike since 2012 extended into December 2016.63 Before this he performed a hunger strike from July 10th to the 25th 2016. This strike there were protests in support of the doctor and some who were arrested at these protests began their own hunger strikes.64 This was the time when Artudio stood in solidarity with the doctor.

During his 15 day protest, artists at Artudio put up the “I’m You” installment just across the street from Artudio. The massive piece was finished just two days before the end of the doctor’s strike. A work of solidarity, this piece shows engagement with a socio-political issue by artists. The method of using Dr. KC’s image to identify with the passerby is striking. It attempts to connect the public with an ongoing and popular issue using a well known figure. The artists

62 Refer to Fig. 4.
63 At time of publishing Dr. KC is still on strike in a critical condition. For more see Aryal, Bishnu Prasad. “Talks on Dr. KC get nowhere on 5th day.” My Republica. 2 Dec., 2016, http://www.myrepublica.com/news/10296
imagine a world where Dr. KC is supported, where his demands are met, where reform in the health education systems is manifest. Their concern is one of community importance, Dr. KC is fighting for more fair systems of merit-based admissions, renewed and improved facilities, and so on. His strikes are protesting the unfair and corrupt health education systems. Again, many people stood solidarity with these demands because of their equality oriented stance.

What artists at Artudio did with this piece is facilitate conversation. Firstly, a conversation among the artists involved had to happen. Secondly, hopefully, the passerby could be motivated or provoked in some way that would get them to think about their identity by way of the image of Dr. KC. This is part of the value of street art. When the message presented and the discussion started is one concerning the local community and has constructive, positive imagination of the future at its foundation, street art can be a form of activism. “I’m You” aims at creating a sort of sense of community by being in the public space. It tells a story and communicates a message to other people in the community beyond just the artists involved. In this way it attempts to “bridge the gap” by drawing on an important issue in Nepali society and promoting a certain cultural value system. This “new” system is simply one that recognizes the importance of health education reform as opposed to the old system which allows such corruption to take root. In this way the “I’m You” project, specifically the Dr. KC piece, is an attempt to creatively destroy the ineffective, unfair systems entrenched in Nepali culture.

“Rape Me”

One of the most provocative pieces in this study, Sadhu-X’s “Rape Me” is treated below. 65 No other pieces like this are reviewed here. 66 This is a graphic piece which was rejected from different art projects for different reasons. Yet, the message it carried with it, and the final fate of this piece is important to understand another way street art can interact with the public. It depicts a nude Kumari, a living goddess, with scarlet letters above her reading, “Rape Me.” “Rape Me” was highly contextual and the importance of this cannot be overstated. Sadhu-X’s provocative, independent street art piece is evidence for the capacities of street art to tackle important issues and indeed force people to consider those issues.

In 2012 a movement called Occupy Baluwatar was sparked following the rape and murder of a young Nepali woman at the hands of immigration officers. 67 Occupy Baluwatar included a mural piece led by Artudio against violence against women and general protests for the safety of women in society. Sadhu-X was inspired to make “Rape Me” afterwards but he held out on putting it in the streets until 2014 when it was also put on display with the City Museum. 68


66 Nor did I encounter any similar pieces.


68 Sadhu-X.
While the work was seen as offensive by some of the people he proposed it to, he held, “I respect where I come from.” In his personal statement on the piece he acknowledges his respect for his goddess and the power of using her for the advancement of the message:

“I am simply taking the icon of her to provoke people through a visual medium – to make the point that no female should be treated lesser than a man, no female should be abused simply because of her gender. Otherwise, it is no different that assaulting or raping your gods and goddesses, whichever they may be.”

In the streets the piece seemed to go over well, it was not buffed for some time.

Then, according to Sadhu-X, after a piece was published in the Kathmandu Post on “Rape Me,” the street piece was partially buffed. The words hanging above Kumari were covered by white paint. Sadhu-X reported he saw the buff on the way home. He passed the piece everyday on his way to work. After seeing the buff he returned to the piece and rewrote the words; the next day the whole piece was buffed. On his blog Sadhu-X said that his piece was “complete” now that someone reacted to it. Further he said “it’s good to be resented.” In his eyes the piece seemed to succeed because it offended and made people in the public and the art community really consider how they feel about violence against women, a topic of immense importance in Nepal.

Street art in Nepal has grappled with topics of similar clout since it emerged. Independent artist began by actively fighting against political slogans and the uglification of public spaces by producing street art. From then on the trend has been toward social discourse and pertinent issues. With “Rape Me,” however, there is another thing to consider. The independence of Sadhu-X is in part what allowed him to produce such a powerful piece, even if it was offensive to some. Further, the piece was provocative enough to actually warrant a serious

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69 Sadhu-X.
71 Sadhu-X. Somebody Got Offended Yeah!!!.
72 Sadhu-X.
negative reaction from someone in the public. This does not seem to happen often in Nepal. Most street art goes unbuffered unless a business wants to put up a new sign or a new building is erected. The buff on “Rape Me” represents a step towards real communicative action in the community beyond workshops, festivals and the like.

Still, “Rape Me” deserves some critical response. Who is “Rape Me” for? One answer to the question is that it is for the public and gallery going audiences. However, as Sadhu-X explained, it is a piece about making people confront their contradictions and further to promote a society where his mother, sister, and girlfriend are safe. Bringing “Rape Me” into the street, the only people whose contradictions it brings to light are men’s. Engaging the male public is a good way to go about establishing a safer space for women or at least initiating a discussion towards that end. Yet, a piece by a male artist engaging primarily with a male audience and using the image of a goddess leave real women out of the conversation; the piece sacrifices relatability for impact. This if not necessarily wrong but it is something to consider when thinking about the politics of representation as they extend to community organizers and independent artists.

Women on the Walls

In Kathmandu there is a plethora of street art pieces on the issue of women’s rights. The variety of projects and pieces discuss what a safe city for women means, women’s place in society, physical, emotional and online violence against women, and female resilience in the face of such obstacles and violations. The prevalence of pieces discussing these issues is astounding; in fact women’s issues may be the most well represented social issue in the street art milieu next to environmentalism.

Not all street art pieces pertaining to women’s issues are presented here. A list will suffice to give a feel for the documented pieces concerned with women’s issues: “A Safe City for Women” near St. Xavier’s University campus, the International Day of Action for Women’s Health piece from May 2016, the We For Constitution multi-piece mural near Tri-Chandra College boundary wall, “Rape Me” by Sadhu-X, Artudio’s project during occupy Baluwatar on stopping violence against women, “Uterine Prolapse,” a project organized by Artudio, and numerous pieces from Kolor Kathmandu including Marina Menuka Lama’s for Ilam, Saran Tandukar’s for Mahottari, Kiran Maharjan’s for Lalitpur, Danaé Brissonnet’s for Doti, Natalie Wohlstader’s for Bhojpur, Shristi Shrestha’s for Sarlahi, Kabina Shrestha’s for Achham, Rimishna Manandhar’s for Jajarkot, and Hisila Tuladhar’s for Kalikot. Unfortunately not all of these can be analyzed here although a critical analysis of the construction of gender in street art is deserved.

Instead, two large pieces on women’s issues are taken up here. Firstly, the multi-piece mural near the Tri-Chandra College is a collection of small murals which take up the issues of

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73 Sadhu-X.
physical, cyber, and emotional abuse. One of the pieces features a woman sitting under a tree. The tree is shedding leaves that read “discrimination,” “girl trafficking,” and “workplace violence,” among other things. Another mural in the series reads, below the image of a woman with her scarf clutched in a large hand, “I move through public space. It doesn’t mean I’m public.” The collection as a whole is very powerful.

This kind of work, similar to “Rape Me” but with a much different tone, brings into the public sphere a topic that is often subdued or ignored. It acts as a sort of revolutionary public education; it urges people to think about the violence against women in all its forms, quotidian and extraordinary. While perhaps not as provocative as painting in big red letters “Rape Me,” the simple “Stop” above a silhouetted woman being choked easily transmits a similar message. These pieces force an engagement with the reality of violence against women in the public sphere. The artists unfortunately remain unknown here. Still, while the “messengers” cannot be investigated here, it seems appropriate to discuss the power and seriousness of this campaign against violence against women.

While the above analysis may fail to seem connected to the claim that street art in Nepal is uniquely influenced by heritage and culture, first consider this: working against the entrenched gender ideology promoted in part by “tradition” and public heritage does not place street art opposite to Nepali culture. In fact it can be considered an extension of the discussions on gender which present themselves in public temple murals, sculptures, and paintings as well as in the general public discourses on the subject of women’s issues. Consider the next piece, where the living goddess Kumari is represented in a new light through street art.

Kiran Maharjan worked with Kolor Kathmandu for several pieces. One of his pieces, done for the Lalitpur district, represented the young living goddess Kumari. Kiran was able to conduct an interview with an “ex-Kumari” who “shared her fascination with space and astronauts.” Using her as inspiration, Kiran painted a mural representing the imagination of the young girl. Birds, a spaceship, and unidentifiable characters flow out and transcend the portrait of Kumari.

This exemplifies a piece which takes into account the heritage of Nepal and Lalitpur in particular and expresses it in a new and somewhat challenging way. To expound on the living

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75 See Appendix V and Fig. 6.
76 Due to lack of information gathered.
goddess’ dreams, or an ex-living goddess’ dreams, is interesting on its own. Yet, to bring those statements to the public and open a discourse about the desires and dreams of the young girl who once represented a goddess is far and away a new and unique avenue of expressing the figure that is Kumari.

It is clear that thinking about women and women’s issues or dreams can be done in the streets effectively and provocatively. From Kiran’s Lalitpur piece to Sadhu-X’s “Rape Me,” one figure from milieu of cultural heritage can be reimagined and deployed to send a message and while those messages differ, the methods and the presence in the public sphere is the same. While new and unique, street art in Nepal draws on Nepali culture in the contemporary moment and from deep in the past to make meaningful discussion and hopefully actions towards a safer country for women or a more inclusive treatment of the living goddesses. These are only two issues in the broad spectrum of social topics brought into the public sphere by graffiti.

Digital Panda in the Slums

As part of the Kolor Kathmandu project, some international artists were called into Nepal because apparently not enough confident local street artists existed. One international artist, DAAS painted multiple murals for Kolor Kathmandu. In collaboration with Dustin Spagnola, DAAS did the Bajhang mural featuring Saraswati. He worked with Shiksanter School children to produce the elephant mural for Jhapa. Obviously he took his work seriously. His third piece, a huge red panda portrait near Kupondol representing Rasuwa district, is problematic.78

The mural looks out over the Bagmati river, and the slums along it.79 When crossing from Kupondol into Thapathali one will smell the river, hear the honking and rumbling of motor vehicles and just might look up and see the red panda. However, just below the building bearing the mural are slums that extend along the river. The juxtaposition of a well done, digitally

79 See Fig. 7.
designed piece of artwork and people scraping by is stunning. Sadly the juxtaposition is not that unique; often vibrant advertisements for beers or the newest film are the best kept things in a seemingly impoverished area. What is most striking about DAAS’s piece is the disconnect between the space he worked in and the message of the mural itself. To be perfectly frank, I doubt the people living near the mural care very much about the red panda’s endangerment when living along the Bagmati is not only an assault on the senses but a challenging life on its own.

One might argue, however, that DAAS was working at developing a point of intersection between the red panda issue and the environmental issue of the Bagmati. That is, perhaps DAAS hoped to initiate a broader discussion of environmental issues in Nepal. The critic may not be wrong. Still, deconstructing the red panda piece, it seems that the evident disconnect is a more easily made conclusion as opposed to the intersectional conversation.

This kind of work, which is so disconnected from the actual public’s lives is testimony to a major problem in street art organizing. The problem is in part rooted in external funding from beyond the community impacted. *Kolor Kathmandu* was funded not by the communities impacted but by the Prince Claus Fund. Working towards an end likely described in the grant proposal, *Kolor Kathmandu* artists sometimes failed to recognize the spaces they were in and their local audience. DAAS is just one example. The environmental issue of red panda endangerment is a serious topic, but claiming public space where the public has drastically different environmental issues at hand simultaneously downplays the seriousness of those
present issues and draws attention far beyond the immediate space where the mural is. Unfortunately DAAS’s piece puts on display the contradictions that can play out in street art when it does not care for the space it is in.

Street art should having meaning in regards to its location; DAAS’s piece does not interact with the space it is in. If it does then it simply spits in the face of the people living along the Bagmati. Street art requires thinking about its place and, by extension, its audience. This is necessary for street art to “bridge the gap” between the artist and the community. When street art is not in discussion with the audience, when it is not situated in the contemporary culture and moment, it fails to have broader impact.

Bridging the Gap

While Kiran Maharjan and Kailash Shrestha had different reasons to bring art to the streets, both have produced pieces and been involved with projects that aim to “bridge the gap.” Kiran said that he brought his work to the streets so that his work would be seen. While he pursued exhibition in galleries in Kathmandu, he also studied street art. Sometime in 2010 he became active in the streets. He brought his personal style to the streets and found the streets to be a place where he could express his own experiences. Kiran worked outside of the boundaries of his traditional European portraiture training and explored new avenues of expression. These new avenues could also inspire and inform the public about art. So, by claiming a new place to express himself, Kiran brought a message to the streets that street art is a possibility, that it is acceptable and meaningful.

Kailash and other artists also brought this message through their work in the streets. He faced a similar dilemma in terms of finding places to express himself. With Artudio, however, Kailash had a way to organize artists and people to get out and produce street art. “We Make the Nation,” Artudio’s first street art project, drew in artists and other to paint a massive street art piece. This project successfully involved the public and bridged the gap in order to promote discussion about hopes and dreams in a frustrating moment. By involving the public “We Make the Nation” furthered the message that street art has potential and can be meaningful to the public.

Sadhu-X and Mr. K went to the streets with some knowledge of the history of street art and graffiti. In Sadhu-X’s words, “you don’t need to wait for a gallery;” going out to the street during the daytime showed him how important his work could be in the public sphere. What they brought, along with other early street artists, was a now familiar message-- one does not need a gallery and art anywhere is meaningful. Their pieces dealt with political slogans in the public sphere. This developed the normalization of street art’s interactions with political graffiti. Both artists called political graffiti inspiring in some sense. Political graffiti seems to act as a spark for some street art. When the public sees artists claiming the public space against the

Sadhu-X.
political graffiti, this sends a message promoting discussion and the claiming by the public of their public space.

Despite this message there remains a problem with artists claiming public space. Kolor Kathmandu, for example, aimed at representing the 75 districts of Nepal; however, few artists involved in the project went to the places they painted. It also seems Kolor Kathmandu lacked participation from local artists in the districts. Of course, street art was and is still young, and Sazeena pointed out that many young and upcoming artists were still nervous or unconfident back then. So, there was not much Kolor Kathmandu could have done to draw out more representative, localized artistic depictions, but it still stands that the politics of representation are important concerning externally funded projects claiming to represent different communities or districts.

Other community art projects do not suffer as much from this problem of representation, perhaps because street art is more popular now. Prasad Project, “I’m You,” “We Make the Nation,” and other such projects focus on issues pertinent to those people involved and include the participation of the communities they target or are located in. On the other hand some of Kolor Kathmandu murals and other projects seem to have a disconnect between the people involved and the issues or people claimed to be represented. The connection between the represented community and the artistic community should be invariably close in community projects or projects which claim to care for the community. This is not to say all street art has to engage directly with the community or the issue it brings into conversation. Rather, organizers should be cognizant of their goals and if they include representing a community or an issue then that community should be included in the production of the pieces as was the case in “We Make the Nation” or Prasad Project initiatives. “Rape Me” and other projects are not submitted to these criteria because they do not claim to represent a community.

Understanding that representation of communities must involve those communities also helps establish the continuity of public heritage and street art. While historically there are trained families who participated in the production and maintenance of the visual cultural heritage in Nepal, street artists and community art organizers emerged as another avenue for producing unique Nepali culture. Street art was reconfigured and reimagined by artists in Nepal and has a unique manifestation here. As such, street art in Nepal is part of Nepal’s culture now. The preservation of it and continuation of it is just another part of preserving heritage through art in the public sphere. Further and more importantly street art must interact with the community in a positive way, a constructive way in order to be valuable to the public.

Graffiti writing in the past was an anti-establishmentarian endeavor; street art does not have to renounce that. Street art in Nepal has to “creatively destroy.” That is, street art and community art in Nepal have to be innovative and critical of the old dysfunctional systems. Representation politics have to be navigated carefully to avoid the continuing of historical

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81 Sazeena.
82 Chitrakar, Anil (pp. 9).
injustices in Nepal. Bringing awareness to the conditions of certain districts which are more impoverished or dangerous should be done through art with those communities. Choosing the important topics to bring to the streets, while it should represent the artists actual hopes or ideas, should also take care to recognize the effects of bringing certain problems into the public sphere through art as opposed to others.

Public art holds stories about Nepali heritage and customs, it layers a spiritual geography onto Kathmandu, its maintenance provides jobs and education for some parts of society. Street art tackles difficult contemporary issues, provides alternative forms of education in the arts, tells people’s stories (albeit sometimes without discussing those stories with them), and promotes a social discourse not just on the use of public space but the development and future of Nepal. Thus, the seemingly different categories are in continuity because they help to educate, inform, inspire, and locate people in Nepal in a historical moment of social importance.

Additionally, some of the artists even think about the contextualization of street art in Nepal and the uniqueness developed through the local conditions that include vast arrays of public art. Kiran, for example thought that street art does not need to be presented as directly continuous with just public art. Yet, the use of traditional symbolism, styles, and characters establishes the uniqueness of street art in Nepal. Kailash sees using local materials, people power, and inspiration from heritage as another thing that makes street art and community art in Nepal uniquely contextualized with its goal of “bridging the gap” in mind. Even more the proliferation of political graffiti makes the response given by street art a more unique feeling of “Nepaliness.” In the end, artists recognize the conditions in which they are working in the street and identify effective ways of communicating with the audience. Street art in Nepal is a Nepali thing now, it extends far beyond the global street art movement; it takes things from Nepal’s heritage and reimagines them, its take the contemporary moment and makes people think, it imagines a future where artists and communities learn about each other and move forward with true community organizing.

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83 Kiran.
84 Kailash.
Final Touches

Street art in Nepal is at the intersection of several forces but predominantly at the intersection of globalized graffiti culture and traditional Nepali public artistic expression. Street art in Nepal follows from the international graffiti writing and street art scenes. This is evidenced by international artists involvement at the beginning and growing stages of street art in Nepal and by the inspirational quality attached to graffiti writing by some artists in Kathmandu. Further the stylistic influence can also be traced on an international level. Finally, as part of the global street art phenomenon, street art in Nepal has garnered attention from international journalists from the U.S. to China.

While the globalized street art discourse has immense influence on street art in Nepal, it is highly important to recognize the artistic context in which street art has grown up in. Newar architecture, Nepali metalwork, painting, sculpture and wood carving, are all present in Nepal’s public sphere. Further the general cultural heritage has deep influence on the artists and audience. Traditional art forms are part of an aesthetic heritage that Nepalis navigate daily. That is, the landscape of Kathmandu is densely populated by public art which forms a present yet passive reminder of the heritage of the valley and its people. These forms are physical expressions of the stories and beliefs of the people of Kathmandu. They mediate, in some way, between “tradition” and the public.85

Street art, as a public art form, is also a mediator. Murals in the street transfer messages about history as well as the future and the present moment of Nepal. They deal with contemporary issues. The artists behind the murals also express a desire to “bridge the gap” between the insular artistic community of Kathmandu and the public. Bridging the gap consists of two major goals. First the goal is to make art accessible to the public. Second, the goal is to promote a social discourse of the topics presented in various murals. Thus, street art is another public art form aimed at mediating meaning. In this sphere, however, the important meanings are those around social issues rather than religious, heritage, and folk stories.

The streets of Kathmandu are thick with meaning beyond the Coca Cola signs and the Tuborg billboards. From architecture to wall stencils, artistic communities in Nepal have produced art in the public sphere for ages. Today street artists and their compatriots are going beyond preservation of traditional art forms. They are breaking ground, creatively destroying the ugly spaces of the city, and posing difficult questions to their fellow citizens. Emerging at a complex and unique nexus of international, local, and personal forces, street art is a mode of activity, scholarship, and community building that has a real place in crafting a Nepal for the people.

Epilogue: Towards a “New Urban Culture?”

At present the street art movement is isolated. According to Sadhu-X, the newer subculture or counterculture movements are all isolated to some degree. Skateboarding, graffiti, fashion designing, non-traditional music, breakdancing, and other emerging subcultures in Nepal are all heavily influenced by the international forms that they are based on. But, they are unique in their reconfiguration to Nepali life. As a result of thinking about street art in continuity with public art, it is possible that, as with public art, street art is only part of a larger network of the ways contemporary Nepalis can deal with the future and the present.

That is, street art in Nepal should be considered in its contemporary context, as ancient public art and restoration works are. The contemporary context of street art in Nepal includes the emergence of seemingly similar movements like those mentioned above. Indeed some people have promoted “urban arts shows,” a recapitulation of a kind of globalized idea of urbanity. The arts performed at these shows or festivals are based on globalized forms that began in various urban areas. Perhaps when these communities come together, the future of Nepal will be taken seriously by the entire “subculture” and street art can become a more viable, self sustaining, revolutionary force.

This is not to say that the current state of street art in Nepal is stagnant or ineffective. Indeed the current scene is very promising and surely promotes arts in a creatively destructive way. Yet, it seems that street art may have lost its spark at some point. The shift from independent works to community works and organized mural projects coincided with a shift toward utilizing external NGO or INGO funding through grants. Again, this is not a bad thing but it neutralizes some of the potential of street art to be an impactful form of activism. Independent artists in this regard have more freedom to be revolutionary, their ability or willingness to pay out of pocket for supplies and create a self brand allows them to push perhaps more provocative works into the public. One can hope that street art organizers can develop some way to become profitable or self-sustaining through their artworks. Making stronger connections with other organizers and other “subculture” communities may be the way forward for street art.

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86 Sadhu-X.
# Appendices

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Author doing research in Pokhara, Nepal. Please direct any questions or concerns to Malik Earle at malikearle14@gmail.com or 978-478-7135 (U.S.)
Appendix I: Methodological Narrative

The present manuscript provides a history and analysis of street art in Nepal. Beginning with a three week course on aerosol arts in the summer of 2016 the author developed an interest in graffiti writing. Coming to Nepal the author slowly became acquainted with various spots that sported minor graffiti or eroding murals. Then, when devising an independent project for the month of November, the author took a serious interest in what exactly the graffiti arts movement was going through in Nepal. Pointed towards the artist Mr. K early on, more and more artists came into view and more projects were investigated.

The research for this project consisted mainly of three parts. Primarily, the author conducted interviews with different artists and organizers. These interviews durations were between 20 minutes and two hours. Artists graciously discussed their thoughts on street art, their involvement, and so on. Some artists requested to be referred to using their street names while others allowed their full information to be presented. The interviews were key in constructing a historical narrative and a picture of street art in Nepal.

The current picture of street art in Nepal was also sought through exploration of the Kathmandu Valley’s bustling streets. The author often wandered throughout the street while waiting for interviews or just after interviews. These explorations resulted in the photo documentation of many pieces in Kathmandu, some of which remain unattributable but such is street art. Over one hundred photos were taken in the streets. Exploring the city was important to this research because it allowed the “discovery” of more and more pieces of street art but also gave the author more contextual understanding of the places and people that different pieces were embedded in.

Thirdly, the author engaged with news sources and a few other text sources. Anil Chitrakar’s *Take the Lead* and Mark Liechty’s “Learning to be Modern” helped to conceptualize different aspects of the street art movement but are not discussed at length in the manuscript because they do not represent immense contributions to the discussion of street art. In fact the major limitation, and simultaneous liberation, of this project was the lack of previous research and documentation. New sources and blogs organization web pages and Facebook profiles are the only evident sources of documenting street art in Nepal.

Other limitations included time, knowledge, and access to artists. The research supporting this manuscript lasted only one month; there is much more to do. Again, access to previous information on street art remains limited and the as such the author tried his best to triangulate and confirm information from various sources. Any mistakes, misnomers, or outright farcical claims are his alone. Finally not all the artists that the author wished to interview were available and there many artists and people involved in the movement that the author failed to interview.
Appendix II: Hopes for Future Research

1. Research into the legality or illegality of works in Nepal is deserved but challenging.
2. As indicated in the conclusion, there are interesting avenues to be explored in researching the development of counterculture in Nepal. Mark Liechty is a good place to start understanding what I think Mr. K referred to as “commercialized identities.” The seeming construction of a new “urbanness” which could claim graffiti art, skateboarding, B-Boying, hip hop, fashion and so on as part of youth counter culture would be one thing to investigate in the future. Further I am interested in what “urban” means in Nepal and how it is commercialized as perhaps revolutionary and appealing to counterculture participants in Nepal. An analysis of how Black American culture is portrayed and the consequences of such assumptions as they manifest in Nepali youth culture is another possible exploration I believe.
3. Participant observation or internship with a community arts organization would be another interesting avenue to explore street art or “artivism.”
4. The section “Women on the Walls” has the potential to be expanded into a full blown gender analysis and critical study of the image of women portrayed in the streets. This would make for a challenging but extremely rewarding project.
Appendix III: Graffiti Examples

Below are examples of graffiti writing, buffed political graffiti, and simple graffiti (a simple character by Sadhu-X and some tags like ROG, another fairly active artist).
Appendix IV: Pokhara Wall Documentation
Appendix V: Women on the Walls
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**Interviews**

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