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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SPATIAL RECONFIGURATIONS OF ART: MAPPING CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PUBLIC MURALS IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Public murals reflect community identity and social commentary, contributing to the visual landscape of the society. This interdisciplinary study attempts to delve into the impact of public murals, focusing on *Trespassers* art collective in Kerala and their involvement in social life and their role in shaping visual literacy. It sheds light on how these murals serve as dynamic cultural markers, fostering dialogue and resistance within the socio-cultural landscape of Kerala. By scrutinising primary texts encompassing selected public murals by *Trespassers*, the research uncovers the transformative potential of public art in promoting cultural engagement and thereby giving shape to a new visual habit. The study also analyses the idea of transience in contemporary art and how the transient nature of public murals becomes a part of the artistic process. Situated within the realm of cultural studies, this analysis underscores the significance of public murals as it directly engages with the everyday life of the public.

INTRODUCTION

Trespassers art collective, originating from Kerala, India, consists of alumni from the Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady. The collective operates under a fluid structure, without a predetermined number of artists assigned to each project. In the context of public murals, they opt to be identified collectively as 'Trespassers,' rather than by individual names. Each mural is created by a varying number of artists, maintaining an open and adaptable membership. The collective critically engages with the gallery culture and attempts to create dialogue outside the art institutions. 'Who Are These Outsiders?' (February 4-12, 2023) and 'Outsiders' (April 13-May 21, 2023) at Gallery XXL, Mumbai, curated by Indian artist Amitabh Kumar, renowned for his focus on post-graffiti and urban contemporary art are two of the notable exhibitions that they have participated in. Additionally, *Trespassers* has collaborated with the not-for-profit organisation St+art India at Sassoon Docks, Mumbai, showcasing their versatility and dedication to diverse artistic endeavours. Their reach extends across India, with projects in Mumbai, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Bengaluru, as well as various regions of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Notable initiatives include organising children's art camps in schools and tribal villages, providing classes for women involved in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and pioneering online art exhibitions such as 'Thodi', in addition to numerous public mural projects. Through their multifaceted engagement with art and community, *Trespassers* emerges as a significant contributor to contemporary artistic discourse in India.

This paper endeavours to analyse the cultural engagement of *Trespassers* with special reference to their public murals. The analysis tries to delineate the role of public murals in the visual literacy of a community and thereby resulting in a paradigm shift in the visual habits. The public murals of *Trespassers* mark a new approach towards public art in Kerala. The prevailing trend in contemporary public art practices, particularly the public murals in Kerala, primarily focuses on cityscape as integral components of urban beautification projects. Unlike most of the public art projects in Kerala, the works of *Trespassers* are known for the collective identity of the artists and the research oriented, participatory nature of their practice. The paper examines how these murals act as strong cultural markers that help in bringing forth public dialogue on visual art.

The collective fosters public engagement with the local and the public with the murals by integrating regional motifs reflective of the everyday experiences of the local populace. Authorship is decentralised through collaboration with the public. Community members may contribute ideas, themes, or even participate in the making of the murals. This collaborative process blurs the line between artist and audience, making the public co-authors of the artwork. The paper also endeavours to analyse how the public murals of *Trespassers* engage with the everyday experiences of the public. Departing from conventional graffiti or Kerala temple mural styles, the artworks exemplify a contemporary approach to figuration, weaving local narratives transitioning from gallery settings to public places. By introducing a heterogeneous bricolage of styles by various artists within a single narrative, the collective inaugurated a new visual idiom to the public sphere.

From the White Cubes to the Street Walls: The gallery culture in Kerala was an underdeveloped phenomenon until the late 1990s and early 2000s as this period witnessed the emergence of private galleries mainly because of the economic liberalisation. The first private art gallery in Kerala, 'Chitrakoodam' was set up by C. N. Karunakaran in 1973. Later in 1978, an arts institution and cultural space 'Kerala Kalapeedam', was established in Kochi by the noted Indian artist and critic MV Devan. Discussing the gallery culture in Kerala, 'Malayala Kalagramam' in Mahe found in 1993 by A.P.Kunhikannan also demands a special mention. However, a significant turn in the emergence of gallery culture in Kerala took place by the second half of the 1990s. The galleries including Kashi Art Gallery and Café, Gallery OED, Draavidia Art and Performance Gallery, Pepper House and Gallery 24 made a significant mark in the gallery culture of Kerala. Kashi Art Cafe in Kochi set up in 1997 by Anoop Skaria along with Dorrie Younger was monumental in bringing a private gallery culture to the cultural terrain of Kerala. These galleries were situated in the ancient port city of Kochi which is also Kerala's business capital. The galleries are set within the tourist, commercialised cityscape of Kochi and thus it was alienated from the general public. The noticeable shift in the visual culture can be seen in the second decade of the twenty-first century with the commencement of Kochi Muziris Biennale. Vijayakumar Menon notes that, given the gallery culture in Kerala only emerged in the mid-1990s, the establishment of the Kochi Muziris Biennale in 2012 as an international art exhibition represents an 'anomalous expansion' of the region's art climate. (Menon, 120) The biennale introduced Kerala with a newer form of visuality including installations, performance and video art. However, the emergence of gallery culture failed to connect the public to visual art as it was located in the urban centres, largely catering to the tourists and art connoisseurs. The visual sensibility of the Malayali public was shaped by and large by the paintings of Ravi Varma, literary magazine illustrations, hand painted billboards, posters and banners.

The emergence of public art in Kerala is marked by the public sculptures by Kanayi Kunhiraman. His monumental sculptures not only captured public attention but also challenged conventional societal norms, thereby initiating discussions and debates within the public sphere. However, public art practices limited itself to individual artists, or curated group projects which were mostly placed in urban centres and tourist spots. The project Arteria, curated by Ajith Kumar G. is notable for its public creative interventions that involves painting the city walls in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala. The project is noted for the participation of a number of renowned visual artists. The discussion on public art in Kerala draws attention to the works of artists including Anpu Varkey and Anto George. The works of contemporary sculptor Chithra E. G. also deserve mention in this context. Yet another important intervention in the case of public art in Kerala was inaugurated with the involvement of Kochi Muziris Biennale. 'Taken syncdochically, the Kochi Biennale might be best thought of as a laboratory of the visual in its broadest sense, not just the visual arts'. (Manghani, 227) Apart from being an art show, India's first biennale interacted with the locale of Kochi and its flourishing tourism. The biennale redefined the concept of gallery space among Malayali viewers by introducing street art and public posters in the street walls of Kochi. Sunil Manghani describes the aesthetic geography of Fort Kochi with vivid details in the paper 'A people's biennale': a democracy of visual culture?'. As you walk about Fort Kochi you cannot help but notice numerous wall murals and graffiti. These artworks, most of them flaking away with the passage of time and humidity, are mixed in a busy, layered street culture, made up of dramatically tangled communication wires, clothing hung out to dry, bill posters, stencilled signs saying 'no bill posters', displays of fresh produce on stalls, crates and matting, and tightly packed, eclectic shop window displays. Many of the murals are traces from the Biennale in 2012 (some of which have been repainted), but others are unofficial and anonymous works of art; the speech of a city that now recognizes itself as one sprawling canvas. (Manghani, 225). The Biennale has significantly revamped the visual landscape of Fort Kochi and its surrounding areas. Furthermore, The Uru project curated by Riyas Komu facilitated the conversion of the

walls within the streets of Kochi into sites for artistic expression. Notably, artist Jalaja P. S. executed public murals in Mattancherry and Fort Kochi under the title 'Working Class Heroes' (2016) as a part of the Uru project. These murals comprised expansive portraits depicting labourers in the regions of Fort Kochi and Mattancherry. This project, unlike many of the street art projects in Kerala, was significant for its theme and approach. Through direct engagement with local workers, the artist portrayed them in the prominent walls situated within their respective work environments. The style of wall murals by Jalaja P. S. reflected the style of billboard paintings which was a very common practice before the widespread popularity of photography or digital advertising. The people of Mattancherry and Fort Kochi interacted with the artist during the process giving her comments and suggestions and hence became a part of the project. Unlike the public art practices by individual artists as well as curated collaborations, *Trespassers*, functioning as a collective, aims to extend visual art beyond cityscapes and into suburban and rural areas, fostering broader conversations on public art in diverse locales. *Trespassers* state that their aim is to take art out of galleries and into public spaces. Their project explicitly aims to bridge the gap between visual art practitioners and the public, as well as to create an impact on public visual sensibility and create engagement with art practice. The initiative employs a research-based, participatory approach, wherein artists immerse themselves in selected locations, gaining an in-depth understanding of the cultural landscape, and deriving inspiration from quotidian experiences. The practice brings the artists' studio and the gallery space to the public space and thereby instigating a new visual habit to the general public. This is a deliberate act of the collective to shift visual art from the convention style and to make art more popular and accessible. As art critic Johny M. L. puts it, 'Trespassing is all about encroaching a place or space without permission, often inviting persecution. These artists trespass with permission and the visual they create in the walls and building facades and any available spaces literally trespass into the mindscape and visual landscape of the people around.' (M. L., 22 January 2021) The impact of the works of *Trespassers* can be seen as a form of metaphorical trespassing. Unlike physical trespassing, which involves unauthorised entry into a space, the artists' striking visuals on walls, building facades, and other available spaces intrude into the everyday environment of the public with permission. This art disrupts the usual visual landscape, capturing attention and encouraging engagement. By altering ordinary locations into extraordinary visual experiences, the art provokes thoughts and dialogue, challenging viewers to reimagine their visual sensibility.

The public murals by *Trespassers* represent a distinctive form of visual text, markedly divergent from the conventional visual texts found within Kerala's public sphere. There were numerous forms of visual texts that engaged with the Malayali ethos that shaped the understanding of visuality. The widespread popularity of magazine illustrations significantly influenced the visual sensibility of the Malayali reading public. Other forms of visual texts integral to the daily life of the Malayali public include paintings emulating the style of Ravi Varma, scenery and landscape paintings, billboard art, and truck paintings. Vijayakumar Menon notes that the introduction of flex boards has diminished the prevalence of billboard paintings featuring film actors. Additionally, the increased popularity of tipper lorries and the consequent decline in the production of painted trucks have led to the disappearance of truck paintings. (Menon, 92) These visual texts had a profound impact on the popular visual sensibilities as they were a part of everyday life and the visual habits of the public. In this context, these public murals emerge as a new visual text which directly engages with the popular sensibilities.

Art in the Everyday: Public Murals of *Trespassers* and the Visual Habit: The works of *Trespassers* reflect and engage with the daily life of the general public. The genre of contemporary art, rather than traditional murals or graffiti, is the primary focus of *Trespassers*' wall paintings. *Trespassers* embrace modern artistic expressions, which often feature experimental techniques, innovative concepts, and diverse media. This shift highlights a move away from the historical roots of murals towards a dynamic approach, reflecting current artistic

trends and cultural commentary. The mural painting practices in Kerala adorned the walls of temples and palaces and was not a part of popular sensibility. The temple murals of Kerala, now widely regarded as 'traditional art of Kerala' was set aloof from the majority of people in Kerala until the early twentieth century on caste and class grounds. This mural painting practice which has extended its contemporary life inside the heritage industry defined the notion of mural in Kerala. By employing a generic style, *Trespassers* redefines the public perception about murals and thereby introduces contemporary visual experience to the public. Apart from acrylic emulsion and adhesives like Fevicol, they use locally available materials such as mud for their works. The artistic process commences with an in-depth engagement with the locale, encompassing an understanding of its regional history, geographical distinctiveness, cultural practices, and the labour types prevailing among the local populace. The themes of the paintings are derived from everyday life, shedding light on the politics inherent in daily existence by illustrating the contemporary reverberations of regional history. Artists employing diverse stylistic approaches collaborated on a large-scale project to create a unified artwork centred around a common theme. Despite the variance in their individual techniques, the resulting piece adheres to a mode identifiable as generic figuration. Essentially, the artwork combines various styles but maintains a general and identifiable way of depicting its subjects.

Following the completion of their Master's degrees in Fine Arts from Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, the artists of the collective who were intimately familiar with the area, formed a collaborative group to create public artworks. Their initial project took place in the Kalady market, a setting deeply rooted in their experiences. The artists closely engaged with the daily lives of the market-goers and workers, carefully documenting these experiences and translating them into murals on the market walls. The people in the market actively contributed to the paintings by providing feedback on the images the artists were creating. These interactions and conversations assisted the artists in deriving elements for their murals. *Trespassers* recalls that the vendors and workers within the market supported the art initiative, noting that the presence of art in a public setting was a new experience for them. The people gathered around the artists to observe the creative process, deriving enjoyment from both the artistic process itself and the eventual completion of the painting. *Trespassers* observes that there is a growing acceptance of the artwork over time, with no objections raised against the creations of *Trespassers* collective. This paper selects three public murals by *Trespassers* painted in three different sites to illustrate its connection with the everydayness of the region. Public murals from the rural area of Pang in Malappuram district, Kopra Bazar in the urban setting of Kozhikode and the suburb of Varappuzha in Ernakulam are selected for a detailed analysis.

The public mural from the village Pang, Malappuram (*Kazhutha*, 7x8 ft, clay and emulsion on wall) is a depiction of people engaged in a card game which is called *Kazhutha* or the donkey game. The painting is done on the walls of a shed originally constructed by the panchayat for housing motors for water pumps. Although the building is no longer used for its initial purpose, it has been used by the local community as a place for playing cards. The painting depicts an elderly woman seated among a group of men involved in a card game. This portrayal is derived from the memories of Pang village about a woman named Kunjalam Devaki who passed away in the year 2007. She was known for her behaviour unconventional to the general public which includes eschewing traditional attire and engaging in activities typically associated with men, such as card playing and smoking. Kunjalam Devaki resided in Pang and continues to be an integral part of the village's collective memory. The composition of this painting carries a significant resemblance to 'Luncheon on the Grass' (1863) by Édouard Manet. The woman in the painting is an active participant in the card game and is portrayed without wearing an upper garment. Through interactions with Pang's residents, artists gathered comprehensive details about Devaki's life, learning that she was an audaciously bold woman who adhered to her father's way of life throughout her lifetime. The village accepted her as she is and she

became a part of the unique everyday experience of the village. The depiction of Kunjalam Devaki and the card players in the mural contributes significantly to the visual literacy of the community. It is pertinent to note that the collective identifies an image which ingrains the everydayness and at the same time the performance of a female body against the patriarchal expectations of a society. By showcasing familiar activities and individuals central to the social fabric of the village, the public mural enhances the ability to interpret and understand visual cues within their cultural context. This resonance with their own experiences not only reinforces local culture but also cultivates a deeper appreciation and comprehension of visual representation, thereby fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging within the community. The painting, spanning a hundred metres in length and twelve metres in breadth in Kozhikode market, portrays the bustling daily activity characteristic of Kopra Bazar, renowned for its longstanding coconut trade. According to *Trespassers*, the depicted space remained dynamic, with labourers actively engaged in the collection, sorting, and storage of coconuts throughout the painting process. The everyday life of the street is reflected in the visual language as well. The locale is renowned for its distinctive architectural features and heterogeneous cultural composition. Predominantly, ownership of the coconut trade lies with Gujarati and Kongani entrepreneurs. Within the Kopra Bazar, labourers employ a traditional song for enumerating coconuts rather than numerical counting methods. Furthermore, an idiosyncrasy of the market is the discreet communication of coconut prices through whispered exchanges, as opposed to public auctioning with vocal declarations of bids. This scenario can be seen in the public mural by *Trespassers* in Kopra Bazar. A notable addition to the composition is the depiction of a dog, contributed by a passing woman who encountered the artists during their work. This incorporation of a suggestion is an instance to show how the mural becomes an organic intervention into the everyday life of a market space. Subsequently, the painting seamlessly integrated into the urban streetscape, becoming subject to incidental damage from coconuts while unloading them, exemplifying its immersive presence within the local environment. The art practice in this region witnessed interaction by the passers by and the labourers in the market. They gave the artists comments and interpretations connecting it with their everyday experience. The paintings challenge the visual perception of the public by juxtaposing a new visual idiom against the traditional means of public representations. In an incident recounted by *Trespassers*, an individual approached them and inquired why they did not depict humans in a manner consistent with conventional portrayals. The individual defined 'normal' as the fair-skinned figures commonly seen in conventional and popular visual media. In response, *Trespassers* articulated the concept that all body types are worthy of representation in art. This stance serves to problematise the notion of an ideal human figure and challenges the prevailing visual habit within society. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of everydayness is marked by the transience of the artwork. Contemporary art practices have always questioned the idea of 'timeless art'. Here, the temporary existence of the public mural and the gradual damage and erasure caused by unloading coconut make the painting an integral part of the cultural habitat of Kopra Bazar. The transience of the painting is also a part of the artistic process, says *Trespassers*.

The public mural located in the coastal suburb of Varappuzha in Ernakulam is distinguished by its depiction of coastal life, its market place and local agricultural practices. Varappuzha is renowned for Pokkali cultivation, a salt-tolerant rice variety that thrives in the waterlogged coastal regions. Pokkali is one of the oldest rice varieties in Kerala, integral to the lives of the inhabitants of the coastal regions in Ernakulam, Alappuzha, and Thrissur districts. During the maturation of the grains, the crops are frequently attacked by a brood of birds known as *nellikozhi*, a type of chicken, which are regarded as pests by the local farmers. The mural incorporates imagery of both Pokkali cultivation and the *nellikozhi*, reflecting these aspects of local life. This mural project was developed following extensive research into the cultural landscape of Varapuzha and through engagement with the local community. In addition to these images, there exists a

compelling depiction of a human figure climbing a tree to mount a loudspeaker. This visual representation draws inspiration from local narratives describing a woman in Varappuzha who engages in the profession of climbing tall trees to mount the loudspeakers. Initially, her participation in this traditionally male-dominated occupation elicited curiosity and scrutiny from the community. However, over time, she has seamlessly integrated into the everyday life of Varappuzha, becoming an accepted part of the local experience. The standing male figure depicted in the mural is inspired by Lawrence, a man residing on a secluded island near Varappuzha market. Lawrence lives in isolation, accompanied solely by his eight dogs. He lacks human companionship and infrequently visits the Varappuzha market to buy groceries before returning to his secluded home. The mural inculcates various aspects of the cultural and social life of Varappuzha, creating a cohesive narrative that is both visually engaging and meaningful. By prioritising collective input and community engagement, *Trespassers* advocate for a more inclusive and egalitarian model of art production. Through the active involvement of the community in the creative process, *Trespassers* enables individuals and groups to have an agency to articulate their narratives and perspectives through the medium of art. The public art of *Trespassers* that focuses on everydayness often highlights the experiences of margins, giving visibility to their histories, struggles and the dynamic world of experiences. This representation subverts the dominant narratives and fosters discussions about the heterogeneity of culture by democratising the art world.

CONCLUSION

The institution of gallery, often understood as the primary institution of art's public manifestation has alienated the working class from their artistic discourses. The visual texts such as paintings, sculpture and installations were never part of the visual habit of the working class. Here, Visual habit refers to the patterns of visual engagement and interpretation that individuals or communities develop over time. It encompasses the ways in which people recognize, interpret, and interact with visual texts, influenced by their cultural, social, and environmental contexts. Visual habits shape and are shaped by the power dynamics in the society and the resultant impact on visual literacy and shifting visual perceptions. The impact of power dynamics in visual habits can be understood with reference to the concept of taste posited by Pierre Bourdieu. In his seminal work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu asserts the individual preferences in food, culture and aesthetics are influenced by social and economic capital, which, in turn, informs their preferences and consumption patterns rather than being a mere personal choice. This notion intertwines with the concept of visual habit, which denotes the entrenched patterns of perception and interpretation that individuals develop through their socio-cultural environment. These habits dictate how people perceive, understand, interpret and appreciate a visual text, thereby reinforcing the connection between social context and aesthetic judgement. The concept of visual habit is relevant to the works of *Trespassers* because their murals are designed to resonate with the everyday experiences of the public. By engaging with the murals, the community develops visual habits that reflect their collective identity and cultural narratives. These visual habits enable viewers to connect more deeply with the artwork and with each other, fostering a shared visual literacy that evolves over time.

The enhancement of visual literacy within a society is a gradual process that cannot be achieved instantaneously. It is a gradual process that happens with the change in visual habits resulting from the subversion of power structures and institutions. The constant critical engagement with the conventional modes of artistic production and exhibition can make a significant mark in promoting visual literacy. Public murals help in bringing art out of the conventional institutional set up and fostering discussion and debate. *Trespassers* Collective, having completed over sixty-five paintings across Kerala, represents a notable intervention in decentralising art practices and facilitating dialogues on art among diverse societal groups.

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