

Walls That Speak: Murals and Social Criticism in “Jogja Asat”

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Abstract

Mural has emerged as one of the primary media for channelling public aspirations, particularly those containing social criticism. This study aims to examine the development of mural as a medium of social criticism and to explore its relationship with social movements through the case study of “Jogja Asat.” Employing visual ethnography as its methodological framework, this research utilises visual documentation as its primary data and information source. Data collection was conducted through documentation, interviews, observation, and library research. The findings indicate that the use of mural as a medium of social criticism is closely associated with the new visual arts movement that emerged in the 1970s, during which young artists resisted the dominance and hegemony of the older artistic establishment during the New Order era. The accessibility of murals to the general public has been strategically exploited as a medium of criticism, with the expectation that the issues raised will reach the audiences who encounter these works. The development of mural into a social movement, as illustrated by “Jogja Asat,” is also rooted in the artistic tradition of resistance against social, political, and economic orders that marginalise civic participation. This movement was spearheaded by a community group identifying themselves as “Warga Berdaya” (Empowered Citizens). Artists participated in the movement by creating murals at the Kewek Bridge in Yogyakarta. The murals displayed served as social criticism, functioning as instruments of resistance against the dominance and hegemony of rapid hotel development that lacked adequate community oversight, leading to water shortages for residents of Miliran. Furthermore, the practice of inhabiting space through the medium of mural can be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim symbolic power over public space, particularly given the increasingly constrained space for civic expression.

Keywords: Mural, Social Criticism, Resistance



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I. INTRODUCTION

Mural constitutes a branch of visual arts located on exterior walls, typically on surfaces facing or visible from the street. This placement renders the mural accessible to anyone at any time. Unlike visiting an art gallery, residents from all social strata can engage with the mural; even passing road users can view it, however fleetingly. Although audiences may encounter these works involuntarily, they nonetheless interpret them according to their individual capacity. It is precisely in this dynamic that mural functions as a medium for communicating messages to a broad public.

Mural, originally employed as part of architectural decoration, has evolved in response to the shifting social, economic, and political landscape. Today, many murals contain social criticism, with the issues they address closely tied to the societal conditions prevailing at the time of their creation. As Marxist Aesthetics holds, art can be profoundly dependent on its environment, both in form and in content. The mural of the early 2000s and the mural of today thus differ markedly, reflecting the changed circumstances of each period.

The muralist most famously associated with social criticism is Diego Rivera (1886–1967), a Mexican artist known for his communist ideology and membership in the Communist Party. Art forms such as murals can be instrumentalised for political purposes, as Walter Benjamin argued: technology in reproducing a work of art carries political implications. In the case of a mural, what deserves particular attention is its proximity to the public. A mural is placed in a public space, which inherently allows anyone to view, witness, or engage with it at any time. Mural can also be understood as an effort to bring art closer to the public, given that art was previously conceived as something accessible only to specific social groups. Contemporary mural, with its inherent characteristics, can thus be harnessed as a medium of propaganda with significant political impact.

Yogyakarta is renowned for a variety of distinctions, including its status as a city of arts and culture. As a city of the arts, its residents are accustomed to expressing their ideas, aspirations, and opinions through various artistic media, with visual art among the most prominent. Artists from diverse age groups seek to assert their presence and participation as urban citizens through this medium, including students and young people.

Mural, as a form of street art, has long been present in Indonesia, including during the Japanese colonial period. It may take the form of scrawlings, paintings, or a combination of both executed on walls along the roadside. Unlike commissioned works, street murals do not require permits from the government or property owners, which is precisely why they are classified as street art. Barry¹ notes that this question of permits has led murals to be categorised as acts of vandalism. They are also called street art because they utilise street-facing walls, placing the works directly in public space where

¹ Syamsul Barry, *Jalan Seni Jalanan Yogyakarta [The Street Art Road of Yogyakarta]* (Studium, 2008).

anyone passing by can appreciate them. The proliferation of this distinctive art form in contemporary Yogyakarta is particularly evident; murals can be found in virtually every corner of the city.

The proliferation of murals in Yogyakarta cannot be separated from Apotik Komik's role in the 2000s. Since then, murals have been produced by various groups of artists and individual practitioners to embellish the city. Before murals arrived, Yogyakarta was not devoid of visual displays; this wave of murals emerged to replace or supplement forms of visual expression that had previously consisted largely of graffiti. It was as though the era of graffiti had passed, giving way to mural. Since the *Sama-sama* City Mural Project, the mural craze has swept Yogyakarta and extended even to rural areas.

Several factors account for the receptiveness of Yogyakarta's local community to mural as an art form. These include the presence of established arts institutions such as the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI Yogyakarta) and numerous other art schools and studios throughout the city, as well as the legacy of prominent visual artists who were born or based here, including Affandi — who has a museum bearing his name on Jalan Solo — Hendra Gunawan, and Sujoyono, who co-founded Young Indonesian Painters in 1946 and People's Painters in 1947. Historically, Yogyakarta has been recognised as a city hospitable to artists, and this tradition continues today through frequent arts events of various disciplines, including visual art exhibitions, music performances, theatrical productions, and other forms of artistic expression.

The murals found in this city are remarkably diverse. Some are commercial in nature, serving as promotional media for cellular telephone products; others convey moral messages and local values; still others contain political criticism directed at both regional and central government. This last category is the primary focus of the present study, particularly in relation to critical responses to the rapid proliferation of hotel construction in Yogyakarta.

Artists endeavour to reconstruct their understanding of existing realities through their works. They channel their anxieties about environmental conditions, particularly those prevailing in Yogyakarta. The rampant hotel construction is viewed through the lens of artists who are also members of civil society. It is not uncommon to encounter murals that express artists' criticisms of the government or of those perceived as the elite. This phenomenon attracted the researcher's attention, as these artists take action by expressing their ideas and concerns through street art and murals.

Mural is perceived as a medium of resistance. Artists attempt to communicate their ideas and express their disillusionment with the government and private-sector actors as dominant forces in Indonesia's contemporary democratic system. It is important to understand that a mural is a visual display situated in public space, thereby endowing it with a social function. Just as murals were used during the independence era to ignite the spirit of resistance against colonialism, today they serve as a medium for resisting governmental hegemony and the capitalist system. Mural cannot be understood merely at the level of its visual content. There is an additional message the artist seeks to

convey beyond depicting Yogyakarta's water scarcity. Through murals, the walls along Yogyakarta's streets become meaningful; they transform into signs that seem to live and speak to those who pass by and witness them.

Through murals, artists have strengthened the movement opposing the rampant hotel construction that has failed to comply with proper procedures, under the banner of "Jogja Asat", which literally means Yogyakarta arid. Their identity as artists is constructed through the street art they produce. This work also raises public awareness of the problem that hotel construction, ostensibly aimed at advancing Yogyakarta's tourism industry, has, in reality, created hardships for residents, most tangibly in the increasing difficulty of accessing groundwater. This study fundamentally seeks to address questions concerning the development of mural as a medium of social criticism and how mural operates in synergy with social movements, examined through the case of "Jogja Asat." It further examines how a mural that expresses social criticism functions as an instrument of resistance for artists.

This study employs a qualitative approach utilising visual ethnography as its methodological framework. Ethnography "is perceived as a method for collecting particular types of data and thus as something that can be added, like the use of a computer, to different scientific procedures and programs". Visual ethnography, meanwhile, focuses on the use of visual documentation to describe the life of a community, whether in the present or the past.² The visual ethnography method was selected because this study takes murals as its object of inquiry, enabling the research to focus on photographs and images of murals. Through this method, the researcher seeks to describe and interpret the cultural practice of mural painting in Yogyakarta as part of a social movement and as a medium of resistance, using "Jogja Asat" as the case study.

The researcher endeavoured to collect data and information in a thorough and comprehensive manner regarding the phenomena depicted in the mural. Mural is a cultural practice of Yogyakarta's artists who voice their protest and criticism of the rapid construction of hotels in the city. Data were gathered through observation and documentation of murals in Yogyakarta, and the researcher interpreted the cultural practices evident in these visual art phenomena in public space by examining their relationships to social movements and other topics relevant to the research.

II. MURAL IN THE CITY OF ARTS

A mural is a form of painting executed on or applied to a broad surface, specifically a wall.³ The term "mural" is not a painting executed on canvas and subsequently hung on a wall; rather, the wall itself constitutes the medium. The word derives from the Latin *murus*, meaning "wall".⁴ In practice, murals are not confined to walls, ceilings, or floors;

² Theo Van Leeuwen, *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, ed. Carey Jewitt (Sage Publications, 2001).

³ T. Britannica, ed., "Mural," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/mural-painting>.

⁴ Merriam-Webster, "Immure," in *Merriam-Webster.Com*, accessed December 10, 2025, [merriam-webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com).

they are often found on other surfaces, such as rolling doors, corrugated iron sheets, roof tiles, road barriers, and similar structures.

Originally, murals were used to beautify buildings and other structures. Buildings where murals were commonly found include churches, indicating that murals served not only an aesthetic function but also a ritual one, given their placement in places of worship. Contemporary murals widely circulating in society tend to address the conditions of their surrounding environment; they do not emerge arbitrarily but in response to the ecological, historical, and sociological context of their location.⁵ Mural has particular objectives in critiquing social issues and cases, making social criticism the primary thematic concern through which artists communicate their perspectives.

Furthermore, a mural can be interpreted as a cultural practice of street artists inhabiting space. Space, according to Lefebvre⁶, is not limited to being understood as something physical but also encompasses the relationships within it, including the diverse cultural products present in any given space. Outdoor advertising, such as billboards, banners, posters, and other media, is part of the space used to promote products and services. Mural as a cultural practice of artists inhabiting space is viewed in terms of both form and content. Mural, accordingly, can be understood as a response to these commercial visual displays and as an effort to contest the encroachment of capitalism, which increasingly saturates every surface with advertising designed to provoke mass consumption.

In its capacity as a medium of social criticism, the mural occupies a position analogous to that of other art forms. Henri Arvon writes in his work, *Marxist Aesthetics*⁷, that Marx and Engels at times regarded art as fully autonomous, at other times as fully dependent on social conditions, and at still other times as an instrument of political action. These three positions correspond to the stages described by Walter Benjamin, one of the most significant Marxist theorists of art. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin argues that technological developments in the production of ever-newer works carry political implications for art itself. Previously, art was embedded in communities' ritual practices. During the Renaissance, coinciding with the emergence of socialism, a doctrine arose: *l'art pour l'art*, or "art for art's sake." This idea rejected the social function of art and any categorisation based on content. In this stage, art is said to be autonomous as existing solely for itself. Subsequently, the overarching function of art was inverted, no longer grounded in ritual function but directed toward political praxis. It is at this juncture that art came to serve the interests of society.

Regarding the theoretical perspective, Yogyakarta's status as a city of arts has provided a strong foundation for the development of murals in the city. The receptiveness of the local community is equally favourable, given that residents are already accustomed

⁵ Obed Bima Wacandra, "Berkomunikasi Secara Visual Melalui Mural Di Jogjakarta [Communicating Visually through Murals in Yogyakarta]," *Nirmala Journal* (Surabaya) 7, no. 2 (2009); Cia Syamsiar, "Bentuk Dan Strategi Perupa-an Mural Di Ruang Publik [Forms and Visual Strategies of Mural in Public Space]," *Brikolase* (Yogyakarta) 1, no. 1 (2009).

⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford (Blackwell, 1991).

⁷ Henry Arvon, *Estetika Marxis [Marxist Aesthetics]* (Resist Book, 2010), 13.

to artistic values as an integral part of their daily lives. Even traditional artists previously unfamiliar with mural art have become involved in this art form, as illustrated by the event titled “Tanda Mata dari Jogja” (Souvenirs from Jogja), in which local artists whose daily lives revolve around painting were invited to create murals around the Lempuyangan Bridge in 2008.

As Yoshi Fajar observed, despite mural being a relatively young vocabulary in the world of art and in the urban space of Yogyakarta, within less than a decade, the discourse and practice of mural had come to involve diverse segments of society in Yogyakarta and other cities across Indonesia. Artists aged 50 or older were invited to participate in this activity. These “older” artists, whose daily lives are deeply intertwined with painting, work across a variety of media: glass painting, theatrical backdrop painting for wayang orang performances, wayang kancil fabrication, moral illustration, and rickshaw painting.

Mural does not restrict itself exclusively to younger practitioners. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that those most frequently engaged in mural production are young groups who use it to voice their aspirations, express their anxieties, articulate protests, and give form to their dissatisfaction with prevailing conditions. It must also be noted that, as it has developed in Yogyakarta today, mural is not limited to those containing social criticism; several other types can be encountered.

As noted by Cia Syamsiar⁸, murals in Yogyakarta can be categorised into three types: those consistent with their surroundings, those inconsistent with their surroundings, and those interspersed with text of unclear meaning. Obed Wacandra⁹ further categorised murals in his research as: (1) murals for aesthetic purposes; (2) murals voicing socio-cultural conditions; (3) murals for commercial purposes; and (4) murals of a political nature.

The researcher identified several additional types of murals in Yogyakarta: murals depicting the diversity of Indonesian culture, murals by supporters of local football clubs, and murals that express social criticism. The following section presents examples of murals by type.

In the Indonesian historical setting, a mural was created on August 16, 2015, commemorating the murder case of journalist Udin, which had occurred 19 years prior. Udin, whose full name was Fuad Syarifuddin, was assaulted by unknown individuals and died three days later. The strong presumption is that the assault was motivated by Udin’s frequent reporting of criticism directed at local officials and government policies.

The case, which has remained unresolved after so many years, prompted a group of artists acting in solidarity to create this mural as a reminder to both the public and the government, as the party responsible for bringing the case to a resolution. The mural

⁸ Syamsiar, “Bentuk Dan Strategi Perubahan Mural Di Ruang Publik [Forms and Visual Strategies of Mural in Public Space].”

⁹ Wacandra, “Berkomunikasi Secara Visual Melalui Mural Di Jogjakarta [Communicating Visually through Murals in Yogyakarta].”

features a portrait of the deceased alongside several articles he wrote for the *Bernas* newspaper.



“Suluh Udin Mural” (Source: Photograph by the author, 2015)

This mural can be interpreted as a defence of human rights, in which freedom of expression is one of the fundamental rights of every citizen. Particularly for Udin, whose profession as a journalist required him to uncover the truth through information disseminated through the media, this right should rightfully be protected by the state. The presence of this mural today signals that the state has yet to fulfil its obligation to protect the rights of all citizens. Although the Udin case occurred during the New Order regime, it remains deeply regrettable that despite successive changes in government, the resolution of human rights violation cases has yet to be achieved. This mural can also be read as a warning to the government in power that civil society continues to await the resolution of human rights violations, such as those suffered by the late Udin.

Mural can also convey cultural or traditional values of Yogyakarta, as illustrated in the following example. This mural, located at Janti Bridge since the previous year, represents various types of court soldier uniforms. As depicted in the image below, each pillar along this bypass road displays a soldier in a distinct uniform. Road users can view these as expressions of Yogyakarta’s cultural richness, specifically that of the *kraton* (palace), as manifested in the diverse regimental uniforms of its soldiers.



Kraton Soldier Mural (Source: Photograph by the author, 2015)

However, viewed from a different perspective, this mural may carry additional meanings. It has been in place since 2014. It should be noted that between 2012 and 2013, Yogyakarta was engulfed in discourse surrounding its special status. This continued until Law No. 13 of 2012 on the Special Region of Yogyakarta was ratified by the President at the time, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The local government apparently deemed the law insufficient and undertook various efforts to reinforce Yogyakarta's special status, one of which was promotional engagement through media close to the public, including murals. Barry¹⁰ notes that as a semiotic phenomenon, space becomes an arena for the exchange and contestation of signs and cultural hegemony. The Janti flyover bridge occupies a strategic position at the intersection of major city roads — Jalan Solo and the eastern ring road — making it a thoroughfare for those entering or leaving the city. Given that Yogyakarta's special status also benefits the tourism sector, it is plausible that this mural promotes awareness of it among the general public and even Yogyakarta's residents.

This mural is located on Jalan Gejayan, specifically on the wall belonging to Yogyakarta State University (UNY). As shown in the image below, the mural depicts the diversity of Indonesia's ethnicities and cultures, executed on a wall approximately 200 meters long. Divided into several panels, each panel represents the culture of a particular region of Indonesia. For example, the panel shown in the image below depicts a culture identifiable by the house depicted and the buffalo. The buffalo is a significant animal among the Toraja people of Sulawesi, where the number of buffalo owned is a measure of wealth. The adjacent panel can be identified as representing North Sumatran culture through the ulos cloth depicted.

¹⁰ Barry, *Jalan Seni Jalanan Yogyakarta [The Street Art Road of Yogyakarta]*, 83.



Indonesian Cultural Mural ((Source: Photograph by the author, 2015)

Members of the public may not immediately recognise which Indonesian cultures are represented in the mural. This recognition would be more immediate for those who come from the regions depicted. Given that Yogyakarta receives a large number of migrants, the introduction of diverse cultures through such works is also valuable, serving as a reminder that Indonesia comprises a vast array of ethnicities and cultures, not only Javanese or Yogyakartaese.

Examining the image again, directly above the mural-covered wall is a sign reading: "Land owned by UNY; Posting of posters/advertisements in the vicinity of UNY's land is prohibited." The irony is self-evident: this wall is no longer a clean, blank surface but is covered in colourful mural imagery. It can thus be argued that the mural itself has become a device for preventing further unauthorised markings on UNY-owned property, and the wall has indeed remained free from unauthorised interventions. Borrowing Foucault's concept of the panopticon, the architectural design of a ring-shaped prison with a central tower capable of surveilling every movement of inmates in surrounding cells. Accordingly, it is argued in *Discipline and Punish* and in *The Birth of the Prison* that the panoptic mechanism organises each space to allow continuous and immediate surveillance.¹¹ This mechanism is similarly operative in the mural on UNY's wall. The panoptic element takes the form of the sign above the wall prohibiting the posting of posters or advertisements. Yet rather than remaining a clean surface, the wall has been pre-emptively covered with a mural depicting Indonesia's cultural diversity. The mural and the prohibition sign thus function in mutual reinforcement to preserve the space from further posters, advertisements, or unauthorised markings.

Another mural that the researcher encountered was on Jalan Kusumanegara. The PSIM club logo at the edge of the image, along with the accompanying text, reveals its

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage Books, 1995), 200.

identity. The predominant blue colour represents PSIM, which always competes in blue kits. The inscription “Tansah Marang Bungah Warisane Simbah”, which means “We are always proud of the club inherited (from our elders)” — expresses the pride of PSIM supporters, known as Brajamusti, toward their club. This mural can be read as an expression of the supporters’ enthusiasm. Their loyalty to the club is demonstrated through the mural’s blue colour scheme, characteristic of their group. The mural also functions as a territorial marker, given its proximity to Mandala Krida Stadium, PSIM’s home ground.



PSIM Club Supporters Mural (Source: Photograph by the author, 2015)

Furthermore, this mural seeks to assert the identity of the surrounding residents, who can be identified with the club. The mural reinforces this identity, communicating to outsiders that the area constitutes a stronghold of PSIM support without any direct interaction with residents or supporters. The community’s pride in the club is also evident in their willingness to publicly display themselves and their community as part of the club’s supporter base.

There are also thematic, yet critically oriented, murals, such as the one on the exterior wall of Kridosono Stadium. It is described as thematic because it was created to coincide with the “Groom Out Corruption Concert” held at Kridosono Stadium, Yogyakarta, organised to commemorate Anti-Corruption Day on December 9, 2014. As is widely known, corruption cases have proliferated in media coverage in recent years, from officials at the national capital to regional officials. This indicates that corruption remains pervasive, even in everyday life.

This mural calls on its audience to collectively combat corruption, beginning with the individual, by cultivating the habit of honesty. Honesty is regarded as a quality and disposition capable of countering corruption, given that corruption is closely associated with dishonesty and fraud. The mural also incorporates a large rat figure, a character frequently associated with politicians through the wordplay “poli-tikus” (politician/many rats in Indonesian), sending a message that politicians must embrace honesty — a commitment that the Indonesian public at large will follow, as expressed in

the phrase “ayo jujur barengan” (let’s be honest together). The mural can also be read as a message to politicians and officeholders in both the executive and legislative branches that society will support their integrity by practising honesty in their daily lives.



Anti-Corruption Mural (Source: Photograph by the author, 2015)

III. MURAL AND THE HISTORY OF RESISTANCE IN YOGYAKARTA

Yogyakarta, as a city of arts and culture, constitutes fertile ground for the development of mural art. The murals found in this city are not of a single type but encompass a wide variety intended for equally diverse purposes. Mural is employed as a medium of counter-hegemony against capital interests and the government, which have sought to occupy public space through the proliferation of outdoor advertising along city streets. Through their works, artists compete to offer visual displays that directly or indirectly constitute critiques of the cooptation of public space by outdoor advertising operators, supported by permits issued by the local government.

The emergence of mural art, including it as a form of contemporary art, cannot be separated from the upheaval in Indonesian visual arts in the 1970s, known as the New Visual Arts Movement (*Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru / GSRB*). The repressive character of the New Order government, as the ruling regime of that period, was also felt in the arts world, leading to the suppression of artistic engagement with political matters or critical voices embedded in artworks. A major transformation occurred when the New Order collapsed, after which many artists assumed the role of chroniclers of the period's sociopolitical turmoil. Mural was among the art forms that developed and enriched the discourse of Indonesian visual arts practice.

In Yogyakarta itself, where a large community of artists resides, murals expanded rapidly during the 2000s. In particular, since 2002, when the government supported the City Mural Project, artists affiliated with *Apotik Komik* and other art groups began decorating the city with murals. Before the murals, the city walls were densely covered

with graffiti and overlapping advertising posters. However, beyond being seen as an effort to “clean up” the city’s appearance of disorderly markings, murals can also be viewed as a medium of criticism against the mainstream visual displays dominated by commercial advertising, which manifests the hegemony of capitalism in Yogyakarta. The characteristic of murals, situated in public spaces and thus close to the public, has been leveraged to convey politically charged messages to society as consumers of this form of street art. Artists recognise that works displayed in public space cannot endure indefinitely, yet this awareness does not diminish their determination to deliver critique. On the contrary, it is precisely this transience that artists exploit to produce critical works continually.

1. Mural and Social Movements: A Case Study of “Jogja Asat”



“Jogja Asat” Mural – Right Side of the Road (Source: Photograph by the author, 2015)



“Jogja Asat” Mural – Left Side of the Road (Source: Photograph by the author, 2015)

While maintaining the aesthetic quality of their works, the mural artists in Yogyakarta affiliated with the Street Art Forum expressed their anxieties and concerns about the city's current state. As discussed previously, history has demonstrated that artists in this city, particularly visual artists, have long infused their works with political issues, dating back to the independence era. The same holds for mural artists, who imbue their works with politically charged messages and pour their protests against the government into this form of street art. With the support of media outlets expected to serve as amplifiers of actions that last only a day yet leave lasting traces, they aspire to have their voices heard by the government. More specifically, the intention is to educate the public that the government is violating the mandate entrusted to it by the people of Yogyakarta.

The debate over art — between the two major perspectives of “art for art’s sake” and “art for the people” — has persisted since the Old Order era. Lekra, as one of the major organisations of that period, rejected the Cultural Manifesto (Manikebu), which was regarded as an ideological agent of “art for art’s sake.” According to Lekra, art must take a stance, specifically, a stance in favour of the people. Art could no longer speak merely of itself but had to become an instrument for igniting the revolutionary spirit.

Artists thus became channels for popular disillusionment, which was subsequently expressed through mural art. Mural art consequently transcended the boundaries of individual artistic expression, carrying the broader anxieties and concerns of Yogyakarta’s people instead. These ideas were then packaged as a mural. The same dynamic applies to Jogja Asat. The artists involved in producing this mural were not themselves among the directly affected residents; however, witnessing and hearing the complaints of those around them, they could no longer remain passive. Their anger was expressed through satirical commentary rendered in the visual language of a mural. The choice of form, colour, and other material elements was therefore calibrated to the message to be conveyed through this street art.

Yogyakarta’s reputation as a city of the arts has positively influenced the development of murals there. The freedom to express aspirations, whether individual or collective, has also earned the city the epithet of a “mural city,” given how abundantly and easily murals can be encountered. This eventually gave rise to an Anti-Vandalism Law intended to reduce the visual clutter that was increasingly rendering the city’s appearance disorderly and unkempt, with markings everywhere. The choice of mural as an element of the movement cannot be separated from its characteristic as a public-space art form. This proximity to the public is precisely what artists have leveraged to select it as a medium for social criticism. As Walter Benjamin¹² observed, in the age of mechanical reproduction, artworks have drawn closer to the public — that is, art is no longer monopolised by and accessible only to the upper classes.

Art has thus transcended its former elitism and become accessible to society across all strata. Unlike painting, where audiences must travel to a designated location, murals can be encountered on the streets. Moreover, the language employed in murals,

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Schocken Books, 2007).

which is both textual and visual, is deliberately chosen by artists to be an accessible vernacular so that the message can readily reach those who witness it. Without requiring the extended contemplation that Benjamin associates with painting, the mural's simple, direct language reconstructs new realities and understandings among its audience about the dangers and adverse impacts of hotel construction.

The mural artists of Yogyakarta, the majority of whom are younger, participated in the Warga Berdaya movement to respond to current issues, including the Jogja Asat problem. Warga Berdaya (Empowered Citizens), a coalition of communities whose members no longer carry any identity other than that of Yogyakarta residents. They were predominantly younger-generation activists who took direct action to address the issues they also raised as demands. For example, they demanded that bicycle lanes be given attention and improved, and accordingly began making repairs themselves by repainting bicycle lane markings along Jalan Sudirman with whatever paint they could afford. The aim was to remind the government, as the party responsible for maintaining and upgrading existing facilities, of its obligations. Their works tend to be political in nature, challenging the government and capitalist interests. This political alignment is also what they hope will prove contagious for the audiences who encounter their works at Kewek Bridge.

Mural has thus ceased to be merely a component of a building or a wall embellishment. Upon examining its content, one discovers something more: the mural narrates social conditions and responds to them critically. The sensitivity of artists in responding to reality constitutes the basis upon which each work is created. The "Jogja Asat" mural was produced in response to the rampant hotel construction in Yogyakarta. The consequences of this construction, namely, the water shortages experienced by residents near hotels, constitute the reality that artists have introduced into the mural. The residents' disappointment and dissatisfaction toward those deemed responsible, such as the hotels and the government, are incorporated into the mural's substance.

Yogyakarta's recognition as a tourist city has led to changes in its social structure. The increase in the number of hotels resulting from the tourism industry in Yogyakarta has affected the city's spatial organisation and, indirectly, the well-being of its residents. Business operators who have built new hotels in the city over the past two years have largely disregarded the city's pre-existing social fabric and broader character. The community's resistance to these changes was manifested in the Warga Berdaya movement. Initially addressing general urban issues, this movement gained momentum through the concrete case of Jogja Asat, which originated in the lived experience of directly affected residents who had never experienced drought in their neighbourhood before the hotels arrived.

Mural became integrated into the Warga Berdaya movement because many mural artists joined it. Although those involved no longer carried their previous community identities but participated simply as residents, the resources each individual possessed as a citizen were deployed within the movement, including artists' capacity to produce mural works. Mural was also chosen for its proximity to the public, enabling it to serve

the collective objective of Warga Berdaya: to raise awareness among Yogyakarta's residents at large about the dangers posed by hotel construction to their living environment.

Viewing Yogyakarta as a (social) space, following Lefebvre¹³, entails attending to the diverse forms of cultural expression produced by its inhabitants. The production of (social) space cannot be separated from the social processes occurring within it. The interactions that take place within a given space are irreducible, including the various forms of cultural expression that emerge therein. The diverse visual displays present in Yogyakarta indicate that an ongoing interaction of values and interests is taking place. Rows of billboards, banners, posters, and other forms of outdoor advertising, featuring product information, event promotions, and political party or candidate messaging, compete for public attention on city streets. Their large scale inevitably draws the eye, particularly at night, when illumination draws attention to them.

Among the visual displays that must not be overlooked is the cultural expression that also constitutes part of the visual landscape of this city, Yogyakarta. Mural is one such expression. As a cultural practice, a mural can be understood as a form of expression and response to the activity of "inhabiting" a given space, since the issues it addresses are problems occurring in the space (location) where it is placed, even as it also frequently raises national issues. Mural is known as street art because it is placed on walls along roadsides, making it accessible to anyone at any time, even in passing. While these visual displays may appear negligible compared to outdoor advertising, they nonetheless compete with other visual displays for public attention.

Understood as a unified whole, a common thread can be traced through each component of a mural, including its images and texts, since each detail is interconnected and mutually supportive. Following the thread through all of the text and imagery in the "Jogja Asat" mural leads to a unified point: the drought occurring in Yogyakarta was caused by the proliferation of hotel construction in the area. Yet upon deeper examination, there is something further the artists seek to communicate through this mural at Kewek Bridge.

"Jogja Asat," translated into Indonesian, simply means "Jogja kering" — "Yogyakarta Arid." The mural extensively narrates the occurrence of drought caused by the construction of large-scale developments. But upon closer scrutiny, something further can be revealed: the issue is not merely one of construction but, more fundamentally, of the pervasive influence of capitalism that has infiltrated the governmental structures of Yogyakarta city and the other regencies within the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The government's pragmatic orientation, which sacrifices the social capital of Yogyakarta's people, has rendered this city, renowned as a centre of arts and culture, indistinguishable from other Indonesian metropolitan areas such as Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya.

The artistic community, as inhabitants of the city, occupies a distinctive role in the production of urban (social) space, namely through the artworks they create. The

¹³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford.

city's diverse visual displays drive artists to produce works, including those placed in the streets continually. The abundance of street works reflects a competition, both between artists and capital interests or the government, and among artists themselves, in the effort to occupy space.

Through the works they produce, knowledge and differentiation between and among artists are continuously reproduced. The hegemony of development pursued by the government as a means of "regulating" its territory is contested by a group of mural artists who regard the government as deeply pro-capital, evidenced by the granting of permits to outdoor advertising operators to place billboards and banners in spaces considered to be collectively owned by the residents of Yogyakarta. Beyond outdoor advertising, the occupation of space has also been pursued through the construction of hotels, ostensibly to develop Yogyakarta's tourism industry.

Beyond its interpretation as an effort by artists to reclaim space from the grip of capitalism through the occupation of public spaces by various forms of advertising, street art can also be seen as an effort by artists to occupy space from other artists. Artists fragmented by competing interests vie for dominance over space through their works. The overlapping and superseding of works can be read as a contest for territorial dominance in Yogyakarta. A work that endures longer signifies greater "power" than one replaced overnight. There is knowledge that accompanies a work and is continuously reproduced by artists for artists themselves; a knowledge that reveals to us that, within the world of street artists, a hegemony is perpetuated by leaving established works untouched, even when they have aged.

Through the *Jogja Asat* work, the mural artists affiliated with *Warga Berdaya* sought to transform the drought crisis experienced by residents affected by hotel construction into a work of art. "*Jogja Asat*" can be read as a tagline given its larger scale and central placement, and this discourse of *Jogja Asat* continued to be advanced by artists and *Warga Berdaya* as a whole as a critical discourse aimed at resisting the co-optation of space by capital interests and the hegemony of development promoted by the local government.

The *Jogja Asat* discourse was carried into cyberspace through social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other media, both those owned by individuals affiliated with *Warga Berdaya* and those representing the group or community as a whole. In the virtual sphere, the *Jogja Asat* discourse generated widespread engagement, typically through the hashtag #*JogjaAsat*, as had the #*JogjaOraDidol* (Yogyakarta Is Not for Sale) discourse, which had previously been rendered in mural form. Responses proliferated in cyberspace, expressions of support as well as criticism directed at *Warga Berdaya*'s actions on Facebook accounts and other social media platforms, including accounts belonging to Elanto Wijoyono, who had previously staged an action intercepting a convoy of luxury motorcycles on the northern ring road, and Anti-tank, a Yogyakarta muralist who is also a member of *Warga Berdaya*.

This is significant because the phenomenon demonstrates that the actions undertaken by artists, specifically by *Warga Berdaya* as a whole, generated discourse in

a new space: cyberspace. The responses observable were not limited to the physical blocking of sections of the mural but also encompassed comments of both positive and negative tenor on the pages where the actions were re-presented to the public through social media. Resistance has thus ceased to be confined to street actions or demonstrations of the kind prevalent during the 1997–1998 period, but also manifests through street art and, virtually, in cyberspace.

The artists' struggle against the co-optation of space is waged through the critical discourse they advance — none other than “Jogja Asat” itself. From the collective painting of a mural titled “Jogja Asat,” the action continued into the virtual spaces they created: the social media accounts of *Warga Berdaya* as a whole, as well as those of individuals in the movement. Whereas the response encountered in the field to the “Jogja Asat” action took the form of sections of the mural being blocked out. In the virtual sphere, discussion ensued, with supporters and critics of the movement meeting through comments on Facebook, Twitter, and blog pages used to disseminate this critical discourse.

IV. CONCLUSION

As has been discussed, the mural has long served as a medium of resistance, particularly to ignite collective resolve against dominant power. This has been true under colonial occupation, in the struggle to defend independence, and in resistance against repressive authority. Mural has also come to be used to contest hegemony, including the hegemony of development aligned with capitalism. The critical messages embedded in the mural are especially compelling because it is not merely an art form that brings pleasure or happiness to its audiences, but has become an integral part of a social movement seeking social transformation.

In the *Jogja Asat* mural, the issue foregrounded is the depletion of Yogyakarta's groundwater due to hotel construction. This issue gained public prominence when residents of Miliran, together with Dodok Putra Bangsa, himself a directly affected resident, staged a protest against the Fave Hotel on Jalan Kusumanegara. Residents felt that, throughout their time living in the area, they had never experienced such a drought (many having lived there since birth and now in their 30s, 40s, and even 60s). This issue was incorporated into the mural and became the movement's title.

This resistance is vigorously pursued by artists, although not all who produce street works do so with this conscious motivation. The abundance of works on the streets renders the city's visual landscape a kind of visual wilderness, in which advertising, event posters, critical murals, and other visual displays compete for public attention and for dominance over particular spaces. It is unfortunate that Yogyakarta, renowned as a city of arts and culture, does not provide sufficient expressive space for its predominantly young population. The result is an intensified competition for space that is inescapably political, involving both business and governmental actors, as well as artists. Resistance undertaken by artists is thus not only directed against the

commercialisation of public space but also against the hegemony of space occupation among artists themselves.

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