



Ruchin Soni. *Life in a Metro*. Mural. Distemper on wall. 9' x 20'. 2017. Image courtesy the artist. © Ruchin Soni.

# IN FULL VIEW

Artists and art collectives, often supported by state organizations and corporate clients, beautify public buildings and sensitise people about a variety of issues. **Kamayani Sharma** looks up from the streets in New Delhi.

In February 2016, artwork on the walls of Delhi's Lodhi Colony transformed it into India's 'first public art district'. Conceived and coordinated by St+art India Foundation, an initiative that has been organising street art festivals and similar events all over the country since its inception in 2014, the vibrant interventions were widely hailed. Artists from across the world convened for the two-month long festival to create their pieces on the open surfaces of the central Delhi neighbourhood, not far from the buildings of public administration that mark the city as India's capital. Vibrant and layered as some of the art is, the fact that street art comprises a curated experience in the seat of national power suggests that it has a decidedly different history in this country than in other parts of the world.

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In New York, where graffiti and, later, street art originated, the form was a backlash to urban blight and marginalization of communities because of the government's city planning schemes and a wider social context such as the Vietnam war and economic recession. Artist Henry Chalfant spells this out in his foreword to Cedar Lewisohn's *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*: "Street art, the natural heir to graffiti, is rooted in the creativity of the dislocated and alienated urban communities...in the second half of the twentieth century...inherits its spirit from hip hop, an autonomous subculture."

In South Asian cities, public space has always been far less regulated and somewhat untended, being the site of local advertisements, political slogans and religious iconography. Due to a long history of murals stretching thousands of years, many street artists in India inherit a tradition of wall painting. What constitutes graffiti in India might also be debatable – initials of young lovers on the walls of heritage monuments or promotional campaigns during election time are part of the commons. Though state governments have passed laws against the defacement of property, imagery and writing on the streets have been long-standing traditions. It is only in the past decade or so that 'street art' as a genre has emerged in metropolitan and Tier 1 cities. In Delhi and the NCR, the expansive geography and political urgency

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**Shilo Shiv Suleman.** From the series *From your strength I weave beauty*. Mural. 2016. In collaboration with the NGO Sewing New Futures. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Akshat Nauriyal. © Fearless Collective and Shilo Shiv Suleman.



**Yogesh Saini.** *Unveiling The Hidden Space.* Mural. 2017. Image courtesy Yogesh Saini, Delhi Street Art. Art Design inspired by the Norwegian street artist Martin Watson.

might have initially made it a crucible for contemporary, self-conscious street art. Artists like Daku and Boss have been making their presence felt since the late 2000s, and more recently, a number of individuals, collectives and organisations engaging with the form have emerged in the area; a talk at Apeejay Arts, Delhi, in March 2015, titled, ‘Street Art in India: Then and Now’ signalled that street art had become a part of the mainstream discourse on visual culture. The Delhi government seems to have cottoned on – the NDMC, DMRC and CPWD have lately been commissioning street artists to give a facelift to some of their buildings.

Hanif Kureshi, a Mumbai-based artist who co-founded St+art Foundation in 2014, cleaves street art from its more anti-establishment ancestor, graffiti, “Street art and graffiti constitute two different kinds of forms and ecologies.” He affirms the assertion about the anti-establishment ethos of the latter, “Graffiti is illegal and non-commercial but street art is more positive. It’s about beautifying public spaces with all the permissions in place.” In 2011, Kureshi, a former graffiti artist who switched to street art, documented the “handpainted type” of sign painters across India. This is somewhat analogous to the stylized lettering that defined graffiti in its original North American incarnation. For the past three years, St+art Foundation has been organizing festivals in Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru and aims to make art accessible to a larger audience.

One of the first projects by Delhi Street Art (DSA), a collective that was started four years ago by Yogesh Saini, was at Lodhi Gardens – painting garbage cans to discourage people from littering. In 2014, DSA partnered with the NDMC to revivify the capital’s Shankar Market.



**Yogesh Saini.** *Pranayam – Step by Step.* Public art. 2017. Art Design by Yogesh Saini. Image courtesy Yogesh Saini, Delhi Street Art. In the foreground are *Sprouts* by **Vibhor Sogani.** 2015.

It often provides support to other programmes and artists seeking permissions within Delhi, and is associated with over 400 artists from around the world. Apart from organising open events involving amateur and professional artist volunteers, St+art and DSA also execute work commissioned by government bodies, corporate clients and NGOs in metros and smaller cities. These entities make odd bedfellows and underscore the stark difference in ethos between graffiti and street art.

There seems to be an element of social entrepreneurship in the ecology circumscribing street art, and a joint rhetoric of beauty and mass sensitization recurs in conversations about it. Both Kureshi and Saini assert that a part of their aim is to make art accessible to a wider viewership. Anpu Varkey, known for her pictures of cats in South Delhi neighbourhoods collaborated with German artist Hendrik Beikirch on a mural of Gandhi at the Delhi Police Headquarters. She says, “The deficiency of museums makes this medium important. What is to be observed is the public knowledge of such art forms, from the rickshawallah to a policeman.” This promises some of the same political thrills but is neutralized by the market-oriented culture in which it is being nurtured. When asked about the inclusive nature of DSA’s collaborative projects, Saini says, “For our commissioned pieces, the artists have to first prove themselves.” This is at odds with the graffiti that South Delhi-based artists like Daku and Boss came to be known for a decade ago, more in line with the impulse to ‘tag’ and claim the city by artistically scrawling one’s name on public walls. Graffiti as a textual response to dominant socio-economic forces like big government and capitalistic

*The non-profit sector offers street artists looking to remain true to the spirit of the form an opportunity to combine their craft with the spirit that generated it.*

urbanization was initially about disenfranchised folk marking their territory. This attitude appears not to have taken root in India, with any subversive spirit being tamed by the adoption of the less offensive genre of street art.

By themselves, creative acts like art-making can be deeply political, allowing for a dialogue between those in power and those without it – using democratic means like public walls to make a point allows for all kinds of groups to do this. While St+art and DSA have worked on commissions by municipalities and public transport corporations, individual artists and independent collectives juggle between autonomous works and commissioned pieces. Many artists straddle the various options available in the world of public art, the commercial and the socio-politically responsive. An example of such an artist, Ruchin Soni trained as a muralist and has to his credit the creeping figure on a flyover near ISBT. “That’s for myself but if you work to support yourself you have to take up commissions: these can be government ones or commercial ones.” He has worked on projects as diverse as painting the Dhaula Kuan Metro station food court and the OLX office in Gurgaon; he has also worked with a village community in Chhattisgarh as part of a UNDP initiative.

The non-profit sector offers street artists looking to remain true to the spirit of the form an opportunity to combine their craft with the spirit that generated it. Working with alienated communities to enable them to take charge of their environs through art reveals the political power of creative expression. Shilo Shiv Suleman describes her work with the Fearless Collective that she founded as moving towards “a creative common goal”. She took to street art after the Nirbhaya rape case in 2012 and conceives of the form as something that evolves out of interactions with communities through immersive and participatory processes like workshops. She represents a position that some artists have taken to resist the commodification of public life while also practising legally. “We always take the consent of the people whose walls we make our art on. This can sometimes be state or local authorities, but we would never do a commissioned piece.” While Suleman’s Fearless Collective has worked with sex workers in Delhi, artist Harsh Raman encountered the possibilities of street art through the prism of gender injustice. In the past he has spoken about how, when he was in the process of registering his company, Harkat Studios, the company registrar did not accept



Shilo Shiv Suleman. From the series *From your strength / weave beauty*, 2016.  
Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Akshat Nauriyal. © Fearless Collective.



I WEAR  
MY BODY  
without  
SHAME

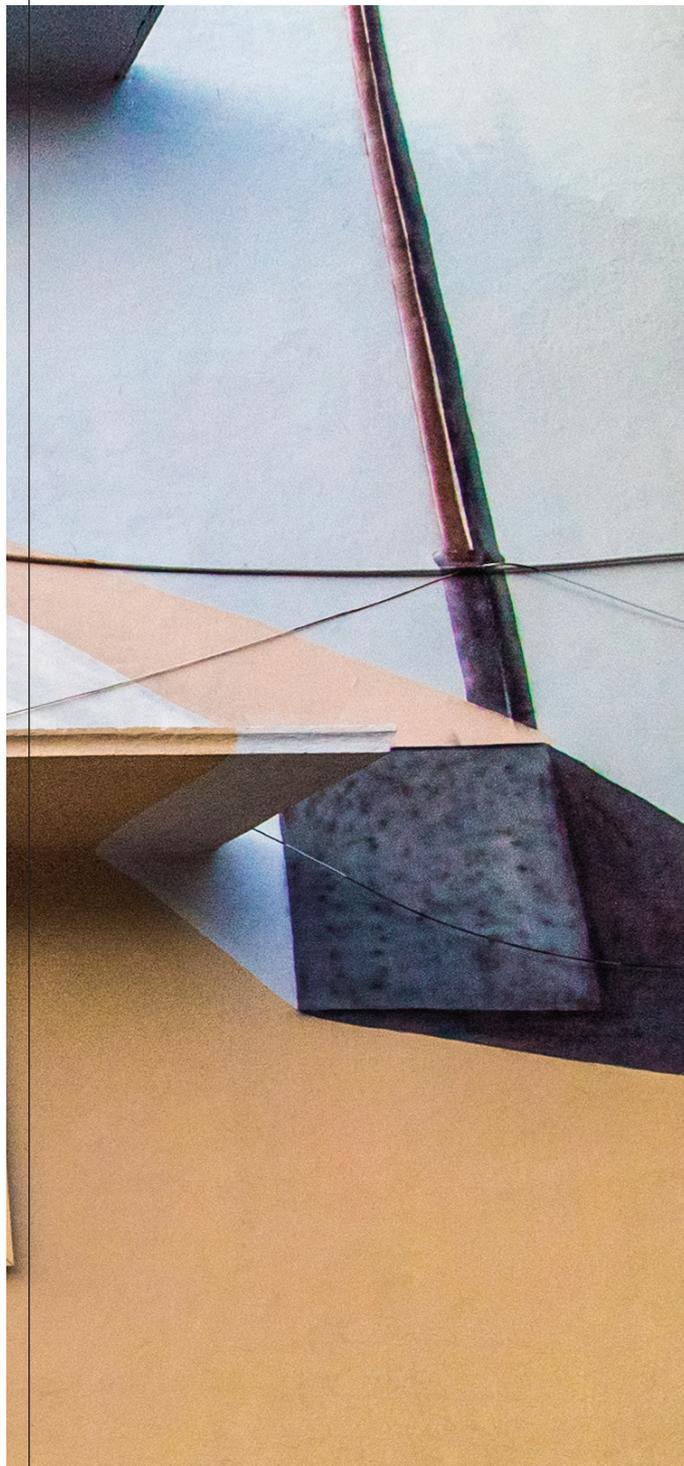
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1 in 9  
HOLA AFRO  
FRIDA  
Outside the lines

We are  
taking back  
OUR STREETS



**Avinash and Kamesh.** *The Tourist.* Mural. 2016. Photograph by Akshat Nauriyal.



his mother's name. In response, he collaborated with an NGO and a German all-women graffiti crew to paint Delhi's red light district, GB Road. His works and Varkey's are also part of Lodhi Art District, apart from works by crews like the Aerosol Assassins Crew.

Lodhi Art District itself has come about as a result of a collaboration between St+art, the Central Public Works Division and the Delhi Urban Art Commission. The DUAC was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1973 to "advise the Government of India in the matter of preserving, developing and maintaining the aesthetic quality of urban and environmental design within Delhi". Exponents of the street-art-as-enterprise model, such as DSA's Yogesh Saini feel that government patronage "doesn't mean that there's no freedom, it just means more responsibility". The institutionalization of a potentially mischievous artistic praxis is represented also by the way in which Daku's career has progressed over the past ten years. One of his works, titled *Time Changes Everything*, a stunning piece involving the play of light and shadow on mirror letter cut-outs, is at the Lodhi Art District too, part of a legitimate space. During a time when the Central government's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is at its most vigorous, the alignment of artists with the state gives one pause. The usual problems of male domination and elite over-representation mar the landscape of street art, divulging perhaps that the streets don't belong to everyone in the same way.

An important facet of the street art movement in Delhi and elsewhere in India has to do with the materiality of the form – the technologies and labour it is constituted by. Kureshi points out how, prior to the late 2000s, the sort of aerosol paint needed to render art on walls was available to few privileged artists. This might be a reason why it took such a long time for it to emerge in India. Some works are elaborate enough to qualify as gallery-grade installation pieces: Daku's *Time Changes Everything* made extensive use of Google SketchUp, a 3D modelling program to help understand shadowplay, while Beikirch and Varkey's *Gandhi* had the painters going up and down in an aerial lift. In addition, the physical act of making art in full view of the street and with media not meant for easy eye and hand co-ordination, is daunting. Soni, Suleman and Varkey draw on their training as painters to do this, using perceptual tricks and lots of practice to transfer the image from their minds to a draft and then onto a wall. Then there are the problems with Public Display of Artistry in India. For Varkey, the most important skill is endurance, "to heat, cold (difficult working conditions), shaky ladders and scaffoldings, and contending with the fact that sometimes there is no place to relieve yourself." This is not always unrewarding. "This vertiginous feeling of scaling heights and not knowing the outcome becomes the biggest allure," she adds. /