

Some guesswork on a cultural expression: Signs on the wall

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All pictures by Svann Langguth, taken between Jan and August 2018



Cruise the Panglima Polim road was rough in those days at the end 2017. The MRT was still under construction, and the road under the elevated railway was a bumpy asphalt mosaic. The stores gave a scruffy impression because it was Sunday and most of them were closed: untended house fronts as urban scenery. The sheet metal shutters are covered with tags, an endless line of calligraphy, and some more elaborated graffiti add color and inspiration to the dusty environment.



I had a visitor from Berlin. We were floating through the light traffic in South-Jakarta, listening to the track Mango Drive to create a kind of harmony between our tropical location and the sub-basses of my old EURO-1-Diesel.

My nephew is spraying Berlin and while traveling in Peru last summer he was eager to look for street art in Lima, so I made some stereotype comments about global urban life style and naturally my friend from Berlin pointed to a 1up-Graffiti explaining that this is done by a Berlin crew in quite a few countries now. They do document their international actions on-line.

We talked about the city partnership of Berlin and Jakarta. A few years ago during a so-called German Week in Indonesia, there were events in Jakarta on street culture too. Some graffiti artists from Berlin's Hip Hop-Nation and from Jakarta painted a skyline of the landmark monuments of both cities as a spray job in the German Embassy. They have done the same motif in the Pondok Indah elite housing area; I don't know whether it was as a test before or just for fun after the event.



When Buddha is in you everything is full of signs and meaning...

Looking more carefully for the writings on the wall, I became kind of obsessed looking and documenting street art work and over time I became aware of some remarkable trends of spraying in Jakarta. While driving through this megalopolis it was first the amusing phrase "young and useless"

klab" which caught my attention and I found it in quite a few places. Less obvious, but even more numerous, there was another club: "teler klab" ("teler" means to be drunk in Bahasa Indonesia).





I like short meaningful phrases commenting on the city life. In 2011 somebody wrote an ironic „Life is beautiful“ at the brute concrete entrance of an underpass in South Jakarta and once I saw a young garbage collector who had „My final job“ written on his lorry.



Street Colors

The rear of trucks in West-Jawa is also often used for pictures and phrases. A collection of various styles can be found in my publication „71 Truck Backside Paintings in the Sunda Region“ at archive.org. These paintings and writings on trucks are in my opinion street art too, a kind of moving street art though.

There are a lot of unfinished and hastily made throw-up and bombing, heaps of tags everywhere. Most graffiti are not very elaborated and shadow lines are wrongly set. It seems that a kind of bulky round style is dominant, at least in South Jakarta. There is one showy flower design which sticks out.



Lifting my eyes from a delicious Nasi Campur and Sirsak-Juice I found these nice vertical tags close to Blok-M.



It was my nine year old daughter infected by my search for graffiti who found this 1up remake, a truly basic imitation. But at least it is evidence that the original has some local impact. And there is also this remarkable little explanation about 1up for the local community.



It is quite difficult and risky to take pictures of graffiti because the constant flow of traffic makes it nearly impossible to stop on the main road sides. So one Sunday morning I took my Honda Tiger to stroll around Kebayoran Lama and collect some of the paintings I hadn't had the chance to document so far. On this expedition I actually met for the first time a "street painter" in action. It was a Pak RT with some communal workers. They were using a wall full of impressive graffiti as background painting murals for the ASIAN Games 2018.



You have to be fast to document graffiti, some are already painted over the next day already. Most graffiti of this article are gone already. But the crews are also fast and re-spraying the same spots maybe just to prove their endurance.





To understand what you see is one thing but to see what is missing is even more difficult

Astonishingly there are nearly no graffiti or tags which refer to ethnicity. Maybe in North-Jakarta you can find Chinese characters. But there also no Arabic letters which is remarkable because of the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Indonesia and the widespread culture of Arabic calligraphy. I found two possible explanations for myself.





The first is street art as a global movement is not connected to religion. Political messages can be religious but the radical Islamic movement in Indonesia does not use graffiti as a mean of agitation. It seems to be too anarchistic and that is not what Habib Risiq and his friends from FPI want to be perceived by society. Indonesia has a more “civilized” way of expressing opinions publicly on the street that is by Spanduk. You find them anywhere for promotion but also for socio-political statements.



The second is that Indonesia has a deeply political indoctrinated taboo called SARA, which is an acronym derived from Suku (Ethnic), Agama (religion), Ras (race), and Antar Golongan (social class). SARA means that you should not denote on one of the four aspects when criticizing or accusing or even when reporting news to avoid tensions bursting out in this multi-cultural and stratified society. So you also don't see much spraying on the walls of churches, temples and mosques.



The youth gangs in Jakarta may be ethnically formed but they are normally not referring to that ethnic identity for their outward profiling. The normal reference is the motor cycle type or the area where they are active. Of course there has been Pachinko (Pasukan China Kota), the Chinese Urban Troop, a famous motorcycle gang in the 70's and 80's consisting mainly of Indonesians with Chinese origin, there is Laskar Bali and there are the infamous rockers Satudarah Maluku (One Blood Moluccas). The last ones are actually originally from the Netherlands and had just recently (2012) founded a chapter in Indonesia.



Another gang calls themselves Bad Boy or sometimes the main leader has a nickname which can be of pop cultural influence as is the case with the infamous inmate Irene "Kill Bill" Tupessy, who liked to fight with convicted terrorists in prison brawls in 2013.

Also acronyms are rare which seems to be in sharp contrast with the Indonesian love for language and word plays: There is the Kamus akronim, inisialisme dan singkatan by Agata Parsidi which in its second edition from 1994 was a 673 pages strong dictionary, kind of funny related to this essay is that the publishing house was Pustaka Utama Grafiti.



Sahur on the Road as youth culture

The overwhelming dominance of tagging as a territorial marking behavior was not really catching my attention until I became aware of many variations of "SOTR" tag all over the city. Also in my

photographs the longer I look at them the more SOTR I saw...





SOTR is the abbreviation for „Sahur On The Road“. Sahur is the term for the last meal before dawn during the Islamic fasting month, and giving or sharing this meal with somebody outside, normally someone poorer who can't afford to buy some food is a good deed for a Muslim and was a common practice in some Jakarta areas. But it was also a common excuse for young man to be outside until dawn.





During Ramadan 2018 in Jakarta and other bigger cities the territorial competition between groups sharing Sahur or just hanging out on the nightly street sharpened savagely, fights broke out and one night a young man got killed by a knife attack. The “SOTR rame bareng” could count as a call for peace among the groups. But the Governor of Jakarta acted and forbid SOTR, because it became a clear code for youth gangs. The fatal attack came perhaps from the motorcycle gang Jepang. This brings us back to the naming of gangs: Jepang means Japan in Bahasa Indonesia, and here it is an acronym from their main territory the Jembatan Mampang (Mampang bridge).

Other tags come from high school pupils naming their SMA. Fighting between these groups has been common and the SMA tags were among the first graffiti that I saw in Jakarta during a visit in the 90's. Football fans like to leave their team name in city when on outward games, and brawls between the supporters are dangerous, sometimes deadly.



Tembok Bomber as a multi-dimensional artwork

Thanks to the input and comments from Dcever41 of the SFK crew from Berlin I started to actually read the graffiti. But standing in front of this empty lot in Kartika Utama was just overwhelming. It's not because of the partly impressive single works which you may like or not, it is because the longer you look the more you see.





Painting, drawing, marking and tagging on walls is a widely common habit, known in many cultures, traditional and modern. It is also one of the oldest human expressions we know. Wall paintings in Spain and France dating back 40.000 years ago, there are some in Sulawesi, Indonesia, which may be even older, and just recently 73.000 years old criss-cross ochre color lines have been discovered in a cave in South Africa.



This is not about comparing graffiti with cave drawings but putting signs on the wall, either as territorial or personal marker or as a real painting maybe with symbolic and ritual function until today varying greatly in the degree of artistic and aesthetic value. You can surely say it's the (stone) age old question whether it is art or scribbling. There was a French scientist who wrote a book about the cave paintings of Lascaux. In one chapter he tried to assign artistic talent to the Stone Age drawings and in the result it was about the same percentage of true artists among the painters as there is today in our society, and probably the same might be true for graffiti street art.

