Reading Hong Kong Neighborhoods: Street Art as Storied Matter

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Abstract

In a contemporary iteration of the world-as-text paradigm, one of the newer and most tangible theoretical turns is referred to as material ecocriticism. What material ecocriticism offers is another way of conceptualizing and "reading" cities like Hong Kong and thinking through the dynamic feedback loops that intertwine street art, literally as "storied matter," and neighborhoods, as place-based storied communities. Reading street art as storied matter offers new explorative ways of utilizing the lens of street art to read the ideation and creation of a neighborhood's history, present and futurity. This article considers my own work creating a mural in Wan Chai as a study in the practicalities of such an approach.

In a contemporary iteration of the world-as-text paradigm, one of the newer and most tangible theoretical turns emerging is what is referred to as material ecocriticism. What material ecocriticism offers is another way of conceptualizing matter and its relations, namely the (dis)connections between us and the natural (as ecologically determined) environment which exert influence on each other. Accordingly, all matter becomes "storied" which can then be "read." While the locus of this paradigm is far afield from the urban environment, "reading" street art and the urban environment of large cities like Hong Kong offers an opportunity to think through and with the dynamic feedback loops created by street art as active matter with agency within neighborhoods. As these are new, fluid areas of research and thought, this is not an exhaustive article, but rather an exploration and practical illustration of these ideas

which I hope will pique the interest of readers and inspire further research.

It must be noted that street art in Hong Kong is an unusual research topic, and it is not yet widely respected or understood by the broader public. However, street art, as political graffiti, has been gaining attention—some of it even internationally due to the increasing and fervent political unrest. Street art, more generally, has been gaining traction not just because of the local political unrest, but also due to the efforts of non-profits and other art-oriented organizations in the city. In addition, there are an increasing number of government sponsored initiatives based on the realization that street art (interpreted narrowly as authorized murals) can enhance neighborhoods and be turned into revenue via tourism while also being used as an economic totem of cosmopolitan development for Hong Kong's official government branding as "Asia's World City" ("Asia's World City at"). My attention in this article will be focused on reading street art as a material agent reflecting and acting upon and within neighborhoods in Hong Kong. I suggest that street art is a material source of and opportunity for narrative as community dialogue which can aid in the construction, development and affirmation of neighborhood identities and communities in Hong Kong. It is my hope that by exploring what it means to read the city in terms of street art as living matter that is part of a neighborhood, new avenues of thinking can be paved. To do so, I will be taking a material ecocritical approach to explore the interplay of street art (storied matter) and neighborhood (as place-based storied communities established in connection with their material environment). I will briefly explore (1) what material ecocriticism is and how it will be used in this article (perhaps somewhat contradictorily as applied to the urban landscape) (2) map the materiality of neighborhoods in Hong Kong (3) define street art as used in the article (4) explore my own involvement in the creation of street art as the creator of an authorized mural in Wan Chai and finally conclude what can be

gained through this ecocritical materialist way of thinking about Hong Kong—its street art and neighborhoods, materially and immaterially.

Material Ecocriticism

Material ecocriticism is the result of the on-going cross pollination of the fields of ecocriticism and materialism. For the purview of this article, I will only be using a basic interpretation of what is a more nuanced and ever-evolving discourse, and as such, I will rely on two of the leading proponents of these theories to create a working hypothesis: Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. Their edited volume *Material Ecocriticism* is dedicated "to those who matter" which I draw attention to because a crucial if underplayed aspect of this discourse is the importance of a sense of reenchantment (à la Jane Bennet, whose work they frequently return to) wherein whimsy, creativity and play can revitalize our ability to think creatively in and about the world around us. This is something I deem essential to my own work as an educator and creator.

Iovino and Oppermann posit the basic conceptual argument of material ecocriticism in one sentence: "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be 'read' and interpreted as forming narratives, stories" (1). This article will be considering street art as matter in a network of agencies, stories and of course, other matter, which collectively create neighborhoods. In the first chapter, Oppermann proposes that through material ecocriticism "we can read the world as matter endowed with stories" because "material ecocriticism speaks of a new mode of description designated as 'storied matter,' or 'material expressions' constituting an agency with signs and meanings" (21). Iovino and Oppermann further extend this argument and clarify that all matter, even the most seemingly inert, has agency and therefore, "generative dynamism" out of which "reality emerges as an intertwined flux of material and discursive forces, rather

than as a complex of hierarchically organized individual players" (3). This, they affirm is part of a larger worldview in which the reality we live in is a "hybrid, vibrant *living* world" the result of which being that we would (ideally) recognize the agentic influence of matter as opposed to focusing on the influence we can exert upon it (3).

As the "eco" prefix implies, Iovino and Oppermann's research readily lends itself to ongoing explorations and considerations of the nonhuman and the ecologically determined environment, however, this article will explore thinking through the materiality of street art as a material manifestation of story and its active relationship with the urban, built and social environment surrounding it. This is potentially at odds with the general thrust of material ecocriticism, however, in that material ecocriticism extends to all matter and inclusivity in this regard seems to be one of its hallmarks and an assumed source of strength, there is no reason it cannot apply to the urban. It should also be considered that Iovino and Oppermann seem to grant matter a kind of innate agency. However, if matter has a kind of innate agency as they seem to subtly assert, built environments may then constitute multiple layers, dimensions, distortions or disruptions even of the material agency originally present in matter as a result of the processing matter undergoes to be included in the built environment. Basically, urban matter has been altered and arranged by human agents which potentially could alter its original agency. Iovino and Oppermann do not address this, but they do refer to a "'middle place' where matter enmeshes in the discursive forces of politics, society, technology, biology, bodies are compounds of flesh, elemental properties, and symbolic imaginaries" which can be found "performing their narrative as statues in a square [...]" (6). This seems to assert that street art, here as a statue, performs a story amidst discursive forces but there seems to be no consideration to any of the matter's agency being altered by its material manipulation. While there is not room to pursue this line of thought here, it does raise interesting

questions about the potential problems of accessing the stories of matter—especially heavily processed matter of the urban environment.

It should also be noted that this manner of thinking has overlap with the study of spatial semiotics which examines the relationship between the physical environment, including visual data, and its inhabitants in the production of culture and society. In "On the Spatial Semiotics of Vernacular Landscapes in Global Cities," a 2011 study of "visual data" across the world (including Hong Kong) by Jerome Krase and Timothy Shortell, they summarized the relationship as this: "Urban spaces are filled with signs of collective identity. In the physical environment, architectural details, commercial signs, and graffiti, among other things, signify the flows of people and culture" (371). The focus of this study is on charting changes in these "signifiers" like graffiti which act as passive or closed indicators. Through material ecocriticism, I will extend this line of thought further than examining the passive vernacular landscape as an indicator of culture. I will not be focusing on reading street art as a passive, closed or inactive "sign," product of culture or signifier of change, or as in the above study—of globalization or "glocalization," but as an active agent that is exerting its own agency as part of a non-hierarchical, matter inclusive, understanding of the flux of a neighborhood.

This kind of thinking aligns with Harold Bloom's description of why we read at all; Bloom asserts that it is because "Shakespeare speaks to as much of you as you can bring to him. That is to say: Shakespeare reads you more fully than you can read him [...]" (28). While Bloom focuses here on literature, I extend this argument to all art, in this instance street art—seeing it and its potential as an active agent in our lives (in so much as we allow it), however, as Bloom hints, its influence extends perhaps even more than we are aware of. Iovino and Oppermann utilize a quote by Cheryll Glotfelty from her introduction in *The Ecocriticism Reader* where she also relates literature to materiality. The quote they use is this:

"literature does not float about the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact" (6). The equation of the material to reading is not that strange when we consider that the text and the reader together create the circumstances necessary for the reader to be able to access the text and the text to access the reader; it is the relationship that makes it work and in terms of materialism, that is what matters.

However, Glotfelty's quote seems to draw attention not to literature but to the immaterial which is in many ways the location and/or means through which matter interacts. It is interesting to note that the word "immaterial" does not appear in their writing. In fact, if you search the entire edited volume, it is only to be found in a few footnotes, leading readers to the conclusion that immaterial things are just that: immaterial. Afterall, they do not exist if everything is material, resolving any mind/body dualism and quietly burying the "ghost in the machine." It is bold to posit a concept without a binary opposite—especially when there seems to be an endless propensity to think binarily in contemporary discourse. Iovino and Oppermann even refer to binaries in their writing, namely the nature/culture divide. In some ways, it resembles an attempt to define a shadow without access to light, but perhaps this just belies their commitment to the kind of web of relations that this paradigm produces.

Interestingly, the word "city" does not appear in the volume either. This is interesting in a theorem which aims to apply to everything, when most of the world's population is urban; a trend which is only set to increase as populations expand and the "eco" environment diminishes. The lack of discussion around urban materiality is perhaps not so surprising as their concerns are under the "eco" umbrella which speaks to a specific genre of environment. However, cities must appear more aggressively and obviously material as they are "unnatural" assemblies of building materials, etc.

Iovino and Oppermann's conception of "storied matter" is however useful in considering the very concept of a "neighborhood." To speak of neighborhoods is already to speak of story. Neighborhoods are rich webs of interrelationships, matter and of collective, cultural and place-based stories. One could even go as far as to define a neighborhood as the matter and conceptual story of an area and its constituents (or inhabitants as there must always be room for significant variations of story). Neighborhood identity is also constructed from a more overt top-down approach as in the case of "place branding" or the development of a "brand story" for an area if we consider the matter from the view of the private, public and government agencies which market and promote certain areas for tourism and investment purposes. This genre of place branding tends to embrace aesthetic elements as assets with an eye to the utilization of creative placemaking, including street art, to further relate and underpin the area's brand story. It is important to note that it is the imaginative power behind and the mutability of the story to change and reimagine spaces that make placemaking work. The physical environment as a whole is also by and large determined and mediated by the powers that govern the area which control urban planning and building regulations and so on, and can be read as indicating the larger interests of the governing body which exerts influence materially in this way. Keeping this in mind, it is clear that a neighborhood is far from simply being a geographic, physical or material location, or a single idea, or a historical set of data.

While the word "neighborhood" implies a physical location, there is also the presumption of a shared conceptual narrative regardless of its "factual" accuracy. A story is factual in this regard simply if it is believed to exist. These neighborhood narratives evolve over time and have a symbiotic or even parasitic relationship with the material location, its inhabitants and their relationships depending on the positive or negative nature of the story, its effectiveness and impact. As such,

a neighborhood is more than its constitutive buildings and/or green spaces, it is the relationship amongst the material and immaterial parts and/or the conceptual story of the inhabitants' fluid relationships to those spaces and each other as influenced by the perceived history and projected futurity of those places. In this way a neighborhood can be read as Iovino and Oppermann's non-hierarchical "flux of material and discursive forces" (3). Reading the built environment in this way, reveals that the seemingly dead, inanimate and/or inarticulate matter of buildings or roadways can and do exert and reflect influence on neighborhoods and thereby can be read as "living" with them. This relationship can be read, reified and/or revised through street art the potential of which is the primary consideration of this article.

The Materiality of Hong Kong in Context

Hong Kong is a bustling and densely populated city with a high cost of living which ensures that simply put, a large portion of the population's time is spent at work. The urban landscape reflects this work ethic and emphasis on economic development and is accordingly one that is designed for efficiency. According to the Census and Statistics Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) government, in 2019 there were approximately 7.5 million inhabitants living in the city. Hong Kong has been struggling with an ever-increasing land shortage while the population size continues to increase year-on-year ("Population"). In 2017, the Chief Executive appointed a government task force called the "Task Force on Land Supply in HK" (2017–2019), to assess the housing and land shortage. The task force reports the land and housing figures thus: "Of the total land area of 1,111 km^2, 24.3% (270 km^2) is built-up area, with the remaining 75.7% (841 km^2) being not-for-development or non-built-up area consisting mainly of country parks, wetland, reservoirs, fishponds, etc." ("Preamble"). According to these statistics, 7.5 million people live in just 270 km^2, which, for example, if

evenly distributed, would yield a minimum population density of roughly 27,778 people per square kilometer. Given these material circumstances, immense pressure and strain are exerted on the built and green environments to provide for such a dense population. This in turn exerts extraordinary influence on the types of neighborhoods in Hong Kong and the opportunities for street art. It is not surprising then that neighborhoods in Hong Kong are by default, largely built environments and as such heavily encoded with signs of both the literal and metaphorical varieties.

The high rents coupled with a desire to cater the wealthiest mainland tourists allow the largest business chains to dominate the urban landscape and duplicate themselves all over the city. This helps to lend Hong Kong a kind of visual uniformity which is reinforced by Hong Kong's skylines, in particular the public housing which reflects this economic utilitarian outlook with its practical cement-and-tile high rises which tend to appear in multiples of ten or more exact copies of the same design. The long work hours and intense pace of living, coupled with the persistent housing shortage and the high-density of living, make it is easy to see why the most common style of architecture is driven by function rather than aesthetics, and may contribute toward a general feeling of apathy towards art and artistic expression, or an awareness that these are luxuries few can afford in the city.

This has been changing in part thanks to Tung Chee Hwa, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 1999, who launched an initiative to brand and position Hong Kong as "Asia's World City" in his policy address ("Asia's World City"). While this branding is primarily focused on convincing businesses that Hong Kong is an ideal place to do business, it also boasts of the city's cultural industries and venues which the government has worked to develop including the West Kowloon Cultural District, which some local artists criticize for being dedicated to the development of the *business* of art, treating art as a fungible commodity, rather than developing local art and

artists for their other-than-pecuniary, or immaterial value (Chan 55). The government further describes Hong Kong as a "creative powerhouse" citing "more than 135,000 practitioners engaged in fields ranging from design and fashion design to publishing, interactive games to animation and comics, advertising to architecture, and music to film and TV production" ("Asia's World City at"). Hong Kong officially embraces the arts as evidenced by the large upscale events hosted locally: the annual Art Basel Hong Kong Fair, the Hong Kong Art Walk, the Asia Contemporary Art Show, and the Affordable Art Fair in addition to a myriad of galleries, art museums and frequent auctions held by both Sotheby's and Christie's. However, for many in the arts community, this official acceptance and promotion of art often excludes street art. Researchers on graffiti in Hong Kong conclude that "[g]raffiti in Hong Kong is neither officially awarded artistic value nor taken very seriously, thus hindering both the art scene and policy-making" (Chan 59). The business of art is very dominant in the

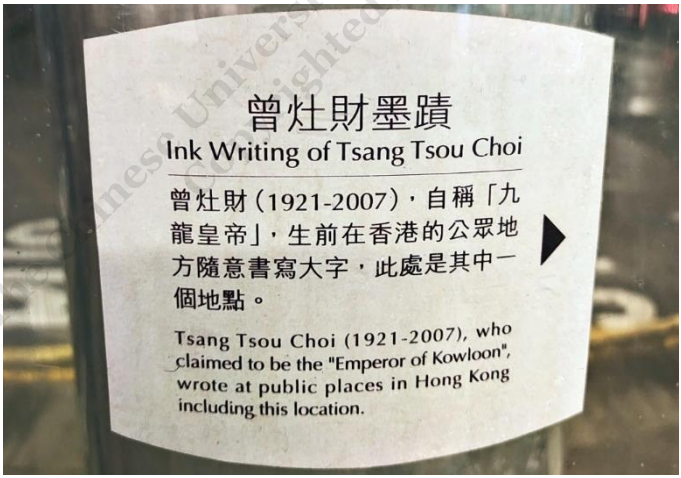

Figure 1. This photograph shows a close up of the official plaque located on the side of the pillar seen in Figure 2 which explains "The Ink Writing of Tsang Tsou Choi." Photograph by Stephanie Studzinski.

city and prominently displayed; however, many describe the government's attitude towards graffiti as indifferent unless it is political. Even the famous Tsang Tsou Choi (曾灶財), also known as the "King of Kowloon" or Choi Suk (1921–2007), who is Hong Kong's most well-known graffiti artist, has not escaped erasure via street cleaners and through a general indifference on the part of the government. A local graffiti artist called Radar is quoted

Figure 2. This photograph shows the last remaining fully intact work by Tsang in an urban public space. It is located in the Tsim Sha Tsui harborfront next to the iconic Star Ferry. Photograph by Stephanie Studzinski.

saying: "When the government protected Choi Suk's work, they described it as writing on public space. They don't really call it art or graffiti. They have actually no idea of what they are protecting" (Chan 57). This is in reference to Tsang's work which is on a pillar by the Star Ferry and is protected by plexiglass installed by the government due to the international (rather than local) recognition Tsang received.

It is also notable that there are no "legal" or "free" walls in Hong Kong, which is to say there is nowhere one could legally create graffiti, the most common form of street art, without the express permission of a property holder. This means that when illegal street art is made, it must be done covertly, quickly, and usually off the beaten path. This also means that there is less room for legal street art, and the physical space available is limited. The available space for graffiti in Hong Kong is increasingly diminishing, and some researchers describe the situation thusly:

> [...] such space is increasingly diminishing not only because of the geographical limitation of the territory itself, but also due to governmental urban planning practices. It is not only street artists or graffiti writers who are marginalized from the use of public space, but the ownership of public space by the majority of people has also been exploited by both the authority and private property developers. (Chan 46)

They conclude that government attitudes towards graffiti in Hong Kong are made manifest in the physical environment which effectively limits graffiti as well as other forms of street art.

Street Art as Storied Matter

Street art in particular has the ability to reach us in unexpected places and ways due to its ability to surprise us with its proximity, location, form and content. Through the lens of material ecocriticism, street art can

be understood as the storied material expression of neighborhoods and/or visual dialogue which reinforce, circumvent or redefine pre-existing narratives. Street art, like "environment," is a term that at once seems obvious and yet, oblique. Their meanings are similarly expansive and all encompassing; especially through the lens of material ecocriticism where there is no distinguishing between matter and environment. By and large, street art is material. It is the addition of materials in any form, usually utilizing paint, paper, stickers, yarn, cement or clay to aesthetically alter the physical, social and storied environment. In this regard, street art is in part defined by its relationship to location: namely the "street," which marks if not its physical location, its origins as in the case of street graffiti sold in galleries or which has passed into immateriality, existing solely digitally or in other derivations. Street art is an embrace of the materiality of the city. In Nicholas Riggle's "Street Art: Transfiguration of the Commonplaces," he recognizes the materiality of street art when trying to arrive at a conclusive definition, writing: "Our definition should entail the material requirement: an artwork is street art only if it uses the street as an artistic resource. (I will often say that artworks that satisfy this requirement make a material or artistic use of the street)" (245). Taking a similar tack, in "Street Art and the Nature of the City," Peter Bengsten discusses street art and nature in the urban environment, but with an ecological focus. Bengsten limits the definition of street art to "artworks that are created or placed in public space, or are visible from public space and are perceived as unsanctioned" (125). Bengsten clarifies that "public space" also includes private spaces that appear public and that whether or not artwork is sanctioned is not as important as the perception that it is unsanctioned. Part of the significance of defining street art in relation to public space is that it speaks to the essential agency of street art.

The street in all its materiality is where street art lives because streets are in a sense the largest outdoor art gallery. They offer the opportunity and ability to interact

and visually communicate with the public within public spaces. The significance of public space has been well established in urban planning, however, in Hong Kong it is interesting to note that there is no actual publicly owned space. All land (with one exception[1]) is leased through the Chief Executive of the HKSAR on behalf of the People's Republic of China. A recent study on graffiti in Hong Kong clarifies the situation as this:

> In Hong Kong, space never belongs to the public, but non-privately owned space, legally defined as "leasehold" land, belongs to the government and people who can pay for owning a space. According to the Community Legal Information Centre, almost all land is owned by the People's Republic of China. However, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong has the power to lease and grant state land to the public for ownership for a limited time. (Chan 54)

This is significant when we think about reading the materiality of the city because Hong Kong is literally a place of borrowed, shifting, contested and perhaps even moribund identities given the evolving political situation. Hong Kong's identity is often described based in its materiality: a fragrant harbor, a port city or a fishing village; while others invoke larger, abstract and immaterial concepts: a global city, a special administrative region, a British ex-colony or Asia's World City.

For Bengsten, the more unsanctioned (and therefore ephemeral) street art appears, the greater opportunity it has to surprise viewers and interrupt the everyday "and increase their awareness of their surroundings" (126). I think this relies on assumptions that need not be made

1 The exception is a piece of land upon which St. John's Cathedral was built. Please see "Piece by Piece: Understanding Graffiti-Writing in Hong Kong" (Chan) or the Community Legal Information Center (HK) for more information.

about the reader and their biases regarding how artwork might be perceived. Even the most playful, innocent or naive street art, which may appear to be sanctioned, has the capacity to surprise. Bengsten's statement is reminiscent of Darko Suvin's famous definition of science fiction as "*the literature of estrangement*," meaning that it is marked by an estranging quality that challenges the everyday and separates readers from it (15). However, as with Suvin's definition, this kind of thinking unnecessarily limits the viewer and makes assumptions which are unnecessary and unknowable, mainly: what content is *universally* estranging. I do similarly think that increasing the awareness of relationships within the neighborhood as a whole and active engagement are ideal functions of street art, even though I would not go as far as to define it as such in deference to a more descriptive and inclusive approach. Due to spatial constraints, I will be considering only one instance: my own mural in Wan Chai.

Storied Matter in Wan Chai Neighborhood

This section utilizes my own experience as a street artist to illustrate, from a hands-on perspective, the agentic influence of matter as it relates to material ecocriticism and its implications for Hong Kong neighborhoods. I have been a painter under the pseudonym of Elucious for over twenty years—my artistic expression is best described as possessing a pop-surrealist style which embraces bright colors and other-worldly lifeforms to create new landscapes for my creations and viewers to inhabit. I create by the ethos of materialism: I intend viewers and my creations to interact and to explore each other. "Elucious" is a hybrid word which encapsulates my own whimsical style and consists of the words elusive, delicious, and *lux*, which is Latin for light and is every painter's most significant tool or, at other times, challenge.

In 2019, I participated in a street art festival organized by HKwalls, a nonprofit organization that gives street

artists opportunities to create murals and other street art and plans creative events to involve the community within a particular area with the aim of transforming and enhancing neighborhoods around Hong Kong. The festival was also organized in coordination with Design District Hong Kong, a three-year (2018–2021) creative tourism project which was part of a place-making project to create as "open-air design district gallery" in Wan Chai and Sham Shui Po areas ("Creation").

According to material ecocriticism, the reader is not the only variable; so is the author that produced the text. In the same way, the role of the street artist must also be considered—they publicly make matter, or rather transform, reassemble or even disfigure it. Material ecocriticism is an obvious inspiration for me because the first thing an artist does is prepare their materials. Materials are active participants in the creation of any artwork. As any beginner quickly discovers, a cheap paint brush which leaves bristles behind and a paint that dries four shades darker or lighter can quickly ruin any effect and potentially hours of work. In this regard, the first law for artists is know your materials.

Moreover, the materiality of the neighborhood itself must be considered, and may, as in my case, exert its influence before any art production even begins. As soon as I had been assigned a wall, I went to measure it, but was forced to delay while a dog finished urinating on it in order to take the full measurements. The wall's rough texture, coupled with grime and urine posed considerable challenges because in my usual work I take great care to prepare and manipulate my canvases. Like most traditional painters, I prime and sand my surfaces until they are smooth to ensure an optimal level of detail and depth can be created. However, on the wall in Wan Chai, I had to accept the environment I was given and adapt to the surroundings instead of the other way around. Instead of preparing and shaping my canvas, my work was now being defined and shaped by the properties of the environment which I could not alter. Painting in the street also forced one to engage with the material world

by exposing the artist to the changing environment. One of the many challenges, in addition to the physical strain of painting on ladders for long hours, was the weather: it rained unexpectedly and intermittently. On at least one occasion, I was forced to watch from a nearby eave as freshly applied paint ran down my mural undoing hours of work. In addition, using the sun as my sole source of light meant that the lighting dramatically changed as I painted. Additionally, the only ladder that the sponsor had access to which could reach the topmost part of the mural was mysteriously stolen in the night. To make matters worse, I was using an unfamiliar paint which I quickly and frustratedly realized had a significant color shift, making it two shades lighter when dry. To further complicate matters, the "bucket" paint was only available in five colors: red, blue, yellow, white and black. In contrast, spray paint, which I quickly observed was the preferred method of the other street artists, was available in around 50 different shades. As someone who paints by hand, I was at a significant disadvantage as my methods were obviously more time consuming in terms of application and mixing my own shades. Fortunately, I favored bold, vibrant colors and was able to mix a fair variety. Ironically, because I took the entire week to paint, I was able to interact more with the neighborhood.

Since I was selected to paint on a school wall, I knew I wanted to make a meaningful piece of art that would speak to young people in a positive way. I imagined these youths walking by every day and wanted something that could catch their eye in different ways and offer differ levels of engagement. In contemplating my mural, I reflected on how street art is the biggest public art gallery and how art can affect people if they let it. This idea of an art gallery for all became the driving idea for my mural, so I decided to create a kind of surrealist gallery, complete with its own observer to demonstrate how one is to engage with art, or how one is to be engaged by art and be materially drawn in.

I designed the work based on the material environment—the angles from which it would be viewed,

the lighting it received at different points in the day and how to maximize its impact due to its location on a busy street corner. I settled on the idea of a kind of "pop-up gallery" where framed art would appear on the wall and a pop-surrealist passerby would stop to peer in the frames and subsequently be altered by and find themselves within the framed art. This idea particularly appealed to me since my mural was also in a thoroughfare in which hundreds of people passed through every day. The passerby I painted is a creature who has chosen to stand on a cardboard box. The box is an important element because I wanted to blur the lines between what is real and what is art. There were many cardboard boxes piled next to the nearby trash and recycling bins, making it possible that this creature has pulled one aside in order to peek into a framed painting. This was also why I opted to keep the color of the wall the same as the others nearby. I wanted the surreal "gallery" to merge with the everyday. I even incorporated a vent into the design to make the surreal creature seem more real and three-dimensional by painting it over the vent and thereby locating it outside the mural.

The mural consists of six framed images, a pop-surreal creature standing on a box looking in the frames, and a ribbon that connects them all. The creature is hollow and consists solely of a ribbon that contours some of its perceived surfaces. This ribbon then also weaves into the frames as the creature's ribbon hands disappear into a central piece of the framed art. This ribbon then playfully emerges and withdraws into and across all the frames until it finally emerges in the lower left corner from a drainpipe. I chose to paint a drainpipe to lend material realism to the painting because the urban environment was characterized by its many vents, drains and pipes. Three of the frames bear the repeating circular statement that "Art is Life is Art is…" To make the fusion of art and life concept even clearer, I included an homage to René Descartes's attributed adage *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) which the creature has focused its attention on. The creature has thought itself into being; it

is the creature's interest in art and its environment that enables it to find itself within and through art. The creature undergoes a process of "becoming" through its engagement with and awareness of its surroundings. The creature is enacting what I intend for human passersby to do: to stop, think and engage with art so that art can engage with them.

Figure 3. This photograph shows the mural in progress and the community of artists and neighborhood residents interacting. Photograph by photographer Daniel Murray, used with permission provided by HKwalls.

As I painted, I also got to know the neighborhood of Wan Chai more in terms of the "storied matter" that Iovino and Oppermann describe. I saw the same residents and passersby and they would stop and chat with me about my work. In addition, there were also tours being run and many international tourists who had come to the city to take in the festival and other street art in Hong Kong. They were highly inquisitive, asking: What is it? What does it mean? How did I come up with the idea? I was very touched by one gentleman who was on his way home with two heavy bags of groceries and stopped, put his bags down, and watched me paint. He took time out from his busy daily life and heavy burden

to engage with the transformations happening around him. This is the ideal effect of and response to street art.

Figure 4. This photograph shows the completed mural from an opposing perspective. Photograph by photographer Daniel Murray, used with permission provided by HKwalls.

Conclusion

While the literary theory of material ecocriticism offers numerous insights for better understanding the creation and appreciation of art more generally, the implications regarding the essence of neighborhoods and the function of street art are especially poignant. Material ecocriticism emphasizes the agency of all matter within a shared narrative; that is, things, materials and people have a place within the web of relations that make up a neighborhood. In fact, a neighborhood is "storied matter" and the sum of its parts—art/observer, reader/text—constitute the material manifestation of a shared story. Street art is more than a timeless or dislocated artistic expression because it is deeply rooted in the conceptual narrative of a neighborhood, in which the history and story, of a place and its people, as well as the materiality of the environment are central active elements.

Notwithstanding the unique context of Hong Kong, where art is largely commercialized and conformity is highly valued, street art invites those in the neighborhood to reevaluate their relationships with the urban, built and social structures in which they live and work and play and potentially, the role and significance of art in their own lives. Seeing street art as "storied matter" encourages one to "read" Hong Kong's neighborhoods afresh as a text that also reads the reader, to consider the agentic influence of all its materials in its various forms, and to acknowledge the voices that contribute to their vibrant stories.

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