

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Life of Indian Street Artists outside Jehangir Art Gallery, Kalaghoda

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ABSTRACT

Deciding to be in a non- digital industry, stemming from a less privileged background can have its own repercussions in India. The aim of this project is to understand the struggle of young artists of India, from the non-digital industry, who from a less privileged background. This study aims to gain their perspective on to how they began their journey and why they chose this path. The Primary focus is the challenges faced by them, their motivation, what they want and expect from their future. The objective of conducting this study will be to understand and hear out their stories, map out the journey and have a casual interaction with them and find out if they were aware of the uncertainties of their career. The study is based on the people who are selling art outside Jehangir art gallery, at Churchgate, Mumbai. This will be a qualitative research project and the method that will be used is case study method with in-depth interviews. 3 interviews will be followed which will be my basis for the analysis and findings. The forum of art will be painting and sketching in any given form. I will be visiting the given location to conduct interviews and engage in a semi-informal chat to gain a more abstract and general view of their life. Their location being an irony in itself and is a reflection of elitism. The prediction of this study is, how it is not their incompetency in art that forces them to sell outside of an art gallery itself but their socio-economic circumstances as well. This project will narrow down on the struggling artists in context of the Indian mainstream expectations. The use of this study can be made to get an insight into the life of artists that are not in the limelight, often overlooked and are extremely underappreciated. Another important aspect that this study aims to examine is the gender of the people sitting outside the art gallery. Even though the presumption would be it is male dominated, the entry of females in the ‘struggling artist’ domain would concur a different story altogether. The relevance of the project is to study the Indian artists who chose the life of struggle and hardships despite the low priority art market in India. There is immense talent in India in various art forms but the channels and opportunities to portray them are very narrow. The proceeding concern for the struggling artists , usually from the lower class or even middle class would be to choose between earning a stable income with certainty of life usually to support their family or follow their passion. Art in India is either very underrated or is only appreciated in the elitist forum. As I presume in context of my study, one has to have a certain kind of privilege to fulfil their artistic passion without making any sacrifices.

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INTRODUCTION

“A **street artist** is a person who makes art in public places. Street artists include portrait, artists, caricaturists, graffiti artists, muralists and people making crafts.” Street art has been around for a long time and it gained popularity in the late 70’s in The United States. Modi (2016).

Although Street art is largely associated with graffiti it actually included a wide range of approaches to art in any form; from yarn bombing to a mural painting. What defines a street artist is by creating art in the public domain. Street art has been traditionally used as a defiance to social and political opinions, but has spread to express personal expressions and also to make a living. Being a street artist can have its upsides and downsides, the better part of it being , it gives an independent voice to the artists without external interferences usually from a contract or authority. As they work outside the institutionalised domain, they have much more control over their work as compared to an artist tied to an institution or an organisation. The same reason of not being associated to an institutions, the major concern is poverty. Choosing art, a career is unpredictable and can be termed as a risky business. (Irvine, M 2012) defines it as “It’s a community of practice with its own learned codes, rules, hierarchies of prestige, and means of communication”

Street art is widely prevalent in India but also underappreciated at the same time. Within the last decade, street artists have been gaining popularity mostly through graffiti work and creating murals. Apart of the main stream street art, in Mumbai we see street artists almost everywhere. From singing in the local trains ,painting on the streets to flash mobs on the railway station. Mumbai offers a vibrant spectrum of street art if one looks for it. Being a fast-paced city, smaller details are often missed out on. India holds a great potential for art , but the mainstream jobs and careers tend to overshadow the raw talent. People migrate in hopes of finding a n opportunity to fulfil their dreams. The city that offers more opportunities also offers a life of greater struggle. Towse, R. (1996).

Art is always considered in the elitist realm, a luxury than a necessity, although the artists would say otherwise., Selling art on the street versus selling art in an institutionalised gallery definitely changes the prospectus of the selling price. Hence the street artists, who also can be called the struggling artists have to do

with selling their work at a significantly lower rate than it would have in a gallery itself.

My study is set towards interviewing the street painters outside Jehangir Art Gallery ,Mumbai and analyse my hypothesis that **Peering into the artistic realm has also to do with connections to the right people and luck than it has to be do with the art independently**. The study will investigate their background, struggles and motivation for choosing their way of life. Their opinions on the irony of selling art outside an art gallery will be analysed and discussed. Furthermore, I will be discussing their thoughts on the contemporary Indian artists like S.H RAZA , M.F. HUSSAIN who contributed majorly to the society and also made an international appearance. I will discuss their influencers in life. The study will be proceeded with no prior assumptions and biases but will set out the discussions as it takes place.

Art does not sell just the material but also the ideas and emotions that come with it. the question arises if the artist is content with the audience, if they are able to understand their work. This usually arises in abstract and conceptual art which solely in the material form does not gain much importance. The jehangir art gallery at kalaghoda ,Mumbai was established in 1952. It is one of the most prominent and renowned art galleries in India. The works of S.H Raza,M.F Hussain, Ram Kumar , K.K Hebar and many more of the initial Indian Contemporary Artist's works have been exhibited here. There are multiple exhibition halls and it holds about 300 shows annually of various artists. Jehangir art gallery majorly falls into the elitist realm and one has to go through a series of submissions, applications that is assessed by a special booking committee of senior artists and experts to be accepted. Due to a large pool of applicants, there is a waiting period of 3 years for their work to be published again. I will have analysed how artists have been taking to the street reclaiming the public space and using the city as their canvas. (jehangir art gallery).

Being an artist in India is usually not widely encouraged in the average middle-class household as it bears the uncertainty of the future and financial instability. Even if there is a pool of artists, they are encouraged to follow commercial arts to find a secure corporate job that lays a safety net within the artistic frame. Graduating in an art form also does not completely guarantee a smooth future. There is always a choice to be made between and 'following your passion'. As art peers into the elitist realm, struggle with poverty is an inevitable part of life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Artists are predominantly being recognized as entrepreneurs and agents for social change, thus making these individuals integral to community change and development. Artists hold great responsibility, power and ability to make change by expressing their views through the medium of art. (borghini et al 2009)

Street art has bloomed in the cities and have been gaining popularity for many reasons, mainly being expression of social issues. Street art has been seen through various perspectives, "*A natural expression that exercises a collective right to the city, and by others, it is seen as a destructive attack upon an otherwise clean and orderly society*". According to 'White' in tiffany (2012) there has been growing tension between the two extreme outlooks on street art as being socially threatening and on the other end sparking cultural and artistic questions. Although looking at street art from a cultural perspective is more viable than through a crime related lens of which the arguments do not stand on concrete grounds and are based on superficial fears.

Tiffany (2012) explores all relevant disciplines pertaining street art including geography, anthropology, sociology, urban planning, philosophy, architecture, and art.

But creating street art is not always a smooth work as it lays in the public domain there can be resistance found among the public as Tiffany (2012) says the artists have problem even while working within the system. This is because of the negative stereotypes connected to the concept of street art as it encourages '*drug deals*' and '*hippies*'.

The berlin wall in Germany is one of the beautiful examples of how art can bring together people from all over the world. It is filled with magnificent street art and is one of the greatest sights of the world. It also holds the devastations and death berlin has experienced throughout the years. The graffiti art stands as a resilience, to creating an artistic impact on the people passing by. When the Berlin Wall was still standing, the western side boasted an impressive display of graffiti, including personal outbursts, political slogans, posters, paintings, and attachments said Ladd in Tiffany (2012)

GRAFITTI AND STREET ART

Graffiti is one of the branches within the street art. The most popular and known form of street art is graffiti and murals. Although the concept of street art is far more wide and subjective, often relying on various factors like the geographical location, its message and how legitimate it is, There are multiple facets to what is defined as art itself and even then it is solely objectives and relies on the viewer's perception as personal opinion or collective ideologies.

Graffiti and street art can often be misjudged as one another , swaying into each other's realms, Their differences are not generalizable or easily delineated Tiffany (2012)According to Dickens in Tiffany , "It is important however, to remember to not reduce this understanding to a forced graffiti/street art binary, because while these art fields represent quite different visual cultures, they also have many connections and overlapping characteristics".

STREET ART : OVERVIEW

The concept of art and its representation has been changing over the years. The environment which it is presented in sets a tone of its background. Since the late 1960's street art has gained popularity as a medium of expression of freedom. The concept of creating on a street , in the public domain speaks art itself. The street art started as a voice against capitalism and poverty which brough it to the streets from the elitist realm accessible only to the niche crowd. The history of street art driven by political and aesthetic ideologies in constant cross-cultural hybridization as quoted by (Gastman, Rowland, and Sattler 2006; Rose and Strike 2004) in (cherry Jr., Andreson et al 2010). The art forms can be seen in conflicting, contradicting and sometimes overlapping forms of the history of our art culture cumulating into a new form. But the problem being according to(borghini et al 2009) is the commercialisation of the art in the act to claim public space eventually turns into the capitalism they reject in the first place. *"what is still missing from conventional service scape inquiry is insight into noncommercial (or countercommercial) ideological place-making that invites people to suspend, or at least modulate, their object position"*

Cresswell views the use of streets for art quoted by Renee (2012) as , *"Historically, public spaces have not been an automatic or guaranteed public right. They have only been made public because someone takes the space and makes it public"* space has to be created for art going against the expected norms and away from the authority to have the liberty of creative expression. This tends to get lost in the 'niche' 'elitist' realm bounded by contracts and limitations to the freedom of expression.

Perception of public on artists

As we see the perception of artists is changing from adjectives associated to ‘genius’ and working solely in isolation, the artists are now bringing the art in public, opening up and making it much more accessible. In a pilot study done by (Leonard and Skaggs, 2017) in the United States, they researched how the artists were viewed in their respected community, the public opinions and perceptions in relation to the policies formed for the artists affect the creation process and the execution of art by the artists. There has been drastic changes as “Shifts in demographics, advances in technology, and expectations for social interactions are contributing to the disruption of the extant paradigm (Novak-Leonard et al., 2014), and the policy paradigm for arts and culture that will emerge after this punctuated change remains to be seen (Toepler, 2013).” The results of their data show that there are signals that the general public wants artists in their local community to be self-employed or self-funded, which dovetails with the artists working as entrepreneurs and civic problem-solvers. Reinforcing the root reason of art to be perceived boundless and non-contractual. *“The semantic meaning, artistic significance and financial value of an object could alter significantly as it crossed borders, whether real or imagined, while moving through time and space”*

ART MARKET

The market for art is shaped by various factors like social, political, geographical and historical contexts and it keeps changing over time with the simultaneously changing economy and the institutions around it. How art was perceived changed in the nineteenth century with the industrial revolution, the social and political change as well as the increase in the wealth among the average middle class consumers that gave more power directly to the common people instead of the role of state and art as art representatives. Fletcher and Helmrich (2019) they also stated further that *“The museum, with its implicit social contract of preserving and presenting works of art for the public, symbolically represented the end point of mobility as works of art presumably entered collections in perpetuity (although in practice deaccessioning occurred regularly).”*

Art being subjective, the power to define what art is and what its worth is can fall into a particular type of group, usually the niche crowd. Street art is out of the niche class realm, usually used for social, political freedom of voice. But it does not only limit to that but street art is taken up as a serious medium of earning a livelihood by the poor artists as well like in France, Berlin, Cuba, Conklin (2012). *“Although tastes differ between individuals and between social groups, there exists an almost universal underlying stratification of high and low art and of art versus non-art in society.”* Abbing, H. (2002).

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative piece of research that uses in-depth interview as a tool for data collection and takes on a case study approach. I conducted in-depth interviews with 3 artists outside Jehangir Art Gallery at Kala Ghoda, Mumbai. All 3 of the respondents identified as male. I approached the artists by taking rounds through the pavement where their art was exhibited and took a keen interest in their work and slowly started up my way towards a conversation. Initially I posed as a potential buyer and even bought one of their art works to start a conversation. The aim of the study was to interview the artists and get to know about their journey and life background. Since this is a delicate topic and understandably not everyone would be comfortable opening up and giving out personal information to someone, they just met some time ago, I used the snowball sampling. I conducted the interview by using an audio recorder on my phone, so that I could be present in the moment and engage with the respondents. I started recording after asking for their consent. After conducting every interview, I headed home and transcribed the audio recording.

I conducted an interview a day, and got another reference for the next day. Data collection was conducted over the period of 10 days. Once I got to know one artist, I got another artist to agree to be a respondent for my research project. This transition was simple as I was overheard taking the interview and one of the artists was interested to tell me his journey. When I was interviewing one respondent, he called his friend nearby (who also was an artist) to talk about his life. Since I was interviewing one respondent and going in depth about his life, I could not abruptly start taking another respondent. After I waited for my respondent to return, I completed the first interview. But unfortunately, as I had to leave due to constraints of time, I could not interview his friend who seemed very eager to talk about his life and even showed us many of his work pictures. I had promised him I would be back in the next two days and even decided the timing, as he is not a regular there. But unfortunately, I fell sick and had to postpone the interview by 5 days. As I had no other means to contact him, I asked the people around him and coordinated with them. As I was walking through the lane searching for the next respondent, I happened to make eye contact with one of the artists

and he gave me a warm smile and called over to see his work if we liked any. He was selling bookmarks painted by him and also some small paintings. I bought one of his book marks to start a conversation about art and then lead the way through the interview.

I went for the interview with my friend as I was a little unsure about the interview. One of the respondent went off track and it was difficult to bring them back to the topic. The sequence of the questions got mixed up . after the interview I realised I did not ask 1-2 questions. Mid way of the conversation called his friend to talk and then left. I sat through the talks of his friend and then waited for my respondent to return. Although I did not get to record the other respondent as he started talking and I did not wish interrupting him, fearing he might get startled and refuse talking. Hence post the interview, I immediately sat on a bench nearby and recorded myself talking about the interview so I would not forget the important details. The conversations lasted between 45mins to an hour. After conducting my first ever interview, I got a hang of how to go about with it. hence my second interview was much more comfortable and less abrupt. I bonded with the respondent as we had lived in the same area for 20 years and that was an ice breaker for the interview

It was a bit difficult initially to glide smoothly in the conversation because of two reasons. First, I had to translate them into Hindi and second since they were busy, they had to get up mid interviews to attend to the customers and because of which the interview link would break. As this was my first time conducting qualitative, on field interviews I was very nervous and was unsure on how to approach them. This is also one of the short falls of the research as it being my first interview I did go back and forth quite a lot with the questions and did not completely adhere to the question guide.

ANALYSIS

I interviewed 3 artists as respondents for my study outside Jehangir art gallery who were in their different walks of life. The first respondent had just started his business, had been there for merely three months while coming only someday to sell. The second respondent had been in the business for five years and was a regular there since then. The third artist had been in the art business for over 50 years and had been selling outside Jehangir for 10 years.

CASE STUDY 1

The first respondent I interviewed was Imran Qureshi. Imran is 35 years old and was born in Gujarat and brought up in Mumbai. He studied in the Islamic college of Mumbai. As he could not find any work, he decided to try his hand in art. He said he had no prior qualifications to be a professional artist. But since he was always intrigued by art, he decided to give it a go. His art style was inspired by the Mughals. When I asked him, what inspired his art style, he said he started practising the style he thought was the toughest and find his way through it. Luckily, for him he did well for the first style he chose and set to master it. He has been working on the same style for the past 5 years and intends to keep getting better at it. He stressed on practising daily as one of the secrets to become a better artist each day. When asked about his sales, he said it was extremely unreliable and he could not give a fixed number as some days his paintings would be sold in bulks while some days none at all. The Kala Ghoda associations support him the artists by providing them the stands which can be rented on normal amount and is affordable and helps the artists to display their art properly. I asked him if he would ever want to exhibit inside Jehangir art gallery, he said he would but after booking it takes them 6-7 years waiting and includes lots of terms of conditions. Even though he was selling outside the art gallery, he seemed to be very much content with it. He has a family and is economically satisfied with the finances. He said although art has no price but for sustaining himself, he priced the art work on an average price that he thought did justice to his work. According to him, he preferred offline promotions better but does a few online promotions on social media applications like Instagram that get his customers that helped him increase his sales. As online promotions take mediator fees that would take a chunk out of his pricing. He seemed very content and with his work as his experience has been really good. The only obstacle he faced was during the rains as the crowd decreases and there is no roof over them. Some days he stands with a windcheater and puts plastic on his work, but mostly during the four months of the rainy season they are out on the selling business. He said the

senior artists around helped him grow and took him under his wing. One of the best and humbling experience for him has been when an artist exhibiting inside Jehangir Art Gallery came out and bought his work. *“The semantic meaning, artistic significance and financial value of an object could alter significantly as it crossed borders, whether real or imagined, while moving through time and space”* (Borghini et al 2009)

He had managed to build a type of solidarity with the artists that bind them together on the commonness of selling art on the pavement.

CASE STUDY 2

Saudagar Abdul Gani was my second respondent for the study. Born in 1944 he is 76 years old. He has been creating art for about 56 years of his life. His mother, father, and grandfather were all artists and the pull towards creating art just came to him naturally. He was inspired by the nature, especially the sea. All of his art works revolve around nature. He is a painter and also a designer. Before creating any work, he has a clear picture in his mind and the justification to each of his strokes. He sold book marks and explained to us beautifully the meaning behind an abstract work. He was the most interesting person I interviewed because of the way he perceived the world and the experiences and opportunities that he narrated of his life. When I asked him about his life, the first thing he stated very proudly was that he had taught students in a primary school for 20 years, to over 2 lakh students. *Artists are predominantly being recognized as entrepreneurs and agents for social change, thus making these individuals integral to community change and development. Artists hold great responsibility, power and ability to make change by expressing their views through the medium of art.* (Borghini et al 2009) This has been the most rewarding experience of his life. He told us he did not want to brag about himself and started with his work history. He has worked with Abdul Gani and Deepak Khosla who are very well-known designers in the Bollywood industry to design Tina Munim Ambani's lehenga. His art works travelled all around the world. Despite being so successful and well known, Saudagar Abdul Gani is seen selling bookmarks and small paintings on the road for 10 years. When I asked him what brought him here, he narrated the time he went into heavy loss due to his show in Jehangir not working out. He had gotten a spot to exhibit in Jehangir Art Gallery for the 5th time. Unfortunately, this time was when there were attacks in Mumbai in 1998. Due to which his work did not get sold as there was a heavy unrest among the city and suffered a loss of four and half lakhs that made him desperate to sell his work at whatever price was being made so he could sustain. As an artist he encountered many ups and downs in his life and had to cope with the changing nature of the art world as according to him the craze of museums has lessened over the years. (Fletcher and Helmrich (2019) *“The museum, with its implicit social contract of preserving and presenting works of art for the public, symbolically represented the end point of mobility as works of art presumably entered collections in perpetuity (although in practice deaccessioning occurred regularly).”* This has been overtaken by simpler computerized art works (graphic designs). Saudagar feels detached to materialistic things and is very

satisfied to what he is doing currently as long as he gets his daily sustenance . it was a beautiful experience listening to his life story.

CASE STUDY 3

My third respondent for the case study chose to keep his name anonymous. He is 28 years old from Kolhapur. He just started selling his work past 3 months as he is simultaneously studying in an art school. Although he is still studying, he has worked quite a lot and is a self-made artist. He and his wife design sculptors and compete in art competitions. When asked what inspired him to become an artist, he said the need to portray the social message through art is what motivated him. . *There have been drastic changes as Shifts in demographics, advances in technology, and expectations for social interactions are contributing to the disruption of the extant paradigm* (Novak-Leonard et al., 2014). He has created several paintings and sculptures that aim to reflect the various atrocities and hypocrisy of the society. With the changing nature of the world, he adapts himself in an attempt to voice his thoughts and opinions through art. Even though he was starting out, he has tremendous amount of hope and strength to prove himself in the art world. He seemed to be aware of his naïve self being surrounded by the senior artists but he had the drive in him to work hard. He showed us many of his art works proudly and even photos of some which he did not have with him. This kind of drive is what I experienced only in him as he started his journey. The other artists I encountered were much laid back and content.

Conclusion

One of the similarities I found among all three artists is their willpower to work hard and practise daily. They come from unstable financial conditions but don't seem to mind because they knew what they were getting into. Their passion overcomes their rationale. They all hold a hope in finding themselves through their art, despite different reasons driving them to pursue so. What looks like a harsh lifestyle to an outsider is actually a very good deal to them. To follow their passion by being submerged in art and living on minimal sustenance. When I started with the literature review, I had a different view on the life of these artists, almost contrast to what it was after I spoke to them. Capitalism has changed how we view success. a lot of times it is measure in finance, and we are wired to sympathise with the people in poverty. Seeing the artists follow their passion, despite the challenges faces by them and being so content and satisfied in life is of great respect.). *“Although tastes differ between individuals and between social groups, there exists an almost universal underlying stratification of high and low art and of art versus non-art in society.”* Abbing, H. (2002).

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW GUIDE

- . Can you tell me about your background?
- . What drove you to become an artist?

- . Past how many years have you been working here?
- . What does your family think of your work?
- . Which artist would you say, inspires you?
- . What do you think makes a great artist?
- . Did you ever consider exhibiting in Jahangir art gallery?
- . Do you think they have a clear stereotype/bias in art?
- . Does your work suffice you financially?
- . What struggles do you face in everyday life while working here?
- . Do you think your art's worth is justified in terms of its price?
- . Do you have contacts with artists that exhibit in the gallery? What type of relationship do you share?

APPENDIX 2

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