



LIVING

## How relevant would street art be minus the power of social media?

By Nidhi Gupta



### ***IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET, A VIRAL MOMENT FOR A WORK OF STREET ART IS ALL IT TAKES FOR IT TO GET NOTICED. BUT HOW IS ART, TODAY, MORE THAN JUST ITS POTENTIAL TO GO VIRAL?***

The day that Kalanjee Mansion in Mumbai grew tentacles is the day it got a new lease of life. In April this year, the over-a-century-old heritage building in Colaba became home to XXL, a new art gallery with a focus on urban and post-graffiti art. Part of its hit inaugural show, *Outsiders*, was an installation by UK-based artist duo Filthy Luker—giant green inflatable feelers that have, since 2004, popped through buildings old and new around the world.

Filthy Luker are no strangers to India. Nearly a decade after a different limbic sculpture debuted at the Jindal Mansion on Peddar Road as part of St+Art India's first outing in Mumbai, there they were this April, bursting out of Kalanjee Mansion's mezzanine-floor balconies. Now, as then, they had unsuspecting passersby stop in their tracks: People wondering what's going on; doing double takes; whipping out their camera phones; recording this bizarre sight and posting it on social media for posterity.

One such Instagram reel, shot by a member of XXL gallery and cross-posted to *The Established's* page, has a whopping 43 million views. Such is the unending appeal of Filthy Luker's "mischievous" art—a clever, cheeky take on art, and an efficient disruption of monotonous cityscapes and skylines.



AIKO, *Bunny Love 1*, 2023, Mixed media, spray paint and acrylic on canvas, 48 × 33 inches



Guesswho, 2023, Stencil with spray paint on metal, 40 × 30 inches

## THE NUMBERS SAY IT ALL

“The response has been overwhelming,” says Joe Cyril, gallery director of XXL and CEO of the XXL Collective. “The same video was reposted by international platforms like *designboom* and *Architecture & Design*, garnering 3 million and 1 million views respectively. It makes you wonder about the power of social media.”

XXL’s launch came after a particularly successful edition of the Mumbai Urban Art Festival that commenced in December 2022, also a St+Art India initiative. You didn’t need to be an art aficionado to have seen at least a dozen reels and selfies posted from the Sassoon

Docks, where the queues snaked around the block, through a Mumbai winter. “In 2017, the festival saw about 60,000 visitors in total,” says Cyril. “This year, the footfalls were almost 3 lakh across the three months it lasted.”

These numbers have been reached, points out Cyril, without any paid promotion or influencer activity. Is the mammoth organic success of *Outsiders*’ and the Mumbai Urban Art Festivals’ a direct result of social media’s impact or simply the coming of age of public art in India? Or are the two intrinsically connected—and what does that bode for the wider art world?



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## ***ACCESS MATTERS***



“I’ve always felt that street art is more of a digital medium,” says Hanif Kureshi, co-founder and artistic director at St+Art India. “Because it’s on the street, it is accessible to a larger audience. And because of that, it’s open. I don’t know who’s going to take a picture and who’s got how many followers and who’s going to share it [on social media].”

Kureshi’s team has presided over the street art movement in India, since the maiden first edition of St+Art Delhi held in 2013. For the first time, street artists from Italy, Germany, the United States and India had gathered to paint murals on the walls of Hauz Khas, Khirki Village and Shahpur Jat in the capital city. It would take another year or two for smartphones with good cameras to become accessible to the middle-class Indian youth, by which time Kureshi’s St+Art India initiative had found its canvas in Mumbai as well.

“It’s also been a decade since Instagram began to grow popular in India,” Kureshi points out. “In fact, today, it’s become so popular that the platform is actually making and breaking people’s careers and businesses. Now, ask anyone what their brief is, and they say it should be ‘Instagrammable’. It’s become a part of the vocabulary. Nobody had a clue that this was going to happen. But what is it doing? It’s making visual-makers, image-makers, illustrators, artists and designers more important. It’s elevating their role in society.”

Historically speaking, says Kureshi, look at Banksy: The elusive, pseudonymous London-based street artist whose satirical work now sells for millions at auctions (even when he shreds it himself). “Banksy’s our Andy Warhol,” says Kureshi.

***“It’s in the past decade or so that most of us have come to know Banksy’s work. But interestingly, 99 per cent of people have seen Banksy’s work on a screen, not on the street. And that is also kind of like a proven point from there onwards: Even though Banksy is a street artist, Banksy’s popularity is actually because of the Internet.”***

### ***Hanif Kureshi***

Compare that with Blek le Rat, the French graffiti artist whose stencil work influenced Banksy’s work heavily. “He operated during the 1980s,” says Kureshi, “and there is a very similar style between the two. Blek started decades before Banksy, but no one knows him. There was no medium.”



Pictured heres is a mural from St+Art India's *Trespassers* project, involving a 10-member group of artists, hailing from different corners of Kerala



*Trespassers* aimed to bring art to the public through the streets and foster a dialogue between passersby and the environments that they interact with

# ***FINDING THE LINK BETWEEN STREET ART AND SOCIAL MEDIA***

Social media may have become a medium for street art to go places, but Cyril doesn't think it is necessarily the reason for street art's existence. "It's a little bit of the chicken-and-egg situation," he says, a day after XXL's new show, in collaboration with Tarq, opened in late June in Mumbai. *Ephemeroptera: Time After Time* seems headed for a similar level of success: 400 people walked in on opening night. "The connection between social media and street artists, I think, has gone back to the time that social media started," adds Cyril.

Cyril cites the example of Martha Cooper, the American photojournalist best known for documenting the New York City graffiti scene during the 1970s and 1980s, and whose book *Subway Art* is considered something of a graffiti bible. Or look at AIKO, the Japanese street artist based in Brooklyn, whose feminine murals are often reminiscent of 18th-century woodblock prints. "They've both always had large followings on social media, pretty much since they started their (blue tick-marked) accounts."

"Urban art is quite magnanimous by its very nature," explains Cyril. "Sometimes it's a huge mural, which obviously has a lot of eyeballs on it. Sometimes it's focused on its surroundings; it's very eye-catching. All of these things get amplified on social media, because of the visual

and global nature of street art. But how are the followers coming in? Because the author or the artist is putting something out there that's being consumed by the people who view it, whether they've seen it in its physical form or not."



Social media may have become a medium for street art to go places, but it might not necessarily be the reason for street art's existence

## ***A BLURRING OF BORDERS***

"The reason for this might be that street art is in the public domain, and often it is temporary without knowing when it might be covered or whitewashed," explains Cyril. "It could be defaced, a poster could be pasted on top of it. The documentation and posting of this art form gathers a life of its own, while it may not last long in the physical space."



The ephemerality of street art may have been why artists began to document their work in depth, but Kureshi believes that artists are now more conscious of how they're doing than what they're doing. "The product on social media is not necessarily just a great painting, but it's also about a great process. People are spending hours and hours building that. It's blurring the boundaries between artist and content creator."

This disruption has meant many things, according to Kureshi. There are no gatekeepers in this situation, and thus a new order in the art world, for one. There's also been a shift in the way artists approach their work. While for some being visible on social media is the entire goal, there are those who are deploying technology and social media to further provoke, question and engage more deeply with questions central to their work.

"Look at the AI-drawn visuals that Tyler Street Art's been posting lately," says Kureshi, referring to the incognito Mumbai-based artist's politically provocative AI visuals on Instagram. "AI and computers are tools, but the idea is going to be most important. Tyler's works are gaining popularity, but at the same time Instagram has almost shadowbanned him. You have to search for him to know what is going on, it doesn't show up on your feed."



The most recently painted mural by the Fearless Collective titled *We Are Each Other's Sanctuary* in Marseilles, France



A mural depicting tribal Warli art by the Vayeda Brothers as a part of St+Art India's Mumbai Urban Art Festival

“Then there’s someone like Shilo Shiv Suleman,” continues Kureshi, “who's producing content, doing things, and then that one thing would lead to invitations to some more festivals, and then some more, and that continues to happen. These are two very different approaches to online existence that artists have taken.”

Suleman is especially emblematic of the 21st century multi-disciplinary contemporary artist who’s as much of a digital citizen as her work is otherworldly. “I’ve had accounts on Hi 5 and Orkut,” Suleman says. “At some point, I had a fan page on Facebook before I moved on to Instagram. My career actually took off when I was 18 because I was putting up images of my drawings and poetry on my blog back then. I ended up getting a pretty considerable Blogspot following. Because of my blog, I was picked up by a children’s book publisher.”

“I’ve had a pretty open, prolific, fluid relationship with digital media,” says the Bengaluru-origin artist. “My relationship with

social media has always been organic. There have been no analytics, or trying to force myself into any space.” Suleman’s practice comprises two parts: Her personal installation and illustrative work, and her work with the non-profit Fearless Collective, which has painted 50 murals in seven countries in the past decade. Whether meditations on bodily autonomy or wider solidarity-building exercises among marginalised communities around the world, with large, vibrant, joyful murals at their heart, Suleman’s work has found resonance in faraway places among people who “are looking for that kind of intimacy, honesty, freedom—also sacredness—in the digital world.”



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## ***VIEWING ART THROUGH DIFFERENT LENSES***

With borderless reach has come the possibility of unprecedented connection, but also the rise of “Instagram art,” or the “self-fulfilling purpose” of interacting with artwork in public spaces, as Cyril puts it: “To photograph oneself against an aesthetic backdrop.” The selfie at the heart of the contemporary urban art experience is something that does bother Suleman.

“There is something about that exhibitionist way that people get photographed in front of an artwork that irks me,” she says. “But I think it does become a sort of postcard for the way people show support, solidarity, or how they’ve been touched by the work.” In her case, she believes that the idea or thematic concerns of her work do also go “viral,” in a sense.

“I think it’s interesting because I align myself with the lineage of women like Frida Kahlo and Amrita Sher Gil, who very much encased themselves inside their works,” says Suleman. ‘A lot of my work also revolves around self-portraiture. So I do think there’s something deep and intimate in the way my audience sees me and I feel completely seen by them and, in turn, I also feel I have the ability to see them.’

At the end of the day, says Cyril: “Art is subjective. Everyone has a right to engage with art the way they want.” For the artist, this is uncharted territory in many ways and staying abreast of each new wave is almost essential for survival. “It’s like Andy Warhol said: ‘In the future, everybody will be famous for 15



minutes’,” says Kureshi. “Now those 15 minutes have actually become 15 seconds. A 15 -second video is all it takes to go places.”

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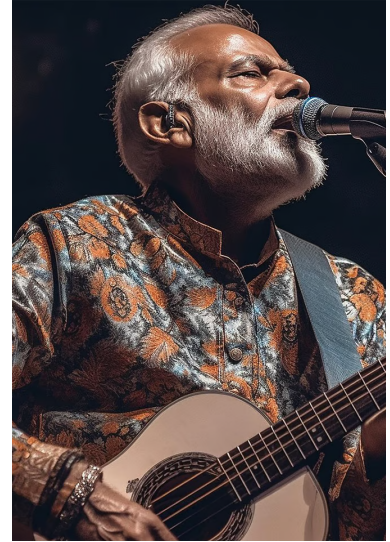
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