

## The writing on the walls

Sara Navrady

My first recollection of graffiti is in grade school desktops, washrooms and lockers. The content was far from insightful. It would be easy to say it was irrelevant and stupid, insulting other students, teasing couples about being in love or declaring a person's coolness. However looking back I can't ignore the simple representation of the social workings of the school, and a frank reminder of the hierarchies of school society and 'cliques'. Does it belong in an art gallery? Probably not, but it confirms what I learned from this workshop.

The initial revelation that the site of our 'fresco removal' was a worn out concert venue made me skeptical. Surely there are more important messages out on the streets! I thought to myself. What could people at a concert possibly have to say? This prompted me to reflect on what gives a message value? All have their own meanings, some to few, others to many. Not every message will be a masterpiece. It is important to acknowledge that, but who am I, or anyone else to decide what someone should and shouldn't write on a wall? If it means something to them, isn't that enough? The collective memory and the representation of the act itself is just as important in what it contributes to the surrounding environment, and indicates a lot into the social context in which the message is written.

Through the process of removing the frescos and re-applying them to a surface, the delicate task of removing the glue without damaging the newly minted art pieces, I gained an appreciation for the varied compositions the writings in their various styles creates. In trying to think of my own writing, looking back at the pieces we collected I gained an appreciation for the delicate art of keeping words effective but simple, rhyming and intelligent, or clever and subtle. In that sense, *Jason is cool* or the like in the halls of my school would have probably fallen short.

So what would I write? How would it reflect my culture? I'm not sure that it would reflect Canada, insomuch that I have spent as much time in the last ten years outside of Canada as inside. (I wish I did this workshop before all of that traveling, because I probably would have seen the various city streets in a very different way!)

I would address something I notice more since moving here. Once I was walking in Eindhoven with my Dutch friend and we were trying to find the train station. I was relying on the occasional directing signpost, while my friend was glued to his iphone. We turned the corner and I could clearly see the train station, meanwhile my friend, eyes glued to his google map screen says 'hang on, let me just figure out where we are.' So in that sense I would write:

Stop and look around you.

This relates not only to our growing dependency on technology to think and see for us, but also to our lack of awareness of our surroundings. Taking a minute to observe is a

simple way to remind ourselves of our context and how we act in it. In that sense it would tie back to what I value in Canadian culture, as it is a reminder to look at the vast open landscapes and appreciate them. Same with our multi-cultural identity. I realize now being outside of Canada, how our immigrant culture is so different from other countries, and also why I find it so difficult to pinpoint 'Canadianness'. Something that confirms this belief, is the response I give when people ask me about food, a cultural fingerprint of any country. Europeans always ask: what *is* Canadian food anyway? A fusion of all other foods, with the exception of maple syrup and poutine, a disgusting Quebec dish. When I try and explain Canadian food, it usually gets linked to other cuisines, not surprising given our English and French roots combined with a population consisting of 20% foreign born residents and another 15% being 2nd generation Canadians (Statistics Canada).

When I think of things I would not keep, it relates to our consumerist tendencies. When these are combined with sprawled out cities, they manifest in the form of a dependence on massive cars, shopping malls and big box chain stores. There is little cultural identity within these generic items, instead it is replaced by corporate branding within these parasitic urban nodes. While I understand the climatic benefits of the shopping mall in the winter at -35 degrees, there has surely got to be an alternative to these massive structures devoid of character. Or limit them to one per city. Why do we need 5 malls that all have the same stores, selling the same things, repeated in every city across the country?

This past week the worst riots in recent memory broke out in Vancouver over the 4-0 loss of the Stanley Cup Hockey championship. 20 cars were set on fire, stores were looted and fights broke out in the street. Hundreds of people stood by watching, and doing nothing or posing for pictures, with the exception of a few brave citizens who did their best to stop the calamity. The following day, however on the plywood used to board up the damaged stores, hundreds of messages expressing disgust and outrage appeared. Perhaps what I appreciate most from this workshop and analyzing writing, at least from the writings that challenge people, situations, beliefs, policies etc., is their willingness to question things period. It is unsettling to see how many people just go along in life without questioning anything. That is not to say that every writing is justified, or everyone should start writing on walls or that everything needs questioning, but indifference is far worse than this so called 'defacing' of public property.