



## Perimeters, Edges, and Walls

Walls define our space and our lives. Walls surround us, and without them man would be small, unimportant, and lost in nature. People erect walls to separate themselves from the natural world and to legitimize their existence, to build a world suitable for them, and to reshape the world that was not quite built for their needs. Walls are the building blocks of tangible culture: they make a hostile world comfortably civilized for the lives of their builders. Civilization started by building and connecting walls to form a labyrinth that we can now call home. History is the story of building this ever-growing structure, and the history of art is the story of justifying all of that with shapes and colors. island6's summer exhibition will dive into the historical and artistic importance of the brick and concrete structures that divide or connect us, reflecting on graffiti culture, art and philosophy.

### An Ode to the Wall

Right at the entrance of Shanghai's most vibrant art district, there was a wall. It was not very well made, nor was it particularly pretty<sup>1</sup>. In fact, it was gray and ugly, made of bricks, and at some points looked like reinforced concrete that had been chewed up and spit out. It ran from the intersection of Changhua Road and Moganshan Road all the way to the former Shangtex factory which we now call M50. What was behind the wall? Not much really, just an empty plot of land covering the remains of factories, a few colonial red-brick buildings, and grass that nobody in this city of 24 million would bother to mow. It was a field of hopes and dreams of gigantic enterprises and promises of bags of money, an imaginary land that was connected by the willingness to shape the future. This valuable real estate had to be closed off from ordinary people. So it was. A great wall was erected, and those on the outside were made to know that they did not belong there, no matter how badly they craved to belong. Instead of belonging, they covered the gray surface with colorful paint, inspiring the designation of Shanghai's first legal graffiti-covered neighborhood.

The neighborhood around Moganshan Road was originally home to the Fou Foong Flour Mill complex and the Shanghai Chunming Roving Factory, located right along the shore of the historic Suzhou River. After the 90's, the textile factory turned into the M50 Art District where island6 has been located for nearly 15 years, and the city masters' new developments are still forming the area. The constant change of Shanghai<sup>2</sup> is what inspired our founders to establish the collective in the first place, and it has been their major source of inspiration through the years. Each artwork they make is about preserving a fragment of their surroundings for the future. And sure enough, the wall is already history as it was demolished just a few months ago.

### Painting Over

What is a wall if not a blank canvas for creative minds? What is it if not a support for graffiti? Graffiti art is a necessarily dynamic and subversive form of expression, and as such has the qualities necessary to remain eternally popular. Photographers and story-tellers like Margaret Cooper were some of the first hooked on the then-emerging phenomenon of the New York City graffiti scene<sup>3</sup>. She and her cohort spent large parts of the 1970s and 80s documenting street and subway art and transmitting it to an audience that did not have the time to consistently view the changing environment of paint and powerful statements, their nightly scrawlings and daily cleansings. Could they have been responsible for the lasting appeal of graffiti over the years? Maybe partially, but there is something that runs deeper here. All artistic movements have their Matisse's, their Picassos, their Warhols—their pioneers and self-made masters. Throughout many great artistic movements, we see a general progression as the struggles that inspire them wax and wane. With the level of deconstruction possible from our current PoMo moment, however, the struggle never has to end. All great street art carries with it the sensibility that the social project is never done, that community can never be satisfied<sup>4</sup>; this value helps to perpetuate graffiti love. We see this with Basquiat as part of the duo-brand-basher SAMO writing what art critic Jeffrey Deitch called "disjointed street poetry", word art scrawled across the buildings of lower

Manhattan, wryly critiquing the corporate and ego-driven structures of domination. If it's not the corporations dominating, it'll be something else; so the critiques continue<sup>5</sup>.

Today, artists like Banksy, Vhils, and SpY tag in the same vein. Their work, painted and chiseled onto walls, reflects a desire to destroy those social, political, and corporate walls that surround the defenseless, further silence the already voiceless, and zombie the exhausted<sup>6</sup>. Of course, the question of their project's success is another one as collectors DO buy framed sections of cut-out concrete, somehow commodifying that which is fully and physically adverse to commodification<sup>7</sup>. It seems that the "righteous" can put aside all indignity toward defacement or vandalism if the artwork made without permission is arbitrarily valued at a million dollars. This is doubly true for the wall owners.

Even though the popular fad of rebelling makes walls appear to be little more than instagrammable backdrop for much-needed selfies<sup>8</sup>, they remain powerful. Walls as symbols have come to political importance in the past century. The Berlin wall, the Israeli West Bank barrier or a (maybe?) soon-to-be-built structure at the southern border of the U.S.<sup>9</sup> have dominated international news and attracted artists from all over the world. But when one side is aggressive politics, the other side can be nothing but mockery. The classic example of this contrast is East Berlin with rigorous soldiers and West Berlin with colorful street art. The tradition was continued when Banksy opened The Walled Off Hotel in the West Bank on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Palestine's colonization by the British. The hotel admittedly has the worst view in the world, looking at tagged and ragged concrete. Another ironic gesture to show the absurdity of such division is French artist JR's monumental public piece called "the Dreamer". It is an enlarged photograph of a baby looking over the fence between Mexico and the U.S., making the fence and its builders appear ridiculously small and unimportant.<sup>10</sup>

What's important is that walls are fabricated to shape the world for us so that we are able to live in it. Space without walls is emptiness. And emptiness is undivided. This unity with the universe is what we might strive toward throughout our existences, but at the same time it becomes either boring (when considered simply) or incredibly frightening (when considered cosmically). Building walls is an act that at once spices up and reels in nature, creating a world that is man-shaped, sculpted to make our natural environment habitable.<sup>11</sup> A wall is a fine line that divides nature, just like it is seen in Antony Gormley's art. Gormley's art started from the traditional medium of bronze sculpture depicting the man alone in the world around him. In later works, however, the "man" doesn't need to appear to signify his loneliness and his being thrown into this Sartrean world or being detached from God. In his most interactive artwork called "Passage"<sup>12</sup> the sculpture is reduced to merely the outline of a human shape in tunnel-form through which the viewer can experience the isolation that comes from a wall between him and the rest of the world.

<sup>5</sup> At a certain point, critique is never-ending teapot full of birds: absurd, but not unpleasantly so. See: [www.island6.org/ExitThroughTheTeaShop](http://www.island6.org/ExitThroughTheTeaShop)

<sup>6</sup> In other words, they paint "Between the Blocks". See: [www.island6.org/BetweenTheBlocks](http://www.island6.org/BetweenTheBlocks)

<sup>7</sup> The New Republic has a write up on the gentrification of street art and how artists are responding in June 2019. See more: <https://newrepublic.com/article/154220/graffiti-became-gentrified>

<sup>8</sup> We do love a good selfie. See: [www.island6.org/MemoryPassage](http://www.island6.org/MemoryPassage)

<sup>9</sup> There's something to say here. See: [www.island6.org/ThePresentTrialsOfaPresidentsTrail](http://www.island6.org/ThePresentTrialsOfaPresidentsTrail)

<sup>10</sup> Maya Kroth, 10 Border Walls That Artists Have Turned Into Powerful Protests. URL: <https://www.afar.com/magazine/10-border-walls-that-artists-have-turned-into-powerful-protests>

<sup>11</sup> Walls help us to have more total control over nature. In our walled world, possibilities open with the snap of our fingers. See: [www.island6.org/SeizeTheMeansOfPollination](http://www.island6.org/SeizeTheMeansOfPollination)

<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.antonygormley.com/sculpture/chronology-item-view/id/2920/page/54#p1>

<sup>1</sup> Beauty oftentimes comes from context. Beautiful things can sometimes become objects of perfection depending on their surroundings; for example, a Peranakan vase is pretty, but when surrounded by butterflies it becomes unparalleled. See: [www.island6.org/NorthwardAndUpslope](http://www.island6.org/NorthwardAndUpslope)

<sup>2</sup> Change and process are qualities that Liu Dao values greatly. See our recent meditation on process: [www.island6.org/GouGouGou](http://www.island6.org/GouGouGou)

<sup>3</sup> Martha Cooper is well-respected within the street art community. Her book, Subway Art is pseudo-religiously referred to as "the bible of graffiti art" as it has inspired generations of street art. See more: <https://www.widewalls.ch/artist/martha-cooper/>

<sup>4</sup> The virtue of community is admittedly difficult to satisfy. It requires hard, careful work to maintain the past and burst into the future. See: [www.island6.org/WorshipAndGoodGlue](http://www.island6.org/WorshipAndGoodGlue)

## Breaking Down the Wall

Walls, maybe more so conceptual ones than steel, are deeply rooted in our traditional concept of art too. It is the border between our reality and that of the artwork. Brian O'Doherty, in his classic work *Inside the White Cube: Ideologies of the Gallery Space*<sup>13</sup>, points out that painting in modernity is similar to looking through a window to another world. This space is built up by imitating something from our physical reality. One can see a realistic portrait, pointillist impressions, abstract gestures or flashing pixels, and still tend to feel the need of having to read, examine and understand the artwork. A modern image has its own inner logic, whether it is framed or not, just like on Marcel Duchamp's last major work *Étant donnés*.<sup>14</sup> Duchamp's piece was a tableau of a landscape with a nude similar to Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* that one can only see through a pair of peepholes. This work represents the logic of modernist art: one can observe it but can never enter.

If modernism has irrevocably ended, our relationship with a contemporary image has to change. If the artwork is not a closed system anymore, but is the very relationship between the observers and their environment, how shall we approach something that is on the other side of that window? How shall we have a closer and more direct relationship with the artwork itself<sup>15</sup>? As Arthur Danto put it when discussing Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, "If one may make the facsimile of a human being out of bronze, why not the facsimile of a Brillo carton out of plywood?"<sup>16</sup> The introduction of Pop art broke the wall between what can and what can't be represented, what can be art and what can only be real life. And as every aspect of real life was introduced into representational art, the fine line between art and life suddenly blurred; life became part of the artwork, and the modernity described by O'Doherty so well was replaced by an interactive contemporaneity where audiences are not merely observers but participants, as if one could enter that Duchampian world.<sup>17</sup>

The invisible wall between viewer and artwork was irrevocably knocked down by the emergence of new media art, which has developed from experimenting with the medium itself to experimenting with each other. In the early years of new media and electronic art, Nam June Paik, Jenny Holzer, and Bruce Neuman<sup>18</sup> used new technology to incorporate it in their own artistic language as part of contemporary reality, just like the Pop artists did with mass culture. Nowadays, it feels natural to be surrounded by futuristic technology. The question is: what is the most essential thing in art that this emerging technology changes? One answer is that it invokes collaboration on different levels. Its multidisciplinary nature makes artists work together, while the work produced can engage the audience in interaction.

## The Preferred Medium

One might go along this track further and consider walls more philosophically. After all, what are walls but distinctions between modes, models, and values? One of the earliest and most thoroughgoing questions of philosophy has been: "Who am I? How should I live?". In one way or another, almost every philosopher starting from Socrates and Laozi has spent time thinking and writing on this topic—about the right ways of being in the world, of accomplishing tasks, meeting goals, and developing oneself to become "good." Much of the writings are centered on politics, providing means to critique systems, control behavior, or gatekeep power. Much of it has to do with building and maintaining (or deconstructing) walls of thought.

One ancient wisdom tradition rejects the very idea of walls by rejecting the idea of institutionalized normative value judgments. For the Daoists, a large part of this problem stems from language and the distinctions that arise from it. These distinctions are called *shifei* (this, not-this) judgements within the context of Daoism. If one were to

explain the Dao in any particular way, then their explanation would necessarily leave out some important aspects of the Dao. If someone were to call something a name, they would necessarily leave out other names which may fit it just as well. In other words, language itself acts as a sort of metaphysical wall; to describe something in positive terms is to carve out its negative space, and to the Daoists this takes away from the dynamism of complex beings and processes to the detriment of all. This thinking can be extended past a philosophy of language, perhaps most poignantly for our age, to the ethical and aesthetic.

Aesthetically, the Daoists and Postmodernists become allies. To call something art is to define the not-art. Within Daoism, there is a fluidity between art and artisanship, a way of classifying that is meant to be as broad as possible. In the "knack stories" of the *Zhuangzi*, different artisans' stories are used to highlight different aspects of being in harmony with the Dao—mostly coming from features of spontaneity, gracefulness, effortlessness, and joyfulness, all which features are traditionally associated with artists. Daoist art revolves heavily around the natural world, depicting mountains, rivers, waterfalls, etc. as being the original, unmolested representation of a harmonized world. In such a world, there is no use for *shifei* distinctions; what is, simply is. To these thinkers and artists, making moral judgements is as ridiculous as the small dove judging the massive bird Peng why he flies so. He flies so because it is his nature.

The question for the Daoists is how to avoid *shifei* judgements. Over the centuries, they've tried it all, always while recontextualizing the ideas for the needs of the day. For example, by the age of 23, Wang Bi<sup>19</sup> (226-249) wrote an extensive and impressive commentary to the *Dao De Jing* in which, by using his knowledge of and commitment to the Confucian *Analects* and of his own political moment, he put forward his own views on the dangers of institutionalized morality (all while spending his days smoking metal and drinking *huangjiu*). His commentaries have gone on to further inspire Daoists throughout history and into today to reduce the distinctions that over-guide our behavior. The question becomes: how can we dismantle today's linguistic, ethical, and aesthetic walls without sacrificing too much of ourselves?

One answer lies in places like Moganshan Road. Walls are built to separate, to obfuscate, to delineate. What happens to the meaning of a wall when one appropriates? When a wall is painted secretly, under the cover of darkness, and with nontraditional mediums, what sort of message does this send? This act of self-expression is an Emersonian claim to divinity, and almost a Nietzschean claim to power. As an action, it not only subverts the intent of the wall, but of the artworld itself. To tag a wall with one's own story is to make a collective claim on the history of the area in which the wall stands. It is to change the way people who live in the space view the space and talk about the space. It is to turn a place of making distinctions into a place of unashamed public sharing-in-history. Street art would be the preferred medium of the Daoist; it would be his weapon in the face of aesthetic normativism, and his shield in the face of moral certainty.

**Dates:** From July 14<sup>th</sup> to September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019

**Curation:** Carlin Reinig & Andras Gal

**Art Direction:** Thomas Charvériat & Nick Hersey

**Art Research:** Tang Dashi 汤大师 & He Dashi 贺大师, Owen 欧文

**Research:** Iris Gardener

**Coordination:** Yeung Sin Ching 杨倩菁

**Artists:** island6 art collective (Liu Dao 六島)

**Venue:** island6, 50 Moganshan Rd, bld #6, 2/F, Shanghai

**Link:** <https://island6.org/PerimetersEdgesAndWalls>

Scan and follow **island6** Wechat account:



<sup>13</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: Ideologies of the Gallery Space*. The Lapis Press, Santa Monica, San Francisco, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Duchamp's influential assemblage was displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. URL: <https://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/324.html>

<sup>15</sup> There is a tension here, where we want this closeness, but are sometimes shocked by its results. When one's person as a viewer becomes part of the artwork, what happens to identity? See: [www.island6.org/ASleepingBeauty](http://www.island6.org/ASleepingBeauty)

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Danto, *The Art World*. The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 61, No. 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting. (Oct. 15, 1964), pp. 571-584. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-362X%2819641015%2961%3A19%3C571%3ATA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6>

<sup>17</sup> Now it seems to be possible. Just call the number on [www.island6.org/TheCurvedShapeOfAPorcelainHeart](http://www.island6.org/TheCurvedShapeOfAPorcelainHeart)

<sup>18</sup> Nam June Paik's ground-breaking video installation called TV-Buddha, Jenny Holzer's Truisms and Bruce Nauman's neon installations had a great impact on the Liu Dao Collective's approach to art.

<sup>19</sup>For more information, read Wang Bi's entry on the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. See: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/wangbi/>