

Future Development in Community Murals and Future Investment in Teaching Artists

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Abstract

Prof. Kong Ho, a teaching artist for more than 25 years and a muralist for 18 years of them, considers himself to be a good source of "archived" experiences that he can share with others who might find them beneficial. This paper explores his inclusive and expansive study into community murals and the role of teaching artists. This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, Ho presents the pros and cons of traditional painted murals and potential formats for the future community or public murals. The second half of this paper discusses the significance of investing in teaching artists, who are the key factor in our creative and cultural industries. Ho's insights into the role of teaching artists and community murals are unique because he presents them as academic artistic research. The aim of this artistic research is meant to highlight the value and impact of mural art in our society and education system. The budget cuts for the art programs from K-12 to higher education in the United States, especially during the economic downturns of the early 2000s, contradicts the rise of creative or cultural industries serving as a crucial economic phenomenon in our current society. This paper will also examine how investment in community murals and teaching artists can celebrate the culture and creative identity of a nation or society.

Keywords: Mural art, community murals, teaching artists, and art education

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The Future of Community Murals

Mural spectators always ask muralists or mural participants one question – Why paint murals? It seems that there are so many outdoor or indoor art activities, but why do we spend so many effort-filled hours transforming plain walls into works of art? It may be true that in the technologically advanced 21st century, there are so many other options for producing large-scale murals, such as digitally printed wall murals and light-emitting diode (LED) screen digital murals, that hand-painted murals might seem to be an obsolete choice. From economic point of view, the cost of a painted mural is always higher than a digitally printed mural because it includes the costs of acrylic paints, gel medium, varnish, painting tools, muralist's honorariums, mural design fee, insurance for participants, and sometimes a rental fee for scaffolding. Also, painted murals, shown in Image 1, always take longer to produce, especially if they are outdoor murals because the amount of production days depends on weather conditions. Moreover, every painted outdoor mural regardless if it is coated with ultraviolet resistant varnish or not, requires restorative preservation or conservation after a certain number of years because of the limited durability of acrylic paints and other factors, such as moisture, ultraviolet (UV) exposure leading to color fading and vandalism. Actually, acrylic paints, the fast-drying paints consist of pigments suspended in acrylic polymer emulsion, have been around for only five decades since they were made commercially available as artists' grade paints in the 1960s. Different brands of professional grade or high quality acrylic paints may have different durability ranges, which may be guaranteed for 15 to 20 years based on their quality and percentage of acrylic resins. Since the short history of acrylic paints is about 50 years, it is hard to know whether they can last for a few hundred years or pass the test of time.



Image 1: Kong Ho and 238 participants. *Transcending Culture and Space Community Mural*. 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 6'H x 30'W.



Image 2: Digital mural design of *Transcending Culture and Space Community Mural*, designed by Kong Ho, in 2012.

If we can digitally design, shown in Image 2, and print large-scale murals, then it would stand to reason that hand-painted murals will die out because of advancement in technology and cheaper in material cost. Similarly, film photography was predicted to be lost because of the popularity of digital photography in the 1990s. However,

some photographers refused to abandon film photography. According to Stephen Dowling's article, "The photographers who refuse to abandon traditional film cameras," of BBC News Magazine, shown in Image 3, some photographers may find film cameras more quaint and work for them better than megapixels digital cameras. When high-end digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras were affordable enough in early 2000s and the smartphone cameras were small enough to fit in a pocket, most of professional photographers were convinced to make the switch from film to digital cameras. However, some photographers may prefer to work with imperfect film's grain, or less perfect color saturation and definition images. Dowling said, "Some want to be in control of the entire process, from the taking the pictures to developing their photos in a darkroom and slowly seeing prints emerge under the red light – an alchemical process that still, somehow, seems like magic" (para. 7). Perhaps, digital photography didn't make film photography obsolete but instead became a new art material or tool for an artist to explore. In Jill Markwood's (2010) article, "Photography's Influence on Painting," in *Agora*, an online publication of Lynchburg College, she said, "All artwork shows influence from the society in which the artists live, the materials available to them, as well as the technology of their eras" (para. 1). Perhaps digital photography gives artists the freedom to experiment with their creative vision while exploring the new media of their times.



Image 3: Dowling, S. (2015, April 18). The photographers who refuse to abandon traditional film cameras. Retrieved from *BBC News Magazine* website: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32337778>

Factors Affecting Durability of Mural

However, sometimes the problem of a mural's durability is based on factors other than that of the medium used. The mural's wall structure and the wall preparation to include sealing it, and its buildings structure are of major importance. If there is no special cleaning treatment of the wall's surface before the mural is painted, then it is easy for the acrylic paint to peel off because any dusty or oily substance will cause the water-based acrylic paints to detach from the surface of the wall. Furthermore, without any varnishing with acrylic gel medium after the mural is complete, the acrylic paints will easily fade away or be damaged because of the deterioration caused

by weathering or human vandalism. In addition, if the building structure is not durable because of the building materials used for that particular building, then the whole mural will be destroyed once the building collapses or is demolished based on unsafe conditions.

Sometimes, the most difficult aspect for protecting painted murals is not the most obvious one of building permanence or painting materials. This threat lies within the domain of legal ownership of the building. If private property owners or real-estate developers thought that they could never sell their properties or cover up their walls, they might not ever offer their blank walls for community murals. The highly visible walls in most cities have high advertising value. Jane Golden (2015) of the Mural Arts Program of Philadelphia, explains to Paige Pflieger, intern of National Public Radio (NPR) Digital News, in her article, "What Right Do Muralists Have To The Buildings They Paint On?", shown in Image 4, that: "losing murals comes with the territory of creating art in a city that is rapidly growing" (para. 30). She also says "Every time we lose something, we try to create lemonade out of the lemons. The memory of it should be so profound that it continually reminds us that art is important in our lives" (para. 31).

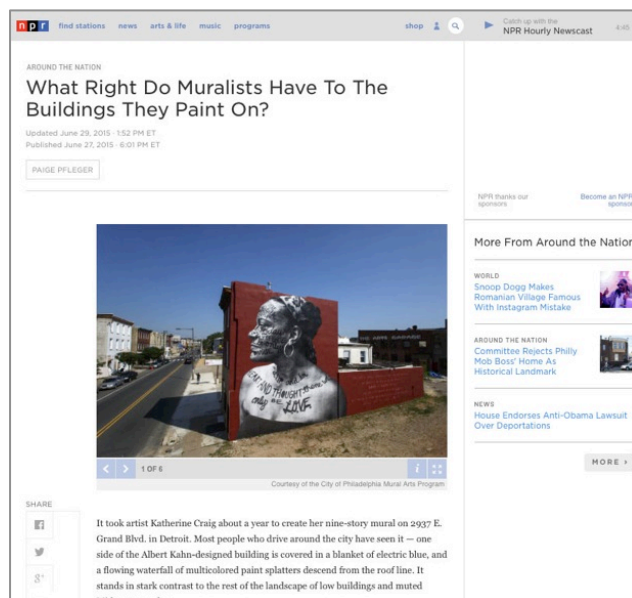


Image 4: Pflieger, P. (2015, June 27). What right do muralists have to the buildings they paint on? Retrieved from *NPR Digital News* website: <http://www.npr.org/2015/06/27/417204222/what-right-do-muralist-have-to-the-buildings-they-paint-on>

I do share the feeling of losing artistic community murals with Golden. It is hard to describe the dark feeling that I had when I heard the bad news from Sherri Geary, director of economic development of McKean County, in December 8, 2014 that the property, which the *Mt. Jewett Historical Mural* was painted on, encountered a partial collapse of its front façade on Sunday night, December 7, 2014. The demolition of the entire Odd Fellows Building started on the following Monday, shown in Image 5, because it was unsafe. I felt like I was being kicked in the stomach. I and other artists, Pitt-Bradford students and community members had worked on the mural over six months. The mural, along with the ageing building had gone through years of windy, rain, sunny and snow seasons and yet it was demolished in one day. If one of your

artworks is destroyed, it is like part of yourself being destroyed. It is true that time may ease the pain of loss. However, after almost a year, I still have no intention to update my website to announce the loss of this community mural. I believe that the true loss remains no matter how long the time has passed.

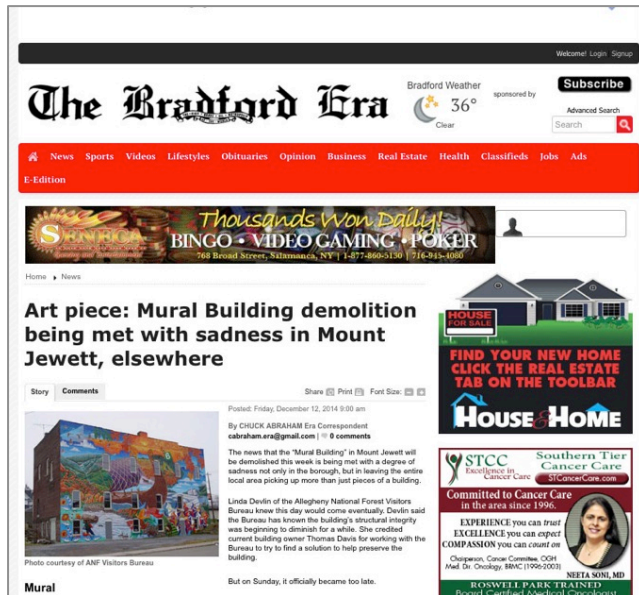


Image 5: Abraham, C. (2014, December 12). Art piece: Mural building demolition being met with sadness in Mount Jewett, elsewhere. Retrieved from *The Bradford Era* website: http://www.bradfordera.com/news/art-piece-mural-building-demolition-being-met-with-sadness-in/article_3cf47e2a-81af-11e4-8a8b-c3246fda135d.html

Background of Mt. Jewett Heritage Mural

Preserving public art is important in our society, but the historical record, or documentation of the work must be preserved because it chronicles the devotion and intentions of the artists and others who made that art. My reminiscence of the *Mt. Jewett Historical Mural*, shown in Image 6, painting process and interaction with participants does make me smile sometimes. Mt. Jewett is a small town with population of approximate one thousand in 2003 and with significant Swedish heritage. Each year there is a Mt. Jewett Swedish Festival parade in August. People line up on both sides of the Main Street to celebrate their Swedish heritage during the Festival. The nearby tourist attractions include Kinzua Bridge State Park and Allegheny National Forest. According to Wikipedia (2015) description, the Kinzua Viaduct was built in 1882, the highest railroad bridge in the world, and was also known as the "Eighth Wonder of the World". Unfortunately, the Kinzua Bridge was destroyed after a level 3 tornado struck in July 21, 2003. Economic downturn and diminished population in early 2000s caused several large local factories closed down and mass layoff. Empty storefronts, burned out buildings and an abandoned guesthouse lined along the Main Street of Mt. Jewett. A typical depression scene found in most small rural towns in Pennsylvania during 2000s. That was the reason for community mural advocator, Bruce Burdick, to have me to lead a community mural project to revitalize Mt. Jewett.

The community members anticipated that the complete mural would not only be the cultural history of the region for visitors but also be an educational tool to their young generation to know about their heritage. I felt the commitment to integrate as much dreams of the community members in this heritage mural. Finally, I decided to depict a large-scale full sail Viking ship with a traditional navy checker sail pattern as a center of focus of the composition. The entire mural production started from June to November 2004. The whole production included setting up the scaffold, cleaning wall surface, mixing paints, priming wall, plotting grid, enlarging mural layout, conducting underpainting, adding colors, refining details, varnishing mural, taking down the scaffold, and final mural documentation.



Image 6: Mt. Jewett Heritage Mural in Mt. Jewett, Pennsylvania, produced by 4 assistant artists, 16 community members including UBD students, and leading muralist, Kong Ho, during the summer of 2004.

I still remember painting the mural with my participant-friends on the mural scaffolding during the annual Mt. Jewett Swedish Festival parade on that special afternoon of August 14, 2004, shown in Image 7. The slogan printed on the hanging yellow festival banner across the lanes of route 6, "One spirit, one community, one hundred elated hearts," still carries me back in time. An email sent by Elisha Brown, one of participating Pitt-Bradford students and community members after the demolition of the Odd Fellows Building, described the significance of that community mural toward Mt. Jewett community, "That mural brought so much color, life and pride to our town. The months it took planning and constructing it will remain etched in our memories forever." I returned to Mt. Jewett in June 2014, ten years after, and took the picture of this mural, shown in Image 8. This visit was the last time for me to admire this community mural before it was demolished in December 8, 2014.



Image 7: Mt. Jewett Swedish Festival parade in August 14, 2004.



Image 8: *Mt. Jewett Heritage Mural* taken in June 16, 2014.

Perhaps what a muralist can do after the loss of a mural is to keep making other murals or even find an opportunity to repaint the original mural at another site. Perhaps the collective memory of that particular mural's production means more the actual mural itself, like the loss of our loved ones, who continue to exist in our memories. Actually, with the help of digital technology, most artworks can be digitally archived. Losing an actual piece of public art doesn't mean we really lose everything. We can have a high-resolution digital record of it if we document that public art professionally and accurately after completion. Thankfully, I did document the *Mt. Jewett Heritage Mural*, so did the Google Map. People still can see the mural, shown in Image 9, when they check the Google Map of 10 East Main Street of Mt. Jewett, Pennsylvania.

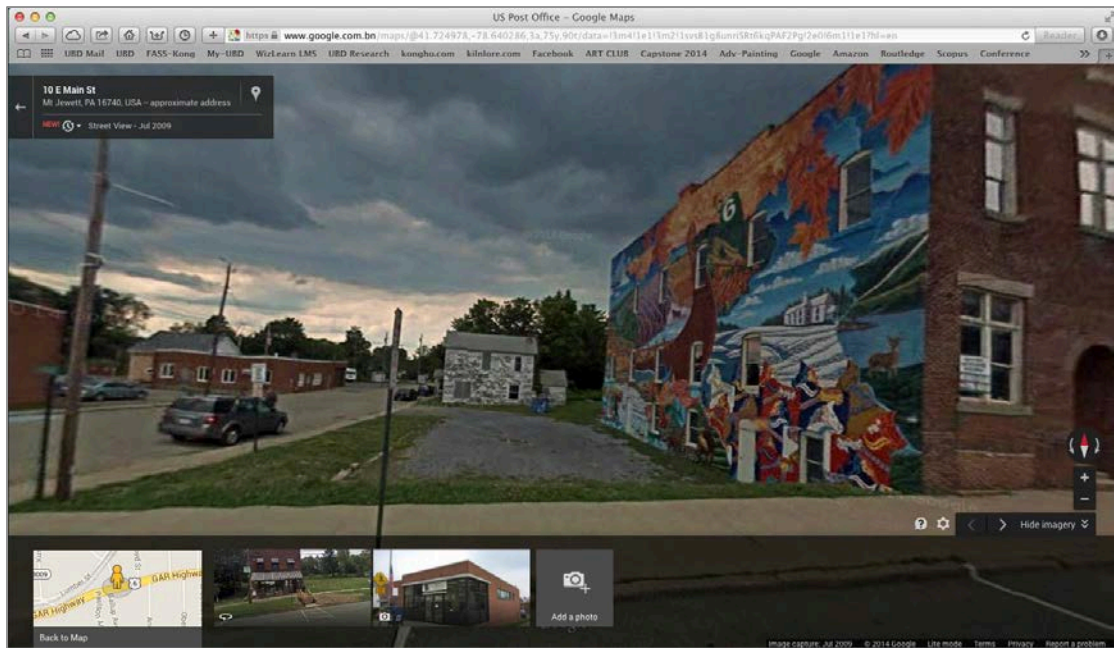


Image 9: *Mt. Jewett Heritage Mural* continues to appear in Google Map search under 10 East Main Street, Mt. Jewett, Pennsylvania

The Rise of Painting

According to Marvin Heiferman's (2010) blog post under Smithsonian Institution Archives, French painter, Paul Delaroche (1797-1859), declared: "From today – Painting is dead!" (para. 1) when the first photographic process, daguerreotype, was introduced by Louis Daguerre, French physicist, in 1839. Of course, painting didn't die, and conventional representational paintings didn't disappear either. Heiferman described, "In France, for example, as photographic images spread over the years, so did Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism. Photography, one might argue, didn't murder painting; it shook things up by creating new options and opportunities" (para. 2). Perhaps, Digital technology and commercial digitally printed billboards haven't eliminated or destroyed conventional painted murals, but offer another option or opportunity for contemporary muralists to explore. It may be a good idea to use digital technology to archive the life of a conventional painted mural thus preserving it in a different format. As we all know, everything has its own limit, including our planet – earth may only exist for one hundred quintillion years, according to David McCandless's (2015) book, *Knowledge is Beautiful*, reviewed by Paul Kerley under his article, "Beautiful knowledge: Complicated numbers made simple," of *BBC News Magazine*, shown in Image 10. In his "Timeline of the Far Future," a collection of infographics with data from NASA, the Potsdam Institute and the Geological Society, he illustrates that most buildings, bridges and dams around today will have decayed in 1,000 years, just like most words will be extinct because of the rapid evolution of languages.



Image 10: Kerley, P. (2015, April 21). *Beautiful knowledge: Complicated numbers made simple*. Retrieved from BBC News Magazine website: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32299402>

Preserving Painted Murals in Digital Form

The duration of conventional outdoor acrylic murals with UV resistant protection may hold up for 15 to 20 years and 50 years or longer if it is situated indoors. Digital archived mural images in optical disc media, such as recorded CDs, DVDs or Blu-Ray optical disks, may only be retrievable for 2 to 5 years according to the US National Archives. Digital preservation requires active management of regular migration of content from older storage devices to newer devices. Digital murals may continue to exist in other future cyber created spaces. Similarly, virtual murals that exist only on the Internet, may also offer another option to preserve or extend the life of conventional painted murals by making them viable in a new way. According to Emily Badger's (2012) article, "Virtual Murals for Real-Life Buildings," Public Ad Campaign, partnered with the Los Angeles-based group, The Heavy Projects, used smart phone applications to project virtual art onto real-life ads, creating an "augmented reality," shown in Image 11, that merges traditional physical images with digital information. BC Biermann, founder of The Heavy Projects, said: "Augmented reality allows us to cross private-property boundaries with street art" (para. 5). Perhaps, digital technology really gives a second life to conventional painted murals. Like photography may have helped painting from painted canvas to digitally manipulated designs printed on a variety of materials.

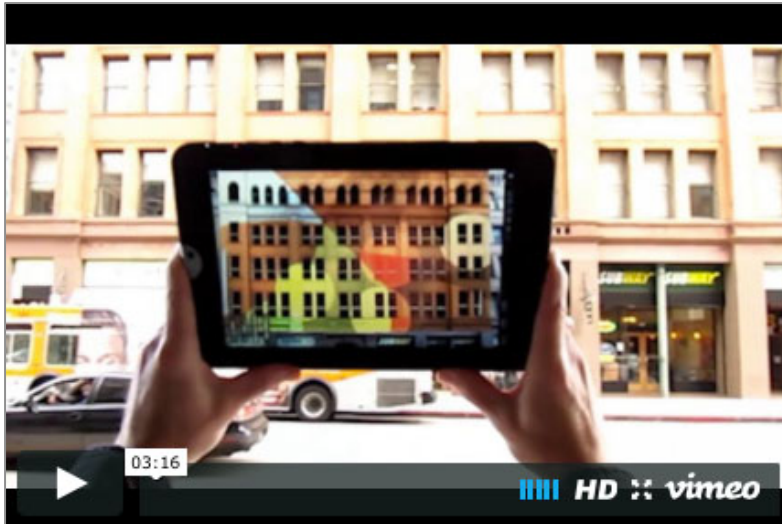


Image 11: Still image retrieved from The Heavy Projects' Public Ad Campaign – Re+public + Momo NYC + LA, based on Badger, E. (2012, May 15). Virtual murals for real-life building. Retrieved from *CityLab* website: <http://www.citylab.com/tech/2012/05/virtual-murals-real-life-buildings/2001/>

The True Value of Mural: Mural Process or Mural Itself

Just as the meaning of life does not depend on years spent, but timeless moments, a great mural or artwork is not valued by the length of its existence but rather its influence on communities instead. I appreciate the mural process as much as mural itself. This belief has driven me to direct some temporary community murals, such as sidewalk chalk drawing, at Pitt-Bradford. In the summer of 2007, I co-taught a week-long high school enrichment summer academy for a group of 15 gifted high school students from Cameron, Elk, McKean and Potter counties in Pennsylvania. I set up an intensive one-week studio art program for this group of young teenagers to explore. A commonality of art interest among this group of students ensured collaboration in the last day's activity – sidewalk chalk drawing. Using Vincent van Gogh's famous paintings, *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries*, as our chalk drawing reference image, we spent three hours one morning to recreate this painting on the cement entrance of cafeteria, shown in Image 49. All of them were engaging for the first time in a collaborative outdoor art activity. They learnt how to use the chalk set to create grid lines on the floor and to enlarge the painting based on them. The most important aspect they had learned in the chalk drawing session was not the drawing techniques but collaborative spirit and group interdependence. I was amazed to see that students directed themselves in dividing up the drawing into different parts without any instruction. They didn't mind getting dirty with color chalk on their jeans and T-shirts. What they really cared was the drawing process which they took part in. They understood that they couldn't take the chalk drawing with them but they only needed some digital photos to share with their family and friends about their street art experience. They also realized that the chalk drawing eventually would be erased from the campus because of the rain and normal cleaning. However, they did enjoy the drawing process, which was mingled with chatting, laughter and joking. It was not easy for everyone to draw for three hours, but the sweat and joy generated during the art making process created the ultimate accolade for the community art project. Their collective memories of drawing process remains in their lives.



Image 12: A group photo of summer academy high school students with teaching artists, Kong Ho and Martie Geiger-Ho, drawing sidewalk chalk drawing at Pitt-Bradford campus in July 20, 2007.

We don't know what popular format community or public murals will take in the future. However, all the possibilities, such as digital murals, 3D murals, animated murals, projection murals, virtual murals, and street art chalk drawings, may exist or co-exist in our future multicultural and technologically advanced society. The most important consideration of all when choosing any format for a public mural is the value of community mural process, which includes unlocking individual artistic talents during the mural making process; and connecting individuals to strengthen art, culture and the quality of life in our society. Last but not least, community murals are more than billboard advertisements because they are site-specific community art projects related to the collective culture and social history of those communities. Losing a community mural is not only a great loss to many people participating in the mural production process and those who are living with that particular mural, but also to our society and cultural development.

Future Investment in Teaching Artists

In the prologue of my recent book publication, shown in Figure 13, I wrote that the most significant reason for writing a book about teaching art with focus on community murals, is to include my experience in mural art teaching and practice as another means or resource for others to explore. As a muralist for 18 years, I understand that it is not easy to paint a community mural in cities that are full of commercial advertisements. I am totally aware of my duties as a community mural advocator and teaching artist to connect people or organizations or governmental departments, who provide funds, manpower, time, talent, walls or permission to use someone else's property before any public or community mural project can start. Usually, the negotiations between mural sponsors, government officials, private property owners or real estate agents, are protracted; they may take 6 months to 1 year before any agreement can be reached. Also, some sponsors, government officials or property owners prefer to review the community mural designs prior to any

agreements. It is understandable that each stakeholder would rather have more control or influence on the public art or community art project, which they invest in. It is true that community murals are a lot harder to arrange in most cities because advertising is an important part of commerce in our society.

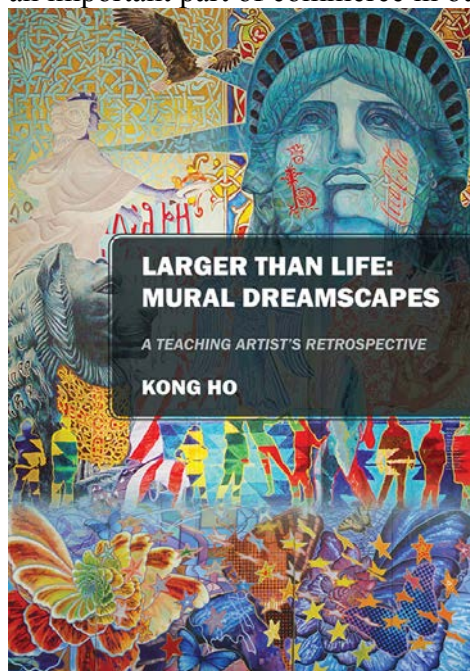


Figure 13: Book cover design. Ho, K. (2016). *Larger than life: Mural dreamscapes*. Parker, CO: Outskirts Press.

Sustainable Art and Cultural Development

According to BBC's Get Creative campaign (2015), shown in Image 13, a year-long celebration of British arts, culture and creativity, launched on 19 February 2015, there is a need to study the kind of "[future] investment needed to ensure all forms of culture and art are inclusive and accessible for all." This statement is based on the report of the Warwick Commission's a year-long study into the future of cultural value (What Next, para 6). The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value mentioned that: "In November 2013, the University of Warwick launched a one-year Commission, chaired by Vikki Heywood CBE, to undertake a comprehensive and holistic investigation into the future of cultural value" (para. 4). The report also said that:

Commissioners have worked with departments across the university to engage with new research an evidence with the aim of developing new policy thinking and practical recommendations that will enable the flourishing and long-term sustainability of culture and creativity in Britain in a competitive and challenging global landscape. (para. 4)



Image 14: BBC Get Creative website. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/sections/get-creative>

Together with "What Next?" a movement bringing together arts and cultural organizations from across the UK, Get Creative aims at articulating and strengthening the role of culture and arts in our society. The objectives of Get Creative and What Next? are "to engage the public in new and different conversations about how and why the arts are important, and become a catalyst for fresh creative thinking and new policy ideas" (What Next?, para. 1). Perhaps, as BBC Director General Tony Hall said: "What I hope we can offer the campaign – and it's something only the BBC can offer – is the ability to reach people everywhere. To inspire everyone to make art or do something creative" (Arts Professional, 2015, para. 1).

Changing the Perception of Art in Society

The past 25 years of working as a teaching artist has taught me that regular art education teaching from K-12 may make a difference in some learners' mind about arts, culture and the quality of life. However, in a bigger picture of public art education, I think it isn't sufficient to depend only on education sectors or visits to conventional museums to turn young learners onto the value and important of art. There must be collaborations between other cultural entities, the creative industries, government organizations, private sectors, artists and community volunteers, in order to change the mindset of many people in our society who do not think that art is important. Nowadays, there are still a lot of people who ask "Do we need the arts?" "What is art?", "Why should we invest our tax money on the arts?", "Why does creativity matter to us?", "Where does creativity sit in education?", "How does the arts benefit our community?", and "What commitment should the government be making to arts, culture and education?".

It is good to see an influential corporation, like the BBC, initiating this national campaign on arts and culture. I believe each nation, each government, each art or cultural organization, and each individual citizen has the right to discuss issues in arts, culture and education in-depth, and to show individual support to arts, culture and education. Together various groups can share the common belief that arts and culture are valuable to our societies. It may be true that art won't save the world. However, if we understand that the meaning of life is not based on an individual's measurable fortune, but the quality of individual life, which is hard to measure, then we may agree that the value of arts and culture is far more than we think. According to the

article, "Budget Cuts to Art Programs in Schools," shown in Image 14, by Linda Emma, writer of Seattle Post-Intelligencer:

According to a 2012 longitudinal study funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, students with exposure to arts programs do better academically and socially. Overall, involved kids stay out of trouble, have higher self-esteem and feel more connected to their community. (para. 2)

Deflated Value of Art and Culture in Society

Despite a growing amount of evidence to support the arts and culture in our society and education system, federal, state and local governments still cut art programs from K-12 to higher education around our nation during a recessionary economy or economic crisis. According to the Think Progress online article, "Public schools slash arts education and turn to private funding," by Marina Fang (2013), "As schools across the country have faced budget shortfalls in recent years, a common cost-cutting measure is to slash funding for arts education, prioritizing what are deemed more essential subjects such as math, reading, and science" (Think Progress, para. 4). It is common practice for budget makers in the US school systems to cut arts programs in favor of other areas of the curriculum, such as reading, writing and mathematics, which are under the standardized test as advocated by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. The NCLB guidelines for mathematics and literacy education in school systems not only have caused some schools to cut or eliminate subjects, such as arts, music, history, but also limit students' experience, curiosity and interest in learning science because it consumes too much time. Perhaps, our current education system may be anchored to an unbalanced basis. Arts and science educations are not opposed to each other but overlap and share commonalities. It may be creativity that unlocks the solution to our social and global challenges and helps to imagine a future that prepares ourselves for uncertainties. It was creativity that discovered the polio vaccine that saves millions lives. Creativity invented the world-wide-web to connect individuals, and created influential works of art to inspire artistic souls.

As stated in the NEA article, "Surprising findings in three new NEA reports on the arts", NEA (2012) Report 3, shown in Image 14, The Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account (ACPSA), states that: "In 2012, arts and cultural production contributed more than \$698 billion to the U.S. economy, or 4.32 percent to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP)" (NEA News, para. 11). This finding reveals that the arts are one of the driving forces of the GDP and jobs. According to the report, there were 4.7 million artists and cultural workers employed in the creative and cultural industries in the U.S. in 2012. The value and impact of the arts in our society and individuals is obviously higher than the estimation of our educational budget makers or cultural policy makers.



Image 15: National Endowment for the Arts. (2015). *Surprising findings in three new NEA reports on the arts*. Retrieved from National Endowment for the Arts website: <http://arts.gov/news/2015/surprising-findings-three-new-nea-reports-arts>

Public Murals as Part of Creative or Cultural Industries

According to Richard Florida (2002), a new group of professionals called the "Creative Class" is swelling to such levels that they are shaping the values and structure of today's shifting American socioeconomic geography (p. xiii). In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida explains that a force greater than the one that transformed society when it shifted from an agricultural society to an industrial one is already here in the form of the creative industries, which he explains are built fundamentally on human intelligence, knowledge and creativity. As a creative individual, I just hope that budget cuts made for arts education and programs during the past economic and political turmoil should not become a typical solution for the federal, state and local governments in both the U.S. and abroad.

My recent travel to Penang, Malaysia in 2015 opened my eyes about how art can revitalize a city and make it fun for tourists to explore. The community murals and city commissioned works of street art have made an impact on the local economy and community in George Town, the capital of Penang, a recorded The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Cultural Heritage site. Penang is a historic colonial city that blends East and West. Ernest Zacharevic (2012), a young Lithuanian artist, has earned his reputation as a respected street artist through his realistic painted figures combined with real 3D objects included with his murals in George Town. The image of his "Kids on a Bicycle", shown in Image 15, is a well-known mural in Armenian Street, painted during the George Town Festival 2012. It has become the icon of George Town's street art and the most marketable souvenir item at the Penang Global Tourist Information Center. According to Kiri Spirou's (2015) article, "Fascinating Street Art by Ernest Zacharevic", he portrayed a playful bicycle-riding scene between a girl and a boy adjacent to an actual old bicycle in the site. His 2D and 3D hybrid street art recreates the image of nostalgic childhood life in George Town. The street art in George Town has definitely revitalized old colonial town with clever art that tourists find endearing.



Image 16: Zacharevic, E. *Kids on a Bicycle*. 2012. Acrylic on wall. George Town, Penang, Malaysia.

Conclusion: The Autonomy of Mural Painting

After more than two decades of investing my time and energy into teaching art and painting community murals, I must ask myself, who has inspired me to keep going? I believe that each one of us has his or her own creative mentor. Living with my disability since I was one year old has not prevented me from studying or making art. My disability has actually strengthened my resolve by making me more persevering, creative and independent. Really, these are good traits for studying and making art. There are a lot of people, things and places that have inspired me to explore art and my teaching. For example, my early art influence might come from watching the fascinating tailoring tools and fabrics, which my self-taught father, Ho Keung, used for making bespoke clothes for his customers. His curved wooden rulers and colorful triangle shaped tailor chalks were my favorite childhood tools. My father didn't really teach me how to sew or cut fabrics but watching him making one-of-a-kind clothing influenced me deeply towards appreciating craftsmanship and creativity.

I followed my heart in choosing fine arts as my major in my undergraduate study in Hong Kong instead of science or other subjects popular at that time. The more time I spent on my art studies, the more I became engaged in them. I soon realized that being an artist would become my dream profession. After I graduated two years, I started teaching art and design at the college. At that time, I realized that the joy of making art and the fulfillment of teaching it broadened my outlook on life.

My teaching experiences transformed my art and vice versa. My personal paintings gradually transformed from serene images of ambivalent spaces to complex enveloping spaces. The mood of my art shifted from tranquil to energetic. I completed my transitional painting for the "Spiral Series", entitled *Beauty of Complexity*, shown in Image 16, in 2002. Sumptuously painted in a technique consisting of painterly drips and splatters held in check by subtly controlled washes of glaze and exacting trompe l'oeil objects, my personal artworks exemplify the bicultural theme and semi-abstract style indicative of my "Spiral Series" of works. Just as with everything else in life, my

art fields change from studio painting to community mural, like *Bulgarian-American Cultural Mural*, shown in Image 17, and then to photography and digital art. Despite these changes, the content of my art still expresses the complexity of cultural orientation within the contemporary global community.

Teaching artists are more than art educators who know how to teach but also are practicing artists who know how to influence others through their work. I believe that my art making and teaching set me on a journey that has allowed me to discover where I came from, to accept who I am, and to transcend what I hope to be. Community murals led by teaching artists not only transform the physical space of the communities but also connect individuals living and working in those communities and create meaning and collective memories in individual lives. Those collective memories shape our cultural heritage and define the value of art in our society. The autonomy of mural painting will not falter in the digital age if we value the importance of art, educational and cultural development in our society.



Image 16: Kong Ho. *Beauty of Complexity*. 2002. Acrylic on canvas. 50"H x 50"W.



Image 17: Kong Ho & 10 Bulgarian NAA students. *Bulgarian-American Cultural Mural*, 2010. Acrylic on polytab non-woven media. 13.6'H x 13.6'W.

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