

Hello, I'm Steve Ember.

Today, in Singapore, we meet a street artist who is testing the limits of free artistic expression in a country where rules are firmly enforced.

Next, in the United States, we hear about small wooden boxes that have become miniature free libraries.

[Music from "The Pines of Rome" by Ottorino Respighi]

And then it's off to Italy, where we celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Ottorino Respighi, who gave the world colorful, melodic music like "The Pines of Rome."

But first, let's meet artist Samantha Lo.

Street Artist Tests Free Speech Limits in Singapore

As Singaporeans become more economically successful, young people are demanding more freedom of expression, including speech that is sometimes unpleasant and politically offensive.

Samantha Lo is a street artist. Last year the 27-year old was arrested for placing messages on traffic lights. The stickers include playful messages that read "Press to Time Travel" or "Press to Stop Time". She also painted a message that some say was disrespectful of the country's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew.

The violations could have led to a three-year prison term. Instead, Ms. Lo was ordered to perform 240 hours of community service and attend counseling. She describes what she believes is her right to express her artistry.

"Back then, even when I first started doing the stickers, I knew that it was illegal. But, I didn't let that limit my freedom in that sense. I still wanted to do it and I still did it. That is freedom, the freedom to express. That is what art should be, isn't it?"

In a nation where rules are firmly enforced, Samantha Lo's street art has led to discussions on the limits of free speech. And she is not the only Singaporean pushing the limits. Officials are investigating 37-year old Leslie Chew. He published a drawing online that has been described as being a racial insult.

Mr. Chew publishes a comic strip on Facebook that has more than 24,000 followers. If found guilty, he could be fined and jailed for three years. M. Ravi, the lawyer defending Leslie Chew, says artists and government critics are using the Internet to get their messages out. But some politicians are trying to suppress such actions.

Terence Chong is a sociologist at the Institute for South East Asian Studies in Singapore. He recently helped produce a document calling for more artistic freedom. The "Arts Manifesto" has been presented to the government. Mister Chong says Singapore is facing a problem. On one side, it wants to market itself as a world-class city for the arts. On the other, issues like race, religion and homosexuality are restricted.

"How do we tell the world we are culturally vibrant, creative, willing to break boundaries and yet, at the same time, designating certain no-go areas? "

Mister Chong believes that Singapore has reached an important moment in its development. It is being forced to consider what kind of future society it wants to welcome and support. OPT:But, he believes progress has been made. Ten years ago, he says, Samantha Lo would surely have been jailed, and Leslie Chew would not have been permitted to publish his cartoons.

You are listening to "As It Is" from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

Is It a Birdhouse? No, It's a Library!

Small wooden boxes that look like birdhouses are showing up along streets and walkways across the United States and around the world. The little boxes were not placed there to feed birds. Instead, they are there to feed people's brains.

Individuals or groups of neighbors create and fill the boxes with books for anyone who wants to read one. Milagros Ardin reports that the boxes are meant to share the love of reading and the building of a strong community.

One of the little birdhouses has been placed outside Centreville Elementary School in Virginia. It gets a lot of attention. The wooden box contains about twenty four children's books.

This Little Free Library was built by a group of Girl Scouts at the school. Kyra Gosney is one of the scouts.

"We had to paint it. We had to attach everything together."

Another girl, Isabella Sursi, says it was a learning experience.

"We had to make sure we knew what we were doing. And, we had to discuss the details before we actually did anything with it."

Her mother, Stephanie Sursi, says even in this fairly wealthy community, the little free library serves a purpose.

“There are still children whose parents work two jobs or can’t take them to the library or who simply don’t think about buying them books as presents.”

The girls have collected more than 400 books so far, so they can make sure there are many different kinds of books. School librarian Sheri D’Amato says she examines what is placed in the box to make sure the books are appropriate for the children and at the correct difficulty for their reading levels.

“We want kids to have access to books all the time. The school library is not always open. We’re not here on the weekend. And, the public library is not open all the time. These little libraries are always open. You don’t need a card. You don’t need any money.”

Little Free Libraries are everywhere, even in unexpected place. Kristen Brabrook put one in the bakery she manages in Reston Town, Virginia. She wanted to share her love of reading.

When she read the story about the free little libraries, she knew she wanted one.

“People come in, usually for cupcakes. They’ll see the library. They always ask if it costs something and we say, ‘No, help yourself. Please take it.’”

The idea for the libraries was born three years ago in Hudson, Wisconsin. Former teacher and book lover, Todd Bol, built a very small model of a library.

“I originally built a library to honor my mother. I built one and put it out in the front yard and never planned on building another one.”

But, his neighbors loved the idea. It made him want to start the Little Free Library Organization to spread the idea. Now there are more than 2,500 of the little libraries across the United States.

And, that is a happy ending for any book. I’m Milagros Ardin.

...and a Musical Birthday

[Opening Fanfare from “Roman Festivals” by Respighi]

The glory that was Rome, evoked musically by composer Ottorino Respighi, who was born on this date in Bologna, Italy. He composed in many forms, from solo piano to opera, but he is best known for his colorful works for large orchestra. Some of his most popular compositions with present day audiences are the impressionistic tone poems, Feste Romane – Roman Festivals, Fontana di Roma – depicting musically four famous fountains in the Eternal City...

[“Pines of Rome” by Respighi]

...and Pini di Roma, The Pines of Rome. Respighi died in 1936. And amidst those Roman Pines on a sparkling sunny day, we wrap up this edition of As It Is from VOA Learning English. There are more Learning English stories just ahead, and be sure to listen to VOA World News at the beginning of the hour.

Steve Ember here. Arrivederci – We’ll see you next time.