

## Why Can't Banksy Be a Woman? The Gendering of Graffiti and Street Art Studies

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### Abstract

In this article, the question 'Why Can't Banksy Be a Woman' is a point of departure to approach some of the pressing challenges regarding sex and gender in graffiti and street art studies, in order to contribute on the matter of the presence/absence of women graffiti and street artists in this epistemological field. To this aim, I summon feminist contributions on the invisibility of women in the established art world, namely from art historians Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock. I map important contributions on the question of women in graffiti, by referring to graffiti scholars Nancy MacDonald and Jessica Pábon-Cólon. As street art has been considered more gender inclusive in regards to conditions of production, I locate restrictions mainly in terms of reception. Finally, I suggest that the question of women in graffiti and street art studies is larger than sex and gender.

**Keywords:** Women, Feminism, Graffiti, Street Art, Production, Reception.

### 1. Introduction: Whose voice?

Graffiti and street art studies have focused on the transgressive and subversive potential of these urban expressions, which largely derive from their unsanctioned and self-authorized nature (Bengtson 2013; Blanché, 2015). By establishing their own authority in the city (Iveson, 2017), graffiti and street art reject established urban conventions and invent their own. In this disruptive process of normativity and urban regulations, graffiti and street art are able to generate new meanings, make power relations visible in the city, and give voice to the voiceless. Banksy once wrote: "Graffiti has been used to start revolutions, stop wars and generally is the voice of people who aren't listened to" (Banksy, 2001: n.p.).

However, less often present in graffiti and street art studies, is a reflection and/or investigation about whose voice is made audible, which, as I shall argue, is often presumed to be male-authored. Graffiti and street art may well be masculine dominated fields, but the perpetuation of such assumptions in research solidifies a male-centered

experience that is already a feature of these expressions. Therefore, this article is not about Banksy, or rather, this article extends well beyond Banksy's voice: it focuses on the myriad of ways women are silenced in research, in particular in graffiti and street art studies.

### 2. The Gendering of Graffiti

To begin with, I suggest to look at to how the [his]story goes: in the early days - invariably located in the late 1960s throughout the decade of 1970s first in Philadelphia but mainly in New York, USA - the ground-breaking graffiti subculture began to established itself as such by a legion of young boys eager to leave their mark in the urban landscape. In the competitive pursuit of fame, male game-changers such as Cornbread, Taki 183, Phase 2, or Futura, left their mark and are invariably mentioned among the names that generated the graffiti movement, as we know it (Stewart, 2009).

In terms of sex and gender, Jack Stewart, one of the first art historians interested in the documentation and historiography of graffiti, was able to map an impressive

number of 120 female writers in New York City during the golden age of graffiti in the 1970s (Stewart, 2009). But, as Jacob Kimvall points out, “considering the total amount of almost 3000 names and that the vast ungendered category seems to be male, Stewart is perhaps, contrary to his own intentions, more successful in pointing out an extreme domination of males than the contrary” (Kimvall, 2015: 67).

It follows that, in terms of historiography, when girls and women graffiti and street artists are mentioned, they are consistently considered an exception, as the following statements from graffiti and street art scholars illustrate: “Women have been involved in graffiti and street art from the beginning, but in fewer numbers than men” (Mattern, 2016: 84); “Although a minority, women have participated in writing culture since the beginning” (Snyder, 2016: 207); “Young women were always in the minority among [graffiti] writers, although several gained citywide fame during the early 1970s” (Austin, 2001: 59). Even when mentioned, women in graffiti are associated with an exceptional status or, as great graffiti artist Lady Pink one described, they are taken as tokens, which arguably further undermines their relevance (Lady Pink, 1992).

That the graffiti culture has been, since its burgeoning days, a male-dominated field is, whilst a well-established discourse, an oversimplification. More than a question of number, looking at the names that got inscribed for posterity, women are yet again missing from the picture. Indeed, according to American scholar Jessica Pábon-Cólon, women graffiti [and street] artists “are not absent from graffiti studies simply because there are ‘not as many women writers’ – the standard rationale – but because the lens, or the conventional way of seeing, renders them and their contribution illegible, invisible” (Pábon-Cólon, 2018: 9). Concomitantly in the fine arts, art historian Nanette Salomon contended that women artists are not simply omitted, they are dismissed and considered exceptions when present, which may contribute to a devaluation of their contributions (Salomon, 1991).

In this way, the male-centered perspective in research was also “reproduced throughout the graffiti studies canon” (Pábon-Cólon, 2018: 7). Regarding the academic field of subcultures, cultural theorists Angela McRobbie and Jenny

Garber were the first scholars to point out in 1977 that research on that field centred on the experience of men, neglecting the question of women. McRobbie and Garber raised four questions that are likewise relevant to the subculture of graffiti: 1) Are girls and women really absent from subcultures?; 2) Are girls and women present but invisible?; 3) When girls and women are visible, what are their roles and do these reflect the general subordination of women in culture?; and 4) Do girls and women have alternative ways of organising their cultural life (McRobbie & Garber, 2006) ?

Taking McRobbie and Garber’s cues, Pábon-Cólon has demonstrated that not only girls and women are not absent from the subculture of graffiti, they have been present from its inception. It may be true that women have been outnumbered by male peers, but female’s contribution has been undermined and made invisible over time (Pábon, 2014). On the remaining questions, Pábon-Cólon has investigated the alternative ways girls and women organize their graffiti subcultural life, namely by resorting to solidarity and unity in all-female groupings and crews and to other resources such as the Internet (Pábon, 2013; Pábon-Cólon, 2018).

The importance of the collective for girls and women graffiti writers contrasts with a reading of graffiti as an individualistic subculture when looked from an ungendered perspective. For instance, Ricardo Campos elaborates convincing arguments as to approach the graffiti writer as a superhero since, from his ethnographic findings, “these young people tend to fabricate a somewhat romantic representation of the archetypical graffiti writer (the ‘King’) as a sort of superhero, one with superhuman abilities” (Campos, 2012: 160). However, the notion of hero itself is socially filled with masculine overtones, which reflects the view of Campos’s informants in this particular study, mostly male graffiti writers. As a matter of fact, the very category of ‘king’ – which in the graffiti jargon designates a person who has proven her skills, talent, and mastery, being above ‘toys’, who are beginners or mediocre graffiti writers – reveals a hierarchical structure that does not necessarily encompass or serve the experience of girls and women in the graffiti subculture.

Furthermore, Pábon-Cólon has argued that girls and women in the graffiti subculture redefine the social roles of sex and gender, displaying a *feminist masculinity* – a femininity that is not [just] the opposite of masculinity, but rather expresses a more complex range of gender performativity (Pábon-Cólon, 2018). An expression of the latter is the reaffirmation of femininity markers – such as the subversion of the dress-code by using dresses – by women graffiti writers in their subcultural life, thus standing out, refusing to blend in, and dismissing the motto that graffiti is ‘something for the boys’, to paraphrase Nancy MacDonald’s 2016 article title.

In her seminal ethnographic work, Nancy MacDonald has inquired the gendered nature of graffiti. Her findings attest that this subculture has been used as a tool for the construction of masculinity and manhood, through the competitive interplay of peers in terms of risk and fame, ultimately proving one’s courage and strength. As a result, female participation is considered an intrusion and even a threat, and is regarded with hostility, being sexualized or underestimated (MacDonald, 2001). Therefore, in the graffiti world, “[c]onventional sex roles and the pressures of heterosexuality are not escaped, [...] they are reproduced and reinforced” (*ibidem*: 139). Indeed, while graffiti is known to reject conventional paradigms of urban authority and regulation, this subcultural practice paradoxically may render normative views on sex and gender.

### 3. The Gendering of Street Art

Whereas street art has largely escaped a gendered scrutiny so far, graffiti as a masculinist and heteronormative subculture has been investigated, albeit sporadically. Despite the lack of consensus on the debate on the boundaries between graffiti and street art, whose discursive formations overlap (Kimvall, 2015), street art has been considered a more gender-inclusive artistic expression. Reasons include the fact that street art is less related with the assertion of masculinity; that the diverse techniques (posters, stickers, stencils) may be prepared at home and easily disseminated without requiring a permanent presence in the streets; and that street art entertains a smoother relation with the authorities, being generally more accepted and considered less deviant.

Thus, the conditions of production of street art are considered more benevolent than those of graffiti – coinciding with a gendered experience of the urban space whereby women are more vulnerable, and with the perpetuation of patriarchal and heteronormative standards by misogynist peers. Since art making does not take place in a void, conditions of production do reflect social norms, values, and beliefs, that actively shape (or even constrain) artistic creation. Recently, Malin Fransberg has explored the unresolved distinction between graffiti and street art and its gendered implications, having concluded that it is “not adequate to study women in street art and graffiti as one *united* group, as they negotiate their structural positions and subvert and negotiate gender regimes through different strategies, and from different locations” (Fransberg, 2019: 501, emphasis in the original). The differentiation between graffiti and street art generates, accordingly, a different relation to sex and gender.

As street art is considered a more socially accepted expression, which has increasingly been more institutionalized in recent years, it can be argued that previous feminist perspectives from the established art world may shed light into the matter of gender bias in regard to the street art. To be sure, street art establishes itself from its system of production, distribution, and consumption – what can be named *the street art world* (Bengtson, 2014) – and the question of the invisibility of women has to be defined in its own terms. Nevertheless, the problem of the invisibility of women artists is not specific to street art studies. Rather, it has consistently permeated other fields of knowledge and practices, such as visual arts and the fine arts, for which feminist contributions have been pivotal, such as art historians Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock.

An intersecting challenge in the street art world and the established world of fine arts is the curation of artists. The curatorial practices of institutions, public and private, have long been a concern among feminist views in the art world. On the one hand, women artists still lack recognition, and, on the other, they are regarded with a problematic visibility such as the featuring of all-women exhibitions – a strategy that has been criticized as a way to pigeonhole the artistic production of women (Hayden & Skrubbe, 2010). As art historians Malin Hayden and Jessica S. Skrubbe argue:

If one considers the art world as a gender-biased system, hence an ideologically charged system, [...] discriminations of e.g. women artists are rather to be dismantled by analysis of cultural, aesthetic, political, economic, and social power structures and valuations rather than to think and argue from a position that claims that women, artists or not, are essentially different from men (artists) (Hayden & Skrubbe, 2010: 56-57).

Similarly, one may ask: Are women street artists represented as much as men in festivals and other similar street art events? Are they rewarded equally and have equal visibility? Social movements, such as AMMuRA<sup>2</sup> in Argentina, suggest that women street artists may be subjected to gender-bias from organizations, which namely assume that women are less able to achieve monumental murals due to prejudices about strength and physical height. As a result, women street artist end up, in such cases, being less invited, rewarded lower remunerations, and attributed smaller sites and surfaces than their male peers (AMMuRA, personal communication<sup>3</sup>, July 18, 2019).

One of AMMuRA's campaign image depicts a woman artist wearing a wolf mask on a yellow background next to a gender-gap revealing statistics<sup>4</sup>, clearly making a street art take on Guerrilla's Girls famous activist posters (AMMuRA, 2018, August 31). Fighting to make visible sexism and racism in the established art world since 1984, Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous collective that use pseudonyms (Guerrilla Girls, n.d.). This concealing of identity as an effective strategy to elude retaliations from the authorities is particularly useful in self-authorized practices in the urban landscape, such as unsanctioned graffiti and street art. In this vein, renowned street artist Banksy has made anonymity his/her face value. Propelled into fame, Banksy's name is currently a brand that draws on the contradictions of street art, on "its simultaneous reliance on both a kind of 'dangerous' street cred and its insistence on sustaining a 'legitimate' place in contemporary culture", gaining currency in galleries, auctions houses, (Banet-Weiser, 2011: 646), and Instagram followers.

Notwithstanding, anonymity can also be a disputed site of gender-bias from the point of view of audiences. Indeed, one challenge to the visibility of women graffiti and street artists at reception end is the fact that, without a clear identity marker, graffiti and street art works are assumed to result from men to the viewer (Pábon, 2016). As a result, women graffiti and street artists deploy different strategies when wanting to make their sex and gender acknowledged while maintaining anonymity, such as the use of pseudonyms, colors, or adornments socially associated with femininity in their works on the streets. Anonymity and pseudonymity acquire, then, different meanings according to gender.

On the opposite side of anonymity and pseudonymity lays fame and recognition, which access may also be restricted according to gendered systems of artistic valuation. Due to gender-based restrictions, the use of male-connoted pseudonyms was not uncommon for women to gain access literary world as authors in the nineteenth century. It may seem displaced to mention here the literary patriarchal canon that has excluded women authors and the strategies used by the latter but, as pointed out by Seán Burke, "[i]t would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the struggles of feminism has been primarily a struggle for authorship – understood in the widest sense as the arena in which culture attempts to define itself" (Burke, 1995: 145).

For this reason, and coming back to Banksy, it does not matter if s/he is a man or a woman – the latter hypothesis having been raised with dubious arguments, such as his/her work being "feminine", a very debatable notion based on the idea that women artists create differently than men<sup>5</sup> (Capps, 2014). What matters are the immediate readings from the viewer that may assume an anonymous graffiti and street artwork to be produced by a male artist. If, as Linda Nochlin has long suggested, the 'Artist' is generally assumed to be male, upper-class, white, and heterosexual, such natural assumptions should be questioned and challenged in art history and, I would add, in any academic field in which I include graffiti and street art studies (Nochlin, 2015 [1971]).

#### 4. Conclusions

The question of gender in graffiti and street art studies has been so far largely raised in terms of the identity of the producers and conditions of production in the urban landscape. Less present from the discussion are issues related with consumption and reception, which may be particularly relevant in terms of epistemological knowledge. Away from production, at the far end of reception, is the role not only of curators, critics, and audiences of graffiti and street art, but also academics, historians, and researchers. In terms of research, considering graffiti and street art as practices nuanced by sex and gender, several questions are yet to be answered: What are the challenges or gender-bias of the specific epistemological field of graffiti and street studies? How can we prevent the gender axis of research to be overlooked in graffiti and street art studies, and to minimize the risk of making women, yet again, invisible?

Taking into account that there is no neutral system, no neutral knowledge, and no neutral point of view, that conventions and assumptions are continuously building on each other, to challenge sex and gender in graffiti and street art studies is to open way to other questions, not only in terms of social categories, but also of the Western and/or Anglophone-centrality in knowledge production. As feminist art historian Griselda Pollock once argued:

Demanding that women be considered not only changes what is studied and what becomes relevant to investigate but it challenges the existing disciplines politically. Women have not been omitted through forgetfulness or mere prejudice. The structural sexism of most academic disciplines contributes actively to the production and perpetuation of a gender hierarchy (Pollock, 2003: 1).

In conclusion, the question of women in graffiti and street art studies – as the question of women in other fields of knowledge – goes therefore well beyond sex and gender.

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#### Footnotes

1. Her earlier works are signed as *Jessica Pábon* while more recent are authored as *Jessica Pábon-Cólon*.
2. AMMurA stands for *Agrupación Mujeres Muralistas de Argentina* (Association of Women Muralists in Argentina, my translation).
3. E-mail correspondence.
4. The statistics reveal that “90% of commissioned murals in festivals in Buenos Aires are made by male artists, also the only ones who are invited more than once. Moreover, they paint bigger murals and are better paid”, my translation from the original: “El 90% de los murales en festivales del GCBA fueron realizados por varones. Siendo los únicos que repitieron participación. Pintando los muros más grandes y, por lo tanto, mejor remunerados”.
5. This hypothesis is elaborated according to the following argument: “The savvy manipulation of media to make viral art, to make art about virality, makes Banksy an innovator breaking out of a familiar form. In contemporary art today, that’s a feminine trait: The best selfie artists are women, for example. So are the artists leading the Post-Internet art world” (Capps, 2014: n.p.).

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