

Worlding through gendering: Female agency, artistic practices and spatio-aesthetic dynamics in and for cities



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the emergent practices of worlding by shifting the focus to the varied forms of female agency taking place in contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism. Given that the position of women has been underestimated in existing scholarships of worlding, (post)subcultures and contemporary art in East Asia, the questions of multiple roles of female agency, signifiers of femininity, and a more nuanced understanding of their impact to the spatio-aesthetic dynamics of public space are becoming ever more relevant. While contemporary graffiti is mainly seen as the domain of masculinity, the diversified manifestations of street art and muralism are more accepting for female participation and self-expression. Through critical analysis of the complexities of female agency and feminine aesthetics, the paper demonstrates how the transformation of contemporary graffiti into acknowledged forms of contemporary art has provided unseen possibilities for women to engage with what I call “worlding through gendering”. I posit that even if feminine signifiers or feminist aspirations might not be a dominating strategy in these artistic practices amidst the ever-growing transcultural urban environment, women protagonists are contributing towards new forms of worlding through aesthetic strategies and forms of female agency. They create situated experiments how to be global in cities in East Asia and worldwide.

Art is an important element in any worldmaking agenda, because it has always been a means to imagine other possibilities. (Turner & Webb, 2016: 146)

1. Introduction

“Mimi” is a flirtatious female character by Shiro (Fig. 1), a Japanese graffiti artist from Shizuoka known for her dedication to hip-hop culture and contemporary graffiti since 1997–98.¹ To develop her skills in spray painting, while working as a nurse in Tokyo, Shiro made extended visits to New York, relocating there in 2014 to become a full-time artist (personal interview, 26 January 2014). Painting with acknowledged graffiti and street artists in the US, Europe, and Asia has further enabled Shiro to create her internationally appreciated style. Depending on the spatio-temporal context of the work and her personal inspiration, the

visual characteristics of Mimi incorporate elements from different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures, varying from mermaids to Japanese geisha and from loving mother figures to bold femme fatales and the Statue of Liberty.

Despite being a representation of an alter-ego rather than a self-portrait, Mimi indicates Shiro's belief in independent and international womanhood. Nonetheless, regardless of feminine representations dominating her oeuvre, gender becomes irrelevant for Shiro when she paints (personal interview, 2 February 2018). Such a perception suggests how painting as a creative process is, for her, not to be reduced to mere presentation of femininity or feminism. Emphasis on indifference to gender – also expressed by other female protagonists – sets limitations for frameworks emphasising solely feminist approaches to adequately explain the interrelated and fluid aspects of creative processes in contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism.² First, the flexibility

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¹ To indicate the existing variety in terms of professional identities, when writing about one female protagonist, I will use the self-definition given by her.

² Despite continuing contestation, a general yet simplified understanding regards graffiti mainly as an illegal intervention in forms of tags, stickers, and spray-painted throw-ups and pieces; street art as an illegal artistic intervention, such as stencils, posters, yarn bombing, and three-dimensional installations; and muralism as large-scale wall paintings, usually made by permission and/or commission. As discussed by Valjakka (2015a, 2015b), the mediation and local adaptations of these forms gained fluctuating interpretations when they came ashore in East Asia. Here, following Valjakka's suggestion, “contemporary graffiti” is used for the novel forms of unauthorised self-expressions inspired by Euro-American examples to differentiate them from more traditional Western (e.g., toilet graffiti) and Asian forms (writing in public).

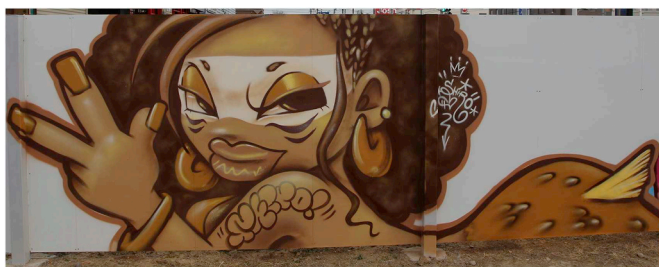


Fig. 1. Mimi as a mermaid outside of Graffiti Café by Shiro, in Shizuoka, January 2014. Photograph by the author.

of spatialised identity is directly dependent on the significance of painting as a creative process, which is not necessarily always gender-conscious but can aim for gender-anonymity or gender-indifference. Second, the situated experiences by women in changing spatial circumstances and in different sociocultural contexts around the globe vary from hostile to supportive. Furthermore, a more positive reception of artistic practices in urban environment leads towards more possibilities for women that may enhance but also reduce the need for gendered identities in relation to global aspirations.

The varied forms of contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism in East Asia have gradually gained academic attention (Marinelli, 2004; Chang & Kao, 2012; Pan, 2014, 2015; Yamakoshi & Sekine, 2016; Valjakka, 2015a,b, 2016a,2016b), but the questions of gender or the role of women are not yet addressed. While existing studies on women as active agents in graffiti and street art (Carrington, 1989; Demo, 2000; Moors, 2011; Pabón, 2013, 2016; Trajtenberg, 2016) provide inspiring insights, their geographically or thematically limited perceptions are not fully adequate to explain the interrelated local and global modalities of the emergent forms of women's transformative power to spatio-aesthetic dynamics of urban environment today. I posit that the rise of contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism by women in East Asian cities and beyond is premised on two discrete but interdependent trajectories – the international aspirations to have more adequate representation of women in public space and the growing emphasis on what Ghertner (2011) refers to as “world-class aesthetic.”

This paper aims to contribute to broadening the notion of worlding practices (Roy & Ong, 2011) at the intersection of (post)subcultures and contemporary art to include aspects of gender in the current paradigmatic change in spatio-aesthetic dynamics of urban space: the transformation from illegal forms of subculture (contemporary graffiti and street art) into an accepted form of contemporary art (muralism). A detailed (art) historical study of all the female protagonists in East Asian cities and the intricate aspects of their oeuvre, agency, and transnational collaborations is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of this global yet localized phenomenon, this paper brings together art studies, urban studies, and in particular, recent discourses on worldmaking, worlding and gendering by art in and for the cities. Drawing on the personal insights of female protagonists, and positioning them into the sociopolitical and cultural examination of contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism, I will demonstrate how women are employing artistic practices for a more versatile take on both “worlding from below” (Simone, 2001) as “situated experiments” of being global (Ong, 2011, p. 2) by “gendering the city” (Miranne & Young, 2000).

By examining interrelated characteristics of female agency and feminine aesthetics in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul, and contextualizing them in recent regional and global tendencies, I demonstrate how the transformation of contemporary graffiti into acknowledged forms of contemporary art has provided novel possibilities for women to re-create urban landscape and build towards global solidarity. Even if feminine signifiers or feminist aspirations might not be a dominating feature in the works, women's role in contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism in East Asian cities is more vivid and present

than previously acknowledged. I posit that a more inclusive comprehension of the fluid phenomenon is better grasped through the conceptual lens of “worlding through gendering”, which seeks for a more nuanced examination of local and global female agency, aesthetics and their incorporated potential to reshape cityscapes for and by women around the globe.

2. Methods

The key methods of this interdisciplinary study include ethnographic research combined with formal analysis of the works, their interrelation of the physical and contextual sites, and the protagonists' personal experiences. Based on extended fieldwork conducted mainly in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul in 2012–2018, and totalling 21 months, this paper aims to shed light on the great diversity of female agency and aesthetic strategies in contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism in these cities enhanced with a comparative national, regional and international perspective. The three cities were selected for more detailed research based on their pioneering position and current prominence in contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism in East Asia.

The primary information derives from qualitative research methods, including participant observations in numerous (un)authorised events and occasions; extensive visual documentation of thousands of examples; repeated site visits to other cities in the region, including Shenzhen, Shanghai, Macau, Shizuoka, Kyoto, Osaka, and Gwangju; and informal discussions and in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting from one to three hours with 18 female practitioners. To bring further depth to the study, some of the female protagonists were interviewed more than once and the interviews explored a range of issues around their practices, experiences and perceptions. The majority of interviewees were either from or based in Hong Kong. Many have mixed ethnic backgrounds and/or extended stays abroad, complicating the notion of “localness” yet contributing to transcultural mediation processes visible especially in styles and subject-themes of the works. Supportive information was also gathered by informal discussions and semi-structured interviews with people involved in or related to the contemporary graffiti and art scenes,³ such as male graffiti writers and artists, art gallery owners, curators and scholars working on related fields along with residents of the selected cities. Secondary sources include media (local magazines and news papers), social media (especially Facebook and Instagram) and online websites focused on the phenomenon (e.g. Vandalog). While these digital sources provide novel contingencies to study the developments, transnational collaborations and geographically broader scope, information can be sporadic and prone to misinterpretations because the usual lack of relevant context (e.g. physical surroundings of the work).

From these versatile materials, the most relevant data are chosen for a contextualised analysis of gender in worlding urban public spaces through artistic practices. The conceptual discussions are supported by formal analysis of the most illuminating examples of aesthetic strategies and their creation processes. Insights of the practitioners form the basis of this study, which is further enriched through a comparative investigation of parallel studies of women as active agents across the multi-scalar and multi-regional phenomenon.

3. Rewriting women on the walls across the borders

In relation to modern Asian art and “worlding” as the interpretative frames of art discourses, Clark (2014, p. 88) emphasises how worlding in art should be simultaneously perceived as an exogenous and endogenous process. Correspondingly, Roy's (2011b: 10)

³ Both in popular and in academic literature, “scene” is commonly used to refer to local, regional or international community(ies) of artists or practitioners with shared interests.



Fig. 2. Guerrilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* 1989. Copyright © Guerrilla Girls, courtesy guerrillagirls.com.

conceptualization of worlding “to recover and restore the vast array of global strategies that are being staged at the urban scale” reminds us how the current study should be enriched by transcultural perspectives to enhance regional and international in-depth contextualization.

The pioneering examples of feminist vocabulary in urban landscape appeared in Los Angeles in the early 1970s. As a method to rearticulate women’s “quieter heroism” in the Chicano movement, the murals painted by Chicanas raised the awareness of women activists and inspired further empowerment, especially among female muralists, whose concerns and intentions transcended gender inequality to broader social issues (Reed, 2005, pp. 120–128). Taking a more multi-method artistic approach, the Guerrilla Girls, an internationally acknowledged group of anonymous women active since 1985, continue to challenge the boundaries of art, public space and the role of women with their provocative feminist aesthetics. One of their most famous posters, originally pasted up around New York in 1989 (Fig. 2), is recently adapted to other art scenes and cities.⁴ In March 2018, the Guerrilla Girls were invited to take part in Art Basel Hong Kong and speak at local institutions indicating the necessity for further discourses of female artists’ positions in Hong Kong and in the region.

At the core of this sociopolitical phenomenon gradually reshaping both art practices and cityscapes lie the questions of gendered power hierarchies. The murals by Chicana feminists and the interventions of Guerrilla Girls further demonstrate how urban women often defy spaces and boundaries set for them for varying reasons, including political ones (Miranne & Young, 2000, p. 7, see also Darke et al., 2000). During the past decade, challenging the dominating norms of public space through artistic practices by women has become more prominent across the globe through transnational knowledge exchange and collaborations. How have sociopolitical and cultural boundaries shaped the role of women in “worlding through gendering” and what kind of modalities of engagement and visual representations are available for them? Is a “feminist street art movement” taking place, as has recently been indicated by media and, if so, to what extent is it visible in East Asia? In tandem with the recent social movements worldwide, women’s presence in art activism has evidently grown,⁵ but as I aim to demonstrate in this paper through a more nuanced analysis, “worlding through gendering” is not to be reduced into a political art or feminist activity alone.

The significance of female agency, signifiers of femininity, socio-cultural norms, and more appropriate evaluation criteria in the realms of contemporary graffiti and street art is gradually acknowledged (Carrington, 1989; Pabón, 2013, 2016; Trajtenberg, 2016). Yet, as Pabón (2016) demonstrates, the role of women has been

⁴ For an insightful analysis of Guerrilla Girls’ feminist visual rhetoric strategies as mimicry, an inventive revision of history and strategic juxtaposition, see Demo (2000).

⁵ Particularly during the “Arab Spring” in 2010–2011, women have actively employed contemporary graffiti and street art to resist social inequalities, including gender issues in the Middle East region (Pabón, 2016).

underestimated in existing scholarship. While the gender of male scholars is alleged for limited acknowledgement of women in sub-cultural studies (e.g. Macdonald, 2002: 5–6), the reasons for unequal representation in contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism are more intricate. The ephemeral and often unauthorised characteristics of the earliest practices, along with an unsystematic documentation, hinder comprehensive research. Similar to art history, the marginalisation of the role of women and the undervaluation of their works add to the challenges of rewriting female agency back on the walls of fame and correcting the dominating power relations. Despite this multifold negligence based on gender, following Meskimmon’s (2003: 3) insights, the research should not, however, focus on “objects defined as ‘women’s art’” but rather on “the contingency of ‘women’ and ‘art’, coming together to make and re-make meaning in the particular social situations and aesthetic encounters.”

Distinctions from (professional) identities to social background and from music tastes to sexual orientations defy existing methodological and theoretical approaches. Together with the multitude of aesthetic strategies and forms of agency, this versatility renders the predominating frameworks of youth culture, (post)subculture, resistance, subversion or feminism too limited to grasp the intricacies of the varied contemporary practices. Already in the turn of the century, the traditional subcultural approach relying on “working-class resistance” failed to explain the significance of graffiti, which according to Macdonald (2002) should rather be understood as the site of masculine identity construction. Consequently, women were regarded as a threat to the masculinity of graffiti, and multiple strategies were used to defame and exclude them, which in turn led women to aim to transgress the gender boundaries (ibid. 94–150; see also Macdonald, 2016; Castleman, 1982, pp. 69, 121). Yet, the shifting sociopolitical and cultural circumstances have made this framework of masculine identity construction inadequate for explaining other forms of visual self-expressions.⁶

If transcending female gender to achieve respect among men was needed in the masculine environment of graffiti (Macdonald, 2002; Macdonald, 2016), women’s growing interest in street art since the late 1990s and muralism in the 21st century became alternative strategies to overcome this patriarchal exclusion. Especially for women who decline to employ masculinity to be accepted, street art – with less stylistic and behavioural norms than contemporary graffiti – provides an intriguing platform to seek innovative styles and languages for transgressing gender boundaries – including but *not limited to* feminine ones. This reconfiguration of urban environment through artistic practices worldwide has shifted beyond the (post)subcultural subversion commonly perceived as antagonistic activities against the establishment, class structures and/or neo-liberal capitalism towards global solidarity and building a better living environment.

In this context, women’s aspirations to address sociopolitical and cultural issues *beyond* gender poses further challenges, especially for feminist approaches. While Butler’s (1993; 1997) perceptions of gender and the complexities of its de/reconstruction through the active re-making of oneself and one’s gendered identity as performativity have gained popularity in post-subculture studies providing new analytical perceptions of dynamics and strategies of gender, the importance of more empirical and localized approaches in women’s strategies to transform their agency is also emphasized (Gagné, 2008; Griffin, 2012; Piano, 2003; Reddington, 2003). Despite Shiro’s claim that gender becomes irrelevant, her paintings of Mimi could be interpreted as a method of self-representation and gendered female identity construction. Yet, similar to the majority of female protagonists in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul, her primary interest lies in art and style, not gender or female empowerment. This kind of positioning of oneself is also clearly indicated by street artist Junkhouse from Seoul (personal interview, 8

⁶ Macdonald (2002: 150) is aware of the possible limitation of her analysis to only graffiti.

January 2018):

“if I think about ‘minority’ ... yes. I am very minority artist coz I am doing street art in [South] Korea. In the whole Art scene we are minority. Here [in South Korea] not many artist doing graffiti or street art Gender is not important. Even in relation to the whole art scene I never think I am minority because I am female.”

Such gender denial could also be considered as one form of performativity and, in terms of art, it could be taken to aim for gender-neutral visual language advocating more holistic and general humanistic perceptions. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated by the selected case studies, the intricate phenomenon of growing female agency in artistic practices in East Asia is not adequately explained through performativity of gender. To inspire more in-depth research on this timely topic, I propose that a more multisided understanding could be gained through an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates “worlding through gendering” to investigate the intersection of local and global female agency, aesthetics and the possibilities of reimagining cities for and by women.

4. Worlding by women in and beyond East Asian cities

The first all-girl crews in East Asia were established around the mid-1990s in Hong Kong (Redy, personal interview, 15 February 2017). Because female protagonists are a minority in these three cities, all-girl crews have remained as a rarity, and women would usually either join mixed-gender crews or paint alone. While the insights of women protagonists in East Asia resonate to some extent with Macdonald's (2002) findings, in particular of contemporary graffiti being physically demanding and bound by rules, similarly degrading comments about women by male peers are rare. Corresponding to the local contemporary art scenes, men are nonetheless more likely to have opportunities and be supported despite that, in general, there is a more lenient attitude towards women being part of the contemporary graffiti and street art scenes. Based on numerous participant observations on varied occasions, it has become evident that such global aspirations are shared by women taking more active part in growing numbers. Grounded on mostly invisible and transnational alliances, four inter-related tangible practices of female agency contribute to the growing phenomenon of worlding cityscapes through graffiti, street art and muralism.

First, organising international and transcultural exhibitions and events in one's home city either independently or in collaboration with art institutions, biennials and festivals represents most closely worlding as an “ongoing art of being global” (Ong, 2011, p. 3) through bottom-up interventions. An illuminating example is the Seoul Urban Art Project (2012–2013), initiated and largely managed by Junkhouse, a female street artist from Seoul. Drawing inspiration and support from local and international peers alike, this contemporary art collective working under the “open gallery” concept aimed to provide alternative sites and ways of interaction through art in a city. “Rather than public art that fits the taste of the masses, we want to show ‘real art on real streets’ with attention to diversity and a daring experimental spirit” (Junkhouse, personal interview, 23 April 2015). Although based on inventive experiments in abandoned buildings, the safety restrictions forced the project to rely on visual representations displayed in alternative art spaces and reaching global audiences online. Despite of the unexpected setback, the configuration and artistic strategies of the Seoul Urban Art Project renders it into a physically situated, non-elitist experiment that aimed to reinvent urban norms.

Second, short-term visits and painting in different cities in Asia and beyond are becoming more common among women as they are invited to participate in varied events, including “women only” ones such as the first of its kind in whole Asia, the Solidarity Movement's Rebel

Daughters graffiti event in Singapore in June 2014.⁷ To be able to paint in different cities and, in particular, with other female peers can be intensively empowering experience, embedded in solidarity among women, as is elaborated by Hong Kong-based artist Caratoes:

I woke up and stared out my window into the streets of Puerto Rico. I just read the essay that @urbannationberlin wrote about female artists through history.

And then it hit me. How lucky I am to be part of this movement I wasn't aware that is happening. I never saw myself as a feminist or whatever. Even though all my previous work situations were major male dominated fields (game design, post video production, advertising). But all I felt was the double urge to produce work that people can't say that it's ‘good for a girl’. But they have to admit, that it's good in general. [...]

And I'm so crazy grateful, that I was so busy trying to find my path in life that I forgot about all things people warned me before, forgot to fear things society told me.

I won't even start about all the occasions when I'm painting a wall and people would congratulate the guy standing nearest to me for the good work.

But I'm grateful to be part and to have found so many strong women who share the same feelings and views. Almost like a secret amongst us that men will never know. Come at us bro.

Anyway thanks to all the women and men who helped me to be safe at all the places. But this post specially goes out to all the amazing pearls of women (art or no art related) so grateful to have crossed paths with.⁸

While all-women events receive media appraisal and affirmative assessment by female protagonists, also the concerns of gender being the primary or only criteria are voiced: “[I]t may not be interesting if people are gathered regardless of the quality of the work, content, and so forth” (Sasu, personal interview, 15 January 2018). Despite such pertinent questioning of the need for gendered enclaves, the positive impact of same-gender support is visible especially in transnational circumstances, which in turn builds towards the possibilities of “worlding from below” (Simone, 2001; see also Roy, 2011a, pp. 312–313), currently taking place outside of what might be considered as the elite circles of contemporary art and its institutions.

Third, besides these international temporary collaborations, long-term overseas relocation – as indicated by Shiro, Lady Aiko and Redy – opens up new possibilities for developing one's artistic career and identity, especially in the US or Europe. These female protagonists, constantly travelling as global agents, bring forward new levels of both locally and globally constructed worlding practices and world-class aesthetics. While so doing, the position of these protagonists reminds us of McRobbie's (2009) notion of a “global girl” in the post-feminist era, which despite its allure, continues to face racial antagonisms and inequalities resulting in black and Asian women sharing “spaces of attention” with their white peers, yet the latter being perceived as extraordinary and serving as “role models for their less successful black or Asian peers” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 132). How well this applies to female artists and their works is a topic to be investigated in future studies.

Lastly, the least-known form of transnational collaboration in current scholarship involves the vast and active networks of artists exchanging and posting up stickers for each other around the globe, known as “sticker slapping”. An example of this new form of “worlding

⁷Two of the female protagonists from Hong Kong expressed their positive perceptions of taking part in this significant event. In East Asia, similarly large-scale transnational endeavours are yet to be organized.

⁸Posted on the private Facebook site by Caratoes on December 25, 2015. Quoted with permission by the artist.

through gendering,” yet based on gender anonymity and the advocating of global sociopolitical issues, are stickers of a sad-looking llama wearing an oxygen mask attached to a tank with a green plant made by The Martians, a street art crew of two Hong Kong women especially active in 2013–2014 (Figs. 3 and 4). The gender of the artists is not decipherable from the work itself and their gender-neutrality is maintained in social media while the stickers aim to raise awareness of air pollution around the globe through an active sticker exchange programme among female and male peers alike.

Transgressing the boundaries to new spheres and territories leads to a new “geography of opportunity” in cities (Miranne & Young, 2000, p. 7). As indicated above, discourses surrounding the artistic practices in public space today have both exogenous and endogenous tendencies complementing Ong’s (2011:4) conception of worlding practices in relation to the urban as the site of interventions, “a particular nexus of situated and transnational ideas, institutions, actors, and practices.”

These four practices indicate how transcultural flows of ideas, practices and female protagonists are contributing to more versatile strategies and “world-class aesthetic” in and beyond East Asian cities. As the insights of Caratoes indicate, for some of the protagonists, such worlding processes encouraging alternative worldviews are interlinked with female empowerment as global agents while for others, like The Martians, the core message is not focused on gender but on globally shared environmental issues.

5. Aesthetic strategies for worlding through gendering

Challenging the aesthetic hegemony is the core element not only in graffiti (Ferrell, 1993) but also in street art and muralism, including transcultural visual elements as indicated by Mimi the Afro-Asian mermaid (Fig. 1). Such aesthetic strategies reaching beyond local references resonate with what Ghertner (2011: 281) understands as an adoption of “world-class aesthetics as a basis of both locating themselves in the changing city and for framing their own world-class aspirations.” Regardless of this budding interest by residents, city officials and artists to employ world-class aesthetics to create a visually more vivid urban environment, the local social norms in public space confine the appropriateness of expressions. As an example, even though LGBTQ issues are gaining more prominence in cultural production in East Asia, self-expressions of such sexual inclinations are not yet visible on the streets. The only visual example, a spray-painted representation of a



Fig. 3. Handmade stickers by the Martians under production in the studio in Hong Kong, in April 2013. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 4. One of the stickers by the Martians on a traffic sign post in Tai Hang, Hong Kong, in April 2013. Photograph by the author.

vagina to indicate same-sex desires under a highway on Hong Kong island, was unexpectedly removed the following day.⁹

Similarly, other directly confrontational forms of cultural jamming, such as subverting messages through visual alteration of advertisements, are rare and practitioners are not commonly interested in challenging the dominating visual codes in such a straightforward manner which could be interpreted as vandalism.¹⁰ The preferred aesthetic strategies rely on a more subtle approach. Beauty ideals for women, for instance, can be questioned through satirical female figures and caricatures emergent both in unauthorised street art and in commissioned murals in Hong Kong, while similar takes are yet to be seen in Tokyo and Seoul. Representations of women are strictly bound to sociopolitical and cultural contexts in question yet globally dominated by (trans)national advertisements of sexy, slim models. Counter-representations of these ideals form powerful visual strategies to question how the city is gendered and by whom. However, balancing between personal artistic aim, tolerance, tastes of residents, and not “participating in a recapitulation of these oppressive, public images [of women by fashion industries]” (Gude & Santiago Muñoz, 1994, p. 315) can be demanding but possible, as illuminated by CathLove’s voluptuous Jeliboo figures (Fig. 5).

Rather than juxtaposing with the dominating norms of representing women, some female protagonists prefer the aesthetic strategy of gender anonymity (Pabón, 2016, pp. 79–81) that problematises the strictly feminist readings and focuses on feminine aesthetics even further. Gender anonymity is obtained by concealing one’s gender through a deliberate selection of a gender-neutral tag or artistic name, style, and subject-themes and it can be perceived as a method to transgress one’s female gender in order to be accepted by the dominantly masculine scene. Yet it also indicates how, for some women, the emphasis on womanhood, femininity or feminist emancipation is not the primary intention. Based on the historical survey of present and past female practitioners in the three cities, gender anonymity – in terms of chosen tags and crew names – has been more common than emphasising one’s female agency. While CathLove, Rosa, and LadyAiko have clear feminine implications, Belx2, Redy, Vol, Junkhouse, and Shiro (“white”) are

⁹ Personal interview with a local female street artist who prefers to remain anonymous, 9 June 2013. The possible limitations for visual expressions of LGBTQ identities would certainly be worthy of future studies.

¹⁰ A transcultural reference is provided by Princess Hijab, who painted hijabs on models to resist the “visual terrorism” by advertising industries in Paris in the early 2010s (Moors, 2011, pp. 133–134).



Fig. 5. CathLove's two Jeliboo figures painted for HK Walls in Stanley Market, Hong Kong in March 2015. Photograph by the author.

not gender specific. Despite the preferences for gender anonymity, not only by name but also by style and subject matters, some women are nonetheless attracted to contemporary graffiti and street art because nontraditional gender roles are accepted by peers.

An intricate example transgressing the readings of gender and gender anonymity is provided by Hitotzuki, a Japanese artistic couple, Kami and Sasu, working since 1999 (Figs. 6–8). According to Sasu (personal interview, 23 May 2014), Hitotzuki represents “the sun and the moon as the contrary elements, yet existing and fusing together.” Although occasionally, bright colours and the detailed flowery design of mandalas may imply a feminine touch, without supportive background information on the artistic couple, it is impossible to decipher who is responsible for which visual elements. The aesthetic coherence of the works rather emphasises the (gender) collaboration than direct empowerment of either as a separate entity. Furthermore, the distinguished style of Hitotzuki has created international interest, including invitations to participate in art projects and exhibitions in Asia, Europe and the US. Especially in Europe, organizers of international street art and mural painting events are requesting East Asian artists in growing numbers to contribute to their world-making aspirations. While doing so, these protagonists and their works extend the scope of Ghertner's world-class aesthetics: Japanese street art and muralism, for instance, can be considered representative as world-class aspirations in other cultural contexts today.

6. Shifting conceptual boundaries for and by women

The growing acceptance of a variety of artistic practices, and murals in particular, for urban revitalisation and tourism in East Asian cities (Kakiuchi, 2016; Park, 2016) complies with Roy's (2011b: 10)



Fig. 6. A part of a commissioned mural (no title) on a private house fence in Gohongi, 2 chome in Meguro City, created by Hitotzuki in 2013. Photograph taken in June 2015 by the author.



Fig. 7. Another part of the commissioned mural by Hitotzuki in Meguro City. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 8. A detail of the mural. Photograph by the author.

understanding of worlding, also as a strategy of urban planning, to seek for global strategies and their inter-referencing at the urban scale worldwide. This emergence of both commissioned and unauthorised artistic practices further resonates with Ghertner's (2011: 281) perceptions of “world-class aesthetic” to create persuasive visions of the future along with world-class subjects. Although city officials and planners in East Asia are familiar with the internationally acknowledged positive potential for street art and murals to contribute to more alluring aesthetics of the global city image, the aspiration to be part of the global scenes of contemporary graffiti and street art – and bring them to one's own city – has been an inherent practice for protagonists in East Asia since the 1990s.

From an art historical perspective, these bottom-up aspirations concur with the dramatic shift in both discourses and practices of contemporary art towards more decentralized understanding of global art and world-making through art and by artists, also in the post-colonial context of Asian art (Turner & Webb, 2016, pp. 2, 146–184; Smith, 2011; Antoinette, 2014). The positive potential for modern and contemporary art to open up new forms for sociopolitical and cultural understanding across the national borders and, consequently, through these transcultural connectivities to provide conceptualizations for alternative worldviews can be extended to contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism. This kind of continuing prominence of artistic practices as situated experiences to create localized, world-class aesthetics and the self-positioning of protagonists as world-class subjects is becoming ever more evident along the growing number of international street art and mural painting events across the globe. Following from these transnational collaborations are not only the enhanced appreciation of these practices but also the aesthetically enriched individual styles and self-identities as female artist embedded both in local traditions and global trends.

Gender relations and norms of appropriate social behaviour have traditionally rendered girls and women in a less visible position in public space (Carrington, 1989; Massey, 1994). Further problematisation of these assumptions is needed since the socially constructed norms are continuously contested, vary from one cultural context to another, and are not always differentiated by gender. Nonetheless, given that the unauthorised artistic practices are primarily created in the shades of

urban infrastructure, the sociohistorically-constructed perception of risks is considered to be higher for women, which often leads to conscious concerns about the appropriateness of these activities for girls. Even if parental distress on physical unsafeness is occasionally brought up in the interviews, female protagonists find the cities in East Asia relatively accessible. Emphasis on gender-neutral social norms and practices, or disregarding them, is an often-repeated perception among the female protagonists. Yet they also admit the benefits of their gender:

“I can tell you one thing good coz I am female artist. When I'm working on street, or redevelopment area site. It's good to be working with my gender. People are not yelling at me but try to talk. Sometimes people are helping me. And if I stand on dangerous part, they are worried about me. Even police is worried, not angry at me” (Junkhouse, personal interview, 8 January 2018).

Other protagonists share similar experiences, especially in relation to law enforcement, which is usually more lenient towards women. Regardless of these neutral and positive perceptions, both women and men still explain the reluctance of more women to engage with contemporary graffiti through social stigmatisation, particularly in Tokyo. Although crossing the boundaries through taking part in illegal activities is still highly important to some female protagonists in East Asia, the shifting perceptions in tolerance and appreciation along with authorised events and walls are clearly supporting women to question and break through the confines of participation in public space.

Rather than regarding boundaries only as methods of limitation and exclusion, [Miranne and Young \(2000, p. 7\)](#) emphasise them as a possibility for women to “create enclaves of similarity and support.” Boundaries can be based on a psychological sense of what is safe, which in contemporary graffiti and street art is related also to male peers' support and the physical site where painting is allowed (e.g. legal walls). The most evident form of enabling power of conceptual boundaries can be seen in forms of all-girl crews, walls, events, festivals, exhibitions and online platforms, which are receiving growing attention around the globe (see [Pabón, 2016](#)).¹¹ Particularly for women protagonists, the transformations are further facilitated by the empowering role of the Internet that not simply provides a platform for “countercultural identities” of female graffiti writers but also affirms “their communities and crews through the openness enabled precisely by the technology itself” ([Pabón, 2013](#)).

Similarly in East Asian cities today, with support of the Internet and social media connecting to multi-scalar knowledge exchange, contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism flourish through multiple (un)authorised and commissioned initiatives in the intersection of (post)subcultures, novel forms of contemporary art, and new methods by women restructuring (im)material boundaries in the urban environment. Through (im)material global networks and solidarity, these emergent international opportunities for women bring forward a variety of artistic events to create what [Ong \(2011, p. 2\)](#) regards as situated experiments inventing the new urban norms of being global – not only as inter-Asian urbanism, but at the international level too.

7. Conclusions

As demonstrated above through selected case studies, challenging the dominating spatio-aesthetic dynamics of public space through artistic practices by women is becoming more prominent in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul through (im)material transnational knowledge exchange and collaborations. Even though perceptions of unauthorised graffiti and street art as a destruction of public space are still common, the examples discussed indicate how “worlding through gendering” could be better understood as a constructive method that builds

towards concrete collaborations in and past a specific city and/or region, regardless of disparate social, professional, ethnic, and national backgrounds of women, and even beyond the gender aspects. Following from these modalities, female agency in contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism cannot be reduced to an evolutionary (art) historical narrative of linearly improving development or to a specific political agenda. Rather it should be viewed as a shifting phenomenon depending on sociopolitical circumstances and cultural trends in each city in question, in the global realms of urban redevelopment, contemporary art world, and (post)subcultures. These intricate factors, drawing references from East Asia and beyond, include the commercialisation and instrumentalisation of the arts and acceptance of subcultures as part of mainstream advertisements. Decriminalisation along with a growing interest among the broader public have led to novel opportunities for women around the globe.

The insights from the female protagonists nonetheless indicate how the individual perceptions of and for this phenomenon vary from indifference to gender to feminist empowerment. In the process of worlding through gendering in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul, women practitioners have countered many of the conventional hierarchies prevalent not only in the artistic realms, but also in public space itself. Despite and because of these multiple (im)material boundaries, women have developed a range of aesthetic strategies and forms of agency to engage cities without simply relying on direct feminist messages or interventions. Even though interventions by women remain limited in terms of spatial impact, they have the potential to initiate (im)material structural changes that can gradually contribute to altering gender relations within the city as well as at national, regional and global levels by granting women greater co-authorship in public space. In making such contributions, they demonstrate how the complexities of this budding phenomenon are not fully grasped if taken strictly as a “feminist street art movement.” If the focus is a shift to “worlding through gendering,” the nuances of the potential of these artistic practices by women to bring about novel forms for sociopolitical and cultural understanding across national borders and, consequently, through these transcultural connectivities to provide conceptualizations for alternative worldviews and reimaginings of the cities can be studied further.

As these examples indicate, acknowledging that contemporary graffiti, street art and muralism are gradually transforming cityscapes across the globe, including East Asia, allows us to have a more holistic understanding of the impact of gender on how cities are lived in, experienced and imagined. This kind of continuing prominence of artistic practices as situated experiences to create localized, world-class aesthetics and the self-positioning of protagonists as world-class subjects travelling across the globe is premised upon the growing number of international street art and mural painting events across the globe. If we accept the perceptions expressed in art studies that artworks and events bring forward new forms of world-making both conceptually and in practice, it becomes evident that the forms of active female agency in the variety of artistic practices in cities builds towards reconfiguration for more compelling future visions of urban environment by and for women. Approach based on “worlding through gendering” aims to encourage interdisciplinary readings of the intricate redefinition of conceptual and practical boundaries in relation to urban environment through artistic practices and how women are reimagining new world-class aesthetics and their own intersubjective role in postcolonial (art) worldmaking.

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¹¹ For more on how graffiti can be used to define toilets as social and gendered, but also contested, spaces, see [Carrington \(1989\)](#).

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