

# The Sex of Graffiti

## Urban art, women and “gender perception”: testing biases in the eye of the observer

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### Abstract

*In this paper I explore the intersection between urban creativity and gender studies, through a composite methodology and with a double purpose: to examine the role and the recognition of women in the graffiti and street art milieu; and to test the existence, the extent, and the quality of gender biases in the eye of the observer. In order to accomplish these two tasks, I examined existing literature treating the subject and created a visual survey. Observations and results from each step of the present work reveal a general lack of recognition of women’s role in street art and graffiti, as well as a remarkable amount of gender preconceptions during mere aesthetic appreciation of urban works of art.*

**Keywords:** Graffiti, Street Art, Gender Studies, Perception, Women, Sex

### 1. Introduction

The amount of unsolved debates around the redefinition of urban art is as copious as it is thrilling: since the outburst of festivals and the media overexposure of street art and graffiti during the last fifteen years, academia is trying to provide new historical, philosophical and sociological interpretation to a certain amount of conundrums. To name a few: the entrance of urban art in museums, galleries and private collections; the transition from an unconventional expressive phenomenon to a widely recognized art form; and its increasing institutionalization despite an original aura built upon illicitness and the ephemeral. The very last years came along with some new, fascinating challenges. One of those may arise, for instance, from the intersection between urban creativity and gender studies: that is exactly where this work begins.

Such an intersection is not an unexplored field: even a superficial bibliographical survey allows one to check that some preliminary approaches have already been led during the Fifties, starting with Alfred Kinsey (1953). Also, a first mono-

graph dealing thoroughly with graffiti and gender studies has been written by British ethnologist Nancy MacDonald (2001) who interviewed female writers like Lady Pink, Claw and Akit, and nevertheless drew an analysis of graffiti as a form of “display of masculinity”. Nevertheless, the present research aims to inform about street art and gender studies through an unedited approach.

In the first place, despite the chosen title, this study is not limited to graffiti-writing: the word “graffiti” is here employed in a conventional, all-embracing fashion, meaning different types, styles, scales and techniques of contemporary urban art, including muralism, stenciling, installation/sculpture, figurative and abstract street painting, and so on. A second difference between this work and its precursors lays in their respective purposes. Sociological (Stocker et al., 1972), ethnographical (MacDonald, 2001), psychological (Kinsey, 1953; Dundes, 1966), criminological (Trahan, 2011) or feminist (Rosewarne, 2004) approaches pay attention to the motives of the writers – who are rarely considered as artists and consistently observed as simple means of data collec-

tion – in order to describe gender dynamics within their actions and activities. On the contrary, the present research aims to stress the relevance of urban artworks' styles and aesthetics, in order to test gender perceptions in the eye of the observer. In other words, I am not considering here the writer/artist's standpoint, but rather that of the graffiti/street art spectator. The main questions here being: in which measure can a street artwork express or reveal masculinity or femininity? Which place do gender, sex, eroticism or even pornography occupy in urban creativity? Which is the role of style and aesthetics?

One can perhaps ask why this study limits its observations to urban artworks and whether the question of gender perception does not rather concern the entire domain of visual arts. Such phenomena as graffiti and street art are indeed a quite fitting case for our purposes: let us imagine standing in front of a "conventional" artwork, canvas or installation, that we have never seen before and that is "conventionally" exhibited inside a whitecube space, like a museum or a gallery. In most cases, we have access to information about the sex of the artist: while looking at an artwork in those spaces we are constantly surrounded by labels and biographical notes, and we rarely find ourselves wondering whether an artwork has been made by a man or a woman. Let us suppose now to bump into a parietal artwork located in an urban context. Unless we are graffiti or street art connoisseurs, the sex of the artist will always remain undisclosed because of the almost certain lack of written indications. The same would occur when in front of signed/tagged artwork: is it really possible to guess the sex of works by 108 (man), Swoon (woman), Kashink (woman) or Xooox (man), only through their signatures?

The widespread habit of the tag among writers and street artists implies an actual concealment of the artist's sex – except, of course, when the artist decides to add clues to their tags: Mr. Brainwash, Miss Van, Miss Tic, Monsieur Chat, Madame Moustache, Lady Pink, etc., or when they simply use their actual names (Maya Hayuk, Barry McGee, Nuria Mora, Agostino Iacurci, Magda Sayeg, etc.).

The choice of hiding one's gender or not may have interesting reasons and perhaps correspond to a particular will or statement. Nevertheless, when every possible clue is concealed, would the observer wonder about the artist's sex? If

solicited to guess it, what would their response be?

## 2. Urban art between androcentrism and gendered aesthetics

The world and history of Western art have for a long time known a clear disparity between women and men (Nochlin, 1971).<sup>1</sup> As Linda Nochlin puts it in her groundbreaking 1971 essay "Why have there been no great women artists?": things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male (Nochlin, 1971: 25).

The causes, according to Nochlin, have to be sought in a status quo made of a vast dark bulk of shaky idées reçues about the nature of art and its situational concomitants, about the nature of human abilities in general and of human excellence.

Though such a disparity remains evident today in several social and cultural environments, the rise of feminist movements during the 20th century led women to gain influence in the arts, including contemporary visual arts.<sup>2</sup>

What about urban art, then? Interviewed for British newspaper *The Independent* in 2013, graffiti photographer Martha Cooper stated that, if formerly women represented 0.1% of graffiti writers and street artists, perhaps today they are the 1% (Wyatt, 2013). Of course Cooper's numbers do not mean to be statistically relevant: they just aim to stress an undeniable situation of minority. Estimating an actual and accurate men/women ratio would require a considerable amount of fieldwork in order to take into account as many underrepresented artists as possible throughout the world. Another way, surely more approximate but yet significant is, for instance, to check how and how much women are taken into account by the urban art "establishment" – i.e., books, museums and galleries exhibitions, media coverage, etc.

It just takes one to survey any specialized book in order to ascertain street art and graffiti's androcentrism. Let us consider, for instance, three major publications having the explicit purpose of serving as world indexes or anthologies of street and graffiti artists. The first is "Graffiti World. Street art from the five continents" by Nicholas Ganz (2004). Only 11 out of 144 artists taken into account by the book are women,

i.e., 7.6%.<sup>3</sup> “From style writing to art”<sup>1</sup> (2011), the anthology curated by French gallerist Magda Danysz, does not show any substantial change: 4 women out of 46 artists, i.e., 8.7%. Nor does most recent “World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti” (2013), by Rafael Schacter and John Fekner: 3 artists out of 97 are women, with a share of 3.1%.

In addition to underrepresentation, Nancy MacDonald’s ethnographical research (2001) give us an in-depth account of some gender dynamics within the graffiti milieu. Her main standpoint being the employment of graffiti by writers as a means to “construct and confirm their masculine identities” (MacDonald, 2001: 96), MacDonald goes ahead by observing what happens when women penetrate a predominantly male subculture. Her methodology implies direct contact with the artists, both men and women, through interviews. Most of the collected answers reveal the idea of graffiti writing as a dangerous activity, therefore not particularly suitable for women. It is noteworthy that this kind of statement does not only come from men, but from women as well: MacDonald (2001: 130) observes that, “The female writer’s task is a difficult one. Male writers work to prove they are ‘men’, but female writers must work to prove they are not ‘women.’” It follows that if being a male writer is an assertion of masculinity, being a female writer is a negation of femininity.

Analogously, political scientist Lauren Rosewarne (2004) reads graffiti as a statement of virility but submits it to a harsh feminist critique. According to Rosewarne, graffiti writing can be assimilated to highly sexualized outdoor advertising, therefore it should be considered as a form of street harassment. Some curious, sort of Freudian points seem to arise from Rosewarne’s critique: for instance, the correlation between aerosol paint and ejaculation, or the idea that men are more “visual” than women:

[...] ‘visuals’ are very important to the construction and reaffirmation of masculine culture. Just as tagging a blank wall is an externalization of masculinity, it can be argued that the same thing is happening in outdoor advertising: the erection of a sexualised billboard is a way for men to externalise their sexual interests and desires. When the display of women is done in a way that uses women’s bodies and sexuality as the primary attention getter, this is evidence of the importance of the visual to masculine culture. [...] Both the graffiti artist and advertiser see blank walls and unused spaces, not

as public sites, but rather as apt targets for the projection of their ideas and agendas at the expense of others: in the process allowing a public space to become male space that can prove exclusionary for women. This ‘branding’ of public space through advertising parallels the motives and implied claims staked by graffiti writers over public space (Rosewarne, 2004: 17-18).

The treatment of gender discrimination within graffiti is, thus, very different between Rosewarne’s and MacDonald’s analyses. The former sees graffiti writing as a form of violent and sexualized possession of the public space, carried by a male community. The latter, on the other hand, aims to stress physical differences between the two sexes and women’s aptitude to face concrete dangers like being pursued by the police, moving quickly through viaducts and railways, and so on. Nonetheless, MacDonald provides us with interesting data concerning visual discrimination as well. In other words: she raises the question of a male and a female aesthetics within graffiti writing, like in an interview with graffiti writer Freedom, where MacDonald (2001: 130) reports that female writer Lady Pink had to quit “painting flowers” in order to be accepted in the crew: she had to “paint like a guy2.” This conversation gives us important information about the acceptance rituals a girl should submit to in order to join a graffiti crew, but at the same time it is the first and only excerpt in MacDonald’s study where a distinction is made between men and women: a distinction of style and content.

This has been the object of several studies led by psychologists and sociologists cited in the introduction of the present work. The graffiti observed by those scientists are, nevertheless, far different from those I am taking into account for my study: surveys by Kinsey (1953), Dundes, Farr and Gordon (1965), Stocker et al. (1972), Bates and Martin (1980), among others, pay particular attention to latrinalia, i.e., wall inscriptions – words, names, sentences, statements, drawings, etc. – made in public restrooms. The main reason to study public restrooms lays in the fact that they represent an immediate means to separate men and women, therefore an easy way to categorize, both quantitatively and qualitatively, their respective inscriptions. It may be surprising to observe that the results of these studies do not always reveal a majority of men in wall writing: the quantitative difference between male and female inscriptions converges or diverges according to several parameters like the social and cultural

environment or the site and the year in which data have been collected. For instance, most recent research reveals fewer discrepancies than those of the 1950s and the 1960s. Kinsey (1953) observes a male preponderance in writing on walls, and that sexualized writing and drawing is more pronounced among men (86%) than women (25%), the latter being more inclined to deal with subjects classified as “romantic” and “philosophical”. However, those very results will be contradicted by other research led during the following years, for instance Farr and Gordon’s (1975). Their work surveyed restrooms at Pennsylvania State University, which showed 60% of sexualized inscriptions in women’s stalls and only a 30% in those of the men. Bates and Martin (1980) corroborate this trend by examining restrooms at the University of Massachusetts: 657 inscriptions in female restrooms against 526 in male ones; 78.8% sexualized inscriptions in the former, 54.8% in the latter. Such changes in proportions and contents between men’s and women’s inscriptions can be read as an outcome of women’s emancipation during the 1970s.

Kinsey (1953) interpreted his results claiming that men are more sexually aroused by infraction, while women are more observant of social conventions and moral codes; therefore they are less inclined to write/draw on walls and to treat erotic subjects. American folklorist Alan Dundes also conducted a study on latrinalia (1965), explaining men’s tendency to write/draw on walls by means of an extravagant, Freudian-flavored “pregnancy envy” theory:

[...] men are envious of women’s ability to bear children and they seek to find various substitute gratifications [...] males commonly use their anuses to provide substitutes for parturition. Feces, like babies, are produced by the body. When a man defecates, he is a creator, a prime mover. Women produces feces too, but since they can produce babies from within, there is less need for women to emphasize this type of body product (Dundes, 1965: 102).

His conclusion is quite lapidary:

That women have less need of fecal substitute activities is suggested by the fact that few women indulge in sculpture, painting, blowing wind instruments, etc (Dundes, 1965: 102).

There is no need to dwell on proving the contrary of Dundes’ statement: it would just take citing a recent study led by Pennsylvania State University’s anthropologist Dean Snow

(2013), who measured the size of Paleolithic handprint stencils in Spanish and French caves, suggesting that the 75% of them were left by women.

The ensemble of the cited studies traces an interesting research path to build upon hypotheses about gender discrimination. Conclusions like a minor inclination to creativity or infraction in women are the product of a specific period and mindset, and we cannot rely on them in order to read current matters like female underrepresentation in street art and graffiti. And, certainly, as evidenced by Farr and Gordon (1975) and Bates and Martin (1980), we can no longer accept the a priori that women’s writings and drawings are more “romantic” and “philosophical” than men’s.

MacDonald’s (2001) conclusions are probably the most appropriate in order to explain female minority in graffiti writing – physical unsuitableness to danger and discriminatory internal dynamics – but do the same reasons apply to today’s street art? And, most importantly, how is street art perceived today by the public?

One of the most renowned female street artists, Swoon, wrote a noteworthy “Feminist artist statement” on the occasion of her 2014 solo show at the Brooklyn Museum:

At first I was so wound up about being a woman in a man’s field that I didn’t want to talk about it at all. I was making art out on the street, and no one knew I was a woman for at least a year, maybe three. I was adamant about my ‘neutrality’ so to speak. I was concerned with my ability to create things which would be read as universally human, and not tether me to a gender identity, which, I feared, would engulf what I had to bring, and chuck me into that marginalized, patronized place I associated feminism. [...] When people started to call me that guy Swoon, I just let them. Not that I wanted to hide and be considered male, I just thought, when it flips around, and the truth comes out, something in our assumptions will be flipped too... [...] Now I strive to be lucid and imaginative and honest. I want to put new wrinkles in our language. [...] I want no gasps of surprise, though I may have enjoyed them, when people see that the things that I make, are made by a woman (Swoon, 2014: n.p.).

Another important statement comes from French artist Kashink:

KASHINK, one of the few very active female artists in the French graffiti/street art scene, is an atypical person. She often wears a moustache, paints huge protean multi-eyed characters or Mexican skulls, in a very distinctive, vividly colored style, far from traditional girly graffiti aesthetics (Kashink, 2014: n.p.).

Interviewed for Global Street Art, she also claims:

I'm a woman but I don't paint women; I'm not constrained by gender. Most female street artists paint cute, half-naked figures. I think its time to bring something new as a person and as a woman (Global Street Art, 2012: n.p.).

The targets of this last statement are, in all likelihood, French colleagues such as Miss Van or Fafi, who establish their very similar aesthetics on sensual, saucy poupées.

A “neutral” style, a “girly” style, “to paint like a girl” – we have reviewed a set of aesthetic a priori related to gender issues. Particularly, Swoon’s and Kashink’s words raise a specific question: if what it is supposed to be a “feminine style” is always recognizable (flowers, the use of pink, references to love, and so on) then what we call a “neutral style” seems always to be associated to a masculine hand. Are these conclusions always true? Can we maintain the existence of other criteria allowing one to perceive a certain artwork as “feminine” or “masculine”?

These questions led me to design a visual survey in order to observe the extent to which an heterogeneous set of artworks, made by both women and men, are perceived as masculine or feminine.

### 3. Graffitisex, an iconographic survey: methodology

In order to test the “sex of graffiti” in the eye of the observer, I created an iconographic survey at the online address <http://www.graffitisex.eu/>, with the support of the CNRS, the Institut du Genre and the Institut ACTE of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. The main task users were asked to accomplish consisted in observing a gallery of artworks whose creators were not revealed. For each artwork, the user was asked to guess the sex of the artist, then to try to explain their answer. The survey was disseminated in French and English, mainly through social networks, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University and Bari Aldo Moro University, throughout a two-week period, from October 23 until November 5 2013. At this date, 658 users had started the survey, but only 242 had successfully finished it. The survey features 24 artworks made by 22 artists (Swoon and Nuria Mora are featured with two artworks each) following this order:

Table A

A.1	Swoon ♀	A.9	YZ ♀	A.17	Utah ♀
A.2	Miss Tic ♀	A.10	Nuria Mora ♀	A.18	Miss Van ♀
A.3	Maya Hayuk ♀	A.11	Xoooox ♂	A.19	Hot Tea ♂
A.4	Horfe ♂	A.12	MOMO ♂	A.20	JR ♂
A.5	Claw Money ♀	A.13	Swoon ♀	A.21	Kashink ♀
A.6	E. Pignon-Ernest ♂	A.14	Zosen ♂	A.22	Faith 47 ♀
A.7	Mark Jenkins ♂	A.15	Lush ♂	A.23	Nuria Mora ♀
A.8	Microbo ♀	A.16	Magda Sayeg ♀	A.24	Boris Hoppek ♂

The whole corpus can be browsed at the following address: <http://bit.ly/1J9xXXt>.

The ratio of men to women with regard to the number of artworks is 10:14 (41.7%; 58.3%). Obviously, it does not correspond to an actually existing men/women ratio within

the urban art milieu: having already explained the difficulties in measuring that and how underrepresented women are in the “institutional” urban art establishment, my main concern was not to reproduce accurate proportions. On the contrary, I preferred to create an iconographic corpus where men are underrepresented and artworks are classifiable under six

“hidden categories” – i.e., undisclosed to the users – my purposes being the following:

a. To observe whether the final results show a substantial overturning of the men/women ratio, in order to demonstrate a generic gender bias existing within street art and graffiti perception.

b. To unearth, demonstrate or contradict common gender biases in the eye of the observer. To determine their quality and reveal the existence of new and unexpected biases.

The six “hidden categories” are the following:

Table B

	Artworks	Category
<b>B.1</b>	A.2, A.7, A.11, A.13, A.14, A.15, A.16, A.18, A.19, A.23, A.24	Gender-stereotypical artworks This category is composed by images that may correspond to common gender biases, like those revealed by previous surveys and field studies (Kinsey and MacDonald above all). Selected images show a certain range of motifs (dance, female fashion, flowers, etc.), colors (a predominance of pink) and techniques (embroidery).
<b>B.2</b>	A.1, A.3, A.4, A.5, A.6, A.8, A.9, A.10, A.12, A.17, A.20, A.21, A.22	“Neutral” artworks These artworks are considered “neutral”, as for their lack of immediate stereotypical elements.
<b>B.3</b>	A.3, A.10, A.12	Abstract street art Is abstract street art perceived as masculine or feminine?
<b>B.4</b>	A.4, A.5, A.15, A.17, A.19	Graffiti Is graffiti still considered a “men’s job”?
<b>B.5</b>	A.2, A.9, A.15, A.18, A.24	Erotic/pornographic street art This category is composed by three women and one man, and aims to test whether sexual content is perceived as masculine or feminine.
<b>B.6</b>	A.1, A.10, A.13, A.23	Same artist’s artworks This category is made of two artworks by Swoon (1-13) and two by Nuria Mora (10-23). For each artist, I have selected a “gendered” (13-23) and a “neutral” (1-10) artwork. My purpose was to test whether any gender bias revealed is less or more powerful than the stylistic identity of two artworks made by a same artist.

All data have been collected, edited and organized in three appendices (D, E, F) that can be consulted at the following web address: <http://bit.ly/1FJf4Xn>.

Before starting the survey, users were asked to indicate their age, country, sex, and study level (Appendices: D). Once put in front of each image, the user was asked to answer two questions:

a. In your opinion, what is the sex of the artist?

- M
- F
- I already know the sex of the artist. <sup>4</sup>

b. Try to justify your answer: why did you choose one sex rather than the other?

- Because of its subject
- Because of its style (colors, forms, technique)
- I don’t know how to justify my choice
- If you prefer, feel free to write down all the reasons, the elements and the ideas you based your choice on [Text box]

**1. Graffiti: results**

Looking at the percentages of the users’ answers, the survey’s results show a substantial overturning of the correct man/women ratio, from 10:14 (41.7%; 58.3%) to 15:9 (62.5%; 37.5%), confirming the general trend urban of seeing urban art as a predominantly male activity. The main results are summarized in the following table:

Table C

Artist	Actual Sex	Users' Answer (%)		
		♂	♀	"I know"
Swoon	♀	75.2	18.6	6.2
Miss Tic	♀	46.9	31.5	21.6
Maya Hayuk	♀	64.3	33.2	2.5
Horfe	♂	76.6	18	5.4
Claw Money	♀	68.8	27.9	3.3
Pignon-Ernest	♂	50.4	43.3	6.3
Mark Jenkins	♂	30.3	63.1	6.6
Microbo	♀	35	55.8	9.2
YZ	♀	55.2	39.8	5
Nuria Mora	♀	70.3	25.5	4.2
Xoooox	♂	25.3	70.1	4.6
MOMO	♂	66	24.8	9.2
Swoon	♀	18.1	70.5	11.4
Zosen	♂	34.6	62.1	3.3
Lush	♂	59.1	34.7	6.2
Magda Sayeg	♀	12.6	79.9	7.5
Utah	♀	83.3	10.8	5.4
Miss Van	♀	37.3	44	18.7
Hot Tea	♂	26.4	70.3	3.3
JR	♂	45	30.2	24.8
Kashink	♀	64.7	25.2	10.1
Faith 47	♀	80.4	13.8	5.8
Nuria Mora	♀	8.8	87.5	3.7
Boris Hoppek	♂	60.6	32.8	6.6

This trend, together with several others, is emphasized by the explanations the users gave for their answers (Appendices: E) – especially those collected in the text boxes (C) – and by the analysis of the six “hidden categories”.

We learn, for instance, that a motive like dance (A.7 Mark Jenkins ♂) is considered a priori as a clue of femininity by 66.4% of the users choosing F. We can count analogous trends when in presence of flowers, laces and arabesques (C.9), a “childish aesthetics” (A.14 Zosen ♂), or the unerotic depiction of women (F.2, F.3), somewhat confirming stereotypes previously disclosed by Nancy MacDonald’s (2004: 4) fieldwork. Furthermore, this last prejudice has been recently displayed by an article on Citylab, claiming Banksy is a woman because “Girls and women figure into Banksy’s stenciled figures, for starters, something that isn’t true of 99 percent of street art” (Kapps, 2014: n.p.). Other common clichés are the correlation between women and artworks releasing a certain aura of “innocence”, “sensitivity” or “romanticism” (C.7), as well as the idea that women are not capable of achieving hard works (C.8), like monumental wall-paintings (A.3 Maya Hayuk ♀; A.12 MOMO ♂) or because of particular emplace-

ments like freight trains (A.17 Utah ♀) or “slums” (A.22 Faith 47 ♀). Disorder was seen as a masculine characteristic, while order and precision was seen as a feminine one (C.4) – this may remind us of Dundes’ (1965) theory on women’s lack of creativity, if we think about the common association between disorder and creativity.

Results from the “neutral artworks” category (B.2) are quite suggestive as further evidence of the fact that, in absence of common stereotypical elements, a street artwork is very likely to be considered as masculine. Users chose the M option for 12 artworks out of 13. The only one artwork being considered feminine was, surprisingly, by Microbo (A.8 ♀): 59% chose F for its style, 23,9% for its content. Some users explained their choice by claiming that the subject was “childish” (C.7), another by pointing out the presence of “rounded shapes” (C.1).

The opinion to consider “rounded shapes” as a distinctive feature of a “feminine style” (C.1) was quite common, and it is among the most interesting and unexpected results of this work. At the same time, sharp or pointed shapes are

usually associated to a masculine hand. The case of Swoon is particularly remarkable: as already specified, this artist is, together with Nuria Mora, featured twice during the survey. Her first artwork (A.1) was perceived as masculine by 75.2% of the users, mostly because of her style (61%) (E.1) and the presence of “a lot of pointed shapes” (F.1). On the contrary, her second work (A.13) was feminine for 70.5% of the users. Once again the style is the main reason (62.3%) (E.13), as well as “a lot of rounded shapes.” It is noteworthy that these two observations come from the same user: in this case the gender bias “rounded = women / pointed = men” seems to precede the perception of a stylistic similarity. The same applies also to Nuria Mora: A.10 was perceived as masculine by 70.3% of the users while A.23 was considered feminine by 87.5%. The first work (A.10) is also part of the “Abstract street art” category (B.3), which can be considered as a subgroup of the “Neutral artworks” category (B.2). Abstract street art was in fact always considered masculine for the majority of the participants: in addition to Nuria Mora, 64.3% chose M in the case of Maya Hayuk (E.3 ♀) and in that of MOMO (E.12 ♂).

Graffiti remains a man’s job (F.5) except for Hot Tea (A.19 ♂). His artwork was perceived as feminine because of its style (79.8%) (E.19), which implies the use of knitting and pink. Works by Horfe (A.4 ♂), Claw Money (A.5 ♀), Lush (A.15 ♂) and Utah (A.17 ♀) were also considered masculine, respectively, for 76.6%, 68.8%, 59.1%, and 83.8% of the participants (E.4-5-15-17).

The “Erotic/pornographic street art” category occupies a special place in this work, because of both its cultural and functional relevance. In the urban environment of Western societies it is all but rare to bump into street advertising making use of implicit or explicit sexualized content, starting from the objectification of women’s bodies through commercials. In spite of protests and consciousness raising campaigns, this is still an existing and generally accepted phenomenon. What about erotic urban art, then? Does it enjoy the same type of tolerance as sexualized street advertising? And what happens when an erotic work of art is created in/for the street, and not in/for a gallery or a museum, under cover of the “institutional” art world? Cases of censorship and iconoclasm are quite recurrent. Among the most known, there is one involving Italian muralist Blu. In 2004, during the

Icone Festival in Modena, Blu painted a giant character featuring an upside-down head in place of genitalia. Solicited by an association of parents, the City of Modena ordered the organizers to modify the artwork. Thus the artist covered the head by painting underwear, the final result being even more grotesque, for eventually the giant character seemed to be provided with disproportionate genitalia (Omodeo, 2004). Another incident occurred when French artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest affixed some posters on Montauban cathedral, as part of an authorized intervention dedicated to Ingres. Pignon-Ernest’s drawings portrayed some angels provided with genitalia: a group of young Catholic activists, covered the angels’ sexes with old newspapers, in a nighttime, graffiti-like action (Vironneau and Vaute, 2009). We have already seen the evolution in the results of different latrinalia surveys. In 1953, Kinsey showed that sexualized inscriptions and drawings were a predominantly masculine activity, then this conclusion was confuted by Farr and Gordon, and Bates and Martin, respectively in 1975 and 1980. Today we know that both men and women are producing erotic or even pornographic urban art, as witnessed in 2013 by an exhibition at the Museum of Sex in New York, entitled “F\*uck Art” and featuring women street artists like Miss Van and Aiko (Museum of Sex, 2015). Nevertheless, the present survey shows that engaging in erotic art is very likely to be perceived as a masculine trait. The representation of female nudity was constantly seen as a men’s activity, as demonstrated by several answers (F.3) on Miss Tic (A.2 ♀) and Mark Jenkins (A.7 ♂). As for the depiction of genitalia or pornographic scenes, like in Lush (A.15 ♂) and Boris Hoppek (A.24 ♂), users chose M respectively in 59.1% and 60.6% of cases.

## 1. Conclusion

It is a well observable fact that today women are playing a pivotal role in the artistic disciplines commonly known as graffiti and street art, by employing a wide range of contents, aesthetic languages, styles and techniques. Nevertheless, the results of the survey seem to confirm the general impression that the perception of urban art is deeply affected by all sorts of gender prejudices. The most impressive – and quite discouraging – data from this survey concerns perception of “neutral” artworks: “things which would be read as universally human, and not tethered to a gender identity,” to quote



Swoon's (2014: n.p.) statement, are almost always judged as masculine, and women's recognition as urban artists seems to be bound to a certain preconceived idea of "feminine aesthetics".

Nochlin, who had already questioned this as a general issue of the art world, in her aforementioned 1971 essay, argues that "the mere choice of a certain realm of subject matter, or the restriction to certain subjects, is not to be equated with a style, much less with some sort of quintessentially feminine style (Nochlin, 1971: 24)." "Feminine aesthetics" preconceptions lie not on a misconception of what femininity is, but rather on a misconception of what art is, on "the naïve idea that art is the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms (Nochlin, 1971: 24)." Nochlin argues – and I do not hesitate to agree with her – that,

the making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, [...] given temporally-defined conventions, schemata or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship or a long period of individual experimentation (Nochlin, 1971: 25).

It follows that when time and opportunities for self-realization, learning and individual experimentation are lacking, and when this lack is caused by inaccessibility, discrimination and underrepresentation, then it is very difficult to become a recognized artist.

Coming back to graffiti and street art, the question is: can this perceptual trend be subverted?

It is my opinion that women will not benefit from how the media usually deal with their role in urban art, i.e., by exclusively considering their art in terms of gender, and by stressing how women measure up to their male colleagues (e.g., Wyatt, 2013; Frank, 2014; Hawkins, 2014). Their interest in urban art made by women seems inherently devoted to this wrong, obsolete and deleterious idea of a "gendered aesthetics" to highlight what makes a woman different in aesthetic and content terms. To actually challenge the status quo, activists, critics and curators should perhaps engage in a more profound analysis – they should speak about women not by comparing them to men, nor by isolating them, as in publications like Nicholas Ganz's (2006) "Graffiti Woman" or in women-only hype exhibitions like Wynwood Walls' 2013

"Women on the Walls" edition (Juxtapoz, 2013). The problem with such books and exhibitions lies in their "cabinet of curiosities", entertaining approach: in no case will this be useful to raise awareness about women's historical role and difficulties, but only to promote the idea that a woman doing graffiti is a 'funny' oddity worth seeing.

At the same time, I am fully persuaded that literature and exhibitions can play a crucial role in this challenge, but only as long as they have a truly historical, critical and sociological approach to the subject.

Then, eventually, it will be time to consider "women artists" simply as "artists", and, with Nochlin (1971: 71) to insist on the "creation of institutions in which clear thought—and true greatness—are challenges open to anyone, man or woman."

## Notes

1. We cannot discuss here such a long and complex subject as the history of women artists in Western civilizations. In order to have a meaningful overview of women underrepresentation and discrimination during centuries, see Nochlin (1988); Guerrilla Girls (1998); Pollock (2003); Chadwick (2012); and Slatkin (2000).

2. For an up-to-date overview of women's current role in the art world, see Artnews, June 2015. Special Issue: Women in the Art World (<https://www.artnews.com/toc/women-in-the-art-world/>) and particularly Reilly (2015) Taking the Measures of Sexism: Facts, Figures and Fixes (<http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/26/taking-the-measure-of-sexism-facts-figures-and-fixes/>).

3. This number accounts only for individual artists, not crews nor couples. The same criterion has been adopted for the next books surveyed.

4. The user was asked to check this box, if necessary, only after choosing between M or F. Checking this box let the user move directly to the following image, as justifications were not required.

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