GIRLS' NIGHT OUT: FEMALE GRAFFITI ARTISTS IN A GENDERED CITY

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Graffiti art is often thought of as a boys' subculture because it is seen as too dangerous and aggressive for girls to be involved. Despite this assumption, girls have been invested in graffiti art since its beginnings in the early 1970's, and continue to contribute to the subculture's development today. This thesis explores the often ignored position of female graffiti artists by looking both at the physical and the social spaces in which female graffiti artists work. The city is explored as a masculine space that is hostile to female graffiti artists. The subculture of graffiti is inhospitable as well, because female graffiti artists are often fetishized and objectified, and their talents are under constant scrutiny within the subculture. This thesis employs personal interviews with several female graffiti artists and then uses a cultural studies approach to develop an understanding of the position of females in graffiti. Finally, it explores the ways in which the hyper-masculine natures of both the city and the subculture have affected the subjectivities of female graffiti artists through a visual analysis of self-portraits of the artists.
To all the girls in boys' clubs.
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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2003, I accepted a position with a language school teaching English as a foreign language in Barcelona, Spain. Little did I know, but when I moved there, Barcelona was the biggest city for graffiti and street art at the time, and it was at its peak. It seemed as if the city had exploded with color. Art of all sorts covered nearly every inch of city space. I became fascinated. As I researched and documented the art all around me, I began to ask questions about who these graffiti artists were. How did these artists find the time to paint the city? How did they find the locations they chose? What was their relationship with the city and how did it differ from my own? I began to find that some of the artists whose work I followed through the city were not men, as I had assumed, but women. This really intrigued me. How did these women get involved in graffiti? How did they go out into the city at night and paint graffiti? Were they not afraid to go out into the city alone at night? Were they friends with male artists? Did they associate with other female graffiti artists? This thesis begins to answer those questions. In this thesis, I explore the distinct position of female graffiti artists within the hyper-masculine spaces of both the city and the subculture of graffiti and some of the ways in which they navigate those spaces.

In his groundbreaking work, *The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment* (1915), University of Chicago sociologist Richard Park states, "The city is not…merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature" (Park 25). This call to study the city as a living and breathing organism created by those living in it is particularly applicable to the study of graffiti art. The graffiti artist takes it upon her/himself to reinvent, redecorate, and rewrite the city according to
his or her own agenda. S/he generally has no monetary or political ties to the powers that control urban planning, directing, or architecture, and yet s/he creates and changes the visual landscape of the city. However, the city is not a neutral space, but reflects the values of its creators. Historically, men have been given the power to create our cities, and this has led to an urban space that caters to men. The city is a gendered space, and the subculture of graffiti is similarly gendered as well. Both are masculine spaces that are not welcoming to women. This puts the female graffiti artist at a disadvantage. When she goes into the city to paint graffiti, she is entering a space that was not created for her, one that is seen as dangerous and unwelcoming.

The subculture of graffiti is similarly unwelcoming to females and femininity. Graffiti has its early roots in the hip hop culture that originated in the neighborhood of the South Bronx, in New York City. Tricia Rose, in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), argues that the socio-economic beginnings of hip hop culture in the South Bronx are a direct result of the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which displaced thousands of working class people of color living in the area. This displacement created an atmosphere of both desperation and improvisation that led to the fusion of African American, Jamaican, and Puerto Rican cultures and ultimately to the birth of a new subculture: hip hop, of which graffiti was one of the three central art forms, along with rapping and break dancing. Graffiti embodied the elements of style and flow that were central to hip hop, and allowed the message of those who were displaced and ignored in the South Bronx to get all around town through the use of subway trains. The trains became a way for disempowered youth to mark their name on the city by writing and sending their names out into the city, telling those that lived across town "I exist."
A brief description of graffiti, as I understand it and have experienced it, is in order. Graffiti is a game in which artists paint their names, which they have chosen for themselves, in public spaces like subway trains, freight trains, city walls and billboards. In order to be "real" graffiti, it must be painted illegally, on private or public property. The anonymity of the artist is of vital importance, mainly because of its legal implications. It has distinct rules, techniques, and handwritings, and its purpose is to advertise the artist's pseudonym all over the city; it is a way to mark territory and claim public space. The subculture of graffiti is intensely masculine. Graffiti artists compete with each other to put their names all over the city. The artist with the most spaces marked, the most dangerous and visible spots, is named the "king" of the city. All who participate in graffiti are expected to compete for the position of "king."

It is important to mention that while race and class are both central to the study of graffiti, this thesis focuses particularly on issues of gender. Though race, class, and gender are always already mutually imbricated, I am focusing my study on gender for two reasons: one practical, and the other academic. The first reason is that addressing race, class, and gender in a thesis was far too large for a project of this size. I have chosen to focus on gender and its relationship to graffiti because gender has been largely ignored with regards to subcultures in general, especially graffiti. Thus, this project highlights gender with regards to graffiti because of the countless number of times I have been told, "I didn't even know women painted graffiti."

The first mention of graffiti in the media was a *New York Times* article published in 1971 about a Greek teenager whose tag was TAKI 183. Although graffiti artists like COOL EARL in Philadelphia were around long before TAKI 183, and there is no pinpointed origin of the subculture of graffiti, TAKI 183 was the first to receive media attention. After the *New York*
Times article, graffiti came to be constructed as a "problem" that the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) needed to take care of. It turned into an all out war between the MTA and the graffiti writers. When the press began to take note of the graffiti controversy, it constructed the graffiti writer to be a low-income male body of color by writing articles only about the young men who participated in the subculture, despite the number, of females involved in graffiti art from the beginning and who continue to be heavily involved. In fact, women like Barbara and Eva 62 were among the first to write their tags in New York City, alongside TAKI 183. Throughout the nearly 40 years that women have been involved in the subculture, female contributions to graffiti art have been largely ignored.

Although there has been little academic work done on graffiti art, there have been some ethnographic explorations on graffiti. The majority of the ethnographic work on graffiti has focused on specific crews or groups, for example, there has been a lot of work on gangs and graffiti, especially in Los Angeles, and of course, in New York, the birthplace of graffiti. Getting Up (1982), by Craig Castleman, is an incisive ethnographic work that clearly details the beginnings of graffiti, how the subculture is organized, and discusses graffiti artists' battles with the MTA. Janice Rahn's Painting Without Permission (2002) is an ethnographic work that discusses the structure of the subculture and then applies knowledge of the subculture to the ethics of pedagogy. Nancy Macdonald's The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York (2001) is an informative look at the politics and creation of masculinity in the subculture. Macdonald is the only academic who has done work on gender and graffiti. Her focus is on the ways that graffiti serves as a training ground for young men to learn about masculinity. Though her work provides the academy with its first exploration of gender with relationship to graffiti, she largely leaves out the position of females in the
subculture, leaving only one chapter of her book dedicated to the women whose lives are consumed with graffiti.

Most of the academic books on graffiti have focused on the politics of criminality associated with graffiti and the emergence of graffiti art as an urban "crisis." Jeff Ferrell's *Crimes of Style* (1996) explores a graffiti crew in Denver, Colorado, and thoroughly discusses what it is about graffiti that makes it criminal and the ways in which the criminal aspects of graffiti have been dealt with historically. Joe Austin's *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (2001) looks at the MTA's famous War on Graffiti, which culminated in many graffiti writers being severely punished and the installation of vicious guard dogs in the train yards along with doubling and, at times, tripling fences.

Outside of these critical texts, many of the books on graffiti art are simply picture books. They feature glossy photos of urban art, with minimal explanation or interpretation. Among the most comprehensive of these are *Subway Art* (1984) by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Freight Train Graffiti* (2006) by Roger Gastman, Darin Rowland and Ian Sattler, and *Broken Windows: Graffiti NYC* (2002) and *Burning New York* (2006) by James T. Murray and Karla Murray. There have also been a number of documentary films that focus on graffiti art. Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver's *Style Wars* (1983) first aired on PBS and was the American public's first look at what was, at the time, a New York phenomenon. *Style Wars* is a graffiti classic, and has in the past few years experienced revival and nationwide film recognition. Doug Pray's *Infamy* (2005) is a look at modern graffiti in its many forms and is the first to feature a female graffiti artist, CLAW, and gay artist, EARSNOT.

The most comprehensive of the graffiti books, *Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents* published in 2004 by Nicholas Ganz, is an expansive collection of urban art from
around the world. In 2006, Ganz, teamed up with Nancy Macdonald and collaborated with street artist SWOON to publish a second book, *Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents*, which was the first look at urban art by women, clearly an attempt to fill the gaping whole where *Graffiti World* left off in regards to the representation of women's urban art. *Graffiti Women* provides a window through which to view the position of females in graffiti art, and will be heavily referenced in Chapter III.

There has not been much critical work done on the field of graffiti studies, and there remain many large holes. This thesis will attempt to fill two holes in graffiti scholarship: a gendered analysis of the subculture that focuses on the females that are and have been involved since the beginning, and graffiti’s relationship to urban space. In my exploration of these two fields, I employ several methods: ethnographic study, subcultural studies, and feminist visual analysis.

The cornerstone of my research is ethnographic in nature. I have interviewed three female urban artists who have been involved in graffiti for quite some time and who provided me with a clear picture of the place of women within the subculture of graffiti. CLAW and MISS 17 are graffiti partners who form the all female crew of PMS (Power, Money, Sex). CLAW is a veteran of the graffiti scene, an artist and fashion designer who began painting graffiti in the early 1990's and had retired before returning to support MISS 17. MISS 17 is an artist who has been painting for a decade. They both have strived to encourage females to become involved in the subculture. My third artist is street artist SWOON. SWOON is an internationally recognized contemporary artist who works mainly on the streets of New York, though she does, at times, show her work in galleries, and has recently sold several pieces to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
Although graffiti art and street art are two totally different art forms, because they both utilize urban space as a place to show their work, the experience of females who work in the fields are similar. Street artists are artists who do their work in the city, on the walls and spaces in which graffiti is also written, but do not follow the rules of graffiti. Street artists are not graffiti writers, nor do they care to be. However, because they use the same space as graffiti writers, they are subjected to the game, its rules, and therefore, its problems. Although SWOON works both in the art world and on the streets and many graffiti writers would agree that her work is not "graffiti," she echoes many of the woes of female graffiti writers and for this reason I feel her experiences are valid for this project.

The cultural studies portion can be divided into two areas: the study of urban space and a feminist study of subculture. Henri Lefebvre's work on location and social space in *The Social Production of Space* (1991) is vital to the analysis of urban space. Feminist geography and urban studies is of particular importance in the analysis of the gendered city. The work of feminist geographers and architectural historians such as Elisabeth Grosz, Kristine B. Miranne and Alma H. Young inform my understanding of urban space as implicitly gendered. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* allowed me to see the power that ordinary citizens have to fight hegemony through the creative use of urban space.

The work of subculture theorists such as Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie are central to my understanding of both subculture in general, and the relationship between young women and masculine subcultures. McRobbie's work *Feminism and Youth Culture* (2000), especially the article "Girls and Subcultures," co-written with Jenny Garber is very important to my research because she details the ways in which one may approach the analysis of girls in subcultures differently from boys in subcultures. Nancy Macdonald's aforementioned book, *The Graffiti*
Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York, is central to this thesis, both as a guide to understanding the ways that masculinity functions in graffiti and as a measure to set my arguments against.

The third portion of my analysis of female graffiti artists employs a feminist visual analysis. Judith Butler's arguments about the performance of gender as a "cultural site" in her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) is the foundation of my understanding of the ways in which female graffiti artists represent themselves. Griselda Pollock's notion of "nominal transvestitism" in Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art (1988) is central to my argument about how the hyper-masculine nature of graffiti influences the subjectivities females involved in graffiti. Likewise, Many Ann Doane's 1991 article on the masquerade in "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" forms much of my understanding of the ways in which graffiti has affected the ways in which female graffiti artists think about and represent themselves.

The first chapter of this thesis explores the space in which graffiti takes place: the city. The city is the background for those who live in it and it presents a canvas for the graffiti artists who paint on it. It is important to examine just what that space entails to better understand the context in which graffiti takes place. I explore the city as a gendered space using the work of a number of feminist geographers and architectural historians. This chapter explores the city as a reflection of the male body and of masculinity on aesthetic, political, and social levels. The city is often thought of as dangerous to women, and historically women have been discouraged from participating in city life. Feminine space has been socially constructed as an interior space, while
public space is thought to be masculine. Graffiti art is inextricably linked to urban space because it is the foundation for the game of masculinity that is the center of graffiti. Male graffiti artists use the city as a playground in which to test and explore their masculinity. The female graffiti artist works in that masculine urban space as well, and because of this she is performing a doubly subversive act when she goes out into the city to paint at night. She claims urban space for women and writes her identity on the walls of the city.

The second chapter discusses the ways in which hyper-masculinity, sexism, and homophobia in graffiti art have worked together to create a climate that de-values females and femininity. Urban art is thought of as a something that only men do, despite the fact that women have been involved from the beginning. The women involved in graffiti are subject to fetishization, objectification, and disbelief in their talents because graffiti has been constructed as a masculine enterprise. This chapter incorporates interviews with women about their experiences in graffiti to create an understanding of the place of women in the subculture, and to explore some of the ways that women find to combat sexism in graffiti art.

The third chapter explores the effects of the hyper-masculinity of graffiti on the subjectivities of female artists by looking at self-portraits that they submitted to the graffiti book *Graffiti Women* (2006), edited by Nicholas Ganz. Through these portraits, we can see how the subculture has shaped the ways that many of the women involved in graffiti wish to be viewed, either as hyper-masculine in order to gain authenticity, or as hyper-feminine, in order to gain attention from the presumed heterosexual male viewer. However, we can also see how graffiti can offer the opportunity to female graffiti artists to challenge not only subcultural ideas about females and femininity, but ideas embedded in American culture about graffiti artists, and the strength of women in general.
Graffiti art is an important part of city life. It allows the men and women that participate in it to have their voices heard. It gives the city back to its inhabitants and allows them to choose what their visual landscape is composed of. However, both urban space and the subculture of graffiti privilege men's voices. In *The Graffiti Subculture*, Nancy Macdonald states that, "male graffiti writers do [graffiti] because doing [graffiti] allows them to construct and confirm their masculine identities" (96). Although this is a clear and true statement about the nature of graffiti and the men who become involved in it, it leads to another very important question: If the masculine nature of graffiti affords men the opportunity to 'construct and confirm' masculine identities, what does graffiti offer the women who are involved in the subculture?
CHAPTER I: GRAFFITI AND THE GENDERED CITY

[The city] is a poem which unfolds the signifier and it is this unfolding that ultimately the semiology of the city should try to grasp and make sing.

-Roland Barthes, *Semiology and the Urban*

The city, in its complete sense, then, is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity. The city fosters art and is art; the city creates theater and is the theater. It is in the city, the city as theater, that man's more purposive activities are focused, and work out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations.

-Lewis Mumford, *What is a City?*

Graffiti as a subculture came about as a response to the social and economic limits placed on the people living in New York City in the late 1960's and 70's. It was a way for urban youth to have their voices heard in a city that routinely told them that their opinions did not matter. In order to be complete, an analysis of graffiti art must be understood within its context--urban space. When we read graffiti art within its urban context, we can see it as an ongoing conversation with the city. Graffiti is often read as a response to the capitalist system that told urban youth that they did not matter. However, when graffiti is read not through the lens of Marxist analysis, but through the lens of gender, we understand graffiti in a completely new way. The city is read as a gendered space that excludes women aesthetically, physically, and socially, and graffiti is read as a hyper-masculine subculture that, when painted on the city only reinforces that masculinity. The female graffiti artist, then, presents a whole new re-imagining of the interactions of women and urban space. Graffiti presents to the female graffiti artist the opportunity to reclaim urban space for women, to make their mark on the city and claim it as their own.
Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, argues that we can read the city in the same way in which we would read a text. When we begin to read the city as a text, we begin to see that the city is socially constructed. The social construction of urban space incorporates a number of types of interrelated actions. There is the production of urban space in the tangible sense--the built environment, to use the architectural term. These are the physical spaces that are produced by those in power (politicians, lawmakers and businessmen) and those with skills (architects and urban planners). These are the people, most of whom are men, who legally and historically have had the power to choose the layout and the aesthetic of urban spaces. They choose for the public not only how their streets, buildings, and public services are organized but also for whom they are organized.

There are also the productions of social spaces. These are the intangible spaces, such as the feeling one gets when one walks into a room, the ways in which our bodies move through space, and the environments in which those bodies are placed. These social spaces, though not tangible, are as instrumental in the formation of identity as the tangible. They are often the effects of the tangible spaces. They involve how the physical space is put to use in the city, who is made welcome and who is not. The social construction of intangible space is the way in which the city is made to feel unwelcoming to certain groups of people, women for example, regardless of there being no formal or legal restrictions against the involvement of women in urban affairs. Because of these social spaces, women arrange their use of the city according to what makes them feel comfortable, safe, and welcome.

This view of urban space, of the city as a socially constructed text that incorporates both tangible and intangible space, allows the reader of the city to see that there are many stories present within the city, many layers to the text. There is the dominant layer, that of the economy,
power and privilege, and at the same time, there are layers that oppose the dominant layer. The view of the city as a text creates the image of a city that is alive, with numerous layers and stories happening at the same time, often in opposition to each other. The notion of socially constructed urban space plays a vital role in forming a holistic understanding of graffiti art in its context. When we see urban spaces as a text, we read graffiti art as another layer in that text.

Graffiti cannot be seen outside of its context. It is written and painted on the buildings, trains and streets that make up the city. The graffiti artist strives to connect with the city; through the buildings on which s/he is painting or with the people that make up the city. The artist is in an ongoing conversation with the city and with other artists, who respond to each other and to the city by altering the urban visual landscape. Because of this, graffiti is contingent upon the space on which it is written for its meaning. In the introduction to Site Specific Art, Nick Kaye argues, "reading implies 'location'. To 'read' the sign is to have located the signifier, to have recognized its place within the semiotic system...its positioning in relation to political, aesthetic, geographical, institutional, or other discourses, all inform what 'it' can be said to be" (1). Kaye's argument is particularly useful when discussing graffiti, which began as a form of public communication between urban youth painted on the walls of the city. However, in the mid 1980's, when graffiti art became recognized and celebrated by the art scene in New York, and subsequently moved from urban spaces to galleries, there was a controversial shift in focus within the graffiti community. The shift in the focus from a wide perspective that includes the work and its surroundings (the train, building or street that it was written on and the other pieces surrounding it), to the gallery space in which the focus is solely on the canvas led many graffiti artists to question the authenticity of graffiti art that was taken out of its original, urban context.
While the localization of graffiti art in the gallery is what has made graffiti popular and a viable form of artwork because the gallery space signifies "art," this is problematic within the graffiti community because it changes the context and therefore, the meaning of the work. Nick Kaye argues that "after a 'substantive' notion of site, such site-specific work might even assert a 'proper' relationship with its location, claiming an 'original and fixed position' associated with what is" (1). Graffiti is a game that was created by urban youth that allowed them to claim ownership of the spaces in which they lived. It is a competitive game that is heavily tied to the masculinity of the artist. The risk factors that are involved in graffiti earn the participants respect and the artist who paints the most dangerous, visible, and proliferate pieces is dubbed the "king" of the city. Because graffiti existed for so long in an urban context and because it relies so heavily on the masculine game of fame and recognition that underlies it, which is only won in the urban context, it has come to draw its meaning from that context.

Many graffiti artists argue that graffiti without urban space is not graffiti. Graffiti artist MISS 17 notes, "Graffiti that isn't public isn't graffiti! It's art fag bullshit" (e-mail interview). MISS 17 expresses perfectly the relationship between urban space, masculinity, and authenticity. For MISS 17, when one steps out of the urban context, one is both stripped of one's authenticity as a "real" graffiti artists and one's masculinity. The price for stepping out of the bounds of urban, public, and competitive graffiti is the loss of credibility in one's masculinity and sexuality. "Queer", "Fag", and "Toy" are all insults that are used against those who step outside of the rules.

For some graffiti artists, simply painting graffiti in public is not enough. In order to be considered a "real" graffiti artist, one must engage in illegal activity. CLAW, another graffiti artist, argues "To me, if you do like legal graffiti, if you’re just like a muralist that uses spray paint and call yourself a graffiti artist, like that is cheating. And whether you're a man or a
woman, like, I'm not really in support of that" (telephone interview). CLAW's statement makes it clear that a graffiti artist is only granted authenticity if he or she is fully engaged in the competition of recognition and masculinity that "true" graffiti is comprised of. The fact that gender arises in her statement about legality and recognition indicates her awareness that many of the spaces in which graffiti is painted are deemed unsafe for women, and that because of this, many female graffiti artists choose not to fully engage in the subculture, preferring to work on legal surfaces during the day. For CLAW, however, it does not matter whether or not it is more dangerous to paint graffiti because of your gender. The rules are clear: "true" graffiti is painted illegally in the urban context.

Graffiti art is physically inextricable from the urban landscape, and because of this, it is embedded in a web of social and political ideas as well. We cannot fully understand graffiti without discussing the space on which it is written, and so we must examine further what the urban context consists of, and who makes the decisions about what urban space will look like. We often refer to urban space as the "built environment" meaning that it is constructed, both physically and socially, by humans. Elizabeth Grosz argues, "the city is a product [of] conceptual and reflective possibilities of consciousness itself" (245). Among the skills that are needed in building the urban environment is "the capacity to design, to plan ahead, to function as an intentionality and thereby be transformed in the process" (Grosz 245). However, it is not only the "capacity to design" that allows humans to shape cities. Not everyone is permitted to build or manipulate urban environments. The "capacity to design" does not only refer to the mental capacity or the ability to plan ahead. It also refers to the political and cultural capacity, or what Pierre Bourdieu would call "cultural capital," to design and organize our public spaces.
Because certain people are given the power to create urban spaces, this creates a system of inequality in which those who are not in power are subjected to the ideas and plans of those who do have power. The average citizen is not granted the immediate ability to make decisions about what our public spaces should look like. Urban spaces are mediated through officials and architects, who, presumably, have the interests of the public in mind. This presents a problem for the city dweller that wants to see him/herself reflected in the urban environment. Many urban dwellers feel disempowered and doubtful about their ability to legally affect change, both politically and aesthetically, about what their surroundings are like.

Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, argues that "beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate" (95). De Certeau sees opportunities for those who are not in power in the city to take control through everyday acts such as walking. Although the grid of the city has been laid on top of the land on which people live, the city dwellers, the people who actually put that grid to use, are, theoretically, free to use it in any way they like. This means "[the] city is left prey to contradictory movements that counter-balance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power" (de Certeau 95). There is no way to fully control the manner in which the city is used by the dwellers, and so the dwellers are able to reclaim power through small acts of resistance.

Graffiti is precisely one of the small actions that de Certeau argues gives the city dweller the ability to resist the hegemonic plans of the city. Graffiti artist CLAW states about the origins of graffiti:

It came out of this like desperation for acknowledgment and recognition from the world…it started off in these like poor urban areas where these kids had nothing. So to assert themselves and write their name on the wall gave them some sort of power…they're kind of like rooting themselves in the neighborhood. Like this is
my neighborhood...look there's my name, like I live here, I belong here. I'm part of this. And I'm like alive, or something. Instead of it being like a cold building, all of a sudden it's, you know, Slim 47's building (telephone interview).

CLAW's explanation about the origins of graffiti clearly shows the ways in which urban youth used graffiti to reclaim ownership over their surroundings. Graffiti allows the writer to reclaim and take possession of the spaces that shape their lives everyday. By writing his/her name on the walls, the graffiti artist, who typically does not hold power, is able to claim urban space for him/herself, and in this way, claims the "capacity to design."

The "capacity to design" is not only about money and power. Within the last thirty years, feminist geographers, architectural historians and critics have argued that many of the power imbalances present in our urban spaces have gender inequalities as their foundations. In their book *Gendering the City*, Kristine B. Miranne and Alma H. Young argue that "women experience cities differently from men specifically because of the gender asymmetries that are embedded in distinct institutions and local institutional relationships" (Miranne 5). Feminist geographers and urban theorists have attacked this issue from many different angles--from the actual physical aesthetics of the city as reflective of a phallocentric society, the social construction of a division between private and public space in relationship to the division between the genders, and the lack of consideration on the part of city planners in creating a city that both is welcoming and provides safety to women, children, homosexuals, and the disabled.

According to these theorists, support for and representations of females are largely absent in urban spaces. Not only has the construction of the built environment reflected a lack of concern with female subjectivities, the city stifles the voices of all citizens, particularly women.

Graffiti presents the female an opportunity to connect with the city in an intimate way. CLAW states,
One of the things that I like loved about graffiti was like I had this secret relationship with New York City where I felt on some level like I was like an official mayor and I would go and visit all these different you know places within New York City that nobody went to or nobody knew about but like there I was like hey I'm here you know? I had a real love affair with New York City (telephone interview).

This statement is made more poignant by the fact that there has never been a female mayor of New York City and that women are traditionally barred from positions of power on both the local and the national levels. The "secret relationship" that CLAW had with the city, which is felt by many female graffiti artists, is an indicator of the lack of public visibility of women in power in cities. Female graffiti artists are able to create a relationship with the city, but they must do so at night, illegally, and in secret.

MISS 17 echoes CLAW's ability to connect with the city through graffiti: "I feel as though I've gotten a really good idea of the cities I've visited by walking around them all night long marking my moniker anywhere I could" (e-mail interview). Both MISS 17 and CLAW were able to reclaim the spaces in which they lived and grew up through writing their names on the walls of the city despite the fact that women are traditionally discouraged from exploring the city because it is thought to be too dangerous. Graffiti allows females who are willing to explore urban space the ability to reclaim the right to exist in that space.

Urban space is thought to be more available and accessible to men than to women. In addition, many feminist architectural historians and critics see architecture itself as reflective of masculinity. Most architects and planners have been men and they create buildings and spaces that reflect their interests and in which men are encouraged to interact. Urban theorists argue that masculinity is clearly reflected in many architects' designs. We can easily draw connections between the city and the body. John Rennie Short argues, "the [male] body was and continues to be reflected in the city" (Short 392). The popularity of the high-rise condominium tower and the
skyscraper is a metaphor for the strength of the economic system as well as of masculine strength and virility. The male body is not the only body reflected in architectural designs. Rennie Short argues "there are feminine parallels. The beautiful soft roundness of Michelangelo's dome of St. Peter's in Rome has the look and contours of the female breast" (Short 392). However, the amount of phallic symbols in any large city outnumbers the female symbols, demonstrating that our urban spaces are far more centered on catering to and reflecting the male body than the female.

If the built environment is largely a symbol of masculine strength and virility, then the female graffiti artist's work is a challenge to this system of masculine representation. Although not all female graffiti artists write feminine names, like LADY PINK or MISS 17, or use stereotypically feminine imagery, like flowers and hearts, the women who do use these styles place a feminine mark on the masculine aesthetic of the city. Additionally, when the female graffiti artist writes her name, whether or not it reflects femininity to the reader, it is a powerful act for her to inscribe her identity onto the masculine architecture. She literally paints over the masculinity of the city with her female identity.

The artists who do not overtly indicate their gender through their names or the use of stereotypically feminine imagery usually allow the viewers who are tuned into signifiers of the subculture that they are females. For example, female graffiti artist CLAW, who paints not a name, but a claw symbol states:

It's funny because when I meet some girls, they're like, 'I always knew you were a girl, I could tell, I could tell!'. And you know I think I subtly incorporate it. Writing the word "sassy" in the middle of your fill-in is kind of feminine even if it's all drippy and gooey and ugly and you know what I mean, really raw-looking. So I think on some level, yeah, I was trying to let people know, but not
completely bashing them over the head with like hearts and flowers and stuff like that (telephone interview). ¹

For those who can pick up on the clues, the idea that a female is the painter of the graffiti presents a radical re-imagining of both urban space and graffiti. Not only is urban space unwelcoming to women, especially at night when graffiti is painted, but also the subculture of graffiti is thought to be a completely masculine occupation that is also unwelcoming to women. The discovery of the gender of a female graffiti artist is a shock to the common conceptions of both who participates in graffiti and also about who is allowed to be out in the city at night.

Although it seems that anyone could paint their name on the buildings, trains, and streets of the city, women have traditionally been barred from participating in the use of public space because urban space is seen as a dangerous space for women. This has, no doubt, negatively influenced many women interested in participating in graffiti. Feminist activists, geographers, and urban planners have been fighting for the reclamation of public space for women in urban environments for some time. They argue that because the city reflects the bodies and concerns of men, arrangements have not been made to accommodate women.² They see public spaces as unwelcoming to women, especially at night. It is commonly thought that it is only acceptable for women to be out during the day, and if out at night, women should be accompanied, if not by a male, then at least in pairs, never alone. The "Take Back the Night" movement is a definitive marker of the struggle for women to regain and reclaim public spaces, especially at night, and make them free of the fear of sexual assault.³ Women's struggle to reclaim city streets began in "1877 when women protested the fear and violence they experienced in the night-time streets of

¹ "Fill in" refers to the spaces inside of a graffiti artist's name or symbol, which can be filled in with dedications, references to crew affiliations, or other creative touches.

² Many of the same feminists add to the list the need to make city streets safe and accessible for children, homosexuals, and the disabled as well.

³ Take Back the Night rallies have been gathering since 1976, and continue to work for the ability for women to explore their cities safely by asking women to join together and march. They hold candlelight vigils, empowerment marches, and survivor testimonials.
London, England" (takebackthenight.org). When women entered the workforces in large numbers during the Industrial Revolution, men largely occupied the streets. It has been a constant struggle since then to change public spaces into spaces in which women are able to walk alone safely.

The idea of the city as unsafe for women is crucial to our understanding of graffiti as a gendered subculture, both within the subculture and from the perspective of the outsider. Women are prevented from joining the subculture in many of the same ways that they are prevented from participating in the life of the city. They are not permitted to join in on the fun of graffiti because there is a perceived danger specific to women in painting graffiti at night in urban spaces. This argument assumes that it is not dangerous for men to participate in late night expeditions and that it is not dangerous for men to paint graffiti, which is absolutely not true. Many men have been injured or killed while painting in train yards or on city streets. It is important to distinguish between what is a real danger and what is a gendered social construction. Graffiti is dangerous. It involves walking around in the middle of the night in dangerous neighborhoods and one can get seriously hurt while painting in the dark in train yards. It is also illegal to paint on private property. The results of these dangers are that many graffiti artists have found themselves running in the night from police and anti-graffiti vigilantes, being held up, or running into gangs.

However, it is also important to recognize that there is a social construction that makes it seem as if danger is the reason that women should not participate, and at the same time the very reason why men should. Spending time in the city at night has been constructed as something that is specifically dangerous to women. If we do recognize that it is dangerous for men to paint graffiti, then it is constructed as something that can be seen as sexy, or that can earn boys "manhood points." Scholars of masculinity, like Michael Kimmel, have noted the place that
danger plays in the acquisition of masculinity. When boys and men engage in dangerous acts and survive them, they are seen in the eyes of others as more manly than other men who have not risked themselves. This competition is, for masculinity scholars, the root of Western notions of masculinity. The "dangerous place" of the city at night provides boys a playground in which to explore their masculinity and a way to test themselves against each other in a competitive game. Graffiti perfectly matches these demands, and allows for boys to "just have fun" in the city although it is dangerous (and illegal) for them to paint. It can also function as an easy excuse to exclude women, to create a club "for boys only."

Female graffiti artists are very aware of their position as females in the city, perhaps more than the average woman because the average female living in an urban environment does not test the limits of the gendered city as frequently as the female graffiti artist. MISS 17 states, "As a woman, I am much more aware of the possibility of becoming a victim when I am out doing my work" (e-mail interview). CLAW echoes this, saying that she has had

Some like unbelievable, crazy, scary encounters. Scary encounters with [MISS 17], you know, being in like the South Bronx and…there's like vigilantes and there's like just plain straight-up creeps and you know walking around in bad neighborhoods, in the middle of the night, two girls, you're kind of placing yourself in a vulnerable situation (telephone interview).

Although males who paint graffiti also experience creeps, vigilantes, and other dangers while painting, they most likely do not think of them as gendered experiences. Women who paint graffiti are in a unique position because they are aware that what they are doing is dangerous, and they are aware of the city as a space that is thought of as especially dangerous to women. Consequently, the ways in which they work and the awareness that they must have is very different from the ways in which men experience graffiti.
Female graffiti artists find ways in which to work more safely. Many female graffiti artists prefer to work in pairs because of safety issues. CLAW and MISS 17 joined together to create the New York City graffiti crew P.M.S. (Power, Money, Sex) and largely work in pairs because it is safer and makes the time pass more quickly. CLAW states:

[Working in] two[s] is better than one, I think. Because, at least somebody can run away and get help or something or, you know, knock somebody over the head or whatever. But I've also, and I know [MISS 17] has, been alone in similar situations which you know you're like, 'what the fuck am I doing here', you know? It just, it works better, you know, one watching out for the other and you know you have someone you can chat with (telephone interview).

Female graffiti writers employ many of the same tactics that girls and women have been taught to use when venturing out into public spaces. CLAW and MISS 17's work in pairs also mirrors the work of activists with Take Back the Night, where women march together to reclaim public space. Working in pairs or groups allows female graffiti artists to unite in the fight to take ownership of urban space.

Another artist, SWOON, says, "Very early on, I started working during the day. At night, undercovers wear out. Sketchy people were scaring the shit out of me. Getting chased by the police. During the day, that shit just doesn't happen. That is totally tied in with me being a woman" (SWOON, personal interview). However, SWOON sees her medium (postering) as something that allows her to work in the daytime, and agrees that a graffiti artist, who would use mostly, or only, spray paint would have a much more difficult time working in the day because of the perceived illegality and sketchiness of working with spray paint. She states "I don't use spray paint so I'm non-threatening. I'm small. I'm just like a white woman wandering around with a big bucket and a million posters sticking out of her backpack. Nothing is hiding, and I'm just walking around putting up posters and I've done it for years and it's always been fine"

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4 Graffiti artists try to be as "undercover", or unnoticeable as possible while working so as to avoid attention from the police and anti-graffiti vigilantes.
(personal interview). As SWOON notes, the spray can will bring along with it suspicions of graffiti, whereas postering, stickering, and, to some extent, stenciling will not because there has not been massive media coverage over the battle between street artists and city police departments as there has been for graffiti.

Graffiti is viewed as more threatening also because of the aggressive and competitive nature of the game. Graffiti artists use their "tags" to claim space. They choose a name, and paint it on as many surfaces as possible. Tagging is the basest form of graffiti. It requires the least amount of technical skill, but is what makes an artist famous and respected. Intuition plays a large role in choosing which areas will be tagged or not. When asked if she allows her gender to interfere with which spots she will paint in the city, CLAW responded:

I'm sure I have maybe not quite as consciously as that. You know, I'm just like, ooh, I don't want to go in that neighborhood or I don't want to go there tonight or whatever, and then I've also felt like that and done it. And it's been a bad experience or good experience depending. It's hard to say. Every night, it's like a different set of problems and a unique New York experience (telephone interview).

Due to the high level of competition in the game of graffiti, the writer who places his/her tag in the most difficult spots is more likely to be thought of as the "king" of the city or of a specific area. Artists compete for "jock spots", which are spaces in which everyone wants to paint because they are the most dangerous, difficult, or visible, and will therefore bring the writer the most fame. CLAW says that the term "jock spot" comes from a reference to "like being like on someone's dick or whatever" (telephone interview). Because the painting of a "jock spot" is key to the game, any female writer who wants to compete with the boys and be recognized as a "king" has to hit up those spots, and they might lead her to dangerous locations and positions.
For Miranne and Young, urban space is made up of socially constructed boundaries, which keep women and men separate. These boundaries serve to keep women out of urban (public) spaces and in the private space of the home. They argue,

Women's lives are a constant transitioning across boundaries: accompanying men to their places, going into spaces that have been closed to them (such as city streets at night)…some women transgress boundaries (for example, prostitutes playing their trade, or others who may be allowed to enter the male domain if they have male attributes) (7).

The female graffiti artist works to transgress gendered boundaries, both intentionally and unintentionally. In order to cross those boundaries, female graffiti writers will "wear like big sweatshirts and baseball caps with our, you know, ponytails tucked in, for sure. We just [don't] want to cause any attention at all" (CLAW, telephone interview). By hiding their gender with their clothing, graffiti writers are able to cross gendered urban boundaries.

At the same time, we can see that transgressing the gendered boundaries of the city draws assumptions. Miranne and Young argue that some of the women who transgress the boundaries can be viewed as "prostitutes playing their trade." When a female is out at night in the city, they can be seen as prostitutes, simply for being out in public at night. CLAW echoes this idea when she discusses the experience of the female graffiti writer. She states that "all these guys thinking [MISS 17 and I] were like hookers, because what the fuck else would we be doing at three o'clock in the morning on, you know, a corner, just like standing there. We're like covered in filth, like, and paint and they're still honking at us and being really aggressive" (telephone interview). That they are out at night in the city makes up for the fact that none of the more direct signifiers of prostitution are in place (verbally offering sex for money, wearing revealing clothing, etc).
Although female graffiti writers try to hide their femininity in order to be made less conspicuous to their fellow late night city dwellers, they can also use their femininity to their advantage: "At the same time, so when the cops would drive by, we'd kick the hat off, pull the ponytail out so they'd be like oh they're just girls over there" (CLAW, telephone interview). Police officers who are out looking for graffiti writers are not looking for females because the stereotype is that the graffiti writer is male. Female graffiti writers use this stereotype to their advantage. Although they are read by some as prostitutes, they are definitely not read as graffiti artists, and this allows them a bit more freedom to escape suspicion.

Graffiti is and can be seen as subversive in relation to dominant ideologies about capitalism, private property, and urban aesthetics. Traditionally, we tend to see graffiti as a radical response to the urban power structure that disempowers the young, those of color and in those the lower socio-economic classes. We see it as a renegade way for those people to make their voices heard, an unharnessed conversation about power that cannot be stopped by the authorities no matter how hard they try. However, if we shift focus from Marxist ideologies and view graffiti through the lens of gender and the gendering of urban spaces, traditional (male) graffiti culture reinscribes the politics of masculine supremacy, both within the subculture and in the way that it interacts with urban space. Male graffiti artists are writing hyper-masculinity directly on top of an already hyper-masculine space and therefore, they are simply reinforcing the masculine structure that is already in place.

Female graffiti artists represent a radical voice that challenges the ways in which we organize our built environment. They continue the work of male graffiti artists, questioning the power structure that dictates what our urban spaces should look like and what purposes they should perform. At the same time, by simply painting graffiti, they physically put themselves in
masculine spaces. Female graffiti artists actively change the gender make up of our urban spaces. They work to physically reclaim ownership of city spaces for themselves, and in doing so, encourage other women to engage with the city, to claim it as their own.
The media has played a major role in the social construction of the image of the graffiti artist. *The New York Times* was instrumental in creating the image of both the "cool" graffiti artist and the graffiti artist as a "menace." There is one teenager, TAKI 183, who has been credited with starting the graffiti explosion that changed the look of New York subways.\(^5\) In 1971, the *New York Times* did an interview with the Greek teenager. The article, the first ever to cover graffiti, portrays TAKI 183 to be an "engaging character with a unique and fascinating hobby" (Castleman *Politics* 21). This image of the cool, collected and charming male graffiti artist caught fire in New York. Shortly after the publication of the piece, graffiti exploded all over the subways in New York. Working class youth from all over the city began to paint their names on the subways and in the streets.

The media chose to represent the subculture of graffiti through the image of the male artist TAKI 183, and as a result, the first image of the graffiti artist that the outside world knew was that of a male. However, female graffiti artists were present in the graffiti scene from the beginning as well. BARBARA 62 and EVA 62 were graffiti partners who wrote during the early 1970's, and were the first women to receive respect from others within the subculture, though the media did not represent them at all and they are still obscure names in graffiti history.

While to the ordinary viewer, it may seem that anyone could place something on the city streets, there is, in fact, a huge gender division in graffiti. Women consistently have to prove themselves worthy of recognition and support in the subculture, femininity (in both women and

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\(^5\) There is some speculation about whether or not TAKI 183 was actually the first person to begin tagging, and there is even speculation about whether or not New York was really where graffiti began. Some believe that Philadelphia is where modern graffiti originated, with Cornbread and Cool Earl being the first tag artists to write their names back in the mid 1960's (Ehrlich). It is possible that TAKI 183, Cornbread, and Cool Earl were all writing at the same time in different parts of the country.
men) is heavily policed—through name calling, the spreading of rumors, and suspicions about one's authenticity--, and the average career span of the female graffiti artist is significantly shorter than that of the male artist. Women who are able to work their way into recognition and fame and who are able to sustain careers as graffiti artists are subjected to fetishization, obsession, skepticism of their talents, and verbal abuse.

As interest in graffiti among urban youth grew, and the media became more interested in the subculture, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) in New York City grew more and more distressed about the "problem." In response, Mayor John Lindsay organized an Anti-Graffiti Taskforce and declared graffiti a "blight" and a "plague." It was the MTA, in 1974, that laid out the profile of a graffiti artist that continues to influence the way people think about graffiti today. The Anti-Graffiti Taskforce issued a "Profile of a Common Offender" which stated that the graffiti artist was "Sex: Male, Race: Black, Puerto Rican, other (in that order), Age: Variable, predominately 13 to 16 years, Dress: Carries package or paper bag, long coat in the winter, Occupation: Student (lower social economic background)" (Chang 135). The gendering, as well as the racing and classing, of the graffiti artist's body was instrumental to the social construction of the image of the graffiti artist. When the MTA issued its profile, the police force, as well as the media and society at large, again received the message that graffiti was a male occupation and one in which females would be neither interested nor involved.

However, at the same time, the MTA's profile also opened the door widely for white, upper class young males, and women to enter into the field of graffiti with a certain degree of ease because they were not suspects. Many early graffiti artists have commented that because of what is now called "racial profiling," it was easier for white writers to steal spray paint for the crews. This is one of the reasons that, although the first generation of graffiti artists may have
been predominantly working class (male) youth of color, by the mid-1970's, the second generation was "more integrated than the army" (Chang 119). There is no doubt that these kinds of loopholes in the gender profile of graffiti artists were sought out and exploited by individuals in order to escape suspicion from the police, albeit to a lesser degree. Female street artist, SWOON, affirms that, "I think that when I get flack from graffiti guys, I think that they are kind of jealous [that I'm a woman and therefore arouse less suspicion] and understandably so" (personal interview). SWOON can get away with more than a male would because is a woman. Her gender affords her invisibility to the police, which is not granted to males, especially working class men of color.

The aggressive fight against graffiti was in part due to the urban crisis in New York at the time and the need to portray New York as a safe, low crime city that was not in a state of urban decay and in the end served to portray urban youth as "not the future of New York City, but an irrational, maniacal outside presence who would bring about [New York's] final destruction" (Austin 104). Graffiti soon came to be seen as the cause of, not the response to, urban decay, and this served to permanently criminalize the graffiti artist in the eyes of the media and, in turn, of the ordinary viewer. The portrayal of graffiti artists and urban youth in general as irrational and maniacal served further to socially construct the graffiti artist in a gendered body. Because there was already an assumption that the city was too dangerous for women, the image of a dark and criminal subculture of young men only reinforced the danger to women, making it seem that if one was in the graffiti subculture, one not only had to spend time in the dangerous city but that one's fellow artists were also dangerous young men as well. This helped to make graffiti seem as if it was not welcoming to young women who were interested in becoming involved.
Deeply entrenched ideas about who a graffiti artist is, fueled by the media and descriptions by the Anti-Graffiti Taskforce, have made it difficult to change perceptions about who is a graffiti artist. Today, the image of the graffiti artist remains remarkably similar to the Anti-Graffiti Task Force profile of 1974. When ordinary viewers see a piece of graffiti or other urban art, they tend to immediately think that a male did the work. For example, when SWOON began to be noticed by the street art blog Wooster Collective in 2003, "they wrote 'that guy is fucking amazing.' And I didn't even correct them because I was super into being obscure about my identity…but this other part of me was like 'You'll see. You'll see! You will just be really surprised" (personal interview). The assumption that SWOON was a male demonstrates the stereotype that the artwork done on the city streets is by men and men only. 6

The media's coverage of graffiti culture and the police profiles of graffiti offenders do not only affect the perceptions of those outside of the subculture. As Dick Hebdige states, "much of what finds itself encoded in subculture has already been subjected to a certain amount of prior handling by the media" (85). What graffiti writers think of their own subculture is influenced by media representations of themselves. No doubt many writers were drawn to graffiti because of its status as the "biggest problem in New York" at the time and their representation in the media helped them to cohere their identity as a "radical" or "wild" subculture. Many subcultural theorists and masculinity scholars have noted that an element of criminality needs to be present for young males when they are involved in or intrigued by subcultures. While the dangerous and illegal nature of graffiti is what draws many male artists into the subculture, many females also felt that they "sort of needed the whole sort of bad thing" (SWOON personal interview). The

6 The statement made by the Wooster Collective also demonstrates that gender stereotypes of urban artists extend not only to graffiti writers but also to street artists. This serves to further drive in the idea that it is not only within the subculture of graffiti that women are not thought to be working in any capacity in public space.
difference here is that young women are not expected to "need the whole sort of bad thing" while young males are.

During their gender socialization, girls are taught that to rebel and to do criminal acts, such as graffiti, are masculine activities. As sociologist Esther Madriz argues, "boys are expected to 'raise hell' while girls are taught the 'behave' and to be 'ladylike'" (34). It is not considered helpful to the proper gender socialization of females to be rebellious. Madriz argues that because there is more pressure on females to behave properly and not be rebellious, when women do rebel, it is considered all the more deviant. A girl would more deliberately want to deal with the repercussions of crime and rebellion, not only on the legal end, but also on the social end. A rebellious girl or woman is not let off the hook as easily by society. Rebellion in females can, at times, even serve to masculinize them.

Pre-formed images of graffiti artists work to invite similar types of youth into the subculture. The subculture of graffiti art is represented to be a dangerous masculine space that is not welcoming to women. Because of this, graffiti draws people who are interested in playing a masculine game where cut-throat competition is the main characteristic of the game. This goes for females interested in the subculture as well. Many women who are attracted to the subculture generally feel that they are able to compete with boys. As SWOON notes, "I have always just felt competitive with boys. I always was like 'why do you get to talk the loudest, why do you get to draw the best, why do you get everything?' Fuck you" (SWOON personal interview). This aggressive statement from SWOON demonstrates exactly the kind desire for competition that is necessary, from a male or a female, to engage in urban art. Graffiti artists of either gender must aggressively seek the position of "king" of the city, the graffiti writer that is most famous and respected.
In order to compete, the women involved in the graffiti subculture must, at times, engage in what Griselda Pollock calls "nominal transvestitism" (Pollock 85). In order to participate and enjoy the competitive and masculine nature of graffiti, female artists must assume, in small ways, a masculine position. This affects the ways that female graffiti artists think of themselves. One example of "nominal transvestitism" is when MISS 17 states, "In graffiti, when someone is extremely active and successful at putting their name everywhere, they are called a king. Some women call themselves queen, but by definition a queen is subordinate when a king is present. That's why I've chosen to refer to myself as a king" (e-mail interview). MISS 17 demonstrates the way in which female graffiti artists internalize the masculine constructs of the subculture. In order to win the game of graffiti, however momentarily, female graffiti artists must position themselves, mentally, in the place of males.

Examples of "nominal transvestitism" can also be seen on the walls of the city. For example, in Figure 1 CLAW has written: "Get off my dick!" in her fill-in space.

Fig. 1. CLAW, "Get off my dick!", From Infamy

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Pollock uses "nominal transvestitism" with regards to modernist painting in her article *Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity* in order to show that "women...are constantly erased so that to look at and enjoy the sites of patriarchal culture we women must become nominal transvestites." Despite the vast differences between modernist painting and the subculture of graffiti, I feel that there are clear correlations between the ways in which female graffiti artists navigate their subculture and Pollock's arguments about the gender politics of modernist painting.
Around the tag, we see signs of heavy competition (the tags of other graffiti artists) for the space that CLAW has claimed. She states about her motivation for writing such an aggressive and clearly masculine statement, "I think they wrote like 'You ho' or something like that on it. And I'm like, yeah" (telephone interview). When other graffiti artists with whom she was competing for dominance chose to attack her based on her gender, she retraced her image, reinstating her dominance over the wall, and filled in the space with a masculine statement that says "get off my property" or "get out of my space." In order to fully express her ownership over the space she needed to resort to "nominal transvestitism" and claim it through the use of masculinity.

Graffiti, because of the ways it was and is portrayed by city authorities and the media as masculine, has become a space in which boys feel that they are able to test the limits of their own masculinities and, in a sense, learn to be men. Nancy Macdonald, in her book *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York*, makes the argument that male writers write graffiti because "doing so allows them to construct and confirm masculine identities" (96). In a culture in which males are constructed to be tough, dangerous, and unfeeling risk-takers, subcultures provide endless opportunities for young males to test the limits of their masculinity, and graffiti, with the added dangers of the city at night and the illegality of writing on private property, provides the graffiti artist with even more opportunities. Graffiti is steeped in masculine references. For example, the term "getting up" refers to the act making a name for oneself or establishing a recognizable identity to others, and can easily be seen as an erotic male reference. Macdonald points specifically to the war references that, she argues, are particularly telling about masculinity and graffiti art. Graffiti is referred to as "bombing" to those involved in the subculture. The goal of the graffiti writer is to bomb the city with his/her tags in order to gain fame and respect. Writers form crews who engage in tagging warfare throughout
the city If a writer from a certain crew paints over another's writing, the insulted writer and his crew will declare war by writing over a member of the other crew's work.

Although it may look to the average city dweller that graffiti is random and that there is no logic to the placement of the tags or pieces, graffiti is an incredibly organized subculture with rules that must be followed if the graffiti writer is to receive the respect that s/he seeks. Dick Hebdige's use of the concept of "homology" with regards to subculture is useful here. Homology refers to the way in which subcultures, despite the appearance of lawlessness and disorganization, are "characterized by an extreme orderliness" which extends from superficial acts such as personal style and activities to the deeply held beliefs that are a part of the subculture and tie the members together (Hebdige 113). Homology is what holds a subculture together and each part comes together to form a whole.

Graffiti has very strict rules about what constitutes "real" graffiti and what does not. Writers mark out their territory by writing their names in subways, on trains, or on city streets. It is a game where the participants gain respect and fame through the creation of an identity and the advertising of that identity in public spaces. The more times one's name has been seen around the city, and the more difficult and dangerous the placement of one's name, the more famous one is. Many graffiti writers agree that in order to be a true graffiti writer, one must work illegally, on private property, at night, on missions. Some writers even go so far as to say that in order to be true graffiti, it must be done with stolen spray paint. In order to maintain organization, graffiti artists carefully police the boundaries of the subculture in order to maintain the boundary between what is allowed to be woven into the fabric of the subculture and what is held outside of the subculture. Graffiti artists do this by letting other artists know that their artwork is not up to par with the best artists.
Artists may write "toy" or "fag" next to another's work as a way to let the writer know that they are not up to par. Homophobic slurs are used in graffiti in order to gain power over other (male) artists and let them know that they are not "real" graffiti artists, that they are out of the bounds of the subculture. Michael Kimmel, in *Masculinity as Homophobia*, discusses how fear of being called a homosexual shapes many of the ways that masculinity is constructed in American society. Because so much of a male's masculinity hinges on the need for him to claim heterosexuality, it is very effective for male writers to question another male's sexuality in order to "diss" him. The policing of both the writer's masculinity as a way of competing for fame and recognition of talent are directly related in a way that forces talent in graffiti to be associated with an identity that is neither queer nor feminine.

The use of homophobic slurs to compete with other artists creates a masculine environment in which women are not invited to participate. Because it is important to lower the level of the artist that you are intending to "diss," using the term "fag" for a female writer would not seem appropriate. It is not effective for a male writer to claim that a known female writer is a "fag" or a "toy" because those are specifically male fears. Instead, they take aim at female insecurities, such as their sexual credibility, bodily cleanliness, and overall attractiveness.

SWOON states,

I had this one drawing of a fish, and someone wrote "I went to art school and I think I'm an artist. Your pussy smells like fish." And someone in Pittsburgh wrote, "respect graffiti you cunt" on one of my pieces. And I'm like you know I don't see guys talking about their testicles and foreskin, you know. They just don't do that to each other. You write "toy," or you write "fag." But you are not discussing this like personal shit. But when it's a woman, suddenly you are. Suddenly it's an insult at this extremely personal level (personal interview).  

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8 Graffiti artists heavily police the work of street artists. SWOON states, "I have gotten so much shit from graffiti people. I have gotten a lot of love, and a lot of support, and I have also gotten like seriously, "I'm going to smash your face in with a spray can" like beef" (SWOON personal interview). SWOON's statement is representative of the reception many street artists receive from graffiti artists.
Not only are the insults that are aimed at female urban artists more personal than the insults leveled at male artists, but they also serve to reduce women to body parts. Numerous feminist critics have discussed the ways in which patriarchal society reduces women to body parts, especially when women present a threat to patriarchal power. This, they argue, is a way for the patriarchy to continue to establish their dominance despite setbacks from the feminist movement. We can read the insults that SWOON discusses as responses from male graffiti artists to the encroachment upon their "turf," the boy's club of graffiti art.

CLAW, a female graffiti artist, agrees that the insults are very personal and thinks that the reason is that:

When somebody's like dissing you, they don't want to diss you and [simply say] "you suck," even though a million people have wrote that – "you suck," "toy" – this and that, but most of the time, it's like "bitch," "cunt," "ho"...they want to take you off their level and turn you into a measly little girl. You know what I mean? Because they're losers [laughs] (telephone interview).

CLAW echoes the idea that the insults are more intimate than for men, though for her, it is more about being reduced from adult to child. However, the flippancy of CLAW's statement that it is because the male artists are "losers" indicates that she feels it is part of the game to reduce others in order to make oneself more powerful than another artist. In order to win, one needs to be competitive, and the only way to be "king" is to make yourself seem bigger, more important, more dangerous, and in a sense, more masculine than your competitors.

Graffiti presents the artists with a space in which they are able to create an identity that is separate from their physical identity. Artists choose a name and a style, and they promote it on the walls, subways, and trains of the city. Because of the separation between the body of the writer and the identity of the writer, Nancy Macdonald argues that graffiti affords the artist a "virtual identity," one in which the artist is able to distinguish between their real life and their
graffiti life, between their identity as a graffiti artist and their identity as a citizen of the "real" world. She states, "As a virtual being, [graffiti artists] can transcend their sex, appearance, and other physical features and effectively reinvent themselves" (Macdonald, 196). In her analysis of the dual identities of the graffiti artist, Macdonald compares the freedom that graffiti offers the artist with regards to his/her identity with the freedom that the Internet offers the user. She sees the space the graffiti artist uses to promote his/her name as an identity free zone, one in which they are completely free to transcend boundaries without their "real" identity being detected.

Macdonald's analysis is quite optimistic about the "virtual identity." When the Internet first became popular, many scholars saw it as a space in which there were no distinctions of race, class, and gender, where one could create an identity completely free from the physical body. However, as recent research has shown, cyberspace is not an identity free zone. In her work, *Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment*, Jenny Sunden argues that despite being thought of as a space in which one can live another identity, completely free from the confines of the physical body, "the creation and performance of [virtual identities] becomes a strategic site where contemporary notions of sex and gender are played out" (Sunden 49). For Sunden, there are always "leaks" which will connect the physical identity to the virtual identity. Likewise, in graffiti, though the artist indeed creates a virtual identity, in contrast to Macdonald's argument, there is always a connection to the physical body that lingers. Graffiti does not get painted on the walls magically; someone has to physically place it there. This connects the work on the walls with a physical body, one that the viewer can speculate about. Pieces of graffiti are "read" by the viewer for the artist's true identity. There will always be speculation about who a graffiti artist "really" is, including what the gender of the artist is.
Within the subculture, female graffiti artists are highly visible. It is very rare for females to begin to write graffiti on their own, without any previous prompting, which means that their real life identity is never truly secret. Most of the women enter the subculture of graffiti through male friends or boyfriends:

I had a boyfriend who wrote graffiti and some friends too. I used to take them out with my car, drive them to other boroughs, other states. Finally, one night I decided to go out and get up myself. It was a surprise. The next day my phone started ringing with friends asking if it was me writing MISS 17 all over. I couldn't believe how quickly my work could have an impact. I also loved the adrenaline. It was so exciting. I was immediately hooked after a weekend mission. I started going on weeknights and the rest as they say, is history (MISS 17 e-mail interview).

I hung around a bunch of different dudes that were painting, and since my nickname was Claw already, um, it was just an easy, it was like an easy tag, so I already had like my name and you know in my mind I was already a graffiti writer before I had even written anything (CLAW telephone interview).

Many female graffiti artists' experiences and origins are mediated through their friendships and relationships with male graffiti writers. Many of the women who paint graffiti learn techniques both by trial and error and through instruction by male peers. MISS 17 states, "Most of my influences have definitely been men…I'm hard pressed to think of other females [besides her graffiti partner CLAW] in my life that are artists" (e-mail interview).

Within the graffiti subculture, it is very difficult to maintain anonymity for long. CLAW states, "If you know one writer, you know them all, because somebody knows somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody. There really is like this very connected community" (telephone interview). Because of the graffiti community, the female graffiti artist cannot stay under the radar for very long. Although she is granted anonymity to the police and ordinary viewers, because she is such a minority, she is highly visible within the subculture. As a consequence, female graffiti artists often find themselves the objects of fetishization, obsession,
and tokenization and they must constantly prove that they are worthy of any of the recognition or
fame that they get. As CLAW states,

Being a woman in graffiti gives you extra attention whether you want it or not, just because it's a fantasy for a lot of guys to like have a girlfriend or be with a girl who can paint...[and] there are so few that it does make it more of a novelty and something that people are interested in or gossip-worthy or whatever (telephone interview).

The attention that female artists get because of their gender causes many artists feel that women achieve fame instantly without having to prove that they are worthy of it. MISS 17 notes,

Because the subculture is so male dominated, a lot of females half step. They don't need to put in half of the work that men do, because they'll get attention anyway. I remember hearing one of the women I had previously looked up to saying that the minute she touched a can she was famous and she never really had to do any work. As one of the hardest working women in the streets this comment disgusted me and made me sad (e-mail interview).

However, due to this visibility, many female artists say that they have to pursue respect more aggressively than male graffiti artists in order to prove that they are good enough to maintain the fame that they are instantly given because of their gender. CLAW states, "I feel like as a woman, you just have to be 10 times more prolific, work harder and really like earn your place and not just kind of like bask in the female afterglow or whatever" (telephone interview). The need to prove that one is worthy of the fame that they are given because of their gender puts added pressure on women to compete with male artists.

Jealousy over the quick rise to fame that is granted to female graffiti artists often leads to rumors that female artists are sexually involved with male artists or that they do not do their own work. MISS 17 expresses her frustrations with these sorts of ideas: "I am sick of people assuming there is a sexual or otherwise intimate relationship with my [male] painting partners! " (MISS 17). It is interesting to note that though most female graffiti artists enter the subculture through male artists who, often, are indeed their boyfriends, an artist like MISS 17—who has been
painting graffiti for many years, works hard, and is more prolific than many male writers— is still rumored to be sexually involved with male painting partners whom some believe she relies on to paint her work for her. On the other hand, there is never a doubt that a male writer, no matter how amateur, would paint his own work. Once a male writer begins to write graffiti, he is instantly given credibility that his work is his own.

LADY PINK, the veteran "Queen of Graffiti," who began her work in the mid-1970's and continues to be a major actor in the graffiti community, states that when she began to write graffiti, in order to combat other writers thinking that she was letting a male write for her she "went piecing deliberately with different groups so that every one could see I could actually paint this stuff and I'm not having some guy do it for me" (quoted in Ganz, 13). MISS 17 has also found a way to combat the rumors that she does not do her own work. She created the PMS (Power, Money, Sex) crew with CLAW and only represents that crew, which means that when she paints graffiti, she only references the PMS crew, and will not paint another crew's name, or paint with another crew. She states,

Working with a female completely alleviates [people thinking that there is a sexual relationship with painting partners]. I [also] think there's a different dynamic when you are working with another woman. It's difficult to formulate into words exactly what the differences are, but there are definitely notable differences (MISS 17 e-mail interview).

The fact that it is assumed that they are not sexually involved because they are both women indicates the high degree of heteronormativity that is present in graffiti. However, it also shows the ways that women can form groups or crews to combat sexism within the subculture.

Although the PMS crew that is comprised of MISS 17 and CLAW allows both women to combat sexism in the subculture, it is important to understand that their relationship is unique within the subculture. There are very few all female crews in graffiti, and MISS 17 and CLAW
have worked hard to define and maintain their reputation as tough, uncompromising graffiti artists. They make it a point to support females in the subculture. MISS 17 states, "Yes! I am in full support of the ladies, when they're doing it right! I get excited about working with other artists and am constantly trying to influence females to become involved" (e-mail interview). Although MISS 17 is supportive of other females who are interested in becoming involved with graffiti, it is important to her that they follow all of the rules of graffiti. She is unwilling to cut corners for female artists just so that they can claim the title of graffiti artist. CLAW elaborates on MISS 17's feelings:

There are like a lot of girls that like use spray paint and do legal murals and call themselves graffiti artists and want to be part of whatever this culture, this and that, but in my book, they're not graffiti artists, and I can't really support that. I would rather paint with like a million dudes that like actually are bombers than paint with like three girls that aren't (CLAW telephone interview).

When female graffiti artists do not follow the rules of graffiti and allow themselves to cut corners, either by painting legally, or by "basking in the female afterglow," they make it more difficult for those female artists who are working hard to make a legitimate name for themselves. MISS 17 states, "I really wish more women would really write, as opposed to what most of them do, then men wouldn't be able to say anything [about female graffiti artists]. At least not legitimately" (e-mail interview). It is frustrating for female graffiti writers who are working hard and following all the rules of graffiti when they see other female graffiti artists who are going along with the rumors that females do not do their own work, that they are not dedicated, or that they are not up to painting illegally and following the rules. This may be another reason that many legitimate female graffiti writers feel that they have to work extra hard in order to gain real respect. They have to tow the line for the other females who are not pulling their own weight.
Many female artists have stated that, in general, they feel that they have a lot of support from the men that they surround themselves with in graffiti. The support that female graffiti artists receive, however, can at times serve to fetishize them. SWOON notes, "one time I went to Germany and I was painting this mural and I was with like 6 graffiti guys on this side of me, and 6 graffiti guys on the other side of me and I asked the organizer "what am I doing here?" and he said 'you're the cherry on top'" (personal interview). The statement that SWOON is the "cherry on top" not only serves to tokenize her because a female in the graffiti scene is such a rare sight, but also demonstrates that females are at times thought of as extra or adornment instead of an integral and legitimate part of the graffiti subculture.

Female graffiti artists have also been the objects of obsession. The secret identity aspect of the graffiti artist can tempt the graffiti fan to speculate about the identity of the artist, and, perhaps to pursue the identity of the graffiti artist. However, when the graffiti artist in question is a female, the interest can turn to obsession. SWOON gives an example of how interest can turn to obsession:

There was this guy who had a crush on me, wanted to interview me, and tried to be my friend and that was a moment when I felt like being woman was somehow involved in this because I felt like I was being pursued. And I felt like I was being pursued in a sort of stalker-y way, which is so often this kind of male female relationship (SWOON personal interview).

For SWOON, the fan's interest about who she was moved beyond the realm of general interest into the realm of stalking. That her identity was no longer secret, that her work could be followed throughout the city, and that because of this, she could be pursued, led her to have the feeling that she was being pursued romantically. It is interesting that SWOON feels that his pursuit of her was sexual because of the nature of male/female relationships. She feels that interest from this fan would not have been geared in the same way, with the same fervor of pursuit, if she had
been a male artist. It is almost as if when the fan found out that she was a woman, a chase became inevitable.

However, there is a positive side to the attention that females have received within the graffiti community. When a female artist is able to achieve a sustained career and receive fame, she is able to be a role model for other girls that are "coming up" in the graffiti community. SWOON states, "The thing that I love is when 17 year old girls are like 'oh my god, you are my hero.' I love that to the end of the world, and I know that that is also related to me being a woman" (personal interview). Although SWOON knows that one of the reasons that she is looked up to by young female urban artists is that she is a woman, the level of pursuit is not there as it was with her male fan. She feels happy that she can support other young women who are interested in learning more about graffiti.

Female artists make it a point to support other female artists because they know how difficult it can be for females in the subculture. CLAW states,

The girls that are really doing their thing, those are the girls I love and respect and you know want to help, lend support, you know, be the sideline cheerleader, whatever it is, you know, I have like a whole network of girls throughout the country, and, really, throughout the world, that, you know, I'm their friend. Forget about, like I don't want to like call myself their mentor, their this or their that, like, I am their friend, and they can call on me for anything (telephone interview).

However, because graffiti is so competitive, it is hard to know who exactly is on your side. Sometimes female support of other female artists is not sincere and serves the position of the supporting artist:

Well you think about graffiti writers, they're very competitive and you know they want the spotlight to be focused on them, so perhaps when somebody goes a little bit above and beyond or whatever there can be jealousies if there isn't like real love there to begin with, do you know what I mean? And real support. It's like phony, like, 'Oh, I just feel like I have to do this because she's a young girl and I

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9 "Coming up" is the term that graffiti artists use when a new artist is beginning to achieve fame and recognition within the community.
want her on my side', this and that and then when [they] try to spread [their] wings, [they] could get like squashed. And [that goes for] everyone, not just girls [laughs] (CLAW telephone interview).

CLAW sees this kind of competition as not necessarily gender specific, perhaps just a part of the game of graffiti. The graffiti artist's main goal is to achieve fame and glory. As in warfare, graffiti artists must be very careful to know who their friends are and are not.

At times, the negativity can come not from other female graffiti artists, but from the girlfriends of male artists. SWOON notes that she has frequently received negative attention from the girlfriends of male artists. She says,

Some of the girlfriends were being really catty, bitchy. And I was like 'wow, its so interesting that you are doing this to me'. Cause I wasn't getting it from the guys (personal interview).

Because SWOON is a successful urban artist, she received negative attention not necessarily from the men, but from the women that are not completely in the subculture. Due to the fetishization that many female urban artists have received from male urban artists, they also happen to be the recipients of jealousies from those women who are not able to "play with the boys" and have to sit on the sidelines. The girlfriends of male graffiti artists who are not artists themselves know how much sought after a girlfriend who paints is to a male artist, and so they feel threatened by female graffiti artists.

Although the competition that is inherent to graffiti creates an environment that many female graffiti artists describe as isolating, female graffiti artists have been able to form communities though the Internet. The online magazine Cat Fight (a telling name about competition between female artists and aggression within the subculture), which recently teamed up with the blog GrafGirlz.com, have provided a space in which female graffiti artists from around the world are able to share their experiences and work. Both sites offer the artists spaces
in which they can showcase their recent work and interview one another about their experiences in the subculture; they provide a forum in which they are able to discuss concerns, ask for help, or direct others to interesting sites, books, or movies. These sites also provide a place where female artists are able to support one another without directly competing on the streets because many of them are spread out around the world. The Internet allows female graffiti artists to build community without the mediation of men, which may eventually encourage other young women who are interested in learning more about graffiti but are unable to engage the mostly male graffiti community in their cities.

Graffiti art is a field that is riddled with gender stereotypes. It is a subculture that supports men and their development by providing endless opportunities for men to increase their masculinity and learn to be men. Through media portrayal and "profiles of common offenders," ideas about the identities of graffiti artists have come to indicate that graffiti is a subculture that only interests men. The females that are involved in the subculture have to fight an uphill battle. They constantly have to prove that their place within the subculture is viable and that they deserve respect and fame as much as male artists. They are fetishized, obsessed over, and subjected to verbal abuse, and yet they continue on. CLAW states about graffiti,

You know, really, it's just a microcosm of regular society, and you're just facing all the same things you face, you know, in corporate world, or you know, in a social world. It's really the same thing. I guess it's just, it's hyper-macho so maybe you might experience more I don't know slurs or something in the beginning, but if you let that stop you, then you can't make it in any field (telephone interview).

CLAW's statement about graffiti shows how although graffiti is generally thought of as a space in which males are able to "construct and confirm masculine identities," it can also serve as a space in which girls are able to learn about how to navigate patriarchal society and, in a sense, about how to be women (Macdonald 95). Graffiti can serve as a training ground for women on
how to stand by their identities and what they believe; teach them the need to fiercely protect it, and demonstrate ways in which to combat fetishization and objectification.
CHAPTER III:
SELF-REPRESENTATION IN A MASCULINE SUBCULTURE

Chapter II explored the role that masculinity, sexism and homophobia have played in the development of the subculture of graffiti art and the place that females and femininity have within the subculture, given the masculine nature of graffiti. Stereotypes that graffiti art is a male occupation are prevalent both within the subculture and are circulated in the media. One of the ways in which the stereotype that graffiti is masculine is perpetuated in the media is through the publication of graffiti books. These books showcase the work of prominent graffiti artists, most of whom are men. This chapter will take a look at one of the most recent graffiti books, *Graffiti Women (2006)*. *Graffiti Women* is presented as a challenge to the traditional graffiti book that excludes women, as a first-time celebration of the women who are involved in the subculture of graffiti. This book, the only one of its kind to focus on women, includes portraits of the artists. The artists provided the portraits to the editor, Nicholas Ganz, to serve as representations of themselves. The combination of images of female work with the artists' representations of themselves and their ideas in their own words about the role of females in graffiti provide the reader with a clearer picture of what the female graffiti artist experiences as a part of the subculture of graffiti. The images in *Graffiti Women* demonstrate the ways in which the subjectivities of female graffiti artists are shaped by the hyper-masculinity present in the subculture of graffiti art. Because of the masculine nature of graffiti art, female graffiti artists are forced to choose between representing themselves as masculine in order to gain authenticity as graffiti artists, or they can choose to objectify themselves in order to gain attention from heterosexual male artists.
Although *Graffiti Women* is a leap forward towards recognition and acceptance of females in the subculture of graffiti, it is important to recognize that it was a response to another graffiti book, also published by Nicholas Ganz, in which he himself neglected the position of females in graffiti. In 2004, Ganz published *Graffiti World: Graffiti from Five Continents* in which he showcases the work of hundreds of graffiti artists from around the world. In the introduction to the book, Ganz claims that, "Nationality, race and sex have no bearing on the graffiti scene" (7). Ironically, though Ganz claims that sex has "no bearing on the graffiti scene," very few of the artists represented in *Graffiti World* are women. In 2006, however, Ganz edited *Graffiti Women*, which indicates an acknowledgement on his part that he overlooked the problem of gender in graffiti art. *Graffiti Women* shows the work of over a hundred female graffiti and street artists, most of whom were ignored in *Graffiti World*. The most important aspect of this new book was the inclusion of portraits of the artists, through which we can see proof that women are indeed involved in the subculture.

Although the portraits included in *Graffiti Women* do give the reader visual proof that women are involved in graffiti, it is important to note that graffiti books do not usually provide the reader with portraits of the artists. For many graffiti artists and fans, this text was the first time that so many portraits of graffiti artists, especially female graffiti artists, were seen in one place. The inclusion of the portraits serves two potential purposes. On the one hand, the portraits give the female artists the opportunity to challenge the stereotype that graffiti is a male occupation. They are able to demonstrate that they are an important part of graffiti. Many of the women submitted photos of themselves actually working on their pieces, serving to combat the assumption that females do not do their own work. However, by including self-portraits, the women put themselves at danger of being judged by the way they look instead of by the quality
of their work. The inclusion of portraits of the artists in a book about female graffiti artists is potentially very problematic, in that it can be interpreted as further objectifying the female graffiti artist by implicitly linking her body with her work. Nevertheless, the portraits of the women illustrated are instructive insofar as they allow an exploration into some of the expressions in gender prevalent in graffiti.

The gender roles expressed in *Graffiti Women* were not simply invented by the female graffiti artists without any relationship to cultural and historical markers of gender. They are responding to cultural signs within their subculture. Simone de Beauvoir argues that the performance of gender is the act of performing a historical site. Judith Butler, in her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," expands de Beauvoir's argument by saying that "to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign" (Butler 394). The body as a performed cultural sign is key to understanding the portraits of female graffiti artists that are presented in *Graffiti Women*. The women in these portraits use their bodies to conform to the sub-cultural ideas of masculinity and femininity embedded within graffiti. Because graffiti is a hyper-masculine subculture, the images are all designed for the male viewer, presumably the male graffiti artist. The male gaze makes it so that the female artists must either attempt to relate to the male graffiti artist in order to say "I am one of you and I deserve respect" by performing a type of sartorial masculinity, or they must appeal to the presumed heterosexuality of the male viewer by objectifying themselves, in a sense, turning themselves into the ideal of sexualized femininity by performing the type of hyper-sexualized femininity presented in graffiti. The women who wish to present themselves as
"feminine" in *Graffiti Women* do so by over emphasizing particular feminine qualities and presenting themselves as sexual objects.

The images in *Graffiti Women* present the reader with a mix of images, both masculine and feminine. Many of the images are of females who present a hyper-masculine image in order to claim authenticity as graffiti artists. Other images exploit the ideals of femininity present within the subculture by offering a hyper-feminine image that is geared toward gaining the attention of the heterosexual male graffiti artist. At times the women combine imagery from both hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity in order to complicate their images. The expressions of gender in the portraits of the graffiti artists are, at times, so subtle and complex that an in depth analysis of some of the more obvious examples of gender play in graffiti should be explored first in order to understand the subtleties present in some of the more complex images.

The image of CASSIE [figure 2] demonstrates the identification with the masculine perspective that can be used in order to gain respect from the male graffiti community.

![Fig. 2. Portrait of CASSIE, from *Graffiti Women*](image)

In this image, she is crouched down in front of her work, and her name is not shown. The clothing that she wears signifies to the viewer a sense of masculinity: baggy pants, sneakers, and
a long sleeved shirt. Her face is almost entirely covered by both a baseball cap and a mask.\textsuperscript{10} Her left hand holds a spray can, finger on the cap, and ready to paint. The nozzle is pointed to the viewer as if it were a gun. Her right hand is poised in a classic masculine "hip hop" gesture, signaling a relationship with a crew or group of artists. The hand signals that many of the graffiti artists make, which were originally used by gang members in order to signify membership to a particular gang, have now been appropriated by hip hop and other related subcultures in order to indicate toughness, deviance, and consequentially, masculinity. The image is quite aggressive. The mask and the spray can recall images of combat, while her direct look at the camera indicates a readiness to fight. CASSIE appears to be strong, assertive, and challenging. There is not an aspect of CASSIE’S image that indicates to the reader that she might be female. In a subculture where masculinity grants credibility, CASSIE uses her body in order to create a masculine image that grants her approval and respect from the graffiti community.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Griselda Pollock's notion of "nominal transvestitism" with regards to the position of female graffiti writers. I argued that because of the hyper-masculine nature of graffiti, the women who become involved in graffiti must identify with the masculine perspective. In her article "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," Mary Ann Doane applies similar notions of nominal transvestitism to film theory. She argues that "identification with the active hero necessarily entails an acceptance of what Laura Mulvey refers to as a certain "masculinization" of spectatorship" (Doane 65). This argument is easily applied to the portrait of CASSIE. Because female graffiti artists are seen as inactive, weak, soft, and unable to compete with male graffiti artists, in order to be seen as an active, competitive part of the graffiti subculture, in other words, and to identify with the "active hero" (the male graffiti artist), the female graffiti artist must masculinize herself. She must

\textsuperscript{10} Some graffiti artists use gas masks in order to protect their lungs from the toxic fumes expelled by the spray cans.
engage in nominal transvestitism in order to gain respect from the male graffiti artist community. The image presented by CASSIE is a clear example of this. In her portrait, she uses her body to signify masculinity and deviance to the viewer. By doing so, she is able to grant herself authenticity to the viewer as a tough, risk-taking graffiti artist, in other words, a graffiti artist that deserves to be taken seriously.

In sharp contrast to CASSIE'S image, and perhaps the most shocking image in *Graffiti Women*, TRIBE [figure 3] presents herself as hypersexual and hyper-feminine.  

![Fig. 3. Portrait of TRIBE, from *Graffiti Women*](image)

She poses in front of her work in a bikini, sprawled on the top of a couch with her back arched in order to accentuate her large breasts, which appear to be surgically enhanced. Her body is tan and her long, blonde hair falls over her breasts. On her feet, she wears high-heeled shoes with straps that crisscross her calves up to her knees. In this image, TRIBE seems to present herself as

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11Though in this image TRIBE paints DJ LADY TRIBE, her graffiti name is TRIBE, and in most of her graffiti pieces she only paints TRIBE. She changed her name to DJ LADY TRIBE when she gave up graffiti and became a DJ because "after ten years of illegal bombing, the cops finally caught up with her and put her under house arrest for six months" (Ganz 126). Her hyper-feminine and hyper-sexual look, however, did not change when she changed her name. I refer to her as TRIBE because that is what she is known as in the graffiti community.
a sort-of embodiment of one of Vaughn Bode's cartoon characters. Bode was an underground comic book writer and his work heavily influenced the work of many early graffiti artists (Rahn 10). Figures 4 and 5 are images of work done by early graffiti legend SEEN, and are copies of Bode's cartoon characters.

Fig. 4. SEEN, Copy of Bode Figure #1, from *Style Wars*

Fig. 5. SEEN, Copy of Bode Figure #2, from *Style Wars*

Bode's representations of women feature female figures with smooth, rounded edges, large features (especially breasts and eyes) and wild colors. Bode is a well-known name in the graffiti community, especially among early artists, and his images can be seen throughout the work of graffiti artists. In the background of TRIBE'S portrait, we can see an image similar to that of Bode's work, except, instead of being simply a fantasy or cartoon image of an idealized, and
highly sexualized, woman, it is a self portrait of the artist, who, in turn is seated in front of the
cartoon, replicating in person her sexualized cartoon self.

Doane explores the reasons why women might want to flaunt their femininity when it
seems that masculinity is what earns one power and respect. She argues:

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a
mask, which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal
positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as
closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely imagistic...The masquerade is to
manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's
image...In Montrelay's words, 'the woman uses her own body as a disguise' (66).

For Doane, there is power in hyper-femininity. Women are able to use it to create a distance
between who they really are and what their image is. This affords them the ability to occupy two
spaces: who they really are and who they appear to be. Doane's notion of the masquerade allows
us to see something beyond TRIBE's shocking image. By employing the masquerade, TRIBE
plays the fantasies of male graffiti artists back to them. We do not know who TRIBE is. She is
hidden behind the masquerade of hyper-femininity that she uses in order to gain attention from
the graffiti community.

An example of this break between the masquerade and the real woman can be seen when
the image of TRIBE is juxtaposed with the text that accompanies her image in \textit{Graffiti Women},
in which she states, "I went to jail for this and risked my life. I've been in and out of jail my
whole life" (quoted. in Ganz 126). Her dedication to graffiti and the graffiti lifestyle is interesting
because if one was simply to look at the image, one would think that perhaps she was adornment
to the work of a male artist or that she was modeling the work, in the same way that a model
would accentuate a car at an auto show. TRIBE'S image and the accompanying text give the
reader two distinct messages of deviance. While the image TRIBE presents does not indicate any
sort of masculine deviance that would help her gain authenticity as a graffiti artist, it does,
however, indicate sexual deviance, which she uses to gain the attention of the male (heterosexual) graffiti artist. However, her image, were it to stand alone, would earn her no respect as a graffiti artist. In order to gain credibility as a graffiti artist, she must indicate some sort of risk-taking deviance. She does this in the accompanying text when she mentions her jail time and dedication to graffiti art.

Perhaps in order to further sell her credibility as an artist, in the photos that surround the main image (described above), which are too small to be reproduced here, TRIBE included images of herself scaling walls in short shorts and high heels, clearly demonstrating that she is able to do the work herself. However, though the images of TRIBE scaling walls demonstrate her ability to physically do the work, the images of can also be read as a further example of TRIBE’S use of the masquerade. TRIBE elects to use the masquerade not only when she is posing with her work, but even when she is working, as short shorts and high heels are not ideal working clothes and certainly not suited to scaling walls. Through her thorough use of the masquerade, it becomes clear that we do not see TRIBE even when she is working, she is merely a reflection of the fantasies of heterosexual male graffiti artists.

TRIBE’S hyper-feminine and hypersexual portrait is empowering in that it questions the idea that femininity is natural and innate to who she is because she turns herself into a caricature of femininity, and therefore exposes how one can "put on" femininity. However, one cannot forget that she clearly derives the image that she exposes from within the subculture itself. And while she is able to successfully pull off her look, other women in graffiti might not be able to so comfortably create an image separate from their real life personalities. The image of the AFC Crew [figure 6] is an example of female graffiti artists flaunting their femininity, objectifying themselves and trying to cater to the ideal, sexualized, image of women that prevails in graffiti.
The women in the photo are, like TRIBE, wearing bikini tops, and two of the three artists are wearing short skirts. In contrast to the clothing, they are positioned in ways that do not accentuate their sexiness or femininity. The photo exudes an awkwardness because the women attempt to rely on the clothing they are wearing to convey a certain sex appeal, but do not appear to feel at all comfortable in what they have chosen to wear. The woman on the left is hunched over, while the woman on the right is passively backed up against the wall. The woman in the middle (the only one wearing shorts), however, assumes a much more masculine pose and seems to be the most comfortable. She is crouched down, her foot extended to help her balance, and with her arms she displays the sign of her crew.

It seems that it is common for representations of female graffiti artists to feminize the artists. Feminization of female graffiti artists has occurred when the media gathers female artists for publicity photos, perhaps as a way to somehow gain attention or to emphasize the unity of the
females in graffiti by emphasizing the one thing they have in common--their gender. An example of this can be seen when CLAW met MISS 17:

We met at this interview, which was like all the New York female graffiti artists. And there's a lot of these kind of legal eagles there, and she and I like instantly were bff [best friends forever] [because] we both didn't want to be in the picture wearing a dress, holding a spray can…we were just like, uh, no thanks. Like enjoy or whatever (CLAW telephone interview).

Although it is unclear from the above quote who is doing the representing (the photographer or the artists themselves), what is clear is that CLAW's refusal to participate in the feminization of the female graffiti writers is a way for her to enforce her legitimacy as a "real" graffiti artist. While all of the "legal eagles" (writers who, instead of "bombing," or painting graffiti illegally, choose to paint murals, which are legal) were allowing themselves to be portrayed as cute and feminine, she and MISS 17, who adhere strictly to the traditional rules of graffiti (illegal, dangerous, etc.) refused, which served to distance themselves from feminized, legal graffiti, and in turn emphasizes their audacity and rebellion, granting them enhanced authenticity in the world of graffiti.

While some female graffiti artists exploit the extremes of feminine and masculine expression within the subculture, others play with the extremes by combining masculinity and femininity in order to present themselves as both sexual objects and as authentic graffiti artists. The portrait of EGR [figure 7], presents a different picture of femininity than that which is presented in the other hyper-feminine portraits.
EGR uses signifiers of both masculinity and femininity to create an image of herself that is both hyper-feminine and, at the same time, masculine and aggressive. The portrait reveals many of the key signifiers of femininity. She wears make up and her eyebrows are plucked heavily in order to accentuate her eyes. Her hair is cut to recall images of the S and M poster girl, Betty Page. This reference, along with the red hair, arched eyebrows, and direct gaze work together to create an image that is aggressively feminine. But, EGR also uses masculine signifiers as well. As we saw with the image of CASSIE, the mask, and the paint can pointed directly at the viewer work together to create an image that is combative, assertive, and challenging. She wears a workman's uniform, which indicates masculinity, and yet, it is open at the top, revealing a black bikini and a silver necklace, indicating to the viewer that there is something very feminine under the rough, masculine, exterior image of the graffiti artist.

In Chapter II, female graffiti artist CLAW discussed the fantasy that many male graffiti artists have of having a girlfriend that can also paint graffiti. The image that EGR creates of herself is the image of exactly that fantasy female graffiti artist. EGR's portrait is a bit more
complex than the one that TRIBE presents because she combines femininity and masculinity in the same image. By doing this, she marks herself as a strong, aggressive, and sexy woman who understands the attraction of a woman who paints graffiti rather than simply a woman who is willing and able to sexualize herself.

While some of the portraits, like that of EGR, use the women's bodies to create complex images of both masculinity and femininity, other portraits in *Graffiti Women* communicate a sharp contrast between the portrait of the artist and the work that the artist makes. Artists can use the anonymity of graffiti to present an image in their work that is feminine, and at the same time use their body to create an image of a masculine graffiti artist that will be respected in the community. For example, in the portrait of DIVA [figure 8], the viewer is sent two different messages, one of femininity, the other of masculinity.

![Fig. 8. Portrait of DIVA, from *Graffiti Women*](image)

DIVA chose a name that clearly alludes to her femininity and references a number of powerful women. The piece represented here is fairly feminine as well, with a pink background and the
artist's name accented with purple polka dots. The piece is quite large, which can be read to illustrate the large personality of a diva. Her lettering is round, not sharp or highly technical. Although round letters, pink coloring, and polka dots do not necessarily indicate femininity in the graffiti world, the name DIVA gives the reader a clear confirmation that the artist is female.

However, the image of the artist DIVA contradicts what is happening in her piece. She crouches in front of her name, wearing jeans, work boots, and a sweatshirt and sunglasses. In this image, she uses the sweatshirt to cover up her face in order to avoid recognition. With her left hand, she raises her middle finger to the camera in an act of defiance. The contradiction here is great. When one thinks of a diva, one imagines Barbra Streisand, Diana Ross, Céline Dion, and other sophisticated, in control, powerful, and very feminine women. The image that DIVA presents in her work with the name she has chosen, the lettering style, the coloring and accents contrast heavily with the aggressive, masculine, defiant image that she presents of herself. With this portrait, she seems to be telling the viewer "Don't be fooled by the feminine name and painting style, I can also be one of the guys."

There are very few images in Graffiti Women in which the female graffiti artist looks like a "regular girl," without the performance of either masculinity or hyper-femininity. The portrait of MEEK [figure 9], instead of using notions of gender present in graffiti, plays on the stereotype that women are too weak to participate in graffiti.
MEEK's image makes a statement about the views of femininity in graffiti art and the power of female graffiti artists to combat them. The image indicates that she fully understands the stereotypes of females, both within the subculture of graffiti and in society at large. Nearly everything in the image indicates a complete lack of deviance or masculinity. To begin with, her name, MEEK, indicates the exact opposite of the strong, confident and combative image of the graffiti artist that most think of. Most of her body language also indicates meekness as well. Her legs are turned in, which shows a lack of strength and her clothing does not show any sort of strength or overt sense of character at all. She is dressed as a regular girl, with jeans, a sweater, and a purse hanging by her arm. Her image is that of a meek girl, almost the girl next door.

MEEK presents to the viewer exactly the stereotype that women are too weak, soft, and they lack aggression and the desire for competition that is necessary for participation in graffiti art.

However, MEEK's right hand is raised in a clenched fist, the universal sign of resistance. This gesture changes the entire image. While all of the other parts of the image indicate meekness and lack of strength, her fist carries all the power of resistance to the idea that she is
The clenched fist may even carry a more deviant signification when it is contrasted by the meekness of the rest of the image. The girl next door might just be a dangerous graffiti artist, climbing fences and painting on private property. But it seems that MEEK is not simply displaying the same sort of deviance that artists like CASSIE or DIVA are displaying, the deviance that earns them respect because it buys into the notion that it earns masculinity. MEEK's use of the universal symbol of resistance calls up much more powerful images than simply being a "bad girl (or boy)." When her image is viewed in relation to her name and the posture that she assumes in her photograph, her raised fist is a challenge to the stereotype that women are too weak to participate in graffiti, not a reaffirmation that in order to be authentic one needs to be masculine. MEEK's image shows the reader that females who participate in graffiti can, if they choose, instead of posturing as deviant, actually challenge stereotypes of weakness about women, both in the subculture of graffiti, and in society at large.

Judith Butler's notion of subjectivity is that it is always influenced by the political climate that surrounds the subject, and we can see a clear example of this in graffiti. The women who participate in graffiti are aware of their positions as fetishized, objectified, and sexualized bodies within the subculture. They understand that they are operating in a masculine climate, that they are playing a masculine game in which the male who takes the most risks is granted the highest reward, the status of king of the city. The gender politics of graffiti completely shape the ways in which female graffiti artists think about themselves and about their roles within the subculture and also, in turn, how they wish to be represented. The images that they present of themselves in *Graffiti Women* reflect just that.

In the portraits in *Graffiti Women*, the female graffiti artists use the "cultural signs" of gender present in graffiti in order to speak to the presumed male viewer. These "cultural signs,"
for many of the artists, function as performances that allow them to separate who they are from what they show they show to the viewer. Some artists partake in nominal transvestitism by performing masculinity in order to earn their status as "real" competitive graffiti artists. By posturing like male graffiti artists, wearing men's clothes, or simply by making themselves look aggressive, female graffiti artists present an image of authenticity despite the fact that they are female. Many female graffiti artists also play on the fantasies of male graffiti artists by creating images that are hyper-feminine and hyper-sexual in order to generate attention for themselves. They use the masquerade in order to create an image that will appeal to ideas about women that are already prevalent in graffiti.

_Graffiti Women_, though potentially problematic because of the way it links female artists to their bodies, is a very rare form of graffiti book. It is the first of its kind to focus on women, and Ganz allows the women included in the book to speak for themselves. He includes their statements about their position as females in graffiti, and allows them the ability to represent themselves personally through the inclusion of portraits. What we see when female graffiti artists are given the opportunity to demonstrate their involvement in graffiti are women whose understandings of themselves as graffiti artists have been strongly shaped by masculine ideas of gender that come from within a hyper-masculine subculture. However, when the artists do not conform to gender stereotypes present in graffiti, we can see the ways in which graffiti can offer the female artist the opportunity to challenge stereotypes that women are weak and docile. The portrait of MEEK does just that. In her portrait, she plays not on male fantasies or rules about masculinity, but on the idea, held both inside and outside the graffiti community, that women are too soft to participate in graffiti. By doing so, she unearths the old ideas that prevent women from being involved in graffiti and offers graffiti as a site of resistance to gender barriers.
CONCLUSION

An analysis of the gender politics of graffiti offers us what we may know already: that a culture that prefers males, masculinity, and male subjectivities is created and upheld in direct opposition to females and femininity and, as a result, directly affects female subjectivities. This tension between masculinity and femininity is everywhere in American culture: it is on television, in movies, in advertising, and on our city streets. When CLAW states that graffiti is a microcosm of the larger American culture, she is absolutely correct. There is nothing created in graffiti that is not already present in the larger society.

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler argues that we are in constant formation by our political surroundings. She states, "My reflexivity is not only socially mediated, but socially constituted. I cannot be who I am without drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede me and exceed me" (32). For Butler, we are always drawing upon our surroundings in order to understand and create ourselves. This argument couldn't be truer where graffiti is concerned. The surroundings in the case of the female graffiti artist are twofold: the subculture of graffiti and the city in which she lives and works. Given these hyper-masculine surroundings, the female graffiti artist stands in the face of not only a masculine subculture and against the masculinity of urban space, but also, by extension, a masculine society at large and its disbelief that there are even females who paint graffiti at all.

Chapter I explored the physical space in which female graffiti artists work. I discussed the ways in which the city is a masculine space, from the aesthetics of the city itself as representative of male bodies, to the lack of females in power in city planning and organizing, which leads to the creation of an urban space that caters to what males need and want from the city. The masculinity of the city makes graffiti a perfect playground for young men to explore
their identities and engage in masculinizing deviance without any of the social stigmas that are associated with deviance in girls, and as a result, this places female graffiti artists at a distinct disadvantage compared to males when it comes to navigating the city safely.

In Chapter II, I detailed the social space in which the female graffiti artist is submerged. Because graffiti takes place in the city, which is masculine and allows young men to explore their masculinity without any constraints, graffiti is an intensely masculine subculture. Male graffiti artists use homophobia and sexism to police the boundaries of the subculture and increase the levels of competition within the subculture. Graffiti artists compete with each other for the position of the "king," and only the most daring, most prolific, and toughest graffiti artists are able to claim this title. Because it is thought of as a playground for young men to explore masculine identities and a game in which one competes for the position of "king," females and femininity are not welcome. As a result of this focus on masculinity, graffiti is a subculture in which the women who participate are fetishized, objectified, and in which their talents are routinely under scrutiny.

Chapter III explored some of the manifestations of the pressures of masculinity on female graffiti artists by analyzing the portraits that they offered of themselves to the book *Graffiti Women*. While the subculture of graffiti offers a lot to the women who participate in it, it can be difficult to navigate the subculture without being caught up in the competitive race for masculinity. Many of the images reflected the masculinity that is inherent to graffiti art by showing how the female artists masculinize themselves in order to claim authenticity as graffiti artists. Other artists objectified themselves in order to appeal to ideas about women present in graffiti. The portraits in *Graffiti Women* demonstrated how easy it is for women to take in the
beliefs and presuppositions about women that the subculture, and American culture in general, present to young women.

I began this thesis with a question about graffiti's value to the women who are involved in it. I asked, "If the masculine nature of graffiti affords men the opportunity to 'construct and confirm' masculine identities, what can graffiti offer the women who are involved?" We know that female graffiti artists have a lot to face. They work in a city that is thought to be dangerous to them, and plans to make cities safer and welcoming to women are few and far between. Additionally, they participate in a subculture that does not support or value their presence or the work that they do.

However, graffiti offers women many opportunities to challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity within the city and the subculture, as well as American culture in general. It offers them an opportunity to challenge the notion that women are weak and docile--too weak and docile to be graffiti artists. By painting graffiti, female artists are able to claim space within the city that has never allowed them free range to participate in the city. When a female graffiti artist paints the city she places her identity on top of the masculine aesthetic of the city, and physically claims the space for herself. The hyper-masculine nature of graffiti offers females a training ground in which to learn how to navigate patriarchal society. Graffiti does not offer only men the opportunity to "construct and confirm" their identities. It also offers the women who withstand its pressures the same opportunity--to "construct and confirm" strong female identities that are capable of standing up to patriarchal society and fighting for the right to claim both social and public spaces.

Graffiti is a microcosm of society, and it reflects the ideas that are present in the larger culture. Though it mirrors many of the same masculinist values, graffiti offers women the
opportunity to step outside of the "sociality of norms" and create new identities that they are able to challenge those standards. Graffiti's identity forming opportunities are not lost during daylight hours, when graffiti artists are not painting graffiti. The women who participate in graffiti are able to use the lessons that they learn from graffiti about standing up to a culture that fetishizes and objectifies them in the dominant society, lessons that are valuable for their entire lifetimes. Female graffiti artists face many challenges in their chosen subculture. When they face the challenges and succeed, they create a rupture not only within the subculture, but within the dominant society as well.


MISS 17. E-mail interview. 6 Nov. 2007.


Swoon. Personal interview. 23 June 2007.


<http://www.takebackthenight.org/history.html>.