Contesting the Levels of Il / legality of Urban Art Images in China

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The possibility to create large, skillful pieces or murals without official intervention in public is becoming increasingly appealing to many creators of urban art images who wish to interact more with citizens or earn their livelihood from creative actions in China. In addition, some creators of these images are actively promoting a more tolerant attitude towards this unavoidable form of contemporary visual culture in co-operation with associations and institutions. Creators take part in projects and events that aim, for instance, to raise social awareness, strengthen the community, educate youth or raise funds for charity and beautify the scenery. Accordingly, the perception that urban art is merely illegal vandalism that aims to destroy the public space is utterly outdated, although unauthorised activities are an inevitable part of the scene. Even more importantly, as this article will show, the understanding of what constitutes a legal or illegal creative action is not always unequivocal.

With this article I aim to continue to compensate for the lack of academic interest in this compelling phenomenon of visual culture. Intriguingly, scholarly publications examining the urban art scenes in China remain rare. Besides three academic articles focusing on Zhang Dali's early activities in Beijing (Wu, 2000, Marinelli, 2004, 2009), the only study that introduces the contemporary scene in Hong Kong in relation to the usage of public space was just recently published (Chang and Kao, 2012).[1] Although these studies provide valuable insights on Beijing and Hong Kong, numerous important issues and contributors to the scenes there, as well as other Chinese cities, remain unexplored. Because of the ephemeral characteristics of the phenomenon and the lack of systematic documentation of the scenes, a comprehensive historical overview of the process of contesting the il/legality of urban art images is still beyond the scope of this paper. Since 2006 when I gradually started to examine the scenes in China, I have encountered numerous examples that indicate the ongoing negotiation process of il/legality in various cities of China.[2] Here, however, I wish to focus on the most recent cases in order to provide new information on developments.

URBAN ART IMAGES

Before entering into a detailed discussion of the il/legality of urban art images, I find it necessary to elaborate on the main concepts and the approach used in this research. It is a well-known fact that there is *no* consensus on what graffiti or street art is—and there never will be. These two popular concepts are contested among the creators themselves, the researchers of the scenes, city officials and the representatives of various institutions. The understanding of the phenomenon is further obscured by the fact that 'graffiti' is used to denote anything and everything scribbled, written,

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drawn, smudged or incised on any surface—starting even from cave paintings or religious paintings (see e.g., Stewart, 1989, pp. 15-147; Plesch, 2002, Ganz, 2004, p. 8).

It is worth pointing out that the strictest old-school definition of graffiti implies mainly the form developed in New York in the 1970s and 1980s: writing alphabetic letters with spray paint or marker pens and primarily on *trains*.[3] Following this hardcore definition, there is practically no graffiti in China today, because 'bombing' trains remains rare. In reality, however, a great variety of unauthorised writings, drawings and posters are an inevitable part of the public scene. Furthermore, the term 'graffiti' appears in Chinese laws and regulations concerning, for instance, city appearance, touristic sites or airports. In Chinese, the wording used in legislation is usually *tuxie* 涂写 and *kehua* 刻画.[4] Interestingly, though, a huge variety of urban art images are created in the public space of Chinese cities, addressed by the creators and media mainly with varying concepts of 'graffiti' (*tuyal toungaa* 涂鸦/塗鴉), 'graffiti art' (*tuya yishu/toungaa ngai seot* 涂鸦艺术/塗鴉藝術) and 'street art' (*jietou yishu/gaaitau ngai seot* 街头艺术/街頭藝術), but not *tuxie* or *kehua.*

From interviews with the creators of urban art images in mainland China, Macao and Hong Kong during the past years, it has become evident that the notions of 'graffiti' and 'street art' vary greatly from one creator to another. Some consider graffiti a form of street art, while others think that street art focuses on art happenings on the street and *excludes* graffiti. For many, the concepts are interchangeable, while a few prefer not to use them anymore and suggest their works be seen as spray painting, stencil art, sticker art, mural painting, art or urban art and so forth. Besides the concepts, the formats and intentions are also continuously being contested. The more traditional old-school representatives usually insist on the value of tagging and/or using letters and/or Chinese characters as the main component of the piece. Nonetheless, clearly a growing number of creators wish to explore the usage of pictures and various new materials and techniques as their peers in Euro-American scenes have been doing since the 1990s. For instance, in Hong Kong, severe disagreements on the forms of 'graffiti' and 'street art' have divided the scene, roughly speaking, into five groups: first, 'graffiti writers', who are closest to the old-school definitions; second, 'graffiti artists', who primarily, but not only, use spray paint and writing but wish to emphasise the artistic process and give more value to pictures; third, to 'street artists', who primarily use formats other than spray paints; fourth, those who are fine with any of these three identities; and last, those who do not consider themselves part of these three groups but would prefer to use other concepts, such as 'spray painter', 'mural artist', 'mural painter' or 'artist'. Some creators change their primary media during their period of activity or even use a variety of formats and/or mixed techniques, such as spray painted posters. Consequently, they find it challenging to identify with the two major concepts, 'graffiti' or 'street art'.

Deriving from the complexity of the contemporary scene in Chinese cities, I consider it far too limiting to examine the phenomenon only through the concepts of 'graffiti' or 'street art', because it would inevitably exclude some creators. Using both concepts, as some researchers do, is naturally better than employing one of them. To label *all* creators with only one identity as 'graffiti writers/artists' or 'street artists' would always be a severe insult for some. For instance, including the Hongkongese Start From Zero, who insist on being defined as street artists, in a publication focusing on graffiti and graffiti writers *per se*, does not demonstrate a deeper understanding of the scene or respect for the perceptions of the creators. As a result, I find it far more beneficial to use the broader concepts of 'urban art images' and 'the creators of urban art images', which allow me to explore more open-mindedly what is happening in these cities today without any limitations of format, content, style, language or visual elements employed in the works.[5] The aim is not to confuse the scenes any further but instead to allow the possibility of varying notions to exist and new formats to emerge inside these two 'umbrella' concepts. So far, my approach has gained positive feedback from the creators themselves, who also criticise the ambiguous usage of the two major concepts and urge the use of more distinguished definitions.

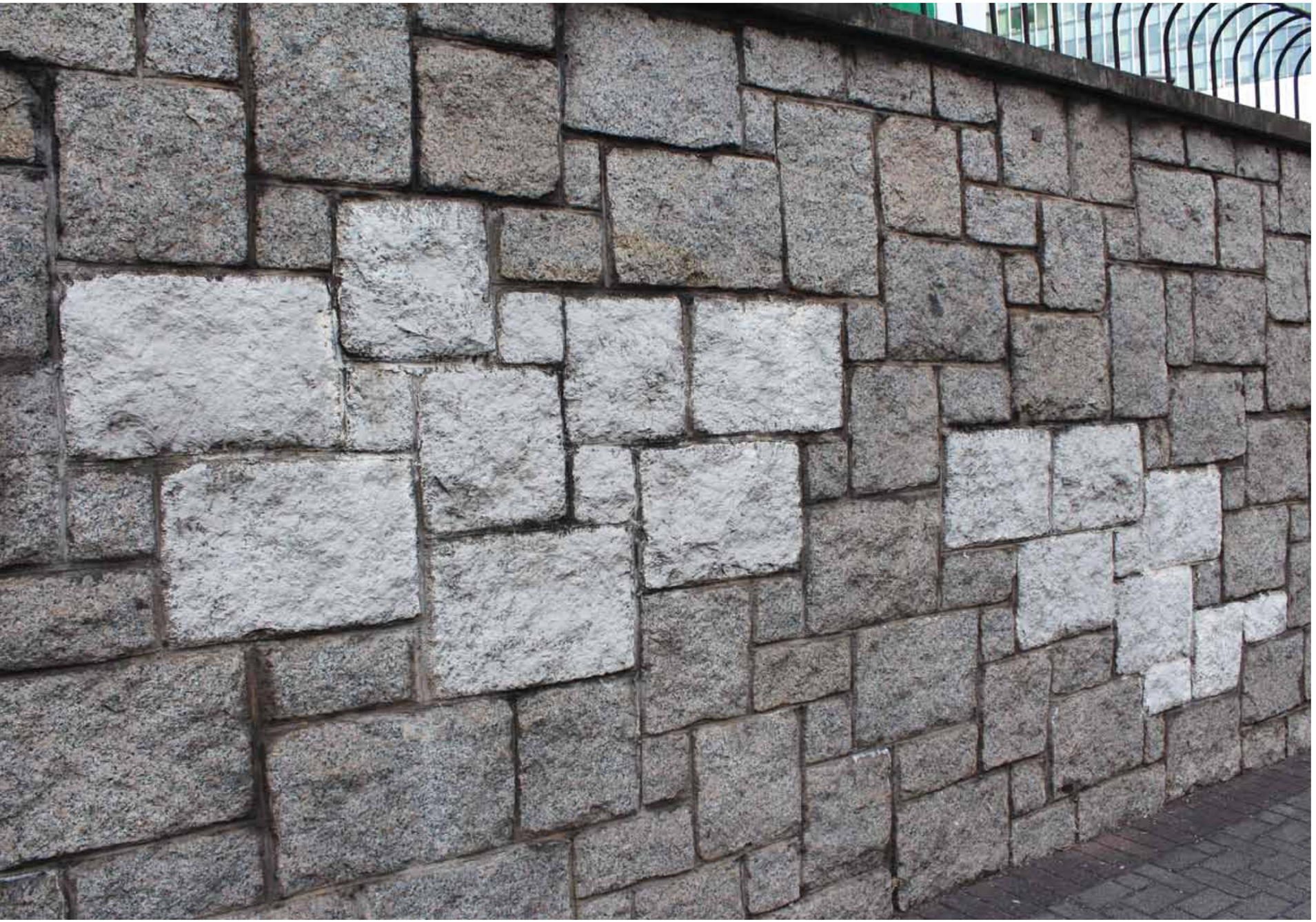
My approach can be criticised as being too broad and including any creative action happening in urban space. However, I define *urban art images* as creative action that leaves a visible imprint, even a short-lived one, on public urban space. Other artistic activities, such as performance art, acrobatics, and music performances on the streets, are not included in this research. Inspired by James Elkins' suggestion of a trichotomy of an image as writing, notation and picture (Elkins, 1999, pp. 82-89), I regard urban art images as reproductions that can include *writing* (in any language), *pictures* and *three-dimensional objects*—or any combination of these—as the most appropriate approach to the complex scenes today. The reproductions can be legal or illegal, commissioned or voluntarily made, resulting from private or collective actions. To focus only on spray painted illegal examples would provide an incomplete perception to the scenes in which the same creators are actually engaging in both legal and illegal activities and, furthermore, exploring the usage of stickers, posters and other formats with growing intensity. Despite this broad approach in terms of formats and intentions, the majority of urban art images today can be regarded primarily as unofficial but not necessarily anti-institutional. In my research, the primary focus lies on creations made in public space.[6] What is even more essential is the creative imprint, which is valued in terms of style, aesthetics and originality. Even if a surface filled with tags might not always be aesthetically appealing, the choosing of the name and the way of writing is always done in terms of style and originality.

As is evident from the choice of concepts, I also encourage for more open-minded methodological and theoretical approaches. Instead of focusing on sociological aspects, as the majority of the previous studies on the Euro-American scene have done (see e.g. Ferrel, 1993; Austin, 2001; MacDonald, 2001; Rahn, 2002), I insist that research of this visual phenomenon must include the analysis of visual features too. This approach has already been initiated by Jack Stewart, whose proposal to use two concepts has not gained popularity. He suggested the separation of 'traditional graffiti', denoting primarily anonymous writings without aesthetic intentions, and 'modern graffiti', which has developed since the end of the 1960s in the United States based on stylistic and aesthetic evaluation (Stewart, 1989, pp. 148-191, 493).[7]

Although crucial for examining urban art scenes, the acknowledgement of the visual features and establishment of new concepts has only recently been further developed (see e.g. Schacter, 2008). Lisa Gottlieb's (2008) approach, which modifies Erwin Panofsky's model of iconographical analysis for defining the styles of graffiti art, is a promising method. However, her approach focuses on the styles used in alphabetic letters. Further research is needed to decide whether this approach is applicable to other contemporary forms of graffiti and street art that are not based on letters. Gottlieb's work is, nonetheless, valuable because she emphasises the importance of visual analysis for any further research as well as the understanding that graffiti art is primarily expressing the self-identity of the creator. Similarly to Gottlieb, Anna Wacławek (2011) has based on her research on visual analysis. Her groundbreaking study provides an in-depth introduction to the development of the phenomenon. However, Wacławek represents the approach that divides the scene into two trends, graffiti and street art/post-graffiti art, although she also notes that there are various terms used for the new formats, namely neo-graffiti, urban painting and graffiti knitting (Wacławek, 201, pp. 28-31, 70-72). Also paying attention to the content of the works created on the streets, Tsan-Kuo Chang and Chung-Linn Kao (2012) provide an illuminating starting point for the historical development of the scene in Hong Kong.

Although I chose to employ different concepts, I agree with Steward, Gottlieb, Wacławek, and Chang and Kao that it is essential to acknowledge the importance of the visual features of the works, such as contents, styles, compositions, colours and materials. Furthermore, I argue that it is equally crucial to pay attention to the languages, the ethnicity of the creators and the site-responsivity of the images. As I have clarified elsewhere (Valjakka, 2011, 2012), the scenes must be approached through the socio-cultural and political context of the city/country in question so that we can better understand the multifaceted layers and features of this phenomenon. As indicated by John Clark, when a visual system is transferred from one culture to another, even the forms of the visual system can be transformed for other purposes (Clark, 1998, pp. 35-37). Based on my findings, it is evident that formats and intentions of urban art images are not necessarily following their predecessors in the Euro-American scene. The contextually related approach is also essential because references to other forms of popular culture, such as cartoons, films, music and design clearly co-exist with social and political issues in the urban art images. Consequently, they fulfill Irit Rogoff's suggestion that the multilayered meanings of the images are constructed in an intertextual sphere in which images interact with sounds and spatial delineation (Rogoff, 2002, p. 24).

Fig. 1.White squares at Harcourt Road, Hong Kong, 5 March 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.



THE RELEVANCE OF FORMAT, CONTENT AND BEHAVIOUR TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF SEMI-IL/LEGALITY

The understanding of the levels of illegality can be challenged by the creators of urban art images through four main variables, namely the format and the content of the works, the behaviour and the choice of the site. Often these four variables are interdependent and have an impact on each other. Preconditions for a site and time, for instance, vary according to the format implied: to create a multi-coloured piece could take hours while creating a throw-up or putting up a sticker or a poster can be handled in a matter of seconds or minutes. Nonetheless, I start the discussion by focusing on the issues of *format*, by which I denote the materials and techniques, and the *content* of the work, including the composition, style and visual elements, in relation to forms of *behaviour*. The selection of the *site* is a complex process that can be divided into two main trends: initiated by the creators themselves or by some other actors of the scene. Because the choices of sites in terms of semi-il/legal approaches require more detailed discussion based roughly on this dichotomy of agency, I will elaborate this intriguing issue in two subchapters in the latter part of this article.

One way for creators to explore the understanding of il/legality is to use new formats that imitate or employ the official and legal images. Intriguing examples that challenge our perceptions are to be found on the streets of Hong Kong: although clearly illegal creations, these urban art images imitate the legal over-paintings done by the city officials to cover illegal urban art images (Fig. 1). The difference between the legal and illegal creation is hard to distinguish for an average citizen, which is exactly the point aimed at by the creator. In this example, however, it is relatively easy to see that the composition of the white squares and the position on the wall in relation to other compositions were deliberately designed to be aesthetically appealing. Closer examination *in situ* also revealed that there were no previous markings, stickers or paintings underneath the white paint and that these squares were painted following the outer lines of the rocks. The squares are deliberately painted to challenge the passer-by's ability to see and understand what is happening on the wall.

Similar irony towards official manifestations is to be found in stickers posted on the streets of Hong Kong

Fig. 2. An official sticker, Hong Kong, 3 March 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

since autumn 2012 by a local graffiti artist who wishes to remain anonymous. The official bilingual sticker, which can be found in public spaces in Hong Kong, cautions against creating graffiti and putting up any kind of notices. The version created by the graffiti artist is identifiable by the wordplay both in English and in Chinese. In the English reworking, two words are changed, which consequently transfers the sentence from denial to a suggestion: *Know graffiti, Post Ur Bill*. In Chinese, a slightly more complex pun is achieved by changing only the first character from *yan* 嚴 to *bu* 不. The official version strictly forbids graffiti while the new version has two meanings: graffiti is not prohibited and one cannot refrain from doing graffiti (Figs. 2 and 3).

Fig. 3. A sticker by graffiti artist, Hong Kong, 18 February 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

The third, far more visible but intriguingly unnoticed new format is a creative modification of banners that advertise the representatives of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and are draped on the railings around the streets of Hong Kong. In an interview on 10 March 2013, the local graffiti artist, who prefers to stay unnamed, explained how he has during the past two years borrowed the banners for visual recreation. In his studio, he re-paints the banners partially with spray paints. Originally, he chose colours matching the original design and painted the banners only partially, but gradually he has shifted to more visible elements that almost fill the whole banner. For this latest set, created in March 2013, the graffiti artist chose to refer to a popular mobile game, *Angry Birds*, because he wanted to emphasise his dissatisfaction with three issues: the inability of people to pay attention to the details in their everyday surroundings, the current political system in Hong Kong and the growing occupation of public space for political advertisement through the banners. The graffiti artist wishes to question the usage of the public space and who can employ it for which purposes. Why are graffiti and street art regarded as vandalism while the political banners and other forms of advertisement are not? After all, these 'accepted' forms are filling up public space, which originally belonged to people. And they are not making it any more appealing to the people—quite the contrary.

After the banners have dried, the graffiti artist sets them up around Hong Kong on busy streets during the daytime—and no one usually pays any attention to him. Passers-by tend to assume he is authorised to hang the banners because they do not acknowledge the content. Furthermore, the banners can remain untouched for several months before they are removed by the cleaners of the area in question (anonymous graffiti artist, Hong Kong, interview, 10 March 2013). The indifference to the political banners is understandable in a city filled with visual advertisement and messages, but it also indicates how little an average busy citizen in Hong Kong actually *looks* at the images encountered. On the morning of 21 March 2013, I was allowed to observe the putting up of the newest set of three banners close to the Yau Ma Tei metro station (Fig. 4). As could have been expected, the presence of two cameras caught attention from passers-by but still no one intervened—even if the visual recreation of the banners was unnoticeable. However, this time the banners were removed surprisingly quickly, already during the firs week of April.

As this example shows, besides the format and the content of the work, the behaviour of the creator of the images has an impact on people's understanding of the il/legality of the action. The simplest way for a creator to contest the limits of illegality is to act openly during the day time in public space. Although the risk of being caught is relatively high, the openness is the key factor that may deceive possible officials and passers-by to consider the action legal. As in the case of the banners, if the creator were to put them up in the darkest hours of the night, the act itself would look suspicious.

A step further in testing the limits of illegality in public space through formats is to employ temporary surfaces, such as cardboard or cardboard boxes. Using removable surfaces for spray painting in public space contests the notion of illegality because the action is not vandalism that would destroy permanent structures. Nonetheless, the possible unauthorised use of public space along with the smell of the spray paints and

potential littering produced during the creation process can cause complaints from the public and interference by officials. This too, depends on the sites chosen for creation.

A relatively new format employing temporary surfaces is to spray paint on cellophane, which can be wrapped around supporting structures. For a documentary film project, Hong Kong spray painter Forget About It and French mural artist Sautel Cago were eager to test this format. The experiment contested the norms of creative actions allowed in public space at Ma Wan Tung Wan beach, Hong Kong on 26 February 2013 (Fig. 5).[8] As the artists began on the first art work, the official responsible for the beach came to inquire whether the project was a commercial or private one. For a commercial project, official permissions would have been required. The official warned the artists that if more people arrived at the beach wanting to relax, he might need to ask them to stop and leave. During the afternoon more visitors came to the beach, but the feedback from them and the cleaners of the beach was only positive. People stopped to admire the creation process, the colors and the composition of the work. Because of the off-season timing and remote location, this experiment was possible and successful. In addition, the fact that the cellophane was not wrapped around any trees or lampposts but was on a removable frame, and that the artists covered the sand to protect it from the paint, had a positive impact on citizens and officials alike. In this project, the interaction of the format, behaviour and site made the project successful. Whether the cellograffing could be used in any other space, time and framing in Hong Kong or other Chinese cities remains an open question.

Fig. 4. Three banners by graffiti artist, Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong, 21 March 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

Besides these two-dimensional formats that depend primarily on vertical surfaces, the public is also challenged to encounter three-dimensional, removable art works on the streets. An illuminating example is the large humanlike dolls created by Graphic Airlines (GAL) for a street art exhibition organised in Babú Gallery in Shenzhen in May 2008. The dolls, the 'fat face' (*aafei* 阿肥) and the 'old man' (*maa lat lou* 麻甩佬), represent two specific types of Hong Kong people, a well-fed lady trying to lose weight and a typical old man in his singlet. The preparation of the dolls, filled with cotton padding, was a laborious project requiring almost a month. Before sending the dolls to Shenzhen, GAL decided to explore people's reactions to them on the streets of Hong Kong. On 11 May 2008, they went around the city placing the dolls in varying locations for at least a half hour at a time and observed the responses of the passers-by while photographer Rraay Lai took photographs (Graphic Airlines, artists, Hong Kong, interview, 21 March 2013).

The interaction varied according to the location. For instance, at the busy street corner at Causeway Bay, people were annoyed by the dolls blocking the street, while in the Lan Kwai Fong area at the Central the attitude was far more relaxed. People stopped to examine the dolls and pose for photographs with them (Figs. 6 and 7). The photograph the artists liked most was taken in front of the Sogo department store at Causeway Bay, the flagship of commercialism. With huge advertisements filling the space and with

Fig. 5. Cellograffing, Ma Wan Tung Wan beach, Hong Kong, 26 February 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

Fig. 6. The Fat Face and Old Man by Graphic Airlines, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong, 11 May 2008. Photographed by / Copyright by Rraay Lai.

Fig. 7. The Fat Face and Old Man by Graphic Airlines, Lan Kwai Fong, Hong Kong, 11 May 2008. Photographed by / Copyright by Rraay Lai.

a collection of national flags reflecting the aim for internationality, the site correlates with the idea of the figures themselves: continuous growth in terms of all kinds of statistics—the economy, consumption and greed. Despite varying feelings among the onlookers indicated mainly by their behaviour and facial expressions, no one intervened or asked the artists to explain their actions. According to the artists, apparently nobody considered the project illegal or contacted the officials to inform them about it. In this case, the format of the works, the fact that they did not leave any permanent marks on the streets and the conduct of the action openly during daytime caused people to tolerate and even be amused by the project.

RECREATING SITES FOR URBAN ART IMAGES

The sites employed for urban art images have a significant impact on contesting the understanding of the creation process in terms of il/legality. As already implied, the selection of the site can be initiated by the creator(s) of the urban art images or other actors of the scene. In the ongoing negotiation processes, the status of a specific site can change, even from illegal to legal, following the changing perceptions of the creators, citizens and officials. Because of the limitations of space, I restrict my discussion to examples that most clearly illustrate the variety of agency, intentions and purposes in relation to semi-il/legal sites.[9]

A majority of the sites for urban art images are established by the creators themselves. The choice of the location is defined primarily in terms of location (accessibility and visibility), popularity, the acknowledged social, cultural or commercial value of the site, the atmosphere of the site, and physical features (size and quality of the wall/surface and openness of the space). For the interrelation of site and the notions of il/legality, it is most important to take into account the acknowledged social, cultural or commercial values of the site. Attacking valuable historical sites, official premises or the stores of worldwide brands is considered far more illegal than creating urban art images at demolition sites.

Consequently, it is not surprising that abandoned buildings can be taken over by the creators of urban art images. Because the value of the buildings is decreased along with their physical disintegration, they gradually become semi-illegal sites for urban art images to emerge. Basically, the creative action itself and even entering the locked-up site are illegal, but the guards might choose not to care about the creation process. If they do, the creators are usually just asked to leave the premises. The severity of the response depends primarily on the activity of the guards and whether something else has happened at the site. For example, creating pieces in an abandoned school building in Hong Kong became much more carefully scrutinised after someone tried to steal a ping-pong table from the premises (Aaron Lam, photographer, Hong Kong, interview, 18 March 2013). Sites of these kinds are usually rather short-lived, like the abandoned factory building in Yau Tong in Hong Kong, which was a popular site during spring 2012 but is now already demolished. Another quite well-known and longer-term site in Hong Kong is the former studios of Asian Television Ltd (ATV) at Sai Kung. Three floors and the rooftop provide an intriguing gallery of urban art images created by locals and visitors from around the globe (Fig. 8).

Instead of demolition sites, the creators also look for walls in the more open public areas in the cities. Roughly speaking, creative actions are usually more accepted on the outskirts than in the city centre. But this too, depends on the city in question. The most famous semi-legal walls where creating urban art images is—or has been—tolerated in mainland China and in Hong Kong are the 798 art district (798 艺术区) in Beijing, Moganshan Road (莫干山路) in Shanghai, the longest wall of fame close by the Honghu West Road (洪湖西路) in Shenzhen and the Mong Kok Alley

Fig. 8. The ATV studios, Sai Kung, Hong Kong, 9 March 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

Fig. 9. Shenzhen, 25 March 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

close to Argyle Street in Hong Kong.[10] I define these sites as semi-legal, because being at the site itself is not illegal, as it is at the abandoned premises. More importantly, creating on these walls has usually been allowed to happen without official intervention or consequences.

The level of surveillance and toleration is naturally always subject to change, as was the case with the 798 art district in Beijing during the summer of 2008 before the Olympic Games. Since the deliberate modification of the art area into an international tourist site by the city officials, creation of urban art images is no longer allowed to the same extent. Although the attitude was somewhat relaxed in summer 2009 when I visited the area, it has since become more scrutinised. Similarly, the status of the one of the most popular sites in Hong Kong, namely the Mong Kok Alley, has recently changed. The narrow alley used to be a safe place to create, even in daylight, since the first piece created by the Dutch graffiti writer Dofi in 2000. During the past two years, however, creators have been chased away or even detained, which has contributed to the declining popularity of the site (Dofi, graffiti writer, Hong Kong, interview, 15 March 2013). Instead, the wall at Yuen Long, started by a piece by Fuck Da Cops crew (FDC) in 2007, has become the site to paint in peace (KDG, graffiti writer, Hong Kong, interview, 25 March 2013). Nonetheless, in 2013 local citizens have started to inform the police if they come across creators in action on this site.

One of the most popular, longest and oldest sites still available is the wall of fame in Shenzhen, where creators from China and abroad have been tolerated since 2002/2003. In summer 2011, however, city officials planted flower bushes and trees close to the wall to prevent creative actions (Touch, graffiti writer, Shenzhen, email, 28 March 2013). Because of the plants it is difficult to paint or take good photographs at the most popular parts of the wall. In addition, some creators have recently been chased away from this well-known site. Whether the attitude of Shenzhen officials is changing can, however, be debated, because creating urban art images is clearly allowed in some other sites in the city. Since 2010 an area close to IKEA has regained popularity (Touch, graffiti writer, Shenzhen, email, 28 March 2013). For example, on Sunday 23 March 2013, after the Meeting of Styles organised at the Shenzhen Polytechnic, around 30 to 40 creators gathered to paint on these walls for the whole day. Despite dozens of people walking by, no one intervened or alerted the officials. Some even stopped to admire and take photographs (Fig. 9).

Another viable semi-legal site is Moganshan Road in Shanghai. Although in 2011 it was rumoured even in the press that the wall at Moganshan Road 'where graffiti art was tolerated' would be demolished (Shanghai Daily, 2 August 2011), so far nothing has changed. Moganshan Road is an illuminating example of a semi-legal site initiated by the creators and gradually accepted by citizens and officials alike to exist as a place to create without consequences. Like the walls in Shenzhen, Moganshan Road is an illuminating example of the semi-legal sites where a more relaxed atmosphere enables larger, more skilful pieces to be created.

An interesting example of how the status of the site can gradually become officially accepted because of the negotiation process is the small park along the Rua dos Mercadores (*Jingdei gungjyun* 营地公园) in Macao. This site is often mentioned as 'the legal wall' in China among creators, although it is not mentioned on the international website *Legal Walls*.[11] Interestingly, for the whole of China, only the previously discussed semi-legal Mong Kok Alley, the status of which is already changing to illegal, is marked on the map, along with the Pantone Graffiti workshop, which provides a variety of classes and workshops using the walls of the rooftop with the permission of the house management (Pantone, graffiti artist, Hong Kong, interview, 18 February 2013).[12] Other semi-legal or legal walls are still missing from this list.

The development of the park into a space to create urban art started in 16 September 2006, when an event to commemorate the French artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2012) was organised in the park. The art works created on the walls of the buildings circling the park had to follow the style of Niki. After the successful event, local graffiti artist Pibg from the crew GANTZ 5 started to negotiate with the officials for open an empty area for creative actions (Pigb, graffiti artist, Macao, interview, 22 March 2013). The second event, Muse Graffiti Zone, was organised in the park by the Macao Museum of Art from 24 May-5 June 2008. According to the information provided by the Museum, the event was organised 'for promoting the exhibition "Plato in the Land of Confucius: Greek Art from the Louvre"' and '[t]he museum wanted to bring art to the community in a fun way by transforming the empty construction site at Rua dos Mercadores, no. 22-26 into a temporary recreation area to display 3D installations and graffiti paintings on the walls with the theme of Ancient Greek civilisation as well as Olympics re-interpreted in a contemporary style. "Graffiti Jam" session by artists from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao was held at the opening of this activity,' which was also open to the public (Macao Museum of Art, email, 2 April 2013).

Although no official agreement or announcement has been made by the city officials about the status of the park, since the Muse Graffiti Zone the site has come to be considered as a legal site to paint without risks of consequences, while creating on other walls in Macao is considered illegal. Still today, a growing number of pieces continue to be created at the site, even during the daytime (Pigb, graffiti artist, Macao, interview, 22 March 2013). Despite the fact that the site is considered legal by the creators themselves and creative actions are tolerated by the citizens visiting the park as well as by officials, whether the site can be defined as legal is questionable. After all, there is no official written

approval. As such, the status of the park is similar to other semi-legal sites in Chinese cities where urban art images are tolerated without legal consequences but no official agreement or announcement has been made (Fig.10).

PROVIDING LEGAL SITES: BEAUTIFICATION, MARKETING, EDUCATION AND CRIME PREVENTION

Although the sites for urban art images are primarily initiated by the creators themselves, new actors are also actively engaged in the process of negotiating the il/legality of creative actions in public space. The premises provided by private citizens, entrepreneurs, associations or even city officials are almost without exception acknowledged as legal sites because the creative action is usually done with the permission of the owner or management of the building.

A gradually growing form of legal walls are provided by private citizens aiming to beautify their own or rented property and asking creators to paint the walls of the houses or rooftops. The initiative for these actions can be taken by the creators, the property owners, or the occupants. A recent example that indicates how the project can grow to include a whole village is from the Lam Tei village on the outskirts of Hong Kong.

An artist living in the village, Lina Wong, explained in an interview at the mural opening on 3 March 2013 how she had become fascinated by some urban art images she had seen and had decided to ask for the outer walls of her house to be painted too by local spray painter Forget About It and French mural artist Sautel Cago. Gradually other villagers became interested in this beautifying process and asked for their walls to be modified too. Some requested specific themes, such as a dragon or an elephant. With spray paints provided by the head of the village, the project developed into a creative process lasting for weeks and engaging the small children of the village in the creation process. Only one villager complained about the smell of the spray paint, and another even called the police to investigate the actions, while all the other villagers were obviously very satisfied with the project and the outcomes. The police visited the village twice to interview the villagers and the artists but in both cases saw no reason to accuse the artists of anything and allowed them to continue. Consequently, it can be argued that this project was officially declared legal. Even more importantly, the project lifted the atmosphere in the village and provided a valuable chance for the children to engage in creativity (Fig. 11).

Fig. 10. Park along the Rua dos Mercadores, Macao, 22 March 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

Besides private homes, a growing variety of commercial enterprises, from private entrepreneurs to multinational companies, are seeking creators to enliven the outer or interior of their establishments or to participate in special events advertising their products. Without a question, the motivations for the use of urban art images for commercial purposes are primarily aimed at attracting the attention of possible customers. Examples I have found are far too numerous to be listed here, and therefore I have decided to limit the discussion to one example that illustrates how even commissioned works can challenge the boundaries of il/legality.

In an interview on 9 February 2013, head chef Austin Fry explained that he wants the Brickhouse at Lan Kwai Fong to be part of the interactive community and a place where creative people feel at home. The interior of the establishment is decorated by young local and international artists and, in addition, monthly art exhibitions are organised there. On 6 February 2013, British illustrator/artist Mark Goss, graffiti writer 2TEK from Auckland and local graffiti writer Xeme joined forces to enliven the narrow alley leading to the restaurant with four pieces representing different styles and themes in addition to slogans and pictures bearing reference to the Mexican restaurant. According to Fry (interview, Hong Kong, 9 February 2013), the feedback from customers and from the community was completely positive during the first couple of days.

Fig. 11. Lam Tei village, Hong Kong, 3 March 2013.
Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

Technically speaking, the project is only partially legal because the restaurant owns just a very small section of the walls painted, and the majority of the walls are owned by other establishments whose consent Fry did not seek in advance. If anyone felt disturbed by the images, Fry has said he would immediately clean the walls. He does not want to upset anyone. Quite the opposite: he wishes to inspire more creativity in the community, as long as it is tasteful and in line with the atmosphere of the restaurant (Austin Fry, Hong Kong, interview, 9 February 2013).

Another legal form of collaboration, besides the urban art images commissioned by private citizens, entrepreneurs and companies, is provided by the representatives of governmental offices, youth associations, rehabilitation centres, schools and universities. A growing number of institutions in Hong Kong have been developing projects that could encourage creativity and add colour to the

monochrome public space in co-operation with the creators of urban art images. One of the earliest youth associations to organise graffiti classes and walls to paint on was the Warehouse Teenage Club in Aberdeen, Hong Kong. In an interview on 16 March 2013, the program manager Ellen Tang, who has been developing the graffiti program, elaborated how the Warehouse has provided classes every year since 2002 for youngsters to learn the basic skills and history of graffiti. Besides classes organised at the Warehouse, the organisation actively seeks collaborations with other institutions in Hong Kong to promote the acceptance of graffiti in part of the community, to provide possibilities for teenagers to develop their skills and self-esteem and to find venues for them to paint through two crews, Paint Da Wall (PDW) and Graffiti Art Association (GAS),[13] working in collaboration with the Warehouse. The two main forms of institutional co-operation are to accept commissioned works and to arrange workshops and classes in local schools. The third form of improving the status of graffiti is to organise exhibitions.

Graffiti lessons, workshops and events are not rare in Hong Kong. Consequently, the competition is getting tough. Even before establishing the graffiti centre, 塗鴉 TEEN HOME, in 2011, the Aberdeen Kai-fong Welfare Association (AKA) organised graffiti lessons in one of their service centres in Aberdeen. The space for graffiti became possible, when one of the management board members of AKA, an owner of a factory, offered one unit of 5000 sq. ft. for organising the graffiti centre from 2011 to 2014. For two years, the centre has actively hold workshops and classes (Nora Yee-mei Ng, Senior Manageress, AKA, Hong Kong, email, 8 April 2013). Although providing a great length of walls to be painted, this association has the same issue with the accessibility and visibility as the Warehouse: average citizens do not get to see the urban art images unless they make an appointment and visit the premises. Usually, however, in these

Fig. 12. SKH Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School, Kwai Chung, Hong Kong, 6 February 2013. Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

premises the creators can quite freely decide on the content, styles and visual elements employed for the images—except for certain limitations of 'good taste', meaning that for instance, pornographic references are not allowed.

A somewhat more structured creating process can be seen in the lessons and workshops organised as part of the art education programs, as was the case in SKH Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School at Kwai Chung, Hong Kong. The art teacher, Ms. Choi Sui Fan, explained in an interview on the last day of the workshop, 6 February 2013, how she had come up with the idea to organise a graffiti workshop of eight sessions held by spray painter Timothy Ng. During the workshop the white wall by the school's sports ground was painted with the motto of the school: 'The truth will make you free' (Fig. 12). First, the students had to design sketches of the words based on information provided about graffiti and spray painting. Second, the teachers evaluated the sketches and chose the best ones to be painted on the wall in teams. Both teachers and students were noticeably thrilled by the project and the possibility to learn new creative techniques. While interviewing the participants of this project, the feedback was unanimously positive. Ms. Choi and the students were extremely satisfied with the project and hoped that they could continue with similar workshops to beautify the school facilities even more.

The previous examples already indicate how creating urban art images can legally be employed for educational purposes that enable teenagers or children to learn creative skills and gain self-confidence. A step further in this category are the projects, which employ urban art images— perhaps somewhat surprisingly— even for rehabilitation and crime prevention. One of the earliest examples is the Tuen Mun police station, which in 2008 contacted Ellen Tang at Warehouse and requested creators to paint all the outer walls of the main police station. At the beginning the local Paint Da Walls (PDW) crew was in charge of the project, but because the work was processing rather slowly, after a few weeks the person responsible for the project, graffiti

Fig. 13. Tuen Mun Police Station, Hong Kong, 29 March 2013.
Photographed by / Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

artist UnCle, decided to invite other local creators, such as KS, Jams, Devil and Fuck Da Cops (FDC) as well as from the GANTZ 5 crew from Macao to join. Altogether 13 creators participated in the project over two months. The police had set up three main themes for the main walls, namely celebration of the Beijing Olympics, crime prevention and anti-drugs activities. (UnCle, graffiti artist, Hong Kong, email 30 March 2013). Despite the scrutinised creation process, both UnCle and the other local crew, FDC, managed to paint their own names on the walls of the station (UnCle, graffiti artist, Hong Kong, email 30 March 2013; KDG, graffiti writer, Hong Kong, interview 25 March 2013). FDC used a very abstract design, but nonetheless putting their crew name on the police station added a somewhat ironic twist to the project.

Despite the length of walls to be painted legally, the project was not very satisfactory to the creators. Besides limitations in creation process, they did not actually get compensated, except for travelling expenses and for the spray paints. In addition, the graffiti artist responsible for the project was harshly criticised by his peers, especially by the representatives of the old-school, who considered that creating a commissioned work for a police station was the ultimate form of selling out the ideals of graffiti.

In 2011, the police station contacted Ellen Tang again to get the front wall repainted. This time only three people took on the task, and the creation process was even more limited as the police required specific concepts and figures that had to be included in the works, such as a person in handcuffs and a sign saying that the shop had surveillance cameras (Fig. 13). Although this time the creators did get better compensation, the commission was not very rewarding due to the strict limitations. A slightly more satisfying project was requested by a sub-police station at Castle Peak Divisional Police Station in Tuen Mun in 2010. This time Roves, a Hong Kong graffiti writer, co-operated with Hugs Centre,[14] and held a ten-lesson workshop for twelve 15-year-olds. As a result, according to the wishes of the station, a long art work including 'cute figures' and specific words and slogans, such as 'to steal', 'to kidnap', 'to avoid narcotics', was created (Roves, graffiti writer, Hong Kong, interview, 29 March 2013).

An even more profound case of employing urban art for crime prevention is illustrated by the *One Love* project organised by the Society of Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention (SRACP), Hong Kong, in co-operation with the Hong Kong Federation of Women Lawyers and Sky City Church. The project consisted of two parts: an urban art exhibition by two French artists, Kongo and Ceet, and a workshop held in the TeenGuard Valley Crime Prevention Education Centre in Shatin on 12 May 2012. The project was started in February 2012 by an initiative from Kongo to one of the board members.

In the workshop, a group of around 20 to 30 youngsters, about half of which were ex-offenders or drug abusers and the rest youngsters from the neighbourhood, were taught the basics of sketching and handling the spray paint. Besides Ceet, who had the main responsibility of the workshop, two local graffiti artists, UnCle and Moe also participated, but Kongo was taken ill. The result from the day was a piece created on a temporary, ten-meter wall with the slogan of the project, *One Love* (Fig. 14). During the creation process the youngsters had a chance to mingle and feel accepted by each other, which is a valuable process for ex-offenders. Maybe even more importantly, according to Joey Chan, while learning to spray paint, the ex-offenders learned from Ceet that making a mistake in painting is nothing too serious and can be fixed with another layer of the paint. Talking with her after the event, the ex-offenders drew parallels to their own lives. Without a question, the whole project had showed them how urban art, as other forms of art, can be used as a treatment in a rehabilitation process. It allowed the youngsters to discover their own talents and potentials (Gloria Yuen, Planning & Development Manager of the Head Office, and Joey Chan, Project Manager of the TeenGuard Valley Crime Prevention Education Center, Hong Kong, interview, 27 March 2013).

The other part of the project, the urban art exhibition, allowed the agency to raise funds for charity by selling the works and to get positive attention for the whole project. Overall, the organisers and collaborators did not find any contradiction in using urban art, which is commonly regarded as illegal, for rehabilitation and crime prevention. For them it was a beneficial method to encourage the ex-offenders to find their abilities for self-expression. Even more importantly, the workshop really gave the ex-offenders a chance for gaining self-esteem and self-respect. For the organisers, the aim was to focus on the positive sides of urban art and show that there is no reason to discriminate against this specific form of art (Yuen and Chan, interview, 27 March 2013).

THE LEVELS OF TOLERANCE TOWARDS URBAN ART IMAGES

The discussed examples represent only a very small sampling of the urban art images created in the public space of Chinese cities today. Nevertheless, they illustrate how the understanding of the levels of il/legality of urban art images in public space is challenged by the creators through employment of format, content and behaviour. From examples that challenge the observation abilities of average citizens, to the three-dimensional works that explore the attitudes towards the use of space, to spray painting on temporary surfaces, these cases demonstrate how great a variety of formats, contents and behaviour are involved in this ongoing negotiation process. The examples focusing on the importance of the site for the process also illustrate the varying forms of agency and intentions related to arbitration and tolerance.

Although the number of commissioned works, workshops and events might be growing in one specific

Fig. 14. *One Love*, TeenGuard Valley Crime Prevention Education Centre, Shatin, Hong Kong, 12 May 2012.
Copyright by The Society of Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention, Hong Kong.

city, such as Hong Kong, it does not necessarily imply that the illegal urban art images would be more accepted by the citizens or the officials. Quite the opposite trend is actually visible because the surveillance on the semi-legal and semi-illegal sites is strengthening. Also, in Macao, the existence of one site where urban art images are allowed to be created has not changed the attitude towards creative actions as a whole. In mainland Chinese cities, however, the situations seem somewhat more relaxed. Based on the experiences and perceptions of the creators of urban art images themselves, in Hong Kong the use of public space is far more regulated than in the mainland Chinese cities. Therefore, the creators living in Hong Kong actually travel quite often to Shenzhen or other mainland Chinese cities to create large, multi-coloured pieces.

As implied throughout the article, the evaluation criteria for legal and semi-il/legal works vary among the creators. Although creating unauthorised urban art images continues to be a highly appreciated form of creative action, including the aspirations to tag police stations and other official premises, the clear majority of the creators are also involved in legal, commissioned works in China. Opinions about going commercial, 'crossing-over', vary among creators from acceptance to harsh criticism, although almost everyone does—or at least hopes for—it today in order to make a living. Occasionally, the most 'hard-core graffiti writers' avoid admitting their legal/commercial activities to keep up appearances.

One reason for the growing number of legal activities is the essential difference between the original Euro-American scene, and the contemporary scene in China. Since the emerging of urban art images in China, the clear majority of the creators are involved in creative industries as graphic designers, designers, illustrators, artists or art students. As a result, many of them are interested in creating more skillfully demanding and complex works with pictorial elements. As mentioned earlier, to create these kinds of urban art images basically requires sites with more tolerance from the public. Contrary to the original evaluation criteria that emphasises the illegality and bombing the city or trains for fame, these creators are also aiming for another kind of fame—as professionals in creative industries. Nonetheless, these two forms, legal and illegal, are interrelated in many ways in the reality of these creators, and what has become crucial is to find a balance between the two forms, suitable for one's own purposes.

A growing number of private citizens, commercial enterprises and educational institutions are responding to this intention by providing legal sites for urban art images. As discussed above, the creation process at legal sites is usually somewhat limited in terms of the access, visibility or the content. The commissioned urban art image, however, may limit the creation process even further by setting a specific theme, colours and/or style to be created. Obviously, the appreciation of the commissioned works varies among the creators themselves. If the restrictions are too tight, the creator might refuse to co-operate with the commissioner because artistic freedom in relation to a certain level of self-expression is a core value for many creators. However, during the past ten years there has emerged a growing interest and appreciation towards, at least, authorised urban art images in these cities. Whether there will be more semi-legal or legal sites remains to be seen, too. The development of these mediation processes, as well as which formats, contents, forms of behaviour and sites will be tolerated in future in the Chinese cities will be worth further research. RC

NOTES

1 For a more detailed discussion on popular publications and the few bachelor's and master's theses written in Chinese, see Minna Valjakka, 'Graffiti in China—Chinese Graffiti?', pp. 61-62.

2 For my previous discussion on the interrelation of contemporary art and contemporary graffiti in Beijing and Shanghai, including examples of commissioned works even by city officials in Beijing, see Valjakka, 2011.

3 For an introduction to this early format in New York see Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art* and the revised edition of the book by the same authors with new materials published in 2009.

4 Information based on surveys conducted with the English word 'graffiti' and Chinese words '涂鸦' and '涂写' in the Peking University law database (www.pkulaw.cn), China Law Info database (www.chinalawinfo.com), HKSAR law database (http://www.legislation.gov.hk/index.htm) and Macao legislation available online (http://en.io.gov.mo/Legis/default.aspx). For State Council regulations concerning cities in mainland China, especially article 17, see http://big5.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2011/content_1860772.htm. Accessed on 20 March 2013.

5 Compare with my previous attempt to explore the scenes in Beijing and Shanghai through the concept of contemporary graffiti images in Minna Valjakka, 'Graffiti in China—Chinese Graffiti?'. This article aims to provide a more elaborated theoretical and methodological approach that is more suitable for examination of the varying scenes in Asian cities.

6 I am aware that the concept of public space is problematic and can also be contested. I use it broadly to mean places that are not restricted to the private use of a citizen or family, but are accessible to a larger audience, at least in some ways, such as schools, companies, restaurants, etc.

7 For more detailed discussion on Stewart's approach and the challenges of employing it in the Chinese scenes, see Valjakka 2011. Another early attempt to define a new concept based on the format, namely 'TTP graffiti' (Tags, Throw-ups, Pieces), was made by Staffan Jacobson, *Den Spraymålade Bilden*, 1996.

8 I was personally observing this experiment in order to document it. However, I did not initiate the experiment, nor was I involved in the creation process itself.

9 More detailed discussion focusing on the sites and their varying levels of il/legality was provided in the conference presentation '(Semi-)legal manifestations of urban art in Chinese cities.'

10 Also other art areas in Beijing have been popular sites for creating urban art images. See Valjakka, 2011.

11 Available online http://www.legal-walls.net/. Accessed 27 February 2013.

12 See the webpage of Pantone Graffiti Workshop http://pantonegraffiti.com/. Accessed 5 March 2013.

13 GAS crew, however, has not been very active since 2006 (Ellen Tang, Hong Kong, interview, 16 March 2013).

14 See the webpage of the centre http://www.hugs.org.hk/. Accessed 29 March 2013.

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