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Kaid Ashton: Conflating Streets, Arts, and Charity¹

Putting up color photographs with captions is a rare trend in urban art images. So is engaging with the less fortunate people from developing countries. Through visual dislocation that highlights the stark juxtaposition of content and the site, Canadian artist Kaid Ashton has managed to raise awareness of social inequalities. Furthermore, by establishing the Home School Project, Ashton has employed art teaching to interact with local communities especially in Manila. In this article, I will examine the art projects of Kaid Ashton to reveal how the multiple forms and levels of interaction between arts, public space and art teaching come together in his oeuvre.

Kaid Ashton, Home School Project, photographic series

Introduction

Growing numbers of creators of urban art images² are concerned with the idea of giving something back to society. Rather than vandalism, their actions show caring, sharing, and contributing. I became aware of this form of employing the streets when in the spring of 2012, while starting my new research project, I encountered a sticker on a street sign at the Central in Hong Kong: a young Asian child was pointing a gun at me (Fig. 1).

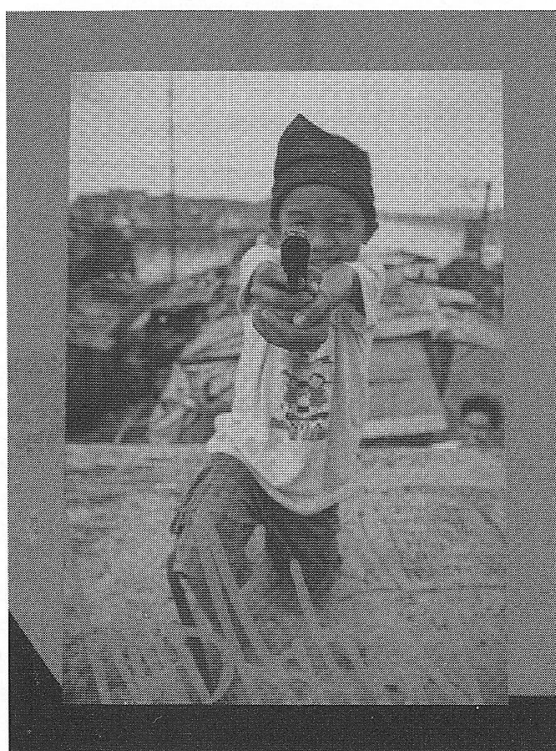


Fig. 1: Kaid Ashton's sticker in Hong Kong, June 2012. Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

In the safe business area of Hong Kong, the image stopped me. Wondering why anyone would put up such a controversial sticker, even with his professional name on it, I came to pay attention to numerous other stickers and wheat-pastes by this artist around Hong Kong. When I got in touch with Kaid Ashton and asked about the photograph that had left me puzzled, he clarified:

"The boy with the gun was taken on a rooftop in one of Manila's most notorious slums in the area called Tondo. It was New Year's Eve day and the mood around the slum was quite upbeat. I pasted two photographs on one of the rusty water towers in the community. The boy saw this and as I descended from the tower he approached and I took the shot."³

The reply provoked more questions than it answered. Why would he be in that area? Did it make any sense to be putting up photographs in Asian slums? In order to understand how street art became Ashton's main medium to raise social awareness and how it relates to art teaching, it is beneficial to start with a brief overview of his background.

In the mid-90s Kaid Ashton started to take photographs of urban landscapes, first drawn to contemporary graffiti and train yards.⁴ In the university, he took a couple of classes on photography and art and was later able to participate in a photography workshop by American photojournalist Steve McCurry (b. 1950) in New York. Ashton is nevertheless mainly a self-taught photographer who has learned through his encounters with people while traveling.⁵

Ashton's artistic inspiration derives primarily from Steve McCurry and Mexican American photographer and director Estevan Oriol. Ashton appreciates how these two adepts are able to enter any area in the city and capture people in a compelling photograph. The encouragement to engage with the streets comes from graffiti artists Revok (LA), Zes (LA), and Nekst (Houston, d. 2013), whose ability to take risks for their work and pursuit for high quality has been a great inspiration for Ashton to go and put up his works, too. He also enjoys Banksy's ability, through humor and wit, to catch the attention of the world and create awareness for art. In terms of the use of colors, Ashton admires Julie Mehretu's (b. 1970) multilayered color compositions. The warm and welcoming people Ashton meets during his travels are similarly a great inspiration and continuous support from his wife is invaluable.⁶

In 2004, after finishing university, Ashton wanted to see the world. Inspired by the decision of his best friends to move to Taiwan, he decided to join them. While learning to live in another cultural context for three years, he gradually came to be more intrigued by people's ways of living and their individual stories. Since this initial inspiration found in Taiwan, Kaid Ashton's interest in different cultures and people has led him across more than forty countries during the past ten years.⁷ During his travels, Ashton became increasingly aware of the prevailing forms of social inequalities, which have an enormous impact on the lives of countless people, especially in the developing countries around the world. With his camera, Ashton started to immortalize the people he met as well as their experiences and life conditions to be shared with the public across the continents.

In 2008, rather than restricting his oeuvre to galleries for commercial purposes or to the social media, Ashton decided to experiment by putting up his photographs in public spaces. The first wheat-paste, a single work itself, went up on a train in Saskatchewan. Satisfied with the results of this "moving gallery,"⁸ Ashton was motivated to continue in this direction. He chose to spread his art internationally, to be seen by urbanites in their everyday surroundings—both to enliven the degenerated neighborhoods and to raise people's awareness of their own and others' circumstances in different countries. He hoped to reach audiences who did not have the possibility to visit galleries.⁹ As with most creators of urban art images, the physical site for putting up a photograph matters a great deal to Ashton, too. He prefers sites "that provide either a stark contrast or poetic similarity"¹⁰ to the subject matter in the work itself.

In addition to single photographs, working with a series of images on specific themes has become a meaningful method for Ashton. These series have benefited from his travels, and some of them were created simultaneously. The first experimental series of portraits, without any specific title, emerged on the streets of Toronto and Los Angeles during September and October 2010. The main intention was to test the scenes in these large cities and "see how receptive people were before going on to bigger projects internationally."¹¹

After gaining this experience, Ashton turned his gaze to Asia. He wanted to humanize the urban space with portraits of individual people, also planning to create visual contrasts between living environments. As a result, starting in 2011, Ashton headed to the slums of Manila equipped with large photographs of the unspoiled nature of Saskatchewan. He ventured on to Sri Lanka, Dhaka and Guangzhou during the next two years with untitled series of nature photographs. So far, creating varying series of works to be discussed in detail in the latter part of this paper, Ashton has spread his works in fifteen cities: Toronto, Vancouver, Los Angeles, Miami, Manila, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Beijing, Kaohsiung in Taiwan, Tokyo, Dhaka, Cairo, Colombo, Jaffna, and Leon in Nicaragua.¹²

Ashton's two main formats to display photographs in public space are large wheat-pastes and postcard-size stickers. He has pasted around 300 posters and 7,000 stickers, the latter consisting of 30–35 images. Although color images are far more expensive to produce, Ashton personally prefers them because their vibrancy better captures the personality of the people as well as attention on the streets. He also creates black-and-white images if he considers them more suitable for the subject.¹³

To my knowledge, Ashton is one of the very rare artists to put up color photographs in public space and also with such diversified subject matter. At least in Asia, it seems he is still the only one to employ this format. For instance, the French street artist JR, who has also traveled extensively, including Asia, is currently the best-known street artist to employ photographs. However, he focuses on large, black-and-white facial portraits of individuals—or details of them—in his oeuvre on the streets.¹⁴ Occasionally, these images cannot even be seen by the people themselves because they are displayed on rooftops. They are visible only to the media and/or anyone in a helicopter. Another difference between Ashton's and JR's work is that while JR and his crew take and paste portraits of local people, Ashton provides a notion of dislocation: he puts up images of people and sceneries taken outside of the community.

Art for Street Children

The photograph of a child from Tondo holding a gun relates to Ashton's experiences in Manila that left a lasting mark on his life. In January 2011, he was living in Manila, looking for a job, and pasting up his photographs around the city. The main theme he was working on was the creation of a juxtaposition between nature photographs from Canada and the slums of Manila. He was touched by the warm-heartedness and generosity of the people, who were eager to share whatever they had. On one occasion, when local people were helping him to put up a poster, Ashton decided that he needed to give something back to the people—if nothing else, at least his time. In order to show his gratitude as an artist and as a teacher, Ashton promised to return to teach an art class to the children of that neighborhood.¹⁵

From this promise and idea came the inspiration to develop the Home School Project. In collaboration with the Office of Culture and Design (OCD), a local business promoting socially engaged art practices,¹⁶ Ashton held thirty visual art workshops around varying

parts of Manila. Occasionally, volunteers from different backgrounds, such as the local artist Gabby Tiongson, participated in the teaching and organizing. Furthermore, while traveling in 2012, Ashton taught three classes in Sri Lanka and one in Bangladesh. Altogether, he has provided thirty-four workshops on arts with about twenty-five volunteers during the years 2011-2013.¹⁷

Initially, the aim of the project was to organize art classes for street children in poor neighborhoods where they might have limited access to formal education or their studies are interrupted for different social reasons.¹⁸ However, Ashton's work also caught the attention of a Catholic orphanage, Association de Damas Filipinas (ADDF)¹⁹ and a children's hospital at Taft Avenue, who were interested in having Ashton to give art lessons to the children. In the children's hospital in particular, art activities provided welcome respite from daily troubles and pains.²⁰ Gradually, thanks to such local volunteers in Manila as Jojo Guballa and the Soulstice break dance crew, the project came to include break dancing and basic education in reading, writing, science, and mathematics to support school studies.²¹

The main idea was to encourage street children through informal art workshops to employ their imagination and creativity to find ways for self-expression.²² The workshops usually included an assignment, such as transforming and writing one's name as a graffiti style tag, painting one's dreams on a t-shirt, making frames for photographs, developing ideas for sculptures, or creating a collage of one's life wishes as a mood board. First, the assignment was explained and demonstrated and then the children were provided the necessary materials and support—also from their parents—to complete their works of art. The parents were helping to deliver the meals and clean after class too.²³ Teaching was only one of the intentions spelled out by the project. Indeed, giving a chance for the children to nurture some notion of self-esteem became even more important. According to Ashton, it was more “about showing these kids that they are not invisible, that they are worth somebody's time.”²⁴ The importance of sharing time is emphasized also by the OCD:

“It's about making the time to go for a walk—a purposeful walk—and giving something in return to the people who allow you to trespass their turf. One of the best things you can give to a stranger is your time. We've given lots of it. Fun times for the kids, family time for the parents, community time for the neighbors, and pizza time of course for everyone.”²⁵

The core inspiration of the whole project was to spread caring and sharing. By initiating collaboration between the parents, the community, and the children, the project ultimately aimed to enhance the interaction and well-being of these underprivileged children—and the whole neighborhood. Furthermore, the project provided meals for the children, their parents, and neighbors in connection with the workshops. Sharing food is an integral component to any Filipino gathering and is an unequivocal sign of respect, peace, and togetherness. It is estimated that more than two thousand people took part in the activities organized by the Home School Project.²⁶ When the project started, there were no specific plans for the future, but the intention was to get more volunteers and supporters involved and to inspire other people to establish their own similar projects.²⁷ One of Ashton's personal aspirations was that he could continue developing the project and make it his way of life and his livelihood.²⁸ Unfortunately, the dreams did not come true. The project's funding was sparse to begin with. It was accomplished mainly by Ashton's own savings and the OCD micro-grants. Fundraising brought generous private donations from numerous Canadians, such as Dylan B, aka the Cameco Kid, and Kelly Rapko. Support also came from the Bonifacio Arts Foundation Inc. (BAFI)²⁹ and BBDO Guerrero, a local creative agency.³⁰ Without a continuous funding stream, however, it became difficult to maintain the activities on a scale they had hoped. In late May 2011, Ashton decided to move to Hong Kong for work.

According to the founder of the Office of Culture and Design, Clara Balaguer, the driving force behind the project was the artist's energetic personality and his commitment to explore, interact, and give back to the people he met. Ashton made every child feel special and important. Without him, it was difficult to continue despite their best efforts. For instance, with two other Filipino teachers, Jojo Guballa organized a Sunday Home School class to teach basic reading, mathematics, English, and ethics at Barangay Hall Vitas, in Tondo, from June to December 2011.³¹

Ashton did not give up, either, although he moved away. When he had a chance, he would travel and give a Home School class. Opportunities in new cities arrived in 2012, and in late January, Ashton headed for Sri Lanka, where he taught three art classes: the first in the slums of Colombo, the second in a community which was rebuilding itself after the 2004 tsunami near Uppuveli in Trincomalee, and the third in a refugee camp in Jaffna.³² The chance to teach a class in Old Dhaka in Bangladesh came in April 2012. In an overcrowded school where 1,200 children take turns to participate in either for morning or afternoon classes, Ashton had 120 enthusiastic students in his arts class.³³ In addition, the OCD has been able to invite Ashton back to Manila to teach on three occasions. The first time he returned on July 30-August 3, 2011 to give a workshop in collaboration with the Bantay Bata 163 program of the ABS-CBN Foundation³⁴ in Laguna and was able to provide two other workshops during the same visit.³⁵ The second chance to return to Manila on June 23-24, 2012, was made possible through fundraising in Saskatchewan and by Carmina Panlilio, an American donor. This time two workshops were organized, one on decorating t-shirts in Tayuman and the other based on Ashton's photographs in EDSA.³⁶

EDSA is a squatter community of around twelve families underneath the Magallanes SLEX Highway Flyover, close to the Makati commercial center. The original idea for this EDSA workshop was not realizable so instead they decided to work with those of Ashton's photographs that he happened to have along. The assignment was to choose one of the portraits and frame it according to the participants' own wishes. The children were more than happy to interact with Ashton's photographs, creating their own interpretations through colorful frames. In the end, a street gallery of the art works was established with the permission of the photographic shop on its blue wall (Fig 2.).³⁷

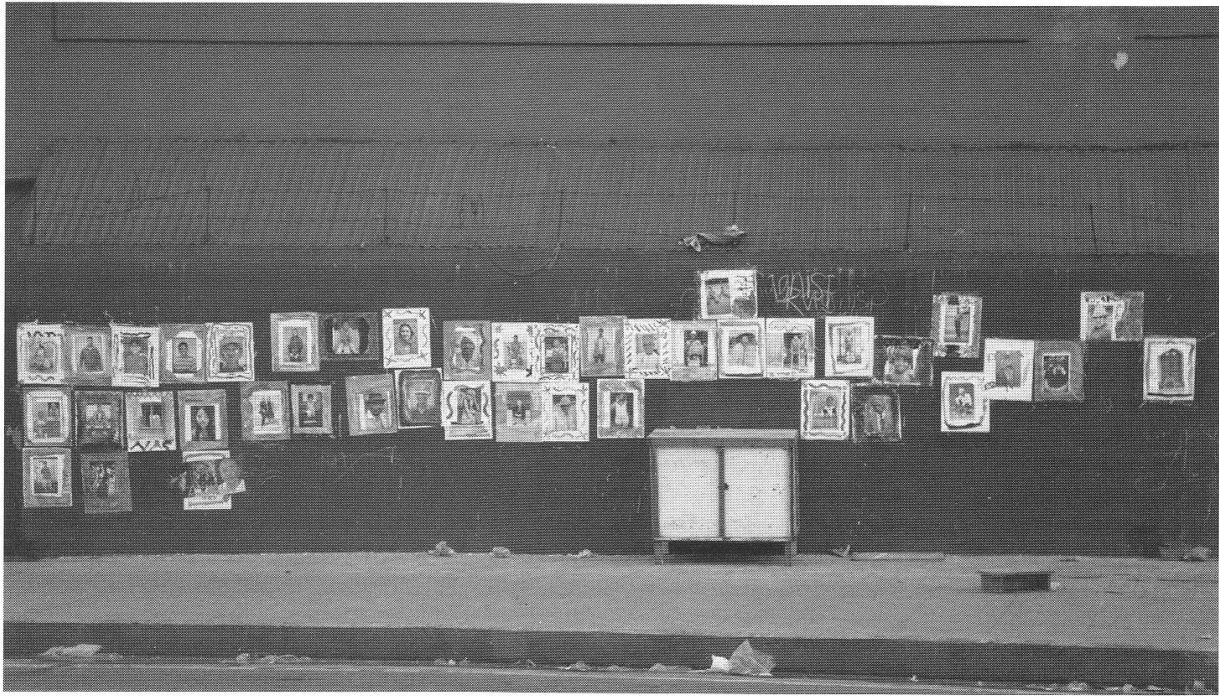


Fig. 2: The framed photographs in the street gallery in EDSA, Manila, 2012. Copyright by Kaid Ashton.

This temporary art exhibition gave children pride, caught the eye of people passing by, and momentarily broke the grayness with color and joyful creation. This was the only time a class was based on Ashton's photographs. It turned out to be his favorite.³⁸ Unfortunately, the city authorities did not appreciate the outcomes and took the gallery down soon after: "they do not agree that these initiatives (posting artwork) contribute anything to the 'beautification' of the city," wrote Balaguer.³⁹

The third time, Ashton came back on December 2, 2012, funded by BAFI. Five workshops were now on the agenda, with a focus on sculptures. First, the children were shown videos of the public art around Bonifacio Global City. The assignment was to draw what kind of alternative uses these sculptures could have if they were located in the children's own neighborhoods. This time too, one of the classes was held in EDSA.⁴⁰

It is often argued that in order to provide any results, community projects should be based on continuity. Even if giving a moment of joy through one workshop was a delightful experience for the children, the possibility to co-operate with the same community and the same children made things easier in the end. In addition, as Balaguer clarified, they understood that no matter how much they did, it would only be a tiny drop of hope. The problem of poverty and its impact on children in Manila is so severe that it would require more long-term efforts by different development programs and government commitment to a massive reform. By returning to give workshops in the same location, the organizers hoped to have some impact. Furthermore, despite the derelict surroundings, the children in EDSA were very enthusiastic to learn and were better-behaved than in some other similar neighborhoods in Manila. Collaboration with the children and the community was easy, especially thanks to the "mother figure" of a thirty-something lady named Esther, who took an interest in the children's well-being and was a mother herself. As a result, the EDSA children came to enjoy four classes on art with Ashton and another four with the Soulstice break dance crew.⁴¹

It is not easy to verify whether or not the Home School Project has had any long-term benefits to the children and/or to the communities. Balaguer is not entirely happy with the results, believing that much more should have been done to create lasting, long-term impact.⁴² However, Ashton is convinced that they truly did see short-term benefits in every class. At least for that brief moment, the children could forget their daily troubles and uncertainties and focus on just being kids and having fun.⁴³ This is a privilege taken for granted by people in developed countries, but it is not at all as self-evident to children growing up in slums. In addition, it is important to remember that there is a severe lack of possibilities for education in many Asian countries. It could of course be argued that learning art is not a top priority, but if art can be used to teach some basic values or even self-respect, its significance cannot be underestimated.

Ashton himself is satisfied with the project because donations and help from volunteers enabled the organizers to provide a number of classes. Despite this success, the fact that the project ended is a setback. Whether there will be a chance to continue the project in future is still completely open. While the practicalities are a challenge, Ashton would like to continue.⁴⁴

The project taught a lot to Ashton, too. When getting to be accepted by the people and interacting with them through workshops, Ashton was impressed how receptive to the classes the children and the communities. The derelict circumstances did not stand in the way of their engagement. Fundamentally, "everyone just needs an opportunity and someone to believe in them [...] and that lesson can be applied anywhere in the world—it's universal."⁴⁵ Ashton also realized that happiness does not depend on money. The whole experience opened his eyes to seeing how the majority of people live with so little. It made him very thankful for everything

he has and even for the ability to explore these places.⁴⁶ Access to the neighborhoods as a friend, not as a tourist or a reporter, also furthered his photographing and enabled him to take intimate portraits in order to tell the people's stories forward.

Incorporating Livelihoods Between Different Cities

After moving to Hong Kong, Ashton decided to share his experiences of seeing different aspects of the world and of building relationships with some fascinating people. This idea developed into a project entitled *People in Poverty*, which consisted of thirty portraits of individuals living in the poorest areas in Manila. Through the portraits and short captions in English and in Chinese recounting the protagonists' stories, Ashton wanted to display the severe contrast between lives in Manila and the first world—and especially the contrast to Hong Kong, a global business center.⁴⁷ Whether Ashton achieved his aim to remind privileged people of the destitute in the developing countries through individual stories, is hard to tell. However, at least according to the perceptions of a local noodle shop owner in Hong Kong mentioned in the CNN article, Ashton's method of employing individual stories did bring issues of poverty to a far more intimate level and raised the awareness of the viewer.⁴⁸

The ability to approach and interact with people is visible throughout Ashton's oeuvre of portraits, regardless of whether they were taken in conjunction with the Home School project or not. This is seen, for instance, in the series *Dignity in Labour*, pasted up with bilingual captions in Beijing and in Hong Kong during 2011-2013. The series portrays people from Taiwan, Burma, Jamaica, Laos, Cuba, Oman, Iran as well as from the cities of New York and Los Angeles.⁴⁹

The same relaxed intimacy is visible also in the portraits of the series entitled *Women Strong and Confident*, created in Hong Kong in 2011. "On any given day the majority of the images we see of women are ones that have been digitally manipulated, 'enhanced' and somewhere along the line that natural beauty is lost," Ashton writes and continues, "[w]ith these photographs, I have tried to capture their confidence and natural beauty while showcasing their strong personalities."⁵⁰ The fifteen portraits on women from Burma, Vietnam, Taiwan, Cuba, Philippines, Malaysia, Iran, and the United States were put up around the city with bilingual captions introducing the women's stories and identities. The series was dedicated to Ashton's mother who "showed me what hard work really is and has always encouraged me to believe in myself and keep my spirit free."⁵¹

One of the portraits which caught my eye in the streets of Hong Kong was of a woman whose smile embraced the world. Her full-body shot was originally part of the above series on women. But this time, Ashton had chosen to put up her facial portrait as a large wheat-paste in the modest, old neighborhood of Tai Hang (Fig. 3). Asked about the story behind this portrait, Ashton replied:

*"The [photograph of the] black lady was taken in LA. She was a recent survivor of breast cancer and full of energy and positive vibes. We talked for a while before I took the photograph and I feel as though I was able to really capture her energy and her soul."*⁵²



Fig. 3: Wheat-paste of a Los Angeles lady in Hong Kong, April 2013. Copyright by Minna Valjakka.

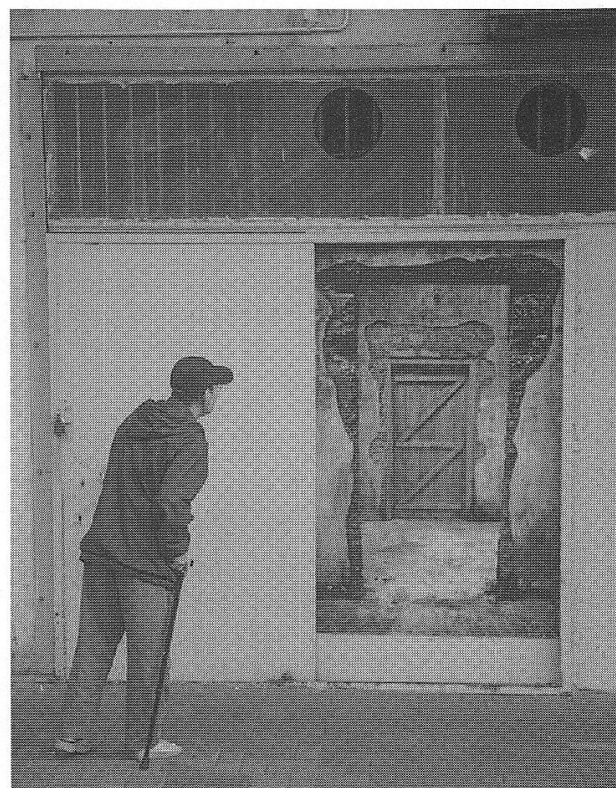


Fig. 4: A Hongkongnese looking at Kaid Ashton's photograph from the series *Through the Doors*. The photograph of the door was originally taken in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka. Hong Kong, 2013. Copyright by Kaid Ashton.

Encountering people who were willing to share their stories and to allow Ashton to take their photographs served to make Ashton feel even more strongly that he needed to return something. Occasionally, he would offer them a meal but it would not be adequate

enough. Most people he met, for instance, in Manila had barely any access to Internet, not to mention an email address. The Home School Project had been one way of giving back. He now found another: giving the people the portraits he had taken of them—framed. This interaction also inspired a series, *Pictures for the People*, in Manila in 2011.⁵³ Ashton saw clearly enough that “[a] framed picture is a small gesture, but I think it can enable people to see themselves in a positive way. I hope it can enhance self-confidence, self-esteem and provide the individual with positive outlook on the next day. Maybe that’s all in my mind, but the people here were very happy to receive a picture of themselves.”⁵⁴

In addition, to show his gratitude towards his collaborators too, Ashton made a series entitled *Inspirational Friends*, also put up in Hong Kong in 2012.⁵⁵ The series is somewhat exceptional because the seven black-and-white images, except one, are a tribute to artists and musicians in North America. Although the majority of Ashton’s oeuvre has focused on people and their portraits, he has also been interested in creating visual contrast through his photographs of urban or natural landscapes. Images of unspoiled nature appear to be readily appreciated by the local people—even in the derelict neighborhoods of Jaffna and Colombo where Ashton continued this series in early 2012. Usually, the local people would welcome Ashton’s paste-ups and would want to pose next to them for photographs. However, the surprising reception of the second natural landscape he posted in Jaffna left Ashton deeply touched. The pasting up of the work in the early morning hours did not cause any negative feedback from a group of friendly fishermen returning from their nightly trip, but the photograph was gone when Ashton came back later to take a better image of the work. The locals noticed his disappointment, and when he was leaving they called him back, asking him to follow them to a room where they kept the holy objects for the temple close by. To his amazement, Ashton discovered his photograph on the wall, beside a peacock and a picture of the Gods. This was a very humbling experience.⁵⁶

Ashton found similar positivity in Guangzhou in March 2012, where he was pasting up the remaining photographs of clear skies. The dissimilarity of the images in the industrialized and polluted urban environment of Guangzhou was extreme to say the least. The local people nevertheless liked what they saw. The guard of the industrial area followed Ashton without intervening, and while Ashton was putting up one of the works in a residential area, local people stood up for him when a local army member tried to stop his work.⁵⁷ In Ashton’s own experience, the majority of the local people’s reactions towards his work have been positive regardless of the subject theme of the image. As a rule, the people have been excited about having his photographs in their community, also enjoying the stories behind the photographs.⁵⁸ Ashton’s works obviously give a chance to connect with and compare experiences from different countries.

Still, the responses have not always been welcoming. In 2013, an uncomfortable incident occurred in Cairo, where Ashton was planning to work on his new series, *Through the Doors*. This series was initially inspired by the doors and doorways Ashton saw and photographed in Sri Lanka in early 2012.⁵⁹ It “was intended,” as he wrote in the blog, “to spark the imagination of the viewer and allow them to explore the idea of what lies behind a door and the numerous possibilities that can take place.”⁶⁰ The original idea was to create this series both in Hong Kong and in Cairo during January–April 2013, but things did not proceed as planned. While pasting up the first piece on a busy street in Cairo, Ashton was ordered to remove it. He went on to do as told, when around thirty aggressive men gathered and inquired about his nationality, what he was doing in Cairo, and what kind of propaganda his works were. The situation grew more hostile with more men gathering and starting to take hold of his belongings and inspecting his camera. To avoid any further trouble, Ashton ran away to his hotel and took care to destroy the posters, stickers and photographs of the incident. Consequently, this series of ten photographs was created only in Hong Kong.⁶¹

For Ashton, another way of connecting people through images is artistic collaborations. Since 2011, Ashton has experimented with graffiti writers and artists to explore new ways of creation in the streets. One way to work together is based on images exchange: Ashton sends his photograph(s) to a partner in arts who modifies the digital image(s) and sends them back to Ashton to be pasted on the walls. This is how collaboration has worked with the Canadian Luke Ramsey and Huskey Brown from London. The second form of collaboration is interaction through images in the same space: Ashton chose or allowed his partner to choose a photograph that would function as the starting point of the final work. After putting up the photograph, the other artist/writer would then continue interacting with the image and create the piece surrounding it.⁶² Naturally, with different companions, the outcomes vary from writing a poem in black in Chinese by Hongkongnese Xeme to multicolored and detailed pieces finished by Kaput from Vancouver.⁶³

As with Xeme, the collaborations have usually been short, one-time experiments. This was also the case with American Ewok MSK, KST crew from Manila and a Canadian Rove.⁶⁴ With Kaput it was different. Since the first co-created work in July 2012, the artists have worked together for an extended period. From August to December 2013, they were involved in ten collaborations around Vancouver on ten executive Saturdays (Fig. 5). The last piece was made on the walls of the Catalog Gallery in Vancouver for their exhibition “It’s a Wacky World!” From twenty photographs Ashton sent to Kaput, he chose ten.⁶⁵ After writing his own name around two photographs, Kaput ended up focusing on different words that corresponded with the portraits of people.



Fig. 5: Kaput-Free Iran, a collaboration by Kaid Ashton and Kaput in 2013. Copyright by Kaid Ashton.

The portrait of this young female artist was taken in Naqsh-e Jahan Square, in Esfahan, Iran. She made an impression on Ashton as “one of few Iranians that spoke openly about how the government suppresses people, particularly women and artists.”⁶⁶ From Kaput Ashton learned a lot about patience, paying attention to detail, and taking the effort to make the piece as good as it could be. The experiences from the collaborations were “mind-blowing”. For Ashton it was very inspirational to see how different artists interpreted and interacted with his photographs. He would definitely want to continue doing this also in future.⁶⁷

Forms of Socially Engaging Urban Art Images

Social activism needs aesthetics. But in our image-dominated world, to catch the attention of passers-by, even for a moment, has become a challenge. Kaid Ashton's blog contains many photographs that show local people keenly examining his photographs. People would stop to show interest, take photographs and even ask questions about the content, meaning and purpose of his work.⁶⁸ It is plausible that Ashton's photographs have raised awareness in some circles about social inequality, women's roles and status and the state of the urban environment, although his efforts have not gained much international attention compared to some other celebrities in the urban art scene.⁶⁹ His preferred method of visual dislocation, especially through portraits of ordinary people and their private stories in the captions, has nevertheless caught viewers' imagination. Indeed, Ashton's photographs gain aesthetic resonance from the juxtaposition of the content, site and the city's socio-cultural context. In Hong Kong in particular, approachable, human-size portraits are an exception in the public space dominated by glossy and digitally manipulated models. The indexicality of the photographic images is a key starting point for interaction. The interpretations are not, however, fixed but Ashton's work can create a continuum of perceptions depending on the viewer's life experiences, values, self-reflection and defensiveness. The public space of the city serves as a locus of a complex comparison across the boundaries of class, race, and gender, oscillating between notions of joy, curiosity, remorse, and shame.

The captions and sequence numbers of the works, indicating the sequence of the image in the series, transformed the series into a public art exhibition. As Ashton said, “it's a walking tour in the city with an educational purpose to it.”⁷⁰ He does not regard his actions as criminal because he is only putting up an art show with paper.⁷¹ As I have argued elsewhere in detail, the acceptance and the understanding of the levels of illegality of the urban art images varies remarkably depending primarily on the content, format, nationality of the creator, and the physical site where the work is put up.⁷² The captions besides the images have most likely made them even more acceptable and “legal” to local citizens as a form of urban art images with a message. They have thus enhanced the images' impressiveness.

To raise social awareness or to make socially engaged creative action, art works, and happenings in public space is nothing new. However, socially and/or politically related themes are still clearly a minority among urban art images in mainland Chinese cities, Hong Kong, and Tokyo. Of these, the scene in Hong Kong is the most varied in terms of socially engaged urban art images. For instance, both local and foreign artists reflect on the Tian'anmen Incident, criticize the government, and/or the issues of urban development. One popular way of engaging with the community to improve the living surroundings is to paint the walls.

Even if the urban art images might be able to beautify an area or raise the awareness of a passer-by, how could they initiate people into further actions? Occasionally, the work itself can be related to the development of a social project, as with the South African street artist Faith47 and her latest work the Harvest. Every time the project, Another Light Up, manages to raise enough funding to install a street light, a smaller light is added to the work and lit up.⁷³ One successful example from Hong Kong is the project of miniature “cage people” by Kwong Chi Kit, his colleagues and two miniature artists in collaboration with the Society for Community Organization (SoCO). In order to make people realize the inhuman living conditions some of them have, three very lifelike miniature

people in their “cage homes” made from rat-catching cages were displayed around Hong Kong. Information beside the cages was complemented by a QR code in order for the viewers to send an email petition to the local government for more public estates. Around 10,000 emails were sent.⁷⁴

Without substantial support, it is nonetheless challenging for an individual artist to maintain a long-term socially engaged art project such as the Home School Project by Kaid Ashton. Despite the fact of not being able to continue with the project, Ashton is hopeful about developing further means in the future. He believes that whenever a passer-by stops to look at his work, it has had some sort of impact on the person. And while Ashton has exhibited in ten galleries, he still strongly prefers making his art visible in the public space because this makes it more powerful and creates more interaction with people.⁷⁵ Kaid Ashton is an artist-explorer who uses his works to raise awareness, to inspire others, and to travel the world. He admits enjoying the adrenaline rush of the possibility of experiencing the “unknown” city and culture without any specific plans and prejudices. What is more, the chance to interact and connect with people over and above the language barrier by capturing their image through camera is a moment beyond words. Ashton also mentions that every once in a while he still has “the feeling that something positive is going to come out of all this and it already has” —being able to meet amazing people and see the world; all these experiences are invaluable.⁷⁶ They are both part of the motivation and the significance of his work.

Notes and References

- 1 This paper is still work in progress, to be improved based on feedback from the conference. It is part of my three-year postdoctoral research project, “East Asian Urban Images—self-expression through visual images in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul” funded by the Academy of Finland.
- 2 With urban art images I denote non-institutional creative actions that leave a visible imprint on the public space. They can consist of pictures, text, and numbers, or three-dimensional objects and other materials—or any combination of these. For more detailed information see Minna Valjakka, “Kiinalaisen urbaanin taiteen kulttuurisidonnaisuus.” [“The cultural contextuality of Chinese urban art.”] *Tahiti* 1, 2012, <http://tahiti.fi/01-2012/tieteelliset-artikkelit/kiinalaisen-urbanin-taiteen-kulttuurisidonnaisuus/>. See also Minna Valjakka, “Contesting the levels of il/legality of urban art images in China,” *Review of Culture*, forthcoming 2014.
- 3 Kaid Ashton, email message to author, May 14, 2013. See also “Kaid Ashton,” on the Home School Project’s (HSP) website, accessed May 2, 2014, <http://homeschoolproject.wordpress.com/kaid-ashton-2/>.
- 4 Kaid Ashton, email message to author March 1, 2013. See also HSP’s website “Kaid Ashton”; Ben Sin, “Signs of the Times,” *South China Morning Post*, December 4, 2011, <http://www.scmp.com/article/986717/signs-times>.
- 5 Kaid Ashton, email message to author May 10, 2014.
- 6 Kaid Ashton, video call interview with the author, May 14, 2014. The earlier perceptions on inspiration were mentioned in Ralph Mendoza, “Take It to the Streets,” *Rogue*, September 2011. Available on Office of Culture and Design’s website, <http://officeocd.com/news/homesch-rogue-magazine/>.
- 7 Ashton, email message, May 10, 2014. See also HPS’s website “Kaid Ashton”; Sin, “Signs of the Times.”
- 8 For some images of the 2010 “moving gallery,” see Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Whole Car,” August 30, 2010, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2010/08/whole-car.html>.
- 9 Ashton, email message, May 10, 2014; Ashton, interview.
- 10 HPS’s website “Kaid Ashton”.
- 11 Kaid Ashton, email message to author, May 12, 2014. For images, see Kaid Ashton’s blog, “City of Compton,” October 15, 2010, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2010/10/city-of-compton.html> and “42 and a half hours in Toronto...”, November 7, 2010, http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2010_11_01_archive.html.
- 12 Ashton, interview; Ashton, email message, May 10, 2014.
- 13 Ashton, interview.
- 14 For recent information on JR, see for instance his website, accessed May 14, 2014, <http://www.jr-art.net/>.
- 15 Ashton, interview. See also Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Homeschool,” February 19, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/02/homeschool.html>. Postings were usually made afterwards, which is why the dates of the postings do not correspond exactly with the dates of the workshops. See also “Homeschool” on the Office of Culture and Design’s (OCD) website, accessed May 4, 2014, <http://officeocd.com/projects/homeschool/>.
- 16 The OCD was established in December 2010 by Clara Balaguer as “a platform for artists, designers, writers and projects that investigate solutions for (primarily) developing world issues”. In practice, any profits deriving mainly from publications are used to develop future projects. At the moment, to keep the expenses as low as possible, Balaguer has no permanently hired employees or office. Clara Balaguer, video call interview by the author, May 5, 2014. For further information, see also the Office of Culture and Design’s website, accessed May 4, 2014, <http://officeocd.com/>.
- 17 Ashton, interview; Balaguer, interview. For more information, see OCD’s website “Homeschool.” See also Home School Project’s website, accessed May 14, 2014, <http://homeschoolproject.wordpress.com/>. For video clips posted by OCD, see “Homeschool 1 EDSA SOUTH SUPER HIGHWAY,” accessed May 14, 2014, <http://vimeo.com/27368927>, and “Homeschool 22 AURORA BOULEVARD,” accessed May 14, 2014, <http://vimeo.com/27369214>.
- 18 Balaguer, interview. See also Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Homeschool.”
- 19 “Association De Damas De Filipinas,” on the Home School Project’s website, accessed May 2, 2014, <http://damasphilippines.wordpress.com/visit-us/>.
- 20 Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Homeschool x 6 x 7 x 8 - The Orphanage,” April 3, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/04/homeschool-x-6-x-7-x-8-orphanage.html>; “Homeschool x 18 & 19: The Orphanage and Children’s Hospital,” July 25, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/07/homeschool-x-18-19-orphanage-and.html>. See also “Class #18 Orphanage Class #19 Children’s Hospital,” on Home School Project’s website, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://homeschoolproject.wordpress.com/2011/08/04/homeschool-18-19/>.
- 21 Balaguer, interview. See also HSP’s website “The Project”; OCD’s website “Homeschool.”
- 22 See “The Project,” on the Home School Project’s website, accessed May 4, 2014, <http://homeschoolproject.wordpress.com/>. See also Kaid Ashton’s interview by Adobo Magazine, “adoboLIVE! Canadian artist Kaid Ashton on the 3-year Home School Project’s,” published December 6, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69tHXurRDwg>.
- 23 OCD’s website “Homeschool.”
- 24 HSP’s website “The Project.”
- 25 OCD’s website “Homeschool.”
- 26 HSP’s website “The Project.” See also Adobo Magazine, “adoboLIVE! Canadian artist Kaid Ashton.”
- 27 Balaguer, interview; OCD’s website “Homeschool.”
- 28 Balaguer, interview; Ashton, interview.
- 29 For the Bonifacio Arts Foundation Inc., see their website, accessed May 10, 2014, <http://www.artsatbgc.org/>.
- 30 Ashton, interview; HSP’s website “The Project.” For BBDO Guerrero, see their website, accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.bbdoguerrero.com/index.php>.
- 31 Balaguer, interview. See also OCD’s “Homeschool.”
- 32 Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Homeschool x 24 x The Slums of Colombo,” February 6, 2012, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2012/02/homeschool-x-24-x-slums-of-colombo.html>; “Homeschool x 25: The Tsunami School,” February 15, 2012, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2012/02/homeschool-x-25-tsunami-school.html>; “Homeschool x 26: The Refugee Camp,” March 10, 2012, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2012/03/homeschool-x-26-refugee-camp.html>.
- 33 Ashton, interview. Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Homeschool x 27: Dhaka’s Tenement Buildings,” April 29, 2012, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2012/04/homeschool-x-27-dhakas-tenement.html>.
- 34 For the Bantay Bata 163 program, see their website, accessed May 14, 2014, <http://www.abs-cbnfoundation.com/bb163/>.
- 35 Exact dates given by Clara Balaguer, email message to author, May 13, 2014. See also OCD’s website “Homeschool” and Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Homeschool x 21: Laguna,” August 14, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/08/homeschool-x-21-laguna.html>; “Homeschool x 22: Back to the Start,” August 24, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/08/homeschool-x-22-back-to-start.html>; “Homeschool x 23: The Tenements,” October 11, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/10/homeschool-x-23-tenements.html>.
- 36 Balaguer, email message. See also OCD’s website “Homeschool” and Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Homeschool x 28 x Tayuman,” July 31, 2012, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2012/07/homeschool-x-28-x-tayuman.html>; “Homeschool x 29: The Street Kids of EDSA x Kaid Ashton,” September 18, 2012.
- 37 Ashton, interview; Balaguer, email message. See also Kaid Ashton’s blog, “Homeschool x 29: The Street Kids of EDSA x Kaid Ashton,” September 18, 2012.
- 38 Ashton, interview.
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- 41 Balaguer, interview.
 42 Ashton, interview.
 43 Ashton, interview.
 44 Balaguer, interview.
 45 Ashton, interview.
 46 Ashton, interview.
 47 Ashton interview. See also Natalie Robehmed, "Slums to cities: street art's Pied Piper," CNN, July 31, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/07/31/slum.street.art/> and Kaid Ashton's blog, "Poverty Paste: Series 1/3," July 26, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/07/poverty-paste-series-13.html>; "People in Poverty: Series 2/3," August 6, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/08/people-in-poverty-series-23.html>, "People in Poverty: Series 2/3," August 22, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/08/people-in-poverty-series-33.html>.
 48 Robehmed, "Slums to cities."
 49 Kaid Ashton's blog, "Dignity in Labour: Beijing 1/2," September 15, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/09/dignity-in-labour-beijing-12.html>; "Dignity in Labour: Beijing 2/2," September 21, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/09/dignity-in-labour-beijing-22.html>.
 50 Kaid Ashton's blog, "Women: Strong and Confident 1/3," November 7, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/11/women-strong-and-confident-13.html>.
 51 Ibid. For the whole series, see also "Women: Strong and Confident 2/3," November 17, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/11/women-strong-and-confident-23.html>; "Women: Strong and Confident 3/3," December 6, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/12/women-strong-and-confident-33.html>.
 52 Kaid Ashton, email message to author, May 14, 2013.
 53 Kaid Ashton's blog, "Pictures for the People," April 16, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/04/pictures-for-people.html>.
 54 Ibid.
 55 Kaid Ashton's blog, "Inspirational Friends," October 1, 2011, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2011/10/inspirational-friends.html>.
 56 Kaid Ashton's blog, "Saskatchewan to Sri Lanka," February 20, 2012, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2012/02/saskatchewan-to-sri-lanka.html>.
 57 Kaid Ashton's blog, "Saskatchewan Skies to Guangzhou Smog," March 27, 2012, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2012/03/saskatchewan-skies-to-guangzhou-smog.html>.
 58 Ashton, interview.
 59 For some of the original photographs, see Kaid Ashton's blog, "The Doorways of Sri Lanka," March 3, 2012, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2012/03/doorways-of-sri-lanka.html>.
 60 Kaid Ashton's blog, "Through the Doors," April 16, 2013, http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2013_04_01_archive.html.
 61 Ashton, interview; Kaid Ashton's blog, "Through the Doors."
 62 Ashton, interview.
 63 I was personally able to see the collaborations with local Jams and Xeme in Hong Kong in 2013.
 64 Ashton, interview. See e.g., Kaid Ashton's blog, "Free Ceschi," September 12, 2013, <http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2013/09/free-ceschi.html>.
 65 Ashton, interview. See also, for example, Kaid Ashton's blog, "Kaput and Kaid Ashton Collaborative Series," January 1, 2014, http://kaidashton.blogspot.jp/2014_01_01_archive.html, see also "Kaput x Kaid Ashton collaboration walls," Juxtapoz, December 28, 2013, <http://www.juxtapoz.com/graffiti/kaput-x-kaid-ashton-collaboration-walls>. The exhibition opened on December 7, 2013.
 66 Kaid Ashton's blog, "Kaput and Kaid Ashton Collaborative Series."
 67 Ashton, interview.
 68 Ashton, interview.
 69 Only three articles have been published: Sin, "Signs of the Times"; Mendoza, "Take It to the Streets"; Mitch Moxley, "Artist's mission brightens poor neighborhoods," June 3, 2011, CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/explorations/life/artists-mission-brighten-neighborhoods-446751>. For a brief video interview, see Nick P., "Kaid Ashton In Los Angeles," published in June 21, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMvRAyPpQA>. A Filipino television company did make a short interview but it was apparently never released (Balaguer, interview). Ashton is not mentioned in either of the two books on graffiti in Hong Kong: Tsan-Kuo Chang and Chung-Linn Kao, 塗鴉香港：公共空間、政治與全球化 Graffiti Hong Kong: Public space, politics and globalization (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2012); Yingxuan Kuang (ed.) 塗鴉 [Graffiti], (Hong Kong: 上書局 UpPublications, 2011). Nor does he appear in the latest compilations such as Rafael Schacter, The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013); Anna Wacławek, Graffiti and Street Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).
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 71 Ashton, interview; Sin, "Signs of the Times."
 72 Valjakka, "Contesting the levels of il/legality."
 73 Deva Lee, "The story behind Cape Town's newest street mural," April 24, 2014, <http://matadornetwork.com/change/story-behind-cape-towns-newest-street-mural/>.
 74 Kwong Chi Kit, interview with the author, April 18, 2013, Hong Kong.
 75 Ashton, interview.
 76 Ashton, interview.