

REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN ESTONIAN GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

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Abstract: The paper focuses on gender aspects in graffiti and street art as context- and communication-based cultural phenomena. The key issues tackled here are how gender aspects and gender-based communication are expressed in graffiti and the nature of the gendered aesthetics of street art. The analysis aims to identify gender clichés in graffiti, illustrating stereotypical views from a broader sociocultural perspective. The study also highlights the role of graffiti and street art in challenging gender stereotypes and bringing novel concepts to the fore. The paper combines studies on graffiti and street art with the gender studies approach and employs as a research method the contextualisation of graffiti and street art as ephemeral cultural phenomena from a viewer's perspective. Graffiti works collected mainly in 2010–2020 and held in the online graffiti database of the Estonian Literary Museum constitute the sources of this paper.

Keywords: graffiti, contextualisation, cultural studies, gendered aesthetics, gender studies, femininity, masculinity, street art

Attitudes towards graffiti and street art can significantly vary depending on whether they are approached from the perspective of a creator or a viewer of graffiti, as well as the viewer's status and occupational role. As researchers studying graffiti, the authors find it important to present here their own attitudes towards graffiti, as it also helps determine their position in investigating this phenomenon.

Literary researcher Eve Annuk has previously not been involved in the study of graffiti but has past personal experiences with the subject. She became more keenly interested in graffiti after seeing a Loesje¹ message on a streetlamp post a long time ago – “My wings couldn’t take the criticism, so I flew away” –, which had such an unexpected, inspiring effect on her and sounded as if a poem amidst the city’s daily bustle. The contrast between the mundanity of the city and poeticity of the message made her reflect on it, inspiring interest towards the message and graffiti in general. It also appeared to be a very democratic phenomenon: someone simply wrote a message in a public space, hoping that someone else would read it. This freedom of expression outside the formal institutions regulating society also served as a countermeasure challenging social authority structures.

Piret Voolaid became involved in studying graffiti in 2010, as she participated in the Estonian-Polish joint project “Creativity and tradition in cultural communication”, which analysed rhetorical folklore in Polish and Estonian graffiti. As a folklorist and researcher of minor forms of folklore, her interests have mostly focused on paremiological graffiti;² she has studied the representations and performance purposes of textuality in graffiti (Voolaid 2012, 2013b), and has compiled a genre-typological graffiti database conforming to the principles of folklore studies (Voolaid 2013a).

The paper focuses on the aspects of gender in Estonian graffiti – a topic which has so far eluded more rigorous scholarly study. The authors’ choice of the subject was also inspired by the fact that Estonian graffiti repertoire suggests that it is a male-dominated field with very few female authors represented. Furthermore, graffiti does not seem to be gender neutral from the perspective of viewers either, which has prompted research questions such as how gender aspects and gender-based communication are represented in graffiti and what is the nature of the gendered aesthetics of graffiti.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

Researchers have defined and/or outlined graffiti, street art and other forms of so-called public art variously (see, e.g., Blanché 2015; Szpila 2013; Ferrell 2019 [2016]), and this is also the case in the Estonian context (Leete 1995; Palkov & Sepsivart & Siplane 2009; Joala 2017). For example, Sirje Joala, a street artist and promoter of street art under her artist name Sirla, argues that “street art and muralism are two separate art movements”. By muralism she means large wall paintings that have been officially sanctioned by the authorities (Joala 2017: 9, 28).

In this paper, the term graffiti has been used in its broader sense, marking any independent street art executed in various styles and techniques. Graffiti and street art are understood as both a visual and textual form of representation in a public space, and as a communicative dynamic context-centred cultural phenomenon set in a specific time period (Voolaid 2014: 237). In principle, any one of us could be an author of this phenomenon, even though it is mainly created by young people who wish to express their ideology or (artistic) aspirations.

Graffiti and street art can be approached as belonging to both art and subculture. As a social phenomenon, graffiti is a form of communication which is related to the use of social, i.e., public/urban space, and as such it is, in a way, the most publicly visible form of contemporary urban culture. Its intricate subtexts, however, may remain elusive for the spectators as the authors embed allusions, the history of the subculture, and cryptic messages in their works that an uninformed viewer may not fully understand. Thus, while being highly visible, graffiti and street art “are often invisible as well”. But there exists also another dynamic of visibility and invisibility, such as the presentation of subcultural belonging where an author paints over a rival’s work (Ferrell 2019 [2016]: xxxii).

Graffiti and street art have also been understood as “forms of edgework”, the fluid interaction of skills and risk in dangerous situations, through which those involved are able to “push out to the edges of human experience” (Lyng 1990; Ferrell 2019 [2016]: xxxiii).

As a form of urban art, graffiti is associated with urban space as an unofficial unsanctioned method of representation and as such it is sometimes considered to be vandalism (from a legal point of view); defining graffiti as illegal depends also on the jurisdiction of a given country (Blanché 2015: 34).³ At the same time, the illegal, “unsanctioned” nature of graffiti suggests that it is an argument towards capitalism and commercialism, it cannot function in the commercial sense and, as such, it is independent, unlike the “saleable” art displayed in galleries (ibid.). While being highly visible in the public space, graffiti and street art may not be understood in the same way by everyone – rather the other way around. While graffiti and street art may speak for themselves, they speak differently with everyone (Blanché 2015: 38). For example, for many passers-by, graffiti and street art in the urban environment are “forms of visual noise that they ignore” (Blanché 2015: 36).

According to Blanché, another important feature of graffiti and street art is that they can be characterised by participation and interactivity. Anyone can participate in a graffiti work, paint over it, write or add something to it; any passer-by can become an active participant in its creation (Blanché 2015: 37).

In this sense, graffiti is a democratic, open and dialogic form of representation, which is accessible to anyone who is able to add comments to it.

Graffiti, in general, is a non-institutional art, and as such it stands apart from public art, which is bound by bureaucratic rules, such as the need to apply for permissions. For example, in recent years, several apartment buildings in the city of Tartu, Estonia, have been decorated with intriguing murals, most of which are associated with the official project SmartEnCity (2016–2021).⁴ This is an example of following bureaucratic rules, such as asking for permission from the local government, the artists commissioned being professionals in creating urban art, etc.

On the other hand, graffiti has been associated with power, more specifically power hierarchies in society. This represents an important issue since graffiti and street art have been seen as oppositional or as subversive to public authorities (Joala 2017: 125). Graffiti as a statement of position prompts the questions about to whom public urban space belongs and who has the right to display their messages there, as well as the question of art (and culture, in more general terms) as an institutionalised discipline, juxtaposing it with non-institutionalised art (or culture).

In his essay “Kool Killer ou l’insurrection par les signes” (1976), the French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard has pointed out the political meaning of graffiti, which is associated with the social power system. Baudrillard argues that graffiti in the urban landscape violates the rules of the game, dismantles the urban sign system and cultural code with the nonsensicality that it conveys. Namely this latter feature is the strength of graffiti because as such it also acts against symbolic authority as a radical, revolutionary cultural practice. Graffiti does not carry a political message, but it is “a savage cultural process with neither goal, ideology, nor content, at the level of signs” (Baudrillard 2005 [1976]: 33). Graffiti in essence acts as a revolutionary counterculture of mass media, an attack against the code of cultural hegemony.

Discussing the relations between graffiti, street art and (public) authority, artist Tanel Rander argues:

The authorities, with their institutional culture, have used the concept of street art as a platform for legalising certain forms of ‘street crime’. This is partly a result of natural deregulation, especially in areas where street art puts extreme pressure on public authorities and private owners, and where a lack of resources does not allow the walls of buildings and subway trains to be kept spotlessly clean at all times. So, whether street crime is considered art or vice versa is merely a political decision – either way, street art is an indicator of the viability of public order and also indicates the

struggle for public space. ... In my mind, it is precisely real tensions over power that are the very stuff of street art – there is a set of scales with the authority and might of the powers that is on the one side, and subversive intervention on the other. (Rander 2017: 3–4)

By associating graffiti with the position of power (graffiti as opposed to public authority), Rander implicitly refers to a male author when he speaks about the author of graffiti. He discusses the work of Edward von Lõngus, arguing that “Edward von Lõngus is Estonia’s ‘very own Banksy’,⁵ whose works have the ability to take our national culture, afflicted as it is by an inferiority complex, and transport it to the wide world” (Rander 2017: 4). Rander is also critical of national culture and the institutions that represent it, claiming that cultural institutions are “an extension of public authority and an embodiment of Estonian ideology” and since Edward von Lõngus “mixes the authority of global culture and the sacral quality of national culture, he automatically gets entangled in national ideology” (ibid.).

SOURCES, METHOD OF COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The sources used in this research are from the graffiti database of the Estonian Literary Museum (Voolaid 2013a), which was started in 2013. The database holds photographs of graffiti works, collected mainly by Piret Voolaid but also by others. Photographs of about 800 images of graffiti have been taken since January 2010, focusing on public spaces in Tartu but also other locations in Estonia and other countries.

Technology plays a major role in collecting and saving place-related graffiti, as it expands the lifetime of graffiti. As a photograph, a graffiti image may survive much longer than the original work in its actual location where it may have already disappeared. In outdoor space, graffiti is vulnerable to the environmental impact (even simple rain may wash it away) but it may also be painted over when it is perceived as an act of vandalism in public space. Other graffiti creators may also write or paint it over. Graffiti and street art are temporary, ephemeral, disappearing, which is why photography is a good tool for documenting a piece of graffiti (Blanché 2015: 37). Other researchers have also compiled graffiti databases using photographs (see Novak 2015; Flynn & Hansen 2015).

The graffiti database is a fine example of combining a need in the humanities and solutions of information technology, resulting in a web application with an access to the folkloristic genre-typological data corpus (see also Voolaid 2014). The aim of such an online solution is to preserve a cultural phenomenon (which

is often very temporary) and present the material as a systematic corpus of folklore. An academic database of graffiti differs from online blogs and albums on this topic particularly in that it is tailored to suit the scholarly needs of specific researchers. A search engine allows a researcher to search for a graffiti work by specific features (e.g., in addition to graffiti text itself, by the place and time of collection, the name of the collector, language, technology, keyword, etc.). Thus, the database provides metadata on each graffiti image. This includes folkloristic typology. A list of the types or categories arranged on the basis of variants that are similar, or can be grouped together on the basis of contents or form, is revealed under the link titled 'Graffiti'.⁶ In cases where more than one variant exists, the number of variants is given after a slant bar following the type number. A type includes graffiti on a similar topic documented in different places, or images of the same graffiti text at different times to highlight the dynamic nature of a graffiti text as efficiently as possible. The diachronic corpus of documents is a useful source for researchers of folklore and culture but also for the wider general public to use for entertainment purposes. Easy access to the material and English translations of the texts favour international academic cooperation regardless of the users' physical location. To serve the needs of researchers, the option of statistical data analysis based on genre specifics has been added to the database.

Graffiti art research requires graffiti to be contextualised as its meaning is always associated with its context. The most important context for understanding graffiti is subcultural because graffiti is often based on subculture and lifestyle. Also, the context of the environment where the graffiti has been created is important – a specific place in the urban environment with text sketches and visual images – in this sense, graffiti art is always a site-specific art form (Novak 2015: 14).

The graffiti database of the Estonian Literary Museum contains details about the location of graffiti works, and the more recent images in particular have been photographed from different angles and from close up and at a distance. Also, there are single references to the context of the image in the database, although, unfortunately, in most cases these have not been included.

In terms of context, information related to the authors is also important: who they are, are they male or female, their age, the subculture that they adhere to, etc. Unfortunately, the graffiti database of the literary museum does not allow exploring all these aspects, because the author's information is most often lacking. Linking a graffiti artwork to a specific subcultural context often proves impossible, which presents the main limitation of the approach in this paper.

The article analyses graffiti as a combination of visual and textual representation, in which both elements are essential, even though graffiti may often be limited only to an image or a text.

About a quarter of the material in the database includes a reference to the gender aspect, which allows analysing graffiti art from aspects such as gendered imagery and/or texts and their role in graffiti as a whole, depiction of femininity and masculinity, etc. The database is limited and does not allow for major generalisation, but still gives some idea of the gender-related meanings of graffiti.

What needs to be considered here is contextuality – where and how has a graffiti work been placed – and also information about its author, if it happens to be available. Whenever possible, an attempt has been made to conceptualise the subcultural context of graffiti, even though the viewers may know nothing about it and even we, researchers, are often not aware of it, the same way that information about the author is in most cases lacking. Graffiti artists often hide their gender, using gender-neutral tags to mark their authorship. There are artists or groups of graffiti artists whose name is gender-marked, for example Edward von Lõngus. However, most of the works represented in the graffiti database lack any indication of the author.

Thus, similarly to Vittorio Parisi (2015: 54), the interpretation of graffiti / street art presented here must be approached from the standpoint of the graffiti / street art spectator, not from that of its writer/artist. The setup in this paper somewhat resembles that of Parisi as it also inquires to which measure graffiti expresses or reveals femininity or masculinity or the question of gender in general.

In a way, the approach presented here can be viewed as related to autoethnography: it is visual in that it analyses visual artefacts and the archives containing photographs of these artefacts (see Hamdy 2015: 69). But the authors' own experience with graffiti and intuitive interpretations have influenced the approach, as indicated in the experience of graffiti perception mentioned at the beginning of the article, which contributed to the positive predilection for understanding and analysing graffiti. This also means that the authors, as researchers of graffiti, are not always neutral observers if their experiential/intuitive attitude towards the subject is rather positive.

The approach here can be understood also as an investigation of the gender aspects of graffiti in the Estonian context, which reveals the inevitably limited perspective of the authors as researchers. This could also be called situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). According to Donna Haraway, scientific knowledge is related to a specific context and a specific subject position, i.e., she criticises the myth of scientific objectivity, arguing that all knowledge depends on the position and standpoint of the researcher. Since the latter also influences knowledge itself (the ways in which this knowledge is created and attributed meaning to), it is important to highlight one's position as a researcher.

Graffiti researchers have mainly associated graffiti and street art with masculine subculture, understanding it as a place for constructing masculine identities (Macdonald 2001: 94–150; 2019: 187). It is also claimed that graffiti culture relies on hegemonic forms of masculinity, which are altered through subordinated masculinities to produce new systems of meaning. These new masculinities emerge from a dialogue between politics of race, gender and nationality, consumer culture, resistance, and other factors (Lombard 2013: 178).

The standards and values of graffiti and street art complicate the total acceptance of women in this topic (Macdonald 2019 [2016]: 188). Jessica N. Pabón has described graffiti as “a presumably male masculine subcultural activity, whereby because of their gender difference females are thought to be unable to perform on par, or felicitously, with their male counterparts” (Pabón 2013).

Graffiti has also been considered a primarily youth-led subculture and since the graffiti subculture “celebrates social deviance” and encourages its participants to resist conventional ideas about growing up, it “exceeds social expectations for girls” (Pabón-Colón 2018: 3). But also our, the spectators’, ways of seeing graffiti remain heavily influenced by hegemonic Western gender norms (Pabón 2019 [2016]: 79).

Graffiti may also represent gendered aesthetics (Parisi 2015: 54); however, as Vittorio Parisi has found, there is no direct link between the author’s gender and this aesthetics. The graffiti created by women does not necessarily represent feminine imagery, such as the so-called soft topics like love. Also, depiction of a naked woman’s body does not necessarily indicate that it was created by a man. A discussion of the gender aspect in graffiti usually focuses on whether and how the creation of male and female graffiti authors differs (e.g., Lombard 2013; Macdonald 2001, 2019 [2016]; Pabón 2013, 2019 [2016]; Parisi 2015). This approach requires knowing who the author is. Indeed, in the international context it often is the case, at least as far as more famous art works are concerned. If the authors remain anonymous, an analysis can only entail the gender aspects of images and texts, to the extent they can be detected in graffiti; however, a rather significant part of graffiti appears to be gender-neutral.

The graffiti database of the Estonian Literary Museum, however, contains a few images by known authors and this allows associating the interpretation with the author’s gender, which at times or in some topics may be important. Regardless of that, the gender of a graffiti author is not necessarily a decisive factor, as female authors do not necessarily create graffiti that is different than that created by men. This aspect is more broadly related to the idiosyncrasy of artistic/cultural representation. Gender identity and its cultural manifestations do not stand in direct relation with each other, which is why this kind of link cannot be assumed in terms of cultural artefacts, including graffiti. Also, female artists or authors do not necessarily paint or write about so-called feminine topics (e.g., motherhood), and can be entirely gender neutral in their approach.

The issue of gender and representation has been tackled by art historian Linda Nochlin in her already canonical work “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971), in which she explains the lack of representation of women in art history with their limited access to the field of learning and practising art as for that they had to have a good fortune to be born white, middle class, and male. On the other hand, she points out that women do not necessarily create art that is in some ways different or in so-called feminine style, i.e., there is no direct and unconditional link between gender and artistic achievements or style, as she calls naïve the “idea that art is direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience” (Nochlin 2000 [1975]: 16). Also, keeping the gender aspect in mind allows us to highlight graffiti as a gendered or gender-related communication. While graffiti does speak to the people viewing it, they are still men and women who, similarly to the authors of graffiti, may understand the message of a graffiti work completely differently. Even the city as an environment is not gender-neutral, which in turn may influence how graffiti is being created and understood.

REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY

The material included in the graffiti database of the Estonian Literary Museum reveals that approximately 20–25% of graffiti works refer to gender in some way or another, in either its visual or textual aspect. While some depict men or women, also completely genderless creatures or odd (fantasy) characters can be found (see Fig. 1). A text may also associate in some way with the subjects of women, men, or gender in general.



Figure 1. Vallikraavi Street, Tartu. Photograph by Anastasiya Fiadotova 2019.

Remarkably, the references to (famous) men, both in the form of quotes and visual images, far outnumber those to (famous) women. One reason for that may be that the majority of graffiti authors are men and for them authority is represented mostly by men.

The gallery of men depicted in graffiti works ranges from world-famous ones to those known locally. There is a remarkably high number of references to writers from Estonia and other countries and quotes by these authors: Anton Hansen Tammsaare, Artur Alliksaar, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy, Hans Christian Andersen, Haruki Murakami, and others. It appears that literature and (male) writers constitute an important source of inspiration for graffiti writers through which to convey their message. This is also an indication of the importance of literature in today's world. One of the widely quoted favourite authors is the Swiss writer Robert Walser. Among the Estonian authors who have inspired graffiti artists, the most popular one is Artur Alliksaar with his highly unique poetic style with several quotes. The portrait of novelist Oskar Luts in front of his home museum in Riia Street in Tartu (Fig. 2) is complemented with a quote from his book *Suvi* ('Summer'): "*Einoh, kui te nüüd nalja ei tee, siis see on küll päris kena nali*" (Why no, if you're not joking right now, then it is a damn nice joke).



Figure 2. Riia Street, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid, March 2015.

Quite often the graffiti works refer to Estonian and internationally known politicians (Vladimir Putin, Andrus Ansip, Jürgen Ligi, Edgar Savisaar), also pop singers and artists (Koit Toome, Uku Suviste, stripper Marko Tasane). Next to Estonian musicians, also several Western pop artists are represented, such as the British singer Pete Doherty or US rapper Kendrick Lamal. Some more specific references require knowledge of the specific subcultural context, such as the reference to chemist Albert Hofmann, who is known for having synthesised the psychotropic substance LSD, or Ülo Kiple, who was an Estonian graffiti artist active in the 1980s. Fictional characters, however, are scarce. Worth noting here are Sammalhabe (Mossbeard) (see Fig. 10) and Kalevipoeg (Son of Kalev) and hedgehog in *Kalevipoeg 3.0*, the work by Edward von Lõngus, reinvented with the Son of Kalev as a biomechanical super soldier and the hedgehog running his operation centre, photographed under Vabadussild (Freedom Bridge) in Tartu in 2014 (Fig. 3). Here, the Son of Kalev, hero of the Estonian national epic, is depicted as a cyborg, with the hedgehog delving into its computer behind him.



Figure 3. *Under the Freedom Bridge, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid, October 2014.*

The construction of a traditional modern Western hegemonic masculinity usually involves the valorisation of qualities such as authority, competition, power, physical strength, aggression, domination, activity, independence, etc. (Lombard 2013: 179). The roles and activities of men in graffiti and street art works usually point to masculinity as it is traditionally understood where the man represents an active agent, authority figure, adventurer, sometimes even the world conqueror – man as an astronaut, boss, soldier, politician, policeman, labourer, but also as a male intellectual (novelist, philosopher), artist, pop singer, authority figure, or a technology enthusiast.

Examples of conventional masculinity can be seen, for example, in the image of a labourer in overalls (Fig. 4) in Õnne Street in Tartu and in the picture of a male tourist on Pärnu beach, with the Finnish text “Virossa on hyvä” (It’s good in Estonia; Fig. 5). The latter ties the notion of masculinity with the national context: Estonia as a post-socialist country that is affordable for a Finnish man. The photograph was taken in 2011, when the price level in Estonia was relatively lower and Finnish tourists contributed heavily to Estonia’s economy.



Figure 4. Õnne Street, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2018.



Figure 5. Pärnu Beach.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2011.

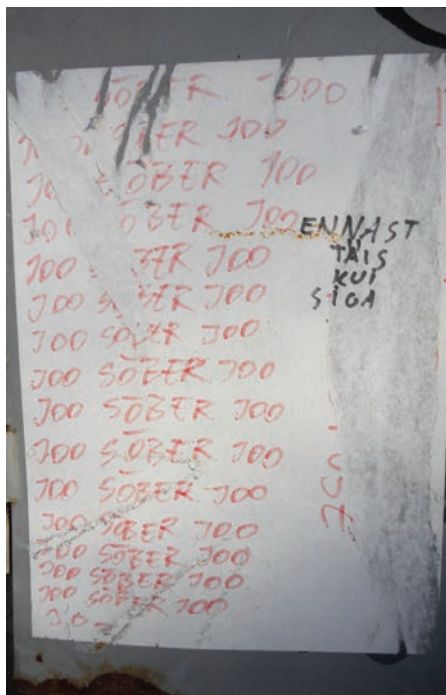


Figure 6. On the corner of Vaksali and Vanemuise streets, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2011.

Masculinity is also associated with alcohol and drug use. For example, a photograph taken in 2011 features a verse from a popular Estonian song “Joo, sõber, joo” (Drink up, my friend, drink up!; Fig. 6). While the song is sung in social occasions by both men and women, the emphasised repetition of the song on fifteen lines rather leaves the impression of masculine self-expression.

Also, certain props, like a pipe or a gun, point to masculinity. An image of a man may be presented simply as a figure, a man wearing a suit, or a small boy.

On the other hand, graffiti art sometimes features masculinity that is perceived as non-traditional, which may be manifested either by conveying the so-called soft values or as an alternative sexual identity, such as homosexuality. Despite that, some graffiti texts stigmatise homosexuality. Soft values, for example, are expressed in an image of an old man sitting with his legs crossed and smoking a pipe, which has been edited, probably by someone other than the author, with the text “I love you all” (Fig. 7). Also, the image of a boy playing an accordion (Fig. 8), under the Freedom Bridge in Tartu, seems to associate with the so-called soft values – the boy is energetically playing the accordion and singing, as if encouraging the viewers to join in.



Figure 7. Villa Margaretha, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2012.



Figure 8. Under the Freedom Bridge, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2014.

Sometimes, however, representations of masculinity can be more ambivalent. For example, man as a soldier is depicted, among other things, as the good soldier Švejk (Fig. 9). The Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek in his satire *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk during the World War* (1923) ridicules human stupidity and social institutions, authority and power hierarchies through its simple-minded main character, soldier Švejk, who either is an idiot or pretends to be one (the book does not unequivocally lay it down). The character of Švejk is highly unique, since in a way he also ridicules traditional masculinity: as a soldier he is not strong, courageous, and heroic as one would expect a wartime hero to be, but quite the opposite – he is both mentally and physically inept, finds himself in all kinds of trouble, asks inappropriate questions, and does not seem to understand anything.



Figure 9. Riiamäe bus stop, Võru Street, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2011.

In the graffiti work (which used to be located in a bus stop at the beginning of Võru Street in Tartu), Švejk appears as a clearly recognisable figure with the characteristic details: happy disposition, with the cap drawn down deep to his eyes, the rifle hanging over the shoulder. There is the (author's?) name tag B. in the right lower side of the work, with no additional text elements.

A separate interesting male character is Mossbeard in the artwork *Kannahabe ja Nõiakütt* (Cannabeard and witch hunter, 2014; Fig. 10) by Edward von Lõngus. As one of the main characters in the children's book *Naksitrallid* (The Three Jolly Fellows) (1972) by the Estonian writer Eno Raud, Mossbeard is a fictional character who represents non-traditional, so-called soft masculinity. As a character in the book, he is close to nature, protects the environment, and represents soft values (love, caring and tolerance). For example, in the book, he patiently waits for the hatchlings to emerge from eggs and grow up in a nest in his beard of moss. Mossbeard also has a unique appearance: drawn by artist Edgar Valter, he is somewhat hippie-like with his long beard of moss, in which lingonberries are growing, wearing a big baggy hat and a long khaki *khalat*-like robe. His entire personality is warm and likeable. In the work by Edward von Lõngus, an upgraded version of Mossbeard appears: instead of moss, his beard is of cannabis (leaves) and his hands are grabbed to be cuffed behind his back by a policeman with the name tag 'Witch Hunter'. This upgrade does not actually change Mossbeard's nature as a literary character – in the image he still looks like he represents nature and soft values, which stands in especially stark contrast against the policeman as a representative of official authority.



Figure 10. Near the building of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2014.

The artist's unexpected and humorous interpretation refers to the "ineptitude of punitive drug policies and the changing trends in global drug policies", as is stated on the website of Noar online art gallery,⁷ who sells a copy of this artwork. The location of the work, the wall of Tartu's former maternity hospital, now the building of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Tartu, facing the building of the Supreme Court of Estonia, is probably not accidental, as it speaks to the institutions of executive and judicial power in Estonia, and conveys the author's attitudes towards them.

On the other hand, this and other works by Edward von Lõngus represent street art that is no longer opposed to art institutions but has, to a certain extent, become part of it (art as a saleable object), since copies of Edward von Lõngus' works can be purchased.

In some works, a man and a woman are depicted as equal partners, such as the image of the figures of a man and a woman sitting together and holding hands in the Risti bus stop in western Estonia (Fig. 11). The figures are painted in a way that they look like people sitting on the bench and waiting for the bus, whereas the gender of both is marked: the woman has long flowy hair and thin arms, whereas the figure of the man with short hair is more robust.



Figure 11. Risti bus stop, photograph taken through a bus window. Photograph by Siiri Pärkson, April 2019.

REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY

Women, both ordinary and famous, can rarely be found in the photographs held in the graffiti database. References are mostly made to female politicians, such as Anna-Maria Galojan, to whose portrait with a laurel wreath has been added the ironic comment “Talents back home!” (Fig. 12). References to politics and political standpoints are common themes in graffiti art and, regardless of gender, politicians are always on graffiti artists’ radar, their actions are commented on and criticised through graffiti. This has to do with the more general socio-critical attitude of graffiti, which manifests in criticising anything from various social phenomena/problems to the social system in general.



Figure 12. The Arch Bridge, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2012.

Among other famous women in graffiti, a reference has been made to Lydia Koidula (Fig. 13), which is quite logical, since she is one of the few women who

has had a prominent position in Estonian national memory. Koidula is not only a historical figure but also a symbol of national identity, cemented by the use of her portrait on the 100-kroon Estonian banknote. Koidula continues to appear both in the cultural memory and public discourse, which is why her image being used in Estonian graffiti is by no means surprising.



Figure 13. Kompanii Street, Tartu. Photograph by Hanna Linda Korp, April 2013.

However, rather surprising are the four quotations (found in graffiti in the graffiti database) by the US fashion editor Diana Freeland, who has worked for *Harper's Bazaar* and as the editor-in-chief of *Vogue*, and who is probably not widely known among the general public in Estonia. It is possible that Freeland was quoted by a graffiti artist who was a woman (and/or) knowledgeable in fashion.

Worth mentioning here is also the graffiti on the wall of the house of the Finnish-Estonian writer Aino Kallas in Raja Street in Tartu (Fig. 14). Aino Kallas lived in this house from 1912 to 1918, with her husband Oskar Kallas, a folklorist and a diplomat. The neoclassical building, designed by the Finnish architect Valter Thomé, is privately owned and currently abandoned and has culture-historical significance also because the Estonian writer Jaan Kaplinski spent his childhood years in this house (Hanson 2011). Considering the location and meaning of the graffiti, it appears that the graffiti artist has been familiar with the life and work of Aino Kallas, especially since Kallas was not

widely known in Estonia, yet the author of the graffiti has a message to convey about her. The image depicts a blossom with petals surrounding the text “Aino”, which is placed in the centre of the wall. The favourable placement of the image is like a homage to this remarkable female author. It seems as if the graffiti artist intended to highlight Aino Kallas as a prominent woman, as if to counterbalance the large number of men represented in urban space/graffiti.



Figure 14. Raja Street, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid, May 2018.

References have also been made to some fictional female characters, such as Laura Palmer, the protagonist of the TV series *Twin Peaks*. Serving as if a parallel to Mossbeard as its male fictional counterpart, a reference is made to Snow White (Fig. 15, the text reads “Peeglike, peeglike seina peal, kes on kõige vingem võistkond planeedi peal?” (Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the best team on the planet?) in women’s toilet in a popular sports facility in Ujula Street, Tartu). However, fictional female characters are virtually non-existent in the analysed sources.



*Figure 15. Women's toilet in the sports facility in Ujula Street, Tartu.
Photograph by Eda Kalmre, March 2014.*

Representations of femininity are generally associated with certain qualities and activities that are perceived as feminine, such as associating women with cleanliness (Fig. 16, the text “Keep it clean” next to a woman’s image) and being sober (Fig. 17), woman as a mother or a lady, woman as an angel by day and a witch by night (Fig. 18), woman as an artist (Fig. 19), crocheting as a feminine activity (Fig. 20), woman as too talkative (Fig. 21). The latter aspect has been highlighted by reproducing a Soviet agitation poster, with the text reading “A party member keeps quiet”, featuring a woman with a finger on her lips (which is the base text of a stencil by street artist von Bomb). However, the meanings of this graffiti ironically largely refer to Soviet symbolism.



Figure 16. Vallikraavi Street, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2012.

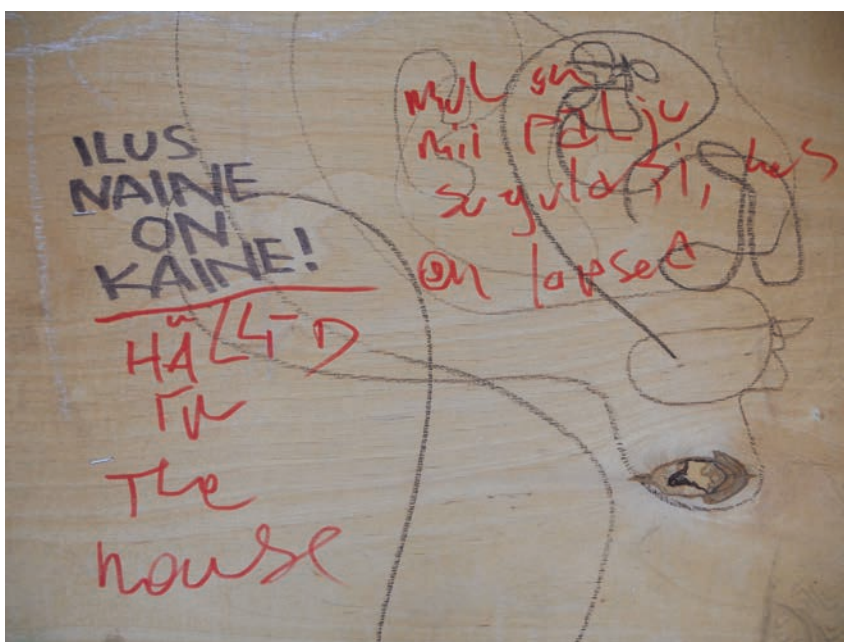


Figure 17. Vallikraavi Street, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid, April 2012.



Figure 18. Põltsamaa. Dormitory of Põltsamaa Gymnasium.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid, July 2014.



Figure 19. Pallas University of Applied Arts, Tolstoi Street, Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2011.



Figure 20. On the corner of Tähe and Pargi streets, Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid, April 2012.



Figure 21. Tartu Writers' House, 19 Vanemuise Street, Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2013.

Associating femininity with cleanliness or sobriety alludes, among other things, to gender stereotypes, according to which women's conduct is subject to expectations different than that of men. Thus, there is a graffiti that reads "A beautiful woman is sober" (Fig. 17). According to gender stereotypes, cleanliness and sobriety are important characteristics of women, whereas a manly man more often than not drinks alcohol.

Woman and creativity or feminine creativity has also captured interest – an image representing woman as an artist (Fig. 19) depicts a woman in heels and a floral dress, spray-painting colourful flowy images on a large surface of wall. The artwork reflects a woman's creative inspiration which is visualised by the paint spray turning into a hand holding a paint brush. The artwork, which used to be located in Tolstoi Street in Tartu, was rather large and impressive, covering the entire wall.

Creativity and intellectuality are also implied in the black-and-white image of a pensive woman (Fig. 22) in Vallikraavi Street in Tartu, drawn in pencil from waist up, with a serious look on her face and glasses contrasting with her large breasts. A rather lengthy text completes the image:

[We work] for the purpose of discovering life – how it functions, how beautiful it is and how to make the world a little better. Each one of us has the opportunity to use our skills to influence the society. It all comes down to what kind of a person you are. Everybody should do what they love.

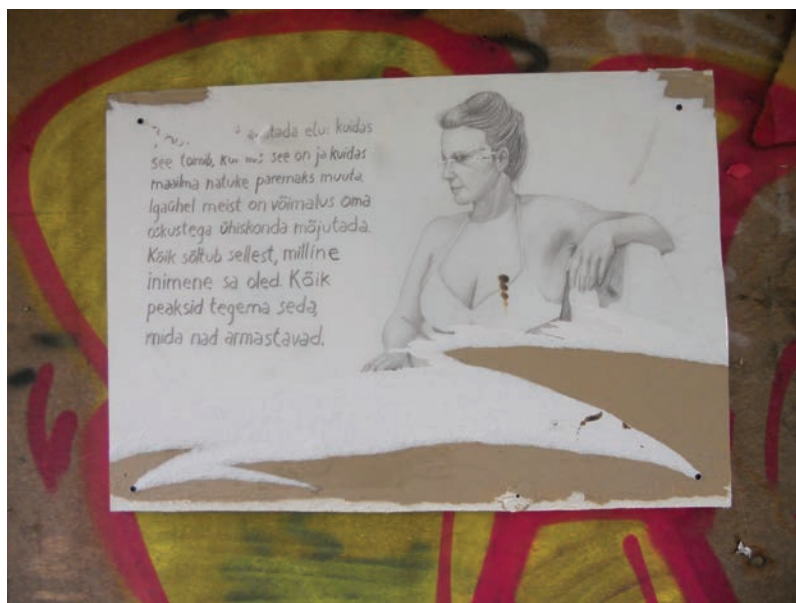


Figure 22. Vallikraavi Street, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid, May 2015.

On the one hand, this text sounds like wisdom shared by a woman who is experienced in life, but on the other hand, it conveys hidden social criticism, because the author's message emphasises the need to make the world a better place. A responsibility to do what you love is a prerequisite of making the world better, which is also the author's categorical imperative.

Depicting femininity is also associated with qualities such as cuteness and softness. For example, there is a graffiti with an image of sweet and childish Hello Kitty, even though it has been complemented with the text "Hello Kitty / Fuck the police" (Fig. 23). For a person looking at it, the subject would probably appear feminine, leaving the impression that it had been made by a young woman.



Figure 23. Riia Street, Tartu.
Photograph by Hanna Linda Korp
2013.

The conscious use of the so-called feminine representation or style is also noticeable in the works of the artist MinaJaLydia, such as the one with no title (Fig. 24), which depicts two girls with glasses but decorated with feminine items (they have a feminine appearance, wear hair jewellery and necklaces) making a victory sign.

Figure 24. *Kompanii Street, Tartu.*
Photograph by Piret Voolaid, April
2014.



Jessica N. Pabón (2019 [2016]) has found:

The historical marginalization of women street artists /graffiti writers has consequently produced an aesthetic hierarchy whereby imagery, lettering, and approach characterized as “feminine” is degraded – tacitly informed by the notion that only men are capable of producing graffiti / street art with “masculine” characteristics. As an active deconstruction of a sexist value structure, a way to bring gender equity to these value systems, and /or as a nonchalant rejection of them, graffiti writing and street art making women mark their letters with embellishments (bows), popular culture references (Poison Ivy), and titles (Miss). Others revel in overt female sexuality and hyperfemininity through characters. (Pabón 2019 [2016]: 83)

Pabón has also argued that certain “aesthetic choices in relation to gender representation differ among individual members, but as a whole they ‘represent’ one another and they do so in full view of the public – bringing a new level of visibility and recognition for girls and women” (Pabón 2019 [2016]: 86).

Such “imagery characterised as feminine” can be found in the graffiti works with the text “Tahan olla öölinde” (I want to be a bird of night; Fig. 25) and “Sulame ära teise sisse. Linnuke” (Let’s melt into another. Birdie; female figure; Fig. 26). Both graffiti works have a similar visual design/style, also the messages have a feminine feel to them, so that whoever views them could interpret the graffiti as a female author’s perspective.



Figure 25. Friendship Bridge, Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid, December 2013.



Figure 26. Friendship Bridge, Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid, December 2013.

Figure 27. *Freedom Bridge, Tartu.*
Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2011.



Some representations of femininity, however, do not associate women/femininity with only traditional values. For instance, a graffiti work conveying the message “Love is concrete” depicts a woman in overalls holding a trowel (Fig. 27, on the concrete wall of the Freedom Bridge in Tartu). The young woman on the image is in real life a professor of concrete buildings and a collector of street art (Eesti Ekspress 2011: 37).

Femininity may also be presented in a somewhat negative manner, for example, as connected with fear as in the image of a big bad wolf and a little girl with the text “Pimedus sööb väikeseid tüdrukuid” (Darkness devours little girls; Fig. 28). This image plays on women’s fear of darkness, which has been expressed in poetic, metaphoric style. The fear of darkness, for example, walking alone through the city at night, may be gender specific. Late night urban space, in which women do not feel safe to walk around, as if belongs to men. The graffiti text “I’m afraid of walking home in darkness” (Tartu, Tähe street, 2011) more directly seems to be an expression of a woman’s perspective, because it is difficult to imagine that this simple and laconic message has been written by a man.



Figure 28. Former “Kaseke” restaurant, Lootuse Street, Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2011.



Figure 29. The corner of Tähe and Pargi streets, Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid, February 2013.

The artwork *Perekond Ideaalne* (The Perfect Family; Fig. 29), signed by the author MinaJaLydia, on a lamppost at the corner of Tähe and Pargi Street in Tartu, depicts a family portrait of a mother, a father, a son and a daughter. The work has the feel of an ironic comment on a stereotypical depiction of the ideal family and family values.

The variety of women's roles and activities, however, is rather limited compared to that of men, which may be explained by the fact that most graffiti artists are men, whose works inevitably reflect their (masculine) experience.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, GIRL POWER

A separate interesting issue in the Estonian context is the subject of graffiti and feminism. In Western countries, for example, feminism has influenced the emergence of female authors in the field of graffiti, mostly because graffiti has traditionally been men's domain, but also because of the themes depicted in street art. In Estonia, feminism did not exist in the Western sense of the word (as the 1970s feminist movement) and so it is safe to say that the influence of feminism and feminist ideas on graffiti here has been small. This relates to the topic of women's empowerment – the perspective and style that represent women and feminine or women-related topics from a positive aspect as a source of (female) strength, as a positive power to change the world. The graffiti database of the Estonian Literary Museum contains a few images that could be interpreted from this perspective; for example, the graffiti *Live fast, die young* by MinaJaLydia, which depicts a woman breastfeeding her child (Fig. 30). MinaJaLydia is a street artist whose online introduction is as follows: "I'm an Estonian street artist named MinaJaLydia (it means Me and Lydia). If Me spends her days solving everyday problems in the style of Kinder, Küche, Kirche, then Lydia spends her nights sketching, working in art studio or sneaking on the streets spray-painting images on the walls." She emphasises the duality of this identity when speaking about her work: "The way how there are two persons inside one isn't only about street artists who often create a new identity for illegal art works but in every character I use in my works."⁸

An image of a breastfeeding mother has the impact of highlighting or glorifying femininity, emphasising femininity as a positive and empowering force. We may even go as far as to say that the image has been created from a woman's perspective and the woman as an object to look at is there for the gaze of a feminine spectator. In her canonical article "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema", researcher of cinematography Laura Mulvey has referred to women in cinema as an object of the gaze of a male (masculine) spectator: the woman is construed according to the man's wishes/desires and she herself is aware of being the object

of the masculine gaze, which creates the pleasure of looking because a woman as a spectator can also identify with this masculine gaze (Mulvey 2003 [1975]).

In this sense, the image of a breastfeeding mother by MinaJaLydia could be viewed as a female standpoint – one that challenges the male gaze looking at a woman and highlights feminine values in public space.

The graffiti work *Pipi piiksub* (Pippi squeaks; Fig. 31) by Astrid Linnupoeg (lit. Astrid Birdchick) serves as a manifestation of feminine power/force, bringing to the focus the famous literary character Pippi Longstocking (Est. Pippi Pikksukk) by Astrid Lindgren as a symbol of girl power. As a literary character, Pippi is a girl who defies gender expectations and norms, and is smart, clever, inventive, very strong, independent, and rich, but at the same time also kind and caring. Pippi's actions and words are never meant to harm, but she always has a message to convey to the world. In the graffiti, Pippi's role, on the one hand, could be interpreted as a messenger, i.e., Pippi has something to say to the world or the passer-by. This is visually strengthened by the depiction of Pippi as halfway hidden: Pippi is as if peeping from behind the fence. But what she has to say has been turned into mere squeaking in the author's rendition: the text "Pippi squeaks" refers to her message not being taken seriously or not being noticed. Squeaking represents a weak, helpless, high-pitched sound which does not have the same impact as a loud and clear statement. The graffiti's author, whose artist's name suggests is a woman, as if intends to draw attention to the fact that even though women are a considerable force in society, what they have to say is not always noticed or taken seriously.



Figure 30. 12 Kompanii Street, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid, October 2014.

Figure 31. Vaksali Street, Tartu.
Photograph by Urmas Sutrop 2019.



The most recent example of women's empowerment is a graffiti in which a Ukrainian woman fights with a dragon (Fig. 32). The graffiti, created by an unknown author, is located under the Kroonuaia Bridge in Tartu. It is a powerful and beautiful painting, which supports Ukrainian fight against the Russian invasion. The author of the graffiti has used the widely known motif of Saint George's fight with a dragon, as an article introducing the graffiti to the readers of the newspaper *Postimees* mentions (Hanson 2022). The message of the graffiti, including the text "Слава Україні!" (Slava Ukraini 'Glory to Ukraine!') in Ukrainian, emphasises women's strength in fighting the enemy. The viewer does not see her face but long blonde hair, and the woman's attitude reflects courage and determination. She is holding a sword and her figure is placed on a light blue background which brings out the woman's slim and youthful figure particularly well. In contrast to the figure of the woman, the dragon as genderless represents amorphous and omnipresent evil power. Thus, the graffiti uses gendered connotations contrasting femininity with evil forces.



Figure 32. *Glory to Ukraine! Under the Kroonuaia Bridge, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2023.*

REPRESENTATIONS OF SEXUALITY

Graffiti traditionally features sexualised gender clichés and representations of women. Parisi (2015: 60) presents a view that in the urban environment of Western societies, advertising making use of explicit sexual content is a generally accepted phenomenon (in spite of protests and awareness-raising campaigns) and wonders if urban art enjoys the same type of tolerance. He argues that today we know that both men and women are producing erotic street art; however, engaging in erotic art is very likely to be perceived as a masculine trait, for example, the representation of female nudity has been constantly seen as a men's activity. Parisi concludes that today women play a pivotal role in street art by employing a wide range of contents, styles, techniques, and aesthetic languages (ibid.).

Such sexualised gender clichés can be found also in the graffiti database, even though here they may have been attributed a broader socio-critical meaning, such as in the graffiti (Fig. 33) depicting a woman, nude from waist down,

accompanied by a text in English: “My sister lives in London now, she has a good job there”. This is an anti-capitalist criticism of sorts and depicting nudity is ambivalent: it either represents a “sexualised gender cliché” and/or social criticism (an Eastern European woman working as a prostitute in London). In most cases, women are represented merely as sexual objects (Figs. 34–36).



Figure 33. “Freedom gallery” under the Freedom Bridge, Tartu. Photograph by Piret Voolaid, March 2014.



Figure 34. Baltic Station, Tallinn. Photograph by Hanna Linda Korp 2013.



Figure 35. Wall of the former shopping centre Kaubahall, Tartu.
Photograph by Hanna Linda Korp, April 2013.



Figure 36. Former “Kaseke” restaurant, Lootuse Street, Tartu.
Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2019.

CONCLUSION

Graffiti and street art are phenomena inseparable from contemporary urban space and their socio-cultural meanings are diverse and interrelated with several layers of subculture.

The interrelation of graffiti and street art with urban space indicates that it is an unofficial way of expression which has sometimes been perceived as vandalism. On the other hand, graffiti is a form of democratic, openly dialogical form of representation because anyone is allowed to modify the works by adding their own comments. Graffiti and street art point out the power relations in society and they have been seen as subversive to the power of public authority. This is related to the unique nature of graffiti and street art as non-institutional art.

Western scholars have associated graffiti and street art with male subculture, which is where masculine identities are forged. While in recent years women authors have become increasingly visible in the field, introducing, among other things, so-called feminine subjects, it has not changed the image of graffiti as a masculine subculture.

The sources used in this study seem to confirm the idea of graffiti and street art being a masculine subculture, even though the share and contribution of female graffiti artists has steadily grown in the recent ten or so years. Also, the meanings of graffiti and street art always depend on the spectators and their attitudes towards the phenomenon, which may range from complete denial to understanding that graffiti and street art challenge the social power system and institutionalised cultural practices. The study of graffiti and street art allows understanding their meanings and functions from the perspective of the author, the spectator, and (urban) space from the aspect of social power dynamics. Unlike in Western countries, graffiti and urban art have not been subject to sufficient study, whereas representations of gender aspects have eluded any scholarly attention. For that reason, this article focused on analysing the gender aspects and interpretations of graffiti and street art.

Urban art is an ephemeral phenomenon which is why a database containing photographs of the works, with contextual information on each and every graffiti item, such as the author, location, etc., is of immense use. Even though the graffiti database of the Estonian Literary Museum, which was started in 2013, represents only a small part of graffiti created and displayed in Estonia, it gives an overview of local urban art and its various aspects, including those related to gender issues.

Analysis of the material included in the database of graffiti and street art revealed that gender issues are represented in about a fourth of the works of graffiti and street art, at least to some extent. The authors observed the

nature of gender representations in both texts and images, the way femininity and masculinity are manifested in the works, whether an image represents a masculine or a feminine standpoint, and how it has been executed.

The majority of the graffiti tends to represent a masculine viewpoint (a large share of quotations and visual images relate to famous men and very rarely to famous women), which seems to suggest that the majority of graffiti authors are male and that men continue to be more visible in society and culture, which, in turn, is reflected in graffiti. The greater visibility of men in society and culture is also connected with the higher authority of men and masculinity. Femininity, on the other hand, is often depicted through stereotypes, for example, by sexualising a woman's body. The graffiti included in the database reflects, among other things, the gender stereotypes established and spread in society, such as perceptions about women as clean, decent and sober, while men are seen as influential public figures (e.g., politicians) and through stereotypes that are perceived as masculine, such as drinking alcohol. To counterbalance the stereotypes of masculinity, the graffiti works rarely feature allusions to so-called soft masculinity, or images in which a man and a woman are represented as equal partners.

Women are also visible as graffiti authors, as can be seen from the emergence of new perspectives as well as in the diversification of the visual representations of graffiti and street art. The urban art created by women, such as the works by MinaJaLydia, highlight the positive experience of being a woman, which can also be conceptualised as an attempt to enhance the visibility and authority of women in public space.

A certain amount of graffiti and street art seems neutral from the gender perspective; however, the interpretation always depends on the viewer who is in the role of an active meaning creator.

The database does not generally include information about the authors of the graffiti, and therefore the study remains limited in that it has proved impossible to focus on potential divergences in graffiti created by men and women. In the future, it would be interesting and practical to analyse Estonian graffiti and street art also from the angle of authors. Data about graffiti authors would enable us to further contextualise graffiti and identify the characteristics of the creation of male and female authors. Further down the line, it is worth comparing Estonian graffiti and street art against a broader international context to point out both similarities and differences. The constantly updated database continues to yield new sources to be analysed both for that purpose and for the study of urban art from different angles.

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NOTES

- ¹ Loesje is an international organisation involved in spreading criticism, philosophical reflections and topical ideas in public space. The messages are signed as Loesje, a common Dutch girl’s name (on posters by Loesje in the streets of Tartu see Voolaid 2013b: 14–16). See also <https://www.loesje.org/category/language/estonian>, last accessed on 22 January 2024.
- ² Under paremiological graffiti, Voolaid (2013b) categorises the type of graffiti in which the graffiti author has made use of sayings ranging from proverbial generalisations (including classical proverbs, their modifications or so-called antiproverbs) and aphoristic author quotations to humorous and juicy catch phrases, slogans, and fixed expressions. The syntactic formulas of graffiti texts but also their purpose to conceptualise everyday experiences, in which it is analogous to traditional folk wisdom, refer to the paremiological nature of these graffiti works. The themes most characteristic of paremiological graffiti are, e.g., society, politics and criticism of the ruling regime, ideologies and religion, lifestyle, school, sex, alcohol, drugs, and spheres of private life.
- ³ In Estonia, attitudes towards graffiti and street art vary even at the level of local municipality, e.g., Tallinn vs. Tartu.
- ⁴ The SmartEnCity project aimed to create a smart and energy-efficient urban area with apartment buildings retrofitted as near zero energy buildings and smart solutions applied in central heating, streetlights, and the use of renewable energy (see <https://smartcity.eu>, last accessed on 22 January 2024).
- ⁵ Banksy is one of the most famous UK graffiti artists whose stencil artwork has attracted global interest. His real person is widely speculated on but is currently unknown.
- ⁶ See <http://folklore.ee/Graffiti/grafitid>, last accessed on 22 January 2024.
- ⁷ See <https://noar.eu/et/kunst/cannabeard-witch-hunter/>, last accessed on 21 December 2023.
- ⁸ See <http://minajalydia.tumblr.com/about>, last accessed on 3 January 2024.

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