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Embodied graffiti and street art research

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Abstract

Graffiti and street art research (GSAR) has become more acknowledged within the academic discourse; however, it has much to gain from theorising its methodological aspects. As a multidisciplinary field, GSAR has mostly used qualitative research methods, exploring urban space through methods that range from visual recordings to ethnography, emphasising the researchers' reflexivity. This qualitative approach has, however, paid little attention to the role of embodied practices. In this paper we discuss how embodied methodologies provide multisensory research results where the experienced moments, the participant's and researcher's senses, cognition and mobility in urban spaces are connected. Our discussion draws on the authors' fieldwork experiences of walking and edge working, and on the literature concerning embodiment and embodied methodology related to the context of GSAR.

Keywords

Graffiti, GSAR, street art, embodied methodology, ethnography, senses, cognition, edgework, walking, gender

Introduction

Graffiti and street art can be defined as public – and often unauthorised – creative art pieces in urban spaces that are produced by self-motivated individuals or collectives. Researching around this issue is a rather new discipline and scholars from the graffiti and

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street art research (GSAR) arena are part of a diverse interdisciplinary field (see e.g. Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi, 2017; Ross, 2016a; Ross et al., 2017; Zaimakis et al., 2021). The diversity of disciplinary traditions, such as visual studies, sociology, criminology, geography and art history, enriches the research terminology and its methodologies, which should be realised as one of the GSAR fields' strongest contributions. On the other hand, a cross-cutting science challenges the epistemological perspectives in GSAR. As Ross states, the field 'lacks a consistent identifiable body of hypotheses/propositions, theories, and models' (Ross, 2016b: 8). This intriguing multidisciplinary aspect entails graffiti and street art to be researched from several different perspectives and yet it complicates the development of one concurrent research language.

One of the challenges within the interdisciplinary field of graffiti and street art studies could potentially centre around the issue of methodology. There are, however, exceptionally few writings that attempt to contemplate the methodology of GSAR (see e.g. Andron, 2017; Ferrell, 2004; Hansen and Flynn, 2015; Lynn and Lea, 2005; Snyder, 2009). Nevertheless, it is relatively apparent that GSAR's major method is approached through qualitative research, ranging from ethnographies, to in-depth interviews, and to collections of visual data. One way to reflect this robust qualitative dissemination of graffiti and street art practices is to relate them to embodied practices that substructures the cultural artefacts in urban space. In particular, an embodied methodology is useful when the research object is the practitioner in action and in cases where the aim is to study the interaction between embodied practices, visual interaction and urban space.

Embodied methodologies are becoming an established research practice among a wide range of human sciences such as the social sciences, cultural studies and the cognitive sciences. However, it is not constituted as a substantive epistemic field in its own right among disciplines that relate to this methodology (Spatz, 2017). Nevertheless, a wide range of different research methods – such as 'action research', 'artistic research', 'practice research' and 'performance research' – have all been related to what may now be distinguished as embodied methodologies, which emphasises the significance of bodily experiences in a multidisciplinary field. This approach puts the focus on the body as an area of investigation and proposes a specific understanding of knowledge through embodied practices (Spatz, 2017: 6).

While the embodied methodology is not a novel approach in the social sciences and humanities, it has been tenaciously neglected through the mind–body dualism, in which the mind is presenting 'rationality', and the body 'impulsive' and 'irrational passions' (Frank, 1990; Howson and Inglis, 2001; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Shilling, 2001). In sociological thinking, the 'bringing bodies in' has stressed the transcendence of the mind–body dualism, limiting accounts of embodied or 'carnal' knowledge as crucial for understanding social agency in interaction with social order (Howson and Inglis, 2001). Thus, such as the conceptualisations of 'habitus' by Bourdieu have sought to incorporate fleshly embedded methodologies that recognise reflexivity and bodily actions as ways of knowing (Wacquant, 2014). Similar challenges have been recognised within the cognitive sciences (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012; Varela et al., 1993), where dualistic thinking has been criticised for reducing cognition and the mind to 'a disembodied computer program' (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012: 7).

Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of developing embodied methodologies and qualitative enquiries (O'Neill and Roberts, 2020; Young, 1980), and specifically strengthened the criticisms against the dualistic approach of the body–mind set (Howson and Inglis, 2001: 303). It refuses to approach the body merely as a static ensemble of a subject's actions (Butler, 2010), as well emphasised the relevance of embodied experience as crucial in producing scientific knowledge (Sinclair, 2019).

In the field of artistic research, the conception of embodied knowledge is also fairly standard. Mainstream scientific research paradigms are often ill-fitting with artistic and cultural research that deals with studying performances, emotions and tactile or bodily experiences in an urban space. The body, in artistic research, is relevant 'ever-present in any kind of meaning making', and therefore it is natural to 'understand thinking as something we do with our body as much as our brain' (Fentz and McGuirk, 2015: 16–17).

A multidisciplinary field such as GSAR may elaborate some of the aspects regarding methodologies concerning embodiment. This paper puts forward the views and experiences of embodied methodologies from three graffiti and street art researchers with backgrounds in artistic research, sociology and cognitive science. Such a multidisciplinary approach may at times challenge a mutual research angle or shared conceptions. On the other hand, it provides a productive setting in which we can carry out research from a holistic perspective. Thus, we attempt to demonstrate how embodied methodologies can be applied and elaborated into GSAR. Here, embodiment emphasises our understanding of the mind–body as one construct, as a process that experiences and interacts with objects and other people in changing contexts and times (Clark, 2013a; O'Neill and Roberts, 2020; Varela et al., 1993).

Our paper considers the following questions: What can be understood as an embodied methodology in GSAR and what kinds of examples are presented in the current literature? Moreover, we demonstrate how an embodied methodology, can be exemplified further by illustrations of case studies that are drawn from research that ranges from walking (e.g. Ingold, 2007; Pink, 2015) to edge ethnography (e.g. Lyng, 1990). We will begin by distinguishing the embodied and its methodological aspects as a framework for conducting multidisciplinary GSAR. The article continues with methodological examples from the authors' research. First, we take a closer look at how embodied methodologies may be illustrated in walking as a multisensory embodied experience in exploring political street art on foot in Spain (Tolonen, 2021a; 2021b). We analyse Tolonen's research situations and draw reflections on field notes that were maintained over four months of field work between 2017 and 2018. The next section depicts how gender as an embodied practice becomes relevant in ethnographic edgework related to graffiti writing. The section draws on examples from Fransberg's long-term ethnography (2011–2019) in a Finnish male-dominated graffiti subculture (Fransberg, 2021). The article concludes with three findings that are proposed for further GSAR field studies.

The embodied as a framework

Graffiti and street art practices may be understood as embodied experiences where both scholars and research participants are part of the embodied process, accumulating field-relevant knowledge. Some graffiti and street art researchers have considered how their

creators' agency, identities, cultures, bodies, thoughts and emotions are embodied in artefacts (Hannerz, 2017; Schacter, 2014). Other researchers have emphasised the joint mind–body actions in generating and perceiving graffiti and street art products through embodied experiences (Myllylä, 2018; Halsey and Young, 2006; Nomeikaite, 2017). Bengtson (2014: 48–53) describes the interplay of verbal and nonverbal communication between a street art researcher and an informant in the different physical and temporal contexts. As Hansen and Flynn (2015) explain, experiencing street art may be understood as an active conversation between the work, the artist and the viewer, where interpretations are made in people's sense-making processes and that are affected by physical contexts as well as viewers' perceptions and values.

To understand human practices and experiences, humans can be studied as intentional and social agents. We interact with the physical and sociocultural world, making sense of information from internal and external environments that are embedded in objects and other agents (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007; Reinhardt and Loke, 2013; Rowlands, 2010). Receiving and processing information assumedly causes bodily sensations, which lead to cognitive and somatic affects (Noland, 2010: 4; Reinhardt and Loke, 2013: 137).

Our experiences and embodied actions are thought to be guided by, for example, thoughts and emotions, past memories and future goals (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012; Rodaway, 1994). We learn by participating in our culture's practices and sense-making, as we engage in our physical and intersubjective mental realities, coordinating and expressing our actions within the changing life situations (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007; Rodaway, 1994). We may perceive our environments as affordances, as possibilities for our actions by enactive processes (Gibson, 1986; Rowlands, 2010). Through our actions – actions such as altering our environment and its corresponding objects – we extend our embodiment outwards towards artefacts (Reinhardt and Loke, 2013; Rowlands, 2010).

The framework of embodied experiences expounds that we humans are interwoven mind–body entities; 'embodied minds',¹ where our bodies and senses shape our cognition (and vice versa) in thinking, emotions, perceptions, memories, experiences and social interactions, how we are situated and how we behave and move in the world (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012; Ignatow, 2007; Ingold, 2007; Noland, 2010; O'Neill and Roberts, 2020). Our mental states are expressed, for example, in our physical movements – such as our gestures and bodily expressions (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012; Ignatow, 2007). According to Noland (2010), intentional or spontaneous gestures can exhibit aesthetic and expressive – among other types of – goals. However, our ability to sense qualitative differences in gestures' meanings in terms of shifting social situations is somewhat of a learned skill (Noland, 2010: 6).

Cultural artefacts and concepts may convey social, symbolic meanings; for example, expressing one's membership within a peer group or identity within a subculture (Macdonald, 2002). Bodies can be perceived as cultural objects, where a person's symbolic identity is distinguished, evaluated and communicated through bodily practices (Hannerz, 2017; Ignatow, 2007; Noland, 2010). Within graffiti and street art, cultural artefacts may embody the creators' individual and culturally idealised forms (Hannerz, 2017).

Embodied methodology: Setting up the research, expanding the analysis

Embodied methodology emphasises the importance of the physical and socio-temporal contexts and the interactions with all people who are involved in the study. In a research situation, the researcher, participant(s) and the other involved parties are all engaged in intersubjective sense-making performances, leading to the construction of socially shared meanings and embodied experiences (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007; Noland, 2010). When people try to understand each other, they observe and react to their opponents' bodily movements, which in turn may create imagined assumptions about others' experiences and interpersonally shared, similar gestures (Fuchs and De Jaegher, 2009). This kind of intersubjective functioning may enrich the research analysis. For example, Chadwick (2017) has described embodied methodologies as the means to record multi-vocal practices and how female body presences are demonstrated in speech narratives. Her method primarily focuses on the language used in self-reference, relations to and memorised topics of one's own and others' bodies (Chadwick, 2017).

Embodied methodology has been used also in GSAR. Schacter (2014: 224) reflects: 'It was by action, by subjective involvement (with all the affective qualities these engendered) that one gained embodied knowledge, a knowledge more important than any purely cognitive understanding.' Quotes from Schacter's (2014) field notes describe the environmental context, physical spaces and temporality, bodily gestures and interactions between the informants and the researcher. Such interactions allow to conclude research findings in ways that concern field activities as bodily engaged, a form of social enactment for relationships, communication and commitments (Schacter, 2014: 226–227). Similarly, as Ferrell (2004) notes, methodologies that entail engagement with the research subjects provide an understanding of different cultural nuances and momentary experiences that are related to graffiti.

Nomeikaite (2017) explores the possibilities of researching street art by including observations and verbal explications of the physical interactions and experiences with people and artefacts (Nomeikaite, 2017). Halsey and Young (2006) suggest that the act of graffiti writing involves bodily, affective aspects, causing a powerful embodied experience. Graffiti connects their creators to the world, reflecting their subjective, varying relationships through the act of writing graffiti. Thus, for a researcher, the point of GSAR is not only to confirm existing theories, but also to investigate: 'how do various lived bodies conceive of and speak about what they do?' (Halsey and Young, 2006: 294). Ryan (2017: 133) and Tolonen (2021a) have both reported on graffiti writers and street artists gaining remedial benefits from the act of painting, reflecting that 'painting does something' to their bodies and acknowledging the intense physical and emotional sensations that occur during the process of creating.

Graffiti subculture is often described as male-dominated and hence researched through a masculine lens of thought (Fransberg, 2021; Macdonald, 2002). In ethnographic research the researcher is physically involved in the lives of the study participants in the observed field. Gendered bodies often create meanings in these research settings and are crucial in understanding the process of knowledge creation (Naegler and Salman, 2016). Butler (1988: 520) proposes that gender identity is performed

as a ‘stylized repetition of acts through time’. It is expressed in bodily signs and other discourses, which construct identities through embodied acts in a social performance (Butler, 1988; 2010).

Gender may therefore influence how the research is conducted. For some researchers, when walking alone in urban environments, a feeling of safety might not necessarily be consistent due to reasons such as their gender, age or the overall context (O’Neill and Roberts, 2019: 51). According to Tay and Diener (2011), the feeling of safety and security can be understood as a fundamental need that people usually intend to fulfil foremost. However, individual psychosocial needs such as feeling respected, being able to master one’s field of expertise and having a sense of independence might be pursued before basic or safety needs are fully met (Tay and Diener, 2011). We are also driven by the emotion of interest (Clark, 2013a; Izard, 2009), which according to Izard (2009: 4) is essential ‘for engagement in creative and constructive endeavours and for the sense of well-being’, also impacting upon one’s attention and other mental processes. An individual’s prior knowledge and experiences, emotions, values, needs and interests can affect subjective inferences and behaviour (Ignatow, 2007; Ingold, 2007; Saariluoma et al., 2016). This may explain that something such as graffiti, tag or street art may seem deviant or insignificant for one, but it may seem novel, interesting and appealing to the other.

Embodied methodologies can utilise several methods, ranging from first- to third-person perspectives, and from qualitative to quantitative data. For example, Myllylä (in press) uses think aloud method, which is common in user psychology, a scientific discourse of studying people’s minds and behavior when they interact with technical artefacts (Saariluoma et al., 2016), to investigate the research participants’ embodied experiences of selected graffiti works. Thus, we would argue that different methodologies should be viewed as complementary and not as exclusive or excluding.

In the following sections we will focus on research cases that perceive urban environments through walking and edge ethnography. We illustrate that walking can be a usable means for experiencing and interacting with the environment and is elaborated here upon as an embodied methodology within GSAR (Tolonen, 2021b; Young, 2016). We also present that edge ethnography is a methodology that requires deep involvement and immersion in the physical, social and emotional activities of the subjects, even in the potential risk and ethical issues that are related work to the engagement for both the researcher and the subjects (Ferrell, 1998; Lyng, 1990). With these two cases we provide examples of how embodiment can be depicted and how it can impact upon both research methods and analysis, in this case, in the examination of street art and graffiti.

Walking as a researcher’s embodied experience

Walking has been theorised in many fields of science, for example, in anthropology, geology, philosophy and sociology (see e.g. Ingold, 2007; O’Neill and Roberts, 2019; Pinder, 2008; Pink, 2015). Walking in environments is, in itself, an endeavour that includes experiential, psychological, social, bodily and physical aspects (O’Neill and Roberts, 2019). In GSAR, walking has become an increasingly utilised research method. For example, Phillips (2015), Tolonen (2021a; 2021b) and Young (2016), among many others, have studied and analysed graffiti and street art by walking around cities and



Figure 1. Sometimes walking takes a researcher to surprising locations, as happened to Tolonen during her two-month stay in Las Palmas, Spain, where she encountered a multi-layered practising place for beginners. 2018. Photograph @Jonna Tolonen.

photographing artworks. Walking per se has not yet been the main focus of graffiti and street art researchers and yet even the researchers themselves tend to acknowledge its impacts on their perceptions, as Young (2016: 92) here reflects:

Walking on the street puts you in the midst, able to see textures up close, to walk away, turn and see a work from a distance, to lay your hand upon it and feel the underlying stone through the paper or paint.

Therefore, it can be argued that walking as a multisensory experience is a methodology, as opposed to being simply a research method (see also Pink, 2015), as Tolonen underlines:

I'm no longer sure if walking for me is just a research method. I see it now more as a bodily and multisensory state of thinking. A state in which, through my movement and observations in the city space, I'm testing the empirical data and theoretical frameworks of street art.²

By walking, a graffiti and street art researcher gains an experience of the surroundings of the artwork as well as of the artwork itself. The researcher is able to see artworks from different angles and distances, feel the textures underneath, and sometimes later return to the artwork and observe how the weather conditions or other artists have modified it (see Figure 1).



Figure 2. A popular graffiti spot in Madrid, Spain, overpainted by the city's cleaning crew. After taking the photo Tolonen had a chat with the cleaners and one of them told he was 'a painter myself'. 2015. Photograph @Jonna Tolonen.

There might also be moments when the researcher can still smell the freshly sprayed paint, discuss with other passers-by about the feelings the artwork raises or even witness the artwork being painted over (see Figure 2).

Therefore, walking is a series of perceptions, thoughts, emotions and experiences that coincide with graffiti and street art and also with the researchers themselves. Walking requires one being present with all of one's senses. The idea of multi-sensoriality – intertwining one's sight with one's other senses – is a fundamental principle in terms of the researcher's walking experiences. Vision is not understood as a primary sense of the researcher, as the perception of the environment could be characterised as a sensory process where seeing works alongside the other senses.

Doing graffiti and street art research on foot

Walking is a form of fieldwork on foot and it generally involves perceiving, routing and recording. A researcher observes the ever-changing environment and perceives information from mutually overlapping sounds and olfactory scenery, landscape views and variations in the ground surfaces under his or her feet. During the walk, the researcher can

fall into his or her own thoughts and combine various observations or previous experiences. Therefore, walking can provide for the researcher, as Pink (2015: 55) puts it, access to a ‘new form of [sensory] knowing’ or as Classen (1993: 9) states, ‘thinking through senses’. This can also stimulate unexpected ways of thinking and offer new insights for the researcher, as Tolonen reflects:

I have never been in this place before. I sense everything of it for the first time in my life: the light, the sounds, the walls, the colours. The odours are peculiar – some kind of mix of sweet, musty and salty. It all feels familiar but yet at the same time somehow different and new. As if all my senses were on extra alert to suck everything in, trying to apprehend this.³

Routing can vary from a detailed pre-set walk to anything such as wandering around the city aimlessly. In Ingold’s (2007) terms, a researcher can be a passive traveller who is merely transporting from one point to another, or a wayfarer walking through the world without any final destination by integrating her perception, locomotion and knowledge. The researcher’s gender can affect routing too. For example, some women researchers might avoid field work during night-time or in vague areas, as Tolonen demonstrates in her field notes: ‘I was standing on a crossroads about to enter a narrow alley to photograph, when an old lady yells from the window at me: “Cariño, no vayas allí, es peligroso!” [Darling, don’t go there, it’s dangerous!]’⁴. As the street continues in so many ways to be ‘a place for maleness’ (Snyder, 2009: 5), women researchers are perceived as more vulnerable to harassment and violence than male investigators.

While walking, the researcher makes decisions on their routing: ‘Shall I take the route I have decided beforehand or should I just wander around the area? Should I turn left instead of right from the next corner?’ Even if a graffiti and street art researcher makes up their mind about the walk route in advance, physical conditions (such as weather or geography), biological (such as hydration or stamina) or sudden sensory inputs, in addition to their ability to navigate in space, might change the researcher’s plan and result in unexpected moments, as Tolonen highlights:

My sense of direction has always been really poor, so it was no surprise I got lost today. I found myself wandering in some kind of semi-industrial wasteland, and as I was cursing about wasting my valuable research time by getting lost, I suddenly spotted a piece by artist Art Is Trash on an abandoned pile of metal stuff.⁵

The perceptions and (visual) materials that the researcher gathers during field work reflect many qualities and features of the researcher himself/herself: the researcher’s age, gender, body type, cultural background, interests, aesthetic understanding and individual knowledge (Berger, 2015). The most popular way of recording graffiti and street art is photography, along with video recording and writing. Photographs are mainly used to make an argument or to support the researcher’s analysis (O’Reilly, 2012). Walking – versus collecting data from archives or the internet – enables the researcher to observe the location and materiality of graffiti and street art, as well as the imagined bodily experiences of their makers (Myllylä, in press) in detail, as Phillips’ (2015: 60) description on two stencils illustrates:

[. . .] stencils are also distinct in the way they are executed. The first [. . .] has an unusual format. Walking around and using such an extraordinary stencil it would be difficult for the user to hide and would attract attention. [. . .] the stencil-maker knows of good visible and suitable locations for spraying, knows material effects of the ground and paint, and has manual abilities to create an accurate and elaborate stencil graffiti. In contrast, the second stencil is irregular, uneven and produced with a small stencil easy to conceal.

It is not universal as to how people perceive their environment. It is influenced by social and cultural backgrounds, experiences and memories (Rodaway, 1994: 5). As a consequence, walking cannot be implemented without acknowledging the role of the researcher's own embodied self (O'Reilly, 2012: 100). The researcher's anatomical shape for standing upright and walking defines what the environment can afford for them and also affects their relations to other people and things (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012: 150–151; Rodaway, 1994: 12). A 19-year-old, 188-centimetre-tall art student who paints graffiti herself senses the streets and its surroundings differently than a 45-year-old 155-centimetre-tall engineer whose passion is science. The researcher learns and knows through his/her whole experiencing body and the research results should be considered as understandings of experiences rather than as objective truths (Pink, 2015: 27, 81).

The value in walking lies in the new levels of awareness about the researchers themselves, their experiences and their embodied knowledge (O'Reilly, 2012: 99). By walking, researchers can get to the phenomena, describe and analyse it. There is no doubt that 'researchers need to have a clear idea of what sensory and embodied experience involves' (Pink, 2015: 26), nor does it automatically offer an understanding of things. Sometimes an embodied methodology may also generate information that is difficult to verbalise, as Chadwick (2017: 58) points out. However, Chadwick's (2017) approach does not take into consideration that research results can be presented as artworks, performances, exhibitions, installations and other artistic practices, instead of or among traditional written scientific reports. This is a common practice, for example in artistic and cultural research (Arlander, 2012; Borgdorff, 2011). Overall, it can be argued that walking can provide multisensory research results that emphasise the experienced moments and connect the researcher's senses, thought processes and environments. Walking is a powerful tool for a graffiti and street art researcher: It can create knowledge that enables new ways of grasping the ephemeral, dynamic and communicative urban environments.

Embodied experience of the edge

Graffiti and street art are often understood as culturally resistant, rebellious and political acts in urban spaces that tend to escape notions of the normative (Ferrell, 1996; Hansen and Flynn, 2015). In GSAR, embodied methodology is particularly relevant among those scholars who take ethnographic, subcultural or cultural criminologist perspectives into account (see e.g. Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2002; Snyder, 2009). These perspectives aim to grasp the experience of resistance, the 'escape' from social order, and the rebellious styles present in the phenomenology of graffiti and street art. As graffiti and street art are often treated as an illegal endeavour and perceived as a transgression, it may also cause several embodied experiences of risk for its practitioners and its researchers. Some

scholars within the field who abide by an autoethnographic approach have reported the adrenaline rush, fear and excitement that they experience when confronting ‘police officers, security guards, huffers (paint sniffers), and various street toughs’, as Ferrell (1998: 22) puts it. One perspective that proposes the element of embodiment within these scholarly accounts that are related to deep ethnographic work like Ferrell’s (1996) is the methodology of edgework.

Originating in Lyng’s (1990) social-psychological work on extreme-leisure activities, edgework analyses the voluntary risk-taking, emotions and sensations that are elicited. Those that are engaged in ‘deviant’ subcultural practices and enjoy trespassing, breaking a restriction or a moral code, expose themselves ‘to high risks and therefore develop skills, or physical and mental abilities, to keep concentration and control in situations characterised by unpredictability and “chaos”’ (Naegler and Salman, 2016: 360). The embodied experience of the ‘edge’ is here explored more specifically in the field of graffiti and street art studies, as it may provide a deeper, cognitive, artistic and sociological understanding of both the individual and of (sub)cultural practices.

Embodied edgework often explores a form of resistance and a type of escape from the prevailing structures of political and economic power (Lyng, 2004). Risk takers, here as graffiti writers and street artists who paint illegally on walls and other objects, often describe the experience of danger as pleasurable and creatively satisfying (Ferrell, 1998; Macdonald, 2002: 107). This practice is constituted around the game, called by some scholars the ‘urban warfare’ between graffiti writers and the authorities (Macdonald, 2002). At times, this is presented as the motivation for why they paint; that is, to dare oneself towards the edge of one’s cultural and social mobility by painting and challenging the aesthetics of the urban space. This experienced edge cannot be performed without the prevailing structures that define an act as illicit or norm breaking. It is these dialectics with the ‘edge’ that drive forth the embodied experiences of pleasures that are expressed in situations of danger and risk:

So, it’s when I start to run away from cops and guards, that’s when I lose my sense of reality. I’ll just have one goal, it’s just to run! And I don’t even realize it, my legs just work. It’s like, I have nothing to lose, I will just let my body do what it can in full force. Afterwards, I don’t really know what happened, I just realise that I did it again. I ran away from an army of pigs and I’m just laughing, not relieved, but in a psychotic way, full of endorphins.⁶

While O’Neill and Roberts (2020: 131–133) theorise walking also as a form of ‘escape’ in regards to transgressing a sense of ‘how to be’, an individual’s running proposes a speeding up of the process of performing a re-formed identity through movements in urban space. The excerpt above refers to a study participant’s act that she experienced repeatedly during graffiti writing at illegal sites – that is, the running and escape from authoritative control attempting to stop her artistic performing and which is here represented by police officers and security guards. Through detailing this repeated experience, she expresses a powerful sense of her own bodily capacities and recognises mobility as crucial for being able to paint graffiti. Transgressing rules and the conventions of norms leads to a process of what Lyng (2005: 28) expresses as ‘moral transcendence’, rewarding the experiencer emotionally and sensorially.

Here, as the excerpt above interprets, the experience is embodied through an emotional loss of reality when running and resisting normative rules about how city space should be used. As Naegler and Salman (2016: 361) note, challenging the edge can be approached as means towards exercising control and autonomy by both symbolically and physically confronting those sources that apparently deprive the actor to control over his or her own fate. Here, social interaction is the common medium for the embodiment, where ‘the body becomes most conscious of itself when it encounters resistance, which is when it is in use, acting’ (Lyng, 2004: 364).

The methodological approach in graffiti research is suggested to be influenced by a masculine lens, especially in studies that take the subcultural and cultural criminologist approach. Edgework has been accused of romanticising masculine performativity through narratives of physical, daring and able male bodies, thus reifying binaries of the active male and the passive female in the field of cultural criminology (Naegler and Salman, 2016: 361). Likewise, graffiti subculture has often been described as male-dominated and as emphasising masculine ideals in its cultural endeavours (Fransberg, 2021; Macdonald, 2002). As such, graffiti is often distinguished as a masculine and aggressive act constituted by risk; whereas in opposition, street art is often understood as being softer, less criminal and feminine (Fransberg, 2021). Naegler and Salman (2016: 362) argue that it is not adequate to do analyses of edgework in gender-neutral ways, as performances of femininity and masculinity in relation to risk are culturally defined. Thus, accepting male risk-taking as part of cultural ideals over masculinity results in viewing female edgeworkers as ‘acting like men’ or even renders them as an exception from the norm, instead of recognising a diversity within gender theorisation that extends beyond a binary approach (Naegler and Salman, 2016: 363).

Another perspective, which is underlined by feminist scholars conducting field research among predominantly male subcultures, is that bodies performing feminine actions may gain a peculiar positioning as a participant–observant as their embodiment occurs as exceptions within the field. Female researchers’ sexual activity has, for example, been subordinated to observation in heteronormative and male-dominated subcultures and this in turn influences the knowledge production in the field (Lumsden, 2009; Poulton, 2012). Yet, there are other embodied aspects that may raise specific subject matters in the field work. In Fransberg’s (2021) ethnographic research among male train graffiti writers, she was found to be useful as a photographer for graffiti writers, as her female bodily appearance was not seen as suspicious to the authorities in certain contexts. Fransberg was able, to some extent, pass through surveillance and more easily photograph graffiti-painted trains in train stations because of a more ‘feminine’ appearance than that of her male informants – males who would perhaps have been chased by security guards.

However, the advantages of her female body have over the years been overexposed, thus resulting in her appearance becoming recognisable to the local authorities, as the next field note discusses:

Early morning at a train station. I waited for the commuter train to come into the platform, the one I knew was covered by graffiti pieces. I saw the train arriving from a distance, pointed my camera towards it and caught a few photos of it. I was happy as I walked along the platform; the photos were great. Little did I know what was going to happen next. As I walked along the pedestrian path next to the railway, I was suddenly confronted by a police car. ‘What are you

doing here?’ they asked. ‘Taking photos.’ ‘Of what?’ they replied. ‘Of trains,’ I answered. ‘We have to take you to the police station.’ ‘Why?’ ‘You are suspected of vandalism.’ I knew I was f*cked. It was not my first time being involved with the police because of studying graffiti. I was taken into a cell and I was even more f*cked because I could not call my boss to tell him that I would not go to work that day.⁷

This ephemerality of graffiti and street art presents some challenges to scholars in the field, as there is often an urgency to document artefacts before they are whitewashed (Ross et al., 2017: 415). Graffiti and street art are often produced in an illegal context, and simply photographing them can become a complex experience of the embodied edgework, as the field note above demonstrates. Bodily acts are therefore part of what could be understood as a cultural reading of certain contextual and social settings that are rarely fixed, but rather compose themselves in the form of a process. This process becomes reproductive through different embodied practices and at times these practices manage to challenge normative beliefs such as those that are related to gender.

Butler (2010) underlines that repeated performances may challenge gender normativities that are related to feminine and masculine embodied practices. Similarly, O’Neill and Roberts (2020: 133) writes that the repetition of walking or other embodied movements in urban space presents ‘ourselves to others’ and may in return transgress mundane body imagery and normative identity constructs. However, visible embodied repetition constitutes a challenge in the case of illegal graffiti and street art, as passers-by rarely view the actual body in situ, as the actor seeks to hide from the public, partly to avoid sanctions from authorities, and partly due to the subcultural attractions of concealed identity and favouring a distance to the ‘mainstream’ (Macdonald, 2002). Thus, the possible creators are often constructed through assumptions that are built on normative beliefs; beliefs that are often based upon notions of an able male body and those viewed as normative bodies in the urban realm (Hannerz, 2017). This underlines the importance that researchers place upon the need to document and disseminate the diversity of embodied practices in the GSAR field, and that challenge the binary approach to the feminine and masculine and other body imagery regimes.

Conclusion

The task of this article has been to look more closely at the ways in which embodied methodologies can be applied to and elaborated on in terms of GSAR. This article analysed both the relevant literature and experiences during the fieldwork carried out by the researchers of graffiti and street art studies. Three specific findings are worth emphasising. The first is that we recommend that researchers should recognise the role of their embodied experience as a part of creating knowledge in GSAR. This posits a versatile understanding of the embodiment, including the researchers’ and research participants’ understanding of positionality and reflexivity in the researched field. Positionality and reflexivity are already commonly analysed in qualitative research, yet we encourage researchers to include embodiment in the scientific discussions that surround graffiti and street art. Embodied reflexivity may intensify the quality of GSAR by allowing researchers and participants to reflect their ways of sensing experiences and deepen our overall

understanding of an embodiment that recognises cultural and psychosocial beliefs and values. This approach to embodiment entails a holistic view, stressing that neither perceptions nor experiences can be detached from our way of being in the world (Clark, 2013b; Ingold, 2007; Merleau-Pouney, 1962; Pink, 2015, Young, 1980).

The second finding relates to the focus of graffiti and street art studies. GSAR tends to emphasise the refinement of the cultural artefact in urban spaces rather than studying the embodied practices behind the artefact. There may be several reasons for this, one is here postulated as relating to ‘disembodiment’ (Hannerz, 2017) as bodies which create graffiti and street art in urban environments often perform when hidden from spectators. Therefore, graffiti and street art scholars tend to focus on cultural objects rather than on the bodily acts done in socially and culturally constructed settings. This has resulted in a wider neglect or interpretation of embodied methodologies within graffiti and street art studies. Moreover, a neglect of the embodied methodologies within street art and graffiti studies may lead us to constructing a set of granted body norms, rather than challenging graffiti and street art practices as, for example, inherently masculine acts. Focusing on bodily acts may emphasise our understanding of diverse bodies and dismantle the corresponding dualism such as in the case of masculine–feminine bodies.

The third finding is that by elaborating and clarifying embodied methodologies in graffiti and street art, we are also contemplating the concept of embodied practices. This allows us to draw on perspectives from different disciplines, working on similar topics that are close to each other, thus contributing to the multi-disciplinarity that is typical within the GSAR field. Instead of working within an academic vacuum or drawing on rather narrow perspectives, it may benefit researchers to grasp a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach. As we have noted, similar concepts that are related to embodiment already exist between different disciplines. Different disciplines can all contribute to the refining of what is meant by embodiment, embodied practices and how they are present in graffiti and street art.

This paper brings forth and clarifies some of the conceptions and practical examples that are related to embodied methodology within graffiti and street art-related research. Further discussions on the meaning of embodiment, embodied methodology and practical applications are still needed to provide valuable research tools, as well to explain cognitive, cultural and socially constructed settings. Considering that embodiment in GSAR is a rather complex issue, it is still essential to involve the embodied participation of both the researcher and the participants in differentiating research contexts, as these elements could influence the production of knowledge in the future development of interdisciplinary GSAR.

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Notes

1. In this paper we condense the concepts of ‘embodied mind’ and embodiment into rather brief descriptions, though extensive literature exists regarding these concepts. See, for example, Clark (2013b) for embodiment and cognition, and Scarinzi (2015) for embodied mind in aesthetics.
2. Tolonen’s field note, Valencia, December 2017.
3. Tolonen’s field note, Valencia, November 2017. [some additional information has been deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process].
4. Tolonen’s field note, Las Palmas, January 2018. [some additional information has been deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]
5. Tolonen’s field note, Valencia, November 2017. [some additional information has been deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process].
6. Fransberg’s field note with female graffiti writer, June 2018.
7. Fransberg’s field note, Helsinki, September 2016. [some additional information has been deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process].

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