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**Title:** Graffiti and Street Art Research : An Outsider Perspective

**Year:** 2023

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Myllylä, M., & Tolonen, J. (2023). Graffiti and Street Art Research : An Outsider Perspective. *Nuart Journal*, 4(1), 111-115. [https://nuartjournal.com/pdf/issue-7/12\\_NJ7-Myllyla.pdf](https://nuartjournal.com/pdf/issue-7/12_NJ7-Myllyla.pdf)

# In Conversation:

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# Graffiti and Street Art Research from an Outsider Perspective

## ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss our endeavours and experiences in the field of graffiti and street art research (GSAR) in the form of a dialogue. We reflect on planning and engaging with GSAR, contemplate our (field) work, analyse the methods we have developed, and shed light on the possibilities that arose during research processes. In particular, we focus on what it is like to do GSAR as outsiders, i.e. as those who are not writers or artists themselves, or who do research into a graffiti or street art scene that is foreign to them.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increased number of scientific articles in which graffiti and street art researchers provide methodological insights concerning their personal experiences (see, e.g. Fransberg et al., 2021; Tsilimpounidi et al., 2022). Also, some scholars, such as MacDowall (2018) and Tolonen (2020), have explored unconventional forms of academic writing and ways of expressing research topics about urban space. Following on from that, this paper comes in the form of a dialogue, serving as an alternative way of writing about experiences and findings in the field of graffiti and street art research (GSAR). Our discussion draws on our distinct and personal methodological experiences; one artistic, the other based on cognitive scientific research. Our intention is to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of our research processes as well as on the important conclusions that we have drawn studying graffiti and street art. In doing so, we aim to provide some indication of the ways in which research thinking may develop.

To both of us, a desire to understand lived experience is important, including aspects such as embodiment, situational awareness (Fransberg et al., 2021), and development of graffiti and street artists' professional identity (Myllylä & Tolonen, *forthcoming*; Tolonen, 2021). Neither of us creates graffiti or street art. Rather, we are more interested in the kinds of experiences, interpretations, and expressions graffiti and street art can evoke, and how those are constructed in the human mind when people interact with each other or with inanimate objects. For this we use different methodologies and methods which can involve using and observing

senses or sensory inputs, and collecting perceptual and semantic content. The output of the studied material comes in different formats, varying from verbal protocols and physical behaviour to photographs and other types of artefacts. Even though we come from different scientific backgrounds, we are often interested in and investigate the same phenomena, hence we ended up doing joint research. The difference is, of course, that we view those phenomena from alternative academic angles, which naturally makes us observe or pay attention to different things. This is sometimes challenging, because, for example, we may not be familiar with the concepts that are used in our respective fields of research, or we may not always agree on possible explanations at first. However, we have learnt that it is very rewarding to be able to engage in multidisciplinary discourse, because it forces individual researchers to critically review their own research paradigms and knowledge. It also enriches and develops thinking and improves researchers' skills to review often complex phenomena from more than one viewpoint.

The following discussion considers the experiences of the research processes we have gone through, most notably data collection, understanding the requirements of field work and data analysis, and theoretical and practical development. Instead of focussing only on insider-outsider questions within researcher-participant settings, we are particularly interested in reviewing how researchers from different academic fields take on new points of view and how this impacts the discourses among them. We begin our discussion by taking a closer look at the current trends and requirements for implementing GSAR.

## EXPERIENCING GRAFFITI AND STREET ART RESEARCH

**MYLLYLÄ:** The first thing I want to point out regarding GSAR, is that some people seem to think that in order to do successful research, researchers must themselves participate in the (illegal) activity of producing graffiti or street art, and gain first-hand experiences of situations that graffiti writers or street artists act wind up in. This is almost a necessity for a researcher to become a 'credible', 'legitimate', or 'authentic' member of the GSAR culture, an insider who has shown their worth and is trusted by both the people that are being researched and by peer researchers (Blanché, 2015; Fransberg, 2019; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Kimvall, 2014; Ross et al., 2017). Trust and the feeling of safety are important factors in research (Berger, 2015; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Iskender, G. 2021; Taylor et al., 2016). However, these factors can also be increased by open communication and honesty (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015).

As Hayfield and Huxley (2015) have noted, being both an insider and an outsider (as well as all being somewhere in between) has its own potential benefits and disadvantages in doing research. Especially in the context of researcher-participant settings, the insider-outsider division has been – as we both acknowledge – discussed in other research fields for decades (e.g. Berger, 2015; Bridges, 2001; LaSala, 2003; Pitman, 2002), and also to some extent in GSAR (see e.g., Fransberg, 2019; Taylor et al. 2016), but not much in detail. Of course, many questions may relate to graffiti and street art's illegal nature, and it is understandable that people, even as researchers, do not want to reveal whether they participate in those kinds of activities (see e.g., Blanché, 2015; Ferrell, 2018; Fransberg, 2019). However, the mere existence and potential impact of the GSAR community's own inner circles and that of external groups – which include scholars like me who come from disciplines that are much less represented in GSAR, or for other reasons do not seem to fit the stereotype of a graffiti or street art researcher – seem to be a tricky and yet unexplored topic of discussion (see e.g. Ross et al., 2017). Do you agree?

**TOLONEN:** I agree with your notions about the insider-outsider division. I have been told many times: 'Oh, you do not paint yourself, REALLY?'; not only by interviewees but also by many fellow researchers. So, the expectation to be a 'doer' yourself when studying a certain topic is still out there. In addition, there are also some researchers in our field who have argued that sometimes researchers from one country are not fully aware of the general situation in another country, or have not studied the research by local experts, which might give them a distorted picture of the local graffiti and street art scene. However, I would argue that there could also be advantages to being a foreign researcher, an outsider. I totally agree, however, with the argument that researchers should be aware of, for example, previous studies (although sometimes, unfortunately, there are language barriers), and the socio-political climate of a particular country. But as an outsider I might ask questions that an insider would not, or as Hayfield and Huxley (2005, 92) put it, ask 'naive questions' (see also Tang, 2007: 16). For example, in one of my studies, I started my interview asking, 'why did you become a writer/painter?' All the interviewees commented

that they were never asked that question before and ended up having long and reflective talks about the reasons for which they had started painting.

I have noticed that as an outsider, I do watch the phenomenon from a slightly different perspective, which is very understandable merely considering my background, education, and interests among other things (see e.g. Berger, 2015; O'Reilly, 2012; Rodaway, 1994). For example, I might find interesting a piece that is not perfect or executed brilliantly, but conveys a strong emotional or political message. Therefore, I think we might see new kinds of results from Finnish GSAR if we had more non-Finns doing studies about our scene. As a matter of fact, I just had a discussion with a British colleague who is studying Finnish graffiti. He finds the Finnish graffiti scene interesting because it is rather 'boring' and lacks almost completely the anarchistic aspect that many scenes in other countries have. Getting back to your original question, for the same reason, I also think that researchers that do not paint themselves give a different yet additional kind of input to the field. As I once put in my research field notes: 'How I understand this place through the images is rather different to the ways in which those who live here understand it, and the way I understand it as a researcher' (Tolonen, 2019).

**MYLLYLÄ:** How different people perceive GSAR may depend on several things, I think, such as their own research framework and methods. For example, different ethnographic and participatory methods are common and well suited in GSAR since it often focuses on social, legal, artistic, and cultural topics (Ferrell, 2018; Fransberg, 2021; Kimvall, 2014; Ross et al., 2017).

However, there are also other methods to do research concerning, for instance, experiencing, thinking, perceptions, emotions, or behaviour. For example, I have been using a content-based cognitive scientific approach to researching graffiti experiences and thinking, where the analysis of mental contents is based on what participants express verbally (Myllylä & Saariluoma, 2022). Similarly, in my opinion, doing GSAR does not require that researchers, for example, engage in the cultural practices or do graffiti or street art themselves. But it does require that they 'familiarise' themselves (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015) with and acquire 'interactional expertise' (Collins & Evans, 2018) in graffiti and/or street art. This means learning to become a specialist in the field through social discourses without actually practising the trade.

A researcher's thinking can always be biased (Hammersley, 1999) and an insider researcher may become blind to certain things that would be more apparent to an outsider observer (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Assumptions based on learned social schemas (for example, gender stereotypes) or various kinds of erroneous thinking can affect other researchers' perception of the research and the researcher (Henry, 2007; Myllylä, 2022b). This, in turn, can affect, among other things, the researcher's social power, control, or 'habitus' (i.e. representation of identity), also among other researchers (Fransberg, 2021; Henry, 2007). Thus, and especially when conducting multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research, researchers should get familiar with the 'know-how', attitudes, and language of other researchers coming from different disciplines (Arnold et al., 2021; Lyall et al., 2011). They should learn

other discipline's approaches and practices, perspectives, problems, standards, structures, roles, and publication channels. Attaining such competences in practice requires different forms of collaborative activity, such as co-research with research experts from different fields, and developing research strategies, infrastructures, and funding models (Arnold et al., 2021; Lyall et al., 2011). It requires creating interfaces between different disciplines and researchers' knowledge.

By the way, I have tried painting with spray paints a couple of times, and for sure it has been very exciting and probably has affected how I think about graffiti. However, my *own* emotions or attitudes towards graffiti have not been that relevant to my research, because my research questions have focussed on other things. But if it would be about, for example, what writing graffiti feels like for me as a researcher, it could require writing or having written graffiti myself.

**TOLONEN:** Our emotions and feelings do influence our research on some level (see, e.g. Rodríguez-Dorans, 2018: 748), and it is important to exercise self-reflexive analysis through the whole research process (Berger, 2015; Pink 2015). If I think for example about choosing artists to be interviewed for my research, I often much rather approach those whose works I like myself. This helps both my research (I already know a lot about the background and the works by the particular artist) and my motivation (I am more eager to learn more about an artist I find interesting). I also admit to having feelings for certain graffiti or street art pieces, and I try to visit them if I have a chance, like this one piece in Valencia (**FIGURE 1**). I always get excited if it happens to be still there and okay.

I have also used photos that I have taken of different pieces to help me write songs and to get in different kinds of moods. I found this very helpful, for instance, when I wanted to get to the right emotional level before recording in the studio an album about the violence against women that I had written (Yvonne and The No Regrets, 2019). Do you have any similar experiences?

**MYLLYLÄ:** Yes and no. I have seen some graffiti pieces that have made a great impression on me and that I still remember, but I have not at least deliberately utilised the emotions they may have evoked elsewhere in the same way you have. But that kind of artistic research could be very interesting. Could such work highlight, for example, things that cannot be obtained within the limits of the usual research paradigm? Could the concepts and perspectives used in artistic research not be shared and opened up more among disciplines so that the researchers could improve, for example, their theoretical foundations and tackle difficult questions collectively?

According to Ferrell (2018), being an insider is useful to gain phenomenal (i.e. experiential) knowledge and empathic understanding of the lived world of graffiti writers and street artists. However, in the end, each individual experiences the world in a unique way and what it is like to be a human being differs from person to person (see e.g. Nagel, 1974). We can only imagine but never fully grasp what somebody else is experiencing or thinking, even if we are part of the same ingroup. Empathy is also a difficult concept, since experiencing it can depend both on the perceivable or imagined qualities of the observed and, for example, on the opinions of the observer (Apperly, 2011; Myllylä, 2022a).

However, I think that through experiencing art, people can also try to understand things that are otherwise difficult for them to grasp. Sometimes the meanings of works of art can be left open to viewers, which could help people accept feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity. Although one function of human consciousness is to make sense of experiences and the world (Apperly, 2011; Beach et al., 2016; Myllylä, 2022a), art seems to offer the opportunity to experience something without a need for sense-making. I think these issues should be investigated further. Studying graffiti has also taught me to understand different perspectives and ways of thinking, and to become more tolerant even in the face of challenging questions. Have you had such experiences?



**Figure 1.** A piece that Tolonen returns to every time she visits Valencia, Spain, to capture the changes done by e.g. weather conditions or other writers. A previous version of this graffiti piece was featured in a photo-essay by Tolonen in the first issue of *Nuart Journal*. Photograph (2019) ©Jonna Tolonen.

**TOLONEN:** Yes, I have. I think that GSAR in so many ways has given my life new paths and widened my perspectives, and taught me so much about Spanish history and the Spanish language, for example, which I would not have assumed when I first got interested in graffiti and wall writings.

**MYLLYLÄ:** So, it seems that we need both insiders and outsiders, but we also need experts and novices as researchers! What do you think?

**TOLONEN:** Yes! Definitely! Experts do also learn from novices! I mentor students writing their master's thesis and love that every single one of these theses teaches me something and opens new horizons to understand certain phenomena. Therefore, should we expand the discussion about insider and outsider researchers and the dilemmas surrounding novices and experts in the context of GSAR?

**MYLLYLÄ:** I think we should. We can also ask ourselves, does the current GSAR community allow inclusiveness and different opinions so that we *can* talk and write more about this in the field of graffiti and street art?

**TOLONEN:** True. Over the last decade the research field has been dominated by male academics who used to be or still are graffiti writers themselves. And this tends to direct the methods and the themes that are presented in articles and books, and at conferences. People who are beginning to examine graffiti and street art might rely too much on this, making our field somehow stuck in the old traditions and in the expectation that you need to be a writer yourself. All new academics in the field should right away feel welcome and as insiders, not in any way as outsiders. GSAR is such a relatively young academic field and the disciplines and theoretical backgrounds of its researchers are so varied, that I am a bit surprised this does not yet seem to be fully reflected – what could we do about this?

**MYLLYLÄ:** I suppose that the GSAR community needs to continue working on its research ethics, with regard to questions such as who is doing research, about what, and in what ways (Ross et al., 2017). Maybe it would be good to make sure that the research community follows some sort of common ethical guidelines, such as those laid down in The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2017). Ethical guidelines should be understood as part of the graffiti and street art discourse (Kimvall, 2014) and be reviewed and updated continuously to keep up with changes in society, culture, and technology at local and global levels. The challenge is to create a code of ethics that considers and reconciles the views of all different stakeholders, as GSAR participants from different backgrounds and with different goals may have conflicting interests and values (Kimvall, 2014; Ross et al., 2017).

As mentioned before, differences in research paradigms and their ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies can have many consequences. First, it is good for any researcher to have their assumptions and views challenged by peers who might approach similar phenomena from different stances. Asking questions that are unexpected, difficult, or often taken for granted is vital for researchers because it requires them to think more critically about their own research, unchallenged implicit assumptions, and arguments (Saariluoma, 1997). Secondly, it raises a more general question about what kind of implications these types of differences in researchers' thinking can have. In the worst case, they can negatively affect, for instance, how researchers' studies are understood, accepted, and consequently, even funded, by others.

**TOLONEN:** Yes, these are all good issues to highlight now that we are coming to the end of our discussion. I think we have enjoyed challenging each other and learnt a lot about different research paradigms while writing our joint articles. Hopefully this article enables other researchers to come up with new ideas or approaches, and serves as a stimulant for insiders and outsiders to do more collaborative research. It would give GSAR a possibility to broaden our narrative and deepen comprehension as these different perspectives would interact.



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**Acknowledgements**

Mari Myllylä's work has been supported by the Etairos STN project of the Academy of Finland (decision number 327355) and the COACH project as part of the SEED Ecosystem (Business Finland). Jonna Tolonen would like to thank both the Emil Aaltonen Foundation and the Kari Mattila Foundation for funding her field trips to Greece and Spain.

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**JONNA TOLONEN** is an artist and researcher who combines aesthetic, ethnographical, and action research practices through an inquiry into embodiments and environments. She studied graphic design and photography in Canberra, education and fine arts in Oulu and received a PhD in Art and Design at the University of Lapland. She has been a visiting researcher in different universities and educational centres such as the Polytechnic University of Valencia and the Finnish Institute of Athens, and has participated in long-term artistic research projects such as Floating Peripheries (2017-2021) and Artivism on Edges (2022-2026).

