

Articles

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Helsinki's urban tableaux

Helsinki's urban tableaux: Electrical distribution cabinets as street message boards

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Abstract

Electrical distribution cabinets are a regular feature on the streets of Helsinki. The surfaces of these boxes are often decorated with stickers, graffiti, event posters and art works which compete for attention and offer clues to a plurality of discourses that signify much about the contemporary life of

the city. This article discusses the significance of these cabinets in relation to a series of paintings made for the research project ‘Urban Atlas Helsinki’ during the author’s Fellowship at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2022–23). The importance of painting as a research method is emphasized due to the visual nature of the subject matter. Through a close reading of a particular cabinet, insights are offered as to the nature of the discourses contained, and what they signify about Helsinki as a contemporary urban culture.

Keywords: painting as research, urban art, Helsinki, graffiti, urban landscape

‘At street level’: Examples from Helsinki’s urban signboards

‘The city itself is the anonymous and multiple author of the images they collect and exhibit as artworks’ ([Bourriaud 2002](#): 20).

In this quotation from *Postproduction*, Nicolas Bourriaud writes about the works of ‘new realist’ artists Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villegle, both known for works featuring layered torn posters collected from city streets and presented as complex abstract compositions within a gallery context. Found ‘compositions’ from the streets of Finland’s capital were the focus of the research project ‘Urban Atlas Helsinki’ that I undertook at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2022–23). These (often unintended) tableaux are created by multiple authors using fly-posters, stickers and graffiti. Many of the 7500 electrical distribution cabinets throughout the city are appropriated as informal message boards, where various agendas are promoted, and discourses negotiated (see [Figure 1](#)).

Such collections are characterized by a DIY aesthetic, and by their organization within the regularly shaped areas of the cabinets that act as frames to delineate composition and balance the dynamic, even chaotic, styles at play within formal edges. There is a visual relationship between the boundaries of these cabinets and the rectangular format of the painting canvas.

The restrained nature of these compositions is, in part, explained by the historic attitude of the City of Helsinki to public graffiti. From 1998 to 2008, the City instituted the ‘Stop Töhrville’

campaign, which attempted to eradicate graffiti in public spaces from Helsinki ([Fransberg 2021](#): 65), informed by the perception that unauthorized painting was too widespread and was damaging the urban landscape. During this period, the City Council spent around €1 million per year paying private security firms to guard public spaces and deter or apprehend anyone seen painting graffiti ([Jokinen 2006](#)). Whilst this campaign proved effective, with a reduction in instances of graffiti from around 68,000 in 1999 to around 5400 in 2005 ([Jokinen 2006](#)), it provoked a backlash from many in the artistic and cultural spheres who felt that the behaviour of the security firms was too heavy-handed, including unnecessary violence and arrests. This protest was organized by the 'Free Helsinki' network, which campaigned for the policy and security contracts to be discontinued (O-Toleranssi n.d.).

Helsinki's crackdown on graffiti can be viewed as part of a wider trend for such approaches across the Nordic countries from the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s, with particular initiatives in Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen, as well as Helsinki ([Fransberg 2021](#): 53).

In this context, the isolation of graffiti and public fly-posting in Helsinki to small municipal spaces, such as electrical distribution cabinets, is understandable. The apprehension of graffiti writers during 'Stop Töhrville' apparently also extended to those putting up flyers for cultural events (O-Toleranssi n.d.). Whilst post-2008 the policy was discontinued, it seems that hardened public attitudes to the decoration of public spaces have persisted. The appropriation of the electrical distribution cabinets as sites for unauthorized decoration has been discouraged by the electricity company that owns them, with an initiative launched in 2021 inviting artists and company staff members to decorate the cabinets with approved designs ([Helen 2021](#)).

By contrast, the informal decorations on the cabinets are rarely the works of a single maker. Rather, an initial 'posting' (either small graffiti, a sticker or fly-poster) begins the use of a particular site as a kind of collective 'message board' which others then add to. The nature of the postings can be diverse, from the political or religious to the profane or absurd. Typical examples include stickers

promoting soccer fan groups, posters advertising musical or theatre performances and art events, protest messages, advertisements for streetwear brands, graffiti tags and pieces of graphic illustration either printed or drawn by hand.

Thus, these sites can be viewed as examples of discourses created by multiple authors across various platforms within the urban space. In some instances, contributors may respond directly to previous postings ([Vasileva 2021](#): 7), most notably when a soccer fan defaces the sticker of a rival, either by scratching it out or placing their own sticker over the top to obscure the previous one.

Often, a contributor does not respond directly to previous postings but rather seeks primarily to add their message to the space. The result of these processes is usually a mixture of types of messages and languages (both visual and textual) which can create a whole that seems disjointed or jarring. In these cases, it is left to the viewer to decode the composition, filtering out content they consider irrelevant or uninteresting, in order to focus on anything of value to them. For many passers-by, the whole of the site may be disregarded as so much visual noise, which they choose to ignore ([Vasileva 2021](#): 7). In this sense, the audience for these communications is self-selecting. To some they are a kind of visual pollution which they would rather was removed ([Fransberg 2021](#): 65). To the groups interested in these discourses, however, they have meaning and significance.

Writing about graffiti in a Finnish context, Mari [Myllylä \(2018\)](#) uses the metaphor of the palimpsest to describe the function of layering in urban artworks, which can enrich them and add to their overall meaning: ‘The remains of previous paint and ink stratify between the foils of dirt, detergents, paint strippers, and the peeling off by natural deterioration caused by weathering. All this is covered by overlapping newer drawings, paintings, stickers, posters and flyers’ ([2018](#): 26). Such layering also occurs in the message board examples discussed here and arguably contributes to their informal aesthetic and impression of haphazard arrangement. The idea of the palimpsest is also significant for the connotations of history and associations with past messages and images that contribute to the sense that the spaces comprised multiple layers that have accrued with time.

Figure 1: Example of electrical distribution cabinets as urban ‘message boards’ in central Helsinki, May 2023. Colour photograph. © Thomas Cardwell.

A colour photograph showing two black rectangular metal cabinets installed on the street. The surfaces of the cabinets are adorned with illegible graffiti and eleven posters advertising music and arts events in Helsinki. The posters feature a variety of colourful graphic typefaces, and several have photographs of the main performers.

Methodology – painting as research

The beginning of the project in August 2022 involved exploration of Helsinki and photographing examples of urban decoration, with a particular focus on the electrical cabinets.

From this collection of photographs, a number were chosen to feature in a series of paintings made in response (see [Figure 2](#)). Through the painting process, more can be learned about how the distinct elements of the street ‘compositions’ might function and why the different elements within them are important.

These processes of image-making form the central methodologies of the study, as it is based in creative practice. Given the strong visual nature of the original material found on the streets of Helsinki, visual practice has much to offer as a methodology ([Grimshaw et al. 2010](#): 161). Creative research can bring unique perspectives that are particularly suited to the study of visual culture ([Bestley and Noble 2016](#)). Through the processes of photography and painting, multiple decisions are made about the selection and content of compositions. Accompanying research into the subject matter of the examples of decoration informs an understanding of the particular nature of these discourses.

All of these alterations are characterized by the shift from digital to analogue processes that painting involves ([Cardwell 2022](#): 11). The marks of the handmade gesture offer a contrast to the slickness or flatness of the digital image, whether printed or viewed on-screen. The organic nature of these renderings means that the paintings themselves offer something wholly different to the lens-

based image. The act of creative translation from source to final artwork involves not just translation but also transformation. Through the creative process the original sources are taken into a new thought-space: the space of painting ([Grootenboer 2005](#)). The painting space is one that is outside time in an immediate sense, where images can be deployed in many ways at once.

Thus, the resulting works, whilst having clear visual connections to the examples from the photographs, become something different as well. The intention is that, through these processes, the visual representations of urban cultures (which are often temporary) are brought into the painting tradition of still life and involved in its ongoing discourse. Still-life painting has long been a memorial for the everyday, the transitory and the mundane ([Bryson 1990](#)) and can have a profound effect on our perceptions of humble objects and scenes.

Analysis of an electrical cabinet and its messages

Through a detailed reading of the elements featured on a particular electrical cabinet, insight can be gained into the nature and subject matters of the discourses at play in contemporary Helsinki.

The painting in [Figure 2](#) is based on a photograph of an electrical distribution cabinet that is situated beside the 'Banna' pedestrian and cycle route that runs through the centre of Helsinki, close to Ruoholahdenkatu (see [Figure 1](#) for a later photograph of this site). This cabinet is in a relatively prominent position besides the walking and cycle paths, its surface covered with a selection of event posters pasted over layered graffiti tags.

The layered arrangement of posters in the painting is referenced from original source photographs. The 'judgement' painting on the right side of the composition is based on the painting *The Last Judgement* (1824) by Carl Gustaf Söderstrand, originally in Keuruu Church, Finland, now in the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki. The original work shows a folk-style rendering of the judgement of Christ as described in the *Book of Revelation*. The upper section of the painting shows the righteous seated in glory with Christ as he judges the Earth, with sinners consigned to torment in the lower part of the picture. Orthodox and Lutheran branches of Christianity form an important and

complex part of Finnish national history and identity ([Bosley 1989](#): xx), clearly represented through numerous church artefacts in the National Museum of Finland.

To the left of the judgement painting image, there is a rendering of a concert poster for the 'Vikings and Lionhearts Tour' by the bands Amon Amarth and Machine Head, which visited Helsinki in September 2022. Amon Amarth is a folk metal band from Sweden, whose lyrical themes and imagery are mostly concerned with Viking histories and Norse mythology. Machine Head is an American heavy metal band with lyrics and imagery that often reference heraldry and empire. The poster combines these elements to feature a divided head with the left side based on Amon Amarth's Viking berserker and the right side Machine Head's lion crest. Heavy metal music and culture are very important in Finland, the country reputedly boasting the highest number of metal bands per capita in the world ([Dempsey 2012](#)).

This poster demonstrates the juxtaposition of contemporary popular culture with historic narratives and imagery which tie in to Finnish interests in mythology and national identity. Both the bands reference ideas of ancient or medieval pasts, in nostalgic or dramatic ways. The use of a heraldic crest emblem reinforces these concerns and communicates them visually.

Above the 'Vikings and Lionhearts' poster there is another large poster, predominantly white, which is torn on the top left and bottom right corners, with several stickers obscuring parts of the original message. The main image is of the head and torso of a figure wearing a checked shirt and brimmed hat, rendered in two-tone yellow and black, with a stencil effect. The face is covered by the stickers, and parts of the text are torn away making the overall meaning unclear. Perhaps this defacement was deliberate, due to later additions registering objections to the original message. Above the figure is a blue text banner which reads 'Are You Entertained [*sic*]' in a block stencil typeface. To the right of the figure's head is a smaller text bubble which reads, 'Do what you want but the future is mine'. The central part of this text is obscured by a circular logo sticker reading 'Eventual'. The face of the figure is covered with a further six stickers. Two of these are from football

fan groups (one German and one Finnish), two from bands (Iron Corpse and Black Spiders) and one from a Helsinki streetwear clothing brand, OSW. Together, these stickers offer a snapshot of some of the urban subcultures active in the city – from sport to music to graffiti.

The ‘Are You Entertained’ graphic and text has featured on many posters and stickers around Helsinki over the past two years, as part of a city-wide street art campaign ([Häsä 2021](#)). The written message has a political tone to it, but the exact agenda is not revealed. It is reminiscent of the well-known ‘Obey’ poster campaign, which featured a two-tone image of the wrestler Andre the Giant ([Fairey 2003](#)).

To the left of the ‘Are You Entertained’ poster is a grey and green sticker, partially removed, for the climate change protest group Elokapina, the Finnish arm of the international Extinction Rebellion movement, whose name translates literally as ‘Biorevolt’. Elokapina posters and stickers are a common site in Helsinki, particularly in the east of the city around the Hakaniemi transit hub which has been the site for various climate protests and actions. Elokapina has performed a number of prominent protest actions in Helsinki and elsewhere, such as the UPM Pulp Mill protest near Kouvola in 2023 ([YLE News 2023](#)), the Pitkäsilta Bridge roadblock in October 2021 and the Kirjoita Kriisistä (‘Write about the Crisis’) action at Sanomatalo Media House in March 2021 ([Mononen 2023](#)). These public events and their accompanying visual signs have polarized opinions in Finland and led to a number of high-profile court cases ([YLE News 2022](#)). These arguments can be discerned in the common defacing of Elokapina posters.

At the bottom right of the paintings is a small blue, black and white sticker, again partially torn away. This expresses support for the Helsinki soccer team Helsingin Jalkapalloklubi. A rivalry exists between Helsingin Jalkapalloklubi and another Helsinki team, Idrottsföreningen Kamraterna i Helsingfors. Fans of the two teams regularly deface the stickers and posters of the other, and clashes can occur when the teams play each other in the ‘Stadin Derby’ matches, notably in September 2022 ([Virtanen 2022](#)). The antipathy between the two teams’ fans, particularly the ‘ultras’, is evident in

graphic form in the areas around the main stadium or 'Stadi' where sites on the streets (electrical cabinets, bus shelters, drainpipes etc.) are decorated with fan stickers. Often the stickers of one team will be overlaid with those of the other or scratched out in a contestation of authority. Whilst soccer is not Finland's favourite sport (ice hockey claims this position), it is nonetheless popular, and its fans are ardent.

The other motif in this painting is a stylized skull sticker with a geometric cranium. This is repeated twice, first in the upper central part of the painting, where it appears on its side rendered in pink and black, and second in the lower left corner where it is upright, with tones reversed, this time in fluorescent yellow and black. As with 'Are You Entertained', these stickers have appeared in many locations in Helsinki. They do not have any text component, suggesting that the main intention is to be seen, both aesthetically and symbolically. Indeed, the aim of sticker art is often to feature the same sticker in as many locations as possible ([Vasileva 2021](#): 3). The skull is a common motif in street art, offering contemporary examples of the ancient subject of the *memento mori* ([Sterling 1959](#)). Graffiti and street art are important modes of expression for alternative or non-mainstream cultural participants in Helsinki. This is especially true, given the legacy of the 'Stop Töhryille' laws discussed above. Today, there are signs that these aspects of visual culture in public space are becoming more accepted in the city. In 2023, the deputy mayor of Helsinki, Paavo Arhinmäki, issued a public apology after being apprehended writing graffiti on a public wall in the city ([Oltermann 2023](#)).

As this analysis of visual examples has shown, a single electrical cabinet with its various embellishments can offer rich clues to the agendas and values at work in the discourses of urban life in contemporary Helsinki.

The posters, stickers and graffiti discussed here reveal the importance of sports fandom (soccer), contemporary music (heavy metal), environmental protests (Elokapina), graffiti and street art cultures, religion and mythology (Christianity and Norse) and themes of art history via the

memento mori. The diversity of these various interest groups is overlaid by common interests in visual expression and a commitment to public discourse across a tacitly agreed platform (the cabinets).

Conclusion

Urban decoration in Helsinki has arguably been shaped by previous efforts from city authorities to curb graffiti and street art. The ‘Stop Töhrville’ laws drastically reduced public painting and posting, and whilst the campaign has now ended, contemporary examples reveal a tendency to restraint. Nonetheless, such modes of visual expression are important for many in the city. The numerous electrical distribution cabinets which populate Helsinki’s streets are commonly used to promote various agendas via posters, stickers, graffiti and artworks.

Combined methodologies of photography, painting and academic research were used in the project ‘Urban Atlas Helsinki’ to explore the significance of these cabinets and their decoration. The process of painting offers a unique perspective on visual examples through a process of ‘slow looking’ and translation from photographic to painted format.

The analysis of a particular painted example of an electrical cabinet reveals a multiplicity of discourses and agendas at play on the streets of Helsinki. Ranging from sports to music fandom, from religious to folkloric, these values are at times in competition or antagonistic to one another, yet they share the public space. Filtered through the modes of expression of contemporary urban cultures such as graffiti and street art, these messages reveal something of the values and characteristics of Finland today in ways that offer alternatives to official or mainstream communication.

Figure 2: Thomas Cardwell, *Are You Entertained*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas. 150 cm × 120 cm. © Thomas Cardwell.

A detailed colourful painting in portrait format showing an electrical cabinet decorated with posters, stickers and graffiti. The background of the cabinet is deep green with many illegible graffiti marks across its surface, including some in bright red. It is decorated with six posters and some smaller

stickers. The posters include a painting of *The Last Judgement*, concert posters and a heavily pixelated portrait.

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