

Keeping

the
Streets

Wild

Kadri Lind & Sirla, Tartu, Estonia

with

Stencibility

Back in 2010, for us the term 'street art' basically meant an illegal stencil on the wall. Banksy was making headlines and street art as an art movement was doing something totally different than the traditional art world. We wanted to support this culture in our hometown Tartu, Estonia, so we created something that we started to call a street art festival and we named it Stencibility. A lot has changed since 2010. Now you see the term 'street art' being used for describing a commissioned five-story high mural or even a canvas in a gallery. It seems that the art movement that was once so punk is starting to resemble the traditional art world more and more each year. But does it have to be this way?

As festival organisers we see that street art nowadays is often executed with a boom lift and through endless piles of paperwork. The artwork isn't the artist's singular vision, but a compromise between the city, the wall owner, the funder, the curator, etc. Our aim has always been to encourage street artists to keep doing what they do and help them through the festival by equipping them with materials and wall options, but not to intervene in their creative process. For us, it's not the aspect of illegality that is important, but the freedom that comes with it. We started using the term 'independent street art' to emphasise the creative freedom of the works that have been made without having to coordinate artists' actions with anyone.

Stencibility mimics the way street artists work 'in the wild': the festival has wall donors who give permission to use their walls without requiring any sketches in advance. When the artists arrive in Tartu for the festival, they just choose their favourite spots and start painting without any further coordination. Every artist chooses how big they go: some do smaller pieces, others use their cars to reach higher and go as big as possible. The most important thing is that no one has the power to change their artworks. We call this format the spraycation. This is a possibility for the artists to do exactly what they want to do – there's no client, no curator, no officials. Isn't this what street art should be all about?

In 2022 we produced an exhibition in Berlin called 'Hello Mister Police Officer'. In it, we gathered stories from the artists we have collaborated with throughout the years. The stories are about working on the streets of Tartu and they describe the excitement of waiting until midnight to jump on your bike and meet up with a group of friends. Everyone has something different in their bag: stickers, spray cans, paste ups, rollers, acrylic paint, markers, and they all stroll through the night looking for the perfect spot.

The photos in this essay – all taken in Tartu – are a reflection of the spirit of our festival.



An anonymous artist looking for a spot to paint, 2017.
Photograph ©Ruudu Rahumaru.



Estonian artist Edward von Lõngus started doing stencils in Tartu in 2007 and is still active in this field. Here he is seen doing a stencil on a bridge in 2012.
Photograph ©Ruudu Rahuma.

You're a young mother of two and feel the urge to use the only available night off from your kids to go out alone to paint, as Estonian street artist KAIRO is seen doing here in 2014, enjoying the silence on the streets. But the painting session is about to be put on hold, as the police sneak up to her and ask whether she has a permit. Well, of course you don't! Painting in fresh air is good for your health and the electrical cabinet was simply calling your name. Photograph ©Siria.



Estonian street artist KAIRO getting caught by the police on the street, 2022. Her excuse was that it was her only night off from her kids. The police didn't agree that that was enough of a reason to do illegal work on the streets and sent her back home. She returned the next day to finish what she had started. Photograph ©Anonymous Police Officer.



It's the naive sort of confidence to park your car under a huge bridge in broad daylight with a plan to do a big roller painting. Half an hour later the police come over to ask whether you have a permit. Of course you don't! The place looked so bleak and empty, it was asking for it! On the occasion pictured here in 2022, Estonian artist GUTFACE knew he better not park there as this had brought unwanted attention from the police before. Photograph ©Kadri Lind.



Estonian artist GUTFACE moments before getting caught in 2022. Photograph ©Kadri Lind.

As we don't provide boom lifts, Latvian artist Lazybra uses his car to reach higher during the 2019 edition of the festival. Photograph ©Ruudu Rahumaru.



The festival is reusing most of the walls every year, so it's up to the artists to decide whether to add something to already existing artworks, or paint over them. In 2019, Latvian artist Zahars Ze decided to add one of his characters to the ones made at previous editions of the festival by his fellow countryman and artist Rombo Kaos and Finnish artist Jukka Peltosaari. Photograph ©Ruudu Rahumaru.



Sometimes the right wall is not on the festival list and we have to ask for impromptu donations, like in 2019. The permission to paint this wall was asked by simply knocking on the door. Luckily the owner of this car repair shop loved art and his only demand was that the Polish artists Sepe and Someart would eat his birthday cake. Photograph ©Madli Viigimaa.



Artists can choose to do one bigger work or a lot of smaller ones. French artist Silex Project chose to spread ancient mythical creatures on walls and utility boxes all around the city in 2018. Photograph ©Saara Tõugjas.



Estonian artist Hapnik painting in front of his house (2017) to pay a tribute to Leo Tolstoy, after whom his own street is named. Tolstoy exchanged letters with Mahatma Gandhi, who is also painted on the wall. Photograph ©Ruudu Rahumaru.



Smaller walls give more freedom to play and improvise. Estonian artist Stina Leek was looking for an industrial location in 2020 and the local repair guys were happy to give their blessing without knowing exactly what the end result would look like. Photograph @Fotomorgaana.

The 'Hello Mister Police Officer' exhibition will be organised again, this time in Aberdeen in the context of the annual Nuart Aberdeen Festival. The participating artists are: KAIRO, Stina Leek, GUTFACE, and Edward von Lõngus. The exhibition is curated by Kadri Lind and Sirla. 'Hello Mister Police Officer' is part of the European Capital of Culture Tartu 2024 main programme.

'Hello Mister Police Officer' – The Print Room gallery, 252A Union Street, Aberdeen, June 7–17, 2023.

KADRI Lind is a professional city lover. With a background in urban studies, she is a self-taught curator/producer and since 2013, a proud mother of two: Stencibility Street Art Festival and Urban Festival UIT. She's fascinated by how people perceive and experience their environment and believes that every inhabitant should have a personal relationship with their city, and that could be triggered by temporary site-specific artworks.

SIRLA is a big believer in illegal street art. She wrote her master's thesis about the importance of illegality and creative freedom in street art. She is the head of Stencibility Street Art Festival that's held in Tartu, Estonia, supporting the idea of independent street art (aka anarcho-street art) in an era dominated by large-scale mural festivals. Once in a while she also goes out to hit the streets to practise what she preaches.

STENCIBILITY (EST. 2010) is an international festival from Tartu, Estonia that grew out of the local street artist community. The goal of the festival is to spread the idea of independent street art and emphasise the importance of creative freedom along with responsibility. Stencibility mimics the way street artists work 'in the wild': the festival has wall donors who have given the permission to use their walls without requiring any sketches in advance. The artists arrive at Tartu, choose their favourite spots and start painting without any further coordination.