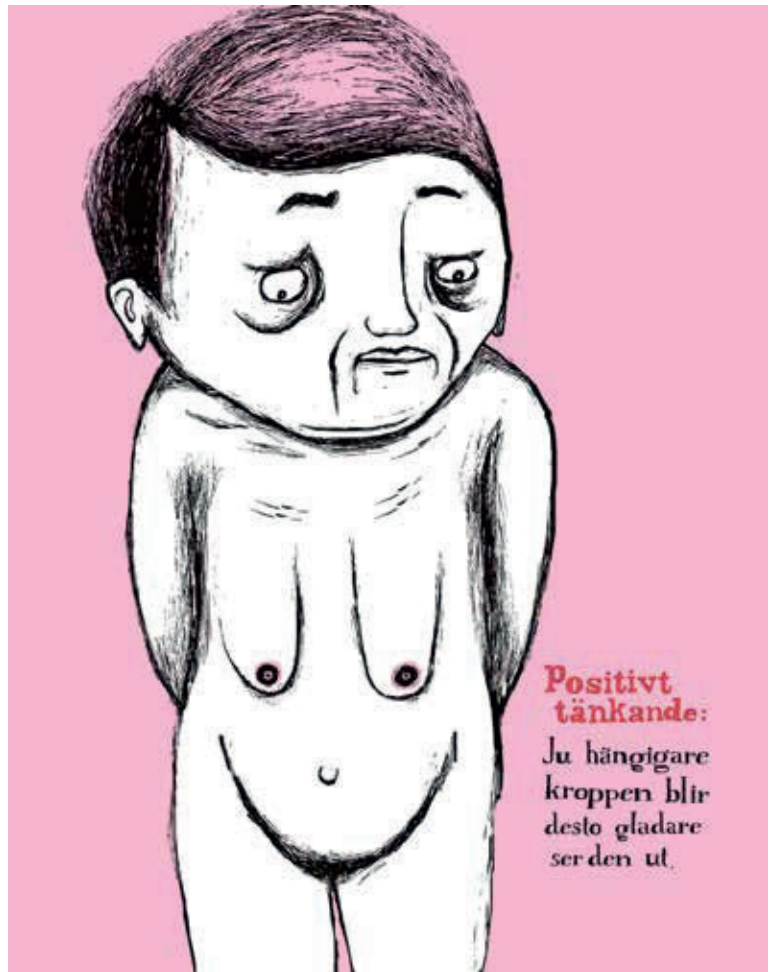




Anke Feuchtenberger, Germany.



Kati Kovács, Finland.



Lotta Sjöberg, Sweden.

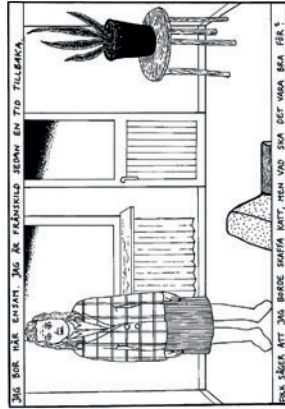
FEMINIST COMIC ART IS SPREADING IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

The comic art industry represents much more than traditional superhero comics and includes genres such as manga, science fiction, horror, autobiography, or history, to name but a few. In recent years, the genre of feminist comic art has distinguished itself on the international comics landscape, thanks in large part to activity in Sweden, where feminist comics had been published in connection with the women's liberation movement since the early 1970s. Swedish feminist comic art, which is characterized by explorations of the political through the per-

sonal, has served to establish a growing cadre of comics artists as influential social commentators and powerful political activists, many of whom have garnered mainstream popularity and critical acclaim for their feminist perspectives and scathing but humorous social commentary. Such contemporary Swedish feminist comics artists as Liv Strömquist, Nina Hemmingsson, or Nanna Johansson can thus be considered pioneers with regards to their depictions of female experiences, and to their engagement with topics such as politics, class, gender, sexualities, and other issues of equality, which have both

driven and supported the feminist movement in Sweden.

THE SUCCESS, POPULARITY, and momentum of Swedish feminist comics encourage an exploration of local reverberations and transnational trends in feminist comic art both in and around Sweden. In Finland, for example, when female cartoonists started to become more common and visible on the Finnish comics landscape during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a need to categorise their comics as "women's comics" in comparison to the decidedly established norm of



Åsa Grennvall, Sweden.

I HOPE IT GETS EASIER TO TALK ABOUT GENDER."



Katja Klengel, Germany.

male-dominated comics. The cultural conversation about the necessity of the label "women's comics", continued in Finland until the 2010s, as the main comics festivals discussed the label's positive and negative connotations. As the discussion has continued, the Finnish comics field has also become more diverse and the need for categorising comics based on the artist's gender has become obsolete.

Furthermore, when discussing feminist comics and their distinctive features, it is of utmost importance to consider the differences between genres, artists, and generations of artists, since both the cultural and political contexts for making comics change over time. In Finland,

women cartoonists had to defend their new place in the earlier male-dominated industry until the 2000s, when women were no longer a rare sight among the readers, students, or creators of comics. Additionally, the ways in which feminism(s) is (are) understood have changed over time: in Finland, the debates about intersectionality, the rights of non-binary and trans people, mental health, and body positivity have become more important and increasingly relevant topics, especially for many younger comics artists during the 2000s and 2010s. This trend is set to continue into the 2020s, even if the critical aspects and themes may very well change as a

reaction to societal and political developments.

AS FEMINIST COMIC ART in Sweden and Finland shows, the surrounding society – with its political situation, gender expectations, legislation, and cultural norms – affects what kinds of feminist ideas creators may choose to tackle in their work. In this sense, both commonalities between and unique characteristics in feminist comics are significant. In many contexts, however, the concept of "women's comics" prevails, threatening to undermine the value of the social and political issues they address.

Feminist comic art in Sweden, Finland,



Varvara Pomidor, Russia.



Emmi Nieminen, Finland.

In 2016, Femicoomix Finland, a network for feminist minded comics artists and activists, co-edited an issue of *Kuti* magazine dedicated to feminist comics.



Joanna Rubín Dranger, Sweden.

and the Baltic Sea region raises the question of whether it is possible to find a common denominator for feminist comic art. Are feminist comics connected by certain aesthetic qualities or themes? Is there a shared conception of feminism that is recognizable in the comics produced in the Baltic Sea region? The answer to both questions is "no". As much as there is an exchange of ideas and aesthetic influences between artists in different countries, there are local varieties specific to countries and individual artists. Furthermore, variations in contemporary conceptions of feminism seem to depend on varying historical conditions and experiences in the different countries. There

"IS THERE A SHARED CONCEPTION OF FEMINISM THAT IS RECOGNIZABLE IN THE COMICS PRODUCED IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION?"

is also a great variety of genres, media, and narrative styles represented in the feminist comic art of the Baltic Sea region, as represented by Joanna Rubín Dranger,

Åsa Grennvall (Schlagerström), or Lotta Sjöberg from Sweden; Kati Kovács and Emmi Nieminen from Finland; Ulli Lust, Anke Feuchtbenger, or Katja Klengel from Germany; Wanda Hagedorn from Poland; or Varvara Pomidor from Russia. Thus, identifying or categorising feminist comic art can be considered an exercise in recognizing variations on shared aesthetic, discursive, and ideological themes.

FEMINIST COMICS around the Baltic Sea region draw their aesthetic influences and feminist ideas from several sources; a transnational perspective highlights practices and characteristics of feminist comic

art which have mobilised to extend across national boundaries. However, there might also be translocal particularities, where forms of global media are adapted to meet the needs of local contexts, which themselves are increasingly linked through practices of adaptation, translation, and mediation. The idea of the Baltic Sea region as a locus for transnational collaboration and exchange also holds true when it comes to artist networks. In 2016, Femicomix Finland, a network for feminist minded comics artists and activists, co-edited an issue of *Kuti* magazine dedicated to feminist comics (*Kuti* #40). The issue included comics from the Baltic Sea region (Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Russia, and Sweden) but also from other parts of Europe and around the world. Femicomix Finland itself was established in 2013, drawing its inspiration from the Swedish feminist network *Dotterbolaget*, which was founded in 2005 by a group of women who had studied at the Comic Art School of Malmö, Sweden. Central to *Dotterbolaget*'s explicit ethos is creating and upholding a collaborative and supportive network among women and trans people inside the comics industry, an ideology that Femicomix also subscribes to. Similar networks (and important partners for transnational collaboration) include the Chicago-based *Ladies Night Anthology* and the British collectives *Comic Book Slumber Party* and *Laydeez do Comics*, which share the aim of promoting female creators and diversity in the comics industry.

FEMINIST COMIC ART, especially that which reflects the continuous flux between transnational and local influences, has the potential to proliferate, thus not only responding to but also creating political and cultural debate. Transnational connections, that is, aesthetic, social, political, economic, and cultural interaction reaching across national boundaries, shape comics cultures and graphic narratives. Translating works from one language to another is a common way to enable a transnational flow of ideas and narratives; however, not only can translations, festivals, artist meetings, or collaborative works (such as anthologies,



Ulli Lust, Germany.

zines, etc.) create transnational interaction between artists, but also the Internet, especially via social media platforms such as Instagram, enables transnational networking. One example is Free Comic Book Day (FCBD) aimed at promoting the comic book industry, FCBD showcases both established and up-and-coming creators, ideally sparking an interest in reading comics and providing exposure to alternative formats and lesser-known genres.² These different platforms have made it easier for readers to find new comics and artists from other cultures and language areas.

Considering the current state of the world, in which one crisis seemingly succeeds another, we can expect a variety of lived experiences, consequences, and commentary to be documented in many ways, including in the medium of comic art and graphic narrative. ❌

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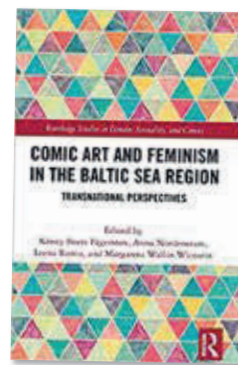
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The authors are co-editors of *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region. Transnational Perspectives* (2021, Routledge).

references

- 1 In 2011, Päivälehti museum (a museum dedicated for media) organised an event called Changing the Woman Image which included a panel discussion about women and comics. The participants hoped that, in the future, there would be no more panels dedicated to “women’s comics”. During the same year, Tampere Kuplii comics festival hosted cartoonist Solja Järvenpää’s presentation titled “Women’s comics – a curse word?” which was the topic also in a panel discussion at Helsinki Comics Festival in 2013.
- 2 Free Comic Book Day (FCBD) usually falls on the first Saturday of May; due to the pandemic, it was cancelled in 2020 and postponed in 2021 to August 14.