

## Book reviews

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Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi (eds), *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing, and Representing the City*, 1st Edition, London: Routledge, 2017; 282 pp.: 9781138600904, £36.99 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Emma Arnold , University of Oslo, Norway

Give it a shake. Make it rattle. Stand back from the wall, get a bit of distance. Bend at the elbow, crook the wrist, press the index finger down lightly on that bit of plastic. Hear the gentle hiss of aerosol paint. First comes the sketch, light spray, memorised lines. Next, the background and fill, give it body. Then the outline and details: switch up the colour, refine the lines, push a little harder, more concentrated flow. So begins the edited collection of essays *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing, and Representing the City*. More or less. The captivating introduction is structured according to the typical stages of graffiti writing, revealing the expertise and tacit knowledge of its editors and, by extension, authors. The collection brings together many notable scholars who reflect the editors' disciplinary orientations, with strong showings from the fields of architecture, sociology and criminology. The editors – architect Konstantinos Avramidis and sociologist Myrto Tsilimpounidi – boldly, though convincingly, distinguish this collection as the beginning of a new fourth wave of graffiti and street art scholarship. This fourth wave marks a new period of research on

urban art practices that moves beyond the descriptive and into more critical and innovative territories. Given the allure of these topics for scholars across many fields, this type of critical engagement stands out amongst exponentially growing literatures.

Graffiti and street art can be understood as contestations both in *and* of the city. The city is central to this collection and not just as site of production. As Ferrell puts it: to read graffiti and street art, we must also read the city (p. 27). Many chapters in this book reflect the city's changing landscape: the literal changes enacted through graffiti and street art but also the broader economic and political changes in which these practices are implicated and situated. Jeff Ferrell points to dialectical tensions between the practices and the city and notes that the rise of graffiti and of street art are connected to two powerful urban trends: increasing social control and the changing political economy of the city. There is a normative politics that trends through this collection, specifically the idea that graffiti and street art *should* have a place in the city and one that stands in opposition to a certain politics and authority, resistant to commodification and institutionalisation, and ultimately transgressive. This is a politics that likely resonates with many critical urban scholars interested in contestations of power and the claiming of space in the city. One may defend this normative positioning fairly easily by noting that graffiti and street art have been politically skewed by authorities and disproportionately maligned and

penalised in many jurisdictions. The ways aesthetics of the city are governed should not be underestimated for they are connected to broader, frequently exclusionary, urban processes and are, as Iveson argues, linked to the democracy of the city (p. 89).

This collection arrives at a particularly interesting moment of street art genesis, an uncomfortable or at least uncertain one for many. While Young writes that street art is undergoing a period of 'cultural legitimation' (p. 46), Schacter argues that the period of street art is over (p. 105). The questions Schacter raises are significant for they point to processes of subsumption and institutionalisation of an art movement that has rested rather heavily on its rebellious and transgressive laurels. Schacter links commercialisation to creative city policies and Brighenti notes similarly, adding that street art may also act as a signifier of gentrification (p. 119). The 'days when we could celebrate graffiti and/or street art as a kind of resistance against the evil authorities are way behind us (if they ever existed)' writes Iveson (p. 89), who suggests that graffiti and street art can be understood as '*assertions of authority*' rather than '*confrontations with authority*' (p. 90, original emphasis). Landry's account of policing graffiti and street art in Ottawa describes how municipalities embrace and valorise street art, formalising this sanctioning through new urban policies and plans while paradoxically continuing to vilify graffiti (p. 216). Snyder's concluding chapter is essential reading, especially for those quick to lambast tagging while venerating street art. The concise chapter explores the narrative possibilities of reading tags in the city, underscoring the importance of these markings, which remains persistently disputed (p. 264). Other authors in this collection connect graffiti and street art to politics at a different scale, demonstrating how these subversive practices become adjunct to the politics of

revolution and crisis that frequently unfold in urban space. As Abaza explains in her analysis of writing on post-2011 Cairene graffiti

(p. 177), graffiti is a way that some citizens choose to take part in political confrontations with expressions intertwined with key events and acting to make resistance visible (p. 182). Stravides notes, in his account of stencil images that emerged during the 2008 uprising in Athens, that expressions that disrupt urban order are often in tandem with other urban struggles, be it over housing, transportation or gentrification (p. 164).


A particular strength of this collection is its treatment of images, which are carefully regarded throughout these essays. The editors set out early on how images are approached and encourage 'a careful reading of the singular image; an examination of its relationship with a larger set of images; and an intensification of the ways they function together' (pp. 5–6). Young's essay addresses the ambiguity of images and argues that the images we encounter in the city defy absolute categorisation. She writes that an image may be 'meaningful, damaging, illegal, political, beautiful; and it may be *all those things at once*' (p. 51, original emphasis). Theory and place are further brought to life through dynamic case studies from diverse cities, illustrated with high-quality photographs. Lamazares, for example, describes the practice of writing *pixação* in São Paulo and suggests that the distinctly local form of runic alphabet style graffiti writing can be understood as an extension of the modernist movement in architecture (p. 197). The book contains experimentations in method and in form, from Andron's proposal for a way of reading surfaces (p. 71) to Edwards-Vandenhoeck's multimodal and photographic approach to studying graffiti (p. 54). Authors experiment with visual methods but also play with text: Leventis interweaves narrative and academic writing

in his account of graffiti along the UN buffer zone in Nicosia, Cyprus (p. 135), while Vilaseca takes a humanities approach to explore representations of a fictitious graffiti writer in comparison with real street artists in Madrid (p. 250). In one of the most innovative essays in the collection, Sabina Andron advocates an approach of 'interviewing walls' and her proposal is persuasive; doing away with the need to categorise and distinguish between graffiti and street art and instead reading them as localised parts of the semiotic urban landscape. In superimposing bracketed text over photographs, Andron's methods for analysis reveal the complexity and diversity of signs in the city, their symbiosis and tensions. Sites of graffiti and street art consumption are not confined to physical urban space. MacDowall's essay importantly explores how 'graffiti and street art are increasingly produced as digital objects' (p. 231), tracing the quest for fame and 'getting up' in graffiti culture as images permutate into online spaces and platforms.


Grffiti and street art are 'valuable research lenses through which to unpack some of the tensions and contradictions of urban life' (p. 2). All works in this book are in different ways careful considerations of the urban, making this a significant resource for urban scholars searching for lively examples and critiques of the (neoliberal) city and its aesthetic hegemonies. The book is particularly useful as it skips generalities, assumes a well-informed audience and provides a sophisticated overview of current topics. The works within this book may also be useful in teaching the city, offering engaging ways for students to access urban theory and politics and showcasing diverse ways of studying the city. The essays in this collection raise many critical questions, each demonstrating the inextricability of the urban from the practice and study of graffiti and street art. Though not all of

these questions are answered definitively here, they are importantly posed. It is in asking such critical questions that this collection kicks off the new fourth wave of graffiti and street art scholarship. Together these authors establish a multitude of ways of reading, writing and representing the city; setting new precedents for future research.

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Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America's Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019; 560 pp.: 978-0374254087, US\$ 35.00/£ 27.23 (hbk)

**Reviewed by:** Andrew Riely , Winsor School, USA

Many historians consider mid-century efforts at urban renewal, designed to counteract the drain of inhabitants and capital to suburbia, a failure. Robert Caro's (1975) biography of Robert Moses, probably the most influential book on the topic, convincingly portrayed the 'master builder' as an unyielding servant of an abstract public good, whose youthful idealism was perverted by prejudice and a contempt for ordinary experience. Moses was blind to the unintended consequences of slum clearance and over-reliance on the automobile. Worse, he embraced creating vertical public housing ghettos that intensified concentrated poverty. Along with interstates, Federal mortgage insurance, and redlining (Jackson, 1985), urban renewal bears the blame for what Douglass Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) referred to as an 'American Apartheid'.