

Book review: Graffiti and street art: Reading, writing and representing the city

Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City. Edited by Konstantinos Avramidis, Myrto Tsilimpoundi. ISBN: 978-1-4724-7333-2, Routledge NY, 2017

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1. The first contact

The book being reviewed here is the first edition, hardcover from 2017. The book is of conventional size at 15 x 23cm and 0.6 kg of weight, natural for the volume of pages. The cover image influences very much the first impressions, and in this case it is composed by a black and white pertinence photo of a ruined building covered with nature, the ruin has some painted patterns, some framed letters, a not defined setting in terms of time (night day, year, month) and space both interior and exterior but also city, street and country.

Over this image you can find the title in bigger letters “graffiti & street art” the subtitle in smaller case “reading, writing and representing”, in the left bottom of the cover. The editors names are included. The image is well described both in the acknowledgment, intro and in the back cover.

On the back cover, we can find some paragraphs of the 3rd (non numbered) page. In the 4th not numbered page we can find very small (one paragraph) appointment reviews by Ian Borden and P. Bengtsen.

The interior cover has, as usual, the title, sub title and editors reference. In the next page we can find the credits and the book’s technical information. The book has a good density white paper, times new roman as a chosen typeset, and good font size.

Contents arrive on non-numbered page 7, that corresponds to page number III in roman numbering, the list of figures are on page VII, contributors on page IX and acknowledgment at page XIV. The introduction arrives after page XV on page 1 arabic numbering that goes up to page number 281, all together we have a 296 page book.

Text based pages are frankly predominant, 245 text only, 55 pages with images, all of these are full page non colour images.

The book has well defined sections, conceptually, in terms of content and number of pages. After the intro by the editors there are 3 book parts, with 5 articles each. The first part, “reading” from page 25 to page 100 (75 pages), the second part “writing” from page 101 to 194 (93 pages) and the third part “representing” from page 195 to 273 (78 pages).

1.2 About the contributors

The editors are Konstantinos Avramidis, a PhD candidate with a background in architecture, and Myrto Tsilimpoundi (PhD), a social researcher. Both editors are Greek and have combined international paths with research and academic interest in the city as subject.

The contributors short biographical notes appear in alphabetical order (from page IX to XV). We can identify the country and sometimes the city, and also only sometimes the PhD qualification is referenced, denoting some irregularity in the biographical notes structure, that in any case serve well as an introduction to the authors.

In short we have contributions from:

Abaza, from Cairo, Egypt, Sociology professor;
Andron from UK, history of architecture (PhD candidate);
Brigenti, from Italy, sociology professor;
Edwards S. PhD in Design from Australia;
Ferrell from USA, professor of sociology;
Iveson from Sydney, urban geography;
Lamazares from USA, modern languages;
Landry from Canada, criminology;

Leventis PhD, from Greece, architecture;
 Macdowall PhD from Australia, history;
 Schacter PhD from UK, anthropology;
 Snyder from New York;
 Stavrides from Greece, professor of architecture;
 Vilaseca from USA, language professor;
 Young, professor and PhD in criminology from Australia.

Of the 15 authors, more than two-thirds are Anglo Saxon “world” authors (11 native English speakers). Four are from USA, 4 from Australia, 2 from UK, and 1 from Canada. In very low minority there is 1 from Italy, 1 from Egypt and 2 from Greece (beside the editors). The scientific areas of these authors are diverse and can be grouped into 6 main areas: the main areas are the ones of the editors, architecture and design (4 authors) and sociology/ anthropology (4 authors), also criminology (2 authors), languages (2 authors) and geography and history (3 authors).

If we join the criminology with sociology/anthropology scientific background of the authors we get the bigger group (6 authors, more than 1/3 of the 15), thus the dominant scientific perspective is in these human sciences approach angles. In the back cover of the book the words SOCIOLOGY/ URBAN STUDIES/ VISUAL STUDIES appear (from the publishing perspective) as the areas where this book would fit by order of relevance.

1.3 The acknowledgment

The acknowledgment text is well structured, starts from the revelation where the idea of the book arose from, the conference Disrespectful Creativity, hosted by the Onassis Cultural Center in June 2014, declaring gratitude to the organizers of the conference and also to the professors and institutions that have been supporting the editors work. Also, they are grateful for Blaqq crew as the authors of the cover image, the families, and contributors, concluding the acknowledgments, the book is dedicated to the “anonymous protagonists, holding spray cans and paste ups who challenge how we read, write and represent our cities”.

2. The intro

Admitting in note 1 that there are practices, writers and artists that do their work outside the urban context, the manifestations addressed by the book are assumed to be limited to urban manifestations. It is a book devoted to the

modes in which graffiti and street art (G&SA) have changed our ways of seeing, knowing and representing urban environments.

The intro is structured as a playful comparison between scholarly and graffiti as both writing practices and includes five parts: sketch, background, piece, outlines, and final details and signs. Assuming this book as having the purpose of filling in gaps in literature, as an opportunity to embrace the craft of writing about writing on the walls, done by “crews of scholars”.

2.1 Sketch

The “Sketch”, as the initial moment of the intro, serves as a draft that gives structure and sense to the work, here we can find the deep justifications for the production of this volume.

It contains an opening quote from a psychologist that, according to the book editors, outlines the main tensions, inspirations and research incentives of the publication. This quote values the “ugly scrawls” as a reflection of the “soul” through the hand. Also mentioned here is the usage of the “writing on the wall” expression, coming from Balthasar biblical character, as a prevision of the future, or also interesting the reference to David Ley and Roman Cyb phrase “today’s graffiti are tomorrow headlines”. It is also mentioned here that G&SA are valuable research lenses, through which to unpack some of the tensions and contradictions of urban life.

Mentioned here in the “sketch” part of the intro, a game of words with Robert Reisner graffiti definition as “dirty words on clean walls”, changed by the greek editors to “clean walls dirty conscientiousness”. It’s assumed that G&SA poetically break down monopoly of the messages on urban fabric and open questions on the nature of public space and right of the city, “who’s right and what city”.

The editors share the message that the book intends to focus on the controversies within the scene, especially those that follow from trying to define G&SA scholars, or generating new terms even knowing that part of their meaning will always escape in the process and new interpretations will emerge. The editors identify the concern about what G&SA are, but also what they do, global interpretation of simultaneously physical acts and cultural practices, material and immaterial.

The introduction “sketch” closes by noting arguments about the relations of G&SA with each editor’s scientific field: architecture and sociology.

According to the editors, Architecture tends to see G&SA as a threat, they are in a reciprocal relation, architecture gives material and historical and political background. G&SA are part of the life of architecture and fascinate architects.

About Sociology it is written that it flirts with G&SA, it reveals the frequent illegal aspects that tell stories that otherwise are untold. Sociology also focuses on elements of G&SA as subcultural practices, such as youth, disaffected communities, and legal limits of social performances.

The editors declare that this book is a tribute to Athens as the muse of G&SA editors explorations. They here identify G&SA are used rather to seduce and attract rather than inform. Closing the “sketch” there is a very detailed explanation about the Cover photo, an image of Athens School of Fine Arts, an image that is purposely ambiguous to raise questions.

2.2 Background

The second part of the intro, called “background”, outlines the context from where the book emerges. This intro section is focused on the existent published material, identified as in majority being non academic, making reference here to all the magazines and mostly photo based books, from journalists and photographers (Mailer et al. 1974; Cooper and Chalfant 1984; Chalfant and Prigoff 1987), affirming that they would not want to critically engage with the subject, having as their main purpose to “document the history and development of this writing genre”.

In academic terms the editors propose to organize the produced knowledge in groups of “waves” distributed chronologically, each wave containing a predominant group of authors and works with common array of contents addressed.

This attempt to define a narrative for the knowledge production of G&SA has risks, for instance the common array of contents addressed by each wave are not homogeneous, the works were not coordinated between each other, also the notion of

wave suggests a peak, and this may not correspond to how knowledge about G&SA is produced. Knowledge production may be more cumulative and distributed, without “peaks” that pull the rest of the authors behind. This difficulty is self assumed somehow by the editors when they use quotation marks when mentioning the waves, or when mentioning Jean Baudrillard’s¹ as something offbeat.

In any case it opens an interesting discussion and proposes a needed structure useful for the better understanding of the development of (academic) knowledge about G&SA.

According to the editors, the “first academic wave” of graffiti and street art scholarship comes almost 10 years after “journalist predecessors”. This wave was inaugurated by Castelman (1982) and includes works of, among others, Richard Lachmann (1988). Also included here is the High & Low 1990 MoMA exhibition catalogue (with a chapter devoted to graffiti) by Kirk Varnedoe, Adam Gopnik (1993), and geographer Tim Cresswell’s (1992) work. Although other authors examined local scenes, the majority of works of the (so called) “first academic wave” are identified as focused on the 1970-1980s New York graffiti scene.

In a note, the book editors clarify: *The “first wave” focus primarily on what graffiti is and how it is the expression of dissatisfied youths, while the “second wave” concentrates on what graffiti does essentially in relation to urban space and began in early 1990s.*

The second wave focuses on other subjects and other geographies. Jeff Ferrell’s (1993) *Crimes of Style*, according to the editors, is probably the founding publication of contemporary graffiti scholarship, focused on the Denver scene. Also in the second wave Susan Philip’s (1999) from looking at Los Angeles scene, introduces different kinds of graffiti subgenres, and others such as subcultural and gender issues by Nancy Macdonald (2001), pedagogical potentials by Rahn (2002) and Christen (2003) and commodification by Heitor Avelos (2004). Others, such as Joe Austin (1996, re edition 2001), Ivor Miller (1992, re edition 2002) are also mentioned in the “second wave” but could be also in the “first wave” due to the contents and dates of the first editions.

Belonging to the “third wave” (21st century), coinciding with the establishment of street art in the visual sphere, the

number of academic publications grows geometrically. The editors mention Ella Chmielewska (2007) as an example of the exception to this era of scholarship dominated by “mostly theoretical (sometimes over-theoretical) approaches that study graffiti in plural form rather examining each graffito in its context”. Also, Briguenti (2010) and other researches about spatial control, liminality, militarization of the urban environment and Macdowall (2006) heritage approach, Kurt Iveson (2010), Lisa Gottlieb (2008) classification system, Gregory Snyder (2009) ethnographic study. In this “wave” are also included Waclawek (2011), Kramer (2009), Brook and Dunn (2011) urban maps, Alison Young (2014) public city, and Rafael Schacter (2014) ornament approach.

Also an interesting cluster of rock art and ancient graffiti scholars are included on this wave, Conferences and specifically the SAUC Journal are identified inside this academic wave. It is suggested that the third wave ends with G&SA handbook edited by Jeffrey Ross (2016).

2.2 Fill in

The fourth wave in academic production is envisioned by the editors to begin with the book they have organized. It is a bold statement, that needs to be analyzed in detail and with time. The organization of academic production is a very useful exercise that we all need to dialogue about, and this is very positive. Not so positive is the self positioning on this exercise, although understandable that comes out of the hard work to push even further the boundaries of the field.

The major reasons stated for this purpose are that, all the contributors to this volume, are mapping new territories by offering fresh and innovative ways of approaching the topic. That commences a new wave of literature that continues and reflects the tradition. That new scholars are introduced and new methods are explored, but also assuming that cities as case studies are not critically explored.

The editors state that the book “explodes” some of G&SA definitions that delimit what are the practices that count. The range of geographies and areas of research serve as justification for the volume to work as a map for current and future researches and practitioners.

At the intention level, the editors identify that the volume aims to:

- relate to contemporary urban public writing;
- offer global context case studies;
- gather various disciplines;
- offer new ways of thinking about current research methods;
- explore the position of academics and the implications on the field.

Also mentioned as the intent of this book is to showcase the plurality of uses of G&SA around the globe, reverse the tendency to over theorize and generalize, and invent new methods. “The Piece”, referred to as the content of the book itself, is organized in three parts:

- Reading, as concept, creating new meaning and linking G&SA and the city, analyzing their relations.
- Writing, as concept, writing in space and writing about writing in space.
- Representing, representation of G&SA and as something that is (re)presented, presented in a new form.

The reasons for this sequence follow the intentions of the editors to structure the volume as a narrative, starting from production, to documentation and dissemination, reactions, criminalization and removal.

2.3 Outlines, details and sign

The outlines section talks about the sequence of chapters (reading, writing, representing), each with 5 articles, 4 with data of distinct contexts, and 1 (closing each part) article with provocations for pushing research forward, according to the editors. Concluding the introduction, the editors explain in some paragraphs that they are aware of the subjectivity behind their choices. Classifying the volume as an “interdisciplinary journey into this affective landscape,” a journey without final destination.

3. Parts and Chapters

In the introduction each part has a short description by the editors. In Part 1 (Reading), it is mentioned by the editors that it showcases how distinct perspectives “read” G&SA. The perspectives come from academia, establishment, campaigns, cultural and educational institutes, city authorities, activists groups, and legal system. The Part 1 chapters and topics addressed are:

Chapter 1 - Graffiti, street art and the dialectics of the city - by Jeff Farrell with focus on mapping the existent scholarly territories dualities legal/ illegal, visibility / invisibility, and art/ action.

Chapter 2 - Art or crime or both at the same time? On the ambiguity of images in public space - by Alison Young, among others identify contradictions between street art legitimation and graffiti persecution, addressing cultural appropriation, questions about authority over urban aesthetics and public space.

Chapter 3 - Reading between the [plot] lines: framing graffiti as multimodal practise - by Samantha Edwards-Vandenhoeck, makes a proposal of interpretative framework for nature through the writing on places. With photography theory references to Michael Shanks "archaeography" and Roland Barthes "studium" and "punctum" concepts.

Chapter 4 - Interview walls: towards a method of reading hybrid surface inscriptions - by Sabina Andron, reading methods, hybrid surface inscriptions, unsanctioned and sanctioned (as advertising). Gathered readings via semiotics between G&SA advertising and street signs.

Chapter 5 - Graffiti, street art and the democratic city - by Kurt Iveson, not only about G&SA confrontations with authority, but alternative forms of authority; challenges the notions of public space and urban belonging, introducing relations with policy advocacy, permission, participation and publication.

Part 2, according to the editors' short description, focuses on the form as process, aesthetic, styles, language, setting but also materiality and the problem of writing about G&SA.

Chapter 6 - Street art is a period, PERIOD: or, classificatory confusion and intermural art - by Rafael Shacter, that addresses issues as Street Art being a term that is no longer capable of grasping the works that are being produced in the streets or galleries, proposes intramural art and declares street art as a period.

Chapter 7 - Expressive measures: an ecology of the public domain - by Andrea Brighenti, contests the trend of street art and graffiti as conveyors for economic growth. Declares

a distinction between the words expression and creativity. Creativity declared as creation without expressive intent is opposed to human expression and/or expression of something.

Chapter 8 - Dead ends and urban insignias: writing graffiti and street art (hi)stories along the UN buffer zone in Nicosia, 2010 - 2014 - by Panos Leventis, using a map develops a narrative text about the UN buffer zone, that splits Cyprus, Nicosia and its old city center in two. Street Art is discussed as a critique, a reflection, and is indissociable from the current and future urban process.

Chapter 9 - The December 2008 uprising's stencil images in Athens: writing or inventing traces of the future? - by Stavros Stavrides deals with traces of 2008 revolt in Athens. Having 2 editors from Greece and Athens, this chapter finally consummates the capital Greek city as case study. A very well referenced chapter and reflection upon December 2008 stencils that were generated in the turning point of the crisis aftermath street struggle. Exploring image value and tension between stencil art and "stencil act".

Chapter 10 - Respective repertoires: how writing about Cairene graffiti as turned into a serial monotony - by Mona Abaza, addresses the Cairo revolution and post revolution. An observation on the effect of the so called "arabic spring" on the Cairene graffiti, and how this transformed the very nature of its perception and practice.

Part 3 - Representing, How, why and with what impact G&SA are represented in media, by fans, promoters, journalists and politicians.

Chapter 11 - São Paulo pixação and street art: representations of or responses to Brazilian modernism? - by Alexander Lamazares

São Paulo - cultural cannibalism, national ID and modernism. Examines well the relation of Brazilian ID and modernism, in culture in general and also specifically about the architectural characteristics, the good and the bad. Overviews pixação and focus on why it is a dystopian reply to modernism.

Chapter 12 - Defensive aesthetics: creative resistance to urban policies in Ottawa - by Deborah Landry, eradication of

graffiti and street art from Ottawa. Tale of the 2 existent legal walls in Ottawa, development in time, from the first times, to zero tolerance and to mural calls and commissions, creating a bigger gap between graffiti writing and other expressions such as murals.

Chapter 13 - #Instafame: aesthetics, audiences, data - Lachlan Macdowall, having presented this topic at the SAUC conference 2016, here deals with industrial decay to post industrial context, using references and questions such as “where is the street in street art?”, analyses local to global, Europe situationism vs Saskia Sassen “global street” considering this last one as more helpful. Also using the geopolitical aesthetic of Fredric Jameson (Sharrett 1993) problematic of local perception of a global movement.

Chapter 14 - Representations of graffiti and the city in the novel *El franco atirador paciente: readings of the emergent urban body in Madrid* - by Stephen Luis Vilaseca, Madrid. Humanities driven approach to urban environments, combining textual criticism with a social analysis of how we engage with the city. To contribute to the discussion of how we can think and practice urbanism in different ways, this chapter compares the actions of sniper (fictional main character of the novel best seller) with the non fictional life of street artists.

Chapter 15 - Long live the tag: representing the foundations of graffiti - by Gregory Snyder, examines contradictions of graffiti challenging the conceptual dualisms of legal vs illegal, art vs vandalism, focusing on “one of the most enduring and less understood aspects of graffiti writing, namely the Tag”. Starting from personal reading of graffiti tags and concluding with a discussion of Twist and Amaze (Barry McGee and John Lazcand respectively).

4. Conclusion

From the 15 authors, there is a more than 2/3 dominance of Anglo Saxon “world” authors (and 11 native english speakers). Also, scientific backgrounds SOCIOLOGY/ URBAN STUDIES/ VISUAL STUDIES appear (from the publishing perspective) as the areas where this book would fit by order of relevance. The attempts of producing an international book, and to break down disciplinary barriers are apparent, but the difficulties regarding language and overcoming the social sciences/ sociology as the main

source of knowledge are visible too.

The knowledge production around G&SA is described as “waves.” Although this opens an interesting discussion and offers a structure for the better understanding of the development of (academic) knowledge about G&SA, it is an exercise that has risks. I personally see knowledge production in G&SA as something more cumulative and distributed, without “peaks” that pull the rest of the authors behind. This is an empirical perception, but here is not the place and moment for this exercise, maybe in another opportunity. In the remainder of this review, I will make some remarks about specific chapters from various perspectives. In regard to Chapter 7 - Expressive measures: an ecology of the public domain - by Andrea Brighenti, and from the Urban Creativity organisation perspective, I guess a discussion could be developed here regarding the “creativity” and in particular Urban Creativity expression that is criticised as vehicle for the trend of street art and graffiti as conveyors for economic growth. Declares a distinction between the meaning of the words: expression and creativity.

It is understandable to want to escape arguments made by Richard Florida, especially those that concern creative industries and associated gentrification logic, but “expression” as a substitute word pushes even further G&SA into the art market, high art logic and more far away from the infrastructural and functional driven approach of urbanism, inclusive of the pervasive low culture that city production is made of.

In any case it is a good moment for assuming that Urban Creativity (UC) leading to gentrification is something that needs to be shifted from inside, and that is one of the reasons for the adoption of UC as expression for a research based network. The origin of UC comes also from the developing process for graffiti expression renewal, starting from graffiti strongly connoted and defined in its essence (manly NY 70s interpretation and not so much the Pompei 19 century meaning) to street art and urban art. Creativity comes from the removal of art word, in a democratization path as in “everyone is creative” and “not everyone is an artist” (at least in high art frame of work) although everyone can be an artist. Urban expressionism or even only expressionism would have totally distinct connotations, mainly connected to the early 20th century German funded art movement.

Chapter 15 - Long live the tag: representing the foundations of graffiti - by Gregory Snyder, is a good example for discussing the duty of research to be neutral. Personally, I fully agree with the article, good writing and relevant statements. But, declarations such as “When tag’s are done skilfully they can be as beautiful as any mural” is a fact that is well known to the members of the subculture, and most who study it, but arguable, for instance the beauty concept is something unstable, thus although recognizing and agreeing personally with the approach, it lacks neutrality. I

In any case, don’t take me wrong in mentioning these specific chapters. This book arose as an idea from the conference Disrespectful Creativity, hosted by the Onassis Cultural Center in June 2014, and it is a good reference and certainly worth reading.

The book has well defined sections, conceptually speaking. In terms of content, it is also quite rich and makes for comfortable reading. As Peter Bengtsen puts it in his short review paragraph, this volume constitutes (one more) important step towards establishing street art studies as a multifaceted academic discipline in its own right.

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