

**Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination**, Alison Young, 2014, Routledge, 180 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-53869-5, £26.99 (paperback)

Alison Young is a well-established scholar in the field of cultural criminology, with a background in legal studies and an interest in street art, graffiti and the powers of the image. She has published extensively on these and other topics like image-related violence, obscenity and affect, in galleries, cinema and public space. *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination* is Young's most recent book, published by Routledge under the GlassHouse series. It looks at street art and its relation to the urban environment, in particular street art's capacity to reflect the openness, management and control of urban spaces through their relation to the unsanctioned image.

Street art has long ceased to be a topic of novelty for academic research, with studies being produced from disciplines like sociology (Lachman: 1988, Stewart: 1988), criminology (White: 2000, Bird: 2009, Ferrell: 2009), urban studies and geography (Keith: 2005, Iveson: 2007, Cresswell: 1996, Scollon and Wong Scollon: 2003) and cultural studies (Austin: 2010, Irvine: 2012). This literature may provide fascinating accounts for interested scholars, but it is rarely accessible enough to reach a non-academic audience. This reader niche only seems to be targeted by massive volumes of picture-heavy coffee table publications, leaving a need for thoroughly documented, engaging introductions to street art that provide arguments and information and not just celebratory images. *Street Art, Public City* is first and foremost a success in this respect, as it elegantly straddles the boundary between specialized academic writing and accessible street art literature, in the good tradition of its namesakes: Allan Schwartzman's 1985 *Street Art*, Cedar Lewisohn's 2009 *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution and*, Anna Wacławek's *Graffiti and Street Art*, published in 2011.

Though enthusiastically written, the rigour of Young's street art study saves it from falling into the fanboy literature category. This is a welcome publication for the novice with an interest in street art, but also for urban geographers, city planners, policy makers and community groups. It achieves the dialogue that it calls for between the producers of street artworks and their legal adversaries, maintaining a well-balanced position between the two often opposing poles. The book also addresses stringent topical myths like tagging and its aesthetic merits, the motivations of street artists for producing unsanctioned street work (a topic Young has looked at in more depth in Halsey and Young: 2006) and the broken windows theory, bringing some welcome clarifications to the table.

*Street Art, Public City* is divided into six chapters, each accompanied by an "encounter", an interstitial text which strengthens the intimacy of the author's street art accounts. The entire book is written in first person singular, as it becomes clear that this is an argument guided by spectatorship and encounter and written from an involved, personal perspective. Young systematically walked the streets of cities like Melbourne, London, New York or Paris while documenting her study, and also interviewed 64 artists – the results of which become apparent in her intimate ethnographic accounts and descriptions of cityscapes and street artworks. This book does not claim to be an in-depth account of street art histories in any of the mentioned cities, but rather a carefully narrated palimpsest of encounters with the images and people that shape the existences of street art.

One of the main arguments that guide the entire volume is the role of affect in producing, encountering and managing the unsanctioned image. Young theorises affect in a line of criminological writing, and employs it to try and capture the energies she argues are always associated with street art. These are identified in its production (the creative pleasure and rush mentioned by Young's interviewees), reception (disgust, resentment and enchantment are only some of the affects Young discusses in

relation to the encounter with street art) and criminalisation (through the ability of street art to contest legal understandings of ownership, authority and propriety).

When Young tackles urban studies in the second chapter, 'The Cities in the City', she draws inspiration from China Mieville's urban visions to speculate on the existence of two separate cities within the same territory: the legislated city and the uncommissioned city. One is the city of spatial and behavioural rules based on property laws and hostile architecture, while the other champions place-making through informality and grassroots urban organisation. Although this distinction might be useful to build Young's arguments about a commons of the image, these two modes of urban organization are hard to be seen as separate, parallel entities, and so are the images produced within them. Young explicitly leaves out legal street artworks from her book and just focuses on independently produced ones, but the reality of our cities' surfaces shows that these are not so easily identifiable, or clearly distinguishable by aesthetic means. Perhaps it is the very category of street art that needs a more powerful reconceptualization, and Young's book certainly paves the way for such a future endeavour.

One of the most notable achievements of *Street Art, Public City* is the lucidity that comes from having been written by someone with a background in law. As easily narrative and descriptive as the book sometimes becomes (and there are a lot of street art stories in it), it never loses a sharpness of argument and a powerful sense of direction. If there is one issue at the core of this study that all the arguments grapple with, it is the persistent criminalization of street art in the context of its increased recognition and acceptance. This is not only a crucial question for the book, but it is one that should be addressed by present and future research on the topic, as added expertise from around the world is needed and welcome.

**Sabina Andron**

Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL

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