

Anthropology Book Forum

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Meaning upon meaning, mediating space and place

Review by David Fazzino

Understanding Graffiti: Multidisciplinary Studies from Prehistory to Present

Troy Lovata and Elizabeth Olton, editors

Left Coast Press, 2015

Understanding Graffiti: Multidisciplinary Studies from Prehistory to Present utilizes a variety of case studies to explore the various techniques and meanings behind graffiti and opens up spaces to further explore this phenomenon, in essence building a theoretical case against Glazer's "broken windows" theory. *Understanding Graffiti* resonates with my own work on development and dispossession of property and place in the context of towns taken through government action in the Ukraine (Chernobyl, Pripjat) and the United States (Pennsylvania: Centralia, and Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (DWGNRA)). In each of these sites, graffiti is ubiquitous although the way I interpret its impacts and meanings varies depending upon the context.



Figure 1 Reviewer's photo of abandoned highway Centralia, Pennsylvania

While I read graffiti in DWGNRA in a manner akin to Glazer's 1979 "broken window" theory of decay (discussed in *Understanding Graffiti* on pp.124, 174, 197, 219-220). In contrast, I view graffiti in

Pripyat as a space of play and social commentary. In the space between is the graffiti in Centralia (see Figure 1).

The contributors and editors to *Understanding Graffiti* seek to highlight the agency and artistry of those who produce graffiti highlighting the importance of studying the phenomena of graffiti production, interpretation, and commodification from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives. Graffiti serves as a sometimes preserved, oft fleeting visual and visceral record of contesting claims. As the editors maintain, graffiti is produced for a variety of reasons with the intent that it will be viewed and hence communicate specific messages to a particular audience or all of society. The volume provides a solid review of the reasons, uses, and interpretations of graffiti in a variety of multicultural and temporal contexts. The editors begin with an overview and provide subsequent introductions to the four sections of *Understanding Graffiti*: Section I Understanding the Function of Graffiti, Section II Understanding the Form & Context of Graffiti, Section III Understanding Graffiti as a Witness to History, and Section IV Understanding the Politics of Graffiti. Below, I briefly highlight the contents of these four sections and fifteen chapters before concluding with some specific questions and my overall impression of *Understanding Graffiti*.

Section I considers the various functions of graffiti as an exchange of ideas, historical record, and site of resistance. Rodriguez (Chapter 1) and Meade (Chapter 2) note that, “inscriptions from bathroom walls transform a private and anonymous environment into a meeting place mediated by a wall, where often-serious concerns are honestly expressed” (p. 18). While graffiti on contemporary bathroom walls is relatively short lived, those appearing on the frescoes of an Italian church have endured over generations and serve as a source of historical information about every day happenings, as well as events of greater consequence (Plesch, chapter 3). Lennon (Chapter 4) considers the reach of ‘conflict graffiti’ appearing during the Arab Spring, engaging not only those passing by on the street, but also a global audience through images of the graffiti circulating over the internet which reflected the passion, humor, and determination of the Egyptian protesters.” (p.63).

Section II delves into the importance of the form (style) and context (how and where it was created) of graffiti (p.73). These are important elements in ascertaining the graffiti artist’s intention in their attempts to appeal to the aesthetics of a particular audience. These elements were utilized in a comparative analysis of art styles to decipher the intended message of a horseman carved in Carpathian

rock at Cetățeni (Măndescu, Chapter 5) and through a phenomenological approach to Rocky Mountain arborglyphs (Lovata, Chapter 6). Beaton and Todd (Chapter 7) highlight their contributions to the heritage work at Evergreen Brick Works that is “...inspired by the industrial, natural, and geographical landscape of a former brick works” (p.105) including the graffiti, which is “...the only surviving artifact of the site from 1989 to 2008” (p.106). This is a part of City of Toronto’s work to distinguish between “graffiti vandalism” which must be removed and “graffiti art” which must remain (commissioned and sanctioned, or approved by Toronto’s Graffiti Panel).

The political climate for graffiti in New York City during the 1980s was less than welcoming as NYC authorities worked to eliminate graffiti production; despite this, artists produced 'wildstyle' on subway cars that further defied efforts by rendering a public text as unreadable by those in mainstream society (Gopinath, Chapter 8).



Figure 2 Detail of wildstyle burner by KASE 2 (from chapter 8)



Figure 3 Details of Wildstyle Graffiti (from chapter 8)

The centrality of context is highlighted in considering the various locations where “Zevs” work

appears; on the street, its appropriation of corporate logos to critique marketing is lost once it is displayed in Manhattan galleries (Duncan, Chapter 9).



Figure 4 Zevs's *Liquidated Version* exhibition at the De Buck Gallery in Chelsea, Manhattan, 2011 (from chapter 9)

The contributors to Section III read graffiti as a supplement to the historical record based on more conventional sources. Specifically, the editors frame graffiti “as witnesses to a historical moment that reveal a certain agency or desire.” (p.140). The location of graffiti at key sites in the Casma Valley of Peru from 2100BCE to 200BCE demonstrate continued resistance to the Sechín Alto polity (Pozorski and Pozorski, Chapter 10). Similarly, Olton (Chapter 11, p.159) suggests that graffiti use in Classic period Maya at Tikal, Guatemala, is a “politically transgressive commentary.” In a more recent example, Beck, Falvey, and Drollinger (Chapter 12) go inside the tunnels at the Nevada Test Site to document 164 panels of art produced by peace activists as a means to come to a greater understanding not only of the events at the Site, but also the larger political implications of nuclear testing.

Section IV explicitly discusses issues of power implicit in the earlier sections by focusing on the politics of defining graffiti. Mitman (Chapter 13) describes how criminalization of graffiti on the problem-riddled New York City subway system in the 1970s and 1980s galvanized an antiauthoritarian counterculture and, subsequently, amplified the desire of young artists to get their work up on subway cars. Daniell (Chapter 14) works to define graffiti by distinguishing it from permitted inscriptions or “calligraphs” at two English military establishments. The final chapter (15) by Sheinman considers how Mexico creates a space for graffiti near the Zócalo, which simultaneously contributes to gentrification and creates “an aesthetic dialogue with graffiti from the periphery” (p.231).

As with any thought-provoking piece, this volume left me wanting more. First, many of the chapters are well-illustrated and provide the visual context for the contributor's claims, some of which would have been bolstered by incorporation of color photographs. Scheinman contributes the sole color photo, appearing on the book's cover. Second, the contributors primarily document the counterhegemonic and anti-authoritarian meanings of graffiti as sites of resistance. As with all media, mixed and multi-media graffiti serve to mediate relationships in a variety of social settings which talk to, talk past, and talk at its intended audiences. As many of the contributors point out, graffiti can also be appropriated by the State as public art that needs to be preserved. The general question I am left with is, how has this process played out over time? Specifically, what are the potential impacts on the agency of those opposing graffiti through top-down designations, such as Toronto's Graffiti Panel? Further, how has expert analysis of objects and subsequent reinterpretations of the past altered readings of place? In the examples given, context certainly provides evidence that can aid in interpretation. This would be further enhanced in some instances with a greater consideration of the various actors involved in the process of graffiti production and interpretation. Nevertheless, the volume successfully situates the cultural and artistic elements of graffiti from diverse perspectives. Overall, the editors and contributors to *Understanding Graffiti* provided me with the historical examples and theoretical perspectives to more thoroughly reflect on and refine my own understandings of graffiti. The volume provides fodder to consider graffiti in one's everyday environment, as a guide to students and scholars exploring graffiti. In this sense, the editors have achieved what they set out to do, that is, provide an easily accessible, theoretically grounded text, appropriate to utilize in undergraduate classrooms.

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