

# Book Review: Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art by Jeffrey Ian Ross

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### Recommended Citation

Tsilimpounidi, Myrto () "Book Review: Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art by Jeffrey Ian Ross," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 93 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol93/iss1/17>

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**Ross, Jeffrey Ian, ed. *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. New York: Routledge, 2016. xxxx + 491 pages. Hardcover, \$225.00.**

The *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, edited by criminologist Jeffrey Ian Ross, is a much anticipated entry in a field of studies that has enjoyed a rapidly expanding interdisciplinary interest over the past decade. Graffiti and street art are now an integral part of our urban environments and have captured a global following in the last few years. From the early inception of the New York graffiti scene in the 1970s, where tags were seen as a sign of urban decay and impoverishment, to the colourful street art pieces in contemporary Berlin that contributed to the city's gentrification process, street art and graffiti have come a long way. Depending on one's point of view, graffiti and street art have become synonymous with two distinct approaches: one that views them as vandalism and therefore a symptom of angry youths and impoverishment, and another that embraces them as signs of free expression that contribute to a more egalitarian cityscape. The *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* engages with such dualities in order to open up a polyvocal critical analysis of this urban phenomena. To put it differently, the *Handbook* views graffiti and street art simultaneously as a sign of social tensions, as a political act in public space, and as an art form with very skilled practitioners.

Part of graffiti and street art's universal appeal is that they allow viewers an understanding of certain urban milieu; in other words, they offer the voyeuristic pleasure of safely entering a subcultural story of a place without resorting to the hegemonic official histories. This is precisely the reason why street art and graffiti attracted academic interest in the last decade, resulting in a burgeoning library of articles and books which this handbook carefully selects and brings together. This text is impressively interdisciplinary, with criminology being the discipline most present in the analysis. Contributors' disciplinary backgrounds include art history, youth studies, sociology, urban studies, subcultural studies, social movements, communication, urban planning, geography, visual cultures, and performance studies. Moreover, the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* offers a rich geographical spread, not only including the dominant graffiti and street art Meccas (the United States and the United Kingdom), but also case studies from Brazil, Egypt, Portugal, Canada, and Australia, alongside excellent visual representations. Yet, above all, its unquestionable strength is that it brings together, for the first time, the cutting-edge scholars—both well established and novice—under four concise and eloquent thematic sections that outline the academic history of the field of graffiti and street art. These four thematic sections are accompanied by a foreword on graffiti, street art, and the politics of complexity by the academic guru of the field, criminologist Jeff Ferrell.

The first thematic deals with the issues of 'History, Types, and Artists' and offers a clear typology of graffiti and street art practices while at the same time tracing the origins and historical trajectories of such practices that many claim are as ancient as the first marks made by cave dwellers. This section also provides an overview of the work of certain graffiti writers and street artists, namely Phillips, Wilson, and Pabon.

The second thematic of the book attempts to unpack the causes of graffiti and street art offering ‘Theoretical Explanations.’ This section includes ethnographic pieces and case studies that provide a close engagement with graffiti and street art practitioners in diverse contexts in order to analyse the causal questions of who, what, when, where, how, and why. What prompts urban dwellers to leave their marks on the city’s surface? What is the meaning of these marks and how do they affect our urban realities? This section is a nuanced account and an aesthetic journey in the subcultural practices that shape our urban environments.

The third thematic deals with the primordial tension between graffiti writers and street artists: ‘Differences of Graffiti and Street Art’ and their regional and municipal variations. This section provides a polyvocal and multifocal account of the primary reasons behind the stereotypical view of graffiti as vandalism—ugly scrawls of disaffected youths—and street art as a artistic engagement with urban space. The section offers stories, images, voices, stencils, and tags from different cities—Montreal (Waclawek), London (Ross), New York (Austin), and Cairo (Abaza) to name a few—in an attempt to trace the global variations but also the common ground between these, at times very diverse, groups.

The final thematic section of the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* deals with the ‘Effects of Graffiti and Street Art’ shifting the focus from the subcultures and the practitioners to how graffiti and street art are being perceived by the authorities, politicians, businesses, and the wider public. This final section engages with the double act of representation, not only the representation on the wall, but also the ways in which these representations are being portrayed by authorities and politicians in different localities. Harm-reduction strategies, removal processes, legal actions, and a whole choreography of diversion strategies, is juxtaposed alongside discussions of the tensions between sanctioned and unsanctioned wall writing, street art as a tool for gentrification, as well as the creative economy. This encapsulates the primary debate that is at the core of the scholarly interest in graffiti and street art: Is it art or is it crime?

Given the proliferation of scholarly interest in the field and until now the absence of a comprehensive compendium, the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* is an important and long-anticipated contribution to the study of street art and graffiti.

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