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Alison Young. *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination*. London: Routledge, 2014. 177 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-53869-5.

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Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination by Alison Young opens the floor to debates on the current state of street art. The history of graffiti and street art can be traced back to 1950 (2), however its artistic value, its role in creating a city image, and its legal status are still in question. In her book Young suggests changing the angle of discussion, putting it this way: “To think about the street artwork in public space is obvious; to raise questions about whether street artworks can help create a public city is rather less so” (3). Therefore she chooses to focus on how street art becomes a part of our daily experience of a city and how it might be beneficial for cities. She also introduces what seems to be the fruitful concept of the “public city,” which includes street art as a legal part of its everyday-ness.

The author incorporates historical, cultural, social, and legal perspectives on interpreting the connection between street art and city space; however, the author’s cultural criminology background is predominant. Regulation studies and criminology are Young’s primary research fields, and *Street Art, Public City* is the result of ten years of work on street art. From a reader’s perspective the book has an (auto)biographical feeling. To some extent Young consciously shows how her own curiosity grew into a research interest and then developed in multiple directions: as a way to see and explore the city, as independent research, as an experience of participation in policy-making projects. The benefit of this is that by showing, for example, her process of establishing contacts with street artists, she provides a glimpse of the realm of street art from inside, shows how the community of artists lives and works and what conditions allow artists to speak freely—or, on the other hand, to become vigilant and avoid communication. The book also seems very personal, it gives the perspective of someone who advocates for the rights of street artists and for street art to be a part of city life.

The book starts with a brief introduction on the history of street art and its relationship to graffiti. In this overview Young emphasizes the situational nature of street art, the importance of multiple reactions to any piece of artwork placed in public space (chapter 1). The author traces back the fact that there is more than one perspective on what street art is to the differences in understandings of the city itself (chapter 2). From the point of view of city administrators, the city is created by laws and rules of all kinds and in this way becomes a “legislated city.” From a street artist’s perspective, a city “gives rise to the potential to alter a streetscape in a range of ways” (54), making it a city of images. The way to reconcile these two views is to

reframe it as the “public city,” which combines the “commons of the image ... an aesthetically driven cityscape ... networks of laws ... and a landscape that is materially produced through hierarchies of taste and cultural capital” (3). Assuming that the public city allows for the coexistence of both legal and artistic perspectives, Young carefully studies each of them.

In chapter 3, by portraying several cities known for their street art scenes Young explores how art in the city and the city as art are possible (90). She uses extended descriptions to show the uniqueness that a city space obtains by accepting street artwork. She describes her own experience of discovering new street artworks in cities throughout the world, interviews street artists, presents art projects, and shows the consequences of new antivandalism regulations. She traces the biographies of artists and their projects, as well as notes changes to cityscapes caused by street art. Young gives the reader not only an understanding of what street art is but also the feeling of it, the optics sensitive to an alternative vision of a city, and the ability to integrate different points of view on the city into a unique image.

For example, when Young writes about New York, she emphasizes the tight connection between graffiti and street art, as well as the strong “zero tolerance” policy in the city. She pays attention to the temporal nature of street art and explains it by the geographic location and climate of New York. Young continues her overview by depicting Paris, London, Berlin, Melbourne, and Rome. However, the selection of the cities is not obvious to the reader. One can assume that New York, London, and Berlin, known to be world capitals of street art, would reflect main trends and changes, whereas Rome and Melbourne are known for street art in some other contexts. But this is merely a reader’s guess rather than the articulated position of the author.

Asking the question “what law is it that street artists are breaking?,” Young enters the realm of the “legislated city” where street art is defined as a criminal activity and public space turns out to be a collection of privately owned properties (chapters 4 and 5). Introducing a street art policy-making case in Melbourne the author shows how a goal of keeping the neighborhood visually sterile makes spontaneous transformation of the city impossible, excludes the ability of street art to change in-between spaces into destinations, something with more than utilitarian significance.

Young places a lot of attention on the arguments of both local authorities and street artists—the next step for her is to find a common ground for dialogue. She believes that it is possible to make street art a valuable part of city space. The emerging value of street artwork and the ways tastes in street art are formed and shaped are the topics of chapter 6. Auction houses, galleries, festivals, and Internet sites contribute to the transformation of street art’s cultural value. Social acceptance can become a first step toward the legal acceptance of street art. The author’s hope is that the mainstream popularity of street art will lead to a change in its legal status and thereby change the image of cities we live in. However, Young formulates this as merely a hypothesis that can create space for forthcoming studies.

The same is true for the concept of the public city. Young gives it a wonderful start but leaves a lot of questions for further research. She carefully specifies this concept, defines its characteristics, and places it between different types of cities:

legislative, uncommissioned, the city of commons. What remains unclear is whether being “public” is some kind of external nomination a city should aim for or whether it is merely the internal “feel” a city has. And to continue, are Young’s examples of street art capitals—London, New York, or Berlin—more likely to become public cities? The notion of “public” itself is somewhat confused, as it refers to “public space,” a concept with a complex and hotly debated history (Low and Smith 2006). What is most important is that public spaces are actual spaces within a city that might have different regimes of access and management (Carmona 2010a, 2010b). The public city, as Young defines it, is merely a way to describe the uniqueness of a city—but remains a utopia that urban planners might never be able to reach.

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